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Botanical Adventures on 41 Islands. Island No. 17. How I Nearly Burnt Down North Twin Island.

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I was the last person to spend a night on North Twin Island. Three nights, in fact, alone in the grandiosely named Stephan H. Congdon Research Laboratory (actually a rustic cabin built in the 1960s) on this isolated 175-acre island on the far northern fringe of the Apostle Islands archipelago, 12 miles from the Wisconsin mainland. And I nearly burnt the place down.

On 17 June 1991, my first morning on North Twin, I tried starting my white gas stove to cook breakfast, still kicking myself for believing NPS ranger Tom Doolittle’s advice not to bring any cooking utensils since according to him the cabin had “everything you need” (There wasn’t a pot or pan to be found and I wound up boiling water in the ice cube trays from the cabin’s defunct propane refrigerator).

Anyway, the stove did not start right away - I had not primed it enough - and I resorted to a time-saving trick that I had seen Smithsonian grass curator Paul Peterson do on many occasions while on a collecting trip to Ecuador the previous year – I poured fuel directly onto the hot stove.

The fumes provided a pathway for flames to shoot up from the stove to the “Mountain Safety Lab” fuel bottle. I immediately flung the now-flaming, nearly full fuel container away from me. It landed on the small “lawn” next to the Lab and proceeded to act like a miniature flame-thrower, laying on its side spewing a three foot jet of flame out of its top, setting patches of dried grasses and sphagnum moss on fire. Recovering my good sense and judgment, I rushed over and gave the thing a solid kick. It sailed another ten feet onto a new patch of lawn and “jetted” afresh, an arching spray of flaming gas setting a different section ablaze.

This all happened at 8:10 A.M. and I knew that at 8:15 sharp I would be called on by the National Park Service radio dispatcher in Bayfield to give the daily weather report that the Park Service wisely requires of its far-flung island rangers, volunteers, and gonzo botanists to make sure they haven’t cracked under the strain of island isolation... “Bayfield, this is 236, North Twin Island, winds are calm, waves are less than a foot, and I’ve set the island on fire”... Had I reported the fire, an armada of ships and probably planes and helicopters piloted by testosterone-primed rangers would have instantly been sent out to rescue me and save the island (the US government spends billions annually on “fire control”). Careers likely would have been made and broken, not the least of which would have been mine as a contract botanist. On the other hand, if I did not report the fire and failed to put it out, it could spread to the woods and lab and devastate a 300-year-old forest ecosystem.

I spent a frantic, heart-pounding five minutes running around and stomping on patches of flaming, smoldering lawn (luckily I had put on my hiking shoes before my

abortive attempt at breakfast, and there was a shovel by the lab door)... And North Twin Island and I escaped our fate that day...

Then I got down to business and spent the next three days combing and re-combing the island for plants. By far the most interesting part of North Twin was the eastern coast, with its wave-splashed sandstone ledges, crevices, and rock pools, offering grand vistas of Outer Island to the east.

Plains or rayless ragwort (*Senecio* or *Packera indecora*) was frequent in this habitat and just coming into golden flower – by far the largest Wisconsin population of this state-threatened northern species grows here. It does seem to be declining, with 874 plants in 1991 declining to 266 in 1996. Because of global warming, or merely natural fluctuations? We simply don't know.

As on many of the Apostles' rocky shores, odd plant stragglers show up, for instance a lone shrub of sweet gale (*Myrica gale*), sand cherry (*Prunus pumila*), a few clumps of swamp buttercup (*Ranunculus hispidus*), and a rock pool clump of a spikerush (*Eleocharis smallii*). The spikerushes, buttercups and sand cherries were gone when I re-visited the island five years later, but the sweet gale bush was still there and was joined by splash-pool-edge individuals of the tiny, fleshy ferns *Botrychium simplex* and *Ophioglossum pusillum* – species that I would not have missed in 1991. Spores must have blown in during the intervening years.

The interior of North Twin Island is a strange place. It is an open, old growth forest of yellow birch, white cedar, mountain-ash, and white pine with a very dense Canada yew (*Taxus canadensis*) understory up to 12 feet tall – traveling through it is very difficult. Canada yew is uncommon or rare on the Wisconsin mainland because it “deer candy”. Here, there are no deer to disturb it.

I found 124 species of vascular plants on North Twin. The island has one of the smallest floras in the Apostle Islands. Isolation, lack of disturbance-loving species, and the dominance of yew help to explain this poverty.

RETURN TO NORTH TWIN

I returned to North Twin Island on 11 July 2002 under bittersweet circumstances. It was nice to re-visit the Congdon cabin, which was in good shape, but the owner's life lease had expired and I knew that the structure would be demolished by the Park Service in just a few weeks. Ecologist Julie Van Stappen had the melancholy task of removing the cabin visitor logbook to the mainland for permanent archival. The log, a cheap spiral notebook placed in the cabin in the 1980's, had an average of 1-2 entries per year, mostly NPS rangers checking the structure for break-ins, but also my comments from 1991 noting the bright triangle formed by Venus, Jupiter, and Mars one evening long ago. I appropriated a book by humorist James Thurber that had entertained me on my visit. Oh well, the island will be “happier” as a complete wilderness anyway.

It was surprising to find 10 plants of northern green orchid (*Platanthera huronensis*) on the east side of the cabin – These plants were not there in 1991 or 1996

and must have invaded during the past six years! The adder's-tongue fern (*Ophioglossum pusillum*) colony in crevices at the north tip of the island was doing fine, a bit of a surprise to me since this is an ephemeral species that often lasts for only a few years at a given site. Two new shrubs, ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) and pear-leaved willow (*Salix pyrifolia*) appeared on the wave-splashed sandstone ledge of the east coast since 1996.

And what of rayless ragwort? It declined slightly from 1996, down to 249 plants of which 51 were in flower or bud. I hope to follow this population for decades yet to see if its decline continues.

Figure captions:

Fig. 1. Stephan H. Congdon Research Lab on North Twin Island, 1991.

Fig. 2. Tom Doolittle in dense stand of Canada yew (*Taxus canadensis*) on North Twin Island, 1 July 1990.

Fig. 3. Low shelving sandstone ledge along east coast of North Twin Island, 17 June 1991. A plant of plains ragwort (*Packera indecora*) is barely visible in a crevice in the center of the picture.