Ecological Jewels of the Straits
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This brochure highlights eight ecologically significant sites in the State of Michigan which when you can view some of Michigan's coastal ecosystems and associated rare plants and animals. It describes the natural features found within these sites and provides photos and additional information on select rare plants and animals found here. A map and information on how to access these sites are also provided.

The Great Lakes shores in this region are extremely vulnerable because of high development pressures. Fragmentation of habitats, disruption of ecological processes, and some human and animal disturbances can negatively affect the species that occur here. Most of the plants and animals highlighted in this brochure are considered as endangered or threatened and are legally protected under provisions of the Michigan Natural Features Inventory Act. Funding for this brochure was provided by the Michigan Coastal Management Program, NatureServe, U.S. Forest Service, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and Michigan State University Extension.

This brochure was produced by the Michigan Natural Features Inventory, Michigan State University Extension. The Maxton Plains complex. These dunes are part of a larger dune system along the Lake Michigan shoreline. The sand dunes are formed from the sand that is blown during the winter months by the wind. The sand is then deposited during the summer months by the wind, creating a new layer of sand on top of the existing dune.

The Lake Huron landscape is a rare grassland known only from Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ontario. The grassshaper inhabits open sandy dunes and beaches and can be found along the beach at Big Knob Campground. Similar to the common grove grass, it has much larger flowers heads, and the finely dissected leaves are hairless.

The white flowers of Pitcher's thistle grows in open dunes only along the Great Lakes shores. Its blue-green leaves are densely covered with white silky hairs, which help minimize the dehydration of heat. It also has a strong root system that allows it to withstand the forces of wind and wave.

Houghton's goldenrod is known only from the Great Lakes shores, occurring primarily in calcareous beach sand dunes, sandy shores, interdunal wetlands and northern fens. It is abundant in the wetlands along U.S. 2 at Point Au Chene. Its large yellow flowers (see photo), narrow leaves and minute hairy stamens of the flower headly distinguish it from other goldenrods that have similar flat-topped flower clusters.

The black tern is Michigan's smALLEST tern, averaging 25 cm in length and 61 cm in wingspan. It is small and black and white, with a white neck and a black cap. It is a highly migratory species and can be seen during spring and fall migrations. It feeds on small fish, insects, and crustaceans.

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Ecologically Significant Sites to Visit in the Straits Region of Michigan

Michigan's more than 3,000 miles of Great Lakes shoreline represent some of the state's most valuable assets. These shores harbor a unique assemblage of natural ecosystems and associated plant and animal species. Ordovician and Silurian limestone and dolomite bedrock, deposited when most of Michigan was a shallow marine basin some 350 million to 500 million years ago, underlies the Straits area. The calcium-rich bedrock supports several rare plant and animal species, including dwarf lisa iris, rare boreal land snails and Hine's emerald dragonfly. The landforms associated with the shorelines of the Great Lakes create several unique habitats. The coastal features include open dunes, dune and swale complexes, and large marshes in protected bays of the Great Lakes. Coniferous forests, northern fens and alvar grasslands also occur here. Some of these habitats and associated plants and animals are regionally or globally rare, and several are found only on the Great Lakes shores.