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## Annual tour of Little Siss' 'Big Island' is Sept. 5

by **Kathy Hanson**  
Staff Reporter

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On Saturday, Sept. 5 the public is invited to a walking tour of the island located in the middle of Little Sissabagama Lake. Led and narrated by Executive Director Rick Gauger of West Wisconsin Land Trust, this annual tour is publicized and offered as part of the partnership between the DNR, WWLT and the Little Sissabagama Shoreowners Association.

Known as the Frank Stout Wilderness Preserve, so-named for Stout, who gifted the 31-acre island to the LSSOA in the early 1900s, the island — also called Big Island — has 4,400 feet of wild shoreline and still boasts huge stands of old-growth pine and hardwoods that have remained uncut since the 1800s. Stout's interest in gifting the island was for its preservation and safekeeping and, according to John Montgomery, president of LSSOA, "the shoreowners take that responsibility very seriously."

Montgomery said the shoreowners meeting will begin at 9 a.m. and will conclude close to 11:30 a.m. at Pine Ridge Resort on Big Sissabagama Lake. People interested in the tour should go to Pine Ridge resort. Volunteers from the shoreowners association will take them by boat to the island for the one-hour tour. There is no public boat landing on the lake. Little Siss, as it's known locally, is considered by many naturalists, the DNR and lake residents to be one of the finest examples of a northwoods lake, with its clear water, diverse fish and bird life, and reptiles and amphibians. Sissabagama is a Native American word meaning "lake of many bays."

Montgomery, who has lived on the lake for 10 years, said that WWLT and LSSOA are partners in a Land Protection Agreement for Stout Island through a conservation easement signed in 2007 which gave the shoreowners property rights to the island and also safeguarded the island from abuse and residential development. The LSSOA, which achieved non-profit status as an organization in the 1990s, is now in the process of achieving status as a State Natural Area (SNA) which Montgomery said will provide the shoreowners property tax exemption for the island. Annual property taxes on the island are approximately \$5,000 to \$6,000, according to Montgomery.

The island itself is not used much by the shoreowners, said Montgomery, who explained that "we cannot have campfires, for example, on the island." But the estimated 52 members of the shoreowners association love and appreciate the island's natural beauty and habitat.

The requirement for the annual tour is to demonstrate that the island is open to the public, as part of an agreement between the DNR and Sawyer County, according to Montgomery. If there were a public access, for example a boat landing, "we would have received property tax exemption long ago," said Montgomery. "But the land around the lake is all privately owned," Montgomery said.

Gauger, who will lead the walking tour, said that "this is an opportunity to examine what a SNA looks like — a glimpse of really wild property." He will explain what SNA is for property like the island, adding that the SNA is the highest designation by the State of Wisconsin for natural land.

SNA status carries with it additional restrictions for use by the public; however Big Island is available to the public for hiking, nature observation, fishing and even hunting, since there is no endangered large mammal on the island, said Gauger.

In the summer 2008 edition of Open Spaces, the magazine produced by West Wisconsin Land Trust, the island is referred to as a "rare jewel . . . rich with recreational opportunities, which, of course, means fishing for musky, bass, and northern pikes. Because of the lake's friendly size and clean water, adults and kids often swim the entire length of the lake on hot summer days. At night, families cruise in their pontoons to dine, watch the sunset, and listen to the loons."

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