

New Brunswick

## The wild history of Kent Island: How a tiny isle off Grand Manan became a scientific sanctuary

A stuffed albatross, a Rockefeller and a famous U.S. museum are all part of the story

[Shane Fowler](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 10, 2023 6:00 AM ADT | Last Updated: 1 hour ago



Kent Island sits off the coast of Grand Manan and its southern tip is just about as far south as you can get in New Brunswick. The tiny island is about 800 metres wide at its widest point and nearly three kilometres long. (Shane Fowler/CBC News)

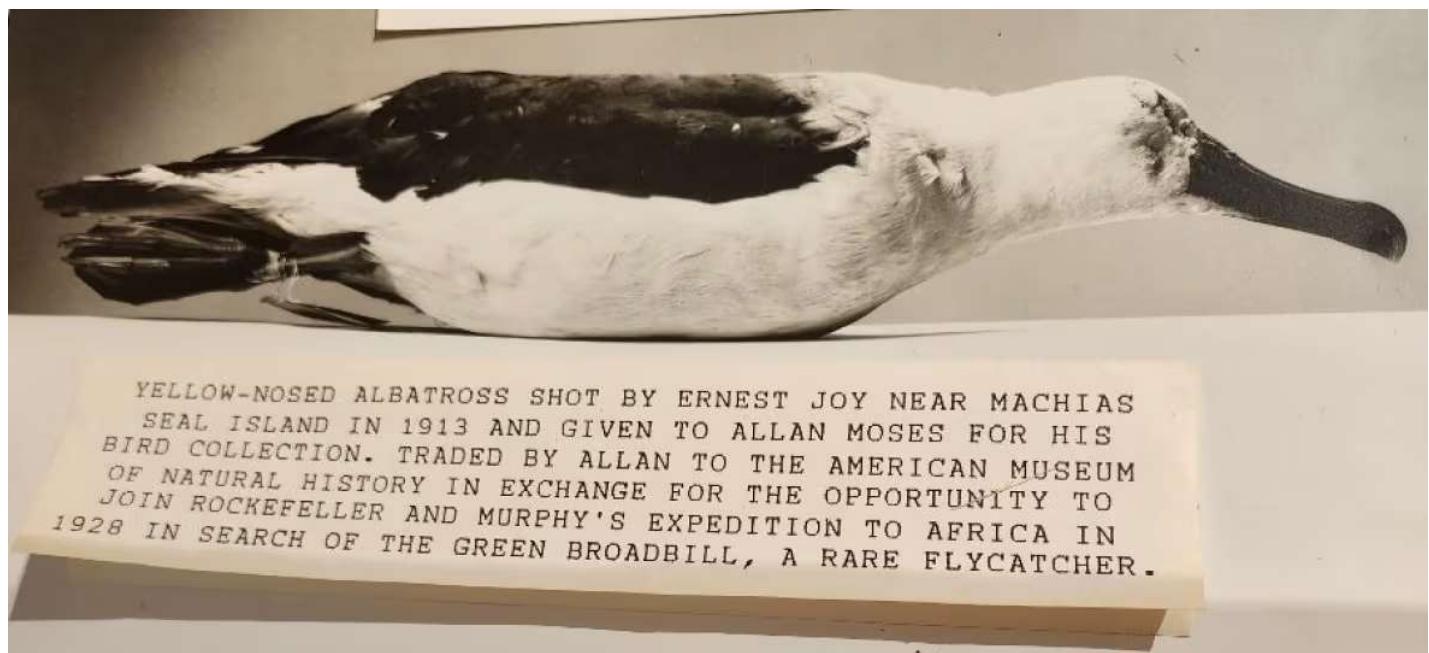
At less than three kilometres tip-to-tip, a tiny island sits in the Bay of Fundy off the southeast coast of Grand Manan.

Most New Brunswickers likely know nothing about it. But it has a fascinating history.

No one lives on the Kent Island year-round, but every summer a dedicated group of researchers, mostly from the United States, live there in near isolation at the Bowdoin Scientific Station.

For nearly 90 years they've been studying the island's flora and fauna, with a focus on long-term seabird research — all because of a wild chain of events that was sparked by a lighthouse keeper's assistant shooting an odd-looking bird 110 years ago.

In 1913, Ernest Joy spotted a seabird he had never encountered while on the Bay of Fundy, near Machias Seal Island.



Photos of the albatross shot in 1913 are on display at the Grand Manan Museum. (Submitted by Ava Sturgeon)

"As you do in the early 1900s, he shot it as that was the way," said Patricia Jones, the director of the Bowdoin Scientific Station on Kent Island.

"It was a yellow-nosed albatross, which was very unusual. It was probably blown off-course — it is not typical for this part of the ocean."

Joy took the albatross back to Grand Manan and gave it to naturalist and taxidermist Allan Moses, who stuffed and mounted it for his own collection.

Word of the rare albatross made its way to New York City and a world-famous museum.

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"The American Museum of Natural History really wanted it because it was a specimen they didn't have," said Jones.

According to records at the Grand Manan Museum, the New York museum sent multiple representatives to Moses, hoping to buy the albatross, but each time he rejected their offers.

"He knew what he had and when they came a second time to try to get it from him, he knew he had bargaining power," said Ava Sturgeon, an archivist at the Grand Manan Museum.

"So he milked it for everything he could."

## Making a deal

According to Sturgeon, Moses eventually made a deal. He agreed to trade his rare albatross in exchange for taking part in an expedition to Africa to collect another rare bird.

In 1928, Moses travelled to what was then known as the Belgian Congo and the Tanganyika territory, today's Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania.

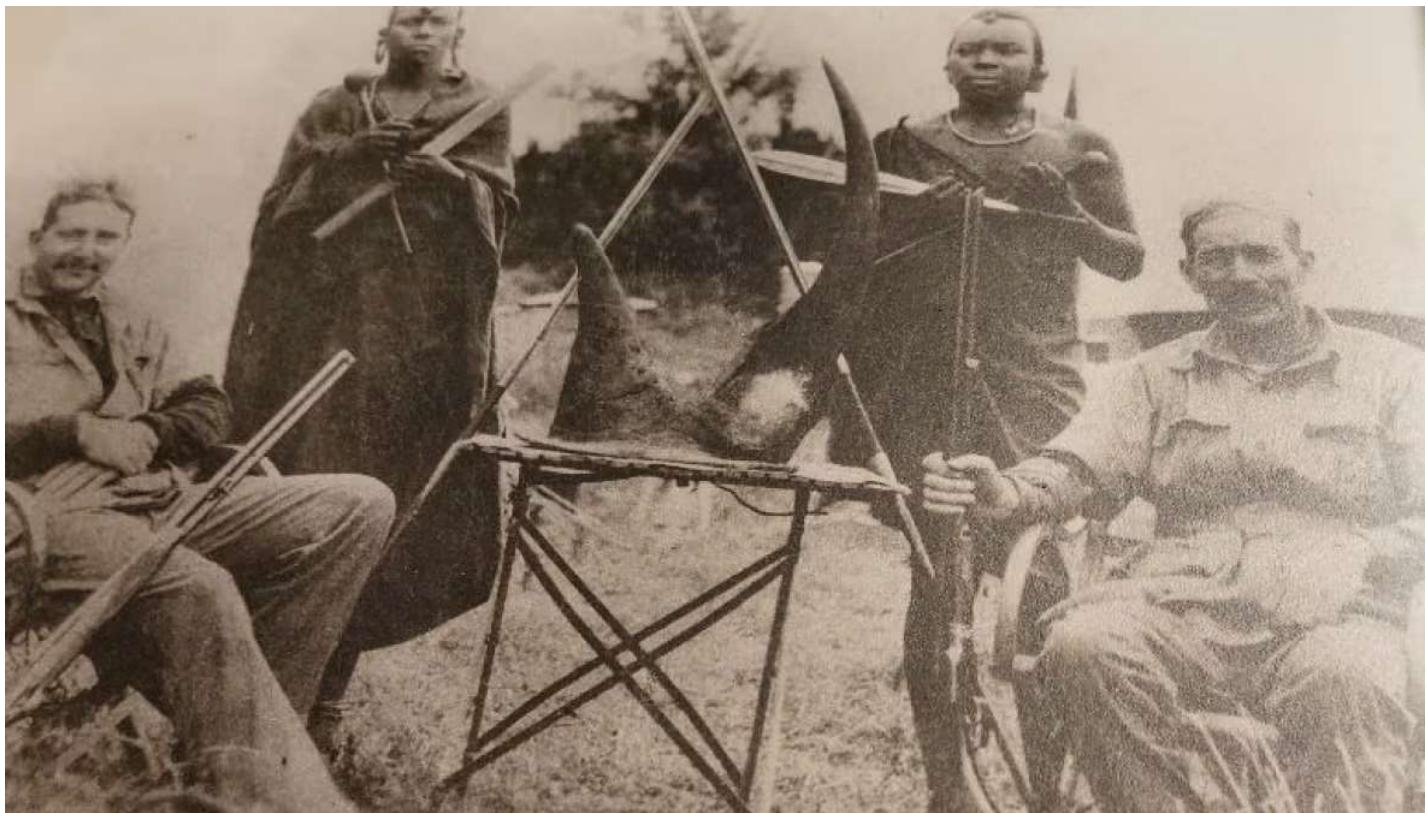


Patricia Jones is the director of the Bowdoin Scientific Station on Kent Island. (Shane Fowler/CBC News)

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Leading the expedition was John Sterling Rockefeller, a member of the wealthy New York Rockefeller family. The goal was to collect an extremely rare Grauer's broadbill, a small green species of flycatcher that was absent from the natural history museum's collection.

After nearly a year in Africa, travelling more than a 1,000 kilometres inland from Africa's east coast searching for the bird, Moses became sick.



A photo on display at the Grand Manan museum carries this caption: 'Sterling Rockefeller (left) and Allan Moses (right) with two Masai Tribesmen on rim of Ingoragora crater Tanganyika, on 1928-29 expedition for American Museum of Natural History.' (Submitted by the Grand Manan Museum)

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"Moses was sick in his tent with malaria," said Jones. "The others had gone off looking for this Grauer's broadbill."

"He spotted it ... in his malarial delirium. He spotted this bird that looked like a Grauer's broadbill," said Jones. "And he shot it."

"The story is they found him passed out in his tent, holding a Grauer's broadbill," said Jones.

The expedition was a success.

But according to Sturgeon, on the long journey home across the Atlantic Ocean, Moses lamented to Rockefeller, "'We've spent all this time and all this money to go this far to kill a few birds and ... if something's not done on Kent Island, we're going to lose to extinction a very important bird called the common eider duck.'"



Ava Sturgeon, an archivist, at the Grand Manan Museum says the museum has a display dedicated to the story of Allan Moses and his seabird collection. (Courtesy of the Grand Manan Museum)

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Sturgeon said the eider duck population on the island was recorded as low as just seven nesting pairs that year.

So, as a thank you for Moses's contribution to the expedition, Rockefeller purchased Kent Island and designated it a seabird sanctuary. The duck population rebounded. And in 1936, Rockefeller donated the island to Bowdoin College in Maine and the Kent Island Scientific Station was established.



Allan Moses poses with a mount of a gull. He was able to collect a rare bird for the American Museum of Natural History as a part of an African expedition with John Sterling Rockefeller. (Submitted by the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick - Item P93-CH-160)

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And the very first job of caretaker of the island was granted to Ernest Joy, the man who collected that rare yellow-nosed albatross 23 years earlier.

"Everything comes in a full circle," said Sturgeon.



The Kent Island Scientific Station was built when the island was donated to Bowdoin College by John Sterling Rockefeller in 1936 and since then researchers have studied here every summer. (Shane Fowler/CBC News)

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