

Key Site 59: Port-Daniel–Newport Point, Quebec

Location: 48°11'28"N, 64°49'58"W

Size: 55 km²

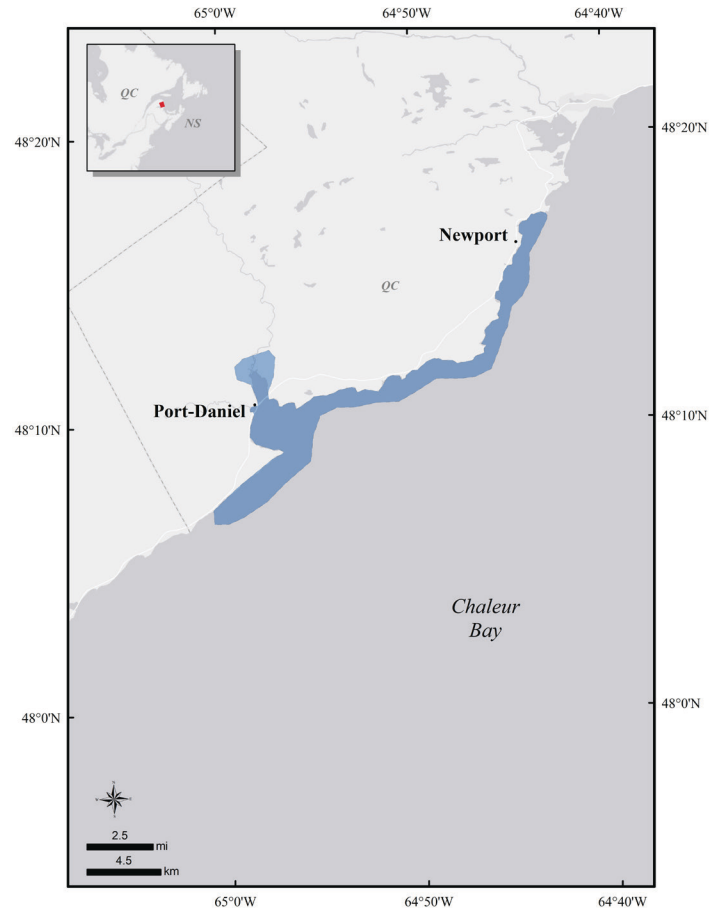
Description: This key site lies at the northeast mouth of Chaleur Bay along the south coast of the Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec. It extends from Port-Daniel-Ouest to Newport Point and measures about 40 km long by 3 to 5 km wide. Baie de Port-Daniel includes several coves, points, and cliffs. Two small rocky islets, named Les Îlots, are important to sea ducks. Coastal cliffs are made of sedimentary rocks that erode easily, and the sea bottom varies from coarse sand to sand mixed with fine sediments. There is an estuarine lagoon (170 ha) in Baie de Port-Daniel with eelgrass beds. On lands adjacent to the key site, human density is low (about 2200 residents) and most of the landscape is rural.

Generally, Chaleur Bay is protected from winds and in summer experiences a warmer microclimate relative to adjacent areas of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The pelagic zone is one of the most productive in the Gulf of St. Lawrence due to the abundance of zooplankton. Ice usually starts to form in late December and breaks up in mid- to late March in that section of the Chaleur Bay. However, in years with mild weather, some coastal areas remain ice-free year-round.

Precision and Correction of Abundance Estimates Presented: Abundance estimates presented have not been adjusted to account for incomplete detection or other biases. Abundance estimates are thus minimum estimates of population size.

Biological Value: This key site's primary importance is because of the year-round presence of Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*), whose eastern population is listed as of "special concern" by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Spring staging scoters (*Melanitta* spp.) also abound in the area. Blue mussels (*Mytilus edulis*) and softshell clams (*Mya arenaria*) are abundant prey available to sea ducks there (Gagnon 1997, Perry and McAloney 2005).

In February, counts of Harlequin Ducks ranged from 40 in 2009 to 275 most recently in 2020 (Robert 2013, Canadian Wildlife Service unpublished data).



Harlequin Ducks are usually present at Pointe du Sud-Ouest near Port-Daniel, and at Pointe au Maquereau. Other sea duck species present in small numbers during winter include Barrow's Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*), Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*), Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*), and Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) (Canadian Wildlife Service unpublished data).

The Port-Daniel–Newport sector has been identified as a spring staging area of great importance to Harlequin Ducks, which breed regionally in inland rivers (Robert et al. 2008, Quebec Breeding Bird Atlas 2018). Counts of 30 to 35 individuals are frequent in March and April (RQO et al. 2018, Canadian Wildlife Service unpublished data), although actual numbers of individuals may be greater because Maine wintering birds also pass through in spring (Robert et al. 2008). Hundreds of Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima*), scoters (mostly Black and Surf scoters [*Melanitta americana* and *M. perspicillata*]), Long-tailed Ducks, and Common Mergansers

(*Mergus merganser*) also transit on a regular basis along this coast in April and May, as well as dozens of Common Goldeneyes and Red-breasted Mergansers (Lamb et al. 2020, Canadian Wildlife Service unpublished data). Overall, the total number of sea ducks using the key site during spring migration may be 15,000 to 20,000 individuals (C. Lepage, Canadian Wildlife Service, pers. comm.).

Les Îlots, two small rocky islets near Newport, host one of the few small colonies of Common Eiders (*Somateria mollissima dresseri*) along the south coast of the Gaspé Peninsula; 570 pairs bred there in 2018 (BIOMQ 2019). Common Goldeneye and Common Merganser nest near the mouth of the Port-Daniel River (Quebec Breeding Bird Atlas 2018).

Small Common Eider, Common Merganser, and Red-breasted merganser molt there (Quebec Breeding Bird Atlas 2018), but the key site is an important molting location for Harlequin Ducks with 56-86 individuals counted in 1989, 2003, and 2004 (Langlois 2006, Gilliland et al. 2002, S. Gilliland, Canadian Wildlife Service unpublished data). In late August, some female Harlequin Ducks with broods move downriver from breeding areas on the Gaspé Peninsula and reach the sea in Chaleur Bay, including the Port-Daniel and Newport sector (Brodeur et al. 2008). About 100 Harlequin Ducks are present by late August and numbers remain relatively stable until mid-October (Langlois 2006). Smaller numbers of other sea duck species may molt there, including Common Eider and Common and Red-breasted merganser (Quebec Breeding Bird Atlas 2018).

Nearly 300 Harlequin Ducks congregate there between mid-October and mid-November (Langlois 2006). This represents at least 9% of the population wintering in eastern North America (COSEWIC 2013) but likely more considering probable turnover among individuals. Scoters are far less abundant during fall than spring; groups of 1000 Red-breasted Mergansers, 200 Common Eiders, and 150 Common Goldeneyes have been observed during fall (Canadian Wildlife Service unpublished data).

Sensitivities: This key site lies in a portion of the Gaspé Peninsula subject to bacterial contamination of coastal waters from municipal wastewater and agricultural runoff. Consequently, local shellfish have high concentrations of toxins, and human

harvest of softshell clams and mussels is often prohibited (Working Group on the State of the St. Lawrence Monitoring 2015). This is also of concern for sea ducks that feed on these shellfish.

Potential Conflicts: There are concerns that Chaleur Bay will become polluted from sulfur dioxide released in the atmosphere by the new McInnis cement factory at Port-Daniel-Gascon. Because Harlequin Ducks are of special concern and are present almost all year in this key site, and because they are very site-faithful, coastal development (aquaculture and fisheries) and human use (boat traffic, recreational activities), particularly near the mouth of the Port-Daniel River, could be detrimental to the species.

Status: Six Aquatic Birds Concentration Areas, established by the Quebec government, cover about half the coast within the key site, including Les Îlots (*Aires de concentration d'oiseaux aquatiques*; MELCC 2021). The Shigawake-Newport Important Bird Area, occupying most of the key site, was established largely based on the great numbers of sea ducks during spring migration and the year-round presence of the eastern Harlequin Duck (QC031; IBA Canada 2021).

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