

Trip Report

2006 Isle Royale Circumnavigation

May 28th – June 4th, 2006

Participants: Brock Hunter, Patrick Maun, Bill Newman, Jerome Rausch

Report by Brock Hunter

SKOAC's advanced trip this summer -- the circumnavigation of Isle Royale, including crossings out and back -- began on an ominous note, but soon settled into a relative pleasure cruise. An unseasonably early heat wave, colliding with the still-frigid waters of Lake Superior, created the recipe for a meteorological explosion. In true SKOAC timing, the "blast" came just as we prepared to embark on our 16 mile crossing to the big island. First, a little back-story:

After basting in 90+ degree temps throughout our Pukaskwa trip last July, the boys and I decided to get this year's trip in early before the arrival (we hoped) of the summer heat and bugs. As we drove north on Saturday, May 27, the summer heat had seemingly already descended with temps in the 90's as far north as Ely. This heat, colliding with the 38 degree waters of Lake Superior created extremely unstable weather conditions -- the perfect recipe for dangerous storms.

As we drove up the North Shore Saturday afternoon, we observed strong easterly winds coming off the Lake with big waves and white caps stacked up to the horizon. With a forecast for continued heat and instability across the North Country, our planned Sunday crossing to Isle Royale (and the whole trip) was looking pretty iffy.

As we packed our boats and prepared to launch from the Pigeon River early on Saturday evening, we "enjoyed" the company of a large dead and decomposing beaver right in the middle of the boat ramp. Many kayakers (and other boaters, for that matter) who travel the waters of Lake Superior develop some superstitions. With the ominous weather forecast looming in our minds, we did not see the dead beaver as a good omen.

Our plan for Saturday evening called for a quick four mile paddle down the length of Pigeon Point to a pocket harbor called Hole in the Wall. We intended to "hole" up there overnight and make the 16-mile crossing to Isle Royale Sunday morning. Our "quick" paddle down the Point turned into a bit of a slog as we battled icy easterly head winds and large waves the whole way.

Shortly after our arrival at Hole in the Wall, we discovered another dead beaver a few feet from our landing site. We noted this was now a Double-Dead-Beaver trip. Not good. Not good at all.

By late Saturday evening, temps at Hole in the Wall dropped into the low 40's and a thick blanket of fog descended over us, while a few miles west in Ely, temps remained in the high 80's. We bedded down for the night with some anxious tension over what the morning would bring.

We arose early Sunday morning and huddled around a weather radio. The reports did not sound promising. The forecast called for continued heat across northern Minnesota and the probability of strong thunder storms. We decided to delay our planned morning departure as we continued to monitor the unfolding weather. By mid morning, things were going south in a hurry. Tuning in the radio for our hourly weather check, we heard a surreal storm warning: strong thunder storms were exploding over the Boundary Waters, with 60-80 mph winds and quarter-sized hail, and were heading towards the waters of western Lake Superior! The report predicted the storms would pass over the North Shore between Grand Marais and Grand Portage around noon and head out towards Isle Royale, directly over our planned crossing route. Had we departed at our originally-planned time we would have been right in its path.

We quickly moved our boats up into the woods and hunkered down in the Hole in the Wall's small but comfy cabin to await the show. The storm arrived right on schedule but, from the protected confines of our fortress-like little harbor, all we saw was some heavy rain and wind blowing the trees on the ridges above us. Off to the south, though, we could hear the wind blowing like a freight train. Our decision to call off our crossing for the day was an easy one to make.

We spent the remainder of Sunday resting, rechecking our boats and gear and exploring the hiking trails around Hole in the Wall. Newman took the opportunity to begin a boat repair session that would last the rest of the trip. Bill's boat, a VERY well-traveled Romany Explorer, has long been the butt of SKOAC jokes. It has seen him safely through all of his big crossings and many a rough landing along Superior's rocky shores. Suffice it to say, it looks (and smells) the part with spider-web cracks, chips, hasty (read "ugly") repairs covering nearly square inch of its surface, and smells of rotting foam (and God knows what else) wafting from its hatches. Despite repeated promises to retire his "garbage barge" and buy a new boat, Billy just can't seem to let go. Looking for a leak that had flooded his rear cargo compartment with an inch of water during our short paddle to Hole in the Wall, Bill ended up ripping out and refitting his skeg and retightening nearly all of his deck rigging screws. He also chose this time to replace all of his deck bungies with new cord he purchased on the way up. Typical Newman!

As we awaited the Monday forecast, we discussed bail out plans should the weather prevent our crossing to Isle Royale, altogether. We were in the heart of some of Lake Superior's most beautiful shoreline and were certainly not without options.

Fortunately, the heat wave dissipated over the course of the day on Sunday and by evening, forecasts for Monday were looking a lot better, with more seasonable highs in the 70's for Ely. We rose early Sunday morning to cool, foggy conditions and a near-shore forecast of northeast winds 5-10 mph and 1-3 foot waves. We decided to go.

The fog was still quite thick as we paddled out to the tip of Pigeon Point. We stopped for a moment to do a security call on Channel 16, notifying the authorities and nearby boaters that four kayaks were preparing to make the 16 mile jump across to Huginnin Cove on Isle Royale. The forecast had predicted the fog would dissipate as the morning went on, but it actually thickened as we paddled out into open waters.

Each of us took turns as lead navigator, eyes locked onto our deck-mounted compass, concentrating to keep our 110 degree bearing in the developing 1-2 foot chop. With the fog limiting our visibility to about 50 feet, we were completely dependant on our compasses and GPS's -- definitely an eerie feeling. Without the quiet reassurance from our GPS's, we would have had no way to know whether the wind and waves were pushing us off-course and out into the middle of the Lake.

The fog finally began to lift as we closed the last couple miles to Isle Royale and we cruised into Huginnin Cove four and a half hours after departing Pigeon Point. As we rounded the corner into the harbor, we saw that we had company in the form of a large double kayak and a small woman peering at us through a huge telephoto camera lens from the beach. As I pulled up, she introduced herself as Ann and told me that she and her husband, John, had also crossed out to the Island via kayak earlier that week and were planning to cross back in two or three days.

Later that evening Ann and John joined us at our campsite and we discovered they were none other than Ann and John Mahan, noted outdoor writers and photographers, whose books include *Lake Superior: Story and Spirit* and *Northern Lights: Lighthouses of the Upper Great Lakes*, along with a slew of beautiful Great Lakes-oriented calendars. They were spending a week on Isle Royale to document the wild flower bloom for an upcoming publication.

The Mahans, we discovered, shared a connection with Newman. In preparation for their 150 mile kayak crossing of Lake Superior (from the Keweenaw Peninsula east to Lake Superior Provincial Park) back in 1997, Bill and Don Dimond needed to know whether they could land at Stannard Rock Lighthouse enroute. Stannard Rock is one of the most remote lighthouses on the Great Lakes, lying approximately 44 miles east of the Keweenaw Peninsula in the middle of Lake Superior. It is built on submerged rocks, consisting of nothing more than a stone cylinder rising from the water. Bill and Don knew the lighthouse had an observation deck 30 feet above the water, but they needed to

know more in devising a scheme to hoist their loaded kayaks up to it. They finally found great aerial photos of Stannard Rock Lighthouse in the Mahan's *Northern Lights* book.

Based on the Mahan's photos, Bill and Don designed system of climbing ropes and ascenders that ended up doing the job (though they left a healthy amount of gel coat behind, perhaps contributing to the myriad of current leaks in Bill's boat). The Mahans had heard about Bill and Don's excellent adventure and had even heard they had used the *Northern Lights* book for research. They were quite pleased to finally meet Bill. They also shared the harrowing tale of shooting those aerial photos of Stannard Rock, which involved hanging out the back of a cargo plane on a harness as they circled the lighthouse at 200 mph.

After our pleasant evening with the Mahans we set out late the next morning for Todd Harbor, midway up the Island's north side. Our paddle that day was relatively uneventful except for a brief lunch stop at Little Todd Harbor where we were greeted by clouds of black flies from a nearby swamp that descended on us, covering every available patch of bright-colored fabric.

We arrived at Todd Harbor that evening to discover the one Adirondack shelter was already taken. For those unfamiliar with Isle Royale, many campsites are blessed with three walled shelters approximately 15 feet wide and 10 feet deep. The open front is covered with screen and the wooden floor is elevated a couple feet off the ground. They provide a wonderful, clean, dry sanctuary from the bugs that often descend in hordes around dusk.

With the memory of the bug-fest at Little Todd fresh on our minds, we were disappointed to find the Todd Harbor shelter taken, to say the least. Fortunately, the shelter's sole inhabitant, a backpacker named Jerry, invited us to join him to cook our dinner. Jerry, it turned out, was another interesting dinner companion. He had recently retired from the Navy after serving 20 years as an aircraft carrier flight deck crewman (you know – the guys in the bright colored shirts who are constantly getting killed by errant planes, jet exhaust and broken arrester cables). He had served on several different carriers during his career and had participated in nearly every conflict the U.S. has fought during that time. Jerry regaled us with stories of working "the deck": of his buddy, Ritter "the Critter" who was blown overboard into 40 foot seas in the North Atlantic (and survived to tell the tale); of personally escorting then-Secretary of Defense, Collin Powell, on a helicopter flight into war-torn Haiti; and of visiting countless exotic ports of call, among others.

Jerry was backpacking the entire Island by himself without a tent or rain gear. His kit consisted of a military surplus sleeping bag and pad, an MSR stove, and the clothes on his back. He told us he was "still getting used to the bugs." The highpoint of Jerry's trip had been a close encounter with a wolf that crept up on him as he napped in the sun on a rock. He awoke with the feeling he was being

watched and looked up to see the wolf about 15 feet away. After a brief instant of eye contact, the wolf was gone.

That night as we settled into our tents, I heard a rustling and a large branch break in the brush nearby. I shined my flashlight out into the darkness and illuminated a large pair of very wide-set eyes – a cow moose casually grazing about 30 feet away. I roused the boys and we watched the moose as she slowly worked her way along the edge of our campsite, slurping leaves off of branches as she went. The next morning some backpackers who were camped on the other side of the harbor told us of their own close encounter with a cow moose and her calf. They had slept on the dock that night and awoke at dawn to find the pair wading in the water just feet away.

Despite our best efforts at an early start the next morning, we were on the water at the crack of 11:00 a.m. From Todd Harbor we continued our journey under sunny skies up the north side of the Island, stopping for lunch at Amygdaloid Island Ranger Station and an afternoon break at the beautiful Belle Isle. A brisk tail wind and following seas that afternoon pushed us along, allowing us countless surf rides. We made it all the way to Blake Point at the northeastern tip of the Island by early evening. We planned to camp at the Merritt Lane campsite just around the point, but we were disappointed to find it already occupied. Having already paddled over 25 miles that day, we resigned ourselves to grinding out five more to Rock Harbor, making it the longest day of our trip.

The consolation of staying over at Rock Harbor, the only spot of civilization on the Island, was hot showers and an Adirondack shelter for each of us. After visiting the Park's only grocery store the next morning and watching another round of Billy's boat repair workshop, we were again on the water at about 11:00 a.m. Having ground his teeth through several days of late starts and late finishes, Jerome "Pepe" Rausch, our resident efficiency expert, was beginning to chafe at our relaxed schedule. He made it known that from here on out we would be on the water and paddling at a decent damn hour!

From Rock Harbor we set out to paddle Isle Royale's south shore. We wound through a long series of long, skinny islands and channels, stopping for lunch on Caribou Island. From there, we paddled on down the shore toward Malone Bay. We paddled against a slight headwind most of that afternoon, which, compared to our tailwind from the day before, made our progress seem brutally slow.

By the time we finally closed in on Malone Bay, the afternoon sun was right in our eyes, causing a near-blinding glare. We were passing between the big Island and some small off-shore islets when we encountered some shallows. Everyone started hitting submerged rocks, hidden from detection by the glare. I hit one rock hard enough to nearly high-center my boat before I slid off sideways, leaving an ugly gash in my gel-coat.

Fortunately for me, this was not really “my” boat. After ordering “my” boat through Midwest back in February (and selling my other two boats in the meantime) the manufacturer screwed up the order. Midwest, in an act of true class, generously provided me with a demo boat (in the same model as my ordered one, no less) for unlimited use until my boat came in. The months have drug on and on and I still haven’t seen my boat. I don’t think the Midwest guys ever dreamed I would still be using their boat in late May, let alone for the Isle Royale trip. Thanks guys! Oh, and about that gash . . .

We finally arrived at Malone Bay in the early evening and were greeted with my favorite campsite of the trip. There were enough open shelters for each of us to have one of our own. Mine was perched right at water’s edge with a magnificent view of Menagerie Island and its light house four miles out.

After unloading our boats we congregated in Pepe’s shelter for dinner and ongoing speculation on the source of Newman’s boat leak. Bill had discovered earlier in the day that a wine bladder stored in his day-hatch had leaked (a recurring theme for Newman) and the wine had somehow leaked around his bulkhead into his cockpit. Bill indicated that he was giving up on finding the leaks and was resigned to the fact that his boat would just be slowly sinking for the duration of the trip.

Jerome, Patrick and I (all SKOAC Board members) realized we had a quorum and called a hasty Board meeting with only one agenda item: Newman’s boat. I offered a resolution that, assuming Bill and his boat made it through the trip, it would never be allowed on the water at another SKOAC event. The resolution received a quick “second” and a unanimous vote.

As we made our way to our respective shelters for the night, Jerome announced that tomorrow we would be on the water early. Since Bill had supposedly given up on his hour of morning boat maintenance, we thought a 9:00 a.m. start would be doable.

A full night’s rest apparently revived Newman’s determination to fix his boat, because, as Patrick, Pepe and I stood, with boats loaded and ready to paddle at 9:00 a.m. the next morning, he was at it again. This time, Bill produced a roll of what looked like oversized black electrical tape. He explained that it was drain tile tape, capable of sticking in wet conditions. We watched in amazement as he proceeded to apply long strips of the stuff to the bottom of his hull. Pretty soon, the boat’s bottom was nearly covered with large black panels of tape. Soon it was 11:00 a.m. and finally time to depart. Pepe mumbled vague threats and profanities as we paddled away from shore.

We had decided that, rather than following the shore down into swampy (and, no doubt, buggy) Siskiwit Bay, we would make the four mile crossing out to Menagerie Island Lighthouse, then follow the long string of islets down to

Houghton Point. The conditions were clear and sunny as we set out for Menagerie, with the lighthouse clearly visible on the horizon. We were somewhat spread out and cruising along when Pepe and I noticed a fog bank moving in from the east. We didn't think much of it at first, but then we noticed it was coming fast. We blew our whistles to try to get Bill and Patrick's attention, but they were out of range. Within minutes, we were in near-zero visibility fog. Pepe and I took a compass bearing to the lighthouse as it disappeared from sight and set off on that course. Once again, our GPS's confirmed that we were on the right track. We emerged from the fog at Menagerie Island just as Bill and Patrick arrived together, also having paired up as the fog hit. We had just passed our surprise quiz in kayak navigation and Lake Superior had just reminded us to never let our guard down.

Menagerie Island was amazing: a long, thin knife edge of rock, no more than 50 yards wide and a quarter of a mile long. The lighthouse, built in 1875, became famous for its longest-serving keeper, John Malone, who, with his wife, raised twelve children on the island during his 32 year tenure. Shortly after his retirement, in 1913, the light was automated and the island was abandoned to the seagulls. Our visit to Menagerie Lighthouse was a high point of the trip. With gauzy fog enveloping the island and lichen covering every surface, the place had an undeniably ghostly aura.

The fog lingered as we departed Menagerie Island and followed the string of long skinny islands to Houghton Point. Once again, we were entirely dependant on our compasses and GPS's to find our way. Often we only knew we were getting close to an island by GPS and the sound of the birds squawking through the fog.

The fog only lifted once we made it to Houghton Point. We stopped for a quick lunch, and then set out again for our day's destination, Long Point. After what seemed like endless hours of paddling, we finally reached Long Point, a (not surprisingly) long point near the southeast corner of the Island. There, a long gravel beach and a gorgeous sunset awaited our weary bones. As we lounged in our tents after dinner, a large red fox paid us a visit, casually trotting down the beach. I was sitting in front of my tent cleaning dishes at the time and the fox passed by within ten feet of me. He gave me a curious glance, but did not break stride. Clearly, he had more important matters on his evening agenda.

By this point in the trip we were starting to run out of gas. Having averaged over 20 miles of paddling every day five days in a row, we needed some rest before the big crossing back to the mainland. We slept in the next morning before paddling a leisurely eight miles to Grace Island off Isle Royale's southwestern tip. Our plan called for a night on Grace and an early morning crossing back to Pigeon Point.

We knew Grace Island had two Adirondack shelters and no room for tents, so we prayed they would both be open. As we rounded the corner and paddled into

Grace's harbor, we were disappointed to see one of the shelters was occupied. Disappointment quickly turned to shock when we saw the condition of the occupied shelter. Words cannot do it justice, but I will try. "Trailer court trash heap" comes close, but still falls short. Our "neighbors" had nailed plastic sheeting over the screened front of the shelter. In front of the shelter, they had hung a large moldy canvas tarp that sagged under its own weight. Beneath the tarp were two large folding metal tables, several five gallon propane tanks, and eight (I repeat EIGHT) huge Igloo coolers. Every bush in the vicinity was draped in dirty laundry, including underwear. Two Wal-Mart-special lawn chairs sat side-by-side out front, each with a matching orange plastic milk crate as an end-table.

The "empty" shelter had also been utilized. Inside, we found a large plastic garbage bag full of rotting trash, including fish guts. The picnic table in front was covered in empty bottles. A dozen, or so, gas cans lay under another moldy green canvas tarp nearby.

Our neighbors were nowhere to be seen. We went ahead and commandeered the "empty" shelter, moving the garbage bag out next to the gas cans, and hanging our camping permit (as required) on the front door. We all struggled to come to grips with the scene, but it was especially hard on poor Pepe, who's neat and orderly German genes were stressed to the breaking point.

Not long after we settled in, we heard the growl of a large boat motor and soon saw our neighbors returning from their day of fishing. Their physical appearance was in perfect alignment with their housekeeping habits. They sheepishly apologized for leaving trash in our shelter and bottles on our table, explaining that they had been there for a week and did not expect any company. Knowing the Park's regulations limits stays at any sight to three days, and that they didn't appear to even have a permit, poor Pepe's head nearly did a 360.

Karma soon smiled on us, however, when, shortly after dinner, we heard another boat motor approaching in the distance. We soon saw a small craft headed our way, piloted by a Park Ranger, clad in green, with a bright orange floatation vest. Our neighbors spotted him, too, and scurried like cockroaches to clean up their mess. They had no hope of straightening it out in time, of course. The Ranger was mooring at the dock before they even pulled all their tighy-whities from the bushes.

Pepe met the Ranger down on the dock and escorted him up to our shelter. Ranger Pete was very gracious to us, inquiring about our trip and expressing amazement that we had crossed out and paddled around the Island in less than a week. He told us the story of lighthouse keeper Malone and his 32-year, twelve-kid, tenure on Menagerie Island. He also made a perfunctory check of our permit and wished us a safe crossing back to the mainland, before heading next door.

Our neighbors made use of the few minutes Ranger Pete spent with us to continue their cleanup, but they didn't put a visible dent in their ugly display before he turned his attention to them. We struggled to hear the conversation, but could only pick up snippets. We heard enough, however, to know things weren't going well for them. After fifteen, or so, minutes in the junk yard, Ranger Pete headed back to his boat with our neighbors in-tow. Their hanging heads and studious avoidance of eye contact confirmed our suspicions that things had, indeed, had gone very badly for them next door.

Ranger Pete spent the next half hour diligently scribbling on pad after pad of tickets as our neighbors sat in their boat waiting for the punch line. Once again, we struggled to hear the conversation, but only picked of pieces, including, "park regulations," "plastic sheeting" and "court appearance." We never heard a dollar amount, though we quietly debated an appropriate fine amongst ourselves. Patrick thought \$500 would be about right. Pepe thought that was just getting started.

Ranger Pete finally went on his way, leaving our neighbors standing sullenly on the dock. They walked back up past our shelter, again avoiding eye contact, and headed back to start working on Ranger Pete's to-do list.

I previously mentioned that we had hoped to get both shelters on Grace Island. That was not because the shelters were too small to house the four of us. They actually seemed to be constructed to comfortably house four people plus gear. The reason for the concern was primarily because of my alleged snoring. Now, I'm not going to say that I don't snore. I'm pretty sure I do, though I never personally witnessed this phenomenon. Past girlfriends and my wife have assured me that I do occasionally snore, but that it seldom intrudes on their rest. My SKOAC companions have never been so charitable. They have long insisted that my snoring is nothing short of an earth-shaking, life-changing experience for those cursed to witness it. In consideration of their delicate constitutions, I typically set my tent up a short distance from theirs. Grace Island offered no such option. With thick brush intruding all around the two shelters there was simply no place to pitch a tent. We were stuck together for our last night.

We agreed to turn in early, rise at 4:30 a.m. and launch at 6:30 a.m. on our crossing back to Pigeon Point. I let the boys slip well into a deep sleep before bedding down myself, hoping that if I did snore, I wouldn't disturb them.

Apparently, all of my precautions didn't work. When the alarm went off at 4:30, I awoke to a chorus of sniveling from all corners of the shelter. I was informed that now that I was awake, perhaps they could finally get a few minutes of sleep. I lay quietly in my bag for another half hour, or so, granting them their wish. We finally arose at 5:00 and the boys spent breakfast spouting off about how torturous their night had been. What can I say? I slept fine.

Despite our late start we were on the water shortly after 6:30 a.m. and paddling into open waters by 7:00 a.m. The Lake was absolutely glass calm and visibility, unlike our crossing out, was endless. Not only could we clearly see Pigeon Point, we could also make out Spar, Thompson and Pie Islands as we looked up the Canadian North Shore. As we reached the middle portion of the crossing, we could turn around and see Isle Royale, in its entirety, from Passage Island and Blake Point at the northeastern tip to Rock of Ages off its southwestern tip. The space and light was intoxicating, giving me a feeling approaching vertigo. As we passed the half way point with conditions remaining glass calm, we started to crank up the pace. Pepe charging out in the lead with a blistering pace. The rest of us followed and as we approached Pigeon Point it turned into a bit of a race, against each other and the clock, as we wanted to beat the four hour goal we had set for the crossing.

Pepe and I reached the Point first, cruising in at over 5 mph. We pushed ourselves to the limit, approaching 6 mph, as we paddled the last few hundred yards into Hole in the Wall, but missed our four hour goal by ten seconds. Newman was uncharacteristically slow in the final sprint. We were starting to think he was losing his edge, but he later claimed that chunks his previously-installed tape were starting to come off, causing extra drag. Whatever.

The dead beaver at Hole in the Wall was gone and we enjoyed lunch in the warm sunlight, knowing we were only four short miles from the trip's end. A short paddle later we landed at the Pigeon River boat ramp, noting the dead beaver was gone there, too -- a fitting end to a bad trip gone good.