

Northeast Avalon Times January 2017

**Seabirds with eyes larger than their gullets**  
**Birds I View**  
**Bill Montevecchi**



A dead gannet with a striped bass in its throat, picked up by a kayaker near St. Peter's Island off Cape Breton in August 2015 (Photo: Philip Brooks)

A recent photo by Josie Arsenault of a dead double-crested cormorant with a sculpin stuck in its open gullet told the tale of the bird's demise on Topsail Beach. Perhaps telling as well, the bird's plumage indicated that it was a juvenile, suggesting that such bad food choices might be tempered by age and experience. Juvenile sharp-shinned hawks at times pursue crows that are considerably larger than they are, that they could not take as prey and that could involve serious injury in failed predatory attempts.

It seems logical that predatory birds would improve in their selection and dispatching of prey as they get older. Yet there are numerous instances in which adult seabirds notably gannets and cormorants have choked in attempts to ingest super-sized fishes. The birds seem to have over-estimated or more likely simply did not consider their ingestion capabilities in their attacks on very large fishes.

Split-second decisions by a seabird to capture an elusive fish and then to quickly ingest the thrashing slippery animal could well override meal size considerations. Those birds that die in their attempts to consume oversized prey like the cormorant noted above are the casualties

of natural selection that should in the long-term minimize or eliminate tendencies to get stuffed.

Oftentimes after long arduous struggles, a seabird does manage to swallow a gargantuan fish that creates a massive bulge in the bird's neck before being partially digested and moving down in the digestive tract. Once a fish starts on the way down a bird's gullet, it's a one-way progression and there is no chance for reversal. The fish's fins and even horns and spines on fishes like sculpins and sticklebacks prevent the bird from ejecting a fish once swallowing has begun. So the fish either goes down or if it is too large, the bird's air passage is blocked and it asphyxiates in harrowing death throes.

When preferred fish are not available, parental seabirds often deliver fish to their chicks that they cannot ingest. The chicks can starve with piles of unsuitable uneaten fish around the nest. In extreme cases, chick die in attempts to swallow over-sized fish or fish with sharp spines or bony hard parts.

In some recent years, puffin chicks in the Gulf of Maine have starved being unable to consume the silver dollar shaped butterfish that they parents provided when preferred herring and hake were not been available owing to warming ocean conditions. Puffin and tern chicks in the U.K. have also starved and in some extreme instances died attempting to eat bony snake pipefishes that their parents delivered following warming of the North Sea.

While moderation and compromise are keys to survival in nature, at times survival instincts can involve inappropriate and lethal decisions – being hungry and alive is almost always a better alternative than being sated and dead.

### **Whales returned to Portugal Cove**

About one year ago to the day on Sunday January 8, a pod of humpback whales was feeding just off the rocks in Portugal Cove. As on that eventful January 12<sup>th</sup> in 2016, the occurrence of the whales was preceded by powerful persistent onshore winds which were associated with fish moving close to shore. Last year the whales feeding on herring and may have been doing so this year as well.

### **Christmas Bird Count**

The Portugal Cove contingent of the St. John's Boxing Day Christmas Bird count roused a grand crew that included Seth Bennett, Tony Lang, Aspen, Bill, Gioia, Katie and Nick Montevicchi, Michael Hannaford, and feeder watchers Carolyn and George Mayo and Dick and Jill Whitaker. In total, we scored 23 species slightly lower than usual tallies in the mid-20s but given the blustery conditions, we felt satisfied with the outcome. Bird of the day was a female common goldeneye in St. Philips Harbour that turned out to be the only sighting of the species on the entire St. John's count.

### **Canada Goose in Pouch Cove**

Many people have expressed concern and some have been aiding the Canada goose that seems incapable of flight in a pond that is rapidly freezing over in Pouch Cove. Calvin Yates had been feeding the goose and black ducks in Pouch Cove until Saturday January 7, when the goose was gone. He thought that someone may have caught the goose. If anyone has any information about the goose or sees it please let me know.

If the goose in Pouch Cove was able to take to wing, we might wonder if it is the Canada goose that showed off Coley's Point on the western side of Conception Bay. A lone and lonesome Canada goose is hanging out just off the ice edge in the frigid waters off Coley's Point (Violet Power). When social flocking waterfowl like eiders and geese occur singly, it is often a sign that things are not going well for the bird.

### **Birds in the area**

It was interesting to a white-winged partial albino crow near the intersection of Portugal Cove and New Cove Roads in St. John's. From time to time a number have been seen around the Long Pond – Kent's areas, though I not seen many recently.

An impressive flock of Pine Grosbeaks visited Imelda Dalton's feeder in Angel's Cove early in the new year. The mopes seem scarce on the northeastern Avalon. Keep looking.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>.  
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