

Gitche Gumee Anyone?

*The Legend lives on from the Chippewa on down,
Of the lake they called Gitchee Gumee*

*The lake, it is said, never gives up her dead,
When the skies of November turn gloomy.*

Gordon

Lightfoot- The Wreck of the Edmond Fitzgerald

I had always enjoyed that song, and the possibility of kayaking the biggest lake in the world around the only island in the lower 48 with native wolves and moose. What capped it was a visit to a National Park Service Office in Seattle last summer. I stepped up to the counter



and asked the fellow decked out in National Park garb for information on Isle Royale (which is a National Park).

Moose by Keto near Daisy Farm

He said, "Huh?" He did not know of any National Park by that name. Isle Royale is the least used National Park in the U.S. system of National Parks (because it is very hard to get there and there are no roads on it...among other things). It also has the longest visitor rate of stay and the highest rate of return. Interesting, aye?

Next stop, Copper Harbor, at the northern end of the "UP", the most northern point of the peninsula sticking into Superior and closest point to Isle Royale from the south, although only about 16 miles from the northern coast (Minnesota and Ontario) where wolves entered from in or around the late 40s across the ice.

Janet and I loaded our 22 ft. double kayak and our son Keto and his wife Katie's 19 footer on the Isle Royale Queen (basically an ocean-going vessel with capacity for around 80 people on one deck, and kayaks, canoes and gear space on the top). We set out on August 13th on a 3.5 hour trip of about 60 miles across the middle of "The Lady", as Superior is called up there. The trip across was uneventful with a choppy sea, rain, and the normal number of folks with a green look hitting the railing. More on that later.

When you read about kayaking Isle Royale, there is one point that is always stressed: **Blake Point**. It is the most northeastern portion of land on the 45 mile long Isle

and the most exposed point of land to the big waters and winds of “The Lady”. It is also the gateway to the Five Fingers region, a series of long peninsulas of land jutting out to the northeast on Royale and really the most beautiful area of that island. Most folks do not attempt it because of the dramatic changes in wind and the sea there. We had considered it, but knew that it was risky, even in our big, seagoing kayaks. Everything depended on the weather.

By noon on the 13th, we were docked and unloading kayaks and gear at Rock Harbor on Royale. Looking at the number of people, mostly hikers who would be spreading out over the accessible areas of the island, and at the other kayaks that were being unloaded with ours, we reconsidered. After looking at the weather reports of rain and wind at 10-15 miles per hour and waves at approximately 1 meter, we decided to go for it, portaging our kayaks and gear across the peninsula of Rock Harbor to Tobin Harbor. This would set us up for a less exposed trip between two long peninsulas of land to the northeast, and a chance to get our sea legs before being exposed to the wind, waves, and rollers around Blake Point.

Once in the exposed area at about one mile from the point, we made a break for it, changing direction and basically surfing with the waves and wind from the southwest across the point. By this time, Keto and Katie had put up their sail and were actually being pushed through those choppy seas at an additional 2 to 3 miles per hour.

Once through, we turned southwest along the Palisades, the cliffs along this northeastern coast of the most exposed portion of the island. The waves were still there, hitting us from the long fetch in the open beyond the other landmasses to the north, with refracting waves from the cliffs hitting us from the south. Here we passed a buoy marking the dive site of the Monarch Shipwreck of 1906. Royale is littered with these markers and map designations of wrecks from the middle 1800s to the present. After about 3 miles or so of this we caught up with the next peninsula to the north and entered the relatively protected area between the two huge fingers of land called Duncan Bay. We camped that evening in the Duncan Narrows on the only flat, open area in the entire bay amid the boreal forest of stunted balsam fir, white and black spruce, white cedar, and thimbleberries (of which our dessert was made that first evening in the bush). Wolf tracks littered the sand of the beach in front of our campsite...a perfect welcome.

We saw no one else in the bay other than some folks in a large motor launch that came down the middle later. It had rained lightly most of the day. The rain continued into the night, but we dried out in a shelter (our latitude about the same as that of the Gaspé Peninsula of New Brunswick).

No one else from the ship made it around Blake Point that day. In the days we were there, no one else came around that point under paddle power.

As it turns out, from talking with people on a trail on the south side several days later, that day, the waves on the outside in the big lake were 8-10 footers. The Isle Royale Queen had docked at its usual time around noon and instead of waiting till 2:30 or 3 PM to begin its trip back to the UP, had left early. Most of the people who had come that day were sick when they hit the shore. It was then that the “other name” for the Isle Royale Queen was invoked.... the “Barf Barge”.

At around 4:30 AM the next morning the loons began their wild serenade with their first sounds almost like wolves, and then the crazy, funny, sounds typical of them. Our son Keto was up early to get time exposures of the sunrise on the water to the east.

As he took the time exposures, a fox trotted down to the shore and looked directly into the lens. His eyes were like huge light bulbs in a flash exposure Keto took.

Dawn on that second day was radiant. The rain was gone and the winds were up...way up. I had carried a marine weather radio to help us deal with the winds and waves out there in the open. The report was for winds between 30 and 40 miles per hour. We would not be attempting any circumnavigation of any of the additional fingers to the north. Instead, we would later go down the bay, pull the kayaks up off the shore, and hike to the top and then literally hike on bedrock across the top to the northern most point on the Greenstone Trail at Lookout Louise. From there we could see Ontario to the North and the UP to the south. There was also wolf scat with moose hair in it all over the trail. It was also the first moose sighting.



Loon Dance by Katie

The next morning was decision time. We needed to get to the outside and around Blake Point to catch the boat back to the UP in several days. If we waited and couldn't get back past the Point in the next two days, we would be forced to cross on Thursday, our last full day, or portage our large kayaks and gear over an entire mountain to get to the big boat before it left for the UP on Friday.

The winds were down to between 15 and 20 mph and now from the Northwest. This meant that we would be fighting crossing waves all the way to the point and then need to turn with the wind and surf past the point.

Four people from Minnesota had camped with us that second night. They had come from the opposite end of the bay in small, single kayaks and were also going to attempt the crossing at Blake's Point the next morning.

We left early and got into big waves soon after leaving the cover of the northern peninsula. Waves came from the Northwest across our left side, and refracted off the cliffs on the right as we got closer to the Point and out of the shelter of the long peninsula of land to our north. Many times our decks washed completely over and many times I turned into the northwestern waves and away from the refracting waves closer to the coast to avoid being swept into those cliffs. It was basically too late to turn around in the 22 footer and go back. The water temperature was in the 50s. Our line to the point was a series of zigzags in an attempt to stay upright and prepare to turn south when I was sure we would be far enough past the point not to be washed into the shoals just beyond the Point when we turned. Keto and Katie continued to sail behind us, tacking as they came. Trying to keep track of them in the turbulent seas was disorientating as the seas literally tossed us back to the south and the ever-present cliffs.

At a point in those zigs and zags when I could see around the Point and to the south through the shoals, we simply allowed the northwest wind and waves to help turn us and surfed through the Point. The huge 22 ft. kayak acted as a surfboard and rode the wave ridges past the shoals. Our kids had pulled down the



Janet and Kerry in the Monster- Photo by Katie

sail and were now behind us. We continued south by southeast around the point and back under the cover of Blake Point and into an eddy on the lee side. It had been as turbulent as anything I had experienced in the North Pacific and the Norwegian Sea north of the Arctic Circle. That is saying something. The “Lady” is something.

The next few days, our last days on the Isle, were bucolic and basically anticlimactic. We found an isolated campsite on Tooker Island, southwest of Rock Harbor on Royale. Again, there were no people here upon our arrival and for the first two days and nights. The big kayaks allowed us to go to the outside and to see things few others would see. We paddled the outside islands close to the shore both in the mornings and evenings, enjoying the big lake rollers and the wind and wave swept coast. We hiked the inland swamps and ridges, looking at insectivorous plants, wolf sign, and seeing and smelling moose.

We did have visitors on the third night here. Three motor launches with nine men from Wisconsin had arrived from across the big lake (from Wisconsin) and immediately set up camp next to us. They had brought their coolers, tables, big stoves, etc. and we thought, basically, there goes the neighborhood. Well, we were wrong. They were very friendly, sharing their fish (huge lake trout caught out at sea) and were very quiet...extremely quiet. They were very good neighbors.

I never did discover what had happened to the four people in small sea kayaks who had camped with us on the north side. I hope they hadn't tried coming behind us that morning.

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