

From Territorial Beavers to Cloud Anemones

portaging and paddling Big Island Lake wilderness



Northern Outings

by Erin Fanning

Water sprayed into the air and tumbled back down again, shattering the quiet. Droplets rolled across the lake like marbles; a stillness followed. A fish, I wondered, or someone throwing a rock? I peered through the woods but saw nothing, only birch trees, their bark peeling in white sheets, and ferns, emerald spikes running along a ridge—the world dyed green, late spring’s gift to summer.

Boom—it happened again. Water ricocheted toward the sky and cascaded, rippling across the lake. Then I spied the offender. A beaver’s brown head swam in circles, and it slapped its tail, warning me, I assumed, to move on.

With my arms full of branches, I took its advice and returned to our campsite on the shores of Big Island Lake, startling a deer as I went, its white rump bobbing through the brush. The water murmured, and our campfire crackled. Gray-purple clouds hung in the sky like ripe plums, and a loon trilled, joining the camping concert.

Our truck was parked only a short paddle away, yet it felt as if we had journeyed hundreds of miles. The Hiawatha National Forest’s Big Island Lake Wilderness had slipped watery arms around us, and we were enveloped by quintessential northern Michigan with its loons; dense, almost claustrophobic, forest; and occasionally persistent mosquitoes.

The 6,600-acre wilderness, 15 miles southeast of Munising, hosts more than 20 inland lakes from 5 to 149

acres. Several of the lakes are connected by well-established portage routes ranging in distance from 100 to 1,800 feet. Access is by foot or quiet water boat only. Motors are prohibited, as well as mechanized devices, including any wheeled objects. Twelve campsites are scattered throughout the area and include metal fire rings and pit toilets.

a general store, old cottages, and one or two abandoned cars rusting in a meadow. Paved roads disappeared and maples touched overhead, creating green canopies. The small parking lot at the main trailhead—off County Road 445—was full when we arrived during the late afternoon.

As we parked, a man and a boy dug into a station wagon and left with sleeping bags under their arms. They vanished down a trail, and we never saw them again.

After our kayaks were loaded, we lugged them a short distance to Big Island Lake. Our 20-year-old boats, senior citizens in kayak years, seem to grow heavier, like their owners, as

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It is a place where time seems unimportant, a step back through the years. You wake with the sun and follow its movement throughout the day. Maple, birch and aspen fill the rolling hills; wild daisies and iris bloom in late spring. Fishing and campfire storytelling satisfy your entertainment needs, and your kayak or canoe becomes your best friend—or enemy, depending on the length of the portage.

We left civilization behind in the tiny village of Steuben, composed of

they age, and we rested several times before seeing the lake.

A dragonfly, munching on insect snacks, fluttered over a carpet of lily pads when we finally stood at the edge of Big Island Lake. Nearby a chorus of frogs hiccupped, and the wind tickled the water, which erupted into ripples of laughter. We shoved off, and the wind turned its attention to us. We skirted the lake’s namesake island and chose a campsite on its far end, near the first portage route. We decided that, combined with



Traveler's Notes

For more information contact the Hiawatha National Forest - Munising Ranger District at (906) 387-2512 or visit www.fs.fed.us/r9/forests/hiawatha. For those not interested in camping, Big Island Lake Wilderness also

makes an excellent day trip. Pack a picnic lunch and fishing pole and spend a day floating back in time.

our late start, carrying our kayaks would be more enjoyable with a lighter load.

As night nestled around us, a layer of sun burst through the gray, and in the distance we saw a raised paddle, then a canoe slipped into view. A loon couple, just off the shore, flapped their wings and cried, singing back and forth as the sun sank. Blue peeked through the gray and rose patchwork. Tendrils of pink clouds seemed to sway as if the sky had been invaded by sea anemones.

The loons continued throughout the night, joined in the early morning by coyotes—a symphony of forest sounds. We slid our kayaks into the lake soon after breakfast and made the first and easiest portage to Mid Lake. The beaver splashed its tail as we left, glad to be rid of us. Each lake seemed similar: beaver houses, purple wildflowers brushing the shore, and a resident loon, a welcoming party of sorts.

We idled after the next portage, a steep 424 feet, into Coattail Lake, and followed the path of a large bird, perhaps an osprey. It perched in a tree, and we drifted below it. A redwing blackbird lectured us for invading its territory, and woodpeckers ham-

mered away, sounding like carpenters building a mansion.

Floating this way for some time, we allowed the day to soak into our skin, a memory tattoo. The buzz of a distant ATV and a plane swooping overhead marred the moment, but soon quiet reclaimed the lake. The birds, however, continued to chirp, sounding like monkeys. A frog joined in, and we grew sleepy, our heads bobbing. Afraid we might fall asleep and tip over our boats, we continued to the next portage site.

Climbing a hill, then leveling off before dropping down to McInnes Lake, the portage trail ran about 1,100 feet, ending at a swampy area with a peat-moss smell. Trees leaned forward as if begrudging the water its space. We quickly paddled to the next portage route and left our kayaks, having decided to hike the trail and save our arms for the return trip.

The pathway rolled and flattened. An ebony jewelwing damselfly with its green body and black wings hovered over ferns, unconcerned by our presence. Charmed, we watched for a while until mosquitoes nipped at our ankles, urging us on.

As we returned to our campsite, we encountered a man and boy at

the final portage. Gear spilled from their canoe, and the boy munched on crackers. They nodded in greeting, and the boy's attention drifted back to his snack. My stomach grumbled; I understood his concentration. Back in our boats, we turned a corner and aimed for our campsite. I heard a splash; the beaver welcomed—or cursed—our return.

During the drive home the next day, we stopped at Lake Michigan's sandy beaches, only 90 minutes from the wilderness area. We lowered our kayaks into the water as the sun tumbled jewels across the lake, the effect more precious than diamonds. In the horizon, layers of white clouds gathered like whipped cream.

We paddled to the mouth of the Brevort River, where part of the beach had been roped off to protect the endangered piping plover. A nest and two eggs rested beneath a metal, cage-like contraption on the beach. The birds, however, were not in sight.

We continued along the shoreline, feeling, in the 80-degree weather, that we had somehow stumbled into the tropics. Sand marched below us, its ripples and ridges resembling photographs of the moon's surface. Enormous crayfish scurried, and children bounded along the beach. Their towels, swirls of pink, blue, green and yellow, trailed behind them like superhero capes.

As we returned to the truck, the black shape of a loon came into view. It trilled as we pulled our boats from the water, echoes of Big Island Lake, a wilderness memory. 🦉

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Illustration by Rod Lawrence