

AN ISLE ROYALE STORY

by Jack Oelfke

SOMETIMES, EVENTS HAPPEN THAT make us pause and lead us to a sense that, indeed, our professional efforts are all worthwhile. Amid the crush of paperwork, reports, fieldwork, and daily crises, episodes occur that help us realize the special nature of the areas in which we work. I have a brief story from the summer 1994 on Isle Royale that has provided a spark of wonder to keep me going. A series of events occurred that individually were significant to the park, but more importantly the setting in which they occurred led to one of those head-shaking, "ain't-that-amazing" feelings.

The first event began in early May when a small team of university and NPS personnel, livetrapping wolves on Isle Royale, accidentally discovered an active bald eagle nest. The nest was in an area of the park in which eagles had not nested for decades, and it was to become one of six active bald eagle nests for the summer. Including this discovery, the nests produced the most breeding pairs of eagles the park had seen in 30 years or more. Unfortunately, the new nest was located in a tall white pine just 40 yards off a popular hiking trail. The park quickly closed the trail, recognizing that the action would disrupt visitor use for most of the summer season. However, the closure was essential, and because of it, the adults successfully raised one eaglet, which later fledged. This was the first major public use closure ever enacted by the park to protect resources during the summer season, and it was a success. The public also supported the closure.

The next event began in late July, when a thunderstorm moved through the park and lightning ignited a small fire by striking a large white pine. Ninety-five percent of park lands lie in a prescribed natural fire zone, wherein a lightning-caused fire can be permitted to run its course within certain parameters. One part

of the process in approving a fire as a prescribed natural fire includes reviewing the national fire situation to ensure that adequate resources are available to assist on the fire, particularly if a later suppression effort should be required. The national fire situation late last July was extreme, and we were able to declare the fire as an active prescribed natural fire just one day before all new such fires were prohibited nationwide. Since adopting a new fire management plan in 1992, the park and its fire policy and response had never been tested by an active fire. With many key personnel away fighting fires in the West, remaining park staff scrambled to complete the myriad of administrative and technical tasks required to manage the prescribed fire. Rains doused the fire a few weeks later when it was less than 1 acre in size—a small fire by any standards—but the park had successfully dealt with its first active prescribed natural fire, under the new policy and with a bare-bones staff.

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place in late August, near the culmination of the field season for our rare plant inventory project. Dr. Emmet Judziewicz, under contract with Isle Royale, was spending the entire season completing an inventory of rare plant species along the sensitive rock shorelines and the few developed areas in the park. Emmet's enthusiasm and botanical interests led him to areas well beyond the requirements of his contract, and by late August he had discovered five small, discrete populations of *Disporum trachycarpum* in interior locations. This member of the lily family had never been located in the United States east of the western Dakotas and Nebraska, or south of the James Bay region of northern Ontario. This discovery highlights the unusual climate and remoteness of Isle Royale that permit many disjunct populations to survive.

So why tell this story, for surely other parks experience such events each year? The kicker is that each event—the new eagle nest, the lightning-caused fire, and the rare plant population discovery—occurred within 50 yards of each other! The young eaglet sitting on the nest on July 24 probably got the surprise of its life when lightning blasted a tree only 40 yards away and in the process toppled it and burned several other smaller trees nearby. The infrequent disturbance from occasional fire monitoring by NPS personnel was likely of minor concern to the eaglet compared to what it had witnessed. As for the actual management of the fire, we consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding endangered species protection, and I am sure we were the quietest bunch of fire personnel on-site ever to manage a fire. We appropriately dubbed the fire the Lucky Eagle fire.

As for the *Disporum* population, we were blissfully ignorant of its presence until after the fire was out and the eaglet had fledged. The possibility that the fire could have easily burned a new eagle nest, its occupant, and a rare handful of *Disporum* plants east of the Great Plains, all in a matter of a few minutes, probably would have grayed me overnight.

These events provided a clear reminder that no place, however nondescript, is unworthy of protection or careful review if human disturbance is planned. Until this summer, that little patch of ground was, to human eyes, truly just another spot along the trail, but it quickly became a powerful place of inspiration to all of us involved in the projects. ■

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