

Hiking the Pukaskwa Trail

Towards the end of summer, September 16 to 23rd, my daughter Annette and I hiked the Pukaskwa Coastal Trail from North Swallow River to Hattie Cove. We both knew it would be challenging; Annette in her early 40s, me 70+ --- was I fit enough and up to the task? We were to find out!

Upon arrival at the park, there is a mandatory information session. One of the park's staff explains the various terrain on your route - boulder fields, rugged rocks and those worn smooth by the retreating icefields, river crossings, driftwood obstacles or cobble stones on beaches, swampy areas but also calm and serene backcountry trails.

And a warning: EVERYTHING can be slippery! Roots, rocks, logs at river crossings, etc (and I can attest to all of that!)

We chose to take the boat service to drop us off at North Swallow River beach, the first of several beautiful campsites. Once the boat had left we were on our own. We set up camp and that night had our first thunderstorm. So fortunate with September's warm temperatures as we hiked the next morning in a soft rain.

This being the end of the season we were completely alone on the trail and, another bonus: pesky bugs were basically non-existent.

Each day we would get up with first light, have breakfast, break camp and be on our way usually around 8:30. This allowed for arrival at the next campsite mid-afternoon and a chance to dry tent, boots and string a line to dry damp clothing

The water levels are high this year, be it Lake Superior or any of the tributaries - small creeks have become rivers. At the White Gravel River crossing the water was up to my hips! But then, finding water to refill your water bottles (always to be filtered or treated) is easy.

Campsites are generally beautiful, often next to sandy or rocky beaches, set up with a metal fire pit and grate, food locker and privy. Sites are clean, hikers are respectful of the "leave no trace" rule.

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As the day winds down one is treated to a spectacular sunset over Gitche Gumee.

The Backcountry Planning Guide available on the website contains lots of good detailed information and is invaluable in the planning. Also a trail map (waterproof!) published by Chrismar is very detailed, making it easy to follow the trail (although having a GPS along didn't hurt and gave that extra level of confidence!) which is well marked by cairns, sign posts where a trail veers off to a camp site or, strategically placed to mark where you leave the beach to go inland, following a path which often leads through swampy areas (forget trying to keep boots and socks dry!) where mosses seem like a green carpet of many shades.

In September the forest abounds with fungi and mushrooms of all kinds and colours. We saw evidence of bear and moose but encountered only squirrels, chipmunks, the odd grouse, rabbit, shore bird and, yes a snake.

Ilse Strieck







