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Opportunities for community environmental stewardship

Birds I View

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Attending the recent annual meeting of the Stewardship Association of Municipalities (SAM) in Carmanville, I was inspired by the environmental stewardship activities and conservation motivations of community leaders from across the province. There is likely no better way to invest in the quality of community life, and the results are obvious in towns that do like Torbay and in towns that develop at all costs like the misnomered Paradise.

Town councils are wise to take these matters to heart. When the council focus moves from primary emphasis on ever-increasing tax bases and engages more inclusive perspectives that include natural environmental valuation and protection, citizens are more content, prouder and more engaged in community life.

Many examples illustrate the point. One of my wife Janet's and my favorite trails is in the Wetlands Nature Trail in Carmanville. We've been going there for years. The well laid out trails promise hikers an experience with boreal forest and wetland habitat and a diversity birds and mammals.

Carmanville Mayor Sam Winsor has referred to the Wetlands Nature Trail as the "best thing" that ever happened in the town. The interpretation centre there like the one at Cape St. Mary's also provides a pleasant atmosphere for community activities involving seniors and young people.

While town stewardship agreements benefit communities, it is often not simple for town councils to foster such stewardship. But it has been done by communities from Lab West to St. John's. Raleigh at the tip of the Northern Peninsula fosters a magnificent example of community stewardship. The citizens, business people, teachers and students have embraced and protected the rare plants in the provincial reserve at Burnt Cape. The enthusiasm and community support by the communities of St. Lawrence, Lamaline and Lord's Cove for the provisional Ecological Reserve on the Lawn Islands has been consistent and effective.

Yet more basically than for stewardship activities, we elect town councils as caretakers of the lands and waterways that they are entrusted with. Yet sadly they are often not trustworthy caretakers. Every election brochure I've read is full of grand promises, though I have only seen the word "environment" in one of them. Living in Portugal Cove – St. Philips, I am often distressed by destructive developments that the council has approved. A recent and obvious one is the destruction of the stream, wetlands and forest buffer at Butler's Pond on Portugal Cove Road. This devastation was approved to accommodate the expansion of heavy equipment parking lot for a road construction company.

There is a better way. Community environments and ecological life support systems do not need to be destroyed for development. Environmental laws must be adhered to.

When you vote in upcoming municipal elections, you might want to keep in mind town council members who sanction such devastation. In Portugal Cove – St. Philips, there's also at least one candidate running for office who approves of cutting steeples off of historic churches. You might not want to vote for him or like-minded candidates either. It's your home town.

Birds in area and around province

Thirty plus Manx shearwater and about 100 sooty shearwaters were encountered in eddies that appear to be a marine hotspot about 2 -3 miles SW of the Cape St. Mary's Cays buoy by Ian Jones and vessel crew in late August.

On July 27, Alison Harvey reported an unusual road-killed northern gannet on the TCH near Arnold's Cove. Yellowlegs were flocking throughout the area during August with a smattering of lessers in among the greater. A small flock of juvenile

harlequin ducks, a zooming peregrine and numerous gannets were at L'Anse Amour in August (Patsy Ploughman).

Kevin Aucoin retrieved an immature goshawk that met its fate at a window on his house on Tucker's Hill. A chirping family of 5 osprey circled over Neary's Pond in early September (Alison Harvey).

Gerard Walsh sent photos of great black-backed gull that has been residing on the Coast Guard jetty on the south side of St. John's Harbour since late May. The bird's wings hang from the body and touch the ground though the bird can fly short distances at least. Gerard surmises that it's unlikely that gull could sit on the water as the wings would go below the surface. So far, the bird is a survivor.

During August in Witless Bay, the puffin patrollers rescued only 30 wayward puffin chicks – down from the more than 500 that were retrieved last year. Local patroller Lori Colbert speculated that clear nights and bright moonlight enabled the puffin chicks to move from the islands to the sea. Bright nights also make it riskier for fledglings to avoid predatory gulls.

At Cape Freels on September 8, I saw what appeared to be a rare sharp-tailed sparrow. Unfortunately, I did not see the sparrow well enough to make a positive identification, and I had forgotten my camera. A photo would have likely allowed species determination. These disappointing experiences are also hugely motivating to capture an identification during the next often long awaited encounter which may take weeks, months or years.

The mountain ash are hanging low with abundant dog berry crops. This bodes well for fall harvesting by robins, starlings, waxwings among others.

Hope that you had the opportunity to run, walk or otherwise participate in the recent Terry Fox Marathon of Hope. It never ends.

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