

Out-foxed on Funk Island

Birds I View

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Fox trap or fox trot? Setting a live trap for an observant arctic fox on Funk Island. (photo: Chantelle Burke)

Aerial photographs of Funk Island taken by the Canadian Wildlife Service earlier in the summer showing vacated breeding sites of murres assured us that there was a mammal on the island. As one of our field crews had to abandon the Gannet Islands off Cartwright Labrador in late July, we hoped that we wouldn't be meeting a bear on our research visit to Funk. Instead, we were greeted (literally) by the same arctic fox that was on the island last summer.

The lack of sea ice during the spring precluded any opportunities for the fox to leave the island. Arctic foxes are migratory highly social animals. Being stuck on Funk Island is likely not the fox's preferred alternative in winter and spring when the seabirds are away. Yet, for an arctic fox whose range extends northward to high polar regions, the harsh winter conditions on Funk Island may not be really all that challenging.

Summer is another matter entirely. For an arctic fox that specializes on seabird eggs, chicks and adults, Funk Island is likely a paradise beyond canid imagination.

Efforts to trap the fox

Having discussed the natural occurrence of arctic foxes on Funk and other coastal and offshore islands of Newfoundland and Labrador with NL Parks and CWS personnel, we decided to try to live trap the fox. Once on the island, I baited a large box-like metal cage with bison and polish sausage, capelin, a dead murre, some murre eggshells and a freshly killed murre chick that I got by chasing the fox away from it.

The fox took a few capelin without entering the trap fully but showed no interest in any of the other baits. He also to my surprise actually put a chewed up adult murre and a murre eggshell in the trap!

More messages for the trapper were to follow. On our first evening on the island. I was awoken three times by a strange dream in which I was carrying a box of stinking rotten birds out of a basement. On the third awakening, I realized that the smell was a very real and intense one – reminiscent of the spray of male cats. I am certain that Mr. fox was marking on the tent near the head of my cot. This was the only time in my life that I have been awakened from a deep sleep by a smell. I hope that it's the last.

Consequences for the seabirds

Funk Island's offshore isolation provides a natural refuge from land-based mammalian and avian predators. Here seabirds that normally nest on steep precipitous cliffs lay their eggs and raise their chicks on the level terrain of the island. This situation makes Funk Island an easy place for us to access birds for research studies but also makes it a place where disturbance can be horrific.

A free running fox besides killing and caching many birds truly terrorizes the lot of them. Here are some of the effects of Mr. fox. The largest fulmar colony in Atlantic Canada has been abandoned for the past 2 years. The puffins appear to have zero breeding success. Though a few razorbills had chicks, the massive murre colony of more than a million birds had huge impacts. Perhaps 20% of the murre colony was abandoned, and breeding failure for those remaining may have been more than 50%. This totals to hundreds of thousands of murre.

Even the large robust and aggressive gannets were showing signs of partial colony abandonment and breeding failures of likely greater than 50%. The consequences for our research have also been profound and costly – almost 50 murre carrying tracking devices have abandoned their breeding sites. It is clear that the fox has to go.

Next steps

In September, we will return to Funk Island and will use a blowgun to attempt to hit the small fox with a tranquillizer dart. I hope it works and the animal can be brought to Salmonier Nature Park. Otherwise, we will have a rifle.

The irrationality of culling seals to enhance fish stocks (continued)

Dick Whitaker's Ground Cover column "Seal culls and fisheries management" in the July issue of the *Northeast Avalon Times* necessitates a response. Just the facts.

Seals eat lots of fishes. They always have and always will. Seals eat many different species of fishes. They eat them in different places and at different times of year. Seals and the fishes that they eat do not exist in isolation from the rest of the marine ecosystem. These circumstances combine to make arguments for culling based on incorrect and unfounded assumptions simply not credible.

Basing action on false assumptions generates mismanagement. We have great difficulty managing the direct effects of fisheries on fish stocks. Proposing the management of indirect effects through culling is not helpful. We are dealing with complex and dynamic marine ecosystems not farms.

Killing thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of seals will create lots of carnage. Such action will not result in more fishes in the nets of fishers.

Rampant and destructive development in the community

It was encouraging to see the Stop Order issued by the Portugal Cove – St. Philips Town Council on 23 June to stop an unpermitted road ripped in off of Emberly's Road above Neary's Pond in Portugal Cove. Yet there is so much to be concerned about.

Heavy road construction equipment is spreading over the meadows and landscapes. Wetlands are being infilled. The recent housing development on Portugal Cove Road looks like an environmental war-zone.

Having spent considerable time on Fogo Island during the past 2 years, it is absolutely astounding to see the economic development that can be generated by truly investing in community heritage. Such investment instills pride as well as prosperity.

Too many people in our communities on the Northeast Avalon are bent on or blind in throwing it all away. We have to stop "Paradising" own towns. It just does not pay in either the long or the short term. It absolutely essential that the Town Council on the Northeast Avalon act to protect our natural and cultural heritage.

Birds in the area and around the province

A number of dead gannets were found on the beach in Musgrave Harbour in July. These birds were likely discarded after being caught in and drowned in herring nets. Wilfred Williams of New Harbour in Trinity Bay provided me with a beautiful specimen of a gannet that drowned in one of his herring nets. Interestingly, the gannet had a geo-locator attached to its leg. When Dave Fifield mapped the data, it showed that the gannet had wintered in the Gulf of Mexico and got out before the oil disaster, only to drown in a net in Trinity Bay.

Tony Power had reports of oiled gannets on the water near Cape St. Mary's but could not locate them in subsequent search (Tony Power). Roy Jon emailed me a couple of photos of a black guillemot that he saw flying around the cliffs while he was hiking the Father Troy in Torbay.

An American bittern crashed into the side of Joe Tilley's new house on Three Island Pond Road in Flatrock. The specimen will be used with students at Memorial University. We have had lots of bird collisions with windows and houses over the years but this is the first I know of that involved such a large bird as a bittern.

Sizeable flocks of whimbrels were seen by Richard Northcott on the berry barrens of Ramea on 21 July. Herring gulls have successfully nested on the roof of the Science Building at Memorial University. They are making a racket. As they move into urban areas, we can expect more gulls nesting on building roofs. This is a common practice in urbanized areas in Europe.

Keep looking. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (home), 737-7673 (office).