



Atlantic Puffins/Macareux moines Photo: Jared Clarke

Witless Bay Ecological Reserve: a global treasure

BY JARED CLARKE

The sun filters through the fog as our boat heads out the bay. Moments later the fog lifts, a craggy island looms ahead of us, and the sound of thousands of seabirds drifts over the ocean. An Atlantic Puffin zips by, followed by another ... and then a dozen more. Soon the sky is full of birds heading back and forth to the island, and hundreds more dot the water below.



This is Witless Bay Ecological Reserve – a series of four small islands just off Newfoundland’s

Avalon Peninsula, and 35 km from the provincial capital of St. John’s. In the spring and summer, more than four million seabirds call these islands home, utilizing almost every inch during their short and hectic breeding season. The reserve boasts North America’s largest Atlantic Puffin colony (more than 250,000 pairs) and even larger numbers of Common Murre. Thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes dot the cliffs, Razorbills sit prominently on rocky outcrops, and scattered Thick-billed Murre can be found amongst the hordes. Keen eyes might find one of the several dozen pairs of Northern Fulmar that nest here, or spot Black Guillemots that

inhabit caves and crevices along the coast. Surprisingly, the reserve’s

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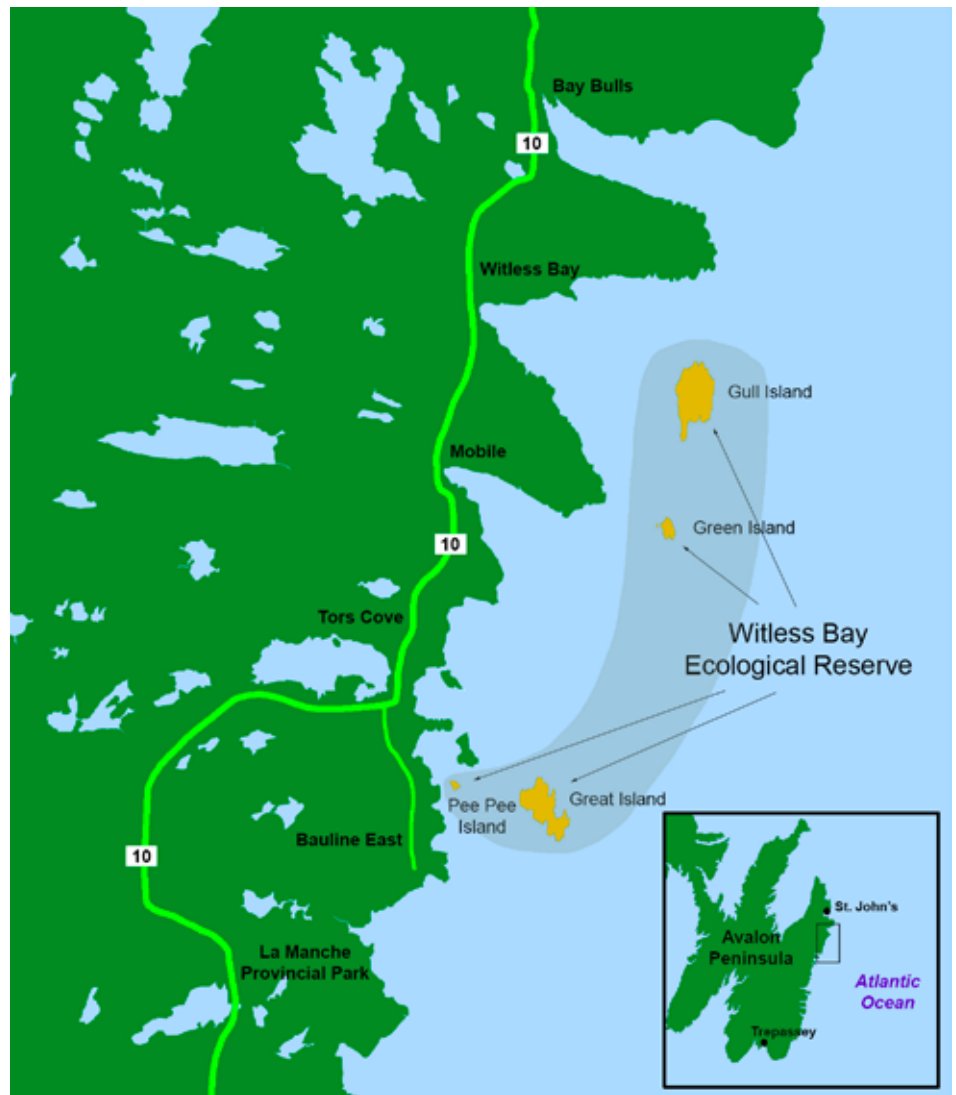
most numerous breeding bird is rarely seen by visitors – the more than one million Leach’s Storm-Petrels that nest in burrows atop the island come and go only under cover of darkness.

The birds are here for both the safety provided by the islands and the wealth of food. The waters surrounding this reserve are teeming with fish, krill, and other sustenance during the

summer months. Most important are the capelin, small schooling fish that arrive in huge numbers to spawn along the coast during June and July. These abundant fish provide the bulk of food for all these breeding seabirds, as well as Northern Gannets (which do not nest in the reserve but have colonies nearby) and even the far-ranging Great and Sooty shearwaters which have travelled from their own breeding grounds in the Southern Hemisphere. Not to be outdone, several species of whale also spend the summer here to feed on these tiny fish. Among them, Minke, Fin, and Humpback Whales are encountered most often. The reserve is relatively quiet in the fall and winter, but marine areas surrounding the islands remain important for migratory species such as Common Loon, Common Eider, and Long-tailed Duck among others.

The islands were first designated a wildlife sanctuary in 1964 (and an Ecological Reserve in 1983) in order to protect their large, diverse, and internationally significant seabird populations. The area is also recognized as a Globally Significant Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA), highlighting its importance for supporting seabird populations worldwide. The reserve is managed by the province's Department of Fisheries and Land Resources, but there are many stakeholders involved in its care. Notably, the islands have become both an important place for research and an integral part of the province's growing tourism industry.

Researchers from Memorial University (MUN) and the Canadian Wildlife Service have been working in the reserve since



Map/carte: Jared Clarke

the 1970s – particularly on Great and Gull islands. Projects have included topics such as seabird breeding biology, predation, interaction with changing food sources (including capelin), and tracking of both foraging and migration behaviours.

Dr. William Montevocchi, a John Lewis Paton Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Biology, and Ocean Sciences at MUN, has been involved in research at the reserve for more than three decades and touts its importance on a worldwide scale. “Owing to long-term research,” he says, “Gull Island is providing a benchmark for seabird responses [e.g. parental

behaviour, breeding success, and survival] to a variety of changing environmental conditions.”

The Witless Bay Ecological Reserve has also become a popular destination for tourists from all over the world. Each year, thousands of visitors enjoy boat tours available from the nearby communities of Bay Bulls, Witless Bay, and Mobile. While it may be the lure of playful whales or even icebergs that attract many visitors to the reserve, the seabird spectacle often steals the show.

Captain Joe O’Brien (O’Brien’s Whale & Puffin Tours) has been leading boat tours here for 35 years, and has watched the industry grow



Razorbill/Petit Pingouin Photo: Jared Clarke

immensely over that time. One of the most notable changes has been the swelling interest in the seabird colonies, and in the number of visitors who come specifically to see the birds. “Living here, we often take it for granted,” he says. “But visitors from away are always amazed at the spectacle and sheer volume of birds – something they’ve only ever seen in the movies. They are lost for words when they see it, and in some ways become part of it.” Captain O’Brien

also stresses that research and conservation efforts are beneficial to tourism operators, who are not only passionate about the nature they share with visitors but want to see it protected for the future.

Conservation is also important to local communities, which have been enjoying and caring for these birds for generations. One volunteer initiative has rescued thousands of Atlantic Puffin and Leach’s Storm-Petrel chicks since its inception in 2004. The “Puffin

and Petrel Patrol” began with a group of concerned citizens rescuing stranded “pufflings” around Witless Bay. On foggy nights (which are common in these parts), recently fledged chicks become disoriented by artificial light of homes, street lights, and even passing vehicles. Like many seabirds, puffins and petrels are unable to take off from flat land and can become grounded if they mistakenly fly inland rather than out to sea. With the help of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (CPAWS), the program has grown considerably and now attracts volunteers from around the province and world. Rescued birds are also weighed, measured, and tagged before release, making this a valuable research opportunity as well as important conservation work.

Witless Bay Ecological Reserve is one of those magical places where the spectacle of nature is on full display. It is special for both the birds and the people who love them – offering a safe space for millions of seabirds to breed, and where we as humans can connect with them in surprisingly intimate ways. Research here continues to shed light on the lives of these enigmatic birds and informs important conservation work around the world. The reserve is a true gem of the natural world, and a “must-see” if you’re ever in the neighbourhood.

Jared Clarke was introduced to the outdoors at a very young age, mostly by his grandfathers. He became interested in birds while working for a local conservation group and soon became one of the most avid birders in the province. He currently runs a small tour business called Bird•The•Rock (birdtherock.com), and leads tours at home and abroad for various companies.



Humpback Whale/Rorqual à bosse : Jared Clarke