

Made Concrete:

Mermaid Rock (Rainy Lake, Ontario) and Canadian mermaid place names

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Compared to Australia, a fellow Commonwealth dominion which has close to 40 locations named after mermaids (Fleury and Hayward, 2021), Canada has relatively few:¹

- **British Columbia** has Mermaid Mountain and Mermaid Peak, in the Rockies; Mermaid Cove, in Saltery Bay Provincial Park; Mermaid Bay, on Dent Island; and Mermaid Point on Nelson Island.
- **Ontario** has two Mermaid Lakes (in Kenora and in the Algonquin Park); two Mermaid Islands (on the eastern side of Lake Huron and in the St. Lawrence River, north-east of Kingston); and Mermaid Rock, in Rainy Lake.
- **Nunavut** has Mermaid Fiord, on Baffin Island
- **Prince Edward Island** has Mermaid², and a nearby locale named Mermaid Cove, east of Charlottetown
- **Quebec** has Île Mermaid in Lac Chibougamau (and also Lac Sirène, north of Quebec City)
- **Newfoundland** - Somewhat surprisingly, as the only province in Canada that has historic mermaid folklore (most notably, Whitbourne, 1620), Newfoundland has no officially designated mermaid place names (although there are two places that carry the name as a result of businesses adopting it – Mermaid Rock, on Twillingate Island, and Mermaid Cove, to the north of Norman's Cove).

With the exception of Mermaid Rock (Ontario) discussed below, there is nothing to suggest that any of these locations were named after folkloric or other cultural-historical associations. Similarly, the names of these places also do not appear to have resulted in themed visual association or destination branding. Mermaid Rock, by contrast, has been more broadly represented by virtue of being named after a statue.

Mermaid Rock

The installation of a mermaid statue on a small rock in a Lake in Central Canada and the subsequent naming of the rock after the mermaid represents an early 20th Century example of the 'internationalisation' of mermaid imagery that followed the publication of Hans Christian Andersen's short story 'The Little Mermaid' (1837). The statue's direct inspiration was Edvard Eriksen's famous statue of a mermaid (or, rather, a human female with finned lower legs) installed on a rock adjacent to Langelinie promenade in Copenhagen 1913. Though closely associated with the protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen's short story, the model and inspiration for the statue was Danish ballerina Ellen Price, who performed as lead in a ballet adaptation of the story in Copenhagen in 1909. Danish brewer, art collector and philanthropist Carl Jacobsen was so impressed by Price's performance that he commissioned Eriksen to produce a bronze statue that reflected Price's performance (an aspect that explains the figure's finned feet, as Price danced in a costume with similar lower leg adornments). Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, Canadian couple Henry and Mer Lynse visited Copenhagen and were fascinated by the statue (Watson, 2004). After returning to their home on Rest island, on the Canadian (northern) side of Rainy Lake (Figure 1), they were keen to erect a similar statue in their lake.

¹ This list is derived from provincial government place name databases and Google Map searches.

² The name appears to have derived from the *HMS Mermaid*, which explored the area in 1769-70 under the command of Captain James Smith (Unattributed, nd). The name was adopted in 1925 but was changed to Mermaid Farm in 1939 before reverting to Mermaid in 1960 (Government of Prince Edward Island, n.d.)

The opportunity to accomplish this arose in 1934 or 35, when a young architectural student and relation, Gordon Schlicting, was spending the summer with them. Schlicting interpreted their wish without close adherence to the design of Eriksen's statue, choosing instead to create the figure of a more buxom adult female with full fishtail (Figure 2). After transporting a concrete block reinforced with metal to a small rock off the north-east point of the island, he chiseled the figure in an example of what is now be referred to as 'guerilla art', where creative works are produced and installed in public places without permission from relevant authorities. While the Lynses' reactions to having such a different mermaid figure installed off the shore of their island has not been documented, the structure has remained in place for over 75 years and has become a popular local landmark, resulting in the (previously un-named) rock becoming known as Mermaid Rock.³

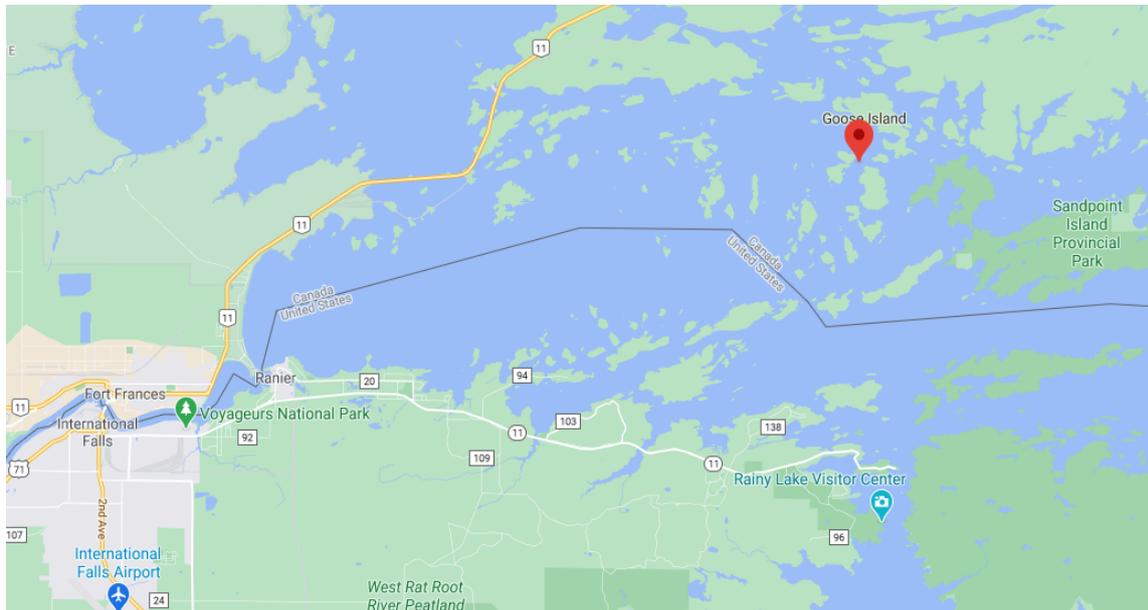


Figure 1 – Map of Rainy lake showing location of Mermaid Rock and US-Canada border (Google Maps, 2020).



Figure 2 – Promotional Image of Mermaid Rock (Fort Frances, nd)

³ This account is synthesised from Unattributed (2002) and Watson (2004).

There appears to be no account of initial local reactions to the erection of the statue but in recent decades it has become recognised as something of a local heritage asset and was the subject of an art show entitled 'Mermaid Imagery' organised by local group Rainy Lake Impressions in August 2002. The exhibition featured a number of works inspired by the statue and the recitation of a poem written for the event by local Ruth Caldwell. One interpretation, a thin, metal statue, has been installed with an information panel about the original statue on La Verendrye Parkway outside of Fort Frances (Figure 3), further boosting the mermaid's profile as a local landmark by including it as a feature in location branding.



Figure 3 – Metal mermaid statue and information panel, Fort Frances

The most recent interpretation of the local mermaid in popular media occurred in the form of Lake of the Woods Brewing Company (based in Kenora) which launched their Rainy Lake Blonde Ale in 2018, featuring a stylised rendition of the mermaid on the bottle label (Figure 4). A publicity note accompanying the beer's release referred to the statue's history and identified that the mermaid "statuesque, secretive and alluring, is said to watch over the comings and goings of the Lake" and playfully identifying that the beer itself was "soon to be the stuff of local lore".



Figure 4- Rainy Lake Blonde Ale beer label (2018).

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