

# Michigan's Isle Royale & Keweenaw Peninsula Trip Report | 8/26-9/3, 2021 | by Dave Mehlman

With guides Dave Mehlman, Ed Pembleton, and Sil Pembleton, and participants Barbara, Brenda, Callie, Chris, Dave P., Dori, Frank, John, Kathleen, Rebecca, Ron, and Steve



## Thursday, August 26

## Arrival in Houghton/Hancock, Michigan

Despite part of the group facing travel delays, Dave rounded up those who had made it in late morning and we headed for lunch in downtown Houghton at Joey's Seafood and Grill. After lunch, the group headed for a short walk on the very well-constructed boardwalks at the nearby Nara Nature Trail, which follow a small creek to its outlet in Portage Lake. Mid-afternoon is always a slow time for birding, but we picked up our first Bald Eagles of the trip, as well as a Blue-winged Teal lurking with a flock of Mallards.

After this enjoyable walk, Dave took the group to the Quincy Mine site at the top of the hill in nearby Hancock. We learned about the fascinating history of copper mining on the Keweenaw Peninsula and viewed the enormous hoist house of the mine (which extends down 6,000 feet under the surface). Numerous other relics of the mining era are present at this interesting site. Returning to the hotel, we rounded up some of the other participants who drove to meet for dinner. At that moment, Ed and Sil made a dramatic appearance, having driven all the way from Duluth, and we went for a delicious dinner at Gemignani's Italian Restaurant across the bridge in Hancock. We then retired to the Super 8 for a night of rest before starting our next adventure.

## Friday, August 27

## Keweenaw Peninsula | Copper Harbor

The day started with a mini-rebellion about breakfast: rather than eating at the Super 8, Dave took all those interested to Suomi House in downtown Houghton where we enjoyed a proper breakfast. After this, we returned to the Super 8 and packed up our vehicles for the exploration of the Keweenaw Peninsula.



Our first stop was the Paavola Wetlands Nature Area, a nature preserve not too far out of town. The poor weather limited our birding, though we did find a few Eastern Kingbirds in a tree in the wetland and a Hairy Woodpecker. Ed left to go to the airport to retrieve our final passengers and the group continued to the nearby Boston Pond Nature Area for another attempt at birding.

While we did not see many, a few birds made an appearance including a few Wood Ducks in the pond and a Turkey Vulture that flew by. We then proceeded to the town of Calumet and the Visitor Center of the Keweenaw National Historical Park for an introduction to the history and development of the Keweenaw Peninsula, particularly the copper mining industry. The remaining four travelers joined us after having to spend an unanticipated night in Chicago. At this point, it started to rain lightly, and we headed over to the Michigan House Café for a delicious lunch (after admiring the amazing artwork behind the historic bar). After lunch, we proceed on our trip up the Keweenaw Peninsula to Copper Harbor under very cloudy skies and intermittent rain, stopping at Eagle River for the falls, bridge, and museum; the Jampot, for delicious treats; and the Eagle Harbor lighthouse. It became clear that the cloud layer was too low for the scenic drive along Brockway Mountain to be worthwhile, so we proceed directly to Copper Harbor and checked in at our lodging for the night, Lake Fanny Hooe Resort. After unloading and getting settled in, we rewarded ourselves for the poor weather with a wonderful dinner at Harbor Haus, one of the best, if not the best, meal of the entire trip.

## **Saturday, August 28 Boat to Isle Royale National Park**

Our boat to Isle Royale, the Isle Royale Queen IV, was scheduled to leave the Copper Harbor dock at 8:00 am. However, we had learned the day before through e-mails to the Naturalist Journeys office that the boat had had to do a layover on Isle Royale the day before due to lake conditions on Lake Superior and would be slightly delayed. This actually was not a bad thing, as we had an opportunity for some morning birding at Hunter's Point Park in Copper Harbor and time for a decent breakfast in town, neither of which would have been possible without the delay. Unfortunately, the poor weather continued, and we were only able to dig up a few things at Hunter's Point, including Red-breasted Nuthatch, a few Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers, and a distant Belted Kingfisher perched on a dock. Breakfast at the Lake Effect Bar & Grill was good, and we all stocked up for the boat ride.



Gathering all our gear, we drove to the boat dock and managed to get everyone on board, with their bags, and the cars parked, before we set off on the almost 4-hour trip to Rock Harbor on Isle Royale. There was a following swell, so conditions were not too bad and some chose to stay inside and others sat outside. After docking, we received a briefing from a very energetic National Park Service ranger while our bags were transferred for us to our rooms at Rock Harbor Lodge. We then met our host from the Lodge, Larry Fabulous (yes, that is his name; yes, he was fabulous) who told us how meals would work and other essentials. We then had the first of our meals, a tasty baked whitefish dinner, at the outside picnic tables behind the (closed) dining room. With that, we retired to our lakeside rooms, lulled to sleep by the waves hitting the rocks on the shore.

## Sunday, August 29

## Isle Royale National Park

A thunderstorm with some rain was noticed by some in the early morning, so we had to eat our breakfast (laid out for us in the empty dining room) wherever we could under a dry porch. We also picked up our bag lunches for the day and most stashed them in their rooms. Some early risers reported a few otters by the seaplane dock. The weather then cleared, so we set out for a group hike to Suzy's Cave (the first of several visits to this spot for some of us!) down the Tobin Harbor side and back by the Rock Harbor side. Although not too many birds were seen, most in the group had super good views of two different pairs of Pileated Woodpeckers wreaking havoc on various pieces of wood very close to the trail. A lucky few saw our only moose of the trip during this hike. Due to varying walking speeds and interests, the group gradually straggled apart, with some turning back and others continuing. The ongoing Horne fire on Isle Royale had resulted in closures of some areas of the park accessible from the lodge, meaning that the Tobin and Rock Harbor trails were the only ones open to us. The fire also shut down the canoe/kayak rentals, which were located on the Tobin Harbor side. Returning from the hike, we ate our lunches and then had free time until our box dinner at the picnic tables.

## Monday, August 30

## Isle Royale National Park

After an "interesting" breakfast of pizza and watermelon, we took several water taxis to the Rock Harbor Lighthouse, about a 25-minute boat ride down Rock Harbor. Since each taxi boat could only take 6 people, our entire group required three different boats to get everyone there. Upon his arrival at the dock, Dave made a quick visit to the Wolf Research Center and found that Rolf and Candy Peterson were there, hard at work making measurements of this winter's moose bones. He went back and rounded everyone else up and we all enjoyed a great session talking to Rolf and Candy about moose, wolves, life, and pretty much everything in-



between! Some also bought t-shirts to support the research project and others bought a copy of Candy's inspirational book. This wonderful interaction with the people behind one of the most famous predator/prey research projects in North America, if not the world, was a true highlight of the trip for all of us, one that we won't forget. Returning to the dock, we took three water taxis back about the middle of the afternoon. While waiting at the dock, Dave P. and Ed revealed previously unknown skills by entertaining us with Sven and Ole jokes. After our return, we enjoyed free time until our next box dinner at the picnic tables, this time veggie lasagna and Caesar salad.

## **Tuesday, August 31**                      **Isle Royale National Park Continued**

We enjoyed our usual coffee and self-serve breakfast today while standing and chatting outside the dining room. A Canada Jay that cruised through grabbed a piece of John's bacon right out of his breakfast box! A classic "camp robber" visit that everyone enjoyed and a great way to start the day—we promptly nicknamed that jay the "baconator." An energetic bunch decided to go on a longer hike today, so they started off toward the only option available to them: Suzy's Cave! This group was so energized that not only did they make it to the Cave but they kept going to Three Mile Campground. They completed the hike in a reverse figure eight with a twist fashion so that every inch of the trails on both sides (Tobin and Rock Harbor) was covered in the hike. When all was said and done, some lucky people on the trip this year visited Suzy's Cave three separate times in one tour. While Dave was personally happy to have accomplished this amazing feat, he sincerely hopes it is a record that will not again be attempted! Unexpectedly during this hike, on the last leg back on the Tobin Harbor side, a variety of waterfowl were spotted that we saw nowhere else on the trip: Common Goldeneye, Ring-necked Duck, and a Greater Scaup. Per Ron's watch GPS, the hiking group walked a total of 7.5 miles that day, more than enough to earn another great box dinner at the picnic tables and, for those so inclined, a beer or two from the Greenstone Grill.



## Wednesday, September 1

## Isle Royale National Park Continued

After breakfast, we again organized our water taxi flotilla with Captains Marina and Phil, this time to take us to Raspberry Island, about a 10-minute boat trip across Rock Harbor from the Lodge. We spent most of the morning hiking around this lovely island, admiring its wonderful bog with pitcher plants, sundews, leatherleaf, and Labrador tea in abundance. Sadly, not very many birds were seen, but the views were fantastic. The most interesting wildlife finding was footprints on the bog boardwalk which were clearly large enough to be wolf prints! Upon return to Rock Harbor, however, the rangers to whom the photos were showed agreed that they looked like wolf but said that wolves were not supposed to be on Raspberry Island. The mystery continues...

By climbing a ledge near the dock, we could see the burn scar of the Horne fire all the way across Rock and Tobin Harbors, along with a few smokes. This gave us a better impression of how hot that fire had burned and why so many closures and precautions were in place around Rock Harbor Lodge. Returning to Rock Harbor, we ate our bag lunches and enjoyed some free time. Some of the group convened later in the afternoon to look for birds and wildlife in the Rock Harbor Area, though little was spotted. We ended our day with our final dinner at the picnic tables, this time a very tasty Swiss steak with mashed potatoes and grilled vegetables. We all were impressed with the quality of the food and Larry was a great help to us and a pleasure to interact with despite the constraints on the Lodge due to Covid, lack of personnel, fire closures, and the need to feed over 100 extra firefighters. Early on, the group had been so pleased by Larry and the rest of the staff that we unanimously volunteered to help them out in any way possible; however, due to liability concerns, they did not take us up on our offer.

## Thursday, September 2

## Isle Royale | Copper Harbor | Houghton

After our last breakfast and bag lunches, we had our bags ready to go by mid-morning in our rooms and we enjoyed a final last walk around Rock Harbor. After doing our group photo by the park sign, we boarded the Isle Royale Queen IV for our trip back to Copper Harbor. This time, Lake Superior was almost totally calm with near perfect sailing conditions and visibility; halfway across, it was possible to see both Isle Royale and the Keweenaw Peninsula at the same time! Arriving in Copper Harbor about 6:30pm, we retrieved our baggage and vehicles and headed back toward Houghton. We made a stop for dinner at The Hut Inn outside Calumet, memorable primarily because of its unusual décor: an odd combination of man cave and copper mine! Continuing, we returned to the Super 8 in Houghton about 9:30pm, after successfully navigating the “meat grinder” intersection of US 41 and state route 26 in town.



## Friday, September 3 Departures

By popular demand, the whole group went back to Suomi House for our final breakfast together and then our Isle Royale and Keweenaw Peninsula adventure ended, with subgroups departing to various places. Some went home, some continued to additional adventures, and a few, brave and hearty souls, headed off with Dave to the Porcupine Mountains and the Apostle Islands in Wisconsin. What a great way to end this trip filled with new friends, Michigan cuisine, and wildlife!

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Ed Pempleton - EP), Hairy Woodpecker (Carolyn Wronker - CW), Houghton-Hancock Bridge (CW), Eagle Harbor Lighthouse (Ronald Gangnon - RG), Belted Kingfisher (Peg Abbott - PG), Group at Paavola Wetlands (EP), Yellow-rumped Warbler (CW), Pileated Woodpeckers (RG), Sea Otter (CW), Suzy's Cave (Dorianne Kalish - DK), Moose (CW), Isle Royale Park Ranger (EP), Birding near Tobin Harbor (EP), Moose Research Camp (EP), Canada jay "Bacon-theif" (CW), Ring-necked Duck, Sunset (EP), Snowshoe Hare (EP), Pitcher Plants (EP), Raspberry Island Hike (David Mehlman - DM), Bunch berry leaves (EP), Firefighters (EP), Rock Harbor Sunrise (CW), Aspen Leaves (EP), Red Squirrel (EP), Birding Group (EP), New Friends (RG), Bay View (EP)