

Surviving in the natural world - working for comfort



Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

With their prowess and mastery of the marine environment, seabirds always impress as Olympian performers. The shorebirds currently migrating along our coasts are moving from Arctic nesting areas to South American wintering sites. These feats are truly of Olympic proportions. Yet they all do it - except of course the ones that don't and perish in the process.

Human athletes of all shapes and sizes often exhibit extraordinary achievements. Yet living one's entire life in such a manner is pervasive among wild species and quite rare in our own. The differences between us and them have much to do with lifestyles, aging and the needs to cope with food availability, shelter and safety. Our needs are relatively predictable and usually simply met, while those of wild creatures are much less so.

Yet humans were not always [and often are not] certain of food, shelter and safety. Impressive accomplishments are documented among aboriginal people who had to rely on their skills and wherewithal to survive. Much less is known about the behavioral ecology of aboriginal people before European contact, though the little we do know is remarkable.

Lately I have been thinking a lot about the Beothuk venturing into the deep by canoe to travel to Funk Island. My ideas were intensified by a presentation that Gerri Squires offered about the Beothuck a few

weeks ago at Grenfell College. We had discussed Funk Island, great auks and lighthouse living in past, and it was inspiring to reconnect with him.

The Beothuk expeditions to Funk Island involved crossing 50 km of treacherous open North Atlantic waters to arrive at small low-lying bird-covered rock. These ocean journeys required keen nautical ability and navigational skills to negotiate the seas, to find the tiny island and to land [no simple matters]. They would return in canoes laden with the large heavy-shelled eggs of the now extinct great auk. Their capability was powered by an endurance of physical strength without GPS, without survival suits, and likely without a plan B. Make to the island or don't.

My amazement over these feats led me to a conversation with a knowledgeable and seasoned ocean kayaker - Joe Dicks at the Marble Inn. Joe explained the Beothuk skills with an idea that he referred to as "working for comfort". I didn't have a clue about what he meant. We kept talking and I kept asking questions.

Joe's contention is that humans [and certainly other creatures] who live and work for survival in the natural world without the benefits of modern technology would continuously push their limits in all their activities to hone their hunting and survival abilities. They would continue to push and to keep on until they could feel comfortable in extreme situations and trying circumstances. That is "working for comfort".

This idea made perfect sense. We work for comfort when we train for a long run like a marathon that is well beyond our physical limits in our initial efforts. In time, training and hard work bring the long run within our range of capability and subsequently within our zone of comfort. People who practice yoga travel this path over a life time of practice and for their efforts – they achieve comfort.

The soiling of Oliver's Pond

It is sad to witness the spoiling of Oliver's Pond with needless run-off from new road construction and development. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor have waxed on about the limited options available to the Town. We hear about visions of future improvement and corrections [Deputy Mayor] and concerns that Council might be sued if efforts are made to intervene on the destructive aspects of the

development [Mayor]. Our option is stand witness to clearly preventable environmental damage.

Birds in the area

A half dozen Leach's storm-petrels were blown into the Whitbourne Youth Centre on the night on 3 – 4 October [Ed Pardy]. Millions of young storm-petrels are fledging from Baccalieu Island [the world's largest colony] at the mouth of Conception Bay and from the islands in Witless Bay. Onshore winds at this time of year blow the tiny storm-petrels away from the sea and over land. They end up helplessly grounded away from their ocean habitat.

The next afternoon, hundreds of storm-petrels were flying doggedly seaward just off and over Holyrood beach though making little headway. Many were being pursued and taken by predatory gulls. Many others were actually flying backwards and being blown over land for certain stranding and death. The noisy ATVs and dirt bikes on the small heavy cobbled beach at Holyrood were a pain in the butt, especially when parents had to move their young daughter off the beach so they could roar by.

Cliff Doran has been photographing gannets, shearwaters and blue-fin tuna feeding in droves just off Cape Race through the first week of October. The likely prey are Atlantic saury [billfish] and short-finned squid.

Eighteen black ducks and greater yellowlegs are enjoying the beach site on Neary's Pond, and a flock of ring-necked duck was seen on Hughes' Pond [Dick Whitaker].

A tight flock of 75 sanderling on Lumsden Beach in mid-September was impressively coordinated, while at the Harricott estuary at the end of September semi-palmated plovers (50), black-bellied plovers (10), a golden plover, greater and lesser yellowlegs (15) and dunlins (2) were scurrying about on the full-moon low-tide flats.

An adult bald eagle perched on a tree on the North Harbour - Branch Road was eying a road-killed mink (Marina Montevecchi). Bald eagles are scavengers as well as predators, though I have not previously noticed an eagle after a road kill. Ravens commonly forage along the highways for road-kills, discarded chicken bones and fries.

An American Kestrel, our smallest and relatively rare falcon, was seen on the Rushmere Farm on the Argentia Road in late September [Dick Whitaker].

Don Diebel spotted a male downy woodpecker in the woods above Middle Cove. Terry James reported an olive-sided flycatcher at Cape Spear in mid-September. In late September, palm warblers were abundant in the alders around Musgrave Harbour and vicinity on the northeast coast.

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