



# Flying to and Touring Apostle Islands National Lakeshore

by Matthew McDaniel

*The author's daughter and guide exit one of the many sea caves popular for kayaking to (and through) with professional guides. This area is on the northwest shore of the Bayfield Peninsula and is referred to as the "mainland sea caves" versus the caves on the edges of the Apostle Islands themselves. A truly spectacular Lake Superior experience on a calm day.*

**E**VEN ON A WARM AND CALM day, the power and danger of Lake Superior is palpable. The largest freshwater lake on earth, its enormity can be appreciated from nearly any perspective. Whether flying above it, strolling along a sandy beach, perched high on a shoreline cliff, or crossing it in a large ship or ferry boat, it is hard to think of it as just a lake. To the natural senses,

everything about this seemingly endless body of water tells you it's a sea or an ocean. No perspective I've had of Lake Superior has been more daunting than that from within a kayak, bobbing across its surface, completely engulfed in its massiveness. Such was the case as I paddled along with my wife, two kids and two guides, far from shore, in search of the famous Lake Superior sea caves.

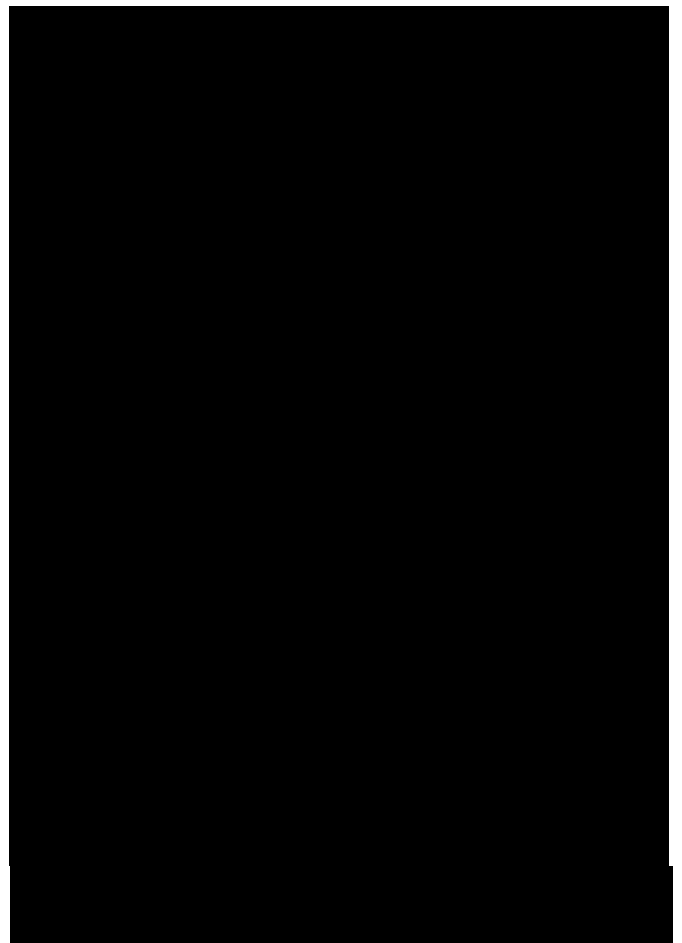
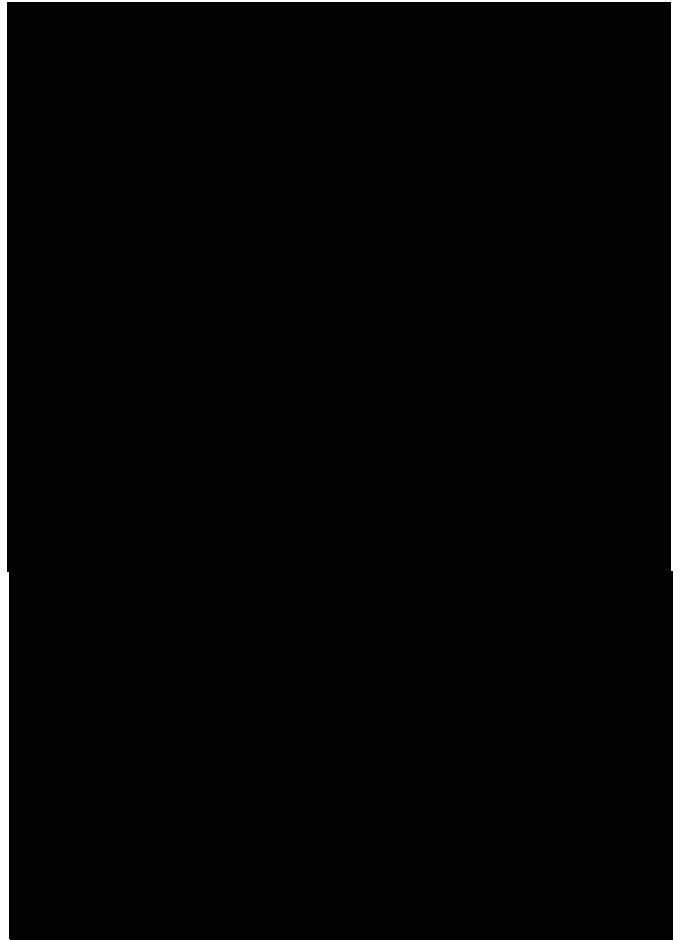
## The Great Sea

The native people of the upper Great Lakes region had an appropriately descriptive name for Lake Superior. They called her "Gitchigami," which loosely translates to "The Great Sea" or "Huge Water." Lake Superior covers approximately 31,700 square miles, making it the largest lake by area. Even if taking depth into account and, thus, measuring



by water volume rather than surface area, Lake Superior would still be the third-largest lake on earth (containing 29,000 cubic miles of water). That's enough to cover, at one-foot deep, the entire landmass of both North and South America.

Countless islands, peninsulas and rocky outcroppings decorate her shoreline. None are boring or without fascinating history, but it is the areas that have been deemed worthy of governmental protections within the National Park System (NPS) that draw the most visitors and offer the easiest access. One such area is known as the







*An evening view of Lake Superior from Bodin's Bayfield Resort. The author and family chose a small cabin at this quaint resort for lodging. Located about halfway between Ashland and Bayfield, Wisconsin, along Highway 13, its central location was perfect for touring Apostle Island National Lakeshore, several Wisconsin State Parks and Natural Areas, as well as the entire Bayfield Peninsula.*

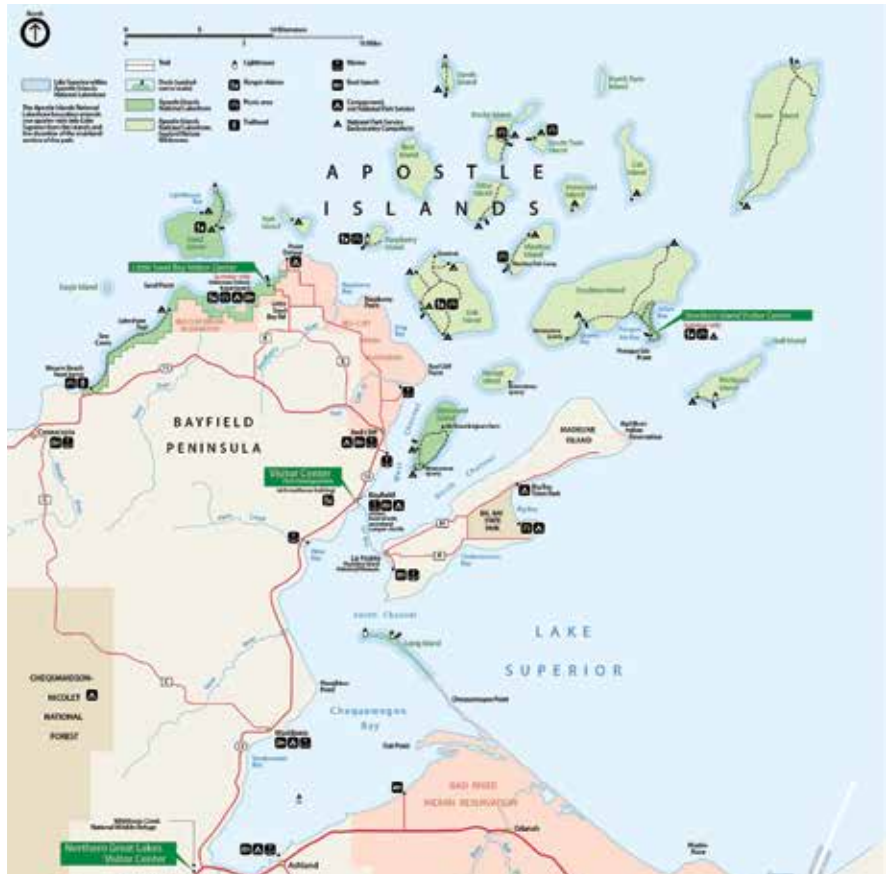
Apostle Islands National Lakeshore (AINL), located in northwestern Wisconsin, on the southwest shores of Lake Superior.

## Gateways to the Great Northwest

The grouping of the seven northwestern-most Wisconsin counties is referred to as that state's "Great Northwest" region. Here, several airports can act as gateways to the Apostle Islands. In fact, the western shores of Lake Superior, both in Wisconsin and Minnesota, have a nice variety of airports that can support all manner of general aviation (GA) operations. However, most lack one key ingredient to terrestrial tourism – rental cars. One exception is Duluth International (DLH), located at the extreme western tip of Lake Superior at the bottom of the "arrowhead" of Minnesota (the triangular northeastern tip of the state which separates Lake Superior's north shore from the Canadian border). Easily the busiest airport in the area, it also offers the greatest amenities for both flight crews and passengers. Monaco Air is a top-notch FBO with clean, efficient and modern facilities. Hangar space is available (important in the winter), as are ample parking aprons, pilot lounges and flight planning rooms. A variety of rental car companies offer their vehicles for pick-up at

either the FBO or the adjacent airline terminal. The airport itself is impressive. DLH is equipped to support Minnesota Air National Guard and Coast Guard units, regional airline operations and to act as an alternate for major airline operations into Minneapolis/St. Paul (MSP).

The airport's long runways are served by multiple approaches, from modern RNAV approaches with LPV minimums, to Category I and II ILS's, to old-school VOR approaches. Add to the typical number of corporate and charter operations, the flight test and training operations associated with Cirrus Aircraft's primary factory on the field and it can get busy at times. Even so, it's still laid back enough to merit only a standard control tower and Class D airspace with dedicated approach control and excellent radar services available. As a Cirrus pilot, DLH provides the peace of mind of having both the Factory Service Center and an additional Cirrus Service Center (Monaco Air) on the field. Beyond Duluth, the natural wonders of the area are all within reasonably short driving distances. Several routes could be chosen to reach the AINL area in northwestern Wisconsin, but the most common would be to simply take Highway 2 almost to Ashland, Wisconsin, then head north on State Road 13.



The Apostle Islands National Lakeshore boundary extends one-quarter mile into Lake Superior from the islands and the shoreline of the mainland section of the park. There are 22 islands in the archipelago, 21 of which are part of AINL.

There are notable alternatives to DLH. The first is Superior, Wisconsin, Richard I. Bong Airport (SUW); named for the Superior native who went on to become America's Ace of Aces, flying a P-38 Lightning fighter in World War II. SUW has standard services and RNAV (LP) approaches to each of the four runway ends, as well as rental cars through Enterprise. While this airport is adequate in every way, it's only a few miles closer to AINL than DLH is. Thus, the more realistic alternative to DLH is Ashland's JFK Memorial Airport (ASX), named for the 35th President of the United States, who visited the city twice.

ASX is a well maintained and full-service airport. Its main runway (02/20) is 5,197 feet x 100 feet and is equipped with a localizer approach into 02. Its second runway (13/31) is 3,498 feet

x 75 feet and is often the preferred runway when winter winds howl out of the northwest. All runways at ASX are equipped with RNAV (LPV) instrument approaches that can be flown to 250-300 feet AGL by properly equipped aircraft. The FBO is an inviting log cabin-style building, constructed of local red pine, symbolizing the logging heritage of the Chequamegon Bay area; the Lake Superior bay upon which the city is situated. Tie-downs are free for up to two weeks. While ASX is much closer to the Apostle Islands than DLH is, ground transportation is a challenge. While a courtesy car is available for short visits, a rental car would have to be reserved for longer sojourns into the AINL and the variety of Wisconsin state parks in the area.

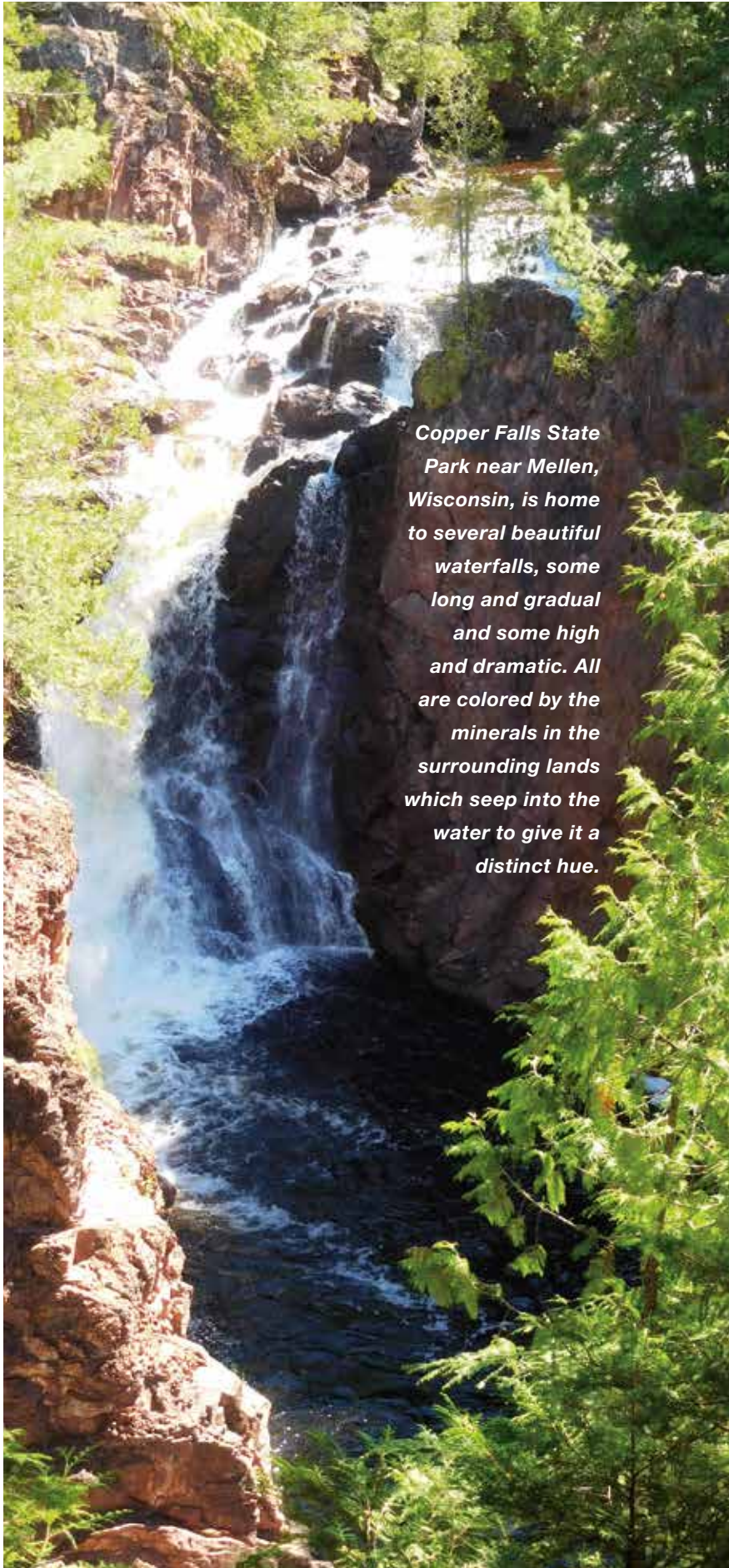
Finally, Madeline Island has its own little airport, known as Maj. Gilbert

Field (4R5). It consists of a 3,000 feet x 75 feet asphalt runway, but little else. Though small, this airport is perfect for a daytrip, as much of Madeline Island can be easily explored, on foot or bicycle, within a single day. Bikes, carts, and other forms of transportation can be rented in the adjacent town of La Pointe during the summer tourist season. For detailed information on Madeline Island tourism, visit [www.madelineisland.com](http://www.madelineisland.com).

## Messengers from the Deep

For multiple-day stays, lodging choices are plentiful and there are plenty that should meet your comfort level during these unprecedented times. From standard hotels and motels in the cities of Ashland, Washburn, or Bayfield, to all manner of resorts, lodges, cabins, Airbnbs and a wide variety of camping





*Copper Falls State Park near Mellen, Wisconsin, is home to several beautiful waterfalls, some long and gradual and some high and dramatic. All are colored by the minerals in the surrounding lands which seep into the water to give it a distinct hue.*

choices scattered across the entire Bayfield Peninsula. Or one could choose from a similar variety of options in or near La Pointe, Wisconsin on Madeline Island. In addition to Maj. Gilbert Field, Madeline is accessible by car/passenger ferry (departing Bayfield). In the coldest months of a typical winter, this ferry route is frozen solid, and an ice road is maintained along the same route for those brave enough to drive it.

Once in the area, it's the Apostle Islands and Lakeshores that call to be explored. The perfect starting point is at the Old Bayfield Courthouse. The stylish brownstone building houses the AINL Visitor Center. There are 22 islands in the archipelago, 21 of which are part of AINL. Only Madeline Island is not within AINL boundaries, though nearly a quarter of it is made up of the tranquil 2,500-acre Big Bay State Park. Most of the islands have campsites for those wishing to roam a desolate isle, followed by a night of near solitude. Sea kayaking is also a popular way for tourists to explore the closer-in islands, as rental equipment and guides are readily available from several launch locations.

Via kayak, one can paddle to an island, beach the craft, hike the trails on a given island, then move on to the next. But, the most popular way to experience the islands is through a variety of cruises offered by NPS authorized concessioner companies. Specific cruises cater to those wishing to explore the island's lighthouses (there are seven), to learn about shipwrecks and visit their locations, or to just meander between the islands while feasting on the scenery of their picturesque shorelines, sea caves, and jagged cliff faces. It's important to remember that these islands are not stagnated environments for casual sightseeing. They are vibrant with wildlife (water, land and air), and densely forested. Even the area's native black bears, who are excellent swimmers,



are routinely spotted. Nonetheless, the islands remain untamed, mostly uninhabited, and at times wholly inhospitable. Choosing the right time and weather to cruise upon Lake Superior and hike or camp on its islands should not be understated.

For those adventuresome enough to leave the peninsula and visit one of the islands, some highlights to consider are:

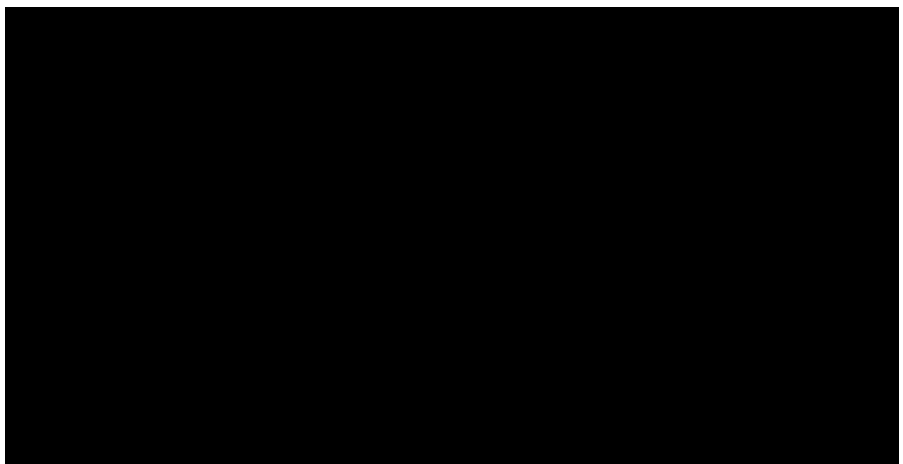
**Stockton Island:** Home of the only non-mainland AINL Visitor Center, a historic brownstone quarry and extensive hiking.

**Sand Island:** One of the most popular islands for kayak trips, it supports both a ranger station and a lighthouse.

**Oak and Basswood Islands:** Both fairly easily accessible from the peninsula, each with great hiking, overlooks, and bird watching.

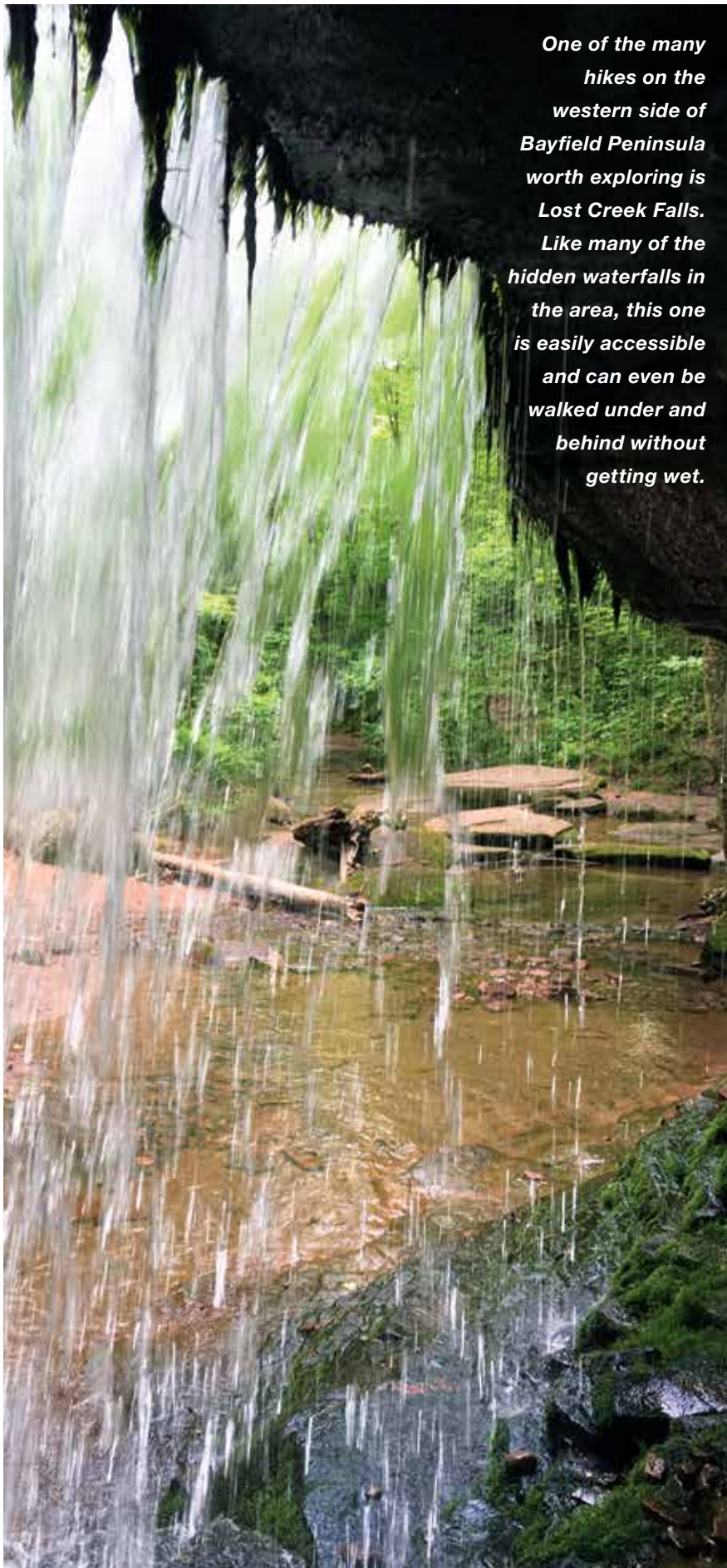


An adult Sandhill Crane forages in the marshland of Big Bay State Park on Madeline Island. Big Bay offers relaxing hiking, self-pay canoe and kayak rentals, and great wildlife spotting.



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*One of the many hikes on the western side of Bayfield Peninsula worth exploring is Lost Creek Falls. Like many of the hidden waterfalls in the area, this one is easily accessible and can even be walked under and behind without getting wet.*

**Raspberry Island:** While small, this island is popular for its lighthouse tour and its short south shore hike.

## **Stately Destinations**

Any extra time you might have in the area can be easily filled with short drives to many of the Wisconsin State Parks in the area. These parks can also be substitutes if the weather is unsuitable for being on Lake Superior. High winds or waves, for example, can make kayaking quite dangerous and turn island cruises into uncomfortable, sea sickness inducing rides. But hiking/biking on mainland trails or water activities on calmer inland lakes, rivers or streams are often remain suitable on such days. The same can be said for the vast numbers of trails crisscrossing the Bayfield Peninsula, almost all within 30 minutes or less from most of the popular AINL lodging options.

Some parks and trails to consider adding to your to-do list (or alternate to-do list) include:

**Any Bayfield County trails:** There are dozens to choose from, ranging from many short/easy hikes of two miles or less to several mid-length/moderate hikes of two to six miles, and even a few long trails of 30 miles or more. Specifics on each trail option can be found at [www.travelbayfieldcounty.com](http://www.travelbayfieldcounty.com).

**Copper Falls State Park:** Located immediately south of Ashland, off Highway 13 near Mellen, Wisconsin, this park is considered one of the most stunning in the state. Ancient lava flows carved deep gorges and helped created gorgeous waterfalls within the park. The area's abundant mineral deposits stain the rushing water's ever-changing shades of green, brown and copper.

**Amnicon Falls State Park:** While much smaller than Copper Falls, this park also contains a picturesque copper-hued

waterfall, as well as hiking along the Amnicon River. This park is a great choice for those driving from/to Duluth or Superior, as it is near Highway 2 – the route between Duluth and AINL.

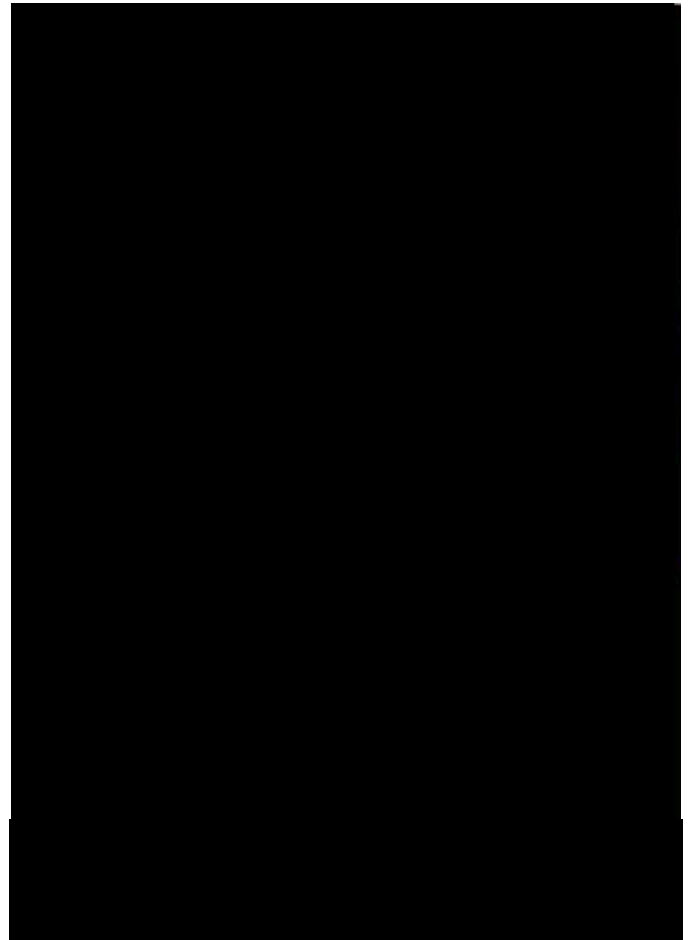
**Waterfalls of all size and shape** are abundant in the Great Northwest of Wisconsin. In the counties of Douglas, Bayfield, Ashland and Iron, over 20 named waterfalls exist. Many are 90-plus feet high with Big Manitou Falls in Douglas County being the highest at 165 feet. Yet, even some of the smaller (15-30 feet) falls are dramatic. Each is ever-changing, of course, and can be quite different to experience from one season to the next.

## Sandstone Cornucopia

As a National Lakeshore, there is more to the Apostle Islands than just the islands themselves. Also protected are 12 miles of mainland coastline along the northwest shore of the Bayfield Peninsula. Most of the islands and all of this mainland coast have magnificent sandstone cliffs. Much of this bedrock rises from Lake Superior into steep walls towering up to 50 feet above the waterline. The relentless wind, waves, snow and ice have carved an endless variation of beaches, stone arches and windows, sandstone sea stacks and sea caves. These are the sights AINL is most famous for and are not to be missed. In the summer, the most interactive way to experience the sea caves is via kayak. Several outfitters offer the appropriate equipment and guides. I recommend Lost Creek Adventures in Cornucopia, Wisconsin, at [www.lostcreekadventures.org](http://www.lostcreekadventures.org).

If your flight(s) to the area are outside the most popular summer tourist season, there are still options. Many summer hiking trails are popular winter snowshoeing and cross-country skiing trails. Snowmobiling is common on the peninsula, and well-groomed roads and trails exist in every direction. If you are lucky (and hearty) enough, every few years, the winter temperatures are so low they cause the sea caves to become ice caves. The sea mist freezes inside them to create a stunning world of crystalline formations and frozen rooms of wonder. In such years, the ice caves are accessible via hikes across the frozen shorelines with appropriately certified guides.

Located on the western shore of the Bayfield Peninsula, Cornucopia is a quaint little village where you can stop for a coffee and sandwich. It even has a little grass runway airport the locals refer to as “Corny International,” which hosts a great small aircraft fly-in every summer. It’s also near Meyers Point, which is both a popular kayak launching



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point and the trailhead for Lakeshore Trail, which meanders along the tops of the cliffs and sea caves. From there, with your guide, you can paddle out to the sea caves, many of which you can then maneuver your kayak into or completely through – the tighter the fit, the more memorable the passage. Longer voyages can include stops at tiny Eagle Island for unforgettable bird watching, or the larger Sand Island, where you can visit the Ranger Station and hike to the lighthouse. But it is the views from the water that truly stun the senses. The sea caves are both beautiful and haunting at once. The sea stacks and sandstone arches are grand in scale. Once in their midst, it is easy to become entranced by the views and forget you are but a floating speck upon the greatest of Great Lakes. ⊕

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*Matthew McDaniel is a Master & Gold Seal CFI, ATP, MEI, AGI, & IGI, and Platinum CSIP. In 30 years of flying, he has logged over 18,500 hours total, over 5,500 hours of instruction-given, and over 5,000 hours in all models of the Cirrus. As the owner of Progressive Aviation Services, LLC ([www.progaviation.com](http://www.progaviation.com)), he has specialized in Technically Advanced Aircraft and Glass Cockpit instruction since 2001. Currently, he is an Airbus A-320-Series Captain for an international airline, holds eight turbine aircraft type ratings, and has flown over 90 aircraft types. Matt is one of*

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