

The History of the Scotch Bonnet Light Race

The Scotch Bonnet, sometimes referred to as a reef, other times called an island, is a low-lying two-acre outcropping of limestone that lies about a mile south of Nicholson Island, which itself lies less than a mile southwest of the mainland of Canada's Prince Edward County.

Erected in the early 1850's the Scotch Bonnet Light, was first illuminated atop its 54 foot high stone tower in 1856.

Originally an oil burner, the light was converted to acetylene in 1907, and finally extinguished forever in 1959. Today a flashing white light atop a 72-foot metal skeleton tower stands nearby.

The crumbling ruins of original tower still stand today, but little remains of the attached keeper's house.

Scotch Bonnet supports one of the largest cormorant nesting colonies on Lake Ontario. Herring gulls, greater black-backed gulls and black crowned night herons also nest on the island. They are believed to favor hatching their eggs by the radiated heat of the sunbaked rocks. To protect the nesting birds, public access to the island is prohibited between March 15 and July 31.

The first running of the Scotch Bonnet Light Race started Friday evening, July 7th, 1972, in the aftermath of Hurricane Agnes. At that time the event was called simply The Scotch Bonnet Race.

Hurricane Agnes

The most destructive, widespread flooding to occur in the eastern United States came as a result of Hurricane Agnes in June, 1972. Not a particularly strong hurricane, most of its devastation occurred after it had been downgraded to a tropical storm. Agnes originated in the Gulf of Mexico and slowly moved up the east coast before moving northwest across Pennsylvania and the southern tier of New York. At this point, the remnants of Agnes joined another large low pressure system to produce extraordinarily heavy rains over the Genesee River basin. The heaviest rains started on the night of Tuesday, June 20th and continued until the 25th. At the heaviest hit area around Wellsville the official rainfall recorded during the 6-day period was 13.7 inches. It is little wonder then that the crews of the first Scotch Bonnet Offshore Race encountered substantial flood debris in the river more than a week later.

Source: U.S. National Weather Service

The idea for the race was conceived by Peter Allen who at the time had been a member of Genesee Yacht Club for just over three years. Peter recalls that the object of the event was to provide a navigational challenge. He adds, "Looking over the Lake Ontario charts, the Scotch Bonnet Lighthouse was the obvious choice for a turning mark, located beyond the horizon, surrounded by navigable water, and clearly identified on the charts."

The first race was won by past commodore Warren Miller. The boat, *New Issue*, was a Cal 25 and the crew included Miller, John Blonowicz, Joe Verdone, and Gerry Rossner. Warren recalled that there were only four boats in the race that first year. Navigation was primitive by today's standards, with the magnetic compass and radio direction finder the only affordable navigation tools of the day. According to Warren, "The RDF was notoriously unreliable, but somehow we managed to find the lighthouse." Other contestants in that first race included Peter Allen, in *No Quorum*, a 24-foot Shark, Ed Elliston, in *Mako*, another Shark, and Tom Koltis in a Morgan 28 called *Xanadu*. The race started Friday evening and finished on Sunday morning.

1973, 1974, (No Records)

Bob MacIntyre started racing the Scotch Bonnet as crew aboard Milt Sales' *Hustler* in 1975, 76, and 77. Then, in 1978 he started racing his own boat, *Double Shot* (the first), a Cal 25. According to Barbara MacIntyre, who was aboard in 1978, the lighthouse was structurally intact in those days, but the light was not functional. She has vivid memories of the cormorants on the island, which were as numerous then as as they are now.

1975, 1976, (No Records)

1977

The notice of the "1977 GYC Scotch Bonnet Invitational Race" stated that there would be "more fleets: IOR I, IOR II, LOR I, LOR II, MORC, with no fleet larger than 15 boats." The race was started on June 17 at 1930 with a 36-hour time limit. They planned an "Early Finishers' Celebration Party on Saturday June 18 at 2000 hours. On Sunday, the awards were presented after a breakfast-brunch served from 0930 to 1230. The General Chairman was Earl Cliffler, Jr. Ernest Persi was Safety and Communications Officer. Jerry Rossner was in charge of Photographic Coverage and Photo Awards, and Peter O. Allen was Special Awards Chairman.

1978, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983,

1984

This item appeared in the July, 1984 issue of Haarstick Sailmakers LOFT LINES newsletter: "The 80 mile Scotch Bonnet across Lake Ontario was another Haarstick success story. *Foxfire*, *Dr. Jekyll*, *Desperado*, *Hooligan*, *Venture*, and *Azrael* all won their respective

divisions. A clean sweep! *Kewero, White Pepper, Good Times, No End, Newave, Kaleidoscope, and Yellow Fever* all placed.

1985

The July, 1985 issue of the Haarstick newsletter reported that their customers won 7 out of 8 divisions in the 1985 Scotch Bonnet Race: Cliff Sertl's *No End*, Harry Voss' *Kiki*, Bob Brorein's *Good Times*, Fred Muhleman's *Rigel*, Jim Hill's *Venture*, Ed Fischer's *Cherokee*, and Ernie Coleman's *Desire*.

1986

By 1986, 99 boats finished the race. The best elapsed time for a monohull boat, 12:04:36, was posted by Tim Kinsella's Olson 40, Polestar. Ray Howe's tri-hull, Volena, completed the race in 9:35:33.

1987

101 boats entered the race in 1987, but 38 did not finish, while four others withdrew before the start. The best elapsed time for a monohull boat, 16:07:54 was scored by Express 37, First Class. The best corrected time, 17:18:46, was posted by Steve Corona's Freedom 25, Azrael. The best multi-hull time was 15:17:41 by Bob Howe's trimaran, Nueva.

1988

Of the 94 entrants in the 1988 race, 14 did not finish. Division winners included James MacArthur in the J/33 Highlander,

1989

...saw 97 entrants representing thirteen different sailing clubs from all over the lake. They included a 10-boat fleet of C&C 35 MKIII's. were represented. Cliff Sertl took monohull line honors in the J/35 Das Blau Max with an elapsed time of 16:10:24, finishing only 6 seconds ahead of John Odenbach's C&C 37R Rampage. Other division winners included Ed Burns in the Hunter 40 Farfelue; Harry

Voss in the Pearson 36 KiKi; David Hill in the J/30 Innisfree; Bob Fields in the Express 30 Vitesse; Michael Dwyer in the Tartan 30 Hooligan; Tom Foley in the Pearson 30 Summer Snow; Tim Donovan in the Pearson 26 Silvercloud; Bob Brinkman in the Merlyn 36 Magician; Don Wulf in the Chrysler 26 Panatella; and Todd Weber in the multihull Northern Cross. A short course for J/24's was won by Reid Stava in Bateau Blanc.

1990, 1991, 1992

1993

According to Jack Kreckman, skipper of the O'day 28 Knot Home, "A light air start took us to mid-lake around midnight. It was cold and damp, with intermittent rain, but the wind improved somewhat in the middle of the lake. The most memorable part of the race was the end, which for us was around 1400 hrs on Saturday. There was no wind to speak of and the fog was so thick we could hear the foghorn on the pier for over an hours before we saw the pier. In fact we could hear voices on the pier for half an hour before we passed it.

1994

As reported by Bob Elliott, skipper of the C&C 35 Bedlam, "We started in very light air and tried to pick up a sea breeze by going close to the shore, to no avail. In fact, it was 0315 Saturday morning before we rounded the Wautoma Shoals buoy. Once we passed the first mark, however, the wind picked up and we reached across the lake nicely under spinnaker. At mid-lake the temperature was in the thirties and the mist felt like little ice daggers hitting our faces. At 0920, we rounded the island in hazy sunshine, reaching back to Rochester by 1545 Saturday afternoon. *Earth Voyager* finished at 0946, while the last boat crossed the finish line at 1904 Saturday evening.

1995

Another light air start tested the collective patience of the fleet. However, for what it lacked in intensity, it made up with consistency, and we slowly but steadily moved across the lake. The overnight temperatures were not nearly as cool as most years, and the breeze picked up to 5-6 knots by midnight. According to Robert Polhemus, skipper of the Pearson Vanguard Siesta, "The wind continued to build to 9-10 knots, and we rounded the lighthouse at 0715 the following morning in 12 knots of breeze. The trip back to Rochester was so foggy that we frequently could see only the top one-third of the sails of nearby boats. By 1300 we were within the bight of the Rochester embayment, about nine miles from the finish line. Then the wind completely disappeared, and we bobbed within sight of the harbor for the next 8-1/2 hours." Even *Earth Voyager* needed 13-1/2 hours to finish, while *Das Blau Max*, the first monohull to finish, took just over 19 hours. The last boat to finish, *Wanderer*, a Pearson 28, crossed the line at around 0100 on Sunday, 29 hours after the start of the race.

1996

We started with more wind than usual, making excellent time in a building breeze. We close reached to the island by 0300 Saturday. Although it was typically cold at mid-lake, it remained dry and things warmed up nicely by breakfast time. With winds ranging from 10 to 20 knots for most of the race, the bulk of the fleet was home by 1000 on Saturday morning, while Whitey LeBlanc, finishing at 1235 aboard the Catalina 28 *Marimba*, set a new record for the fastest time by the last boat to finish. The trimaran *Cakewalk* finished at 0534, and the first monohull, *Das Blau Max*, finished at 0727.

1997

A down year for the Scotch Bonnet Race, the date was changed twice, first to avoid conflicting with the Sodus Bay Challenge Cup, then back to the original date to avoid the prospect of finishing during the Harborfest Fireworks show. We also experimented with the format,

starting the race on Saturday morning rather than the traditional Friday evening. The result: only 33 boats entered the race. However, even worse, only 4 boats finished. The race course was pockmarked with numerous holes, so that few of us succeeded in moving consistently for more than an hour or two at a time. By 0200 Sunday, most of the fleet still hadn't rounded the island, 19 hours after starting. Faced with a 1000 Sunday time limit, it took only a little simple arithmetic for the skippers to conclude they had no chance to finish on time, and one by one, they called in their DNFs and started their motors. Even *Earth Voyager* averaged only 5 knots, finishing in 14-1/2 hours. The three monohulls that finished within the time limit, *Contender*, *Foxfire*, and *Sea++Major*, finished between 0815 and 0906 Sunday morning, while Bill Golden's *Cardinal* crossed the finish line only a few minutes after the time limit.

1998

Another light air year for the race, the average speeds ranged from 5.2 knots to 3.2 knots. Most of the fleet finished late in the afternoon or evening on Saturday. Spinnaker division winners included Tim Kinsella's *Polestar*, Bob Fields' *Vitesse*, and Bob Porter's *Harrier*. Non-spinnaker winners were Bob Polhemus' *Siesta*, John Nicholson's *Chenonceau*, and Kermit Sleggs' *Ariadne*. The multihull winner was Paul Abendroth whose *Corsair F-27* trimaran also took the prize for the farthest travelled boat, coming from Yellow Springs, Ohio (near Dayton).

1999

Among the more peculiar Scotch Bonnet races, the 1999 event was characterized by a number of large windless areas interspersed with substantial areas of 10-15 knot breezes. The trick was to be in the right place at the right time. In only one division was the differential between the first and last finishing boats less than two hours. Division One was typical with the first boat finishing in 13 hours vs

20 hours for the last boat in the division. Even though Fourteen boats did not finish, 21 stubbornly inched out of the lulls to finish within the time limit, some even posting surprisingly good elapsed times. The Olson 40, *Rambunctious*, for instance, finished in just over 13 hours to lead all monohulls.

2000

Scotch Bonnet 2000 was blessed with some of the best weather ever enjoyed during the event, even though it faced one of the worst forecasts. With predictions of thunderstorms issued even on the day of the race, 43 boats showed up to be treated to consistent 8-18 knot breezes from start to finish. The spinnaker fleet started with a 1-mile weatherly leg toward Crescent Beach where all 24 spinnakers were set on a broad reach. Almost the entire fleet passed the mark boat at the island between 0100 and 0300. In fact, 26 boats rounded the island between 0149 and 0249. The year 2000 was also a record setting year. Gene Angelidis' *Nobody's Business*, a Nelson Marek 43, set a new monohull mark of 09:33:48 for the 79 NM course, while Dave Poulin's *Rambunctious*, an Olson 40 established the record for best corrected time of 12:00:26. Ray Howe and *Earth Voyager*, meanwhile set a new multihull record of 07:05:00. This year also saw a new record of 12:11:58 for best elapsed time for a monohull of 30 feet or less when John Rodgers' *Mad Cow* beat Bob Porter's *Harrier* by only 11 minutes as both boats sprinted across the finish line close reaching under spinnaker. Finally, Leonard Redon's *Passages*, a J/42 posted the best elapsed time for a non-spinnaker boat, finishing the race in 11:50:47, while Jim Ely and his J/35C, *Moonrise*, set the record of 12:47:09 for best corrected time for a non-spinnaker boat.