

Local bird and place names tell tales

Birds I View

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Bawk or Greater shearwater (photo: J. Coffey)

“There’s many men in summer who cannot buy salt meat,
They have to trust to sea-birds for something fresh to eat,
But if they keep this law that’s passed, they will not get a taste
Of bawk or noddy, tinker, tur, and not a tickleace.”

Art Scammell from the “Shooting of the Bawks”

So it was for the coastal communities of Newfoundland in the 1940s, when the Commission of Government banned seabird hunting during the summer. In protest, Art Scammell’s poem, “Shooting of the Bawk”, penned on Change Islands swelled a social tempest that swept around the coasts and pressured the commission into reversing its ban. The pen was indeed mightier than the ban.

Imagine a diet enriched and enlivened with bawk, noddy, tinker, tur and tickleace – seabirds were welcomed changes from diets of fish. They were often saved for the Sunday dinner table. Southern hemispheric breeding shearwaters (bawks), eastern Atlantic fulmars (noddies), elegant tuxedoed razorbills (tinkers), Olympic Arctic murre

(turs) and graceful kittiwakes (tickleaces) provided staples on Change Islands and elsewhere in the outports of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Many of our local bird names vary with place, and many place names are derived from birds. For instance, the bawks of the northeast coast in Scammell's poem are the hagdowns of the south coast in Otto Kelland's lyrical and enchanting song "Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's" where the fog horns wail and the hagdowns sail. Even more discriminately, some fishermen use the term black bawks refer to sooty shearwaters. Skerwink is name applied to Manx shearwaters as well as to the hiking trail in Trinity.

Some time ago when working on an island off the south coast, I asked the lighthouse keeper what he had for lunch? "Liver" he replied. "Beef?" I asked. "Bird" he said. "Chicken?" I queried. "No, hagdown" he confessed with partridgeberry pie for desert.

Bay Bulls apparently derived its name from bull birds or dovebies. These tiny auks from Greenland spend their winter vacations in the balmy ice waters of Newfoundland, and they are abundant around our coasts as I write. In Ole Perlican, dovebies have also been referred to as nunchies in reference to their convenient size for lunches. Baccalieu birds are common murrelets. Grebe and Grebe Heads and Points are likely sites where bald eagles nest or once nested. In St. Mary's Bay grebes were called spirit birds and winkers because they were so difficult for hunters to shoot (Tom Dalton, Bill Furey).

In Lake Melville Labrador, scaup are referred to as Walloons (Keith Chaulk). Some birds are called after their calls like hounds (long-tailed ducks), twilicks (greater yellowlegs) and kittiwakes. Red phalaropes are called whale birds and red-necked phalaropes - gale birds owing to the company and weather they keep.

Terns are stearins and paytricks. And while black guillemots are not rock doves, they are called pigeons. And the mourning doves have been paradoxically perhaps from a country and western perspective referred to as love birds? We have tooting owls (northern hawk-owls) and loppers (short-eared owls). The ever approachable pine grosbeaks are mopes.

Saddlebacks, mackerel gulls and seal birds refer to great black-backed gulls, Caspian terns and ivory gulls. Ivory gulls are also referred to as ice partridges, owing to their resemblance to winter plumaged ptarmigan or partridges.

Pure Ivory

In early January, a flock of two adult and 12 immature ivory gulls showed up at Sam Pike's house in Pinware River, Labrador. A couple of days later, Val Edison reported 15 or more in L'Anse-aux-Meadows, and John and Ivy Gibbons sighted 10 between Flowers cove and Eddies Cove East.

Sighting and birds then moved south and east. Fourteen ivory gulls were seen between Parsons Pond and Rocky Harbour (Tina Leonard, Darroch Whitaker), and others were found in Trinity and Conception Bays, Quidi Vidi Lake, Cape Spear, Trepassy and St. Pierre and Miquelon.

Ivory Gulls are meat eaters, hence the name seal birds owing to their associations with and affinity for seals. The high proportion of young ivory gulls sighted is encouraging news for this rare and threatened species.

More grim disservice from Canada Post

I just received a February hand-delivered Christmas card from a friend from St. John's. Canada Post in their wisdom had returned it to him because he used a former postal code. On 11 February, I received another card from friends from Maine. They resent it in another re-stamped envelope. Their original card which was perfectly addressed except for the street number was returned with the hand-written note "incomplete".

How could any postal employee with any sense of responsibility and good-spiritedness engage in such dreadfully appalling activity? I hope Canada Post will reimburse these people for the costs of the stamps that they purchased, but that would not much to restore trust in Canada Post to deliver the mail. How many more Christmas cards might my family and I or others not received? This really sucks!

Birds in the area and around the province

After just finishing a Seniors Resource Centre bird course, Dr. Fred Woodruff scored two tufted ducks at Burtons Pond. MUN ground crews have the aerator working so there is open water and many interesting ducks and gulls on campus. Besides Burtons Pond, if you want some local excitement visit Quidi Vidi Lake which is absolute carnival with many species and age classes of gulls, ducks and eagles.

Lillian Walsh of St. Lawrence captured two photos of what looks to be a summer tanager at her feeders in November and December.

Though there appears to be a dearth of finches around feeders, Linda Gaboroko has been attracting consistent flocks of purple finches, pine siskins and American goldfinches at her feeder in Manuals-Long Pond.

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