



Too Much Fog, Too Damn Cold

EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, LAKE SUPERIOR FAILS TO LIVE UP TO ITS FEARSOME REPUTATION
STORY AND PHOTOS BY FRED BAGLEY

» *Catamount* at anchor, in the lee of Allouez Island; forbidding Pic Island is in the distance. Below: Jennifer Bagley, feet in the chilly lake waters



My wife's father was 98 years old when I asked him why, having sailed Lake Michigan and Lake Huron's North Channel for 65 years, he had never taken any of his boats to Lake Superior. George replied without hesitation, "Too much fog, too damn cold."

Superior's reputation for unpredictable weather, frigid water, and marginal harbors is legendary. Its fog and ice and wind and rocks have sunk hundreds of vessels over the last two centuries. Ships disappear, many never to be found, and mariners' remains still repose somewhere in the lake's icy depths. At 350 miles long and 1,300 feet deep, it commands respect from any sailor.

In spite of my father-in-law's admonitions, we had to go see for ourselves. For me it would be a coming home of sorts. I was born and raised in Duluth, Minnesota, at the western end of the lake, but never, not even once, had I been out on its waters. We told George we'd let him know how we fared.

My wife, Jennifer, and I sailed *Catamount*, our Caliber 38, north from our home base in southern Georgian Bay, then west along the North Channel to the mouth of the St. Mary's River, the 40-mile-long connector between Lake Superior and Lake Huron. Gale-force winds blowing down off Superior kept us there for two days—not a good omen for our cruising plans—but when the storm passed, we motored upriver to Sault Ste. Marie, dodging thousand-foot freighters that crowd this busy shipping lane. After reprovisioning at the "Soo," we went through the locks and entered Whitefish Bay, the eastern terminus of the lake and the usual recipient of seas with 300 miles of fetch. Fortunately, a gentle northeast wind greeted us as we turned to head up the Canadian shore for our first glimpse of what the Ojibwa called Gitchigami.

The imposing scale of Superior came as a surprise. It was like going to the Grand Canyon for the first time; the place can't possibly be as dramatic as all the pictures you've seen, but then you



get there and you can't suppress a "Wow!" This is the southern end of the Canadian Shield, 4-billion-year-old earth's crust with its fracture lines filled with diabase dikes and its edges clawed but barely diminished by repeated glacial scouring. The colors of the shoreline are vivid and varied: red and gray granite, white quartzite, black basalt, and golden beaches. The hills behind the shoreline soar a thousand feet high.

And to the west, nothing. No land, no ships, no sails, no people. Just water.

We settled for two nights in Sinclair Cove, in the shadow of 100-foot-high cliffs, but with crystal-clear water showing our anchor lying placidly in sand 20 feet below. It's an idyllic anchorage when there's little wind, but untenable when a tempest blows (we had the idyllic, thank you). Hiking trails lead to pictographs on the lakeshore, left there by Ojibwa warriors 400 years before to commemorate a successful raiding party across the lake. (Picture yourself paddling a birchbark canoe 200 miles to beat up on your enemy). We had our first fresh-fish dinner when we bartered boat-baked apple pie for lake trout caught hours before by a fish tug that anchored beside us for a night. And, George, I did something I never did in all those years of growing up on Superior's shore: at the beach off our stern, I swam! Repeat, I swam in Lake Superior!

Make no mistake: Lake Superior is cold. So cold that our refrigerator worked only half as hard and the beer from the bilge locker

came out already chilled. While you do not want to fall off your boat in Lake Superior (ten minutes is all you get before you are helplessly, fatally cold), the good news is that you can swim, albeit quickly and judiciously. The bad news is that the water is getting warmer. According to recent studies, less winter ice and warmer summers are driving the water temperature up. The average temperature has risen over 4°F in the last 25 years, and surface temperatures have been recorded as high as 68°F. Scientists are concerned, fish populations are being altered, and weather patterns are changing (yes, Superior is big enough to make its own weather). The consensus among longtime Superior sailors is that its legendary fog is less prevalent, perhaps because of that warmer water.

Farther north we sailed out into the lake toward Michipicoten Island. Too big to avoid and too foreboding to love, Quebec Harbour, on its south side, is most often used as a one-night layover on the way to the juicier anchorages up north. But on our way there, a rapidly rising west wind popped up 4-foot waves as we approached the island's east end, so we sought refuge in tiny Cozen's Cove, barely distinguishable against the broken red-rock shoreline and guarded by two barren basalt islands. We gratefully edged into its limited protection and anchored.

There we met Cookie and Alfred Dampier, the cove's only residents, who were spending a month in their tiny cabin on the shore. Engaging, welcoming, and a bit glad

of someone to talk to, they invited us to use their sauna and to join the summer residents for a turkey dinner the next day. At the appointed time a local fish tug chugged into the cove carrying all (20) of the island's population for a feast that left everyone immobile by the time the lingonberry pie was finished. And the sauna? If we could add one of those to our boat, we'd do so in a heartbeat.

Later we sailed to Quebec Harbour, where rusted skeletons of wrecked fishing tugs and an empty fishing village reminded us of the hardy souls who braved these waters long before radar and GPS.

From Michipicoten we headed north to well-protected Otter Cove, which we shared with a few other boats, the first we had seen in days. We were now in Pukaskwa National Park, where waterfalls plunge directly into the lake off high cliffs and a dramatic light-house still stands guard on a lonely point. On outlying Otter Island we came face to face with caribou and explored 4,000-year-old stone structures built on terraced cobble beaches by an unknown early people who left no other traces behind.

Farther north in the park we anchored in Pitch Rock Harbor, where black rock surrounding sand beaches results in surprisingly warm water. With much grinning, we frolicked in the Caribbean-like scene. Night brought a blazing sunset over a tranquil lake, the colors dancing between cloud and sea and not a soul in sight and nary a sound. We wondered how George could not have



» Abandoned fishermen's cabins at Quebec Harbour, Michipicoten Island; Fred fills *Catamount's* water tanks from the lake (right)



known about this.

The next day we turned west toward the Slate Islands, another protected area off the lake's northern shore, and finally the odds caught up with us. The wind and waves beat on us and the sky glowered as we reefed the main, only to roll nauseatingly through swells as the wind died and fog enveloped *Catamount*. In a way we were glad; maybe George was right. Not warm sand beaches and sunsets, but dreary mizzle and fog and rolling seas. We motorsailed using our plotter and radar for 20 miles, found our way to the north side of the archipelago, and gingerly turned south in search of an entrance. Technology prevailed; as we got within a hundred yards of the shore, we caught a glimpse of pine trees in the haze, confirmed our entry, and sailed into this mysterious network of islets, reefs, and steep-sided islands.

The Slate Islands offer charming bays, weathered rock peninsulas, bold headlands, and indigenous caribou herds. For all their channels and convolutions, though, the Slates are filled either with shallow reefs or very deep water, leading all cruising boats down to the only really secure anchorage in Pike Bay. We slithered through its narrow entrance, still in low-lying fog. We were grateful to confirm we were where we thought we were.

We had been on the move for a few weeks now, and the only source of a pumpout and diesel fuel since we left the "Soo" 200 miles back was still 30 miles away at tiny Rosspoint, Ontario. So we sailed west in 8

knots of southwest wind, *Catamount* thrumming along at 6 knots with little wavelets delicately sounding on her hull. With the autopilot turned on and the sails trimmed, it was lunch on the bow and sun on our backs as we headed for Rosspoint.

Pumped out and topped off, we headed back. Our provisions were getting low (at one anchorage we traded two Farley Mowatt books to locals for a fresh cucumber and moose steaks, and we filled our water tanks right from the lake), but with all those places we had sailed by on our way north, which ones to see on the way back? First on our list was Les Petite Ecris, a barely perceptible cluster of rocky islets on the north shore of Superior that would be unsafe on any night other than the one we spent there. Like Sinclair Cove it requires benign weather to sit off its sandy beach, surrounded but not well protected by red rock with hundreds of miles of open water before us.

We stopped at remote Allouez Island and bushwhacked up to its summit for the view of majestic Pic Island blocking the northern skyline. Anchoring there for the night was dicey, so we settled for two nights behind the protection of nearby Foster Island. No sign of civilization anywhere, although at night the serenading of loons was echoed by the whistles of Canadian Pacific freight trains eight miles inland.

Turning south, we saw our first boats in nearly a week, as the bays and harbors of the northern lake were slowly emptying themselves, all sailors wanting to be off the lake

by the end of August. "All sailors" amounted to a total of six boats in the next two weeks.

We spent two nights at lovely Fish Harbour, its mile-long sand beach visited by a black bear each evening, and two more nights at Indian Cove, where two moose swam by our boat. We navigated tricky Tugboat Channel off Cape Gargantua, dodging barely submerged rocks and craggy islets, with terns and gulls and the occasional eagle wheeling past us as if in agreement this was indeed a special place.

And finally it was back to Whitefish Bay, where this time a west wind and 4-foot waves did justice to its fearsome reputation. We had to gybe in the ship channel to give one of those thousand-foot freighters its proper due. Returning to the mouth of the St. Mary's River, we once again sat out a two-day gale that battered the lake we had just left.

So which is it? Was George right? Maybe we were just lucky; our Superior cruise, after all, was book-ended by gales before and after we were on its open waters. Or is Gitchigami the Holy Grail for Great Lakes sailors? We had little fog, we swam, we had picture-perfect sailing days, and we had it to ourselves.

George is gone now; he never got to Lake Superior. But we're going back. After all, we promised him we'd keep him posted. ♣

Vermont residents **Fred and Jennifer Bagley** keep their boat on Georgian Bay and sail the upper Great Lakes from June to September.



» East End Light on Michipicoten Island once guided freighters down the lake's eastern shore



MAP ILLUSTRATION BY PIP HURN