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North Atlantic winds bring birds and bergs

Birds I View



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Fall is the prime time to view migrating shorebirds in Newfoundland and Labrador. At the end of summer, shorebirds from the Canadian Arctic move along the coast to southern wintering areas. On the way, whimbrels and American golden plovers search the barrens for berries, while turnstones, knots, sanderlings, sandpipers and dunlins forage along surf-swept shorelines.

During spring however the northerly migration of shorebirds from South America and the southern US wintering areas is overland in the interior of the continent, so most fall shorebirds are not seen. Yet owing to the Newfoundland's projection into the western Atlantic, when migrant shorebirds do show up during spring, they are often vagrants from Iceland and Europe. These are the birds that excite birdwatchers from both near and far, due to their rarity here and across North America.

The potent persistent northeasterly winds that swept across the North Atlantic during late April facilitated widespread occurrences of Icelandic and European birds around the province. Birds migrating from Europe and Africa toward Icelandic nesting sites were veered eastward and the ones that didn't perish in the North Atlantic were saved by their Newfoundland landfall.

Since late April, flocks of European golden plovers shown up at St. John's Airport, in the Goulds, Bay Bulls, Renewes, Chance Cove Provincial Park, Old Perlican and Eastport, while smaller numbers have occurred in Lumsden, Deadman's Bay, on Ramea and on the west coast.

Stunning orange and black plumaged black-tailed godwits with long upwardly curved bills have been in Renewes, the Goulds, Old Perlican, Deadman's Bay and in Gros Morne (Bruce Mactavish, Darroch Whitaker). Renewes is a remarkable birding hotspot, and soon after the godwits had made an appearance, two European common redshanks were spotted. The redshanks resemble yellowlegs though as their name implies are red-legged.

Another spring showing is also being made by a small passerine bird that nests in coastal Labrador, the Canadian Arctic and Greenland - northern wheatear. This species has an extraordinary trans-Atlantic migration to wintering grounds in Africa in autumn. Wind-driven wheatears are being seen around the province at Cape Spear (Rick West stunning photos), Cape St. Francis, Conception Bay North, Ferryland, Renews, Lumsden, Cape Freels, as well as in Gros Morne and Nain (Darroch Whitaker).

Perhaps the most unusual bird of all during the spring rare bird frenzy was the Ross's Gull in Torbay. First detected by Ed Hayden on 29 April the small rosy-breasted Arctic gull is a rare visitor often associated with pack ice. The bird was seen intermittently over a number of days.

The winds continue to blow in from the North Atlantic, the northeast coast is blocked with sea ice, icebergs and covered in snow. The fishermen are trapped in port, the robins are food-stressed and flocks of sea ducks and auks are showing up in small near shore openings in the ice. Keen eyes and attention will determine which species show up next and how they fare.

Snowy owls

Numbers of snowy owl are extending their stay in St. Shotts and Ramea (Richard Northcott), and 4 and 7 were seen on the Cape St. Mary's and Cape Race roads (Brendan Kelly, Bruce Mactavish). The owls' prolonged occupations may not be indicative of good times, as many owls have perished – the most recent carcass of a young seemingly emaciated young bird was picked up in the Goulds by Wayne Ledwell and Julie Huntington.

Other birds in the area and around the province

The rising population of great cormorants is has been evident during the winter and spring. Birds have been seen at Bowring Park, the waterway in front of the Health Sciences Centre [Winston White] and in mid-April seven were on the ice at Long Pond [Chris Baird]. In early May, 20 or more were at the Ragged River outflow in Musgrave Harbour (Bobbi Mayer, Janet Montevocchi).

A small flock black ducks including a banded bird is visiting the brook by the Whitaker's farm on Western Gully Road in Portugal Cove [Jill Whitaker].

In mid-April, an injured adult bald eagle seen near the Portugal Cove wharf was flushed and chased off by harassing gulls [Joe Butler]. It hasn't been seen since. In late April, a pair of red-breasted nuthatches – the first of the year visited our feeder (Janet Montevocchi).

As so much is unknown about land birds getting lost at sea, it is intriguing to learn about birds landing on offshore vessels and platforms. On 13 April a yellow-bellied sapsucker and barn swallow, not exceptionally common birds in Newfoundland, boarded a vessel off Placentia Bay [Pierre Ryan]. A catbird returned to Ramea on 3 May [Richard Northcott].

A most unusual record comes from the Humber Village, where on 21 April a nestling pine siskin was found on a dirt road with two agitated chipping adults nearby (Marina and Janet Montevocchi). The tiny flightless chick with a stubby tail and wings and yellow flecked plumage was moved off the road. When we returned, a few hours later the pair was still there though the chick was not relocated, and a red squirrel was chattering nearby.

Assuming the chick was about 6 or 7 days old following an incubation period of about 2 weeks, its egg would have been laid at the beginning of April or late March! This is the earliest laying date that I know of.

A previous report by Dick Cannings from 9 May 1977 of two 4-day old chicks outside a nest near Long Pond, would suggest a laying date around mid-April – still quite early in terms of the Newfoundland nesting season.

Keep looking.

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