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Cutting the trees and mercury at Muskrat Falls



Humpback whale lunge-feeding in Portugal Cove on 12 January 2016
[photo Bill Montevecchi]

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

Fish may be brain food, but mercury in fish can damage your brain. Eating fish which I do a lot is the primary route of mercury into the body. Pregnant women should avoid mercury in fish as it crosses the brain and placental blood barriers. The perspective I offer is not about eating fish but about not eating mercury.

Here's how mercury gets into the fish we eat what we can do about.

Burning fossil fuels [especially coal], volcanic eruptions and forest fires send mercury into the atmosphere. Air-borne mercury settles in the ocean and in rivers and lakes. Aquatic bacteria create methyl-mercury, a toxin that is taken up by plant and animal tissues. Grazing herbivores such as krill and shrimp ingest the mercury in the plants, and as small fishes eat the herbivores and larger fishes eat smaller ones so on up through the food web, methyl-mercury is accumulated in large predatory fishes such as bass, pike, tuna and swordfish. One would not want to make a steady diet of these fishes.

Methyl-mercury is also created by the decomposition of trees and other plants in water. So one sure-fire way to put a lot of mercury into our waterways and hence into fishes is to flood extensive treed areas to create large reservoirs for hydro-electric developments. This common practice of reservoir construction has not been without serious environmental and health consequences. A 2015 study by Harvard University researchers indicated that the flooding at Muskrat Falls will profoundly increase mercury levels in Lake Melville and vicinity and hence in the flesh and fat of fishes and seals.

Based on scientific evidence, the Sierra Club contends that the best option to reduce methyl-mercury in hydro-electric reservoirs is to remove the trees and vegetation before flooding. Cathy Jong, a member of the Muskrat Falls Environmental Assessment Panel has gone to record to point out that Nalcor has ignored a panel recommendation to do so.

This refusal is not understandable, because cutting the trees and removing the vegetation is logical, straight-forward, environmentally responsible and would benefit everyone. We have great experience in logging, cutting fire wood and sawmilling. Surely, loggers could be engaged in the clearing and even a temporary sawmill set up on site. Lots of folks are un- and under-employed throughout Labrador and here are jobs and fine wood for harvesting. These constructive options must be given precedence over flooding the forest, letting it rot and increase unnecessary mercury pollution in the environment and in the fishes and seals that we eat.

A whale of a time

The low pressure system that stalled over Greenland in early January delivered surging seas to the east coast. These ocean surges carried bait fish, harp seals and whales to Portugal Cove over the weekend of 9-10 January.

It was a magical time. Gasps and shouts of delight burst from the crowd of enthralled onlookers every time a humpback exploded through the surface just a few feet off the rocks. Capelin were leaping away from the cavernous vacuum created by the whale's open jaws, as the gulls gobbled up whatever they could. Cars lined the roadways, cameras were everywhere and everyone was exuberant. And ... it was all for free with no commercial additives complements of Mother Nature and the great big sea.

Christmas bird count

On Boxing Day a keen birding team scoured the bounds of PCSP and totalled 30 species – 4 more than our previous high. Some highlights included 11 red crossbills [an endangered species], a hairy woodpecker at the Mayos' feeder, a female red-breasted merganser in St. Philips Harbor and a ruffed grouse. The last three species [two which were credited to Tony Lang] were our unique species contributions to the larger St. John's count.

The single grouse was in a small remaining wetland on the former Duffett Farm. Most of the wetland has been infilled for a new hydroponic greenhouse. It is perplexing how some horticultural businesses can take such adversarial approaches to the environment. Just another step in the “greening” of Portugal Cove - St. Philips.

Our bird team members included Seth Bennett, Tony Lang, Gioia, Katie, Marina and Nick Montevicchi, Darroch and Dick Whitaker, and feeder watchers Carolyn and George Mayo.

Birds in our area

The sudden shocking explosion was over in a flash. Confusion and feathers were flying as the sharp-shinned hawk disappeared into the forest. The junco impaled in its talons was in the last throes of death. One dies and another lives ... nature red and resilient in tooth and claw.

A pair of downy woodpeckers and a mourning have been visiting the Mayos' feeders at Neary's Pond. A female hairy woodpecker is now regular at our suet feeders. Gray jays are a welcome sight on the Voisey's Brook Trail.

Ice conditions are dangerous for both us and the birds. Ice coatings prevent birds from accessing food and feeders can impenetrably crusted. Please check feeders on icy days when the birds are especially challenged.

Constant provisioning has kept our deck hopping with feisty juncos trilling enchanting bell-like sounds that adhered the flock of 50 or more as it made its way through the forest. Five vivid raspberry-red male purple finches and some conservatively plumaged females, 6 American goldfinches, boreal and black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, crows and blue jays joined in the festivities. A stunning flock of pine grosbeaks is visiting Imelda Dalton's feeders in Angel's Cove on the Cape Shore. Keep feeding and keep looking.

Birds I View columns are available at
<http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>

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