

THE PEOPLE'S ISLAND



*An ongoing collection of stories from
those who cherish Sears Island*

THE PEOPLE'S ISLAND

Huntin', says one. Mourning says another. Recharging says a third. We walk and run, bike and ski, swim and kayak, skip rocks, walk dogs, discover birds in the bushes, ancient artifacts in the ground, and porpoises offshore. People of all ages, all walks of life, from up the road and half a world away come to teach our children about the cycles of monarchs and spring peepers, to witness the sun streaming through forests, and the twilight glow flooding the water and glimmering against the lights of Mack Point. To explore.

This people's island, Sears Island, is a place of mystery, of wildness, yet also accessible to those who can't walk or walk well.

As my partner Bill Carpenter and I hiked and biked the island over the past months, we've often asked our fellow visitors about their time here—why they've come, what they do, why they love it. The following pages represent the launch of this volunteer project. Many more stories await from those who cherish Sears Island, who visit it frequently, who rely on it for joy, for amazement, and for healing from daily labors and accumulated scars.

Two strains run through these stories: love for this refuge and a potent mixture of bewilderment and alarm as to why such a beloved sanctuary would yet again be threatened by development, given an available industrial site right across the channel. The dismay expands as we realize that over the years, upwards of 30 million of our tax dollars has been spent on failed attempts to develop the third of this beloved state-owned island that is currently not under conservation, supervised by the Department of Transportation.

These visitors understand that locating industry on the unprotected portion would bury forever the peace and solace of the island—by the 24-hour noise, traffic, and lights of a manufactory, along with the deforestation followed by soil harvesting that would furthermore eliminate the significant environmental benefits of the carbon sequestration of that portion of the island's forests.

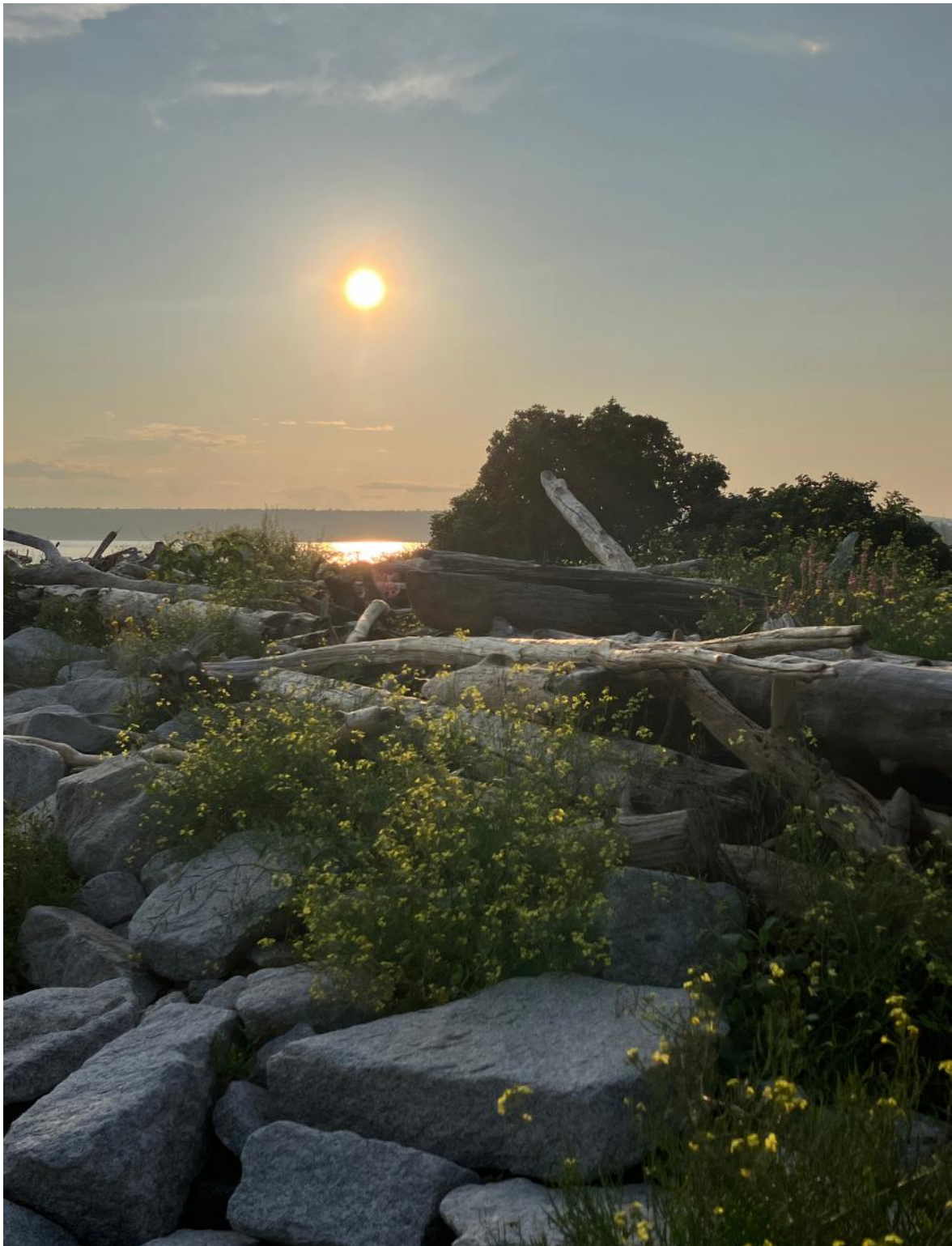
We can't interview the birds or the trees, the springs or wetlands, or the dune. Only the humans. These twenty-five stories represent but the tiniest fraction of people whose lives would be diminished by any industrialization on Sears Island.

Let Sears Island—all of it—remain a sacred place of refuge for the people of Maine and beyond. Let Sears Island be the people's island, wild forever!

—Donna Gold, Stockton Springs
journalist, novelist, & oral historian
SearsIslandStories.org

CONTENTS

Sears Island Saves Lives	1
Protect Sears Island	2
Sears Island Song	4
Returning, Remembering Home	6
I Come Here Huntin’	8
Escaping Life’s Hubbub	9
Mourning for an Island	10
A Sears Island Childhood	12
It was Just Wonderful	14
Majestic, Mystical Moment	16
A Swing for All	17
Sears Island, Fall Equinox, Low Tide	18
A Place of Wonder	19
Discovery Links to Deep Past	20
Hen of the Woods	22
7 Coyote Pups; 1 Big Dog	23
Talking to the Wind	24
Sears Island Aurora	25
A Treasure for Animals & Birds	26
A Place to Rejuvenate	28
Like an Enchanted Forest	29
Boy Scout	30
I Felt a Green Energy	31
Hérons	32
I Come to Recharge	33



Sunset begins over the jetty. Photo by Donna Gold

SEARS ISLAND SAVES LIVES



Story by Charles Kniffen, Lubec

I am a combat-wounded Vietnam veteran with PTSD. Sears Island was my place of refuge and peace. I was a caregiver for a dear old friend, a Navy veteran and life-long long-hauler as he faded into the deepening folds of Alzheimer's. On days when his mom, came to visit and I'd go for a paddle in my kayak around Sears Island, stopping at the southern tip for a walkabout. Those days I'd enjoy, from the innermost reaches of my traumatized heart to the crown of my troubled head, the wonders that an open, uncluttered, non-commercialized island can yield.

Leave the island be. Don't pinch pennies and lose a treasure. People along the crowded midcoast need at least one place that is open, quiet and surrounded by the glorious waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Leave the island be. Please, Governor.

Charles Kniffen is the author of two non-fiction books on war and its aftermath, Fifty Years in a Foxhole and Rude Awakenings, Making peace with the beast machine. He's worked as a truck driver, milkman, dairy herdsman, licensed social worker, and vocational rehabilitation counselor. He's been an all-season solo kayaker for two decades, plying the North Atlantic from Spring Point to the Bay of Fundy. He and his wife, Rhonda Welcome co-own Turtle Dance Totems in Lubec, Maine. Photos courtesy of Charles Kniffen.



PROTECT SEARS ISLAND



Story and photos by James McCarthy, Brunswick

On Memorial Day my poet friend Gary Lawless and I went on a seven-mile walkabout on Sears Island. A chestnut-sided warbler greeted us soon after our arrival. Its song is sometimes described as a short ditty: “Pleased, pleased, pleased to meetcha!” Even though this is what male chestnut-sided warblers sing to attract a mate, we chose to take it as a friendly greeting to both of us as we explored its homeplace.

We visited to see for ourselves what’s at stake under the Maine Department of Transportation’s announced preference to build a \$760 million wind-energy port on a 100-acre section of the 941-acre Sears Island. Mostly, we walked in silence listening to wind moving through grasses and trees.

We marveled at the thousands and thousands of emergent yellow-green ferns bordering the forest and the trails. In their own way, the ferns were walking with us as we made our way to the southern point of Sears Island overlooking Penobscot Bay. There, we listened to harking gulls and calm ocean waters slip-sliding over smooth stones and seaweed.

We were mindful of the people who spent time here long before: the ancestral Wabanaki who named the island Wahsumkik, meaning “bright sand beach,” which made the island an important navigation beacon for the Wabanaki as they navigated Penobscot Bay in their birchbark canoes.



Gary Lawless gazes out at Penobscot Bay.



Mack Point as seen through a driftwood construction on Sears Island.

Our walkabout took us to the designated “transportation parcel,” where the state wants to build a port facility to support the manufacturing, assembly and launching of floating offshore wind turbines for eventual placement in the Gulf of Maine. From the vantage point of a tumbled-rock jetty we looked across the cove to the industrial site of Mack Point in Searsport. It has significant dock frontage, extensive facilities such as warehousing and liquid tank storage and access to a nearby rail line.

Neither of us can fathom why the state prefers to transform a significant section of Sears Island into an industrialized site when there’s already an industrialized port site a stone’s throw away at Mack Point. Especially when the energy company Sprague, which already operates a full-service terminal there, offers a viable alternative that would spare Sears Island from all the clearing, grading and earth removal and destruction of forest and tidal-zone habitats that is called for in the state’s proposal.

James McCarthy served as managing editor of The Times Record and as digital editor of MaineBiz. Following his retirement in 2019, Jim turned to photography, creating ’zines that challenge people to consider their surroundings. From racial and economic justice to Maine’s changing rural landscape to securing full sovereignty for the Wabanaki tribes in Maine, he continues to tell stories that are as meaningful as they are thought-provoking. In 2023, Jim was inducted into the Maine Press Association Hall of Fame.

SEARS ISLAND SONG



Gary Lawless, Nobleboro

I.
The island is singing —
The song of wind in the trees,
Ferns in sunlight,
Water against rock,
The song of stars in deep space —
Bird song, sky song, granite song,
Eelgrass moving in the tide —
We walk surrounded by song.
The island has been singing
For so long, so long —
Slowly, we learn to hear —
Slowly, we learn to sing.

II.
Bowling to this moment
To this particular moment
This moment of
Sunlight, grasses, ferns,
Birch, salt water
Chestnut sided warbler —
Bow to the
Horizon — hello
Clouds — hello
Ocean
Every moment
Bowling

III.
Wet moss and i
Can't hear you walking —
We are moving above
Lower layers of stone —
“Look at the trees” he said
“under the ground
They are holding hands.”

IV.
Wisps of fog follow
Birdsong along
Edges of the island
Mist rising

V.

Hard to be lonely in the lushness of
Eel-grass, feeling the ocean's
Ebb and flow —
Hard to know
Want or hurt or
Waste, here below
The sun, the sky,
The water's edge of
Grass and mud and
Moving with the moon —
Hard to know the
Hearts of men, those
Who would fill and spill and
Kill all below
Their own shallow depth of heart, their
Line of sight —
Hard to know these hearts,
Hard to be alive, hard to survive
In the face of their
Rush toward riches, toward death —
Hard to be alive.



Gary Lawless contemplates Penobscot Bay from Sears Island.

Photo by Beth Leonard.

Facing photo, of ferns on the island's southern edge, by James McCarthy.

Poet Gary Lawless is co-owner of Gulf of Maine Books in Brunswick, and editor/publisher of Blackberry Books. His latest book of poems, How the Stones Came to Venice, was recently published by Littoral Books, of Portland, Maine. It will also be published in Italian in Italy, and in Portuguese in Brazil. He recently edited and published Nanao Sakaki's collected poems How to live on the planet earth, as well as several other titles by and about Nanao.

Gary was born in Belfast and lives in Nobleboro with his wife, Beth Leonard, their cat, and their two rescue donkeys.

RETURNING, REMEMBERING HOME



Journeyers raise their paddles as they near shore. Photo by David Italiaander.

*By Alivia Moore, citizen of the Penobscot Nation & co-director of Niweskok**

Niweskok organized a ceremonial canoe journey for this August, following the main stem of the Bunawupskeag/Penobscot River to the Bay, ending at Sears Island/Mali-pakansisihkok/Hazelnut Island*. As we paddled the four segments of this ancestral canoe route, we experienced an embodied remembering that we, as the people of the River, are ocean people too. Panawahpskewi, the people of the Penobscot River—our culture, our shared identity—centers from our relative, the River. Colonization has physically and psychologically disrupted Penobscot connection to our ocean culture and identity. The construction of Fort Pownal in 1758, now the site of Fort Point State Park, marked the beginning of an era where Penobscot and other Wabanaki relatives could no longer safely paddle the Penobscot River to our coastal villages. With our ceremonial paddle we have been able to return as visible, vibrant community to coastal Penobscot territory!

On the final day of the journey, our elder and master paddler Eugene ‘Chip’ Loring, who had paddled two legs with us, waited for our canoe at the rocky point off Fort Point beach. As his eyes searched for our approach, it was the flash of water reflecting on our paddles that he first saw. A wave of emotion and pride came over him seeing his people come home. Our ceremonial canoe filled with Wabanaki flowed past Fort Point safely and with the blessing of our elder. This is healing, for the people and land and waters.

When Wabanaki are able to return to our home on the coast, we understand we will have responsibilities to those lands and waters too. It is vital that Wabanaki are not only invited into broader movements, but also that space is created, resources shifted, and that we are welcomed back on our terms just as we were able to do during our canoe journey. From these restored relationships, Wabanaki can reconnect to the caretaking that the earth is calling us into.



Eugene ‘Chip’ Loring awaits the journeyers. Photo by Bridgid Neptune.

*Niweskok: From the Stars to Seeds is a nonprofit whose mission “rematriates Wabanaki lifeways through engaging with our kinship responsibilities and reclaiming traditional foods & healing. We prioritize restoring the Penobscot Bay region as a Wabanaki foodhub.” In Penobscot, Niweskok translates as “dried seeds for planting”, also “essence of life” and “spirit” Alivia notes that there are several names for Sears Island, among them “Wahsumkik”, “White”, or “Bright Sand Beach” and “Mali-pakansisihkok”, “Hazelnut Island”. There are still hazels on Sears Island, she adds.

*Medicines rest in a shell beside a canoe bow.
Photo by Jessica Sockbeson.*



I COME HERE HUNTIN'

Bill Carpenter speaks with VB, Belfast, and DC, Carmel



Motorcyclists on Sears Island's causeway. Photo by Donna Gold.

VB: I come here huntin'! Deer huntin'. And we come to swim, and for a little recreation.

Bill: No huntin' today though—

VB: No, no, we got something else going on. We're just looking for some cool air. And no, no, we think they ought to leave the island the way it is. I mean, it's one of the last accessible, uninhabited islands on the East Coast. We come down at least once a month. Sometimes more.

Bill: Think of what this island would be like anywhere else, filled with estates of the rich, we wouldn't be able to get anywhere near it.

DC: There are still artifacts here from when the natives came down and shellfished. We come up and kayak, me and my wife, my son. My granddaughter, when she comes up from Connecticut, loves to come here. It's one of my favorite places. A lot of people use the island. It's one of the best places around. If you want to get away, you can come right here and get away.

VB: Yeah. Me and my buddy hunt it though.

DC: The old homestead up there is cool, too, with the foundations. There's a hut up on the beach made of driftwood. I live in Carmel now, but I grew up in Winterport, so I came down here as a kid. Everybody around did. From Winterport it was just a hop, skip and a jump. My mother liked to take us down here on the rare occasions when she had time off.

VB: We absolutely love it here and I heard they were gonna do some stuff here, industrialize it. It breaks my heart, really. I hope they don't.

DC: So what I want to know is what they're proposing gonna to do for the greater good?

ESCAPING LIFE'S HUBBUB

A conversation with Steve Bonin and Frank Hart, Searsport



Friends Steve Bonin and Frank Hart on their evening walk.

“There are not many places I can go—not with this scooter, not if you want to see something,” says Frank Hart, as he rolls down the jetty road in his wheelchair after a bracing journey up the pavement, his friend Steve Bonin walking beside him. They keep up quite a pace. “I walk every morning by myself,” says Steve, “and every evening with Frank.”

“I’ve seen Bigfoot hunters here,” Steve adds. “There are some big trees broken right off—ones you couldn’t get your hands around, and they were sure Bigfoot did it, so they were out hunting Bigfoot, see if he was there. It was a storm of course that took down the trees.

“This is a nice, quiet place to get away from the hubbub of life—and get some exercise.”

MOURNING FOR AN ISLAND



Story and photos by Peter Wohl, Unity

Yesterday I went down to the coast to begin a process of mourning. I was mourning for the loss of a coastal Maine treasure that until now has been the “largest uninhabited, undeveloped, causeway accessible island on the eastern coast of the United States.” This is the place that we now call Sears Island, and the Wabanaki people who visited there for thousands of years called Wahsumkik, or bright shining beach. This is the place that has recently been identified as the likely site for the transportation, fabrication, and assembly of offshore wind turbines.

Of course, while it is uninhabited, it isn’t really undeveloped. In addition to the paved causeway from the mainland, there is a paved road bisecting the island. A jetty juts out into Penobscot bay on the western side of the island, and there is a cell tower on the southern end. These are the relatively recent human alterations. The land also tells the story of past human activity. The forest that covers most of the island shows the signs of successive tree cutting and varied land use, including at one time being cleared for grazing animals.

Yet, in spite of this human usage, if you wander off onto the lesser traveled side trails, the island has a pervasive sense of wildness and mystery. Many large, venerable trees remain, casting their deep shadows over the forest floor. Walking these trails, you can feel the presence of the Wabanaki families who came there to share the abundance they found in the waters of Penobscot Bay. On these trails you can also encounter skeletons of European settlers’ farmhouses. The stone foundations of their homes remain in silent testimony to the lives of those who settled on the island. If you walk these paths in reverent silence, the very present spirits of the island’s past will walk with you.



Steps leading to the cellar of the former Sears Island farmhouse.

Sears Island has also held a special attraction for our officials in Augusta, who have sought to see it developed since the 1980s. Now, Governor Mills may succeed where governors Brennan, McKernan, King, and Baldacci did not. Friends of Sears Island make a clear case for utilizing more appropriate alternatives, but a tragic decision may soon be made.

I am grief-stricken that once again, a place of wildness, a place rich in both natural and human history, a Maine treasure, may be greatly diminished in the name of progress. Personally, I will no longer be able to walk the trails without feeling a pervasive sense of sadness. If we meet there, please walk with me, treading silently and reverently along the path, accompanied by the island spirits. Perhaps, inspired by our collective grief, we will arise from the threat of a terrible loss with renewed dedication to helping our remaining wild Maine heritage survive.

A SEARS ISLAND CHILDHOOD

From Gertrude Gordon's autobiography (1899-1981)



Gertrude Gordon's watercolor of the farmhouse she lived in while on Sears Island. It burned down in 1917, shortly after her family left the island.

Gertrude Gordon's memories of living on Sears Island as a teenager are excerpted from her autobiography. Additions, in *italic*, are from Sarah Nickerson, one of Gertrude's granddaughters.

When I reached the age of sixteen and was in my first year of high school, my father was persuaded to leave the farm [in Belfast] and take over the management of a large lumber and farm business on an island off from Searsport known as Sears Island. This island was connected to the mainland at low tide by a sandbar. One could cross at half tide if one was familiar with the winding road.

The farm was a large, two-story house that sat back about a quarter of a mile from the bar. It was gray and weather-beaten and strongly built, with its long sheds and barn all connected. At that time there were fields surrounding the house which have since grown up to bushes. There was a short path leading to the shore, lined with elms for some distance. From the back door a road wound gracefully around the barn and swung down to the shore.

[Adds Sarah: The foundation, which is off the Homestead Trail, had a small cellar, but these were huge buildings. There's a tree growing up in the middle of the cellar now, and you can see the old bricks lying in the bottom of the foundation, all singed from when, in 1917, the house burnt.]

There was a crew of men working in the woods at that time. And there was farm work to do with a herd of cows to be taken care of and hens and chickens as well as a pair of turkeys.

My mother, with the help of myself and the girl that became my sister-in-law, did the cooking and cleaning for the men who stayed there the year round. The upstairs rooms were where the men slept, and it was the duty of

us girls to make the beds and keep the rooms clean. Many of the men went back and forth by way of boats to Cape Jellison where they lived, while some had small camps and boarded themselves.

[The women also did the men's wash, hanging out the clothes, and got paid a little bit for it. They did everything by hand. They had no electricity. They had kerosene lamps and wood stoves.]

Often on payday my father allowed me to pay the men off. This was a duty of which I felt very proud. With few exceptions, they were a very good crew. We were really more like a huge family. My father was the kind of man that worked with the men as an equal and was much liked.

Sometimes we had a clambake on the shore with a campfire and a few of us sat around the fire telling stories or perhaps singing. I played the mandolin, and at one time there was a fiddler there and he was really something when it came to playing. We had many a game of ball in the evenings, and I was quite adept at sliding bases.

[Grammy used to talk about how the guys that worked there would play their banjos and she played the mandolin. I know they also played a lot of checkers.]

The men played many a prank and sometimes we girls did not escape. One time we found our beds very uncomfortable. Someone had slipped horse hairs into them which had been cut into small pieces. These did not contribute to our comfort, being very itchy.

Our bedrooms had large fireplaces which I think I enjoyed more than anything else the place had to offer. My bed was the closest to the fire and I liked to lie there watching the flames and dreaming the dreams that young girls dream.

I loved it there.



The cellar hole, with a tree growing inside, is all that remains of the farmhouse Gertrude Gordon lived in. Photo by Rolf Olsen.

IT WAS JUST WONDERFUL

A conversation with Sarah Nickerson, Searsport



Grammy's home on Sears Island, needlepoint by Sarah Nickerson.

Beginning back in 1958 when I was about eight years old, we used to camp on Sears Island. We'd stay for about two weeks in summer, then go home, then we'd come back and stay another couple of weeks, all through the summer. Usually it was my Aunt Polly and her children, or my mother, sometimes both, and my sister and brothers.

We'd have tents and camp out on the right side where the big oak tree is, because of the fresh water.

We were right close to the causeway. Two-, three-hundred feet from where the causeway is now, but this was before the causeway was in, when the island was connected to the mainland at low tide by a sandbar. There was like a four-hour tide. When we drove over, we'd have to go a certain way, or we'd get stuck. A lot of times we had to come back across in the rowboat.



Sarah Nickerson remembering summers on Sears Island. Photo by Donna Gold.



Sears Island as seen from Cape Jellison, with the three permanent platforms between. Painted by Sarah Nickerson.

We kids would run all over the island and no one had to worry about us. We'd go swimming from morning to night, except for an hour after we ate. That's the only rule we had. And we could stay up at night and lay around the campfire.

We camped out there from like 1958 to like 1962, when Mom remarried. I was eleven. After, we went down for day trips. Then, when I hit fifteen, my sister and her husband and my boyfriend and I would go camping out down there. Once, the tide was coming in and my sister and her husband were crossing the bar and got their little car stuck in the sand. I was with them. We got it unstuck, but boy, I'm telling you, it was a little bit scary!

We did a lot of fishing over there. Striper fishing, mackerel, also canoeing and kayaking. I had a sailboat one year. I put it out on the right-hand side of the island and lost my anchor. We saw the boat going down into the cove and went after it. We never got the anchor, but we got the sailboat back! Another time, a friend and I were hanging out onshore with the family and Aunt Polly's kids. They were spending the night onshore, we spent it on my boat. In the morning I woke up hearing these kids giggling, walking right around the boat. I didn't know we were that close! When we rowed out there the night before, it seemed like miles. But they were just walking around the boat.

We usually spent the Fourth of July there. Before she passed, Grammy often joined us. We'd have forty, fifty people on the island. There were a lot of us. And every so many years, my friends and I take a day and walk completely around the island.

Sears Island was our home. It's part of our heritage.



*Flowers by the beach.
Photo by Sarah Nickerson.*

MAJESTIC, MYSTICAL MOMENT



Harbor porpoises fishing in the fog off Sears Island.

Story and photo by Nimhue Willow, Searsport

I could tell a hundred stories about magical experiences at Wahsumkik, but one was the most mystical and breathtaking moment of my life.

My partner and I live a short ten-minute walk from the island, so we come almost daily. One afternoon in late summer, we came to cleanse ourselves in the salty air and seawater, to immerse ourselves in the birdsong, and be blanketed by the shadows of the tree canopies. Kicking off our shoes, we walked the left side beach. We like to go as far as we can before the tides creep in.

Sage and I ventured as far as the sea caves, reminiscing about the time we found a nest full of chicks tucked in the tree roots hanging over the caves. When a warm fog crept in, we headed back.

Approaching the bend where the steps come into view, we slowed, taking in the beauty of the water, looking like a slate of stone reflecting the gray fog above. Something was there.

“Was that a shark?!” Eyes squinted, locked in, we kept watching. There it was again!

The black silhouette of a finned creature did a classic dolphin-style dive in the middle of the bay. Listening, heard a little exhale. What an amazing gift to hear the breath of a creature who lives its life in the sea!

We stayed for a long while, until we could barely see the creatures under the darkening sky. Back in our truck, I began researching. I believe what we saw was a trio of harbor porpoises come to feed on schooling fish such as the abundant mackerel found around the island.

To see this rare sighting in such a setting, their black-finned silhouettes against that foggy sky and glassy sea, was breathtaking and mysterious. The photo doesn't do it justice.

I worry that if the windport is built, these majestic creatures will no longer visit the island, as they sensitive to noise and water pollution. Are we the last people to see harbor porpoises at Wahsumkik? I hope not.

A SWING FOR ALL



*Zeke crows,
swinging on the
swing his father
made for him
and anyone else
who visits Sears
Island. Photo by
Donna Gold.*

Story by JG, Prospect

We'd go to Sears Island almost every day with Zeke, our four-year-old, and Max, who is nine, and swing on the rope swing by the beach. Zeke, especially, just loved it.

One day we found that the swing had broken. Zeke was so sad. We went back to the house and gathered some rope and a 2×6 board left over from building our house. I drilled holes into the board, got some rope, went back over to the island, and my wife and I climbed up the tree, swung the ropes around the limbs, and made a whole new swing for my kids and anybody who wanted to enjoy it.

Sears Island is a place to walk, hang out with the kids, and have a relaxing time outside—instead of staying at home with them wanting to watch TV or whatever. It's a good escape.

We're originally from New Mexico. Three years ago we came up looking for property because we wanted to be closer to the ocean, and fell in love with Maine.

Sears Island is so quiet and calm—it's kept almost all natural. We've gone swimming there plenty of times, and walked around by the old farmhouse foundation, but soon the little one says, *I want to go to the swing!* He always wants to be on that swing.

Max is home-schooled, so we also go to the island whenever he's studying animals or forests. Recently he had to look at different types of evergreens, so we went there and talked about bark textures, how animals and trees coexist, how they help each other—and he gets to enjoy and learn from something that's kept so natural.

It's a great place for all to enjoy and I really would like to see it stay the same.

SEARS ISLAND, FALL EQUINOX, LOW TIDE



Linda Buckmaster, Belfast

Each rock, each
beached tree trunk,
every rockweed mass,
all the nodding blades of beach grass
pulled into relief by the sharpness of Equinox light.

Earth turns and we with it as the sun marches south.
The tide reverses. The boulders stay put
except for shadows moving across
their bulk. I grow older.
We turn, we turn
we turn

*Linda Buckmaster has lived within a block of the Atlantic most of her life, growing up in “Space Coast” Florida during the sixties and living in midcoast Maine for forty years. She is the former Atlantic and Gulf editor of the commercial fishing magazine National Fisherman, former poet laureate of Belfast, Maine, and the author of several books, including Elemental: A Miscellany of Salt Cod and Islands.
Photo by Rolf Olsen.*

A PLACE OF WONDER



Story and photo by NK, Searsport

When I first moved to Searsport, in January of 2023, I discovered this jewel of an island.

I remember walking down a trail through beautiful trees, coming around the bend, seeing the ocean through the trees, and climbing down to the beach to find a sea cave. I sat down inside, looking out at the water. I walked through more trails, coming onto brooks that enter the ocean, finding more sea caves.

This place is like a mini-Acadia. But more importantly, it is a place which has become my friend, a place to go and bask in the beauty of the island meeting the sea, a true friend I can rely on, a place of beauty and wonder. When my friends come to visit, this is the first place I want to take them. It is such a natural treasure, a place to go to meditate, to walk, to swim, to play.

I found the sea caves off the Ledges Trail. If you walk down there at medium to low tide, there's a miniature beach below and caves which you can go into, and look out at the water and the rocks.

There are so many places! In the transportation area, beyond the incredible amount of moss alongside the trail, I found two trees, two different trees, that look like a married couple. And the moss there is so resilient that even though the path goes through, you can sit in it and it's still soft and comfortable.

Sears Island is a treasure!

DISCOVERY LINKS TO DEEP PAST



Eli's hand displays the axe head he discovered.

Story and above photo by ML, China

Sears Island is known for its serene beauty, offering a perfect escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life. For many, it's a haven of tranquility, where the rhythm of the waves and the calls of native birds create a peaceful symphony. For me and my young son, Eli, it's also a place of adventure and discovery, a cherished spot where our love for tide pooling and bird watching intertwine.

I've been coming to Sears Island for years, and it never ceases to amaze me. The peacefulness is unmatched, and it's always a joy to share that with Eli.

Our visits often begin with Eli eagerly sifting through the tide pools, his small hands uncovering hidden treasures among the seaweed and rocks. The tranquility of the surroundings and the gentle splash of the tide are part of this ritual.

One day in late June, as we explored the island's rocky shores, Eli stumbled upon an extraordinary find—a Native American axe head partially buried in the sand. Its surface, etched with ancient patterns, told a silent story of the people who once inhabited this land. Together, Eli and I marveled at the craftsmanship, each detail revealing the skill and artistry of its maker.



Sunset over Mack Point. Photo by Donna Gold.

With its rich tapestry of sea life and native birds, Sears Island had always been a sanctuary for us, a place where we immerse ourselves in nature's beauty. This discovery was more than just a moment of excitement; it was a poignant connection to the island's deep history, adding a new layer of significance to our visits. This artifact, though small in the grand scheme of history, was a testament to the island's enduring legacy and our personal connection to it.

We carefully cleaned the stone axe head, planning to contact a local museum to ensure it would be properly preserved and appreciated by others.

Bird watching, another cherished pastime, offered additional rewards that day. As we examined our find, a group of puffins, with their vibrant beaks and playful antics, made their presence known. Their arrival seemed to celebrate our discovery, adding to the sense of wonder and connection that pervaded the day.

Moments like these make our time here so meaningful. It's not just the peaceful environment but also the rich history and the living, breathing nature that surrounds us.

That day, as the sunset cast a golden glow across the water, we walked back along the shoreline, our hearts full. The island had offered us a bridge to the past and a deeper appreciation of the natural world we so dearly loved.

For those who seek solace and wonder, Sears Island remains a haven of discovery and tranquility and a reminder that even the most familiar places can hold surprises that enrich our understanding and deepen our connection to the world around us.

HEN OF THE WOODS

A conversation with CD, The Bahamas



CD's catch: hen of the woods. Photo by Donna Gold.

It's a mushroom. It's called hen of the woods. And it's really good. It usually grows on the foot of the oak and comes out this time of year. We haven't had a good rain, which is good for the mushroom. This mushroom, this 'hen' is the fruit of a really big organism that connects all those trees, the mycelium, right? And it works symbiotically with all the trees. It pulls nutrients and manages water for them.

You need mature oaks, and this island has old growth oaks, which are really rare in Maine. But this island has some beautiful old oaks and a lot of biodiversity. I found the hen near red oaks, but there are a lot of different types of oak here and they're very old. I'm working on knowing more about trees and I'm learning that they're all a big, interconnected city.

There's a saying, you got to look at a hundred mature oaks to find one 'hen'. I found this behind a really big one. There was a homestead there at one point, because there's a rock wall, and behind the rock wall there's a straight line of hundred-year-old oaks. Those oaks had plenty of light and not much competition and got really, really mature.

[Looking over at Mack Point]: They can make some room for all that industry right over there. Yes, absolutely.

7 COYOTE PUPS; 1 BIG DOG



One at a time, Munchie gently picked up each coyote pup, carried it back to the den, and nudged them all inside.

Story and photo by Janet Flint, Searsport

In the early years of Friends of Sears Island, Bob Ramsdell and I served as vice president and president of the board of directors. Sometime between 2008 and 2010, an official from Maine's conservation department asked us to take him out to Sears Island to tour it and help search for an eagles' nest that was said to be at its southern end. He had never been to the island and there were no trails cut at that time, only some narrow deer trails.

Accompanied by my dog Munchie (a brindle-colored 100-pound Akita mix breed), the three of us set out to hike the entire perimeter of the island inside the tree line.

When we arrived at the southern region we searched back and forth deeper into the spruce forest. Sadly, we did not find the nest.

Heading back toward the outer perimeter, we were amazed to come upon a coyote den. We might have missed it had it not been for the excitement of seven curious, fearless, and fuzzy pups, maybe six to eight weeks old, emerging from the holes, happily running all around us.

Concerned that their parents would return or that our scent could be transferred to them if any jumped up on us, we pressed forward, looking back to see if any pups were following. To our astonishment, Munchie gently picked up each pup, carried it back to the den, and nudged them all inside, then ran ahead to join us, and we continued on with the hike.

TALKING TO THE WIND



Bench celebrating Jim Freeman, passionate supporter of Sears Island and Mother Earth.

Poem and photo by SM, Islesboro

When turning turbines, does Wind
become tired and stressed
and become an ill wind?

Will Wind change course
when faced with sharp blades
on tall towers massed in lines
like old-time foot soldiers
across the ocean?

Can turbines slice Wind into pieces,
to be devoured by rain, ice and snow?
Might Wind say, “No way I’m passing
thru those monsters,” then
fall asleep over mountain and plain?

Will Tree and Wood Frog unite and revolt
against the tyranny of sacrifice,
a blood-letting, a massacre
of monumental proportions,
and whisper to near-shore Fish,
“Get away, Get away while you can.”

Consider the consequences,
the known and the unknown.

This island off the North American coast,
at the epicenter of climate change,
amidst competing futures, sea-level rise,
severe storms and occupied Wabanaki territory,
excess beside misery, species extinctions,
species migrations,
compassion and connection displaced and homeless.

Wind, Tree, Wood Frog, Fish –
We are the earth-community, ill and wondering,
Get it right; get it good?

SEARS ISLAND AURORA

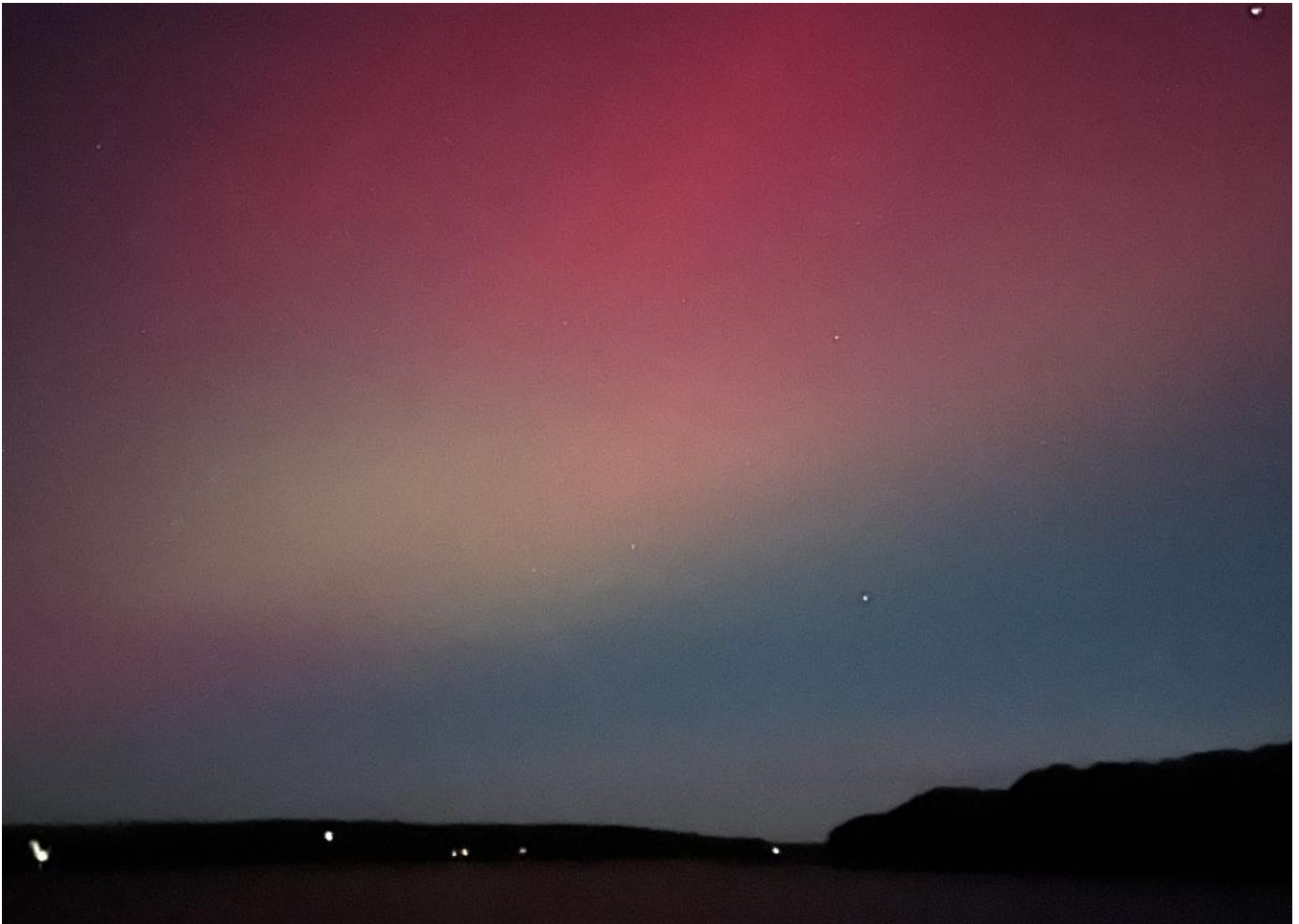


Photo and story by Jeannine and Christopher Audet, Searsport

On October 10, 2024, a magnificent aurora borealis show hovered over the north. Knowing that the best night sky view in the area would be from Sears Island, my husband and I drove out to the causeway to watch the incredible display. Over the island, it was a gorgeous band of magenta; looking to the north and west, the colors shimmered in greens and pinks.

We've been hiking, biking, kayaking, cross-country skiing, and walking our dogs on Sears Island year-round for about twenty-five years. This is such a special place for us and we're so fortunate to have it only a couple miles from home. It's so peaceful and quiet and there's always incredible wild-life—eagles, owls, deer, and seals. I even saw my first moose while walking up the road! I hope this place will always remain as it is so that many generations can enjoy the unspoiled natural preserve.

A TREASURE FOR ANIMALS & BIRDS



A nesting pileated woodpecker finds dinner in an old growth forest on Sears Island.

Story and photos by Karl Gerstenberger

My first Maine island experience occurred almost eighty years ago on a Casco Bay island. We used kerosene lamps for illumination and warmed ourselves by the fireplace. Ice arrived in an old Model T truck. At age eight, my world changed from a gray-toned suburb to one of brilliant, “living” color.

I’d never seen a seal, porpoise, or osprey before. The songbirds were all new to me. A local lobsterman, at least sixty years my senior, quickly became a friend. I’d never known such arm muscles as his, pulling the heavy wooden traps. The entire month was a life-changing, magical adventure which has remained with me ever since.



Sears Island's iconic chestnut-sided warbler sings to the wind.

I learned that islands are beautiful, peaceful places of unique natural environments, only most Maine's islands are difficult to access. Sears Island is unusual in that it is both uninhabited and easily reached by a paved road and causeway.



A refreshed yellow warbler sings on a spring day on Sears Island.

The Maine Birders' Network introduced me to Sears Island. In spring we'd arrive around 5 a.m. to find a large variety of birds resting and feeding as they prepared to continue their migratory flights.

Discovering a nearby, accessible, uninhabited Maine island that is a significant migratory stopover and home to a wide variety of bird species was really exciting. It became all the more important when I realized that these birds have an increasingly difficult time securing a safe place to spend the night or establish a home.

Sears Island is an essential component of North Atlantic bird habitat and its biodiversity support structure. It's connected to the mainland, thereby granting access to visitors but is uninhabited by them, offering the protection and tranquility that our natural world so badly needs these days.

While on the island, my wife Louisa and I would meet some of the most helpful birders. At one early encounter a small group was gazing intently at some bird activity, so I approached them and asked what they were looking at. "We're looking at these yellow-billed cuckoos," they answered. I had never seen these birds before and marveled at their beauty.

In my old age I've learned more about how some of our citizens work hard at pursuing short term financial goals of unproven value while destroying natural habitat and ruining land in the process.

Sears Island is a treasure for all animals and birds who stop there or remain for extended periods. These animals are key to maintaining a balance of nature. The island is also an irreplaceable part of the Maine landscape and accessible to all who care. It is invaluable to the citizens of Maine and to its visitors.

I didn't know what an island uninhabited by humans was when I was a kid. If it is a unique place, which I believe Sears Island is, why choose it as a manufacturing site when a nearby location nearby is available?

Mainers depend a great deal on accessibility to Sears Island. There are few, if any, similar places. Visitors come from the world over to visit our state because of its uniqueness and beauty. If we believe in the long-term value of biodiversity and really do want to combat climate change, why would we ruin the long-term value of this rare, accessible, uninhabited island?

It makes no sense.



A lovely yellow-billed cuckoo.

A PLACE TO REJUVENATE



Sun and snow on Sears Island. Photo by Rolf Olsen.

Joli McKeen, Searsport

I come to Sears Island all the time, even when it's freezing out and the wind is blowing from every direction, I walk on the island. I've been coming since the early seventies, when you could drive over the sandbar, being careful not to get stuck when the tide came in.

This is a place of solace, of peace and fullness, where we can all feel its our very own space. A place to rejuvenate. Whether walking the trails or the beach, there's such a sense of freedom. Sears Island is a place to forget about the cares of the day.



Sometimes I stand on the causeway and look over toward Stockton Harbor, hoping to see the lobster boat that my son works on, leaving or returning, and wave to him. And sometimes he looks for me on the land, and waves.

I'll bring bubbles here to blow, and watch as they dance in the wind. Everyone enjoys that! In winter, I've made snowmen and placed them on the railings. It's so much fun to let go and feel like a kid again, and Sears Island brings out that childlike playfulness.

I was talking to a friend about Maine's wonderful places and that I'd recently seen the movie about Don Fendler's book, *Lost on a Mountain in Maine*. He said, "Joli McKeen, *Found on an Island in Maine*." It's true.

Sears Island is a treasure island. Let's keep it wild and free.

LIKE AN ENCHANTED FOREST

A conversation with KP, Searsport



KP and her partner returning from the enchanted Loop Trail. Photo by Donna Gold

KP, Searsport

We just skied the Loop Trail! It's like an enchanted forest, so dreamy. I just floated through.

I've walked the island for almost forty years, skied it ever since I've been skiing, and walked all the way around it quite a bit. Once, I had just quit smoking, and my son wanted me to get some good air into my lungs, get me outside, walking. We went out around the island and a fox followed us, then jumped off over a bank. An hour later that fox went flying by, close enough to almost hit my hand!

Every Thanksgiving my daughter and I would walk an old trail just before the loop. We called it the Moss Trail, for all the moss along the footpath. When we reached the water, the trail hugged the shoreline all the way to the jetty. Beautiful trail. My kids all have stories about the island.

At a deeply troubled time in my life, I'd walk the Tower Road every day after work, even when the clock changed and I'd be walking in the dark. I did that for almost two years. There was hardly anyone else there at that time—the postmaster and one or two others. I'd walk until my fingertips got cold, then I'd quit. The island was so peaceful, it helped me to feel better, it really did.

BOY SCOUT



The paved road up Sears Island, which allows many disabled and tick-averse people to enjoy the island's peace, along with the songs and sights of its birds. Photo by James McCarthy.

Darrell Seekins, North Searsport

When I was in my early teens (in the mid-1960s) I was in the Boy Scouts and we used to go camping on Sears Island. It was before the causeway was built and it was kind of a neat feeling to know that we were somewhat isolated from others. We also dug clams on the island while we were camping. It was a first and possibly only time for many of us.

I live in North Searsport in the same house that I grew up in. Back then we didn't go down to the water much, so the camping trips with the Scouts were even more special.

Later, as an adult, I spent a fair amount of time on the island as a runner. I would park out at Route 1 and run to the island. It's a terrific place to run and much safer than on the highway. The relatively flat road is ideal for speed work and the hill up to the end of the island is great for strength work. The solitude and occasional wildlife sightings are a bonus. Good memories.

I FELT A GREEN ENERGY



"I came upon a meadow clearing, sun streaming onto the surrounding trees." Photo by James McCarthy

By David Tait, Searsport

It was nearing summer's end, late in the day, when I first drove down Sears Island's long, narrow causeway and began my journey up the rather long hill. When the road leveled, then turned to dirt I came upon a meadow clearing, sun streaming onto the surrounding trees as if they were a cathedral shining against the blue.

I felt an energy. An almost heavenly green energy flowing into my senses. I was the only one around, but I felt one with all creation. That such a place as Sears Island exists seemed a miracle. I continued on to a boulder. Climbing it, in silence broken only by birds and insects, calm filled my soul.

The last of the light was fading from the treetops as I turned back down the road, glad for the moment when the island was kind enough to gently slope downhill.

As the sun was setting, I walked down to the beach where a great blue heron stood at the water's edge. Slowly and quietly I approached, hoping not to startle it, then plunged both hands into the water like some metaphorical baptism, wiggling my fingers in the sand.

Driving home, I tried to imagine heavy construction equipment and large semis passing back and forth on the dilapidated strip connecting the island to the mainland, and couldn't, and thought that my journey up the rather long hill was a lot like the fight to protect the island.

How can we deny such pleasure and peacefulness to our children and our children's children?

HERONS



Story and photo of herons by Donna Gold

I've had so many experiences on Sears Island, racing up to the Tower on bikes, ambling down the Blue Trail to the bay, hearing the twilight song of the thrushes on the Green and Homestead trails. Daring myself to ski ever farther on the Tower Trail, despite exhaustion. Seeing my first yellow warbler and redstart and catbird flitting through the underbrush. Watching my grandkids rush to clamber over the downed troika tree on the Homestead Trail.

And then there were the herons.

It was the spring of 2020. We were isolated from the world, but in Maine we could go outside. Down in New York City, our son and his partner were stuck working in a two-room apartment, barely leaving, their soundtrack the wail of ambulances down Broadway—including the one that parked in front of their building to remove a neighbor, never to return. I was desperate to bring them home, bring them to Maine where we walked daily along beaches, through forests, up hillside. We walked for our sanity, yes, but also for them, as if a mother's immersion in beauty could transfer to a child decades outside the womb, as if photos reminding him of the richness of the world he grew up in—of sunsets over Sears Island's Long Cove, over Mack Point's shimmering lights, the world's yin and yang—could transport some part of him back to peace.

Then the peepers began, loud enough to summon my son and his dear one from that tiny New York cave. Finally, the ban on out-of-staters was lifted and they came back.

Was that the day we saw the herons? The osprey had returned long before, the ducklings were getting large, but there were no herons. When I walked with my late, dear friend MaJo, she fretted, dismayed. Had the herons gone the way of so many disappeared species?

There they were. Seven herons. Seven! Old and young. Old and young. Two families hunting, dining, walking, yes, also playing in the waters. Life renewed.

I COME TO RECHARGE

A conversation with Youssouf Adam, Stockton Springs



*Youssouf
recharges
on the
Sears Island
causeway.
Photo by
Donna Gold*

Youssouf: Sears Island is the only close place I have to recharge myself. It's quiet, no traffic. Beautiful. I love being here. It's an amazing place. Sometimes I go walking, just walking on the beach, which is the same thing—just recharging. I'm from the East Coast of Africa. Comoros Island. Comoros is a country between Madagascar and the African continent. I'm the first and last Comorian you will meet! On a map you have to zoom five times to see the four islands. Beautiful islands. Wherever you are, you can see the sea.

Donna: So you left an island to come to an island?

Youssouf: I love the water that's why. I love the water. You got the full story. Sears Island is beautiful.

SEARS ISLAND,
FOR THE PEOPLE

WWW.SEARSISLANDSTORIES.ORG