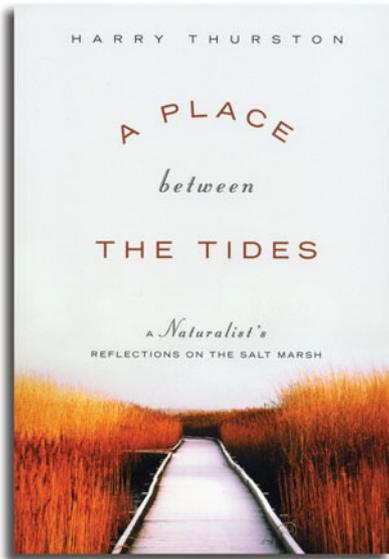


# Reflections on the “Old Marsh”



**A PLACE BETWEEN THE TIDES**  
**A Naturalist's Reflections on the Salt Marsh**  
 by Harry Thurston

Greystone Books  
 Douglas & McIntyre  
 Publishing Group,  
 Vancouver/Toronto/Berkeley. 2004.  
 235 pp. Soft cover \$15

**W**HILE KAYAKING, I often search for wildlife in the salt marsh near my home. A regal blue heron stealthily follows my progress, then elegantly flies in the direction from which I've just come. A solitary deer stands in filtered sunlight on the shore. As the tide recedes, one crab clings to tall grass on a lip of sand. Cormorants stretch to dry their pterodactyl-like wings, standing on decaying railroad ties that cut across the tidal creek where it meanders toward the marsh. I can't help but wonder what else happens in this watery landscape where our paths intersect.

Harry Thurston has observed such a habitat all his life, probing its mysteries, recording its history. As a child, he lived on a farm beside a four-acre salt marsh fed by the tidal Tidnish River in Amherst, Nova Scotia, until his parents moved the family into town. Thirty years later, he returned with his wife and young daughter to live again on the banks of the “Old Marsh,” where as a boy he loved to wander alone in his outdoor classroom while he fished for trout, caught smelts and eels with his bare hands, and, emulating his father and older brothers, pretended to hunt.

The pull of Atlantic Canada has never left Thurston. On the day he returned to the marsh, a pair of willets flew by, calling as if to say, “welcome home.” He was impelled to investigate and record the world in his backyard.

Educated as a biologist, Thurston is an environmentalist, poet, and award-winning nature writer who served as contributing editor and field correspondent for *Equinox* for two decades. His is a “visceral and instinctive” attachment to the salt marsh. As fall becomes Canadian winter, he worries about the fate of young foxes; in summer, he sees beached whales as a poignant lesson in marine life; he watches the avian migration, the habits of kingfishers and sparrows, realizing that like the great blue heron, he is “eyehungry, ever watchful, predatory, listening. [That

his] hunting for stimuli feeds a spiritual hunger.”

It would be an injustice, however, to merely say I found answers to my own wildlife questions in the pages of Thurston's new book. The book is magnetic. His descriptions focused my attention on nature's quiet moments, animal interaction, and seasonal change, forcing me to slow down. His writing has a rhythm that echoes the steady rise and fall of the tides.

There are two kinds of pleasures for a naturalist who stays in one place, Thurston notes: one is developing an ability to pre-

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dict what will occur at certain times of the year, the other is excitement at encountering the unexpected.

In March, Thurston observes the truth of the maxim, “Nature abhors a vacuum.” The ice melts, and within days mergansers dive in the open river, harriers fly low over the open marsh, black ducks swim in marsh pools. A great bull gray seal swims slowly against the tide with its head out of the water, “like a gentleman in a straw boater from an unhurried, bygone era.” A neighbor telephones with the news that an otter in the river is munching a fish, and Thurston runs to look. It is the first time otters have appeared here in many years.

Raccoons and skunks reappear, their semi-hibernation ended. Robins and grackles scout for food; overhead, eagles once more spiral upward solo and in courting pairs.

Thurston recalls the eagles' absence here during his youth in the 1950s. It is one of numerous opportunities he uses to discuss the natural and man-made threats to wildlife and to express his delight in the ability of various species to survive.

Thurston is a neutral observer, watching the mating and dining habits of two foxes and the drama surrounding a deer hide stuffed part way into a feed bag, surmising it was left by a poacher. A bald eagle uses its hooked bill to peel strips of fat from the hide while ravens taunt the eagle until a gray coyote nervously steps out of the woods. The other animals flee, yet the coyote, still fearful, leaves without satisfying its winter hunger.

Another day at the same scene, the ravens again surround the eagle but they are bolder than before. This time the eagle is trapped, its talons caught in the mesh of the bag that holds the deer hide. Thurston evaluates the gravity of the

creature's situation as well as the danger to himself should he attempt a rescue. As he approaches, the eagle glares at him, then powerfully breaks free to fly upriver toward its winter home.

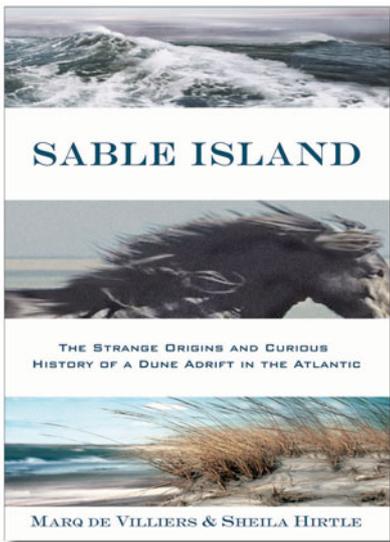
In August, swarming mosquitoes sound "like the hot tires of an 18-wheeler passing along the highway, or the distant roar of a jet." Nothing can control them, Thurston writes. Attempts with pesticide spray, draining and ditching salt marshes, or dousing with oil have all failed, he informs us, because the pests are so flexible that they can reproduce three times faster in fresh water than in salt water. They use the high lunar tides to keep their eggs submerged, protecting the larvae for nine days until adulthood, when they, too, will reproduce every two weeks. He praises the mummichogs (minnows) that feast on mosquitoes until they in turn become food for bitterns and herons.

There are snapshots, too, of grand but doomed commercial ventures waylaid by the terrain, and of locals who dig just enough quahogs to meet their own needs, disdaining commercial fishermen who decimate the supply.

Thurston acknowledges that "our glimpses into [the lives of wild animals] are usually so brief and fragmented that it is often impossible to piece together a coherent plot of their lives and motivations.... We cannot always intuit their meaning for the simple reason that we do not think, as the poet said, in the language of the wild, as foxes do."

Nonetheless, Thurston sees more than most:

In October, "one morning a heavy frost encircles the grasses and the first skim of ice temporarily seals the marsh pools. In the sky there is the glower of November, gray nimbus clouds like a ledge of overhanging slate. My three crows take up their winter stations. A blue heron, the color of the impending month, flies poker-straight into a nor'easter. The wind strips the maples of the last of their fiery leaves.... The otters, which have spent the summer somewhere upriver, also return to the brackish waters for the flounder feast.... Outside on the deck, I can hear the sound of their fearsome teeth, slicing through and crushing the flatfish's bones, echoing across the water." — *Janet Mendelsohn*



**SABLE ISLAND**  
**The Strange Origins and Curious History of a Dune Adrift in the Atlantic**  
by Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle

Walker & Company,  
New York, New York. 2004.  
288 pages. Hardcover \$24.00

## Island of Shifting Sand

**W**E TEND TO THINK of islands as fixed in one place, but Sable Island, 100 miles off the southern coast of Nova Scotia, refuses to stay put. Its propensity to change shape and location has contributed to its being the site of hundreds of shipwrecks over the past 400 years, as ships sailed the great circle route from New England to Europe.

Sable Island's mysterious shifting of shape is linked to its composition. Sable is the French word for sand. "This is just a beach in the middle of nowhere attached to nothing and apropos of nothing, a beach attached to nothing but beach," write Marq de Villiers and Sheila Hirtle in *Sable Island: The Strange Origins and Curious History of a Dune Adrift in the Atlantic*. In this new book the authors deftly weave together natural history and human history. They

describe what natural forces influence the island's topography, what people, plants, and animals inhabit it, and where this isolated island may be headed.

Where Sable Island may be headed is the subject of some conjecture. The authors state that it appears to be much smaller than it was in historic times and seems to be moving eastward, toward the edge of the continental shelf. They express concern that the crescent-shaped island, which is approximately 30 miles along its arc, might someday disappear entirely.

Why doesn't Sable Island just wash away? De Villiers and Hirtle describe how the island is routinely hammered by ocean currents and Atlantic gale winds, and how these natural forces move the beaches and dunes. Shifting sands have forced the relocation of the western lighthouse four times since 1873, for

instance. Sand movement does not always result in a net loss of land, however; sometimes sand is picked up by the currents and deposited elsewhere on the island.

The authors note that one possible destination for Sable's moving sand is the Gully, about 28 miles to the east. The Gully is the largest marine canyon in the western North Atlantic. This past May, it became the second location to be designated a Marine Protected Area by Fisheries and Oceans Canada. It is home to diverse habitats and species, including 21 species of coral and a population of 130 at-risk northern bottlenose whales.

In addition to its reputation as the site of numerous shipwrecks, Sable Island is noted for its population of wild horses. De Villiers and Hirtle counter the misconception that the earliest horses were shipwreck survivors. They describe how Sable's horses are similar in genetic makeup to the horses used by Acadian farmers, and how 60 were taken ashore on the island in 1756. These days 200 to 350 horses roam the island. They survive on marram, a salt-tolerant, beach-binding grass, which grows abundantly in the dunes.

Grey seals and harbor seals are frequent visitors to Sable Island, as they haul out on its beaches. The island has important habitat for nesting terns and other seabirds, and provides a stopover for migratory birds.

People have been landing on Sable Island, intentionally or not, at least as far back as the 1500s. The authors describe how Portuguese sailors fishing for cod used the island as a supply station. Finding fresh water in abundance, they pas-

sured cattle and pigs there. In 1801, a lifesaving station was established to aid sailors whose ships had run aground. The number of residents has fluctuated, but the island has been inhabited ever since. Continued human habitation is not assured, however.

Four to six people staff the Sable Island Station year round, doing atmospheric and climatological research and monitoring. The station's staff also supplies the infrastructure—electricity, water supply and treatment, communi-

### *There is still much work to do to secure long-term funding and stability for Sable Island.*

cations, ground support for aircraft, etc.—required by visitors. University, government, and private researchers, as well as media representatives, make the journey to the island, with about 50 to 100 visitors in an average year, according to Zoe Lucas, a biologist and naturalist who has lived on the island nearly year round since the mid-1980s.

Without federal funding, the Sable Island Station would close and research on the island would cease. That funding was in jeopardy and the station in flux until January 31, when the federal government announced plans to contin-

ue a year-round human presence on Sable Island and to manage the station. "Although the future of Sable Island is now far less uncertain, there is still much work to do to secure long-term funding and stability for Sable Island," said Lucas. "We have confidence that the Government of Canada, assisted by the Government of Nova Scotia and the proposed advisory board, will continue to make progress on this issue."

Authors de Villiers and Hirtle live near Port Medway, Nova Scotia, and Hirtle visited Sable Island before writing this, their latest book. They seem to have an affinity for sand; they co-wrote another book that blended natural and human history, titled "Sahara." Judging from the extensive end notes and the bibliography in *Sable Island*, they availed themselves of a great deal of archival information. However, I would have liked more information about present-day life on the island, derived from the authors' personal observations and from interviews. I would have also appreciated more in-depth reporting on current research on Sable's horses, seabirds, and marine life.

*Sable Island* provides an engaging portrait of a remarkable place. I'm hoping that the station will remain open to welcome scientists and others fortunate enough to visit this shifting island.

— Lee Bumsted

*A version of this piece originally appeared in the Winter 2004 issue of Gulf of Maine Times ([www.gulfmaine.org](http://www.gulfmaine.org)) as a review of A Dune Adrift: The Strange Origins and Curious History of Sable Island (the Canadian edition's title). Reprinted here by permission.* 