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The birds and the bees and the pesticides

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Black ducks like other waterfowl remain pair during the winter. Female on left has a band on her right leg (photo: Bill Montevecchi]

During summer, the surface of Neary's Pond would bubble with trout snatching Mayflies. Just above the surface the air was a swirl of feeding tree swallows zooming through the myriads low-flying insects. I watched in anticipation of a time when a trout might hit a tree swallow and figure it had struck the granddaddy of all insects. It never happened, and now it is even more likely that it never will.

The pond no longer percolates with trout, and where have all the tree swallows gone? Reasons for the demise of the fishes and birds are many. They include increasing numbers of black ducks eating trout eggs on the stream beds around the pond, and the swallows may be having difficulties in their southern US, Caribbean and Central American wintering grounds.

Yet there is one fate that both the fishes and birds share – a massive reduction in their insect food base. So the real question becomes where have all the insects gone? Concerns have been raised about demise of insects playing a major role in the declines of insectivorous birds like swallows and flycatchers.

Among ecologists, farmers and gardeners alarms have focused on the absence on insect pollinators like bees that have co-evolved with plants ensuring the propagation and survival of both.

So how might this relate to “care-free” pesticide coated seeds that you may be planting next spring and that will be broadcast throughout the major croplands of North America and Europe? Mega-production farming and gardening practices are colliding with insect diversity and pollinators.

The seemingly innocuous seed coating treatments have replaced obvious and often disturbing blanket spray programs of the past. They have also provided considerable benefits to crop production and gardening success. Yet their ubiquitous application with minimal scientific investigation of their biological consequences is alarming agro-scientists and ecologists alike.

Neonicotinoid seed dressings are the most widely used insecticides in the world today. They are water soluble and provide effective systemic protection to all parts of the plant from the roots to the leaves but are also expressed in the pollen. These lethal neurotoxins affect insect pests and pollinators alike. The toxins also have a persistence that allows accumulation in soils and waterways with unknown effects. Scientific studies are essential for addressing these knowledge gaps and for providing options for optimal planning and decision-making.

We are clearly witnessing high risk environmental interventions. There are many things that we do and many that we can't. But having an awareness about what is happening around us is the essential first step in understanding then reducing the negative impacts of our very heavy footprints over the environment that sustains us.

Snowy owl invasion

The first time I saw one was an image on a box of White Owl cigars that one of my uncles smoked. The cigars were manufactured in Alabama well outside the range of the arctic owl though well within its wide web of attraction as an avian equivalent of the polar bear.

In late November, snowy owls were the first signs of a white Christmas. The howling northwesterlies precipitated an arctic owl influx that continues to build in the region.

They're everywhere. Cape Race is a hotspot where on 8 December Bruce Mactavish tallied 206 snowy owls! Cape Spear and the offshore Terra Nova platform have also had drop-ins. On 7 December one was atop the Country Ribbon abattoir in St. John's scanning for rats while being harassed by crows. Five snowy owls were in Ramea on 30 November (Richard Northcott).

Record numbers are in New Brunswick and New York. At Kennedy International Airport, citizens' protests and petitions stopped the shooting of snowy owls near runways in favor of live-trapping and relocating them. Even the balmy Bermuda has had a snowy owl touchdown.

What's going on? Almost all of the owls are immature as indicated by their heavy dark barring. This reflects a very productive breeding season followed by a crash in their cyclic rodent food supply which has driven the young owls southward. The absence of snowy owls on the west coast of Newfoundland (Darroch Whitaker) and in western Canada has led to conjecture that the birds showing up eastern Newfoundland and North America are of Greenlandic origin.

Many of the owls are in dire states. An emaciated carcass was found at Cape Race (Paul Linegar). And this appears to be their fate, as there are few rodents on the barrens. Ptarmigan, seabirds and sea ducks could provide some sustenance for the owls. Yet the prognosis appears grim, and this is for the ones that made landfall and did not perish in icy North Atlantic on their southward odyssey.

Birds in area and around province

On 9 November, more than 2000 Canada Geese and more than 1000 greater scaup in the Codroy Valley (Alvan Buckley). On 23 November a mixed flock of about 80 greater and lesser scaup were in Clarenville, an east coast hotspot for these ducks. About 100 Canada geese and 60 black ducks were there as well.

Small flocks of black ducks are visiting the remaining open water on Mitchell's Pond, and a couple of diving duck, likely goldeneye, have been

diving along the ice edges in the shrinking open water pool in the center of Neary's Pond.

In the evening of 9 November, Coldon Ethridge picked up a northern saw-whet owl on Spruce Hill Road in Topsail. Unfortunately the tiny owl likely had had neurological injury from an auto collision and soon succumbed.

Survival of the resilient was apparent in a 1 footed crow perched in a tree in Portugal Cove (Jon Garvin).

On 7 November, Terry James picked up a perfect specimen of a cliff swallow near the Cape Spear lighthouse. Comparisons with bird guides suggest that the bird be a subspecies from the southwestern US. Appearances of other species from the southwest around this time (Virginia's warbler) and in October (scissors-tailed flycatcher) add circumstantial context for the occurrence of a cliff swallow from the southwest.

Christmas Bird Count

Portugal Cove–St. Philips CBC falls within the purview of the official St. John's count run each year on Boxing Day. In PCSP, the local effort is championed by the Whitaker and Montevecchi families. If you want to join, or if you see any birds around or at feeders, please let me know. We work at but it's more refreshing than the consumer-fueled box store sales.

Best wishes for the season and new year, and if your life isn't filled with joy and peace, lighting a candle and feeling the warmth of new day's sun can help. Godspeed.

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