

TIPS from the National Audubon Society Seabird Island Researchers

How to live with boundaries, the joy of isolation, the solace of the natural world...

1. You will adapt to fit your world.

It's true. Being confined to a small seabird island can take a bit of adjustment. Usually one explores all the boundaries, before settling into the core of their new territory. After a few days, the scale changes and even a short jaunt to the opposite shore seems an epic journey. The writer May Sarton found, "the free within the framed, as poets do" on her island, and we agree that one's spirit can soar with boundaries clearly defined by the sea. Our current "stay safe at home" boundaries are defined by caring for our fellow humans. Enjoy this time of enforced stillness.



2. Food is important.

The researchers on the seabird islands are collecting important long-term data on the diet of puffins and terns. This tells us much about the health of the bird populations and the changing Gulf of Maine ecosystem. We think about fish a lot. It also seems like much of every day is devoted to thinking about the next meal or snack we humans will consume. Will we bake the brownies? Will a cup of cocoa suffice? Curry for dinner? A peanut butter cracker can be epically satisfying when one is perched on a rock surrounded by blues of sky and sea. Only sometimes do we eat a random fish dropped by a tern.



3. Learn a new skill.

There is *time* on seabird islands. Short commutes and low-key dressing for success allows us to have extra hours in the day. Some days are long – as we take shifts to conduct dawn to dusk feeding watches on Puffins and Razorbills, or as we move from blind stints to productivity checks and back again, but the weather is our boss. We don't disturb the birds when it is cold and wet – these are the “small craft advisory” days. Everyone breaks out their knitting, sketchbooks, modeling clay, etc., and gets creative on their small craft. Music and reading, interspersed with napping and tea drinking are excellent pursuits. There is time to make things, to learn things, to perfect a skill. With YouTube, you can watch videos and the sky is the limit to what you could learn to do!



4. Embrace the weather!

Every day. Whether it is sunny or rainy, you will have to go to the outhouse at some point. Especially after all those cups of coffee. Lift your face to the sky and spread your wings. Fog is beautiful and soft, sun is warm, rain can be sharp or gentle. Pay attention to the clouds and wind direction. A day that is dry and not too hot is perfect for weighing and measuring tern chicks. A day that is windy and blue is when the puffins revel in their ease of take-off and landing, and terns do acrobatics in the air. A day that is rainy and chill is a good one to enter data, make soup, read a book and appreciate that you can get warm and dry. See the mention of “small craft advisories” in previous post.







5. No time to be bored. Not with board games!

With your island crew of 2-5 people, it is a great time to play some games. The variety of games changes with the whims of the players, but some standard offerings are common. Classic games like backgammon, checkers, chess, and cards are good for 2-person islands. "Go Fish" though simple, is appropriate. Scrabble is a winner, a rousing game of spoons is great fun, and more recently Exploding Kittens and Catan have become popular. Hold a hula-hooping competition. Or a poker chip tossing competition. Or a food eating competition. Seriously, anything can be turned into a competition. Who has the tallest ears and longest nose? A haiku writing competition (throw out a topic and compete to write the best/funniest haiku on that topic) can be hilariously entertaining. During extended stretches of rainy weather customized games of Set (Seabird Set) and Monopoly (Island Monopoly) have been created. We even tried to contact the ghosts of Abbie Burgess and Mo, using a Ouija board on Matinicus Rock, but there was no clear response. Of course, watching for surprising bird sightings and scanning the sea for whales and distant shearwaters is always a good time. Looking out the window at your bird-feeders, and online at live-cams around the world is a good thing to do from your current "island". Learn more about the Audubon bird cams: <https://projectpuffin.audubon.org/conservation/audubon-live-cams>

6. Keep it clean.

Ok, we might not have tips on this from the seabird islands – but maybe can take some new good habits to the islands! In case you're curious, we collect rainwater for our fresh washing water, and use seawater as backup for dishwashing when supplies are low. After 3-5 days the desire for showering diminishes, until there is a spike in the hair, or the threat of outside visitors, and the solar shower bag gets filled up for heating. Grubbing around in puffin burrows and getting scratched by dirty claws is a good reason to wash, wash, wash your hands. So, let's make that our habit, now and always, to keep viruses and bacteria at bay.



7. Find community around a fire.

There is camaraderie around the campfire. On islands with enough space, and a supply of driftwood (make sure it's not toxic pressure-treated), it is a delight to grill up some spam slices or fresh caught mackerel. Topping off the evening with s'mores and some storytelling is a classic Seal Island treat. Other burning activities include vegetation management. Test plots on Eastern Egg Rock and Outer Green Island show that using a propane torch can reduce tall growth, at least temporarily, and provide tern-friendly short vegetation for nesting habitat. There is something primal in people that makes an evening fire a great way to relax and bond. If you can try it at home with a fireplace or backyard fire pit.

8. There is more there than meets the eye.

Look carefully. Everywhere, anywhere! How often in life do we get the time to really dive deep into a small world? As field biologists that is often our task, and as an island field biologist you are given the gift of staying put. This "enforced stillness" eliminates the distractions of going so many places and allows you to really pay attention to what is around you. Can't go racing off to the store? Look at those interesting insects on the plants outside your tent flap. Under that rock – is that a whiff of storm-petrel? Look, the rockweed is getting brighter green now – good golly the life cycle of seaweed is an amazing thing! The terns are becoming more aggressive as the hatch approaches. Puffin – has again paired up with __, her mate of __ years. Pick a plant or animal you can see from home and learn ALL about it - you can research online, but then use your own eyes and ears to find out what is happening in your part of the world. This is a great time to start a wildlife journal or a bird list.

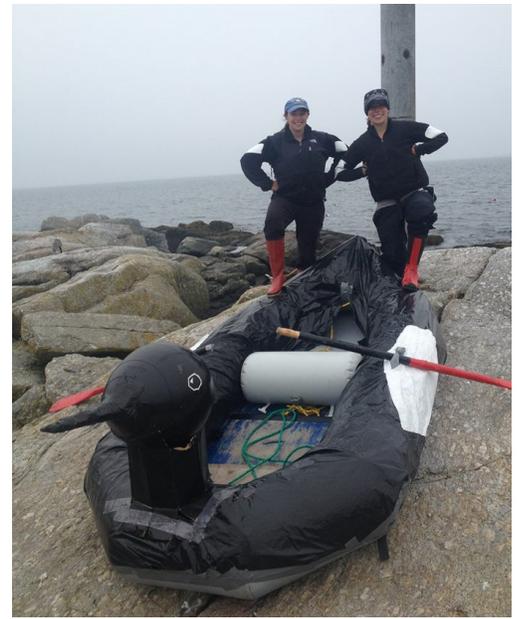


9. Surprising things become valuable.

On Eastern Egg Rock we had just landed the "Robo Ranger" onto the island. If you recall this "scaregull" was housed in a big, heavy, wooden box (about 2'X3'X7') from which it would pop up at surprising intervals. How to move it into position over the rocks? We thought that attaching 2X4 handles would be a good plan, and we had some wood scraps. But nails?? Big nails? Even bent big nails? Oy – it took a thorough scouring of the island and washed up lumber to find enough nails to complete our task. So you never know what will become valuable! On another occasion, we were replacing a window (also at EER) and realized we didn't have enough primer to protect the trim. A wander around the intertidal yielded half a can of primer washed up! Funny how the sea, the universe, provides. Look in your basement and discover some treasures to be used for an intended, or newly invented purpose! Find a craft or construction project using materials at hand. On an island, this means beachcombing and finding purpose for whatever you find – such as outdoor furniture, shelving, etc. At home this could be using scrap materials to make birdhouses, pollinator houses or birdfeeders. If you need help brainstorming, here are some ways to make your own birdfeeders at home: <https://www.audubon.org/news/how-make-diy-bird-feeder-recycled-materials>

10. Celebrate!

Celebrate everything! Cinco de Mayo, 4th of July, Canada Day, Lighthouse Appreciation Day, National Corn Fritters Day, and especially INTERNATIONAL GUILLEMOT APPRECIATION DAY! On June 27th each year we put the under-appreciated Black Guillemot (and its *Cepphus* peers) center stage. People write poetry, create culinary delights, wear costumes, and celebrate them in every way possible. If you can't find a holiday to celebrate, make up one of your own. How lucky that we have Easter, Earth Day, and National Wear Your Pajamas to Work Day in April!





11. You will become more creative as your supplies dwindle!

Contrary to what you might think, having fewer options will stretch your creative powers. Towards the end of a typical 2-week island stint most of the fresh produce will be used up, and certainly all of the candy. Now begins the real fun! How can you combine those old sardines, that brown banana, rice, a can of tomatoes, and curry powder? Surprisingly it has been done! Condiments are key – one can work wonders with a garlic clove or some cardamom. A can of coconut milk is gold. Do you understand the physics of baking? – you don't NEED eggs to stick things together and make them rise... some vinegar and baking soda and oil can do that. The term "need" takes on a different meaning out there – with plenty of time to consider it, that need for a cookie is actually a need for sweet and satisfied with some rice pudding or a cup of cocoa. That need for a fishhook translates to the creation of one from a bent nail. Limit yourself – and expand your possibilities.

12. Connect to your archipelago, and beyond.

Back in the "old days" we communicated between seabird islands on a CB radio. We shared news of the day, jeopardy games, knitting instructions – everything. It was paleo internet. It was fun! Now of course we can communicate by cell phone or internet (when it works), but it is less inclusive of all. This is a perfect time to practice slow communication. Hand write a letter that won't show "age" in a few weeks when it may get delivered. This is particularly touching when the people you love are far away. Also meeting apps like Zoom have changed our ability to bond, allowing you to connect to your immediate archipelago, and the larger world. It is great to know that we aren't alone in our current challenges. We are safe on our islands, honing our skills, having fun, appreciating the weather and making minute discoveries that we usually rush right past. Stay safe at home and enjoy your island time.