

BEACHCOMBING FOR GEMSTONES ON GRAND MANAN ISLAND

By Curtis H. Gates
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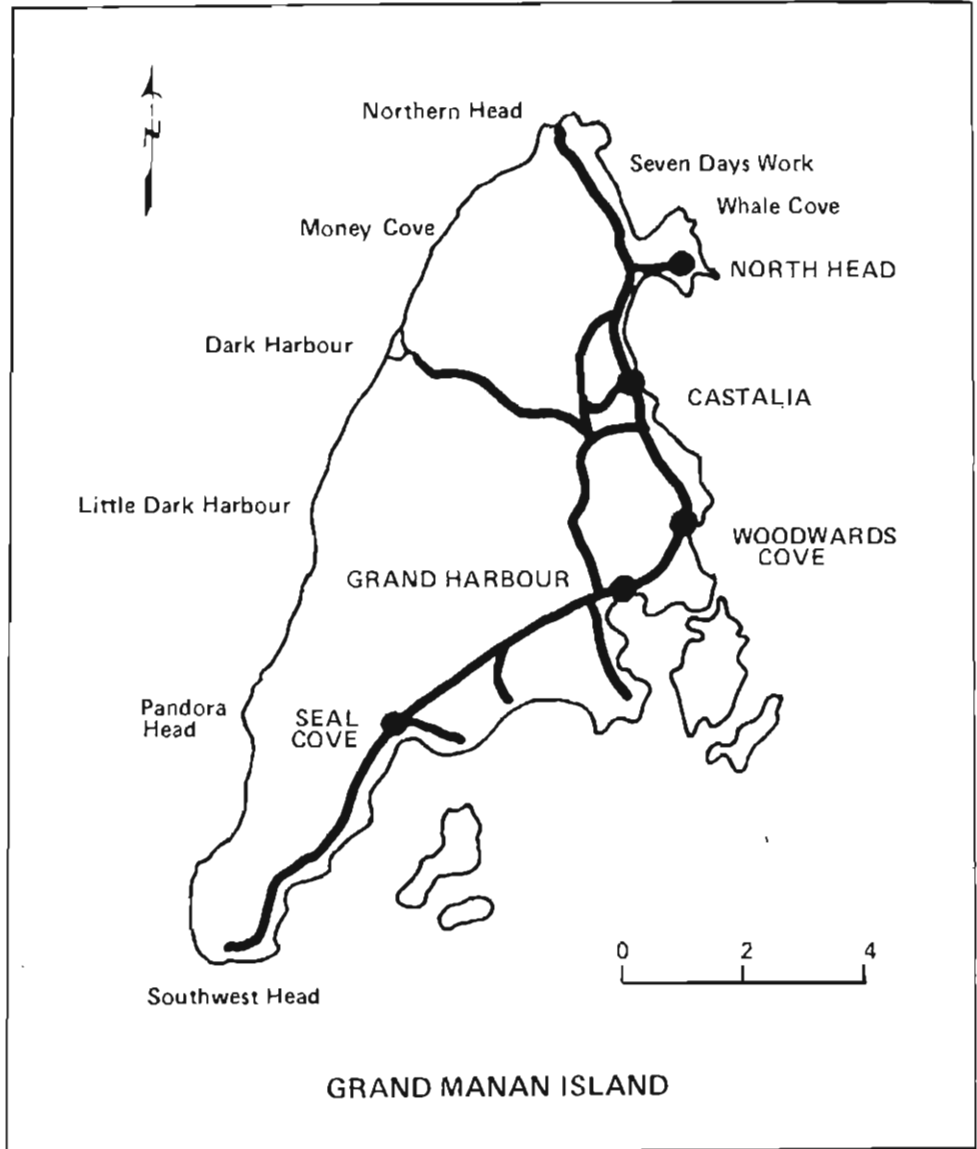
The Bay of Fundy area has always been a popular agate and mineral collecting area, especially with New Englanders and New Yorkers whose home states have never produced an abundance of capping or tumbling material. In the Fundy area, as in most places, collectors invariably overwork a few localities and leave the rest of the area virtually unexplored. Grand Manan Island, up until recently, has remained off the beaten path of tourist and rockhound alike. Approximately fifteen miles long and six miles wide, Grand Manan is situated in the mouth of the Bay of Fundy. This Canadian island, which is less than ten miles from the coast of Maine, is now relatively accessible by auto, thanks to a seagoing ferry which makes two trips a day from Black's Harbor, New Brunswick.

Geologically speaking, Grand Manan is practically all basalt. Cliffs of basalt guard the island on three sides, forming dark ramparts which tower up to four hundred feet. In some places the basalt occurs in classic columnar formations and the talus heaps below look like piles of giant crystals. In other places the basalt is vesicular and contains excellent specimens of zeolite minerals. The gem hunter's basalt, however, is that which contains seams of agate, bloodstone and amethyst.

Specimen quality amethyst is fairly abundant on Grand Manan beaches, occurring as seams of tightly interlocked crystals which are invariably pale. The seams, one to six inches thick, frequently contain sparkling vugs. Typical of Fundy amethyst though, very few seams will produce anything suitable for cutting. Books mention the occurrence of gorges between North Head and Dark Harbour, but I have never been lucky enough to verify the claims. But I can verify the occurrence of other gem materials, namely agate, jasper, bloodstone, porphyry and unakite.

The most interesting lapidary material found there is a type of seam chalcedony which can be cut into fine bloodstone cabochons. It is abundant enough to supply vacationing hobbyists, yet scattered enough to frustrate the commercial collector. The material is not a typical bloodstone in which red spots occur uniformly throughout a green matrix, but a chalcedony sandwich, so to speak, with a red moss agate core centered between two green layers of plasma. The interface between the red and green layers is irregular; and if the base of a cabochon is cut parallel to the layers, the top of the cabochon will have an unusual blood-on-stone pattern.

This bloodstone material can be found all along the beach at Whale Cove and for approximately half a mile up the shore toward a cliff called Seven Days Work.



Grand Manan is a Canadian island less than ten miles from the coast of Maine. A paved road connects the villages along the eastern shore. Other roads provide access to Dark Harbour and Whale Cove, both of which are of interest to the beachcombing rockhound. Most of the western side of the island is accessible only by foot or boat.

More about this cliff later. The best way to find the bloodstone is to arrive at the beach just when the tide is going out and walk back and forth along the receding waterline. On a sunny day the material flashes a bright green, making it extremely easy to spot.

The tides at Grand Manan are among the highest in the world, a condition which exposes a great deal of beach at low tide and also presents an attractive hazard to the unsuspecting beachcomber, when the tide comes in, it covers a lot of dry land in a hurry. Rising water can't trap you at Whale Cove, but elsewhere on the island you can find your retreat cut off by icy

surf. Under these circumstances it's too late to run and you will have to sit, swim or climb. To twist an old saying, time and tide for no last piece of agate wait.

Returning to the cliff called Seven Days Work. It was named not for the amount of effort it takes to walk there, but for the horizontal layers of basalt of which it is composed. It's a rather slow walk to it if you follow the beach from Whale Cove, but it's only a ten to fifteen minute stroll if you use a trail which follows Eel Brook down from the highway. This trail leaves the highway just beyond a dump (rubbish type, not rock). If you have a personality which is annoyed by irrationality, be sure



Top left—Basalt cliffs rise to four hundred feet in places. Below the cliffs, an abundance of rock makes progress slow, especially for the gem hunter. But the scenery is spectacular and the beach-combing interesting.

Lower left—Nearly all of Grand Manan's beaches are rocky, but this is all to the gem hunter's advantage.

Top right—Fog drifts through the island's picturesque fishing villages through much of the year—unfortunately even in spring and early summer, the time when rock hunting is at its best due to winter storms. Chances for clear weather are best in late summer and early fall.

Lower right—Rocky beaches such as those along the Grand Manan coast line provide good rock hunting, especially after a high tide.


not to count the layers of basalt in Seven Days Work, an endeavor which is likely to ruin your day. Be forewarned that you have to stand in one particular spot to see

seven layers; anywhere else there are from five to nine. Even at that one spot, it is necessary to decide whether the thin layers between the main layers boost the total

of work to two weeks or more.

The spot may be called Seven Days Work, but it takes only a few minutes to
(Continued on Page 1622)

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Seam chalcidony from Whale Cove. The most interesting material, which can be cut into fine bloodstone cabochons, has a red moss agate core surrounded by a green rind of plasma. The inner beach at Dark Harbour is a good place to find jasper, unakite and porphyry.

locate some fine specimens of zeolite minerals—scolecite, heulandite, natrolite, laumontite, etc. My father has picked up several nice pieces of gray agate there, and also a piece of beautiful carnelian. These were real teasers because the original seams are probably up above in the cliff, no doubt at midnight of day number seven. The occasional pieces of white moss agate found at Whale Cove are teasers for the same reason. But I am at a loss to explain the unakite and porphyry at Dark Harbour. Further exploration may provide some clues.

The source of the bloodstone material at Whale Cove is a section of cliff between Whale Cove and Seven Days Work. To be exact, directly below where a rope arches down from the top of the cliff to a herring trap out in the water. Two years ago I gathered a knapsack full of cutting material there. This summer, however, Whale Cove beach was the more productive spot.

Here are a few words on how to get to the island, where to stay, and how to add dimension to what might be just another rock trip. Frequent highway signs in New Brunswick make it easy to find the ferry at Black's Harbor. There's always passenger room on the ferry, but get in line early if you want to take your car. The ferry can carry two dozen cars each trip, but the exact number depends on how many trucks and trailers are going along too. Except for the mail truck, vehicle space is on a first come first served basis; and if you want to be sure of returning to the mainland on a weekend, it might be necessary to leave your car in line overnight. Enough said on that score. The two hour trip is pleasant and a school of porpoise or a spouting whale will usually provide some entertainment. As for accommodations, there are a number of inns, cabins, tourist homes, etc.; a list of which can be obtained from the Board of Trade, Grand Manan, N.B. In addition, there is a campground at Castalia.

No beachcombing expedition worth its salt would be complete without some gesture toward living off the land, or sea as

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it were. Grand Manan is famous for a particular type of seafood which can be gathered along the beaches near Dark Harbour. This crisp delicacy, called dulse, is an edible seaweed which is gathered from the rocks at low tide and then dried in the sun to bring out its flavor. What does it taste like? It's almost indescribable. A salty poem of the sea is about the best description I can offer.

Gemstones and edible seaweed are not the only rewards for the beachcomber. There is an abundance of bleached driftwood (from pine stumps to mahogany planks), fishnet, nylon rope, and to the delight of children, an assortment of sea urchins, sand dollars, lobster claws and clam shells. In the middle of August the island meadows offer wild blueberries, raspberries and caraway seeds.

Bird watchers outnumber rockhounds on Grand Manan; in fact, Grand Manan is a virtual Mt. Mica for ornithologists. Because the island is situated in a natural funnel for migratory birds, there is a great variety of transient and permanent avian residents — the Wilson's Warbler, Duck Hawk, Bald Eagle and Gannet to name a few.

Whether you want to hunt rocks or watch birds, the island's game warden and ranger, the remarkable Vernon Bagley is the best source of information about foot trails and how to get to places that don't even have a trail. The March 1968 *Reader's Digest* carried a spellbinding account of how he roped down one of the island's cliffs in a winter storm to rescue a shipwrecked fisherman, an act for which he received the Carnegie Silver Medal for heroism. Having guided some copper prospecting outfits around the island, Vernon has a good knowledge of what type of rock can be found where.

Recently he had the satisfaction of finding a "lost" copper mine, a personal quest he had been conducting for several years. Although there was ample evidence that the mine did exist, no amount of searching could locate it. Century old records mentioned that the mine tunnel was near the beach at Sloop Cove and that the ore was loaded directly onto ships. Vernon had conversed with people who could recall seeing the mine years ago; however, their memories could never pinpoint the location. When he finally discovered the mine, it was during an all out attempt for one of the prospecting outfits. The moment of enlightenment came during one of the infrequent times he sits down to rest. Noticing a section of hewn timber all but buried under the talus at his feet, he called the prospecting crew over. Clearing the rockslide away, they exposed the tunnel, which ran straight back under a cliff for several hundred feet to end in a pool of clear water. Since much of the rock on the island is stained green by copper, I suspect that the green color of the Whale Cove bloodstone may be due to the presence of this mineral.

The Grand Manan museum, which has pieces of native copper on display, is a worthwhile place to visit. For the beachcombing rockhound, high tide is always a good time. It is a bright, cheery place and the hostess is a good source of information.
(Continued on Page 1624)

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mation. She has answers to most questions, and even better, the names of local experts. The mineral collection includes polished specimens of agate from Whale Cove and Seven Days Work. Also on display are relics salvaged by scuba divers from ships which unexpectedly ended their voyages in Grand Manan waters, strewn everything from brass cannon to black-glass bottles onto the ocean floor. A picture window in the museum provides a fine view of one of the more treacherous shoals—when it's not obscured by fog.

The Grand Manan fishermen collect tons of a lustrous material for the jewelry trade, but you will probably never see an ad for it in the *Lapidary Journal*. The substance? Herring scales. It seems that the "pearl essence" used in costume jewelry and fingernail polish is frequently this byproduct of an industry which supplies our tables with sardines and kippers. Naturally, the herring will never threaten the oyster's status, but this ubiquitous fish no doubt enhances the beauty of many more women.

There are times and places for high-pressure gem hunting, where the name of the game is to work fast and carry away as much loot as possible. I doubt that these tactics will work on Grand Manan. The thing to do is walk the beaches at a leisurely pace, converse with the people and enjoy a spot which has remained isolated from superhighways, supermarkets and super activity. You will collect just as much gem material—and enjoy it a lot more. ⊕

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