

Visions of great auks are all that remain

Birds I View

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Magellanic penguin in the waters around the Falkland Islands
(photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Great auks were the last flightless birds of the Northern Hemisphere. Try to imagine flightless penguin-like birds in our coastal. Adventure tourism would be our primary economic driver. Yet basically, wouldn't it just be captivating to simply have them living with us.

They were referred to as penguins. The numerous Penguin Islands and Arms along the Newfoundland and Labrador coasts attest to their former occurrences in historic times.

The species' largest known colony was on Funk Island. Overwhelming abundances these fat flightless birds on Funk Island and in the Strait of Belle Isle were exploited by aboriginal peoples. Beothuks made remarkable ocean canoeing

trips across 50 kilometers of the open North Atlantic to reach Funk Island and to collect the auks' large porcelain-shelled eggs.

Great auks were so abundant at sea that the Basques used them as indicators of the New World fishing banks. In 1534 and 1535, Jacques Cartier visited Funk Island and provisioned his crew with fresh auks and salted others for later use. He penned lucid detailed descriptions of the immense numbers of great auks and the ease of their capture. He set the stage for mariners from many European nations to visit Funk Island toward the end of their trans-Atlantic crossings.

Located at the easternmost continental gateway to North America, Funk Island and its auks provided needed nutrition for challenged and often protein-stressed trans-Atlantic mariners. So important was this auk-covered island for supplying fresh meat for ocean weary travelers that it soon became the North America's first fast food take-out.

Namesakes in the southern hemisphere

Great auks were most closely related to their smaller flying cousins, the razorbills. They are also related to murrelets, puffins and dovekies. They bear no relationship to large flightless birds of the southern hemisphere called penguins.

Paradoxically however, European explorers and sailors carried the penguin epithet to the southern hemisphere and gave it to the flightless birds of the Antarctic. Three penguins, the Gentoo, the chinstrap and Magellanic, are about the same size as the great auk. Like the auk, they each weigh about 5 kilograms.

Watching and studying these three penguins can provide some insights into the behavioural biology and challenges of great auks. While in the Falkland Islands, I have watched the antics and abilities of Magellanic penguins. It was a truly enthralling experience.

A lesson too late for the learning

Experience has shown us time and time again that a species' abundance often has little bearing on its long-term survival. It's a lesson that we have trouble grasping, even though wildly plentiful species are often eradicated by our own designs. Consider the fates of passenger pigeons, bison and northern cod. So it was for the penguins of the North Atlantic.

For all the former immensity of their numbers by about 1800, great auks were gone from the coastal islands and waters of Newfoundland and Labrador. The "infinite abundance" described by Whitbourne less than two centuries before had been eradicated forever.

By 1844, these magnificent creatures were extinct. William Beebe, a naturalist and fisherman from Massachusetts, has chiseled the species' epitaph and lesson for or us all

The beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived,
Though its first material expression be destroyed;
A vanished harmony may yet again inspire the composer;
But when the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more,
Another heaven and earth must pass before such a one can be again

These visions of our penguins are all that remain.

Manx shearwaters in Massachusetts

The only known Manx shearwater colony in North America is situated off the heel of the Burin Peninsula on Middle Lawn Island. These shearwaters are known to also occur in other seabird colonies on coastal islands around the Newfoundland coast.

As well single pairs of Manx shearwaters have nested in Maine and Massachusetts in the past. During the past two summers Manx shearwaters have been frequenting Revere Beach on the Massachusetts coast. Bob Stymiest has been searching local islands and playing Manx shearwater recordings in an attempt to find evidence of their nesting. So far, no luck but Bob is confident that Manx shearwaters are breeding in Massachusetts Bay.

On 25 April 2008, Bob captured an image of Manx shearwaters copulating in the water just off of Revere Beach. Check it out on the web - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rstymeist/2440870221/>.

Birds in the area and around the province

During the last weekend of November an unusual European lapwing and a killdeer visited the Portugal Cove South area (Richard Thomas).

During November, a cave swallow made the species' first documented occurrence in the province. First seen by Cape Race lighthouse keeper Chris Doran, the swallow remained in the Long Beach area for some time. Many bird enthusiasts obtained exciting views and added checks to their provincial bird lists.

More than 30 snowy owls are enlivening the coastal barrens at Cape Race and seabirds are feeding around the rocky coasts. It is shaping up to be a huge year for snowy owls, and in early December one was seen on Forest Road in St.

John's. Besides Cape Race, the White Hills and Robin Hood Bay are good sites to look for the white Arctic owls.

Bruce Mactavish and Darroch Whitaker found a rare Pacific Slaty-backed Gull in Corner Brook.

Boxing Day is the date of the St. John's Christmas Bird Count which includes Portugal Cove. If you see any interesting birds at your feeder and if you are out and about and looking, please let me know.

Tis the season to be generous

It's that time of year. Try to avoid being trapped by the commercial distortions and aberrations that bombard you. This season is really all about family and friends, the quality of your life and environment you live in. It's about generosity and caring for others.

Keep looking up and see the enriching generous and joyous spirit that surrounds you. Reach out and contribute as best you and only you can. Merry Christmas.

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