



# Irresistible ISLES

The mystical appeal of Nova Scotia's Tusket Islands—and the shanty envy to match

Story and photography by Sandra Phinney



You never know what you might see: this fellow keeps an eye on the comings and goings from a shanty on the wharf at Big Tusket, NS. Above: rugged shanties on Ellenwood give the island a forlorn presence.



As I step off Donnie Jacquard's 18-foot skiff onto the floating wharf at St. Martin (also known as Big Tusket) I catch a whiff of seaweed and salt—just a trace, but it's enough to make me feel heady with delight.

I am on one of the Tusket Islands off Southwest Nova Scotia. As the crow flies, the islands stretch about 32 kilometres, from Roberts Island off Yarmouth to Seal Island off Shag Harbour. Local lore says there are 365 islands, one for every day of the year. That's a tad exaggerated, but most agree that there are more than 200 islands, each with a distinct character. The islands have names like Turpentine, Pease, Pumpkin, Murder Island and the Balds—Half Bald, Middle Bald, Mossy Bald, Inner Bald and Outer Bald Island (see "The Birth of Outer Baldonia," page 43). Many of the Tusket Islands have two names—one French, one English. A friend in Wedgeport once told me that St. Martin was named by Samuel Champlain in 1604, "... and was renamed Big Tusket by les maudits Anglais."

I love the Tusket Islands, and have yearned to come back since I first visited Owls Head in the 1960s to camp and scuba dive. It took us about 45 minutes to get to St. Martin from Wedgeport, a small Acadian fishing community. Donnie's made arrangements for me to stay in one of the shanties here; he'll come back to fetch me after a few days.

Donnie is a retired teacher. His roots in Wedgeport run deep. His father, all 10 of his uncles, all of his in-laws and most of his neighbours and friends are (or were) associated with the lobster fishery. Donnie's passion for this fishery and the Tusket Islands generally has led him to spend more than 10 years talking with scores of people, doing research for a book called *Lobstering Southwestern Nova Scotia 1848-2009*, filled with interesting info and colourful characters.

Donnie's book, in part, chronicles the day when this archipelago teemed with families. As the late 1800s turned into a new century, the Tusket Islands had dozens of canneries—almost all of the lobsters sold in Nova Scotia at that time were canned. Some islands, like Deep Cove, had their own barber, tanner, forger, cobbler, post office—even a pool hall.

Today, only a few of the original shanties remain in use as camps by fishermen on the islands. A handful, like the ones on Ellenwood, have a haunting presence. They stand like silent sentinels, faceless and forlorn. Yet the islands have a mystical quality about them. Even lowly dandelions gone to seed somehow look luminescent and holy.

People no longer live full-time on the islands, with the exception of a few places like Morris Island and Surettes Island, which are joined to the mainland by a bridge or causeway. Yet



Almost every camp on the Tusket Islands has a guitar or two—in case a kitchen (or deck) party breaks out. Top: a fisherman gears up for the lobster season, which begins every year on the last Monday in November at exactly 6am.

descendants and their families frequently spend time at their shanties. They visit each other by kayaks and speedboats for barbecues and kitchen parties. Guitars are as common as gulls on the islands, and there's often a song floating in the air.

Some of the islands have flocks of sheep, owned by farmers on the mainland. The sheep roam wild, getting their sustenance from seaweed in the winter and from berries and grasses in the summer. Eventually, the lambs are brought to the mainland, fattened up and sold.

Mainly, however, the Tusket Islands continue to be home base for fishermen during lobster season. With the approach of fall, men spend hours repairing and checking over their gear. On "Dumping Day," the last Monday in November, at precisely 6am, the fishermen pull away from the wharves, head to the lobster fishing grounds, dump their traps and pray for a good haul.

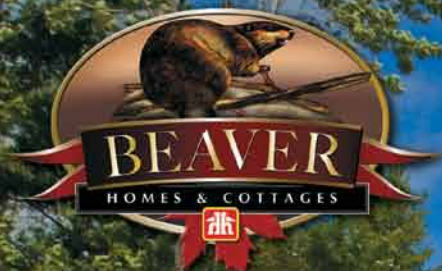
The people I meet on the islands are mostly Acadians. They have a great sense of humour and are open, generous and kind. There's plenty of time to forge friendships but no time for pretense. These folks know who they are, and don't need the approval of strangers.

I am comfortable in my skin here, although somewhat jealous of people who have shanties.



# Another relaxing cottage moment

brought to you by...



Building with a Beaver Home or Cottage material package will have you **relaxing sooner than you think**

When it comes to building your home or cottage, you can trust the experts at Home to help you make your dreams a reality. Over 105 material packages available exclusively at:



Customize your home or cottage online at [www.BeaverHomesandCottages.ca](http://www.BeaverHomesandCottages.ca)



Earl Jacquard and his father, George, share a moment before closing their shanty for the season. Inset: Earl does a last-minute check.

But there's no time to brood.

As I unpack my gear, I hear sounds next door and decide to saunter over. George Jacquard and his son Earl have carried a bed, box spring and mattress to their small boat. Now they are removing a damaged screen door.

I introduce myself and gush about how happy I am to be on the island. Laughing, George says, "This place is Alcatraz." Surprised by the comment, I hang around to learn more. His shanty is the oldest on Big Tusk; it has low ceilings, a wee kitchen, a tiny bathroom and one bedroom downstairs; in days past, this bedroom was for the cook. Upstairs is open, like a dorm with bunk beds—formerly for the fishermen; later, for family.

Eventually, father and son board up the front door of the camp with a large piece of plywood. There's something final about the sound of the last two nails being hammered home. George picks up the conversation.

Eventually, father and son board up the front door of the camp with a large piece of plywood. There's something final about the sound of the last two nails being hammered home

"It's a damn shame to say, but I never saw my kids grow up. I was on the islands all the time. It was a lot easier to fish from the islands than from Wedgeport."

Years ago, a previous owner put insulation (likely formaldehyde) in the bedroom as a barrier against the bitter north wind. George may have developed an allergy to it, so he's spent little time here lately, which is why he's boarding up the place. "The shanty needs repairs. Could be awhile before it gets some TLC."

I wish the place could be mine.

They board the boat; we wave goodbye.

The next day, I meet Anthony Pothier, a long-time Wedgeport resident. Although well into his 70s he's as spry as a jackrabbit, and his smile practically runs off his face when I ask how often he visits St. Martin.

"Almost every day," he says. "I have to be here; just have to be here." His head bobs for emphasis.



The New Brunswick College of Craft and Design is a centre of excellence in the visual arts, with a range of full-time programming in fine craft and design. The College is also founding partner with the City of Fredericton in edVentures, the award-winning program of arts workshops scheduled throughout the summer.

edVentures is Atlantic Canada's largest and most diverse vacation learning program in craft and culture. Workshops at the College are delivered in campus studios and labs in the heart of Fredericton's downtown Historic Garrison District.

For more information on the College visit our website or call toll-free 1-877-400-1107. For information on edVentures, visit [www.edventures.ca](http://www.edventures.ca)



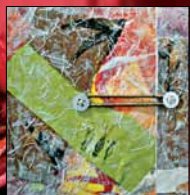
Cathy Dymond



Jessica Kelly



Sarah MacLeod



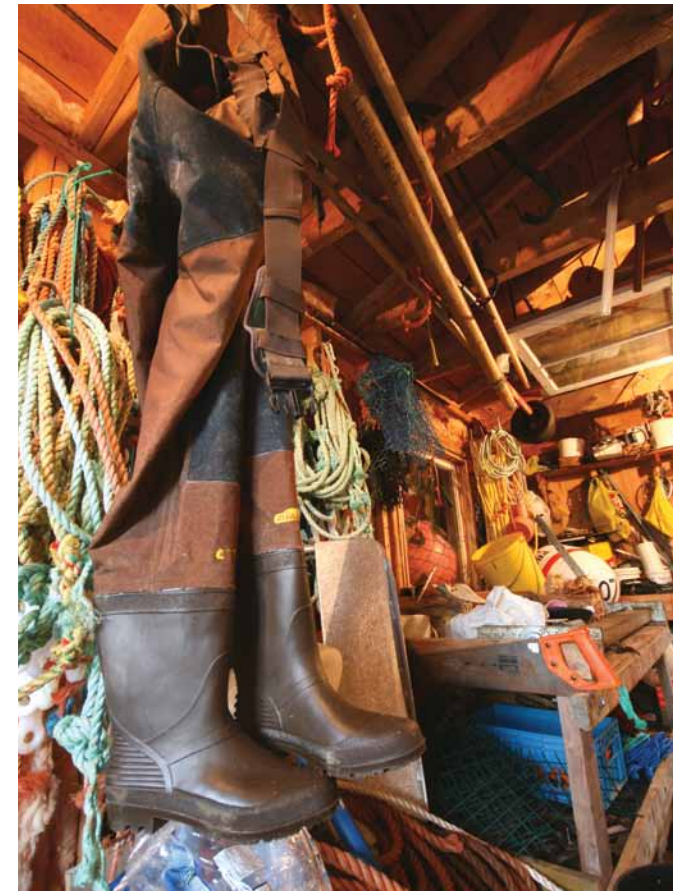
Michelle Beaulieu



Alexandra Maclean

www.nbccd.ca

Jeff Crawford



Island-hopping by boat is a popular activity—the water serves as a highway between the islands. Top: some shanties, like this one on Harris Island, are strictly workshops and storage stations for lobster fishing gear.



## The birth of Outer Baldonia

Every island among the Tuskets has its story. Outer Bald, for example, was bought by Russell Arundel in the late 1940s. He built a stone house so tuna anglers could rest there if caught in foul weather.

A year later, Arundel and his cronies cooked up a plan to turn the island into a separate nation—the Principality of Outer Baldonia. Its manifesto stated that fishermen are a race and endowed with certain rights. These include the right to lie and be believed; the right of freedom from questions, nagging, shaving, women, taxes, politics and war; and the right to swear, drink and gamble—to name just a few.

Arundel wrote official letters to mapmakers and to the National Geographic Society, demanding that the Principality of Outer Baldonia be included in future maps of North America. He also acquired a listing in the Washington telephone book as an embassy. When Russia denounced the new nation, "Prince Arundel" started a formal protest with the USSR, defending the rights of Outer Baldonia.

He also let it be known that he was in alliance with the powerful naval forces of the Armdale Yacht Club in Halifax.

Eventually, the fabrication (likely made up by friends over a few bottles of rum) was uncovered. The international joke left Washington scratching its head, Russia furious, and the locals laughing.

Anthony's long-standing love affair with the Tusket Islands started when he left school at 14 to fish. He learned from his father how to read the waters with only a compass and a watch. Even in the fog, he could tell where they were in relation to each island by the pull of the currents, and the time of day.

By the time he was 22, Anthony had his own boat. It was gruelling work, often in harsh weather, but he learned how to deal with things like broken shafts and burned out engines; once, his boat sank. Never one to complain, he always kept going.

Although he no longer fishes, he's never away from St. Martin for long. Anthony tells me that he wants some of his ashes to be spread here after he dies.

Meanwhile, there's plenty to do. Concerned about the number of coyotes on his beloved island, Anthony learned how to trap them, and has since bagged 52—which has helped bring back the population of rabbits and deer.

Weeks after my trip to the Tusket Islands, I visit Anthony at his home in Wedgeport and ask him: "What is it about those islands that keeps pulling you back?"

Anthony looks at me as if I have two heads. In a split second I realize that I've asked him to explain the inexplicable.

He sits back, shakes his head and states the obvious: "I just gotta go."

I know the feeling. 🐟