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Provincial budget devastates environmental safety net

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



These are the best of times. Never before has the province had more wealth. Yet these are the worst of times. Never has the province faced such dire financial circumstances.

The grim consequences of government's mismanagement are many. The first and most obvious is the firing workers tasked with the daily running of provincial affairs. Those responsible for the crisis are now firing frontline workers in the name of efficiency.

Environmental and wildlife programs and personnel have absorbed disproportionate damage. Here are some examples.

After 19 years of nurturing eco-tourism, conservation, environmental education, cultural appreciation and hunter cooperation, the Manager of the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve has been removed. The Manager, a former fisherman from a

nearby community, has exerted a major influence in eliminating mystery oil pollution along the southern coast.

The diligent Manager of the Witless Bay and Baccalieu Island Ecological Reserves is gone. The relationship that the Manager developed over the years is one of cooperative conservation and shared purpose. The Manager's presence will be very greatly missed by tourism operators, local residents, researchers and tourists alike.

It is difficult to envision anywhere where such globally significant seabird capitals would be so undervalued and without Managers. As well as providing ecological archives, these reserves are major economic drivers that simply cannot be so cavalierly taken for granted.

The cuts are too sweeping and too deep. The biodiversity component of the Wildlife Division has been eliminated, and the Natural History Curator at the Rooms is gone. There are frightening losses in inland fisheries and the list goes on.

Yet in a March 31 interview in *The Telegram*, the Minister of Environment and Conservation swaggers "I have a responsibility to make sure I haven't cut down below what I need in order to fulfill my responsibilities". That is true. What is questionable is the minister's further assurance "I am confident that I have that." On what basis?

Perhaps the Minister of Environment and Conservation is so confident that he didn't bother consulting with the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Council [WERAC] – a Council that is enshrined in the provincial Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act. But then again he didn't need to as the Council has been effectively dissolved through lack of ministerial appointments. Instead of rationalizing the devastation of his department, the Minister should uphold provincial environmental laws. What is going on is a grave threat to the environmental oversight needed in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Don Steele

Our good friend of the Newfoundland and Labrador environment has passed on to a higher plane. A classically trained biologist and naturalist who seemed to know about and be interested in everything ecological, Don Steele was a pillar of the Natural History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador (Nature NL). Don championed environmental awareness, appreciation and protection. His deep unflinching integrity and environmental commitment inspired many, and the society honored him with a Tuck-Walters Award.

Thank you, Don for your exemplary strength of character and humanity. You focused on the best it could be, gave your full effort and encouraged us to do better. We will.

Ray Guy

The auditor general of the people - Ray Guy has laid his pen aside. No one can better concoct political savvy founded on Newfoundland bedrock and steeped in outraged hilarity, monotony, salt fish and the rant better than the keenly observant, straight-shooting and shrewdly penetrating Ray Guy. All things must pass though transitions can be challenging. The ripples from Ray's pen have surged into a tsunami of public accountability that is the life blood of a democratic society for which, as Ray continually reminded us, we must be ever vigilant and responsible. Thank you, Ray. We will.

Oiled eiders at Fogo Island

On Good Friday, hunters on Change and Fogo Islands reported oiled eiders on land and on ice flows (Barry Brinson). Hundreds of oiled duck were reported.

It is highly unusual for eiders to get out of the water like this. A seabird's plumage is waterproof but if it gets oiled the dry seal is broken and cold water penetrates to the skin. Oiled birds get out of the water to reduce heat loss to the frigid seawater.

A few days later, oiled eiders were seen in Seldom on the opposite side of Fogo Island about 30 miles from where the first oiled birds were seen [Aubrey Payne]. Later oiled eiders were seen in Tilting and then across the sound in Musgrave Harbour and Ladle Cove.

The oiled bird reports came in during a period of tremendous NE winds that caused extensive coastal damage. Coast Guard reported that no commercial vessels were in the area before or during the incident (Bruce English). A slick was seen near Baccalhoa Island a couple of miles from the site of a sunken paper carrier that went down with fuel oil aboard in 1985. One possibility is that the oil came from the sunken vessel impacted by the extraordinary turbulence created by recent storm surges. The oiled eiders are moving and their numbers need to be determined.

On 4 April, the Canadian Wildlife Service collected 2 oiled eiders at Tilting (Pierre Ryan). The oil is being fingerprinted to gain clues about possible sources of the pollution. Too many of these mysteries go unsolved.

Other birds in the area and around the province

Craig Northcott brought home an eider with very pale blondish plumage from a hunt off Ramea in December. The duck's appearance indicated that it had originated in James or Hudson Bay and was of the *sedentaria* subspecies which as the name implies is relatively non-migratory, except for this bird at least. This was a first for Ramea.

Those resilient plastic shopping bags that that time will not decay litter the country side and are taking a toll on gulls. Driving near the Torrent River, Larry LaVallee saw 2 herring gulls with shopping bags tangled around their necks. One flew with difficulty and the other scrambled off the highway to avoid traffic.

Peregrines falcons have been seen at Quidi Vidi Lake and Torbay (Robert White). Red crossbills have been visiting Joe Brazil's feeder in Pasadena throughout the winter. The first robins of spring arrived at Cape St. Mary's on 9 May (Tony Power) and in Portugal Cove a day later. Keep looking.

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