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Back to the future - returning to Middle Lawn Island

Birds I View

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Leach's storm-petrel Gull Island [photo: Paul Regular]

More than 30 years ago, the first seabird island that I visited as a young aspiring researcher was Middle Lawn Island off the sole of the Burin Peninsula. I joined Jon Lien's crew who were studying Leach's storm-petrels. Last month I returned to Middle Lawn Island.

Leach's storm-petrels or Carey chicks [or chickens] as they are known locally are our most mysterious seabird.

What's with the name?

For a mariner, a storm-petrel can conjure up images of nasty weather. The "petrel" part of the name derives from the robin-sized seabird's habit of dragging its feet in the water while foraging to avoid being blown from the surface in an analogy to St. Peter walking on water,

Carey chick is from Latin - Cara Mater or Dear Mother. The mother might refer either to the Blessed Virgin or a sea witch, depending on perspective and circumstance.

David Blackwood's *Lost Party at Sea - The Sign* used to hang on my office wall at MUN. The dark blue-gray image depicts a small boat with slumped and arm-waving opened-mouthed men in a foreboding sea with a seabird in the foreground flying toward them. Perhaps the bird was a tern providing a sign of hope. That perspective changed

sharply one day while on Bill Sturge's longliner headed for Funk Island from Valleyfield, in Blackwood's home territory.

The crewmen were sharing local bird names. Storm-petrel came forth as "pall Carey" as in pall bearer. My thoughts returned to *The Sign* and another possibility that the bird was not a tern but rather a storm-petrel bringing a sign of doom.

Tiny albatrosses

Though small in size - storm-petrels are high performance wide-ranging seabirds like their huge albatross "cousins". Recent tracking research by April Hedd of Memorial University is providing new insight into tiny seabird's oceanic behaviour.

During incubation, storm-petrels from Gull Island in Witless Bay and Baccalieu Island fly out beyond the edge of the Grand Bank to forage. Interestingly, even with these extensive trips of many hundreds of kilometers, birds from Baccalieu and Gull Island that are only separated by 75 kilometers do not overlap at sea!

April's tracking research with that of Ingrid Pollett of Acadia University is also suggesting that following the nesting, the storm-petrels cross the Atlantic to winter off of West Africa. The return to Canada in spring appears to be via stopovers in Brazilian waters. These little robust seabirds are true oceanic Olympians.

Declining populations

Newfoundland is the global capital for Leach's storm-petrels. The world's largest colony on Baccalieu Island has about 3.5 million breeding pairs or 10,000,000 birds counting adults and chicks.

Yet storm-petrels are not faring well in Newfoundland. Many colonies are declining precipitously. Jon Lien and crew counted more than 26,000 pairs of storm-petrels on Middle Lawn Island in 1981. Yet by 2001, numbers had plunged by almost 50 % to 14,000 pairs. A count a few years ago recorded a further decrease to 9,000 pairs - about a third of its size just 30 years ago. What's going on?

In a collective effort to answer this question and what it might signal for wider marine environment, researchers at MUN [led by April Hedd], CWS, Acadia and Dalhousie have joined efforts. Gulls are intense predators on the tiny storm-petrels. In fact the sharp-eyed predatory gulls are the reason that storm-petrels assume a nocturnal existence around their colonies to evade the gulls' attention.

The small population of about 75 herring gulls on Middle Lawn Island are unlikely to be a driving factor in the storm-petrels' decline. Some evidence suggests that mercury might be playing a role. Deep sea lantern fishes or

myctophids are important food for storm-petrels, and myctophids reportedly have high mercury burdens, so the investigation will investigate this avenue as well.

Working with Environment Canada and Bird Studies Canada, our MUN crews are currently on Baccalieu, Gull and Middle Lawn Islands to unravel more of the secrets that this mysterious little seabird holds and how they can inform us about the state of our ocean environment.

Lawn Islands Provisional Seabird Ecological Reserve

Baccalieu and Gull Island are protected under provincial Ecological Reserve status, while the Lawn Islands make up a provisional reserve awaiting government approval for full Ecological Reserve status. Community support for the Lawn Islands reserve is strong. Hopefully government will soon upgrade the reserve with full Ecological Reserve status.

A seabird reserve on the tip of the Burin Peninsula will along with Cape St. Mary's on the southwestern tip of the Avalon Peninsula provide seabird protection and monitoring on both sides of the mouth of Placentia Bay. Placentia is Newfoundland's most industrialized bay as well as the site of one of our richest fisheries. Enhanced vigilance can only help.

Lawn Island storm-petrels are also important marine animals in DFO's considerations of a marine protected area in the deep-water Laurentian Channel along the southwest coast of the Newfoundland.

Birds in the area and around the province

Loons are visiting Neary's Pond and providing enchanting morning and evening mantras, while bitterns are lurking in the remaining wetlands along Western Gully Road in Portugal Cove [Carolyn Mayo].

In late June, 6 Manx shearwaters were on the water near Middle Lawn Island [Pierre Ryan, Chantelle Burke, Wade Roul]. Very interestingly others were heard on 2 nights on Baccalieu [April Hedd].

On 17 June, a light-keeper photographed a Pacific tufted puffin among the seabirds on Machais Seal Island in the Bay of Fundy. With the opening of the Northwest Passage, more Pacific seabirds can be expected.

On 21 June two juvenile gray jays were on the Three Pond Barrens Trail at Pippy Park [Rick West]. In early July another juvenile was moving with its parents along the developing Voisey's Bay Trail in Portugal Cove.

Spotty-breasted juvenile robins with and the young of most species are on the wing. Car and window collisions and cat depredations are on the rise.

Short-eared owl have been making a showing on the northeast coast where a male has been loping over the meadows near Anchor Brook searching for fat meadow voles.

A pair of pine grosbeaks is visiting their Mayo's feeder in Portugal Cove where American goldfinches and juncos are feeding on the seeds of the fluffy white dandelions.

The capelin are in reaffirming the resiliency and wonder of the natural world. Keep experiencing.

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