

Art & Photography

Through the



Camera Lens

A first person account of photographing the mysterious Graveyard of the Atlantic

By Dani Moritz

Nicknamed the "Graveyard of the Atlantic," Sable Island is most well known for the number of wooden ships its dense fog and frequent storms have claimed long ago. But, centuries worth of shipwrecked vessels upon its surrounding shores are not the only thing this island is famous for.

On this Canadian island, you will also find upward of 400 wild horses – which are believed to be descendants from the horses that came to the island with settlers in the mid-1700s. What you won't find are very many people. With less than a half-dozen permanent residents, few visitors are allowed to step foot on the island.

Debra Garside, of Water Valley, Alberta, is one visitor who has been allowed to frequent Sable Island – and through her visits she has managed to capture the spirit of the wild horses through the lens of her camera.

This is a first hand account by Debra of a day photographing Sable Island and the horses who roam its lands. Debra's words describing her adventure are in italics.

An Early Start

Debra's day begins early – as she prepares for her journey. The island is not easy to photograph. The dense fog, the troublesome terrain, the constant threat of the howling wind all could be detrimental. Yet, Debra must always make the best of what Mother Nature hands her.

My alarm goes off at 4:00 a.m. I crawl out of my sleeping bag and peer out of the second story window of the Canadian Coast Guard staff house. The yard lights glow diffusely through the dense fog and everything is covered with heavy dew – another typical early morning on Sable Island.

I wonder what this must have been like for the early mariners, with no modern navigational equipment. Over 300 ships were wrecked on this island and many lives and much cargo were lost. The station, where I am based, was part of a facility that was established on this remote island back in 1801 to help save crew and cargo of the many ill-fated ships. The island was dubbed "Graveyard of the Atlantic" and even to this day the turbulent weather in this area strikes fear into the hearts of sailors. Remnants of the renowned Andrea Gail ("The Perfect Storm") touched these shores not so long ago.

I sleepily descend the stairs, enter the austere kitchen and begin preparing breakfast. I want to be well fuelled for what I expect to be another strenuous day of hiking the sand dunes and heathlands. I had prepared lunch and my camera gear the night before, so that my morning departure from base would be swift. While the weather did not appear favourable for photography, experience reminds me that this can change at any moment, especially on Sable Island where the easterly winds are unrelenting.

Her Journey Begins

It is not terribly long before Debra's subjects appear. With a wide range of genetic origins, several types of horses can be spotted. Debra says some resemble Arabian breeding, others of old European bloodstock and some resemble Thoroughbreds. However, all the horses appear to be bays, browns, palominos, chestnuts and blacks – as horses of color were bred out long ago



These are the photos of the four stallions Debra photographed that morning.

All photos by Debra Garside

as they were considered inferior by the island's early settlers. On this day, Debra was fortunate to find four of these beautiful stallions.

I pull on my waist waders and river walkers (water-proof pants and hiking boots), don a rainproof jacket and hoist my 35-pound camera backpack up onto my shoulders. I have my 70-200mm lens and Nikon D3s ready in hand, as horses can appear over a sand dune at any moment. Sunrise has been muted by the persistent fog, but optimistically, I head out across the wooden walkway of the compound, past the meteorological equipment and out towards the west gate. I then follow a horse trail that leads me past the station's wind turbines, close to where the Artic Terns have begun their seasonal nesting. As soon as the Terns are aware of my presence the sky above me fills with squawking, aggressive birds, determined to send me away. I hurry my way across the heathlands as quickly as possible to avoid attack. Once out of bombing range, I relax my pace a little and start to focus on the world around me.

I pass by a freshwater pond full of blooming water lilies and surrounded by iris, pearly everlasting and beautiful grass-pink orchids. I feel slightly guilty about not taking the time to photograph these little Sable Island gems, but I must stay on task. I have come here for my third expedition, now a seasoned Sable Island visitor, with high expectations of the type of wild horse imagery I wish to capture, and every moment from dawn until dusk must be used productively. At a cost of \$300 per day for accommodation in the staff house and a \$13,000 charter flight to get to the island, this is serious business.

Less than one mile from base, I come across a group of four bachelor stallions. I am thrilled, as the young bachelors are often the most active and interactive of the social groups. Two blacks, a bay and a chestnut – they were making their way along the dunes near the south shore. Keeping a discreet distance, I followed along in the fog waiting for an opportunity.

The boys stopped for a moment at the site of an old wooden crate and each took turns scratching against it. There are no trees on the island (save for one stunted old pine), so items to scratch upon are highly regarded. This did not hold their interest long, however, and they headed over the next dune and down onto the south beach. Again I continued my pursuit, staying just far enough away so as not to influence their behaviour.

The Perfect Shot

As Debra's journey continued, the perfect moment arose. In that moment, she was able to capture what she had been searching for – the untamed spirit of the Sable Island horse.

Beachcombing on Sable Island is an adventure in itself. Sitting at the convergence of three major currents, including the Gulfstream, the island's tideline collects all manors of sea-borne debris, both natural and man-made. One of these treasures (at least by equine standards), is the peat encrusted rhizomes (roots) that break off in chunks and are taken out to sea and then eventually brought back by the tide. These salt-soaked clumps are left strewn upon the beaches and are a natural mineral lick for the horses.

The bachelors quickly spotted one of these treats and trotted anxiously over to it, and began voraciously licking the salt with great enjoyment. The sun was just starting to burn off some of the fog and a little warmth pushed away the morning chills. But, this peaceful moment did not last long. One small treasure shared by four young stallions was just not going to work. Soon they started nipping at each other trying to establish a pecking order. This in turn escalated into a foray of serious knee-biting and evasive action, and soon the two most dominant stallions began spinning their way along the shoreline in mock battle.

This was the opportunity I had been waiting for. Shooting hand-held, I ran parallel along the base of the dunes, doing my best to keep up with the action. The fog co-operated for once, and rolled back out to sea, allowing a beautiful diffuse light to



envelope the scene. I ran, paused and took shots and then ran some more, my adrenaline level kicking into high gear. The horses reared up, striking with their front feet, and barred their teeth in display of dominance. They carried their performance down the beach until a large group of grey seals, hauled out on the beach, blocked their path and the action ceased.

Almost instantly, calm was restored, and the four bachelors walked away in single file, towards the inland ponds for a drink. I suddenly realized what an amazing opportunity had just been bestowed upon me. My hands started to shake, partly from the exhaustion of running heavily laden in deep sand, and partly from excitement. An element of fear crept in as well. It had all happened so quickly that I had not had the time to adjust my camera settings while on the run. I always start out with my camera set on aperture priority, and a fairly forgiving ISO (digital equivalent of film speed), but running and shooting hand-held is always a roll of the dice, and I was not sure if I had made quality shots.

I sat down on a piece of driftwood, poured myself a cup of tea from my thermos, and with unsteady hands began to scroll through the images on my LCD screen. Yes, I had done it! The images were sharp and the beautiful pastel tones of the morning light were there. I knew right then that this would be a pivotal moment in my career as a nature photographer.

Adventuring on a remote island surrounded by a herd of majestic, wild horses is something most of us only experience in our dreams. But, through the images that Debra has captured, we, too, can relish in such an adventure.

Sidelines Magazine hopes you have enjoyed Debra's story and images and we hope that, perhaps, her tale will inspire your own adventure. For more information about Debra and Sable Island, visit her website at www.sableislandhorses.ca.

