

Walter Cook Caves Ecological Reserve

Backgrounder

Land Designation

Ecological reserves play a key role in Manitoba's Protected Areas Initiative by protecting unique, rare and representative examples of plants, animals, geological features and ecosystems. They are the most protected of the provincially designated sites within Manitoba's network of protected areas.

Landscape Description

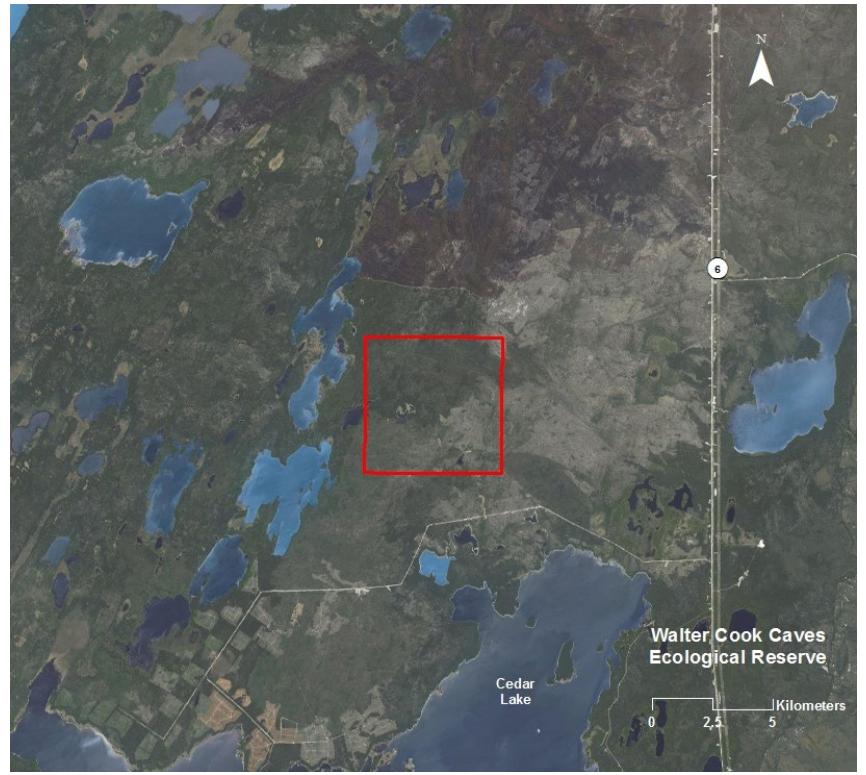
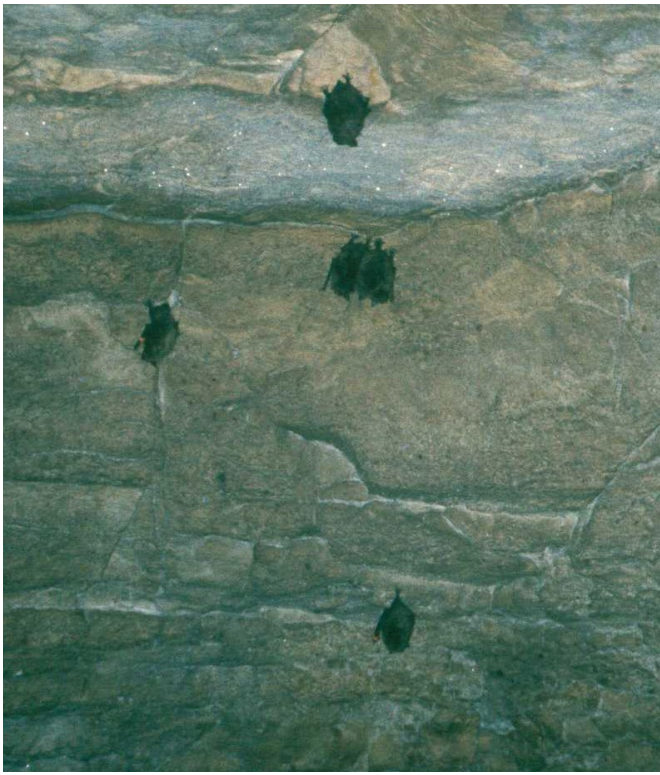
Walter Cook Caves Ecological Reserve protects a vast array of Karst topography – limestone and dolomite areas etched by water, creating numerous solution features approximately 430 million years old. The reserve covers approximately 2,250 hectares, which includes six caves: Walter Cook's, Iguana Crypt, Ice Cascade, 4-Eyed, Caprocl and Anticipation. The region has several grassy surface depressions (similar to Irish turloughs) known collectively as "Deep Basin" which are unique to North America.



Outstanding Features

Boreal forest dominates the area primarily with Jack pine although trembling aspen is common in sinkholes and moister sites. Lichen covers the forest floor along with crocuses and fireweed in recently burned areas. Additionally, the calypso orchid, a rare find in Manitoba, can be seen blooming around Tear Drop Lake in the early spring.

Fauna in the reserve include two species of bats: little brown myotis and the less common northern myotis, as well as moths that have been found over-wintering in some caves, and bears that use the caves as dens. The site also contains vast areas of ancient fossil colonies known as stromatolites, representing some of the oldest forms of life – the single-celled blue-green algae.



Walter Cook's Cave is primarily a solution cave exhibiting beautiful scallops on the roof. A few overwintering bats have been banded from this cave. Iguana Crypt Cave has some of the finest speleothem displays known in Manitoba, and harbours over 300 bats each winter. Ice Cascade Cave is a prominent trench, reaching a depth of 6.3 metres, one of the deepest in the region. Its scalloped walls provide ledges and recesses for long cascading draperies of ice that extend up to 5 metres in depth. They last well into summer, and may form perennial ice in some years.

Deep Basin is the most outstanding of the features found in the ecological reserve. It is composed of grassy surface depressions that fill with water through subterranean passages in the rock during wet periods, and empty the same way in dry periods. The Basin dries out completely in dry years and floods during spells of particularly heavy rain because the subterranean conduits cannot cope with above-average runoff.

The ecological reserve also contains a series of bedrock-hosted drainage points that lie at the bottom of the large, collapsed sinkhole surrounded by 12 to 18 metres of limestone/dolomite cliffs. The largest drain on the site, Anticipation Drain, is considered to be a significant active regional drain. Its rubble-strewn orifice shows abundant evidence of solution and significant flows of water. A cool current of air that flows out may indicate that large reservoirs of water exist at great depth.

The Walter Cook Caves Ecological Reserve will be maintained for the preservation and protection of these rare caves. **A permit from Manitoba Parks is required to access Walter Cook Caves Ecological Reserve.** Indigenous people are permitted to carry out their treaty and aboriginal rights within the ecological reserve. All other activities require prior ministerial approval.

This area is categorized by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a protected area under the management category Ia – a protected area managed for strict nature protection available primarily for scientific research and/or environmental monitoring. These protected lands are free from logging, mining, hydroelectric development, oil and gas development, and any other activities that could harm habitat.