

Voyageurs 2009: Summer to Fall in 4 Days

Ten ISK members met half way to Duluth at Tobies last Thursday, en route to four days in Voyageurs National Park. Larry had proposed the trip at the club's planning meeting in January, and had offered to lead it. The trip's initial maximum of 6 had quickly been filled, and a second leader was identified (John) and the second 6 slots also filled promptly. Clearly, this was a popular trip.

Voyageurs is in northern Minnesota, west of the BWCA and adjacent to the Canadian border. It's an ancient land, located on the Canadian Shield, with rocks between 1 and 3 billion years old. The sandstone formations in the Apostles evoke a sense of awe at the thought of paddling through caves carved into rock laid down a billion years ago; in Voyageurs, one paddles by outcrops of rock up to 3 times as old. According to the park's website, this was an area where volcanoes once erupted beneath an ocean that no longer exists. Much more recently, glaciers advanced and retreated over the land, carving and grinding, leaving behind glacial till and ice that would become kettle lakes.

Humankind is a latecomer to the area, having arrived about 10,000 years ago, but since then the lakes have been a crossroads and a magnet for people and animals. European fur traders arrived in the late 1600s, and loggers in the late 1800s. There was even a mini gold rush on Rainy Lake at about the same time, before the small mines failed around the turn of the century.

The park was created in 1975, and is only accessible by water. It's made up of four main lakes (Kabetogama, Namakan, Sand Point, and Rainy), as well as numerous smaller ones. Kayaks, canoes, houseboats, and fishing boats coexist in reasonable peace. The US/Canadian border actually cuts across some of the bigger lakes, so this would end up being an international trip.

It had been a long wait since the trip had been planned, but Sept. 22 had finally arrived, and fortified with Tobies food and coffee, we were finally under way. After leaving two cars at Crane Lake for a post trip shuttle, we gathered at Ash River Visitor Center on the eastern side of Kabetogama and loaded our boats, then launched.



The weather couldn't have been better for the first two days of the trip – warm and sunny, with a light wind at our backs. The leaves had scarcely started changing, so it felt as if we had caught the tail end of summer, albeit with much earlier sunsets. We even had the mosquitoes of summer, a decidedly unwelcome surprise.

We had great opportunities to work on our piloting skills as we wound our way through the islands and channels between Kabetogama and Namakan and along the way to Kettle Falls. A few motorboats buzzed past, but they weren't overly intrusive.

Upon arriving at Kettle Falls, the two campsites we were hoping for were both available and we moved in. Jeff spent some time rolling, while the rest of us focused on getting our gear unloaded and our tents set up. Part of the group decided to paddle across the lake to the Kettle Falls Hotel for dinner. The hotel was built in 1910 by a timber baron; it's still in use and is accessible only by water. The rest of us opted to dine in camp and then crash.

It was dark when our Kettle Falls adventurers returned, so they had a magical paddle across the lake with a quarter moon lighting their way back to the campsites.



Next morning we re-grouped and retraced part of the previous day's route, then opted to explore a different path to the Wolf Pack islands. As we paddled up to what the map showed as a channel between two islands, we realized that it had filled in. Jeff and Doug got out and did some exploring and discovered that if they pulled our boats over a downed log at the near edge, we could paddle through the grasses to the other side.

Soon we reached Wolf Pack Islands, which are two smallish adjacent islands with three campsites between them. Two sites were available, and we established Wolf Pack East and Wolf Pack West camps. This was our earliest afternoon arrival, so we enjoyed lunch, then took our time setting up camp and going for swims, which included an island circumnavigation by Doug and a special performance by the ISK synchronized

swimming team. Doug, John and Peggy did some more exploring by boat, while Jeff took a nap and then went fishing.

Dave was the most ambitious camp cook of the group, having brought steak and chicken, and he cooked up steak and potatoes that night. The chicken needed to be eaten that night as well, so Deb accepted the challenge and prepared it. The rest of us made the best of our variations on dehydrated food.

Day 3 was a bit cooler and cloudy, but still dry as we headed east towards Blind Pig Channel. Jeff caught a 20 inch Northern Pike along the way. Mike had offered to clean any fish that Jeff caught, but they agreed that this particular fish was too small, so it was returned to the lake to grow, contemplate the nature of lures, and dream fishy dreams under the ice during the long northern nights.



As we neared the channel and started looking for the path south into the narrows, we learned to watch for the appearance and disappearance of motorboats through the apparently impassable walls of trees to locate the hard-to-see openings. Some of the narrow channels were only a hundred feet across, and mindful of the monster houseboats that periodically churned through, we scooted around the corners one after another like little ducklings.

Wind and rain were due to arrive Saturday night, so we went a bit farther than originally planned to shorten our route for Sunday. It took a few tries to find a free campsite, and the radios proved helpful as we sent out scouts looking for options. We ended up all fitting into one site on the final night, which was a nice way to end the trip.

We put Dave's big tarp up over the picnic table before it got dark, and sure enough, the rain and lightning and thunder started overnight. A gap in the clouds provided a glimpse of the northern lights for late night wanderers, though.



In the morning, we waited until the lightning stopped, then headed out. Fall had clearly arrived, and although it was much cooler, rained intermittently and was breezy, the downpours and high winds held off until we made it back to the takeout point. After going to get the cars at Ash River, we tossed in our wet gear and loaded the boats in record time, and headed for home.

It was a very full four days. I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly the park claimed our attention, and how easily we shed our city lives and created a group of fellow paddlers in tune with each other and with the rhythms of the water and boats, the daylight the sun gave us, and the sights and sounds of eagles and loons. Of course, the city bided its time and patiently awaited our return, and no tasks or assignments

completed themselves while we were gone. But the memories and pictures of the trip and the new and deepened friendships remain. Note to self: do this again!