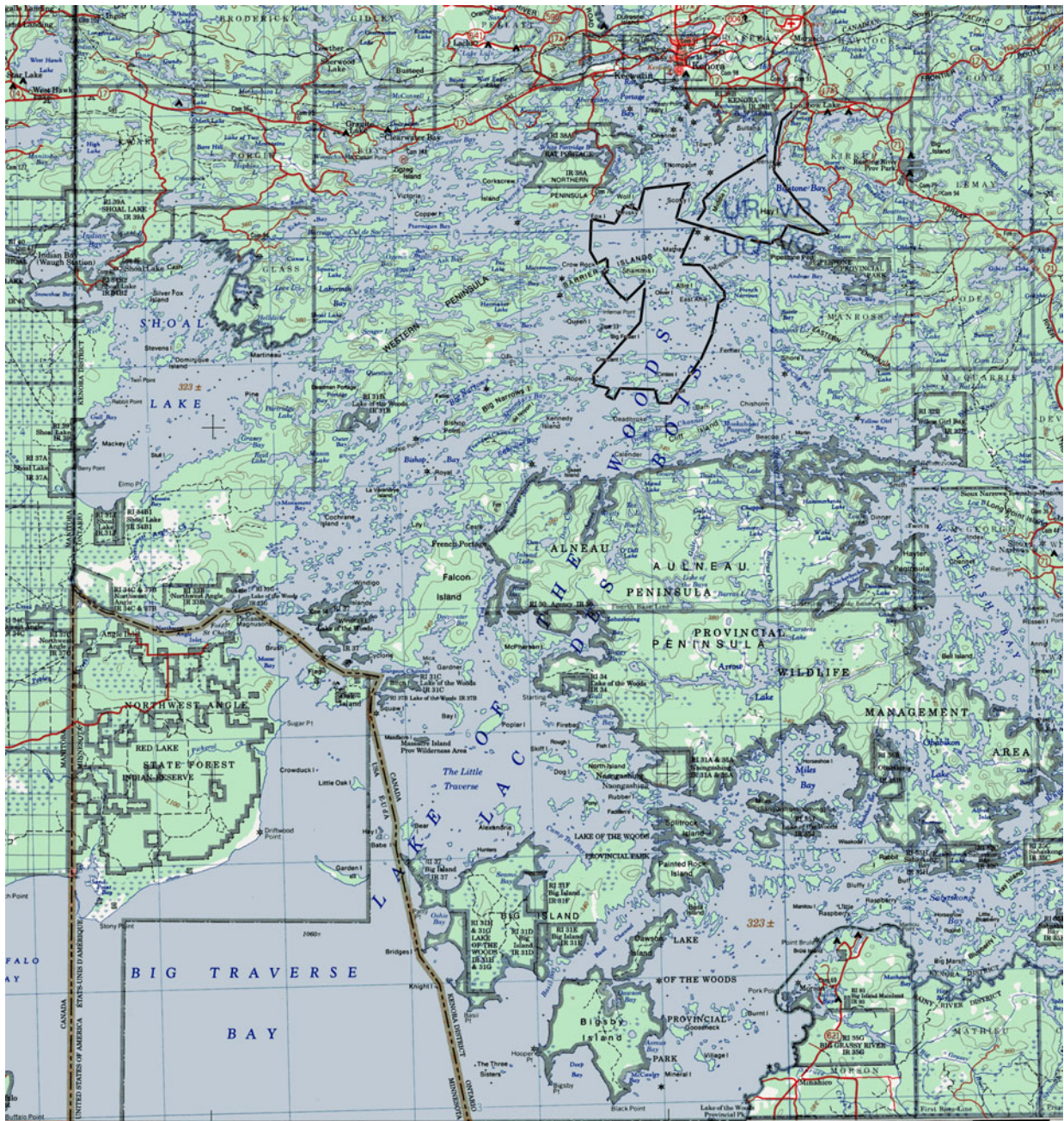
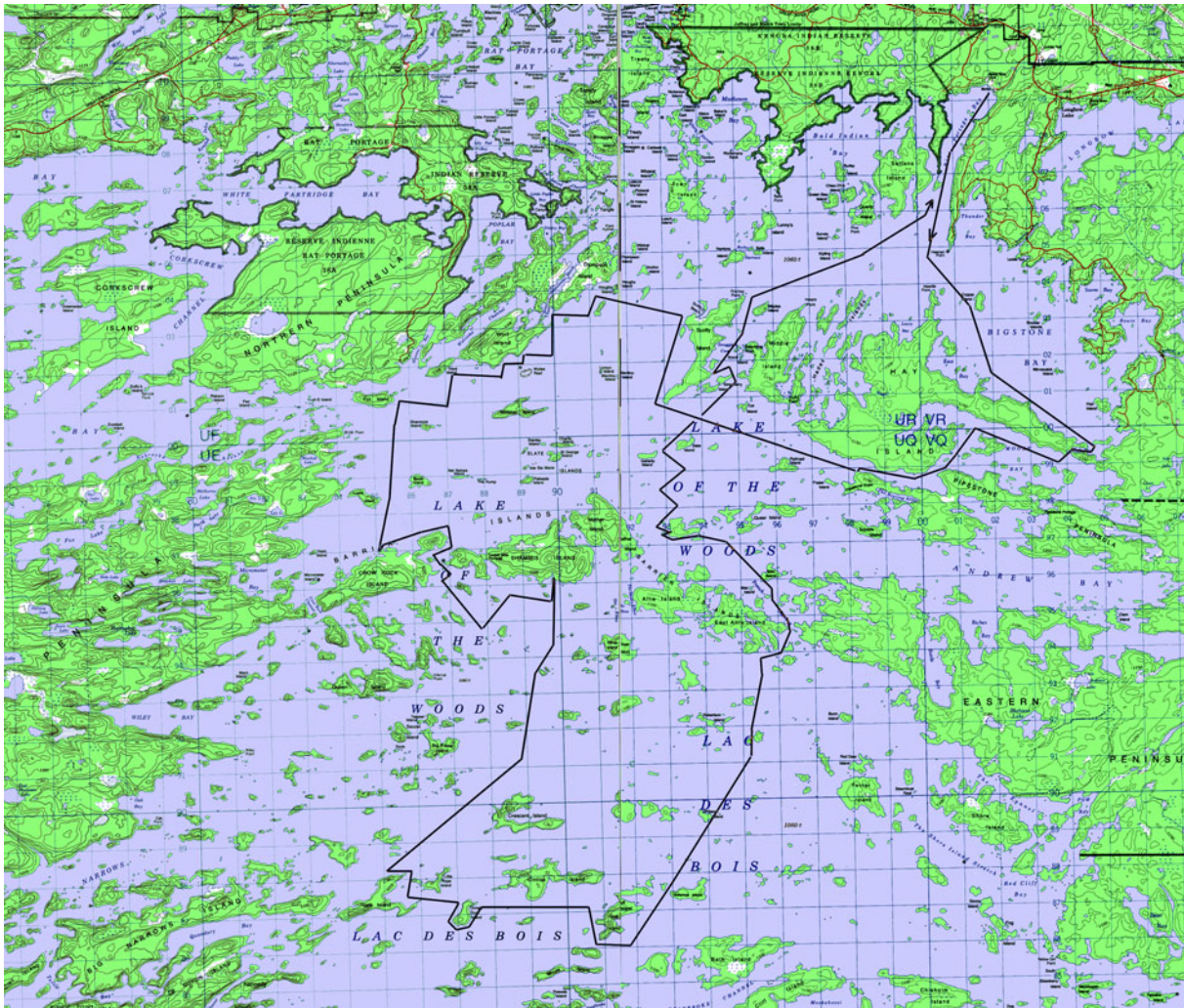


The quest for Donald Duck ... a Lake of the Woods Wayfarer Cruise

I came back from the Wayfarer Rally at Killbear on Georgian Bay with increased determination to do some more local cruising. The other Thunder Bay Wayfarer owner and my regular racing crew Andy Ivancic and I had previously talked about sailing the Rossport Islands area east of Thunder Bay but as he was already on holidays in Kenora at the in-laws cottage, heading west seemed the logical thing to do. Lake of the Woods it would be. The boat was still in travelling mode after the return from southern Ontario so a bit more bearing grease and a mere 5hrs later, W9657 was at waters edge in a marina in Pine Portage Bay on the north-east corner of Lake of the Woods.

The view of the lake from the highway through Kenora gives little impression of what lies beyond... Lake of the Woods is huge- about 60km by 105km in size, with 105,000 km of shoreline and a barely countable 14,542 islands. The northern portion is sculpted out of the volcanic and granitic rocks of the Canadian Shield and forms a maze of channels, rocky islands, peninsulas, and bays. The very different south borders on Minnesota and is shallow with sandy shores and extremely wide open. With a long history of aboriginal inhabitants, an early travel route west to the prairies, and turn of the century lumbering and gold mining the area also has an interesting past behind its recreational usage of today. No question the northern part appeared ideal for Wayfarer cruising and would provide multiple options for routes with the numerous islands and peninsulas helping to limit wave build-up, and offer lots of exploration potential.





It seemed to take forever to rig and launch the boat, then transfer and load camping gear while attempting to extract some local knowledge from the marina operator and address the questions and stories that seem to arise out of all who walked by and had once sailed a small boat. Eventually however we set off mid-afternoon from the marina under a predominately blue sky and into an ideal wind that required sitting but no hiking out. It did however require numerous tacks (some in due regard of the marked navigational channel) to exit the narrow Pine Portage Bay and gain the more open waters of Bigstone Bay.



The greatest joy on a warm, sunny day and sailing along a beautiful rocky shore covered with pines and birches was in fact the water temperature... none of that cool to cold Lake Superior waters we were used to, this was bathwater by comparison... 19deg C. And despite the popularity of some sections of Lake of the Woods for cottages there was almost nothing here... just a shoreline of numerous pines, very wilderness appearing and really great sailing.



We headed roughly southeast towards and along Hay Island, whose large size effectively blocked access to the portions of the lake south of it. A very narrow gap at the east end offered a passage through and despite very shifty winds we negotiated the route into an enclosed and island filled channel behind.

As it was getting on towards evening and the wind now much lighter, we clearly wouldn't make the only sand beach we knew about and started looking for another place to camp. This was where an aspect of Lake of the Woods presented itself... there is a lot of rocky shore, and not a seeming abundance of locations that provided both a flat area for the tent and a spot we could pull the boat out of the water. One very tiny island offered an in-a-pinch possibility but we decided to look further along the shoreline of the Pipestone Peninsula... and under a rapidly descending sun and dying wind were eventually disappointed to discover a number of cottages which further reduced our chances.



Fortunately at a point where the channel broadened and opened up a bit there was a smooth level rock outcrop and a narrow clearing, and no cottages except a couple well across the channel...so this was it. A couple of fenders under the keel and a pulley system tied to a small tree and the Wayfarer was pulled out of the water. We must have looked like a crash landing as someone did come over to see if we were okay... which was quite thoughtful although we had some initial concern that they were coming to turf us off. The site wasn't as ideal as seemed from the water as the best flat spot for the tent was within a foot of the lake, but figuring there wouldn't be much to worry about from the weather we set up there. And of course as with every late arrival, dinner was pretty much cooked and eaten in the dark.



The next day was cloudy and a fairly stiff wind from the southwest. We figured we should check out our previously intended camping beach on Scotty Island with the thought of using it as our final camping spot and ensure we were reasonably close to the marina should the last day have little wind. It was great sailing along a close reach... a few times the boat picked up and planed briefly and in the frequent spray we again were appreciative of the warm water.



As we proceeded into the more open lake the wind had built a fairly decent wave set which gave the occasional push to the boat after we turned north and downwind along Scotty Island. A quick check of the beach and we turned back upwind and headed west towards a distant island group hoping to get a bit more protection from the waves and work our way south along the islands. The sail across made it apparent that the wind was building and reefing the main a good idea. We tucked into a gap between Thompson and Wolf islands and some relative shelter where we could more easily reef. The few cottages here made one very envious.

We decided to continue heading southwest towards an east-west line of islands named the Barrier Islands figuring they would block the worst of any swell as befitted their name and still have steady winds and good sailing conditions if we kept some distance offshore. Precise navigation was a challenge particularly with strong wind and wave requiring some concentration, and eventually all the islands and channels began to look the same. Although we had a GPS which certainly was a help at times, the goal was not to have to rely on it. After a fair bit of questioning and upwind work we reached Fox Island and made our final tack south towards the Barrier Islands. As we crossed the large bay that opened up on our right, the building wind had a vastly increased run and the gusts were starting to get a little concerning ... even with warm water we had no interest in dumping a loaded boat and at times it was getting harder to hold it down even with the main significantly eased.



It was time for shortening sail but the boat wasn't conveniently set up to put in a second reef without undoing the first and that wasn't happening while on the water. We started scanning the far shore for somewhere to land but there wasn't anywhere obvious, just a lot of rock and trees. As we got closer it was apparent there was a cottage or two on a point of Crow Rock Island and although reticent to have to use anyone's property it was time to get some sail off regardless. I picked the dock having the most rubber tires as fenders and headed for it. We actually did a fairly controlled approach and landing on the dock which was just as well as the owners had apparently been watching the whole thing as we battled our way across the bay. Such 'distressed mariner' landings had happened a number of times in the years they had owned the property. Lake of the Woods was nothing to take for granted.

We sure didn't want to bother them but they seemed quite happy to take a break from brush clearing and eventually talked us into a cup of tea. This proved a rather fortuitous landing as they helpfully told us the location of some additional beaches tucked into bays and behind islands. We had discovered they can't be easily spotted from the water and some knowledge of what's out there is certainly safer and invaluable when evaluating whether it is better or feasible to carry on for a bit or make do where one is. We left feeling much more comfortable, in clearing skies, and with the second reef now well in place.

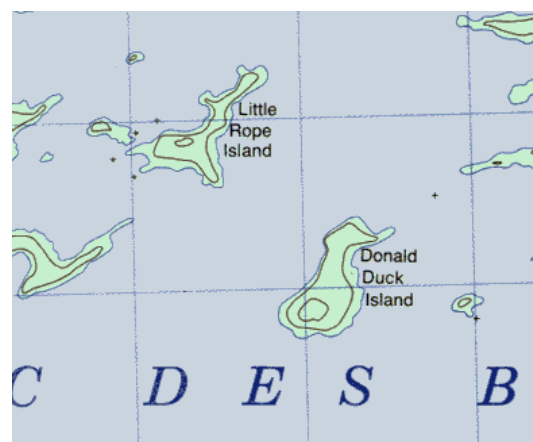


I think it was at this point that the cruise also actually gained its purpose. When looking at the maps we noticed a curiously shaped and named island off to the south. It was small but unmistakably shaped like a duck and the name appealed to us both. Going around Donald Duck Island became the quest of the expedition.

With two reefs and now downwind, the sail along Crow Rock Island was benign in comparison, however there wasn't much relaxation in the very shifty winds as we worked through the passage between it and the adjacent Shammis Island. And then it was upwind again, very glad of the double reef in the waves and strong wind. Amongst what we could see of the many islands there wasn't much apparent from a camping perspective and as it was getting into late afternoon and the wind still quite strong we decided to turn back towards Shammis and the beach we'd been told was there. We gybed back and forth on a number of very fast broad reaches to approach the island, often surfing on the waves.

When we found the beach, it appeared we would have company as there were a couple of powerboats and someone already camping on it but our options were few and we were claiming part of it for a Wayfarer. It was a downwind landing...and despite the beach itself being somewhat sheltered we were moving fast. I spun the boat upwind just off the shore and as we bailed out either side to hold it we might even have looked like we knew what we were doing. A short bit later the sails were down and boat pulled up the beach. As

we introduced ourselves to our beach companions they told us they were leaving shortly and just waiting for the waves to decrease a bit towards evening. We were going to have the place to ourselves after all.





This was a well used site but the power boaters had left us their fire so we spent a bit of time cleaning up some of the beach debris. A short walk up an adjacent rock outcrop gave a higher perspective and view over the lake and scattered small islands.



The whitecaps still visible beyond the far islands made this beach seem a fine choice and it certainly was a nice spot, although when camping on sand it seems to get everywhere and into everything. A swim and eventually dinner followed (the rear hatch of a Wayfarer makes a fine table), and a splash of rum into some apple cider seemed a suitable recognition of naval tradition.



The next morning produced a gentle northerly wind under a broken but mostly cloudy sky. After packing up we headed south into this island strewn but more open section of Lake of the Woods. On our way we checked out the camping potential on a couple of the islands we had examined through binoculars from the beach. Particularly intriguing was the island that improbably looked like it had a white curving road on it and turned out to be a long strip of rock cleared when trees blew over and the roots pulled off soil and ground cover.



It was mostly downwind and we sailed with poled out jib. Off in the distance we could see a considerable number of keel boats and figured this was the LOWISA fleet (LofW International Sailing Association) which was having their own cruise of Lake of the Woods over this long August weekend.



Particularly plaguing us in the light air was an infestation of the boat by numerous ankle-biting flies. Too fast for the hand, we eventually found success and revenge with a small towel and were soon providing the fish a number of snacks. We headed towards the gap between Little Rope and Rope Islands, passing a couple of houseboats moored in that protected channel before exiting and gaining sight of the entire purpose of the cruise... Donald Duck Island. In truth it didn't look much different than the rest of the islands, rocky, pine studded, but it had that unique name and we sailed closely around it.



Given the light winds we considered this should be our furthest south and having now reached our goal started on our return. After sailing beneath Cintis Island and then out to Gull we noticed a few of the keel boats passing beyond a gap in the islands and diverted on an interception course. They must have been the last few boats of the fleet because we never even came close but the passage through the south of Gull Island gave us an encounter with a number of American White Pelicans. These ungainly looking birds have a large yellow beak, black tips on white wings spanning almost 9 feet, and are incredible to watch in flight as they swoop down low over the water (often in line-astern formation) and use the speed gained and ground effect to glide for a very considerable distance just a few feet off the surface. This was a real treat.



The wind was getting lighter by the hour and by the time we were off Whiteout Island we were pretty much becalmed. Opportunity for a swim and a few pictures of the boat on the water which otherwise are difficult to obtain on a one boat cruise.



Very patchy winds and a bit of paddling slowly moved us north... pelicans again providing some company and interest.



A few very nice island cottages were passed and we slowly worked our way towards French Narrows under a now gloomy sky. As we reached the narrows it started to drizzle slightly and we sailed with a poled out jib downwind on a gentle breeze through the marked channel.



The drizzle stopped shortly after and soon this passage brought us back to the north side of the Barrier Islands. With improving wind strength we started looking for a place to camp as it was now getting late in the day.



It was a long way to that beach we had previously scouted out on Scotty Island so it was an easy decision when rounding an unnamed but pipe shaped island and spotting a small pebble beach on its western end. The beach was fairly narrow but it was workable and camp it would be.



It appeared occupied by a fierce looking blue coloured inhabitant and we thus named it Transformer Island. Andy provided a flame tribute to the occasion while lighting the stove and rum was of course eventually involved in the evening ceremony.



The following morning was again mostly cloud covered and the wind seemed to strengthen a short time after we left the beach until we were hiking quite often even with our initial reef which we had actually debated putting in. Unfortunately hard upwind hiking didn't add to ease of navigation. The shore ahead looked pretty featureless in the very flat light, it was hard to know where we were exactly, and we wanted to pick the proper channel through the islands ahead of us. Hades Channel didn't sound very good either by name or chart showing the numerous islands and shoals in it, and so we wanted the one further to the west. We sailed past a boat anchored for fishing and when we asked found it humorous they didn't seem to know their location either and had to check their chart plotter. This update confirmed we were on track to the channel we wanted. Whilst in the protected waters we decided a second reef was prudent and stopped on an abandoned looking and very rustic cottage dock to easily put it in. The clouds now had numerous and growing bits of blue behind them and it was a great day, alas however our last one on the lake.



As we exited the channel from between the islands we were again back on the wider waters of Bigstone Bay where we had started and could lay a close reach course directly for the distant end of Pine Portage Bay and the marina at its end.



It was great sailing across the bay under very dramatic looking sky and clouds. We were occasionally at hull speed and sometimes wished that second reef wasn't in but it allowed us to relax a bit more as we cruised past some islands with very nice cottages and then Sultana Island where one of the original gold mines was located. We shook out the reef just after the opening of Pine Portage Bay and again a number of long tacks were required to get up the bay before reaching the marina and the completion of our Lake of the Woods cruise.



So we had fantastic scenery and sailing, quite decent weather, a range of no wind to almost too much, very pleasant warm waters for sailing on, and good fun all around. Not to mention what might be the first recorded rounding of Donald Duck Island by a Wayfarer. Some additional knowledge of beach locations would provide more certainty in camping possibilities and route planning, but Lake of the Woods was a fantastic location for Wayfarer cruising and with all the islands and channels there are lots of options to adjust the trip to suit conditions. We saw only a fraction of it. Unfortunately I don't expect a Wayfarer cruise rally to be happening on it anytime soon but for any southern Ontario sailor that 23 hour drive across the province and the top of Superior is quite worthwhile in its own right.