

## OUR MARITIME PAST - AND PRESENT

### THE TUSKET ISLANDS

The cove seemed strangely quiet as we tethered our canoe to the wharf. The thick fog, so typical of this coastline, blanketed the islands and obscured the mainland in the distance. The calm water was disturbed only by the gentle rocking of our craft. Above us, lobster traps were neatly stacked in rows on the weather-beaten planks, awaiting another season, while the solitary light at the end of the wharf struggled to penetrate the mist.

In need of fresh water, always a scarce commodity on the rocky outposts, we docked at this small fishing community to fill up our jugs. Perhaps, as a bonus, the hospitality that had followed us on our journey would, here too, result in a coffee and a piece of pie (if not a full meal and a hot bath). Any supplement to our meager rations would be welcome. As we made our way towards the nearest house, several startled sheep scattered over the rock-strewn hillside and disappeared over the ridge. We knocked several times on the porch door but there was no answer.

“Anyone home?” Not a sound. We cautiously peered inside and called again. Still no response. The musty air in the well-provisioned kitchen suggested that it hadn’t been used for some time.

We then proceeded to check the other houses and shanties of this “village” and also found them either empty or bolted shut. The inhabitants had disappeared and except for a few scrawny cats and the untended sheep, the place was like a ghost town.



It was my circumnavigation of the province in a canoe that I discovered the Tusket Islands. We had just passed Yarmouth, leaving behind the tides and currents of the Bay of Fundy, and reentered the Atlantic. Like most other parts of Nova Scotia’s Extensive coastline, this region was new to me. My map had indicated buildings on some of these small islands, but I expected only to find abandoned and deteriorating fishing shanties, if anything at all. The charts often noted structures long since gone and nature rapidly concealed traces of the early settlers. Thus we were surprised to find not only intact dwellings, but one compete with electricity

and running water. Even more inexplicable was the apparent desertion.

---

The Tusketts are a cluster of three dozen granite drumlins scattered off the southwestern coast of Nova Scotia. Formed from glacial till deposited during the last Ice Age, they were once hills on an undulating landscape that extended much farther than it does today, well towards the edge of the continental shelf. With the continual melting of the glaciers the rising sea inundated and isolated these hilltops. The gradual process of marine erosion is still eating away at their fringes and, eventually, they will disappear entirely under the water. The surrounding sea bed is shallow and speckled with shoals. High tides, uneven winds and strong currents (the Bay of Fundy still has considerable influence) renders navigation treacherous - and fog and mist shrouds the region for much of the year. Not surprisingly, shipwrecks cover the bottom.

The size of the islands varies, from scarcely more than a mound of gravel and cobblestone to several square kilometers in area. But most are under fifty acres. The soil is scant and highly acidic. Big Tusket, the largest island, has sphagnum bogs and considerable salt marsh while others are limited to dense, stunted spruce and fir which crawl down to the water's edge. Still others have no forest cover at all with scotch-lovage, goldenrod and raspberries competing with grasses for the limited fertile ground. These outposts are home to the seabirds, with colonies of gulls, terns, guillemots and petrels establishing in relative isolation.

Mink and mice are common but, except for deer on the larger islands, major mammals are absent. Sheep, however, have been introduced and left to graze and play havoc with the indigenous flora. These indiscriminate foragers will nibble on just about anything, leaving the neglected nettles and thistles to dominate the closely cropped grasses. At low tide they will even feed on seaweed, especially

during the winter months.



With my curiosity sparked by the “abandoned” village, I did some research and found that the Tuskets have a human history, long predating the arrival of the Europeans. Early North American natives migrated into the Maritime provinces soon after the ice sheet melted (a land bridge connected this area with New England) and later the MicMacs used these islands for centuries as campsites. With their massive birch bark canoes (kayaks were the traditional means for water transport only much further north), they traded and raided as far away as New England and there is evidence that Big Tusket was one of their sacred burial grounds. The Europeans also chose to live along the coastline, as fishing was the reason for coming. For years the French and English competed, fought and, sometimes, peacefully coexisted. Today there is still a prosperous Acadian community at nearby Pubnico.

The descriptive island names allude to their past. Tusket is a MicMac word meaning “great forked tidal river” and refers to the waterway which drains into this bay of islands. Some designations such as Turnip and Turpentine, refer to crops or products harvested; others allude to the shape (Spectacle, Owls Head), ownership (Ellenwoods, Harris) or a particular activity (such as a cannery on Lobster Island).

One decidedly ominous designation is Murder Island. Its origin isn't entirely clear, but one theory traces it to the spring of 1735, when the brig "Baltimore" was discovered, blood spattered and deserted excepting one lone woman. The confusing and conflicting stories of an Indian massacre or a convict revolt were never satisfactorily explained and the sole survivor disappeared, along with her tale. Another explanation has an epidemic of smallpox decimating a French fleet sent to capture Acadia in the 1700's. Hundreds of dead were supposedly unloaded on the tiny island. Numerous reports of bleached human bones emerging from the cobble beaches up until this century has lend some credence to the story. However, the mystery remains.

Unlike most of Nova Scotia's offshore islands, the Tuskets were never completely abandoned. Fishing was so lucrative and the islands so handy to the lobster areas that they serve as bases to this day. During the winter and spring months when it is lobster season down here (the season varies along the coast so that fresh lobster are always being caught somewhere in the province), many fishermen move out to be closer to the rounds. Sometimes their families accompany them and continue a way of life that has been around for centuries. Underwater cables carry the electricity for the lighthouses (now unmanned) - and the stoves, blankets, televisions and VCRs that lessen the isolation during frequent stormy weather. At the season's close, most return to the mainland. At the season's close, most return to the mainland leaving alone the rustic dwellings that I chanced upon during that misty August day, many years ago.

In May, when the lobster season is still in full swing, fishing boats compete for space alongside the tall wharf pilings and the noise of motors fills the channels in the early mornings. Large wooden crates, serving as temporary holding pounds, float next to the docks where the fishermen tend to torn nets and traps. The place is a bustle.

Ronnie Jackson, an Ellenwoods Island tenant, almost swamped us one day with the swell from his "Cape Islander" as he came over to investigate our small flotilla. "You got to be crazy to be out here in one of those tippy things !" But after assurances that, although possibly crazy, we could nevertheless handle our "tippy" craft, he invited us to a crustacean feast (with some suspiciously small lobsters) on his island. From Ronnie we learned much about the Tuskets and their inhabitants, about lobster fishing, lighthouses, and living in an exposed island shanty. He also demonstrated how, with a little back breaking work, he could supplement his income by raking Irish Moss, a red seaweed from which an emulsifier is extracted for use in everything from ice cream chocolate milk, to cosmetics.



The fishing industry continues to prosper in this part of Nova Scotia. There is more demand than ever for the product and the prices are correspondingly higher - not many poor fisherfolk to be found along these shores. This is in stark contrast to the situation in many other maritime communities throughout the rest of Atlantic Canada (especially Newfoundland) where the closure of the fishery has had dire consequences, decimating the only way of life many of them know. Nearby Georges Bank, still one of the richest fishing grounds in the world, yields the scallops, herring, and groundfish which fuel a successful economy reflected in the attractive houses and new cars found in abundance on the mainland. No wonder there is concern with the periodic interest in oil drilling in these waters.

In 1935 it was discovered that tuna could be had with little more effort than dropping a line into the water and the Americans “invaded” this rugged archipelago, Even Roosevelt made an appearance and for more than twenty years, sports fishermen made for the swift currents of Soldier Rip, just off Outer Bald Tusket. Contests were held, pictures taken and the Tusket emerged from oblivion to become a major attraction. Then, almost as quickly as they appeared, the Bluefin vanished. The migration patterns changed (no one knows why) and from an early catch of 1,780 in 1949 to a single one in 1958, the collapse was total. A reminder of this heady time can be seen on Owls Head Island, where a well constructed lodge is still resisting the elements. The beach stone pillars on which the neighbouring cabins were mounted are gradually submerging under the regenerating vegetation. This elaborate camp, the Acadian Tuna Club, was vacated even before the tuna declined as the well-heeled clientele didn’t much appreciate the isolation.

The Tusket Islands still exude the very essence of Nova Scotia. Abandoned shanties accompany well maintained houses, seals and seabirds share the rocky terrain with domesticated animals, and the ragged coves alternate with sand beaches and salt marshes. The rich history of the islands can be read in a people that still make their living much as their ancestors did.

(This article first appeared in the Atlantic Advocate)

**Scott Cunningham is a biologist and BCU Coach 4 and a Paddle Canada Senior Instructor Trainer. He has published [\*Sea Kayaking in Nova Scotia\*](#), a detailed route guide to the province.**