

THE FIVE ISLANDS

Bay of Fundy



I crawled over the scarp edge, onto a plateau of dense brambles and stunted spruce so characteristic of this inhospitable coast, and set about seeking my fortune. But my rambling search produced only scratched flesh, and the rotting remains of a few boards, hints of previous treasure hunters. When left alone, nature rapidly reclaims what is rightly hers, and she had all but obliterated the traces of earlier diggings. As my gold fever waned, along with the daylight, I lay along the cliff edge and savored the dynamic panorama unfolding below. The tidal currents raced among the reefs and islands and invaded the sand flats, chasing the clam diggers into their boats and back to the mainland. Only my solitary canoe remained, securely tethered to the rocks underneath and rising by the minute. I was once again alone in my coastal world, and the mystery of the Five Islands.

From the beginning of local storytelling the Five Islands have been cloaked in as much mystery as the fog which claims them well into the spring. Inaccessible and forbidding, they are aberrations in an otherwise tame world of sandy beach and mud flat, bastions of legend and myth. According to the MicMac, they were born when Gloscap, the Indian demigod, hurled enormous boulder at his archenemy the beaver, who had dammed the Bay and flooded his garden. Later, in the era of pirates and privateers,

these waters were scoured for a safe haven - and possibly, as a hideaway for ill-gotten loot, as an old map indicated was the case for Long Island. Such were the boyhood fantasies that drew me to those spooky islands.



Arranged like pearls on a string the Five Islands reach out six kilometers from the tip of Economy Mountain in Nova Scotia's Minas Basin. They all betray their forms in their names: Diamond, Long, Egg and Pinnacle. Only Moose has gathered some dispute, with some suggesting that it resembles the head of the animal while others see it as the back of a moose breaking the surface. Diamond and Egg are unassailable (at least for mere

mortals such as I), Long and Pinnacle can be climbed only with considerable difficulty but Moose, closest to the mainland, will welcome you willingly. Further to the west are other basalt remnants leading the way out of the Bay - the Brothers, Partridge and Spensor's Island, the birthplace of the mystery ship the Mary Celeste.

Moose Island was the only one of the five ever to be inhabited and carries with it the most tangible tale of intrigue. Early in the 1800's John Ruff, a Scotsman, settled this outpost with his family. He cleared much of the forest and established a modest mixed farm, supplying the coastal village with produce, wood and charcoal. He was reputed to be a hard, cruel person, and rumors circulated that he abused his wife and children. When he died a violent death, suspicions arose that he had been murdered by his son. A controversial trial led to their acquittal and afterwards the family moved to the mainland, carrying the unresolved mystery with them. Legend has John Ruff's spirit stalking the long overgrown fields during misty, moonless nights in search of vengeance.

When I first visited these secretive islands of my youth, the uncertainty bred by earlier innocence had only partly dissipated. They were closer to shore than I had imagined but retained that aura of obscure invincibility. I was warned of the tides - and of a schoolmate who, while out duck hunting had been surrounded and carried away. For if any place symbolized the tremendous power of tidal movement it is the Bay of Fundy. Twice a day billions of tons of saltwater surge into this funnel separating the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In the upper reaches they create the highest tides on earth. Around these islands they can exceed 45 feet!



Such a phenomena is taken lightly at one's own peril. From my vantage point on Long Island I could follow the chimerical patterns of the currents as they swept over open bars, dancing and swirling, constantly modifying abstract patterns before finally settling down in deepening water. The expansive flats, surrounding and connecting islands, disappeared into the clouded ripples and eddies of an ever changing seascape which rolled right up to the hay fields.

The incessant attack of water (and, in winter, ice) has gradually taken a toll on the exposed shoreline. Soft sandstone and glacial till is readily removed and distributed in beaches and bars that are seldom the same one year to the next. Even the resistant basalt has be cut and molded. Major changes have occurred in historical times. Pinnacle Island once surrounded by a ring of spires (depicted in old paintings) now has only a few towers at the western tip. Caves and arches continue to etch into the cliffs, behind the huge blocks that girdle the base.

At low tide you can walk around all the islands and between some of them - as if the waters had parted and the bottom laid bare. All that seems missing are the columns of chariots following a fleeing people. Seaweed, shellfish and crustaceans of all types clutter and color the bed, an open air laboratory for biology students and naturalists.



With the ocean and its effects so omnipresent it may be difficult to imagine it ever being otherwise. However it was, and radically so. Millions of yeas ago when the days were shorter and the atmosphere of another composition, our world would have been unrecognizable. The continents had coalesced into one massive land mass centered at the equator, where they remained for eons, jostling for position. When the crustal plates finally began to shift apart again, a large rift valley opened, extending all the way down what was to become the eastern seaboard of North America. The sands and silts of adjoining mountains (e.g., the Appalachians) accumulated and when climatic emptied the rivers and dried the lakes, the particles oxidized into the reddish-brown color so characteristic today. It became a hot, arid desert. As continental migration progressed, faults and fissures cracked the earth's surface. Volcanic eruptions repeatedly spewed forth lava until layers of dark basalt were hundreds of feet thick, covering the entire valley floor. The northern edge of the crustal block slipped and debris continued to accumulate

on the bed of the future bay. When the continents finally pulled apart and the sea entered, the process of erosion began with a vengeance augmented in recent geological times by an ice age. The large tidal range developed about 5000 years ago.

Another remnant of this tortuous geological past is found within the frozen lava. Jasper, agate and amethyst will yield to the keen eye, or sharp rock pick, along the base of the basalt scarp. Expanding gasses formed chambers in the liquid rock, into which mineral found their way and crystallized into colorful networks. Each, year, in August a rock hound festival is held in nearby Parrsboro where you can buy and sell, or forage with the experts. The Five Islands recently unveiled a new chapter in the tale of

evolution. In 1985, Neil Shubin, a biologist from harvard was relaxing under a rock outcrop at McCoy's Brook, opposite the Islands, when he glanced at the cliffs above. What he saw etched in the sandstone was to become part of the worlds largest collections of Triassic-Jurassic fossils, including the world's smallest (at that time) dinosaur fossil and some rare Trithelodont skulls, a reptile group most closely related ot the mammals (and found elsewhere only in Africa).

However, of even more interest than the quantity of this impressive assemblage was what it told about the evolution of life on earth. It confirmed a catastrophic extinction around 200 million years ago when the reptiles, which had dominated the planet, were decimated. Forty percent didn't make it any further and thus began the ear of the dinosaurs. A huge meteor creator near Manicaouagan, Quebec, has been dated ot this period, sending support to the extraterrestrial origin of mass extinctions.

I now return to the Five Islands frequently, but not for the gemstones, fossils, or even mythical treasure. Rather, for the colors, textures and forms, and the chameleon land/seascape that constantly throws up a new picture. And also for the peaceful isolation in a tiny paradise all my own, that even the errant clam diggers cannot disturb.

A detailed routed description of the Five Islands can be found in [Sea Kayaking in Nova Scotia](#) .

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