

NSIS FIELD EXCURSION 2025

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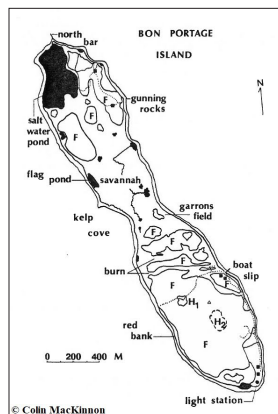
A VISIT TO BON PORTAGE ISLAND, NS

On July 12, 2025, seventeen NSIS members and guests participated in an excursion to Bon Portage Island, off the south-west coast of Nova Scotia. Bon Portage (called Outer Island on some maps) is a 240-hectare uninhabited island now owned by Acadia University, which operates it as an ecological research and field education site. It is also protected by a Conservation Easement with the Nova Scotia Nature Trust.

Bon Portage supports a tremendous richness of pristine coastal habitats and species. It is one of Nova Scotia's last remaining large, unspoiled coastal islands, with many botanical species of interest. The island also provides a critical stopover for many migrating songbirds, shorebirds, waterfowl and raptors. It is home to over fifty species of breeding birds, including the largest

breeding colony of Leach's storm petrels (*Hydrobates leucorhous*) south of Newfoundland.

Historically, it is the location of the famous book "We Keep a Light" by Evelyn Richardson. She and her husband Morrill purchased the island in 1926, moved there in 1929, and lived on it for the



Bon Portage Island



Photo courtesy: Scott Cunningham/Coastal Adventures

The Lighthouse

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Our Mode of Transportation

Our First Briefing on the Steps of the Field Station

next 35 years. He was the official lighthouse keeper. Her Governor-General's award-winning book describes their efforts to survive, run the lighthouse, and raise a family under very basic conditions.

We began our excursion on the mainland at the dock at Shag Harbour, south of Shelburne, where we boarded a fishing boat, named the *TGIFF*. The skipper, Mike O'Brien, took us out to the island on a foggy morning and helped us disembark on its only pier. The weather was fine, the winds were calm, and it was a smooth half-hour crossing. A curious harbour seal came close and observed us as we approached the island.

Once there, we made our way to some of the more recent buildings built to accommodate groups of students and researchers who spend several days at a time on Bon Portage. Our scheduled guide, Dr. Sherman Boates from Acadia, was unable to be with us so Mike O'Brien took his place. Mike has many years of experience on the islands and understands a great deal of the work conducted there, as well as the ecological and human history. He started by briefing us on the evolution of the biological field station, its infrastructure, and the focus of the island research. As it happened, no one from Acadia was present working at the station on the day of our visit.

We then headed down to the southern end of the island, the location of the lighthouse. On the way, we observed many coastal-plain flora of interest, including Sea Pea (*Lathyrus japonicus* Willd.), nettles

(*Urtica* Spp.), and others (see NS Nature Trust 2005¹). Mike also pointed out portions of forest flattened by recent hurricanes, and large areas with loss of trees due to the Brown Spruce Longhorn Beetle (*Tetropium fuscum*). Fortunately, these forest areas are recovering with rapid new growth.

The lighthouse no longer requires keepers, having been automated in 1984. The formerly-attached house is no longer there, and we were told that the lighthouse itself had been moved to higher ground, away from advancing seas. There are a few buildings in the vicinity and they are being refurbished for the additional use of students and researchers. The nearby area is quite open, having been used by the Richardsons and their successors for growing vegetables as well as feed for a few domestic animals. There is a marshy area next to this, occupied by many noisy Herring Gulls (*Larus smithsonianus*).

As we headed back to the research station, Mike shared his encyclopedic knowledge about the ecology, the weather systems, the wildlife, and items found along the shore. He commented on the many derelict lobster traps that get torn from their settings during the storms that come through the area and end up along the shoreline, and some even carried inland. He said that work parties collect them and put them to some use, depending on condition. One use is to fill them with rocks and stack them up to help stabilize the shoreline and the wharf.



A Briefing Along the Trail
Arriving at the Lighthouse

¹ Nova Scotia Nature Trust. (2005). "Guide to the Atlantic Coastal Plain Flora of Nova Scotia". Report of the NSNT. 77 p.



Whale Skull
Storm Petrel Nests
Lunch Time



Upon returning to the field station near the pier, we settled down for a nice relaxing picnic lunch and some socializing. After lunch, we headed north, then west on a cross-island path that took us to the opposite side of the island. This path passed through a thick forest with lots of overhead coverage, which turned out to be important habitat. The storm petrels dig deep holes and make their nests in the ground. The woods contained hundreds of holes, and many have been mapped and tagged by researchers. Seagulls and other predators prey on the petrels and their chicks, which are especially vulnerable when in the open. The forest cover provides a lot of protection, making the nests hard to see from above and making it difficult for the larger birds to get down to ground level.

The west side of the island was much the same as the east side, but with even less sign of human presence. The shoreline, as elsewhere on the island, is covered with sizeable rocks, a typical cobble beach; there is very little sand here, making shoreline walking difficult. The weather became a little overcast and slightly misty, so after a short stay, we headed back to the station and the pier.

The tide had gone out and our boat was now moored offshore, so we left the island four at a time using a small outboard motorboat as a ferry. Once all were on board, Mike sailed us most of the way up



*Happy Island Explorers
Leaving the Island Behind*

the east side of the island and pointed out more items of interest. One was the point of landfall where electricity was finally brought to the island via underwater cable in 1964. After this, we had a smooth, sunny and pleasant crossing back to Shag Harbour.

It was a wonderful day of exploration, touring a little-visited part of our province in ideal weather. Bon Portage is a small island but it has much interesting human and natural history. We learned a lot from Mike about a wide range of topics, and we enjoyed each other's company.

Acknowledgement Many thanks to Mike O'Brien for his valuable time and expertise, and to Acadia University for permission to visit the island.

Photos by H. Bird and P.G. Wells.

Copyright: Map on page 1 is by Colin MacKinnon, retired from Environment Canada's Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) - Atlantic Region. First appeared in his Master's Thesis at Mount Allison University in 1988: "Population Size, Habitat preferences and Breeding Ecology of the Leach's Storm Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa* (Vieillot) on Bon Portage Island, Nova Scotia".