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## I'll Be Seeing You

*By Stacey Waring*

A group that trekked across America in 1980 reunites at Michigan's pristine Isle Royale.

Our puddle jumper from O'Hare banked sharply over the Northwoods below and plunked onto the runway in Houghton, Michigan. Grabbing our backpacks, Sharon, Cindy and I eagerly began searching for a couple we hadn't seen in over 30 years. Keith and Linda were waiting outside to give us a ride to Eagle Harbor, where we planned to reunite with five other long-unseen friends and catch the ferry to Isle Royale National Park the next morning. As we left the terminal, we breezed past an elderly gentleman standing near the door and began to scan faces in the parking lot.

"Stacey?"

I stopped in my tracks and spun to see the elderly man smiling at me. In spite of his bald head and snow-white beard, there was no mistaking Keith's deep baritone, even after three decades.

"Jeez, what happened to you?" I blurted out. I immediately hoped that his bear hug had blocked out my pernicious question. Besides, who was I to ask such a thing? My second knee replacement was only three months away.

We had met while backpacking across the United States in 1980 on a trip aptly called "Hikanation, one of the earliest coast-to-coast group hikes ever organized, proposed by the then-nascent American Hiking Society (AHS).

It was a diverse crew indeed that departed San Francisco in

April of 1980, with the journey attracting hikers as old as 69 and as young as 14. Over the next 4,200 miles, close to fifty hardy souls endured searing heat in Utah, sub-zero nights in Missouri and deep spring snow in Virginia. By the time we arrived at the Atlantic Ocean in May of 1981, most of the group had morphed into a close-knit family on foot.

When the hike ended, we went our separate ways, reconnecting briefly at reunions but otherwise living out our lives in towns scattered across the country. As we entered our fifties and sixties, most had evolved into day hikers, leaving old backpacks in closets to gather dust. A few hard-core hikers continued to pursue challenging treks such as the Colorado Trail or the John Muir Trail, but even for some of us who had kept up with backpacking, those paths were getting tougher on body parts. Searching for manageable adventures was becoming more attractive, and less-demanding treks such as Isle Royale sometimes beckoned.

While bucket lists usually have some degree of urgency, Isle Royale had languished on mine for 30 years. I first noticed the island from the Minnesota shoreline in 1991 while on a canoe trip to the Gunflint Trail near the Boundary Water Canoe Area Wilderness. It seemed a mysterious, alluring place, lying flat like a sleeping dog, 20 miles distant in northwest Lake Superior. A unique national park that provides both hikers and paddlers an unparalleled wilderness adventure, Isle Royale has a plethora of flora and fauna not frequently seen elsewhere, and I found myself strongly pulled to hike there, but it was always too far away from my home in Virginia, too far from my children and career.

Enter Ed.

Ed is a 78-year-old gentleman with a weathered face and bony body who regularly hikes in spite of hernias and cancer. A man of unique proficiencies, Ed astonishes with his ability to light up a cigarette on the trail, while demonstrating mountain-goat agility due to his fat-free frame. Once, while hiking with me up Mt. Washington, he paused for a smoke every 20 to 30 minutes, then proceeded to fly down Tuckerman's Ravine like a bird while I gingerly crossed over its rocks, fearing I would break an ankle. It clearly seemed as though Ed would live forever.

The fall of 2020, however, as Ed, Lyle, Cindy and I were sitting in a restaurant after a week-long trek on the Appalachian Trail, Ed finally admitted that time was limited as we chatted about

another alumni hike.

“I just want to make one last trip to Isle Royale,” he said wistfully.

Isle Royale!

Lyle, always a steady and calm man who was the perfect organizer of all things adventurous, sat back. A Michigan native, he had been to Isle Royale five times but was now in no mood to organize a trip there. He wanted badly to return west but COVID was meddling with everything.

“I’ll go, but I won’t plan it,” he said emphatically.

“OK, I’ll do it,” I said quickly. We would finally have a trek for those who could accept we were no longer thirty! Or fifty! Or even healthy. Isle Royale would benefit aging joints, hernias and sciatica, and with no significant elevations to tax our lungs. I had researched this faraway land and knew it was a feasible backpacking trip for older hikers. I quickly enlisted Cindy, my fellow Virginian, to serve as quartermaster so we would not duplicate equipment. The word quickly went out and, on Labor Day weekend, nine Hikanation friends and one spouse arrived in Eagle Harbor.

Isle Royale sits in the immense expanse of northwest Lake Superior, about 55 miles from Michigan and 20 miles from Minnesota. While popularly known as one 45-mile-long island, it actually includes an archipelago of over 450 smaller islands, all of which can be reached by canoe or kayak. In addition to its unique natural resources, wildlife and vegetation, the island was also inhabited for several thousand years by humans, including the Ojibway, who named it “Minong,” meaning “the good place”; French fur traders; commercial fishermen and miners who came to search for copper, leaving behind a collection of decaying mines that can still be seen along the trails. As commercial interests in Isle Royale dwindled, the protection of its natural beauty as well as research interests led to it becoming a national park in 1940. Since the 19th century, scientists have examined the species that inhabit the island due to its isolation— the wolf research conducted there is still the longest running large-animal predator-prey study in the world. Named an International Biosphere Reserve in 1980, it is habitat to roughly 260 species of birds, 60 of fish and 19 of mammals, providing both investigators and visitors the chance to catch glimpses of wildlife not easily seen on the mainland.

Although lodges or cabins at either end of the island provide housing for day hikers, the vast majority who arrive at Isle Royale are either backpackers or canoeists/kayakers. The 165 miles of hiking trails crisscross a wide variety of terrain, and many lead to bays, inlets and basins that provide boaters shelter from Lake Superior's wrath. With a series of nine different portages connecting the various inland lakes, you can paddle to lovely, secluded campsites, if carrying a 60-pound canoe on your shoulders is within your repertoire.

"Isle Royale is the least visited national park in the lower 48," a cheery ranger told us, "but it's the park that most people return to." This is a surprising fact, given that reaching the island clearly dismisses a casual trip. If you don't own a hefty boat to power across wildly unpredictable Lake Superior, the only option to reach the island is either by commercial ferry or seaplane. No cars are allowed because there are no roads, and seasons on the island are short. It is the only national park to close to the public during the winter, which extends from early November to mid-April.

But Isle Royale is clearly a remarkable wilderness that beckons those with the resources, time and energy to reach it.

The ferry from Copper Harbor, Michigan, to Isle Royale takes about 3-1/2 hours and can provide a pleasant experience when the waves and the weather are temperate. Unfortunately, those days are promised to no one, as Sharon and I learned when we took the ferry, a day later than the rest of the group. Our first omen came in a warning from the captain before shoving off.

"You need to be aware that the seas are really rough today," the weathered skipper said, "and we'll know within 45 minutes if we have to turn around. If we have to do that, we won't try again until tomorrow. Good luck."

While we never had to retreat to Copper Harbor, the going was indeed rough, with high waves continuously rocking the craft and breaking over the bow. I managed to keep my eyes on the horizon and my stomach intact for nearly 4 hours, but Sharon did not fare as well, bonding with many of the other passengers in turning a drab shade of green. When we finally rejoined our friends at Rock Harbor, I enjoyed a great lunch but Sharon had, unfortunately, left her appetite on the mainland.

Besides Ed, Lyle, Cindy, Sharon, Keith and Linda—the only couple who met on Hikanation and later married—the group also included John, an affable, strong-legged man from Tucson

who would frequently humble us by doing an extra “side trip,” often of several miles, after we had collapsed in camp. He didn’t always follow the exact route or make it back before dark, but he was still the unabashed hiking “animal” of the trip.

And then there were Janet and Andrew.

Janet was an exuberant and funny woman who had barely backpacked in 40 years and, like me, was heading for a knee replacement soon. The youngest of the group at 60, she had just married Andrew, a quiet, good-humored man who would often regale us in camp with “Aussie-speak” from his native land. Clearly not versed in ultralight concepts, both had arrived on Isle Royale with heavier packs than the rest of us by at least 10 pounds. Though we were worried that Janet might struggle to get to camp, our compassion was overridden by curiosity about what on earth they had packed.

It did not take long to find out.

The backcountry campsites in Isle Royale are mostly beautiful and well maintained, with many located right on the water, sporting primitive but comfortable screened in-shelters for individuals or couples. Unfortunately, we were all required to stay in reserved group sites which, though well kept, nearly always involved a hike to the water and were not meant to house eight tents comfortably. “Group camping” in Isle Royale clearly seemed more intended to serve young Boy Scouts or smaller groups with a much more limited housing plan.

Thus, after a taxing and rocky 2.7-mile hike the first day to aptly named Three Mile Campground, Janet and Andrew were the first to break the rules and move into a shelter nearby—still deserving newlywed status, we agreed—while the rest of us jostled for spots in the group site. As we began to boil water for our freeze-dried pasta, singing was heard coming from the shelter. For Andrew’s 65th birthday, Janet had cooked two ribeye steaks in a frypan, served with smoked oysters and a wineskin of prosecco.

The mystery of their pack weight was becoming more clear. S’mores to be cooked over PocketRocket stoves, appetizers of smoked squid, a box of chardonnay, shelf-stable milk for cereal, a Spanish wineskin of port and 10 pounds of gorp gave us all the evidence we needed that Janet and Andrew were friends to stay close to on this trip.

The week we spent on Isle Royale provided enormous

opportunities to experience both pristine nature and each other, and neither would disappoint. Time became a long-lost friend, allowing us all to get reacquainted after so many years apart. Unlike more challenging hikes such as the John Muir Trail, where departing camp at 6:30 a.m. was often requisite, the miles we had chosen for this trip were usually quite manageable, so starting by 10 a.m. was just fine. Unlike a power bar grab-and-go, breakfast was a leisurely hour-long chat at the picnic table. Eventually, we'd remember that hiking was on the schedule, and the camp breakout would be started by Keith and Linda, who had raised two AT thru-hiking children. John would always be the last to leave, but would quickly bypass each of us so he could add his extra miles later.

The trails of the island were well worn and easy to follow, though the only signs were posted at trail intersections, keeping the human imprint to a minimum. Despite offline navigational maps that could be downloaded, our group used our long-honed skills in reading a real map—just as we did 40 years before.

Certainly, the most beautiful trails were those that followed the water. The Rock Harbor Trail, leading from the Rock Harbor port toward Moskey Basin, was sometimes rocky, but more often consisted of a pine-strewn path through a boreal forest, along sweet gale and bog plants. It opened on views of both man-made structures, such as lighthouses and fishing lodges, and waterfowl, including merganser ducks, gulls and occasional loons. In camp, we were often treated to amphibious entertainment at its best. At Moskey Basin, a gorgeous inlet campground with shelters on the waters' edge that hosted incredible sunrises, beavers could be seen simultaneously erecting and then disassembling lodges. There were playful otters at Daisy Farm, the largest campground on Isle Royale—named for fields of daisies that once proliferated in the early 1900s—and lovely Chippewa Harbor, where Cindy and I were regaled one evening by three of these characters who would swim under the dock, disappear, surface 50 yards away, and then repeat the entire sequence.

Once we arrived in camp and pitched tents in our haphazard, often crowded formations by late afternoon, bathing and clothes washing were completed, followed by Happy Hour, though only sipping was allowed in order to make a stash of scotch last ten people a full eight days. Often, after dinner, we took short hikes and chatted with many of the interesting groups of canoeists staying in the shelters. Indeed, according to

the Park Service, boaters are the largest contingent of all visitors to the park in any given year. Once on a rest day, we stopped and talked with an energetic young couple who had just left Lake Ritchie on one of the island's nine portage trails, a large canoe balanced on the husband's shoulders, with the wife ferrying all their supplies in a large double-sided pack. We were humbled as we headed down the trail in our day packs holding a water bottle and snack. The boaters were always friendly and I would sometimes fantasize when my knee hurt that their canoes would hold just one more person.

I had been able to hike with minimal pain until the day we left Chippewa Harbor. Unlike the other trails, the portage path from Chippewa to Lake Richie, an inland lake, was more rocky, uneven and quite elevated at times. It took only one tree root grabbing my foot to kill my well-thought-out game plan that my doctor and I had developed: pray that my cortisone shot would last three weeks. After a fall near a bog bridge, Keith carried my tent and nursed me along, while Linda begged me to take some of the Percoset I was carrying so my painful grunting would stop bothering everyone.

But my biggest struggle occurred at bedtime. I simply and utterly am a late-night person. But, late one night, my wilderness insomnia paid off when I heard wolves howling off in the distance. As there are only fourteen to eighteen of the reclusive creatures on the island currently, I felt at that moment I had bonded with them in some ethereal way by providing an audience for their howls.

I would also muse at night about hearing moose noises. We had been searching for the elusive animal near bogs and watering holes, but as our time on Isle Royale waned, we feared our only moose sighting would be the one decaying skeleton next to the trail. Yet, early on our last morning, the camp was awakened to Cindy's voice, whispering, "Moose down the trail!" The blitz of aging hikers hastily dressing and unzipping tents was a sight only outdone by the massive mama moose herself, happily chomping on vines and tree bark. Calm and pastoral, she clearly cared not one whit about us hikers, vainly trying to stay invisible as we crowded near her, clicking our phones. She was a beautiful, seemingly gentle creature, and as she slowly ambled away, we had, at last, crossed off one of the biggest of our "Isle Royale Bucket List" items.

I found myself contemplating our incredible trip on our final day's hike up to Mt. Ojibway, a 600-foot climb to a fire tower

on Greenstone Ridge, the highest trail on the island. As I sat looking down the north side of the island to Canada, I cast away any memories of sleepless nights and rough seas, and felt a contentment I have not experienced in a long time. On the human side, this trip provided a wonderful reminder that despite the different personal journeys we had all followed over the last 40 years, we could still so easily find the way back to our love and connections with each other. And the natural element of our trip had left me incredibly grateful that in this time and place, I had been a witness to an organic world I had rarely seen.

The place once called “Minong” calls us to leave our routine world behind, immersing ourselves in a nearly magical ecological community. On this remote island, where you can commune with a grazing moose or assiduous beavers, walking on paths once trod by Indigenous peoples and French fur traders, it is easy to be swept into a time and place so distant from our own homes and lives. And that, of course, is the true reason for going. You cannot visit Isle Royale without being reminded of the grace of the natural world, and you cannot leave without being deeply reflective about its impact on our souls. Isle Royale is, simply, an extraordinary place, where so many unique creatures and organisms, protected from the outside world, are open to be seen by those who make the effort to get there.

And perhaps no one enjoyed the “getting there” more than Ed, who now intends to return to the island by seaplane for his 80th birthday. Next time, he’ll paddle a canoe.



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