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## **Witless Bay council rejects development at Ragged Beach**

### **Birds I View**



### **Bill Montevecchi**

Ragged Beach in Witless Bay is an excellent site from which to watch marine birds and mammals throughout the year. Yet so what, we can view seabirds and whales at many sites along our coasts, islands, sea stacks, cliffs and coves. So what's special about Ragged Beach? Much of it has to do with its adjacency to the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve.

Among the numerous seabird colonies in Newfoundland and Labrador, five stand out as world-class seabird capitals. These five capitals are protected in Ecological Seabird Reserves and provide nesting sites for more than 90 percent of the seabirds that breed in our province.

Cape St. Mary's, Witless Bay, Baccalieu Island, Funk Island and the Gannet Islands off Groswater Bay in southern Labrador comprise the capital reserve network. Seabirds also nest in Ecological Reserves in Hare Bay on the Northern Peninsula, at Mistaken Point and on the Lawn Islands.

The Witless Bay and Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve are readily accessible to tourists. Each summer thousands of provincial, Canadian and international visitors and tourists are drawn to these natural spectacles. Access to these reserves has changed the economic landscape of the nearby towns as well as those further afield.

Gull, Green, Great and Pee Pee Islands make up the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve. These islands are immediately adjacent to the coastal communities of Bay Bulls, Witless Bay, Mobile, Tors Cove and Bauline East.

Seabird colonies are not immune from the environmental changes we create and cannot simply be taken for granted. Of all of our Ecological Reserves, Witless Bay is in closest proximity to growing towns and expanding marine businesses and activities. Hence, the colonies on the islands there are most at risk to disturbance, development and encroachment. These very real concerns require sustained vigilance as the pressures of our activities increase continually.

The offshore supply base nestled among the tour boat operators in Bay Bulls has a considerable environmental footprint with large vessel traffic throughout the period of seabird occupancy from April through October. During March the *West Aquarius* drill rig which brilliantly illuminated the night sky was anchored just outside the reserve.

Lights attract and disorient marine birds, especially those that are nocturnally active such as Leach's storm-petrels. Were a rig or brightly lit vessel near the reserve during the breeding period, it could cause untold disturbance and mortality.

Extensive community efforts by the Puffin Patrol rescue wayward pufflings that are drawn to coastal lights and end up on land and roads rather than out at sea where they belong [see - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtSHVHE4fj0>]. The unnecessary skyward and ocean projection of street lights, glaring signs, store lights, etc. pollute the night sky lure nocturnal animals.

For well over a year the Witless Bay Town Council has been assessing a proposed housing development at Ragged Beach. Besides lighting up the mainland immediately adjacent to the reserve, the proposed development involved considerable legal maneuvering. Rural land had to be reclassified as residential, and crown land also had to be included in the development which would encroach on the East Coast Trail.

The proposal elicited a widespread negative outpouring from local residents and from many others throughout the province, country and even from abroad. The council was inundated with hundreds of letters and messages expressing concern about the development. This was by far the

greatest response that the council had ever received on any issue. Yet it all seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Refreshingly, as is often the case, a new council with a clear view brought a new perspective to the table. The councilors supported the community concerns and rejected the development proposal.

In today's climate of economic frenzy, community well-being and environmental integrity are constantly given away in free exchange for supposed gain. Yet every once in a while when the give-aways are carefully considered and checked, the supposed gains pale in comparison with the longer and larger term investments in the in rural character and integrity of a town and the enhanced quality of life for its residents. Safeguarding rural community environments is something that all towns can aspire to, as they move forward with sustainable and well-reasoned developments.

Oftentimes town councils can make all the difference. Sometimes they are all we have to rely on.

### **Birds in the area and around the province**

Newly arriving Canada geese, a sure sign of spring, have been showing up on the Southern Shore. Along the coast, ring-billed gulls are returning in crisp nuptial plumage complementing the well adorned herring and black-backed gulls. The interaction of increasing spring day-length and hormones is enlivening the forests with singing juncos, robins, flickers and fox sparrows. Winter flocks are disintegrating as birds shift from group affiliations to pairing and territorial behavior.

Good sized flocks of common mergansers on the open water at the Gander Bay causeway are likely feeding on delicious smelt that locals have been catching through the ice. A few red-breasted mergansers have been foraging near shore in St. Philips and Portugal Cove.

A few lingering snowy owls are at Cape Spear and along the coast. In Outer Cove grounded owls have been dive bombed by murders crows that eventually moved on leaving the owls in peace [Jim Brokenshire].

It's looking to be a good year for grouse. A ruffed grouse is taking advantage of spilled seeds at the Garvin's feeder on Neary's Pond Road. Another feeding on seeds scattered on the trail around Long Pond posed for some stunning images captured by Rick West.

Flocks of waxwings and robins are cleaning up the last few dogberries around Quidi Vidi Lake and along the coast [Bruce Mactavish, Annie McEwen].

In early March, a visiting song sparrow and a sharp-shinned hawk were visiting the West's feeder in Portugal Cove. The hawk dispatched at least one junco.

Spring is in the air and on the wing. Keep looking.

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