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FIRE ON ISLE ROYALE

*Excellent report, well
researched and written.*

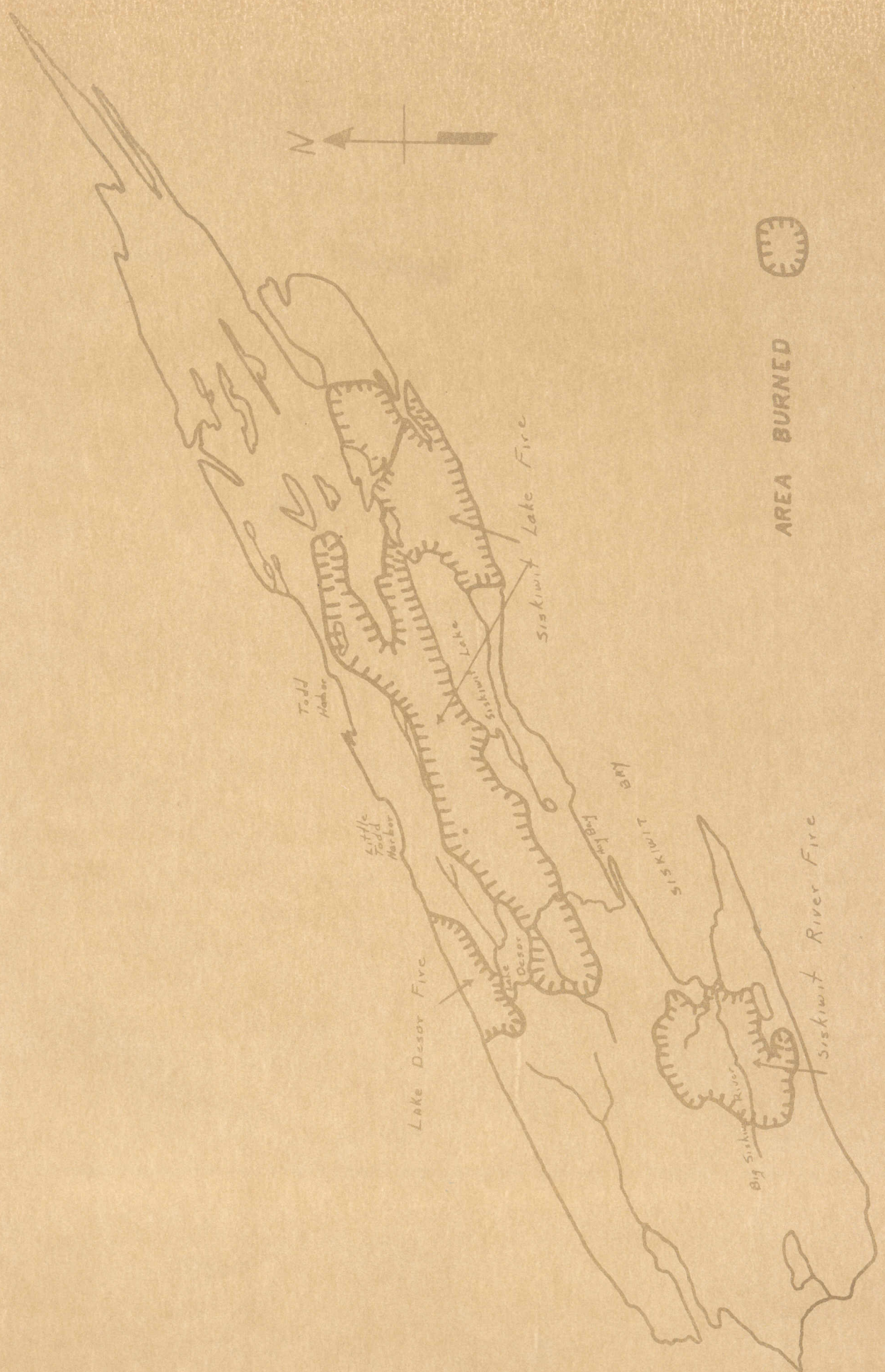
Report
to
Dr. Rakestraw
for
Forest History

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ISLE ROYALE



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FIRE ON ISLE ROYALE

In June, 1936 temperatures in the Lake Superior region were above normal and rainfall was far below normal. As June moved into July the temperature became even higher and the precipitation dwindled farther. All across Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan a drought was being felt and Isle Royale was no exception. On the Island the drought conditions were acting as a rough vacuum, pulling every possible ounce of moisture from the coniferous forest. The highly combustible slash left on the ground by a logging company was also being rid of its precious moisture leaving the area in a explosive fire situation.

Isle Royale is located in Lake Superior about 45 miles from Michigan. The major portion of the island was covered with forest. The low lands contained old-growth balsam-fir and white spruce. The ridges and higher ground supported northern hardwoods.

In 1936 Isle Royale was in the process of becoming a national park, but as yet the government had not purchased all the land on the island. Meanwhile the Consolidated Paper Company began logging balsam and spruce from their holdings.

As was mentioned earlier, the area was in the

midst of a severe drought that sent temperatures soaring and fuel moisture to an extreme low. The fire started on July 25, 1936 at or near the location of the Consolidated Paper Company lumber camp on the Siskiwit Bay.⁽¹⁾ Anyone with a first hand knowledge of what an area looks like after clear cutting balsam fir and white spruce can quickly visualize how easy it would be for a fire to start and how rapidly it would spread once started. The cause of the fire was never definitely determined but it is believed to have been started by a careless camper.⁽²⁾ Immediately after the fire was reported the two camps of Civilian Conservation Corp enrollees that were already on the island were called into action. At the time fighting began the area claimed by the fire was approximately 200 acres with the direction of spread steered by a southwest wind.⁽³⁾

By July 27 the 200 men (160 C.C.C. and 40 loggers) had the fire under control, but late the same day wind dampened all hopes of complete control by blowing the flames over the control lines. By July 30 the fire crowned and had covered about 4,000 acres.⁽⁴⁾ Up to this time the area that had burned was either logged over slash or low value conifers. The fire burned with such intensity on the night of July 31 that reflections could easily be seen on the Michigan mainland over 40 miles away.⁽⁵⁾

By the first of August the fire was threatening the C.C.C. camps, the lumber camp, and the stored pulp wood on the docks. Reinforced with 400 more C.C.C. men, bringing the total to over 600, the fire fighters succeeded in saving the camps and 10,000 cords of pulp~~ed~~ valued at \$100,000. An additional 2,500 cords were destroyed.⁽⁶⁾ Through-out the rest of this report this fire will be called the Siskiwit River Fire. It was reported as being under control again on August 4 but spot fires from it were to be found later. The area laid waste by this fire totaled over 5,00 acres, but due to the extreme care and caution

ions, flew over Isle Royale on August 2. The airplane survey of the fire area revealed two spot-fires on the southwest part of the island. One fire, destined to become the largest and most damaging, started on the south side of Lake Desor, headed east, and surrounded Siskiwit Lake, the largest lake on the island. Fire fighters arrived at this fire on August 4 and found that the fire had already covered an area three miles

long and two miles wide.⁽⁸⁾ For the remainder of the report this fire will be called the Siskiwit Lake fire.

With the arrival of fire fighters from the mainland coming in a steady flow, new camps and more blankets, cots, tents, and fire fighting equipment were needed. Most of the supplies were sent from Fort Brady, at Sault St. Marie, Michigan.⁽⁹⁾ Six new camps were established near the Siskiwit Lake Fire area to facilitate the fire fighting. Each of these camps

feet but always excavating to mineral soil. When possible all material was thrown to the outside of the trench. However care was taken to throw material into the fire when it was hot or burning. Trenching was followed with Pacific pumpers mopping up at least 100 feet inside the line. Through the swamps it was necessary to cut out a trail from 15 to 25 feet wide to keep the fire from jumping across the trench. (13)

By the middle of August there were 1800 fire fighters on the island, 1600 of them were C.C.C. enrollees, with the remainder being loggers or residents of the island. (14) After 19 days of devastation, the fire finally started to abate. A shift in the wind in favor of the fire fighters improved the situation. This gave the men a chance to began construction of a fire barrier. (15) 550 men were used to build a fire line across the island from the western end of Rock Harbor to the eastern end of Todd's Harbor. (16) The idea was to keep the fire from the resort section on the eastern side. Backfiring was employed to help with the construction.

(15)
The Grand Rapids Press on Aug. 11, 1936 stated that two such fire barriers were constructed. One reaching from Thomsonite Beach to Hay Bay using Lake Desor and the Little Siskiwit River as a part of the control line. If such a barrier was constructed the fire must have jumped it or the barrier was not completed before the fire reached the area. No other sources were found to confirm this.

A heavy rain began to fall on August 18 and the fire was officially declared out. However much clean-up work remained to be done but the worst was over. The fire left behind 27,000 acres of ruin. The trees were burned so completely that nothing remained except stumps, some fallen and some still standing. The moss, lower vegetation and the valuable humus were completely destroyed leaving a large portion of the area as bare rock. Conservation officials reported that a great amount of damage was done to the moose yard near Lake Ritchie but very few if any of the animals were killed by the fire.⁽¹⁷⁾ The animals were merely driven to the higher grounds.

If a person stops to consider what the conditions were that confronted the fire fighters on Isle Royale it is easily seen why the fire wasn't stopped. The difficulty in fighting fires on the island lies in the nature of its ground cover and the isolation of the fire area. A heavy carpet of deep moss covers most of the island and when drought sets in, as it did in 1966, this material becomes highly inflammable and the flames spread rapidly. It was impossible, owing to the rocky character of the island, to employ tractor plows to throw up fire trenches to check the ground spread of the fire, and with the flames far inland the possibility of using power pumps and hoses were slim. Fire fighting here meant using axe, back pump, hand shovels and other hand tools.⁽¹⁸⁾

The camp life also was none to pleasant. Not enough food and going without tobacco for more than a week, along with the general conditions around the camp did not make things too enjoyable. F. T. Priester, an assistant forester acting as fire boss at the Gull Rocks Camp had this to say about camp life: "There was a definite lack of camp and food sanitation. Flies accumulated around the camp by the millions and very often while eating, a well cooked fly or flies made their appearance, mixed in with the food. This can be excused occasionally but not every day. I can safely say that it was the dirtiest, most unsanitary, most foul smelling camp that I have ever worked in. The food in the camp, when it was available, barring the palatability of flies was fairly good with the exception of fresh meat."⁽¹⁹⁾

When fresh meat arrived at the camp it was often spoiled. On August 15 two quarters of beef had to be buried shortly after taking them off the boat. On August 18 the only food for breakfast was beans and cocoa. On the following day the food supply had become completely exhausted. Men did not go to work until noon when a⁽²⁰⁾ boat came in with food supplies.

On August 20 the men ran out of tobacco. A failure to snip this necessity to the camp resulted in a strike by the C.C.C. enrollees on August 25. That afternoon

tobacco was brought in. (21)

Today, 30 years after the fire, the after-effects can easily be seen on the island. In almost any area covered by the fire one can see dead snags and charred stumps. The areas having a very thin layer of soil and organic matter was burned so as to expose bare rock. Throughout the area, small patches of trees can be found that escaped the fire. The areas where some mineral soil was left has been seeded by natural forces with weeds, brush, and minor tree species such as aspen, white birch, fire cherry and smaller amounts of balsam and spruce.

On the following pages, three photographs are shown illustrating the area as it appears today. Photograph number one was taken from a ridge overlooking the area burned by the Siskiwit River Fire. Several stumps and dead snags can be seen mixed in with the young tree reproduction. Aspen, white birch, and spruce are predominant. As can be seen the reproduction is barely two inches in diameter. (22)

Photograph number two was taken one mile west of Chippewa Harbor camp-ground, in the area burned by the Siskiwit Lake Fire. Tree growth is small and scattered, consisting of the usual fire types, aspen and white birch with some spruce and an occasional white pine. Notice on this photograph the bare rock exposed by the fire.

Photograph number three was taken one mile east of Isnpeming Point just off the Greenstone Ridge. This area has sufficient soil to support a dense stand even though the species are of inferior quality.

Considering the area as a whole it will be many years and possibly many centuries before a stand of desirable species of adequate size and density will occupy the area.

Even though it is probably no consolation to the island it was not alone suffering from fire. The Michigan Conservation Dept. reported 1,200 fires during that month of July, burning a total of 17,500 acres. (25)

Note: Photos (not reproduced here) are from permanent photo stations established by Park Naturalist as part of Isle Royale research project, "Plant Succession Following Fire on Isle Royale". Negatives are in Park photo file.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Calumet News, 18 Aug., 1936.
2. Department of Interior, Memorandum for the Press, 8 Aug., 1936.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. The Calumet News, 1 Aug., 1936.
6. The Detroit News, 3 Aug., 1936.
7. The Calumet News, 3 Aug., 1936.
8. The Daily Mining Gazette, 5 Aug., 1936, Marquette, Mich.
9. The Sunday Mining Gazette, 2 Aug., 1936, Marquette, Mich.
10. The Daily Mining Gazette, 5 Aug., 1936,
11. The Calumet News, 12 Aug., 1936.
12. Ibid.
13. F.T. Priester, "Resume of North Shore and Greenstone Ridge Sector Fire, Isle Royale, Michigan.", Report of Gull Rocks Camp, Sept. 1936. (*when is the report*)
14. The Calumet News, 12 Aug., 1936.
15. Ibid., 18 Aug., 1936
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 12 Aug., 1936.
18. The Escanaba Daily Press, 10 Aug., 1936
19. Priester, op. cit.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Photographs taken by Bill Dunnwire of The National Park Service. Personal interview on March 1, 1965.
23. The Detroit Press, 7 Aug., 1936.

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- The Calumet News, 1, 3, 12, 18 Aug., 1936.
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- The Detroit Free Press, 7, 11, 13 Aug., 1936.
- The Detroit News, 3 Aug., 1936.
- The Escanaba Daily Press, 10 Aug., 1936.
- The Grand Rapids Press, 11 Aug., 1936.
- The Kalamazoo Gazette, 12 Aug., 1936.
- The Lansing State Journal, 11 Aug., 1936.
- The Sunday Mining Gazette, 2 Aug., 1936.
- Resume of North Shore and Greenstone Ridge Sector
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Camp, Sept. 1936, F.T. Priestler.