

CRISS-CROSSING CASCO

I have done a lot of day tripping on Maine's Casco Bay and have traversed it several times (doing the entire Maine Island Trail from Portland to Machias), but I had never spent any extended time gunkholing on this large, deeply cleft, very glacial looking bay. Many long, thin peninsulas, island chains and strings of ledges extend far into the bay, like the fingers on two hands, all pointing to the southwest, the direction of travel of the last big ice shield.

Looking at my NOAA chart of Casco Bay and the MITA guide booklet (see appendix) for overnight possibilities, trip options for my solo canoe camping trip seemed endless. The Maine Island Trail Association, as many of you readers know, was established in 1987, 25 years ago, as one of the very first water trails in the US. It is based in Portland, Maine and currently protects 191 islands and mainland sites along the Maine coast.

The traditional and most convenient starting point for an island trip, with boat ramp, parking facilities and drinking water, is without a doubt the Eastern Promenade in Portland, right off Interstate #295. So why not use it, I thought. From there I plotted a northeasterly course for the first day, along the western shore of the bay, past Cousins and Little John I., along the islands off Freeport and then deep into Merepoint Bay, to tiny Crow and Little Birch Island. And since Crow is surrounded by extensive mudflats, as most of the northeastern tips of the big bay are, I chose Little Birch, where I found some deeper water at its easterly shore.

Strong wind warnings were issued for my first day on the water, May 12, 2012 (SW 20-30), but I did not think the wind would affect me so far up in the bay. But the last 3 miles from Bustins I. to my take-out were quite sporty, surfing my 17'2" Verlen Kruger covered sea canoe on large, breaking waves from behind. It was definitely time to land on the lee shore on some island (like Little Birch) and call it quits for the day – 17 miles in 4:30 hours, was enough for the first day out anyway.

The next day I reversed my direction, traveling mostly to the south. This took me all the way down Middle Bay along Harpswell Neck to Potts Harbor, and from there around Steve and Cliff I. to Jewell Island, a place I had wanted to see for a very long time. The small, very protected cove on its northwest tip is a sailor's delight. "Cocktail Cove", as it is known among sailors, is a perfect little anchorage and an even better stop for lunch/supper or a raft-up party. The shoreline, though, is very steep and can only be ascended in one place via a few broken-off chunks of rock.

Rather than trying to portage or drag my boat up there, I balanced it on a big protruding ledge, barely above the high tide line. The other option would be landing on the beach just north of the Punch Bowl, on the northeast tip of the island. But it had a long line of fierce-looking breaking ledges on the ocean side, and thus could be very intimidating in

case the wind springs up again. Because of the southwest swells from yesterday, there also was no chance of landing on the rocky southern tip of the island. I did not even try.

At almost high tide next morning, which happened to be my 73rd birthday, and with relatively little wind, I followed a course through a formidable rock garden (Broken Cove, West Brown Cow and the Mink Rocks) to Eagle Island, polar explorer Admiral Robert Peary's former summer residence. But since the museum would not open for another month, I just tapped land with my paddle and went on up Merriconeag and Harpswell Sound to tiny Strawberry Island, a mile before the tall Mountain Road bridge. It is a veritable tidal mud hole with minimal camping possibilities. So I had to carefully plan my arrival and departure times. I surely did not want to be held hostage here by the tide and the oozy mud flat surroundings for at least 6 hours, from one mid-tide to the next.

It rained all night and was cold to boot. So it felt good getting back in my canoe and riding the tail end of the incoming tide all the way up Ewin Narrows and Long Reach to Gurnet Strait, the tidal narrows separating rather large Sebascodegan I. from the mainland. I flushed under the low road bridge, feeling smug having figured out the tides perfectly.

My goal for the night was a MITA campsite on Long I. in the New Meadows River. On the way there I rounded 11 more islands, just for the fun of it, including Williams and Merritt, where I had camped on my first Maine Island Trail trip in 1995. Long I. was another minimal campsite: take-out/put-in over mud, rocks and seaweed, and a tiny, rough, woody tent site without a view – a no repeat, like all the sites I had chosen so far.

More rain at night and dense fog in the morning. I gave myself a one hour fog delay, but then pushed off anyway, since the tide was right. I decided to go gunkholing behind a string of skinny looking islands, because the New Meadows River, on the other side of those islands, was shrouded in thick fog. Cundys Harbor looked and smelled like a real Maine working lobster harbor, a bit on the messy, dirty side, I am afraid.

At one point of my trip planning I had wanted to paddle all the way to Cape Small Harbor, or better to Hermit Island and The Branch, where Hodding Carter had a replica of a Viking boat built. In 2001, "Snorri", as she was called, named after the first Viking child born on Newfoundland, sailed from Greenland to L'Anse Aux Meadows at the northern tip of Newfoundland, where I saw her in 2008 (see my trip report "Up the Western Shore of Newfoundland" on my website).

But I prudently held on to the Sebascodegan I. shore, paddled around East and West Cundy Point in truly thick fog, and then all the way up into Quahog Bay, to the tiny island of Little Snow, a delightful MITA overnight spot: easy in and out, level boat storage above the high water mark, and best of all, a level, shaded tent site with a

great view down the bay. The most interesting thing about Quahog Bay was, that it was filled with jellyfish, the glassy, slightly bluish type.

So this here, I thought to myself, was a true "L'Anse Aux Meadows", "Bay of Jellyfish": "meadows" being an English corruption of the French word "méduse", jellyfish, which even many people from that little northernmost town in Newfoundland don't know. I could not avoid poking, prodding and shoveling them with my paddle on the way up to Little Snow Island. They were so thick in the water.

Eventually the fog burned off and even the sun came out briefly. But at night I enjoyed a significant thunderstorm with spectacular lightning, but also lots of rain. The new morning, though, welcomed me with my first sunrise of this trip. The sky was clear, but the wind was building to 20+ knots from the north, slowly turning to the northwest and west eventually, my NOAA weather report predicted. I did not worry too much, though, as long as I had those wispy, long peninsulas shielding me on my northwest side.

As expected, the stretch from Gun Point to the granite-slab bridge at Wills Gut turned into my first test. At the bridge, tide and wind were both pressing so hard against me, that I barely made it through the narrow span, even after shifting into sprint mode. On Harpswell Sound the north wind had a very long fetch and had whipped up big, rolling, breaking waves. It was also running against the incoming tide. The water looked black, topped with long, white wave crests with squiggly, foamy streamers attached. It was a real challenge negotiating the breaking crests and deep troughs on my beam course across the Sound to South Harpswell.

At Potts Point my course changed, and I was paddling almost directly into the wind, sneaking up on tiny Thrumcap Island, and from there across to Horse and yet another Little Birch Island. In the lee of those islands I had a chance to regain my strength while watching large flocks of male Eider ducks in their striking black and white plumage. I figured the brown females were tending their nests on shore, while "the boys" were having a male bonding party, or whatever male Eiders do off duty.

The next leg, I knew, was to be my hardest segment for today: crossing Broad Sound from Little Birch to Bangs Island. My course was straight to the west, with the wind coming from the northwest now, while the incoming tide was running straight against it – not a very encouraging, comforting or enticing picture. As I stuck my bow out around the point, waves were instantly breaking onto my deck, and I was wet in no time. That always wakes me up, though, and challenges me to dance the waves better, so they won't slam me in the chest. 1.6 miles in those conditions can be a very long stretch, but Bangs I. did get closer eventually. I then decided that it would be very difficult to take out at the MITA campsite at the northern tip, in the surf, on a hard, rocky shore. So I swung around to the lee of the island, to a crescent beach at mid-point.

Landing was easy, the seawall was level enough for my tent, and I had a great sunny

afternoon drying my clothes, reading, writing and enjoying my coffee and later cocoa, but most of all the spectacular view out to sea, where I had just come from. A great reward for a challenging day of hard paddling. The wind finally abated, but the surf continued to pound the outer ledges all night, making it sound as if a distant train was approaching - great music to fall asleep by, after I had carefully checked that my tent was OK and my boat was properly secured.

Tomorrow morning was going to be a piece of cake, I thought to myself as I dozed off: only 10 miles back to the Eastern Promenade in Portland for an 11:00 a.m. pick-up. To make the last day of my trip a bit more interesting, so it would not turn into a total let-down, I plotted my course down Luckse Sound, on the open ocean side, along the southeast shores of Sand, Hope, Long, Vail and even around big Peaks Island.

Hope I. stood out as being more groomed than the rest of the Maine islands I had seen. There was an old homestead with a huge barn, but also a brand new humungous vacation complex (or estate?) at the southern tip of the island, surrounded by park-like mowed lawns, newly planted flower beds, shrubs and even alien/out-of-place looking trees, all perfectly landscaped with pagodas, benches and the like. In stark contrast, on the northeast end of the island I found an eagle's nest with an eagle sitting proud and erect beside it, staring out to sea, wondering what had become of his island.

Surf was still breaking on the many ledges and ledge islands off Long and Peaks Island, and I felt good having successfully crossed tidal Hussey Sound and rounded the fierce breaks off the south-southwest tip of Peaks Island. I made my way fine into Whitehead Passage, up to House and Little Diamond I., where I took my first break. I recalculated my time of arrival, taking just enough of a break to snap a few pictures of impressive, water-borne Fort Gorges. At almost high tide it looked as if it floated on the water.

And as I approached the parking lot beside the boat ramp at the Eastern Promenade in Portland, there was Nancy with our big yellow Lab Willoughby, who had decided he wanted to come along to pick up Dad.

Just as I had finished packing my gear and walked Willoughby to the beach for a romp in the waves, our daughter Brenda showed up with a lunch picnic of Portland's famous "Wild Willy Burgers", which were greatly appreciated by me and my "Wild Willy", Willoughby's more fitting nickname.

The trip home to Orono went swiftly and was uneventful, which is good. My week on Casco Bay in retrospect was not ideal weather-wise, but maybe I was pushing the season a bit getting out on the ocean in mid-May. My overnight stops were marginal, definitely less inviting and accommodating than those on Muscongus Bay, for instance. The only overnight repeats for me would be Little Snow I. in Quahog Bay and Bangs

Island. Jewell I. would appeal more to sailors and power boaters anchoring in Cocktail Cove, or to day-tripping paddlers. It is simply too awkward to lug a sea kayak or canoe up the steep cliffs solo, for an overnight.

The courses one can lay through the myriad of islands and peninsulas in Casco Bay are endless, though. There are sheltered coves for beginners and challenging outposts for expert boaters. Casco Bay has it all, and yet it is still part of the Atlantic Ocean; it is always cold and can get rough in no time when the wind kicks up or difficult to navigate when the fog rolls in.

Another great danger in Casco Bay, as I see it, are the many long ledges and ledge fields, the submerged extensions of the many thin peninsulas. They are mostly unmarked and can make any old innocent-looking swell suddenly explode into a fiercely hissing, toppling wave. And if paddlers do not read their charts carefully, do not watch out or get too close, those waves will swamp a boat for sure and send it through the wringer – not a pretty picture with all that hard stuff just below the surface of the water.

All in all, a very fine week criss-crossing Casco, paddling 87.5 miles, into almost every nook and cranny of this large, deeply cleft bay; 12.5 miles per day on average in about 3:35 hours in the boat each day. Later in the season, during real summer, that is, the weather will usually be gentler and kinder, but the bay will also be more crowded and hectic. So take your pick: choose your time slot and favorite corner of this large, spectacular bay and enjoy.

Be kind to the islands, be safe, and try hard not to paddle beyond your comfort and skill level.

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NOAA chart of Casco Bay
www.MITA.org Guide booklet

Overnight stops:
Little Birch Island
Jewell Island
Strawberry Island
Long Island
Little Snow Island
Bangs Island

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