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In the [Ojibwe language](#), the lake is called "Gichigami" ("big water"), but it is better known as "Gitche Gumee" as recorded by [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#) in [The Song of Hiawatha](#). Lake Superior was also immortalized by that name in the song "[The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald](#)" by [Gordon Lightfoot](#).

The lake was named le lac supérieur, or "Upper Lake," in the seventeenth century by [French explorers](#) because it was located above Lake Huron.(Nute, 1946)

Geography and hydrography



Lake Superior and the other Great Lakes

Lake Superior is the largest [freshwater lake](#) in the world by surface area. [Lake Baikal](#) in [Siberia](#) is larger by volume, as is [Lake Tanganyika](#). The [Caspian Sea](#), while vastly larger than Lake Superior in both surface area and volume, is saline; though presently isolated, in the past, it has been repeatedly connected to, and isolated from, the [Mediterranean](#) via the [Black Sea](#).

Lake Superior (48°00'N, 88°00'W) has a surface area of 31,700 sq. mi. ([82,100 km²](#))—which is larger than [South Carolina](#). It has a maximum length of 350 mi (563 km) and maximum breadth of 160 mi (257 km). Its average depth is 483 ft (147 m) with a maximum depth of 1,332 ft (406 m). Lake Superior contains [2,900 mi³ \(12,100 km³\)](#) of water. The shoreline of the lake stretches 2,726 miles (4385 km) (including islands). The lake's elevation is 600 ft (183 m) above sea level.

The lake is fed by over 200 rivers. The largest include the [Nipigon River](#), the [St. Louis River](#), the [Pigeon River](#), the [Pic River](#), the [White River](#), the [Michipicoten River](#) and the [Kaministiquia River](#). Lake Superior drains into [Lake Huron](#) by the [St. Marys River](#). The rapids on the river necessitate the [Sault Locks](#) (pronounced "soo"), a part of the [Great Lakes Waterway](#), to move boats over the 25 foot height difference from Lake Huron.

The largest island in Lake Superior is [Isle Royale](#) in the state of [Michigan](#).



The larger towns on Lake Superior include: the twin ports of [Duluth, Minnesota](#) and [Superior, Wisconsin](#); [Thunder Bay, Ontario](#); [Marquette, Michigan](#). Duluth, at the western tip of Lake Superior, is the most inland point on the [Saint Lawrence Seaway](#).

Among the scenic places on the lake are: the [Apostle Islands National Lakeshore](#); [Isle Royale National Park](#); [Pukaskwa National Park](#); [Lake Superior Provincial Park](#); [Grand Island National Recreation Area](#); [Sleeping Giant \(Ontario\)](#); and [Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore](#).

Geology

The land surrounding the lake in Ontario, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan has proved to be rich in [minerals](#). [Copper](#), [iron](#), [silver](#), [gold](#) and [nickel](#) are or were the most frequently [mined](#). Many [towns](#) are either current or former mining areas, or engaged in processing or shipment. The sparsely populated Lake Superior country with its rugged shorelines and [wilderness](#) attract [tourists](#) and [adventurers](#), making [tourism](#) a large modern [industry](#).

Lake Superior is an important shipment route for iron ore and is part of the [Great Lakes Waterway](#).

Water levels, including diversions of water from the [Hudson Bay](#) watershed, are governed by the [International Lake Superior Board of Control](#) which was established in 1914 by the [International Joint Commission](#).

History

The [Anishinabe](#), also known as the [Ojibwe](#) or [Chippewa](#), have inhabited the Lake Superior region for over five hundred years, and were preceded by the [Dakota](#), [Fox](#), [Menominee](#), Nipigon, Noquet, and [Gros Ventres](#).

According to an old sailor's tale, Lake Superior never gives up her dead. This is due to the temperature of the water. Normally bacteria feeding off a sunken decaying body will generate gas inside the body, causing it to float to the surface after a few days. The water in Lake Superior however, is cold enough year-round to inhibit bacterial growth, meaning bodies tend to sink and never surface. This is poetically referenced in [Gordon Lightfoot](#)'s famous ballad, [The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald](#).

The last major shipwreck on Lake Superior was that of the [SS Edmund Fitzgerald](#) in [1975](#).

American [limnologist](#) [J. Val Klump](#) was the first person to reach the lowest depth of Lake Superior on [July 30, 1985](#) as part of a scientific expedition.



Ecology

Although part of a single system, each lake is different. In volume, Lake Superior is the largest. It is also the deepest and coldest of the five. Superior could contain all the other Great Lakes and three more Lake Eries. Because of its size, Superior has a [retention time](#) of 191 years