

Trip Report by Jerome R.

Dates – Launch Sunday August 30, 2009 - 10 days paddling

Participants – Bill N. and Jerome R.

Trip Plan – the NE shoreline of Lake Superior including Pukaskwa National Park and the Crown Lands leading into the mouth of the Michipicoten River. Also including a crossing to/from Michipicoten Island and circumnavigation of the island.

Estimated Total Miles Paddled – approximately 200 miles

Bill N and Jerome R planned this trip for early September to avoid mid-season heat and to increase the potential challenge from late season winds.

This trip plan presented a significant challenge since we intended to paddle the beautiful but remote shoreline of Pukaskwa National Park and continue on to the mouth of the Michipicoten River. In addition, we planned a crossing to/from and circumnavigation of Michipicoten Island. This was a side trip adding some 70 miles or so including the crossings which were over 13 miles each way. Our desire to get to Michipicoten was influenced by the allure of seeing this remote and wild island including its resident Woodland Caribou inhabitants.

We had extra days built into our schedule to allow for possible weather delays. If all went according to plan we intended to use our extra days for paddling Lake Superior Provincial Park or Pictured Rocks before heading home.

Bill and I headed out of town on a Friday evening and drove north before camping just short of the Canadian border. We spotted a wolf limping along the side of the highway as we approached Grand Marais, a good omen for our trip. The next day we completed the drive along the north shore of Lake Superior, over the top and on to our launch destination at Hattie Cove. Just before arriving we ran into club members Jill W, Matt K, Aras K and Chris E. who had just completed an out-and-back trip within Pukaskwa Park and were beginning their trip home. We set up our tents at Hattie Cove and checked over our food provisions in preparation for departure the next morning.

Sunday August 30 – Launch at Hattie Cove and paddle to Oiseau Bay with side trip up White River– 23 miles

We checked in with the Canadian authorities at the park kiosk and outlined our paddle trip plan and obtained our park permits. Loading the boats was an adventure as we were packing food and other provisions for a minimum of 10 days and each of us had several extra days of food in case the weather slowed our trip. Both Bill and I had brought along multiple options for paddling attire but the moment of truth was at hand – we opted for drysuits given the recent cold and windy weather and expectation for more of the same. This proved to be the wrong choice later on.

In any event, we loaded up and shoved off, paddling out the entrance to Hattie Cove and into the open lake. Winds were out of the west, which wasn't bad and there was decent swell from the very strong winds of the last few days. We hung a left, paddling south along the coast an hour or so to the mouth of the White River. We chose to paddle up the river a couple miles to a stretch of rapids from which we planned to hike up to a suspension bridge hanging high over the river. As Bill exited his boat I heard a loud shout and words of displeasure – the wine bag stowed in the cockpit area had sprung a leak and red wine was sloshing around the cockpit. Not good. After frantically transferring the remaining wine into two 1-liter nalgene bottles, (and sipping the extra)

Bill sponged out his cockpit and we headed off on our hike. It seemed the trail started at a campsite fire grate and we followed it for a while before concluding it most certainly wasn't a trail. The underbrush was thick so we started bushwhacking back to the sound of the river until finally spotting what looked like the trail across a creek bed. We caught up to it and followed it on to our destination.

Upon reaching the bridge we found signs indicating it was "closed" and was due for rehabilitation. Despite this, the caution tape on both sides of the bridge was torn and we decided to step out across the chasm, one at a time, to get some photos and video. Of course, Bill let me go first!

Back in our boats after the hike we paddled down the White River toward the open lake once again. At the mouth of the river the bank had huge amounts of driftwood stacked high – nothing like you'd see on any US shore.

The remainder of the day found us making our way southward along the coast to our destination at Oiseau Bay. We took a rest stop in picturesque Fish Harbor. Upon exiting Bill spotted a pair of otters scampering down some rocks and plopping into the water. They were quite wary of us and kept their distance – periodically spyhopping high out of the water to get a good look at us before finally disappearing. The paddling continued to be fantastic with the swell creating interesting clapotis waves off the rocky shore. Very fun. We made Oiseau Bay quite late due to our White River excursion and set up our tents on the beach – no other people were anywhere in sight. After dinner we enjoyed a nice fire and a bit of relaxation.

Monday August 31 – Oiseau Bay to Cascade Falls – 23 miles

Monday's plan was for another fairly long day. We continued our southward progression and took a rest stop at a big sand beach before White Spruce Harbor. Again, the paddling was just fantastic. Huge Boomers were exploding against the rock faces – some of the spray rising 20 to 30 feet. The swell was also producing sizeable and unpredictable reflection waves. I wished we could have played in these conditions for hours but we had miles to make. We took another very quick stop at North Swallow Harbor to pick up a tent pole accidentally left behind by our friends who had just completed their trip. From here we proceeded past Newman's Bay where the shore produced more exciting conditions.

Along the final approach to the Cascade Falls site there is a thin slot of water between some offshore rocks and the mainland which again afforded excellent paddling conditions. Rounding the final point resulted in our first view of Cascade Falls – and they were roaring. Far more flow than our prior visit of a few years ago. The river split into 3 channels before plummeting the 40 feet or so directly into the lake. The wave action into the beach was strong and dumping and the beach was most definitely not boat friendly – lots of large rocks on and off shore. To the far right was a tiny bit of sand that we thought would work for us to land the boats. I headed in first and exited my boat quickly to get it out of harms way. Bill followed and I helped him secure his boat on shore. The beach area was littered with huge logs and driftwood but we were able to find room to get our tents pitched and settled in for some dinner and rest.

Tuesday September 1 – Cascade Falls to the Wheat Bin – 19 miles

The weather had been quite warm the first couple days of our trip and today brought more of the same. Bill had an advantage as true to form, his suit had some leaks (ie: more ventilation) and the neck gasket had split as he put the suit on – normally a concerning situation but with the moderate water temps and above average air temps I was envious!

We set up a log launching pad to allow us to get into our boats on land and launch without the constant wave action upsetting the boats against the rocks. We decided to head offshore a couple miles to Otter Island. On the north end is a lighthouse and harbour with keepers' quarters from years ago. We checked them out before paddling to the outside of the island as we made our way southward and on to Otter Head. Again, the temps were stifling and we had to keep our pace and exertion level in check so as to avoid unnecessarily overheating. Hourly water breaks were the call of the day. Departing Otter Head we continued on towards Pointe La Canadienne, a potentially dangerous spot in south or southwest waves. For us, the wave action continued to provide fun diversions as we piled on the miles.

A couple miles past the Pointe we passed the Pukaskwa River, the official boundary of Pukaskwa National Park. We paddled on by as we were ultimately headed to the Wheat Bin – a favored destination – and an early arrival would be good to allow for more rest before our planned paddle of the next day. The Wheat Bin is aptly named as it is a huge pale gravel beach probably a third of a mile or more in length and multi-tiered with the top flat tier maybe 20 feet or more above lake level. It affords limitless tenting opportunities.

Many of these camping locations provide an ample supply of driftwood for evening fires. Sometimes we forego this luxury but not on this night. We settled in over a small beach fire and were treated to a nearly full moon later in the evening. Very Nice. Before calling it a night we checked on the weather report to assess our prospects for the planned crossing to Michipicoten the following morning. It called for more of the same but with building winds as the day progressed. We decided a reasonably early morning departure would be appropriate.

Wednesday September 2 – The Wheat Bin - crossing out to the midsection of Michipicoten Island and on to Schafer Bay – 26 miles

We chose the Wheat Bin as our launching point for the crossing because of our fondness for this location – and our intent to return here upon completing our circumnavigation of Michipicoten. Our paddle plan for this day was long and complicated by the 13.5 mile crossing from the Wheat Bin to Michipicoten. We headed out amidst continued warm weather – clearly we were mired in a huge high weather system that was baking us in sun, hot temps and regular afternoon winds.

The crossing proved uneventful – until the final half hour. As Lake Superior is wont to do – the winds came up and beat us down a bit upon our approach to our landing. I for one was glad to be nearing our landing location – a small creek just to the west of Bonner Head. Unfortunately, the winds had come up from the west and were producing dumping waves onto a stony beach full of cobbles. Bill and I both cautiously approached the shore and finally spotted a tiny patch of gravel. We exited our boats as quickly as we could and then slid them up onto the rock and gravel beach.

The first order of business, as it was on many rest stops, was to get out of the drysuits and lay out our undergarments on the rock to allow them to dry. We surveyed the lake – a sea of white caps – and checked on the weather before discussing our options. Our plan had been to proceed from here to the west end of the island and on to Schafer Bay – that wasn't going to happen against the current wind conditions. Especially as we'd be pushing up against a 30 mile day. So true to form, we decided to take a snooze and then explore a bit.

Walking down to the creek mouth we noted numerous Caribou tracks – awesome! This is part of the reason we came to Michipicoten – we hoped to be fortunate enough to see this animal in one of the very few places you can find them. Then Bill spotted the presence of a bright red fruit – thimbleberries! They were everywhere and very ripe. They look a bit like a raspberry – though these were consistently larger, rounder with smaller more uniform dimples. And the taste while

still sweet, was a bit more unexpected and interesting. We both foraged for sometime – like a couple of hungry bears I suppose – but in this case just a couple of kayakers reaping the rewards of fresh berries off the bush. Hmmmmm..... Not to be outdone, there was also a smattering of raspberry bushes along the beach, though these berries were much smaller and less consistent.

After eating our fill and taking more of a rest we decided to wait the winds out and continue on with our plan to head west (vs. reversing course to head around the island in a counter-clockwise direction). A couple hours of paddling brought us to a small sand beach near the Quebec Mines. We stopped and took the short trail from the north end of the beach to the remains of the stone cutters cabins which were hidden back in the woods. The remains consisted of a few stone walls propped up with timbers planted into the ground. From here, we hoped to follow more trails further into the island to find some of the old mine shafts but this proved difficult – caribou trails headed every direction and after a bit of effort we determined we needed to get back to our boats in order to hit our final destination for the evening before dark. A bit of berry foraging on our way back took the edge off the hike.

Back in our boats we headed to Schafer Bay on the far west end of Michipicoten. There was a large cave visible from the water not far from the entrance to Shafer Bay but the lateness of the day prevented us from exploring. Dusk was approaching and as we rounded the final point the sun was setting to the west and producing a vibrant orange glow while the moon was already above the horizon to the east. The lake was calm and we headed into the bay to check things out. Schafer Bay had only a narrow, two-tiered cobble beach – not optimal but it was getting dark and we'd had a long day so we decided to make the best of it. We pitched out tents and fortified the stakes with larger rocks before settling in. Dinner was cooked and enjoyed in the dark.

Thursday September 3 – Schafer Bay to West Sand Bay (& Quebec Harbour) – 15 miles

We had been making good progress on our trip plan with no weather delays to date so we decided a short day was in order with a late sleep-in and paddle on to West Sand Bay. The weather continued to be unseasonably warm so we stopped for more berry picking and relaxing before making our destination. West Sand Bay is a huge sand beach with plenty of opportunities for camping. We setup and because of the early hour decided to get back in our boats with our fishing gear and try our luck as we paddled further east into Quebec Harbor. We had hoped the water temps might be cold enough to at least legitimize our fishing efforts but alas, that was not the case. The water was warm and despite trolling and casting as we moved along no bites were to be had. While I could see the writing on the wall and decided to return to camp Bill pressed on and checked out the shipwrecks in the far east end of Quebec Harbor. On my paddle back to camp I made a quick pit stop and had a beaver swim by checking me out. A short distance later I spotted my first Caribou traversing a gravel beach before heading back into the woods. Very neat – I judiciously scoured the shoreline for the remainder of the return paddle but no more sightings were realized.

Back at camp I cleaned up and Bill returned a while later. We each grabbed a Surly and our camp chairs and settled in at the shoreline to wait and see if more Caribou would make their appearance. Sure enough, a cow and calf emerged well down the beach and started our way – a short while later a huge buck followed them. They continued for a while but the buck, ever aware, scooted back to the woods before we could get a photo of him. The other two caribou continued a bit further and then took his lead. It was awesome to see them. After dinner we enjoyed a small beach fire before calling it a day.

Friday September 4 – West Sand Bay to Point Maurepas – 15 miles

Our paddle plan for this day began with a departure from camp and a paddle out to Davieaux Island. Upon landing we were treated to a fantastic blueberry patch and set in to feast once again. We hiked to the point of the island and enjoyed the view back towards Michipicoten. In the boats again we proceeded east and converged back to the main island. We spotted a kayak in the distance heading towards us – the first people we'd encountered in a number of days. As they approached we noted it was a large tandem with an older couple paddling. Upon rafting up we saw the gentleman in the stern position was using a broken paddle and they had no spare – not good. We chatted for a while before separating and making our way on to East Sand Bay, where the couple had their camp setup. Bill and I discussed their situation and the unlikely prospects of a repair of the broken paddle and so we decided to leave his spare at their camp to ensure they'd have a viable option. I still had a spare paddle so we were not exposed to their same fate.

We left this location and the shoreline and topography changed to provide large open areas with grass and rock and fewer trees. We had an easy paddle on to Point Maurepas and the lighthouse marking the east end of the island and another relaxing evening.

Saturday September 5 – Point Maurepas to midpoint of Michipicoten Island, crossing back to mainland Wheat Bin – 25 miles

Our leisurely pace of the past few days was going to change today as we were facing several miles of paddling on Michipicoten and then the crossing back to the mainland. Before breaking camp and loading the boats we enjoyed some breakfast berry foraging. The blueberries in this location were ripe and large and made for easy picking. Having our fill it was time to get going.

First we had to proceed from our camp at Point Maurepas westward toward our demarcation point. The shoreline along this stretch is mostly rock, cobble beaches and a little bit of sand. During one stretch Bill spotted a beaver who warned us with a slap of his tail, submerged but was still visible as he swam below the surface. After a couple hours we approached Bonner Head and were treated to the more vertical topography of the rock cliffs and formations coming right down to the water. It was amazing in some instances to see trees growing out of nearly vertical rock walls. We finally reached the location of the landing near the creek where we first set foot on MI. Our circumnavigation was complete.

Given the continuing hot weather we decided to take the remainder of the afternoon to hike up the creek bed and do a bit of exploring. Back at the beach we made dinners and waited for dusk as we planned to cross back to the mainland via an evening/night paddle so as to avoid the mid-day heat. Finally, with the sun setting we entered our boats and prepared for the 3 ½ hour crossing back to the Wheat Bin.

An hour or so into the paddle, the sun and any remnant light were gone and night was at hand. An orange glowing moon was rising and provided a bit of light for a brief period. We could make out the horizon line of the mainland in the distance and agreed upon a point to paddle towards. This allowed us to avoid paying unnecessary attention to our deck compasses and the potential fatigue this can produce. Not long thereafter the horizon line began to fade in a foggy haze. The wind picked up a bit and darkness was upon us. The stars were now out in force and we were clearly in the midst of a night crossing.

Things can get a bit interesting in such a situation. We maintained our heading as best we could via the fuzzy outline on the horizon. Periodically we turned on our headlamps to verify our heading according to the deck compasses and to get a destination confirmation via GPS. Other than that we continued paddling in the dark, except for the glow sticks on the back of our pfd's.

With the stars out in force and our heading very close to 0 degrees we could also use the North Star (identified via the two stars forming the end of the shovel of the Big Dipper). Problem is, this was high in the sky and would require us to look high above us – not fun given the wave conditions and vertigo inducing effects! The waves were not big – mostly 1 to 2 footers with an occasional convergence producing something bigger. However, in the darkness your visual senses are significantly reduced and much of your boat balance and control becomes reactionary instead of anticipatory. It can be a bit unnerving at times. Nonetheless, we pressed on towards our destination.

We had hoped to be able to see the huge gravel beach of the Wheat Bin from a distance away, assuming the moon would be out in force. This was not the case. The moon was mostly hidden in haze or not bright enough so we took our periodic location fixes before finally completing the crossing and hitting the beach around 10:30 pm. We were both glad to exit the boats, set up our tents and relax with a Surly before calling it a day. We were feeling good about our success to date – being able to get the crossing out to Michipicoten and circumnavigating that island in its entirety – and then returning to our demarcation point at the Wheat Bin. We were now in position to complete our trip plan with no gaps in the shoreline.

Sunday September 6 –Wheat Bin to Floating Heart Bay – 17 miles

With the long day yesterday, late night and relatively routine paddle plan for today we both slept in and didn't launch until noon. Once again, despite whatever the weather and wind forecast indicated it continued to be hot and we fought modest headwinds all day. The shoreline to the east of the Wheat Bin brought a change to the look of the rock. There is much more granite and Canadian Shield rock with colors starting from white to orange and turning pink as you move eastward. The paddling was mostly uneventful and we finally took a lunch break on a beautiful sand beach to the inside of Crane Island. If you didn't know better it could have been a location in the Caribbean. The water was vibrant blue and the beach a stark white.

We continued on from here and briefly contemplated attempting paddling through the shallow and narrow channel of "Le Petit Mort Rocks". Alas, as on our trip a few years prior the water level would not allow it and we were forced to paddle to the outside of the offshore island before continuing down the coast. I think we were both anxious to complete the day, our bodies feeling the effects of the prior long days and the head winds facing us now. Despite our wishful thinking that Pilot Harbor was the end of our paddle day we needed to cover a couple more miles before finally reaching Floating Heart Bay.

This rest stop is nice with a rock fire pit on the east end and stool back in the woods. There is a small creek that runs to the lake on the west end of the beach and there were a lot of wolf tracks visible in the sand in this area.

Monday September 7 – Floating Heart Bay to McCoy's Harbour – 23 miles

Departing Floating Heart Bay we continued east along "the Flats". The rock and topography proved much more interesting than my memory suggested and we enjoyed the new terrain. This was the first cloudy day of our trip and we were enjoying the relief from the sun. Shortly before reaching a planned rest area we once again came upon the couple we had met on MI and for which Bill had left his spare paddle. We made a courtesy stop to make sure they were doing ok and they were both very thankful for our assistance with the paddle. A couple miles down the coast from this stop we came to Point Isacor, another potentially dangerous area with tall vertical rock coming right down to the water. The weather was routine so we had no trouble rounding this point and continuing along the steep shoreline until reaching Tamarack Bay. By now we definitely needed a pit stop so we eyed a small group of rocky mini-islands, noting a slot we

could use to exit our boats. As I entered the slot first it was a déjà-vu moment. I recalled stopping in this exact location on our prior trip a couple years earlier. Good thing for this recollection as the rock surface where we wanted to exit was very slippery and treacherous. We were both extremely careful exiting our boats to avoid a nasty spill. Safely out of the boats we got out of the drysuits to once again dry our undergarments and take a rest.

Paddling a couple hours further down the coast brought us to the Dog River. Based on the water volume at Cascade Falls we were hoping that there would still be sufficient runoff to make the paddle and hike up the Dog to Dennison Falls worthwhile. This was not the case. We paddled through a small opening and the current guarding the mouth of the river and paddled up to a landing a half-mile or so up the river. We hiked for a bit before both concluding that slogging our way up the river to Dennison would be a disappointment. There just wasn't enough flow to expect the falls would be the spectacle they supposedly are in the spring or after big rains. Given that it would consume a couple hours to make this excursion we decided to bail.

This conclusion was not all bad – we now had the opportunity to paddle another 5 miles down the coast before setting up camp which would make the final day a shorter one. Back in the boats we continued to enjoy the granite rocks guarding the shoreline as we continued on. The colors in this area ranged from orange to pink and provided constant visual stimulation. Finally reaching McCoy's Harbour we landed on the sandy beach to the east of the tiny peninsula. Bill set up on a tent pad amongst a small bevy of trees but I opted for the sand beach. After the camp chores were taken care of we once again grabbed our camp chairs and the final ounces of box wine remaining and sat down to catch the beautiful sunset, content that the end of the trip was at hand. We felt a few drops of spitting drizzle, the first and only rain over the nine days of paddling so far. It was a false alarm and there was no need for rain gear.

Tuesday September 8 – McCoy's Harbour to mouth of the Michipicoten River – 13 miles

Due to our progress of the day before we knew our paddle in to Wawa would be a relatively easy day, weather permitting. Our boats were significantly lighter now as all the Surly and wine were gone as well as a huge amount of our food provisions. Packing the boat goes a lot quicker when you don't need to squeeze gear into any available void. They seem to move more easily through the water and have a livelier feel as well – or maybe that's also the result of putting in a lot of miles over a relatively short period.

The paddle in was uneventful and there's not much to say about it. We were looking forward to completing our trip plan and possibly getting a shuttle back to Hattie Cove to retrieve the vehicle yet today. We were pleased to have successfully completed our trip. While we covered a lot of territory the weather was mostly cooperative (except for the heat). We did not need to take any layover days though we delayed some departures. We had some long days but nothing over 30 miles and over the course of the 10 days paddling averaged something like 20 miles per day. We were especially happy that we left no gaps in the shoreline we paddled – we diligently completed the circumnavigation of the entire coast of Michipicoten and we also returned to the same spot on the mainland leaving no gaps.

Reaching the mouth of the Michipicoten River we checked in at Naturally Superior Adventures. We were a day early so despite their efforts we had to wait until morning for the shuttle to retrieve our vehicle at Hattie Cove.

Wednesday September 9 through Saturday September 12 – Shuttle to Hattie Cove and Drive to Grand Marais, MI; more paddling; drive on home

We woke early for the shuttle ride back to Hattie Cove. It was another couple hours drive back to Wawa to then load up our boats and gear. We drove down the east end of Lake Superior and crossed the border back to the US at Sault Ste. Marie. From here we continued the drive along the upper peninsula of Michigan and finally reached Grand Marais, MI in the early evening.

We spent the next couple days paddling the Grand Sable sand dunes and Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore before driving on to Washburn WI and then on home.

Comments? Send to Jerome@skoac.org