

BIRD ISLAND BOAT TOUR (BIBT)

- written by Bernie McKenna, edited by Grace Beazley
- *photos by Ian Van Schoick, Bird Island Boat Tours (unless otherwise indicated)*

This past July, my wife and I spent 3 days in Baddeck with my wife's brother and his wife. We have done this for the past several years and it has always been a much-anticipated little break. We typically stay in bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), and find them practical and an enjoyable way to learn about the local area and meet other guests from practically anywhere in the world. Our preferred time of year to go is during *KitchenFest! Féis a' Chidsin!* which is an annual Cape Breton Island-wide musical festival celebrating Gaelic culture, music and island traditions. It is on a much smaller scale than *Celtic Colours International Festival*, and features local talent and smaller venues.

Along with enjoying the music, we look for different activities to keep us entertained in the mornings or afternoons while waiting for the evening entertainment. This has ranged from a Cape Smokey Gondola ride, Cabot Trail (twice), nature trail walks, a leisurely boat tour of Baddeck waters, a tour of inventor Alexander Bell's *Beinn Bhreagh* (Gaelic for "Beautiful Mountain") historic 600-acre estate, and the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site and museum. This year we branched out a little and booked a Bird Island boat tour out of Big Bras d'Or with BIBT, one of two such tour companies in the area. We went with BIBT as they are situated closer to the islands which made for a shorter sail out and more time on site near the islands. Our B&B proprietor assured us both of these tour operators are equally professional and provide a wonderful tour experience. BIBT itself has been in operation since 1972 (over 50 years) and is now on its 3rd generation of captains; on this trip Ian was our captain and his father Captain Vince was the second crew member onboard.

The day we chose could not have been better, it was pleasantly warm, had a gentle breeze and the water had barely a riffle on it. The Puffin Express tour boat seats 35 passengers, has a roof, side windows and bathroom facilities (heads), all designed with passenger comfort in mind. Once we were all onboard and seated Captain Ian gave a very thorough safety briefing covering all aspects of the boat and tour procedures. Our destination was the two small islands of Hertford and Ciboux (collectively known as Bird Islands). They are uninhabited, narrow islands with steep rocky outcroppings that lie just off St. Ann's Bay, and they are within the provincial protected *Bird Islands Wildlife Management Area* (designated on 22 April 2009). The islands are out of bounds to all: boats are not allowed to land nor are people allowed on the islands. The channel going out is fairly narrow with considerable tidal flow depending on the tides themselves; hence, Captain Ian paid careful attention and took advantage of the tidal current back eddies both on the way out and back in.

Once near the islands the boat was often only 30 to 50 feet off shore, and this provided everyone an excellent view and photography opportunity for any number of birds. The birds were obviously comfortable with us and paid us minimal attention as we cruised by, even birds swimming often just swam aside or dove. The crew gave an informed-running account of the

various birds, their identification features, nesting habits, feeding, population density, and hazards they may face. We saw any number of the following pelagic seabirds in their breeding and nesting concentrations:



Great cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*



Double-crested cormorant *Nannopterum auritum*



Herring gull *Larus smithsonianus*



Great black-backed gull *Larus marinus*



Black-legged kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*



Black guillemot *Cepphus grylle*



Atlantic puffin *Fratercula arctica*



Razorbill *Alca torda*



Common murre *Uria aalge* (photo Wikipedia)



Great blue heron *Ardea herodias*

Bank swallows were in full flight above the islands. *For the reader's information*, pelagic seabirds are "birds that spend most of their lives flying, feeding, and living on the open ocean far away from land, returning to solid ground only to breed and nest" (eBird).

We were told Bald eagles have taken to frequenting the islands for the availability of easy food. Although we saw no eagles at the islands, we did see two while waiting at the wharf to board the boat. Seeing both Great and Double-crested cormorants, side by side, helped greatly to differentiate between the two. Captain Ian pointed out the redness of the Black guillemots legs and prominent white wing patch when on the water. Another surprising point of interest was the variation of effort taken by different species in nest building and maintenance, a lot of nests are literally just a few tufts of seaweed on the cliff face. As well as seeing these birds, we saw a number of Grey seals. They'd surface right alongside of the boat and look us over with their large black eyes, that seemed as large as loonies. It being lobster season, there was a heavy concentration of lobster traps with some traps set very close to shore, often only a few feet off and clearly visible in the shallow depth. The traps are laid one trap per line, and as this was low tide there were trap lines floating everywhere on the surface. We sailed right amongst them and the captain said except for the propeller cages they'd constantly be tangled up.

This 2.75-hour boat tour was a fascinating experience, between the birds, seals, scenery and the crew's knowledgeable commentary. There was something to draw your attention every minute. If you happen to end up in Baddeck with a morning or afternoon to spare, I'd highly recommend a boat tour to the bird islands with either of the two tour outfits. Looking back now, I feel being there seeing these birds in their home-environment was a true privilege and one my wife and I would gladly repeat.



Grey seal *Halichoerus grypus*