

## **Blizzards challenge birds as well as humans**

### **Birds I View**

**Bill Montevecchi**



Living on the North Atlantic brings challenges. Some of these are life-threatening. Blizzards can wreak havoc with birds as well as humans. Snow and ice can prevent land birds from obtaining food at natural sites and at feeders as well. At sea winter gales create turbulent ocean conditions that can prevent seabirds from capturing prey. And strong onshore winds can strand starving emaciated marine birds on land.

This is precisely what happened in the aftermath of the early January blizzard. At Holyrood beach, the catch basin at the bottom of Conception Bay, Ian Jones collected more than 200 dead and dying dovebies that were scattered over the shore, on the road and in the water.

Dovebies are diving seabirds - the little cousins of murrens and puffins. Yet small size does not dampen their large character which has led Scandinavians to refer to them as Alkakonge or king auk.

Other emaciated dovebies were reported dying on the beach in Bonavista (Jon Joy), and weakened dovebies were just off the beach in Portugal Cove where intrepid gulls were keeping a close watch and at times snagging a meal of bull bird. Land-stranded dovebies were picked up in St. John's (Dave Jenkins) and elsewhere. Food conditions may have been poor over an expansive region, as dovebies were also reported in unusual numbers at animal rescue centres in New York.

Such mass die-offs of seabirds precipitated by food shortages, inclement weather, and powerful onshore winds are often referred to as "wrecks." Dovebies, murrens, storm-petrels and shearwaters are marine birds that are particularly susceptible to such

“wrecks”. The dovebies that winter in Newfoundland waters are from the massive colonies of tens of millions of birds in the Thule District of northwest Greenland, though some from Iceland and perhaps further afield may winter here as well.

Dovebies feed on tiny plankton referred to as copepods. And it is not difficult to envision that turbulent seas could make these minute prey extremely difficult for these tiny seabirds to capture. Under the harsh frigid winter conditions of the North Atlantic, seabirds can only survive for a few days without food. So when blizzards howl for days on end, the birds are at times pushed beyond the brink and end up weakened and dying along our coasts.

The most extensive “wrecks” on record occurred in the 1930s when dovebies “rained down” from eastern Canada to Florida and were reported as far south as Cuba. Other “wrecks” of dovebies occurred in Newfoundland in December of 1974 and 1982.

During the blizzard, Lynn Holwell rescued a wayward American coot that landed on her street in Wedgewood Park. The bird was in good shape and appeared fine when released in Burton’s Pond.

### **Other birds in the area and around the province**

In mid-January, Jared Clark and I made a visit to the Codroy Valley. Waterfowl were the big story – more than 1,000 Canada Geese congregated all along the ice-free regions of the Grand Codroy River. There were also flocks of common goldeneye, mergansers, black ducks and a number of bald eagles checking out the possibilities. Waterfowl were also abundant at Stephenville Crossing where a dickissel was observed in a flock of house sparrows.

A pink-footed goose from eastern Greenland has been wintering with multitude of ducks in Bowring Park. Last sighting of which I am aware was by Beth Macdonell on the CBC morning road crew on 6 February as this column go to the editor.

In late January, about 500 greater scaup were along the ice edge in Clarenville, and common mergansers, American wigeon, tufted and black ducks and Canada Geese are also in the area (Diane Burton). It’s a waterfowl hotspot on the east coast. Canada geese are also overwintering in Noggin Cove.

Nora Lipa photographed a gathering of six bald eagles on the ice at Quidi Vidi on 22 January. Numbers rocketed up since then and 1 February Nora counted 11 eagles, Cecil Hare reported 16 on CBC Radio’s Morning Show and Bruce Mactavish topped it off with a count of 19 eagles on ice! Most were gathered around a dead black-backed gull carcass.

Bruce likened the event to a scene from the Serengeti of vultures around an animal carcass. The eagle population is on the rise throughout the province, and creating havoc for seabirds at some large colonies.

A gray jay flying over Thorbourne Road near Healy's Pond made me wonder if more frequent sightings of these deep woods dwellers nearer civilization are being facilitated by the clearing of the deep woods for local housing and large box industries and stores?

In Long Pond Manuals, Bruce Bennett and Linda Gaborko have more than 100 American goldfinches coming to their bird feeders that are filled with cracked black oil sunflower seeds and niger thistle seeds. Bruce also noted crows seizing a goldfinch that collided with a window. Whether or not the crows forced the collision is an open question.

The bone-chilling windswept dunes along the Musgrave Harbour shore were enlivened with rolling flocks of snow buntings and common redpolls feeding of the seeds of the marram grasses that give the sandy dunes a permanence and integrity. Redpolls including some whitish hoary redpolls have been reported from a Lumsden feeder that is also sustaining a clay-colored sparrow, a white crowned sparrow and 2 song sparrows!

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