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Come-from-away birds

Birds I View

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Ring-billed gulls scuffling over a French fry. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Like humans, avian immigrants have been, are and will continue coming to Newfoundland. Owing to the glaciation of Newfoundland during the previous ice age about 10,000 years ago, most of the Island's birds like people are in the long-term come-from-aways. Common seabirds, like herring gulls for example radiated here from colonies in the eastern Atlantic.

Like tourists, most out of range birds will visit only rarely, sometimes only once. At times some species arrive in seasonal droves like conventioners as did the snowy owls this winter.

Others like the Norse Greenlanders will stay for a while then leave. Some, as the Maritime Archaic People did about 4,000 years ago, will settle and establish colonies. Some residents like the Beothuk and great auk will go extinct.

Vagrant birds or accidental tourists

Being at the northeastern extremity of the North American continent on the edge of the North Atlantic, Newfoundland like the outer Aleutian Islands, Baja California and the Florida keys is ideally positioned to pick up extra-limital birds. The term vagrant applies to birds that are well outside of their normal ranges that might be in Greenland, Europe, western North America or even further afield.

Vagrants often include young wayward animals and others that are moved by storms and large-scale weather systems. Hurricanes can generate “fallouts” of southern birds on the island. Fall migration is a time when some travelers frequently young inexperienced ones head off in the wrong direction and arrive here instead of the Everglades.

Avian vagrants are continually adding to the number of species on the Newfoundland bird checklist. Among the 400 or so species recorded, almost a quarter have been seen fewer than 5 times, many only once. Examples of vagrants include the recent Virginia’s warbler from the Texas area and barnacle geese from Spitsbergen.

Avian pioneers

Many land birds have expanded their ranges northward with warming climate conditions. Booming bird feeder activity has allowed migrants to overwinter in areas from which they would have previously migrated.

The ubiquitous European starling introduced in Central Park in New York City during the 1890s is among the most resilient of North American pioneers, expanding breeding ranges across the continent and inside the Arctic Circle.

Starlings established residency in Newfoundland about the time of Confederation with Canada in 1949, though I am certain of the significance of this. Introduced species like starlings can be problematic for native birds, for instance by displacing cavity nesters like tree swallows.

A number of seabird pioneers have established colonies. Ring-billed gulls from the Great Lakes region are more terrestrial than marine, following the plow for earthworms and McDonald’s visitors for fries. Black-headed gulls and Manx shearwaters are of European origin. Some relatively new winter residents include tufted ducks from Iceland.

Climate change and bird movement

Extreme bird movements across environmental divides are early signals of global climate influences. Pacific seabirds like the black-tailed, slaty-backed and glaucous-winged gulls are showing up in Newfoundland, while Atlantic seabirds like the gannet and dovekie are being seen in the Pacific.

These inter-ocean transits are facilitated by melting Arctic ice opening northern waterways. As polar ice flows recede, linkages between Pacific and Atlantic biota (including fishes) that have been isolated for millennia will open. The ecological consequences will be profound.

It is the nature of things to change, and rapidly changing environmental conditions will influence new avian arrivals and departures.

Birds in area and around province

On Boxing Day, the Portugal Cove – St. Philips component of the St. John's Christmas Bird Count set a local record of 30 species. Tony Lang, Nick Montevicchi, Darroch Whitaker and I were assisted by feeder watchers Carolyn and George Mayo and Rick and Angie West.

Each year, we strive to add species not otherwise obtained on the larger St. John's count. This year we contributed the sole records for ruffed grouse, northern shrike and white-throated sparrow. We also got 1 of the 2 hairy woodpeckers, 4 of the 13 bald eagles, 1 of 6 sharp-shinned hawks and 1 of 8 murrelets recorded for the St. John's count. Not bad for bay guys.

Interestingly and as always happens, some relatively common species just barely made the St. John's list. There was but 1 common loon, 1 Canada goose, 1 kittiwake and a single snow bunting, providing good motivation to always keep looking.

What crisis?

Displaced seniors, closed educational institutions, people sleeping in cars for warmth, house fires, carbon monoxide poisonings – what odds these are just minor personal problems.

Unchecked and improperly permitted developments coupled with no concern for conservation and with inadequate energy capacity maintenance and planning caused this crisis. It's not rocket science, but rather ignoring the obvious. Yet according to the Director of Nalcor we're

experiencing a confluence of repair issues and unforeseen environmental circumstances. Wasn't last winter's power crisis a wakeup? Common sense planning has to include the unexpected as well as the obvious.

When my daughter Gioia was in Cambodia she learned that the term crisis was coupled with opportunity. And it is opportunity that has to be grasped. The opportunity to correct faults, the opportunity to develop within the bounds of environmental restraint, the opportunity to conserve and to move ahead together sensibly.

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