

Rucksack Winter '97/98

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"ON THE FLORA OF McNAB S ISLAND, HALIFAX HARBOUR, N.S.": CAPTAIN JOHN BARBOUR S 1905 BOTANICAL SURVEY

The above is the title of a curious article in the Transactions of the Nova Scotian Institute of Science (volume XI, session 1905-1906, pages 553-569), the first-ever biological survey of the island. It was written by physician John H. Barbour, a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps, who apparently was stationed on McNabs Island just before the Imperial War Department handed over Halifax's fortifications to Canada in 1906. The article is based on a November 13th, 1905, lecture to the learned Institute.

Captain Barbour published in the Transactions previously: In 1903, shortly after his arrival in Halifax, he authored "Local variation and other notes on Blue-eyed Grass (*Sisyrinchium angustifolium*)", based on collections of a huge number of specimens of this inconspicuous member of the iris family. Barbour has done his extensive collecting around Halifax Harbour, but McNabs Island is not mentioned in his earlier work.

"On the Flora of McNab s Island" consists of four discrete parts: Part I ("General Notes") is perhaps the most valuable, as it contains Barbour's impressions of the island and its vegetation, as he witnessed it in the early years of this century:

"When we consider the position of the island, its size, the winters which occur, and the presence of the ocean around it, I think that we have on it a most wonderful variety of flowers, and the botanist may there find plenty of work to do in all departments, for he comes across woodland, littoral, meadow and sea plants growing in profusion within a small area.

One great peculiarity that one notices, is that the woodland plants descend right on to the shore, even to high water mark and in fair numbers also. Never do I remember seeing so many woodland plants on one shore before, especially on the side of an island or district exposed to a good deal of the force, tides and winds of the Atlantic ocean, as is the case on the south side the island looking out towards Devil's Island ().

Then we have rock roses, not really littoral plants, everywhere, and in the proper season the margins are decked with masses of purple irises, so that one feels inclined to call the island "a garden of irises", for it is not only on the shore that they are to be seen, but all over it. Grasses and sedges dip in the water and seem to enjoy the tide rippling over them ().

The island evidently is a veritable garden, in the season, for raspberries, and this brings me to suggest that it appears to me that McNab 's island might easily be converted to some good use as a spot wherein to grow various crops for economic purposes. Take for instance raspberries: the island is well suited for their production; they were very plentiful and of good size this last summer, wild as they are. With a little attention () quantities could be placed on the market in Halifax; there would be little or almost no train or transport rates to cut down the producer s results. Again, from the quantities of irises growing on it, the island is evidently well suited for the growing of them. Would it not be possible to manufacture a cheap and beautiful violet ink, stain, or dye from their rich, velvet perianths?"

Part II ("Work in Special Orders") of Captain Barbour s paper includes anatomical observations on a number of individual plant species, including the description of a new variety of Bluets (*Houstonia caerulea* var. *Piersii*), honouring Harry Piers, secretary of the Institute and a prominent Nova Scotia naturalist.

Almost all of the plants mentioned still grow on McNabs Island today; an exception is One- flowered Wintergreen (*Moneses uniflora*), which doesn't appear on the list of plant species in Parks Canada's 1996 "Inventory of Ecological Values on McNabs Island, Halifax County". Part III ("Narcotisation of Plants") reports on "a few experiments made on wet days when outdoor work could not be well done", and involve chloroforming various plants. At least one of the "narcotised" plant species, the Pitcher-plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*) no longer appears to be found on McNabs Island. Here is Captain Barbour s rationale for his "narcotisation" experiments:

"The practical reasons for my experiments are the same as so many others have done them for, and resolve themselves into three questions- What are the best flowers and plants for a town or house in and around which noxious chemical products are formed? Which are those least likely to be affected by soot, dust, harmful vapours, etc., containing narcotising elements? These simple experiments with wildflowers throw little light I grant, on such things, but possibly one or two ideas may be gained, although similar experiments accurately conducted have often been done, which may be the stepping stones to greater efforts on the part of those who are interested in beautifying of their native city, and who can teach those in slum-land the

simple methods of keeping in the way of thriving, their few window plants, possibly their only knowledge of the country beyond the city's outskirts". The last part of Captain Barbour's article, Part IV ("Occasional Notes on Flora of McNabs Island"), contains a number of charming observations about the flora of the island, e.g. "Early fruit. - A ripe blackberry was found by me and eaten on July 20th, before I saw ripe raspberries.". Other observations concern mainly unusual colouration of flowers and mushrooms.

In conclusion, Captain Barbour: "It is not my intention to deal fully with the flora of this island, I intend rather to just mention some of the principal things which struck me personally, leaving it to others who know the locality much better than I do, to fill in the details in after years.

Dusan Soudek

(Author's note: I thank FOMIS member Alan Ruffman for bringing the above article to my attention several years ago. It is available at the library of the Public Archives of NS. Captain Barbour spelled the name of his island McNab's Island; the current usage is McNabs Island.)

1997 CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT ON McNABS ISLAND

The annual Christmas Count of birds was taken in the Halifax-Dartmouth region on December 21. Once again, McNabs Island was trekked and tromped in a relentless search for fortuitous finds of fine feathered friends. This year's survey crew consisted of Greg Johnson, Todd Keith, and Rachael and Bill Freedman. Mike Tilley ferried these adventurers to McNabs in the wee misty hours, and was so kind as to also pick them up for the return trip later in the day. The weather was comfortably crisp, not too windy, overcast, and without snow, sleet, rain, or tsunamis. The following species of birds were seen:

Common Loon (2 individuals), Red-necked Grebe (2), Great Blue Heron (1), Oldsquaw (35), Common Goldeneye (30), Bufflehead (13), Greater Scaup (40), Common Eider (306), Red-breasted Merganser (41), Black Duck (68), Gadwall (1), Herring Gull (88), Iceland Gull (17), Great Black-backed Gull (26), Ring-billed Gull (12), Ruffed Grouse (3), Common Pheasant (13), Downy Woodpecker (10), American Crow (12), Raven (2), Golden-crowned Kinglet (14), Black-capped Chickadee (57), Boreal Chickadee (19), Red-breasted Nuthatch (1), Goldfinch (23), Common Redpoll (22), Song Sparrow (9), Tree Sparrow (9), Dark-eyed Junco (16).

Of the native species, the most "unusual bird was the single gadwall, a duck that mostly winters to the south. Of the non-native species, the covey of ring-necked pheasant was notable. The species that was most "missed" by our intrepid birders was the purple sandpiper. These are found on many Christmas Counts on Thrum Hook (the long, gravelly spit near Thrum Cap), but this season they were apparently eating their feast of amphipods and turkey on a different rocky shore in our region.

Rachael and Bill did, however, have a long and leisurely study of a coyote at Thrum Hook. They watched this canny, charismatic canid trot from the base of the hook to the tip, and then back again, apparently looking for edible flotsam, jetsam, or day-old donuts. Another coyote was seen at about the same time near Ives Cove, at the other end of McNabs. Bill (who is an ecologist) plugged these observations into a sophisticated super-computer model of coyote population dynamics, which predicted that there must be at least 175 coyotes on McNabs Island, with a confidence interval of 92 to 733 at a probability level of 95%. Rachael, however, told her dad that sounded kind of stupid, and that she thought there are only 2-3 coyotes on McNabs. Upon further reflection, her dad is inclined to agree with her.

Bill Freedman

(Editor : note: Most if not all of the above-mentioned pheasants have been released on the island by a private individual.)

NEWSBRIEFS

McNabs, The Learning Island: A Proposal for an Outdoor Education Centre is the title of a 30-page group project by students from Dalhousie's School for Resource and Environmental Studies. The report was completed in June 1997. Prof. McAllister's economic development class in Dalhousie's Department of Economics used McNabs Island as a model. The class was divided into several groups, resulting in several interesting reports in the autumn of 1997.

The Use of Indicator Plants as Educational Tools on McNabs Island: A Survey is the title of a thesis by FOMIS director Nancy Simovic. The work-in-progress, supervised by Drs. Martin Willison and Pierre Taschereau of Dalhousie's biology department, was presented on January 31 at the annual Cameron Conference for Biology and Marine Biology Honours Students.

On February 13 Catherine McCarthy and Dusan Soudek of FOMIS met with Peter Underwood, the deputy minister of the NS Department of Environment. Responsibility for planning for provincial parks, including McNabs Island, and protected areas has been moved from the Department of Natural Resources. The deputy minister knows McNabs Island well, having camped there often in his younger days.

McNabs Island, Mass.? The lighthouse at Maugers Beach on McNabs Island may be used for exterior scenes of a docudrama about a 1910 sinking of a ship near Nantucket, Mass. Should the film be shot in Halifax, the lighthouse may stand in for the Nantucket Light. So states an anonymous location scout with a Boston accent, recently encountered at the Sambro Head lighthouse.

An extensive discussion of marine litter and of our beach sweeps, including an interview with FOMIS treasurer Catherine McCarthy in situ on McNabs Island, were featured in a video in the Travelling Environment Show series. It was produced and narrated by Heather Gordon of The Clean Nova Scotia Foundation, and is available for use by TV stations throughout the province.

We have just learned of the passing of long-time FOMIS member Donald MacKeen Smith. The board of directors offers sincere condolences to the Smith family.

Parks Canada has commissioned Prof. Jim Morrison of St. Mary's University to compile an oral history of Fort McNab and other island military installations during World War II. He will be interviewing former military personnel and their families.

A new edition of The Natural History of Nova Scotia, a two-volume treatise on our province's natural environment, has just been published by Nimbus and The Nova Scotia Museum. Its second volume, Theme Regions, discusses Nova Scotia's geological regions, including Eastern Shore Beaches (Region 833). Unfortunately it fails to list McNabs and Lawlor Islands among nine provincial parks and park reserves in this region (p.200), mentioning McNabs Island solely as "scenic viewpoint".

The Halifax Defence Complex, which administers Fort McNab and Fort Ives, together with all other Parks Canada lands on McNabs Island, held a volunteer appreciation function at the Halifax Citadel on March 21. FOMIS members Mike Tilley, Victor Dingle, Catherine McCarthy, and Dusan Soudek were honoured among mostly volunteers from the Halifax Citadel Regimental Association and the Army Museum.

Cole Harbour-Eastern Passage, the provincial riding that includes McNabs Island, Lawlor Island, and Devils Island, will be represented by the NDP's Kevin Deveaux, a 31-year-old lawyer. The previous MLA, Liberal Dennis Richards, did not re-offer in the March 24 provincial election.

The Future of Halifax's Green and Blue Natural Areas is the theme of a weekend conference on April 25-26, organized by the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS). FOMIS will present a lecture on the future park on McNabs and Lawlor Islands. Contact Doug Linzey at 429-5997 for details.

Clean-up of Halifax Harbour is again making press headlines. On March 24 Halifax's regional council received three documents - reports from its staff, from the advisory committee, and from a consortium of consultants - outlining its options for dealing with pollution of the harbour, which continues to receive untreated sewage from the former cities of Halifax and Dartmouth. The clean-up project has been costed at between \$190 million and \$290 million, with no promises of financial assistance by the provincial and federal governments. A regional sewage treatment plant on McNabs Island is NOT among the options.