

THE ISLAND TRAIL

NEWSLETTER OF THE MAINE ISLAND TRAIL ASSOCIATION | WINTER 2026



NICK PARSON

Longtime monitor skipper Ben Fuller teams up with young volunteers to remove beach stones from a lobster trap on the #LoveMaineWaters cleanup.

ISLAND STEWARDS YOUNG AND OLD #LOVEMAINEWATERS

By Nick Parson, Communications Manager

There's something that I must admit to you, dear reader. It's true that you'll always hear us talking about the importance of proper preparation on the Maine Island Trail. It's absolutely critical that you know what's potentially in store for you while you're out on the water, and that you're prepared for it.

When I'm out there on my own, or in a leadership role on the water, I plan things meticulously. However, when performing duties

as MITA's staff photographer, I rarely (if ever) check the weather ahead of a day out with our stewardship staff and volunteers. Why? Because planning for a day of volunteering on the Trail is what our regional stewardship managers do for a living. They analyze the tides, the precipitation forecast, the wind, and the waves. I take photos of it all, and keep an extra layer in my camera bag.

There's value in having varied specialties and

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The Maine Island Trail is a 375-mile water trail extending from border to border along the Maine coast consisting of 227 sites for day or overnight use.

The Maine Island Trail Association (MITA) is a nonprofit organization whose goal is to advance a model of thoughtful use and volunteer stewardship of Maine's wild islands, creating an inspiring recreational water trail that is cared for by the people who use it.

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WELCOME



A TRAIL OF CHANGE

By Ben Dougherty, Executive Director

Whenever people wax poetic about the virtues of the Maine coast, you can count on a few familiar themes. They'll say that life moves slowly here, or that time seems to stop entirely. It's quieter. Things are slow to change.

But, inevitably, change arrives all the same. Everything changes. Geography may influence whether those shifts happen gradually or all at once, but regardless of the pace, change is one of life's few true constants.

Now in my second year as MITA's executive director, I've been here just long enough to observe, and help lead, some meaningful changes unfolding in our little corner of the world.

One evolution I'm especially excited to share is the development of an all-new MITA App, now underway. The original MITA App launched in July of 2014 and has served our members well for more than a decade. Looking ahead, we're eager to build on everything we've learned since then and create what we hope will become an essential tool for exploring the Maine Island Trail, and the Maine coast as a whole.

This work has been made possible through the generous support of Together for Good / The Salka Family Impact Group. We are deeply grateful for their partnership in this endeavor, and for their belief in our ability to create something that will have a meaningful, positive impact for everyone who loves the coast of Maine.

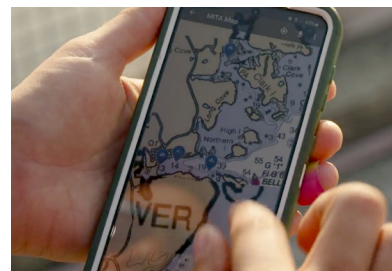
The new MITA App is being built by Maine-based development agency Noreaster Group, whose vision we found to be closely aligned with our own. They have been terrific to work with so far, and we are energized to build something transformative together.

I look forward to sharing more as we make progress, and when the App is ready for release, you'll be among the first to know.

In the year ahead, MITA is also leaning heavily into partnerships up and down the coast to expand our impact of stewardship and access. By working more closely with island owners, local communities, land trusts, harbor masters, conservation groups, youth groups, nonprofits, and other coastal organizations, we can improve access and the overall experience for people exploring the Maine Island Trail.

Within these pages, you will also read about other ways change has been present for us at MITA lately. There are stories of new islands joining the Trail through partnerships, and others leaving due to the forces of nature. We take a closer look at the recent explosion of jellyfish in Maine's waters. And, sadly for all of us, you will see a goodbye from our esteemed editors, Stu and Juli Haddon, who have moved on to other adventures. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their years of volunteer service, and for the care and thoughtfulness they brought to every issue of The Island Trail.

A slow pace of change is often romanticized here on the coast, but the shoreline is always being reshaped, one tide at a time. In many ways, MITA is the same, shaped by seasons, stewardship, and the people who care deeply for these places. Thank you for being part of that story, and for helping keep the Maine Island Trail accessible, resilient, and cherished.



A new MITA App is on the horizon.

perspectives when it comes to collaborating on a project. That's part of the philosophy with #LoveMaineWaters, a grassroots collection of coastal nonprofits who have worked together to promote respect, safety, and best practices for protecting the health of Maine's coastal waters.

As a capstone for the work that #LoveMaineWaters has done together to promote a vibrant and shared Maine coast, the idea was floated to do an island cleanup involving as many of the partner organizations (and others) as possible. Who better to take a lead in organizing it than MITA? That is, after all, our specialty.

Following a few weather cancellations, all variable elements finally worked in our favor on Oct. 10, when we gathered in Owls Head along with staff members from Maine Coast Heritage Trust (MCHT), Maine Marine Trades Association (MMTA), Maine Sea Grant, and a handful of folks from the MITA volunteer community. Temps hung around the mid 30s when I left my house that morning, so I was grateful for that extra layer that happened to be sitting in my camera bag.

As we went around the circle of folks to introduce ourselves, it was heartening to hear our nonprofit peers and volunteers bubbling with excitement for the day ahead. Stacey Keefer, executive director of Maine Marine Trades Association and leader of the #LoveMaineWaters group, acknowledged how wonderful it was to see the #LoveMaineWaters partnership manifesting in person for a day of service.

Not all participants were initially thrilled about spending their day picking up trash, however. A young boy, nine years old, who was tagging along with his dad announced to the crowd, with arms crossed, "I want to make it clear that I'm only here because my dad says I have to be!" I chalked it up to the fact that not everything is for everyone, and many schools were off on this day for parent/teacher conferences. I'm sure there were other things he'd rather have been doing. All good.

The plan laid before us was to head



NICK PARSON

Stacey Keefer, executive director of the Maine Marine Trades Association, addresses the volunteers.

out to two nearby islands owned by MCHT that were not on the Maine Island Trail: Ash and Sheep. MITA had recently completed a Fall Cleanup in the area, so we were more than happy to help out with some off-Trail islands that could use a few hands for shoreline debris removal.

Volunteers were divided among four MITA skiffs and one larger boat owned by MCHT, and headed out for their respective islands. I was on MCHT's boat, and we hit the shore of Sheep Island after anchoring and getting ferried in on a MITA skiff that is better suited for on-island landings. The adults set right to work, while the handful of children quickly took to rock skipping.

After some parental encouragement, the kids reluctantly began to pick around for trash in the woods just beyond the high tide line. The reluctance quickly dissipated, however, as the kids realized the following: small items of trash can be thrown with force at a target (the nearby trashbag), and excavating larger pieces of trash made for an excellent bit of competition among peers. While a few of the kids started humming buoys and bottles out of dense thickets that they were able to crawl under, others raced to unearth lobster traps that had been buried deep under beach stones.

On the other side of the island, another

group had gone to gather debris out of the woods. I headed in that direction, anxious for some more ways to show off the day through my photography. Through it all, we made small talk that became big talk, learned from each other, and enjoyed a shared experience with a mutual sense of satisfaction.

Once we returned to shore and filled a nearby dumpster that was waiting for us, we went off to McLoons Lobster Shack to enjoy a late lunch and to celebrate the accomplishments of #LoveMaineWaters. I don't think we ever really have bad days when doing this work, but I'll admit that the needle moved up into the "exceptional day" range once we circled around the picnic tables adorned with lobster rolls, steamers, and cups of chowder.

As we said our goodbyes, a volunteer casually asked the initially defiant nine-year-old participant whether he had a good time after all. The crossed arms were no more as he reached for the sky and said "I had the best day EVER! I want to do this all the time!" His sister giggled and bobbed her head in agreement. In that moment, another one of MITA's specialties was put on display: inspiring the next generation of island stewards. We're pretty sure he'll be back.



Juli and Stu Haddon, who both significantly elevated The Island Trail through their dedication and skill as volunteer editors.

Line of Best Fit

Trials and Tribulations of Editing the MITA Newsletter

By Stu Haddon, Editor (Emeritus)

“Writing without revising is the literary equivalent of waltzing gaily out of the house in your underwear.” — Patricia Fuller

“I’m a big fan of editing and keeping only the interesting bits in.” — Sarah Vowell

“Substitute ‘damn’ every time you’re inclined to write ‘very;’ your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.” — Mark Twain

Six years ago, at an event at MITA Headquarters, I approached Program Director Brian Marcaurelle, and, during the conversation that followed, uttered the fateful words: “Newsletter,” “Editor,” “Juli and I,” and “willing.” They were, of course, strung together in an appropriate conversational syntax, but the intervening phrases were of little importance. In an instant, the job was ours. Brian seemed pleased with the outcome. No doubt, this

had more than a little to do with the fact that he and Madison Moran (at that time MITA’s communications manager) had been joint editors since the departure of the previous incumbents.

Professional editors we are not, but between us we have more than a smattering of editorial experience. Juli has a degree in English and many years of teaching the subject at high school and college. It was she who inspired me to

write and then edited my initially chaotic scribbles.

As for me, many years of critiquing the output of others at a writers’ group plus a fascination with the process led to at least a level of marginal competence.

Of course, editors need something to edit, and this was where the hard-working MITA staff came in, starting with a gathering around a meeting table in Portland, a spreadsheet, and some coffee. Potential articles usually hung around in the ether, either as new ideas from recent MITA experiences, or carryovers from the previous edition’s trawl that hadn’t made it to the launching pad. Balance was important: making sure that every aspect of the MITA experience is covered. Not all in a single issue, of course.

Usually it was obvious who was going to write each article, but occasionally a suggested topic would be missing an author, in which case the strategy might have been to give it to an unsuspecting individual who missed the meeting.

Sometimes, an article came from a guest author not on staff, but elsewhere in the MITA community.

In the weeks following the planning meeting, the editors could twiddle their thumbs, whistle a merry tune etc., while others did all the work. Soon enough, though, a deadline would come barreling over the horizon and hurtle towards the various scribes, now frantically clattering away at their keyboards. The communications manager would be awakened by the commotion, and ask everyone (nicely) if they could kindly submit their articles at once, if not sooner.

I exaggerate for effect here, but I'm sure you get the idea!

And at last, with style guide to the fore, the editors were unleashed on the collection of partially, half, or fully-baked articles. With nine or so items to be edited, this was no swift process. Every conceivable variable was in play: number of words, paragraphing, punctuation, readability, and so on. Sometimes, a tweak here, a tuck there; occasionally, something more like a rewrite; but always focused on keeping the author's voice and meaning.

After all this came the populating of the "finals" folder on the Google Drive, a brief pause for authors to take stock, then over to the communications manager to create the final product. No mean feat, squeezing 6,000+ words, many photos, and a smattering of ads into around 20 pages, while at the same time making it as visually stunning as possible.

Finally, staff and editors were given one last chance to pick up any stray typos, before the newsletter went to the printer.

Juli and I have enjoyed our time as editors, and we have been fortunate enough to see the newsletter evolve from its monochrome period, tight-corseted in a restrictive template, into the full-color splendor it is today. While we played little part in this change, it was fun to be involved as it developed.

A huge thank you to the staff at MITA for their unfailing support, and to others who helped us, wittingly or unwittingly. Not forgetting all of you out there who read the newsletter and make the effort worthwhile.



NICK PARSON

Cocktail Cove at Jewell Island, a popular destination for boaters of all types in Casco Bay.

Family Adventures on the Maine Island Trail

By Jordi St. John, Business Engagement Manager

For many families — and certainly for mine — summer in Maine means time on the water exploring hidden coves, quiet anchorages, and spectacular islands. Among the many destinations on the Maine Island Trail, three islands stand out as my favorites for family boating adventures: Jewell Island in Casco Bay, Warren Island in Penobscot Bay, and Buckle Island in Jericho Bay. Each offers a unique blend of natural beauty, adventure, and imagination that's just right for a family day trip, quick overnight, or multi-night getaway.

Jewell Island: Casco Bay

A short trip from Portland or Harpswell, Jewell Island feels both like a world away and from another era. It's one of the most visited islands on the Maine Island Trail for a reason, as it is an ideal destination for adventurous families who are looking to explore both Casco Bay's island ecology and wartime history.

Jewell is perhaps best known for its

World War II-era lookout towers, standing tall above the trees. Climbing the staircase to the top of one of these concrete towers is a thrill for anyone, rewarding explorers with sweeping views of Casco Bay, and on a clear day, far beyond. It feels equal parts history lesson and treasure hunt, with the treasure being the experience of looking out from the top of the tower. Nearby, the remnants of the old naval observation bunkers add to the intrigue, sparking conversations about what life was like there decades ago when the island helped safeguard Portland from enemy ships.

The island has a network of trails that criss-cross the island and lead to numerous secluded coves that are perfect for picnicking or beachcombing. The trails are just long enough to feel like an adventure, but manageable for younger explorers to run free.

Jewell also offers 16 campsites that can accommodate anything from larger groups to smaller families and individuals. There are numerous privies, and everything is maintained by a MITA seasonal caretaker who is in residence

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during the summer, as well as MITA's many volunteers. Families can set up tents near the shoreline, roast marshmallows over the fire, and relax outdoors together while enjoying nature.

Warren Island: Penobscot Bay

Heading east to Penobscot Bay, families will find Warren Island State Park, a gem of the Maine Island Trail and one of the few islands along the coast with both dock and mooring access. Located just a short hop from Islesboro, Warren Island offers a wonderful combination of wild beauty and family-friendly amenities — a perfect “first island” for families who are newer to enjoying the Trail.

Warren Island has well-marked walking trails that weave through a mature spruce forest and lead to picnic areas, a scenic shoreline, and quiet campsites scattered across the island. There are also a number of privies in convenient locations. The day-use area near the dock makes an easy spot for lunch, while the park's history adds a layer of interest — from its days as a private summer retreat in the early 1900s to its transformation into Maine's first state park accessible only by boat.

For kids, Warren Island is a wonderland. The trails offer plenty of opportunities to walk or run, and the gentle shoreline makes for safe exploring and swimming. MITA's partnership with the Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands ensures that access to Warren Island remains open, clean, and fun for everyone.

Buckle Island: Jericho Bay

Farther Down East, nestled between Swan's Island and Mount Desert Island, Buckle Island offers a dose of pure coastal magic. This heavily forested island captures the imagination of children and adults alike with its “door in the woods”, a mysterious, weathered relic tucked among the trees that seems to lead straight into a fairy tale.

For many families, this simple wooden

door serves as the starting point for an imaginative adventure. Kids love to create stories about who might live behind it, and it has inspired countless fairy houses that are built along the trails. The curious creations made from sticks, shells, and moss add to the island's mystery and whimsy. Buckle's trail system winds through the woods and along the mossy ledges overlooking Jericho Bay, offering just enough challenge for small legs and endless opportunities for wonder and enchantment. There are no docks or moorings here, but the anchorage is wonderful with a few safe landing beaches

for small boats or kayaks nearby. MITA's stewardship volunteers help keep Buckle's trails clear and campsites clean, ensuring that its wild charm remains unspoiled for all to enjoy.

Each of these islands offers something special for families: adventure, connection, and a sense of belonging on Maine's coast. But what truly ties them together is MITA's mission to provide access while promoting responsible recreation. So, pack your gear and get out on the Trail to play, have fun, and leave things better than you found them to help sustain the Maine Island Trail for future generations.



NICK PARSON

The dock at Warren Island offers a convenient place for a family to unload their camping gear.



NICK PARSON

The famous "door in the woods" at Buckle Island.

THE CASE OF THE DISAPPEARING ISLAND

By Sandy Gilbreath, Executive Director, Kennebunk Land Trust



NICK PARSON

The rocky remnants of Strawberry Island at low tide. The island was once the site of a homestead complete with grazing cattle before the ocean took over.

Just off the coast of Kennebunk, between Lords Point and Great Hill Road, you'll find a small rocky outcrop called Strawberry Island. The name might suggest bucolic rolling hills where strawberry fields abound, and in fact the land used to support a home, a barn, and even some cattle. Today, however, the island would be almost unrecognizable to those who used to live there.

As the result of sea level changes and tidal action, Strawberry today is almost entirely submerged at high tide. At low, it is a place of only rocks and tidepools. The remaining outcropping protects Libby Cove to the east, and is completely exposed to the open ocean on the west.

This exposure has led to decades of powerful wave action that has slowly denuded the landscape.

In January of 2024, Maine endured some of the worst storms that our coastal area had seen in decades. Flood waters from a storm surge ravaged coastal businesses and residences, and caused \$2 million in damages to public infrastructure in Kennebunk alone. Across the Maine coast as a whole, damages were estimated to be in excess of \$70 million.

All of us at Kennebunk Land Trust are proud that Strawberry Island, the very first land acquired by KLT upon our founding in 1972, was a part of the iconic Maine Island Trail as a stop for day-trippers, picnickers, and coastal travelers. However, the 2024 storms brought us to the

unfortunate realization that Strawberry was no longer viable as a site along the Trail for these purposes. It is only accessible at low tide, and even then, the island's large tidepools and rocks, while interesting features, are not ideal for summer picnics or as a rest stop for boaters who are traveling along the coast. Both KLT and MITA felt that the damage and erosion were only going to continue to get worse, and there was too big of a risk to boaters and paddlers who might make plans that would rely on stopping at Strawberry Island when it could be entirely under the waves.

We are also concerned about the long-term viability of Libby's Cove. The Strawberry Island outcropping is protecting the cove from strong tidal

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In Praise of Those Who Share

How a family treasure found its way on to the Maine Island Trail

By Brian Marcaurelle, Program Director



Dozens of islands dot the perimeter of Hurricane Sound on Vinalhaven's western shore. Some are large and fabled places, others are small and generally unknown, but each island has a distinct personality and story.

One of these islands, resembling a gnarled heart when viewed from above, was a new addition to the Maine Island Trail in 2025. Unlabeled on the charts, it goes by several nicknames, including Harbor, Little Crotch, and, according to three MITA-affiliated campers, "Ledge-apalooza." But to the family that owns it, the island has always been known as Tobacco Juice.

"Apparently my grandmother thought it resembled the shape of tobacco that had been spit on the ground" explains Susannah Washburn, who co-owns the island with her brother, Jonathan. "I suppose you could say that about pretty much any island, though." While the name Tobacco Juice has gained traction locally, Google Maps and Maine's Coastal Island Registry have it designated as Harbor

Island, so that is the name that appears in the Maine Island Trail Guide.

Harbor Island has belonged to their family for many years, but Susannah and Jonathan assumed ownership only recently. As kids, they would spend time at their family camp on Vinalhaven and venture out to Harbor in their small boat to swim, use the beach, climb the steep rock faces, or relax on the ledges. "Rather than meet neighbors at their homes for picnics, sometimes we would gather on Harbor for lunch," recalls Susannah. "It was like a little flotilla of canoes, kayaks, and outboards in the cove."

According to Jonathan, the island provided an opportunity to learn how to tie knots and cleverly secure their Boston Whaler in the middle of the cove, avoiding the difficulties of the changing tides. "My memories of the island are intertwined with my gratitude for being able to be a more confident and able person," he says.

Camping on the island wasn't a prominent part of their childhood, but Susannah remembers spending at least one night out there as a teenager. The

island has a sheltered nook for tenting above the beach, and a modest tradition of permissive use by locals. In Susannah's memory, the public use never detracted from her family's enjoyment of the island.

MITA's introduction to Harbor came from one of the island's intermittent public users. A few years back, we received a travelogue that listed Harbor among a series of favorite local destinations. "Perfect for skiff camping," they said. "A nice tent site at the head of the cove and wonderful smooth granite shores for barefoot exploring." The accompanying photos backed this up. The sender noted that they had been camping on the island since 1976, and that Harbor was the site of their child's first unsupervised overnight outing with friends.

MITA has an abiding interest in islands with recreational appeal where our stewardship and visitor education efforts could benefit both the land and the owner. Based on the travelogue, Harbor certainly seemed like a good candidate for the Trail. Subsequent recon trips confirmed that not only was the island

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NICK PARSON

The small cove on the north end of Harbor Island offers a beautiful and tranquil landing for small boats and kayaks.

MITA extends our heartfelt appreciation to the individuals, foundations, corporations, and organizations who generously donated to support our mission of stewardship and access along the Maine Island Trail during our 2025 fiscal year, spanning October 1, 2024 — September 30, 2025. Thank you for your commitment.

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MITA recognizes the following individual donors who made an annual unrestricted gift of \$1,000 or more during fiscal year 2025, and are recognized as members of our Trailblazer Giving Society:

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exceptionally beautiful, but it seemed like it was formed with the Trail in mind.

Cold calls are not our preferred method of outreach to island owners, but in this case, it was the best option. So, we crossed our fingers and contacted Susannah, and to our delight, she was more than receptive. Her family was not familiar with MITA, but as they learned more and discussed the island's future, they agreed there was value in including Harbor on the Trail. A late-summer day on the water with MITA staff solidified the relationship.

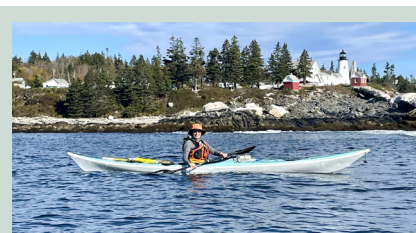
By adding Harbor to the Trail, Susannah and Jonathan joined a community of generous landowners who openly welcome public use of their island. Margaret C. Emerson blazed the path by including Sheep Island in the first edition of the Maine Island Trail Guide in 1988. Since then, nearly 100 private islands have been part of the Trail at one point or another. Over time, some of these islands have changed hands and have been removed from the Trail, but the vast majority have persisted, with many now protected via conservation easement or by outright land trust ownership. Despite strong headwinds from inflated coastal property values, complicated family dynamics, and generational detachment, privately owned islands continue to endure on the Trail, with new additions coming regularly.

Strong landowner liability protections

are partly to thank for the perpetuation of public access to private land in Maine. But legal safeguards alone can't compel someone who owns a slice of heaven to share it widely. For that, it takes a special blend of altruism and trust. MITA's relationships with island owners have been predicated on trust from the get-go. Trust in landowners to share their islands without contracts. Trust in visitors to use the islands responsibly and respectfully. Trust in the organization to watch over the island and provide quality care.

In Susannah's mind, the pleasure derived from Harbor Island comes not from owning it, but from accessing it. That is why her family chooses to share it. As she puts it, "The beauty of the trees and granite, the sense of peace, I carry that with me when I'm not in Maine. Providing opportunities for people to enjoy the same experiences I had as a kid is part of being a good steward of this place." Jonathan concurs, "I'm glad we are able to share Tobacco Juice with other people."

As MITA approaches the 40-year mark, privately owned islands like Harbor remain cornerstones of the Trail. Access to private islands is a special privilege, and we owe a huge debt of gratitude to island owners like Susannah and Jonathan for their generosity. Whether they are shaped like gooey globs or irregular hearts, private islands offer unique opportunities for wonder and discovery that we are fortunate to enjoy.



Trailblazer Spotlight: Elizabeth Ehrenfeld

I've had deep ties to Maine for my entire life and have been a member of the Maine Island Trail Association since 1994. Over that time, my appreciation for MITA's role in Maine's outdoor landscape has only grown. What I value most about MITA is something that makes all the difference: stewardship.

Maine is fortunate to have many organizations doing important work to protect and acquire land. But stewardship — the ongoing, hands-on care of special places — is where MITA truly excels. It requires experience, consistency, and a specific set of skills.

MITA has built deep expertise not only in stewardship, but also in coordinating and supporting volunteers who care for islands, campsites, and coastal access points. By maintaining sites, educating users, and fostering respect for fragile coastal places, MITA ensures that protection doesn't stop at access — it continues through care. That combination of stewardship and volunteer leadership is what makes MITA unique, and it's why I'm proud to support this wonderful organization.



MERCH THAT MATTERS

Visit the MITA Gear Shop at shop.mita.org

Every piece of gear you purchase from the MITA Gear Shop helps fund our critical programming out on the islands.

As a way of saying thanks, we'll give you a 10% discount by using the code **NEWSLETTER10** at checkout. Thank you so much for the support.

action, and as the island becomes more eroded, we don't yet know how that will impact the cove, the residential homes, and the plants and animals that rely on that habitat. We are continually concerned about the effects of sea level rise on our coastal communities in Maine, which will only exacerbate the dissolution of Strawberry Island.

As impactful as it is to remove a property such as Strawberry Island from the Maine Island Trail, both KLT and MITA hope it will serve as a reminder that nature is continuously being shaped and reshaped, and that we need to shape our work along with it. The effects of climate change are not limited to one or a few places on earth — they make their mark everywhere.

Thankfully, the work that land trusts like KLT do contributes to the necessary defense against strong storms and sea level rise. Conserving natural protections such as marshes, sand dunes, and undeveloped coastal corridors is increasingly critical as the frequency and intensity of coastal storms continue to rise. These critical natural systems provide long-term protection for cherished local ecosystems and community infrastructure. Kennebunk Land Trust is committed to protecting land for habitat, watershed, and environmental benefit, while also creating accessible spaces for people to experience nature. Strawberry Island was quite literally the rock that formed KLT. As it changes over time, we also look to our organization and the landscapes we preserve to adapt, grow, and build a more connected and welcoming future.

KLT protects over 1,500 acres and maintains over 30 miles of trails for public use and enjoyment. KLT also offers outdoor nature walks, community programs and events, and collaborates with other local nonprofits and organizations to achieve their mission of land protection and recreation in perpetuity. Learn more at kennebunklandtrust.org.



Steve Plissey, an island adopter out of Roque Bluffs, fills a bag at a cleanup on Head Harbor Island.

Under Their Wings

MITA's Island Adopter Program

By Regional Stewardship Managers Christina Hassett, Alex Terry, and Chris Wall

MITA's Island Adopter program, established in 1990, is a simple concept that has a big impact on the Maine Island Trail. Volunteers who have access to their own boats (or friends' boats) can sign up to "adopt" islands on the Trail, and visit them at their leisure to help MITA with island monitoring. With many volunteers choosing to adopt islands that they tend to frequent, MITA maintains an informal "let us know how things look whenever you're there" approach.

We got in touch with a few of our adopters and asked them to tell us the story of how they got started in the program, and what makes it so rewarding. Thank you, to all of our adopters, for making stewardship a part of your routine on the Maine Island Trail!

Southern Coast: John Auble, Little Whaleboat Island

It was at an island cleanup in 2018 where John Auble first experienced the adventure of MITA volunteerism. The proud owner of a 17-foot Boston Whaler, John is a frequent explorer of Casco Bay, and was excited to have found a way to contribute some service to the local islands that he enjoys recreating on. When MITA put out a call for island adopters, John jumped at the opportunity to help keep an eye on Little Whaleboat Island.

MITA's Island Adopter program is flexible by design, encouraging volunteers to visit their respective adopted islands on their own time with no commitment or schedule, and to report back on conditions. If they can, they are encouraged to do some light sprucing up or trash pickup, and to have a friendly chat with visitors should any be present.

John's consistent presence as an island adopter has turned out to be a great service to Little Whaleboat. A popular and busy island situated between Chebeague Island and West Harpswell, it is extremely

popular with locals and has been for generations. On one of his first visits, John encountered a group that was having an evening lobster bake that no doubt seemed lovely, but was a bit lacking in following “leave no trace” principles. What could have been a heated exchange turned out to be an opportunity for John to engage and educate the group on best practices, and why we practice them: so that everyone can have that feeling of landing on a totally unspoiled island on the coast of Maine.

A few weeks after the encounter, John made another visit to Little Whaleboat and encountered the same group, once again cooking up a shoreside lobster feast. This time, the group called him over. “John, how are we doing?” Happily, the group had taken John’s advice to heart and put it into practice. This is just one of many success stories forwarded on by our island adopters each year, and one that was made possible by the willingness of MITA volunteers to put in just a little bit of extra effort in caring for the islands and the communities that love them.

Midcoast: Peter and Janet Roderick, Sheep Island (Stonington)

Some island adopters are drawn to specific sites on the Trail thanks to long-standing connections to those places that reach back to childhood. Many, however, get into the game at other points in their lives. Such is the case with Peter and Janet Roderick, who were first drawn to Deer Isle back in 2001 for the inaugural Deer Isle Jazz Festival.

Deer Isle has a few other things going for it as well, in addition to the festival. It is rich in maritime history, is home to Maine’s largest lobstering port (Stonington), and is surrounded by one of the most spectacular archipelagos in the world. Not ones to pass up an opportunity to explore, Peter and Janet geared themselves up with the help of a local outfitter and set out to discover one of the most iconic regions of the Maine Island Trail. It didn’t take long for the Trail to become a consistent part of their lives.

Having experience as trail adopters and

volunteer leaders with the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), becoming island adopters for MITA seemed like a natural fit once they truly began to identify as proper sea kayakers.

Selecting from the islands that were in need of adoption at the time, they chose Sheep Island, off Stonington. Sheep was the very first private island to be added to the Maine Island Trail, setting an example for other private landowners to consider adding their islands to the Trail as well. With just over a mile of walking trails through its dense evergreen forest, there is plenty for Peter and Janet to stay occupied with on their visits. Asked about what motivates them to continue being a part of MITA’s island adopter program, Peter said “The work is both fun, and a chance to give back to MITA — who have a philosophy that we believe in.”

Peter and Janet hope to keep up their service as island adopters for as long as they’re able to get out on the water. To this day, attending the Deer Isle Jazz Festival following a trip out to Sheep remains a cherished part of that tradition.

Downeast: Steve Plissey, Ram Island

For Steve Plissey, the Island Adopter program offers two compelling advantages: a mission that gives him some extra motivation to get out on the water, and the flexibility to do it whenever he wishes.

Steve and his wife have been summering

in Roque Bluffs for over 20 years, and as their time spent there increased, Steve found himself seeking out ways to become more involved with the MITA community. One click led to the next at mita.org, and Steve quickly found himself signed up as an island adopter. Already an avid paddler with a few Trail sites close-by, the fit couldn’t have been better.

Steve makes all of his adopter visits by kayak, so he enjoys venturing out on the choicest Maine summer days. He’ll head out of Little Kennebec Bay, around Point of Main, and land on an idyllic little beach on the north end of Ram Island. Composed of 16 acres of wind-swept meadow, Ram doesn’t require any heavy lifting as far as tree work is concerned, but Steve will make his rounds picking up trash along the shoreline and will check up on the camping areas. The reward for his efforts, at the right time of the season, is a handful or two of wild raspberries or blueberries.

When it’s time to leave, Steve will fit whatever trash he can in (or on) his kayak, record any observations he’s made so that he can report on the island’s condition to MITA, and set off for a quiet paddle home. Thanks to a little bit of stewardship and attention, the experience for the island’s next several visitors will be that much better. To Steve, and all of our other island adopters throughout the years, we give our thanks!

Learn more about MITA’s Island Adopter program at mita.org/adopt.



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A lion's mane jellyfish. Users of the Maine Island Trail can participate in a citizen science initiative to help record jellyfish numbers in Maine waters.

A Jolt of Jellies in Maine (Yes, Maine)

By Kalyn Bickerman-Martens, Membership Manager

Growing up in the Lakes Region of central Maine, there was very little in my life that one would consider “tropical.” My childhood bedroom attempted to compensate for that, though, being adorned with colorful fake bromeliad flowers, a brilliant scarlet foam macaw perched above my headboard, and a stuffed red-eyed tree frog that gave a glassy-eyed stare from my bookshelf. I might have been raised in the temperate Kennebec Valley, but a piece of me always craved the humid wildness of palm trees and coral reefs, which led to my study abroad experience on the shores of Belize.

It was there that I first observed jellyfish in the wild — serene moon jellies that pulsed among the tangled mangrove

roots along the shoreline. I remember watching the animals from my kayak, captivated by what I truly thought then was a scene only possible in the tropics. I was certain that I could never see this along Maine’s rugged coast in the “frigid” waters here.

Of course, I was quite wrong in that assumption.

The Gulf of Maine has most likely always been within the natural range for several species of jellies, including the moon jellyfish, although scientists don’t have good baseline data to define what “normal” is for population levels. What we do know, however, is that jellyfish sightings in 2025 were seemingly off the charts, beginning in early June in Casco Bay with

observations of the moon and the much larger (and with potentially painful stinging tentacles) lion’s mane jellies coming in from all over with frequency.

True jellyfish are simple invertebrates; they’re made up of over 95% water and are actually classified as zooplankton. Although some species might have some form of swimming ability through the pulsing of their “bells,” they’re generally at the mercy of the ocean’s currents and do not consciously decide on chosen routes. Their lifestyle is captured in their classification, as “plankton” comes from the Greek word for “drifting.”

We’ve seen other apparent population booms in the Gulf of Maine before, such as in 2014 when there were widespread

sightings from Casco Bay to Frenchman Bay. At that time, scientists cautioned against attributing the rise in jellies to just one cause. Populations of species can ebb and flow through time, and while a snapshot at one specific moment may seem completely out of the ordinary, it could fit within a broader view of population booms and busts over a longer time period.

Although many were quick to blame climate change for the perceived explosion of these invertebrates (the Gulf of Maine is indeed warming faster than nearly any other ocean surface on the planet), this would be an oversimplification of what is very likely an interplay between numerous factors.

In an attempt to learn more about the underlying forces that dictate these jellyfish booms, Dr. Nick Record at the Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences pioneered a citizen scientist initiative called Jellycast, which uses reports of jellyfish encounters to drive a predictive model to forecast jellyfish distributions. Ecosystem forecasting recognizes the complexity of ecological systems, and their tool blends satellite data in the Gulf of Maine with observational reports of

"Although many were quick to blame climate change for the perceived explosion of these invertebrates (the Gulf of Maine is indeed warming faster than nearly any other ocean surface on the planet), this would be an oversimplification of what is very likely an interplay between numerous factors."



W. CARTER

Three moon jellies ensnared with a lion's mane jellyfish. Both species are common in Maine waters.

jellyfish sightings. Jellycast was a result of the dramatic increase in jellyfish reports during the summer of 2014, and is now a part of the Gulf of Maine Research Institute's Ecosystem Investigation Network, which focuses on collecting data on climate-driven change.

Due to widespread press coverage during the jellyfish surge in Maine in 2014, scientists were able to leverage the significant attention as a way to better monitor and collect data on where and when jellies were being seen. With no previous monitoring studies on these populations, there was no easy answer for why their numbers had seemingly skyrocketed. A social media hashtag (#MaineJellies) was born, along with a dedicated email address for reporting, bringing in observations from up and down the coast from recreational and commercial users, and even from one lobsterman who remarked on the number of moon jellies fouling his traps. Besides abundance data, observers were encouraged to send along information on perceived size of the jellyfish, as lion's mane jellies in particular can vary quite a bit their measurements.

Dr. Record's ultimate goal is to use this data to create a realtime "nowcast" that would display the predicted distribution

of jellyfish in the Gulf of Maine based on current conditions. In terms of environmental variables, temperature is the top influencer for almost all species, not only due to its direct effects on organisms but its potential to affect other aspects of oceanography. The second predictor is wind speed, as this can influence whether or not the jellies are carried toward shore where they would be counted in reported observations.

There are some negative associations with jellyfish, particularly the ones capable of a potent sting. However, these species play an important role in the ecosystem and are capable of surviving in stressed ocean environments, even those with low levels of oxygen, where other marine organisms can't survive. So, they have potential to help sustain an ecosystem while it recovers from stressors, playing an important role in resilience. Finally, their otherworldly appearance and behavior can serve as a gateway for people to learn about the ocean, and appreciate the ocean ecosystem, about which we still have so much to learn.

Email jellyfish@bigelow.org if you've spotted a jellyfish, with the date, location, and description of your observation — including size, if possible!



MAINE ISLAND TRAIL
ASSOCIATION

2025 PHOTO CONTEST WINNER



Sean Carnell
Little Hen Island

My regular kayaking put-in is Camden Harbor, just a few minutes' drive from my home. From the boat launch, I can see islands scattered down the bay — Lime, Lasell, Saddle, and Mark; beyond them, North Haven and Vinalhaven. Out of sight are the islands on the Maine Island Trail scattered around Vinalhaven, that are frequent destinations for me.

So many of my favorite memories are from Maine islands — hearing waves breaking on rocky shores while navigating long crossings in the fog, relaxing on warm rocky beaches on summer days, falling asleep at dusk while the tide is out, and waking at midnight to the sound of water just a few feet from the tent.

On the day of this photograph, I had planned to stay on an island further north. However I was making good progress, and having stayed on Little Hen before, I knew it would be worth the effort to push on. But then the afternoon sea breeze kicked in from the south, and I fought a strong headwind all the way there... which dropped to nothing within about 15 minutes of getting to the island. Of course.

Looking at this photo now, I can remember how stubborn I felt about wanting to get there that day, along with the acceptance that the wind and the tide cared nothing for me, or my stubbornness. I also remember the trust that it would be worth the effort to reach this gem of an island, and be lucky enough to call it home for the night.

My times on the Maine Island Trail are treasured memories.