

HEART OF VILAS TRAIL SYSTEM:

Fueling Five Connected Communities



Executive Summary

Known for its scenic views through the Northern Highland-American Legion State Forest, the Heart of Vilas Bike Trail System connects five communities in the Northwoods of Wisconsin with one common goal: to enhance the region's plethora of outdoor recreation opportunities and grow the area as a cycling destination. Designated as a National Recreation Trail in 2022, over 52 miles of paved trails connect the communities of St. Germain, Sayner, Boulder Junction, Manitowish Waters and Mercer in Vilas and Iron counties.

Attracting over 160,000 cyclists annually, the trail system makes a significant contribution to the local tourism industry. Not only does the trail system draw people to the area, it allows residents and visitors alike to travel safely on two wheels to and from campgrounds, resorts, hotels, dining, shopping and even other trails.

Based on a survey of trail system users, this report highlights the impact of outdoor recreation infrastructure on the local economies and paves the way for future outdoor recreation projects.

The Heart of Vilas Bike Trail System generates \$25.7 million for the area's economy.



Paving the Way to Collaboration

The earliest trail section was paved in 1994 in Boulder Junction, with expansions in 1995 and 2000 that linked downtown Boulder Junction to the Crystal Lake Campground 11 miles away. At that point, it was simply known as the Boulder Junction Bike Trail. It was always the dream to expand the trail system, and in 2007, the Heart of Vilas Bike Trail was born as the paved, off-road trails connected into Sayner and St. Germain. Manitowish Waters connected in 2014, and Mercer connected in 2018, completing the 52 continuous miles of the current trail system. These communities continue to grow their trails. Recent additions include a 3.3-mile segment along Highway H, completed in Boulder Junction in 2024, and another paved mile in Manitowish Waters, along Highway 51, in 2025.

The Heart of Vilas Trail System is an excellent example of collaboration across communities. Each town along the trail is responsible for its own trail maintenance, fundraising and expansion plans (often with the help of volunteer committees and dedicated residents). With a shared vision for the trail system, these communities provide a cohesive and unified experience for users.



Users: The Heartbeat of the Trail

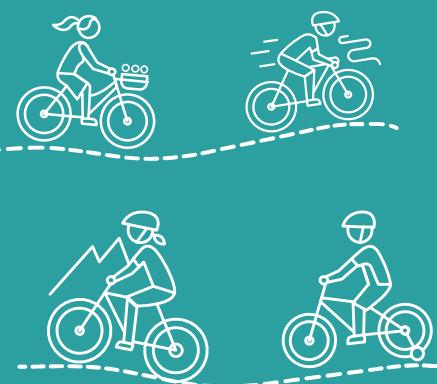
The Heart of Vilas Bike Trail serves as both a magnet for tourism and an asset for area residents. A survey found the majority of users are from out-of-town (46% traveled from 151-300 miles and 18% traveled over 300 miles, including internationally). In contrast, locals, those traveling less than 50 miles, made up 18% of users.

The trail system also plays a major role in users' decisions to visit and directly benefits lodging establishments. Approximately 57% of survey respondents noted that they came to the area primarily to bike the trail system, and more than 60% of users stayed overnight: 31% of respondents stayed in a hotel/resort/cabin in one of the five communities, 10% stayed in a campground in one of the five communities, and 27% stayed in a nearby community not connected to the trail system or with family or friends in the area.

Repeat visitation is common among Heart of Vilas users. The survey found that 72% of respondents ride multiple times a year, 13% ride at least annually and 15% visited for the first time.

Like the heart pumps blood to enable life within the body, Heart of Vilas cyclists infuse life into the economies of Mercer, Manitowish Waters, Boulder Junction, Sayner and St. Germain in the Northwoods of Wisconsin.

Meet the Cyclists



ORIGINS

82% out-of-town

18% local

KEY MOTIVATION

57% came to the area to bike the trail

BEHAVIORS

72% ride multiple times per year

13% ride at least annually

41% stayed in paid lodging facilities



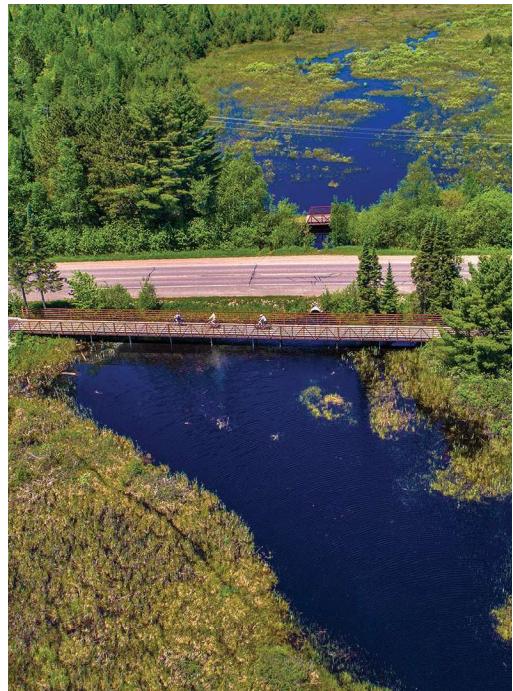
Pedaling into Business

The Heart of Vilas is vital to the local tourism economy, especially when use surges in the summer months. More than 162,500 cyclists rode the trail from May through September of 2025, with over 45,000 of those users in August alone. Counter data was not yet available for October at the time this report was created. However, with the later peak of fall colors and comfortable weather throughout the month, local businesses also noted increased traffic during the fall season.

On average, trail users spend \$188 per day, generating an estimated \$25.7 million in economic activity for the area. Lodging was the highest spending category, followed by food and beverages and souvenirs.

Overnight visitors spend more, approximately \$287 per day, while day trippers spend \$43 per day. Their overnight stays vary in length, with almost half (47%) staying one to three days, and more than a third (37%) staying seven days or longer, followed by 16% who stay 4 to 6 days.

With more than three quarters of the trail users coming from out of town, spending by these visitors injects revenue into the five local economies along the trail. It also supports 141 jobs and generates almost \$2 million in local and state tax revenues, which strengthens the communities.



Shifting Gears: Beyond Economic Value

In addition to the economic significance the trail system brings to the area, it also offers numerous intangible benefits. Providing an accessible, off-road trail for non-motorized transportation benefits both the community and the environment, allowing people to easily opt for non-motorized transportation for recreation or daily commuting.

Additionally, the trail serves as a backdrop for several community events, strengthening both tourism and community engagement. Community organizations in St. Germain, Manitowish Waters and Mercer all host non-competitive bike ride events. Pedal in the Pines, Solstice Festival and Loon Ride introduce people to the trail system in a cooperative environment. The Boulder Junction Chamber hosts a competitive triathlon introducing prospective riders to the trail system. These events support the trail system in numerous ways, from ongoing trail maintenance to funding trail expansions, establishing a fleet of adaptive bicycles for public use, and promoting and marketing the trails.

"We have seen more bikers coming yearly due to the bike trails and the expansion projects happening on them. This has greatly helped turn the fall season into an even more favorable time to visit Manitowish Waters as it becomes cooler and leaves change along the trails. Guests have also mentioned that it is nice that the trails run through the local towns because they are able to easily bike to many restaurants and shops."

**Nathan Ochocinski,
Manager, The Lodge at
Manitowish Waters**

Economic Significance



Riding into the Future

Cyclists are the number one priority for the Heart of Vilas Bike Trail, and plans for growth are always underway. While there is no one entity that oversees the entirety of the trail, each section can operate semi-independently to move projects forward at its own pace and in alignment with community needs.

Most notably, the Great Headwaters Trails Foundation is fundraising for an expansion to link Eagle River to St. Germain and the Heart of Vilas Bike Trail System. As the county seat and home to several other bike trail systems, a connection to Eagle River would provide visitors with more trails to explore and residents with additional transportation options. Additionally, Iron County Outdoor Recreation Enthusiasts in Mercer plans to create a new trail segment to connect existing trails to WinMan Trails, an off-road biking and hiking destination that already generates \$4.3 million annually in economic impact. It would create another loop, allowing users to complete a circular route. Future expansion plans also include a connection to Arbor Vitae, providing direct trail access in Minocqua and linking to perhaps the most popular destination town in the immediate area.

While their projects may vary in size, scope and timeline, communities are not building in a bubble. They are in constant communication and collaboration with each other to ensure a great experience for users.

In the 30 years since its humble beginnings, the Heart of Vilas Bike Trail System has far outgrown the dreams of its creators. Through cooperation and collaboration, it will continue to grow and thrive as a beloved asset in the area.



"The Trail brings business with bike rentals, sales and service, including bike repairs."

"The part I enjoy the most is meeting friendly visitors from around the country, including travelers from Iowa, Colorado and California."

"Santa Ron" Rhodes, Owner, St. Germain Rentals & St. Germain Bed and Breakfast



Methodology

The economic impact analysis is based on data collected from Heart of Vilas Trail System users between May and September 2025. The trail user counting program included three trail counters placed around Boulder Junction, and applied a trailwide use formula provided by Stephen Martin, Ph.D. in "Calculating Trail use from Counter Data" to estimate usage throughout the system. An online user survey during the same period collected 144 responses, providing direct data on visitor spending, behavior and motivations.

The economic contributions of trail user spending to the local economy were estimated using a sales area multiplier calculated using the formula provided by Wen-Huei Chen in "Variations in multipliers and related economic ratios for recreation and tourism impact analysis" (Michigan State University, 2001) and applying a conservative capture rate of 70% to reflect the proportion of visitor spending that is retained in the local economy. Other impacts (jobs and labor income) were estimated using ratios between visitor spending and local jobs and visitor spending and labor income reported by Travel Wisconsin for the economic impact of tourism in Vilas County in 2024.



OutdoorRecreation.wi.gov



biketheheart.org



THE HARBINGER CONSULTANCY

HarbingerConsult.com

This report was a joint effort produced by the chambers of commerce from each of the Heart of Vilas County Bike Trail System communities, Boulder Junction, Manitowish Waters, Mercer, Sayner and St. Germain, with support from the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation and The Harbinger Consultancy as a result of the Office's Do-It-Yourself Economic Impact Program in 2025.