

The Sandhills

Affectionate impressions of the sand dune system running from Alberton to Billhook Island.

The Sandhills appear inaccessible; across open water, an indeterminate length of rolling dunes, receding East and West to blurred horizons, imparts a sense of isolation. Yet these inside waters are only a few hundred yards across, bath-warm in summer, and, at the "wading place", only waist deep at high tide. Here, in days gone by, existed a rudimentary road, exposed at low tide, where farmers crossed with horses and equipment to cut and stack the wild marsh grasses, returning in winter when the inside waters were frozen to bring the feed back to their barns. Here, too, workers crossed on their way to the lobster canning factories which thrived on the sandhills at a time when sailing boats landed their catch on the outside shore.

Hérons fishing in the shallows seem oblivious to the wading visitor's approach, only taking off with their ponderous wing-beats as strangers emerged full-bodied from the tepid inside water and violate unmistakably their ancient sacred privacy. Terns wheel and scream overhead, swooping close; their distress is acute and we suddenly feel the vulnerability of an intruder audaciously stepping onto these shifting sands which bear the brunt of northern winds and waves.

The terns are left behind as we gradually ascend from the mud-flats, eelgrass and tidal pools on the inside shore, our footprints stirring up a fetid black mud from below an almost lavender surface of these shallow waters. Yellowlegs freeze in the pools and then fly off, calling loudly. Our steps take us higher into marram grass and clumps of pungent bayberry. A marsh hawk drifts along ahead, following the contours of hills and valleys. Cranberries, wild strawberries and blueberries appear along this path at their appointed times. Upward still, the wind-blown hilltops reveal bare sand; a deep fox lair exposed on a southern flank and bank swallow nests riddling the steep walls. And, finally, the highest, pyramid-shaped dune, to which we are drawn as the most dramatic reference point in this strange land, falls away to a white beach so surprisingly extensive that it takes the breath away. Looking back over our trail, the topography is delineated by countless variations of green grasses, deepening in color toward the lowlands, shimmering and shifting in a summer breeze and turning, in autumn, to pale yellows, ambers, reds and purples.

An elemental place, set apart, the sands changing shape at the mercy of the winds, repeating more slowly the movement of clouds overhead. Within living memory, the sandhills almost disappeared once, only a few dune tops remaining visible. And a major storm will alter their configuration from one visit to the next. When spring winds sweep out over Labrador and the Gulf of St. Lawrence, bringing winter's last fury, the deep roar of breakers crashing against the sandhills can be heard at farms far inland. The remains of lobster traps dashed ashore in such storms litter the outer beach, their bows bleached and half-buried in the sand.

The sandhills appear to be a totally natural environment, but time was when they fairly bustled with human activity. Every spring, a good portion of the population of Freeland migrated across and worked on one of the five lobster factories there. They lived out there during May, June and July bringing over hens and cows. Egg yolks turned bright red from all the lobster bodies the hens ate, and when