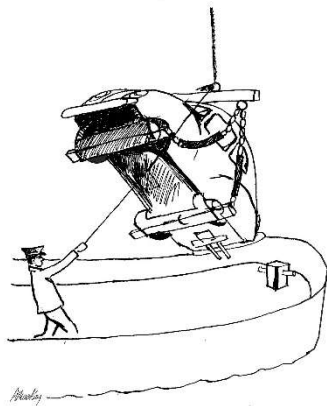


Grand Manan Adventures with Uncles Neil and Fulton

Art MacKay



Grand Manan, showered with the brilliant rays of spring, was looking her best. The towering cliffs of Northern Head stood out sharply against the deep blue water of the Bay of Fundy and chalk white fishing boats moved slowly across the horizon with greedy-eyed gulls following in their wakes. The "Steamer", loaded with bored locals, sleepy-eyed children, and happy tourists, plowed smoothly around Swallowtail Light, blew its foghorn with a child-scaring blasts and headed toward the dock where it would unload its passengers, cargo, and the half dozen cars located in her stern.



New Brunswick's Grand Manan Island is the largest of a group of islands guarding the mouth of the Bay of Fundy and it was my job, as a graduate student from McGill University, to survey the vertebrate fauna of the Archipelago. My landfall should have warned me that I might have an upsetting effect on the local populace, for my battered Volkswagen, the back seat loaded to the ceiling with the assorted paraphernalia of the collector, reacted in a most undignified manner to the efforts of the crew to

hoist her about 15 feet upward to the dock. After being strapped into the most unlikely looking harness, she demonstrated her obvious displeasure with this treatment by attempting to do a

complete reverse somersault. Completely stunned by the turn of events, I was squealing ineffectual encouragement to the crew, when a leathery old chap with a pipe clamped in his jaws placed a fatherly hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry Cap", he said, "we've only lost one that I know of." Smiling expansively, he walked off. I could still hear him chuckling when my car bounced unceremoniously to the dock.



Theoretically the process of surveying the animal fauna of any area is relatively simple. One has merely to set out assorted types of traps, fish the streams, observe signs, and just generally keep your eyes open, making notes and preserving your specimens so they can be examined later in the laboratory. In many respects it is an ideal life for anyone who enjoys animals and working outdoors. The major problem in a populated area like Grand Manan is to convince the people you meet and from whom you seek information, that your research has any validity. Just try to convince a 220-pound fisherman, who has just returned from a hard week of seining off Nova Scotia, that trapping field mice or collecting toads and snakes is work. Mind you the Grand Mananers were not rude. The word is hardly in their vocabulary. But an intensive discourse on the value of catching these animals for scientific research would invariably bring an indulgent smile which left me no doubt that my mental capabilities were in question. My initial sojourns into the field with dozens of mouse traps slung over my back always left me with the feeling that many residents regarded me as a fastidious mainlander who, suffering from a pied piper fixation, had come to the Island to rid them of rodents. Regardless of the feelings that the Islanders had, within days assistance was given from all quarters. An old shore building was placed at my disposal and youngsters would careen up to my work area on bicycles and deposit wriggling snakes, frogs, and toads onto my work bench. Adults of all ages supplied information about where I could find certain

animals, information on how some species were introduced to the Islands, or similar facts which were important in the compilation of data about the Archipelago.



Not long after I had begun my work, my Uncle Neil began to visit me with increasing frequency while I was busy preparing my specimens. At 79 he was no longer actively engaged in fishing and had considerable time at his disposal. Eventually, he began to accompany me on my field trips and became a close friend and assistant. He is a man of average height but wiry and leathery from a long life at sea. At first, I thought that his trips with me would be hard for him, but he was soon to teach me that one should not be deceived by appearance, particularly if the individual is an islander. Included in my itinerary was a trip to the west coast of the Island which, due to its rugged nature, is completely uninhabited except for the occasional hunting camp.



On hearing of my plans Uncle Neil suggested that he could take me to a camp which belonged to a friend of his. Of course, in view of his age and apparent condition, I was somewhat apprehensive

about undertaking this seven-mile hike with him, but he persisted, and I finally agreed. Preparations were begun and on the day of departure my traps, clothing, ammunition, and food were neatly stowed in two backpacks which each must have weighed about eighty or ninety pounds. Without hesitation Nail hoisted the pack to his back and started off at a brisk pace with me in active pursuit. "Don't worry Art, he'll slow down." I thought as I stumbled along behind. After two miles, I was bathed in perspiration and desperately trying to mask the sucking noises resulting from my attempts to obtain enough oxygen to keep me going. Carefully controlling my breathing, I suggested, as calmly as possible, "Neil, you must be tired. Why don't we stop here for a rest." He agreed and I sank to the ground and relieved myself of my pack. To my amazement Neil remained standing with the pack still on his back. Not a drop of perspiration showed, his breath was steady and he looked as if the trip was just beginning. To add to the humiliation, we repeated this procedure twice more during the trip while I dampened the moss with sweat and gasped for air.



Eventually, we reached the camp and set up housekeeping. While Neil cleaned the house, I went for water to use when we cooked our supper. To my dismay the well was filled with finely suspended clay and was completely undrinkable. The bog water flowing into the lake in front of our cabin was equally unpalatable due to its high acid content. Our food, when cooked in the available liquid, tasted either of clay or acid but was edible, but nothing made the water suitable for drinking. About noon the following day, I mentioned to Neil that I was beginning to become quite thirsty. Without a word he went to his pack, buried his head to the bottom and emerged with a large bottle of rye whiskey. "Have a drink of this." he said, "It'll fix what's ailing you". Since I have limited drinking abilities and there was no suitable mix available, I declined. Hoisting the bottle to

his lips, Neil took a sizable swallow, corked the bottle, and placed it on the table. "Help yourself, if you change your mind." I lasted out that day, but the following morning dawned bright and hot. The effects began to show after we had tended the traps and prepared the specimens. That bottle became more and more tempting and at each trip to the cabin it seemed to have moved to a more prominent position and become larger. By suppertime my throat was dry, and my lips were parched. While Neil was out, thirst won out and I decided to have a slug. Rapidly I unscrewed the cap and downed a large slug. If the fires of Hell burn that badly, then I shall attend to my religious duties fastidiously. I coughed and spewed rye throughout the cabin. Running to the well I doused the fires with a quart of clay tinted water. When I returned to the cabin Neil was helping himself to another thirst-quenching drink. Not an eyelid quivered.



With Neil's help, my collection of Grand Manan animals grew, and my notebook was becoming filled with information which would be valuable in preparing my thesis. But an important part of my work was carrying out surveys on the thirteen smaller islands just offshore from the main island of Grand Manan. My original plan was to devote the following summer to this project, but when the Director of the Bowdoin College Research Station on Kent Island invited me to visit with them, I decided to accept their offer. The evening before my departure for Kent Island, I visited with relatives and late in the evening the discussion turned to local stories and eventually Island ghosts. My Uncle Fulton, a short gnome-like man took the floor at this point, and it shortly became obvious that he was a master teller of ghost stories. With his eyes twinkling mischievously, he recounted the sad facts leading up to the appearance of the Thoroughfare ghost, a poor man who had gotten his throat slashed as the result of an illicit love affair. He told about the ghosts of Deep Cove. But the story which made me straighten in my chair was one about the headless ghost of Kent Island, the very Island I was to visit the following day. Some knowledge of the physical characteristics of the Island is necessary for full appreciation of this tale. The most outlying Island in the Archipelago, Kent Island is long and narrow. Its southern tip is directly exposed to the full

fury of the sea and wind. During the summer this area is inhabited by hundreds of breeding gulls and their accumulated excrement has killed the vegetation leaving only briars and gnarled and grotesque tree remains. The north end of the Island is wooded and protects a small bay called the Basin into which boats can move at high tide. At low tide the Basin is completely drained. It is here that the ghost appears.



About forty years ago Uncle Fulton was stationed on this Island as part of a life saving crew which was housed in a building overlooking the Basin. During the long evenings the talk often turned to disasters which had occurred in the area and there was one tale of a shipwreck off the southern tip of the Island. Only the head of one of the crew was found. One evening Fulton had just completed his meal and was gazing out into the basin which was now turning gray as dusk approached. He noticed a movement on the sand bar and straining his eyes, he watched a figure, somehow strangely stunted, walk slowly across the mudflats, up the beach, and into the woods. Just as he was asking his friends, "Who is out in the Basin?" He realized that everyone on the island was seated at the table. The storyteller maintained that his tale was true and that others had seen the headless ghost as he roamed this wild island looking for his head.

As I walked home that evening, I could feel the hair bristling on the back of my head and felt apprehensive about my visit to Kent Island the following day.