



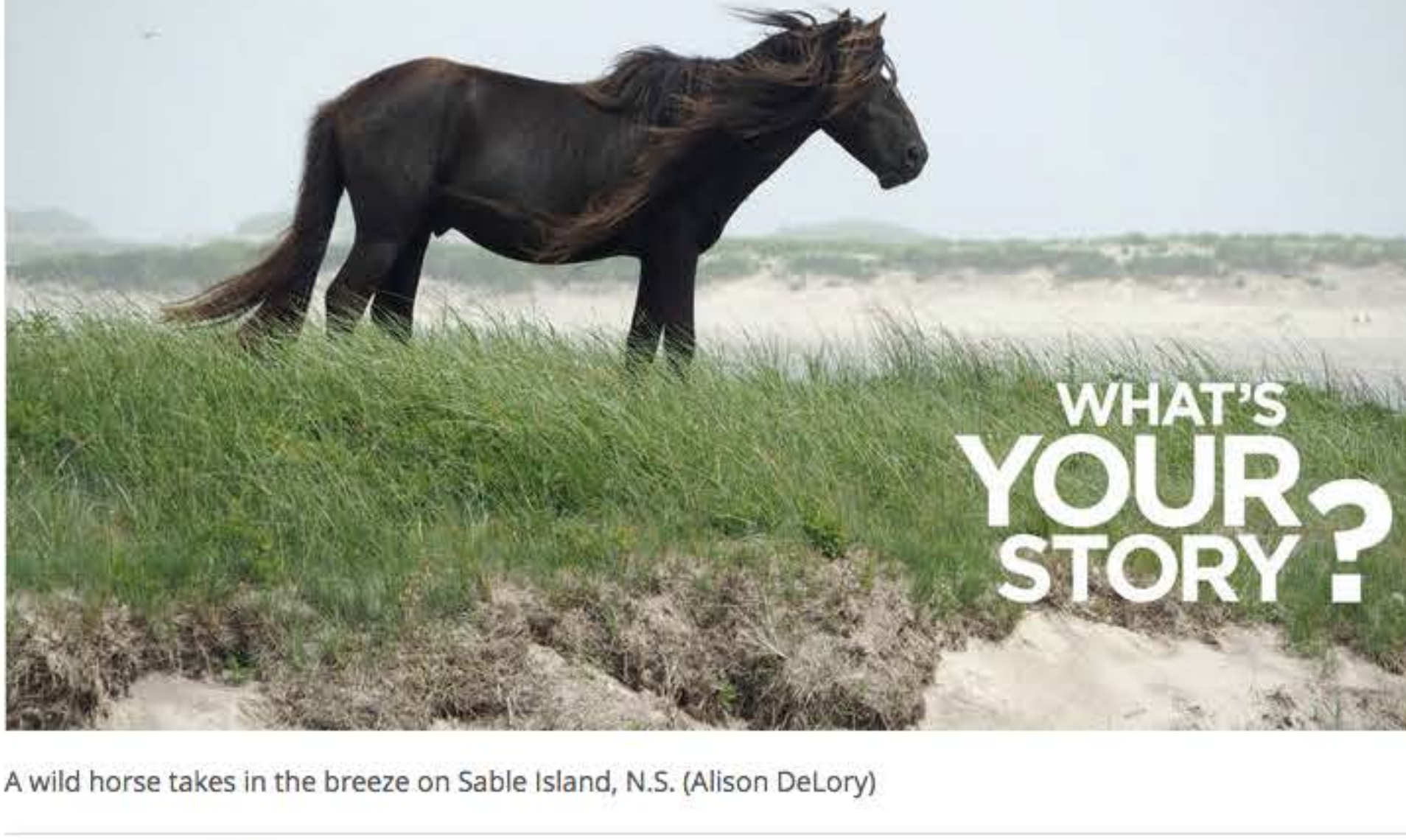
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WHAT'S YOUR STORY

For me, Sable Island feels like another dimension

It's a part of Nova Scotia — but also a place unto itself.

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A wild horse takes in the breeze on Sable Island, N.S. (Allison DeLory)

2 comments

Sable Island — a crescent-shaped strip nicknamed the "Graveyard of the Atlantic" — is the most remote part of Nova Scotia and a national treasure most Canadians will never see.

*Throughout 2017, we're asking Canadians, "What's your story?" **Alison DeLory** of Halifax, one of the lucky few who have set foot on Sable Island, shares hers.*

After a day at sea with no land in sight, we awoke under a cerulean sky. Impossibly, illogically and impressively, a long, taut sandbar stretched before us, grinning.

Sable Island was no longer an illusion or mythic lore. It was right there off the bow of our ship — a narrow strip of sand like a slender piece of seaweed.



Long and narrow Sable Island is home to much unique flora and fauna, some of which can only be found here. (Robert Short/CBC)

Off the island's tip, the Gulf Stream meets the Labrador Current in a crescent of white-capped waves. Here I was, at this land of lore, whose contradictory history and landscape are cruel and captivating, gentle and harsh.

• Why Sable Island is a living national treasure

Our Adventure Canada expedition began in St. John's, N.L., where we boarded our ship, the Ocean Endeavour. After pulling out of the St. John's Narrows past Signal Hill — where we spotted humpback whales — and sailing past one of the last icebergs of the season, we were on our way to Sable Island.

We arrived a day-and-a-half later on a dazzling July morning heavy with sunshine and possibilities.

A remote oasis



'We weren't permitted to eat anything on Sable Island, to wander off on our own without a guide, or to take anything away except photos and our impressions.' (Allison DeLory)

The day before, when my fellow travelers learned I'm from Halifax, they asked if I'd always wanted to come to Sable Island. The honest answer to that was "no." Sure, I learned about Sable Island and its horses in grade school, but it was never presented as a place one could actually get to.

“Here I was, at this land of lore, whose contradictory history and landscape are cruel and captivating, gentle and harsh.”

- Alison DeLory

Sable Island was a remote, protected oasis nearly 300 km offshore from Halifax that was both a part of Nova Scotia and a place completely unto itself. It wasn't open to visitors and I never knew anyone who'd been there. Since 2013, however, it's been a National Park Reserve and limited tourism is being tested.

• Google Street View comes to Sable Island

After months of planning, the moment was upon me.

From the ship's bow I focused my camera's zoom lens, seeing [Sable Island's mythic horses](#) dotting the shore and dunes.

No one knows for sure how horses came to live on Sable Island. It's been speculated they swam ashore from a wrecked ship, but people now say it's more likely they were transported there on purpose in the 18th century to breed for future resale.



This isn't just a photo of a wild horse sunbathing. It's also a photo of cautious grey seals, watching from the waves. (Allison DeLory)

The day we arrived, they drank from freshwater lakes, grazed on Marram grass, and glanced in our direction as if to say, "Come if you want, interlopers. Be with us awhile but don't come too close. Remember whose island it is."

“I learned about Sable Island and its horses in grade school, but it was never presented as a place one could actually get to.”

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We boarded Zodiac boats and lurched with waves that then tossed us ashore, spitting us up onto the beach like the stubby grey seals basking there. We grouped and created lazy trails of footprints in the sand, onward toward something called Bald Dune.

Seeing, not quite believing



'We slept on our ship, leaving nothing on the island but footprints — we even brought a portable outhouse and took human waste back to the ship with us.' (Allison DeLory)

On Sable Island, I thought about how mired I'd been in my day-to-day personal problems and those of the modern world — consumed by my daily routines in Halifax, annoyed by traffic or other irritants, inundated with troubling news from around the world and hovered increasingly behind screens. Stepping outside my regular environment broke that down.

• 4 ways to dodge crowds during a busy year for Canada's national parks

The Canadian treasure reminded me to see and listen actively rather than passively and opened me up to accept that what's unlikely is not impossible.

Stepping onto Sable Island was like stepping into another dimension, one with no Wi-Fi or cell service, almost no human habitation (one resident and a rotating handful of Parks Canada staff) and only one squat, lonesome tree.

Through yarrow and beach peas, bayberries and wild strawberries, our boots sidestepped horse droppings, skeletons, whale bone fragments, entrails and seal skins. Yes, Sable is an island of decay, a wrecker of many ships and a robber of lives.

Then at a pond dotted with yellow lilies and irises, a mare and her foal walked to the edge and began to drink. Sable is also an island of creation and rebirth.

Bald Dune is the highest elevation on Sable Island. It's desert-like conditions here and, although it's a short climb, walking uphill in sand made it challenging. Our group became hushed as we climbed.



'Canada is many things and no singular experience can define it, but the journey of discovering and reflecting on its diversity is its gift.' (Allison DeLory)

The Ipswich sparrows, who nest only on Sable Island, stopped flitting by. The terns no longer screeched overhead. We were alone with our thoughts and uttered snippets of conversation in hushed voices. We slipped and slid in shifting sands, inching onward.

• You'll soon be able to hold a Sable Island horse skull in your hands

Atop Bald Dune we gazed out with wonder and disbelief. Sometimes seeing is not quite believing.

'Time moves differently here'

I left Sable Island with no mementoes save for a renewed appreciation for the places that still exist within Canada with relatively little human interference. Humans aren't the overlords. There aren't roads. Flora and fauna prevail.

“The Canadian treasure reminded me to see and listen actively rather than passively, and opened me up to accept that what's unlikely is not impossible.”

- Alison DeLory

Sable Island meets an endless ocean in every direction, and out of the turquoise waters, grasses swayed in breezes and seals slid on their bellies in and out of the turquise randomly.

Time moves differently here — a place where a horse can spend a couple of hours digging a hole to find fresh drinking water.

In the end, the dark corners of the wider world and my individual problems seemed relatively small on Canada's wild and free sandbar in the North Atlantic.



'Despite there being no maple leaves in sight, I'd never felt more Canadian.' (Allison DeLory)



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