

Funk Island – it could be heaven

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Funk Island, adjacent rocks and iceberg [photo: Pierre Ryan]

Through the roaring cacophony of more than a million murrelets and the coarse grating of tens of thousands of raucous gannets, the harsh strident calls of a pair of Arctic terns pierce the din - drawing attention upward. The terns circle above the oceanic island surveying the situation below then move seamlessly to the horizon with effortless strokes from their slender sabre-shaped wings.

On an annual basis, these seabirds move back and forth between Arctic nesting colonies and wintering areas in the Antarctic polar region. Some fly more than 80,000 km during the course of a year and over a life-time travel 2,500,000 km or the equivalent of three trips to the moon and back.

In doing so and living at high latitudes year-round, Arctic terns experience more daylight than other animal. Their Herculean movements decouple the photoperiodic flow of the seasons and allow them to live in a virtually endless summer at the polar regions of the earth.

So perhaps it is not surprising that the Beothuk people held a profound spiritual reverence for terns. They looked to them as the spirit birds that would guide them to their island afterlife. In view of the Arctic tern's taxonomic nomenclature - *Sterna paradisaea*, it seems others may have had similar ideas.

The Beothuk canoed to Funk Island from Fogo Island and the Wadham Islands to collect the large porcelain-shelled eggs of the great auk. The Beothuk's ocean-going skills, vessel design and seafaring know-how were hewn by environmental experience, ecological knowledge and no doubt many failures.

This 50 km voyage in an open canoe required navigational expertise, physical and mental prowess as well as chance to arrive at and land safely on a tiny bird-covered rock in the volatile North Atlantic. Surely, this journey was something much more than an egg-collecting trip. Seabird eggs were available inshore and even great auk eggs on the nearby Penguin Islands.

The summer mission to Funk Island was a Beothuk pilgrimage - a spiritual venture to the unseen island beyond the horizon. The island was inhabited by myriads of seabirds that would provide sustenance, wonderment and mystery. The island offered a glimpse of the afterlife. Only the very privileged would make this physical journey of dedication and faith and return to tell about it.

A large east-west oriented ravine named Indian Gulch lies at the eastern end of Funk Island. A Beothuk canoe paddle was found here in the late 1800s. Might the Beothuk have gathered in this canyon where the earliest glint of the North American sunrise would mark the advent of new day and the earliest sunset would end it? Perhaps they left the paddle and other ceremonial objects for good reason.

Europeans also visited Funk Island as long as at least 500 years ago. The Basques knew Funk Island, indicated as "Y-dos-Aves" on a 1503 chart by Pedro Rinel. Jacques Cartier landed at Funk Island during both of his New World voyages in the 1530s.

Cartier's lucid accounts noted that the abundant flightless great auks offered easy replenishment of fresh protein following rigorous multi-week trans-Atlantic voyages under sail. This information was rapidly assimilated by mariners, and Funk Island quickly became North America's first fast-food takeout.

For three centuries at least, there were distinct European and aboriginal uses of the seabirds on Funk Island.

The Beothuk visited Funk Island for food with a focus on the eggs of the large flightless auks. Their harvests were limited by the capacity of a few canoes. They surely entertained other interactions with birds.

On a much larger scale, the Europeans also exploited the seabirds for food and bait. In the late 18th century, the great auks were slaughtered for their thick warm down. This characteristic along with their flightlessness and massive aggregation on Funk Island facilitated their eradication and eventual extinction.

Written historical records published by Ingeborg Marshall document an interaction when the peoples with separate realities encountered one another at Funk Island. The report

by Lieutenant Pulling written in the 1790s accounts that five men from Tilting were on Funk Island collecting eggs when two canoes approached. As the canoes neared shore, two blasts rang out. Shots were fired wounding some of “savages” in the canoes. They paddled away.

It could have been heaven.

Birds in the area and around the province

In mid-July a Canada goose made a surprise visit to the stream in Beachy Cove [Carolyn Mayo]. A plastic ribbon entangled Manx shearwater was found in Ferryland on 23 July by Dave Snow. Our oceans are littered with persistent non-biodegradable plastic that is wreaking havoc with many marine animals besides seabirds, including fishes, turtles, seals and whales.

A young brown great blue heron was reported in Lewisporte in August [Bruce Porter], and on 11 September, a male ring-necked pheasant on Marine Drive shocked Don Diebel. On 4 July, a whimbrel was on the Little Fogo Islands where 8 were seen a few days later [Pierre Ryan]. An unexpected mourning dove perched on a wire in Musgrave Harbour on 27 July [Janet Montevecchi], and another later visited Rick and Angie West’s feeders in Portugal Cove.

A male black-backed woodpecker was on the Portugal Cove path to Brock’s Cove in early July [Carolyn Mayo] and hairy woodpeckers were seen in Comfort Cove during mid-August [Janet Montevecchi]. White-winged crows are attracting attention on Ridge Road [Don McKay].

Nesting activity continued well into summer. An up-close and personal nesting attempt by robins has altered traffic flow through Kay and Gus Etchegary’s front door at their Baccalieu property in St. Philips.

In St. John’s, John Haggas’s tree swallow box housed a productive pair that fledged 6 juveniles, and John and Ivy Gibbons has successful nesting in 14 of their 15 tree swallow nest-boxes at Plum Point. Late nesting juncos were found in mid-august in Portugal Cove [George Mayo] and in St. John’s shrewd juncos avoided feline predators by nesting in Elizabeth Adams’ hanging flower pot. Chickadees nested in the stump of a cherry tree in Elizabeth’s yard and in Wayne Cowan’s and Gerry Young’s bird house in Seal Cove.

My first sighting of a Swainson’s thrush this season came from the grill of Katie Arnot’s and Nick Montevechi’s pickup truck. The thrush was taken in near Cape Ray on the west coast in early August. Northern waterthrushes were still singing lustily though with variants of spring song on 20 August in Portugal Cove.

Three tame American goldfinches boarded a sloop along the Nova Scotia coast and stayed on board for a few days [Jon Garvin]. A pair of red-breasted nuthatches and 4 very docile pine siskins were wayward tent visitors on Funk Island in early August.

Keep looking up – mont@mun.ca, 895-2901[h], 693-5305[c], 864-7673[w]