

Rucksack Winter '96/97

Index

- **AN OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE FOR McNABS ISLAND**
- **FORT HUGONIN THEN AND NOW**
- **McNABS ISLAND CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 1996**
- **NEWS BRIEFS**

AN OUTDOOR EDUCATION CENTRE FOR McNABS ISLAND

Our favourite island has been used for outdoor education programs on an informal basis for many years. Year after year children and their teachers visit the island as part of year-end field trips. Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, and cadets can be frequently spotted hiking or camping on the island. Last summer and again this year, Dalhousie University students will take part in ecology field courses on McNabs. Charter boat operators report that visits to McNabs Island by school groups increased substantially in 1996 compared to previous years. All these groups come to the island despite the lack of any facilities or established outdoor education centre or programs.

In an effort to bring together those interested in outdoor education on the island, the Friends of McNabs Island Society Outdoor Education Committee hosted a half-day workshop on the topic at Dalhousie's Biology Department on March 1st. Fifteen people from diverse backgrounds such as university and high school educators, outdoor education leaders, recreation specialists, students, and parents attended the workshop. presented a slide show on McNabs Island and the outdoor education possibilities on the island. Following the slides, the group broke up into smaller groups to focus on the educational needs of public school and university students and others who visit the island.

Several areas of consensus were reached at the workshop. There was no support at all for construction of a new building to house an outdoor education centre. It was felt that the existing empty buildings on the island should be repaired and retrofitted for outdoor education facilities. The renovations should use the latest in sustainable development techniques and principles. Every effort should be made to cut down or eliminate fossil fuel power for the buildings. As well, the historical character of the Conrad and Lynch houses should be maintained.

No one site was preferred for an outdoor centre. All the buildings could serve an outdoor education purpose. University students and professors preferred restoring the Listening Post at Fort Hugonin which is large enough to house

lab space and a library. Those interested in public school education preferred restoring the Teahouse, and the Conrad and Lynch houses. An interpretation centre for Forts McNab and Ives would serve as an important link to the island's military past.

A report on the outdoor education possibilities for McNabs Island is being prepared by John Charles, chairman of the Outdoor Education Committee. It will be presented to Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources and Parks Canada staff in the near future. Further discussion groups are planned to keep the enthusiasm and ideas for outdoor education alive and to make Outdoor Education Centre on the island a reality.

Catherine McCarthy

FORT HUGONIN THEN AND NOW

On Valentine's Day a small group of adventurers made up of Friends of McNabs Island Society (FOMIS) members and staff from Public Works Canada and the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) unlocked the old listening post building at Fort Hugonin to investigate its possible use as an outdoor education centre for McNabs Island. The building had been abandoned by the military in the fall of 1992, ending military presence on the island that had been so important in the defence of Halifax since the arrival of the Europeans.

Fort Hugonin was constructed in 1899 by the Imperial War Department, the last British-built fortification on McNabs Island. It is named after Captain Roderick Hugonin, who in 1851 married Harriet McNab, thus becoming a son-in-law of the formidable James McNab. The fort was a battery of quick-fire guns that supported Forts McNab and Ives, helping to protect the main harbour minefield. The building was expended during WWII for personnel of the nearby ship degaussing range, while the guns were moved outward to the new Strawberry Battery. Since then the fort had become a "listening" post, recording the unique underwater sound signatures of ships as they travelled in and out of Halifax Harbour.

According to historian Don Chard, in the 1930's Fort Hugonin was used as a school for the island children. In 1933, twenty-nine students were enrolled at the McNabs Island school. Now back to Valentine's Day 1997: Armed with flashlights, crowbar, keys and the perseverance of island caretaker, Dave Seaboyer, our band of adventurers eventually got into the listening post, a boarded up building that had not seen the light of day in almost five years. The two storey building is large, approximately 20m X 10m. The main floor

is the oldest part of the building, built most likely at the turn of the century. It is made up of about ten rooms, all with interior brick walls, including a small one-bedroom apartment. The rooms are large enough to be converted into labs, workshops or a library.

The blackness of the place was, to say the least, eerie. Vandals had left their mark years ago, with broken light fixtures and glass throughout. Upstairs was a great disappointment. This part of the building is a later addition, circa WWII. The large room which would have been perfect for meetings and lectures is now ruined. The roof is leaking, causing the ceiling and light fixtures to come crashing down. There was ice on the floor, creating a dangerous indoor skating rink.

Due to neglect by the Department of National Defence (DND) the building now requires extensive and costly repairs. Obviously, no one from the military has bothered to check on the site since it was abandoned. It has officially been declared surplus and is awaiting disposal by Public Works Canada.

Our society hopes that the site will be taken over by DNR and eventually become a part of the infrastructure of the future park on McNabs Island. Should DNR be interested in taking over ownership of the property, DND will have to undertake an environmental assessment of the site, removing any contaminants such as PCBs and/or asbestos and securing underground magazines.

In the meantime, the rain continues to pour in causing more damage to a building that could serve a useful purpose as a site for learning on McNabs Island. DND should take steps immediately to repair the roof, preventing further damage to a building that is worth preserving.

Catherine McCarthy

McNABS ISLAND S CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 1996

On Sunday, December 22, the winter birds of McNabs Island were surveyed as part of the local Christmas Count, which involves most of the Metropolitan Halifax-Dartmouth area, and has been ongoing in one form or another for more than 30 years. It is part of an extensive effort throughout North America, involving hundreds of counts in the vicinity of most cities and towns and many rural villages, including about ten counts in various Nova Scotia localities.

This year, McNabs Island was surveyed by an intrepid team of Greg Johnson, Larry Eisenhauer Minga O'Brien, Tim Farmer, Rachael Freedman, and Bill Freedman. Minga and Tim arrived at the island by kayak, directly from their home on Northwest Arm, while the others took Mike Tilley's friendly ferry from Eastern Passage. Because the date of Christmas Counts is set well in advance, the weather is always "iffy". However, the weather was quite comfortable this year, with slightly above-freezing temperatures, mostly clear skies, light breezes, and no snow on the ground.

Our fearless birders split into two teams, with Minga, Tim, Rachael, and Bill scouring the seaward tracts (south end of the island), and Greg and Larry the inner-harbour (or north) end of the island. From about 08:00 until 15:00, or for seven hours, these teams wandered over and about the roads, paths, shores, forts, and uncharted wilderness of McNabs, scanning the skies, trees, bushes, grasses, beaches, and offshore waters for signs of feathered friends. A total of 34 species was seen, which is about average for the McNabs Island Christmas Bird Count.

The most abundant birds were common eiders, with an estimated 262 birds, mostly in "rafts" off Thrumcap on the southern end of the island. Herring gulls were a close second, with 257 individuals. Other species, listed in decreasing order of abundance, were: black duck (81), black-capped chickadee (52), red-breasted merganser (47), greater black-backed gull (33), white-winged scoter (27), dark-eyed junco (26), old-squaw duck (25), great cormorant (23), song sparrow (22), boreal chickadee (20), black guillemot (16), tree sparrow (15), common goldeneye (13), common crow (9), American goldfinch (9), Iceland gull (7), ruffed grouse (4), hufflehead (3), hairy woodpecker (3), downy woodpecker (3), and common raven (2).

Moreover, we saw single birds of the following species: mallard, gray jay, common loon, red-throated loon, black scoter, green-winged teal, brown creeper, red-breasted nuthatch, golden-crowned kinglet, mockingbird, and white-throated sparrow. Rachael has only started to enjoy birding, and she got distracted by some of the other wonders of McNabs Island.

Rachael found a vertebra of a whale (likely a fin whale) half buried in some seaweedy wrack inside of Thrumcap Hook, as well as a skull of a cormorant, two old soda-pop bottles, and some nice rusty nails and spikes, all of which are now decorating her bedroom.

Bill Freedman

(Editor's note: The author is a member of the Department of Biology at Dalhousie University. He has counted winter birds on McNabs Island for many years.)

NEWSBRIEFS

One hears of McNabs Island in the most unexpected places, including Peter Gzowski's Morningside on CBC Radio. During a recent interview with Rebecca Jenkins, star of the CBC TV series Black Harbour, filmed in Hubbards and Mill Cove. Ms. Jenkins mentioned her Nova Scotia connections, including her brother John Jenkins, builder of the Island Teahouse on McNabs Island and former operator of the McNabs Island Ferry Company, now a busy general practitioner in Lunenburg, N.S. John and his wife Glenna are kept doubly busy by their new baby daughter. Congratulations to the entire Jenkins family!

A 450 kg moose, loose in Halifax's Point Pleasant Park on December 18, terrorized early-morning joggers and dog walkers, prompting the media to speculate that the adult female swam over from McNabs Island, where several pairs of moose are reported to live, according to the Daily News. While moose have been reported from the island in the past, it is far too small to support a permanent population. Moreover, moose do not do well in habitat occupied by white-tailed deer, such as McNabs Island, due to the presence of a parasite. Nor do moose live in pairs.

Winter Trips to McNabs Island. FOMIS, in conjunction with the McNabs Island Ferry Company, organized three daytrips to the island this winter: January 18, February 9, and March 16. The January trip took place despite -16 C temperatures, howling winds, and snow flurries (See photo on front page.), while the second trip was similarly challenging. The March trip had to be cancelled. Mike Tilley, operator of the ferry, reports a steady trickle of visitors to McNabs Island throughout the winter off-season.

A notice circa 1775

This is to give notice to all persons who would land cattle on Cornwallis's Island, that they must first make application to Mr. Thomas Phelon: and likewise all persons upon removing their cattle from the said Island are to inform said Phelon thereof, and pay him such charges as he may make for their Grazing. Also all persons having removed their Cattle from said Island this summer, are required to satisfy the said Phelon for their Grazing, or they will without further Notice be sued.

Halifax, September 18th. JOHN BULKELEY

Editor s note: The above notice appeared in The Nova Scotia Gazette and the Weekly Chronicle, Halifax, Volume VI, No. 263, page 3, on Tuesday, September 19, 1775. It was unearthed by FOMIS member Alain Ruffman. Prior to its purchase in 1782 by Peter McNab I McNabs Island was known as Cornwallis Island.