



# INTO THE DEEP

Few places in the North Atlantic are as rich in such concentrated biodiversity as Gadd's Wall, NL

Photography and text by Scott Leslie

**W**e've just steamed across "The Tickle" from the village of Norris Point in Gros Morne National Park. Despite being only a few hundred metres from the wharf we just left and literally a stone's throw from the fjord's opposite shore, the water is deep, very deep. Though bottoming out at about at 60 metres directly below me, it can plunge to 200 metres in places in Bonne Bay. It's not the thrill of deep diving that I'm here for, but the variety of life that lives below the surface. I've anticipated this dive more than any other in Newfoundland.

Despite my excitement about what's *under* the water, it's hard to take my eyes off what's *above* it. Surrounding me is some of the most spectacular and unique geology in North America. Just minutes earlier, as we left Norris Point, I could see the golden-brown hulk of the Tablelands not far to the south. This barren, Martian-like plateau is a slab of the Earth's mantle that was thrust up from deep inside the planet when the Earth was much younger. The Tablelands are geologic evidence of the disappearance more than 300 million years ago of an earlier ocean, known as the Iapetus Ocean. So, as I ready myself to roll into the modern day Atlantic, I wonder if any of the manifold species I will see on my dive today are evolutionary descendants of creatures that lived in the extinct Iapetus Ocean?

A lion's mane jelly reflected against the underside of the ocean's surface.



Northern red anemones are one of the beautiful and ancient creatures living in the North Atlantic.

*Here, on Gadd's Wall, each species finds its niche in the midst of countless others.*

Over the side and into the chilly brine, I float beside Gadd's Point, whose rocky face continues underwater as a near vertical cliff, forming one of Atlantic Canada's most famous dive sites. Cold, clear water moves in a weak current along the shore, perfect for conveying me effortlessly along the underwater escarpment. I descend to 20 metres. With my buoyancy adjusted to maintain this depth, I face the rock and drift slowly sideways while taking photographs. It seems every square centimetre is covered in some sort of living thing. Bunches of frilled anemones are conjured into view by my underwater lights, a ghostly miniature undersea forest clinging to the bright pink coral encrusted rock (if anything here might have pre-cursors in the erstwhile Iapetus Ocean, members of the archaic anemone family would be good candidates). A comical toad crab on a pale sponge waves its fragile knitting-needle legs about as if to warn me away; while a big sea raven fish half hidden in a hole smiles at me with a homely mug that only a mother could love!

In few places—outside of a tropical coral reef—have I seen such a variety of life in such a limited area. Like most underwater sites where biodiversity is concentrated, Gadd's Wall is largely a realm of the diminutive. The majority of species in view are small, like the 20-centimetre rock gunnel and shanny fish, to the 3-centimetre-long nudibranch or even smaller stalked jellyfish. It's the little things that account for the lion's share of biodiversity. Here, on Gadd's Wall, each species finds its niche in the midst of countless others.

Clockwise from top left: Sea gooseberries, one of the most abundant animals in the sea, drift past Gadd's Wall in their thousands on occasion; a small toad crab clings to boulders near Gadd's Wall; rock gunnels are small, often colourful, and common fish found inhabiting walls and boulders.



Clockwise from top left: An ocean pout lies in wait for a meal to swim past; a jelly staurozoan attaches itself upside down to a rock; this sea peach tunicate is surrounded by pink coralline algae; curious cunner fish (a species of wrasse) are attracted to divers' bubbles and often swim up to check them out; a large short-horned sculpin rests among the boulders of the wall.

Finally, I discover a few of the larger denizens in deeper water. A rock shelf plastered in encrusting coral and seaweed has become a temporary balcony for a football-sized lumpfish. It looks to be fascinated by a small group of cunners milling about nearby, who, in turn, seem to be intrigued by *me* as they swim close to my face to check out my bubbles. At the deepest point of the dive, 35 metres below the surface, a coiled-up ocean pout pursing an enormous pair of lips peers at me from a wide shelf of rock jutting out from the wall.

Almost back to the world of fresh air and sunshine, near the surface I pass a huge lion's mane jellyfish and several sea gooseberries. These tiny translucent globes, propelled by colourful, waving rows of cilia, are one of the most abundant animals in the oceans. Now at the surface, I realize that Newfoundland and Labrador's most famous marine species didn't make an appearance. I was hoping to see a big codfish, but I had no such luck on this dive. Maybe next time. 🐟

