

Paddling Lake Huron - The North Channel (Or "OH THE WIND AND THE WAVE")

By Phil Nester

Located on the extreme north end of Lake Huron the North Channel is world renowned among yachting enthusiasts. Its sparkling clean water, many islands, and exquisite scenery combine to make it one of the top five sailing destinations. Its countless bights and coves offer safe anchorage for mariners of all kinds.

The following Chesapeake Paddling Association members:

- Todd Angerhofer
- Deb McKenzie
- Nancy Hendrick
- and myself

along with: My grandson Wolfgang (15), Dennis and Marty Shaak from Pennsylvania, Jamie Lee, and Meghan (13) and John O'Grady from Ontario gathered in Spanish Ontario to start a six day adventure through this beautiful area.

We paddled in four singles (Todd, Deb, Nancy, and Jamie) and three rented tandems. The tandems were chosen to accommodate the younger and less experience of our team.

Leaving a float plan with the harbor master at the Spanish Municipal Marine, we set out on a circular course through the islands. An advantage of the North Channel is that the islands are plentiful enough and so arranged that you can expand contract or so alter your plan to accommodate your progress to suit the whims of the group or conditions of weather. If you have the time you can easily make a three or four week trip here and only have to re-track the last mile or two in the channel to the marina. Additionally you can duck into the protection of the leeward side of the islands if you encounter heavy seas. Of course being a circuit, you end your trip where you started, so there is no need for a time-wasting shuttle to and from your vehicles.

Shared equipment and meals-- Each person brought items to be shared. We had three back packer stoves, fuel for them, a large cook set, cooking tools, a nylon tarp big enough for all to get under, and all other items carefully chosen and assigned to meet the needs of the group.

The meal plan was simply a matrix with a row listing each meal by day and a column listing each participant by name. I simply started at the upper left and made check marks across the table moving to the right and dropping down a row until reaching the last column then returned to first column until each meal was checked off. When it is your turn, you provide that meal for the group. It lessens the work and need for equipment but most of all it makes the meals very interesting and fun! My hat is off to all for providing tasty, interesting and satisfying meals. Well done!

The Course--Because of the level of experience of some of our members I wanted the early part of our trip to be in the sheltered areas so they could get a feel for big water before venturing out into the main body of the North Channel where the prevailing westerlies on a normal day can kick up ocean size waves over many miles of fetch. First we traveled to the west through the Whalesback on the north side of the huge Aird Island and then a circumnavigation around John and Gowen Islands. Second, we traveled east along the south side of Aird and a string of smaller islands to Crook Island. Third, took us south passed Eagle Island to Hook Island then east through the Benjamins to a circumnavigation of Croker Island. Fourth we headed out to The Sow and Pigs then north for a thorough exploration of the Benjamins and back to Croker. Fifth, we turned north-east to Fox Island, passed Frecette to Hotham Island. Finally we headed east through McBean Channel and Little Detroit Strait, then north to end at the Marina.

Our Campsites-- We had four sites in all. In two of them we spent two nights. This provided the opportunity to make day trips for exploration besides the obvious advantage of saving set up and pack up time. There are no official camp sites or guide books listing them. Some clues can be extracted from internet searches but most are a matter of searching out a suitable place. This can prove a challenge as it did on our first day. Paddling for miles passed shore line with vertical or steep angled rocks plunging into the water with no place to land had me concerned. Places where you could land offered no flat area where a camp could be set. The rocks were jagged on top making it impossible to set up a camp on them even if you could get up there. We started searching early in the day so as not to be in a pinch as the sun descended. We explored every bight and cove getting out to explore on foot if we could land.

Finally, in a straight between two islands we found a suitable site. It had two little sand beaches on either side of a point with enough area to set our seven tents two rock outcroppings to lounge and cook on, and bear tracks. Dennis asked: "Does it matter to you if there are bear tracks here?" I replied, "The way I see it, the bear was already here. He should be someplace else tonight. "



We spent two nights here. The rest of our campsites were easy to find. We passed plenty of beautiful sand beaches that would have made great sites. Our second site was from an internet clue. There should be a site on Crooks Island. We landed in a cove that looked right and found the site with a fire ring, a table made from a few old boards and sticks, and plenty of flat spots in the pines to set our tents. Further into the woods is a boom box with a privacy screen. The rocks and the cove provided good swimming and relaxing. Our third site was the best of all. In the back of a cove on Croker Island is a large crescent shaped sand beach. Behind the beach is a flat bench of land with plenty of space for our tents in the pines. It even has a genuine outhouse with a door. What luxury! We spent two nights in this site.



Our fourth and final site was a bushwhacked emergency site (More on that later). It is in a small bight on Hotham Island. There is a pebble beach to land on and a narrow flat strip of land beyond it in front of a dense forest understory. The bight has a muddy bottom that was not good for swimming but there are two nice outcroppings that are good for lounging. Though not perfect, it served our needs well.

WILDLIFE--Our wildlife sightings are good on this trip. Most if not all saw the following: Todd reported seeing a pine martin (Growing scarce maybe endangered). Deb watched two foxes playing in a cove near our camp. A beaver swimming from a small island on our starboard to John Island on our port passed in front of the group. We watched two otter (My favorite mammal) playing off our port side between two islands. And remember the bear tracks? Well, he came back the next morning walking slowly along the shore skirting the small bight of our camp. We had plenty of time to photograph him until he finally walked into the forest. Although not a sighting perhaps a hearing happened on our last night. While snug in my sleeping bag, I awake to the sound of something walking stealthily through camp. I hear small twigs and reeds crushing slowly under heavy, cautious steps. No person emerging to the call of nature would sound like that. The next morning Todd reports hearing something in the night too. Big Foot?

FIRE! ON NORTH BENJAMIN--While passing the west side of North Benjamin Island we see a column of smoke rising into the air. It looks like a camp fire but as we approach it does not look right. We stop to investigate and find a fire ring on bedrock that has flashed and sparks blown into the dry ground cover nearby. It ignited and spread into a fallen tree. A four or five square meter area has burned and there are several islands of vegetation in the granite bedrock that have been burned off. Fortunately, the southerly wind was blowing such that the fire had not spread far. When the wind shifted to westerly a few hours later the fire would have blown into the heart of the island and it would have probably been turned to toast.

Todd had some heavy duty plastic bags that he used to carry water to the fire and put it out. Then he notified the Canadian Coast Guard via his VHF radio of the fire giving the latitude and longitude. Later that evening when we were back in our Croker Island camp, a helicopter circled North Benjamin Island.



GEOLOGY AND SCENERY--This is the main reason for visiting The North Channel. (I am not a geologist but it is something like this.) It is an area where at least four types of rock converge. There is shale and lime stone to the south. To the east is white quartzite. The La Cloche Mountains of Killarney visible to the east are famous for this. To the west is schist. And to the north is granite in pink and gray varieties. Now take these interesting rocks and pass countless tons of rivers of ice over them for a few thousand years. Next, let the ice melt away and fill the lake. Then sprinkle with flora and fauna. Finally, toss with the power of great storm winds and voila! You have a glacially sculpted, windblown landscape that is rugged and gorgeous. The Benjamins and Fox Island are the crown jewels of the North Channel featuring beautifully sculpted pink granite. Striations clearly show the direction of the flow of the glaciers as the ice carried debris worked like sandpaper to smooth and form the exposed bedrock surface like a pastry chef forms icing on a cake. A patchwork of lush green foliage with wild blueberries and storm twisted pine weave between the rock formations. They hold many coves and channels to explore.

THE FOSSIL BED--In my internet searching, I read of a fossil bed on Hook Island. This is at the edge of the limestone region of The North Channel. Hook Island is about one half square meters in area and is covered in forest. Approaching the island our plan is to look for a spot that might give a clue as to where the fossils may be but the prospect of finding them on such a large island seemed slim. However,

as we draw closer to the island, we can see a large exposed horizontal rock, probably limestone, projecting out from the forest and extending for over 100 meters near the shore, about one meter above water level. I thought this is a good place to look as any and I set our course for the middle of this slab. After landing, we walked the five meters to the slab. Stepping up onto it, it becomes immediately clear that we landed at the right spot. The slab is covered with hundreds nay thousands of fossils. One of the first I see is a mollusk about the size of a grape fruit. The spiral cross section of the snail is clearly discernible in the rock. Within centimeters are many smaller snails with the same clarity. There are many distinct types of fossils exposed in the rock, some as large as a half meter in length. There are mollusks.



THE WEATHER--We are blessed with wonderful weather. The days are warm and sunny. We only have rain briefly on two days. The air and the water are unusually calm early in the week. This pleases me with the level of experience of some of our members. The wind slowly increases day by day as the week wears on giving them a chance to get used to waves gradually.

On our second to last day we launch with 30 kph winds on our port beam. The wind increases as we paddle and at noon we turn headlong into. As we round Oak Poking we find that the wind has increased yet again as we round the point. First, waves lift the bow of the kayak as it rides up and over the steep crest. Second, the bow hangs suspended over air as the wave passes under the boat. Third, as the buoyancy changes, the bow plunges down into the trough between the waves and spears into the oncoming next wave. Finally, in a tug-of-war between gravity and buoyancy the bow pulls free of the grip of the wave and rises for the next cycle. The ride through the waves is exhilarating, but our progress has slowed to a crawl. John and Meghan, and Wolf and I, lacking the strength of mature bow paddlers, are falling far behind the rest of the paddlers. We try to take advantage of the shore as the wind

theoretically is less there due to the laminar effect of the resistance created by the land, but it is of little if any help.



I unconsciously shift into the mental state of determination that kept me going on other trips against stiff wind when there was no choice but to continue. The others grow farther ahead as I monitor John and Megan's slow progress against the shore line when from far ahead I hear a whistle. I am puzzled by its meaning. Soon Jamie, then Nancy comes back in the opposite direction. Nancy states, "It is stupid to continue." She and Deb whistled for Todd's attention. It takes me a moment to shift gears out of my determined mind set but Nancy is 100% correct. The wind shadow of Aird Island is too many kilometers away and the blow is not predicted to abate until the night. We return to and take refuge behind Oak Point and then set a bushwhack camp in a small sheltered bight on Hotham Island.

THE CONCLUSION--The next morning we get an early start. The wind has died. We have twice as far to paddle now as planned for our last day but conditions are good for us to go. It is a relief to paddle easily passed the same shoreline that was so difficult yesterday. Making steady progress we soon paddled the seven kilometers to Little Detroit, the narrow passage between the east end of Aird Island and a narrow peninsula from the Mainland. Turning north for the last leg of our journey we head for the Spanish Municipal Marina. We are now back on schedule. Our bows smoothly cut the water through the pass between Landry Point and Green Island. Then, passed Sproule Islands and through the Fletcher Islands, and finally make our landing at the Marina bringing the 2007 North Channel Kayak expedition full circle.

I checked in with the harbor master to announce our safe return and retrieve our float plan. Then we loaded our kayaks onto our vehicles, had a welcome hot shower at the marina, and then had a great finale lunch in Spanish toasted the trip and each other. Dennis pointed to a mural of a storm swept seascape on the wall saying, "Does that look familiar?" Finally, we said our last good-byes in the parking lot and set out on the long drive home.



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