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Michigan's Isle Royale and Keweenaw Peninsula Trip Report

**Peg Abbott and Mary Jane Dockeray, guides,
With 12 participants: Bob, Dave, Meredith, Penny, Ruth and Owen,
Linda and Mark, Ed and Beth, and Bud and Gingy**



Sat., Sept. 1 Arrival in Houghton

We arrived in Houghton just as hundreds of young college students did. At mid-day when we gathered, we witnessed throngs of them lined up to check out fraternities, join clubs, purchase supplies and sample lunch at various restaurants, many of which had street food filling the air with sumptuous smells on this beautiful day. We snuck over to the Suomi Restaurant, a Finnish restaurant with traditional pasties and Pannukakku (pancakes), for lunch and then returned to the shaded deck of the Super 8 motel for introductions. This hotel is located on the canal that divides the twin mining towns of Hancock and Houghton, and from the deck we looked off to the ski hills, an old smelter from the copper days, and today's modern lift bridge, which allows large ships to pass through.

We made do with a short introduction to meet each other, and to the role that mining copper played in settlement, as we were headed up to explore the Calumet section of Keweenaw



National Historic Park en route to Copper Harbor.



We had time at the Visitor Center there, and to wander a bit through town – stopping at coffee houses or the local pub - and then stopped at the former headquarters for C & H (Calumet and Hecla, one of the most successful and longest-running Copper companies), a marvelous structure with intricate patterns of rock work. Out front stands an almost 2000 lb. piece of float copper. Mary Jane Dockeray explained



the rock and its origin (delivered by glacial ice) with her special brand of enthusiasm.

We drove up the center road of the peninsula, winding through forests that shaded the road, near Copper Harbor turning into the wooded drive of Keweenaw Mountain Lodge, where our log cabins awaited. We had time to settle in and then met for dinner in the main lodge, a dining room with lofty ceilings, a fireplace and charm. For us the initial charm was spoiled, however, by music of a very loud band that made conversation

challenging. Luckily for us, they took a break just ahead of our meal being served, and once the food arrived it was delicious; whitefish and fresh lake trout all got good reviews.

Sun., Sept. 2 Keweenaw: Copper Harbor / Hunter Point / Brockway Mountain Drive



We woke in our cozy log cabin accommodations to crisp air suggesting fall. Some of the group took off on a nature hike with Mary Jane, on a trail close to the lodge. They had a grand time identifying local shrubs and wildflowers, and scoping out the forest.

Others followed Peg to the local kayak company, wanting to get out on the water. We signed up for the beginner trip, but soon drove our guide crazy as we felt pretty comfortable on the water, tired of the hour-plus long instructions, and took off

inspired by a family of Bald Eagles. Owen and Ruth, experienced paddlers, were not impressed by the large, sea-style kayaks with rudders. In waves we all tired, and tethered to tight control of our guide, we returned. It was fun to get out on the water, but quite a production. Much more fun was the next step of the day, which was lunch at the local marina followed by a hike to Hunter's Point. This was a great walk, not long, but lovely, along a thin peninsula where we could see water on both sides. The Superior side was rocky and wild, the Copper Harbor side gentle and wooded. We sat out at the point, savoring the idea of going on tomorrow – to the island!

Our final jaunt was to drive up the spine of Keweenaw, to the grand view afforded on Brockway Mountain Drive. Mary Jane



discussed the geology as a Merlin screamed and put on a show overhead. Two Broad-winged Hawks, a Red-tailed Hawk and several Ravens followed. We made a loop drive and returned, taking a quick stop on a rocky beach, already sold on rock-hounding amid those Lake Superior stones.

Tonight was a free night for dining, and most ventured down to town to sample the Harbor Haus, a long time Copper Harbor





favorite. Everyone rated their meals very highly.

Mon., Sept. 3 Ferry to Isle Royale / Passage Island Hike

We woke to flashes of lightning and the threat of rain; quite a surprise as the day before had held only crystal-blue skies. We needed to be at the ferry by 7:30, and Peg wanted to take luggage down early, so we loaded up at dawn, just ahead of a wild deluge. This rainstorm came fast and furiously, and caused much confusion, as Peg was completely held up with luggage over at the docks, and others were scattered in town at restaurants or waiting at the lodge. Close to departure we were

making a quick dash back to pick up our last three, when quick-thinking Owen arrived in his own car to help. Phew!

All safely aboard, we headed out in thick mist, the captain promising blue skies ahead. In time this proved true, and many of us stayed out on deck, bundled up but enjoying fresh air, to enjoy conversation, the sense of adventure and, in time, a view of the island. It seemed far off for several hours, but the Isle Royale Queen chugged on, and 3.5 hours later, right on time, we landed on the island. For some time there was no land in sight,



and Bud and others concurred that it was difficult to turn off our trained eyes that associated this much expanse of water with seeing whales,

dolphins, and creatures of the sea! The rangers and service staff from the hotel were ready and waiting, and we were whisked off to an orientation session while they delivered luggage. We checked into our lodgings, and then had a very nice lunch of fresh whitefish sandwiches.

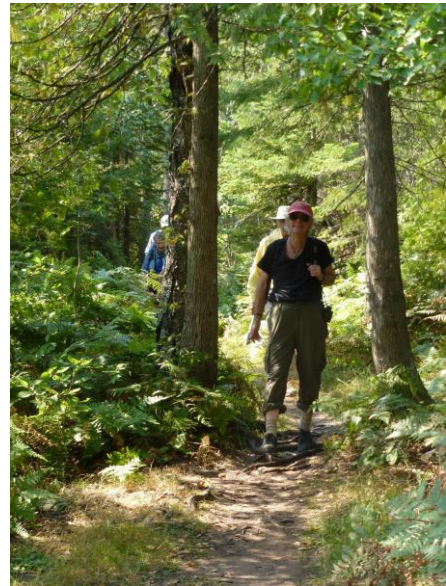
At 1:30 we reconvened for the trip over to Passage Island, the final island of the archipelago to the east. It has a



lighthouse dating from 1881; still in operation, though unmanned in modern times. The trip was leisurely and we threaded through a protected channel, watching Red-necked Grebes, Common Loons, and the lovely matrix of color decorating Isle Royale's base of volcanic rock – greens and yellows of lichens, first fall colors of various shrubs and poplars. We crossed the gap to the Passage Island, following its shoreline to a center, very protected mooring, entering by a narrow slot. This island holds special interest as it has never had moose or wolves, two animals so tightly wed to our image of the islands;

species on which some 55 years of research has been conducted. In essence it's a natural control to compare results of this research to. We wanted to see it for ourselves.

We walked to the lighthouse on a well-worn, but very rocky trail used over the decades when conditions were too rough for the lighthouse keeper to land at a closer mooring, one quite exposed to gales and waves of the lake. A Mourning Warbler worked shrubs at the lakeshore, coming out enough to show its colors for some quick photos. Erin, our guide for the outing, was a volunteer ranger at the end of her summer here, hoping to get on at another park to start her career. She shared tales of the lighthouse keeper, and the theme of isolation so much a part of the island's story. We found the yew bushes common here, rare on the island proper due to moose browsing. And we found a lot of Devil's Club, a plant better known from the Pacific Northwest; oddly located here.



On the island's far side, across the northern twenty miles or so of water, Erin showed us the Sleeping Giant, a rock outcrop in Ontario, just off Thunder Bay. She turned us loose to explore the site, and we found Mary Jane's well described "golden stairs" (concrete steps totally covered with orange and gold lichens). Peg found a little mixed flock of birds, with Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and White-throated

Sparrows. Several poked about the lighthouse and light, taking photos from various directions. We got back to the boat by five, the lodge by six, and enjoyed dinner together by seven, a full day that brought us all to Isle Royale!



Tues., Sept. 4 Rock Harbor / Tobin Harbor / Suzy's Cave / Daisy Farm

We met this morning at 8:30, and Mary Jane headed out to the trails with the naturalist gang, who joked later that it was noon before they got to Suzy's Cave, 1.8 miles away, as they stopped so frequently. Wildflowers were begging their attention, many of which had gone to seed, but Beth and Ruth – of Minnesota and Michigan origins – in team with Mary Jane, could figure out many of them. Still in bloom, lush beds of asters lined the trail.

There were beautiful beds of mosses – a dozen kinds or more, many kinds and large mats of lichens, loons calling, and a Common Merganser bathing, putting on quite a show for Bud to capture with his long lens. The group watched as a float plane roared off, and then another came in with a second group from Houghton. On the trail crossing from Tobin Harbor to Suzy's Cave over a small ridge, a lot of Ussnea (Old Man's Beard) lichens were draped over branches of spruce trees, while club mosses of several varieties crowded the floor. The small Princess Pines were still colorful and firm. Mary Jane explained that pollen from club mosses once gave the same effect as flash photography, in the "olden days". Everywhere there was lots of fox scat.





Suzy's Cave had a lot of white patterns running through the rock, likely magnesium coming through the basalt. Suzy's marked a former water level during the ice ages, and was created by water. An active wasp nest occurred at the door. After admiring the cave, the group stopped at a scenic spot to savor the landscape, enjoy some snacks and water, and to hear tales of earlier days. The story that really captured their attention was that of a couple brought to the island to work, promised a ship would arrive in a few weeks with food and with others, but it never did. They were abandoned and left here in 1845, only the woman making it through winter, and Mary Jane painted in full the harrowing tale. Perhaps the story made lunch seem pressing, for from here the group came back pretty directly, checking one beach for greenstones, arriving back just in time for lunch at the grille.

Peg headed out with five others of the group on a water taxi to a farther off

trailhead, a longer hike from Daisy Farm that would eventually tie in to Suzy's Cave, following the Rock Harbor shoreline. They had a grand time hiking, stopping to scan through a few mixed flocks of birds: a very active Olive-sided Flycatcher, a cluster of Magnolia, Bay-breasted, and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Golden-crowned Kinglets, many Red-breasted Nuthatches, Cedar Waxwings, a Brown Creeper, Downy Woodpecker and, down the trail a ways, Gray Jays. Peg and Mark watched a Pileated Woodpecker tucked down in a tree trunk, showing off only its wild red head. Throughout the walk, Common Loons let fly their tremolo calls, and their fuller, wailing tones – wonderful! The group kept up a good pace, pausing to take in the views of the Rock Harbor Light with fog dancing around it, of the park headquarters complex, and of the many small islands framing the bay, which they matched up with various names on the map. At several points they sat on rock ledges scraped and polished by glaciers, perfect perches from which to admire the grand scenery of the coast of Lake Superior.



At the trail's conclusion, Bob suggested a cold beer and several took him up on it; members of each group reunited



to talk about their days and finds. A very satisfying day for all.



After a break, we collected on Ed and Beth's porch for music. Ed had brought his guitar over on the ferry, and the two form a great duo. What a treat to gather, and sing in such a lovely setting! We sang and clapped along until we needed to be at dinner, the music making for a finale to the day that was very relaxing and fun.

Fog and thunderstorms were rolling in, so sadly our sunset cruise was cancelled. We gathered in the cozy common room where Wi-Fi replaced conversation and all were engrossed in catching up on news or sending cyber communications. Mary Jane came in to read, and as dark fell she said, "It's weird to look up and see you all glowing!" A great show of thunder and lightning came in just as we all went to bed.



Wed., Sept. 5 North Shore / Minong Mine / Chickenbone Lake / A Few for a Fifteen-mile Hike

This morning we met for breakfast, trying to lighten up a bit on our orders to cope with the abundance of potatoes that kept appearing on our plates. We left at 9AM to navigate around the island, through the channel between the main island and

Passage Island where we had explored earlier in the week. This is the most hazardous place on the island for ships as the currents change dramatically at the point. We could see that waves were higher with lots of turbulence, and we admired two kayakers we saw in extremely rough water, making slow headway. We made our way through several islets and islands, past Amygdaloid Island, making our way over to McCargoe Cove. It was beautiful in the narrow, quiet waters of the cove, with lovely reflections of colorful shrubs and trees. We spied two immature Bald Eagles, and then the adult flew right over our boat. We'd have about two hours here for a picnic lunch and exploring. Today, lunch was in one of the backpacker shelters as light rain was falling.



Mary Jane spiced up the afternoon telling us about the sex life of Jack-in-the-pulpits, the architecture of honeysuckle flowers and more. Several of the group hiked up to the historic Minong Mine, where they could see the mine shaft from several angles, one from an adit which gave a good side view. The mine was one of



the larger endeavors on the island, and village was



there with a school, several families and a dormitory. Evan, the young deck hand, gave some background on salaries of the day, working conditions and how the ore was handled. Ruth described the beautiful hike down through lush woods. Others walked a more level trail going back to Chickenbone Lake, but the trail was challenging as it passed over bogs and wet areas, often on a narrow boardwalk. They went as far as the creek

before turning back to arrive at the boat with plenty of time.

After they got back on the boat, they stopped at Belle Isle, mooring at the dock for a lightning quick visit to see the old foundations of a former resort, quite fancy for its time in pictures they showed us. Bud found an old

chimney and mantle with some artifacts on it. They retraced the path home, enjoying the chance to get the big picture of the archipelago, a sense of lots and lots of islands, with comprehensive views of the eastern portion of Isle Royale, including some private homes. It was a scenic walk, with some light rain but clearing by mid-afternoon.



Peg, Mark, and Dave completed a fifteen-mile hike, a no-turn-back option as the boat left them behind. They enjoyed all but the last few miles fully, soaking in grand views, escarpments of rock, spongy masses of lichen, lush forests, and the first of fall colors. The route climbed up to and then followed the Greenstone Ridge, with several stunning viewpoints designed to lure the three into taking breaks. They climbed the fire tower at Ojibiway for unsurpassed views up and down the island.

Those comfortable and home took

a poll as to when the three would return. All were glad when the trio emerged from the forest, heading directly to the bar for pizza and beer, as sun tucked in for the day and night fell.



Thurs., Sept. 6 Canoes on Tobin Harbor / Hidden Lake to Lookout Louise on Greenstone Ridge / Afternoon boat to Edisen Fishery, the Isle Royale Wolf Project headquarters, and the Rock Harbor Light.



Six of the group enjoyed a canoe ride this morning, in the company of calling loons. Peg and Dave, Ed and Beth, Bud and Gingy pulled boats from the rack, launched and explored at will, a wonderful sense of freedom made available to us by the Lodge. We paddled to the head of the bay, a place the three of us hiking the Greenstone Ridge had come down, and found a family of Barrow's Goldeneye in the narrows. A float plane came in as we returned; it was fun to see it glide.

Several of the group went for a hike with a park ranger, Melissa, to Hidden Lake and Lookout Louise. They hoped still to see a Moose, but scenery had to suffice. The group went

aboard the Sandy, and docked at the trail by Hidden Lake. They searched and searched, but no Moose were in sight, though we heard later that a couple had seen a cow and calf there later in the day. The moose like to feed in the Hidden Lake due to its mineral content, and in the water they are safer from possible attack by wolves. The

entire group made it to the top of the ridge, where they had good views back on Tobin Harbor, where they had parked and the maze of islands nestled against the main island.



In the afternoon we boarded the *Sandy* once again, this time bound for the historic Edison Fishery, an on-the-ground look at the Rock Harbor Light (they let you walk up it inside) and headquarters



for the famous, long-running Isle Royale wolf and moose research project.

Biologists Rolf and Candy Peterson were there at their cozy Bangsund Cabin. They came out to answer our questions about



the literally hundreds of bones and antlers on display. Of special note were bones of the three wolves that died tragically in a mine shaft earlier this year, pushing the

island's population to a low of just nine known wolves at this time. Few full wolf skeletons are ever found, and amid this loss, knowledge of the individuals' health and signs of former injuries were valuable. Both talked with ease, veterans of many years studying this wildlife drama. Some of us picked up Candy's new book, one that details stories of their lives on and off the island. The afternoon passed all too quickly, but what a memorable outing.



The dining staff knew us pretty well at this point, and made our experience very enjoyable. Particularly for being the very end of the season (they would close one day after we left), the food was quite good, ample portions with a varied menu. For many of us it was hard to stray too far from the fresh Lake Trout and Whitefish, local to this region.



Fri., Sept. 7 Scoville Point Hike / Return to Copper Harbor

One of the most dramatic walks on Isle Royale is just out the door of Rock Harbor Lodge, a four-mile loop to the rock outcrop at Scoville Point.



We had a perfect morning for it, sun-bright sky showing off first tinges of fall color decorating the island. We walked through the forest, stopping as we discovered something in that elfin realm of understory, but as rock took over as substrate, we all fanned out immersed in views. Far in the distance we could see Passage Island, the site of our first walk a week ago. We posed for photos, drank in the views, and reluctantly

returned for.... One more whitefish sandwich, yum!

We'd traveled the crossing by ferry in rough weather; today's crossing was much easier, and a cloud show erupted that captured our attention.



Time passed quickly, and just before dinner we arrived in Copper Harbor. Our meal had been so good at the Harbor Haus ahead of our island adventures that we decided to return. The sight of looking out to the harbor lighthouse, decorated by pink tones on this bay of Lake Superior, made for a great mood scheme for this dinner. Afterwards, we tucked back into our cabins at Keweenaw Mountain Lodge.

Sat. Sept. 8 TNC Horseshoe Bay Preserve / Pasties / Eagle River / Houghton

Isle Royale is a tough act to follow, so we wanted to choose a good hike for today. Mary Jane was curious about reports of a fine outcrop of stromatolites, fossil algae mats, on a rugged bay facing Lake Superior near Copper Harbor.



We got directions, drove a series of dirt roads, and parked for a short walk to a fantastic red stone beach. We could have stayed a long time on the beach. Like children, we all walked up to Mary Jane with precious stones, she'd excitedly tell us we had this mineral or

that, and her answers held our imaginations captive. But the stromatolites were not obvious, and Peg went out on the prowl – bingo. Down a side path, they lay where rock was lifted just above the water





line. This was a band of a formation, with an impressive rise above it. We should have known it was something rare that took Mary Jane’s eyes off this find, and it was. In a small series of red stone pools, we found quite a number of rare Musk Frogs, basking and acting like any common frog, yet these were the first Mary Jane had seen in her over-eighty years. Wow! Frogs and fossils and a lovely walk; a nice way to wrap up our outing.

Owen had worked in the UP on various legal cases

over the years, and he used his research and networking skills to turn us towards finding Tony’s Country Kitchen – fabled to have the best pasties on the peninsula. This is tough talk in a land where pasties are a “national”

dish, but Tony’s passed with flying colors. The crust was lovely, the filling savory; well worth the drive. We back-tracked a bit on country roads, driving over to see the river and bridge at Eagle Harbor, and to stop for preserves made by the monks there.



Our final dinner was a change of pace -- Asian food in a bistro setting. They welcomed us at a long table that held fourteen and we had a fine meal to celebrate our grand adventure. Afterwards, Ed and Beth hosted one more round of songs in the hotel’s conference rooms, a great way

to avoid any sense of saying good-bye!

Sun., Sept. 9 Departures

Many of the group had drives ahead of them, so they pulled out shortly after breakfast -- five to the west, three to lower Michigan and Peg to Marquette for a flight out after Noon. Bob

and Meredith had the oh-dark-thirty morning flight, and Penny some time to explore Houghton ahead of an afternoon departure. We left revived – a great time in quiet country, nature close at hand.



Photos by Bud Ferguson, Dave

Mennenga and Peg Abbott, please contact Naturalist Journeys for details.