

Bergs and birds in the Little Fogo Islands

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Iceberg looming in the Little Fogo Islands, June 2009
(photo: Bill Montevecchi)

Les Harris spent a lot of time on Fogo Island. His wife Mary was originally from Joe Batt's Arm, where they often spent many summers. Les was a natural history buff with keen interests in birds and berries. He often told me about the seabirds on the Little Fogo Islands and encouraged me to visit.

Following Les's suggestion, in July with Pete and PJ Decker, Zita Cobb and Gordon Slade, I had visited the Little Fogo Islands. The archipelago off the northeast coast of Fogo Island is an ecological and scenic paradise. Stunning icebergs carry the vestiges of 10,000 year old Arctic water. Environmentally integrated stages, stores and cottages of varying ages and conditions provide a present and historic expression of coastal life.

Seabirds islands

Many of the islands are just for the birds. As on other islands along the Newfoundland coast, the populations of diving auks are increasing.

In the Little Fogo Islands this evident in the growing number of puffins and razorbills. These population increases are due largely to the fisheries moratorium and the removal of thousands of kilometres of gill-nets from coastal waters. Gill-nets, well known for their non-selective by-catch of untargeted fish species, also entangle and drown diving seabirds and marine mammals that like the cod are pursuing capelin.

We observed colonies of herring, black-backed and ring-billed gulls, cormorants and of common and Arctic terns. Fulmars were attached to and possibly nesting on at least two islands.

A minke whale driving herring to the surface attracted the attention of diving gannets exploiting the transient opportunity for a meal. Gannets and murrelets from Funk Island often fly to the Little Fogo Islands to fish. No doubt great auks did as well, and men from Fogo Island often sailed to Funk Island to kill the auks. We all know how that one ended.

Yet constructive action, re-affirmation and resolve survive. Plans are underway to recreate the Great Auk – Funk Island exhibit in the Fisheries Information Centre in Seldom-Come-by.

Puffins predominate

In the Little Fogo Islands, puffins appear to be by far the most abundant nesting seabird. Yet our survey was by day, so the local abundance of our province's most populous breeding seabird – the burrow-nesting, diurnally secretive Leach's storm-petrel remains to be assessed. Pete Decker and Mike Dillon told me that the storm-petrels are abundant on the islands.

A systematic census of the breeding seabirds of the Little Fogo Islands is needed. Some local residents feel that the seabird breeding islands should be safe-guarded in a reserve or marine protected area.

Other reasons to visit Fogo Island

With all the desolation and desperation ongoing in coastal communities, it is heartening to experience venturesome activity. Magnificent hiking trails are well kept at Lion's Den near Fogo, in Tilting and elsewhere.

Renovation of stages and houses in Tilting and across the island, much inspired by the Shorefast Foundation, carries a strong sense of cultural identity and prosperity. Young people are in-migrating to engage new employment opportunities and are creating some of their own.

Nicole's Café in Joe Batt's Arm serves local cuisine with all the elegance and none of the pretention of high-end restaurants. A desert of partridge berry tart with juniper berry ice cream is a must. The crafty chef, Sean Hussey, has been drawn to Fogo Island from previous work on Nantucket Island, one of North America's wealthiest residential and tourist sites. Great local ice cream can be made at "growlers ice cream shop" in Joe Batt's Arm where low sugared flavours include bake apple, partridge berry, blueberry and jam-jam.

Under the sponsorship of the Shorefast Foundation, artists from Iceland, Norway and Lithuania are giving community workshops on Fogo Island and the Change Islands. Classic coastal houses are being renovated for artist residences and studios with minimal environmental footprints are being constructed along the coast. The feel of prosperity and bringing it all back home is real.

Unusual capelin year

Since the early 1990s, if it isn't an unusual year for capelin then it just doesn't seem usual. The capelin's population ecology has changed radically. Spring DFO surveys for capelin showed poor signs of capelin.

Murres are capelin specialists. They carry capelin - one fish at a time to their hungry chicks. At Cape St. Mary's, murres have been leaving eggs and flying off the cliffs – a sign of food shortage and the need to forage more intensely. At the Witless Bay, murres are late breeding, and Paul Regular saw one murre with an unprecedented load of 6 immature sandlance – a certain indication that capelin are scarce.

The rarity of humpback whales on the east coast also reflects little capelin in the area. Yet Gordon Slade has told me that the waters in southern Labrador around Battle Harbour are boiling with humpbacks.

For the first time in at least a decade, Leach's storm-petrels are also late breeding, as April Hedd and a crew from my lab confirmed in Witless Bay. Storm-petrels feed on many of the same prey as capelin, so food shortages for the capelin may be at play.

The buffoons of Beachy Cove

One of the most idyllic and legendary beaches in the province, Beachy Cove is a coastal and community treasure. Yet some don't see it that way.

The rocky outcrops and beach have been littered with beer bottles and broken glass. I have made a few beach-cleaning forays, and others have also. Some young people are assaulting the beach with utter disrespect for the environment. Trucks and ATVs are trammelling the narrow pathways and beach, digging ruts, killing vegetation, and creating muddy water flows on the hillside.

For those of us who have faith in the next generation to take up the challenge of environmental responsibility, we need to recognize that the young yahoos are the same as the old ones. The town council really needs to do something effective to help protect this natural community endowment from attack.

Birds in the area and around the province

A noisy, nesty and protective spotted sandpiper is guarding the shores of Oliver's Pond where an ethereal signing forest bird, likely a hermit thrush, is proclaiming a nearby territory (Sarah Hansen).

A family of five black and white warblers were flitting about Gerri Young and Wayne Cowan's property in Seal Cove on Canada Day. What maybe a partially albino robin is hopping and flying around Hammond Estates near Neary's Pond Road.

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