

## A heady mix of skinny from Isles of Shoals

*In this column, I will share stories and observations from the Isles of Shoals and beyond. Some six miles south-southeast of the mouth of the Piscataqua River, this amazing and historic place is host to a variety of interesting vessels, wildlife and people – a rest stop on the East Coast maritime highway.*

**F**orgive me if the following dispatch is a bit disjointed. The demands of finishing projects and opening up the island are at their height right now, and the best I can muster tonight is a partially embellished list of some of the notable recent events and preparations for the summer season.

The Coast Guard presented us with the gift of a brand new bell buoy last week. The “IOS” buoy is located in the thoroughfare, on the approach to Gosport Harbor from America (as the old Shoalers called the mainland). When the fog shuts down on the way out, that buoy is the first concrete indication that your compass, aided by GPS and radar, was not leading you astray for an hour or so after all. Freshly painted red and white, it signifies that the Islands are ready for visitors.

Have you ever thought about how great the aids to navigation system is on our coast? Over the years, the system has evolved out of necessity and experience – with the happy result that the most important obstacles are marked as they should be, and there is a safe and reliable sign of good water and safe passage for pretty much every destination. The whole thing is quietly maintained, and constantly improved, by smart people like the crew of the buoy tender *Abbie Burgess*, which carefully placed our shiny new buoy right where I know I’ll need it on the next misty morning ride out.

By the way, have I mentioned how much I love the Coast Guard? Always there, and always ready to go out whenever needed: Life on the water (especially in the off season, when no one else is out here) is so much easier knowing that help is a mere radio call away.

At the Shoals, we have also relied on the Portsmouth Fire Boat for many years for emergency medical assistance, and we are grateful for the many calls and emergency transports they have made. When the city considered selling the boat last month, we thought we might have a problem. But the Coast Guard, at Station Portsmouth, stepped in with enthusiasm and pride, agreeing to provide whatever emergency assistance we might need.

“What about rough-weather evacuations?” I asked.

“We’ll get there,” was the confident reply from the young coxswain. The Guard will work hand-in-hand with our friends at the Rye, N.H., Fire Department to get help to the Islands when we need it. Stuff like this makes it easier to pay your taxes.

Speaking of the Rye Fire Department, Star Island hosted four of its members at our annual pre-opening inspection last week. In addition to helping us keep the Island and buildings ever safer by checking up on our water supply, sprinkler and alarm systems, and emergency evacuation procedures, Rye Fire also provides staff training including hands-on hose and extinguisher experience. Really fun to watch.

Two weeks ago we concluded the rowboat restoration project (highlighted previously in this column) by hosting the Strawberry Banke Boat Shop and Portsmouth High School Building Trades Program students, along with

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the gundalow *Piscataqua*. On Wednesday, the students came out with us on the workboat *Utopia* with two of the six refurbished boats. We toured the island, and as required by the school's curriculum, focused on history, sustainability and construction project management (all of which we have in abundance). And then we launched the boats, and watched the pride and excitement, as the students rowed around the harbor, some for the first time. Islands are a perfect platform for inspired education.

The next day, the gundalow *Piscataqua* made a cargo trip to the Isles in the long tradition of marine transport in the Piscataqua region, where these vessels were the mainstay of local coastal shipping. Gundalows carried lumber, clay, hay, livestock, firewood and other essentials from inland river ports to Portsmouth and beyond. The *Piscataqua* carried out four refinished rowboats, several thousand feet of lumber for Oceanic Hotel preservation projects, and two 2,500-gallon water tanks, part of Star Island's sustainable infrastructure improvement program. How cool is that?

With no connection to mainland power on the islands, we have to make our own, and for many years this was primarily done with diesel generators. Now in its second full year, the Star Is-



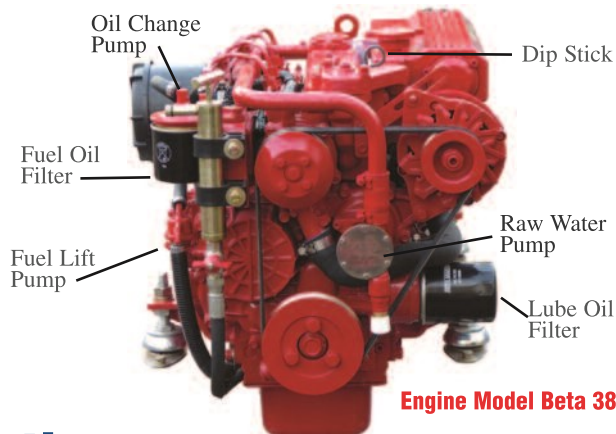
Photo by Jack Farrell

The students came out with us on the workboat *Utopia*, with two of the six boats, and we toured the island before launching the refurbished craft.

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land solar array continues to prove that alternative energy is both viable and economical.

More than that, this system helps us live up to our stated intention to protect the islands and the surrounding marine and air resources from environmental degradation. The new system presently saved about 15,000 gallons of fossil fuel last year, and provides over half of our annual energy needs. We continue to work toward improving these numbers with energy efficiencies and awareness.

We on the islands rely on the help of volunteers for so many jobs that keep the islands running and constantly improving. Islands are a magnet for interesting souls and compelling stories. One of our best volunteers spends half the year in Florida on his 29-foot sailboat, making the annual trek in both directions to spend his spring and early summer at the Shoals, and the rest of the summer cruising in Maine.

He is about to buy a 40-foot sailboat in which to continue this pattern in greater comfort. During the process he asked me what I thought about the upgrade. He was especially concerned about his ability to handle such a large vessel alone. My take on this is that is that 40 feet is still well within the range of singlehanded, especially when equipped and laid out with singlehanded in mind. The stability and working space afforded by a larger vessel can make her easier to manage than a smaller cousin, as long as he takes it slow at first and

has a back up plan when docking. I think he's going to go for it.

We hauled *Utopia* today after six months of hard service for bottom paint and zincs, only to discover that the cutlass bearing had failed. Thanks to Jamie Thompson and Hamilton Marine, we'll be back in business in time for the start of the visitor season next week. Butch Madden at Great Cove Marina in Eliot, Maine, did the hauling. Butch was part of the team at Bruno and Stillman that built this classic Royal Lowell lobsterboat in 1974, and they are both still going strong all these years later.

Our friends at Independent Boat Haulers put the winsome Island launch *Tom Dudley* overboard today. Capt. Marshall will take her back to the Islands in the morning to be readied for a second season of hospitality in Gosport Harbor.

So, as the summer begins to unfold, please plan to stop and visit us at the Isles of Shoals, home of history, art, magical sunsets and inspiration. Whether you come on your own boat or on one of the scheduled trips from the Piscataqua and Rye, you'll be welcome. Hail us on Channel 9 on the weekends. We'll bring you in on the *Tom Dudley*. Take a walk, see the solar array, visit the Island Grill for a lobster roll, and you'll be a Shoaler forever.

*Jack is a USCG 100-ton master and the island manager at Star Island at the Isles of Shoals, where his boat, Aloft, lives most of the summer.*

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