



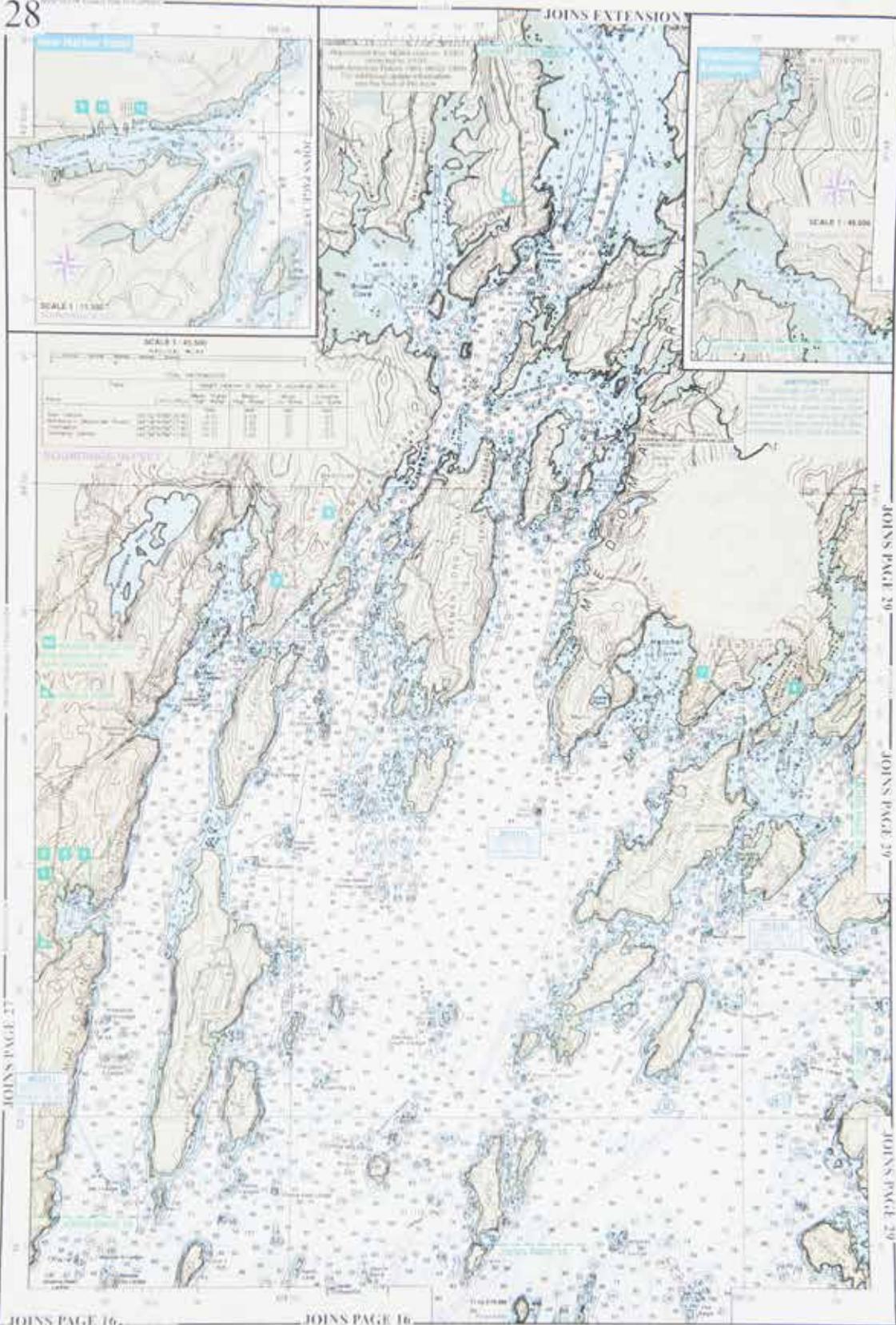
# maine.

THE MAGAZINE

75 Market Street | Suite 203  
Portland, Maine | 04101  
207.772.3373

[themainemag.com](http://themainemag.com)

If you choose to post this article online, please post as is without alterations,  
and provide a link back to *Maine* magazine's website: [themainemag.com](http://themainemag.com)  
Thank you.



# SKIPPERs *and* Stewards

---

UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE MAINE ISLAND TRAIL ASSOCIATION, A DEDICATED GROUP OF SEAFARING MAINERS IS WORKING TO PRESERVE THE PRISTINE BEAUTY OF OUR AQUATIC ASSETS.

---

**Opposite:** A NOAA nautical chart showing Muscongus Bay, apart of a Maptech waterproof chart book that is stashed on each MITA boat. **This page:** Volunteers head out for a cleanup day. Annual cleanups allow mainlanders an opportunity to see Maine's many islands while providing a valuable service for the offshore conservation lands.



# A

thick fog seems to rise from the surface of the ocean as we cruise over choppy waves and move slowly out of the sheltered waters of Muscongus Bay. As the fog clears, islands appear on the horizon like a pod of preternaturally large whales. From a distance, they are just smudges of color—the closest ones are dark spruce green; the furthest are glaucous streaks. I can't shake the feeling that they're waiting for us.

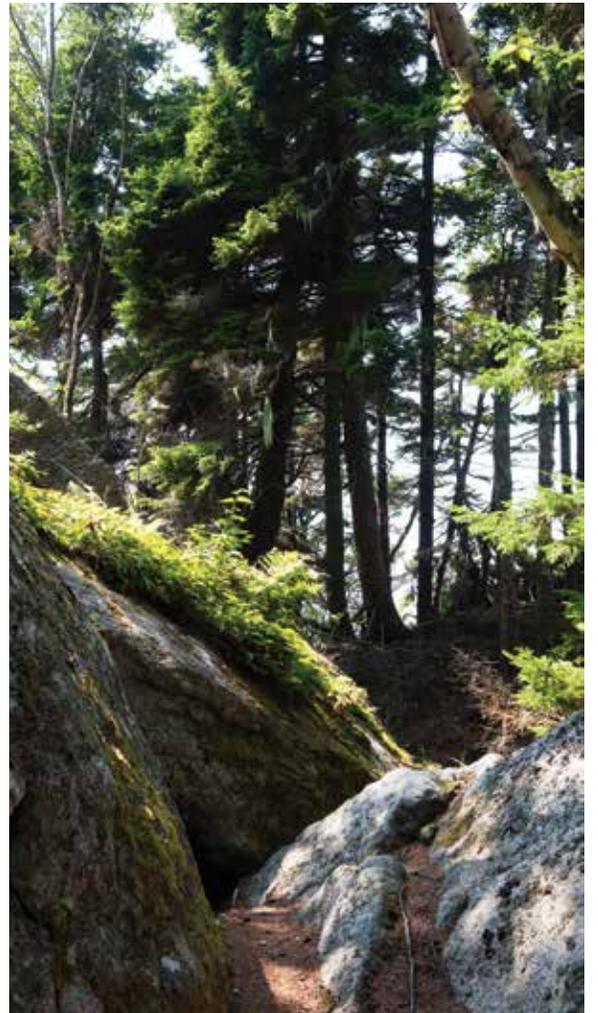
These islands have many different owners and inhabitants, but the string that ties them together is Maine Island Trail Association. Known more commonly by the acronym MITA, this organization cares for over 160 islands off the coast and 57 mainland sites that are open for public enjoyment and accessible by sailboat, kayak, or motorboat. MITA is both a guide to travelers and a steward for many stone and soil properties and oceanic outposts. The nonprofit makes maps and apps and protects the islands from all manner of threats, from garbage on the beaches to invasive plants from the mainland. On the frontline of the work is a group of "monitor skippers"—men and women who donate their time to patrol the islands. On this late August day, I'm traveling with one of these aquatic ambassadors along his route.

We had planned to leave from Rockland, but the fog was so thick that our skipper, Bob MacEwen, decides to take us down to Damariscotta and head out from there. Once on the water, he handles the tin skiff with businesslike ease as we bounce over waves, my shoes leaping up from the floor like popcorn in a pan. "It's a rough morning," he shouts, "but we'll get you to the islands, don't you worry."

That right there is MITA's mission: To get you to the islands. However, the organization doesn't often offer transportation like this—I'm lucky to hitch a ride with MacEwen as he goes about his work. Typically, a visitor to these islands must access them via her own boat, be it schooner or kayak. This 18-foot aluminum

**Clockwise, from top left:** Skipper Bob MacEwen navigates down the Medomak River from Waldoboro onto Muscongus Bay. A large haul on a busy day. Mossy boulders and evergreens on the southwest side of Harbor Island. MacEwen checks a camping log to see who has visited the island since his last monitor run. Idling offshore.





Lund (with a 30-horsepower engine) is one of five MITA boats used by skippers on their monitoring runs.

After completing an apprenticeship program, volunteer skippers are assigned a route (or multiple routes, if they have the inclination to take on more work). Some go out once a month, but MacEwen enjoys the work so much he volunteers two or three times each week during the entire summer season (which stretches from Memorial Day to after Columbus Day). Some days, he cruises Penobscot Bay, while other monitoring runs find him further south, near the Damariscotta River or Linekin Bay. The monitors' routes span the entire Maine coast from the southern tip to the Canadian border. They run their aluminum boats up and down rivers, around Maine's many bays, weaving amongst islands and cruising into open water. They check in at each island, picking up trash, interacting with visitors, and checking on the handwritten logbooks at campsites. Sometimes, they disassemble fire rings on beaches where fires aren't permitted. "We don't want the next guy coming along and thinking, 'Oh, I guess fires are allowed here since someone did it before,'" MacEwen explains.

Sometimes the skippers are tasked with ferrying groups of school kids, or more

often, groups of volunteers who have signed up to help clean the islands. These cleanup days allow mainlanders to get out and see parts of Maine that they may not normally have access to. "I would guess that maybe 90 percent of the Maine population has never been out to the islands," says monitor skipper Tom McKinney. "They don't even know what they're missing." MacEwen has noticed the same thing. "Sometimes, I'll bring people out on the water who grew up in Portland or Westbrook, and they've never seen the islands," he says. "One guy said, 'Why have I been flying to the Caribbean all these years when we have something even more beautiful right here!'"

As I explored Hungry Island with MacEwen, I felt a similar sense of happy confusion. While MacEwen checked on fire rings and campground logs, I wandered, picking wildflowers and searching for sea glass. Located in the tiny town of Bremen (population: 806) and owned by the Chewonki Foundation, this oddly shaped landmass is covered in tall pines and looks as though it broke directly off the mainland. Unlike islands located further offshore, this particular aquatic treasure is sheltered from the worst of the ocean winds and waves, which makes it a popular destination for kayakers. Its location also makes the island hospitable to flora and fauna; the growth of trees is not inhibited

by wind, and it's near enough to shore that deer and other animals can swim to its cove for some happy grazing.

After checking all three sites on Hungry Island, MacEwen and I hop back in the boat and head to Crow Island, and then Black Island, where we find a mess of lobster rafts that have washed up on shore. "We can't remove this stuff," he says, gesturing toward the flotsam. "I'll call it in." Later, MITA skippers will return with a larger boat to clean the entire beach and haul out the derelict gear. Our last stop is the privately owned Harbor Island. This particular island, with its sweeping views of the water and verdant fields, takes my breath away. We hike across the island on a root-gnarled trail. MacEwen leads the way, and I follow, mouth agape. The island's owners aren't currently in residence, so there's no one to interrupt us as we go about our visit. I pretend, for a moment, that this island with its charming white house and daisy-strewn lawns is mine. Handling garbage and visiting heaven on earth—these contradictions are all in a day's work for a monitor skipper.

Richard Stetson, a retired software developer, has been volunteering with MITA since the 1980s. "I started volunteering with MITA because I wanted to spend more time in my boat," explains



For years, MITA left buoys and lobster traps alone on the islands, since they remain the property of the fishermen who lost them. However, the organization recently started a pilot program to return these items back to the lobstermen.

Stetson. “I’ve always lived in Maine, and my family has been in Maine since Massachusetts was part of Maine, as we like to say.”

Not only does volunteering give Stetson an excuse to indulge one of his favorite hobbies, it also makes it cheaper for him to spend time on the water. “When someone else is paying for your fuel, you always have a little more fun,” he says. “I have a daughter who was born in 1988 and from an early age, she went on numerous monitor runs with me. It was our thing, where we could bond.” Now, his daughter is training to become a skipper herself.

Like Stetson, MacEwen’s No. 1 reason for volunteering with MITA stems from the freedom of movement it provides. “I don’t feel right when I can’t get out on the water,” MacEwen says. “It gives some extra purpose to my life, and provides me with a reason to be out in the fresh air and ocean spray.” When he’s not volunteering, MacEwen still finds ways to help clean up Maine. He spends much of his downtime outdoors, and even when he’s just walking or paddling around, he keeps an eye out for litter. “Sometimes, I’ll go out in my kayak in the waters near my house, and when I come home, I’ll be sitting on a pile of trash in my cockpit,” he says.

“As you get older, you have a lot of free time, and for me, I started to think about how I could use that time better, how I could give back,” he says. “People have got to wake up to this stuff. There’s global pollution going on, and we’ve got to start cleaning it up. I’m just doing my part.”

---

---

A month goes by before I return to the islands. This time, I’m put to work by Tom McKinney. Alongside a team of volunteers, I’m pattering out to Jewell Island and Cow Island to help patrol the shores for garbage. I’m handed a black plastic bag, a pair of work gloves, and a watch. I’m allowed to roam as far as I like, so long as I return at the prearranged time with trash collected from the rocky beaches and the fragrant spruce-and-fir woods.

Like Stetson and MacEwen, McKinney became involved with MITA after retiring. “I grew up on the Maine coast, and I’ve been cruising up and down for years,” he says. “Over my life, I’ve seen public access become a little more restricted. We can’t all afford oceanfront properties, so it’s important that we keep the mainland sites and island sites available for people to





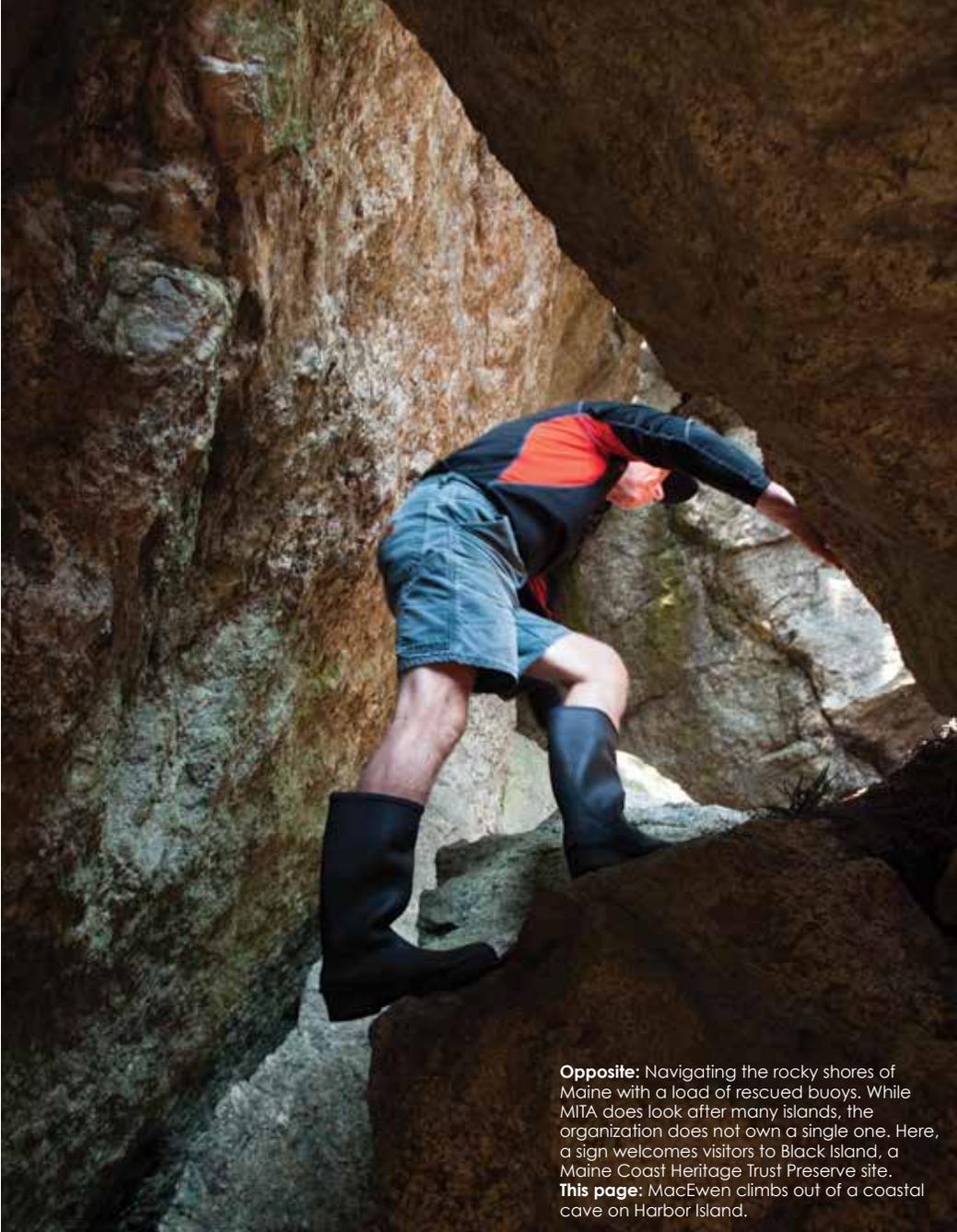
go out and enjoy this wonderful natural resource we have.” Cleanup days, like his regular monitoring runs around the coves, sounds, and bays of the midcoast, give McKinney a chance to help MITA keep the coast of Maine accessible to the average citizen.

On this particular cleanup day, our small group of four is focused on finding garbage, which is a primary function of the MITA skippers and volunteers. However, some cleanup days have a different aim, one that snaps into focus the moment I see the distinctive red-hued stalks of knotweed crowding amongst a copse of trees. “On many of these islands, invasive species are just starting to appear,” explains Brian Marcaurrelle, program director at MITA. Each year, he works with approximately 400 volunteers in addition to maintaining the monitor run schedule, training new skippers, and working on landowner relations. Knowledgeable and soft-spoken, he knows better than almost anyone the value of these trips. “Sometimes, with group work, we’ll bring boatloads of volunteers

**“OVER MY LIFE, I’VE SEEN PUBLIC ACCESS BECOME A LITTLE MORE RESTRICTED. WE CAN’T ALL AFFORD OCEANFRONT PROPERTIES, SO IT’S IMPORTANT THAT WE KEEP THE MAINLAND SITES AND ISLAND SITES AVAILABLE FOR PEOPLE TO GO OUT AND ENJOY THIS WONDERFUL NATURAL RESOURCE WE HAVE.”**

out to the islands where invasive species have been transported—often, birds bring the seeds over, so even with diligent work we may not keep them completely invasive-free forever. But we still spend hours ripping them out and bagging them up.” And as an extra incentive, he adds, the group leaves with a good lesson in ecology. After seeing the damage a field of knotweed can cause to biodiversity, they’re unlikely to drive by the white flowering plant without pausing (or motor out to the islands without cleaning off any invasive species from the underside of a boat, for that matter).

But aside from the knotweed, I don’t see much plant life on my Casco Bay trip that strikes me as out of place. These islands feel so quintessentially Maine, from the color of the evergreen needles to the uneven shape of their shores. As I wander, I pick up frayed pieces of nylon rope, Styrofoam, and painted wood—shattered remnants of a lobster buoy unmoored and dismantled by a careless powerboat or a particularly intense storm. It’s easy work, and yet pleasurable in the way that good, hard work often is. And



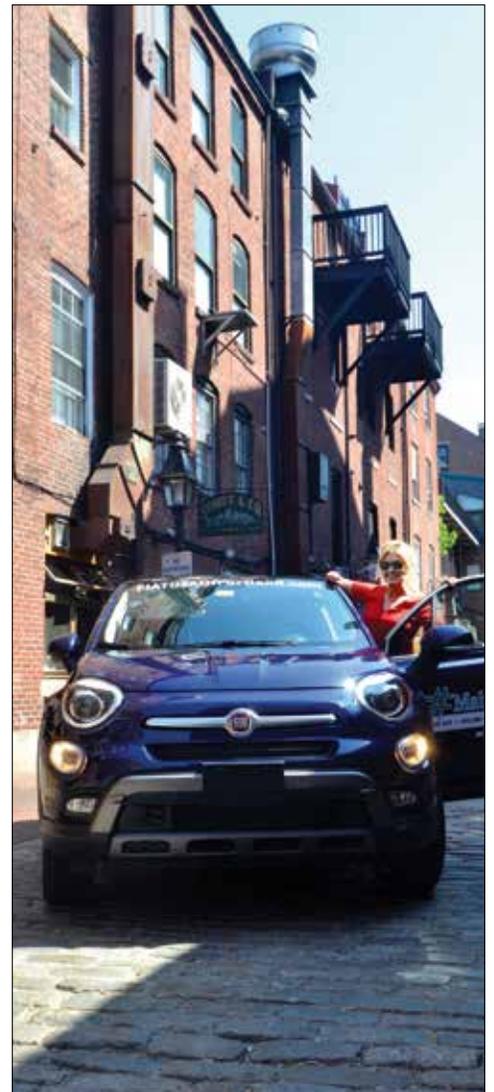
**Opposite:** Navigating the rocky shores of Maine with a load of rescued buoys. While MITA does look after many islands, the organization does not own a single one. Here, a sign welcomes visitors to Black Island, a Maine Coast Heritage Trust Preserve site. **This page:** MacEwen climbs out of a coastal cave on Harbor Island.

despite the bag of trash in my hand, I still feel a childlike sense of wonder at each new turn in the trail. There is so little evidence of use (thanks to MITA's tireless work) that many of these islands feel like uncharted territory, wild and free.

Later, once we're back on the mainland, McKinney reveals that this is his favorite part of the work: seeing the sense of awe dawn on the faces of those he ferries. "One of the highlights of my time as a skipper happened about four years ago," he recalls. He was driving over with a group of seven Girl Scouts who had raised enough money through fundraisers and bake sales to travel from Wisconsin to Harpswell. Even though they were entering their teenage years (McKinney guesses they were around 12 or 13) none of them had ever seen the ocean

before. They had arrived in Maine the night before, and their volunteer trip with MITA was their introduction to the Atlantic.

"Everything they did that day was a brand-new experience for them," McKinney remembers. "I got to see the joy on their faces the first time they touched saltwater spray. The first time they saw a lobster boat pull up a trap. When we got to the island, they waded in the water for the first time and touched seaweed for the first time. It took me back to when my daughter was that age. Kids at that point like to think they're grown-ups, but on the islands, those girls saw so much newness, so much beauty. They reverted back to the innocence of their early childhood years. I was just the guy driving the boat, but to be there for that? It was pretty magical." ✦



**#MaineLife**  
ON AIR • ONLINE • ON THE ROAD

with Erin Ovalle

ON AIR • ONLINE • ON THE ROAD



**#MaineLife**  
ON AIR • ONLINE • ON THE ROAD

Presented by  
**FIAT** of Portland

Photo Credit: Carrie Lonsdale WJME CBS 13