



a right LITTLE island

Brier Island enchants with legends and old bones, bird ballets and whale songs

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Island architecture harkens back to the days when a sea captain's stature on land was as big as it was on the water. Below: Bladder wrack and periwinkles cling to basalt rock near the south end of the island. Left: The channel between Long Island and Brier Island, which takes seven minutes by ferry—not long enough to appreciate the wicked rip.



“Islands and their surrounding waters cover
ONE-SIXTH OF THE WORLD’S SURFACE,
 and provide habitat for more than half the earth’s diversity
 of marine plants and animals” ~Source: *The Nature Conservancy*

When British playwright Thomas Dibdin wrote, “Oh! What a snug little Island, A right little, tight little Island!” back in 1833, he wasn’t referring to Brier Island in Nova Scotia. But one could imagine he was—for there’s no question that it’s a snug little island, and everything about it is “right.”

Brier Island is the westernmost point of land in Nova Scotia, and a stopover on the Atlantic flyway—a migratory pathway for birds. There’s something magical about witnessing northern gannets fold their black-tipped wings and plummet 100 feet for dinner.

The locals got quite excited once when a scissor-tailed flycatcher showed up by the church. However a couple from Texas, the bird’s main habitat, complained that they didn’t come all the way to Brier Island to see the scissor-tailed flycatcher!

In fall, thousands of sharp-shinned hawks float on air currents for hours on end. It’s a breathtaking sight, as are the peregrine falcons.

Along with birding being “right” on Brier Island, so too is whale watching. The region has an abundance of phytoplankton and zooplankton. This attracts schools of herring and mackerel, a rich diet for whales—they come here to have their babies and fatten up for winter sojourns.

Depending on the time of year, you may see beluga, humpback, minke, finback and North American right whales, to name a few. If you’re lucky, you’ll hear the whales “sing.” It’s a primordial experience that defies description.

There’s no chance of getting lost on the island, which is only four-and-a-half miles long by one-and-a-half miles wide, but there are some satisfying hikes, especially if you’re a rock hound. You can find everything from dolomite banks with rippling veins of quartz to basalt rock formations standing like sentinels, warding off time.

Wildflowers run riot from spring until fall. Westport’s librarian, June Swift, is especially fond of orchids, and will tell you about the 22 species that grow on the island. Aside from thousands of pitcher plants, the most prolific flower is the wild rose. Some say Brier Island got its name from the brier rose, a.k.a. sweet brier, witches’ brier or brier hip. The rosehips are so large that people have mistaken them for cherry tomatoes.

Top Left: One could say the ferry *MV Spray* doesn’t know whether she’s coming or going—the ferry migrates back and forth as much by demand as by schedule. **Bottom Left:** Benjamin DeVries and Curtis Colwell take a break from their fast-paced game of chess, where brawn is as important as brain.



Resilience, perseverance and a sense of community have long been hallmarks of island residents. Joyce and Wally DeVries, above, add environmental awareness to the list—their diner was one of the first

in Nova Scotia to use biodegradable coffee cups. Below: Bow to stern and beam to beam, the state-of-the-art fishing fleet of Westport wrestles the Fundy tides as did the plank, tar and canvas fleets centuries before it.





Above: Just as it has done since the great volcanoes erupted and produced lava that formed this island, the setting sun draws close to another day on a tranquil setting, in harmony with the natural world surrounding it.

Below: The humpback whale can silently slide into the depths with the grace of a ballerina, or hurl through the Fundy surface like a 40-ton missile, defying its size. The tail of each humpback is unique.



“There are people who find islands somehow irresistible. The mere knowledge that they are in **A LITTLE WORLD SURROUNDED BY SEA** fills them with an indescribable intoxication. Islomania is a rare affliction of spirit”

~British writer Lawrence Durrell quoting Gideon

One of the island’s most famous characters was Joshua Slocumb (later changed to Slocum), the intrepid captain who circumnavigated the globe in 1895. It’s a fascinating story of a feisty sailor, but stories abound on the island—like the one about Margaret Davis, who in 1828 discovered that the ownership of her land was in question. The 63-year-old widow rowed to the mainland, then walked more than 20 miles to Annapolis hoping to settle the affair. No luck. She proceeded by foot to Halifax, some 130 miles away, met the lieutenant-governor, received confirmation of 761 acres, and walked back home. That’s the stuff these islanders are made of.

Had that been today, Margaret could have presented her plight to three commissioners who, along with the village clerk, oversee the affairs of the inhabitants of the island. They’re elected annually by the ratepayers. Sure smacks of a time when life was simpler! Not easier, but simpler.

Fishing is the heart of the economy and the small but active waterfront hums, especially at the height of lobster season.

There are no traffic jams, busy crosswalks, police or Tim Hortons on Brier Island. But there are people who will give you the time of day—in spades. Like Wally and Joyce DeVries. They operate the local general store, gas bar, gift shop, restaurant and a hostel.

Getting there is a cinch, albeit it involves a bit of island hopping—you take a five-minute ferry ride at East Ferry; cross Long Island to Freeport, then take a seven-minute ferry to Brier Island. The Freeport crossing is over before you have time to be mesmerized by the wicked rip in the channel. Although most ferry crossings leave on the hour and half hour, the Brier Island ferry heads back to Freeport 25 minutes past the hour. It’s a long and humorous story—best explained by the captain or crew. They have lots of stories! Like the foggy day a passenger got off the ferry in Freeport and drove in a loop around the island, then tried to board the same ferry. It took quite awhile to convince him he’d be heading back to Brier Island.

Then there are those who might intend to get back on the same ferry: those who yearn to stay. It’s not easy saying good-bye to this snug little, “right” little island.

Sandra Phinney says she goes to Brier Island “to walk, think, follow my shadow and people watch.” Dale Wilson’s photographs have been published in numerous magazines and books. See more of his award winning photos at dalewilsonphotography.com.



Evening primrose along the gravel road leading to Western Head—wildflowers run riot on the island. Below: A great cormorant, which can dive considerable depths for food, finds sanctuary on the western shoreline.

