

A Not-so-lonely Walk on the Beach by Peter and Deana Gadd, Miramichi Naturalist Club (Photography - Peter Gadd) Published in Miramichi Leader Wed. Sept 28, 2011

A “Walk on the Beach” you say. Sounds romantic, sounds inviting, sounds like a very pleasant time. How about, “sounds challenging”? We had such a walk (with a limp!) recently, not for the first time did we take this trek. Seven kilometers of the left foot walking lower than the right and seven kilometers, to put things right, walking back along the water line with the right foot lower than the left!

Many people go to Kelly’s Beach at Kouchibouguac National Park for a swim and a sunbathe, a few who turn right off the boardwalk go for a walk, but not so many though go to the very end of the long beach to enjoy the company of the seals, the shorebirds, the peace and the quiet. I doubt this walk will have changed substantially for hundreds of years. It is nice to realize that and this will continue to be the case as long as national parks in Canada continue to exist. (Parks Canada is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year). Preservation of sensitive ecosystems is one of their main objectives.

This seven kilometer barrier island is extremely fragile as are some of the species of living things that have it as their habitat. Sand is so easily influenced by wind and waves that were it not for its anchor, the fragile Marram Grass, the island would not exist. Visitors to Kelly’s Beach are perhaps sometimes disappointed by the fencing that protects the Marram Grass and the signage that limits their access when turning left off the boardwalk. This area is a breeding ground for the very vulnerable and protected shorebird species, the Piping Plover. Recent visitors will have seen a wooden-frame meshed structure that’s been created as part of a recover project to provide a predator free zone for young abandoned hatchlings to have a chance to grow to maturity.



However, a right turn provides an opportunity to walk along the sandy beach until one's romantic heart is content. Here in the spring and late summer and fall representatives of other shorebird populations such as the Semi-palmated Plover, the Semi-palmated Sandpiper and the Sanderling can often be seen feeding in the wet sand between waves. As you walk they scurry to stay ahead of you and eventually in small groups fly off over the water with a dramatic flash of their wings, and circle back behind you and resume their feeding, preparing to soon resume their long seasonal migration. Unlike the Piping Plovers, they are not summer residents, just seasonal transients. Above the high tide mark where the low Marram Grass sand dune cliffs rise up can be seen the somewhat rare Nelson Sharp-tailed Sparrows one of the more colourful members of the sparrow species. Other birds that are included in this ageless walk as you look seaward might be Black-backed, Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, Common Terns, various ducks and the dramatic high diving Northern Gannet. As you look inward you might see Northern Harriers, Great Blue Herons and very often the ubiquitous American Crow.



Sanderlings



Semi-palmated Plover

Perhaps the most dramatic of wildlife that may be seen on this walk are the Grey Seals, particularly in September it seems. After a few kilometers of walking, as you look out into the surf you realize you are not the only mammal around. From not far offshore looking back at you will be the seals, increasing greatly in number the further you walk. It's a little spooky as they really seem quite interested in your progress. You may come across a few that have decided that they like to actually sunbathe right on the beach requiring you to take a detour in the softer sand to avoid them. Or you might see a large congregation of them, 1000 or more, basking on a sand bar at the far end of your walk. Their size as

individuals and the size of the herd is very impressive.



The Grey Seal is found on both coasts of the North Atlantic. It is a large animal varying in weight from 170 to 400 kg. It eats all manner of marine life including herring, cod and lobster, and so its expanding population is a major concern of commercial fishermen. Presently the Grey Seal is a protected species and has been for the last few decades. A recent report however by the Fisheries Resources Conservation Council is calling for a cull of many thousands of Grey Seals in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, as the mammal is seen as responsible for the slow recovery of ground fish stocks.

Kelly's Beach at Kouchibouguac National Park, so often crowded with sun seekers in the summer, with a bit of effort on your part it can provide a timeless solitary walk along the surf. You quickly feel that you are getting away from it all. However, as you progress down the beach, if the seals with their curious gaze are around, you can soon get the feeling "you are not alone". That is, at least for the time being!