

One seabird adventure after the next

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Gannets trundling among the murrens on Funk Island. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

It's the time of year when our research team heads to Funk Island – a small seabird-covered rock 50 kilometers off the NE coast. This year's roster included April Hedd, Paul Regular and me.

Our transportation and landing team aboard the *Lady Easton II* included Skipper Larry Easton, former skipper and patriarchal advisor – Ed, Sam Windsor, Jeff and Dean.

Following a 5 hour drive from Portugal Cove that included an uneventful nocturnal encounter with a mother moose and calf just beyond Gander, we arrived in to Carmanville about 11 PM. We bunked on *Lady Easton II* at dockside. Departure was at 2 AM to arrive at Funk in the early morning.

At 630 AM, I was awakened by Ed's joyous bellowing - "Breakfast, bye – let's eat." Though I might have preferred sleeping, I hadn't seen Ed in a while and

knew we'd have lots to discuss - family, friends, experiences and as always – fish, the fishery, capelin, seals, coastal living.

Ed's astute understated stories are insightful. Things change and we rely on people with experience and wisdom to help us realize how. Jared Diamond (author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*) has emphasized how elders in aboriginal societies serve as cultural and knowledge archives for the community. This relationship holds in our society also.

Ed talked about boyhood experiences aboard his father's schooner in Labrador. Mason jars brimming with cod livers and slow burning wicks created the dim, smoky and aromatic light on board.

In the Wadham Islands, Ed was nostalgic. "This place used to be full of boats, people and fishing communities." The magnificent pristine archipelago has but a few transient food fishers, summer campers, berry-pickers and winter duck hunters. Resettlement, outmigration – call it what you will – the movement of coastal people dependent on renewable marine resources has been a way of life since aboriginal times.

The landing

As with all Funk trips, the sea and weather determine the possibilities. On this day (30 July), a swell washed the Bench landing ledge on the northeast side. Conditions prevented landing in the flat that had hoisted from the long-liner.

Option 2 was a ladder tied over the bow rail of the *Lady Easton II*, a bobbing approach to the narrow ledge and well-timed jump. Larry's boat handling skills are extraordinary. After carefully sizing things up, acting patiently and deliberately, we were in a relieved and euphoric state on the solid unshakable rock. The *Lady Easton II* crew was similarly elated. Landings are always one of the "highs" of the trip.

Tracking seabirds

We attached (and retrieved) dive and compass loggers to common murre parents. Some Funk Island murre parents dive to extraordinary depths deeper than 100 meters to catch capelin. Information from the compass loggers will allow us to plot the murre parents' foraging routes and the sites where they dive for capelin.

We are comparing the parental efforts of Funk murre parents that travel 40 – 60 kilometers to feed on coastal capelin with those of murre parents at the inshore colonies in Witless Bay where the capelin essentially come to them. Funk Island is the site

of the largest common murre colony in North America (more than a million birds). Yet the colony is not growing while those elsewhere in the province are. The body weights of murre parents on Funk are also lighter than those of Witless Bay murrens – likely consequences of their greater parental foraging demands.

April and Paul recaptured 10 of the 20 murrens that we had attached geo-loggers to in 2007. When we map the data from these loggers, we will know where Funk murrens winter.

The single Funk murre that has been tracked this to date wintered near the southeast shoal of the Grand Bank. This highly productive and sensitive area lies downstream from the offshore oil platforms.

The geo-loggers weighing less than 1% of the bird's weight are well tolerated even if we do not retrieve them in a particular year. I retrieved 2 geo-loggers from gannets that had been attached in 2006.

Seabird diets

Murrens delivered large egg-bearing capelin to chicks. A good year for capelin translates into a good year for seabirds.

Gannets too provisioned chicks with capelin. They are much less discriminating than the murrens however, taking spent females and males as well as gravid females. A murre parent returns a single capelin per trip whereas a much larger gannet can carry up to 25, so there is plenty of rationale for their differing degrees of selectivity.

The gannets' also landed mackerel and Atlantic saury. These are sure signals of warm ocean conditions and the promise of a mackerel fishery in the weeks ahead.

The departure

All good things must end, and sometimes on Funk the end doesn't come too soon. Tent living on a North Atlantic rock is highly variable and at times challenging. Our work was completed by 29 July, and pick-up was scheduled for the next day. The weather to that point can be described as Floridian – tans, shorts and t-shirts, but by 27 July a massive seas were roaring from the north. The winds rose from the northeast and stayed there for the next 8 days with no sign of deviation.

As the big seas crashed around the Funks, departure was not possible. By day 13 food and water were running low. Larry was apprehensive and would bring water and food, if conditions appeared too risky for a pick-up.

To generate options, I used my satellite phone to call neighbors on a Sunday morning. Greg Robertson quickly mobilized a Canadian Wildlife Service Zodiac, engine and trailer that Alejandro Buren and Chantelle Burke delivered to the *Lady Easton II* in Carmenville. Then I called whale release expert Wayne Ledwell to help if needed. Within minutes, Wayne was on the TCH and arrived at the Carmenville dock where we now had 2 zodiacs and driver to accompany the *Lady Easton II*.

On arrival at Funk early on the morning of August 4, sea conditions were wild around the island. Owing to the sustained northeasterlies, the southwest side was the only possible exit option. It didn't look good.

Larry considered dropping food and water, but evaluated the situation with Wayne. After 2 hours, the zodiac was in the water with Wayne, Larry and Jeff aboard. We secured a rope and ran it down a crevice to the water. Wayne feathered the boat through the surf, and bingo - Jeff was on the island. What confidence – they were adding rather than removing people.

After our gear was removed, we rappelled down the rock into Larry Easton's arms of steel arms. Safe ... done ... homeward bound.

Back at the wharf

When our buoyant but bedraggled crew arrived at dockside, the Eastons were there. Diane (Larry's wife), Ed and wife Glenda and Larry's brother Tony gave us same warm greeting (and bake apples and cod) that started it all off. Some adventures are expensive, some are priceless.

Birds in the area and around the province

Last month's column noted that great blue herons may soon nest in the province, most likely on the southwest coast. The column had not even been published when Bruce Mactavish reported that Patricia Cousins and Brent Martin had video-taped great blue heron nests with young in Upper Ferry in the Codroy Valley.

Caspian terns are common along the Northern Peninsula in late summer and fall, but little is known about their nesting sites. John and Ivy Gibbons reported that 3 pairs appear to be nesting on Entrance or Kerry Island off Plum Point.

A rare white-winged dove was at Neil Dollard's feeder in Stephenville Crossing (Bruce Mactavish). Ellie Cohen enjoyed a rare northern mockingbird in

Topsail, and John Garvin had a magnolia warbler in Portugal Cove. American goldfinches and a female hairy woodpecker and fledgling are visiting Sam and Isabelle Windsor's feeder in Carmanville.

Four fledgling juncos departed the nest being monitored by Marilyn Hicks and her husband in the Goulds. Many young birds are on the wing - flying into cars, slamming into windows, being captured by cats and birds of prey. These are all part of the costs of growing up (or not).

Stay vigilant.