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BONAVENTURE ISLAND MIGRATORY BIRD SANCTUARY

by

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All photographs courtesy of the Province of Québec Film Bureau.

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The Island

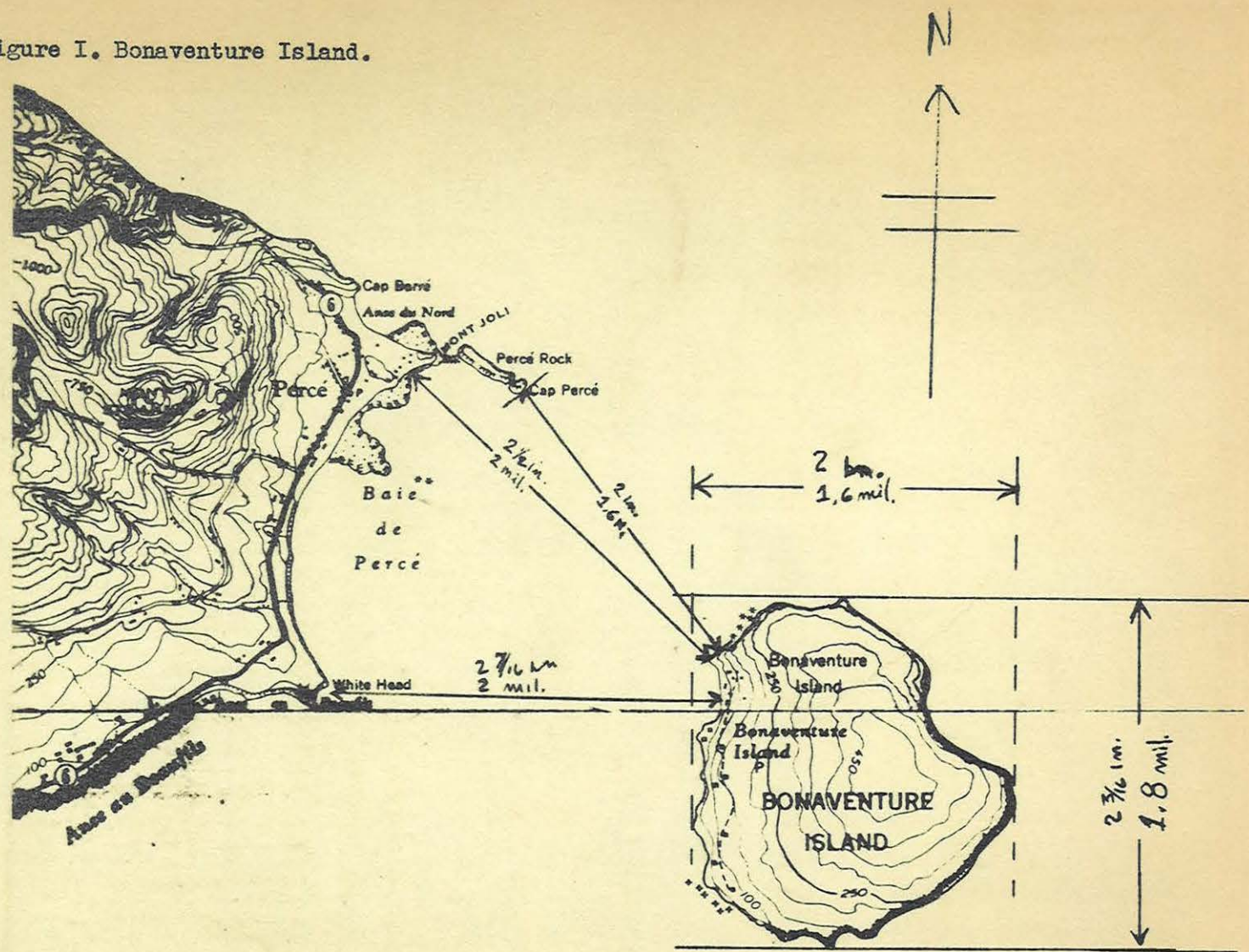
Bonaventure Island lies approximately two miles east of Percé, Quebec (Figure 1). It is roughly circular with a diameter of one and three-quarter miles. Rising gradually from the sea on the southwest it reaches a maximum elevation of 450 feet. The northeast and southeast sides drop sharply resulting in cliffs varying from 100 to 250 feet in height (6). The island is a part of the bonaventure geologic formation and is composed of a carboniferous red sandstone and conglomerates. Nearby Percé Rock is composed of devonian siliceous limestone (1).

There is an average of 114 (45-145) frost free days at Percé with the last frost occurring at the end of May and the first frost shortly after mid-September. The annual average temperature is 37° with an average annual maximum of 47° and minimum of 27°. The annual average precipitation is 31.8 inches and the average snowfall is 113.0 inches. (3).

Balsam fir is the dominant tree species on the island. Over 300 species of plants and 90 species of birds have been observed there. Mammals are limited to small rodents, feral rabbits and a few foxes. (2).

The island was discovered in 1594 by Jacques Cartier. The census in 1831 listed 37 families numbering 172 people as residents of the island, mainly from Ireland, England and the Jersey Islands. Fishing was the major occupation although some farming was practised. Today about 15 residences are occupied during the summer (4). The winter of 1962-1963 saw the last of the year around residents on the island.

Figure I. Bonaventure Island.



13 HOUSES
3 BARNS

1.25 INCHES to the MILE

The Sanctuary

A Migratory Bird Sanctuary was established on the island in 1919, consisting of "a strip of land 10 feet in depth, along the cliff itself on the north and east sides of the island" (2). Gannets, herring gulls, kittiwakes, black guillemots, razor-billed auks, common murrens, Leach's petrels and common puffins nest in the sanctuary. The gannets are the major attraction, their numbers have increased from the 7-8,000 estimated by P.A. Taverner in 1913 to the 40-50,000 estimated by the C.W.S. in 1962. (2). In recent years the gannets have nested on top of the cliff. Although a boon to amateur photographers it is a liability to the gannets. Many people approach too close to the nesting birds causing panic among them. To get airborne the frightened birds must reach the cliff edge, running over other nesting birds and often trampling eggs and/or young in the process. Mr. Paget, our caretaker on the island, erected a one strand wire fence around the perimeter of the nesting birds but still many people step over the wire to get a closer look or photograph.

Since the sanctuary was established many portions of the cliff have fallen and it is likely that the original 10 feet in the sanctuary is now a mass of rubble at the bottom of the cliff. It would be desirable to obtain more land for the sanctuary.

Tourism

Tourist boats operating from Percé make tours around the island and debark people on the island upon request. In 1964 nine boats made trips around the island and one passenger ferry plied between the island and Percé. An estimated 38,000 persons took one of the cruises around the island and

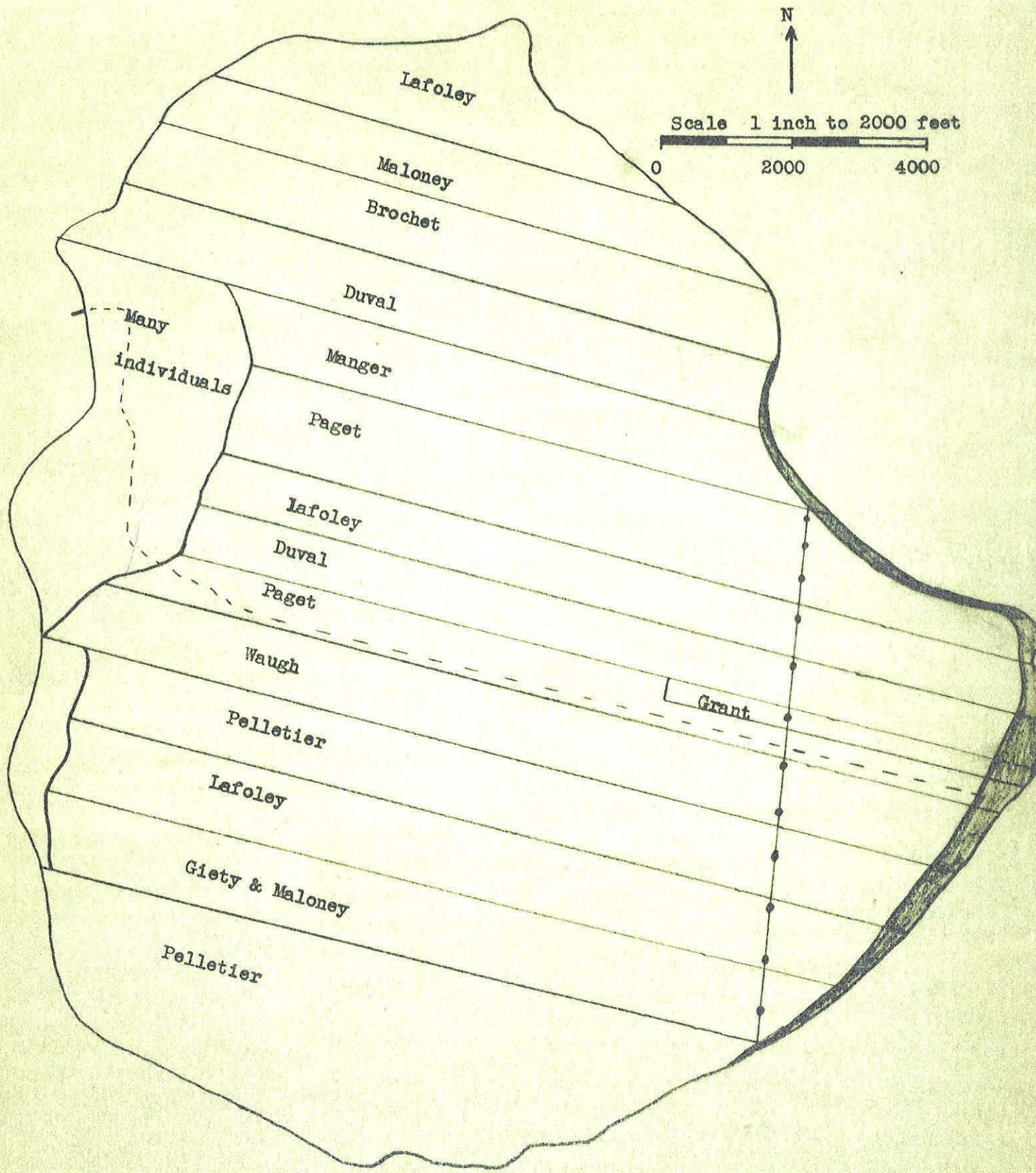
about 7,000 persons landed on the island. (Paget, pers. comm.). There is an inn, recently renovated, which offers cabins or rooms and meals on the island.

The provincial government operates a traffic counter on the road between Ste. Anne des Monts and New Richmond. In 1962 113,405 vehicles travelled the road (5). The number of tourists visiting the Gaspé appears to be increasing each year. Tourist facilities are expanding and the government is expanding its program of tourist advertising. An increase in the number of tourists, summer homes and commercial enterprises on the island is to be expected in the future. Even now, Bonaventure Island is probably our most often visited sanctuary. It can, and should, become a major showplace for our service before it is desecrated by the "pseudo-beatnik" groups which descend on Percé each summer to separate tourists from their money by many ingenious and often devious means.

Aquisition and Development

To guarantee the protection of the gannet colony in its natural setting the C.W.S. should purchase enough land on the island to provide a buffer zone between the birds and private holdings. The acquisition of 500 to 600 acres on the east side of the island would provide adequate protection. It would assure a substantial screen of trees between the birds and any future private developments. The suggested area to be purchased with the names of the owners is outlined in Figure II.

Free public access should be available from the wharf to the sanctuary. The C.W.S. should obtain a right-of-way from the wharf to the sanctuary and construct a small road or wide footpath. A proposed route





- proposed road
-  cliff-top nests (gannets)
-  proposed sanctuary boundary

Figure II. Bonaventure Island showing land ownership.

following the trail presently used by Mr. Paget is shown in Figure II. Mr. Paget is willing to let the C.W.S. have a right-of-way along the trail.

One of the major complaints heard from the tourists is the complete lack of information concerning the sanctuary. These complaints could be answered by erecting large wooden signs giving short biographies of the nesting species of birds. For people with a deeper interest a pamphlet should be prepared outlining the history of the island and the sanctuary and the part played by the C.W.S.

Some type of easily visible fence, preferably wooden rail, should be constructed around the perimeter of the nesting gannets to prevent people from approaching too close. It must be easily visible so that the gannets do not fly into it during storms.

A lookout providing a view of the cliff face would be very well used by visitors to the sanctuary. There are several spots along the cliff where one could be constructed which would provide an excellent view of several of the cliff nesting species.

At the entrance to the sanctuary an educational center could be established. It could be staffed by one or two students during the summer who would answer all questions and conduct tours around some of the lesser known portions of the sanctuary. Such a center would greatly enhance both the sanctuary and the C.W.S. in the eyes of the public.

Recommendations

- 1) Acquisition by the C.W.S. of 500-600 acres on Bonaventure Island


as outlined in Figure II for the purpose of a Migratory Bird Sanctuary.

- 2) Aquisition of a right-of-way and the construction of a small road from the wharf to the sanctuary as outlined in Figure II.
- 3) Erection of large bilingual signs in the sanctuary giving short biographies of the nesting species of birds.
- 4) Construction of an easily visable fence around the perimeter of the nesting gannets.
- 5) Construction of a lookout providing a view of the cliff nesting bird species.
- 6) Construction of an educational center near the entrance to the sanctuary and provision of summer staff.

Literature Cited

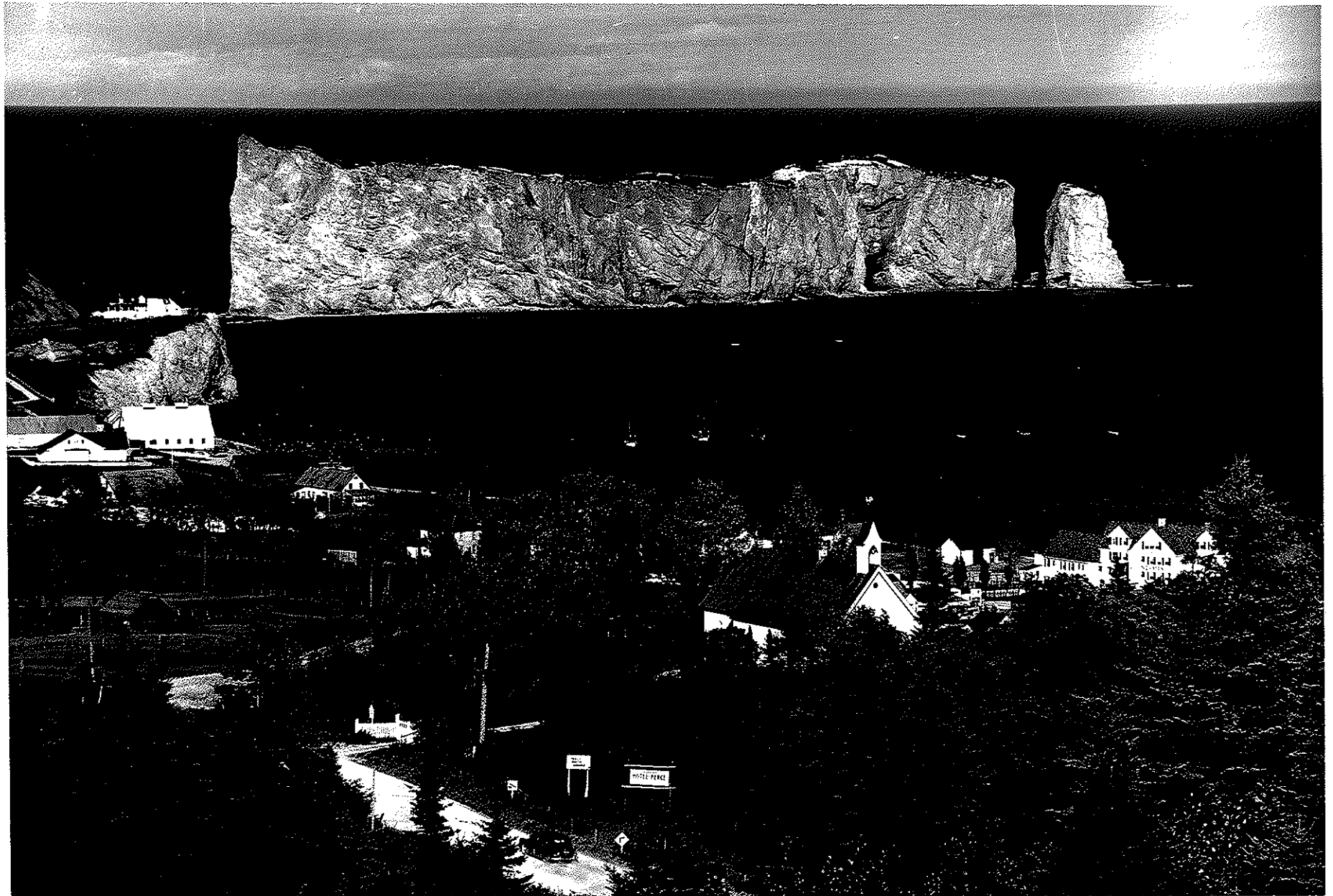
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Québec June 1965


Wm. F. Munro,
Wildlife Biologist.



The village of Percé seen from the Peak 'o dawn. Left-Percé Rock: Background-Bonaventure Island.



Percé Rock and part of the village of Percé



A small portion of the gannets nesting on the cliff top.



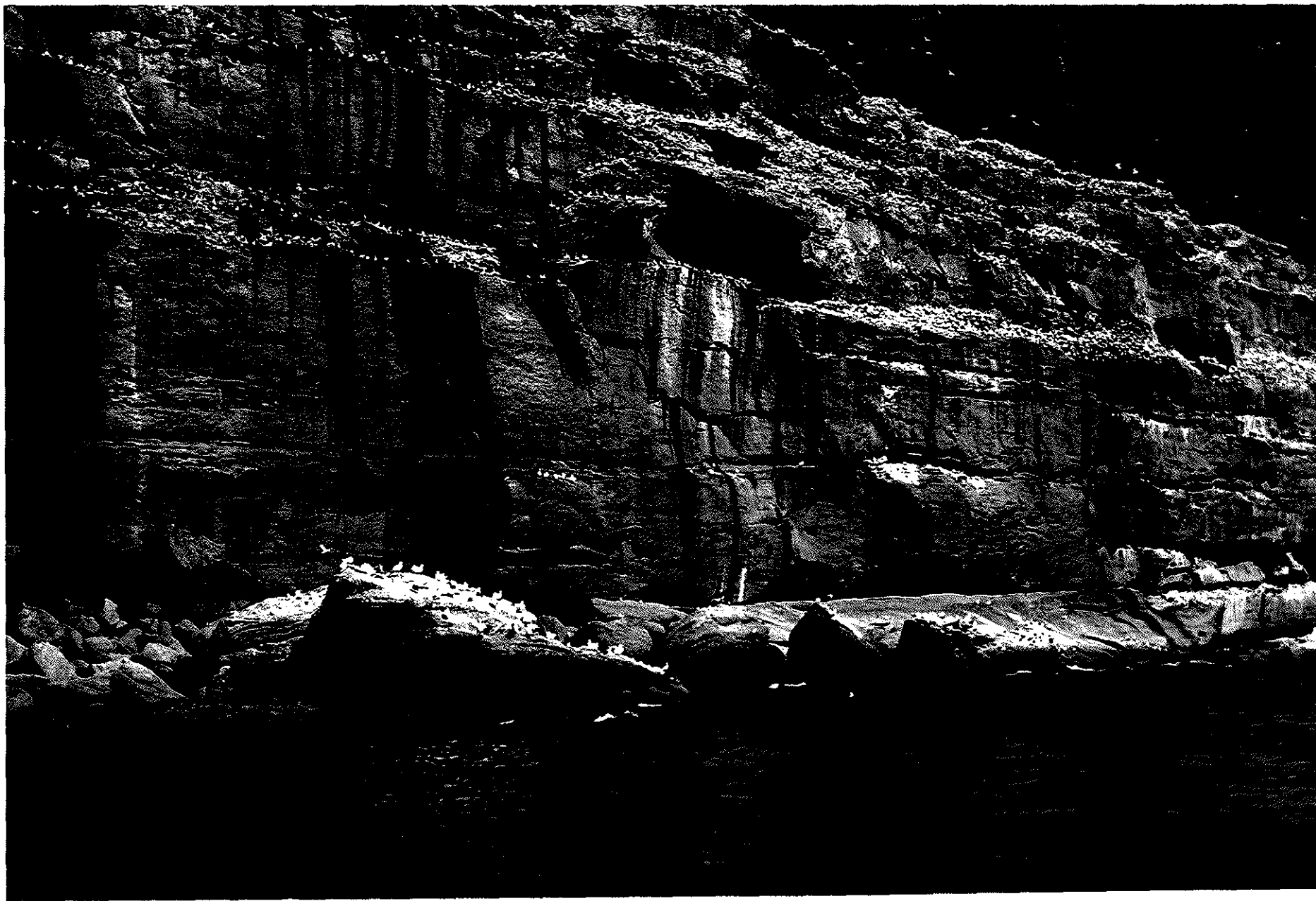
Everyone wants a closer photograph of the nesting gannets.



A colony of non-nesting sub-adults on the cliff top.



A colony of nesting gannets on the cliff top.



Kittiwakes and gannets nesting on the cliff face.

From -
March-April 1958 (Vol. 2, No. 2)
Canadian Audubon 181 Jarvis St
BONAVENTURE INTERLUDE Toronto

BY VIOLET HERMES

WE were in the middle of the channel when Johnny suddenly yelled, "Over there. Look over there." Turning to where he pointed near the "Rock", we saw a group of large white birds circling over the sea. Suddenly several birds, half-closing their wings, hurtled down into the water. Another, then another followed, sending up great plume-like sprays. This was the sight that we had hoped to see for four years—the gannets making their spectacular dives for fish. Rarely has this scene been photographed.

The sight of so many birds, plummeting down from exactly the same height at the same time, is magnificent. Sometimes the altitude of the drop is over eighty feet. The fish is caught under water. The bird then floats a moment on the surface of the sea and is off again to resume his diving.

We watched the birds until our boat came into the little cove which was Johnny's landing place. Black guillemots splashed about in the water and flew to their nesting places on the red ledges overlooking the cove. We had come to Bonaventure Island primarily to see the largest gannet sanctuary on this side of the Atlantic and had decided to walk across the island in order to see what flowers, birds, and trees were to be found here.

This tiny island lies in the Gulf of St. Lawrence three miles off the Gaspé coast. It is oval in shape, about three miles long and somewhat narrower, and is most picturesque with its red cliffs and rolling green pasture and forest land.

At Johnny's Cove we climbed the boards which made the steps up the steep cliff and came to a grassy knoll, where we stopped a moment to admire the view of the mainland and the "Rock". Hard rushing tides swirled about the island. In the distance Mt. Anne, the Three Sisters and the "Rock" looked as unreal as the back-drop of

a stage setting. We continued up the path, the climb is about 160 feet, and reaching the top found ourselves looking across fields carpeted with daisies—Bonaventure's "summer snow". Sun, air, and soil on this island as elsewhere in the Gaspé, conspire to make the field flowers grow to a large size and in tremendous profusion. Here and there among the daisies were buttercups, the lovely blue harebell, the purple vetch and caraway.

Savannah and song sparrows perched on the fence posts, and kept us company as we walked along the single track wagon road, which is the island's main street. Two spotted sandpipers called a warning to their young when we crossed a little brook. In the yard of the abandoned schoolhouse we saw the purple of the bog violet (*pinguicula vulgaris*). Along the road grew many plants of the leafy green orchid (*habenaria dilatata*).

Soon we left the road and struck off across the fields to reach the path to the gannet ledges. Here and there in small patches was that lovely white flower, *zygadenus chloranthus*, delicate as an orange blossom, but vilely scented, which also occurs in the Bergen swamp and the Niagara Gorge. Climbing a fence we were now at the edge of the dense and virgin-like forest which covers over two-thirds of the island. This area is composed to a large extent of spruce and balsam with a few cedars, white birch and alder.

Of the several paths which we saw we took the one marked with a cairn of stones. Due to the fact that cattle and sheep make many of the side paths we had to be careful to choose the right one in order not to end up in a blind alley. This can be most disconcerting when you are carrying sixty pounds of camera equipment.

It was early in the morning and the air was heavy with the fragrance of balsam and the moist damp earth.

Rain the night before had turned the gray lichen to a bright green. The forest path was strewn with myriads of snails.

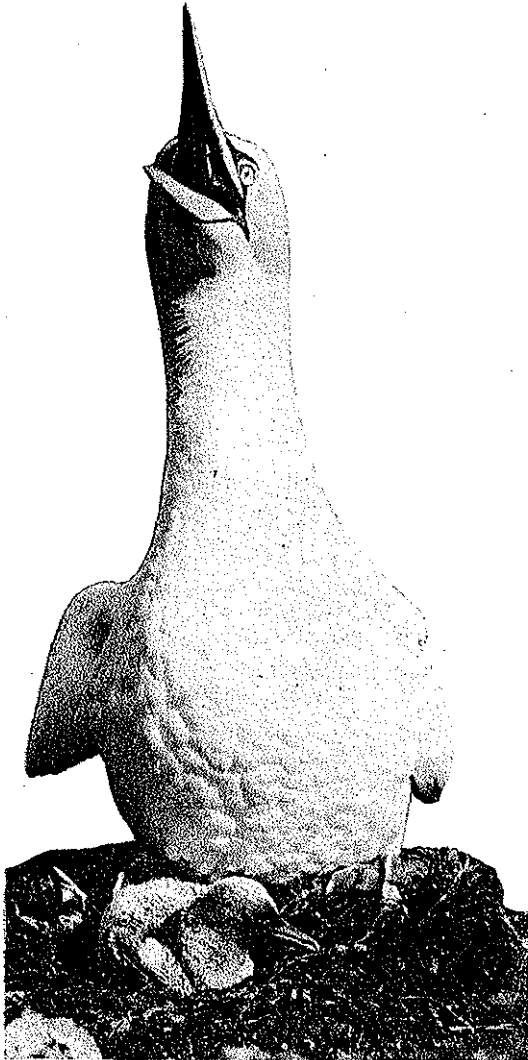
The warblers had already begun their daily concert. We could pick out the songs of the black-throated green, and the magnolia. The Nashville and Tennessee warblers were such enthusiastic musicians that they kept right on singing all through the day. Dominating the whole orchestra was the clear high note of the white-throated

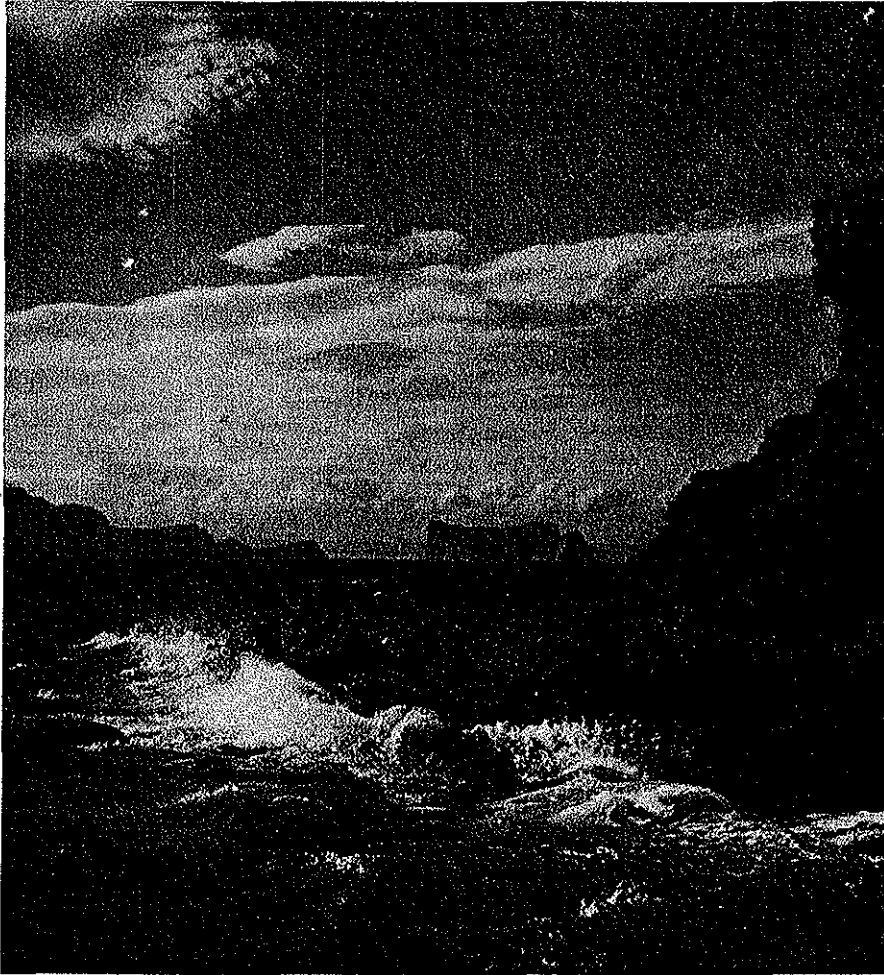
sparrow. To the French he says—"Je t'ai vu, Frederic, Frederic, Frederic." "I see you, Frederick," and is called the "rossignol" or nightingale. Overhead is heard the "wink, wink" of the white-winged crossbills. The whirr of many wings was about our heads as we passed through a dense thicket of spruce, pine siskins, ruby-crowned kinglets, juncos and robins.

At an open sunny spot near the path was a group of the beautiful pink and magenta pyrola asarifolia. The one-flowered pyrola and the pyrola minor were just coming into bloom. White bunchberry carpeted the woods and the delicate pink twinflowers grew in great patches. Here and there we found a few choice plants of the magenta-spotted orchid (*Corallorhiza maculata*). Every dead tree and cut stump was a fairy garden of lichen-reindeer, cup, and British soldier. Old man's beard (*usnea lichen*) hung from the trees like the Spanish moss of the South. We stopped a moment to pick up a pair of wings that were all that remained of a Leach's petrel, probably eaten by cats. ~~(foxes)~~

Our uphill path had taken us to a height of five hundred feet and now began the descent toward the gannet ledges. Soon we were out of the woods and on to a grassy slope about one hundred feet in width. Before us lay a view of the gannetry. Edging the red cliffs and silhouetted against the blue of the sky and sea were hundreds of graceful snow white birds. The sun reflected from such a great mass of white dazzled our eyes. As we looked over the edge of the two hundred and eighty foot cliffs we could see these great birds nesting in every available nook and cranny of the red conglomerate ledges, stretching along the rocks for over a mile. Overhead the mates of the nesting birds rode the air currents in an unending circle.

For many years gannet flesh was used as bait by cod fishermen and the colonies were greatly reduced. The island is now a Federal and Provincial Bird Sanctuary and is protected by a government warden. The birds on top of the cliffs are the overflow from the gannet ledges below and show the value of protecting them, as ten years





Johnny's Cove, Bonaventure Island, looking toward the mainland.

ago no birds nested on top of the cliffs. It is estimated that one tenth of the world's gannet population is to be found on this island, probably well in excess of 20,000 birds.

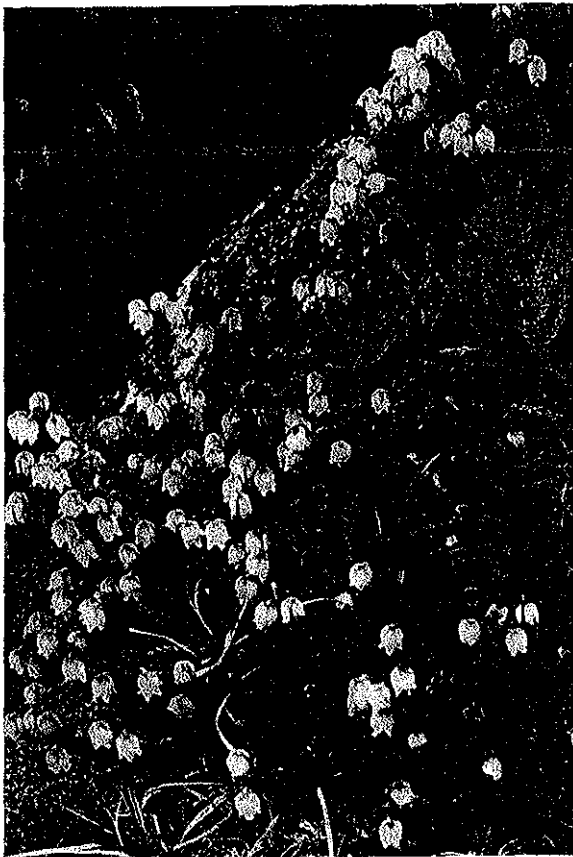
Bonaventure Island is one of the most accessible bird islands on the Atlantic coast and one of the few that can be visited in the space of three hours without special arrangements. It is the high spot of any Gaspé tour.

For the artist, the bird lover, and the botanist, Bonaventure Island furnishes endless and exciting material for study. To the traveller who has rested

there, if only for a day, its beauty and charm are a magnet that compels his return again and again.

Ed. Note: One of our members, James D. McIntyre of Toronto, visited Bonaventure. Here is what he wrote to me: "In mid-August of this year (1956) the writer walked around the northern shore of the island. Along this shore there are a few grassy fields and these are criss-crossed with fox runways. In these runways and on nearly every bare patch of ground, petrel remains were found. The foxes strip the wings and occas-

continued on page 61



Robt Hermes
pictures (photos)
of Typical House
on Bonaventure Is.
& Timbered ramp
(no harbours) on

Top: A bit of the tundra, p.49
clumps of white heather in
bloom, lichens and small
grasses cover this area.

Bottom: Main Street, Bona-
venture Island. Notice the
flowers that abound by the
sea.



p. 36 Try bird watching
Mar-Apr 1958 by Vivian Wilcox.

Can-
Audubon

I wanted to be called regardless of the hour if it happened again. (At sea)

That very night there came a rap on my cabin door. When I opened it, Pillay, our Indian waiter was standing in the passageway holding in his hands one of Mother Carey's chickens. "I thought you might like to see this bird," he said shyly, a smile lighting up his handsome young face. The little slate grey bird with shiny black, hooked and knobbed beak and beady eye, nestled trustingly in Pillay's hand and let us examine him. The forked tail identified it as a Leach's petrel. We noted the light streak on the wing, the white under the tail and on the rump, we even counted the tail feathers. "A bird of mystery,—seldom seen as it roams the sea by day, a voice heard at night as it flutters over its dark burrow," writes Roger Tory Peterson when describing Leach's petrel in his book, "Birds Over America".

petrel wings were found every few yards. This predation has been carried on for years and the toll on the petrels must be enormous." These observations were also made independently by Dr. H. J. M. Barnett of Toronto earlier the same summer.

Mr. McIntyre concluded his note to me. "The Leach's petrel problem is probably the most urgent. Clearly a sea island is not a natural home for foxes, particularly since the island is a bird sanctuary. If the foxes on the island are not soon removed, the Leach's petrels there may be in danger of extinction. The writer strongly suggests that the foxes be trapped off the island. Although common on the mainland, there seems little likelihood that the foxes, once removed, could return to the island. The trapping probably should be done in winter and in conjunction with the local residents who could cooperate by putting any butchered carcasses into the sea". This was dated September 10, 1956.

Bonaventure Island
continued from page 47

ionally the feet from the bird, but devour the rest whole. Some fox excrement which was examined contained feathers, small bones and fur. On one path that ran through the woods near the northernmost gannet colony,