

The street dogs of Chile

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Marina (daughter of light) and Gioia (daughter of wisdom) cuddle Chilean street pups.
(photo: Bill Montevecchi)

This column is about birds. I write about bird occurrences, habitats, behavior, history and lure. Yet more generally, I write about nonhuman animals and our perspectives of and relationships with them. So I must tell you about some extraordinary animal relationships that I recently experienced in Chile.

For the past couple of years, on returning home from a seabird research project in the Falkland Islands during December, I have a stopover in Santiago, Chile. This country and its people are enchanting.

In December, I had the opportunity of indulging in a South American holiday. I also had the great fortune having my wife daughters and son from Newfoundland, Alberta and British Columbia join me in a family celebration in a foreign and captivating country and culture.

Most of our time was spent along the coast and in the deserts north of Santiago. The community of LaSerena was home base for a while. Fishermen and women dragged large heavy dories through the fine white sands alongside sun bathers to ply their trade, harvesting fish and crabs from the truly peaceful Pacific Ocean. We ate lots seafood stews, abalone and strange fishes of sumptuous tastes and textures. When not eating, we biked, hiked, ran and swam.

Dogs were everywhere. They were sleeping, loitering and loping on streets, sidewalks, beaches. They were masterless community creatures.

Though many would have benefitted from a grooming, most were healthy, friendly and in a detached sort of way completely at ease with their community and their surroundings. They were fed and hunted scraps but were in no way ravenous or malnourished. They survived on the benevolence of local people, many of whom did not command great capital or wealth.

It was truly fascinating to experience these disengaged respectful relationships between the residents and the resident canines. While visiting the fishing wharfs and waterfront markets in Coquimbo, we came upon an extremely emaciated female with a litter of five. Unlike her miniature grey hound appearance, the little fat bellied pups looked like Labs.

We were concerned about the mother and pups but noted that an old jacket had been laid out on which the mother and her pups rested in overgrown grass beside a fence. There was also hard food on the jacket and water in a cutoff plastic container. Local people were clearly looking out for this family. Like all youngsters with fat tummies, the pups were playful and content in their world as it was.

We did the yuppy tourist thing and delivered milk, soft food, hotdogs, etc. for some well received meals. One day the cute feisty runt of the litter was gone and we were worried about its fate. The next day two more pups were gone. We realized the some of the fishermen were taking pups home. Perhaps they would be Christmas pets for young children in the community. Though seemingly rare, some people did have pets.

These experiences provided a wonderful Christmas gift – affirming that at Christmas, as throughout the year, personal wealth has little correlation with the expression of good will.

The Christmas grinches of Canada Post

In the days leading up to Christmas, I received a distressing email from a good friend in St. Andrews, New Brunswick asking if I had moved. Her query arose because her Christmas card had been returned with a sticker reading “MOVED / UNKNOWN”.

Her card was addresses to Neary’s Pond Road in Portugal Cove where my family and I have been living and receiving mail for 25 years. Yet she had the wrong postal code and a former mail box number. For this grievous error, her card with Christmas wishes and letter was returned.

More recently, a friend from St. John’s called saying that his Christmas card had been returned. He had gotten the postal code wrong. Had he not called, I would have completely unaware of the Christmas greetings from him and his wife.

Why does this happen, when it is perfectly clear who the recipient of the mail is and where he resides? From whom else might I have not heard? It is disturbing that someone could miss Christmas greetings, well wishes or a gift from relative, loved one or friend, because a digit or letter or two in a postal code was incorrect.

What are the real costs of going through this exercise of labeling and returning mail with known recipients? It’s economically and energetically wasteful, it’s unnecessary and it might also be considered mean-spirited. It’s difficult to comprehend paying for such disservice.

In the not so distant past, I can recall some helpful and relatively heroic efforts of Canada Post. The aunt of a student working with me on Baccalieu Island baked some homemade lassy buns and mailed them from St. John’s in box wrapped in brown paper. The package was addressed to “Lighthouse Keepers, Baccalieu” – no codes, no special instructions, just a stamp.

Within a couple of days the package was delivered expediently, intact and safely. Having reached the Bay de Verde post office, the post mistress passed the package to fishermen.

The fishermen carried the package in their trap skiff powered by an Acadia make-and-break across the Baccalieu Tickle on the way to their cod traps. On reaching the island, they beckoned the light-keepers who used a diesel-powered crane to lower a wooden box to retrieve the package. When we returned to the

lighthouse from a day's work at the seabird cliffs, there were fresh baked buns from St. John's to enjoy. What a rich treat. What service.

The cost of sending that package was about the same of sending a card today. Yet it's not the increase in cost that's important, it's the change in attitude that is so costly.

Christmas bird count

On Boxing Day, Darroch Whitaker, Tina Leonard, my father Al and I comprised the Portugal Cove Christmas Bird Count contingent. All totaled, we scored 26 species. Highlights included an out of season American pipit, a ruffed grouse and a northern shrike.

What we didn't see was also striking. Besides a few evening grosbeaks, there were no finches - a reflection of this year's scarcity of cones. No house sparrows were seen and but a few blue jays and chickadees and a lone starling.

Lots of dovebies (bullbirds) were in the Portugal Cove and St. Philips harbors. Fresh carcasses were also found. During sustained winds, these little auks from Greenland are vulnerable to starvation, "wrecking" on land. They are also preyed on by gulls that hunt when they feed close to shore. Dead dovebies were also reported in Devil's Cove near Port Rexton (Ivan Morgan) and in Baie Verte (Patrick Howard), and a wreck of hundreds of dovebies was reported from St. Anthony in early January (Dave Snow).

Happy 2009.