

Early aboriginal interactions with birds

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



For aboriginal peoples, intimate knowledge of plants and animals was clearly a survival imperative. When knowledge is shaped this way over generations, there can be no better motivation for learning. Yet beyond learning and utilization, many animals and birds in particular carried spiritual significance for the indigenous inhabitants of Newfoundland.

As our technological savvy has sky-rocketed us into realms of apparent detachment from our environment, our fascination about aboriginal ways of life before European contact has only intensified.

Maritime Archaic People and birds

The first known inhabitants of Newfoundland who occupied the island 3,000 or more years ago are referred to as the Maritime Archaic People. Though the name is not

one they applied to themselves, it was created by archaeologists to emphasize their coastal existence and dependence on marine animals.

Through the research of Drs. Jim Tuck and Priscilla Renouf, much of what we know about these people came from the earliest known aboriginal sites on the Northern Peninsula and on the southern Labrador coast. These occupations on both sides of the Strait of Belle Isle provided access to the seasonal movements of seals, fish and seabirds through the strait which was a vital ocean conveyor belt of reliable food sources.

The extensive cemetery at Port au Choix contains a wealth of avian material and information. Seabird effigies adorned the bone pins, pendants and combs fashioned by the Maritime Archaic People. They also crafted flute-like instruments and whistles from the long wing bones of swans, geese and eagles. Great auks were a very important bird. These large fatty and flightless seabirds travelled through the Strait of Belle Isle from their former large colonies on Funk Island and on Birds Rocks (Magdalene Islands) in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Yet birds held much more than dietary significance and more than 25 avian species mostly waterbirds and some birds of prey have been unearthed in the human burials at Port au Choix. As indicated by hundreds of great auk beaks interred, these birds were unmistakably important to carry into the afterlife.

Beothuk and birds

The Beothuk possible descendants of the Maritime Archaic People had a rich fabric of bird knowledge and appreciation, as documented in Ingeborg Marshall's magnificent book on the Beothuk. The little that is known of their language from Shawnawdithit's accounts with the geologist William Cormack has produced a highly informative lexicon of bird names and information.

Eggs were a major component of their summer diets, and Beothuk visited seabird colonies on islands along the northeast coast for this purpose. In extraordinary navigational and endurance feats they paddled their ballast-laden, ocean-worthy canoes through 60 kilometers of treacherous North Atlantic waters to Funk Island. There they collected the large porcelain-shelled eggs of the great auk. Todd Kristensen, a former Masters student at MUN and presently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Alberta, has hypothesized that the Beothuk encamped near or on seabird islands as matters of dietary convenience and expediency.

Bird down (including that of eagle and gray jay) was used at times when igniting fires, and hot stones were dropped in bark pots in which the large auk eggs were boiled. Yolks were used in puddings and were dried and powdered for winter use. Birds as well as eggs were eaten, and geese, eiders, cormorants, gulls, guillemots, loons, ptarmigan

and other birds were boiled or roasted for consumption. Curiously the remains of great auks and gannets have not been found at their camp sites

Feathers were used in hair styles and avian imagery was highlighted on jewelry and decorations. Bird skulls and feet were at times included in Beothuk graves, though not as commonly as in the burials of the Maritime Archaic People. However, carved bone pendants interpreted by Kristensen as avian symbols were a dominant inclusion in Beothuk graves. In this light, birds are considered as spiritual messengers that transported the dead to an idyllic island afterlife. The birds that turn out to be the special messengers are the Arctic terns whose crimson red bills and feet may well have held a special spectral significance for the “Red Indians”.

In considerations of birds and Beothuk, it has always behooved me that both the great auks that were so important to them and the Beothuk themselves were erased from our seascapes and landscapes at about the same time in the early 1800s. Yet in so many intangible ways their presence still remains.

Oil leaking from sunken vessel near Fogo Island

Coast Guard has confirmed speculation from local fishermen and hunters that the source of oil impacting eiders near Fogo and Change Islands is coming from the sunken vessel at nearby Blow Hard Rock. Two cracks have been found in the fuel storage area of the vessel which is fully loaded with diesel and bunker C oil.

Current effort is to seal the leaks for containment with a longer term solution of removing the fuel oil. These tasks will not be simple as the vessel lies 250 feet below the surface. The situation requires careful vigilance as there many breeding seabirds in the area and the fishery is just opening.

There are many sunken vessels with fuel oils aboard in our coastal waters. They are deteriorating and rusting through till eventual release. One striking example is the shrimp trawler that was being towed by the tug *Atlantic Maple*. The *Katsheshuk* sank on 30 March 2002 in the mouth of Conception Bay between Cape St. Francis and the Baccalieu Island Ecological Reserve. No efforts were made to secure pollutants aboard the sunken vessel.

Birds in area and around province

A male ring-necked duck was showing an interest in a black duck on Neary's Pond. Hopefully he will find a female ring-neck and nest nearby. The low wing-whirring flights of a pair of courting savannah sparrows gave a fresh spring perspective to the meadow at the Neary's farm ruins.

Contacts – 895-2901 [h], 864-7673 [w], mont@mun.ca