

Northeast Avalon Times November 2016

Spirit in the night – releasing a stranded storm-petrel
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi



Leach's storm-petrels work the night shift to avoid predatory gulls (photo: Paul Regular)

Good fortune has allowed me to release many land-stranded storm-petrels. It happens nearly every autumn in September and October when these robin-sized seabirds are leaving their massive colonies on Baccalieu Island, in Witless Bay and elsewhere around our coasts.

Couple the departure of millions of birds including millions of juveniles making their first-ever flights with strong onshore winds and “wrecks” of the tiny seabirds are a virtual certainty. An exhausted, likely dehydrated storm-petrel on land has little chance of flight to sea and little chance of survival. Fortunately we can at times offer a helping hand.

When stranded birds are picked up they are best held in small boxes with toweling and kept in a warm dark quiet place to reduce stress, regain some body heat and to stabilize physically. Often I include water with bits of capelin or tuna and some cod liver oil, though rest and recovery is what they need most.

It is essential to release a captured bird as soon as possible - usually the night following their pick-up. Rescued storm-petrels should not be released during the day as they are prime targets for gulls who attack and kill them on the wing. Night time affords safety from the eyes of the diurnal gulls.

Nocturnal releases need to be made on the coast preferably from an elevated site in a darkened area. Storm-petrels like so many nocturnal animals are attracted to light. It is always best to let the bird make the decision about departure. I do this by holding the bird gently but firmly by its toothpick-thin legs and letting the bird flap its wings into the wind to ready it for take-off. Then I place the bird on a prominent boulder or hold it in the palm of my hand.

This can require patience. If the bird does not take flight in about 4 or 5 minutes, hold it in two cupped hands and toss it as high as you can in a seaward direction. Almost always in this situation the bird will begin flapping and fly off.

If successful, we give the bird a second chance. We provide the storm-petrel with another opportunity to play the odds with the challenges of the bountiful though often unforgiving North Atlantic. There is no more to it than that. Had the bird been left stranded on land it would have surely perished. Sometimes a second chance is all that is needed, and second chances are always better than failed initial attempts.

Though I have released many storm-petrels, there is almost always the satisfaction of having helped a fellow creature on its way through the vagaries of life. And sometimes there is more to it than that as was the case a few weeks ago. A student delivered a comfortably boxed storm-petrel that she had rescued from the CBS Highway to my office. When I picked up the box on my way home, tiny squealings came from within. It sounded so fearful, so helpless, so young. I opened the box and delicately held the little bird in my hand – it felt almost weightless.

Later that evening I went to the cove for the release. Powerful onshore winds made me move along the coast until we gained a bit of an angle on the headwind. Still I considered delaying the release. Then thinking it likely better than keeping the bird in the box for another 24 hours, I let the bird make the decision.

Holding the ever so fragile tiny ball of feather, fluff, eyes and beak gently in my palm, I slowly opened my hand. After a very long second or two and a couple of wing flaps, the little storm-petrel opened its wings and exploded straight-up in the air about 30 feet over my head and disappeared in the darkness - the comfortable opaque darkness of its ancestral home – the mighty North Atlantic Ocean.

Bankruptcy with limit

This column is about birds and the environment but when outrageous political or management decisions are made that greatly affect our environment, our values and the way we live on the planet I feel responsible to respond. When I heard Stan Marshall, current CEO of Nalcor, state unequivocally that the Muskrat Falls “boondoggle” as he put it must go ahead without pause no matter the cost, I knew there was a disconnect with reality.

Only the power elite can make such decisions with other people's futures and money and apparently have a clean conscience about it. Anyone with responsibility for one's self or one's family knows that you cannot credibly engage life this way. It just doesn't fly – it can't.

Yet somehow the power elite are confident that they can make these decisions for us or rather in our faces. It is this type of callous power tripping that spawns the reactionary Donald

Trumps and Marie LaPens of the world. They can rise to power when people just get sick of having bullshit dumped on them over and over again.

Stan says Muskrat Falls cannot be stopped. That is simply not true. He just thinks it is. We witnessed the indigenous people put a telling pause in that apparently unstoppable process. It might not happen again, but the Stan Marshalls of the world in their power vacuums have to realize that they are not in full control of all circumstances. Muskrat Falls can be stopped and whether or not this happens, it is really not in titanic Stan's command.

Birds in the area

In early November, Gioia Montevocchi and friends had the wonder of a boreal owl fluttering over them while hiking/camping in Red Head Cove. Nearby in Branch a visit by a great egret excited the very lively locals (Florence Power). A great egret has also been moving around St. John's (Gene Herzberg). Also in Branch golden-crowned kinglets caught John Foster's attention.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>.
Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 695-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h]