



Lake Superior

National Estuarine Research Reserve



Location: Northwestern corner of Wisconsin along the St. Louis River, bordering Minnesota and Lake Superior

Date Designated: 2010

Area Protected: 16,697 acres

Web Address: lakesuperiornerr.org

Management: Daily oversight is provided by the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension. NOAA’s Office for Coastal Management provides funding, national guidance, and technical assistance.

Access and Infrastructure

- The reserve is a combination of four components located within 10 minutes of each other: Red River Breaks, Pokegama Bay, Pokegama-Carnegie Wetlands, and Wisconsin Point. Each site possesses its own combination of habitats.
- Two waterfront structures on Barkers Island are part of the University of Wisconsin–Superior campus. The buildings house administrative offices, a 1,300-square-foot dockside laboratory, a public science and interpretive center, and classrooms. A boat and dock are available to visiting researchers.
- The reserve features areas of national significance, including the world’s largest freshwater bay mouth sand bar (Wisconsin Point), estuarine wetlands, and steep, highly erodible red clay bluffs.

The Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve is located along a river-to-lake gradient at the confluence of the St. Louis River and Lake Superior, the largest and most pristine of the Great Lakes. The reserve is a combination of varying land areas that include uplands, riparian and riverine habitats, freshwater marshes, interdunal wetlands, forests, and open sand beach and dunes. The reserve is adjacent to the “Twin Ports” of Superior, Wisconsin, and Duluth, Minnesota, which together represent the largest freshwater port in the world.

The lower portion of the St. Louis River watershed is one of 43 areas of concern in the Great Lakes, and the reserve plays an important role in conducting research and monitoring within the area. Data and information collected by reserve staff members are used to maintain and restore the ecosystems and inform community planning and initiatives. The focus is on climate change, water quality, healthy ecosystems, strengthening community, and sense of place. Community outreach and education represent an important part of the mission.

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Interesting Things to Know

- Significant historical and cultural sites exist within and near the reserve, including Native American cultural sites and historical lumbering and shipping locations. The adjacent industrial ports of Superior, Wisconsin, and Duluth, Minnesota, remain central to the region's economy.
- The associated wetlands and boreal forest were identified as an area of continental significance, which means that many portions of the estuary remain relatively pristine.
- Pokegama Bay contains one of the largest municipal forests in the country, with 6,723 acres of land and water owned by the City of Superior.

About the Programs

The nation's 30 research reserves represent a tremendous asset, protecting nearly 1.4 million acres and providing habitat where plants and wildlife thrive. Community benefits include recreation, flood protection, and water filtration. Because the following programs are offered at each reserve, the system is able to make an environmental impact at the local level, as well as nationally.

Stewardship. Site protection and enhancement are part of every research reserve. Activities may include managing land and water resources, restoring habitat, controlling invasive species, maintaining biodiversity, and reducing environmental stressors.

Research. Reserve research is focused on how environmental factors—such as nutrient loading, climate change, invasive species, and storms—impact coastal ecosystems. The System-Wide Monitoring Program, or SWMP, provides long-term data on water quality, weather, biological communities, habitat, and land-use and land-cover characteristics. This combination of research and data provides a strong, science-based foundation for addressing coastal management challenges.

Training. To provide the community with the information and skills needed to integrate coastal science into local decision-making and everyday lives, reserves provide specialized courses and information. Reserve training professionals are active in community planning and improvement initiatives.

Education. Local data generated at the reserve provide students with a firsthand experience of local environmental conditions. Educators lead student, teacher, and citizen field trips that are life-changing experiences, as participants see, feel, and smell what makes an estuary one of the most remarkable places in the world.

To learn more, visit coast.noaa.gov/nerrs.

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