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September 2024 Community Check-In

[Voyageurs National Park \(https://www.nps.gov/voya/\)](https://www.nps.gov/voya/)



The Community Check-In is a monthly newsletter designed to update the public on the latest news, projects, and events happening in and around Voyageurs National Park.

From the Desk of the Superintendent

As we look back at September, the leaves at Voyageurs National Park are already brandishing their autumn colors and signaling the turn of the season. Across the park, staff see to the regular rituals of changing operations – winding down from a busy summer season and preparing for the reality of winter.

Many of our team members – from the volunteers, maintenance staff, interpretive rangers, field fellows, resource technicians, to our tour boat captains – have completed their summer assignments and left for the year. While the weather still allows, buoys

and watercraft are being pulled from the lakes and put away into storage. The Kettle Falls hotel, fuel dock, boat portage, and more, are done for the season. The start of the school year is well past us at this point, and at Rainy Lake Visitor Center, hundreds of students were able to come out on field trips to enjoy outdoor recreational activities and learn about the park's natural resources. The Kabetogama Lake and Ash River visitor centers are quiet now and closed until 2025.

If you're wanting to find out more about the work that's been done and projects accomplished this past summer or even further back, you can find past issues of our Community Check-in Newsletters on our management page: [State of the Park \(https://www.nps.gov/voya/learn/management/stateofthepark.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/voya/learn/management/stateofthepark.htm).

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,

are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -

over and over announcing your place

in the family of things.

- Mary Oliver

Team Member Spotlight: Connor Cieminski

Connor Cieminski was a Field Fellow with the Voyageurs Conservancy this past summer. He worked with our Natural Resource division to examine the park's aquatic ecosystems. More information about Field Fellows and the variety of projects they undertake can be found in the Conservancy section of this newsletter.

What did you do before you came to Voyageurs?

I graduated from the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, MN) this spring, with a Bachelor of Science in Biology and minors in Environmental Science and Chemistry. I participated in several research projects during my time at St. Thomas, including one analyzing the potential for dietary competition between muskellunge (muskie) and walleye. This project - completed in collaboration with the Minnesota DNR as part of my capstone Aquatic Biology course - was inspired by recent controversy around stocking muskies in Minnesota lakes that depend on the walleye fishing industry, as many people in these communities have raised concerns that muskies will harm walleye populations by eating, and/or competing for prey with, walleye. I also completed an independent research project that involved using lake modeling software to predict how road salt could affect Minnesota lakes, including their mixing patterns, water quality, and the aquatic ecosystems within them. Last summer in 2023, I worked, but in a much different role. I spent most days decontaminating boats crossing the portage at Kettle Falls, to prevent the spread of zebra mussels from Rainy Lake to Namakan Lake and beyond. I also had the opportunity to help the Aquatic Ecology team once per week, which introduced me to many of the projects I worked on fulltime this summer.

Tell us about the type of work you do at the park.

I worked on the Aquatic Ecology team, which is responsible for conducting research on the park's waterbodies and the organisms within them. In addition to our routine projects like water quality monitoring, zooplankton sampling, and zebra mussel detection, the major new project for this year was a comprehensive fish survey of the Voyageurs' 26 interior lakes. Such a survey has not been conducted since the 1980s, as routine DNR surveys typically only study larger, "game" fish. As such, we completed these surveys - in 13 of the 26 interior lakes, so far - to better understand how the overall fish communities in these lakes have changed over time, as well as how to best manage and protect these communities in the future. We used several methods to capture fish for these surveys, including collecting them in various nets and temporarily stunning them using what is known as a backpack electrofisher.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

In my free time, I love to do anything outdoors. I love to fish, swim, hike, camp, explore, and just enjoy nature, making Voyageurs the perfect place to work and live. I am a pretty lousy walleye fisherman, though, which has made the fishing tough this summer. Like many Minnesotans, I grew up playing hockey, so I enjoy watching it and still playing on outdoor rinks and frozen ponds in the winter.



Connor Cieminski
NPS Photo

What is your favorite fact or part about Voyageurs National Park?

My favorite (fish) fact about Voyageurs National Park is that it contains its own unique strain of muskie. Shoepack-strain muskies —native only to Shoepack and Little Shoepack lakes on the Kabetogama Peninsula—are smaller and slower-growing than other strains, but their small size makes them much more abundant in these lakes. Voyageurs National Park therefore gives anglers the unique opportunity to catch several "fish of 10,000 casts," all in a special, wild setting.

Natural and Cultural Resources

At the Voyageurs Conservancy's annual board retreat this month, board members were given a special behind the scenes look at some pieces in the park's museum collection including logging stamp hammers from the early 1900s, a birch bark canoe replica, and Harry Oveson's fishing boat. Catherine Crawford, the museum collections manager, even gave them a peek inside the oldest book in the collection. Published in 1744 in London, an *Account of the Countries Adjoining Hudson's Bay* in the North-west Part of America was written by Arthur Dobbs. Dobbs was a British colonial officer who later became governor of North Carolina in 1754. The book is a famous attack on the trading monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company and the writing of it was inspired by Dobb's frustration with the English failure to find the north-west passage.



Catherine Crawford, Museum Collections Manager, gives the Voyageurs Conservancy Board a look inside the oldest book in the Museum's collection.

NPS Photo

various methods tried, what has worked and what hasn't, and how the project has improved the wetlands for the regrowth of native species, such as the culturally and environmentally significant plant: manomin (wild rice). Attendees included various park staff, rice harvesters, researchers from universities and the MN DNR, a Treaty 3 staff member, and political activists. Everyone had a shared interest in the restoration work being undertaken by Voyageurs National Park and were able to have discussions on the noted decline of wild rice growth and challenges to its re-establishment. The group spent the afternoon on the lake touring project sites around Black Bay to view the past year's contractor removal results on cattail mats and see the impact on future rice habitat. Previous successful restoration sites were visited by Reuter Creek. This boat tour allowed for an overview of the various restoration techniques, their successes, and limitations, as well as the impact the park neighbors have had by their private cattail redistribution projects.

Cultural resource staff also completed their annual checklist to confirm that the park museum is meeting all NPS standards for collections. These standards relate to such aspects as museum planning, storage systems, environmental controls, security, and fire suppression. An intern from the regional office visited in September and inspected all the locations where collections are held: the museum storage at headquarters, Rainy Lake Visitor Center, and even the Kettle Falls Hotel furnishings to set a new baseline for standards for the park's museum collections.

Even earlier on in the summer, the regional museum program director and regional curator were in the park with contractors to develop an updated Museum Collection Emergency Operations Plan and Climate Change Vulnerability Assessment. This plan will layout the preparations and procedures needed to protect the collection in case of emergencies – covering everything from a burst water pipe and power outages to flooding, fire, and many other catastrophic events.

On September 4th, Voyageurs National Park Wetland Restoration Project gave a presentation and hosted members from U.S. Tribal Bands and Canadian First Nations. The presentation covered the removal of invasive cattails, the



Students learning about the park's natural resources.

NPS Photo

Interpretation, Education, and Outreach Events

The park's two tour boats, *The Voyageur* and the *Ne-Zho-Dain*, have been pulled from the water for the season, but will return in the summer of 2025. This year the two boats hosted their highest number of passengers ever, at a record breaking 8,773. That's a 28% increase! The growth was thanks to the good weather and the hard work of the boat captains and rangers who added 20% more scheduled tours. When it comes to outdoor activities, the weather always decides whether an outing will be a success or... less of a success. Park visitors found this out on two of the September stargazing programs. Passengers on an early star cruise on Kabetogama Lake were looking forward to seeing the partial eclipse of the moon. Instead, the moon was fully eclipsed by cloud cover. The tour guide, Ranger Linda, spoke about the mechanics of lunar eclipses, the significance of the harvest moon, and towards the end of the evening boat ride, bright glimpses of the moon could be seen peeking through the clouds. The very next week, passengers were more fortunate and on the last star cruise from Ash River, passengers were treated to the dancing of Northern Lights.

Also, in September education specialists from the Voyageurs Conservancy and the park's education ranger, led programs for 434 local students! Schools in Koochiching and St. Louis Counties, including students from International Falls, Littlefork, and Big Falls, were immersed in the history, science, and unique landscape at the park. Groups of field trippers came out to Rainy Lake Visitor Center to learn about fishing and the park's natural resources. The "floating classroom" program gave fourth graders the chance to get out on the water to learn about eagles and other park wildlife.

Voyageurs Conservancy: Our Philanthropic Partner

The Conservancy's Field Fellow program offers professional development opportunities for students and recent graduates. In

turn, their work and projects provide valuable insight into the status of the region's ecosystems and support the park's conservation efforts. Some highlights from 2024 include:

Night Skies Observation: Kendra Kersting's visitor education programs taught beginner astronomy and fostered appreciation for the importance of protecting dark skies as both a cultural and natural resource.

Wolf Research Projects: Andria Barrett and Alex Gross' were out in the field researching wolf behavior. The data they gathered is part of an ongoing project that has garnered national attention and will inform both public policy and scientific research for years to come.

Wetland Habitat Restoration: Dawson Stone and Nissa Thomas's wildlife monitoring and work on wetland restoration helped ensure the health and sustainability of wetland ecosystems by tracking species populations and removing invasive species to support biodiversity.

Aquatic Ecology and Fisheries Study: Connor Cieminski and Whitney Gouin's research and surveys of the native fish populations focused on examining aquatic ecosystems, particularly invasive species management and fisheries conservation. With over 655 miles of shoreline and countless waterways, Voyageurs relies on vigilant management of its aquatic resources.

Park Accessibility and Maintenance: Conor Bolton's work and care for vital park infrastructure such as docks, campsites, trails, and historic structures ensured that our public lands are accessible and safe for visitor.

Visitor and Resource Protection

On September 12th there was an all-staff meeting as part of the NPS's service-wide safety standdown to prevent suicide. Local mental health advocate and educator Rachel Hasbargen-Glowack led discussions on how individuals can incorporate meaningful activities and periods of rest into their routines, and on the ways team members can check in with each other and get help if needed.

Law enforcement rangers have been staying in shape with their annual physical fitness tests and marksmanship qualifications. They also assisted Vermilion Community College with their firearms training. Around the park, one warning was given for improper food storage; this issue can have long term harmful effects on wildlife. Two boat accidents causing property damage were written up in rangers' reports.

Finally, the law enforcement rangers helped verify the park's International Dark Sky certification by taking a sky quality reading at Sand Point Lake. These measurements are performed four times a year at five different locations around the park. Law enforcement rangers, concessionaire staff at Kettle Falls, interpretive rangers, and Conservancy staff stationed across the 340 square miles of parkland work together to ensure the requirements are met for certification.

Maintenance and Facilities

On September 23rd, Beau Readman started in his new position as the Facility Management Software System (FMSS) Specialist. Before taking on this new role, Beau was the park's carpenter for historic architecture for over 19 years. As the FMSS Specialist,

Beau will be responsible for tracking and collecting data on park assets and their related projects. By using these reports, we can better manage facility operations and costs. We will also be able to assess conditions and needs for repairs. Some of the projects tracked by the FMSS include roadway repairs, trail maintenance, campground improvements, and wastewater and water line replacements.

Maintenance and facility leadership staff attended multiple meetings for initial, as well as ongoing project planning. This included the award of lumber contracts and the installation of new retail displays at Rainy Lake Visitor Center. At the Kabetogama Lake Visitor Center, contractors were invited out for a site visit to develop plans for new carpet installation. The bidding period for that has closed and the contract has been awarded. Another site visit was hosted for contractors to look at the job site in relation to the Kettle Falls powerline replacement. This major infrastructure project will replace the 11-miles and 29 junction boxes needed to provide electricity to the historic site, hotel, marina, and other vital services offered at Kettle Falls. The bidding for that project opened on Oct 4th.

Lastly, continuing to provide current, while also seeking more opportunities to add future employee housing is a priority for the park. In the last week of September, a team from both the region and Washington levels came to inspect the current condition of the housing units and assess the need for new ones. Voyageur's facility and leadership staff also presented to them on the current projects slated for the next few years.

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