

JIM SERVI

The National Park In Our Backyard

Discovering Isle Royale

Most outdoor enthusiasts are in awe of America's National Park System. In fact, people travel from around the world to see our grand spectacles, and many American families make the pilgrimage to Yellowstone or the Grand Canyon at least once in their life. Yet, Isle Royale National Park is one of the most impressive National Parks in the park system and lies right in our backyard in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. But it is the least visited of all National Parks in the Lower 48 States. Over 200 square miles of undeveloped wilderness and 450 islands surround the 45-mile-long and 9-mile-wide main island of Isle Royale.

Going to school at Michigan Tech in Houghton, it was only a short boat ride away, yet my good friend Kevin Staus and I never took the voyage. Perhaps we took it for granted like many do with national treasures in their own backyard. Before we knew it, graduation was at hand and real life began. Eleven years later, we finally made the trip.

Our goal was to hike across the entire island. It was almost 50 miles from Rock Harbor on the east to Windigo on the far west tip. Our limited schedule and coordination with the return boat gave us four days. Both of us spend a fair amount of time outdoors and consider ourselves in good shape; however, hiking with a 50-pound pack is not for the faint of heart.

Although we were planning on hiking, there are many ways to enjoy the island. Many take day trips. There are comfortable lodges with all the amenities at both main harbors and outdoor shelters for those that don't want to tent it. Some do day hikes and return to the lodges, others go out for a couple days before returning, and a few crazy souls are set on making it across the island.

Getting out to Isle Royale takes some coordination but is not too difficult. The *Ranger III* routinely leaves out of Houghton, Michigan; the *Isle Royale Queen IV* leaves out of Copper Harbor, Michigan; and both the *Voyageur II* and *Sea Hunter* leave out


of Grand Portage, Minnesota. The return schedule is equally as flexible, and all of the ferries make stops at several locations on the island.

As we hiked we passed lake after lake without a sign of development. The east side of the island is dominated by large conifers and thick underbrush, while the west side has more upland and deciduous mix. Every hiker we came across was on the lookout for moose. The first day we saw one bolt into the thick brush. The second day we followed tracks from one of the two remaining wolves on the island down our trail with no moose sightings. Finally, on the third day we saw a cow feeding across the lake as we filled our water bottles. Shortly after that, we were passing a beaver pond and heard the loud splashing over what could only be a moose. A nice bull greeted us and happily ate on the other side of the beaver pond. A short while later an elusive pine marten was watching us pass by on the trail. The wildlife sightings certainly helped pass the time and made us temporarily forget about our ach-



This bull moose was spotted across a beaver pond by the author and his friend Kevin Staus during a recent trip to Isle Royale National Park.

ing muscles.

On the fourth day of our journey heavy rains made the hiking treacherous, but we had passed the point of no return. We pushed through to Windigo. Our goal was accomplished and after 11 years, our Isle Royale adventure was complete. It was worth the wait, but it will not be another 11 years before we return. It is just too magical to stay away. 

Jim Servi is a freelance writer who spends every opportunity he can in the great outdoors with his wife and three boys. Contact Jim at jimservi10@gmail.com.