Explore the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary

The Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center is a great place to begin your paddle or snorkel expedition. The Center features immersive maritime heritage exhibits, an HD theater, a wooden boatbuilding workshop, a gift shop and exciting programs and events throughout the year. Bring your friends and family and dive into our Great Lakes past!

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Paddle & Snorkel Guide

Shipwrecks for Everyone
Located in northwestern Lake Huron, Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary protects one of America's best-preserved and nationally significant collections of shipwrecks. To date, more than 50 shipwrecks have been discovered within the sanctuary and an additional 30 wrecks have been located immediately outside of the sanctuary boundaries. Through research, education and resource protection, the sanctuary works to ensure that these underwater treasures are preserved for future generations.

Readily accessible by paddlers, snorkelers, and divers of all abilities, many shipwrecks in the sanctuary are marked with seasonal mooring buoys anchored to the lake bottom. Buoys make the sites easier to locate, improve safety, and protect shipwrecks. Buoys feature attachment lines that are available on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Shipwreck sites are located at a wide range of depths, from just a few inches to more than 200 feet beneath the surface of Lake Huron. Whether by paddling, snorkeling, or swimming, any sanctuary visitor can dive into Thunder Bay's rich maritime heritage.

Paddle into Maritime Heritage
A number of convenient access points along the shores of Lake Huron make Thunder Bay shipwreck paddling fun and feasible recreation. Excursions can vary from a one-hour paddle to multi-day trips along the coast.

Although the sheer number of shipwrecks in the sanctuary is impressive, it is the range of vessel types that makes the collection nationally significant. From an 1844 sidewheel steamer to a modern 500-foot-long German freighter, the shipwrecks of Thunder Bay represent a microcosm of maritime commerce and travel on the Great Lakes.

With lighthouses and lifesaving stations, commercial fishing camps and working ports, northeastern Michigan enjoys a rich maritime landscape that truly makes paddling Thunder Bay a complete experience.
Schooner John F. Warner (1855 - 1890)
GPS Coordinates: N45° 03.050’ W83° 26.128’
Depth: 3 feet
Distance from the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 1 mile
Description: Head to Alcona Township Starlight Beach to explore some of the shallow shipwrecks just outside Alpensia’s Small Boat Harbor. The Warner and the Shamrock are two of five shipwrecks in the area that are buoyed, making them easily accessible. Nearshore shifting sands and murky water may make these wrecks difficult to see at certain times of the year, but a paddle along the downtown shoreline is always worth it!

The John F. Warner spent several years trading between the Great Lakes and European ports. After 1860, it stayed closer to home, engaged in the booming steam lumber carrier trade. Anchored off the mouth of the Thunder Bay River in 1880, the ship was driven onto shore during a gale.

Steamer Shamrock (1875 - 1895)
GPS Coordinates: N45° 03.077’ W83° 26.052’
Depth: 11 feet
Distance from the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 1 mile
Description: The Shamrock was built as a schooner barge and reconstructed as a steam lumber carrier. It was bound from Ontario to Toledo with a cargo of lumber when it encountered a squall coming over the headlands, and was driven onto shore.

The ship was later salvaged and abandoned. Many interesting structural features can still be seen on the wreck.

Tug Loretta (1892 - 1896)
GPS Coordinates: N44° 48.503’ W83° 16.955’
Depth: 7 feet
Distance from the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 23 miles
Description: The tug Loretta can be accessed from the public launch at Alcona Township Huron Park. Head straight out of the mouth of Black River and paddle ¾ mile east. Visibility is generally excellent at this site.

Towing and fogging for four years, the Loretta enjoyed a short life for working conditions on the Great Lakes. Hauling a cargo of sand, it broke its propeller on a reef coming into Black River. The tug was brought upriver and tied up at the docks when it suddenly caught fire. Another tug came to its rescue and towed it out into the lake where it burned to the waterline and sank.

Schooner Ishpeming (1872 - 1903)
GPS Coordinates: N44° 48.568’ W83° 16.650’
Depth: 12 feet
Distance from the Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 23 miles
Description: The wreck of the schooner Ishpeming can be accessed from the public launch at Alcona Township Huron Park. Follow the directions for the tug Loretta and then head south another 1/2 mile. Visibility is generally excellent at this site.

Launched in 1872, the schooner Ishpeming met with a number of disasters throughout its career. The three-masted canal schooner collided with a steam barge, struck a reef, and suffered severe storm damage before finally running aground near the mouth of Black River. At the time of the grounding, the schooner was heading north with a cargo of coal and salvage crews from Alpena attempted to refloat it. After unsuccessful attempts, the Ishpeming was stripped of its salvageable parts and abandoned.

Steamer Joseph S. Fay (1871 - 1905)
GPS Coordinates: N45° 29.311’ W83° 54.600’
Depth: 18 feet
Paddling Distance From Shore: ¼ mile
Distance from Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 45 miles
Description: The wreck of the Joseph S. Fay is located at 40-Mile Point Lighthouse just off US 23 north of Rogers City. Parking is available at the lighthouse and you can launch your kayak at the beach and paddle out to the submerged portion of the wreck located approximately 300 yards offshore. One of the sides of the Fay’s hull is located on the beach just west of the lighthouse.

The Joseph S. Fay was a 216-foot bulk freighter built in Cleveland, Ohio for the Bradley Transportation Co. The vessel wrecked just in front of the 40-Mile Point Lighthouse in October 1895 in a fierce storm that claimed a dozen ships in the area and smashed the aging ship to pieces after running aground. Visitors to the site can see parts of the engine, the propeller shaft and some of the boat’s final cargo of iron ore. Visibility is usually excellent at this site.

Schooner American Union (1862 - 1894)
GPS Coordinates: N45° 21.411’ W83° 35.368’
Depth: 4-10 feet
Paddling Distance: About 2 miles
Distance from Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 26.5 miles
Description: The American Union lies in the bay at Thompson’s Harbor State Park.

Travel north from Alpena on US 23 to reach the park entrance and follow to the boat launch. From here, travel north on US 23 until you reach the boat launch until you reach the end of the peninsula. Paddle straight to the west from the end of the peninsula and you will paddle over a deeper patch of water before coming over a very shallow reef. The main body of wreckage is on the western edge of this reef.

The American Union was a 185-foot schooner built in Cleveland, Ohio in 1862. It carried bulk cargos on the upper lakes for over 30 years before stranding in a storm on May 6th, 1894. Visitors to the site can see all that remains of one of the sides. Large iron shrouds that once held the masts lie scattered at the stern of the wreck and the centerboard trunk lies on its side near the bilge.

Schooner Portland (1863 - 1877)
GPS Coordinates: N45° 14.929’ W83° 24.450’
Depth: 6 feet
Paddling Distance: 127 miles
Distance from Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 15 miles
Description: The Schooner Portland is wrecked near the Bessemer State Natural Area. Take US 23 north from Alpena to Grand Lake Road, then to Bessemer Natural Areas and follow the foot trail to the beach. Paddle northeast along the coast for ¼ mile. The wreck is located 250 feet offshore.

The Portland was a 2-masted schooner built in Pillar Point, New York in 1863 to carry bulk cargos. The ship was driven ashore and broken to pieces by a storm in October 1877 while carrying a load of salt. The ship’s wreckage includes the bottom of the hull and starboard side.

Sidewheel Steamer Albany (1846 - 1853)
GPS Coordinates: N45°19.396’ W83°27.508’
Depth: 6 feet
Paddling Distance: 1¼ mile with ½ mile portage
Distance from Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 18 miles
Description: The steamer Albany is located in a bay to the south of Presque Isle Harbor. The bowhead behind the Presque Isle Cemetery leads you to the beach on the northwestern edge of the bay after hiking approximately ½ mile. There is a small island in the middle of the bay, the wreckage lies to the south-southeast of the island approximately 300 yards offshore and 75 yards from the island’s southwestern edge. The Albany lies in 4 feet of water and visibility is usually excellent in the bay.

The sidewheel steamer Albany was constructed in Detroit, Michigan in 1846 for the passenger trade. The ship encountered a gale while underway with passengers on November 25th, 1853 and was driven ashore in Albany Bay while attempting to take refuge in Presque Isle Harbor. Following the stranding, the passengers were forced to spend the night on the boat before being rescued by local small craft. The ship was broken to pieces by subsequent storms and salvage efforts and all that remains of the wreck today are large sections of the bottom of the vessel’s hull.

Negwegin State Park
Distance From Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center: 20 miles
Description: Take US 23 south from Alpena to Black River Road and Negwegin State Park. Follow the foot trail to the beach. Negwegin State Park is a rustic, undeveloped natural area with beautiful undeveloped sandy beaches along Lake Huron. Please use caution when visiting Negwegin as the roads into the park are often so sandy that a four-wheel drive vehicle is needed. There are several shipwrecks to explore along the shores of Negwegin State Park near Black River and Bird Island.