

The federal assault on the environment

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Male northern pintail often congregate in spring while the females attend the eggs and nest. (Photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Whether it's protecting aquatic ecosystems and fish habitat, maintaining adequate levels of offshore vigilance, supporting diligent environmental assessment processes, nurturing archaeological, biological or meteorological scientific expertise, the myopic and destructive ideology of the Harper government has no time for it. Their time frame is set for "fast-tracking".

This "shoot first and ask questions (make regulations) later" is the antithesis of a rational and precautionary approach to sustainable development. Their structural damage to the environmental safeguards will be extremely difficult if even possible to rectify. By the time this government is voted out of office, some of the enormous economic, environmental and social costs will be well underway.

At a time when government agendas merge into corporate agendas, there is urgent need for arm's length and independent checks and balances. Yet these are precisely what are being demolished by governmental decree.

What does it mean for the general public? For starters - increased health risk, loss of biodiversity and ecosystem integrity, unnecessary environmental destruction, loss of Canadian scientific expertise, and most importantly we are witnessing the demise of a carefully considered approach to healthy and sustainable development.

This destructive fundamental ideology has to be questioned. There is serious concern throughout Canada about the denigration and silencing of scientific inquiry.

This type of repression is characteristic of dictatorial regimes. In Canada such a turn needs to be guarded against. It's not trivial. It's not business as usual. It's much deeper than that.

Why is the portfolio of the federal Minister of the Environment focused on development rather environmental protection? Why is the federal Minister of Fisheries intent on permitting the destruction of fish habitat? These actions are so outside the box of credibility that four former fisheries ministers have condemned the proposed revisions to the Fisheries Act in Bill C-38. And with all this going on, the silence of the provincial government is deafening.

In speaking about the dissolution of the Round Table of the Economy and the Environment and other nongovernment environmental groups, Stephen Harper said "it is a waste of taxpayers' dollars to fund groups that disagree with government policy." Think about that statement carefully and consider the totalitarian and repressive regimes around the world that have such policies. Not in Canada.

There comes a time, when one has to stand and to push back, or simply acquiesce to being pushed under. It's time.

White pelican visits

The third white pelican known to occur on the island of Newfoundland was photographed on 20 May in Roddickton Harbour by Helga Weir. The adult bird was in full breeding regalia including a protruding knob on the top of its very prodigious bill. Interestingly, on 30 May an adult white pelican was in Biscay Bay (Richard Thomas). "The" bird was then photographed on 1 June in Come By Chance by Brenda Mulrooney. And 4 June, CBC reported a white pelican on Lamaline on the Burin Peninsula. If this the same bird, then it has in a zigzag way be moving south on the island.

White pelicans nest in Manitoba, Alberta and BC and in the western US. This is just the third record for Newfoundland. The first occurred about 30 years earlier in nearby Raleigh in June 1983. The second record occurred about a decade later on the northeast coast.

Starling nesting sites

The common, ubiquitous and industrious introduced European starling is experiencing a housing boom on the island. Their exploration and development strategy of "find hole – build nest" is serving them well.

Recently sighted starling nest-sites include a Chinese Restaurant on Cookstown Road, a condominium on Terra Nova Road, the overhead walkway between the Biotech and Chemistry Buildings at MUN, the hole in the street pole at the Elizabeth Avenue exit from Churchill Square and in the pole at east end of Windsor Lake on Portugal Cove Road, a bird house in Musgrave Harbour, the unfinished dock light beside the Artists' center at Quidi Vidi Gut. Look and listen, there could be a starling family living near or with you.

If a starlings is nesting in your home, the solution involves patience and waiting until the young vacate the nest in a few weeks. Then screen the hole over before the starlings begin re-nesting. If holes are screened before the young birds vacate, the parents are frantic and the noisy starving chicks inside will die and deteriorate.

Birds in the area and around the province

Another unusual large white bird also made a showing. Kathy Coulombe of CBC Radio International informed me that her brother-in-law Ern Keefe saw a Great Egret in Tilting Harbour on early May.

Also on Fogo Island, Larry Donahue ventured out at 5 am on 16 May to find hundreds of northern gannets diving on herring in the shallow inner waters of Joe Batts Arm. The gannets are from large colony on Funk Island.

The gannets disappeared as quickly as they arrived. Diving gannets disrupt fish schools, and more gannets create more disruption. This is why gannets disperse when they search for food. The location of schools in shallow inshore water provides the gannets with hunting advantages where the herring have much less opportunity for dispersal and escape.

Six common loons at Mitchell's Brook were with a pair of red-breasted mergansers on 20 May. Five male pintails in striking breeding plumage were in Wesleyville on 2 June; presumably the females were incubating nearby. A Caspian tern was among the ring-billed and herring gulls at Harricott on 20 May.

Two tiny black ducklings and pair of small adults were at the outflow stream of Neary's Pond by the picnic area on 23 May. Spotted sandpipers were fluttering and whistling along the shores of North Harbour on 20 May. A pair of tree swallows was seen on wires near the western entrance to Terra Nova National Park on 15 May (Janet Montevicchi).

The eastern kingbird seen on a power line by Andrew Lang in Portugal Cove on May 24 is the first record that I know of for the town. Other eastern kingbirds have been seen across the province in Wabush (Lorne Stanley), St. Lewis (Eva Luther) and near Quidi Vidi Lake (Donna Mactavish).

A yellow-rumped warbler was singing in Portugal Cove on 9 May, they are everywhere now. Northern waterthrushes and purple finches began their territorial proclamations on 19 May.

A pair of early nesting junco had 3 newly hatched chicks and an egg in its well-hidden nest in a ditch on Neary's Pond Road on 14 May. During my last check on 26 May two well-feathered burst fluttering from the nest. Immediately, the two parents were at the site frantically chipping and scurrying about. I managed to return the smaller nestling. The juncos have the opportunity to rear a second brood later this summer.

In Carmanville, Sam Winsor reports an active feeder with purple finches, gold finches, evening grosbeaks, juncos, white-throated and fox sparrows, and possibly a white-crowned sparrow moving through during migration.

Alison Harvey has the good fortune to have had three rusty blackbirds and a young moose in her yard in Portugal Cove. Her report of white-breasted nuthatches nesting in her birdhouse motivated me to upgrade and reposition avian condos. So far – no takers; not even starlings!

Keep looking (up) Contacts – mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (h), 864-7673 (w), 693-5305 (c)