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Ferry takes 200 from Quincy to Georges Island in frigid weather

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QUINCY — Kathy O'Hara of Squantum hiked across snow and ice to the far side of the island in search of harbor seals. "It's been a long winter, so it's nice to get outside for a while," she said.

The **Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area** is usually closed to the public for the winter. From November to the start of May, the islands dotting the harbor are off-limits.

On Saturday, for the second year in a row, the park and the islands were open to the hardy. A ferry leaving from the Quincy shipyard carried nearly 200 visitors to Georges Island. The temperature hovered near freezing, and whitecaps dotted Boston Harbor.

"I come out here every summer with my teenager, but I've never been here in the winter," O'Hara said.

Joe Hajjar works for Boston's Best Cruises, which operates ferry service to the harbor islands from Quincy, Hull, Salem and Long Wharf in Boston.

Hajjar said a bird-watching cruise last month drew more than 240 people.

"Everyone is starving for something family-friendly that's reasonable," he said.

People like O'Hara, who came to see harbor seals, weren't disappointed. Georges Island's winter caretaker, Eva van Aken, 28, stood ready with binoculars and a clear view of two plump seals basking on rocks just offshore.

An employee of the Boston Harbor Island Alliance, van Aken said she enjoys spotting wildlife and the solitude of island life, though this day she was happy to have the visitors.

"I was looking forward to (winter on the island) as a time to relax and read books," van Aken said. "Not seeing people for days on end is intense — intensely boring, but really amazing, too."

Consisting of 34 islands and peninsulas, including Hingham's World's End and Webb Memorial State Park in Weymouth, the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is the nation's newest national park. Established by Congress in 1996, it's managed through the cooperative efforts of federal, state, local, public and private agencies.

Georges Island is the best known of the park's island destinations because it's the central hub for ferries. History buffs can spend hours on either ranger-led or self-guided tours of the Civil War-era prison Fort Warren.

"This spring brings the 150th anniversary of the Civil War," National Park Service ranger Kelly Fellner said. "This fort is going to host a series of events, including music from the era, specifically 'John Brown's Body.'" Fellner said the patriotic song, which evolved into the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," was composed at Fort Warren in 1861.

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