

About Black Island

Black Island is one of three large islands that guard the north end of Lake Winnipeg's South Basin. When viewed from Hecla Village, Gull Harbour or the cockpit of our sailboat this wooded island, often shrouded in mist, conjures up a level of curiosity that prompts one to ask questions about this guardian of the many other islands, islets and rock shoals of the Lake Winnipeg Narrows....

1. To the Anishinaabe: The Midewiwin (Grand Medicine Society) of the Anishinaabe have viewed Black Island as a sacred place and hold gatherings on Black Island. The Midewiwin believe in maintaining a respectful relationship between people and Mother Earth (source: The Canadian Encyclopedia/Midewiwin)

2. Hemitite: Red Cliff is marked on nautical charts and topographical maps. During our '23 cruise east along the southeast shoreline of Black Island the Red Cliff outcropping of Hemitite (Fe_2O_3) was quite visible (Source: Mindat/Hemitite from Black Island, Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba). This red coloured mineral was crushed into a fine powder by



Anishinaabe then mixed with minerals to form a paint. The mixture then was used to create sacred pictographs on rock faces. La Verendrye had learned about this deposit from the indigenous people and sent his son, Louis-Joseph to look for the iron ore deposit on the southeast shore of Black Island in 1739 (source: Manitoba Historical Society/La Verendrye and Manitoba's First Mine).



3. The Lumbering Industry and Buried Treasure on Black Island: During the 1920/30's a lath mill had been set up on Black Island to supply the Winnipeg building industry. Prior to drywall (Gyproc) home interiors were finished with lath and plaster. The S.S. Kenora was one of the lake boats that would transport lath and lumber from Black Island as well as bring in the payroll for the workers. The workers were paid in silver coins as there were no banks. Apparently, so the story goes, two nefarious characters decided to rob the payroll.

They buried their booty under a huge pile of sawdust with the plan to return at some future date. Did this really happen? It is a good mystery and maybe the Oak Island crew should visit Black Island to look for vintage Canadian silver coins... (Source: Memories from the Lake/ Buried Treasure on Black Island, the plot thickens by Ken Kristjanson of Gimli, Manitoba and photo courtesy "Make History - The Lumber Industry in Manitoba")



4. The Black Island Road Mystery: Yes there is a 14.2 mile long road on Black Island that connects Sawmill Bay on the west side with Hidden Bay (Black 6 to boaters) on the east side. This road was completed during the winter of 1977 and was so well constructed that you can walk or bike much of it today if you can get there. My wife and I along with other Silver Harbour Sailing Club members have walked sections of the eastern stretch many times. Why was the road constructed? The plan, according to the Manitoba Government News Service dated July 9, 1976 and cited by Renewable Resources and Transportation Services Minister Harvey Bostrom, was to create a loop for tourists that wished to explore both the Interlake and the eastern part of Manitoba in one circle tour. In fact, to test the concept a pilot project was conducted during the summer of 1976. The Hecla II ferry would shuttle vehicles for the two and a half hour crossing between Gull Harbour and Hole River seven days a week. The Hecla II was captained by Grimsi Grimolfson and Harold Bennet. So what happened? The road is still there and if you look hard you can find the remains of the terminals. Why was this project cancelled? Do you know anyone who might have crossed on the Hecla II?



5. Exploiting Silica Sand Exploitation: The Silica Sand Quarry is very evident while cruising along the eastern shore of Black Island. It had been a frequent stop for exploration but the old barge is too dangerous to tie up to and many do not want to leave their boats unattended on anchor. It is an interesting area to explore as the geology of the area is visible in the exposed strata and one can experience the devastation to the environment by man as well as nature's attempt to reclaim it. The Silica Sand at this site is found within the Winnipeg Formation. The first stakes for silica on Black Island were in 1910 and the first production occurred in 1929. The sand was barged to Midwest Glass in Winnipeg. The extraction of the sand continued on and off until 2003 and was used for the manufacture of glass, fiberglass, foundry sand and hydraulic fracturing. Processing took place in both Selkirk and Winnipeg. Today there is a demand for high quality silica. The extraction processes are very controversial and although there is an extensive deposit in the Wanipigow area across from Black Island its development had been opposed by many in the community. As of July 27, 2023 CPS Inc. has received an Environmental Act License to construct its proposed Wanipigow extraction and processing facility. (Source: Apex Geoscience Ltd., CPS inc.)



6. Flora and Fauna: We found the old roadbed at Black 5/6 quite overgrown with the last stretch to Hidden Bay essentially eroded away. However, after trekking through a bit Manitoba “jungle” the track was easy to hike and it was apparent that quads had been using it for some time. We discovered a hunting camp a short distance up the road that would probably be occupied during the fall. Manitoba Natural Resources describes the island as having mixed and coniferous forests dominated by white and black spruce, trembling aspen (poplar) and jack pine. There is also Red Pine on the Island, a rarity for this far north. The island had been extensively logged in the past so much of the forest is second growth. According to MNR there are apparently rare plants on the island including a Three-way Sedge called *Dulichium arundinaceum*. Along the trail we also saw black bear scat loaded with choke cherry seeds and possibly some wolf scat. The islands and islets of this part of Lake Winnipeg are renowned as breeding sites for many bird species including the American White Pelican which fly in from as far away as Mexico and Texas. There is an ecological reserve on Lake Winnipeg comprised of six small islands that are the breeding grounds for Pelicans and the endangered Piping Plover. During our stay at Black 5 in August '23 we had the privilege of observing a pair of fledgling Bald Eagles testing their wings while watched over by their parents.

Craig Mackenzie

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