

The reckless and risky lives of young gannets

Birds I View

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Juvenile gannet on the water near Cape St. Mary's. The antenna of the satellite tag taped under its tail can be seen. (photo: Gene Herzberg)

During July and early August, the gannet colony on Bird Rock at Cape St. Mary's hosts a cacophony of white downy chicks with their parents. Each one is an "only chick" with no siblings as female gannets produce a single egg. By September, the fluffy chicks have transformed into sleek fully feathered and impressive large brown birds. Standing among their white gannet parents, they have at times been considered to be another species rather than the new gannet generation that they are.

During their 13-week rearing period, young gannets are well fed by their parents. With no rivalry from brothers or sisters they grow rapidly and pack on a lot of fat that can help them get through sparse times if the parents cannot find

fish. By about 3 months of age, the brown youngsters are larger than their parents, often outweighing them by 10 to 20 percent or more.

Besides changes in appearance, the young gannets also exhibit radical changes in behavior at about three months of age. Their ravenous appetites subside, and they begin refusing food from their doting parents. They spend much of their time staring intently out to sea and vigorously flapping their large wings. During strong onshore winds and drafts up the cliff, their webbed feet almost lift from the nest pad. But not quite, they use their body's gravity to plant them back down. They behave this way for days on end.

Soon gazes are transfixed on the horizon and the wing-flapping escalates often with jumping up on very narrow cliff ledges. They look, they flap, they gulp and suddenly they take the plunge. Having not moved more than about 20 centimeters in their entire lives, they make a leap of faith from a 100 meter cliff that will either carry them safely out to sea or crashing fatally to the rocks below.

Parents play no obvious role in this avian rite of passage. The parents do not touch or even watch or follow their offspring that they have cared for and defended so fastidiously on a daily basis for 90 days. Once the young gannet leaves, parental responsibilities cease until the next breeding season and the production of a fresh new egg.

As is wont among parents of many species, when the young head off to seek their fortunes, the mates again turn their attention to one another. Often, but not always, they like what they and courtship blossoms anew. These are the final tête à têtes before the mates depart Bird Rock on their separate migrations to wintering quarters thousands of kilometers away.

If all goes well (and it usually does), they will meet again and renew their bond on this same rock at this same nest-site. After having traveled many thousands of kilometers in migration, their partnership will be maintained due to their spring reunion at the same 20 square centimeters of rock where they mated and nested the year before. That tiny site that is defended so violently at times is the essential ring that binds their lifetime monogamous relationship.

How do the young gannet fare?

For one thing it depends on where they were raised. Young gannets on the steep outer narrow ledges of Bird Rock have the best chance of make a clear jump to the sea. Whereas those raised on the front sloping part of Bird Rock and

especially those on the rock's plateau have to make their way the edge to jump. They cannot get aloft from flat ground.

Getting to the edge of the rock through a maze of stabbing and biting gannets is life-threatening. And some chicks reared in the interior of the colony die a painful and bloody death trying to make their final few rock-bound steps to the cliff edge. It ain't easy.

For those juvenile gannets that manage to jump avoid the rocks and land safely on the sea, the challenges have just begun. Having fattened up on parental provisions, the young plump gannets are unable to lift off the water and fly. Instead, they begin swimming south for Nova Scotia and beyond.

Incredibly as it seems, these independent young gannets will soon be flying south. Somehow somewhere along the way, they will master and eventually perfect their fantastic plunge diving abilities. If not, they die. And death is the most common fate of young gannets. About two thirds will not survive their first year. If they do, the odds are that they will live a long life of 20 years or more.

Following young gannets

Because they cannot take off from the water, this provides opportunities for my seabird research crew from Memorial University to catch and study them. In October, working out of St. Brides on Brian Careen's long-liner we pursued and dip-netted young gannets from the waters around Cape St. Mary's. We weighed them, put metal CWS identification bands on their legs and with waterproof tape attached satellite tags under their tail feathers, then released them.

Their movement patterns have shown us that were flying within a week to 10 days. As of the second week in November, four of the six juveniles with satellite tags are alive and well. Three of them are in the coastal waters of the Middle Atlantic States and one is off the coast of Florida. The odds are that two of these remaining four tagged birds will survive their first year. If they do, they will take four to seven years before they actually begin breeding at Cape St. Mary's. To paraphrase, my daughter of light (Marina), life can be a battlefield – one immersed in the beauty and resiliency of nature.

Birds in the area and around the province

Speaking of young gannets, Calvin Whalen picked a dead one Flowers Cove. This juvenile likely was making its way from Funk Island or possibly Great Bird Rock in the Magdalen Islands.

Small numbers of harlequin ducks and dovebies were in Point Lance in mid-October (Tony Power). In October high numbers of dovebies and thick-billed murre were off of Nain, where a gyrfalcon was also seen. The auks were likely moving south to the Grand Bank and shelf edge, where in early November lots of thick-billed murre and dovebies were in the area around the White Rose platform.

A substantial flock of 40+ turkeys was seen in O'Reagans in the Codroy Valley (Lisa Giroux). A cattle egret was reported in Bay Bulls (Melvin MacDonald).

A merlin has been harassing the juncos at Nigel Allen's feeder in Portugal Cove, where a northern shrike is also keeping an eye on the feeders. A loud crash on our dining room that sounded like a hurled basketball turned out to be a temporarily grounded sharp-shinned hawk. The stealthy and speedy predator aimed to fly through our house to snag a junco in flock feeding on the deck outside the glass doors of the opposite wall. It might have worked except for the glass. Rapidly attacking hawks and speedily and erratically escaping targets fly without thought to light. It gets them through the dense forest without a nick. But they have no knowledge of transparent glass until they have met it head on.

Lisa Giroux's husband Moe snapped some awesome shots of an immature goshawk that killed a snowshoe hare (<http://www.k9station.com/goshawk.htm>).

It's looking to be a big year for snowy owls, 20 or more are reported from Cape Race. Four mourning doves are visiting a feeder in Logy Bay (Sally Goddard).

A new species for Newfoundland – a cave swallow – was discovered at Cape Race by Cliff Doran and then seen by many birds from the area.

Lots out there. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 737-7673 or 895-2901.