

Michigan's Isle Royale & Keweenaw Peninsula

Aug. 15-22, 2025 | Trip Report by Dan Donaldson



With Naturalist Journeys guide Dan Donaldson, Kent Skaggs, and participants Jane, Arvella, Lynn, Tricia, Carol, John, Dan, Cindy, Julie, and Scott.



Friday August 15: Arrivals in Michigan | Local Patch Birding

Welcome to Michigan! Today was the official arrival day for this tour and those of us that arrived yesterday, about half the group, headed out this morning for some local patch birding. We started at Nara Nature Park, just outside of Houghton. It's a very nice boardwalk marsh along the shores of Portage Lake and the Keweenaw Ship Canal. It was a delightful morning and we started right at the bridge where the Pilgrim River flows into the marsh. There's a nice forest edge that provided good looks at Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, American Redstarts, a pair of Pileated woodpeckers working a tree trunk just a few feet above the ground, and Eastern Wood-Pewee. Just beyond the bridge we entered the boardwalk and headed out into the marsh. The river takes a winding route through the marsh and the boardwalk winds through the marsh and Alder stands as well, out to the open waters of Portage Lake (part of the ship canal). Slowly walking along the river into meadow habitat, we encountered Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, American Goldfinches, Purple Finches, Least Flycatchers, and Eastern Kingbirds. Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers worked the shoreline's edge as Common Ravens and Bald Eagles called from nearby Pine stands. A flyover Sandhill Crane capped off our walk nicely. We made a quick stop at Michigan Tech's A. E. Seaman Mineral Museum to learn a bit about the geology of the region and the copper legacy of the area. We'll return there tomorrow with the full group. We then returned to Houghton for lunch and additional airport pickups. Houghton is a college town (Michigan Tech) with a quaint



but lively downtown. Later that evening, with our entire group now in town, we had a fine dinner at the Library Restaurant.

Saturday August 16: Local Birding | Transfer to Copper Harbor

After breakfast in our hotel, we loaded up for some local birding and made our way to Copper Harbor. Our first stop was back at the Nara Canal Wetlands for the boardwalk. We birded the same route, but added several new species. We had a special encounter with Cedar Waxwings as they were hawking for insects very low along the creek. Blackbird flocks were here this morning with over 100 Red-winged Blackbirds mixed in with Common Grackles.

We added the forest trails across the road this morning and came across a large feeding flock of migrating warblers. They were high in the trees, but we had great views of them hunting for insects as the morning sun warmed the treetops. We spent a good 30 minutes watching this flock, while getting good looks at American Redstarts and Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Pine, and Black-throated Green warblers. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks made an appearance as well.

We stopped in the village of Calumet for a walkthrough of the Keweenaw National Historical Park Visitor Center and lunch at the Michigan House Cafe. As luck would have it, the Pasty Fest, an annual Keweenaw celebration of the quirkiness and heritage of the Cornish Pasty, was in full swing. So, after our walkthrough of the visitor center, where we learned about the copper history of the region, we walked through the festival to learn about the role the pastry had in the copper region as well. Lunch at the Michigan House was spot on and then we got back on the road.

Our next stop was at the famous Snow Thermometer, a giant measuring post indicating 27 feet of snow fell here last winter. Birding was light here, but we did manage a wild turkey along the road. We decided to take the inland (high) route to Copper Harbor which allowed us to stop at Brockway Mountain for some incredible views of the peninsula from above as well as Lake Superior. Isle Royale was visible on the hazy horizon.

Arriving in Copper Harbor, we got settled in at the Bella Vista Motel, made a quick trip to the market to buy breakfast goods for the morning (due to our 7:00am departure) and had a wonderful dinner at the Harbor Haus.

Sunday August 17: Ferry to Isle Royale | Local Copper Harbor Birding

Lake Superior was angry that day my friend. First thing this morning we learned that ferrying over to Isle Royale this morning would be delayed a day. This was not a total surprise after the winds last night and seeing the surf



this morning. Our guides put a quick call into Naturalist Journeys and the team got to work on lodging and a meal plan. We, on the other hand, got to spend an extra day exploring the Keweenaw Peninsula. Other than the wind, it was a beautiful summer day and the winds had blown away the haze from distant forest fires up in Canada. We started with a more proper breakfast at the Tamarack Inn and then set out for some exploring and birding.

Mary Macdonald Preserve at Horseshoe Harbor was our first stop of the morning. After a couple miles of dirt road, we found the preserve and birded the $\frac{1}{4}$ -mile trail through the forest down to the shore of Lake Superior. We again found a feeding flock of warblers amongst the pines and birches. Black-and-White, Nashville, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, and Black-throated Green Warblers were seen well by everyone in the group. Arriving at the shoreline, we were greeted by a beautiful natural bay with incredible basalt outcroppings lining the shore. We noodled around the beach here for about 45 mins and worked our way back to the vans and back to Copper Harbor for lunch. We opted for a light lunch at a local craft festival that was going on in town.

In the afternoon, we made our way back up the ridgeline to Estivant Pines Wilderness Nature Sanctuary, a forested preserve that still has some of the area's old-growth White Pines. Here we hiked a beautiful woodland loop trail up a slope to where we would get to the massive pines. Birding was good along the trail and we stopped in a thinner spot in the forest and watched Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Red-breasted Nuthatches methodically work their way through trees. Warblers were here as well with Nashville, Cape May, and Black-throated Green all making appearances along the trail. But it was the old-growth pines that stole the show! Old-growth trees are pretty rare here in the east, especially in areas like the Keweenaw Peninsula that were early mining and industrial areas. This 500-acre tract was protected by a family from France that purchased it for mineral speculation but never developed the site, preserving it until 1940 when it was protected by the Michigan Natural Areas group.

After our 2-hour hike, we headed back to the town of Calumet where we secured lodgings for our unexpected night stay. Dinner was at Carmalita's, a local Tex-Mex restaurant.

Monday August 18: Ferry to Isle Royale

We were up early this morning for the hour drive back to Copper Harbor to board the ferry at 7:00am. It was a beautiful sunny morning and Lake Superior had settled down considerably so off we went! The 3-hour cruise to Isle Royale was quite pleasant and we spent time in the cabin and on the front deck of the boat during the crossing.



Once on Isle Royale, we had an orientation with the NPS Rangers to review the dos and don'ts while on the island, especially when it came to moose and wolves. We couldn't check into our rooms until 3:00pm so we went straight to the Greenstone Grill for lunch. There are two restaurants on Isle Royale: the Greenstone Grill and the Lighthouse Restaurant. We'd be eating breakfast, lunch and dinner there for the next three days. After lunch we took a short orientation/birding walk around Rock Harbor and over the ridge to Tobin Harbor where the seaplanes come in and kayaks are available for rent. We'd have a boat tour on Tobin Harbor in the days to ahead. Birding was good on our first walk with Common Mergansers, Common Loons, Hairy Woodpeckers, Merlins, and Canada Jays (a lifer for many). Cedar Waxwings were here in great numbers and we'd see many large flocks all week. Bay-breasted and Yellow-rumped warblers worked the shoreline giving us great looks and photos.

Late in the afternoon we checked into our rooms at the Rock Harbor Lodge. Everyone had spectacular lakeside rooms with balconies or patios right on the water's edge. We would have some wonderful sunrises. Dinner was at the Lighthouse Restaurant. One appetizer menu item, fried cheese curds, caught the attention of our travelers from the west, so of course we had to order for our tables. They're a Midwest thing, especially in Wisconsin and Minnesota. They are delicious and my favorite comment about them was "Now I get it." Dinner was very good for such a remote location, with trout, steak, and other fine meals on the menu. Afterwards, we retired to our rooms, going to sleep to the sound of waves lapping on the rocky shoreline just outside our windows.

Tuesday August 19: Isle Royale National Park

We woke up to a beautiful morning with crystal clear blue skies and a wonderful sunrise. The breakfast buffet at the Lighthouse restaurant started our day. This morning, we chose to bird around Rock Harbor and then hike the Tobin Harbor Trail far as we could and make it back in time for lunch. As we were about to walk down for our bird walk meet up, those of us that were staying in the east building got distracted by a large feeding flock of warblers. We were 10 minutes late for the meetup, but it turned out that those who made it to the meet up on time were also rewarded with a wonderful River Otter sighting. A family group of otters made their way along the bay towards the marina, staged in some bushes, and when the coast was clear, they made a mad dash across the trail and under one of the nearby buildings.

The Tobin Harbor Trail is a lush woodland trail along the calm waters in the bay. Common Loons were heard often as we hiked and we did get good looks at a pair from one of the openings in the forest. A family of Common Mergansers was a treat to watch working along the shoreline. One female with 8 chicks were chasing small fish in the shallows. Downy and Pileated Woodpeckers, Red-eyed Vireo, and a small flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets were nice additions to the regular mix of warblers we'd been seeing.



After lunch at the Greenstone Grill, we boarded the Sandy, a small tour boat, and headed to two destinations: Edisen Fishery and the Rock Harbor Lighthouse. It was a nice 20-minute cruise down to Edisen Fishery and we passed several loons and a Bald Eagle enroute. Once docked at Edisen Fishery, we had a quick briefing by volunteers and set our rendezvous time for the return trip. First, a quick hike took us over to the iconic Rock Harbor Lighthouse that is now automated, and the house section has been turned into an education center. It's a very picturesque lighthouse, sitting on black basalt cliffs surrounded by pine forest. Fireweed was in full bloom in the areas where the vegetation is cleared around the lighthouse and a small set of stairs takes you down to the shoreline. We spent about 30 minutes here and then headed to the Wolf and Moose Research Station. Luckily the legendary author/researcher, Rolf Peterson, was there and spent an hour casually explaining the 40 years of wolf/moose research that has been done here. While walking us through the collection of moose antlers and sculls, he described moose aging and the various diseases that affected the individual specimens. In this isolated island environment, the moose and wolf populations are constantly moving inverse of each other.

Currently, the wolves are at a high peak with about 30 individuals and the moose are at a near all-time low of around 800. We could have spent hours here listening to Rolf, but it was time to get back to the boat. We hiked back to the dock, boarded the Sandy and made our way back to Rock Harbor for a little down time and of course dinner and a checklist review.

Wednesday August 20: Isle Royale National Park

It was another beautiful morning with crystal clear skies. We hiked the Stoll Memorial Trail east along the shoreline from Rock Harbor. This was a wonderful hike as it took us along the rocky outcrops along the shoreline, provided incredible views of Lake Superior, and got us into scrub/shrub meadow habitat along the exposed shoreline. A new group of migrants appeared overnight and were actively feeding in the morning sun. Golden-crowned Kinglets and Red-breasted Nuthatches were active in the pines and warblers worked the small trees along the trail and shoreline in good numbers. Black and White, Nashville, Northern Parula, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, and Canada warblers were seen throughout the morning, with Canada Jays working the area as well.

After lunch, again at the Greenstone Grill, we boarded the Sandy for an excursion to Raspberry Island. It's a 10-minute boat ride across the bay to this small linear Island. Raspberry Island is all about the stunning landscapes, cliff views, and amazing views of Lake Superior. We hiked the loop trail here that took us through a boardwalk wetland with carnivorous Pitcher Plants, up to the tops of ridgelines that overlooked Lake Superior. We spent a good bit of time sitting on the rocky shorelines enjoying this stunningly beautiful day. The birding was light on the island, but we did have great views of a perched Merlin and found several Common Loons as we hiked along



the shoreline bays. We all met back at the small dock to board the Sandy and headed back to Rock Harbor for some free time before dinner and checklist.

Thursday August 21: Isle Royale | Hidden Lake | Return to Copper Harbor

Many of us met early on the shoreline this beautiful morning to photograph an amazing sunrise. We would have our ferry ride back to Copper Harbor later in the afternoon, so we packed our bags, stowed them in the office building, and once again boarded the trusty Sandy to head over to Hidden Lake. This trip took us northeast around the Stoll Peninsula and back to the entrance of Tobin Harbor. The water was amazingly still in the harbor this morning and Loons and Common Mergansers were here taking advantage of it. We passed several loons as we approached the dock, including one pair with a large, fluffy black chick.

The hike here was around the back side of Hidden Lake and up a slope that, although having burned in the 2021 Horne fire, was now a meadow lush with low vegetation. Blue Jays were active here, using the burned trees as sentry spots to watch the area. Merlins could streak low over the vegetation hoping to startle a sparrow.

Hiking up to Lookout Louise, we passed Monument Rock which now towers out of the meadow. Before the 2021 fire, Monument Rock was largely hidden by boreal forest. We gain elevation and reach forest that was not impacted by the fire. Cooler and shaded, it's a bit of a relief. Lookout Louise is only 300 feet in elevation gain from the dock where we landed but it certainly feels like a mountaintop once you're here with its cool winds and amazing views to the north into Lake Superior. We are looking towards Canada's shoreline now. It's a stunning landscape and we sat atop a large outcrop and viewed the forested islands and bays below us. After about 20 minutes of solitude, we retraced our route back down to the dock to board the Sandy and return to Rock Harbor.

We enjoyed our last lunch in Rock Harbor, gathered our luggage and made our way to the ferry dock to transfer back to Copper Harbor. The crossing was quite nice with smooth water, but few birds to enjoy in the open waters of the lake. We arrived in Copper Harbor with time to settle in to our rooms before walking down to the Harbor Haus restaurant for some fine dining.

Friday August 22: Birding Keweenaw Peninsula | Transfer to Houghton

Today is departure day but we started with a short bird walk through town, ending at the Tamarack Inn for breakfast. The birding was pretty good this morning with Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Purple Finches, and Cedar Waxwings spotted in the neighborhood gardens and woodlots. Warblers were here as well, likely last night's migrant arrivals, including Tennessee Warblers, American Redstarts, a beautiful Magnolia Warbler and our most consistent of warbler friends, Yellow-rumped and Black-throated Green Warblers.



After breakfast we loaded the vans and departed to Houghton once again. We noodled our way, stopping for birding, lunch and then a visit to the Quincy Mine and Museum just outside Houghton's sister town Hancock (each on its own side of the Portage Lake Canal). Hancock's claim to fame, other than its copper history, is that it is the site of the Finnish-American Heritage Center and Historical Archive. We took a quick tour of the mining areas, the mine's shaft rockhouse, and the Nordberg steam engine that powered manlifts and ore hoists along the 9000-foot-long mineshaft.

We returned to the Hampton Inn in Houghton and settled into our rooms. We met for our final bird list and review of our amazing adventure to the Isle Royale and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Dinner was at The Den Restaurant in downtown Houghton.

Saturday August 23: Departures

Saturday was departure day. We all met in the breakfast area for our good-byes, sharing of contact info, and hopes of travelling together again someday. Dan and Kent dropped off those with early departures at the airport before driving to Green Bay to return the vans. Travelers flying later in the afternoon had a chance to enjoy the town of Houghton a bit more and have lunch before making their way to the airport.

Photos: Group at The Keweenaw Snow Thermometer (Kent Skaggs - KS), Spotted Sandpiper (KS), Evening Primrose (KS), Lighthouse (John Ianacone - JI), Young Common Merganser (KS), Female Purple Finch (KS), Nara Nature Park (KS), Mary Macdonald Preserve (KS), Chipmunk (JI), Scenic (JI), Float plane in Tobin Harbor (KS), Tobin Harbor (KS), Fruit of the Bluebead Lily (KS), Mooseum of Pathology/Bangsund Cabin (KS), Common Loon (KS), Edisen Fishery (KS), View of the Rock Harbor Lodge (KS), View of Tobin Harbor (KS), Frogs (JI)