

The problem with swans and other introduced species

Birds I View

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Krissy Holmes' continuing CBC news saga about the swans in St. John's parks has sparked interest in animal care and introductions of species not native to Newfoundland. My perspective about this was grounded when I bumped into journalist and Pouch Cove councilor Roger Bill in Ben's Pub who reminded me that like the swans I too wasn't native to Newfoundland. So what's this issue with the swans all about?

People are enamoured by swans and enchanted by the four young cygnets on Mundy Pond that outwitted the city staff "egg-oilers". As they say swans will be swans and when sexes are paired they are going to court, mate and produce a clutch of eggs which if not oiled by city workers will produce offspring.

The city of St. John's has an Environment Canada permit to maintain 6 swans and with the four cygnets they have exceeded their quota by 66%. Council can now attempt to increase the permitted number of swans in the city to 10 and continue in heavy management mode - that is oiling the eggs to prevent hatching and keep swan numbers stable.

Alternatively, they can remove the swans or perhaps have a contingent of same sexed birds (e.g. females). It is uncertain as to how the same-sex option might play out, but it could reduce management issues involved with preventing opposite-sexed pairs from reproducing.

What is the harm in introducing swans to Newfoundland?

We don't know. We do know that non-native species introductions, especially on islands can have devastating consequences for native species. So why risk it?

The indigenous birds of Hawaii, Australia and New Zealand have been eradicated and drastically reduced by the introduction of non-native species. One introduced species common to all of these islands as well as Newfoundland is the house sparrow.

In 1851, just 16 house sparrows from England were released in Brooklyn, New York. Today, the hearty house sparrows nest in every US state except Alaska [they're on the way], through Central America and across Canada.

House sparrows nest in cavities and nest-boxes often evicting native species such as tree swallows. Similar tales can be told about the introduction of fewer than 100 European starling to Central Park in Manhattan because someone desired to have a bird mentioned in Shakespeare in the neighborhood.

Today starlings nest through the Americas and inside the Arctic Circle. They are known to evict tree swallows, flickers and many other cavity-nesting species from real estate that they usurp. I have heard "stars" calling from cavities adjacent to those of razorbills in the Baccalieu and Witless Bay Ecological Reserves. Watch-out seabirds "stars" are invading the marine environment.

Swans are iconic birds that decorate many ponds in European capitals. Yet the ponds that they decorate, unlike the ponds in Newfoundland and Labrador, are essentially devoid of other wild species.

So what do we want - a natural system with native species or a fabricated one with showy wildlife? I have been in parks in the US where peacocks have been introduced. With their iridescent plumage and intriguingly patterned massive fan-tails they are very spectacular, but 10 to 15 of them grovelling in parking lots deadens the thrill of the encounter.

Introduced species among us

In previous centuries a number of "game" birds were introduced. Most have been unsuccessful, including ring-necked pheasants and black grouse. In the 1950s and 60s, ruffed grouse and spruce grouse were released and are currently well-established and wide-spread.

On the mammalian side of the "game" ledger, snowshoe hare were introduced in the middle of the 19th century and are ubiquitous across the island.

Our most famous come-from-away is the moose that arrived with a Noah's Ark release strategy involving a mere 6 animals from nearby Atlantic provinces in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The wolf, a major predator, was eradicated. The forest were lush. And there were no competitors - the caribou pretty much stayed on the barrens. The rest is history.

Escaped mink are abundant in aquatic and coastal environments, and their impacts on native species can be devastating as they prey on ducks and have swum to the seabird islands in the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. And where are the muskrats - might the mink have a role here?

Red squirrels are everywhere, yet just 40 years small numbers were released. The feisty little critters are having major impacts on our birds – both as nest predators and as competitors for the fir and spruce cones that they fastidiously crop.

Lastly, the most devastating introduced predator of birds worldwide is so integrated with our life-styles that it is scarcely considered introduced at all. Cats kill more birds than any other mortality human source including pollution, building and vehicle collisions and all of these combined.

Invasive species

At times new species arrive of their own accord. Some can be problematic [coyotes] and some are welcomed with open arms, like the Manx shearwater pioneers who established their first North American colony on the Lawn Islands.

Change is the rule not the exception for wildlife diversity and abundance. But change induced by the animals themselves rather than by us is the prudent and ecologically rational approach.

Birds in the area

Six serenading loons celebrated the Canada Day sunrise on Neary's Pond [Carolyn Mayo]. A black duck with 7 newly hatched ducklings were swimming near the trouters on Mitchells Pond on 13 June. Many broods of duckling are crossing our roadways ... please drive vigilantly.

A merlin has been using the forested area at the eastern end of Winsor Lake along Portugal Cove Road. Where are the osprey this year? Seen any?

On 25 June a pair of killdeer were on the trail at Octagon Pond – a neat sighting of these less than common shorebirds [Anne Marie Dalton, Paul Bowlby]. A great horned owl has been calling from forests above Neary's Pond [Robert Picco]. A black-backed woodpecker visited Angie and Rick West's feeders in Portugal Cove in mid-June.

On 3 June a male brown-headed cowbird was seen on a lawn at Biddeford Place in St. John's [Judy Gibson]. In May, a female was seen at Second Pond in the Goulds [Catherine Barrett]. Cowbirds are uncommon in Newfoundland, though previous sightings of juveniles suggest that these parasitic egg-layers have at times successfully duped their local "host" species.

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