

Greenstone Ridge Trail Guide

by Kevin McKelvey

These poems detail necessary information so that hikers can heighten their experiences on the Greenstone Ridge Trail. The chapbook assumes that hikers will head northeast from Windigo and follow the Greenstone Ridge Trail to Rock Harbor.

The Voyageur II passenger ship provides boat service to Windigo on the southeast part of the archipelago. Starting in Windigo, the Trail Guide offers insights on all of Isle Royale's winsome attributes, including geologic features and plant and animal life, especially moose, wolves and birds. The Greenstone Ridge Trail passes near the highest point on the island, Mt. Desor, and offers great vistas of Siskiwit Lake and Bay to the south and of Canada to the north. Isle Royale has a rich and exuberant history, from Native Americans to miners, fishermen and vacationers.

After the long trek across the archipelago, many hikers take a day or two to explore the Scoville Point area near Rock Harbor. The Scoville Point area is also excellent for fishing, one of the best habitats in the Great Lakes, and the Guide ends with recommendations for fishing in that area.

The poet hopes this Trail Guide is helpful to you in your hike across the backbone of Isle Royale National Park.

Ticket for the Voyageur II

Twin engines wake and twitch
like thoroughbreds, the aluminum hull
bumished to mimic a lake trout.

Tribute to the old passenger ships,
the boat breathes into small harbors
and bays, even in Superior's fury.

Circling this archipelago's lava basalt
tilted sidelong into jaunty ridges
and stoic reefs, we thread the green water.

Today, on the resting lake,
loons venture far out, gulls relax.
And we cut the white caps
in this Ojibwa god's canoe
as building thunderheads parade
with us into the Earth's curve.

Recipe for all-natural, no-spray Northwoods insect repellent

Gather:

two garlic bulbs
your hands
5 asparagus spears
20 mint spears
1 lemongrass shoot
1 red onion
5 tablespoons of oil (e.g., olive, canola, vegetable)
plenty of water
your feet
a broken-in baseball cap

With your hands, peel both garlic bulbs. Set aside cloves. Next, cut stalk ends off asparagus and mint. Dice white part of lemongrass and onion. Heat the oil and add half of garlic cloves, onions, lemongrass and asparagus. Cook until tender, then add mint for two minutes. Serves 1 (Drink lots of water).

For desert, eat the rest of the garlic cloves. Drink lots of water (this helps with absorption).

Tips for a successful recipe:

Learn the female mosquito's caress like your lover's. They both want the same.

Occasionally swipe your arms with your hands. Don't slap, which pushes the mosquito* into your flesh, a death ecstasy. Leave their carcasses on your arms like a crime scene. Wear pants.

Walk fast. Mosquitoes can only fly at .74 miles per hour, and can only sustain that speed for four feet.

If the insects are thick, use the broken-in baseball cap to swat. **

*This recipe not guaranteed to work on black flies or deer ticks.

**If recipe fails, return to the poison spray.

Rest # 1

starting July trail,
Windigo—last flush toilet
and faucet water

Rest # 2

maple shade, granite
fills the heat-cracked basalt, I
wait for broad-winged hawks

Azimuth

The axis of this Island, with its own Magnetic North,
floats in Superior's compass.

The rose—sugar maple and spruce, greenstone and copper,
wolf and moose, basalt and cold water—
points to the eight directions we all make here. On a calm day,
the bezel-smooth Lake bares its fullest blues and greens
and reflects the sky's goodnight blushes. The furious days
end engulfed in a lake bottom black.

Those extremes, like in the compass rose,
we tread here, and reorient the azimuths to our souls.

Rest # 3

no others' stone, I
christen you. Next to the trail,
greenstone flow exposed

Twilight Shadows in the Wilderness

a water buffalo
three women
a one-antlered caribou
moose bulls with September antlers
an overturned Mackinaw fishing boat
walking lichens
an astronaut
my fate
a Snickers bar
two wolves slow dancing like teenagers
a delivery truck
pregnant moose cows
a flying alligator
milk cans
a shipwrecked schooner
stumps like six-foot toads
a charging moose cow
eagle-sized mosquitoes
copper boulders

Rest # 4

well-used stone, ringed in
powdered dirt. Superior
begins to enclose

Circadian Royale

Sleeping like a lazy moose in a heat wave,
I've needed two days to sync with this island's long light.
No other word but pleasant will do for this place.
Envy the hikers' guilty backcountry naps after lunch.

Here two weeks, nothing's crucial. The recent solstice
eases out before me, a mammal forgetful of first snow.
The wolves sleep in and nap. But what I haven't kicked
is my human need for light, staying up late.

Diurnal, I need to be up with birds before the sun,
and bedded down again by the time I'm waking now,
then venture out again at dusk after reading my book
and marking maps. I need to sleep when the sun
goes behind Greenstone Ridge and wake on its return.
I need to experience this place like winter's coming.

Rest # 5

in the tallest spruce
a cedar waxwing grooms, rests
before more berries

Rest # 6

midway from Hatchet
good stop on the uphill climb
cocooned in birch bole

Lightning over Superior

In the same pink flares of far-off lightning
in the Indiana flatlands, the charged storm
maunders south. The crackles finger above
the anvilheads, and when they strike water,
the fish, like peace marchers, float stunned,
or dart from the quick pulse. How the gulls
must gorge and float among buoyant carrion.

The nor'easter's waves crash, tall as ball hoops.
The cliff across the cove winks from lightning
behind me. Like those fish, what will kill me
is electricity—not rough waves filling a canoe
off Blake's Point or dry spruce crowns igniting
like candles above me—excited electrons
thrumming across my body into my body.

Rest # 7: Lunch break, Day 3

shading spruce, ridgetop
respite from cloudless azure
as I ration food

Cairns

Human's first sculpture and first road sign,
cairns mark no graves on Greenstone Ridge.
Bedrock balds, with clear views of Siskiwit
and Superior, marked by human moraine.

Add a rock, take one away on your return;
build human-shaped figures like Inuit on tundra.
Glaciers found their way home, and dirt
never stays long on these ridge-top balds.

Where the lichens edge no path, the cairns
straight-line our civilized need for the fastest path.
But first find sun, silence, clouds, or horizons
on these hot balds before you find the trail.

Rest # 8: Chickenbone Campsite # 1

Near water, I leave
you for a downed log in shade,
much cooler, hidden

Bull Moose with Herring Gull

Scanning Chickenbone Lake's opposite bank, a moose disappears
like a hippo to bite water plants at their base and chomp nutrients for winter.

Big enough to be a bull, but no antlers, no calf near in the water,
no start on a showpiece for September's rut from what I can magnify.

Further down the shore, a herring gull splash-lands and floats against the current,
no frenetic wing-flapping or squawking after fish guts or tourist trash: untroubled.

But I transfix on the chewing bull, put digital to binocs for close-ups,
a fresh coat over what hair he rubbed off to rid himself of winter's moose ticks.

The gull drifts in the current and rests on an island overflight, like Orion.
I ease toward McCargoe until the eyepiece blurs, then I hurry on halcyon.

While the moose kith plummets, this bull won't grace me again. But the gull might
meet him when ten thousand moose ticks end their breeding feast in mild springs.

Rest # 9: Above Angleworm

Trying to make time,
I still plod along at the
changing seasons' pace

Seven Cedar Waxwings in a Dead Popple

They flock to find more fruits, squat and fat
on their bare-branched roosts in an aspen crown.
A good painting: lost in the dead bark,
their gray rumps temper to pastel brown breasts
of some cumulus clouds' earthy undersides.

But now, gorged on stem-end serviceberries,
they perch for remaining pomes: nutty blueberries.
When those erupt, the waxwings
will loot them all, then settle in with life-mates
and crack after insects like horsewhips.

Rest # 10

too inviting, I
ease in hard contours
perfect for my height

Seeing My First Fir

The moose are crashing—
from moose ticks or heat,
from no firs, some other stress—
while the wolves
burgeon on their slowed prey.

*

After walking thirty miles,
I finally ID the flat needles,
no more squinting at spruce needles
until their squareness eye-crosses flat.
No, I wasn't mistaken all these miles.

Here, this spindly fir intertwines
with a spruce, camouflaged
like a mimic, weaved so tight
that the poor-sighted moose
can't even smell it.

*

The firs will rebound.
The wolves will crash.
The moose will rebound.
The firs will crash.
The wolves will rebound
The moose will crash again.

Rest # 11: Tree Cradle, Greenstone and Daisy Farm Trail Junction

rotting boles, snapped trunks
rounded into a cushioned
seat—a new trunk starts

Rest # 12: Short of Mt. Franklin

One last climb before
Greenstone Ridge descends to Lake
and Passage Island

Rest # 13: Mt. Franklin

a cargo ship aims
for the Sleeping Giants. Rock
Harbor: 5 miles

Wolf Scat with Berries

Easy moose waned in spring, fat beaver exiled
by the packs' growing talent

at perching by beaver dams and chutes until one forgets
to sniff the air beyond the water.

Wolves' nocturnes loll along manmade trails
until they slink after

a moose spoor and crave that flesh
glutting on water plants.

In hunger, wolves will swim if their genes
remember Lupa by the Tiber,

and those codes will cede their fear of humans,
of her twins Romulus and Remus,

who learned too many wolfpack ways.
In this slow, lean summer,

the wolves gorge on berries, plump or green,
dispersing seeds like songbirds.

Rest # 14: Last trail

Hike's first rain threatens,
I hurry past good sitting
stones to Rock Harbor

Concordat

After 48 miles, my feet hurt.
I don't smell as bad as I thought.
My heels burn.
My first taste of refrigeration in four days
is the god's nectar of Sunkist.
The second and third: beers,
which ease the walk to my cabin.
No shower to look forward to, the flat bed will do.
Tomorrow, I have nowhere to start for.
I promise to not wear boots.
I promise to sleep in.

Aurora

Just as we sit on the overlook bench, what I once thought
were the sun's reflections off the arctic ice cap
move in a thick white band, slow and elemental
like whalesong. Jnan's never seen the Northern Lights.
I saw them once before at a church retreat,
the red-as-Hell sky fulgent above a country road.

This perfect sinew bends taut against the horizon,
then dissipates. With cigars and whisky, we palaver
and wait. Then long rays streak us into silence.

Straight above, those beams orate when they collect
in a circlet of whitish points that arcs from the Milky Way
and crowns this archipelago. Good mushrooms or more booze
would only make us laugh like children in church
as the Aurora flows from the Milky's chalice.

Privileged by not having to wait until dawn
for the solar wind's romp in the magnetosphere,
we gape at the sun's other gift for our spinning Earth
until it darkens our souls' pigments, illumed.

* with a last line stolen from a poet-friend, Dakota Shultz

On Cliffcrest Dock near the Dassler Cabin

-In Memory of Joshua Vinzant, 1973-2007

Dock fishing never is this good. The cribbed dock
edges to a seventy-foot shelf where the cold current
swoons for Tobin's head or spurts straight out
past Government Island for St. Mary's River.
In this slow fishing year, the suggested Rapala J13s
find nothing. Only copper spoons are working
for Schiebe; best spoon at Rock Harbor Concessions
flashed chrome opposite Gay Pride colors and an eye.

What a fishing map you would draw of this dock, Josh—
structures, depth, current, where the fish are—
like the one of the Upper Cedar Lake Dam Spillway
you diagrammed during a grad class at Southern Illinois
the Tuesday after we hiked in there with a PBR twelver
and tried every lure between us along the silted berm,
heaved heavy spinners short of the eddy below the dam
while its slurps and gurgles chanted of big fish.

In that aerated vortex we knew the keepers thrived.
The logic of your map was a boat, which we didn't have.
When you borrowed Rodney's, your map was no good.
We see water and life differently when we stand above it.
When I went out with Schiebe, downrigging along
Government Island's reefs in the green water,
reeling lake trout from fifty or sixty feet down,
they vomited their last meal when they met air and sun.

Dock fishing never puts you within an easy cast
of a cold upwelling in Superior's best fishery.
Schiebe said the lake trout might be caught off here
real early or real late, and here I am real early
casting my rainbowed spoon into the current.
Letting it sink, patient like you, two lake trout
follow my reeling ten feet off the dock, like tame ducks.
Then they linger there until I cast right to these manna.

The spoon sinks, and the bigger one strikes it to the bottom.
Then Ellie, a life-leasee, comes out for her morning paddle,
and solves my problem of getting the net from the boat house
with a fish as long as my arm on the hook. He thrashes
in the shallows. I aim the net for the head, not tail—
mistakes since Superior's eighteen inches down. The line snaps.
He's gone. (I should have jumped in, clamped my hands
behind the gills, and heaved that fish to the dock.)

Josh, you're dying in Missouri while I cuss and throw the net
in a crescendo chorus that carries across the Harbor,
the same litany when I hear the voicemail with the news
the next day while driving back—these fish your last gift to me.
My 12-pound test drifts in the breeze. Ellie paddles away.
You would love this archipelago, this dock, this story.
The big trout trolls away into the depths where he'll rub rocks
until he spits that spoon and frees himself of man's earth.