How Many Islands Are There in Lake Erie?

There are at least 37 "real" islands in Lake Erie, but an exact count depends on what you decide to include or exclude. (Also see the last page for two very different counts of 1,752 or 2,176 islands and an explanation of those.) The four types of islands that cause a counting problem are

- Islands that existed in the 19th century but now either connected to the mainland or submerged, e.g., Catawba Island, Gull Island, Long Point Island
- Islands not quite in Lake Erie such as Johnson's Island in Sandusky Bay or Bois Blanc Island at the mouth of the Detroit River
- Artificial islands, such as the ones that the Southeast Shoal Lighthouse off Pelee Island and the Detroit River Light sit on.
- A large number of tiny unnamed islands, mostly off the Michigan shore and off Long Point, Ontario

So the exact count of islands is at the reader's discretion. But here are the islands to consider. Groups 1 and 3 below contain the 37 "real" islands in Lake Erie. If you take out the three that are now permanently connected to the mainland (Catawba Island, Presque Isle and Long Point Island), the count goes down to 34. Groups 2 and 4 contain 9 other islands that are sometimes mentioned as Lake Erie Islands, even if incorrectly.

The names of all 24 of the islands in the Bass Island Archipelago are in boldface. These are all 15 in Group 1 and 9 in Group 3.

Group 1: The 15 Core Ohio Islands: Ohio's Bass Island Archipelago in Ottawa and Erie Counties

Island	Inhabited?	Comments
Ballast	YES	Small island with 9 homes and no scheduled ferry service. Former summer HQ of the U.S. Canoe and Kayak Association
Buckeye	NO LONGER	Small; Known to have had one home in the past
Catawba	YES	Originally a real island, connected to the mainland since 1897
Gibraltar	YES	Small; Provides protection for Put-in-Bay harbor on South Bass
Green	NO LONGER	Small; Previously inhabited by a lighthouse keeper
Harbor	YES	Small and bridged. At entrance to West Harbor on Catawba Island
Kelley's	YES	Large & well developed; The only Group 1 island in Erie County
Lost Ballast	NO	Not much more than a reef with a few trees
Middle Bass	YES	Large and well developed, but only half the size of South Bass
Mouse	NO LONGER	Small; Known to have had one home in the past
North Bass	YES	Large & not well developed; owned 80% by the State of Ohio
Rattlesnake	YES	An exclusive private club with about 15 home sites
South Bass	YES	Large & well developed. Where Put-in-Bay is located
Starve	NO	A small, bare and dangerous reef off South Bass Island
Sugar	YES	Small with a handful of homes; Now separate; connected to Middle Bass on some early maps

Group 2: 4 Other Ohio "Island" Candidates in Ottawa and Erie Counties

Island	Inhabited?	Comments
Cedar Point	YES	In Erie County. Sometimes mentioned as a former island, but the historical record is less clear on this than about Catawba Island.
Gull	NO	Listed on 19th century maps as a separate island between Middle Island and Kelleys, this island is now just an underwater shoal
Johnson's	YES	In Sandusky Bay close to Lake Erie and connected to Marblehead Peninsula via a bridge, but not really in Lake Erie
Kafralu	NO LONGER	This artificial island built on a sandbar off Cedar Point had ten buildings on it. Built in 1911 by Louis E. Wagner near the entrance of Biemiller Cove, it was sold to the Cedar Point Company in the 1930s and extended to be part of Cedar Point. The name is from his wife **Ka**therine and his sons **Fra**nk & **Lou**is.

Group 3: The 22 Other Core Islands in Lake Erie

Island	State/ Prov.	Inhabited?	Comment
Turtle	OH, MI	YES	Half in OH (Lucas County) and half in MI
West Sister	OH	NO LONGER	In Lucas County. Extensive agriculture in the 19th century.
Gard	MI	NO (but see comment)	Known to have been inhabited by Indians, but never by settlers. Close to Toledo, OH
Indian	MI	NO	Close to Toledo, OH
Stony Point	MI	NO	Close to Toledo, OH
Presque Isle	PA	YES	Originally a real island, now permanently connected to the mainland

East Sister	ON	NO LONGER	Extensive agriculture in the 19th century
Hen (and Chickens) (4)	ON	YES (Hen only)	We count these as 4 islands, even though 3 are not much more than reefs. The "chickens" are Big Chicken, Chick and Little Chicken Islands. Hen Island has been the home of the private Quinnebog Club since the 19th Century.
Long Point	ON	YES	A large real island in the 19th century, now permanently connected to the mainland and a World Biosphere Reserve. Near Port Dover. There are many small islands off Long Point Island, but only three (Ryerson's, Second, Snow) have distinct names on most maps.
Middle	ON	NO LONGER	Previously inhabited. The southernmost point in Canada, 7 miles east of Middle Bass Island
Middle Sister	ON	NO LONGER	Extensive agriculture in the 19th century
Millionaire's	ON	YES	Not named on any maps, this is an island known to many locals of the Long Point area as a very exclusive private hunting preserve. An island presenting a significant barrier on Long Point to the entrance to a large private marsh behind it, this is where the Duponts used to go duck hunting 100 years ago, and is still a very exclusive private club. It is southwest of Ryerson's Island.
Mohawk (formerly Gull Island)	ON	NO LONGER	Off Lowbanks, ON, near the Welland Canal. Site of historic lighthouse ruins. In the 19th century, there were 2 islands in Lake Erie named "Gull".
North Harbor	ON	YES	The only Lake Erie Island today with just 1 private house and nothing else.
Pelee	ON	YES	The largest Canadian island in Lake Erie.
Rock	ON	NO	A tiny island the size of the Chickens, about 6 miles east of Mohawk Island near Port Colborne.
Ryerson's	ON	YES	Off the N. shore of Long Point Island. Named after the first owner, Joseph Ryerson, who was a Loyalist sniper in New Jersey with a unit that tried to kill George Washington.
Second	ON	NO	Off the N. shore of Long Point Island
Snow	ON	NO	Off the N. shore of Long Point Island

Group 4: 5 More Island Candidates for Lake Erie

Island	State/ Prov.	Inhabited?	Comment
Bird	NY	NO	Shown on a few 19th century maps, this was in Lake Erie near the mouth of the Niagara River. Not on current maps.
Bois Blanc	ON	YES	Technically in the mouth of the Detroit River, but with a great view of Lake Erie and very close to it.
Detroit River Lighthouse	MI	YES	Artificial island in Lake Erie south of the mouth of the Detroit River. Sometimes incorrectly referred to as a replacement for the Bar Point Lightship that was about two miles north of this lighthouse for many years.
Little Sister	ON	NO	There are several historical references to a Little Sister Island in Lake Erie. It is not clear whether these refer to (a) West Sister Island, (b) Little Sister Island in the Maumee River in Toledo, but definitely not in Lake Erie or (c) some shoal not on current maps.
Southeast Shoal Lighthouse	ON	YES	Artificial island in Lake Erie off Point Pelee, built for the lighthouse there. Supported by a lightship before the lighthouse was built. It has a helipad on the roof.

Note: NOAA has a chart stating that there are 2,176 islands in Lake Erie, but this count includes the coastal zone. In the western part of the coast this boundary extends inland up to 15 miles along certain low-lying wetland and floodplain areas; in most of the eastern part of the State, areas with high bluffs, the boundary extends inland for only about an eighth of a mile, with the exception of the Mentor Marsh area.

The first two pages above had only small changes since they were first published around 2006, but then in 2018 I discovered a very different somewhat "official" count stating that the total number of islands in Lake Erie was 2,176. So I wrote an article about that for the Put-in-Bay Gazette, and here is an updated and more current version of that article:

How Many Islands Are There in Lake Erie? (2018 Version)

I saw a slide recently listing over 32,000 islands in the Great Lakes, including 2,176 in Lake Erie. And it was hard to believe. Because the presenter was from NOAA, I thought he had created the slide. But the slide was actually created by Matt Preisser of Michigan DNR, using data published in "Islands of Life – A Biodiversity and Conservation Atlas of the Great Lakes". It was published by the Nature Conservancy of Canada and is the result of a joint project between the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and the Great Lakes Program of the U.S. EPA.

The previous count that most people used for Lake Erie was 37, which contains the 15 Ohio Islands in the Bass Island Archipelago in Ottawa and Erie Counties, plus another 22. The core 15 are Ballast, Buckeye, Catawba, Gibraltar, Green, Harbor, Kelley's, Lost Ballast, Middle Bass, Mouse, North Bass (Isle St. George), Rattlesnake, South Bass, Starve and Sugar. Catawba Island was a real island until 1897 when it became a tied island, one permanently tied to the mainland. But most people leave it in the list and consider tied islands real islands. The list of 37, plus 11 more sometimes considered as Lake Erie Islands, is at http://middlebass2.org/IslandsInLakeErie.pdf. The report listing 2,176 is at http://greatlakesislands.info.

The count of 2,176 is actually only about 25% too high but as counted includes 130 Western Lake Erie Islands (including 21 "large islands), 66 in the Rondeau System near Erieau, ON, 1484 in the Long Point, Turkey Point Systems and Northeast Coast, 37 in the Welland Canal – Niagara River area and 55 in the Lake Erie Southern Coast area. It also includes the St. Clair River, Lake St. Clair and Detroit River area with 403 islands. If we take out that last area to limit ourselves to Lake Erie and adjust for a small arithmetic error in the 2176 count, **the final count of islands in Lake Erie is 1,752 and includes 42 "large islands"**.

Coming up with the meaning of this was not easy. The report defines an island as "any land mass (natural or anthropogenic) within the Great Lakes or connecting channels that is surrounded by an aquatic ecosystem. Therefore, a particular island can be periodically connected to the mainland or part of a reef depending on water levels. Rock, shoals, shallow reefs and breakwaters can all be considered islands in this report".

But the numbers still don't seem logical. However, digging a bit further shows that the definition of the lakes includes their coastal environments. And it's not easy to find the definition of that. It should have been in the report. Here's the definition of the coastal zone on the U.S. side of Lake Erie. "In the western part of the coast the boundary extends inland up to 15 miles along certain low-lying wetland and floodplain areas; in most of the eastern part of the State, areas with high bluffs, the boundary extends inland for only about an eighth of a mile, with the exception of the Mentor Marsh area."

I still need to reconcile my old list of 37 (plus 11 other island candidates) with the new list of 42 "large islands" within a total of 1,752. But none of these lists is perfect, so use any of the three numbers you choose, or come up with your own based on the available candidates. Note that the "official" list leaves out Catawba Island.

Michael Gora is the Middle Bass Island historian. He has a number of free island history documents available at http://www.middlebass2.org/island_history_nearby.shtml, and some other books available at http://www.mikegora.com.