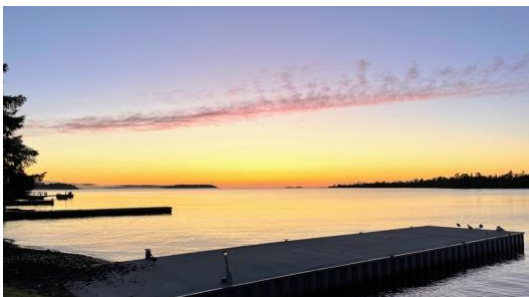
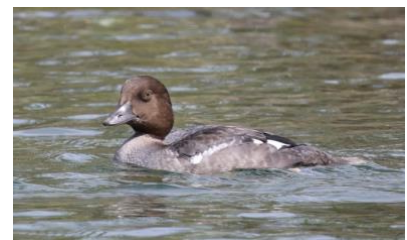


# Michigan's Isle Royale & Keweenaw Peninsula Aug. 25–Sept. 2, 2023 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



**Guides: Dave Mehlman and Kent Skaggs, with participants: Adele, Carol, Dave, Jack, Jane, Jeanne, John, Rose, Steve, Theresa, Tom, Vicky, and Vi**

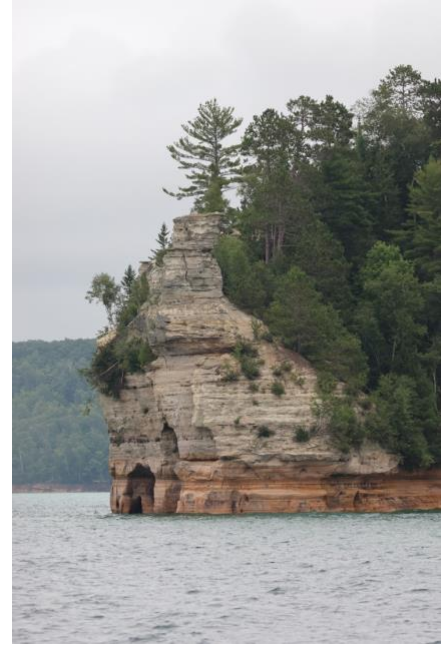
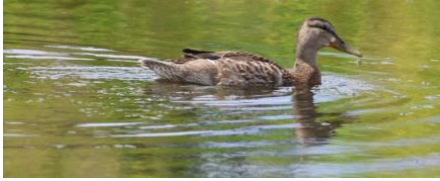


## **Fri., Aug. 25**

## **Arrival in Houghton/Hancock, Michigan**

A few of the early arrivals already in town met Dave and Kent at the Super 8 and we all walked to lunch in nearby downtown Houghton. Alas, our target restaurant Suomi was jam-packed with a wait, so we retreated to the Library where we were seated immediately and commenced getting to know each other. After lunch, we returned to the Super 8, got our birding gear, and all went out for a short afternoon walk to Nara Nature Park at the edge of town (noticing that freshman orientation at Michigan Tech was in full swing!).

The Nara Nature Park has a lovely set of boardwalks which extend out into the marshes edging Portage Lake on both sides of the Pilgrim River. Although the action was a bit slow, we enjoyed great looks at an adult and juvenile Bald Eagle, a couple of Eastern Kingbirds, a Spotted Sandpiper gingerly walking on the water lilies, and



some Purple Finches. We then returned to the Super 8 for a brief rest, then met all the rest of the crew in the hotel lobby for a brief round of introductions. At that time, Kent headed out to the airport to pick up Theresa, Jack, and Vicky who were flying in, while Dave drove all the rest of the group downtown for our welcome dinner at Joey's Seafood & Grill right off main street. We started right in with a great meal and pleasant company! Returning to the hotel, we had a brief review of plans for the following day and those who wanted got their trip species checklist. Then, off to bed to prepare for the exciting days to come.

## **Sat., Aug. 26                      Keweenaw Peninsula | Copper Harbor**

Everyone had breakfast at their leisure at the Super 8, followed by meeting in the front with all gear and loading of the two vans. We then headed to the Nara Nature Park for our first "official" outing of the tour. Although the weather was not too conducive for birding and things were a bit slow, we started off with a nice adult Bald Eagle perched in a tree right above the parking lot and found Yellow Warbler, Cedar Waxwing, some Barn Swallows, and Purple Finch for the bird list. We then headed across the lift bridge over Portage Canal and started our trip up the Keweenaw Peninsula, stopping briefly at Paavola Wetlands Natural Area. Though the birding was slow there, too, we spotted a Pied-billed Grebe in the pond, a juvenile Broad-winged Hawk flew overhead, and a Red-breasted Nuthatch foraged in some trees by the parking area.

We then drove into the historic town of Calumet and stopped at the Keweenaw National Historical Park visitor center to learn about the copper mining history of the area. This was followed by a nice lunch at the Michigan House in their private dining room. We then continued on, stopping (of course!) at the legendary snow thermometer to ogle the snow depths and take photos. Our Keweenaw exploration continued as we drove through Eagle River and stopped at the Eagle Harbor Lighthouse to explore the grounds and small museum there.

By now, the skies had turned beautiful so we drove the scenic drive up and over Brockway Mountain, stopping at the top to admire the views, with Isle Royale easily visible in the distance out over Lake Superior on this clear afternoon and a "laker" headed to Duluth or Superior. On our way down from the Mountain, we stopped at the





Copper Harbor overlook to get an idea of the topography of the tip of the Keweenaw. We ended our journey by checking into the King Copper Hotel right on the waterfront where everyone had rooms with a great view of the Lake. We met on the back porch for our daily checklist and review of plans for the following day, then walked over to the nearby Harbor Haus Restaurant for a wonderful dinner. Then, all returned to their rooms to prepare for our boat ride the next day.

## **Sun., Aug. 27**                      **Copper Harbor | Isle Royale National Park**

Everyone was up bright and early this morning for a breakfast snack of juices, yogurt, and donuts on the King Copper picnic table, along with coffee for those interested. Everyone then walked their gear over to the nearby ferry dock while Dave and Kent parked the vans. Upon command of the captains, we all brought our bags up to the boat to be stowed for the voyage and then we all boarded along with many others. With a toot of the horn, we were soon off for the 3.5-hour trip to Isle Royale on the Isle Royale Queen IV! Fortunately for all, the waters were practically smooth on this crossing and we had a great ride. Some of the careful observers aboard spotted a few birds either over the lake or on the boat, including a Tennessee Warbler and a Sanderling flying faster than the boat along with another, unidentified peep. You just never know what will turn up in the middle of Lake Superior!

Arriving at the Rock Harbor dock in Isle Royale a bit before noon, we got off the boat and received a briefing from a National Park Service ranger on the general dos and don'ts of life on Isle Royale. Our group then walked over to the Greenstone Grill for lunch, apparently with everyone else from the Queen! We had our first experience at that point of lunch on Isle Royale, with a slow ordering line and major competition for limited tables outside and inside—but, we were on Isle Royale, which made it all worthwhile! After lunch, since our rooms were not ready, we took a brief orientation walk around the Rock Harbor area with Dave introducing everyone to some of the key points, including the Stoll Memorial Trail, Smithwick Mine, Tobin Harbor, and the Visitor Center. During the walk we saw the first of many Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers we were to find on Isle Royale and heard the far-off yodeling of Common Loons.

Finally, in mid-afternoon, our rooms became available, and we all found our rooms in various lodge buildings and got settled in. We then reconvened around 5:30pm at the Lighthouse Restaurant to join the dinner queue in the small restaurant, another part of what would become our daily routine on the island. But, after a bit of a wait,



we all received our orders and enjoyed a satisfying dinner. We then retired for the night with the sounds of Lake Superior's waves gently lapping at the rocky shores outside our room windows.

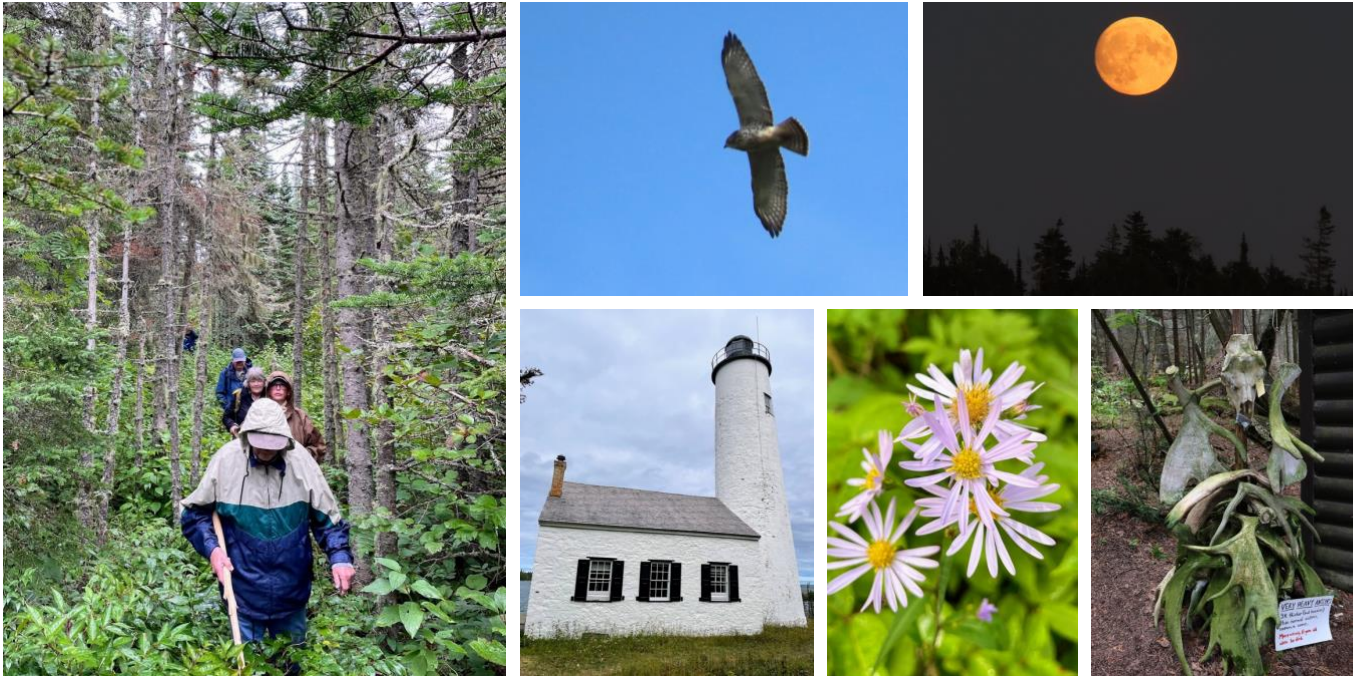
## **Mon., Aug. 28                      Isle Royale National Park**

We started the day with the fine buffet breakfast in the Lighthouse Restaurant, finding that competition for breakfast was a lot less than for dinner! After breakfast, we gathered our gear for a morning hike on the Stoll Memorial Trail loop, a delightful trail accessible from Rock Harbor which leads out along one shore of the peninsula and then loops back along the Tobin Harbor side. Although the birding was slow, we did find Yellow-rumped, Blackpoll, Nashville, and Tennessee Warbler; Golden-crowned Kinglet; Savannah Sparrow; and saw fly-over Common Loon and Double-crested Cormorant. We also enjoyed the lovely foliage, just starting to turn color for the fall, along with countless berries of many species of shrubs (including some blueberries for the vigilant). Some in the group also tried thimbleberries, which are abundant on Isle Royale, with mixed opinions!

On our return, we fought our way through another lunch at the Greenstone Grill, with everyone finally getting something to eat, then took a short break. For the afternoon, we had tickets for the first of several trips on the Sandy, the Lodge's excursion tour boat, with Captain Joe and First Mate Krista on board to provide narration. This afternoon's trip was to Passage Island, a separate island off the northeast end of Isle Royale that marks one side of the ship channel to and from Thunder Bay, Ontario.

After about an hour and a half boat ride, we arrived at the Passage Island dock. Passage Island is quite fascinating for the naturalist/ecologist since there are no moose on the island. Hence, it appears amazingly lush with vegetation in comparison to Isle Royale. Most notably, several plant species such as American Yew and Devil's Club are easily seen on Passage Island but are essentially non-existent on Isle Royale due to moose browsing pressure. Also, thimbleberry, abundant on Isle Royale, is very difficult to find on Passage Island. Unfortunately, the ¾ mile trail from the boat dock to the Passage Island Lighthouse is one of the more difficult ones that we hiked, plus the rocks were wet from rain. Most of us persisted on the hike, however, arriving at the lighthouse in time to admire the views of Isle Royale and the Sleeping Giant (just outside Thunder Bay) in the distance, before turning around and hiking back. The weather was not too cooperative, but we did have great



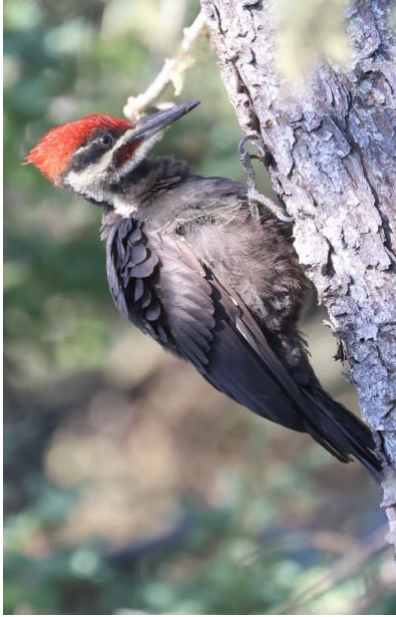


views of Peregrine Falcon from the boat and on the hike, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Belted Kingfisher, and a Northern Harrier. After returning to the boat, we boarded and enjoyed the trip back to Isle Royale, spotting some freighters out of Thunder Bay entering the passage as we neared shore. Returning to Rock Harbor, we got in line for dinner, some opting for a quicker meal of pizza in the Grill, others for the full sit-down meal at the Restaurant. We then met for our daily checklist and then retired for a quiet evening.

**Tues., Aug. 29                      Isle Royale National Park**

We started today off with another buffet breakfast at the Restaurant followed by a morning walk and afternoon boat trip. The morning walk was an out and back hike along Tobin Harbor, part of the way down the trail to Suzy’s Cave and Three-Mile Campground. However, the winds had come up so bird activity was pretty low. A bit of effort from our crew ended up with more Yellow-rumped Warblers, Nashville Warbler, Chipping Sparrow, calling Sandhill Cranes, and some Canada Jays, the latter an Isle Royale specialty for Michigan. Our next activity was lunch, which turned out to be easy today since the Queen had cancelled its run for the day, thus greatly reducing the competition.

Reconvening by the boat dock in early afternoon, we boarded the Sandy again for one of the more popular trips offered from Rock Harbor: to Edisen Fishery and Rock Harbor Lighthouse. Unfortunately, bird activity on this trip was pretty slow, too, with some Bald Eagles perched on trees by the water and a small group of Common Mergansers (all seen from the boat) being the highlight. A few in the group spotted Swainson’s Thrush in the underbrush of the trails. All in the group walked down the small trail to the Wolf & Moose Research Center, only to find that no one was home. However, we found the large collection at the Mooseum of Pathology quite intriguing (maybe a bit morbid for some?) and most in the group also explored the Lighthouse, with its exhibits on Isle Royale shipwrecks, and the old Fishery buildings. After returning to Rock Harbor, we again enjoyed dinner at the Restaurant before retiring for the evening.



### **Wed., Aug. 30**                      **Isle Royale National Park**

Today started with the breakfast buffet in the Restaurant followed by a morning walk around the Rock Harbor area, including the Rock Harbor side of the Three-Mile Campground trail and a bit of the Stoll trail. Much to our surprise, that morning we noted that a sizeable contingent of the kitchen and housekeeping staff from Rock Harbor Lodge were leaving the Island for the season (already?! ) on the outbound Ranger III trip headed for Houghton. Though a very lovely morning, not too many birds were out and about, although we managed to find Canada Jays again, along with Magnolia Warbler, Hairy and Downy Woodpecker, Swainson's Thrush, and White-throated Sparrow. We ran through the lunch drill again at the Grill, but since the rescheduled Queen had no day passengers, our worries were unfulfilled, and we had a nice, tranquil lunch.

After lunch, we gathered near the boat dock again for the afternoon Sandy trip to Raspberry Island, a very short ride literally across the harbor. Disembarking at the dock there, we walked the short trail to the lovely boreal bog in the center of the island with its boardwalk. This allowed great views of plants that are more common further north, such as Labrador Tea, many carnivorous Roundleaf Sundew and Purple Pitcher plants (some of the sundews were so small that you had to get down on your knees to see them), and Small Cranberry. Most of the group walked the loop trail back to the boat dock, admiring the view to the south on the rocky cliffs and to the north. Fortunately for us, during the hike we discovered that the Park's naturalist-in-residence was on the trip, too, and she was out collecting mushrooms. So, we found some very interesting mushrooms like Coral Fungus and Red-banded Webcap for our sightings list. Finishing our walk, we boarded back on the boat for the short trip back to Rock Harbor, then piled into the dining room for our last dinner on Isle Royale, giving everyone a chance at any menu items they had missed previously. After that, some in the group caught up on the bird list and then we headed off for our final night.

### **Thur., Aug. 31**                      **Isle Royale National Park | Copper Harbor**

We started the day with our normal breakfast buffet at the Restaurant. During breakfast, interest was expressed in possibly going to Hidden Lake, as several people we had talked to during our stay on Isle Royale had seen Moose there and our trip was currently moose-less. Upon inquiry, Dave found out that the Sandy had a trip scheduled there that morning and that tickets were still left! Since the Queen would not leave until mid-afternoon, there was time for those interested to take the Sandy trip, have lunch, and still get on the boat for the





return trip. After quickly polling the group, six of us were interested in this trip, so we quickly organized two morning outings: Dave went to Hidden Lake/Lookout Louise with some and Kent took the non-travelers for a walk around Rock Harbor.

The Sandy people met on the dock, boarded the boat, and went off for our final trip with Joe and Krista. After about half an hour, we docked at Hidden Lake and began the hike. It starts off looping around Hidden Lake, a lovely wetland with lots of open water surrounded by a bog and tamarack swamp. Of great interest to the birders were five American Black Ducks in the pond, some at very close range—these were the only ones of this species seen during the entire tour. The hike continued past the pond, through the massive Horne fire burn area from 2021, up to the top of the ridge to the point known as Lookout Louise. The view of the northeast side of Isle Royale and the Ontario mainland in the distance was spectacular! We then hiked back down to the boat. All in all, a lovely hike, though with few birds other than a couple of American Kestrel, some Hairy Woodpeckers enjoying all the downed timber, and some pairs of Sandhill Crane.

Arriving back in Rock Harbor, we went to the Grill, grabbed some lunch, and joined the others who were already back from their hike and eating. They reported the excellent sighting of a Blue-headed Vireo, the only one of the tour, among the many “usual suspects” seen during their walk. After that, we had a bit of free time before we joined the others heading back to Copper Harbor on the main dock and soon boarded the Queen for our return trip. Again, another very smooth ride over Lake Superior and we arrived in Copper Harbor about 6:20pm following the usual greeting from the Harbor Haus staff to the Queen upon its return from a day out at Isle Royale. Everyone grabbed their bags as they came off the boat and then walked them over to the nearby King Copper Hotel, where Dave and Kent met them with the vans. We quickly piled our belongings into the back of the van, then walked over to Harbor Haus as we had to make our dinner reservation at this most excellent restaurant. Dave stayed behind a bit and got all the room keys so that we could all go straight to our rooms after dinner. All in all, a very successful concluding day to our Isle Royale stay!

## **Fri., Sep. 1                      Copper Harbor | Keweenaw Peninsula | Houghton**

We began our last full day of the tour with an early morning birdwalk around Copper Harbor. This town near the end of the Keweenaw Peninsula is a known hotspot and we hoped to see some of the species that had been reported on eBird recently for the area. The hard-core birders of the group turned out in force for about an hour walk through the quiet streets. Although pretty quiet, we enjoyed the very fun sight of a Merlin apparently playing with a bunch of Blue Jays (or, were the latter harassing the former?) and had some great views of a Pileated Woodpecker, at one point very close to us on a telephone pole. A few of the last Barn Swallows of the season flew overhead and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird or two foraged for nectar in the remaining flowers. A



surprise was a female or immature Indigo Bunting hiding in a bush and, on the return walk to the hotel, a small flock of Eurasian Tree Sparrows popped out of the shrubbery and perched on a phone line. This introduced species, similar to its more widespread relative the House Sparrow, had been reported recently from Copper Harbor as an eBird rarity and so may represent a new colonization of the area.

After concluding our walk, we met everyone else back at the King Copper and then we all walked the short distance to the Tamarack Inn for a great breakfast. Finishing breakfast, we returned to the hotel, gathered all our gear, then loaded the vans to begin our trip back down the Keweenaw to Houghton. As we left, a spur of the moment suggestion from the folks in Dave’s van led to us taking a very short detour to the official start of US Highway 41, which runs 1990 miles from Copper Harbor to Miami, Florida! We got out and took photos by the sign, then continued to nearby Fort Wilkins State Park for the morning. This Park is a reconstructed mid-19<sup>th</sup> century U.S. Army outpost, built to safeguard the copper mines. Although it saw little to no action of any kind and was not used for very long, it has been carefully restored to give a great example of what life was like for the U.S. Army on what was then a frontier settlement at that time. Unfortunately for us, a brisk breeze had sprung up, so there were few birds to be seen despite the nice weather.

Finishing our walk at Fort Wilkins, we continued into Calumet for our second lunch at the Michigan House. Continuing south from there, we stopped at the Quincy Mine for a self-guided tour of the old mine infrastructure on the site. After that, we drove down the steep hill through Hancock, across the lift bridge into Houghton, and back to the Super 8 for our final evening. After a bit of free time to do some final organizing, we reconvened in the hotel lobby for a group tour review session of highlights, lowlights, and everything in between. We then loaded in the vans and went to our final, very enjoyable dinner at The Den in downtown Houghton, before returning to our rooms for the last night together.

## Sat., Sep. 2 Departures

Departures today were largely at everyone’s own schedule as so many people had driven directly to Houghton from their hometowns. Kent and Dave took the three people flying out to the airport for their morning flight, then they drove their vans back to Green Bay to finally end another great Isle Royale and Keweenaw Peninsula tour.



*Photos: Group on Copper Harbor Overlook (Kent Skaggs - KS), Canada Jay (KS), Common Goldeneye (Adele Skolits - AS), Monk's Hood (KS), Common Loon (KS), Dawn at Copper Harbor (KS), Joe-pye-weed (David Mehman (DM), Mallard (AS), Spotted Sandpiper (AS), Kent & Tom on the boardwalk (AS), Rock Ledge (AS), John on Rocky Beach (AS), Bald Eagle (Carol Beam - CB), Red-breasted Nuthatch (AS), Yellow Warbler (AS), Group at Nara Nature Park (KS), Common Mergansers (AS), Isle Royal Queen at Rock Harbor (DM), Cedar Waxwing (CB), Black-throated Green Warbler (AS), Brockway Mountain Overlook (KS), Passage Island (KS), Canada Jay (KS), Moon (KS), Rock Harbor Lighthouse (KS), Aster (KS), Wolves & Moose Research Station (AS), Pileated Woodpecker (AS), Pearly Everlasting (KS), Green Frog (KS), Coral Fungus (KS), Rock Harbor Lodge (DM), Hidden Lake (AS), For Wilkins Historic State Park (KS), Purple Pitcher Plant (KS), Raspberry Island (KS), Blackpoll Warbler (AS), Red-banded Webcap Mushroom (DM), Group at Snow Thermometer (KS)*