

Northeast Avalon Times

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The pilgrimage

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Jonathan Live-Strong Herring Gull. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

It all began rather seamlessly and perhaps even unintentionally 35 years ago. An opportunity to visit Funk Island - a research endeavor made possible by Les Tuck. It was a happening, a journey to a remote rock in the North Atlantic – a place of birds, of lore, of legend.

Preparations for the trip are amplified by anticipation and apprehension shared with biologists who hold the credence of a life studying nature and with seasoned fishermen who spent a life on the ocean. The visit is timed by the avian breeding season but dependent on weather, winds and a willing and skillful skipper and crew. The landing begins (or not) with a carefully timed jump from a dory bobbing and falling in the surf to the slippery ledge referred to as “The Bench”.

The arrival smacks with a rock solid euphoric grounding. From “The Bench”, a 6-inch-wide slanting shelf leads to the top of the island. Here the greeting is an unfathomable cacophony and smell of more than a million closely packed breeding

murres and gannets and their chicks. This is a mind-boggling immersion in a seabird community that is usually distributed over sheer ocean cliffs. The remoteness of Funk Island lies beyond the ambit of most mammalian and avian predators such as weasels and eagles, though occasionally an arctic fox transported on sea ice is stranded on the island. Under these relatively predator-free circumstances on Funk Island, the seabirds have forsaken their cliff-nesting habits and nest on flat terrain.

Most of the birds occupy the central spine of the island stretching about 1 kilometer from Gannet Head in the south to Indian Gulch at the northeast end on the island. In a grassy meadow on the otherwise bald granite rock, a stone cairn of granite slabs chiseled from the surface by Arctic pack ice belies a former human presence. The granite provided the building materials for a hut that housed visiting bird harvesters from nearby communities in the late 1700s.

Yet well before, aboriginal people knew of the island (I wonder what they called it?) and canoed the 50 kilometers of ocean to the bird-covered rock outcrop. How they knew it was there and how they navigated in the unpredictably treacherous sea is a mystery of human endeavor. The Beothuk in their distinctively crafted ocean-worthy canoes paddled to the island with a purpose – the collection of the large porcelain-shelled eggs of the great auks.

European voyagers to the New World relied on Funk Island as a source of fresh meat following arduous North Atlantic transits. The large flightless auk was the preferred and most easily acquired fare. Funk Island quickly became North America's first fast-food takeout, and the clientele kept returning for centuries.

The birds were eventually eradicated from Funk Island though not by those securing fresh protein. The large concentration of flightless auks also provided opportunity for overharvesting for down feathers for mattresses, quilts and pillows. The remnants of stone corrals, where the birds were herded for killing and parboiling for removal of their outer feathers to access the underlying down, are still evident in the meadow. Funk Island is a treeless rock, so some of the auks were also used to fuel the fires that heated the hot water caldrons. Following feather and down removal, the great auks were discarded, simply heaped in large piles to rot.

The result – the largest known colony of the last flightless bird in the Northern Hemisphere, the “Penguin of the North Atlantic”, was obliterated by 1800. The few remaining great auks that bred on a couple of isolated skerries off southwest Iceland were likely beyond the tipping point of population recovery. The demand and price for

great auk specimens and eggs skyrocketed as the numbers of auks diminished, and their ultimate fate was sealed by economic demand.

Following the seabird decimations on Funk Island during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, visiting vessels made massive removals of decomposed great auk material for fertilizer that was used in the Baltimore - Washington D.C. vicinity. In the late 1800s, collections of numerous specimens, skeletons and barrels of bones were made for the Smithsonian Institution. The remaining bodies composted, providing the substrate of the grassy meadow which is a cemetery for the extinct auks. The tragedy of the great auk is a poignant iconic reminder of how not to interact with wildlife species – a reminder that is still often ignored.

My personal experiences with Funk Island have grown over the years. Raw encounters with the omnipotent North Atlantic Ocean provided lessons in survival and in the day to day rhythm of life punctuated by death. Cooperation with fishermen, students and colleagues in these ventures has led to long-lasting bonding friendships. The significance of the annual venture matured with the cumulative knowledge of age. Time blended the good and the bad, the fantastic and the mundane into a melding process. The trips have created a journey – a voyage of passage between decision and resolution.

“Eyes to see beyond tomorrow
through to the time without hours
Passing the Eden of flowers ...
on to the force without power
Reason to live, reason to continue
Reason to live”

The Trader
The Beach Boys 1973

Birds in the area and around the province

Yellowlegs (both greater and lesser) are on the move in local ponds and along the coast. On 5 August, Tina Leonard and Richard Thomas scored an American avocet in a pond in Lamaline where two residents reported that a pair of avocets had been there for a couple of weeks. A rather uncommon gray jay exposed itself to Carolyn Mayo in the meadows below Beachy Cove Mountain in early July.

John Lewis confirmed that the hummingbird feeding on honeysuckle in the family's garden in Holyrood was a female. Peter Miller, the former CBC Morning Show host, sent an email about his birding adventures at his home in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia. He remarked on huge numbers of ruby-throated hummingbirds in the area this summer. Flocks of the tiny nectar addicts are visiting sugar water feeders that have been sold out at stores in the valley. Peter and his wife Edna are provisioning the hummingbirds with 9 to 12 cups of sugar water per day at their feeders! I am not able to answer Peter's query about why there has been such a huge population increase this year (climate warming?), but did speculate that perhaps some of the hummingbird bounty in Nova Scotia may be "spilling over" to Newfoundland.

Keep looking. Contacts – mont@mun.ca, 895-2901 (H), 864-7673 (O), 693-5305 (C)