

Alone in the Middle of Lake Michigan with Just a Compass and Eyes I Cannot Trust

(Jim Dreyer's account of his August 6-8, 2024, attempt to swim self-sufficiently 82.9 miles across Lake Michigan from Grand Haven, Michigan, to Milwaukee, Wisconsin)



Jim Dreyer swimming from Michigan for Wisconsin on August 6, 2024

Photo: Jon Krohmer

In the end, I believe it was something as simple as two AA batteries that prevented me from successfully completing a self-sufficient swim across Lake Michigan.

It was an accident, but it was my fault. This is a tough pill to swallow.

Things were going so well. The weather gave me the window of opportunity I was looking for. It was a gift.

Early in the second day, at about one-third of the way across the lake, my *Raven Strategic* team came out from Michigan in the 40' *Knot Balanced* rescue vessel to find and check on me. We were all whooping it up, as I was on a pace to complete the swim in perhaps as little as 60 hours (well ahead of the estimated 72 hours). All of us believed 100% that there was no way I was not going to make it.

Then, sometime within two hours after their visit, it happened.

The batteries in the GPS on my supply craft were dying. I got into my dry bag, found my bag of AA replacement batteries, and carefully placed it inside the supply craft to my left. Turning to my right, I removed the old batteries, and then turned again to my left to get two new batteries from the bag. THE BAG OF BATTERIES WAS GONE!

I tore that supply craft apart looking for them, but to no avail. Somehow the bag of batteries must have been pitched overboard.

I was now faced with continuing the swim without ever truly knowing where I was. As before, I would continue to navigate using the compass on my wrist, the direction of the waves, and the sky when it was clear. However, I would no longer have the luxury of checking my position on the GPS when feeding and making course corrections.

"I can still do this," I thought.

I followed the sun as it got lower in the western sky and continued to swim toward the glow after it set. As the second night set in, my plan was to follow the brightening glow of Milwaukee on the horizon and be guided by the stars in the clear sky.

As I had hoped, the stars and constellations were vivid when they first appeared to me. The north sky was clearly marked by the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, and Polaris. That brightest glow in the western sky had to be Milwaukee.

Now, I am well aware that I experience wild hallucinations during the second night of a continuous swim. I train for this so I can discern between what is real and what is not real. Logic must often overrule the information your eyes are feeding your brain.

The Milky Way streaked across the sky brightly that night. Now, suddenly, the Milky Way appeared to fill the ENTIRE sky, 360 degrees, from horizon to horizon. This vision was actually quite beautiful, but I would have enjoyed it a lot more if it were not completely obscuring the constellations from which I was navigating. I knew the full-sky Milky Way was not real, but that did not help me see the real constellations.

To make the sky a little more entertaining, there were a multitude of glowing, squiggly lines, (which looked like glowing, flying snakes), rotating clockwise all along the horizon in 360 degrees. Other lights would also continuously appear, move around, and disappear in the sky and on the water.

The night sky would no longer be of any help to me, but I could still see the glow of Milwaukee through all the stars of the Milky Way and through the glowing snakes. So, I kept following the light.

Then, to my total dismay, the glow of Milwaukee began to dissipate. I stopped and looked around desperately and found another bright glow in a slightly different direction. So, I began chasing that light. Then, that glow also began to dissipate. Once again, I found another bright glow, changed directions, and pursued that light. This happened over and over again ... one false start after another. Oddly, my compass seemed to confirm I was going in the right direction each time, which makes absolutely no sense.

At this level of hallucinating, were my compass readings also hallucinations?

It was a lost night both literally and figuratively. I was lost in the middle of Lake Michigan. From sundown to sunrise, I mostly swam in circles and made almost no forward progress. What a lot of wasted effort!

At one point, late into the night, after reaching the apex of frustration, I let out a primal scream with all the voice I could muster. I followed that by stating out loud, "I can't go down this way ... lost in the lake because I lost a couple of batteries!"

The primal scream and audible statement must have given me some resolve. After the lowest of lows, I now thought to myself, "The sun will come up soon and I can still get back in the game."

For the rest of the night, I tried to make light of the hallucinations and even enjoy them.

I remember seeing a freighter. The freighter may or may not have been real, but I can tell you that its actions were definitely not real. The freighter would shoot ahead like a rocket ship and then shoot backwards just as quickly. It kept moving forward and backward across the water in this manner at light speed.

Then, there was the wall. This may have been kind of symbolic. A large wall suddenly rose up from Lake Michigan right in front of me. I could see it vividly. It was made of large steel girders with a metal mesh in between. It's as if some force was saying, "You will not pass."

I saw the wall while I was taking nutrition. I grabbed my flashlight and shined it on the wall. I figured the hallucination would dissipate when shining a light on it. Quite to the contrary. In

the light, the wall looked as real as anything I have ever seen. So, I learned something. You CAN shine a light on a hallucination.

I swam up to the wall and stuck my hand right through it. It was like a horror movie where ghosts pass through walls. So, I just swam through it and continued to follow the latest glow in the sky posing as Milwaukee.

When the sun came up, I was rejuvenated. Keeping the sun in the east at my back, I adjusted my course, which seemed to be confirmed by my compass. Physically, I felt great, and while I didn't count my strokes, I believe I really picked up my pace again. I was ready to put the lost night behind me and make some real progress again!

A little before noon on that third day, *Knot Balanced* pulled up beside me with my team. It was great to see them! I explained to them what had happened, which answered their questions about why I swam in circles all night. They confirmed that I was now swimming in a straight line again, but it was a devastating shock when they also told me I was swimming 90 degrees in the wrong direction all day. Somehow, I was swimming due north while keeping the rising sun to my back and maintaining a westerly heading on my compass. How could this be?!

Tim Webb, my paramedic, told me how he has seen sleep deprived athletes in adventure races stomp their compass into the ground because they are so sure it is wrong. I understand.

Then my team delivers the most devastating news. While they estimate that I have swum about 60 miles, the fact that I have made virtually no forward progress since sundown the previous evening means that I am still in Michigan waters, about 5 miles from the halfway point. What a blow! I should have been in the home stretch, well into Wisconsin waters with about 23 miles to go. Instead, I had 47 miles to go, and the weather window would soon close.

Overnight into the 4th day, there would be 9-foot waves in my face directly out of the west. Pulling the weight of my supplies, this current would have me on a treadmill.

The decision on whether to continue was ultimately up to me, but having a team of sound minds to reason with was a huge asset to have at a time when my brain was mush. I continued to hallucinate while discussing my dilemma. All team members were in agreement that the group of freighters I saw off to our left were not real.

The reality was that I was a little less than halfway across the lake after already swimming 60 miles. Yes, I would have batteries in my GPS now, but I was facing a third night with a worsening mental state. Waves would turn into my face and build to 9 feet. I was halfway through day 3 and I could easily only be halfway through my swim ... or worse. This translates to a swim of well over 100 miles and 100 hours.

While this news was demoralizing, I felt good physically and thought I still had a chance to survive the beating promised for the rest of the swim. However, there would certainly be a

fourth night ... possibly a fifth. It was hard to imagine how my brain could have survived that, when I was already having such wild hallucinations and difficulty in processing thoughts. Swimming is second nature to me, but would there come a time when my brain would stop telling me to roll my head out of the water to breathe?

The thing that cemented the decision to get pulled from the water, was the fact that in 9-foot waves, my rescue team would have to rely on the U.S. Coast Guard to rescue me. We all knew that success was now a long shot and the need for rescue was likely if I continued. The odds were high that the U.S. Coast Guard would be called into action.

I did not want to call upon the U.S. Coast Guard for rescue on the taxpayer's dollar ... especially when the purpose of the swim is to raise funds for the [**U.S. Coast Guard's Chief Petty Officers Association**](#). Just as I could not let that happen in last summer's aborted self-sufficient swim attempt from Milwaukee, I could not let that happen in this summer's swim from Grand Haven.



Jim Dreyer discusses his dilemma with his rescue team in Lake Michigan on August 8, 2024. Photo: Jon Boeve

Will I try again?

I definitely want to ... but when? I have other commitments, not the least of which is directing the [*Edmund Fitzgerald Memorial Swim*](#), which I am dedicated to in 2025. I can promise you that my mind is working on it.

I said prior to this swim that I have put my trust in God as I attempt to find my way alone across Lake Michigan. Not to be misunderstood, my faith is not conditional on success, avoiding hardship, or even survival. I have faith that I am doing what I have been called upon to do, and as long as I follow that path, good will come from the swim regardless of the result.

That said, I still vote for success. 😊

NOTE: I have been and am still working with my partner, **Vuzix Smart Swim**, to address my needs for self-navigating across Lake Michigan. There is still work to be done in developing an external battery that is submersible and has enough capacity to last for a 90-mile swim. Just prior to the swim, it was decided it would be best to use a wrist compass and GPS on my supply craft in lieu of wearing the smart goggles, which still had some bugs to work out with the external battery.

Getting lost in the middle of Lake Michigan after losing the use of my GPS underscores the importance of being able to adapt the amazing *Vuzix Smart Swim* technology for my purposes. I believe *Vuzix Smart Swim* would play an integral role in any future attempt to swim self-sufficiently across Lake Michigan.

~ Jim Dreyer
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