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A North Carolina birding adventure

Birds I View

By Bill Montevecchi



Flocks of yellow-rumped warblers enlivened the North Carolina coast.
(Photo by Bill Montevecchi)

“In my mind, I’m going to Carolina,
Can't you see the sunshine, can't you just feel the moonshine?”
James Taylor

Having grown up on the New England coast, I have had a long attraction to Cape Hatteras. It was from the Hatteras light station on edge of the wind-battered Outer Banks of North Carolina that we would hear marine forecasts, storm warnings and learn of hurricanes heading our way.

Though I’ve visited the state a number of times, my first opportunity to venture to the cape came a few weeks ago. I joined a crew of biologists from Maine who were using satellite technology to track northern gannets and red-throated loons along the eastern North American coast.

The research is designed to provide assessments of potential interactions of birds with proposed mega-marine wind energy developments. Major alternative energy projects are being considered off the densely populated eastern US coast to help supply the massive levels of energy consumption.

The winter distributions of gannets from Newfoundland and Quebec are concentrated along many of these coastal areas. Chesapeake Bay, the Outer Banks of North Carolina and the Gulf of Mexico are hotspots. Any bird that migrates south of the aggregation off the northeast US coast will travel through the area during their fall and spring passages.

Catching birds at sea

Unlike noosing birds attending a nest in a colony to which they are tied, catching seabirds during the winter necessitates engaging birds on the ocean. This also necessitated night work, using a portable spotlight on highly maneuverable rapid boat to search for birds on the water.

Once a bird is located, the beam is held on it as the boat approaches. The strong light disorients the bird at times allowing a researcher to dip-net the animal as the boat comes alongside. Though the birds often dive and fly off avoiding the net.

Each captured bird is banded and examined for robust condition and body weight. If the bird appears healthy and passes a minimum weight threshold, it is given mild sedation and held in a rubberized tub. Birds are brought to the lab within a few hours.

A good night might net 3 or 4 birds; a moderate night - 1 or 2 birds. Trying nights during the roughest sea conditions resulted in zero captures.

Implanting the satellite tag

At the lab, a veterinary team conducted a comprehensive examination then fully sedated the bird. A 5 cm incision was made in lower belly and a small satellite transmitter was inserted into the abdominal cavity. A tiny hole through the lower back was made to allow the device antenna to protrude from the animal.

The surgery required about an hour. The bird was then allowed to recovery for a few hours, and when the vet deemed it ready, the tagged bird was released at the ocean's edge.

Tracking free-ranging seabirds

From this point onward, the bird's position is accessible via satellite feedback. This amazing technology has provided incredible and valuable insights into animal movement patterns around the world. We are finding that juveniles tend to stay far offshore well outside the study areas when they migrate southward. In contrast, adult females move nearer the coast and may be at higher risks than the males.

Minimizing device effects on the birds

The birds handle the surgical implants very well. Most migrate back to their Canadian breeding colonies and continue transmitting positional signals for about a year until the batteries expire, by which time they have returned again to their wintering areas off the US coast.

However a small percentage of birds die within a couple of weeks of release. Some of this mortality likely results from surgical stress, so we are exploring alternate non-surgical means of attaching satellite tags to the birds.

This is not a simple thing to do with a plunge-diving gannet that impacts water at high speeds to capture fish. Foremost considerations are to minimally encumber the bird.

Over the next weeks thin elastic silicon harnesses that fit under the gannet's plumage with satellite tags riding on their lower backs will be attempted. We will test these attachments on some gannets at Cape St. Mary's this summer. Another goal is to attach light-weight video cameras, so we can see first-hand how a gannet makes its living at sea.

Other North Carolina birds

North Carolina is a winter home to many birds from Newfoundland and eastern Canada. A few days before I arrived, a friend had been out on an offshore survey on which 1700 razorbills were counted. Horned grebes were everywhere along the coast, as were shorebirds including dunlins, willets and killdeer.

Ring-billed gulls bent cedar trees with their weight as they fed on dried berries. And cedar waxwings even occurred in the trees for which they are aptly named. Who would have known?

Savannah and song sparrows fed on the lawns, and flocks of rusty blackbirds and grackles splashed about in puddles, while flitting flocks of yellow-rumped warblers enchanted the thoroughfares.

Unusual bird report of month

If you enjoy feeding birds, you have no doubt come to the realization that it's not all joy and peace around the seed dispensers. Fighting for food is the modus operandi.

And even if a bird manages to scarp out a meal, she has to be wary of others trying to make a meal out of her. Hawks and merlins hunt the bird concentrations at feeders.

Though when Eva Mousseau told me of a predatory attack at her feeder on the southside hills of St. John's, it was surprising. Eva observed a blue jay killing a junco then devouring the brain and breast muscle of its victim. Winter has a way of upping the ante on survival options.

Birds in the area

A male red-breasted merganser joined Iceland gulls feeding along the slob ice off the rocks of Portugal Cove on 8 March.

In last month's column, I reported on a 30 year old murre that had been shot in Placentia Bay. Since then, ornithologist Aevan Petersen informed me of a 30 year-old black guillemot and a 32 year-old gannet that were recently documented in Iceland.

In late February, a great horned owl was spooked in the wooded area along the Voisey's Brook Trail in Portugal Cove (Misha Montevecchi).

A male downy woodpecker visited John Foster's yard in Portugal Cove, and four "moustached" male flickers arrived at our suet feeders en masse, and at least one female visits periodically.

Spirited juncos are heralding spring revival with their joyous trills and twitters. And the frenetic ever-industrious chickadees are whistling while they work zipping about with black oil sunflower seeds.

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