

A feather in Acadia's cap; Island bird sanctuary protected for future university students

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Bill Spurr, Features Writer

A week between showers, a "nearly full" outhouse, and knowing you're probably going to encounter projectile vomiting.

On Bon Portage Island, this is higher learning.

The list of Acadia University honours and master's students that have come to study on Bon Portage, 15 to 30 minutes from Shag Harbour depending on wind and the tide, includes a former Apple Blossom Festival Queen Annapolis, though life on the island is not fit for royalty.

"My field book from two years ago still smells like petrel puke," said Ingrid Pollet, an Acadia student from France.

The island is home to 50,000 pairs of seabirds called Leach's storm petrels.

The human population fluctuates between two and 20. The food and accommodations are basic, and nighttime entertainment is sparse.

"We play a lot of Boggle," said Emily Mills, who has graduated from Acadia but felt the call to return to Bon Portage this summer. "It was nice coming here, working hands-on with birds, instead of being trapped in a lab."

The university acquired the 120-hectare island from husband-and-wife lightkeepers, who lived

there for decades and who had bought the island from the Crown. Acadia students started coming to the island to do research in the 1970s, then a bird-banding operation was begun and cabins were built. All the activity revolves around the petrels.

"Do you want to see a chick?" asks Pollet, who then thrusts her arm into a burrow in the ground, past her elbow. When she withdraws her hand, it's holding a small grey bird.

"Here, smell it."

Even if you're a bit startled by having someone thrust a bird toward your nose, it's impossible to miss the musty smell of the petrel, a result of a diet that consists of small fish, crustaceans and jellyfish.

Petrel eggs are laid in early June and take 105 days to hatch. The chicks stay in their burrows and parents return at night to feed them.

"It's a cacophony unlike anything you've ever heard," says Prof. Dave Shutler of the time about an hour after sunset when the sky suddenly fills with adult petrels.

Feeding and incubating duties are shared by both parents, which have been known to return to the same burrow for more than 20 consecutive years. The Bon Portage petrel colony is

the largest south of Newfoundland.

"Petrels offer several advantages; one is, they're extremely abundant," Shutler says.

"If you look at a lot of the species of albatrosses, which are one of their relatives, they're getting entangled in fish nets, they are probably being exposed to pesticides and things like that. If you want to work on albatrosses, it's much more difficult to get good sample sizes, get permits, access to their islands.

"So we can use petrels as a model for factors that affect albatrosses.

"This island, there's a certain magic to it for the people who like this kind of setting, and there are other students who've come here and absolutely hated it, and have been unable to finish the work they were supposed to do."

Thanks to an agreement between Acadia and the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, students can be confident they'll be able to keep on coming to the island. The two have come to terms on a conservation easement, marking the first time in Canada that university land has been placed under such permanent protection.

"We started negotiating with Acadia a long time ago but it was very recently that we got official word that the board of directors would sign that memorandum of understanding; it was just a vision, a dream, until really recently," said Bonnie Sutherland, executive director of the nature trust, who credits Tom Herman, the longtime head of Acadia's biology department, with making it happen.

"He put together the idea of this really special place Acadia owns and the concept of the nature trust, and making sure it's protected forever, recognizing that as an asset of an organization it's at risk. As the economy tightens and universities are under increasing financial pressure, there's going to be pressure to look at what can be liquidated.

"In this case, because it's a conservation easement, they will still own this island but the easement is a legal document . . . so the land is protected forever. We'll have a legal agreement that spells out what can and can't happen here so it's protected from any subdivision, development, logging or any kind of activity that could harm the natural habitat, but it will allow for continued use for academic research, for education – the uses that Acadia enjoys now."

While petrels are by far the most common creature on Bon Portage, the island is on the migration route of dozens of species, allowing volunteers at the banding station to take part in other research.

Andrew Major, who just finished a stint on the island, saw 62 species in 10 days.

"Holding a bird is unreal; it's very special. I work in an aquatic consulting firm but I really want to focus on birds, so this is a unique opportunity to gain that experience," said Major, who was most impressed by getting to handle a sharp-shinned hawk that the banding station nets caught.

"Whenever a sharp-shinned hawk is hunting, he floats. They'll come over a canopy of trees fast and they'll hit whatever they can. They're not looking for a net. A lot of big raptors are going slowly and they'll see the net and just fly away.

"We got a northern flicker, which is a very large woodpecker, we had juvenile orioles.

"We had a summer tanager, which is a rare bird in Canada, so we were very fortunate to get that one."

The island is also home to great horned owls, and Major was able to record their shrieks on his smartphone. For Sutherland, the most memorable sound on the island is the noise the adult petrels make when they return from sea at night.

"It sounds like this weird laughter, like human laughter," she said.

"There are thousands of them flying in overhead, and then you can hear the babies underground because they can hear the parents. So, under your feet, you hear this chirp, chirp, chirp, chirp, then this strange laughing. It's amazing."