



buoy oh buoy

BY **correy baldwin**

Walk through any coastal fishing town in the North Atlantic, from PEI to Maine, and you'll see them: brightly coloured lobster buoys, displayed on shop fronts and hanging from

fences and mail boxes and front porches—some weathered and worn, their colours faded; others repurposed and repainted, bright as new. And down by the water, you will find them along the shorelines and on wharves, gathered next to lobster traps and coils of rope, showing off their wild combinations of blues and reds, pastels and pinks, in stripes or in bold blocks of colour.

The colourful lobster buoy has come to represent so much of the life, culture and traditions of coastal fishing communities. Its appeal is obvious: it is delightfully simple yet eye-catching, instantly recognizable, and an intimate part of seaside living.

Buoys are, first and foremost, tools of the trade—functional objects with a specific utilitarian purpose, playing an important role in the seasonal and daily routine of a hardworking industry. But they also have an undeniable poetic resonance. The playfulness of their colours, and the cultural significance they have taken on, elevates them from being simply, and merely, a tool.





There is also the imagery of the buoy floating on the open ocean, far from shore. They are, after all, markers of things that lie beneath, that have been left behind. Buoys tell the lobstermen where their traps lay, fathoms below on the ocean floor—and likewise they feel like markers telling us where we've hidden away a secret part of ourselves, secrets that are waiting for us to return, to find them again and bring them back to the surface, and back home to safe harbour.

That's the poetry. But let's not forget, there is also the lobster. Buoys float on the surface and mark where a fisherman has set a trap, or a series of traps (for lobster, but also for other shellfish, such as crabs).

Lobster traps, known as "pots," are laid in singles or pairs or groups of up to six, lowered onto the ocean floor where the lobster live and feed. The traps themselves are the other elegant—and iconic—object of the trade. Though today the modern trap is a rectangular metal-framed box with synthetic webbing, traditionally it was a curved cage built of wooden slats and net, with an opening to allow in curious lobster. A trap consists of two areas: the "kitchen," where bait is set, and the "parlour," where the lobster end up in their attempt to exit the trap. Between the two rooms is a small fun-

nel-shaped opening through which adult-sized lobster have a difficult time escaping.

The lobster pots are connected to the buoy floating on the surface by a long rope, known as a "warp" or "pot warp." This warp is hooked (or "gaffed") by the lobsterman from the boat, and the pots winched to the surface, where the lobster are removed (claws banded with elastics), and the trap re-baited, then dropped back into the ocean, ready for another catch.

The buoys themselves—usually around a foot and a half long—tend to be torpedo or bullet shaped, though they come in a variety of shapes and sizes, some more oblong, some rounded. Each buoy has a stick, or spindle, inserted through it, which serves as a handle, and to which the warp can be attached (via a swivel, which keeps the warp from twisting on itself). Modern swivels are designed to break under immense pressure, to help protect whales that might get caught up in the trap line.

Early buoys were made from wood, often cedar, and turned on a lathe or even carved by hand—true pieces of art—though today they are almost exclusively made of a hard foam, similar to Styrofoam.

Today, lobstermen—by which we mean lobstermen and lobsterwomen—mark their buoys with a GPS, but

even technology has not replaced the traditional way of identifying a buoy: colourful paint.

Buoys are painted (usually hand painted) a particular colour combination and pattern in order to be identified, and each lobsterman has their own pattern, unique and exclusive to them—legally, no two lobstermen are allowed the same colour design in the same fishing area. Buoys are also marked with a registration number, and both number and colour pattern must be registered as part of the fishing license. Numbers and colour patterns must also be prominently displayed on the fishing boat.

The colours tend to be bright in order to be seen from a distance, and in all types of weather, from fog to heavy rain. Fluorescent oranges and electric yellows and pinks have become popular, along with traditional reds, blues and greens.

Small family businesses still make up the core of the lobster fishing industry, and these working families come to identify strongly with their own buoy colour pattern. Not only do they become a symbol of the business (much like cattle brands in ranching), they are also often passed down from generation to generation. Sons and daughters adopt their parents' and grandparents' colours, or choose variations if they branch out on their own.



“Like many other fishermen, my father has always taken great pride in his buoys and I was taught early on to paint each red stripe with precision, avoiding any splotches or paint runs. When I have time, I still enjoy painting a few of my father or brother’s lobster buoys.”

— CHRISTINA LEMIEUX

“A lot of people pick their colours lots of different ways,” says a lobsterman who goes by “Wakey” on his Dylan Outdoors YouTube channel. He shows off his collection of orange-and-purple buoys, explaining: “My grandfather was orange and white, my father is orange and green, I’m orange and purple. So,” he says, pointing at the purple stripe, “my mother’s favourite colour, and I wanted to keep the orange going, as a family tradition.”

He then shows off an orange-and-purple buoy tattoo on his forearm, then a tattoo of his father’s buoy near his elbow, and his grandfather’s closer to his wrist.

Author Christina Lemieux writes on her Maine-ly Lobster blog about her own family’s colour pattern: “My grandfather’s buoy color was orange with a blue stripe. When my grandfather finished fishing, my brother took over that color pattern and still uses it today.”

Christina grew up helping her father work. “Like many of the girls in my town, I grew up with my name on the side of my father’s lobster boat. Unlike most girls at the time, I worked as a sternman on that boat,” she writes.

One of her jobs as a girl was helping her father paint the buoys, something that must be done every year, before the start of the fishing season. It is, Christina writes, one of the first jobs given to a son or daughter when they are old enough to help out in the family business: “I began painting my father’s buoys around the age of eight. Each spring, I would gather up bunches of buoys from our backyard, brush off any sea growth and pin the buoys to one of my mother’s clothes lines. I would then work my way down the clothes line with my brush and bucket, painting the buoys one by one. Each buoy would get three stripes of red paint along with a number. It would then dry in the sun before being bunched back up, tossed into the back of my father’s pickup truck and taken down to the wharf along with a trailer full of traps.”

Buoys are family traditions, but they are also cultural icons. Maine in particular has embraced the colourful lobster buoy, recognizing, perhaps, its appeal to tourists, hungry not only for a fresh lobster roll at a seaside shack, but also for a view of a “a shoreline littered with a kaleidoscope of different-colored lobster buoys,” as Christina describes it.

They are eye-catching, but they also tell a story about tight-knit fishing communities, and family traditions being passed down—and about hard work on the open ocean, surely one of the harshest and most awe-inspiring environments in which to labour.

And each time a lobsterman picks up a paintbrush to freshen up a faded familiar colour, the buoy becomes not just a tool, but part of a true folk art tradition—born out of hard labour, ingenuity, rural creativity and the application of loving hands. **U**

