

Dancing Lily Pads and Soaring Dunes

a weekend on Beaver Island

by Erin Fanning

Inky wings, velvet in the soft sunlight, burst from the marsh. Neck pulled in, the great blue heron swung over emerald treetops before disappearing into the shadows. A carpet of lily pads danced across the displaced water. Wings, their beating audible in the still afternoon, again filled the sky as three more herons rushed out of the wetlands.

The sun splashed a yellow haze across Beaver Island's 230-acre Miller's Marsh, owned by Central Michigan University's Biological Station, which is a 48-acre facility located on the island's eastern shore. A nature trail skirted around the water, rolling past trees decorated with bite-mark necklaces, gifts from active beavers.

I squatted near the pond, stretching my sore muscles, and looked out at the beech and maple forest. My bicycle sprawled behind me, and a few paces away, my husband Keith rested after a long ride that had taken us past soaring dunes and forested bluffs.

The largest island in a Lake Michigan archipelago, the 37,385-acre Beaver boasts about 600 full-time residents, but the island's population surges to around 3,000 during

the summer. It is a casual place, where visitors find quaint shops, delicious dining, and just about every flavor of recreational pursuit.

The island's diversity had touched me the previous day, even before I stepped off the ferry from Charlevoix, a 32-mile journey. As we pulled into Beaver's Paradise Bay, children splashed in Lake Michigan, and the whir of a kayak paddle flashed in front of a dock. Cheers filled the afternoon, as if we were on a tropical cruise returning to port, and three clouds, an ellipsis of white fluff, hung in the sky.

Cyclists wheeled their bicycles, and musicians gathered their instruments, chattering about the Beaver Island Music Festival, one of several annual island events. Large gatherings, however, were not on my mind as I studied the dense forest nearby and thought about its promises of long hikes interlaced with solitude.

St. James, Beaver Island's commerce center, unfolded around us, and its Victorian homes and shops, some weather-worn, felt like an East Coast fishing village. After checking into our hotel, we drifted



along the main street, birdsong on one side and the whine of a seaplane on the other. A 1967 Oldsmobile convertible cruised by, and kayaks rested on the beach, their owners unconcerned with theft. While on the island, life seemed to unfold at a slower pace, and my watch felt like an intrusion.

The road bent around St. James Harbor, and we ambled toward Whiskey Point and the white tower of the Beaver Harbor Light. We continued on a dirt two-track through the woods to the Gull Harbor Nature Preserve as the smell of barbecue mixed with the sound of waves. Eagles and herons can be spotted here, as well as fossil-threaded limestone and numerous water snakes.

More two-tracks dipped to our left, and a nature pathway wound through the area. Numerous hiking routes

ers, deer and coyote. With the sun slipping in the sky, dyeing the clouds pink, we turned our backs on Garden Island and hiked back to our hotel beneath a canopy of trees.

The next day, exchanging walking shoes for bicycles, we snaked through forest along the paved Donegal Bay Bike Path. It spit us out near a campground, and we continued on dirt roads, skirting around Font Lake, one of several inland lakes on the island, before reaching Donegal Bay. Sand tumbled toward Lake Michigan on our right, and an enormous dune, Mt. Pisgah, climbed 730 feet to our left.

As we turned onto Kuebler's Trail, an early 1900s railroad grade used during the island's logging days, feathery leaves framed McCauley's Point and an overlook of Lake Michigan. A white sail flashed across the lake, and in the distance,

*...and in the distance, High Island unrolled
like a verdant carpet...*

dotted the island, offering rugged rambles along little-used trails to shorter jaunts such as the Brothers' Trail. Located near the Beaver Island School, it meandered past paper birches, red pines and dwarf junipers.

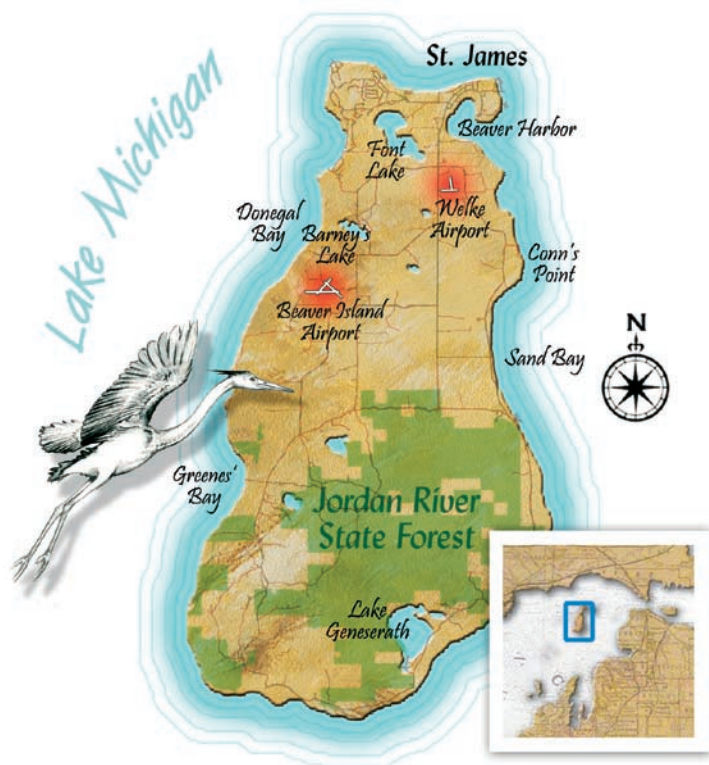
Continuing on the dirt road, we curved around Whiskey Point with views of Garden Island, the second largest in the archipelago, about two miles away. Popular with kayakers, it is a unique place, home to an Indian burial ground, wildflow-

High Island unrolled like a verdant carpet. A loon cried as we turned around and continued on our way down the narrow dirt pathway.

Sandy in places, it rolled beneath a bluff, and we brushed up against Barney's Lake Nature Preserve, a marshy finger that poked into the trail. Owned by the Little Traverse Conservancy, the 120-acre natural area boasted sedge meadows, loons, cedar swamps and blue herons. Two-tracks begging for exploration divided the property,

Beaver Island

More information is available from the Beaver Island Chamber of Commerce, www.beaverisland.org or (231) 448-2505. You can also visit the island's monthly newspaper, *Beaver Beacon*, at www.beaver-island.com or take an online tour at www.beaverislandtour.com



which included an old homestead and stone-bordered pastures.

Kuebler's Trail deposited us near the West Side Road, another old railroad grade, and we pedaled south along the designated Natural Beauty Road. Our tires bit into the soft soil, and after stopping at Miller's Marsh, we coasted down to Iron Ore Bay, a rush of waves and beaches. I imagined unfolding the layers of shimmering lake, revealing shipwrecks more than one hundred years old, including the *Betsy Smith*, an 1800s schooner that rests near the south shore and is a popular snorkeling site.

Climbing away from Lake Michigan, pedaling north, we passed Lake Geneserath, the island's largest inland lake and host to bass, bluegill and pike. Farther north sat the 60-acre Little Sand Bay Nature

Preserve, also owned by the Little Traverse Conservancy. A trail with footbridges spanning a creek wandered throughout the property, which included about 1,300 feet of Lake Michigan shoreline. During the summer, the rare Lake Huron tansy and Michigan monkey-flower flaunt their yellow blossoms here.

Later, exhausted and waiting for the ferry, the weekend flashed through my mind in a jumble of images: a heron's wing, a sandy trail, and a marshy shore slipping into dense forest. Our car and reality waited in Charlevoix. As the ferry arrived, I glanced at my watch: island time had officially ended. 🦅