

Photo Destination: Voyageurs National Park

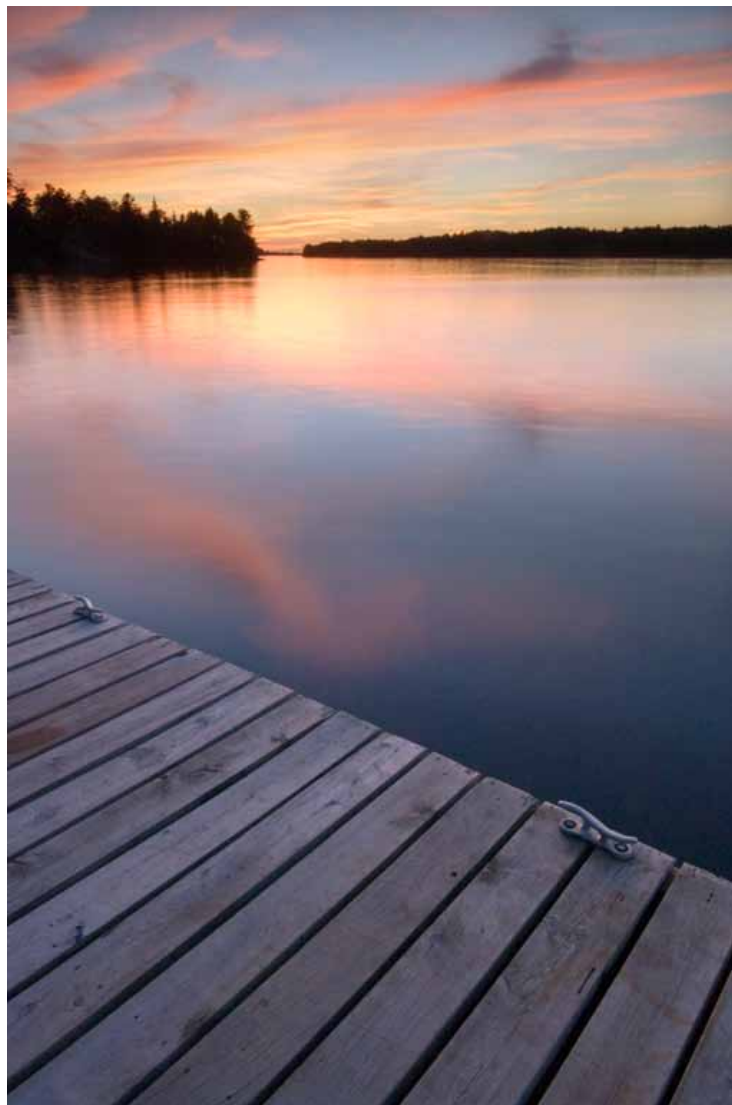
by Photographer Raymond Klass

Tucked away in the northern woods of Minnesota, Voyageurs National Park is one of the true gems of the National Park Service. A paddlers paradise, the best way to view the scenery and abundant wildlife is by canoe, kayak, or even houseboat.

A visit to this pristine wilderness should begin with the short drive to any of three visitor centers, though you can't really appreciate the park until you begin to travel on the crystal clear lakes. The park offers a scenic boat ride, which can be a great introduction to the area, but as far as photographic opportunities go, you can't beat having your own boat, canoe, or kayak.

For a month and a half during the summer, I was awarded an artist-in-residence through the National Park Service to live at and interpret this amazing place. What makes Voyageurs truly unique is the lack of roads – in fact, the only roads are around the perimeter of the park, all of the inner destinations are reachable only by boat or float plane. On the surface, this might seem very limiting, but after a while, I realized that this lack of roads has made the park what it is today. Due to the lack of development, the wildlife and pristine nature of the habitat has been preserved better than most of our national parks. There are great opportunities for solitude and contemplation, as it's not difficult to find a quiet spot even on the busiest summer day.

Formed by glacial movements millions of years ago, the park contains some of the oldest exposed rock in the world. These very glaciers carved out the 4 big lakes that comprise the majority of the park. The Kabetogama peninsula divides Voyageurs roughly in half, and creates hundreds of unique



coves for great wildlife photography, exploration, and solitude.

If you're looking to photograph the animals – and they have a lot of it, from eagles to loons and moose, you'll want to try paddling the small coves in a canoe or kayak. Alternatively, if you're not inclined to paddle yourself, an electric motor is a good



alternative. Both of these methods will allow you to travel quietly on the water – so as not to disturb your subject. I found the best time for wildlife is the early morning, when the water tends to be calmer. With a small craft, you can fit into the back coves along the Kabetogama peninsula, away from motor boat traffic. This will give you the best chance of taking the illusive loon or eagle shot.

Make sure to keep a comfortable distance from wildlife – as this is their home too. By recognizing the signs of their discomfort, and being prepared with a long lens, you can get some incredible shots of wildlife rarely seen elsewhere in the continental states. I would recommend at least a 300mm lens, though ideally a 500mm lens would probably work best.

If you're a landscape photographer, the shorelines







of the small islands and rugged coast have great potential. The trick is to be there at the right time to get the shot. When I was living there, one of the biggest tricks I used was to camp at one of the well-maintained backcountry sites throughout the park. This way, when I woke up for sunrise, I was already at the right spot. There are literally hundreds of spots within the park, some are reserved for houseboats, while others are for tents.

A houseboat can be a great experience if you're looking to camp, but still keep some of the comforts of home. Houseboats have full kitchens, toilets, and often come with a small motor-boat that you can use to explore nearby islands when your houseboat is tied to a camping spot. I spent a week on a houseboat before my artist-in-residence, and it was one of the most unique and fun vacations I've taken in years.

July and August are the busiest times of the year there, though because of the raw expanse of the park there aren't the types of crowds one might associate with Yellowstone or Yosemite. If you choose to go later in September – and this is a great time to visit, just be sure to pack some warm clothes, as overnight temperature can dip below freezing.

Voyageurs National Park is one of the true gems of North America, and it is the very lack of attention this park has received that makes it one of the parks at the top of my list to visit. Whether you're paddling your own canoe, taking a houseboat, or just sitting on the shoreline, a Northern Minnesota experience is something you'll surely not forget.

