

Was the Christmas puffin a Quebecker?

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Adult Atlantic puffin with a bill load of fish for its chick. (Photo: Bill Montevecchi)

When a wayward juvenile puffin showed up on a street with lots of bars and revelers in Montréal and was picked up by an animal care worker, it attracted a lot of media attention. It also generated a lot of hype.

The young puffin was definitely off-track and drawn to the brightly lit street in the city. Wayward young puffins often occur here Newfoundland when they depart their nesting burrows on coastal islands. It is not unexpected, and the juvenile puffins need to be retrieved and released at sea or they will die.

Owing to their high levels of stress in such situations, it is very useful to rehydrate them with lots of water and provide some food. After this, it is extremely useful to release them relatively rapidly at night by the sea from unlit coastal locations where they likely came from.

The young puffin that showed up in Montréal had most likely fledged from one of the puffin colonies in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Yet, as soon as the director of a Québec animal shelter suggested that the puffin was probably transported to the Montreal area onboard a ship from Newfoundland and that she was concerned about how to raise the \$150 to fly the bird back to Newfoundland, the media engaged in a reporting frenzy.

Everyone was captivated by the rescue efforts, rehabilitation and release. Everyone except perhaps a few skeptical biologists. Little consideration was given to the likelihood that the puffin flown to Newfoundland amid much to do had never been here in its entire short life.

At the Montréal rehab center, the puffin was kept in fresh water. This would have been the first time that the puffin had ever been in freshwater. Puffins live saltwater and saline water is essential for its survival in the wild. When seabirds are kept in freshwater, they often lose the ability to waterproof their feathers with their natural oil from a specialized gland just above their tail. When this happens, it is impossible for a bird to be released because cold water soaks through its plumage, the bird will become waterlogged and die a slow death of hypothermia.

Following its flight from Montréal to St. John's, the puffin had further weeks of "rehabilitation". Generally, the longer a wild animal is held in captivity, the lower are its chances of survival in the wild. Risks include losing its plumage waterproofing, acclimating to warm water and air temperatures, reducing its ability to locate, pursue and capture fish.

While it is indeed reassuring to know that people will go out of their way to help a stranded animal in distress. A relatively rapid release of the wayward puffin into the Gulf of St. Lawrence would have done the trick. If the young puffin decided to move to the Newfoundland Grand Bank then either the Cabot Strait or the Strait of Belle Isle would have afforded it such an opportunity.

There are many things that we can and need to do to protect birds in the wild. Moving them around without sound biological rationale is not one of them. To help Christmas puffins and other seabirds, we need to garner all the public and media help that we can to accomplish this considerably onerous challenge, so maybe in its own farcical way the Christmas puffin rescue will help. I hope so.

CNLOPB appointment

This Canada Newfoundland Labrador Offshore Petroleum Board (CNLOPB) has a mandate to protect the marine environment. So it's curious that there are no biologists, ecologists or environmental organizations among its membership. But appointments made on the basis of relevance, expertise and competence could get in the way of political patronage.

The recent appointment of Minister Peter Penashue's former campaign manager to the CNLOPB Board demonstrates again how the politics of entitlement trump integrity and leadership. Still interested in saving seabirds? It's just the way it is.

Christmas bird count

Our bare-bones Christmas Bird Count team in Portugal Cove-St. Phillips consisted of Bobbie Mayer, Tony Lang and me in the fast lane, and my children - Nick, Gioia and Marina on the hiking trail above the Portugal Cove. All tallied we recorded 24 species.

We observed 2 cormorants, one swallowing a very large and very flat flatfish that had the bird essentially standing on its tail to move the fish down its gullet. We also saw 2 bald eagles, many boreal chickadees, flickers, robins, purple finches and American goldfinches. The best birds were red-breasted mergansers, Iceland gulls, a thick-billed murre, dovebies, a belted kingfisher, a red-breasted nuthatch, and in Portugal Cove - a hairy woodpecker that showed up at Carolyn Mayo's feeder and a ruffed grouse that left telltale tracks by Jill Whitaker's feeder.

Birds in the area and around the province

Eider flocks made a strong showing at Cape St. Mary's just after Old Christmas Day, when Santa's 12 reindeer (caribou) happened to be visiting the reserve as well (Tony Power).

In early January a couple of dovebies were picked up in the St. John's area and another was found on Ramea Island by Richard Northcott. The one that I retrieved from Peggy and Frank Walsh in Airport Heights died after two days in my care - very disappointing.

A flock of 10 bald eagles that poured from the cliffs along the East Coast Trail between Logy Bay and Robin Hood Bay topped a family hike on the last day of 2012. Agile dancing ravens harried the soaring raptors.

A good number of snowy owls are about and sightings have been made around the province, including one in mid-December on Ramea (Richard Northcott).

On 11December a stunning Cape May warbler, presumably pushed here by the roaring gales of a few days previous, visited Gene and Karen Herzberg's suet feeder in St. John's. The warbler is still toughing out the Newfoundland winter, providing a special holiday gift for many birders.

A pair of purple finches and some nuthatches have been visiting Pam Williams' feeder in St. Philips, and evening grosbeaks have been feeding at Carolyn Seeley-Mayo's feeder in Portugal Cove. Huge numbers of American goldfinches have been partaking in the offerings around Bruce Bennett's bird-feeders in Long Pond-Manuals.

Keep looking. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 864-7673 (o), 895-2901 (h)