

Killing two birds with one stone – fuming autos and drivers

Birds I View

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Night flight - Leach's storm-petrel on Gull Island in Witless Bay.
(photo: Paul Regular)

Ugh – I really don't relish that cliché, but to use another – it does at times - hit the nail on the head.

Driving into town from Portugal Cove, the question is for how long will I be halted, dead stalled in a long line of traffic? It is now part of driving reality. Morning after morning the events repeat themselves. Morning after morning on the CBC Radio Morning Show Roadman Cecil Hare repeats the soliloquy - driving delays due to road work in Portugal Cove, Torbay and numerous other communities on the Northeast Avalon.

But why?

Pollution and frustration hand in hand

Long lines of delayed idling vehicles spew hydro-carbons skyward. We sit, idle away and wonder why. As we do, we are enhancing the greenhouse gas effect, warming the atmosphere and melting the Arctic ice cap.

Frustrated drivers worry and fume along with their vehicles. Even a bicycle wouldn't help much in the chaotic road situations at hand.

But it does really have to be this way?

Simple solutions

It seems like a no-brainer to suggest the road work start earlier in the day so a break could be taken between 745 – 845 am to ease the traffic flow. Another break between 430 and 530 pm would also help.

It could also be suggested that drivers start to work earlier and return later. Certainly some do, but school commitments, child drop-offs and pickups really preclude this strategy from being a viable solution, though more people in fewer vehicles would help.

The road works involve lucrative contracts, commissioned by government and paid for with tax-payers' dollars. Provisions about working hours could be part of contract requirements. Such provisioning would be unlikely to reduce the number of bidders or quality of the work. So why is the general public being held hostage in these air pollution inconveniences? It simply isn't necessary.

Objections could and would likely be raised. Some concerns might involve about union hours, the difficulty and safety of working in the dark, etc., but these contentions pale in view of the simple creative solutions that are possible. In Montreal and other Canadian cities the bulk of road construction work is carried out between mid-night and 6 am. This is not a new possibility - it's a reality. So why not here?

Maybe I missed it but did any political candidate even mention these unnecessary traffic delays and propose simple straight-forward problem-solving ways to correct them? Perhaps it's just another political disconnect with the everyday problems of everyday people that could easily be addressed. Perhaps we are so polite (not a bad thing) and used to accommodating inconvenience (not a bad thing either) that we fail to see simple solutions. There is a better way.

The election – the aftermath

It is refreshing to see the NDP capture a number of seats in the House of Assembly and some substantial vote percentages across the province. Yet it is disappointing that environmental issues were totally absent from the campaigns and

from the minds of the voting public. One might think that we live in a vacuum rather than an living ecosystem.

The campaigning much “tell them what they want to hear” politics feeding some pervasive short-term “what’s in it for me” perspectives from the electorate. In Terra Nova National Park, for example, the PC and Liberal candidates supported the local protesters who want to cut snow mobile trails of convenience through the park.

Terra Nova like all National Parks is there for a reason – to preserve the natural environment and its wildlife inhabitants. Like every National Park – Terra Nova is owned by every person in Newfoundland and Labrador and across Canada. The park was not established for the convenience of the “give me my rights” local protesters who are cajoled by the “tell them what they want to hear” politicians.

The park personnel are not part of federal government conspiracy against Newfoundlanders. Many if not most of the staff are Newfoundlanders but what odds if they weren’t. They do not deserve the distorted denigration and at times intimidation imposed on them by local naysayers.

There have to be some basic frames of reference. It is truly an inconvenient truth that we take our natural environment for granted at our own peril.

Birds in the area and around the province

Some dead and stranded storm-petrels were picked up on the streets of St. John’s following terrific onshore winds that have been blowing our way from the Caribbean (Karen Herzberg, Mark King). It is during autumn that storm-petrels depart their massive colonies around the coast and are highly vulnerable to gales and to artificial night lighting in coastal communities and at offshore oil platforms and rigs.

Storm-petrels weren’t the only birds found on roads, in an early morning commute Andy Ploughman reported a gannet walking about the intersection of Battery and Signal Hill Roads in early October.

Large numbers of black ducks were flocking in the open marshy areas near the mouth of the Manuels River in early October (Cynthia Brown and company). And a single black duck also remained out of the sights of hunters by foraging among the fishing boats on the algae along the Portugal Cove wharf (Kathryn Welbourn).

A stunning male wood duck showed up in Bowring Park in mid-September about the time that Hurricane Marie made an appearance.

Hundreds of sanderlings waltzed with the waves on the sunny sandy beaches of Musgrave Harbour, Deadman’s Bay and Lumsden during their late September stopover from the high Arctic tundra to Argentina. It’s difficult to fathom the Herculean oceanic and trans-hemispheric feats of the everyday lives of shorebirds.

Belted kingfisher are about in good numbers being seen at Neary's Pond, on Western Gully Road in Portugal Cove (David Artiss, Janet Montevecchi) and also on the Manuels River and over a battered waterway in Paradise (so to speak).

A mourning dove on a wire in Burgeo attracted my attention. Jim Pink told me that the doves have been visiting a local feeder for some years now.

As soon as the black oil sunflower seeds were scattered on our deck railing the chickadees and red-breasted nuthatches, like old friends were visiting with exuberance and enthusiasm. And like old friends with more of an imposing nature the blue jays and crows also returned.

A singing fox sparrow on 27 September in Banting Park on the Straight Shore of Bonavista Bay celebrated the last vestiges of summer as mountainous icebergs glistened offshore. Two fox sparrows are still coming to our feeder in mid-October.

An early flock of 15 snow buntings on 8 October surprised berry-pickers on Meeting House Road in Pouch Cove (Janet Montevecchi).

Keep looking up – it's just the way it is.

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