



# My Paddle and Plunge on Ancient Shores

by Zack Metcalfe

Photos courtesy of Nova Scotia Nature Trust

**It was the first of October** that I launched my kayak among the 100 Wild Islands, a collection of coastal rocks made famous by their temperate rainforests, back-to-back white sand beaches, freshwater lakes, and abundance of fleeting wildlife, feathered and finned alike. I reasoned that such exceptionalism existing off Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore, between Ship and Sheet harbours, more than merited a visit.

I wasn't alone, thank goodness. The charity which saw fit to protect these islands, the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, was then organizing a public expedition in partnership with the outdoor tourism group Coastal Adventures, supplying kayaks to whomever didn't bring their own. Our island of choice that warm and welcoming morning, Shelter Cove, was accessible by foot at low tide, so half our troop hiked in while the rest of us paddled, the two groups meeting at the far side and trading modes of transport.

We took to the ocean under the watchful eye of Gayle Wilson, a member of Coastal Adventures and a masterful paddler. Long before our destination came into view she was weaving her craft through the tightly packed rocks of the Eastern Shore and encouraging those of sufficient faith to follow behind. I was among these enthusiastic few and in her wake I discovered previously unappreciated aspects of our coast.

Among these were sheer faces of rock that I could caress with an outstretched hand while gliding by, so close that the orange Maritime Sunburst lichen adorning its surface appeared as hieroglyphics. The incongruities of this stone looked like roots probing from soiled tops to salty bottoms. I know members of our provincial rock climbing community who've practiced their craft on these islands, choosing faces which, at worst, would drop them harmlessly into the Atlantic should they slip. It's but one of the many romances to be found among these islands.

Under us always was an aquatic forest of rockweed, constantly in motion with the working of the waves and more beautiful I think than any field of flowers. At times I was hypnotized by their regular grace, dancing green and orange in the morning light.

While kayaking is a relatively new undertaking for me, decades of canoeing have made me a strong paddler, which Gayle employed on our journey to Shelter Cove. In order to steer our fleet in the proper direction, she'd have me go ahead and mark our destination with the bright blue of my Riot kayak. At times like these I'd lean back and take in the view while waiting for the others. The water surrounding me was so clear that sunlight passed through it unimpeded, perfectly illuminating a submerged stone floor with smatterings of sand and vegetation. I was able to imagine there was no water, and that I was levitating 10 feet off the ground in what amounted to a lawn chair.

The most beautiful point on the shores of Shelter Cove, very near the end of our journey at sea, was also the most treacherous. This was a deep, narrow passage cutting into an otherwise solid shore where the modest waves of the





day were amplified into great swells and depressions. At the end of this passage was a small opening which drained back into ocean, and while most chose to go around this quagmire, Gayle paddled confidently in. I waited at its mouth, watching her progress, when she waved me in and disappeared through its far side.

In spite of my limited experience I followed without reservation, immediately feeling the exaggerated rise and fall of the waves. The ocean gave and took until I floated between two great walls of rock, and in front of me was the small opening Gayle had used to escape. I could see her beyond, waiting.

"Choose your moment," she cautioned, but a wave had already struck

me from behind, pushing the nose of my kayak into the small opening. Once I'd committed to the maneuver the ocean fell away, draining all water from beneath my kayak and leaving me stranded on bare rock. A moment later I was struck by a wave on my starboard side, tipping my kayak and sending me back into the narrow passageway. The force of the fall threw this man unceremoniously overboard.

The time I spent underwater was brief, but in that instant I glimpsed a spectacular community of coastal life, clinging to stone and whirling with the ongoing tumult of the waves. Suddenly I was in the Caribbean Sea or on the Australian coast, in the presence of natural beauty which couldn't possibly exist in

Nova Scotia. The water was remarkably warm and while several bruises would be discovered in days to come, I wasn't in pain. In fact, I was euphoric.

To their credit, the staff of Coastal Adventures was at my side within seconds of resurfacing. A man I knew only as "the serious Italian," in Gayle's words, helped me back into my kayak and escorted me to our final destination, not five minutes from the ordeal. Here was one of the aforementioned white sand beaches, standing in stark contrast to the majority of our rocky province and offering welcome harbour to our exhausted fleet.

Gayle met me on shore and helped empty my kayak of water. She then offered me a dry shirt, beginning a chain reaction of charity that converged on my







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pitiable self. Another shirt, thick pants, gloves, and a wool hat were thrust on my person faster than I could thank their various owners. The chilling consequences of my swim only then struck me, at which point I fit on the jacket of a woman half my size. I must have looked ridiculous, but I was cozy, and grateful to these people I didn't even know.

Together with our hiking counterparts, arriving on the beach shortly thereafter, we found a more classically Nova Scotia shoreline of granite and slate for lunch. Being without food I chose a bolder on which to continue the drying process, while piece by piece learning the history of Shelter Cove.

It was acquired sometime ago by the Friends of Nature, a charity based in the United States with a mandate for preservation very similar to that of the Nova Scotia Nature Trust. The late Rudy Haase, whose praises I've heard sung by a great many people, played a crucial role in founding the Friends of Nature, and upon moving to Nova Scotia expanded their vision locally. Eventually he decided the island would be better served by a local organization, one promising to protect these shores now and forever. Together they and the Nature Trust from 2005 to 2006 raised the money necessary for ongoing stewardship, as well as funds to change its legal ownership. At the Nature Trust's annual dinner that second year, the protection of Shelter Cove was announced by none other than Justin Trudeau, prior to his bid for our country's highest office.

Now Shelter Cove is a proud part of the 100 Wild Islands archipelago, safeguarded before this broader enterprise was even conceived. Not all of these islands were protected so easily, but that October morning I sat atop a good-news-story.

Handing my kayak to yet another fine stranger, I prepared to hike back with the group led by Karen McKendry of the Nova Scotia Nature Trust. With the trademark enthusiasm of a true ecologist she guided us through the rough trail system of Shelter Cove, explaining as we went the hidden magnificence of this island forest.

While the word "rainforest" might conjure up images of the Amazon, the woods of the 100 Wild Islands earn this description with a simple abundance of

precipitation, not with towering trees or world-class biodiversity. They're what you'd expect on our breezy coast: wind-swept, short, and coated thickly in lichen. But they are nevertheless outstanding.

They are not technically "old growth" because every century or so, a storm strong enough to level these trees rages through Nova Scotia, but their solitude has largely shielded them from human disturbance, as well as from invasive species and outbreaks of pests. Because of this the ecological processes which define these islands, from the canopies of their forests to the microbes in their soils, have continued, uninterrupted, for millennia. The Nova Scotia botanist Nick Hill coined the term "old process forests" upon visiting these remarkable isles, the opportunities for education and research rivaling those for recreation. These humble islands, unlike the majority of Nova Scotia, are genuinely ancient.

As well they reside on the Atlantic flyway, not only housing native birds and breeding colonies, but also those countless species passing through our region on their seasonal migrations. It's our responsibility to keep this flyway open, in the opinion of every conservationist I've asked.

It's difficult to visit the 100 Wild Islands and not pick out potential campsites, or imagine these waters hosting low-impact sailing, paddling, or swimming. Businesses such as Coastal Adventures have made a living off this extraordinary archipelago and benefit tremendously from its protection, just as visitors benefit from intangibles like mental health and spiritual fulfillment.

Once I'd collected my kayak back on the mainland and returned everyone's clothes, I was left wet, wiped, and with extreme gratitude, for these islands and their power to immerse us in all that's good about our province. How the 100 Wild Islands will be managed for tourism has yet to be set in stone, given innumerable natural concerns, but then as now this archipelago will be held in trust, safe from the environmental indiscretions of industry and ownership. Come kayak or campground, these islands will remain wild.



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