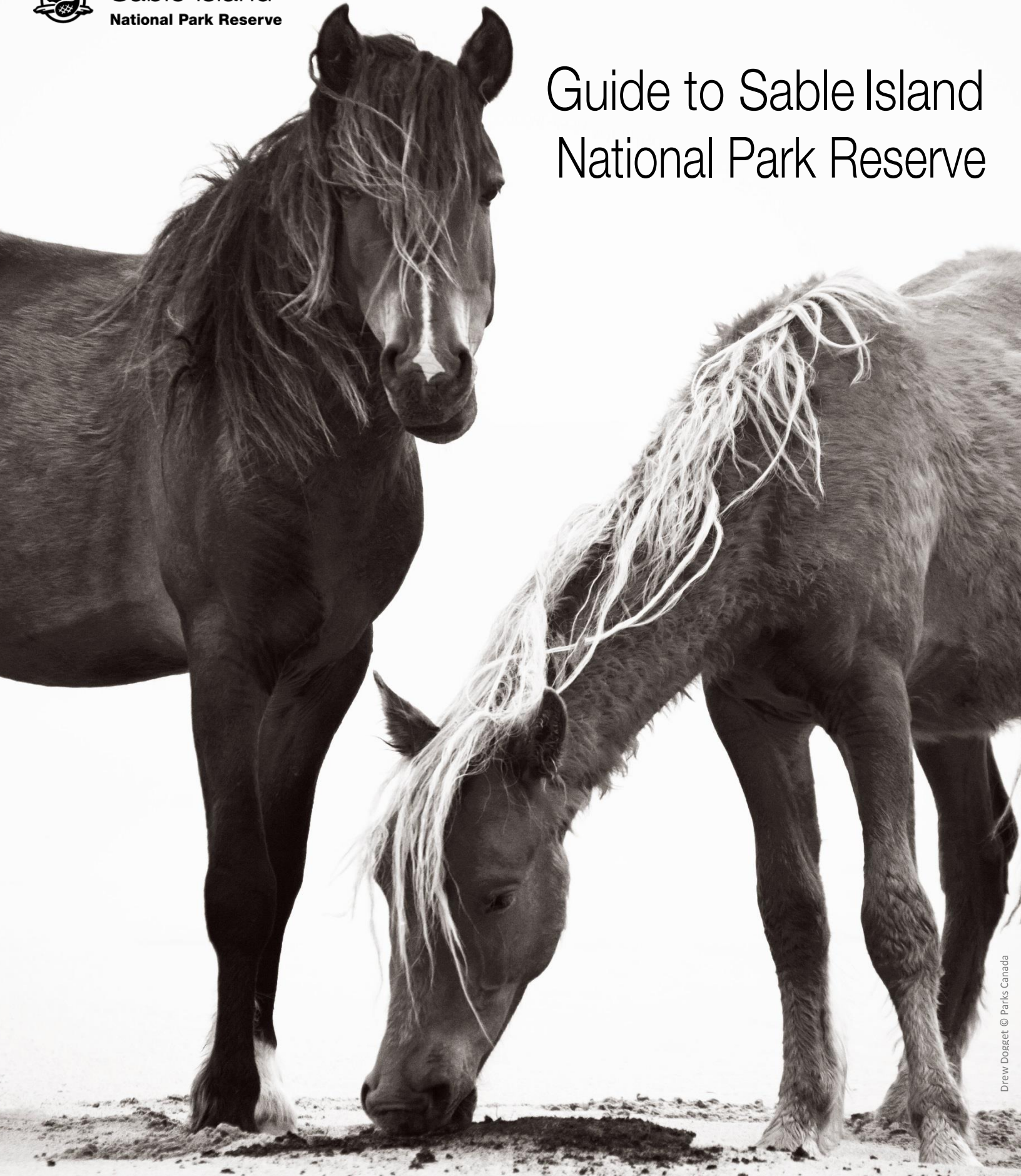




Sable Island  
National Park Reserve

# Guide to Sable Island National Park Reserve



Drew Doggett © Parks Canada



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## Introduction to Sable Island National Park Reserve



© Parks Canada / P. Illsley

A wild and windswept island of sand sits far out in the North Atlantic, its iconic crescent shape emerging from the expanse of the sea. Isolated and remote, Sable Island is one of Canada's furthest offshore islands. Shifting sand dunes, among Eastern Canada's largest, dominate the landscape. The famous Sable Island wild horses roam freely, and the world's biggest breeding colony of grey seals uses its extensive beaches. Freshwater ponds hint at the life-sustaining freshwater lens floating below the island. Plants, birds, and insects have adapted to life on Sable Island, some of which are found nowhere else on earth.

Sable Island has a long and fascinating human history which spans more than four centuries. Over 350 vessels have been wrecked due to rough seas, fog, and submerged sandbars surrounding the island, earning it the title "Graveyard of the Atlantic". Canada's first life-saving station, established in 1801, was built here. Sable Island is a testament to survival in an unlikely environment.

Sable Island National Park Reserve is an extremely isolated location, and access to it is determined by constraints of weather and geography. Visitor experience opportunities are similar to other remote national parks in Canada, where there are few visitor facilities and the wilderness of the site constitutes an important feature of the experience.

As a visitor to Sable Island, you must be self-reliant and responsible for your own safety. You should be prepared for weather delays accessing or departing the island. Visitors are responsible to make their own



transportation arrangements to Sable Island, and most visits are day trips. Visitors either arrive by air charter or come ashore from private vessels that are anchored offshore.

All visitors are required to register in advance of their trip. The visitor season on Sable Island is June to the end of October.

The information in this guide provides you with essential safety information and important guidelines for your visit. Parks Canada considers researchers, contractors, government employees, media, and independent travellers all to be visitors.

For more information about the natural and cultural history of Sable Island, or the establishment and management of the national park reserve, please go to the Parks Canada website at [www.pc.gc.ca/sable](http://www.pc.gc.ca/sable).



Aerial view of Sable Island. Debra Garside / © Parks Canada



Terns flying above the beach. Debra Garside / © Parks Canada



A harbour seal pup appears to be smiling. Debra Garside / © Parks Canada



# Maps of Sable Island National Park Reserve

Sable Island is situated in the Atlantic Ocean near the edge of the Continental Shelf, 290 km offshore from Halifax, Nova Scotia. The closest landfall is Canso, Nova Scotia, at 161 km, making it one of Canada's furthest offshore islands. It is a thin crescent shape, made up entirely of sand, and is approximately 42 km long and 1.3 km across at its widest point.

## Regional Map





# Map of Sable Island



© Parks Canada



A family band of wild horses walks near West Light. The Sable Island horse population has historically ranged between 150 and 450 individuals.  
© Parks Canada



# How to Get There

## Registration

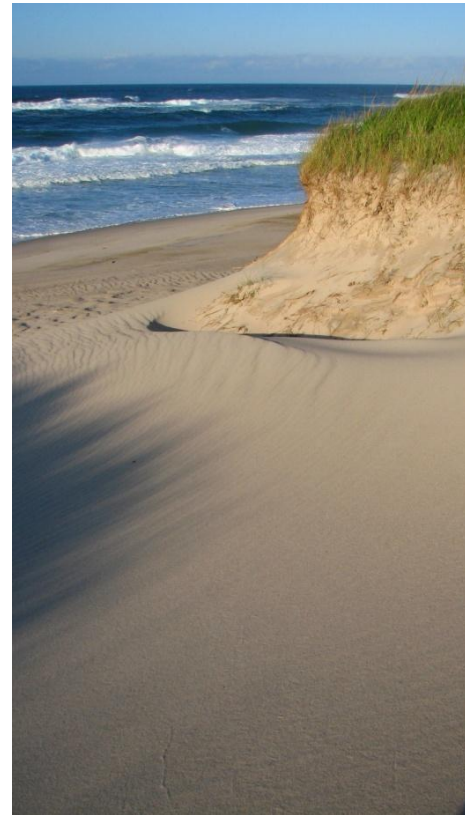
Sable Island is accessible by air and by sea. You are required to register with Parks Canada prior to your trip to Sable Island National Park Reserve.

Although the visitor season on Sable Island is June to the end of October, the most favourable travel conditions exist between August and October, since fog is often thick from late June to early August, and can impede air access.

Most visits to Sable Island National Park Reserve are day trips. Availability of overnight accommodations is extremely limited. In special circumstances staff accommodations may be available for overnight visits, but space is limited and is subject to operational requirements. Camping is not permitted on Sable Island at this time.

Registration is required for any duration of visit including vessels that plan to anchor offshore and make a beach landing. Please contact us for a visitor registration form: **Email:** [pc.sable.pc@canada.ca](mailto:pc.sable.pc@canada.ca) / **Phone:** 902-426-1500

Instructions for submitting completed registration forms are included on the form. Information required for registration includes names and number of people in the party, detailed contact information, mode of transportation to and from the island, projected dates of arrival and departure, and details of logistical support required (aircraft landing, boat landing, or accommodations).



Dunes and shifting sand on north beach © Parks Canada

## Arriving by Air

Air charter is the most common way to get to Sable Island, since most people only make day trips. Sable Aviation 44 60 Inc. is the provider of this service to Sable Island, with a 7-passenger Britten- Norman Islander plane. Based on normal wind conditions, the flight from the Halifax Stanfield International Airport to Sable Island is about one hour and fifteen minutes; the return is approximately one hour forty minutes.



Island personnel greet visitors beside a plane on the sand runway of south beach. © Parks Canada

There is no permanent runway on Sable Island, so the plane lands and takes off on the south beach of the island. Parks Canada personnel assess and mark runways based on the changing conditions of the beach. Flooding of this beach due to severe storm surges can interrupt air service to the island for days or weeks at a time.

Main Station is located just inland from the south beach; however, given the condition of the beach, the actual landing location could be up to half an



hour's drive. Parks Canada personnel and vehicles will meet the plane to provide logistical support and transportation as long as arrangements have been made in advance and logistics confirmed prior to take-off from Halifax.

Fees are charged to the visitor for flight support services on the island, including logistics, runway preparation, and transport (see *Fees* section). These fees are in addition to the cost of the air charter.

For scheduling, availability, pricing, and other information about air charter, contact Sable Aviation 44 60 Inc.: Phone: (902) 860-3994 | Email: office@sableaviation.ca | Web: www.sableaviation.ca

## Arriving by Sea

Arriving by sea is a truly authentic way to experience Sable Island, to appreciate its stunning landscape, and to connect with its long and rich history.

The possibility of heavy fog, shifting sandbars, and rough seas in the waters around Sable Island can pose challenges to boat access. There are no wharf facilities on Sable Island, and vessels must anchor offshore and have a zodiac or other small boat suitable for a beach landing through the surf. If you are in charge of a vessel, the following guidelines are critical for a safe landing:

- Anyone planning to travel to Sable Island must register with Parks Canada for their trip prior to departure.
- Following registration and confirmation of a visit, vessels should contact the Parks Canada Operations Coordinator on the island before departing the mainland to ensure that island personnel are aware of their itinerary, and to ensure vessels are informed of activities or conditions on the island or offshore that may affect their plans. The Operations Coordinator can be reached at (902) 492-4678.
- Vessels should contact the island on Marine Radio Channel 8 or 16 or with a satellite phone when within 10 nautical miles of the island to confirm their safe arrival, and to obtain any special instructions.
- Vessels must anchor off the north side of the island, opposite Main Station – at longitude 60.01W. There are submerged sand bars off the beach, and vessels should maintain their distance – 500 meters is usually sufficient, although there are times small boats are able to approach within 200 meters. A zodiac or small boat suitable for landing in surf is required to get ashore and make a beach landing.
- Vessels should contact Sable Island on Marine Radio Channel 8 or 16 or with a satellite phone to advise when they are anchored. The Operations Coordinator can file or close sailing plans as required.



A zodiac after transferring passengers from a ship anchored offshore.  
Debra Garside / © Parks Canada

- Visitors must not attempt to land on the beach until Parks Canada personnel are in position to monitor their arrival, provide transportation to Main Station if required, and to provide an orientation and safety briefing to Sable Island.

- Changing conditions may make it difficult for a small boat to land or depart from the island, so sailors should exercise caution coming through the surf zone, and should have experience in managing beach landings in rough surf. Please note that surf conditions can be very difficult when winds are blowing





toward the beach or along the beach (West to East through North), and/or if there is any swell from the north.

- All passengers must have life jackets for beach landings, and zodiacs or small boats must not be overloaded beyond manufacturer's recommended carrying capacity.
- When boat passengers are landing on, departing, or walking on the island, they should have a VHF marine radio or satellite phone in order to maintain contact with the boat anchored offshore and with island personnel.
- When departing the island, boat passengers should provide radio / phone confirmation to island personnel to indicate that they have left the island and are safely back on board the anchored vessel.

## Delays on the Island

Sable Island is a very remote island, and often experiences a wide variety of weather conditions, including fog, high waves, and wind. Due to poor weather or a lack of a safe landing area, you must be prepared for delays in transportation schedules, both when attempting to arrive on the island and when attempting to depart.

Normal delays might last a day or two, although significantly longer delays are not uncommon. You must ensure you have adequate supplies to account for unplanned delays.

Visitors should also ensure that they have adequate budget and flexibility in their schedule to be able to deal with travel delays. Visitors may be on the mainland for extra days awaiting a suitable flight, or may be left on the island awaiting suitable

conditions to depart. Both situations affect travel itineraries and impact accommodations costs. If a delay persists when a visitor is on the island, emergency accommodations and provisions may be available. There are fees for these services.



Stormy skies. Sarah Medill / © Parks Canada



Main Station has, among other infrastructure, weather monitoring equipment, staff accommodations, workshops, emergency supplies, power generation, water treatment, and communications equipment. © Environment Canada/D. Fenton

## Main Station

Parks Canada and Environment Canada's Meteorological Service of Canada collaborate to provide a year-round human presence on Sable Island. Island personnel are based at Main Station.

Main Station acts as the operational hub of island activities and programs. It is your point of arrival on Sable Island after landing either by airplane or vessel. Restroom facilities and drinking water are available to visitors.



You might interact with researchers, weather station technicians, and staff while at Main Station, allowing you to learn about the island. As each of these individuals have duties to fulfil, please respect their operational requirements.

Main Station is within walking distance of key features of Sable Island National Park Reserve.

## Fees

To facilitate the use of the island by researchers, contractors, visitors or government staff, on-island services are provided on a cost-recovery basis. Parks Canada is currently reviewing fees for Sable Island National Park Reserve.

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### Fee Schedule

**Flight Support Fee for Aircraft Landing.** This fee includes transportation between the landing area and to/from Main Station. Note that for flights booked through Sable Aviation, they will collect and remit this fee on your behalf.

Fixed Wing \$500 each flight

Helicopter \$500 each flight

**Emergency Food Rations**

\$55.00 per day

A receipt for goods or services provided will be issued prior to the departure of your party. A detailed mailing address must be provided at that time.

An invoice will be issued and payment will be expected within 30 days.

No payments for goods or services will be accepted by island personnel.

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## On-island Travel

A well-organized day trip offers visitors the opportunity to experience many of the most compelling aspects of Sable Island National Park Reserve. The area around Main Station has many iconic features within walking distance. You can explore rolling windswept dunes, walk along beaches on both the north and south sides of the island, see wild horses, seals, birds, freshwater ponds, remnants of the island's history, and experience the isolated nature of being on a remote island in the midst of the North Atlantic.



A hiker walks by the dunes flanking north beach. The high dunes of Sable Island are one of Eastern Canada's largest dune systems. © Parks Canada

Be aware that walking on sand for prolonged periods can be more difficult than equivalent distances on hard surfaces or solid terrain. The sandy terrain and wilderness setting can prove challenging to some people. Please be aware of these accessibility issues when planning your visit. Keep in mind that Parks Canada staff will transport you and your gear from the south beach landing area to Main Station if you are arriving by plane.



Horses supplement their diet with kelp and seaweed on the beach © Parks Canada

Vehicle use on Sable Island is currently restricted to activities in support of park administration and to facilitate research. Use of vehicles abides by strict regulations to ensure safe travel, avoid disturbance to wildlife, and minimize impacts on natural and cultural resources. Vehicles may travel on the hard-packed sand of the beaches, the short stretches of defined roads around Main Station, and on select approved island crossing locations. Vehicles are restricted from driving on vegetation, dune slopes, or sand blowouts. Vehicles must avoid horses, seals, or birds, and travel slowly on all parts of the island.



# Protecting Sable Island

Sable Island is a wild, remote, and fragile island. The guidelines below will help ensure that your visit is memorable, safe, and sustainable.

## Leave only Footprints, Take only Pictures



Wooden part of an old shipwreck © Parks Canada

In a national park, it is illegal to collect rocks, shells, animal specimens, plants, or cultural artefacts. Over time, removal of plants, shells, or other natural elements can have negative effects on the ecosystem of Sable Island. Sable Island has a rich history, with over 350 recorded ship wrecks since 1583 and continuous human habitation since 1801. Visitors will occasionally find artefacts from shipwrecks or old settlements on the island. We encourage you to photograph your findings, and report discoveries to Parks Canada personnel at Main Station. Removal of any artefacts is not permitted.

## Watch Where You Step

Sand dunes, held together and stabilized by vegetation, are vulnerable to disturbance. All activities, including foot traffic, are not permitted on steep dune slopes, whether those slopes are vegetated or not, since this can lead to dune collapse and blow-outs. Walking on stable vegetation in areas away from steep dunes is permitted, but please follow existing horse paths as much as possible.

There are quite a few plants on Sable Island that have very restricted distribution elsewhere. Many of these grow in wet sites with lush vegetation, so please minimize your activities in these areas.

The hard-packed sand of the beaches is the easiest and best place to travel.



Hikers using existing horse paths through dune grass © Parks Canada



## Keep the Wildlife Wild



Horses must be respected as wild animals © Parks Canada

The wild horses are Sable Island National Park Reserve's most famous feature. It is important to remember that the horses are wild animals and must not be harassed, interfered with, or fed. If you are approached by the horses, please back away and remove yourself and maintain a respectful distance from the horses (20 metres) so as not to interfere with their behaviour. Do not approach young foals. There have been a number of instances where people have been injured by horses. In all cases, humans were agitating the horses, trying to feed them, trying to pet them, or interfering in herd movements. Please be careful!

Grey seals are the most common large animal on the island, with large breeding colonies throughout the island for the pupping season of December and January. Up to 50,000 pups can be born in a given year. During the summer, their numbers are reduced but they are still common. Harbour seals are also year-round residents but are less numerous than Grey seals. They breed in May and June. This population is in decline and it is important to avoid disturbing them, either on vehicles or on foot. Seals can bite! Keep your distance and avoid getting in their way.



Harbour seals basking on north beach © Parks Canada



Gulls flying over West Spit. Gulls and terns will aggressively defend their nests © Parks Canada

There have been more than 350 species of birds recorded on Sable Island, with sixteen species breeding in the island's various habitats. During spring and summer, care must be taken to avoid disturbing ducks, shorebirds, and sparrows nesting in the areas of heath and pond-edge vegetation. Tern colonies should be avoided on the dunes or on the open beaches during April through July. Both terns and gulls will aggressively defend their nests, and can injure humans. If you find yourself 'under attack' turn and leave the area immediately.



There are 18 species of shark found in the waters of the Scotian Shelf. You may notice that the beach contains carcasses of seals that bear evidence of shark predation.

Swimming is currently not permitted for your own protection.

## Pack In, Pack Out

You are required to bring in all of the food and supplies that are required for your visit, including extra supplies to account for unexpected travel delays.

You will be required to pack out all of the garbage that you have brought to the island. Littering is strictly prohibited. Please pack accordingly.

## To Keep in Mind

The following rules apply to anyone on Sable Island:

- Open-air fires such as beach fires, bonfires, and campfires are prohibited.
- No pets are permitted.
- Camping is not permitted.
- Firearms are prohibited.

## Respecting Research Projects

Sable Island has a tradition of research, which yields fascinating information about the island's ecology and cultural history. While on the island, you might observe the delicate instrument field for weather and atmospheric monitoring at Main Station, researchers involved in Grey seal studies, monitoring of species at risk on the island, researchers collecting specimens for study, or archaeologists at work. If you are interested in learning more about ongoing research projects, please contact Parks Canada personnel.

If you find horse skulls or bones, walrus skulls or bones, beached whales, dolphins, or sea turtles, or any electronic tracking devices that have washed up on the beaches please inform Parks Canada personnel of your discoveries. Photographs and locations of your observations would be helpful.

Similarly, if you find any archaeological or cultural artefacts or remains, please advise Parks Canada staff at Main Station of your discovery.



Horse skeletons are subjects of research on Sable Island © Parks Canada



# Safety

You are responsible for your own safety. Parks Canada can help you prepare by providing you with trip planning information. Remember, a safe visit is a good visit.

Please begin with the tips below. You can contact us with any questions about conditions on the island.

## Visiting a Remote Location

The natural environment can be hazardous if you are not prepared. This is especially true at Sable Island which is an extremely remote location. The normal range of commercial, municipal, and medical services is not available. The nature of the environment means that hazardous conditions can frequently exist and visitors should exercise extra caution.

With the possibility of travel delays and limited medical response on the island, it is possible for minor medical concerns to become life-threatening situations.

It is important to note that there is no cell phone coverage on Sable Island. In case of an emergency, phone calls can be made from Main Station to the Mainland via satellite phone. When hiking around Sable Island it is recommended that visitors carry their own marine radios or satellite phones.



Driftwood washed up on the expansive East Spit sand flats  
© Parks Canada

## Travelling by Air and Sea

Anyone planning to travel to Sable Island National Park Reserve must register for their visit, and must confirm trip details and landing plans in advance of arrival. Landing on Sable Island, either by aircraft or by boat poses some hazards given the variability in landing conditions and weather.

For aircraft passengers, please follow the safety directions provided during the briefing by the pilot, and check with the air charter company for guidelines for safe travel on the aircraft. For visitors arriving by sea, please be aware of the hazards and safety tips associated with beach landings. Please see the *How to Get There* section of this guide for information on safety for air and boat travellers.



## Severe Weather



Hurricane surf conditions at Sable Island pose serious risks © Parks Canada/D. Austin

Located in the North Atlantic, Sable Island can be subject to severe weather conditions. It is advised to bring a variety of clothing and equipment to be prepared for various weather conditions.

Sable Island can experience high wind conditions and has limited shelter. In extreme wind events, please stay indoors if possible and ensure that windows and doors are securely closed and latched. If you must go outside, use exits on the down-wind side of buildings. Pay attention to dangers that exist upwind; there is usually little warning before debris on the ground or parts of buildings become airborne. If you hear flapping, or other noises suggesting something is loose and blowing in the wind, please notify island personnel. In lightning conditions, stay inside and avoid telephones and metal equipment.

## Personal Medication

If you are taking medication you must ensure that you bring sufficient supplies for the duration of your visit, **including extra quantities in case of unplanned delays**. Even day trips run the risk of being prolonged for multiple days so please pack extra medication. If you, or anyone in your group, have known allergies you must provide your own medication and ensure you **carry it with you at all times**.

## Wildlife

All animals on Sable Island are wild animals, including the horses. Please do not feed, approach, or harass wildlife. Seals, horses, nesting birds, and sharks can all pose risks to your safety if you do not respect them as wildlife.

For information on the hazards posed by wildlife, please see the *Protecting Sable Island* section.



Grey seals can be aggressive if agitated © Parks Canada





## Terrain

When you arrive on Sable Island, you can ask Parks Canada personnel about known or temporary hazards on the island. You should ensure that someone on the island knows your travel plans including departure time, route, and expected time of return. It is a good idea to carry your own marine radio or satellite phone and develop response plans within your group or with Parks Canada personnel. See section below on Emergency Contact Numbers.

When travelling away from the Main Station area, you should carry dry clothing in a waterproof pack. Please be aware of hazards in the terrain:

- Quicksand, salt-water slush, and ice covered water
- Flood conditions
- Uneven terrain, unstable ground, and steep slopes
- Flotsam and jetsam, litter and debris on the beach
- Shifting drainage rivers



Hiking up Bald Dune © Parks Canada

## Emergency Contact Numbers

In case of an emergency on the island you may be asked to assist Parks Canada personnel with a response.

In a first aid situation, you should advise the Operations Coordinator or other island personnel immediately, and administer first aid as required and as you are able.

In case of a structural fire on the island, or upon hearing a fire alarm, there are marked muster points at the Main Station where you should gather and wait in safety until direction from the Operations Coordinator. If you detect a fire, you should sound the fire alarm and evacuate the building and contact the Operations Manager.

### **Operations Coordinator:**

- Dial 0 on the on-island telephone system
- Call (902) 492-4678 from a satellite phone or from the mainland
- Or use Channel 08 on Marine Radio VHF-FM

### **For distress call (either air or marine):**

- 1 800 565 1582 (Joint Rescue Coordination Centre)

### **For an environmental emergency (marine pollution):**

- 1800 565 1633 (Canadian Coast Guard Marine Communications and Traffic Services Centre)



## Weather

Sable Island's climate is tempered by the ocean, and is usually milder than mainland Nova Scotia. Although it can be subject to severe weather conditions, including strong winds, the winter temperatures rarely drop below  $-13^{\circ}\text{C}$ , with normals between  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $5^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Summer temperatures in August do not usually rise above  $25^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Located in the North Atlantic, Sable Island is the windiest place in Nova Scotia, and is subject to frequent fog.

People planning to travel to Sable Island should be prepared for a variety of weather conditions in any season.

Check the Environment Canada Weather Office Marine Forecast website for the Sable Island weather forecast and current weather conditions.



© Parks Canada



Evening light on south beach dunes © Parks Canada



## How to Reach Us

For general inquiries:

**Sable Island National Park Reserve**  
Parks Canada  
1869 Upper Water Street  
Suite AH 201  
Halifax, Nova Scotia  
B3J 1S9  
Phone: 1 902-426-1500  
Fax: 1 902-426-4228  
Email: [pc.sable.pc@canada.ca](mailto:pc.sable.pc@canada.ca)



Young horse on beach in winter © Parks Canada/D. Austin