

# Searching for a gannet colony on the Port au Port Peninsula

## Birds I View

### Bill Montevecchi



Black-legged Kittiwakes are nesting in two large colonies on the cliffs of the Port au Port Peninsula in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.  
(photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Gannets are common sight along the west coast of Newfoundland. The frequency of their sightings has led to considerable speculation that gannets are nesting in the area.

The mayor of Cape St. George, Peter Fenwick was fuelled with a particularly intense enthusiasm in this respect. To help quell his emotions and to generate interest in the seabirds around the Port au Port Peninsula, he organized a tour boat search for a gannet colony along the coast. I was a sceptical but keen participant in the search. My daughter Marina was an enthusiastic observer as well.

Our vessel ventured around the Boot of Cape St. George on a search of the sheer and stunning cliffs for nesting gannets. We did not document any new gannet colonies, as I expected. We were however treated to a couple of large and very substantial black-legged kittiwake colonies just north of the Boot of the Port au Port Peninsula.

Rough estimates of the two spectacular colonies were on the order 5,000 and 1,000 pairs on the geologically striking and nearly vertical 400 foot cliffs. Including non-breeders, this would tally to about 15,000 – 20,000 birds on the cliffs, comprising the most significant kittiwake colonies the west coast of Newfoundland.

## **Gannet colonies**

It is ironic that while gannets are among the most aggressive animals on the planet, they are also among the most social. They breed and rear their young in very dense colonies in which violently aggressive pairs nest but a neck-length apart.

One striking indication of the power of social attraction for nesting gannets is the fact that there are only 6 gannet colonies in all of North America. These colonies are hundreds and thousands of years old. Contrast these facts with the observation that there are many thousands of islands with seaward cliffs where gannets might nest but do not.

Pioneering gannets might move to a new site to nest, and this rare possibility has increased during recent decades as gannet populations have been growing rapidly in expanding colonies. About a decade ago, a pair of gannets nested in the Bay of Fundy where gannets had nested in previous centuries. But the pair did not return to nest during the following or subsequent years, and a colony was not initiated. Gannets have also been observed resting but not nesting on islets north of Fogo Island.

Yet gannets do at times expand their breeding ranges. For example, during the 1970s and 80s, new gannet colonies were established in northerly progression along the Norwegian coast.

## **Gannet along the west coast**

So where are all the gannets seen along the western Newfoundland coast coming from? My best guess is that they are gannets from the colony on Great Bird Rock in the eastern Magdalene Islands. We have tracked gannets in the Gulf of St. Lawrence that travel 200 – 300 km on 2-day foraging trips. Gannets have a tendency to forage coastally, because their primary prey – herring, mackerel and capelin – occur close to the coasts during spring and summer. So even though it is some distance, the western Newfoundland coast is likely an important foraging locale for gannets from the Magdalenes.

Who knows maybe sometime a homeless and venturesome pair or group will settle and nest in a new location. That will be big news.

## **Piping plovers and ATVs**

A shocking pair of copulating Piping Plovers was photographed on the sandy beach in the Provincial Park at mouth of the Grand Codroy estuary during the Nature Conservancy's annual bird outing. New provincial government signs banning ATV use in and around the sandy beaches of the Provincial Park are good news for the plovers and for the environment. Similar signs banning ATVs have been erected in other sensitive sites and nesting habitat of the endangered piping plovers. This excellent initiative by the provincial government needs to be expanded more widely throughout the province.

## **Tooting owl in Portugal Cove**

Almost every night throughout May and beginning about 10:00 PM and lasting for 2-3 hours, Rex Porter was bewildered by a persistent tooting sound “like the beep-beep warning noise when a delivery truck or heavy machinery is backing up”. The noise came from in the woods behind his house on Tolt Road where was no development going on. He assumed that the noise was coming from some distance where heavy machinery was working.

Curiosity got the best of him. One night at about 11:30 PM, he took a walk in the woods and located the sound source. Searching the internet for bird songs and calls, Rex determined that a northern saw-whet owl had moved into his neighbourhood.

The tiny 8-inch northern saw-whet owl is rare in Newfoundland. The slightly larger 10-inch boreal owl is much more common. Unlike the tooting call of the saw-whet, the boreal owl has a repetitive hollow whistling call reminiscent of the winnowing of snipe.

During May, Saw-whet owls were also heard at Bonne Bay Big Pond (Darroch Whitaker) and in the Codroy Valley (Paul Linegar).

## **Snipe – bird of the bogs**

The evening and nocturnal winnowing of snipe is a comforting expression that we share our natural environment with wild creatures with their own designs and purposes. Yet wetlands are continuing to be filled for development, increasing risks of flooding and water pollution. We are imposing on the snipe’s world as well as our own.

Some folks are concerned about the filling of the wetland marshes near the Torbay municipal building and adjacent to Murray’s Pond in Portugal Cove. The snipe may be concerned also, as their enchanting winnows seem less frequent and distributed in recent years.

## **Birds in the area and around the province**

A male wood duck is at the Bowring park duck pond (Gene Herzberg), and common terns are having a ball on the orange ball float in Burtons Pond.

A number of yellow-bellied sapsucker sightings have been made recently. Bruce Porter has a female at his feeder in Lewisporte for the first time. Bruce Mactavish found a sapsucker nest-excavating in an aspen-birch grove in Goose Bay, and Dave Brown sighted a sapsucker in Searston in the Codroy Valley.

While in the Codroy Valley this week, Dave Brown and Jen Harding recorded an amazing 111 different species in a single long and totally awesome day! For an engaging read of their adventure, you can google nf.birds.

A male pine grosbeak is filling our yard with exuberant song. Could this be why he has attracted two females, or vice versa?

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