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## Stop 57. *Isle Royale*

Arrival datetime: Monday, July 22, 7:00PM  
Sites visited: Isle Royale National Park  
Accommodations: The Mariner North, Rock Harbor Lodge  
States traveled: Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan

Again on the highway route, we crossed the Mississippi into Wisconsin. But a local shortcut drew us off the highway and gave us the excuse to stop at a Wisconsin Cheese outlet. It also gave us an opportunity to enjoy the countryside. In the 50 miles we were off the Interstate, we passed at least a half dozen scenic blue tree lined lakes. There were also scenic blue tree lined rivers. Back on the highway we passed the Wisconsin River so many times we had to stop. We found the peaceful Riverside Park and ate our Wisconsin cheese by the Wisconsin River in the town of Merrill, Wisconsin.



*Wisconsin River in Riverside Park.*

We reviewed our itinerary and thought it a good idea to call the Ferry Company to confirm the next day's reservations to Isle Royale. But we had not realized we changed time zones and the company had closed before we tried to call at 5:45PM.

We reset our clocks and continued on, arriving in Copper Harbor at 7:00PM. We drove by the ferry and could see it organizing for a dinner cruise. So Michael decided to drop in to confirm our reservations. He confirmed that we had none. Apparently, we had forgotten to make them. But Michael was told to come back at 7:30AM with no guarantees.

We had dinner at a German restaurant overlooking Lake Superior. The Lake was a bit choppy, and a very deep blue that got progressively deeper under a cloudy sky as the sunset. A bit of local culture was on display, a copper nugget a few feet in ruggedly shaped diameter, displayed under a sign saying it was 1750 pounds.

Our cabin at the Mariner North could have comfortably slept eight. We soaked in a hot tub then slept in one of two upstairs bedrooms. Early in the morning, especially for us with the recent time zone change, we unpacked everything we might want to bring to the Island and laid it out in the living room. Then we repacked it into two small duffel bags and a backpack.

We drove around a bit in an unsuccessful attempt to get breakfast to go. The grocery shops had not made coffee yet and the only open restaurant would not

release two of its precious cinnamon rolls on a to go order. So we ended up sitting down for coffee and cinnamon rolls. As it turns out, we only ate one, they were so huge, apparently a specialty of the house. Two coffees, one OJ, and one cinnamon roll cost us \$3.97. But we left a good tip anyway, as we had used up a table.

We showed up at the Ferry before 7:30AM with our very light looking luggage and meandered around the shop reading posters and informative signs about Isle Royal until 8:00. Finally, the proprietor, also the captain, begrudgingly let us on the Ferry. First, he announced to the passengers that there were two standing room only passengers, so although we were not entitled to a seat, if they were gracious and squeezed together, we would be allowed to sit. The announcement was unnecessary, as there was plenty of room for us to sit, though by that point the only two seats together at that point were across a table from another couple. They had been seated opposite across the table, taking up two seats each, prior to the captain's announcement.

Jim and Diane are a retired couple from a Michigan suburb. They had traveled a lot in retirement and we shared travel stories for much of the time. We told them about the trip and Diane said that when they were young they talked about traveling the country in a VW bus but never did. The ferry took 4 ½ hours to get to Isle Royale. We fended off boredom by going out on deck every hour or so and staying there as long as we could stand the wind, spray and cold. The discomfort outside grew less as the day wore on.

A Ranger met the ferry at the park and gave us an orientation lecture, apparently a short version of the "leave no trace" speech he promised give to the backpackers, who were the vast majority of travelers and who were shuffled off to get permits before their orientation. We were then herded off to the lodge registration desk while our bags took the slow route to our rooms. We lingered behind the crowd at the Visitor Center, getting info on day hiking. But there was still a line when we arrived. After registration, we saw our bag on a cart that had not yet reached our room. We went to lunch.



*Michael on the ferry, and at Rock Harbor in Isle Royale.*

Our room was right on Lake Superior, which looked like the ocean. The view included a few little islands. The blue water splashed and gurgled on gray rock ledges below. The rocks had orange highlights. Some in the distance appeared to be painted with horizontal orange stripes at the base, but we later learned it was just a strange pattern of lichen.

We walked to the furthest point east from our lodge, a peninsula called Scoville Point, named after a miner who had staked a claim there. The trail was named after a conservationist named Stoll who had lobbied hard to make the park happen. But closer to the Visitor Center, there was a plaque granting credit to Stephen Tyng Mather, the first national park director. It was the same plaque we had seen at many other National Parks. They must have had them mass-produced after he died. Apparently, he had visited the area less than a decade before his death and lobbied to make it a national park. His death delivered the sympathy vote the conservationists needed to push the vote over the edge.

The four-mile walk was through a forest of fairly short pines, some juniper and birch, but mostly low dense leafy foliage. In some places, the foliage was so high we could not see our feet and had to hold our hands above our heads to make sure we did not scratch them on anything. Luckily, we were wearing long pants and long sleeves. Of course, when we put them on because the temperature was in the sixties, we did not think we were so lucky. Moreover, when we approached to the rocky coastline near the point, the sun was hot enough to make us want to shed some layers. But actually walking along those rocks, we found that wind pervaded

the coastline, so we were still comfortable.

Isle Royale reminded us of Acadia. Just as in Acadia, the rock ledges lining the shore were edged by a treeline of thick vegetation and dark forests. Yet, the comparison was not completely valid because Isle Royal has much shorter and less diverse trees and other plants. Isle Royal, like most of the country, was experiencing a drought. Moreover, the large population of moose pretty much prevent most young trees from surviving anyway. Most of the trees on the island are fairly old, yet they grow few and far between. The younger trees are either a very hearty pine with thick needles, or a very young tree with half of their branches eaten away. They blend on the forest floor with Queen Anne's Lace and purple wildflowers, a few berry bushes, and other low lying vegetation that, for some reason, the moose do not eat. There was plenty of light in the forest. There were no bear, mountain lion, or even rattlesnake warnings as there had been in just about every other park we had been in. This combination made for a very enjoyable stroll.

We showered and went for dinner. As we entered the restaurant, there were at least ten people pouring out the door. A moose calf was wandering on a paved walkway between the woods and the docks. We joined the throng, but did not have our camera. The calf finally disappeared into the woods, so we went inside.

The captain of the ferry had announced that we should look out for the Northern Lights while on the Island. We have never seen them, so we were excited at the possibility. After dinner, we headed to the



*The view from Scoville Point.*

Visitors Center to ask when was the best time to see them. On the way to the Visitors Center, we saw the moose calf again. Again, no camera. We also ran into the couple we had met on the boat. They had been talking to a transient boater, or yachtsman, we should say, as his boat was at least a 50-footer. The yachtsman had complained that the park service was getting rid of some of the docks, and the lodge was next, that they wanted to restrict the island's overnight guests to backpackers only.

To the question of Northern Lights, the Ranger shook her head. The lights follow sunspots and none had been forecast. We slept early anyway in

preparation for getting up at 2:00AM to view them. When we woke, the moon was high and brilliant orange, with three different colors of perfectly horizontal blue stripes below it. So it was worth becoming awake for a few moments even though there were no Northern lights.

We got up in time for an 8:30AM water taxi to a Trailhead at Daisy Farm. Our water taxi driver told us that it was called Daisy Farm because some fisherman who had homesteaded the area tried to plant a garden and all that grew were daisies. A clerk had told us it was a six-mile hike back to the Lodge. On the map, we saw that there were a few

interesting looking overlooks along the way. One was an observation tower. Another was an overlook at the highest point on the Island, Mount Franklin at 1074 feet. Yet a third was an inland sea cave. We plotted a route that included all these high points without stopping to see how it affected the estimated mileage. We certainly did not take into account the fact that the estimate of six miles the check-in clerk had offhandedly offered might be wrong. As it turned out, the straight back route was 7.2 miles and our version was 9.5.

The first 1.7 miles took us over a ridge, into a valley, and up the next ridge to the observation tower. The very top was closed off, so we lingered on the fourth story. To the north, Canada was clearly visible on the horizon in the form of long green-blue plateaus and smaller, grayish shadows of land beyond. Below us were long oval lakes set in dark green foliage. To the south, Lake Superior dominated the scene all the way to the horizon as well as any ocean. We descended and continued along the ridge. Though there were few tall trees, large thimbleberry bushes, with big flat, spongy maple-like leaves crowded the path. Also, grasses with grainy plumes grew four to five feet. Walking through this high brush, we were again grateful that the day had been cold enough to warrant long pants and long sleeved shirts. We were also grateful that we had received no Park Service warnings about predators, snakes, or poisonous plants. For many long stretches, we could not see our feet or our surroundings well enough to look out.

The path to Mount Franklin went down and up through another set of ridges, 2.5 miles from the first. On either side, we

often caught views of lakes and islands shining up at us like blue and green gems twinkling in the distance. Every twenty feet or so, the path would make use of a lava ridge that looked like decaying macadam or a sandstone ridge that looked like decaying concrete. The rest was either a dirt path through shady trees or a push through tall foliage.



*Typical forest scene at Isle Royale.*

All of it was easy, so we took it fairly quickly, arriving on top about 11:00AM. The overlook included Canada, but looked out in only one direction framed by trees. The view was not nearly as sweeping as had been the one from the observation tower. We were not even sure that we had really reached it until we came upon a trail junction .3 miles further that let us know, via our map, that indeed we had. A backpacker at the junction told us that there had been moose sightings at Three Mile, a campground 2 miles away. By then we had looked a bit more critically at the map and had faint recognition of our mileage mistake. We



*Canada is visible from Mount Franklin.*

might be back too late for our American Plan (thus prepaid) lunch at the lodge, which ended at 1:30PM. Moose and lunch provided two incentives that had us fairly sprinting to Three Mile. Once there, we slowed to less than a stroll and took long pauses at a long swampy area near the campground, but saw no moose.

A sign let us know we were three miles from lunch and it was after noon. So we returned to a workout level pace and hurried through long plank bridges over swampy bogs, then along the shore of Tobin Harbor. However, we could not resist going out of our way to visit “Suzy’s Cave,” a natural arch and inland sea cave about a mile out of the way. It

was a cave of very plain sandstone, with some volcanic rock at the base and underfoot. The path to it brought us to the shore of Lake Superior. We walked along pebble and cobblestone beaches for a few miles, then through conifer forest until we reached the lodge with twenty minutes to spare.

After lunch, we showered and got ready for the daily Ranger program at 2:30PM, but were an hour late, for it had started at 1:30. Instead, we rented a canoe and toiled around Tobin Harbor for a little under two hours. Almost immediately, we saw two fishing birds that looked like ducks. By their laughing call, Michael identified them as loons. They would

duck under water and come up several dozen feet away.

After an hour or so of paddling around with no destination, and partly in circles, we pulled the canoe onto a rock for a rest. From the water, our resting-place had looked like just a rocky outcropping, but we found low foliage around the rock that was dry and crisp on top like the alpine tundra in the Rocky Mountains. The rock itself was reddish and granite in appearance, but smooth enough for Jennifer to accidentally slide into the water in her rubber sandals. She caught herself on her hands in a push-up position. We sat on our lifejackets and watched a loon use its wings to propel itself loudly across the water's surface, all the time laughing like woody woodpecker. It appeared to be building up steam for a take-off, like an airplane. But after the display, it simply sunk back into a swim.



*View from the canoe.*

We had an early dinner and again set our alarms for 2:00AM. Again there was a gorgeous moon, but no northern lights. In the morning, we took a boat tour with a Park Ranger to Hidden Lake and Lookout Louise. It was overcast and chilly, but we were happy that the tour went anyway. We rode a small ferry-like boat to a dock

in Tobin Harbor, listening to the boat captain tell stories of the history of the buildings along the way. Apparently, when the National Park was established, people who lived here were allowed to retain ownership for their entire lives. Now one by one as the now-elderly people die, the Park Service is getting these buildings and using them for things like Artist-In-Residence programs.

At the dock, the Ranger took over and led us to Hidden Lake, where we immediately saw a moose. It was a female, standing in



*A moose swimming/eating at Hidden Lake.*

the lake, and eating something. We hung out for at least fifteen minutes taking pictures, then continued onto Lookout Louise. The walk was at first through bog, then on a steep path of dirt and rocks. We saw one more moose, about ten feet behind some trees. The Ranger stopped every quarter mile or so to let people catch up and catch their breath, giving some info on the lake or the island in the process. She told us that the lookout was named for a little girl who was told to lookout when meandering around there. The drop was steep. The Ranger mentioned that moose do not see very well, and so often walk off the cliff by mistake in the winter, and that wolves periodically check out the site below the cliff to see if there is any fresh moose meat to be had.

Along the way, she also talked about the geology of Lake Superior and Isle Royale. Lake Superior is the largest freshwater body of water on earth. Were it to be emptied evenly over the continent, it would cover North, South, and Central America in a foot of water. It is, in some places, a thousand feet deep. Its average temperature is 39°. It was created by a glacier, which melted in place and remained as the lake. Isle Royale was created by geologic uplift. Lava flows and sandstone layers alternate in its ridges. It rises to a bit less than 500 feet above the Lake elevation of ~600 feet. It continues to rise by about a foot every 100 years. The unique

geologic formation has turned everything we had so far learned about the ecology of elevation upside down. Its deciduous trees grow better in the higher elevations, where it is generally warmer than the lower elevations that are near the cold lake. The higher elevations also have better soil, as the lower elevations have more recently risen from the lake and so are mostly rocky and support only plants with little need for rich soil. That explained the tundra-like conditions of our canoe experience. It also explained all the juniper on the Stoll trail and the Aspen we were observing at the top of Lookout Louise. Of course, we were still



*The view of Canada from Lookout Louise.*

at only less than 1000 or so feet, so it did not really disprove other elevation theories concerning higher elevations.

The plant life of the island is also affected by Moose, who eat all the young Canada yew and mountain ash trees so no new ones every grow to full height. They also eat all the lower branches of balsam firs, leaving many unhealthy trees in their wake. A study is being done to see whether this will become a problem for the park service. We asked the Ranger what she thoughts of the yachtsman's complaint that the park service thought people were destroying the island. She had never heard of it and doubted its veracity, but admitted that the boaters and the park service have an ongoing battle on where the docks should be located.

We lingered at Lookout Louise, admiring the view of Canada, whose major feature we learned was named, "Sleeping Giant," for a legend of a Giant that told the white man about the silver in the mountain, and so was condemned to hide it by sleeping on it. We exchanged National Park stories with the other guests and the Ranger, who was a seasonal Ranger, moving from Park to Park with no guarantee of any future position. We encouraged her to go to school to study geology. It started to rain and we headed back down.

The boat ride back was a bit bumpy, forecasting an uncomfortable ferry ride back to the mainland, we feared. We had lunch at the lodge and wandered around the paved trails at Rock Harbor until it was time to board the ferry. At the Tobin Harbor dock, we came upon a Ranger program where the topic was loons. We listened for long enough to hear that the laughing call we had heard was meant to scare us away. But were nervous about getting a good seat on the ferry, so left before it was over.

We were mistakenly waiting on the wrong side of the dock when the ferry started to board. It filled up quickly. There were no two seats together in the main section of the boat by the time we got on. Luckily, the forward cabin still had an empty two-seater with a table and a window. People moved so quickly to their seats, the ferry left five minutes early. Six-foot swells made the ferry ride cold and bumpy. Some teenagers in our cabin went to the bow to observe and came back soaked. But Michael spent a half-hour outside anyway, staying amidships on the port side and out of the spray. Then it started to rain so he had to come in. The ferry arrived nearly twenty minutes late and we waited for our bags for another ten.

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Miles traveled: 347  
Departure datetime: Thursday, July 25, 8:00PM  
Departure weather: 62° Raining