

Reflections from Sable Island:

LIFE, LOSS AND SURVIVAL

by **RHYL FRITH** /// EAC Volunteer

Sable Island's unsheltered environment.

PHOTO: Damian Lidgard

I am writing from a crescent of sand on the far edge of the Continental Shelf, 300 kilometres from my home in Kijipuktuk/Halifax. I am an ebullient observer of the artistry of this seabed and subsoil that expresses far more than the obvious summation of sand, grass and sky. Sable Island is a remnant of glacial history – a realm where life and death intertwine with an inextricable sense of wilderness pervading every inch of the landscape. It is a harsh reality for the creatures who – by fate – call this place their home. Seal pups and horse foals are born into a world unsheltered from death and decay, far from the humans that seek to hide and flee from these realities. The young roam the beaches and the meadows among the still and silent bodies of their kind, a solemn and ubiquitous reminder that survival is for the strongest individuals. The healthy are round, sturdy and full of life – while the weak lie frail and hollow-eyed – their dying bodies betrayed by nature's indifference.

By now, I have covered nearly the entirety of the island on foot, noticing contrasts in light and dark, young and aging, life and death every step of the way. I sit in the grass watching a heartbroken mare lay quietly beside her dying foal while gulls scream overhead, waves crash along the shore and other horses graze nearby, inattentive to her pain. I watch a courting pair of Ipswich sparrows dance gracefully around each other, twirling above the mist-covered heath, full of life and hope for a future. I hear hungry peeps from day-old gull chicks calling to their parents for food, I see seal pups with uncoordinated bodies do their best to scramble out of the way of my approaching footsteps while stallions stand guard over their herd, protecting their foals. I see countless species of birds seeking a resting place on their migratory path across the Atlantic Ocean, many of them lost in this land far from their natural habitats, blown off course in relentless winds.

As I pass by the remnants of sea creatures and shipwrecks that the tides lay to rest on the banks of Sable Island, I contemplate the stories of life and loss buried beneath the sand, remaining forever untold. The windswept dunes and barren stretches are reminders of a world where survival demands loss and resilience as a form of companionship. Here, beauty resides not in what survives – but in the contemplation of survival itself. Here is life; unfiltered, uncompromising, unapologetic and achingly beautiful.

Rhyl (she/her) is based in Halifax and is currently finishing her master's degree in oceanography. She is a big fan of being outside skiing, biking, climbing and seeing things that live in the wild.