

GULLS AND GHOSTS AT KENT ISLAND, GRAND MANAN

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Previously, I told you the story of the headless ghost. It was a rather gory story, told to me by my Uncle Fult, about a man who, in unusual circumstances, had lost his head in a shipwreck on Kent Island off Grand Manan. Legend has it that his ghost still wanders the island looking for its lost head. I had heard this story the evening before I was to go to Kent Island.

The next morning, I gathered my gear together, packed it into my battered Volkswagen, and headed towards the Ingall's Head Breakwater. The story Uncle Fult had told the night before was still passing through my head, creating an unreasoned state of apprehension. My common sense told me that ghosts don't exist; they can't be touched, there is no proof for their existence, they are not real. Yet, many of our basic beliefs have their roots in the supernatural and overall humans do believe in powers greater than us which are minds cannot understand.

As the boat rounded the breakwater and began to dip into the gentle swell rolling in from the Bay, I shook these disturbing thoughts from my mind and began to make plans for my two days on Kent Island. The mammals on this island and adjacent Hay and Sheep Islands might well provide me with a valuable clue in the puzzle of how the islands in the Archipelago were colonized after the last great glacier receded from the area. With my mind occupied with my work and the pleasant scenery, the crossing passed quickly and the boat was soon weaving among the ledges off Kent Island. It ran the opening in the bar and glided smoothly across the Basin towards the small wharf.

I was greeted by four young students from Bowdoin College. They immediately made me feel welcome and as we strolled up the path towards their living quarters, they told me about the work they were doing there. One of them was working on the life history of the Leach's Petrel, a small,

dainty, oceanic bird which nests in ground burrows in the spruce woods. Another was working on the behaviour of the Tree Swallows which swooped above our heads. The remaining two students had the job of tagging and dyeing Herring Gulls to learn their movement patterns, and, hopefully, to find a method of eliminating the dangerous affinity that they have for airports. No one mentioned the headless ghost.

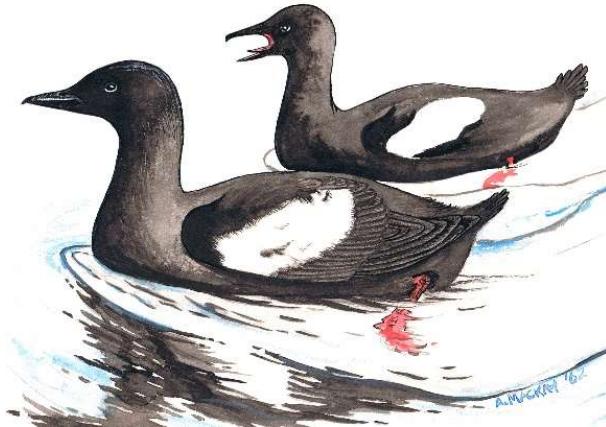


The remainder of that day and the following day were uneventful and I wandered the Island looking for signs of the mammal inhabitants and taking photographs. I discovered that Kent Island was a beautiful, but eerie, place. The northwestern end of the Island is much like any other island in the Bay of Fundy. It is heavily wooded with spruce trees which were cleared here and there many years ago. These old fields are now covered with second growth and bright wildflowers. The few buildings that constitute the research station were a typical shingled fish shed at the Basin and, in the center of the Island, an old house which has been converted into a dormitory and lab. An old car was parked beside the house, an odd note on an island where you could travel only a few hundred yards in any direction. To the southeast, the Island becomes awesome. A path leads from the house, along the shoreline of a wild, desolate finger of land which points towards the open Atlantic. Hundreds of gulls use this area as a nesting site during the spring and summer. They are everywhere and, as you pick you way through the brambles, they spring from their roughly built nests and flutter anxiously over your head. Everywhere there are the white weathered bones of dead trees. Over the years, tons of gull droppings have rained down on them slowly killing them and leaving only their barkless skeletons. But the brambles and briars have survived, and they reach out to grab your clothing and skin as you work you way through them.

In the late afternoon of my final day on the Island, a heavy white blanket of fog swept in over the Island, soaking everything like a heavy rain. The day's schedule called for the tagging of Petrels and Gulls that evening and I was invited to participate. At about 10:30 in the evening, I left with one of the students to try for Petrels in the spruce thickets. The others headed for the gull breeding grounds on the point. We would join them there later.



As we walked towards the woods, the thick fog soaked our clothing almost immediately. But the southerly breeze was warm and we were not uncomfortable. We proceeded to an opening in the edge of the woods, raised the mist net across the opening and sat on a log to wait. The Petrel, although it spends days in flight over the open ocean, is a relatively feeble flier and is no match for the stronger gulls which will gladly harass them in the hope of an easy meal. As a result, the Petrel can only return to its nest after dark. The fine mist net was stretched across one of the flyways to their nests and any birds that returned that night would be easily captured, banded and released. But nothing came, so we lowered the net and headed back across the Island to assist in the "gull jacking".



As we approached the now darkened form of the house, my companion uttered a mild curse. "I've left my notebook back on that log", he said. "You join the others on the point and I'll be along in a half hour or so". Without a further word he turned and disappeared into the fog. I probed the mist with my flashlight, found the path, and began to stroll towards the point. A fine rain had started falling while we were sitting on our log, but the breeze was still warm and the exercise that I had

been promised would certainly keep the chill away. Ahead of me, I could hear the noisy din of gulls which had been disturbed from their nests. The boys must already be at work.



As I reached the edge of the nesting grounds, an abrupt, strange silence fell over the Island causing the hair to rise on the back of my neck. Not a living creature could be heard; only the waves booming off the surface of the beach directly below me. A sudden cool breeze struck me from behind, causing me to shudder. The story of the headless ghost sprang into my mind. "Nonsense! Shake those thoughts from your head, boy." I continued on, as the path narrowed, the briars reached out for me and the white grotesque skeletons of the dead trees appeared in the beam of my light. Suddenly, with a wild scream, something burst from the brush to my right. Startled, I stepped back, nearly falling over the embankment into the surf below. "Easy. Relax. It was only a gull. Take your time." The disturbed gull had brought life back to the point and hundreds of noisy, shrieking voices filled the air around me. By now, I was well out onto the point and I had not found the three students. I turned off my light and stared anxiously into the fog. There was no one there; no flickering lights, no voices. I flicked my light back on and turned to go back up the path. The cold breeze struck me again and I shuddered. Suddenly, my light went out! I shook it. Nothing! A few steps to my right I could see the white topping of the waves. To my immediate right was an impossible tangle of dead trees and briars. "Don't panic. Listen to the surf and work your way carefully up the path. Be calm." I took a few steps. Something reached out of the darkness and grabbed my leg. I crashed heavily into the bush. A few feet away, a gull was screaming insults into my ear. As I lay there breathing heavily, my entire soul became overwhelmed with the feeling I was not alone. There was an ill-defined presence near me. In panic, I shook my light again and again. It flickered and went out. I shook it again and it stayed on. I jumped to my feet and dashed along the path. But the light went out and I stumbled again, rolling within a few feet of the

embankment. I shook the light again and it came on. I proceeded more slowly, controlling the impulse to run, stopping every few feet to shake the life back into my light.

With painful slowness, I reached the edge of the breeding grounds, the presence at my back, my heart pounding in my ears. I heard a muted voice ahead of me and, with rising anxiety, proceeded towards it. My dying light picked up the glistening shingles of a small building on the shore which I had not previously noticed. With relief, I recognized the voices of the students. As I reached the door, the rain stopped, the soft, warm breeze returned, and my light began to burn strongly, without a single flicker.

I sat quietly for some time, allowing my emotions and body to return to near normal. So as not to reveal my fears, I very slowly made the statement, "I went to the point, but I couldn't find you." "Ok", one of them laughed, "I guess we were feeling lazy It started to rain when we were coming down the path and, for some reason, we decided to sit it out. It's funny you didn't hear us when you went past. We've been talking steadily since we got here." "Yes", I thought, "that's funny." With the arrival of the other student, we headed back to the point where, for the next two hours, we mesmerized gulls with our lights, grabbed them by their wings, and carried them back to the tagging table. It was a wild mad night and the physical exertion and companionship drove my fears from my mind. I slept well, despite my experiences.



The next day dawned dull and overcast. With considerable relief, I packed my belongings and walked, with the boys, to the Basin where the boat was to pick me up. We said our good-byes and the boat powered its way out of the Basin. As we cleared the bar and began to weave through the ledges, I turned to have a last look at the Island. In the shade of the spruces at the far end of the bar, a movement caught my eye.....

