

Environmental Stewardship of the Witless Bay Seabird Reserve

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The Seabird Ecological Reserve Network

The coastal ecosystems of Newfoundland and Labrador provide habitat for many spectacular seabird colonies. Among these, five sites stand out as globally significant seabird capitals with colonies that provide nesting habitat for more than 90 percent of the seabirds that breed in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The provincial Seabird Ecological Reserve network includes Cape St. Mary's, Witless Bay, Baccalieu Island, Funk Island and the Gannet Islands off Groswater Bay in southern Labrador. Ecological Reserves that are also important for marine birds are in Hare Bay on the Northern Peninsula, at Mistaken Point and on the Lawn Islands provisional reserve (Figure 1).

Of all these sites, Witless Bay and Cape St. Mary's are the only reserves readily accessible to tourists and the general public. Each summer, many thousands of provincial, Canadian and international visitors seek out these natural spectacles. Owing to this attraction, these reserves have greatly bolstered the economic landscape of nearby communities, as well as those much further afield (Figure 2).

Gull Island, Green Island, Great Island and Pee Pee Island make up the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. These islands are immediately adjacent to the coastal communities of Bay Bulls, Witless Bay, Mobile, Tors Cove, St. Michaels and Bauline East (Figures 3 and 4).

Our Large Human Footprint

Owing to their proximity to towns, marine businesses and tourism activities and their high visitation rates, the seabird colonies in Witless Bay are more at risk to human disturbance, development and encroachment than any other provincial seabird reserve. These risks require sustained vigilance as the pressures of our activities increase continually. Seabird colonies are not immune from the environmental changes we create and cannot be simply taken for granted.



Figure 1. Seabird Ecological Reserves of Newfoundland and Labrador



Figure 2. Tour boat and humpback whale off Mobile (Photo by Bill Montevecchi).



Figure 3. *Witless Bay Ecological Reserve and adjacent communities.*

Yet, indeed this is just what the provincial government is doing. Their devastating pervasive cuts to environmental and wildlife programs in 2013 disregard stewardship and concern for our natural areas. Their most recent extraordinarily expansive deficit-inflating budget is even more telling as it made effort to reverse these cuts while funding for other programs flowed lavishly.

Consequently, there is no longer a manager at the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. The former manager who had nurtured strong cooperative relationships with tour boat operators, local residents, researchers and tourists is gone.

As well, the Cape St. Mary's and Baccalieu Island Ecological Reserves have also had their on-site managers removed. It is very hard to imagine anywhere that such globally significant seabird capitals would be so undervalued. These reserves are ecological archives that provide us with baseline indications of natural changes that occur outside of major human influence. Seabird research programs run through Memorial University of Newfoundland, the Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada and the NL Parks and Natural Areas Division help in documenting changes in seabird populations, behavior and ecology and some of the risks that they face. Yet, without on-site management and

vigilance, human disturbance, for example from small pleasure craft operators and illegal hunting, can go unchecked.

Artificial Night Lighting

Lighting at night is not something that we readily associate with pollution. Yet excessive and unnecessary skyward projected light is obscuring the moon- and star-lit sky. Opaque ocean environments are being lit up, especially along the coasts.

For animals that are nocturnally active, artificial night-lighting can be both disorienting and attracting. In Witless Bay, Leach's Storm-Petrels (Figure 5) and fledgling Atlantic Puffins can be lured by bright coastal lighting, especially during foggy and overcast nights with onshore winds. During March 2014, the brilliantly illuminated West Aquarius drill rig anchored just outside the reserve lit up the night sky. Were a rig or brightly lit vessel near the reserve during the breeding period, it could cause untold disturbance and mortality. Huge offshore ocean support vessels frequently move near reserve boundaries on their way to and from the offshore supply depot in Bay Bulls. Needless skyward and ocean projection of depot lighting, street lights, signs, store lights, etc. along the coast illuminate the night sky and lure nocturnal animals.

The Puffin Patrol and the Witless Bay Town Council

Puffling and storm-petrel strandings occur most often during easterly winds and foggy overcast conditions which were dominant during the past



Figure 4. *Gull Island murre cliff with Green and Great Islands in background (Photo by Paul Regular).*

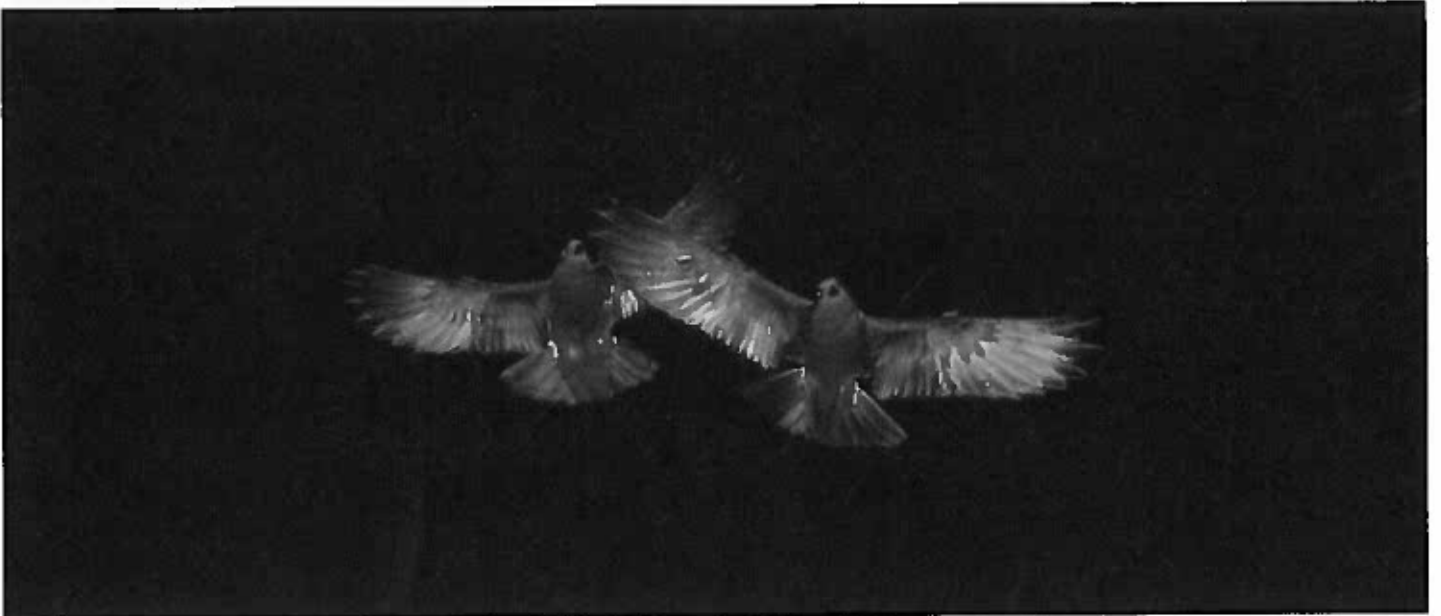


Figure 5. Leach's Storm-Petrels dancing in the night sky at Gull Island (Photo by Paul Regular).

summer. Fortunately, communities surrounding the reserve are becoming increasingly aware of this problem and have formed a proactive group - the Puffin Patrol, which has acted to rescue wayward pufflings that end up on land and roads rather than out at sea where they belong [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtSHVHE4fj0].

The patrollers are also addressing the issue of excessive and inappropriate coastal lighting.

Community efforts along these lines, however, are often hampered by the developmental pressures felt in growing towns such as Witless Bay. For more than a year, the Witless Bay Town Council assessed a proposed housing development at Ragged Beach. Nestled less than 3 km from Gull Island, the beach is an excellent site to view seabirds (Figure 3).

The proposed development would have lit up the mainland immediately adjacent to the reserve.

The proposal also involved considerable legal maneuvering, involving the reclassification of rural land and the inclusion of crown land encroaching on the East Coast Trail.

The proposed development drew a widespread outpouring of protest from local residents and from people throughout the province, country and even internationally. The council received many hundreds

of letters and messages expressing concern about the development. Yet it all seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Refreshingly, as is often the case, a new council with a clear view brought new perspectives to the table. The councilors supported the community concerns and rejected the development at the edge of the seabird reserve. At a recent public meeting of the

Witless Bay Town Council in July 2014, Deputy Mayor Dena Wiseman tabled a motion to explore options for 99 hectares of crown land around the Ragged Beach area designated as a conservation area. The council also recommended that the provincial government re-instate the position of the Reserve Manager.

The Town Council of Witless Bay has made some wise long-term investments in protecting the rural character of their town and the adjacent marine environment and reserve. While there are and will always be conflicts to be resolved

with land-owners and others, they can be resolved for the benefit of all. Safeguarding rural community environments is something that all towns can aspire to. Oftentimes town councils can make all the difference. Sometimes they are all we have to rely on.

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