



The view from the lookout platform at Nordhouse Dunes (Nick Meador).

The Direction of the Dunes

by NICK MEADOR

One nature lover's sense of direction was tested while wilderness camping at Nordhouse Dunes on the coast of Lake Michigan in September 2007.

I've always considered myself to have an excellent sense of direction. As a child, I would navigate from the front passenger seat on family road trips to Florida, Tennessee and South Carolina. Once I got my driver's license, I generally remembered how to get to a place after I drove there once. When I journey to unfamiliar cities and countries, I tend to be the one who leads my fellow travelers around. I don't mind the responsibility. On the contrary, I enjoy the sense of control, and the feeling that I'm helping others out. But sometimes, I learn the most by getting lost and finding my way back home again.

In the wilderness, this notion is tested to the ultimate degree. I had been camping before, but never so close to Michigan's sand dunes. Surprisingly, I didn't feel like I was in the wilderness. I definitely didn't feel like the Nordhouse Dunes were 12 miles from any major sign of modern civilization. Perhaps this was because I had grown up exploring similar forests near Traverse City, MI. The dry soil and lanky pine trees that stretch along the coast of Lake Michigan are familiar and welcoming to me. But I was still expecting to feel isolated from my ordinary life. In fact, I *wanted* to separate from that world for a short while. I even strove to set up camp far away

from the parking lot, at the cost of having to carry my equipment much further than necessary.

Instead of seclusion, what struck me the most severely during my experience was the extreme pitch-black darkness that befalls the forest each night. Even as we were cooking dinner in the Dutch ovens around the campfire, the dark slowly filled the spaces between the branches and the leaves. By 9 or 9:30 pm, we were enveloped inside a small bubble of warmth provided by the flickering flames.

The nighttime walk from the group campfire area back to my tent would have been impossible without a flashlight or propane lantern. An eerie feeling crept over me each time, as if a dozen ghouls or goblins were waiting behind tree trunks to jump out at me. Or even worse, maybe the trees themselves would come alive, entangle me in their roots, and pull me deep into their subterranean domain.

The sheer darkness wasn't the only hardship to face. The howling wind blew in hurricane bursts from the vastness of Lake Michigan. My tent was situated on the eastern side of a large dune hill that should have blocked most of this, and yet the trees still creaked and swayed. The tarpaulin tied over the tent flapped restlessly, and the corner stakes barely held to the ground.

Even the stars would have offered some comfort, if the dense clouds would have opened up for a moment and let some of that pristine light shine upon me. More importantly, though, the stars would constitute a map to navigate this black hole, since I can easily locate the North Star, Polaris, humbly situated between the constellations Cassiopeia and the Big Dipper. Polaris is directly above the Earth's rotational pole, so its dim light always shines from the north.

On certain occasions, when the moon is between waning and waxing, it emits a luminescence that overpowers most starlight. Luckily, the moon serves as a secondary compass to the constellations. That reflective bulb revolves around the Earth, but it does not rotate on its axis as the Earth does. Therefore, Earthlings see the same image of the moon every single night that it is visible. Dark craters on the moon's surface form a "U" shape, the opening of which always points more or less toward the South Pole. But I didn't see the



moon on this occasion, since the clouds kept rolling across the sky, like an avalanche of snow tumbling and rumbling down a mountainside.

When we decided to walk to the beach to witness the true power of the storm, I realized a new way to orient myself. I could hear the crashing waves from the campfire, nearly half a mile away from Lake Michigan. Since the lake was undoubtedly always west of me, it meant that the crashing noise was always west. So if I walked away from the noise, that meant I was headed east, and so forth. We basically followed a road to the beach, so this tactic didn't really help me until the next day.

On Saturday afternoon, I set out on a trek with some of my friends, and I attempted to navigate using the primitive map of the Nordhouse Wilderness area. We walked southward along the beach, and then climbed a 100-foot rise to the main trail in the woods. I asked the group where they wanted to go, and one of them replied, "Let's just get lost." I thought to myself, "I don't usually *try* to get lost. I pretend I'm in control, and then when things go badly, I try to find out where I am." We followed the trail along the ridge for a while, but eventually turned away from the water. I knew we were going east as long as I could hear the crashing waves behind me. But the weather on Saturday was much calmer than on Friday, and the waves had subsided to normal activity.

After a while, I could hear nothing, so I turned to my final method of navigation: the sun. In mid-September, the sun will pass westward in line with the Earth's equator. That means, on an afternoon in Michigan, wherever the sun is will be between west and southwest. I used this method, along with the simple map, to find Nordhouse Lake and the route back to our campsite. It was a wonderful feeling, exploring that beautiful forest with my friends, getting lost, and then finding our way back again. Sometimes the best way to improve our sense of direction is by stepping back from our plans, reevaluating our strengths, working together, and recalling that there will always be signs to guide us.

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