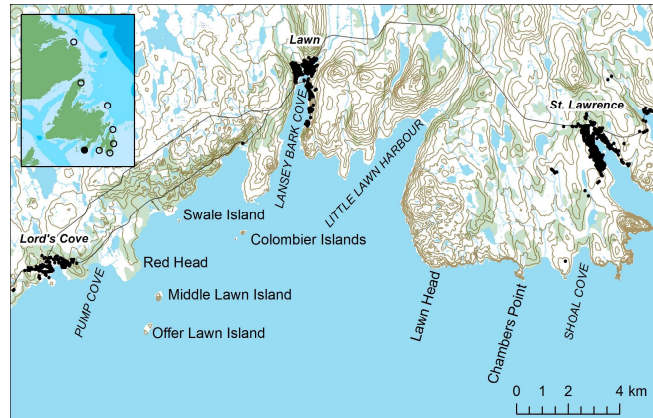


The long and lasting reach of Jon Lien

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



The Lawn Islands Archipelago off Lord's Cove on the sole of the Burin Peninsula. Inset shows locations of other seabird ecological reserves in the province. (map: Paul Regular)

When I arrived in Newfoundland three plus decades ago, the first seabird island that I visited was Middle Lawn Island off Lord's Cove on the sole of the Burin Peninsula. I went there with one of Jon Lien's graduate students who was studying storm-petrels.

On Wednesday past, I was back at the foot of the Burin in Lamaline, an idyllic fishing community. With other members of WERAC (Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council) and staff from the Parks and Natural Areas Division, we held a community information session about the Provisional Ecological Reserve in the Lawn Islands. Middle Lawn Island is home to the only colony of Manx shearwaters in North America. As well, the eighth largest colony of Leach's storm-petrels in the province burrows in the peaty soils of Middle Lawn. A rich community of other of other breeding birds including kittiwakes, murres, eiders and Canada geese also inhabits the other islands during the nesting season.

Options for protection

The possibilities for the protection of the archipelago discussed were to protect 1) all four islands – Middle Lawn, Offer Lawn, Columbier Islands and Swale Island (see map), 2) Middle Lawn Island and Columbier Islands only, or 3) Middle Lawn and Offer Lawn Islands only. The meeting in Lamaline was extremely productive. And while it is important for all the information from the public to come in, it seemed that there was a consensus for an entire archipelago – four island reserve.

Information on the wharf

On Thursday morning, we had a fantastic tour of the coastline from Lamaline to Lawn and the archipelago on Alfred Fitzpatrick's long-liner. When we landed on the wharf in Lawn, we had a most important community discussion.

About 10 fishermen were in boats and on the wharf. They were interested considerations about the reserve. Many if not most of the fishermen hunt seaducks and seabirds in winter. Offer Lawn Island is a key site where they hunt eiders. Hunting is not permitted in Ecological Reserves.

The conversation was pointed, informative and friendly. "Well, you started out with Manx shearwaters and now you want it all. I'm putting my X on that. This is like two aboriginals protesting and the entire Tars Sands project is shut down." Well, not exactly but being prone to overstatement myself, I got the message clearly.

The banter, humor and informative discourse on the wharf reaffirmed how important bird hunting was for many local residents. The tradition of having a bird on the Sunday dinner table was still strong in the vibrant surviving fishing communities of the southern Burin Peninsula. And if that bird could be an eider or a turr - all the better.

I recall a relevant conversation with Art Scammel, author of "The Shooting of the Bawk" and "The Squid Jigging Grounds". He described the significance of seabird hunting during earlier times in Newfoundland outports, "throughout the week it was fish, salt fish and potatoes with a scattered meal of beans, but there was always a bird on the Sunday dinner table."

Giving hunters their grounds

The suggestion by the fishermen was to exclude Offer Lawn island from the reserve, so they could hunt there in winter. Another public consultation was held on Thursday evening in St. Lawrence that I could not attend so am unaware of what was discussed. Once the public information is received, government will make a decision about the reserve.

As the wharf conversation was winding down, two final and compelling points were made. It was suggested it was best to "pursue the path of least resistance" in establishing the reserve. While excluding Offer Lawn from the reserve would not have been my initial preference, what was said makes a lot of sense.

And as we were departing, one of the fishermen yelled up from the boat "Have you got a name on the reserve?" Having heard that some folks didn't like the name Lawn Islands Ecological Reserve, I asked "what do you think?" "You should call it the 'Jon Lien Seabird Reserve'". Everyone nodded and affirmed.

What goes around comes around, and sometimes coincidence is everything. I headed back to St. John's to participate in a Natural History Society meeting celebrating the life and work of Jon Lien.

The irrationality of culling seals to enhance fishery catches (continued)

There seems to be no letting go of illogical arguments nor of accounting for scientific evidence in Dick Whitaker's continued support for culling massive numbers of seals. The proposal that has been presented to the Minister of Fisheries suggests killing about 70 percent of the gray seal population on Sable Island and providing contraception to most of the remaining animals in the population. We're talking about hundreds of thousands of large marine animals.

To affect such action would require building an incinerator in a protected area and trucking the bodies there for incineration. Such slaughter could be considered as a "final solution" for gray seals. It would cost millions of tax payers' dollars. It would not enhance fishery catches, but it would spiral decades of cumulative mismanagement of the fishery deeper into a dark vortex of irreversible errors.

Support for the Newfoundland seal hunt as the worthwhile and sustainable enterprise that it is needs to continue to bolster respectful and humane interactions with the animals that we utilize. At the moment, Canadian seal hunts seem to have been given a potential reprieve in the banning of seal products by the European Union. One thing that could really bung this up is calls for and support of the proposed killing and incinerating of hundreds of thousands of seals by the Canadian government that would be of no potential benefit to the fishery. Makes no sense, certainly not the common kind.

Birds in the area and around the province

Eva Luther of St. Lewis Labrador reports that it was "raining" diving gannets around the harbor in late August. It was thought that the birds may have been feeding on squid; there also seem to be lots of mackerel about for the gannets to pursue.

In Portugal Cove, Wayne Ledwell and Julie Huntington had a white-winged crow in their yard, and Cath Bonney-Berzins found the tiny body of a stunning male golden-crowned kinglet below a window at her home. A spotted sandpiper is visiting the outflow of the river at the Portugal Cove wharf.

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