

NSIS FIELD EXCURSION 2024

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SCATARIE ISLAND EXCURSION

On 14 July 2024, about 20 NSIS members and guests participated in an excursion to Scatarie Island, off the north-east coast of Cape Breton Island. Scatarie is now a protected Wilderness Area, but in the past was populated. It has a distinctive history, geology, ecology, and environment. A previous issue of the PNSIS – Vol. 45, No. 1 (2010) – was devoted to the natural history of the island.

We began at 8:00 am on the dock at Main-à-Dieu, next to the large fishing boat skippered by Robert Parsons. We had chartered the boat to take us to the island, and to come and bring us back at the end of the day. Bruce Hatcher of CBU also brought along a large Zodiac which he used to take groups on a few mini-excursions along the coast of Scatarie.

Before leaving, we heard a little about the history of the island – how it once had a community of 100 or more people with a church



Gathering on the dock.

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Outward bound, Island capped by forest and thick sod.

and a school. They did fishing and limited farming, but gradually the community shrank and in the end the people moved to the mainland. When the island became a protected wilderness area, there ceased to be any permanent residents. But a few families are permitted to make use of their few remaining houses on a casual basis, mostly in the summer.

The day turned out to be finer than the forecast – partly cloudy turning to sunny and quite warm. The seas were very calm, which made for an easy passage. (It is often windy, and choppy with large swells.)

Arriving at the island we disembarked at a sheltered beach at Northwest Cove, using the Zodiac to make the transition from boat to beach. During the day we became fairly adept at getting in and out of the Zodiac without getting our feet very wet. Once on the beach, Jason Loxton gave us a description of the interesting geology of Scatarie. Like much of Nova Scotia, Scatarie Island has a long and complex geological history.

At that point we broke up into a couple of groups. One group went with Maureen Cameron-MacMillan, a Regional Biologist with the NS Dept. of Natural Resources and Renewables, who conducted a guided nature walk. It went through the woods towards the lighthouse on the eastern tip of the island, about 5 km away. Maureen pointed out various native birds and plants, cataloging them. She identi-



A short geology lesson.

fied more than 20 species of birds, some of them just by their calls. One item of interest to the group was a tiny carnivorous plant, Round-leaved Sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) growing along the middle of the trail. It's native to Nova Scotia, and it traps and digests small insects in sticky droplets on the red hairs the leaves. This survival strategy allows the plant to thrive in very poor-nutrient soil conditions. This group emerged from the woods on top of a grassy knoll, with a bench, and made their way down to the shore and ate their lunch on some large boulders.

The second group went on a geology mini-excursion back along the coast in the Zodiac. Much of the shoreline was comprised of steep cliffs arranged in upturned layers, and Jason Loxton pointed out many of the interesting features. It is suspected that there may be important fossils to be found, similar to others found in nearby regions, so Jason spent some time ashore examining the strata, but with no luck. But we all enjoyed the spectacular rock formations – and the abundant sea birds. These included guillemots, cormorants, and ducks.

After the geology tour, the Zodiac took this second group around the eastern tip of the island, where sits a decommissioned lighthouse. That structure appears to be quite intact, but some of the surrounding buildings are in a state of collapse. The lighthouse function is now provided a small automatic light in front of the old structure. There also remains a platform where it is believed a foghorn once operated.



Rock hounding, Eastern Harbour backbarrier meadow.

Being on the water as we rounded the tip of the island and passed by scenic rocky outcrops allowed the group to see lots of marine life. Bald eagles were abundant, occupying the roofs of the buildings and the outcrops. Terns flew by in large flocks and roosted on the little islands. And the seals were everywhere – lazing on the rocks, following the Zodiac, or just curiously watching our progress.

The second group disembarked at the beach on the south-east side of the island, where they met some of the walkers, and where we all settled down to have lunch. About half the participants had opted to purchase a “catered lunch” provided by an establishment in Sydney. It was ample and very tasty, with a wide selection of quite healthy items included.

This beach was the last resting place of a fin whale which had washed up a few years ago. We learned that the fin whale is the second-largest species, after the blue whale. This one has been reduced to a bony skeleton and some baleen, somewhat scattered over the beach due to wave action, etc. The backbone was fairly intact – and long – and we found a scapula which was huge, and a rib about 1½ to 2 meters long.

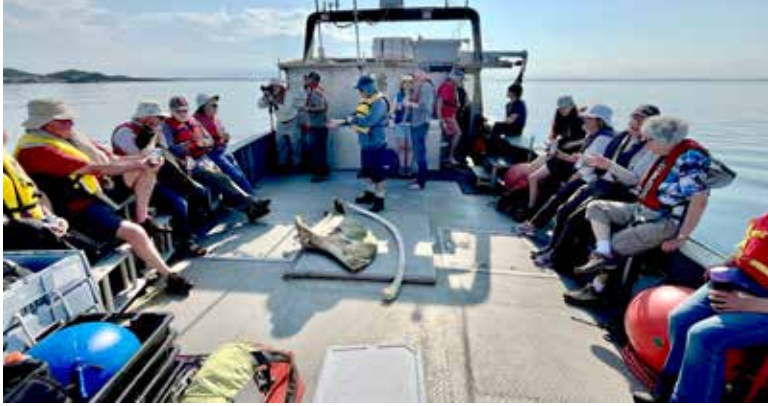
Most of the second group (geology tour and rounding the lighthouse) exchanged places with most of the first group (nature walk),

who embarked on the Zodiac for a trip out to nearby small Hay Island – its main attraction is that it is home to a big seal colony, with a large swarm of seagulls flying around. The group walked up the shore and saw some seal bones and were able to see some seals that were sunning on the rocks from much closer. One even swam quite close to get a look at the people. The group also observed some interesting geological rocks; participants who were interested in them had lots to say about how there were many conflicting rock patterns and how it was difficult to decipher the geological history of the area. Once the Zodiac began the return trip, it went out a bit further east around the Cormandarie Rocks which, until 1949, were the easternmost extent of Canada. Maureen pointed out some characteristic sea birds, including a Gannet and a Puffin. Then the Zodiac returned around the lighthouse back to the original beach at Northwest Cove.

In the meantime, several of the second group took the path back through the woods to the first beach, while others walked the short remaining distance to the lighthouse before returning. The path was very pleasant, with pretty scenery along the way. There were also large patches of toppled trees and deadfalls. These were the result of Hurricane Fiona, which did extensive damage to that part of Nova Scotia.

Geology cruise, Fin whale backbone and partial jaw.





Refreshments on the return trip, and an end to a great day.

Back at the beach everyone relaxed and waited for Robert Parsons to arrive for the ½-hour return trip to the mainland. A few people even managed a brief swim, saying that the water temperature was quite comfortable – Bruce measured 18.3°C at the surface.

We had a pleasant ride back, enjoying some refreshments. We arrived at about 6:00 pm and the end of a very pleasant and informative day to a little-known and little-visited part of Nova Scotia.

Special thanks should be made of Bruce Hatcher. He suggested this excursion in the first place and then played the major role in planning the trip, and securing the charter boat and the nature guide. He also obtained the excellent catered lunches, and refreshments on the return trip. And he provided and operated the Zodiac, which gave us excellent mini-excursions up and down the coast.

As an addendum, Bruce had also recommended that we consider visiting the Fossil Museum and the adjacent Heritage Centre at Sydney Mines. A few of us did that on the day before the trip to Scatarie and were glad that we did. The small Fossil Museum was especially well-done – with excellent specimens nicely displayed, a logical organization of exhibits, good explanatory signage, and an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide.

*Hank Bird with contributions from
Bruce Hatcher, Donald Forbes and Crystal Parker*