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Sanctuary ^{of the} Great Lakes

Adventure



*Kayak, Snorkel,
Free-Dive*

Shallow Shipwrecks

Exploring Shallow Shipwrecks



Did you know that there are nearly 200 discovered shipwrecks in the protected Lake Huron waters of Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary? Also known as “Shipwreck Alley”, Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary’s underwater graveyard includes a vast variety of vessels; ranging from 1800’s wooden schooners to modern day steel freighters. Unpredictable weather, murky fog, sudden winds, and rocky shoals contributed to the loss of these great ships.

Unlike ocean shipwrecks that become eroded in the salty water, the cold, fresh water of Lake Huron keeps the ships well preserved, and Thunder Bay’s deep water wrecks remain unchanged for decades. Divers find many with masts still standing and passengers’ personal possessions still on board. Pieces of shallow wrecks lay nestled in the sand along the Lake Huron coast or just below the surface of crystal clear water. Here are seven of the most accessible shipwrecks for snorkelers and kayakers to explore along the Alpena area shoreline:

1. AMERICAN UNION

GPS: *N45°21.412' W83°35.368'*

Location: off the coast of Thompson’s Harbor State Park. Thompson’s Harbor State Park can be found by following highway US-23 about 25 miles north of Alpena. Follow the park entrance along Trailhead Road to the boat launch. The American Union is marked by a bouy.

Depth: 10 ft.

Paddle Distance from shore: 2 miles

Wreck Length: 185 Feet

Beam: 25 Feet

Gross Tonnage: 543

Cargo: Unknown

Built: 1862 by Ira Lafrinier at Cleveland, Ohio

Wrecked: May 6, 1894

Description: Larger than the typical schooner of its time, American Union’s deep draft got it in trouble more than once. When rounding Presque Isle in a heavy sea, the ship ran up on the rocks at Thompson’s Harbor and quickly broke apart. Its remains are now scattered and flattened on the lake bottom but are easily viewable to kayakers and snorkelers.



Above: A handful of shallow wrecks are easily accessed off the shore of the City of Alpena making it an ideal destination for snorkeling fun with a Stand Up Paddleboard for transportation.

Left: A group prepares for a light-assisted night dive of the Shamrock shipwreck in Lake Huron just off the coast of Thomson Beach in the City of Alpena. Safety always comes first with water activities, so snorkeling in groups of two or more is recommended. Photo courtesy Blake Olsen.

2. ALBANY

GPS: N45°19.396' W83°27.508'

Location: Albany Bay is just south of Presque Isle Harbor. A trailhead behind Presque Isle Cemetery leads you to the beach after a ¾ mile hike.

The Albany is marked by a bouy.

Depth: 4 ft.

Paddle Distance from Shore: 3/4 mile

Wreck Length: 202 Feet

Beam: 29 Feet

Gross Tonnage: 669

Cargo: Provisions

Launched: 1846 by C.L. Gager in Detroit, Michigan

Wrecked: November 26, 1853

Description: The steamer Albany, carrying 200 passengers, provisions, and supplies, went ashore during a storm at Presque Isle. The passengers had a horrible night, but all were safely landed before dark the following day. The wreck was stripped of its furniture and abandoned for the season. The primary wreckage consists of the lower bilge about 106' in length and features massive centerline and bilge keelson, with rider keelsons and standing knees machinery support.



Sue Peterman kayaks over the Portland shipwreck off Besser Natural Area beach near Bell Bay. The Portland is a popular wreck for beginning snorkel enthusiasts as it lies in very shallow water and can be reached by swimming from the beach at Besser Natural Area.

3. PORTLAND

GPS: N45°14.929' W83°24.450'

Location: Bell Bay-Besser Natural Area. Take US-23 north of Alpena to Grand Lake Rd, turn right at the first intersection (look for the sign board). Continue following Grand Lake Rd to Besser Natural Area turn off (look for the DNR signs on the right side of the road). Park in the gravel lot and follow the foot trail to the beach. Follow the shore to the north. The wreck is located 250 ft. offshore to the northeast, and marked by a buoy.

Depth: 8 ft.

Paddle Distance from shore: 250 ft.

Wreck Length: 150 Feet

Beam: 24 Feet

Gross Tonnage: 250

Cargo: Salt

Built: 1863 by Asa Wilcox at Pillar Point, New York

Wrecked: October 13, 1877

Description: When wooden schooners run aground they are often quickly torn apart by waves, currents and ice. Such is the case of the Portland lost at Besser Bell. The bilge and starboard side rest in shallow water, while the stern and portions of the portside are located in a lagoon now separated from Lake Huron by a buildup of sand and rock.

4. SHAMROCK

GPS: N45° 03.077' W83° 26.052'

Location: In Thunder Bay, just off the coast of the City of Alpena. The Shamrock is located northeast of the Blair Street Pier, and straight out from Thomson Beach (parking near shoreline available), and is marked by a buoy.

Depth: 11 ft.

Paddle Distance: .42 miles from Blair St. Pier

Wreck Length: 146 Feet

Beam: 30 Feet

Gross Tonnage: 403

Cargo: Lath

Launched: 1875 by Bower and Cash at St. Clair, Michigan

Wrecked: June 24, 1905

Description: The Shamrock was built as the schooner barge John W. Hanaford and reconstructed as a steam lumber carrier in 1904. It was bound from Midland, Ontario to Toledo with a cargo of lath when it encountered a furious gale on the open lake. The ship sprung a leak and became waterlogged, but the lath cargo kept it afloat until it was beached at Black River, MI. The abandoned vessel was later towed to Alpena by the steamer City of Holland and left near the Alpena harbor. The machinery was later removed, but many interesting structural features, including a large propeller, can still be seen on the wreck.

5. HARVEY BISSELL

GPS: N45° 03.287' W83° 25.603'

Location: Lies in Lake Huron's Thunder Bay just out from the City of Alpena Boat Harbor and Thomson Beach (parking lot at boat harbor open to public, and along US-23 at Thompson Park), and is marked by a buoy.

Depth: 12 ft.

Paddle Distance from Shore: .55 miles from Thomson Beach

Wreck Length: 162 Feet

Beam: 33 Feet

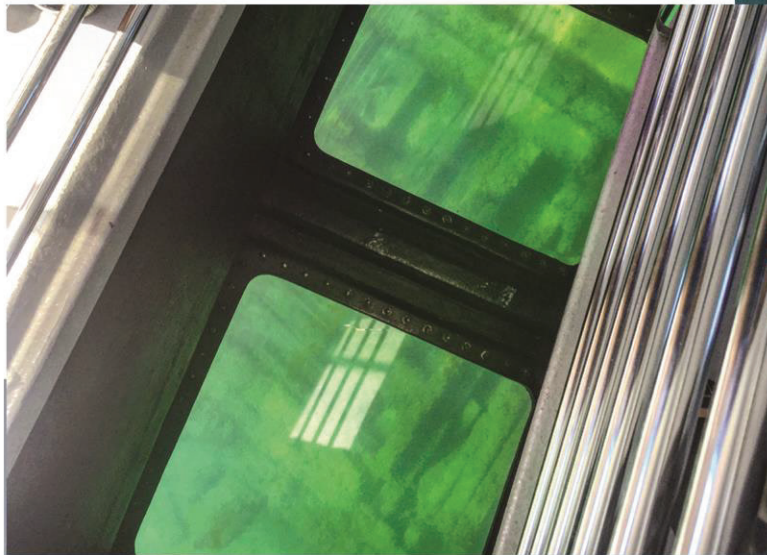
Gross Tonnage: 496

Cargo: None

Launched: 1866 by Little at Toledo, Ohio

Wrecked: November 24, 1905

Description: The Harvey Bissell went through many changes during the four decades that it sailed the Great Lakes. Originally rigged as a barkentine, it was made a three-masted schooner in 1874, and later cut down to a two-masted towbarge. Like most of its contemporaries, the ship suffered many accidents during its long career. At 39, the Bissell was wrecked for the last time, between Thunder Bay Island and Presque Isle. Three weeks later it was salvaged and towed to Alpena to be dismantled and abandoned in the outer harbor. The ship's remains lie in the shallows, flattened but nearly complete. Three mast steps can be seen on the heavy keelsons.



6. JOHN F. WARNER

GPS: N45° 03.050' W83° 26.128'

Location: Lies in Thunder Bay between Blair Street Pier (parking near shoreline) and the City of Alpena Boat Harbor (parking lot open to public), and is marked by a buoy.

Depth: 9 ft.

Paddle Distance from Shore: .35 miles from Blair St. Pier

Wreck Length: 126 Feet

Beam: 26 Feet

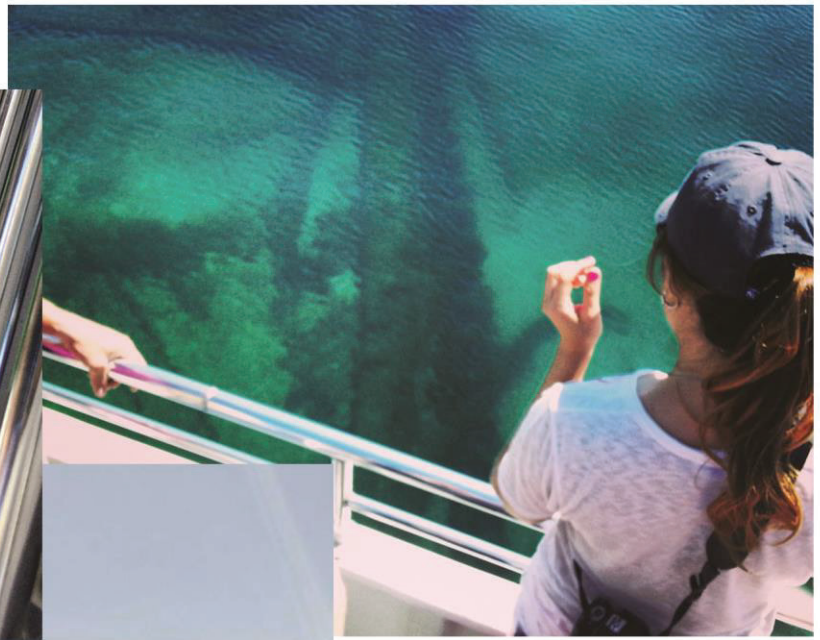
Gross Tonnage: 200

Cargo: Lumber, Lath

Launched: 1855 by Quayle and Martin at Cleveland, Ohio

Wrecked: October 13, 1890

Description: The John F. Warner spent several years trading between the Great Lakes and European ports like Greenwich and Liverpool, England and Glasgow, Scotland, carrying lumber and staves overseas and pig iron on the return trips. After 1860, it stayed closer to home, engaged in the booming lumber trade. The schooner met its end at Alpena, Michigan. Anchored off the river mouth, the anchor chain was parted by heavy seas and the ship was driven ashore near the lighthouse. Continuous buffeting by the waves soon broke the vessel in half. The cargo was removed a few days later, and the wreck was abandoned south of the harbor where it lies today.



Above: You can see the wrecks from the Lady Michigan glass-bottom boat. Get tickets at AlpenaShipwreckTours.com.

Left: If your plan is to go below the surface, even for a moment, you must use a dive flag (pictured). This alerts passing boaters that someone is in the water and may not be visible from the surface.



7. BAY CITY

GPS: *N45° 03.369' W83° 25.605'*

Location: Lies in Thunder Bay just outside of the City of Alpena Boat Harbor and Thomson Beach in Lake Huron (parking lot open to public), and is marked by a buoy.

Depth: 12 ft.

Paddle Distance from Shore: .55 miles from Thomson Beach

Wreck Length: 146 Feet

Beam: 29 Feet

Gross Tonnage: 306

Cargo: None

Launched: 1857 by Augustus Tripp at Saginaw, Michigan

Wrecked: November 29, 1902

Description: Originally brig-rigged, the Bay City was cut down to a schooner barge after it burned at Detroit, MI in 1869. No stranger to the dangers of the Great Lakes, Bay City was over the years beached, dismantled, burned, had its stern washed away, and was repaired many times over. The schooner was finally abandoned after a gale drove it against the piers at Alpena. No longer worth repairing, it was abandoned in place.

Friends dive in for a fun snorkel over a shallow wreck off the coast of Alpena in Lake Huron. Much of the wood from ship remains in near pristine condition due to the cold fresh water of Lake Huron. Photo courtesy Paul Gerow.

Wrecks at a Glance

1. American Union

Depth: 10 ft. Distance from Shore: 2 miles

2. Albany

Depth: 4 ft. Distance from Shore: .75 miles

3. Portland

Depth: 8 ft. Distance from Shore: 250 ft.

4. Shamrock

Depth: 11 ft. Distance from Shore: .42 miles

5. Harvey Bissell

Depth: 12 ft. Distance from Shore: 162 ft.

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Left photo: Russ Green snorkels over the Albany, photo courtesy David Ruck, Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary; Top Right photo: You never know what you'll find when snorkeling!, photo courtesy Casey Stutzman. Bottom Right photo: Free diving opens new doors for underwater exploration. Casey Stutzman free dives the Montana.

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