The Maine Islands

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Rockbound midcoast Maine has some of the most beautiful islands in the world. Over 10,000 acres of islands exist in the Knox and Lincoln Counties Soil Survey area. Most of the islands are 20 to 50 acres. They act as a natural breakwater, protecting the mainland shore from the worst raging winds of the Northeast.

In three previous field seasons, we mapped the largest islands—Vinalhaven, Northhaven, and Isle Au Haut. Isle Au Haut, most of which is part of Acadia National Park, was reached by way of the mail boat each day from Stonington. We took the Rockland ferry to Vinalhaven and Northhaven on Monday and returned on it on Friday. Mapping these three islands took about 4 months to complete. We will never forget the fine home cooking of Mabelle Crockett during our stay on Northhaven.

As we enter the final field season of the Knox and Lincoln Counties Soil Survey, we are making preparations to go ashore and map most of the remaining islands. This field season will be different. A local lobsterman has been hired to take us to the outermost islands where seas can be quite rough. The survey party has rented a boat, motor, and trailer to do the innermost islands. On calm days, when the wind is not blowing, we will head for the islands. Where island docking facilities are lacking, two or three men will go ashore while one man tends the boat. Smaller islands will necessitate the shuttling of men back and forth between islands. We will have to watch the weather closely. The wind can quickly change direction and blow in a fog bank or churn up the water so that we may need to take a quick trip back to the mainland. The ebb and flow of the tide will be able to launch the boat, as we have some of the highest tides in the world.

The islands and bays are a remarkable ecosystem with a rugged environment. The islands are composed of granite and schist bedrock. The granite industry was once a big business and quarries are common. Maine granite was chosen for many of the fine old buildings and monuments in the East. The soil parent materials are of glacial origin. Shallow glacial tills, outwash, and organic soils are common. Spruce and balsam fir are the dominant vegetation. Hiking through this dense native vegetation can be difficult.

Island population swells greatly with the influx of summer vacationers. During the rest of the year a few hardy year-round island people fish, lobster, and clam for a living. The islands provide nesting sites for bald eagles, hawks, ospreys, gulls, terns, and the resurgent puffins. Commonly, herds of seals are seen basking in the sun on the ledges. Several whale species also grace the bays. Surveying the soils on the islands and learning more about them is the finest way I can think of to conclude the Knox and Lincoln Counties Soil Survey.

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