

Into the fog

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



It's coming on Christmas
They're cutting down trees
They're putting up reindeer
And singing songs of joy and peace
Oh I wish I had a river
I could skate away on

Joni Mitchell, River

So why tell this story now? It's Christmas, I know, but I'm having writer's block. And this story is real. And because you have to learn to fail in order to succeed it may be helpful for venturing into the New Year.

A lot of boating knowledge and skills were required to work in the tidal salt marshes on the New Jersey shore, where as a student I studied the nesting patterns of gulls. The marsh waterways were convoluted with extensive sandbars that could ground a boat and create havoc under different tidal and current conditions. As in all situations on the water, fog is an unwanted companion.

Fog was extremely dense and thick as I sped away from the dock heading out to the field station on the outer marsh island. The speed was a show of bravado for the fishermen on the dock but mostly for myself as I ventured into the uncertainty. Later I learned that one of the fishermen expressed surprise at a departure in such conditions, while the other, nicknamed Jumbo owing to his size and strength, a man of few but usually wise words reassured him – “Those students know this marsh like the backs of the hands.”

That was certainly the impression that I wanted to engender, but within minutes it was clear that the back of my hand had many features which I was completely unaware of. The same was true of the now featureless marsh from whose hazy and smoky details I struggled to discern something known, something familiar, even something vague and obscure.

I ventured onward for some time trying to scan the banks of the channels. Nothing familiar ... onward ... darkening obscurity ... onward... more slowly ... onward. Then with a unmistakable

resounding clarity - a hair-raising sound exploded in my ears. The roar of pounding surf was dead ahead and indicated that I was heading out of the marsh into the open ocean.

Besides not boating in heavy fog conditions one rule was even more basic - if boating in the fog never head out in to breaking surf. I knew immediately that forward progress had to stop and that I had missed a key turn-off from the main channel.

As it was now quite dark, and as I still could still not orientate, it was time to engage rule number 3 – land the boat and hope for a warm dry night to wait out the dawn or a search and rescue, whichever came first.

Waiting it out

Though without a radio, I did have 14 gum balls which by calculation, I could enjoy a fresh one every half hour until dawn. That strategy dissipated after a few hours when I decided that it would be better to sleep than to chew. Using a gas tank for pillow in damp enshrouded open boat, sleeping was interrupted by the Edgar Allen Poe-like hair-raising barking "quoks" of unseen night herons somewhere overhead.

Later my sleep was interrupted by engine sounds and the bright light of an aircraft in the distance. Upon watching the light for a while I came to realize that upward was actually eastward and that the airplane was in fact a boat. The bright fog penetrating search light was looking for me.

I did what I was supposed to do – make noise. Banging on my pillow (gas tank) provided the needed decibels and direction for the SAR guys to find me and put my boat in tow. The SAR crew was a taciturn lot who indeed did know the Brigantine salt marshes like the backs of their hands. As we sped to the field station, I was feeling pretty chagrined from having put them to such trouble owing to my lack of experience. I couldn't raise much conversation but I kept up an incessant babble as a thin cover of humility. Once at the island, they declined a coffee at field station, but I was assuaged a bit when they accepted a bottle of Mateus rose that I had picked up with the gumballs when in town.

It was sometime about 3 AM and the field station was dark and quiet. My colleagues at the station who had called in the SAR when I didn't return were asleep. Bless their souls. I wouldn't have wanted to explain the diversion.

Moving ahead depends where you've come from

Much of the time that I was trying to get back to the outer island, I felt that I may have actually been boating in circles. In dense forests when unable to discern distant landmarks I have at times walked in circles.

The post-mortem was worked out with Jumbo who'd been fishing the marshes for decades. He summed it up – "The fog can really turn you around." He also told me that the best way to keep a straight-ahead course in the fog is to look behind from where you've come and watch your wake. Brilliant. Thank you, Jumbo. Onward into 2011.

Birds in the area

A dozen or so tufted ducks from Iceland are frequenting Burton's Pond on the MUN campus. Much of the grassy and sedge-lined banks of the pond have been walled with mega-concrete blocks. If this wasn't on a university campus, this would be sad, but it is a university and it's appalling.

Robert Picco and Carolyn Mayo have observed scaup ducks visiting Neary's Pond. A pair of pintail ducks are happily foraging in the artificial marsh at the water filtration plant on Windsor Lake.

Christine Draper rescued a stranded but otherwise healthy dovekie from a road in St. John's. When these tiny Greenlanders are blown inland, the black glistening asphalt of the roads and parking lots must appear like opaque ocean to them and many end up among our vehicles.

An immature sharp-shinned hawk had a difficult time with a pigeon it had struck in downtown St. John's. Unable to carry the pigeon, the hawk dropped its prey in the middle of York Street where it began tearing it apart (Jon Garvin).

A possible immature yellow-bellied sapsucker visited the Garvin's feeder on Neary's Pond Road where hairy woodpeckers are also frequent visitors.

New Year's resolution

God gave Sandy Pond to all of us. The Government gave Sandy Pond to a foreign mining company. The Sandy Pond Alliance is going to take it back. Give a gift to your Great Great Grandchildren – Support the Sandy Pond Alliance (savesandypond@gmail.com).

May wisdom guide you in the new year and hope sustain you on your earthly journey. Godspeed.

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