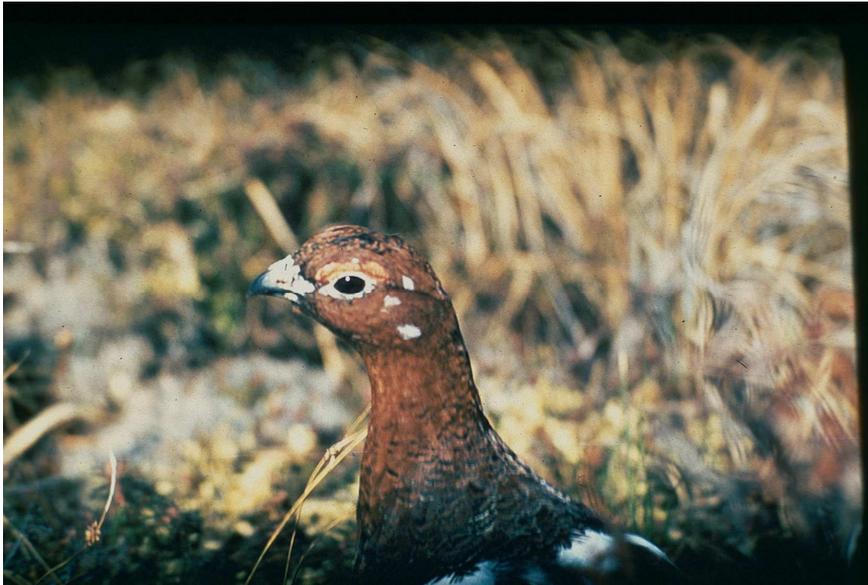


Gerard Leonard – Newfoundlander Tried and True

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Willow Ptarmigan on nest. (photo: Les Tuck)

Gerard Leonard was a great Newfoundland and Labrador wildlife biologist. He was also an outdoorsman, a hunter, a conservationist, a magnificent human and a good and well-respected friend. Gerard's recent sudden passing at 60 spry years of age sent shock waves through family and friends that will be reverberating deeply for a very long time.

Most of Gerard's work concentrated on small game in western Newfoundland. The touchstone and gem of Gerard's work was the long-term research program on ptarmigan that he and colleague Alex Murley carried out on the LaPoile barrens.

While I had known Gerard for some time by lore and legend and some bad jokes, my first substantial contacts and interactions with him began about a decade ago. At that time, the Partridge Forever Society, the Newfoundland and Labrador Science and Wildlife Divisions and Memorial University came together to collaborate on a research project on the province's official game bird – the ptarmigan. This joint effort was initiated by the Partridge Forever Society because of their concern the about demise and desperate state of ptarmigan.

Owing to the impressive past research on ptarmigan by Tom Bergerud working for Newfoundland and Labrador Wildlife Division, the proposed prime study area was the barrens of the southern Avalon Peninsula. Substantial effort was invested in scouting and scouring these barrens with excellent dogs but there were simply extremely few ptarmigan to be found. So few birds were detected in fact that it was not possible to conduct a meaningful research project.

Other potential study sites considered included the Long Harbour barrens and the Burin Peninsula. Yet all the while, the extraordinary information about the long-term study that Gerard and Alex Murley were conducting on the LaPoile barrens where both Willow and Rock Ptarmigan were breeding together kept rising to attract our attention. Their long-term research and the LaPoile study site that they had selected and been working for decades was just so over-whelmingly impressive that we directed our attention to them, their long-term knowledge and their LaPoile study area.

I recruited a student from the University of New Hampshire, Ellen Jedrey to take on the research project. Gerard took Ellen under his wing like a daughter.

I did not know Gerard's family at that time and his magnificent covey of daughters but I did know with certainty that if my daughter was involved in this research, I would entrust her to Gerard and Alex's tutelage.

Gerard's sense of humour was always shining through. For some reason he referred to Ellen as Nellie. And as with one of Gerard's other companions "Burgeo Joe", the name had a certain sticking quality. He would send me pictures of a tiny image of Ellen during mid-winter February surveys on the endless snow and ice-encrusted barrens. The caption read – "Nellie on the moon".

Research with Ptarmigan

Gerard was so excited about the research. He would constantly send me information about the changing states and weights of the Willow and Rock Ptarmigan. He crafted extraordinarily detailed maps of the surveys walked and where birds were shot or counted. We would discuss the year's new findings and were always trying to understand the longer-term patterns.

During October and November, Gerard and I had contacts. For the Partridge Forever Society, we decided to write a summary of the 30 years

of surveys that he and Alex conducted. Gerard was very keen and dug out his old files.

These have been tabulated, and we are running graphical analyses on them now. The research summary will be finished as Gerard so passionately wanted it to be.

Tributes for Gerard

Many people are thinking about fitting tributes for Gerard. The Partridge Forever Society has recognized Gerard's contribution and friendship and has offered to make a contribution in his memory.

There are many possibilities for appropriate tributes. I have focused on one.

The long-term and ongoing destruction of the bog land and barrens habitat of the ptarmigan and other wildlife is a provincial disgrace.

Everyone of knows this. It is so obvious. It is so destructive. And it is so disrespectful. It is the antithesis of how Gerard Leonard lived his life, of his respectful interactions with wildlife, with his environment and with every human being he encountered.

This is an appropriate time for resolve from Gerard's colleagues and friends in the Wildlife, Forestry and Parks and Natural Areas Divisions, the Partridge Forever Society, Memorial University, hunters, birders, natural historians, biologists and everyone throughout the province who care about this place as Gerard so clearly and dearly did. It is our responsibility to guard this natural cultural heritage which is entrusted to us.

Somewhere the destruction must stop. Let it be here. Some time the destruction must stop. Let it be now. It's time. It's Gerard's time.

Yet finally – when it all comes down to dust as it always must for each of us, there is no more fitting tribute than one's own family. I have been fortunate to meet Gerard's beautiful Bride and daughters – Mara, Tina and Erin. Tina, I've gotten to know quite well because like Gerard she too is a wildlife biologist who has honed many of her skills from those of her father.

Gerard could not have wished a finer tribute than his family. As is evident, he clearly knew this and cherished and enriched his family every day. What a family, what a tribute, what a privilege. We'll be seeing you Gerard.

Godspeed.

Birds in the area and around the province

The eiders, dovekies and harlequin ducks are showing up around Point Lance (Tony Power). Reports of high numbers of harlequins are encouraging and are consistent with the increasing number of birds that have been recorded on winter surveys in recent years.

The thus far mild autumn weather has given our resident birds lots of feeding options on open ground and in forests. Hence action at local bird feeders has been rather quiet, as noted by Cathy Smallwood and others.

If you see any interesting birds over the holiday season, let me know. Darroch Whitaker and I will be making the rounds on Boxing Day to see what Portugal Cove – St. Philips might contribute to the St. John's Christmas Bird Count.

Best wishes for a joyful and family and friend oriented Christmas and holiday season.

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