

Potential Description of One Large Primitive Area (see December 11, 2103 Board minutes page 5.)

ESSEX CHAIN LAKES

This area is located in the Towns of Newcomb and Minerva in Essex County and the Town of Indian Lake in Hamilton County and also includes a portion of the Blue Mountain Wild Forest that was reclassified and added to this area in 2013. This Primitive Area was originally classified as two Primitive Areas, Essex Chain Lakes and Pine Lake.

The two areas were merged into the Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Area upon the authorization of a bridge over the Cedar River which enabled the connection of one corridor within the Blue Mountain Wild Forest, containing Camp 6 Road, with an unclassified corridor containing Chain Lakes Road (South), adjacent to the western boundary of the Hudson Gorge Wilderness. This resulted in the classification of lands pending classification and the reclassification of a portion of Blue Mountain Wild Forest, north of Pine Lake Primitive Area, eliminating the potential corridor which had separated Essex Chain Lakes Primitive Area from Pine Lake Primitive Area.

The northern boundary of the area generally follows the Boots-to-Cornell Road east from its beginning to a point ¼ mile from the west end of Fifth Lake, continuing east from there generally ¼ mile north of Fifth and Sixth Lakes to the Chain Lakes Road (North), then along it to Camp 6 Road. The eastern boundary is the 1/10th-mile wide corridor of Wild Forest south to the Chain Lakes Road (North) and along it before leaving the road where a bridge once crossed the Cedar River. The eastern boundary then follows the Chain Lakes Road (South) adjacent to the Hudson Gorge Wilderness to a 1/10th-mile wide corridor Wild Forest to the northern boundary of the former Indian River Tract. The southern boundary is the northern boundary of the former Indian River Tract and unnamed streams leading west and north to the Cedar River. The western boundary follows the Cedar River to its confluence with the Rock River, the Rock River to the outlet of First Lake and drainages north to Little Grassy Pond and the boundary of private lands; from there it continues northeast to the beginning of the Boots-to-Cornell Road.

The dominant feature of the landscape is the Essex Chain Lakes, a series of eight interconnected lakes. Together with nearby ponds, this tract has eighteen lakes and ponds. The Essex Chain Lakes includes eight lakes that are interconnected or within portaging distance of each other to provide a six- to seven- mile canoe route. Other prominent features of this area include Pine Lake and Mud, Clear and Corner Ponds.

Significant wetlands surround many of the water bodies and are also found throughout the upland area. Both emergent marshes and deepwater marsh wetlands border the Essex Chain Lakes. These wetlands provide nesting habitat, food and cover for wildlife, stabilize lake sediment and cycle large quantities of nutrients. Deepwater marsh wetlands provide valuable fish spawning and nursery habitat and are a food source for waterfowl and other wildlife. Several emergent and deepwater wetland plants are found in the channels which connect the lakes, including two state protected species.

Rivers in the unit include portions of the Cedar and Rock Rivers. The Rock River is designated Scenic and the Cedar River is designated Wild from the southwest edge of the Primitive Area to the Essex County line, at which place its designation changes to Scenic.

There are permanent restrictions on the land that preclude Wilderness classification. Prior to transferring these lands to the State, The Nature Conservancy granted easements to the Towns of Minerva and Newcomb over portions of the Essex Chain Lakes Tract that will allow for, as permitted by DEC, float plane access to First and Pine Lakes. The easement also grants the Towns access to, and use of materials from, two gravel pits located on the periphery of the property in order to provide gravel to maintain roads, trails and other infrastructure in this Area that may be open for motorized use. These activities would be nonconforming in lands classified as Wilderness. Even across adjacent lands and waters, such as the Essex Chain Lakes other than First Lake, the activities of float plane use in such close proximity to the lakes would significantly detract from the sense of remoteness expected in Wilderness.

The Department developed an Interim Access Plan for this area in June 2013.

This area does not yet have an adopted Unit Management Plan.

Essex Chain Lakes area statistics:

State Lands	9,940 acres
Waterbodies (18)	767 acres
Non-conforming Uses:	
Camps	—
Roads (private)	indeterminate mileage
Float Plane Access*	2 lakes (First Lake and Pine Lake)