

Community efforts to protect Ragged Beach

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Murre breeding cliffs on Gull Island and Green and Great Islands in the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. (photo: Paul Regular)

There are five major Seabird Ecological Reserves in Newfoundland and Labrador. Each of them protects a globally significant seabird breeding community. From south to north, the Seabird Ecological Reserves are at Cape St. Mary's, Witless Bay, Baccalieu Island, Funk Island and the Gannet Islands off Groswater Bay in southern Labrador.

Only a two of these reserves are readily accessible to visitors – Cape St. Mary's by road and the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve by boat. And of these the reserve in Witless Bay is most at risk from development and encroachment.

The town council is in the process of assessing a proposal to construct a housing development at Ragged Beach, just across from the

seabird nesting areas on Gull Island. Ragged Beach is the closest point of land to the Seabird Ecological Reserve.

The proposed development involves a lot of legal maneuvering. Rural land classification has to be designated as a residential area. And crown land has to be included in the development. The development would also encroach on the East Coast Trail.

In support of many people in Witless Bay and surrounding communities, throughout Newfoundland and Labrador, across Canada and internationally, I want to add my serious concerns about the ecological consequences of the proposed Ragged Beach Development in Witless Bay.

My concerns are based on more than 25 years of seabird research with my students and associates in the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve. Ragged Beach has been a traditionally important area for marine bird, duck and mammal observations for decades, often being a particularly important site during the fall, winter and spring non-breeding seasons of the birds.

We are very well aware of the detrimental effects that artificial night lighting can have on seabirds that are active at night. In the case of the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve, the species most seriously affected are the Atlantic Puffin and Leach's Storm-Petrel. Strandings of these birds are particularly common during late summer when the young birds leave their nest burrows and go to sea for the first time. Ongoing efforts in Witless Bay are being made to reduce unnecessary night lighting and to work with the local youth to rescue the stranded puffins. To add increased human impact through artificial night lighting, noise, etc. that would be imposed by a development at Ragged Beach, the closest point of land to Gull Island would impose added risk to seabirds nesting there, as well as on Green, Great and Pee Pee Islands.

We are also well aware of the very considerable benefits the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve has brought to Witless Bay and surrounding communities on the Southern Shore. It would not be an overstatement to say the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve has literally changed the

economic landscape of the Town of Witless Bay and surrounding communities. Clearly there have also been enhanced benefits surrounding fishing and cultural traditions in the community.

There are five major Seabird Ecological Reserves in Newfoundland and Labrador – 1) Witless Bay, 2) Cape St. Mary's, 3) Baccalieu Island, 4) Funk Island and 5) the Gannet Islands. All of these reserves are global seabird capitals that warrant very careful and special protection. It must be emphasized that of the Ecological Seabird Reserves in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve is the one in closest proximity to coastal communities and the one most at risk to human activities and development. The protection and well-being of the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve cannot be simply taken for granted and ignored. To further increment these risks by approving a development at Ragged Beach that will require re-designations of land classifications and incorporating crown land to meet the wishes of a developer seems beyond the pale to me.

From ecological, economic and social perspectives, it is totally baffling why the Town Council of Witless Bay would even entertain such as particularly environmentally compromising development? And more so, go such extraordinary lengths to advantage developers and development to the detriment of an internationally significant seabird reserve?

Fortunately, they have the opportunity to support the many concerned and dedicated people in your community who want to prevent this unnecessary and unnecessarily environmentally risky development.

I trust that they have vision and wisdom to make an informed decision to protect the coastline of the Witless Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve.

Birds in the area

The wings of wayward Leach's storm-petrels were scattered along the hiking trail to the Great Auk Sculpture in Joe Batt's Arm on Fogo Island (Janet Montevicchi). The tiny storm-petrels nest on the Little Fogo Islands but during foggy conditions are drawn to inhabited island where foxes

capture them and maintain ongoing pressure for storm-petrels to nest on offshore mammal-free islands.

Gannets were diving in CBS in late May (Linda Gaborko), likely pursuing spring herring. Bruce Porter reports a pair of black-headed gulls hanging out in Campellton where they may nest in the area.

In early June, a Caspian tern was being dived at by common terns in the harbor at Seldom-Come-By on Fogo Island (Janet Montevecchi). Caspian Terns used to nest nearby on North Penguin Island and on Ladle Cove Island but were disturbed decades ago by Canadian Coast Guard burning the magnificent old Penguin Island lighthouse and by a fox on Ladle Cove Island. These colonies were never re-established, and the nesting activity of Caspian Terns in Newfoundland is currently unknown.

A male pintail duck on Neary's Pond in mid-May is a hopeful sign of a female sitting on a clutch of eggs in a nearby nest and of a June brood of ducklings. Pintails have been increasing in the area, and pairs have been seen at Windsor Lake and Murray's Pond.

Ruffed grouse appear to be in good number this spring (Harry Burden, Jon Garvin), though John Haggis reports that the tree swallows nesting in his nest boxes in St. John's are 17 days late this year! Fog?