

Why Portage County is truly a 'great lakes' kind of place

GREEN PORTAGE

Terry Seidel



We all know that Ohio is a Great Lakes state, but if you've spent any time studying geography you also know that — aside from Lake Erie — the Buckeye State generally is not blessed by an abundance of naturally occurring open water. Indeed, most of the lakes in Ohio are man-made reservoirs created by the damming of rivers or creeks.

Portage County, on the other hand, is truly a "great lakes" kind of place.

One of the many qualities that distinguish this county from much of the rest of Ohio is its orderful abundance of natural lakes and wetlands. Did you know, for example, that Portage County has the largest natural lake solely confined to Ohio's borders? At 340 acres, Aurora Pond in the northwestern corner of the county claims that prize.

In fact, of the 20 largest natural lakes confined to Ohio borders, seven of them occur in Portage County. Although neighboring Summit County has the most lakes (34), Portage County's 16 lakes cover 1,493 acres, making it the county with the largest total surface area covered by lakes in Ohio.

Crystal Lake in Rootstown Township, partially owned by The Nature Conservancy as a nature preserve, is one of Ohio's most pristine natural lakes. It's unusual in that it is known to support a population of half dollar-sized freshwater jellyfish.

These areas owe their existence to massive glaciers that covered much of Ohio thousands of years ago. In Northeast Ohio, the glaciers left behind a rather impressive example of a landscape that geologists refer to as a kettle and kame topography. Kames are large hills of gravel and kettles are huge bowl-like depressions in the landscape.

It's in the kettles, or kettles holes, that many of the county's lakes and wetlands occur.

Given their abundance here, Portage Countians may have the impression that these features are common throughout Ohio. In fact, most parts of the state have few if any natural lakes.

Similarly, unlike Portage County, most areas of Ohio have few, if any, unusual wetlands known as bogs and fens. These remarkable living relics of the Ice Age are worth a visit. Landscapes more

commonly found in Canada, bogs feature thick mats of sphagnum moss floating on tea-colored water while fens are more like spring-fed meadows. Both can be populated with tamarack trees and carnivorous plants such as pitcher plant and round-leaved sundew.

Kent Bog on Meloy Road, for example, supports the most southern stand of tamarack trees in the continental U.S. Nearby is Triangle Lake Bog, one of the best examples of a kettle lake bog in Ohio. Both these nature preserves, operated by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, offer trails and boardwalks, as does The Nature Conservancy's Herrick Fen, in Streetsboro.

The Portage Park District's Townner's Woods overlooks Lake Phippen, an excellent quality 143-acre kettle lake owned by the City of Akron that attracts bald eagles and ospreys.

There are many others where public access is limited to protect rare and fragile plants, places such as The Nature Conservancy's Flatiron Bog or the Portage Park District's Gray Birch Bog Preserve.

These natural lakes and wetlands are home to dozens of rare species of plants and animals, but they're good for people, too.

They filter groundwater and help prevent flooding. They provide us with places of natural beauty, and they are important elements of our heritage.

Above all, they help define what makes Portage County such an unusual and beautiful part of Ohio.

Terry Seidel is the Director of Protection for The Nature Conservancy in Ohio. He has worked for the international non-profit conservation organization for 20 years acquiring natural areas throughout the state including over 280 acres in Portage County. Green Portage is a monthly feature of the Record-Courier in cooperation with the Portage Park District.

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