

# Voyageurs

National Park  
Minnesota

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



Public Archives of Canada

Water dominates the Voyageurs National Park landscape. Within its boundaries more than 30 lakes—some huge, some small—fill glacier-carved rock basins. Between these lakes and adjacent rocky knobs and ridges extend bogs, marshes, and beaver ponds. These waters play a major role in your experience at the park. Once you arrive at one of the park's four entry points, you leave your car behind and set out by water, much as the voyageurs traveled in the heyday of the fur trade in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Voyageurs National Park exists to preserve this natural environment, and its native plant and animal life, for the benefit of present and future generations.

As the fur trade expanded westward, it depended heavily upon the voyageurs, or French-Canadian canoeists, who moved beaver and other pelts and trade goods between Montreal and the Canadian Northwest. The route of these adventuresome men, who paddled up to 16 hours per day, became so established that the 1783 treaty ending the American Revolution specified that the international boundary should follow their "customary waterway" between Lake Superior and Lake of the Woods. Today, Voyageurs National Park, established in 1975, adjoins a 90-kilometer (56-mile) stretch of that Voyageurs Highway.

The voyageur's character has been described as daring if not brave, knowledgeable though uneducated. Above all, he was colorful. Understandably, varying accounts of these men's lives exist. Daniel Harmon, a partner in the Northwest Company, wrote of them in 1819: "... the Canadian Voyageurs possess lively and fickle dispositions; and they are rarely subject to depression of spirits of long continuance, even when in circumstances the most adverse. Although what they consider good eating and drinking constitutes their chief good, yet when necessity

compels them to it, they submit to great privation and hardship, not only without complaining, but even with cheerfulness and gaiety. . . . Trifling provocations will often throw them into a rage," Harmon continued, "but they are easily appeased when in anger, and they never harbour a revengeful purpose against those by whom they conceive that they have been injured."

Whether by flattery or other motivations, voyageurs were convinced to risk their lives to advance the fur trade. And risk them they often did. The enemy took the form of rival fur company representatives, unfriendly Indians, or nature's forces. They came to know the country well, and they, along with the Indians and lumberjacks, gave this region the bulk of its place-names, such as Grassy Portage, Lake Kabetogama, and Cutover Island. It is interesting to note that the park's place-names are predominantly water-related. Even today, the ridges and hilltops in Voyageurs National Park bear no names.

The park lies in the southern portion of the Canadian Shield. The ancient sediments that comprise the shield represent some of the oldest rock formations exposed anywhere in the world. Younger rock formations do not appear here. Perhaps they never existed, but more likely glaciation simply removed them. At least four times in the past million years, continental glaciers—ice sheets three kilometers (two miles) thick—bulldozed their way through the area. They removed previous features, leaving mostly level, pock-marked rock up to 2.7 billion years old. Hundreds of ponds, lakes, and streams now nestle in the depressions and some rock surfaces in the park still bear the scrape marks. The glaciers gouged out the lake and river beds and set the stage for vast forests. You might say that the Voyageurs Highway was a gift of the glaciers.

Look out across the landscape here and you will see the elements of the fur trade itself. The waters provided the "highway," fur-bearing animals provided the goods; and the boundless forests provided the materials for the birch-bark canoe, that marvel of environmental adaptation. The canoes were constructed of birchbark, cedar boughs, and cedar or spruce root bindings sealed with pitch. It was a skill developed by the native Americans and readily exploited by early European explorers. The canoes were light, easily navigable, and quickly repaired with native materials. The fur trade was indeed a product of the wilderness and for several generations was the continent's biggest industry, returning investments up to 20-fold. It has been described as a vast empire held together by nothing stronger than birchbark.

Nature's abundance is evident in other ways here. Osprey, eagle, and great blue heron nests occur throughout the park. Be observant and you will likely see kingfishers, mergansers, loons, and cormorants. Since water covers one-third of the surface of the park, aquatic animals predominate. Creating ponds, the beaver provides not only his own habitat, but also the environment needed by aquatic plants. These plants provide food for aquatic insects and some fish. The fish, in turn, support the wide variety of fish-eating birds. Beaver are fare for coyotes and timber wolves.

Perhaps nothing so symbolizes Voyageurs National Park's enduring wilderness character as the presence of its wolves. The park is in the heart of the only region in the continental United States where the eastern timber wolf survives. Wolves are shy and secretive, and contrary to folklore they pose virtually no threat to humans. Their wariness and small numbers make it unlikely that you will see them during a visit, although you might see their tracks in winter. Wolves usually live in packs

of two to twelve and often kill large animals such as deer and moose for food. The timber wolf may cover as much as 60 kilometers (40 miles) in a single night, and can run several kilometers at 50-55 kilometers (30-35 miles) per hour. To hear the wolf's lonesome howl on a moonlit night is a rare wilderness treat.

Winter is a force to be reckoned with here. From spring thaw until freeze-up the voyageurs had six months at most to complete their travel. Their round trip between depots at Grand Portage or Fort William on Lake Superior and the subarctic interior of northwest Canada consumed four or five months. Summer is relatively short here, but winter need not be a time of inactivity. From late December until late March, life's pulse is slowed. Ski travel is often possible as snow blankets both land and lake. And warming temperatures and crusted snow in late winter definitely invite snowshoers. However you travel, proper equipment is a must. Take a compass and map, warm clothes in layers, and carry an emergency survival kit. High winds can spring up quickly and, accompanied by low temperatures, can be dangerous.

When the waterways begin to open in spring, animals and insects stir from a season's rest. Migratory species return to summer in the North. It's one of the best times to observe nature here. Both spring and fall favor those who seek quiet enjoyment of nature's continuous show. For many, the display of fall colors marks a highlight of the North Country year.

The voyageur's canoe has long since gone, but his land remains. Here you can take to the wilderness waterways of this intricate landscape where moose, wolves, bear, and loon still wander and you can sense the spirit that called the voyageur to adventure.



Arnold Bolz



Arnold Bolz

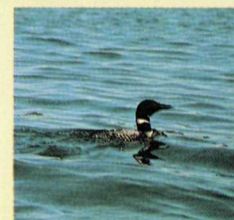
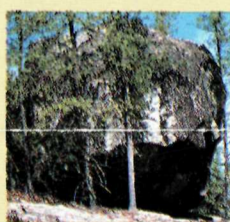


#### Glaciers

Continental ice age glaciers scoured the region at least 4 times, scooping out myriad lakes. Some 30 park lakes occupy glacier-carved rock basins. Glaciers also set the forest conditions and therefore determined what wildlife would thrive here. You can see evidence of glaciers on scraped rock and in large boulders—called "erratics"—seemingly dumped at random in the woods.



Arnold Bolz



Edmund Lee Pugh III

#### Wildlife

Beaver drew Europeans into this vast wilderness. Today the presence of loons and wolves, species intolerant of civilization, attests that wilderness remains. This is the heart of the only area in the contiguous 48 states where eastern timber wolves survive. They pose no threat to humans. You will not likely even see one, except possibly winter tracks.

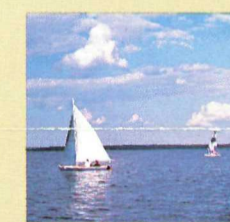


Minnesota Dept. of Natural Resources



#### Recreation

The glaciers also left a wilderness world of water and winter recreation. Canoe and boat camping, sailing, fishing, cross-country skiing . . . many pursuits await you in Voyageurs National Park. So do scenic beauty in spring's profuse explosion and the splendor of fall colors. This landscape speaks the language of recreation, tranquility and beauty all the year round.



## For Today's Voyageur

**To enjoy the park** you should make use of its guided trips, evening programs, and other activities. Programs begin in early June and run through Labor Day. Schedules are posted at park headquarters in International Falls, or ask a park ranger. You are encouraged to get out on the waters and into the wilderness here. This is what Voyageurs National Park is all about.

**Go camping.** Camping in the park takes an unusual form. Scattered throughout the interior of the park are more than 100 individual campsites. Some are remote and require a kilometer or more of portaging or backpacking, but most are boat-in sites near shoreline. They offer great privacy and close proximity to nature. You will treasure such an experience.

**Go fishing.** Northern Minnesota needs no introduction as great fishing country. Walleye, northern pike, trout, and bass fishing here is world renowned. Commercial fishing continues in this region, too.

**Travel the waterways.** Voyageurs' interconnected lakes accommodate all types of watercraft: canoe, houseboat, fishing boat, runabout, sailboat, or cabin cruiser. Radio stations at 800 AM or 1230 AM carry periodic weather reports and forecasts. Or tune in 162.55 Mhz FM for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration weather broadcasts.

**Boaters note.** Obtain and follow U.S. Department of Commerce nautical charts for the waters you will travel. These official charts show water depths, underwater hazards, and aids to navigation. Write the association listed below the map for a list of chart titles. This is important. The lack of prominent topographic landmarks here can be confusing, even for experienced boaters.

**Go hiking.** Trails get you in touch with features of Voyageurs National Park inland of the major lakes. Portage trails were established by the first humans to inhabit these lands after the glaciers retreated. Voyageurs helped wear them too. The National Park Service has begun developing other trails. If you venture off designated trails carry a good map and compass.

**Winter sports** . . . Yes! From Christmas until late March, snow dominates the scenery and directs activities: Cross country skiing through woods and over lakes, and later, as snow crusts, snowshoeing. Camping under clear, starry skies doesn't require the voyageur's fortitude, just proper clothes and equipment. See the winter safety precautions listed below the map.

**Kabetogama.** Find the greatest number and variety of commercial services and facilities adjacent to Voyageurs here. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources operates the Chief Wooden Frog Campground here.

**Crane Lake.** Camping and canoeing opportunities north of Crane Lake are among the best in the park. Whatever your means of travel, resorts and stores here provide complete services. Find motels, service stations, and grocery stores along approach roads and in International Falls and Orr. Hours and services may be seasonal, so check in advance.


**Kettle Falls.** This is a popular day-trip destination. Kettle Falls Hotel is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The hotel opened for business in 1913, a year after completion of the nearby dam that regulate the levels of these lakes.


**Black Bay-Island View.** The open waters of Rainy Lake can be reached from this area. These waters are best for relatively large boats; they can be hazardous for canoes. On summer weekends commercial boat tours are offered here. This presents a good opportunity to enjoy the lakes if you don't have your own craft and are reluctant to take to the waters on your own.

**Kabetogama Narrows and Ash River.** Canoeing opportunities from this area are among the park's best for quiet bays and narrow channels. Six resorts serve this part of the park and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources operates Ash River campground here.


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**Aids to Navigation.** Please learn these important boating markers for your safety and that of others. Boats must comply with Coast Guard safety regulations. If you have questions, ask a park ranger.

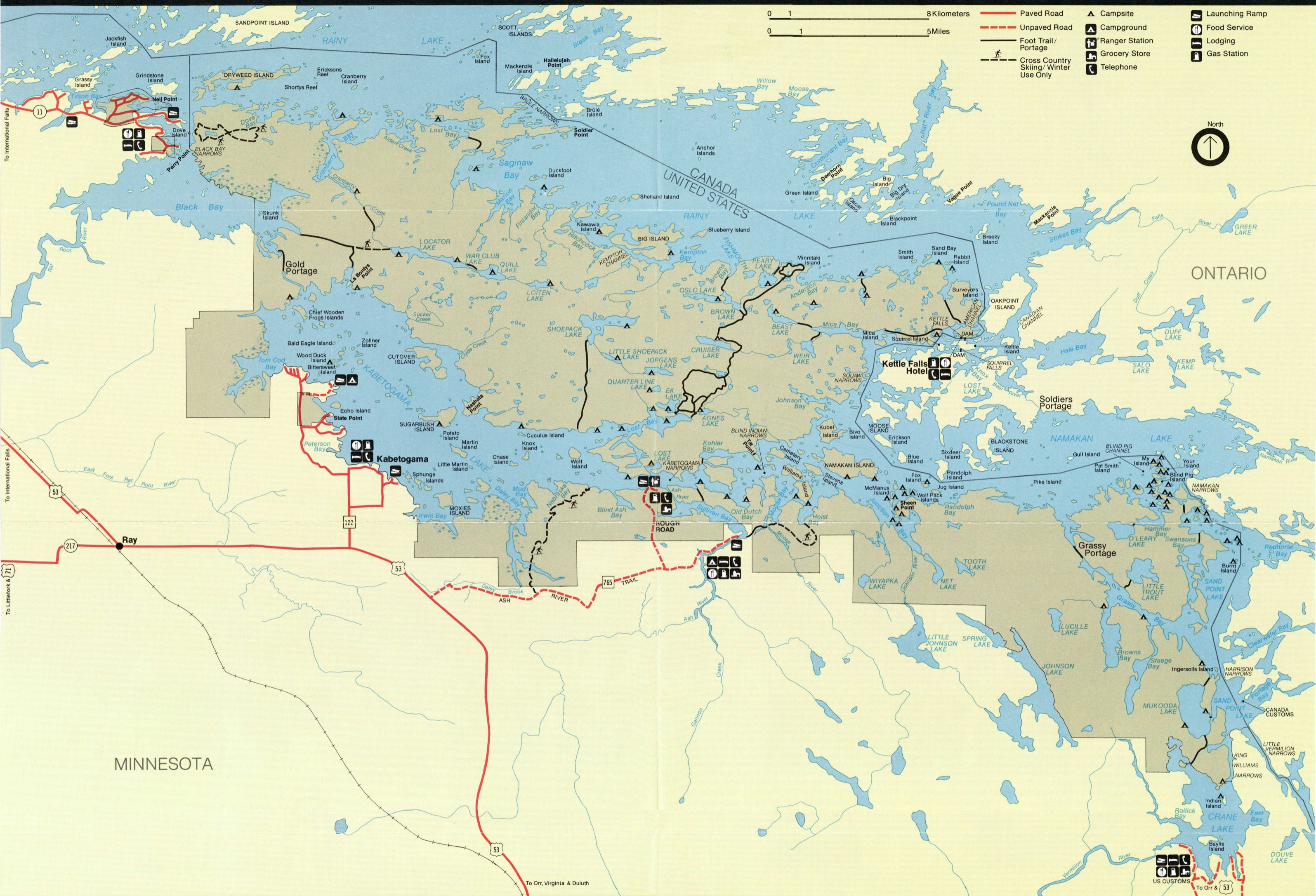
 Diamond shape warns of danger. Cross in diamond means boats must keep out.

 Circled mark means a controlled area. It may carry a speed limit, for example.

 Divers flag warns of the presence of divers, who may be just under the surface.

 Can buoys are black with odd numbers. Keep them to the left when going up-lake.

 Nun buoys are red with even numbers. Keep them to the right when going up-lake.



## Mapping Your Visit

**Getting here.** Surfaced roads approach the park from four points along U.S. 53 between Duluth and International Falls. County Route 23 from Orr leads to Crane Lake at the park's east end. County Route 122 south of International Falls offers access to Lake Kabetogama's south shore. Minnesota Route 11 out of International Falls approaches the national park at

the Black Bay area. County Route 765, the Ash River Trail, takes you to Kabetogama Lake. Hibbing and International Falls provide airline access. Scheduled buses serve points on Route 53. Amtrak serves Duluth.

**Accommodations.** Meals and lodging are available at facilities on the edge of the park. For lists of facilities and car campgrounds write:

Superintendent, Voyageurs National Park, P.O. Box 50, International Falls, MN 56649.

**Please note.** Some lands within the park remain in private ownership, and there are many private cottages. Please respect the rights of these property holders.

**Maps and books.** Reading books and pamphlets and poring over

maps adds anticipation to the enjoyment of your trip to Voyageurs. For a list of available books and topographic maps write: Lake States Interpretive Association, Box 672, International Falls, MN 56649. This non-profit group helps the National Park Service preserve and interpret this park.

**Fishing** in park waters requires a Minnesota fishing license. Fishing

in Canadian waters requires an Ontario license. Obtain and read applicable regulations before you fish. Dispose of fish entrails so that they don't become health hazards or attract animals.

**Bears.** The park is home to black bears. Do not feed them; they are powerful and unpredictable. When camping, store your food where bears can't

get at it. Pack out all trash and garbage that you packed in as supplies.

**Some necessary rules:** Firearms are prohibited. Dogs and cats must be leashed and are not permitted on trails or in the backcountry. Use only dead and down firewood, and check with the National Park Service because in dry seasons fires may be prohibited. Leave all

Indian artifacts or other historical objects alone right where you find them.

**Customs.** Before going ashore in Canada and upon returning to U.S. soil, you must report to customs offices. You and your boat may clear Canadian Customs at Portage Bay on Sand Point Lake and U.S. Customs at Crane Lake public landing.

**Boating Safety.** Before getting underway, know your boat and its operation. Understand and comply with state

## Boating

and federal boating regulations. Pre-sailing checklist: Stay ashore when water is rough. If you are out, seek a sheltered cove and await calm water. Do you have enough fuel for your round trip? Make sure fuel vapors disperse, then start engine. One USCG-approved personal flotation device for each person on craft. Know distress signals and carry signal equipment.

Do not overload boat. Load it low for stability, and do not stand in small boats. Riding on bow of boat prohibited unless it is fitted with bow railing. Know boating "Rules of the Road" and the navigational aids—see top of map.

**Winter Safety.** Travel in groups and be prepared for emergencies. Tell someone your destination, route, and expected return time. Carry matches, first aid kit, and emergency food. Find out about unsafe ice areas and avoid them. Check with the National Park Service for current information.

**Warm clothing,** preferably worn in several

## Winter Safety

light layers, is essential, and you must avoid getting wet. This region experiences extremely low temperatures, often accompanied by high winds. The combination can be deadly for those who are unprepared or those who fail to use common sense.