

APPALACHIAN MOUNTAIN CLUB

Quiet Water

Canoe Guide

Maine

BEST PADDLING LAKES AND PONDS FOR ALL AGES

Alex Wilson and John Hayes

Pocumcus, Junior, and Sysladobsis Lakes

T5 ND BPP and T5 R1 NBPP

MAPS

Maine Atlas: Map 35

USGS Quadrangles: Dark Cove Mountain, Scraggly Lake, Bottle Lake, and Duck Lake

INFORMATION

Physical information:

Pocumcus Lake area: 2,201 acres; maximum depth: 44 feet

Junior Lake area: 3,866 acres; maximum depth: 70 feet

Bottle Lake area: 281 acres; maximum depth: 42 feet

Sysladobsis Lake area: 5,376 acres; maximum depth: 66 feet

Prominent fish species:

Pocumcus Lake: white perch, salmon, and smallmouth bass

Junior Lake: salmon, smallmouth bass, perch, and chain pickerel

Bottle Lake: brook trout, salmon, smallmouth bass, perch, and chain pickerel

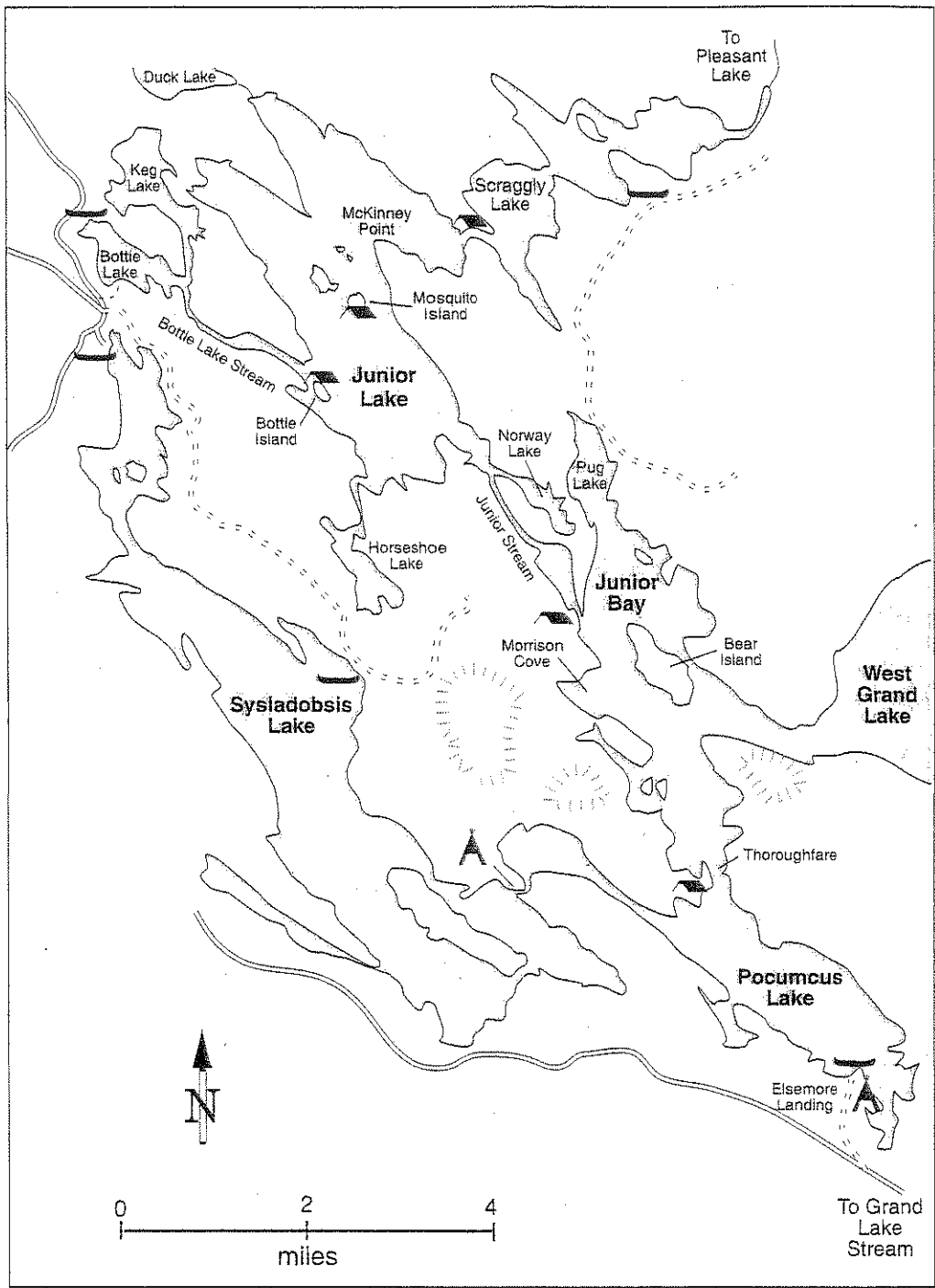
Sysladobsis Lake: salmon, smallmouth bass, perch, and chain pickerel

Fire permits: Maine Forest Service St. Croix River District (207-738-2601) or Central Region Headquarters (207-827-6191). Fire permits required for all campsites except Elsemore Landing.

Outfitting: Sunrise County Canoe Expeditions, Inc., Cathance Lake, Grove, ME 04638; 207-454-7708

Maine Wilderness Camps, RR 1, Box 100, Springfield, ME 04487; 207-738-5052

The loop comprised of Pocumcus, Junior, and Sysladobsis lakes in the heart of eastern Maine's lake country offers one of the best extended quiet-water loop trips in the state, especially when one detours for a few days into Scraggly Lake. These lakes flow into the St. Croix River, which forms the southeastern border between Maine and New Brunswick. Because you can end up where you started, the trip requires just one car. But be aware that these are large lakes; under breezy conditions, large waves can build up quickly, making paddling difficult and, at times, quite dangerous. Always keep your plans flexible and be ready to change them if the conditions prevent you from



paddling on the big lakes. We recommend traveling in parties with at least two canoes for safety.

The ease of this loop trip depends somewhat on water levels. With relatively high water levels (usually up until midsummer), you can paddle from Junior Lake into Systadobsis Lake via Bottle Lake Stream, Bottle Lake, and a half-mile carry into Systadobsis. But with lower water levels the closest take-out on Bottle Lake may be inacces-

sible. In that case, the carry would require either disembarking on someone's waterfront yard (Bottle Lake is more heavily developed than any other part of this trip) or making a much farther carry from the official boat access at the north end. So from midsummer through fall, you might want to plan a different up-and-back trip, rather than making a loop of it. Here we give the description of a loop trip that takes anywhere from two (if you really push it) to five days.

Elsemore Landing on Pocumcus Lake to Junior Lake

Elsemore Landing, near the south end of Pocumcus Lake (pronounced po-COM-ses, and referred to locally as Compass Lake) has a state-run campground where you can leave a car and launch your canoe. Midweek, the campground is pretty nice; on a busy weekend, though, it can become a rowdy madhouse (we returned from a multiday trip on Fourth of July weekend to find cars, RVs, tents, and barbecue grills packed like sardines). During the summer season, a campground host lives in a trailer to the right as you enter the camping area and can tell you the best place to leave your vehicle.

Pocumcus Lake is about five miles long and a mile across at its widest point. Deer Brook Cove, about two miles up on the left shore, is a wonderful cove filled with boggy islands and marshy shorelines to explore. We watched a cow moose browsing on underwater vegetation near the north end of this cove, observed lots of beaver activity, and paddled by a week-old loon chick riding on its parent's back near the entrance to the cove. On the sphagnum islands and floating logs, look for the small reddish leaves of sundew, one of several carnivorous plants found in the area. On a windy day, this cove provides a nice respite from the main lake.

To reach Junior Lake, paddle north through the Thoroughfare. Along the western shore, north of the Thoroughfare, are several interesting islands and a deep cove. To the east you will see the quarter-mile-wide outlet from this lake system into West Grand Lake, which is really too big a lake to paddle enjoyably, except in very calm conditions. Head north between Morrison Cove and Bear Island into Junior Bay.

Near the north end of Bear Island on the western shore, Junior Stream drains Junior Lake. You'll find a great campsite here, with picnic tables, outhouses, and plenty of flat tenting locations. This is a permitted campsite, meaning that you don't need a fire permit. (See Introduction (page ix) for an explanation of fire-permit regulations.) If

you camp here, spend a few hours around daybreak exploring the Junior Bay and Pug Lake shoreline or Junior Stream and Norway Lake; moose frequent these shallow waters and marshy coves. Also watch for otters, deer, loons (seemingly everywhere), and bald eagles.

With favorable weather, you can make the Junior Stream campsite a lunch stop and continue on to Junior Lake, where you will find some island campsites. We chose to continue on when paddling here—and regretted it. Most of the morning we had had a light tail wind, and we wanted to keep taking advantage of it. But by early afternoon, when we got out onto Junior Lake, the wind had picked up considerably. Our two laden canoes (one with precious cargo of four- and seven-year-old daughters) bobbed in the increasingly rough water as we made our way for an island campsite near the center of the lake. We got there all right, but just in time, as the winds picked up even more, increasing the waves to two feet.

Though we did not realize it at the time, the island we chose is named Mosquito Island—with good reason. Two stagnant lagoons on the small island, one at each end, breed a crop of healthy and hungry mosquitoes that become all too apparent as soon as the wind dies down. Bottle Island, where we also camped, farther to the south and a bit west, is far better during mosquito season. Another campsite is found on McKinney Point. On one of the islands just north of McKinney Point, a bald-eagle nest perches in a tall white pine. Be careful not to get too close. Eagle nesting success has been poor in recent years due to dioxin pollution from Maine's paper mills (see page 93); this magnificent raptor needs all the help and protection we can give it.

This island area near McKinney Point has a very wild and remote feel to it. Huge granite boulders dot the undeveloped shoreline. Watch out for boulders lurking just beneath the water's surface; we hung up our canoes pretty thoroughly a few times. From the eastern arm of Junior Lake, you can make a wonderful trip into Scraggly Lake to the east (see the following section). The deep coves extending to the north and Duck Lake extending to the northwest, offer hours—and miles—of exploration.

Another interesting side trip from Junior Lake is on the western shore, south of Bottle Island and the mouth of Bottle Lake Stream: Horseshoe Lake. From a campsite on Bottle Island (the nicest campsite, with a picnic table, is on the north end), paddle south about a mile to the entrance to Horseshoe Lake. The channel into Horseshoe narrows to just a few yards across in places, and a few spots swarmed with mosquitoes, but we loved this little out-of-the-way alcove. On the

western shore, just before the channel widens to form the lake, look for a floating bog. The thick mat of sphagnum moss floats on the water and harbors fascinating plants, including pitcher plant, sundew, bog laurel, leather leaf, and two species of orchid: rose pogonia and calopogon, both in full bloom with pink blossoms at the beginning of July—a real treat to be enjoyed from your canoe, never picked! We watched a deer drink at Horseshoe Lake, and it looked like a great area for moose. There is said to be another eagle nest near Horseshoe Lake, though we did not find it.

Junior Lake to Sysladobsis Lake

To the northwest of Bottle Island is the access stream into Bottle Lake, where you can portage into Sysladobsis Lake. The two-mile marshy stream was beautiful when we visited in 1993, with cattail, pickerelweed, bullhead lily, and many, many stumps of trees from when the area was dammed. Enjoy this area while it is still relatively undeveloped. As part of a land settlement in 1979, the federal government returned extensive tracts of land to the Passamoquoddy and Penobscot Indians—land they claimed had been taken from them illegally. Facing financial difficulty a decade later, the Indians sold large tracts to developers, who in turn are subdividing it into forty-acre tracts. Cottages are beginning to appear on Bottle Lake Stream and parts of



Paddling across Junior Lake.

Junior Lake in an area that until recently was almost totally undeveloped. Fortunately, Maine has fairly strong regulations controlling development next to water, requiring significant setbacks and stringent septic design for all development, even summer cottages.

Just before you paddle into Bottle Lake proper, a channel to the right leads into Keg Lake, which we didn't explore but is supposedly quite nice. Bottle Lake's heavy development provides a glimpse of what much of this area might look like in ten years if the recent pace of development continues. While not as thickly developed as many lakes farther south and west in Maine or in other New England states, Bottle Lake represents the kind of place we prefer to paddle through as quickly as possible.

A developed boat launch exists at the north end, but if you are paddling onto Sysladobsis Lake, a small cove extending to the south provides much closer access. As mentioned above, however, this may not be easily reachable at very low water levels. To find the portage, paddle around a small peninsula (almost an island) and behind a boathouse (gray when we visited). Though not marked or maintained, we are told this is an acceptable access for the half-mile carry to or from Sysladobsis. From the boathouse, walk south on the dirt road a few hundred feet, then bear right. In a few hundred yards, cross a larger gravel road and continue south for another few hundred yards until you see an access stream on the left. You can launch into this access stream or carry down the dirt road next to it and launch on the main lake.

Sysladobsis, or Dobsy, as it is locally known, is a big lake, stretching about nine miles from northwest to southeast and extending about a mile and a half across at its widest. You will become well aware of its size with even a modest breeze from the north or south. We had to buck a strong breeze paddling south from the access at the northern tip.

There is some development along the shores, but nothing like Bottle Lake. Dobsy is still clear and clean. Summer residents pump their drinking water right out of the lake, and anglers catch good-size salmon regularly. You can explore the few coves and inlets along the lake if the weather conditions permit leisurely paddling. We paddled a few hundred yards up Sysladobsis Creek, which drains Upper Sysladobsis Lake, but low water and rapids eventually blocked our way.

Unfortunately, owing to the land settlement mentioned above, few campsites exist along the lake. There is supposed to be one near Cranberry Cove, but we failed to find it. Away from established camp-

sites, finding a place to set up a tent is difficult; the land is rocky and full of hillocks and depressions.

Sysladobsis to Pocumcus Lake and Elsemore Landing

Near the south end of Dobsy, Big Island stretches almost two miles in length on a northwest-southeast axis. As you paddle southeast on the lake, keep to the left of the island (unless you have time to explore around it), passing two points of land with cottages on them. Stick to the shoreline and you will reach the lake outlet at Dobsis Dam and Dennison Portage about three-quarters of a mile from the second point. There is a campsite here (fire permit required) but no outhouses or picnic tables. Accessible by road, this campsite was heavily used and filled with trash when we camped here. The nicest site is by an old chimney.

From the campsite, Pocumcus Lake is an easy carry around the dam. Launch your boat into the stream on the left side of the dam (west). From here, it is about a five-mile paddle back to the campsite at Elsemore Landing. The section through Pocumcus Narrows is particularly nice; the south side is marshy with cattails and stumps of long-dead trees.

Getting There

From Calais, take Route 1 north through Princeton. After passing Lewy Lake on the left, watch for a left-hand turn toward Grand Lake Stream. (If you are coming south on Route 1 from Topsfield, this turn [to the right] is 13.8 miles from the junction of Routes 1 and 6.) In 10.1 miles cross Grand Lake Stream (set your trip odometer here to help with the following directions). Stay on the main road, continuing straight where smaller roads turn off. The road quickly turns to gravel. Bear right at 0.5 mile, following the sign to Elsemore Landing. At 6.6 miles, turn right at another sign for Elsemore Landing, and at 7.4 miles bear right toward the water at the state campground. The campground host usually lives in a trailer parked to the right.

Scraggly Lake (Southern) and Pleasant Lake

T5 R1 NBPP and T6 R1 NBPP

MAPS

Maine Atlas: Maps 35 and 45

USGS Quadrangle: Scraggly Lake

INFORMATION

Scraggly Lake area: 2,758 acres; maximum depth: 42 feet

Prominent fish species: smallmouth bass, white and yellow perch, and chain pickerel; also some salmon and lake trout

Pleasant Lake area: 1,574 acres; maximum depth: 92 feet

Prominent fish species: salmon, lake trout, and brook trout

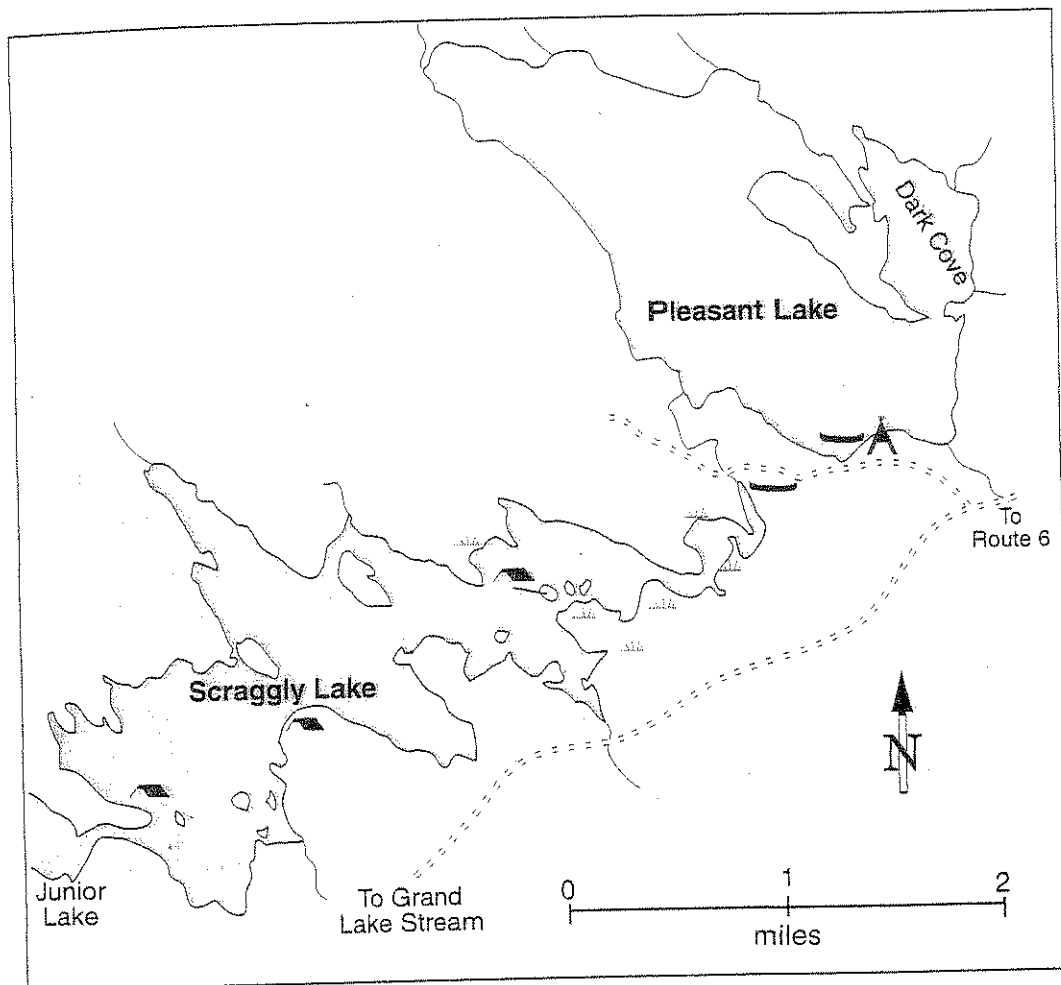
Fire permits: Maine Forest Service, St. Croix River District (207-738-2601) or Central Region Headquarters (207-827-6191)

Outfitting: Maine Wilderness Camps, RR 1, Box 100, Springfield, ME 04487; 207-738-5052. Canoe-trip outfitting, transportation from Bangor airport, and year-round campground.

Scraggly Lake is one of our favorites. Called "southern" in this section to distinguish it from another Scraggly Lake farther north (see page 274), it is accessible either from Pocumcus and Junior lakes to the west and south, or from Pleasant Lake to the north and east (via a portage). The lake is only 3.5 miles long, but the highly varied shoreline extends nearly twenty miles along marshy coves and wild undeveloped islands. Wild and remote, this is the paddler's ideal lake: too shallow for most motorboaters and far enough from road access that you have to do some work to get here.

We paddled into Scraggly as part of a loop trip starting at Elsemore Landing on Pocumcus Lake and extending through Junior and Sysladobsis lakes (see previous section). On that trip, Scraggly makes a wonderful two- or three-day detour. More popular is a one-way trip starting at Maine Wilderness Camps on the northern shore on Pleasant Lake with a portage to the northeastern tip of Scraggly, then on through to Junior Lake and either Pocumcus or West Grand Lake. Maine Wilderness Camps is both a very nice campground and an outfitter that can set you up with gear and shuttle you to a starting or ending point.

Scraggly Lake is a wonderful place for wildlife. Paddling along the northern shore in the first light of morning, we surprised a magnif-



ificent bald eagle that had been feeding at the water's edge. We saw a number of eagles here, including an active nest in a large white pine tree on an island in Junior Lake. Wood ducks, loons, ring-necked ducks, deer, and a huge snapping turtle were among our other observations here. During a morning paddle from Scraggly up into Pleasant Lake, we watched a playful family of otters in the glass-smooth water. Though we did not happen to see moose while here, it appears to be superb moose habitat. You may also see common terns here; we suspect they nest on large boulders protruding from the lake that are visible from the Scraggly Island campsite.

A number of designated campsites dot Scraggly Island. The nicest site is a permitted site, meaning that you do not need to obtain a fire permit to use it. The other two sites shown are permit sites. The island's camping areas have fire rings, picnic tables, and lots of space for tents. Unlike most sites in the area, you'll also find outhouses here. During a visit at the end of June we found surprisingly few mosquitoes on Scraggly Island, though some of the surrounding

marshy areas were quite buggy. From this island, a particularly interesting area to explore is the marshy area east and south of the island. If the water isn't too low, you can find a passage around the large marsh, though by midsummer passage would almost certainly be blocked by low water.

A Side Trip to Pleasant Lake

If you want to go from Scraggly Lake up into Pleasant Lake, paddle to the eastern tip and take your boat out at a steep gravel ramp (too steep for trailers). Carry up to the road (about fifty feet) then to the right (east). You can carry all the way to the state campground, where there is a launch onto Pleasant Lake (about a half-mile), or you can cut over to Pleasant Lake on a portage trail. We had a two-wheeled portage cart so we stuck to the road. The trail seemed to be poorly marked and hard to follow due to logging activity in recent years.

The state campground on Pleasant Lake is a stark contrast to the relaxing feel of Scraggly Lake; when we visited, it was crowded with thirty or forty small trailers and badly littered. Used by a heavy-drinking, hook-and-bullet crowd, the campground is known locally as "Rowdyville." When we launched here at around 7:00 A.M. most of the camp was still sleeping it off. Apparently, the state may begin clamping down on long-ignored regulations that limit the length of stay here (common practice today is to park a trailer here for the summer and use the lake as a weekend retreat). There is no charge to camp here, and if vehicles were somehow kept out this would be a great spot.

The best area of Pleasant Lake to explore by canoe is Dark Cove. Hundreds of boulders sticking out of the water and hiding just beneath the surface near the mouth of the cove effectively keep motorboats out. The water is very clear, and you will see thousands of fresh-water mussels sticking out of the sand on the bottom. White cedar is the dominant tree here, along with balsam fir, spruce, and white pine. Alders, bog laurel, sweet gale, and other northern species grow in profusion along the shore. We found a very pleasant campsite (unmarked on maps) near the north end, nestled beneath a grove of red pines.

At the north end of the main lake is Maine Wilderness Camps, which seems to be a good private campground with tenting and trailer sites as well as cabins. Owner Terry McGrath also provides canoe outfitting and shuttling service to area lakes and rivers. Those wish-

ing to enjoy some wilderness canoeing but not a lot of driving, can even arrange for shuttling from the bus station or airport in Bangor.

Getting There

As mentioned, there are several options for getting to Scraggly Lake. You can launch your canoes at Elsemore Landing on Pocumcus Lake (for access directions, see page 159) and paddle north through Junior Lake into Scraggly. Plan at least a day to get to Scraggly; in windy conditions it may take longer. Be very careful paddling on Pocumcus and Junior lakes in windy conditions. These are big lakes with potentially dangerous conditions.

Alternatively, you can drive to Pleasant Lake and begin your trip there. If you are coming from Pleasant Lake, you might be more comfortable leaving a vehicle at Maine Wilderness Camps (there may be a small fee) than at the state campground. If you choose to leave your car at the campground, you can drive to the eastern tip of Scraggly, unload your gear, then drive back to the campground to park. A high-ground-clearance four-wheel-drive vehicle is recommended if you want to drive in; we have not tried it.

To reach Maine Wilderness Camps by car, take I-95 through Bangor to Exit 55 (Lincoln). Follow Route 6 east for approximately 34 miles through Carroll and across the Washington County line. Continue on Route 6 for 4.5 miles past the county line, and turn right at the sign for Maine Wilderness Camps. Follow the private road for 3.5 miles to the campground and shores of Pleasant Lake.