

Apostle Islands

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore
Wisconsin



Community Under Siege!

Apostle Islands' forests provide critical habitat for hundreds of species of songbirds and wildflowers.



Veery photo courtesy of Ryan Brady

Canada yew
browsed by deer

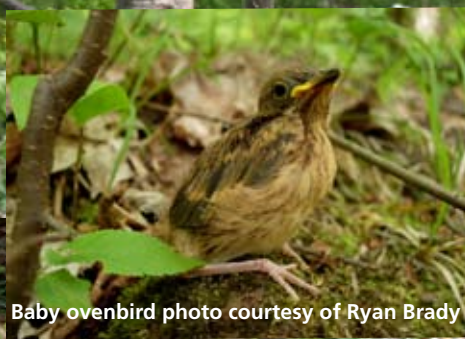


Growing deer herds on some islands pose a threat to this rare plant community and the habitat it provides.

Pink ladyslipper



Baby ovenbird photo courtesy of Ryan Brady



Windows into the Past



In the Apostle Islands, it is possible to walk through forests that provide a glimpse of what northern Wisconsin once was. Some of the islands have areas of old-growth forest that have never been logged. Many areas that were cut more than 70 years ago are once again covered with mature forests of maple, birch, oak, hemlock, and pine. But it's not just the trees that makes these forests unique. The forest understory is thick and full of Canada yew, providing important habitat to birds and other species. This plant "community" is still found on Sand, York, Raspberry, Devils, North Twin, Outer and Eagle islands, which have historically supported few, if any, deer. This "community" was once common, but has become extremely scarce elsewhere in the upper Midwest primarily due to over-browsing by white-tailed deer. The plant communities on these islands are invaluable for research, providing a living baseline for understanding the impacts deer are having in other places.

Getting to Know Yew

Canada yew (*Taxus canadensis*) is an evergreen shrub with flat green needles and bright red fruits. It is highly preferred by deer for food. This "deer candy" will be eaten before such other deer favorites as cedar and hemlock. Yew is nearly impossible to find on the mainland where deer have eaten virtually every plant.

Rocky Island, and several other Apostle Islands, quickly lost their stands of Canada yew when deer numbers exploded in the 1950's. Even though deer numbers on these islands have dramatically declined, recovery of the yew has been very limited and slow.

Controlling the Deer Herd

White-tailed deer were scarce in Northwestern Wisconsin prior to the mid-1800s. The densely forested north woods lacked the clearings that provide a critical food source for deer in the spring. This began to change in the late 1800s as extensive logging dramatically altered the ecosystem allowing the deer population to explode. Deer numbers in the Apostle Islands reflect this trend.

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore has been open to hunting and trapping consistent with state regulations since it was established in 1970. The islands within the park are designated as Deer Management Unit 79 by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. A special muzzle loader hunt for deer has been offered during the month of October on Oak and Basswood islands since 1983. Deer hunting on the other islands has been limited. Under the park's recently approved Wildlife Management Plan, hunting opportunities within the park and options for management will be expanded. One of the goals of the plan is to keep deer populations on certain islands as low as possible. Recent colonization and a very rapid increase in deer numbers on Sand and York islands pose a serious threat to these islands' rare plant community featuring an understory of Canada yew. Efforts are underway to control the deer herd on these islands.

