

Rocky Mountain environmental highs

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Dandelion-like flower celebrating life in Jasper National Park Alberta (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

“Yesterday a child came out to wonder,
Caught a dragon fly inside a jar,
Fearful at the roaring sound of thunder,
And tearful at the falling of a star.”

Tom Rush, The Circle Game

Between working meetings of the Society of Conservation Biologists and COSEWIC (Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canadian) in Edmonton, I cherished a visit by my wife Janet, son Nick and his partner Katie for an adventure in Jasper National Park.

Lying along the Rocky Mountain border between Alberta and British Columbia, Jasper National Park is a Canadian environmental treasure. Here the changing light paints an enthralling spectacle of mountain grandeur on a canvas of sky and clouds. The enormity and precipitousness of the mountains elevates the spirit while grounding the body. Transparent cold mineral-rich waters from snow caps and high mountain glaciers smooth and over time beyond humanity wear riverulets into the mountain stone.

Lush large-treed forests overwhelm the senses in powerful sacred places. Walking among the ancients, the young, the living and the dead in a mountainous old growth forest through patterned and unpatterned light, familiar and unfamiliar colors and novel earthy fragrances with a partner, family or friend enriches an incomparable experience. The elk and big horn sheep express an animate magic, while the ephemeral presence of bears instills a keen awareness and rare sense of vulnerability.

Such immersion in a world of natural wonder provides an invaluable yet truly priceless (free) mental and physical rejuvenation – a reconnection with what we’re all about. Where does this attraction and these feelings come from? Surely, our bond to the earth and all its earthly and living manifestations is rooted very deeply in our evolution and biology. And owing to this primal rooting, what better experiences can we have? What more can we provide for our children? What better gift? What better inheritance?

All the beauty that surrounds us

One need not travel to Alberta enjoy such environmental spectacle. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we are indeed fortunate to live immersed in environmental wonders on the land and sea. Yet we squander this wealth and destroy this inheritance. Perhaps because too often, we simply ignore the natural beauty surrounds us.

As the naturalist from Massachusetts, David Henry Thoreau pointed out, there are two ways to experience the world. One way is to travel around it, and the other is to watch the seasonal progression of life march through our garden. Environmental wonder is everywhere, often above but as often or not at our feet. It is so pervasive that you have to go out of your way to not notice.

Consider for one example, the magnificently outrageous dandelion. You can eat the leaves, boil, dry and power the roots, and glory in the sunshine radiance of their blossoms. Why do these fantastic plants get so much bad press and unwanted attention?

Wispy white dandelions are glorious expressions of life. What child has not delighted blowing their seeded fairy angels into wild and windy aerial dances? If you are fortunate enough to have dandelions in your yard, watch for ground-feeding finches that know well the healthy nourishment that they provide.

“There must be some way of here, said the Joker to the Thief,
There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief,
Businessmen – they drink my wine, Ploughmen plow my earth,
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth.”

Bob Dylan, All Along the Watchtower

Oiled gannets in the Gulf of Mexico

There have more reports of oiled gannets in the Gulf of Mexico. An Associated Press news item on 4 July indicated that in the eastern Gulf along the Mississippi, Alabama and Florida Panhandle coasts, gannets were the most oiled seabird species, running ahead of locally breeding brown pelicans!

All of these gannets would have originated in colonies in Newfoundland or in Quebec in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. To assess potential effects of Gulf of Mexico oil pollution here, Environment Canada and the Canadian Wildlife Service are presently engaged in aerial photographic surveys of the gannet colonies in Newfoundland at Cape St. Mary’s, Baccalieu and Funk Island.

My research group at Memorial University and I are working with Environment Canada to mount a large scale tracking study of gannets, many of which will very shortly be returning to the heavily-polluted Gulf of Mexico. This information will be used to assess the pollution-related mortality of Canadian seabirds in the US Gulf.

Birds in the area and around the province

A successful brood of northern pintail ducks was observed crossing Portugal Cove Road from the Murray's Pond marsh to Murray's Pond. The lush cleansing marsh is being infilled by the expanding Murray's Farm parking lot, likely illegally.

A ring-billed gull with a large orange disc on its left wing has been visiting Bennie Benoit's yard in the Mi'kmaq Reserve in Conne River. Bennie like me and David Artiss and others, feeds table scraps to crows. Hence other large birds are often attracted to his property. The tagged gull in Bennie's yard was banded in Massachusetts where it spent its winter vacation and where there is an ongoing study of the movements and migration of gulls (see:

<http://www.mass.gov/dcr/watersupply/watershed/study/index.htm>.

A couple of secretive brown creepers revealed themselves to David Artiss in the Hammond Estates area of Portugal Cove. On Canada Day, Carolyn Mayo was greeted by a fleeting flock of 8 evening grosbeaks in the maple tree in her yard by Neary's Pond.

Keep looking up (and down).

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 895-2091 (home), 737-7673 (office), 693-5305 (cell).