

# Sea life and seabirds describe a little island

By Sandra MacGregor  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BRIER ISLAND, Nova Scotia — “Are you here for the whales or the birds?” says Penny Graham, our guide from Mariner Cruises, as she hands out muffins and hot chocolate to the eight of us gathered on her boat. Most of us yell out “both,” but the truth is we are all here to see a whale, and though we would be happy to see a humpback, the elusive blue is the true prize.

Though we are here early in the season (June to September is the best time for spotting whales), Graham assures us she has never had a trip without a sighting. Three hours later, we’ve seen dozens of dolphins, porpoises, and puffins, but not a single whale. It’s not until the boat turns back that two humpbacks appear and give us a bit of a show before they head out deep into the Bay of Fundy. “There you go,” says Graham, “no one ever leaves Brier Island without seeing a whale.”

Brier Island, at the Atlantic province’s westerly tip, is no more than 1½ miles wide and 4 miles long. As an island destination, it’s got daunting competition. On the opposite end of Nova Scotia lies Cape Breton with its famous Cabot Trail, one of the world’s most scenic drives. Despite Brier Island’s legitimate claim to some of the Canadian Maritimes’ best whale- and bird-watching, the tourists are rarely so numerous as to swell the area’s scant accommodations beyond capacity (the island has one hotel, a hostel, and a handful of bed-and-breakfasts).

Then there is its somewhat challenging accessibility: It is at the least populated end of the province, and it takes two ferry rides (though no more than 15 minutes each) to reach the island. And though tourism contributes to Brier Island’s economy, the fishing boats that line the shore are the main source of income for the approximately 300 inhabitants. Boats far outnumber cars here and the din of seabirds rarely ceases.

As the ferry pulls into Westport, the island’s only village, we are greeted by a boisterous group of seabirds; cormorants, seagulls, and greater shearwaters demand fish. A couple from Toronto, on their third visit to the island, still my hand as I try to take photos. “Don’t worry honey,” says the woman, “just walk along any of the hiking trails, you’ll see enough birds to last a lifetime.”

But before I can confirm her



SANDRA MACGREGOR FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE (ABOVE); NOVA SCOTIA TOURISM BUREAU

The docks at Brier Island’s harbor are on stilts to accommodate the changing tides in the Gulf of Maine. Fishermen store their catch in the small warehouses. Tourists out on a whale watch contribute to the island’s economy, but fishing is the mainstay.

claim, I am off to settle in at the island’s only hotel, the Brier Island Lodge, which also operates one of only two restaurants here. Check-in is a casual affair and rather than being asked for a credit card, I’m invited on a tour of the farm that abuts the hotel’s grounds. I’m cheerfully handed a bucket of feed and before I know it I’m surrounded by at least a dozen sheep, some chickens, and a pot-bellied pig — all happy to make my acquaintance for a handful of pellets.

But it’s the undomesticated wildlife I’m here to see, and though whales can occasionally be spotted from the shore, on land it’s the birds that own the spotlight. With its pristine forest and coastline, the island, over the course of a year, will host tens of thousands of migratory birds. Two couples from Cleveland, amateur ornithologists, invite me to accompany them on a hike through the forest toward the coast. They have come to experience what they describe as “some of the best birding in North America.” Less than 10 minutes into our hike, they have already spotted a pair of blue herons, a bald eagle, and a turkey vulture flying overhead.



Just as I’m getting the hang of negotiating the uneven, rocky paths while scanning the skyline, I am abandoned when one of the group believes he has spotted a Western kingbird. The foursome excitedly take off deep into the forest in an effort to track their elusive prey.

Luckily, you don’t have to be a birder to enjoy Brier Island’s bucolic hikes. It is at once a terrain of rolling hills and mighty spruce only to become rocky and moorlike as I near the coast. A light fog has begun rolling in as I come across a bog complete with

gnarled, stunted trees and I feel like I’ve stumbled into an 18th-century Gothic novel.

Fog is a frequent visitor to the island, and is responsible for some of the over 50 recorded shipwrecks offshore, which explains why such a small island has three lighthouses. No doubt many a fisherman’s wife must have stood along these same cliffs scanning the horizon for sight of a lost ship.

My melancholic musings are suddenly interrupted by strange barking noises and I realize I’ve come upon the aptly named Seal

Cove. As the cliffs begin to melt into lower, rocky outcrops I’m greeted by several playful seals bobbing in and out of the water while more than a dozen sun on the shore. I keep my distance and my presence provokes no more than a few curious glances.

Seal Cove is just one of the breathtaking vistas on the island, all of which seem ready-made for a picnic — but come prepared. There is no liquor store on the island and the only place to buy food is at the local convenience store. Be sure to go early to buy any prepared foods. I made the mistake of going after the lunch rush and found the store had been cleaned out of fresh sandwiches and soups by a long line of hungry fishermen.

With so few dining options tourists and locals often bump elbows at dinner time. If you didn’t know fishing was the main industry on the island you would after a glance at the menu: lobster, clams, chowder, and scallops are the main attractions. Brier Island is located at the epicenter of Nova Scotia’s prime fishing spots; 90 minutes away lies Digby with its coveted scallops, and just a little to the south is Yarmouth, which offers up

## If you go . . .

**What to do**  
**Mariner Cruises**  
Westport  
800-239-2189  
www.novascotiawhalewatching.ca  
Whale and seabird tours June-October; adults \$49, seniors \$41, children \$27.

**Hooking by the Sea**  
161 Water St.  
902-839-2607  
www.hookingbythesearetreats.com  
Birding, hiking, and local history tours; some packages include accommodations; prices vary.

**Where to stay**  
**Brier Island Lodge**  
Water Street  
800-662-8355  
www.brierislandlodge.com  
Comfortable rooms, most with an ocean view. May-October (or longer depending on demand); \$89-\$149.

**Brier Island Hostel**  
Water Street  
902-839-2273  
www.brierislandhostel.com  
Clean rooms with a large shared kitchen, year-round, \$20 per night.

**Where to eat**  
**Brier Island Lodge**  
Water Street  
800-662-8355  
www.brierislandlodge.com  
Nova Scotian regional dishes and fresh local seafood; breakfast and dinner only; entrees \$12-\$17.

**Lighthouse Cafe**  
Water Street  
902-839-2273  
Casual, \$5-\$13; high season only (June to mid-September).

what is considered to be the best lobster in Canada.

Along with the fresh seafood, dinner also consists of some friendly scorekeeping. As the sun sets over the ocean and the locals cheer us on, fellow guests and I recite what whales and birds we’ve seen. I learn that on this beautiful, secluded island a puffin beats a porpoise, a humpback outdoes a bald eagle, but the giant blue whale trumps them all.

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# Big-city aspirations leave room for historic preservation

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cheese, and heritage vegetables are all available.

The market is run by The Stop, a sustainable food production and education center that also operates a greenhouse, bake oven, community kitchen, and classroom on site. The combination of meals, talks, and advocacy on food issues has quickly made the Barns one of the most popular foodie destinations in Toronto.

The other attraction here is the two dozen artist studios whose occupants not only live here but also mount exhibits, host tours, and keep the energy of the place buzzing beyond the busy weekends. Having an artist colony was part of the plan to put a cultural agenda into the mix of urban renewal, and it seems to be working.

St. Clair Avenue is undergoing a revival with new restaurants, galleries, and shops following the completion of a contentious right-of-way for streetcars, which no longer turn into Wychwood for repair.

“The barns have brought a focus to the neighborhood,” said resident artist John Coburn. “For 30 years, I’ve had studios in the backs of warehouses and never encountered anyone who might buy my art. Now when I paint I leave my door open, people stop by, and relationships are made.”

Sometimes efforts to preserve the past can make for strange bedfellows. It took a combination of beer and sofa salesmanship to finance the Toronto Railway Heritage Center in the John Street Roundhouse at the foot of the CN Tower downtown. The Steam Whistle

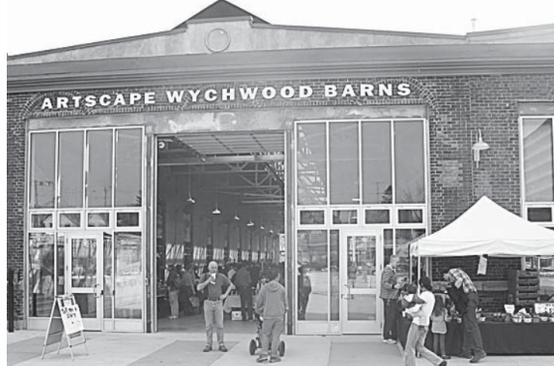


PHOTOS BY PAUL FRENCH/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Locomotives in Toronto’s Roundhouse Park before the Toronto Railway Heritage Centre opens this month; an artist colony and food destination in what were streetcar repair sheds.

Brewery and a Leon’s furniture showroom occupy all but three stalls of the large 32-bay engine depot built in 1930. The remainder will form the nucleus of the museum when it opens on May 29 to coincide with Doors Open, an annual city-run program that features free access to architecturally significant buildings.

Steam and diesel locomotives are on display in the adjacent Roundhouse Park along with an operating turntable and restored railway buildings, including the 19th-century Don station. Steam buffets will be able to ride the miniature 7.25-inch-gauge train that will puff around the park against a backdrop of rising skyscrapers. The museum took seven years to realize and is



run by volunteers eager to share their enthusiasm about the city’s railroading past. “We welcome more help as we near opening

day,” said Michael Guy, as he cleaned the tracks for the little train to pass.

If railroad lore is not to your

## If you go . . .

**Artscape Wychwood Barns**  
601 Christie St.  
www.torontoartscape.on.ca/places-spaces/artscape-wychwood-barns

To tour The Stop’s Green Barn, including the greenhouse and sustainable food production center during the week, visit [www.thestop.org/green-barn](http://www.thestop.org/green-barn).

**Toronto Railway Heritage Center**  
255 Bremner Blvd.  
www.trha.ca

Open weekends as of May 29.  
**Steam Whistle Brewing**  
255 Bremner Blvd.  
416-362-2337

www.steamwhistle.ca  
**Evergreen Brick Works**  
550 Bayview Ave.  
416-596-1495

**Doors Open Toronto**  
www.toronto.ca/doorsopen  
May 29-30, free access to 150 buildings of architectural significance, with talks and tours from 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

taste, the microbrewery offers tours, hosts art exhibits, and pours generous samples of its one beer, a Czech-style pilsner. It’s a popular pre- and post-game destination for Blue Jays baseball games at Rogers Centre across the street. And even if you’re not in the market for a recliner, the furniture store is an attractive showcase that has preserved many architectural features of the roundhouse bays.

The most ambitious of the industrial revival projects is the

Evergreen Brick Works in the Don Valley. Few cities can claim such a centrally-located example of open-pit mining in their midst and this clay quarry, which closed in the 1980s and supplied a good portion of the bricks that built Toronto, is about to transform into a center for sustainable living.

Local architecture firm Diamond and Schmitt has built a showpiece of environmental design in what once was a drying room for freshly minted bricks. The Center for Urban Sustainability opens in September and will feature “a living billboard,” explained architect Michael Leckman, that functions both as climate control for the interior space through louvered screen mesh windows, as well as a canvas to promote the Evergreen movement’s message of environmental awareness through changing art work and window boxes. It will be the only heritage site designated LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum in Canada.

This 40-acre park with a restored wetland, boardwalk, organic community gardens, farmer’s market, and active educational program is open every day and, as of September, will include guided tours of the rusting remnants of heavy machinery and kilns used to make bricks. The setting is highly symbolic for the green movement replacing former industrial models of urban living. It is also an inspiring and calming oasis in the heart of the city. “Now ideas are coming out of the quarry to remake the city where bricks once did,” said Leckman.

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