

The necessity of compromising development

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



A Leach's storm petrel (photo: P. Regular)

Some years ago I participated in a waterbird conference on the beautiful island of Grado in the Gulf of Venice. The place was absolutely stunning, yet as in many places in Italy, Europe, the US and Canada, it was difficult to find running rivers and streams. Most had been diverted to irrigate vineyards and farmlands, and virtually all had been trenched with little natural vegetation along the banks.

Some of this may seem familiar to ongoing developments on the Northeast Avalon. Look at the way streams and wetlands are treated in housing and business developments in the area. New housing developments along Portugal Cove Road are destroying wetlands and streams. This is illegal but the provincial and federal agencies either don't look or turn a blind eye to the destruction.

The site of the completely in-filled and paved over site of the tire business and new day care center near the airport was just a few years ago a rich marsh with waterfowl and a stream that flowed downhill to Quidi Vidi Lake. That is all gone now, and the children who attend the daycare are oblivious to the marsh and ducks that once lived there.

Environmental services provided by wetlands

But that marsh provided us with environmental services that were ignored as it was destroyed for development. Marshes filter and clean water. They also buffer rises in water levels from flooding downhill. Much of the flooding that we have seen in the Quidi Vidi area and elsewhere on the Avalon Peninsula is not a consequence of climate variability but rather a result of improper developments that relegate water bodies to inadequately culverted trenches, infilled parking lots and the like.

Roads, parking lots and driveways are sealed with impermeable agents so the earth can no longer absorb moisture or breathe below them. This is analogous to sealing our skin with plastic – we would soon dehydrate and die.

Water on land follows gravity to the sea and as long as there is gravity on earth it always will. The sooner we accept that truth and realize the value water and wetlands, the sooner we might make adequate responses for protecting it.

At the start of bird conference in Italy, as is usually the case, there was a welcoming by conference and government officials. There were two concurrent themes in the welcoming addresses. One was how incredibly fortunate it was to have the last lush and productive wetland in the area. The other was that environmental protection should compromise development.

Though they could not acknowledge it, the environment had been compromised many times over, and the only thing that really needed compromising was development.

The winds of autumn

We have been experiencing mighty autumn winds. The onshore gales have created challenges for many marine birds and opportunities for others.

The powerful sustained winds of 17 October pushed thousands of storm-petrels, kittiwakes and a few gannets into Conception Bay (Linda Gaboroko). The small storm-petrels and kittiwakes were flying hard into gusts making sustained treadmill-like efforts to hold their position in the bay and avoid being wrecked on land.

The ever vigilant and opportunistic gulls took advantage of the circumstances and pursued the exhausting storm-petrels. Even the crows were on the lookout for wayward land-bound storm-petrels. Flocks of pomarine and parasitic jaegers were observed harrying kittiwakes to force them to regurgitate any food that they might have in their guts (Dave Brown).

Flocks of phalaropes off Cuslett were flying out of Placentia Bay (Tony Power). A wayward juvenile white-rumped sandpiper was flushed from the grass on Signal Hill (Dave Schneider) and others hunkered down Quidi Vidi Lake (Bruce Mactavish).

Caring for and releasing stranded storm-petrels

A Leach's storm-petrel rescued under Tom Marshall's front steps in Kilbride was successfully released at night in Petty Harbour.

What can you do if you find a stranded storm-petrel on land? Keep it in warm dark quiet place in small box with towelling. Provide water with cod liver oil and mashed capelin if you have some. Then plan for a rapid nocturnal release.

It is important to release the bird at night to avoid gull predators that are active during day. Bring the warm dry bird to a dark coastal location preferably at some height above the sea. The birds are attracted to light so try to avoid these.

Orient the bird toward the sea and let it fly. Giving the bird a second chance is the best we have to offer. Often it is enough to save a life.

Birds in the area and around the province

In early October, sooty shearwaters, humpback and fin whales provided good signs of capelin off Cape Bonavista (Tony Power). In mid-October, a flock of 150 eiders was seen off New Melbourne (Janet Montevecchi).

In late October, a belted kingfisher was seen along Western Gulley Road (David Artiss), and in early November, a mourning dove was in the meadow at the start of the Beachy Cove Mountain trail. A displaying male ruffed grouse and two females were captured in magnificent photos on Witch Hazel Road (Bill Matthews).

Keep looking. A bird in the bush is worth two in the hand.

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 737-7673 (w) and 895-2901 (h).