

The slaughter of murrens must stop



Birds I View

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“I am a sea bird hunter for 40 years and have never witnessed such a destruction of wildlife in all of my life.”

Wayne Fulford
Dunville

When this column is published, the 2015-16 murre hunt will have just ended. Unlike any in memory, more hunters and citizens are worried about the over-killing of murrens.

Strong voices are heard from the northeast coast and from Placentia Bay. Though they are not the only voices, we have learned from them in the past, and it is important to hear them now.

In the early 1990s hunters with the Lewisporte Rod and Gun Club were instrumental in setting the regulations on what was then an unlimited hunt. Regulations established hunting seasons that opened earliest in Labrador then moved [with the murrens] along the north, east and south coasts of the Island. Daily bag limits of 20 birds and possession limits of 40 birds were also set.

People of the Cape Shore in Placentia Bay drew attention to the oiling of murrens from vessel bilge water discharges and tanker flushes. They were a driving force in the efforts of Transport Canada, Environment Canada and Coast Guard to curtail that pollution. Many are now concerned about the hunting frenzy around the island and in Placentia Bay. Their calls mustn't fall on deaf ears.

Changes in the hunt

At Confederation, the murre [and other seabird] hunt was an important and at times an essential source of fresh meat in coastal communities. Consequently, the Migratory Bird Treaty with the US was modified to allow Newfoundlanders and Labradoreans to continue hunting murrens. For our province the murre hunt was essentially a term of Confederation, and as such we are the only non-indigenous people in North America allowed to hunt migratory seabirds.

Much has changed from the days of trap-skiffs and make-and-break engines that chugged hunters with their single-shot shotguns and pocket of shells in search of murrens along the coasts. Fiberglass boats have replaced wooden ones and are less restricted by slob ice. With terrific horse power they speed faster than murrens can fly. Automatic rifles allow many shots where one would have been made in the past.

The new mobility of hunters has opened an entirely new scale of hunting. Boats are towed from one hunting zone to another following the seasonal southerly movement of the murrens. Hunters no longer simply pursue birds near their communities and many urbanites travel distances that were previously unattainable. Yet with bag and possession limits why should any of this even matter? There are a number of reasons.

Here are three – the illegal selling of murrens, disturbance, and ethics.

Murrens are hot sale and bartering items. Those sellers pay little heed to bag and possession limits and hunt days on end. Issuing tags for birds as we do with Atlantic salmon is one potential way to prevent the illegal selling.

Disturbance

When 100 boats arrive at dawn in Argentia or 40 head out of Arnold's Cove, it is going to be a tough day for murrens. It might also be a tough day for hunters. An acquaintance stopped hunting in Placentia Bay out of fear of "being shot".

Local hunters estimate the kill at 6,000 birds per day in the Argentia – Placentia area alone. Besides the kill, excessive disturbance and harassment can be lethal. Murrens need time and refuge to forage and consume about 50% of their body weight daily for winter survival. It's not easy under the best circumstances and at times it must be an excruciatingly diminishing effort.

Ethics

Some have argued that there are fewer birds on the north and east coast owing to a lack of bait and that the murrens have moved to Placentia Bay. May be so, though we mustn't overlook the possibility that decreased numbers are influenced by hunting pressure. Following a species' demise - northern cod for example, the first response is often that the animals went elsewhere.

Evidence indicates that murre populations in Newfoundland and Labrador are doing well. The birds have benefitted from reduced oil pollution on the south coast and from closures

of the cod and salmon gillnet fisheries that entangled and drowned thousands of murre. I am uncertain about populations of murre in the Canadian Arctic and Greenland where murre suffer from over-hunting during nesting. Some survivors winter in Newfoundland and are killed in our hunt.

The strength of our local populations are taken by some to imply there should be little concern about hunting effects. Not so. Though we don't do it, the optimal time for conservation is when populations are strong.

Wildlife are impacted by many influences, including hunting, climate, pollution, food, etc. When populations decline, crashes are often catastrophic – note cod, caribou and capelin to mention some.

Everything considered – cheating cannot be justified. Piles of murre at dump sites belie a disrespect that would sicken a true hunter. Like our seal hunt, the murre hunt has to be engaged with the highest levels of integrity and sustainability.

Intense social pressure makes it difficult for hunters to speak out about abuses. Messages I've gotten include: "You cannot mention I talked to you." "He's asking you to be his voice." "Please delete this email after reading."

What is needed

Enforcement presence is a necessity. Similar calls come from salmon fishers worried about illegal netting on rivers.

It is important to know the proportions of northern murre and local murre from our Seabird Ecological Reserves that are shot during different times and in different hunting zones. Environment Canada can provide this information to hunters and the public.

Many hunters and outport residents will not welcome suggestions about changes in hunting regulations. I don't either. Yet we are in new technological and economic realms that do not allow for the perpetuation of poorly enforced laws over-ridden by new attitudes of entitlement.

At times conservation in Newfoundland and Labrador is more like writing epitaphs than long-term planning to protect wildlife. The examples are too obvious, too many and too depressing. The extinction of the great auk ... the commercial extinction of northern cod ... the cessation of Labrador caribou hunts, etc.

For some the murre hunt has shifted from a bird-hunting tradition to yahoo sporting rodeo. For those like me who want to preserve this hunt, it is incumbent on all hunters and everyone to call them out.

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

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