

POSTCARD FROM MINNESOTA

A great spot to watch 'em like a hawk

Angela Frucci., Special to The LA Times
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Minnesota's western Lake Superior region is a land of contradictions. Duluth first appears over the horizon, a gray speck of factories and silver smoke on the shoreline, an ironic gateway to the north shore of Lake Superior, a place known for its untrammelled and pristine beauty. In this part of the world, Lake Superior has a reputation for being a fierce and untamed place. Stoic Duluthians know its calm surface is all facade — this seemingly endless body of waveless water can surprise without warning when ferocious storms whip the water into 26-foot waves.

The greatest Great Lake? The moody north shore is beautiful in a stark, majestic way. Here, the sky converges with the water, and then the water with the land, distinguished only by giant ships that float across the horizon. For 25 miles of the most dreamlike scenery in the U.S., take the north shore scenic drive (Highway 61), from Duluth to Two Harbors. The water of Lake Superior has a clean, focused feeling, but its cold temperature is deceptively dangerous and as unforgiving as raptor's talons.

Good, good migrations

In that vein, Duluth's Hawk Ridge Nature Reserve sits at the tip of Lake Superior, a place where grand concentrations of raptors arrive every fall — 94,000 in an average season. The ridge is like a super highway for southbound birds coming from Canada, Alaska and the Arctic. From August to November, the ridge is one of the most spectacular, colorful spots to view fall raptor migration in North America. Migrating birds reluctant to fly across the lake wing it southwest along the coast, often gliding and riding thermals and updrafts. The reserve advises that hawk-watching is best during the middle of the day. Raptors generally begin flying around 8 a.m.

Other outdoor activities

Despite the 44-degree water temperatures, kayaking is all the rage in the summer. Midnight Sun Adventure Co. lets you paddle out from Canal Park; (218) 727-1330, <http://www.midnightsunsports.com>. For downhill skiers, Spirit Mountain is right in Duluth and overlooks Lake Superior; (800) 642-6377, <http://www.spiritmt.com>. The city's cross-country ski trail system is packed with 27 miles of groomed cross-country ski trails; <http://www.ci.duluth.mn.us/city/parksandrecreation>.

Back in town

Go to the Canal Park Pier to watch foreign freighters pass under the Aerial Lift Bridge and into Duluth's harbor. Also, check out historic Glensheen Mansion, the San Simeon of Duluth. Only 10 minutes from Hawk Ridge, it's a must for those interested in Duluth's historic past, as well as a famous double murder that continues to intrigue. Tours run seven days a week except in winter, when they are run on weekends; \$12, call for times. 3300 London Road; (218) 726-8910, <http://www.glensheen.org>.

Where to stay

South Pier Inn (on the canal) is next to Duluth's famous Aerial Lift Bridge. It's convenient to Hawk Ridge. Freighters from all over the world pass. Waterfront suites offer gas fireplaces, whirlpool and private balcony. Rooms from \$89. 701 Lake Ave. S.; (800) 430-7437, <http://www.southpierinn.com>. Try Comfort Suites Canal Park if you'd like something that caters to families but is still close to shops and restaurants. Rooms from \$89. 408 Canal Park Drive; (800) 517-4000, <http://www.choicehotels.com>.

Where to eat

Historic Fitger's Brewhouse Brewery and Grille is downtown Duluth's best beer house. Eleven handcrafted beers are usually available, and seven are seasonal — \$2.50 a pint during happy hour. Try the popular meatless wild rice burger, about \$9. 600 E. Superior St., (218) 279-2739, <http://www.brewhouse.net/2005>. Lake Avenue Cafe offers a multi-ethnic/eclectic of a menu as you'll find in Duluth, and a decent wine list. Main courses from \$12. 394 Lake Ave. South (in Canal Park); (218) 722-2355, <http://www.lakeavenuecafe.com>. For the top hippie breakfast-cappuccino-scones in town, good lunches, all in a warm atmosphere, go to Amazing Grace Bakery, in Canal Park. Lunches from \$5. 394 S. Lake Ave., (218) 723-0075, <http://www.amazinggracebakery.com>.

Getting there

From LAX, Northwest offers connecting service to Duluth (change of planes). Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$446.

For more information

To learn more about dining, lodging, charter fishing and other outdoor activities around western Lake Superior, call (800) 438-5884, or see www.visitduluth.com.