

The Site Guide

Magdalen Islands, Province of Québec, Canada

Location Gulf of St. Lawrence, roughly equidistant from Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and Nova Scotia.

Description The Magdalen Island (hereafter: M. Is.), lie in the Gulf of St. Lawrence and are part of Québec Province. Seven of these red sandstone islands are connected by a pair of narrow parallel strips of sand dunes. Enclosed by the islands and sand strips are two large and several small tidal lagoons. Elevations range from no more than 35 feet on the sand dunes to no more than 550 feet on the highest hills of Havre-Aubert and Cap-aux-Meules. The dunes are covered by the Beachgrass (*Ammophila breviligulata*); stunted Black Spruce and Jack Pine thrive in favorable habitat. Extensive Black Spruce forests are set against pastures and abandoned lands invaded by alder bushes. Thirteen thousand people inhabit the M. Is. and French is the predominant language. English is spoken by the two thousand inhabitants of Grosse Ile and the fifty families living on Ile d'Entrée, Brion Island, twelve miles north of

Grosse Ile, is uninhabited. From Grosse Ile, under conditions of excellent visibility, the famous Great Bird Rock can be seen. The climate is chiefly characterized by strong steady breezes; winds being much more prevalent here than on the continent. The windless days of a summer are on average less than ten. Air temperatures are comfortable, rarely rising above eighty degrees. Nights are usually cool.

Access Tourism has developed dramatically in the last five years. The period of maximum tourist pressure extends from mid-July to mid-August. Visitors should be advised that frustrating travel delays may occur during this period. Eastern Provincial Airways flies twice daily from Charlottetown, P.E.I., to the M.Is., and flies to Charlottetown from Montréal, Halifax, and Moncton. Advance reservations must be made. From Souris, P.E.I., a ferry makes the five-hour crossing twice daily (except Tuesday). This ferry accommodates 50 vehicles and food trucks are given priority. The Coopérative de Transport Maritime et Aérien's ship plies weekly between Montréal and the M.Is. Cabins are available and cars can be transported on deck. Again, advance reservations are advisable.

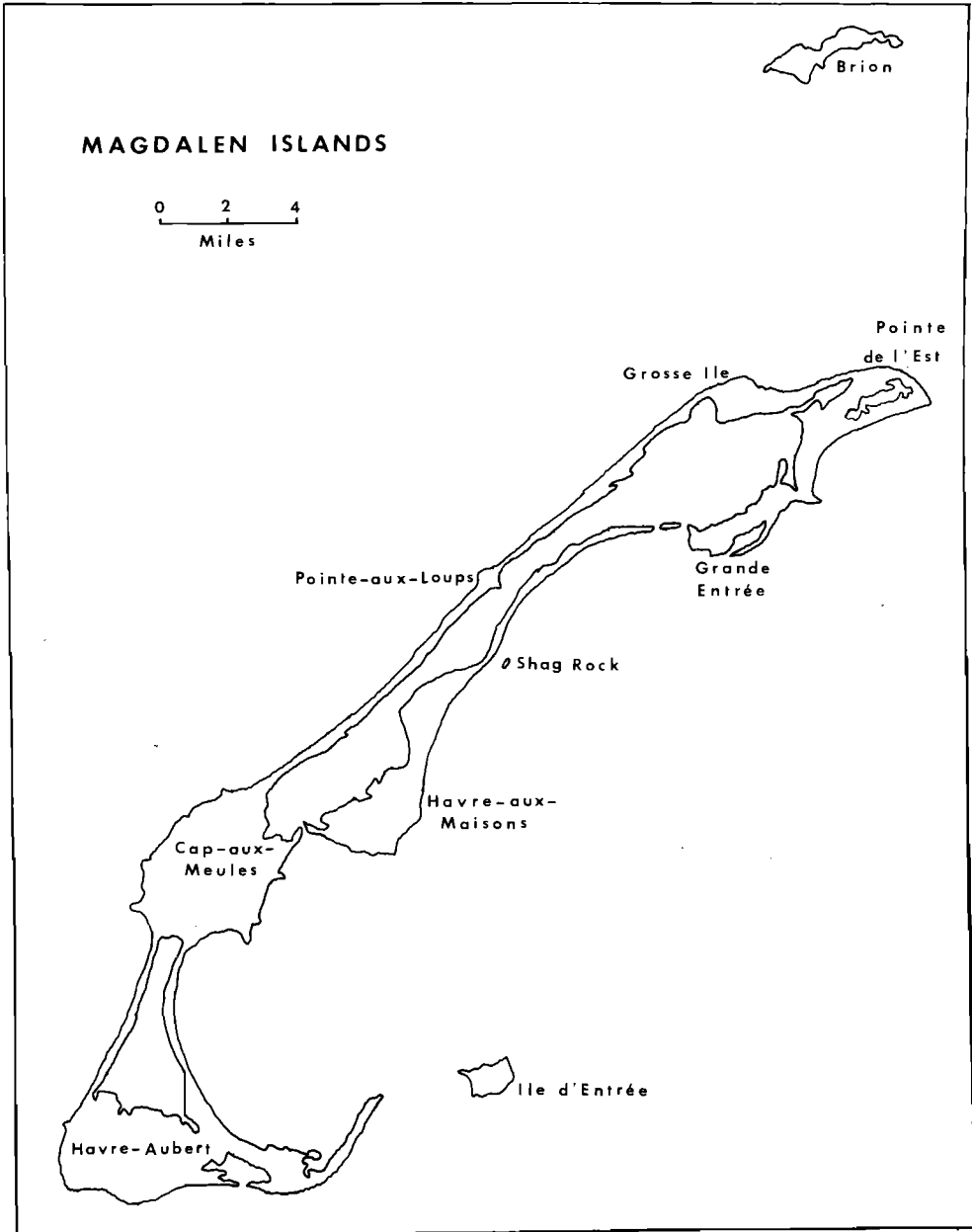
Accommodations Approximately a dozen motels and hotels offer a range of accommodations on the islands. Six camping grounds provide complete facilities from June to September.



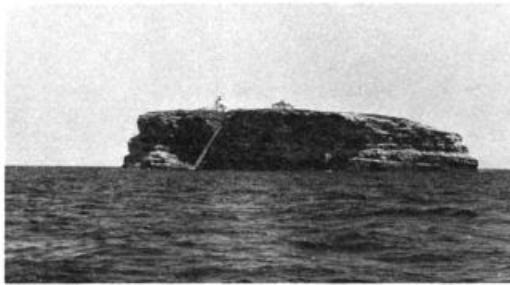
View looking south over Havre-aux-Basques. Foreground: pastures and Black Spruce forests of Cap-aux-Meules island. Background: Havre-Aubert island. Photo/N.David

Birdwatching About 240 species have been recorded here, primarily from June to September. Relatively little is known about the islands' late fall and winter birds. For birders arriving by boat, pelagics will likely be seen in the surrounding waters, but not in high numbers. Leach's Storm-Petrel and Greater Shearwater are common. Sooty Shearwater, Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Sabine's Gull and Red Phalarope are only occasional. Excellent road conditions

on the M.Is. insure ready access to the best birding spots. Three features of the bird life on the M.Is. will appeal to the birdwatcher. The land bird composition of the islands is different from that found in continental eastern North America. Witnessing the spectacular migration of thousands of shorebirds, intensely feeding before their long flight south will be of special interest. Finally, a visit to the rarely seen Bird Rocks will be a most rewarding experience



Song Sparrow, Blue Jay and Black-capped Chickadee are very rarely seen. The most common breeding species of the Black Spruce forest are: Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Boreal Chickadee, American Robin, Hermit and Swainson's Thrushes, Veery, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Tennessee, Yellow-rumped and Blackpoll Warblers, White-throated and Fox Sparrows. In sand dune country, Horned Larks and Savannah Sparrows are everywhere. Predators are scarce.



The Great Bird Rock. Photo/N. David.

However, during each of the two summers that the author spent on the M.Is., summering Snowy Owls were often observed hunting over the sand dunes between Pointe-aux-Loups and Grosse Ile. They lived well on abundant meadow voles. Several species of water birds breed on the M.Is. The well named Shag Rock holds a large colony of Great Cormorants. A walk through the dunes and on the beach, in early June, will afford views of cormorants flying overhead, their white flank patches plainly visible. They often come to dry their wings on rocks visible from a public picnic area off the main road on the northeast side of Havre-aux-Maisons. The Piping Plover is distributed on all beaches, but difficult to locate. The Black Duck, Pintail, Green-winged Teal, and Greater Scaup are the most common breeding ducks; Horned Grebes and Red-breasted Mergansers nest in the marshes of Pointe-de-l'Est which is, however, rather inaccessible. Many small islands of the greater lagoons support colonies of Double-crested Cormorants, Great Blue Herons, Common and Arctic Terns, Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls. With the advent of July, thousands of shorebirds invade the Magdalens. The most abundant species in order of respective chronological peak numbers are Short-billed Dowitcher, Least Sandpiper, Red Knot, Whimbrel, Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Sanderling, White-rumped Sandpiper, Hudsonian Godwit, Semipalmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Greater Yellowlegs,

Black-bellied Plover, American Golden Plover Shorebirds feed on the extensive tidal flats of the lagoons. All species can be seen in Havre-aux-Basques, between Cap-aux-Meules and Havre-Aubert islands. The northern half of the lagoon dries up almost completely in summer. Extensive mud flats link this area with the deeper waters of the southern half. Several species select the northern grassy areas as their feeding grounds: the entire population of the migrating Short-billed Dowitchers and Lesser Yellowlegs, thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers, accompanied by many Least and White-rumped Sandpipers. Flocks of several species gather on the mud flats: Semipalmated, Black-bellied and golden plovers, and Red Knots are common, while Sanderlings, Ruddy Turnstones and Whimbrels are less numerous. The latter are often found in the dunes, feeding on wild berries. Greater Yellowlegs flock in the shallow waters bordering the mud flats. It is not uncommon to see more than one hundred Hudsonian Godwits together there. All these birds, with the exception of the Short-billed Dowitcher and the Lesser Yellowlegs, can be studied on the inner Shore of Dune du Nord from the road leading to Grosse Ile. A spotting scope is absolutely necessary to study the water birds. Going to the Bird Rocks is certainly the highlight of a visit to the M.Is. When approaching the vertical cliffs of the Great Bird Rock, one is overcome by the feeling one is trespassing on private property. The rightful owners are of course thousands of Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes, and hundreds of Common and Thick-billed Murres, Razor-billed Auks, and Common Puffins. There, they nest on narrow ledges and the two Little Bird Rocks, three quarters of a mile away, are entirely occupied by Gannets. Only during the best weather conditions is access to the Bird Rocks possible. The water surrounding Bird Rocks is so shallow (especially at low tide), that an approaching boat may strike the rocky bottom if the sea is even minimally rough. Therefore a perfectly windless day is necessary. When ideal conditions prevail, a fisherman of Grosse Ile can be hired to safely take birding parties to the Bird Rocks, or to magnificent Brion Island where Great Cormorants and Common Puffins are easily seen and where Leach's Storm-Petrel is also known to breed.

Rating Fall *** Winter?, Spring?, Summer ****

—Normand David, 1733 est Henri-Bourassa No 214, Montréal, Québec, Canada.