

Arctic fox vexes Funk Island seabirds and researchers

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Black-brown Albatross by a crab vessel 100 miles off Hopedale, Labrador
(photo: Juliana Coffey)

So much of what makes studying animal behaviour so exciting is the rather continual rendezvous with the unexpected. Things happen and much of life (and death) is determined by chance occurrences. We live our lives embedded in environmental uncertainty, and as much as we try to maintain an even keel – surprise changes in sea state require shifts in tack and tactic.

This likely no more true anywhere than in the dynamic ocean environment that surrounds us. This year's research trip to Funk Island was designed around a major effort to retrieve tracking devices that we had attached to murres during the summers of 2008 and 2009 to map their migration routes and wintering areas.

That design was all to change. We (April Hedd, Chantelle Burke and I) were landed on Funk Island by Skipper Larry Easton and Jeff Chaulk aboard the long-liner *Lady Easton II* late in the evening of 14 August. It was approaching dark as we were getting the final ropes knotted on our large sturdy Labrador trappers' tent.

During that time, I noticed that there were no murres around the stone cairn in the center of the island which was our primary study site. April noticed there were no gulls around, and we all realized that there were no fulmars and that puffins were scarce. It quickly occurred to us that there was a mammal on the island. Our grave concern was that it might be a polar bear.

Our tension was heightened because the *Lady Easton II* had departed, and our only sources of defence were an air horn and a satellite phone. We reconnoitred the island quickly before nightfall. In the grassy meadow growing on the remains of the last flightless bird in the northern hemisphere, our spotlight captured the source of the problem in the brilliantly glowing green

eyes of an Arctic fox. With our minds at ease that a small fox and not a large bear was sharing the island with us, we slept a bit less fitfully than we would have without this information.

Co-habitant and competitor

The fox no doubt arrived in late March, before the seabirds, when arctic pack ice hemmed the Labrador and Newfoundland coasts. Once the seabirds began arriving the fox must enjoyed a heavenly feeling of living on a small rock packed with more than a million seabirds.

The fulmars and razorbills deserted the island completely. Few kittiwakes were present, and puffins and gulls came and went but had given up breeding. A third or half of the murrens were breeding but there was sheer chaos in the colony owing presence of tens of thousands of spooky non-breeders flitting and running about everywhere. The large, robust and aggressively dangerous gannets appeared fine though there were a few remains of gannet chicks that had been taken by the fox.

Like red foxes that I have watched on Baccalieu and on Bonaventure Island in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the arctic fox learned like we have that when one approaches a roosting gannet, the bird tends to regurgitate food in its gullet to allow it to make a more rapid departure. The fox then like the researchers can access the vomited fish remains – the fox eats it, we study it.

Painful to say, we could not retrieve any of the 40 tracking devices, as our study sites were abandoned or occupied by frightened birds that would flee at any mammalian movement, either canid or human.

The female fox was intensely curious about us. She often followed us when we were working at night. The problem was we were both interested in the same birds. We were attempting to capture fledgling murre chicks going to sea with their dads, and the fox too had a keen interest in running down and killing murre chicks.

Outfoxing the fox

The fox was ruining possibilities for our current research. I then took it upon myself to attempt to scare her away. I would capture her shining green eyes in my head lamp or spotlight, bark deeply and run at her. She would scurry off a bit but quickly realized that I couldn't catch her. Then she would teasingly approach closely and run circles around me with impressive speed and agility and return to our new study site, that is - her hunting territory.

Throwing rocks at her did little to intimidate her. Blasts from the air horn spooked her but did not solve the dilemma of our competitive interaction. I needed something more potent and unpredictable.

In dead of night when she was standing about 75 feet away with her eyes glowing in my beam, I picked up a 5 foot metal pole from one of our nets. I threw in high in the air in her direction twirling like a helicopter blade. She hadn't seen this. When pole clanged noisily down next her, the penetrating green light from her eyes blazed brilliantly like camera flash – it was shocking to me and certainly to her.

She ran off and from then on she stayed on the south side of the island and never ventured to the north side where worked unhindered by Ms. Fox. It's very unlikely that she will survive the winter on Funk.

Research endeavors

Despite the interference, we accomplished a lot. We attached satellite tags to a number of parents going to sea with fledgling chicks.

Sandlance was in tremendous abundance around the island. It was strange to see murrelets carrying individual 2 gram lance rather than 15 gram gravid capelin to their chicks. Yet all the lance were fresh and some alive, indicating that the murrelets had captured them very close by and could easily make many trips to provision their offspring.

Even the large gannets were gorging on tiny young-of—the-year and 1-year sandlance. Some food loads contained 60 or more small fishes.

Another research visit provided another intriguing encounter with the rock solid and the unexpected. It was swell.

Albatross off Labrador

Juliana Coffey sent the stunning image of the black-browed albatross. It trumps an image of an arctic fox on Funk because it is the best documentation of an albatross in provincial waters to date.

The albatross came along side a crab boat about 100 miles off Hopedale, Labrador. Interestingly, another possible albatross sighting was made in June around a crab boat about 75 miles off of Catalina. In July, a sub-adult bird was observed by lobster fisherman John Drury in Maine.

Albatrosses feed on squid and other crustaceans and discards from fishing vessels. They may have a special attraction to crab and lobster boats.

Birding effort of the month

Sarah Hansen has hands down captured this month's award for effort and ingenuity. Listening to recordings of songbird vocalizations convinced her that the ethereal calls she was hearing in the evenings near Oliver's Pond were not those of a hermit thrush. So she took alternative action. Here's her account, "I went for walk and faintly heard it, so I recorded myself doing the sound on my cell phone. Not

the best quality, but it got the song in my head, and I'm pretty sure it's a Swainson's thrush."

Keep looking and listening and if you're lucky, you could have an albatross around your neck or a Swainson's thrush on your cell phone.

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 737-7673 (office), 895-201 (home).