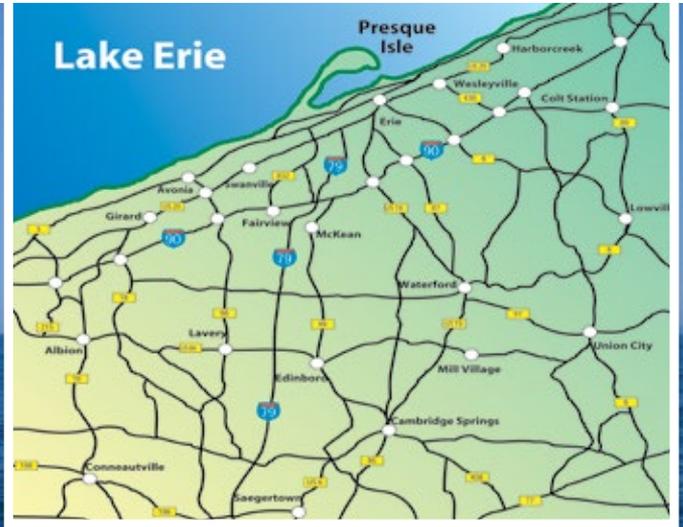


# Paddle a Loop around Presque Isle Bay



by Linda Steiner

Presque Isle State Park, Erie County, is home to Pennsylvania's most-visited state park, so paddlers will find lots of access and parking. Go during the week or in the off-season, before Memorial Day and after Labor Day, for more parking options, fewer boats and a more solitary experience on the water.

When to complete a Presque Isle paddling circle depends mainly on wind-driven water conditions, especially the force and direction of the wind. Ideally, choose a windless day or one with a light breeze. Preferably when any wind is out of the south or southeast, from the mainland across Presque Isle Bay, and providing a sheltered lee on the north or Lake Erie side of the peninsula.

It was such a warm, calm day in late spring when my paddling partner and I launched our canoe at Horseshoe Pond, near the eastern tip of the peninsula. We parked at a pull-off and carried from the car to the water's edge, putting the canoe in near a wooden dock. Horseshoe Pond is dotted with houseboats that are more house than boat—floating, moored cottages that have long been a part of the Presque Isle Bay scene.

## About the author

Linda Steiner, originally from Oradell, NJ, currently lives near Cooperstown, Venango County, where she has resided for 30 years. She has been contributing to the magazine since 1972, originally providing illustrations for articles and later writing her own articles.

Steiner recalls an experience on a cold, windy winter day on an Erie County steelhead stream. Linda and her husband, Bob, were the only ones on the water that day. The two seasoned outdoor writers did not bring a camera to photograph their catches, including very good steelhead and big lake-run Brown Trout. Without a camera, they concentrated on the moment and enjoyed a private day on an otherwise public stretch of steelhead stream. The next day, they returned to the stream with cameras. The usual large crowd was there, so they decided not to fish. They felt they couldn't improve on the previous day, as it had been a one-of-a-kind fishing experience.

"Writing for the *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* magazine has been an exceptional experience in my outdoor communications career because of the breadth of subject matter the editors have always allowed me to explore. I've got a huge curiosity about all things outdoors, and I've been able to indulge and find things out by writing on a multitude of subjects, as well as share what I've experienced and learned along the way. I've written on subjects that ranged from the "art of the fish" (physical beauty) to the problems being experienced with diminishing amphibian populations in the state and worldwide, to how to be a better stream wader when you're fishing, and how to choose your first kayak. Thanks are due to the editors for letting me play so widely in the outdoor writing field," said Steiner. "I've had a long enough association with the *Pennsylvania Angler & Boater* magazine that I was on the cover when I was in my 20s, again in my 60s, so that's a 40 year span; next time when I'm 100? If I'm around and healthy, and can still fish, maybe so. I intend to be and to do just that," said Steiner.

photo: Bob Steiner

Horseshoe Pond is connected to Misery Bay by a narrow opening. We paddled through, taking care to avoid old pilings by staying between the marker buoys. Making a sharp left, we paralleled the shore and the United States Coast Guard station. Across Presque Isle Bay, we could see large ships sitting at the Port of Erie docks. Then, we entered the shipping channel, the only water exit from Presque Isle Bay into Lake Erie.

We started early in the day, so we got through the pier-edged channel before it became busy with boat traffic and avoided a lot of wakes. We hugged the North Pier side, maintaining a respectful distance from fishing lines. Leaving the channel, we passed the North Pier Light and Beach No. 11 and crossed the entrance to Thompson Bay, heading for Gull Point.

Gull Point is the sandy eastern tip of Presque Isle Bay and is a State Park Natural Area for rare and migratory shorebirds. Public entry is prohibited from April 1 to November 30. Our trip was during the restricted time, so we just skirted the shore, watching gulls rise skyward in great flocks and keeping our binoculars handy for shorebirds.

That day, as we made the far turn around Gull Point, we were greeted by a nearly calm Lake Erie. The surface was barely ruffled by the faintest of breezes. During the day, even that died, and we had smooth "sailing," or rather paddling, for the rest of our tour along the outer edge of the peninsula.

The lakeside shoreline from the tip of Gull Point to Beach No. 10 (Budny Beach) is the park's most "remote." It is the farthest from parking areas, does not have a designated swimming area and no trails cross the swampy interior to access it. For a while, it was just us, the wild shore to our left and the magnificent view of the Great Lake to our right. Big ships passed occasionally, far out.

A vagrant swell from one caught us, lifting the canoe up and setting us gently down, making us laugh.



photo-Bob Steiner

Houseboats have long been a part of Presque Isle Bay, Erie County.



photo-Linda Steiner

When we got to the condos at the foot of Presque Isle Bay peninsula, we knew that we were past the state park, so we turned back for Beach No. 1.



photo-Bob Steiner

Gulls take flight at Presque Isle Bay, Erie County.



photo-Linda Steiner

Gull Point is off limits to boats from April 1 to November 30. Foot access is allowed on Gull Point but only on a marked trail to the observation tower, which provides a "bird's eye" view.



photo-Bob Steiner

*Interior ponds and connecting channels extend from Misery Bay to Marina Lake on the peninsula. If it's windy on Presque Isle Bay and Lake Erie, it's almost always calm enough to explore the lagoons.*

photo-Linda Steiner



*Paddlers have the historic view, from Lake Erie, of the Presque Isle Lighthouse, built in 1872. It still flashes a white light that is maintained by the United States Coast Guard. The building is used as a park residence but may be viewed from the exterior.*

For a map of Presque Isle Bay: [www.dcnr.state.pa.us/cs/groups/public/documents/document/dcnr\\_003286.pdf](http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/cs/groups/public/documents/document/dcnr_003286.pdf)

Then, we reached the first of the rock breakwaters and the swimming beaches. The breakwaters are huge piles of boulders placed parallel to the shoreline, with spaces between, to lessen beach erosion. Sometimes, we paddled between the beach and the rocks and sometimes on the outside, always watchful not to get too close and scrape. There were dozens of breakwaters. On the beach, where the sand was fine-grained and smooth, sunbathers abounded. The water wasn't yet warm enough for swimming.

Four hours of easy, steady paddling took us past the park's historic lighthouse and the wind turbine to the end of our sojourn on Lake Erie. We landed near Beach No. 1 for our carry-over into Presque Isle Bay, splitting the load for the portage across the narrow neck of the peninsula.

The carry is about ¼ mile but entails crossing the park auto road. I made sure that there was no traffic while my paddling partner toted the canoe on his shoulders. Then, we walked the paved recreational trail several hundred yards and set the canoe into the bay near the Vista 1 Parking Lot.

By now it was late afternoon, and most of the bay's boat anglers were gone. We knew that we wouldn't have time to paddle every shoreline nook on this side of the peninsula, so we took advantage of the flat water and set a straight-line course toward Perry Monument.

The canoe glided quickly across the glittering surface. We marveled at the huge schools of Emerald Shiners scooting away from us through the clear water. Carp basked above weed clusters, and Largemouth Bass and Bluegills were excavating and guarding their nests. Then, we rounded the monument that commemorates the battle of Lake Erie during the War of 1812. The tower stands at the entry to Misery Bay, so-named for the grueling winters Commodore Perry's men suffered at that location.

Soon, we were across that bay, past the buoys at the entrance to Horseshoe Pond and paddling toward the car. Our circumnavigation totaled just over 15 miles, not the most heroic bit of seamanship that Presque Isle Bay has ever seen but a satisfying personal achievement.

If you accept the challenge of paddling a Presque Isle Bay loop, first and foremost, wear your life jacket. This is big and unpredictable water. Watch the weather and act accordingly. Park roads nearly encircle the peninsula, so you can "bail out" and hike back to your car or carry across to the less windy side in many places. Before starting, stop at the ranger station for a map, so you know your options.

If you would like to recreate our route but want to avoid paddling through the shipping channel, park and launch near Beach No. 11, and finish your trip at Horseshoe Pond. Your parking lot is a short walk to the left.

If your plan for a full Presque Isle Bay loop is derailed by rough water, or if you want a shorter loop, try the lagoons. These interior interconnected ponds are usually sheltered from the wind. The launch is near the canoe rental, past Perry Monument. Explore the lagoons, and paddle under the bridge at the end of Long Pond and down to Marina Lake. Reenter Presque Isle Bay and return to your put-in.

Longer canoes and kayaks are best for long distance travel, tracking better and providing more stability. My tandem canoe is a 17-foot, 6-inch ultra-light Kevlar that weighs 43 pounds. It's easily solo-portaged or carried by two people. If kayakers make the loop as a pair, they can help carry each other's watercraft or strap it on a wheeled carrier for the cross-over. ☐