The Watersheds of Northeast Michigan

What is a Watershed?

Did you know that everywhere you are, you’re within a watershed?

A watershed is an area of land that contains a common set of streams, rivers and lakes that all drain into a larger waterbody. Watershed boundaries follow natural features of the landscape, such as a ridgeline or a height-of-land (see diagram at right). Watersheds include both the water features within the area, as well as the land surrounding those water bodies. As a result of the connected nature of a watershed, all activities on the land and water can affect the condition of the larger watershed. A watershed can be divided into progressively smaller watersheds, which are often referred to as subwatersheds. For example, the Klacking Creek Watershed is one of many subwatersheds that can be identified within the larger Rifle River Watershed. Likewise, the Rifle River Watershed itself is part of the larger Lake Huron Watershed.

Huron Pines is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization and an equal opportunity provider. Our dynamic staff of ecologists, geographers, biologists and environmental educators think big and act quickly to ensure that Northeast Michigan’s watersheds and wild places will stay healthy and resilient for future generations. Located right in the center of the Great Lakes system, we have the unique privilege and responsibility to protect our treasured lands teeming with wildlife, and to sustain the world’s most important source of fresh water. Learn more at www.huronpines.org.
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In simple terms, a watershed is a precipitation collector. It is a geographic area of land that drains to a common point in the landscape. Watersheds catch rain and snow and channel the water into streams that gradually flow downhill; small streams feed into bigger streams and rivers, forming a network similar to a vascular system. Watershed boundaries are determined by the high points of the land, called divide divides.

All of Northeast Michigan’s watersheds eventually flow into the Great Lakes. This means that what we do within our watersheds will impact the health of the Great Lakes. This map shows the path of water flow from the uppers, headwater areas of a watershed through streams, lakes, and rivers.

WHY SCHOOLS?

Through the network of the Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative and the USDA Great Lakes R-BET Program, students in the region are engaged in hands-on watershed stewardship projects that enhance both their learning and the communities in which they live. Each school represented on this map is committed to participation in meaningful watershed education projects such as water quality monitoring of rivers and streams, adopting local beaches, combatting invasive species, and interpreting Lake Huron maritime history—all to benefit the watersheds of northeast Michigan and in turn the Great Lakes basin.

### LEGEND

- **Watershed Boundary**
- **County**
- **City**
- **Parcels/Parishes**
- **Cultural and Natural Monument**
- **Map River**

**GREATER THUNDER BAY DRIFTER**

Drainage for each watershed. Many smaller streams and rivers are not shown due to limited space. Major rivers and selected lakes are included in this map to illustrate the general pattern of drainage for each watershed. Many smaller streams and rivers are not shown due to limited space.

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The Black River Watershed of Alcona County is a small coastal watershed composed of a south-flowing north branch that joins a north-flowing south branch before emptying into Lake Huron. This small watershed consists of the Black River, which flows north for just over 15 miles from its origin between the small cities of Lincoln and Harrisville to its outlet to Lake Huron in the unincorporated community of Black River. The North Branch of the Black River originates in Black River Swamp and flows through a wetland area south to join the mainstem Black River 1.5 miles from the mouth to Lake Huron. A few small creeks join it along the way, including Silver Creek, Gauthier Creek, Haynes Creek, Liston Creek and Butternut Creek.

Tourism, farming, forestry and resource extraction are the main activities in this rural area. The Black River in Alcona County is known for its coaster brook trout and steelhead runs. This is one of the last systems in Lower Michigan still supporting a lake-run brook trout population, making it a conservation priority. Huron Pines conducted a road/stream crossing inventory in 2007 and with help from our partners reconnected 18 miles of river to Lake Huron in 2012 by replacing culverts at the Sucker Creek Road crossing with a free-span timber bridge.

**Communities**
Black River

**Recreation Areas**
Au Sable State Forest, Huron National Forest, Mackinaw State Forest, Negwegon State Park

**Major Tributaries**
North Branch Black River, South Branch Black River
Au Gres River Watershed


The Au Gres River originates in the forests of eastern Ogemaw County and flows 45 miles in a generally southeasterly direction before reaching the City of Au Gres, where the river drains to northern Saginaw Bay. As the Au Gres flows into Iosco County and through Arenac County agricultural activities become more prevalent. The East Branch Au Gres historically joined the Au Gres but has been diverted east via the Whitney Drain to its outlet to Lake Huron at Singing Bridge road crossing. In total, the Au Gres and East Branch Au Gres watersheds drain an area of 392 square miles (245 square miles and 147 square miles, respectively).

Twelve miles of the East Branch Au Gres River, from the confluence of Hall Creek and Smith Creek to Whittemore Road, is designated a blue ribbon trout stream by the Michigan DNR. This stretch is characterized by excellent insect hatches, wild resident trout stocks, and water quality, making it a great spot to try some fly-casting.

Communities
Au Gres, Prescott, Turner, Twining, Whittemore

Recreation Areas
Au Sable State Forest

Major Tributaries
East Branch Au Gres (historically)
Au Sable River Watershed

The 1,932 sq mile Au Sable River Watershed is northern Michigan’s largest watershed. The Au Sable River begins at the confluence of Kolke and Bradford creeks, near Frederic in Crawford County. It eventually empties into Lake Huron near Oscoda.

The mighty Au Sable runs over 130 miles beginning in the quiet wooded headwaters that are the heart of the Lower Peninsula. The Au Sable River Watershed boasts 476 miles of streams, much of which is coldwater habitat, and extends into eight counties (Otsego, Crawford, Montmorency, Roscommon, Ogemaw, Oscoda, Iosco and Alcona). The towering cedars enclose those who pass on their journey through the meandering waters that eventually join the seemingly endless sand beaches of Lake Huron. In the middle of all this is one of the best trout fisheries of the east and home to one of the oldest canoe races in America, the Au Sable River Canoe Marathon (a 120-mile course).

Over 80% of the watershed is forested. Of this, 5% is National Forest land and 29% is State Forest land. The main composition of the watershed’s vegetation has shifted from the historically-extensive prairie-savannah habitat and conifer-dominated forest to more deciduous forest. Continuing residential development has been responsible for the clearing of riparian zones in many areas. A classic groundwater-fed resource, the watershed receives heavy use and faces increased development pressures, since it is especially susceptible and sensitive to impacts from sedimentation, fluctuating water flows and increased water temperature. In 2011 the river was named to the National Fish Habitat Action Plan’s 10 “Waters to Watch” as a result of the numerous conservation efforts taking place and the level of collaboration being directed at the local level to ensure success of this work.

One unique feature of the Au Sable River Watershed is the presence of Iargo Springs. These natural springs near Wallace were historically used for drinking water, especially for early loggers, and have been an important recreational site since at least the 1920’s. Renovated in 1991, the Iargo Springs site now features a boardwalk winding through the natural springs, a series of small waterfalls, and a gorgeous view of the Au Sable River and Cooke Pond. The Au Sable River Watershed also provides habitat and nesting ground for the rare Kirtland’s warbler. Historically, arctic grayling lived here, too. When a railroad to Grayling was established in 1873, a world-class arctic grayling fishery drew anglers from far and wide to the Au Sable. By the beginning of the 1900s, however, the arctic grayling had disappeared from the river system.

Communities
Grayling, Lewiston, Lincoln, Mio, Oscoda, Roscommon, South Branch, St. Helen

Recreation areas
Au Sable State Forest, Backus Creek State Game Area, Hanson Hills Recreation Area, Hartwick Pines State Park, Huron National Forest, Mackinaw State Forest, North Higgins Lake State Park, Otsego Lake State Park, South Michigan Shore-to-Shore Riding-Hiking Trail

Major Tributaries
East Branch Au Sable River, North Branch Au Sable River, South Branch Au Sable River, East Branch Big Creek, Middle Branch Big Creek, West Branch Big Creek, Pine River, East Branch Pine River, West Branch Pine River, South Branch Pine River, South Branch River

Road/Stream Crossing Inventory
Black River Watershed

The Black River Watershed drains 547 sq miles of northern Lower Michigan and is located in Cheboygan, Montmorency, Otsego and Presque Isle counties. It is part of the larger Cheboygan River Watershed, of which the Black River Watershed accounts for 38%.

The Black River Watershed is a jewel of northern lower Michigan, with diverse options for outdoor recreation and amazing aesthetic appeal. Before flowing into Black Lake, the Upper Black River joins up with many coldwater tributaries and supports a healthy coldwater fishery. It also runs through Pigeon River Country State Forest (PRC), a premier destination for hiking, hunting and fishing. Because of the special features of the PRC, more protective land and water management policies are in place there than on most state forest lands.

Black Lake, the 9th largest inland lake in Michigan, is heavily utilized for recreation and is famous for its self-sustaining population of lake sturgeon, a threatened species. Anglers also spend time at Black Lake fishing for muskellunge, northern pike, yellow perch, walleye and bass. Besides the Black River, Black Lake also receives the flow of the Rainy River and Stewart, Mud and Stony Creeks. When the Lower Black River flows out of Black Lake toward Lake Huron, the character of the river is noticeably different than the Upper Black's. Because of its close proximity to Black Lake and because of the local karst topography (which keeps groundwater inflows low), the 11-mile Lower Black River becomes a warmwater habitat with fairly homogenous flow.

Partners working to maintain and improve the high water quality found in this river system focus on improving Best Management Practices at road/stream crossings, working with landowners to improve stewardship practices and controlling erosion at numerous sites along the river. Work is also ongoing to preserve, protect and enhance the wildlife corridors and habitat in the area outside of the boundaries of the Pigeon River Country State Forest.

For more information on the Black River or Black Lake Watershed, see http://www.watershedcouncil.org/water%20resources/local%20watersheds/black%20lake%20watershed/

Communities
Alverno, Manning, Onaway, Tower, Wateland

Recreation Areas
Mackinaw State Forest, Pigeon River Country State Forest

Major Tributaries
East Branch Black River, Canada Creek, Packer Creek, Rattlesnake Creek, Tomahawk Creek

Road/Stream Crossings
127
Cheboygan Watershed

The Cheboygan River Watershed drains 1,493 sq miles of northern Michigan. Originating as many headwater streams that eventually flow through a series of large lakes, this watershed empty's into Lake Huron at the port of Cheboygan.

The Cheboygan River Watershed boasts some truly huge lakes. Burt, Mullett, and Black lakes— the 4th, 5th and 8th largest inland lakes in Michigan, respectively— are part of this watershed. The Inland Waterway, the state’s longest chain of rivers and lakes that stretches nearly 40 miles, begins in Cheboygan. Historically heavily used by Native Americans for transportation, then transportation of felled trees during the logging era, the Waterway is still a tourist attraction. The relative groundwater loading to this watershed is the highest for any watershed in the Lower Peninsula, especially in the southern half of the watershed where the Sturgeon, Pigeon and Black rivers begin near Gaylord, which drain into Burt, Mullett and Black lakes, respectively. Eventually the Cheboygan River drains into Lake Huron at the port of Cheboygan. The Cheboygan River itself makes up only a small portion of the Cheboygan River Watershed.

Opportunities for outdoor recreation abound in the Cheboygan River Watershed due to the vast tracts of publicly-owned land that it contains. Nature lovers can find plenty of places to hike, bike, watch birds, pick berries and morel mushrooms, fish, hunt, camp, ski, snowshoe, kayak or canoe, or ride horseback. Most of the watershed is covered by forest, with patches of wetland here and there. Water quality is generally quite good, and the watershed contains the Pigeon, Sturgeon and Black rivers, which are blue ribbon trout streams. The Black River and Black Lake are also home to the threatened lake sturgeon.

 Communities
Alanson, Cheboygan, Gaylord, Indian River, Onaway, Vanderbilt, Wolverine

 Recreation Areas
Aloha State Park, Burt Lake State Park, Cheboygan State Park, Mackinaw State Forest, Onaway State Park, Otsego Lake State Park, Pigeon River Country State Forest

 Major Tributaries
Black River, Cheboygan River, Crooked River, Indian River, Maple River, Pigeon River, Rainy River, Sturgeon River

 Road/Stream Crossings
779
Lake Huron Coastal Watershed

Michigan’s beautiful natural landscapes enrich our lives, but perhaps no landscape is more breathtaking than our coastal areas. Michigan has approximately 3,921 miles of Great Lakes shoreline – more coast than any other continental U.S. state.

The Lake Huron Coastal Watershed is a transition zone between terrestrial and lake ecosystems. This zone is characterized by numerous small streams and watersheds that flow directly into Lake Huron, including Saginaw Bay. Although each of these component watersheds is relatively small, these streams provide important spawning habitat for Lake Huron fishes, and the wetland areas provide habitat for waterfowl and other wildlife species.

The coastal ecosystem not only serves as a vital transition area between aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, but also provides critical habitat for many wildlife, fish and plant species. Coastal features such as wetlands and dunes are extremely fragile and can easily be impacted by land use activities and invasive species, such as phragmites. These areas require special attention because they provide habitat for unique species, buffer shorelines from erosion and are sensitive to alterations.

Communities
Alabaster, Greenbush, Harrisville, Ossineke, Presque Isle, Rogers City

Recreation Areas
Au Sable State Forest, Harrisville State Park, Huron National Forest, Mackinaw State Forest, Negwegen State Park, Thompsons Harbor State Park, Wigwam Bay State Wildlife Area
Upper Manistee River Watershed

The Upper Manistee River drains 565 sq miles across portions of Antrim, Otsego, Crawford, Kalkaska and Missaukee counties. The mainstem flows for about 78 miles before discharging to Manistee Lake and then Lake Michigan at the City of Manistee.

In September 2004, the Upper Manistee River was designated under the Michigan Natural Rivers Act (Part 305 N.R.P. Act (1994 PA 451)). The process began in January of 1994. The designation is a form of zoning that is designed to control development within 400 feet of the ordinary high water mark (or "river’s edge") on both sides of the river.

Additionally, two segments of the Upper Manistee River watershed are state designated blue ribbon trout streams. They are the Manistee mainstem from Deward down to the confluence with the North Branch of the Manistee River and the North Branch of the Manistee River from Mecum Road down to the confluence with the mainstem.

Flow stability is a determining factor in ecological and evolutionary processes in streams and is positively correlated to fish abundance, growth, survival and reproduction. The Manistee River mainstem has very stable flows, being in the top one or two in the country. The extreme stability of the mainstem of the Manistee River is a reflection of the geology and predominately sandy soils in the watershed.

Communities
Deward, Ishaward, MacIntyre Landing

Recreation Areas
Au Sable State Forest, Mackinaw State Forest, Pere Marquette State Forest

Major Tributaries
Cameron Creek, Goose Creek, North Branch Manistee River, Portage Creek

Road/Stream Crossings
88 (Road/Stream Crossing Inventory)
Muskegon River Watershed

Covering 2,700 sq miles, the Muskegon River Watershed is the second-largest watershed in Michigan. Its headwaters in Crawford and Roscommon include Higgins Lake and Houghton Lake. From there, the Muskegon River flows over 200 miles to Lake Michigan.

Within the service area of Huron Pines, the large Muskegon River Watershed is born. Both Higgins and Houghton lakes are at the extreme northern end of the watershed. Both of these valuable recreation resources receive heavy use and restoration projects led by local partners are essential in order to help maintain opportunities for quality recreational experiences.

Huron Pines has been actively involved in numerous projects within the Higgins Lake Watershed. This watershed covers an area of 18,907 acres and is located in Roscommon and Crawford counties with minor acreage in Kalkaska and Missaukee counties. The area comprising the Higgins Lake Watershed is a highly popular tourist destination due to its clear water, natural setting, wildlife habitats and proximity to two major highway corridors, I-75 and US-127.

Water from Higgins Lake flows to Lake Michigan via the Cut River, Houghton Lake and the Muskegon River, which flows in a southwesterly. The greater Muskegon River Watershed covers parts of Wexford, Missaukee, Roscommon, Lake, Osceola, Clare, Newaygo, Mecosta, Montcalm and Muskegon counties. Only one mile north of Lake Higgins is Beaver Creek, which flows into the Au Sable River and eventually into Lake Huron.

Higgins Lake is one of Michigan’s larger and more spectacular lakes, with a surface area of 9,831 acres and a volume of nearly 20 billion cubic feet. Higgins Lake is a spring-fed lake with 51.3% of its volume coming from groundwater. Only 5.7% of its volume comes from streams and the remaining 43% is derived from direct rainfall and surface runoff. Higgins Lake has a long hydrologic retention time, estimated at 12.4 years and is a clear water lake that ranks tenth in size in the state of Michigan and fifth in depth. The shoreline of Higgins Lake covers 21.3 miles. The mean depth of the lake is 44.3 feet with about one-third of Higgins Lake being shoal and about one-half of the lake exceeding depths of 50 feet. There are two deep basins in the lake. The north basin is 135 feet deep and the south basin is 100 feet deep.

Communities
Cadillac, Evart, Reed City, Big Rapids, Lakeview, Howard City, Newaygo, Fremont, Muskegon

Recreation Areas
Au Sable State Forest, Backus Creek State Game Area, Haymarsh State Game Area, North Higgins Lake State Park, South Higgins Lake State Park, Houghton Lake State Wildlife Research Area, Manistee National Forest, Muskegon State Game Area, Muskegon State Park, Newaygo State Park, Pere Marquette State Forest, White Pine Trail State Park, William Mitchell State Park

Major Tributaries
Clam River, Hersey River, Middle Branch River, Little Muskegon River, West Branch Muskegon River
Ocqueoc River Watershed

Located in Presque Isle County, the Ocqueoc River Watershed drains approximately 148 sq miles. Its headwaters flow north and eventually empty into Lake Huron. A very small portion of the watershed is located in northern Montmorency County.

“Ocqueoc” is a Native American word meaning “crooked waters.” One look at the twisty, turning course of the river confirms that the Ocqueoc River was aptly named. The area is very rural and about 20% of the Ocqueoc River Watershed is made up of publicly-owned land.

The Ocqueoc River Watershed is located upon an area of limestone bedrock, leading to its karst topography characterized by sinkholes and the “undergrounds,” where a tributary disappears and reemerges several hundred feet downstream. The Ocqueoc River is also known for having the largest waterfall in the Lower Peninsula. Ocqueoc Falls, with about a five-foot drop, is a very popular tourist attraction.

The headwaters portion of the Ocqueoc River Watershed contains expanses of wetlands and small lakes, many of which have been flooded by manmade impoundments. This area of the watershed is dominated by cedar, tamarack, balsam, poplar, aspen and black ash trees and supports a warmwater fishery with sunfish, bass and northern pike. After leaving the “chain of lakes,” the main branch of the Ocqueoc flows through Millersburg, then continues on over Ocqueoc Falls. The stone outcroppings here are a rare feature in northern Michigan. After passing the falls, the Ocqueoc is joined by coldwater tributaries Little Ocqueoc and Silver Creek, which cool the Ocqueoc’s temperature and allow it to support salmon, steelhead and trout fisheries.

**Communities**

Big Cut, Hawks, Millersburg, Ocqueoc

**Recreation Areas**

Mackinaw State Forest, Ocqueoc Falls Bicentennial Pathway

**Major Tributaries**

Indian Creek, Little Ocqueoc River, Silver Creek

**Road/Stream Crossings**

70

Image source: MI DNR
The headwaters of the Pigeon River originate northeast of Gaylord. From there the Pigeon River flows north to Mullett Lake. This watershed drains 88,000 acres in Cheboygan and Otsego counties and is part of the larger Cheboygan River Watershed.

A gem of northern Lower Michigan, the Pigeon River is a designated Natural River. This allows the state to offer greater protections to preserve its fisheries, wildlife, scenic and recreational resources. The majority of the watershed is heavily forested with little development. The Pigeon River is influenced by high groundwater inflow due to the presence of permeable soils and large changes in topography. Flowing through the heart of the Pigeon River Country, the Pigeon River is one of Michigan’s top coldwater streams. Noted as a blue ribbon trout stream, it is a sought-after destination for the outdoor enthusiast. The groundwater tributaries help to keep the river cold year-round, supporting a thriving coldwater fishery that includes steelhead, brown trout and brook trout.

The Pigeon River runs through Pigeon River Country State Forest (PRC), a premier destination for hiking, hunting and fishing. PRC is the biggest contiguous piece of state land in northern lower Michigan and is home to the only free-ranging elk herd east of the Mississippi. Because of the special features of the PRC, more protective land and water management policies are in place there than on most state forest lands, helping to protect the pristine character of the Pigeon.

**Communities**
Afton, Fingerboard Corner, Legrand, Sparr

**Recreation Areas**
Mackinaw State Forest, Pigeon River Country State Forest, Shingle Mill Pathway

**Major Tributaries**
Bird Tally Creek, Cornwall Creek, Grindstone Creek, Little Pigeon River, South Branch Pigeon River, Wilkes Creek

**Road/Stream Crossings**
18 (Road/Stream Crossing Inventory)
The Pine River-Van Etten Lake Watershed is part of the larger Au Sable River Watershed and is located in Alcona and Iosco counties. The Pine River-Van Etten Lake Watershed drains an area of 292 square miles.

Although the Pine River-Van Etten Lake Watershed feeds into the Au Sable River, it clearly has unique features and resource opportunities. Due to differences in soil types, hydrology and agricultural opportunities, the Pine River-Van Etten Lake area warrants its own Management Plan to address its unique resource concerns.

The Pine River-Van Etten Lake Watershed drains 187,000 acres in Alcona and Iosco counties. The 372 miles of streams in the Pine River Watershed flow through agricultural, wetland and forested areas before entering Van Etten Lake, a 1,409-acre reservoir impounded by Van Etten Dam. Downstream from Van Etten Lake, Van Etten Creek drains into the Au Sable River, which flows another 2 miles before entering Lake Huron.

The Pine River-Van Etten Lake Watershed is a scenic and popular place to hunt, fish, boat and snowmobile. One third of the watershed lies within the Huron National Forest and the watershed is home to the endangered Kirtland’s warbler and the threatened bald eagle and common loon. However, the watershed faces environmental challenges. Excess sedimentation, elevated levels of phosphorus in Van Etten Lake and invasive species like zebra mussels and Eurasian watermilfoil are problems Huron Pines and partners are working to solve.

**Communities**
Lincoln, Mikado, Oscoda

**Recreation areas**
[Go to Au Sable State Forest](#)

**Major tributaries**
South Branch Pine River, West Branch Pine River, East Branch Pine River, Van Etten Creek

**Road/stream crossings**
189
The Rifle River Watershed covers 382 sq miles in Ogemaw and Arenac counties. The Rifle River begins in Ogemaw County and flows south and then southeast to its outlet to Lake Huron (Saginaw Bay).

The Rifle River, located in Ogemaw and Arenac counties and identified as the highest quality tributary to Saginaw Bay, is one of Michigan’s 16 Designated Natural Rivers. The first stroke of your paddle in the Rifle River tells you this place is special. Uninterrupted forests in the headwaters give way to small cities and rolling farm fields dotted with cattle. The fast-moving waters churn over ancient bedrock, flow under canoes and ripple over the backs of sucker and steelhead. The last paddle stroke propels you into Saginaw Bay with vast Lake Huron waiting beyond, making you realize that the Rifle River Watershed is part of something much bigger.

The main branch flows undammed for 60 miles, joined along the way by 140 miles of tributary streams. Recreational opportunities abound. The Rifle River Recreation Area, managed by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, lies within Au Sable State Forest and is a great place to paddle, fish, hunt, camp, bike, hike and view wildlife. This recreation area boasts 10 scenic lakes and 14 miles of pathways. In the winter snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and snowmobiling are popular activities. Further downstream in the small city of Omer, the "sucker capital of Michigan", anglers gather from near and far to line the banks of the Rifle each spring and fish a mighty run of spawning suckers. The Rifle River is one of the most heavily used streams in northern Michigan, making conservation both a high priority and a big challenge.

Huron Pines has played an active role in the Rifle River Watershed, coordinating on-the-ground restoration projects and reaching out to organizations, volunteers and landowners to strengthen conservation efforts. Ongoing and upcoming projects include efforts to improve stormwater management in the cities of West Branch and Rose City, the design and installation of education river etiquette signage at public access sites and work to connect interested landowners with resources that will help them develop better land-use practices.

**Communities**
Alger, Lupton, Omer, Rose City, Skidway Lake, West Branch

**Recreation Areas**
Au Sable State Forest, Rifle River State Recreation Area

**Major Tributaries**
West Branch Rifle River

**Road/Stream Crossings**
245 (Road/Stream Crossing Inventory)
Sturgeon River Watershed

The Sturgeon River headwaters originate near Gaylord and the river flows north to Burt Lake, where it has been redirected from its original flow into the Indian River. The Sturgeon River Watershed is part of the larger Cheboygan River Watershed.

The Sturgeon River is one of the most pristine and high-gradient streams in Lower Michigan. It is one of Michigan’s top coldwater streams and a notable blue ribbon trout stream. Flowing through the heart of Pigeon River Country, it is a sought-after destination for the outdoor enthusiast. The Sturgeon River runs through Pigeon River Country State Forest (PRC), a premier destination for hiking, hunting and fishing. PRC is the biggest contiguous piece of state land in northern Lower Michigan, and is home to the only free-ranging elk herd east of the Mississippi. Because of the special features of the PRC, more protective land and water management policies are in place there than on most state forest lands.

The Sturgeon River is influenced by high groundwater inflow due to the presence of permeable soils and large changes in topography. In its headwaters, it is born from a set of groundwater springs and swamps and flows over sand and limestone bedrock. Dotted with lakes, the watershed is mostly forested. The river continues through a high-gradient area, toward the town of Wolverine, where it is joined by the West Branch Sturgeon River. The riffle-pool sequences generated by the high-gradient flow of the Sturgeon River make for excellent fish habitat, especially in combination with its crisp, cold waters from groundwater tributaries. This coldwater fishery supports brown trout, steelhead, brook trout, walleye, bluegill and white suckers. The Sturgeon River swiftly surges into Burt Lake, since being redirected from its original course to the Indian River due to the navigational difficulties caused by large sand deposits it left there.

Communities
Gaylord, Green Timbers, Rondo, Trowbridge, Vanderbilt, Wolverine

Recreation Areas
Burt Lake State Park, Pigeon River Country State Forest, Mackinaw State Forest

Major tributaries
Beebe Creek, Club Stream, Marl Creek, Mossback Creek, Pickerel Creek, Stewart Creek, West Branch Sturgeon River

Road/stream crossings
11 (Road/Stream Crossing Inventory)
Tawas River Watershed

The Tawas River Watershed drains 156 sq miles and is located within Iosco County. The Tawas River flows three miles from Lake Tawas to its outlet into Tawas Bay, which is part of Lake Huron (Saginaw Bay).

The Tawas River Watershed is located wholly within Iosco County. A number of small headwater streams originate in Huron National Forest and flow east before turning south, eventually flowing into Lake Tawas, which is the largest lake in the watershed at over 1,600 surface acres. Below the outlet of Lake Tawas, the Tawas River flows along the coast through East Tawas and Tawas City for three miles before draining into Lake Huron at Tawas Bay. At the river mouth, anglers enjoy fishing for yellow perch, salmon and steelhead. In Lake Tawas bluegill, northern pike, largemouth bass and smallmouth bass are pursued. Much of the Tawas River Watershed is poorly drained, creating wetland areas that attract waterfowl and other wildlife. The Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area is a great spot to view wildlife, including many species of birds and mammals.

Communities
East Tawas, Tawas City, Wilber

Recreation Areas
Huron National Forest, Tuttle Marsh Wildlife Area

Major Tributaries
Silver Creek

Road/Stream Crossings
39 (Road/Stream Crossing Inventory)
Thunder Bay River Watershed

The Thunder Bay River Watershed drains 1,250 sq miles. The mainstem Thunder Bay River originates at McCormick Lake, northeast of Lewiston. From there the river flows northeast 75 miles to its confluence with Thunder Bay of Lake Huron.

Heavily influenced by glaciation, the landscape of the Thunder Bay River Watershed is made up of rolling hills, gentle streams and abundant forests. With over 500 miles of rivers and streams, nearly 90 lakes and expansive wetlands throughout, the region is truly a gem of Northeast Michigan. Historically, Native Americans occupied the watershed, especially around Hubbard Lake and the area near the mouth of the Thunder Bay at Lake Huron. Then came the logging days, when the virgin forests were harvested and transported through the waterways. The logging industry gave way to farming and limestone excavation. Today, oil and gas wells dot the landscape.

The Thunder Bay River Watershed, which covers parts of Presque Isle, Montmorency, Oscoda, Alcona and Alpena counties, provides homes to a vast array of aquatic invertebrates as well as reptiles, birds, mammals and amphibians. The human inhabitants and visitors to this area can enjoy many varied outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, canoeing, kayaking, camping, morel mushroom- and berry-picking, and bird watching. Many water bodies within the watershed can be accessed via publicly- and state-owned land. Two very popular water bodies are Fletcher Pond and Hubbard Lake. While recreational opportunities abound, habitat fragmentation caused by a number of dams limits some of the fishing and canoeing possibilities in the central regions of the watershed.

Communities
Alpena, Atlanta, Backus Beach, Hillman

Recreation Areas
Alpena Wildlife Sanctuary, Au Sable State Forest, Clear Lake State Park, High Country Pathway, Huron National Forest, Mackinaw State Forest

Major Tributaries
North Branch Thunder Bay River, Lower South Branch Thunder Bay River, Upper South Branch Thunder Bay River, West Branch River, Wolf Creek

Road/Stream Crossings

131