

## West and wild

Suzanne Morphet enjoys a spring fling sailing around Canada's Gulf Islands | *July 21, 2007*

**SOMETHING I have noticed about islands: the harder they are to get to, the more we want to see them. Small islands, in particular, offer escape and the promise of a more natural world.**



Many of the Gulf Islands are fringed by pristine white beaches

The Gulf Islands on Canada's west coast are no exception. Even though they lie smack between Vancouver and Victoria, the province's biggest city and its capital city respectively, they are off the beaten path, even to the people who live there. Believe me, I'm one of them.

BC Ferries takes visitors to half a dozen of the larger Gulf Islands -- and each has its charms -- but the dozens of smaller ones are beyond the reach of most. Unfortunately, this includes most of the islands in the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve, one of Canada's newest parks. Unless you have a boat and know where to go, the diverse nature of these islands remains elusive.

Fortunately, Kevin Smith does have a boat -- a 28m schooner, to be precise -- and having grown up on Saltspring Island, one of the larger in the Gulf, he knows where to go. So it is with great anticipation that seven of us join Smith and his four-person crew aboard the *Maple Leaf* in northern spring to explore the "other" Gulf Islands.

Spring is one of the best times to be on the water anywhere. New life is bursting forth and in the southern Gulf Islands -- where we will spend six days -- a seasonal chain of events gets under way with predators coming on to the scene, including sea lions, transient orcas and thousands of birds. As soon as we motor out of Sidney on Vancouver Island, the bird life is abundant.

But our first truly spectacular visual treat is not wildlife, but wildflowers.

We've anchored the *Maple Leaf* in a small cove and jumped into two inflatable zodiacs to go ashore to our first island, which really is a tiny islet. A white shell beach, probably cleared of rocks by the aboriginal people who first called these islands home, beckons us ashore.

As we pull the zodiacs up on to the beach, we find that spring has arrived first and with shocking beauty. Pink sea blush, blue-eyed Mary, white fawn lilies and mottled brown and green chocolate lilies are all aglow in the late afternoon sun.

Beautifully gnarled Garry oak trees stand over the wildflower meadow like guardian angels, while red-barked arbutus trees are bent almost horizontal by the prevailing winds. Because of increasing urbanisation and changing climate, this is one of the most endangered ecosystems in Canada. Protecting it is one reason the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve was established.

The next day we wonder how the flowers can possibly survive as we pull on our fleece and raingear; it has suddenly turned cold and nasty. Hurricane-force winds are forecast for open bodies of water. We don't go far before our captain decides to pull into a sheltered cove at Wallace Island. It happens to be a Friday and the 13th of the month; sailors are a superstitious lot.

Now, the rain pours down, but we go ashore anyway. Smith and our on-board naturalist, Tracey Moss, try to find things to amuse us. As we walk along a soggy trail we come to a boarded-up house and an old flowerbed that's sprouting daffodils. Kevin tells us the island used to be owned by David Conover, the photographer who discovered Marilyn Monroe. When Conover met her, she was still Norma Jeane Mortenson and working on an assembly line at the Radio Planes Munitions factory in Burbank, California. After the war, Conover and his wife, Jeanne, bought Wallace Island and developed a successful resort. Today, most of the buildings are gone and the island is a provincial marine park, accessible only by private boat.

Later, as we explore barnacle-covered rocks at one end of the island, Moss gives us another piece of information to consider. This one has nothing to do with a sex goddess, just sex itself. Did we know that barnacles have one of the largest penis-to-body mass ratios of any animal? "A barnacle's penis can be 20 times the length of its body," she says with a hint of a smile. "It's very impressive."

We're even more impressed the following day when the sun returns and we find ourselves surrounded by hundreds of black-headed Bonaparte's gulls as we cruise south past Galiano and Mayne islands. The birds are here for the fish, dipping and diving in the water where huge schools of Pacific herring congregate to spawn each spring.

Sea lions also welcome the herring and as we pass the Belle Chain of islands and get within nose range of a dozen or more of the noisy mammals, someone suggests the islands may better be called the Belching Islands.

The sea lions amuse us, but I actually laugh out loud the first time we cruise past a couple of Canada geese. These large, long-necked birds have become so common in Canada's city parks that they seem strangely out of place here in the wild. To my eyes, they appear lost, but Smith tells me I need to get out of the city more often. I couldn't agree more.

Until this voyage, Tumbo and Cabbage islands were just names on a map. Now we know them to be two jewels of the new Gulf Islands National Park Reserve. We hike along a deer trail through a forest of arbutus, Douglas fir and Garry oak trees on Tumbo's southern bluff and breathe in the sweet scent of a forest in spring. Later, on Cabbage Island, we explore marine life at low tide, spot a green sea anemone waving its tentacles and look for the bright orange bills of the black oystercatchers that like to nest on rocky islets nearby.

Like most beaches on the British Columbia coast, Cabbage Island has its share of cut logs that have gone astray from a logging operation and washed ashore. They're nice to sit on, but our captain points out that 95 per cent of beached logs in BC are strays and therefore unnatural. We wonder what harm, if any, they've done to the shoreline ecology.

Certainly, the Gulf Islands and the birds and animals living here are under pressure from development, pollution

and boat traffic. Smith doesn't do any fishing from the Maple Leaf on this part of the coast because he believes the marine environment here is fragile.

Still, the islands and the ocean they lie in give the impression of health and vitality. Two bold harbour porpoises come by to check us out while we're eyeing the birdlife. When we go ashore at Rum Island (now officially Isle-de-Lis), we're thrilled to discover several native prickly-pear cacti, a testament to how warm, dry and diverse these islands are.

More than anything, perhaps, we are impressed with the sheer size of the watery region. The last isle we visit is Russell Island, where Smith grew up. He tells us that Russell, as well as other islands nearby, was homesteaded in the 1800s by Kanakas from Hawaii. They came to work on tall ships owned by the Hudson's Bay Company and many decided to settle here after they finished their contracts.

As we unfurl the sails in a light breeze and take in the beauty all around us, we can understand their reasons for staying.

#### **Checklist**

Maple Leaf Adventures offers ecotours of the Gulf Islands National Park Reserve in April and October each year. Coming trips include: Autumn in the Gulf Islands (October 18-23) and, in 2008, Spring in the Gulf Islands (April 15-21) and Autumn in the Gulf Islands (October 17-23 and October 25-30). [www.MapleLeafAdventures.com](http://www.MapleLeafAdventures.com).

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