



BY SEAN KRAJACIC

The backpacking trip at Isle Royale National Park began the evening of Thursday, June 14, 2012 with a through-the-night drive along wet winding highways traversing the eastern edge of Wisconsin and through the heart Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The Red Bull-fueled journey ended just short of eight hours, about 3 a.m., enough time to catch a four-hour nap in the reclined front seat of my Subaru Forester. I had parked in the upper lot of Houghton Harbor, where the view of the Ranger III ferry against the harbor was immaculate. Amber lights thrown from the vessel danced upon the churning waters beneath.

After more than six months of planning, I was only hours away from hiking around the least visited, but most revisited, national park. Countless hours were spent nit-picking gear, reading through other hikers’ experiences and physically training for the trip.

Was it the caffeine and lack of sleep or the anticipation and excitement of what lied ahead that had my head swimming and my legs shaking? Either way, sleep was a necessity I couldn’t afford lose this early in the game.

As I closed my eyes - after setting multiple wake-up alarms on my cell phone and watch - hard drops of rain pounded the roof of my Subaru threatening to steal my slumber.

Dawn broke followed by the co-mingled onslaught of sensory overload I had set for myself on my Motorola smart-phone. This marked the last time the next nine days I would see, hear or feel the 8-ounce device that tethered me to my family, friends, work - the “real world.” Fighting the urge to send just one more text message, I disconnected the battery and threw the phone in the glove compartment.

I made the decision months before the trip to go without my cell phone, even though I found service exists on parts of the island, according to members of various online forums.

In the past, I have felt there is greater danger carrying the cell phone than not. Every time I’ve stowed the device, it ultimately gets used to phone home. At first, it’s fun to talk to family and friends while in the middle of nowhere, but it throws me back into my “old” life. Thoughts of responsibilities left behind flood my mind. The same thoughts I set out to elude during a trip. There is immediacy to one’s current situation in the backcountry - no matter how comfortable we are at the moment; we need our full faculties to prevail over the step that has yet to be taken.

After filling up on a box of doughnuts and relieving myself at the convenience store across from the upper parking lot, I make my way down to the Ranger III. As I walk through the lower parking lot, I take notice of other island-goers readying for their trips. To my left, a man sitting in the passenger side of a silver Honda Civic holds a toothbrush, gargles and spits. Another man to my right effortlessly lifts a canoe from the top of his car and grunts as he puts the yolk along his shoulders.

I shuffle into line which leads to an Isle Royale National Park Ranger who is meticulously placing bags on carts to be stowed for the maritime journey to the island. I catch a glance at his name tag - Paul Anderson.

Paul grabs my bag and puts it on top of an overstuffed REI brand backpack.

“Hmmm. My bag kind of gets lost, doesn’t it?” I asked, hoping he’d take notice as to how light my bag was. (I consider myself an ultralight backpacker, and I’ve never met an ultralighter that didn’t like to talk about his gear, or lack of gear ... until he’s blue in the face.)

“Are you one of those minimalists?” Paul replied. “How long are you on the island?”

“Yep, I’m an ultralighter. I’ll be out for nine days and my pack weighs under 18 pounds.” I said in a quick breath,



Ranger Paul Anderson entertains passengers with music and poetry during a trip to the island.

but wasn’t finished. “But, it’ll weigh about seven pounds by the time I’m done hiking.”

With a look of amusement Paul said, “You guys always amaze me.”

We talk for a bit more. He wishes me luck and returns to his duties.

After leaving the harbor, my itinerary was approved and I was given my backcountry permit. I decided I would roam around the ship, maybe do a little people watching as I wasn’t sure when the next time I’d see a human being after being dropped off on the island. I made my way through the lower deck snack bar, ordered a turkey sandwich and sat alone in a booth. In a booth behind me I overheard a man talking about canoeing and portaging through parts of the island where few dare to venture - a place that required a special cross-country permit. My interest piqued.

I turned around and we both engaged in the obligatory pre-trip conversation. His name was Mark and he visits the island multiple times

any given year. We shared facts and folklore about the island and he gave me advice on a couple of trails and campsites along my route. Once most of the island-related topics were exhausted I asked where he was from. He said he lives in Wisconsin now, but was from a small town in Illinois and that I probably had never heard of it.

“Try me.” I said, knowing there was a small chance I would know the town because I grew up in northern Illinois.

“A place called Mundelein,” he said.

With a smile I said, “You’re kidding. My dad was a teacher at a small Catholic high school in Mundelein.”

“Carmel High School?” he asked as his eyes widened.

“Yeah.” I said.

“That’s where I went to school,” he said.

Turns out Mark attended the school the same time period my fa-

ther was teaching there, and he even went as far as to describe what my father looked like (back in the ’70s).

About halfway through the ride, the Ranger III was coasting along the open waters of Lake Superior with ease and the gray skies transformed to blue. A commotion arose on the upper passenger deck. Paul Anderson took a seat on a wood-carved stool with guitar in hand and began to play for the crowd. He carried tunes about the island: its history, its inhabitants, and his personal experience. Every couple of songs he would stop to recite a poem he had written, expressing a thought, feeling, or philosophy about the world around him. He contemplated every word as if it were the first time the verses had passed his lips.

The ship’s fog horn sounds as land becomes visible along the horizon. Paul makes a quick exit, and the passengers make their way to the outside decks. My final destination, Rock Harbor, is only an hour away.





Once we're docked at Rock Harbor, everyone dashes to the gear carts, collecting belongings and disbands into the wild. I linger at the port a while longer, giving other hikers a head start. I used the bathroom facilities even though I didn't really have to go. I didn't want to pass up my last chance at running water and flush toilets.

Originally my itinerary took me along the Rock Harbor Trail to Three Mile Campground. However, after the conversation with Mark on the boat, I decided to take the less-traveled Tobin Harbor Trail. It would only increase the day's distance by about half a mile.

Mark was spotted on. The soft-earth trail was barren of other hikers and filled with lush green foliage. I stopped more than a few times to snap a photo reminding myself not to review the image as I had only brought one extra battery, which turned out to be just enough for the nine days.

My hike along Tobin Harbor Trail ended at Suzy's Cave. I took the narrow, uphill path that led to the rear of the cave. The opening would have been a bit tight, even for a small man like myself. I walked around the tall rock outcropping to the front of the attraction. The mouth of the cave was tall and wide and I was able to walk a few yards into its interior. After a few snaps of the camera, I was back on the trail to Three Mile.

I chose to take the Rock Harbor Trail the rest of the way to my destination. Most of the trail follows

along open rock - the kind of open rock where you need to spot a cairn for direction. Cairns are trail markers made of a few rocks placed on top of one another. At first, they were hard to spot, as I had never walked a trail marked with the designations. I'd find one and assume where the next portion of the trail would lead. Many times having to backtrack a few hun-



dred yards to find the previous cairn. I laughed out loud on a few occasions. How could a couple of miles take so long? I knew I had to get better at finding the trail, as I had never navigated this way before.

For me, the trick was once I spotted a cairn, I travel to it, stop and sight the next. The stopping part of the process was frustrating, but after a bit of practice it became a rare occurrence.

When I got to Three Mile Campground, I realized why everyone dispersed so quickly from Rock Harbor - they all had to get to Three Mile. Every tent site was taken, so I toured the shelter areas. A shelter can sleep up to six and consists of three wooden walls, a screen wall with a door, and a wood floor. Aside from a broom, they're completely empty.

I found a vacant shelter and I staked my claim. I didn't want to spend the first night "indoors," so I hung my hammock on a couple adjacent trees.

I sat down on the picnic table to organize my gear and look at the map when I heard a woman at the end of the trail talking with another camper. She sounded a little upset, from what I could gather from the distance.

It turned out that she and her son, in his 20s, were the last ones to make it to the campground from the boat. They were looking for shelter or an empty tent site, but realized they were out of luck.

They stood at the trail head, hunched over from the

weight of their oversized camouflage backpacks. The sun was low in the sky, which meant they wouldn't make it to the next campground four miles out before dusk at the pace they were traveling.

I started my way down the trail, they were about 30 yards away, and yelled, "There's a shelter up this way."

Once I was at the trailhead I said the only catch was I was hummocking next to the shelter, so they would have to share the site with me.

With a look of relief, they agreed.

After they settled into the shelter, we spent the next hour or so talking and playing cards.

They were from a small town in Michigan and decided to take a five-day backpacking trip together. The mother had been to the island when

she was younger and had always wanted to go back. They were well prepared for the island having packed multiple changes of clothes, meals fit for the hungriest of backpackers and games to pass the time at camp. The weight of their backpacks wouldn't allow them to travel vast distances, but I doubt they ever experienced a moment of boredom on the island.

Day 2 - 14.4 miles

As dawn broke the next morning, I woke up with a sore tailbone and a bit chilled. I thought to myself that I shouldn't have sore tailbone - that's the whole reason I took the hammock. I looked over the edge of my hammock and the ground had risen a good three feet - just enough to press against my rump.

I made a mental note to hang my hammock a bit higher next time and to tighten the slings just a bit more to allow for stretch.

I ate my granola with powdered milk, broke camp and headed to the beach area to gather water for the day.

I started to make my way to the Mt. Franklin trail, but decided to double back and take Rock Harbor Trail to Daisy Farm to connect with the Mt. Ojibway Trail. I wanted to stay close to the water and thought the views would prove to be more spectacular. Plus, I was curious to see the layout of the larger campsite.

It was a good choice. The scenery was glorious as the sun burned the morning's haze.

About a mile into the trail, I ran into the mother and son I shared the campsite with. They were trotting along making slow progress. I noticed the son was having a bit of trouble carrying his backpack. He didn't have his hip belt fastened and his sleeping bag was strung to the back leaving it to bounce with each step.

His mother and I convinced him to stop for a break and we moved the sleeping bag to the bottom of his backpack and secured it for less movement. The adjustment improved his stride.

We parted ways at Daisy Farm - they stayed to find a campsite and I turned towards the dock to take a short snack break before continuing to Mt. Ojibway.

As I moved further from Lake Superior on the Mt. Ojibway trail, the cool breeze subsided and the heat settled in. The trail ascends through a series of switchbacks to the spine of Greenstone Ridge. The hike, albeit short, is fairly rigorous. I found myself breathing heavily and sweating during the uphill battle. Once at the top of the

exposed rock, the wind kicked up and quickly dried my synthetic clothing. I climbed the lookout tower, snapped a few photos and spotted the Greenstone Ridge Trail, which I would follow for the next hour.

The trail runs along the ridgeline, so there isn't much



elevation gain and loss, but many parts of the trail are hard rock - hard on the knees. The hiking is fast and there's enough tall foliage to catch quick breaks in the shade.

Around 1 p.m. a brief shower hit the area. It's just enough to break out the rain jacket, but not the rain chaps. It passes in less than an hour, but I can feel a definite increase in humidity and cooler temperatures are moving in.

I connect with the Indian Portage Trail, which I travel just under three miles to McCargoe Cove Campground, my stopping point for the day.

The campground is big, but secluded. The first thing I notice is all of the shelters are taken, but none of the permits on the doors are for this night. I stop a man in his

20s and ask him about the permits. He said he had been there for a couple of days and realized a group had taken all of the shelters and planned to stay at the campground for multiple days. I could see why - the area was beautiful. The dock overlooking the bay could have been a painting.

Day 3 - 13.5 miles

I was up around 7 a.m. and took my time getting ready.

The dew was thick all around so I tried to give the sun a chance to dry some of it up. I hit the trail around 8 a.m. and headed toward the Minong Mine along the Minong Ridge Trail. The brush along the first portion of the trail was thick and laden with morning dew. My pants made quick work at sopping up any moisture they came in contact with. It was time to break out the waterproof chaps. I rolled up my pant legs to my knees and slid the rain gear on. The cool wet brush thrashing against my thin chaps felt oddly nice.

Minong Mine was only a couple of minutes outside the camp. I felt fresh and already established a good pace being so early in the morning, so I had second thoughts about stopping at the site. I forced myself to think of a spot in the Smoky Mountains that I've missed on multiple trips - High Rocks. Everytime I think about the sight left unseen, I get angry. This was enough to encourage diversion to the mine.

The first glimpse of the mine is the huge hole surrounded by a fence. I couldn't help but throw a couple of rocks and listen for them to hit the bottom. I may or may not have also spit into the hole. Beyond the hole was the mouth of the cave-like mine. It's worth the trip down the slope into the cavern. It's a completely different world inside the mine. It's only a few yards long and wide on either side. A shaft leads to the hole that marked the beginning of the mine, but it's filled with water. The other way, old train tracks jut from the ground beneath leading to another exit. There is a mist in the air and the sound of dripping water I imagine remain a constant.

Exiting through the rear of the cave I see a trail leading to a pile of rocks spanning hundreds of feet that were extracted from the mine. Another trail leads past the mound of rocks, but I decided it was time to get back onto the Minong Ridge Trail and head to Todd Harbor for lunch.

The first few miles of the trail winds through the forest and and sometimes leaving me wondering whether I'm really on a trail at all. "Just follow your feet," I thought. The packed dirt of the trail is the most reliable sign that I'm still on it.

Just as I began to wonder if I would be hiking on bare rock again, I hit a wall. The trail slightly turned and lead straight into a wall of rock. I looked around and couldn't find any indication of another trail around the barrier. The rock, which some of my friends would argue is a class 5, rises almost straight up for a couple of yards and tapers off into a steady grade. I scramble up the rock and look back and think to myself, "Thank God it's not raining."

:: gallery ::









The trail takes me from open rock and back down to the forest many times. I feel a bit of aching in my knees from the elevation gain and loss, but it's tolerable considering the views change so dramatically from rock to forest to wetland, which keep me engaged.

I arrive at Todd Harbor just before noon. The site, nestled right against the Minong Trail, doesn't appear to be very large and it's completely vacant at this hour. I grab the picnic table near the fire pit and tear off my shoes. My feet are damp from the first part of the hike and figured a half hour of sun could at least dry off my socks. I try to enjoy an energy bar and some nuts, but take those down in what feels like seconds. I felt the trail calling, but forced myself to relax - lying down on my foam pad and soaking up the sun.

The second portion of the day's hike is through the forest. I'm able to keep a fast pace due to the clean wide trail. In the last mile, the trail stops at another obstacle - a large downed fir tree. The diameter has to be at least 5 feet. There's no way around it, nor can I go under it. I climb over, pushing and breaking branches, hoping not to hurt myself or puncture my backpack.

I walk into the Little Todd Campground at 3:30 p.m., but I'm not the first. I see two guys setting up hammocks in the center site. I walk around the grounds looking for a good hammock site.



A view of the secluded beach on the northeastern portion of Little Todd campground.

Little Todd is a small site that overlooks Lake Superior on the northern side of the island. The jagged Canadian landscape can be seen about 20 miles offshore on a clear day. The beach is long and littered with smooth rocks. However, at the most eastern campsite, there is a path that leads beyond an outcropping of rocks that divides the beach. The eastern beach is far different from the west. Instead of smooth rocks, coarse black sand lines the beach and an area where "private" bathing is possible.

I chose to stay in the eastern site because of the beach access, plus it's the smallest site in the campgrounds.

After a quick dip in the 40-degree Lake Superior water and a bit of sunbathing on the black sand beach, I venture over to meet my neighbors.

Mike and Scott are both from the Detroit area and take yearly backpacking trips together. They've come well prepared. They're cooking burritos and tending a campfire as I approach. Along with burritos and ultralight camp chairs, they seem to

have all their Ts crossed. Mike walks over to a water bladder hung on a tree and offers me a drink. Vodka and lemonade was on this night's drink menu. I graciously decline. (Normally I'd indulge, but I was a little worried about the next day's hike which had me finishing up the Minong Ridge Trail.)

We sat down around the fire and talked shop - gear, trails and other places to backpack. The hot topic was the Minong Trail. They came from the west and I from the east. We compared notes on what to expect the next day. They mentioned a goshawk just a few miles from Windigo. The word on the island: the bird is tending to its young and is very territorial. It'll swoop in at hikers occasionally making contact. I believe the term "pterodactyl" was tossed around a few times.

The sun was setting, so it was time to clean up and call it a night.

Day 4 - 17.3 miles

I woke up well past the alarm I set on my watch for 5 a.m. It's a little past 7 o'clock, so I rush through breakfast while packing my bag and make a quick stop at the beach to fill my water bladder. The whole process takes about half an hour.

The day's hike wouldn't mark the longest, but it would prove to be the most difficult. The first portion is primarily along the ridgetop, dipping into the woods for brief periods. My pace is quick and spirits are high. I spot the cairns with ease, rarely ever having to stop. The views are wondrous with the cold blue water leading to the outline of Canadian shore to the north.

I make it to the break-off trail that leads to North Lake Desor in just a couple hours. I notice a trio huddled together looking at a map.

As I get closer I recognize the group from the ferry. Todd, Corin and Leah are on the island the same nine days as I am, though their route is completely different. We chat for a minute or two. They had just filled up on water at North Desor and looked tired. The group attempted the 12-mile walk from Windigo to North Lake Desor the previous day, but had to stop just a couple miles short of the campgrounds. They found a spot along the Minong and spent the night on the trail without any water source. Now, they were second guessing their hiking abilities and the mileage ahead.

I assured them Little Todd is just a couple hours away and they could easily keep going to Todd Harbor. We said our goodbyes and good lucks and set off in our respective directions.

A few hundred yards from the group I decide to sit down to eat a quick snack and look at my map. I started to doubt myself after running into the hikers. I have that same 12 miles to go, but it was early and

I wasn't feeling any fatigue from the trail whatsoever. If the trek was anything like the past few days, I didn't see any problem accomplishing the day's goal of 17 miles.

I stuff my half-eaten energy bar in my bag and take a sip of water. I'm back on the trail. The trail follows the ridgeline for a while before entering the woods. The trail seems to be getting thinner and the brush taller. At parts, I move at a snail's pace holding my arms in front of my head for protection against the growth that towers over me. All I can see are leaves and branches. I have to use my feet to find the trail - the edges are only about a foot across.

Eventually the trail opens into a valley marsh. The path, just large enough for one person, passes alongside a body of water. Uphill, downhill, left, right. This is crazy. The landscape changes at every turn. It's wild and beautiful.

The trail ascends and descends multiple ridges and traverses through a series of marshes.

My feet are burning and my shoes are feeling tight, which means I already have blisters. I'm not quite sure how far I've traveled, but it feels farther than most 20-mile days in other places. So, I decide to not attend to my feet as camp must be close by.

But, it's not.

A few hours later, the ups and downs of the hike have diminished and I'm on a large path in the forest. I see a white paper sign nailed to a tree. I'm hoping it says, "Windigo - half mile ahead." It doesn't. It reads, "Goshawk Nesting Area." It goes on to say there is a territorial goshawk with young that has posed a threat to hikers - grab a stick and keep it above your head.

After what I've just been through, I'm going to worry about some bird?

Come on. I grab the smallest stick I can find, actually more of a long twig.

I hike for about five minutes or so and nothing. The bird must have left the area.

Then, "Kak-kak-kak-kak-kak" echoes through the trees. I can't see where it's coming from, but it sends chills down my spine.

I keep walking, but now I've got my twig high in the air. Again, "Kak-kak-kak-kak-kak."

It's closer, but I still can't see it.

BAM! SNAP!

My twig, broken in two, hits the ground in front of me. She attacked from the back. I look around and I see a tall gray bird staring down at me from a tree about 10 yards away. "Kak-kak-kak-kak-kak."

I reach down and grab the longer half of my twig and run. My feet are tingling and my thighs burning. The "pterodactyl" follows, floating from tree branch to tree branch.

It swoops down at me a couple more times, but never connects. I'm sweating and out of breath - I have to slow down. I'm at a jogging pace, now, and the raptor is nowhere in sight. Another minute or two and I decide it's safe to walk.

The last half mile to Windigo feels like hours. I'm so fatigued I'm afraid to sit down as I might fall asleep. My feet feel like bloody stubs. I'm not about to mess around with setting up camp, so I find an empty shelter for the evening.

It's time to take off my shoes and take care of the blisters. It's not as bad as I thought; there are blisters on my pinky toes and on my heels. The pinky toes are an easy fix - just wrap them up before the next day's hike. The heel blisters are a different story. They're huge, red and cover the entire backs of my heels. I don't think I'll



be able to put my shoes back on the next day if I just leave them. So, I slice them open to drain.

I’m usually opposed to popping blisters while on the trail. With open wounds on my feet I’m just inviting all kinds of infection to set in. I treat the open blisters with triple antibiotic and bandage them up with athletic tape.

My back is sore, my shoulders ache, my knees stiffening and my feet throbbing. It was a good day’s hike, but now it’s time to lay on the hardwood floor with my 1/8-inch foam pad and get some sleep. The problem now is the floor’s too hard to sleep on my side and on my back forces me to place my heals on the ground. I reach for my food bag and prop it under my ankles - problem solved, asleep by 7 p.m.

Day 5 - 19.2 miles

I wake up 12 hours later in the same position I fell asleep in. It’s cold - I can see my breath. The thermometer on my watch reads 46-degrees. I roll onto my side and slowly get up. I’m achy, but not sore. My heals are tender, but nothing a bit of duct tape wouldn’t cure for the hike ahead.

During breakfast, I look at the map and decide to change my route. Originally, I planned to hike 19.1 miles around the Feldtmann Loop to Siskiwit Bay, which wouldn’t leave many options to camp in between if I had problems. I decide to take Greenstone Ridge and either stay at Island Mine (6.3 miles) or South Lake Desor (11 miles).

After taking my time at the campgrounds, I’m on the trail by 9 a.m.. The clouds are thick, but the forest’s canopy is thicker, so I’m not too worried if it were to rain. The trail is wide and soft, which makes it fast. I stop for a break a couple hours later at the

trailhead to Island Mine. It’s early and I feel good. It’d be a waste of a day to stop now, so I’m going for South Lake Desor about five miles away.

I arrived at my destination around 2 p.m. and walk through the grounds. It was pretty, but I wasn’t overly excited about staying in the camp. It was starting to rain and spending hours under my tarp was not very enticing. I took out the map to look at my options. The only choice was Hatchet Lake - 8.2 miles away. I can do this. Maybe another four hours of hiking. Besides, the trail was “easy.”

Within a quarter mile, the trail thins and the brush is waist high. It’s raining harder and thunder roars in the distance. My rain chaps don’t help much as water from the overgrowth pours down the open crotch design. I focus on my feet - one in front of the other. The view is blocked by the brush, so there’s not much to look at for long stretches.

My mind wanders and I think of cake. No, not the moist, sugary goodness a normal hungry, overworked backpacker should be thinking about, but Cake, the once-popular alternative rock band.

A chorus surfaces from the subconscious and repeats:

*“He’s going the distance.
He’s going for speed.
She’s all alone
In her time of need.
Because he’s racing and pacing and plotting the course,
He’s fighting and biting and riding on his horse,
He’s going the distance.”*

As I battle the trail - and it’s thick wet overgrowth - the song keeps me occupied and distracted enough to continue at a pace a little over two miles per hour.

The 19.2-mile day ends about 6

p.m. at Hatchet Lake. The campsite is empty and I figured it would remain that way this late in the day with the weather worsening. I look for the best trees for my hammock, which lands me in a two-tiered group site within a couple yards of an outhouse.

The temperature continues to drop, the rain gets harder and the wind is picking up. I’m starting to get chilled, so I hurry to hang my hammock and eat dinner.

I lack ambition to do more than go to bed at this point. I slip into my sleeping bag and listen to the rain drops hit my tarp as I fall asleep.

Bang! Crash!

I’m thrown out of slumber, and I’m weightless for a moment. I don’t know if it was a lightning strike or a tree falling all too close, but it was enough to toss my hammock - with me in it - up and down. My tarp has come loose and is flapping in the wind. The rain is pelting my shelter from all directions.

I get out of bed and tighten the tarp, lay back down and watch the lightning show. Streaks of white light up the sky all around. The initial cracks of the thunder are ear-piercing followed by rumbles felt deep in my chest.

About an hour passes and the storm hasn’t let up. I can hear the water rushing down the trails around me, making its way to Hatchet Lake.

Splash!

A rush of cold overwhelms my body. My hammock has fallen and what was once dry ground is now three inches of running water. I sit up and see that my tarp is still hanging intact, so the trees I was attached to weren’t downed. Next, I check my slings. One was still connected to the tree, but the other was just dangling. I follow the line, starting from the hammock, and discover there’s not a

break - the line is fine. I look up at the tree the line was attached to and see my homemade AmSteel Blue carabiner hanging from the tree - wide open.

In my haste while setting up the hammock, I didn't tighten the carabiner to lock onto itself. When I woke up bouncing to the crash, it must have worked itself loose.

The hammock only takes a minute or so to hang back up, but by the time I'm ready to get back to bed, everything is wet.

Since the nights have been cold, I have been wearing all of my clothes. My only insulation, sleeping bag and jacket, are both down and feathers only work when dry.

I look down at my watch, it's 2 a.m. The storm and lightning are in full force, so hiking to stay warm is not an option. I slide back into my wet sleeping bag and assume the fetal position, shivering until the storm dies down. I slip between sleep and consciousness for the next three hours, trying to put the storm and the cold as far from my thoughts as possible.

Day 6 - 15.4 miles

Shortly after 5 a.m. the lightning is sporadic enough to safely hike, but the rain is still coming down. I get out of the hammock and break camp. I'm shaking uncontrollably and it takes quite a bit of willpower to unclench my fists and move my fingers. Packing my bag takes over an hour.

On my way out of the campgrounds I get the first taste of what the day has in store. The campground trail leading to Greenstone resembles more of a river than a path. At first I straddle the sides of the trail to stay above the torrent, but it's inefficient. I'm better off just walking through the water and keeping a good pace.

Within a few minutes, despite sloshing through cold water, I start to warm up.

I'm heading east, but I haven't yet decided where I'd end up for the night. Rock Harbor is about 25 miles away; they have clothes dryers there, and it's early. I don't care if dryers are cheating - I'm cold and willing to use any resource at my disposal to get dry and warm. If I don't make it to Rock Harbor, there's Daisy Farm,15 miles out of Hatchet Lake. Daisy Farm is already on my itinerary and the site has lots of those three-sided shelters. The night would be cold, but I'd be out of the wind.

The trail was a bit more forgiving than expected. It was relatively wide and crossed through areas of open rock. The "river" parts of the trail were mostly ankle-deep, but every now and then I'd step in water up past my knee. The rain slowed and became intermittent as the morning progressed. By noon, the rain had ceased but the skies remained dark for the next couple hours.

In the middle of mile 10, my right knee began to ache and within minutes was completely locked up. It was probably time for a break anyway. I popped 800 mg of ibuprofen and slowly chewed on an energy bar. During the break, the weather cleared long enough for the sun to poke through the clouds. Temperatures warmed, allowing me to take off my shirt and soak up a few rays.

The effects of the ibuprofen were apparent after 30 minutes, my knee was starting to relax and I could put most of my weight on it without any pain. I didn't want to push it, so I sat and performed some simple stretches for another 15 minutes before returning to the trail.

My knee was the deciding factor in which campground I would stay at for the night. I didn't want another

episode, so chose I Daisy Farm as the final destination for the day. With only 5 miles to go, I could walk as slow as needed and still make it before dinner time.

Upon turning off on the Daisy Farm Trail, a 1.7-mile straight shot to the campgrounds, the sky once again darkened and thunder rumbled across the island. My clothes were fairly dry thanks to the break in the weather so I picked up my pace to a slow jog to beat the storm. I got caught in the rain in the last quarter-mile, but I was already donning my rain gear.

The first shelter off the trail was vacant, so I didn't have to spend any time scouting. I hung my wet sleeping bag and down jacket from a nail in the shelter, but there wasn't any hope at having dry insulation this night. It's early, a little before 4 p.m., and I'm stuck in the shelter during the storm. I wait about an hour and start dinner - dehydrated pasta and a few mixed nuts for dessert. I have a couple servings of freeze-dried coffee that I hadn't touched the entire trip - this was as good a time as any for the luxury. Plus, the hot cup would warm my hands.

Around 7 p.m. I decide it's time to call it a night. The clothes I'm wearing are getting close to being dry, so to keep them that way I wear my rain jacket as I slip into the damp sleeping bag.

Day 7 - 0 miles

I slowly get up around 6 a.m. and the sun has just come up. I jump out of my sleeping bag and hang it up outside the shelter. I tear off all of my damp clothes and place them in direct sunlight on the steps. It's still a little chilly, but the sun will dry them faster than wearing them.

I take a walk down to the dock and

sit down to figure out the day's game plan. I could walk to Rock Harbor, where there's a dryer, and then back to Three Mile for the night, or I could take a rest day at Daisy Farm - where I already have a shelter - and hope the weather holds out long enough to dry my things.

I chose the latter. Throughout the day, I explore the campgrounds and the beachfront taking time to talk with other hikers and to snap photos. As the day wore on I wished I had brought something to read.

My clothes and sleeping bag were completely dry by noon and the weather held out for most of the day - only a brief shower passed in late afternoon. About 6 p.m., I ate my dinner and hunkered down in my shelter for the night.

As the light finally fades - after 10 p.m. - I'm awoken to the sound of rain hitting the roof of the shelter. I smile because I'm warm and dry and have no worries that my shelter would fall into a river in the middle of the night.

Day 8 - 8 miles

I wake up around 7 a.m. and I can see my breath - it's still in the 40s. The sun is shining and I can hear other hikers getting ready in the distance. I'm itching to get on the trail as the campgrounds at Rock Harbor tend to fill up early in the day.

I head off onto the Rock Harbor Trail about an hour later and decide to take it a bit slow - since it's the last eight miles of the trip. A leisurely hike sounded great, but reality sets in within a couple hundred yards. Large sections of the trail are still flooded. Now, I have to decide whether I'm going to plow straight through the water or tiptoe along the trail's sides to save my dry feet. Still feeling a bit defeated from the storm two days prior, and not in the mood for wet feet

again, I take the trail's edges.

I hit the Rock Harbor campgrounds in about three hours, including a 20 minute break to talk to a gentleman from Scotland on the trail.

The campgrounds are bustling with movement. I definitely wasn't the only one to get an early start. I look for Scott and Mike, the guys I met at Little Todd - they said if they saw me this morning they would hand over their shelter as they were leaving. I check each shelter as I walk past, all taken. It's not until I reach the last shelter in the row, shelter No. 1, when I spot them. They quickly recognize me and flag me down. I set my backpack on the picnic table and let out a sigh of relief followed by a wave of sadness - my hike was over.

Scott and Mike caught their sea-plane a few minutes later, but their generosity lingered. They had left a six pack of a local brew in the shelter for me.

The rest of the day I explore Rock Harbor doing laundry, showering, eating and buying souvenirs from the gift shop.

After dinner, I find myself in the shelter alone with the six pack. Thoughts of sipping the 72 ounces over the next couple hours was tempting - very tempting, but I remembered seeing Todd, Leah and Corin roaming the campgrounds earlier in the day and I might as well share my bounty.

I find the group at the very last campsite and they had just finished dinner. We sit down over the next hour and share stories from our time on the island.

I wandered back to my shelter as the sun sank below the tree line. As I lay on the shelter floor, I enjoy the scent of fabric softener radiating from my freshly laundered shirt and begin the hike all over again in my head.

Day 9 - 0 miles

The final morning is sunny and clear as I board the Ranger III. I'm ready to be ferried home while listening to more of Paul Anderson's island songs and poems, but this time with a deeper appreciation.

My blisters are still screaming, so I'm forced to wear my homemade flip-flops - the insloes of an old pair of running shoes laced with paracord.

Lake Superior is calm, but the sun falls behind clouds as we get further from shore.

A few of us share our experiences from the past week, but the hot topic is the storm that battered the island midway through our trips.

Everyone appears to have made it off the island safely, and with tales of the wild to carry across the mainland.



Writer's note:

Thank you for reading my trip report and allowing me to share my experiences on Isle Royale with you.

If you ever catch me on a hike, don't hesitate to stop me and tell me your story.

See you on the trail.

~Sean Krajacic

:: hindsight 20/20 ::



My gear is spread throughout and hung to dry in one of the shelters towards the end of the trip. Had I brought synthetic insulation and a baselayer, I would have slept much warmer this night.

What I know, now ...

No matter how much preparation I've put into a trip, there are always things I would have done differently. These are those things:

Gathering intel

The weather was a huge factor during this trip. I researched weather trends, almanacs and current weather for the island, starting months before the trip. The weather report I had for Isle Royale was very wrong the week I visited - about 10 degrees wrong. I realized my forecast was from the mainland, not the northern tip of Lake Superior. The mistake was apparent the moment I stepped onto the island. I would have been better off looking at forecasts along Canada's coast for a more accurate temperature range.

Clothing

My insulation, down jacket and down sleeping bag, just didn't cut it in the wet weather. Feathers and water don't mix. I've used down for a number of years - in wet and dry weather - and have never had a problem until this trip. The problem rooted from a mistake I made when hanging the hammock during a storm. The mistake left me and all of my gear wet and cold. The next trip, my down jacket will be replaced with a synthetic version with the same temperature rating.

Due to looking at inaccurate weather reports, I left my baselayers at home. Aside from the shirt I was wearing, I only carried a thin long-sleeved running shirt. Given

the nights dipped into the low 40s, a bit of merino wool would have kept me nice and toasty.

Haste and my sleep system

Hammock backpacking is fun and, for the most part, very comfortable. However, the nights were cool, so the air between me and the ground dropped my sleeping bag's temperature rating by more than 10 degrees. Sleeping cool normally isn't a problem, but when I hastily set up my hammock during the storm and fell into runoff from the rain, the situation became dangerous. The only solutions I see are to either double check my work or sleep on the ground.

Footwear

The blisters on my heels were horrendous and my pinky toes were bruised to the point I lost the nails shortly after the trip. I've always worn trail running shoes for backpacking. The problem wasn't the type of shoes, it was the size. I needed a half size larger shoe. The shoes were comfortable walking around town and for a few short

runs, but after the first 50 miles on the island my feet had swollen beyond the width of the shoes.

Boredom

Backpacking is not boring, but spending a zero-mile day in a campsite with infected blisters is torture. A book or magazine would have eased the pain. Books are heavy, so after a bit of research, I've found an alternative. Kobo, a Toronto-based company, makes a 5-inch fully functional e-reader that weighs only 4.73 ounces. The e-reader can hold hundreds of books and the battery lasts up to a month. Although, after a bit of research and number crunching, the projected battery life is really 15 hours of use (30 minutes a day, with a page turn every minute). For me, it should be enough juice for a 9-day backpacking trip and then some.

I have seen other options that utilize standard AA batteries, which have the potential to last a year before requiring new batteries, but they haven't hit the US market, yet.



A very bored (and skinny) version of myself taken on the zero-mile day. A book would have come in handy, as there was more than 16 hours of daylight this day.