



- | | |
|-------------|---------|
| Light House | ☼ |
| Boardwalk | — |
| Buildings | ■ |
| Footpath | |
| Blind | □ |
| Mowed Area | - - - - |

Machias Seal Island

MACHIAS SEAL ISLAND

by Paula Butler, Belmont

Machias Seal Island--the Contested Island*--has served as a sentinel at the south end of the Bay of Fundy since the establishment of a lighthouse in 1832. Before that time, this rock (barren except for a highland meadow in summer) was a mariner's nightmare of sudden fog banks, high seas and hidden rocky shoals. The Harbour Seal, for which this island was probably named, occurs only at a nearby shoal, North Rock. Although today's journey is quite safe, trips to the island are cancelled without notice due to unexpected wind changes or a possible dangerous landing because of ground swells, strong currents and surf.

The meadow area of the island contains a variety of plant life: asters, wild parsleys, docks, grasses, sedges, and many other herbs. This island, like many others in the Machias Bay area, was used for cattle and sheep grazing as well as limited farming. Some of these islands were strategic in the naval maneuvers during the American Revolution. The first naval encounter of that war was in Machias Bay when the villagers of Machias beached the British cutter Margareta.

Most birders and photographers are attracted to Machias Seal Island to observe Common Puffins (Fratercula arctica) at close range. Common Puffins and Razorbills (Alca torda) seem to invite us not only to watch them but to take delight in posing. Two blinds are provided overlooking the rocky nesting area. The puffins arrive in late April and remain in the water until they receive a mysterious signal; then, in one large flock, they settle into their nesting sites. The female makes a simple nest of dead plant material in a sheltered hole among the granite boulders. She then lays a single egg which is incubated by both parents. The peak of the hatch occurs around mid-June and the diligent feeding by both parents continues for over six weeks. Adults and young are present until mid-August. About 800 pairs of Common Puffins currently nest. The Razorbill selects similar nesting sites and also lays a single egg in a crevice or under an overhanging boulder. There are approximately 40 pairs of this species present. Scientists are unable to explain the decline of the Razorbill and suspect sea pollution by toxic chemicals or intensive commercial fishing pressure. Since they have been eliminated from most of their traditional nesting places, author Franklin Russell in his book The Sea has Wings suggests they could not compete against the aggressive hunting of murre and puffins. He comments, "Last of all, the Razorbill most closely resembles the Great Auk, so perhaps he shares that extinct bird's inflexibility of temperament. Unable to adapt, he remains a vestige of another age."

The Arctic Tern (Sterna paradisaea) nests throughout the island, but to the visitor they all seem to be where the passengers disembark. The warning to wear a large hat is no joke. These militant, screaming birds dive at you repeatedly and may score several direct hits. It appears that all 2,100 nesting pairs are in action at once! Nesting activities are well established by the end of May. There are usually two eggs in an exposed ground nest. They are incubated by both parents who fiercely defend them from avian predation. Bad weather, which is not unusual in June, accounts for the demise of many young. The young are fed small fish and insects and are airborne by the middle of July and leave by the end of August for Antarctica and the

Indian Ocean.

It is estimated that 100 pairs of Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) also nest here. It quickly becomes apparent to the observer, the points of identification between them and Arctic Terns.

A member of the Canadian Wildlife Service will guide you around the island and his knowledge of natural history will make your visit more meaningful. He carefully guides visitors around ground nests, but you never feel restricted in your explorations. Because Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*) is nocturnal, your guide might remove one from its burrow for close examination. The petrels use the same burrows for many years, the female laying a single egg which takes 42 days to hatch. Both parents share in feeding young, which do not fledge until well into September. The food of the petrel is obtained by skimming and fluttering over the water for small shellfish and oily food particles. This is why they follow injured seals and are found in the wake of whales--thus the name "whale birds."

A few species of land birds breed on Machias Seal Island, such as Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*), and Tree Swallow (*Iridoprocne bicolor*). Over 100 species of migrants and accidentals have been noted here.

Arrangements for this trip are made with Captain Barna B. Norton, Jonesport, Maine (207) 497-5933. He is the only captain at present who takes passengers (up to eight at \$18.00 each) so make your plans early. Smaller groups can be arranged. The boat leaves the Jonesport pier at 9 A.M. and, depending on weather, arrives at the island about 11:30 A.M. After a leisurely lunch and tour, you should return to Jonesport around 4:30 P.M. Bring your lunch, "layers" of clothes and dramamine. Be prepared to be philosophical if the trip must be postponed.

The trip from Boston to Jonesport takes about seven hours and I recommend that you take snacks, as there are only a few Howard Johnson restaurants en route. The best route to reach this area is to take the Maine Turnpike to Bangor; then 1A into Elsworth; north on Rt. 1 to Millbridge; Rt. 1A by-pass to Harrington then returning to Rt. 1. Do not take the first Rt. 187 road south, but proceed toward Jonesboro. At this junction of Rt. 187 is Sunkhaze Campground, which is open from May 15-September 15 and has 30 sites with water, electricity, flush toilets, and swimming pool. The fee is \$3.25 for a family of five with a \$.50 charge for each extra person. Phone (207) 434-2542. For those who prefer indoor accommodations there are cabins in Jonesboro and the Bluebird Motel in Machias. Helen's Restaurant on Rt. 1 in Machias is well known for great food and homemade pastries. Immediately past the center of Machias is a causeway at which you should look across the river for resident Bald Eagles. Osprey often fish this area, Ravens are also possible, and Spruce Grouse are regularly seen.

Pelagic birds do occur on this trip. On July 4th weekend in 1976 I saw several Northern Fulmars, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and Black Guillemots. This is one of the best vacation bird trips I've had along the New England coast. A three-inch shoulder patch of a puffin lettered with "Machias Seal Island" was purchased on the island and has been a neat memento of my trip.

*Machias Seal Island is claimed by the United States government but is operated

by the Canadian Wildlife Service for the Canadian government. The political contest for this rock is of little importance compared with the contest for the survival of the species that struggle to maintain their island breeding grounds.

POSTSCRIPT: MACHIAS SEAL ISLAND, JULY 5, 1977

On July 5th, Nancy Claflin, Nan Harris, Marge Ahlin, Olive Farmer and I went to Machias Seal Island from Cutler. Cutler is on the north side of Machias Bay and the boat trip takes about an hour. Captain Barna Norton sometimes leaves from here when he knows the tides are not favorable for a later trip from Jonesport. We left at 7:30 A.M. So it is necessary to phone him the night before the trip for the latest advisory and starting place. Our stay on the island was only one hour instead of the usual three hours due not only to the tide factor but that the sea was running high and the ground swells were increasing. We felt we saw all that we had expected to see and had enough time for photographs and an early lunch.

The lighthouse keeper's wife, a former Maine Audubon Guide, gave us some pertinent information:

1. The puffin count is down by 50 per cent of last year's 3,500.
2. They are counted not only by island personnel but by other concerned groups.
3. As the puffins circle the island many times in small flocks before coming ashore to nest, they feel the count is quite accurate.
4. The tern and razorbill population appears to be stable.
5. Spring migration of land birds is spectacular. Thousands of sparrows rise in a dense cloud when disturbed in the meadow area.
6. In migration one can literally pick birds out of the air that are attracted by the lighthouse beacon.
7. More strict control of visitors is needed in this fragile nesting area as some birds are off their nests too long due to intrusions.

The Bangor Daily News had a news release on July 5th for the National Audubon Society alerting people along the Maine coast to report sightings of puffins and banded puffins. The Society is deeply concerned as relatively little documented information is available.

NIGHTHAWK MIGRATION WATCH

P. R. B.

There will be a Common Nighthawk migration watch between August 20 and September 7, 1977. For further details please contact: Massachusetts Audubon Society, Natural History Services, Lincoln, Massachusetts 01773.

FALL HAWK MIGRATION

The New England Hawk Watch will take place on September 17-18 and 25-26. The major flight of Broad-winged Hawks will be moving south and volunteers willing to donate any time to this project are urged to call or write: Paul M. Roberts, 24 Pearson Road, Somerville, Massachusetts 02144 (776-8566). More information on this project will be printed in the next issue of Bird Observer.

UPCOMING PELAGIC TRIP

Sunday, August 28, 1977: from Lynn: Brookline Bird Club. For details contact: Bill Drummond: 375-0292 (Haverhill) or Herm Weissberg: 526-4020 (Manchester).