

A storm survivor, Swan Island offers tours, history

| August 24, 2018

BY CHRIS QUATTRUCCI
Times Record Staff



SWAN ISLAND was able to recover from October wind storm damage, with trucks bringing fallen trees off the island 10-15 times a day. There are still plenty of chances to experience the island in September. CHRIS QUATTRUCCI / THE TIMES RECORD

RICHMOND

Perched in the Kennebec River near Richmond, Swan Island endured the brunt of the infamous October 2017 windstorm, leaving Maine Department of Inland Fish and Wildlife to clean up 120 acres of damaged forest. Despite the bustle of 10-15 trucks daily taking the downed trees across the Kennebec River, the island remained open to the public.

On Saturday, a morning island tour with island staff will give visitors a chance to explore an array of wildlife habitats. Visitors will have two chances to learn about the long history of the once-inhabited island through a pair of historical tours with the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay in September.

Following the storm, Friends of Swan Island Chairman Ed Friedman took to the air with wildlife biologist John Pratte to survey the damage. While they saw a significant amount of tree loss, it remains to be seen how island's natural environment could be affected. The loss of shade opens up the opportunity for a new, drier habitat to develop in some areas.

“The downside is when you have to do something like that, those trees are a habitat as well,” said Friedman. “There are a lot of critters out there that use it as a jungle gym.”

Friedman said he has been monitoring the tree removal project from the air. Although the view is a little different from above, there's still a lot of nature to explore on the island.

TOURING THE ISLAND

“The historical tours are fun events,” said Friends Chairman Ed Friedman. “I don’t think anyone has studied the island or knows more than Jay Robbins.”

Robbins is a member of Friedman’s organization, and also heads up a group of his own that supports the island. Robbins has plenty of stories to share about the island — once known as Perkins Township — including the days when the last residents abandoned it.

“1846 is when it became a town unto itself,” said Robbins. “That was until 1917, there wasn’t enough male voters to hold all of the constitutional offices to be a town.”

The state began acquiring the land in the 1940s, and the Stephen Powell Wildlife Management area was named in 1988. The island is managed by the Maine Department of Inland Fish and Wildlife.

Robbins and the Friends group are looking forward to providing more historical background while enjoying nature.

“The nice thing is, we break up into groups and I give them the history of the island,” said Robbins. “It’s not a rigid schedule, there’s plenty of time to walk around and hang out.”

Saturday morning’s island tour begins at 7 a.m. Island staff will also host a lobster bake with a tour of Little Swan Island on Sept. 15. The historical tours of the island take place on Sept. 7 and 16, including a two-hour tour by boat circumnavigating the island.

chris@timesrecord.com