

**Extinct auk and Beothuk kindred spirits
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi**



Great Auk eggs at dwarf egg of their surviving cousin – the Razorbill. [Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University; photo: Bill Montevecchi]

Named as a foul-smelling place of panic, Funk Island is a small 800 x 400 meter low-lying rock 50 km off the northeast Newfoundland coast. Well known to fishermen through centuries of myth and lore, Funk Island has been characterized by Skipper Bill Sturge of Bonavista Bay as a “marvelous terrible place”.

Home to a massive colony of gannets and the world’s largest colony of common murre, the island’s remoteness and treacherous access for humans and other terrestrial predators, has allowed these cliff-nesting seabirds to lay their eggs at ground zero.

Just over a couple of centuries ago, Funk Island held the largest breeding aggregation of the last flightless bird of the northern hemisphere – the great auk or “penguin” as it was called then. The grassy meadow on the otherwise bald granite rock has grown upon the composed remains of the thousands of auks that were simply discarded after crews plucked their down for stuffing in mattresses and quilts.

Yet during historical times and well before, another people – the Beothuk also visited Funk Island for different purposes. The co-occurrences of the extinct flightless bird and the extinct indigenous people has captured my imagination since I first set foot on Funk Island 40 years ago and have been returning every year since.

North America’s first fast-food take-out

In the early 1500s Jacques Cartier proclaimed the ease with which flightless auks could be herded into waiting boats to replenish fresh meat supplies following difficult trans-Atlantic crossings. Cartier’s lucid penned descriptions of the avian bounty on Funk Island at the very edge of the New

World fishing banks launched North America's "first fast-food take-out" for all those who followed under sail.

Through three centuries, the island's auks provided food and bait for European explorers and fishermen. This continuous exploitation did not however lead to the auks' ultimate demise. Rather, in the late 1700s, crews camped on the island slaughtering the breeding concentrations for the down needed during the long Newfoundland winters. The flightless auks were herded into stone corrals, then clubbed and scalded before their outer feathers were removed to access the down. On the treeless island, the fat auks also fueled the fires under the cauldrons. De-feathered carcasses were cast aside in mounds creating – unlike anything anywhere - a grassy cemetery for an extinct species - the "penguin of the North Atlantic".

Another history

Another history yet paralleled that of the auk. Great auks have long held significance for coastal peoples. The first inhabitants of Newfoundland, the Maritime Archaic People revered the auks and included their beaks in burials of their people.

The Beothuk also held strong associations between birds and the after-life. They carved intricately detailed pendants on thin sections of caribou bone that they included in coastal burials. Many of these pendants represented birds' feet and feathers. As Shawnadithit related the Beothuk believed that a "spirit bird" carried the souls of the departed to the afterlife.

Through diligent comparative analysis of the elongated fork-tailed pendants with corresponding bird anatomy, anthropologists identified the Beothuk "spirit bird" as the arctic tern. What a remarkable choice for a bird to accompany the souls of the departed. Arctic terns nesting in the Arctic and wintering in the Antarctic travel more than any animal on earth – some travel a lifetime equivalent of three trips to the moon and back. Interestingly, the species has been classified by biologists who knew nothing of the Beothuk as *Sterna paradisaea* – the tern of paradise.

And arctic terns nested on Funk Island. The Beothuk developed the technical capability to build distinctive ocean-capable canoes, and acquired the navigational skill to find the tiny bird-covered island in the perilous North Atlantic.

The Beothuk's knowledge of the existence and location of the tiny island over the horizon involved seabirds. Presumably they tracked birds that foraged inshore for capelin before returning to their nests on Funk Island. The most obvious and expedient bird to follow would have been the water-bound great auk.

Each summer Beothuk canoed to Funk Island to collect the large porcelain-shelled eggs of the auk. These were risky life-threatening ventures, and as great auk eggs were available nearshore as on the Penguin Islands off Musgrave Harbour, why would the Beothuk risk the challenging trip to Funk?

The island expeditions held another significance, for as Shawnadithit remarked her people believed that the afterlife was on a "happy island over the horizon". So while Funk Island was deemed a place of panic by newly arriving Europeans, it embodied a reflection of paradise for the indigenous people. Those life-threatening voyages to Funk Island were not simply egg-collecting trips but were instead demanding annual pilgrimages to a "happy island over the horizon".

In the late 19th century, a Beothuk canoe paddle was found in a gulch at the eastern extent of Funk Island named Indian Gulch. Here one experiences the first light of the morning sun, and this place too may have been of special significance. The Beothuk favored coastal burial sites - might they have carried bodies of their deceased to the island over the horizon?

Given their preoccupation with the auk, why didn't the Beothuk create pendants of these birds? Could it be ... could it be ... that these magnificent flightless birds that nested in myriads on the "happy island over the horizon" were viewed as reincarnations of the deceased? And as such, the Beothuk would not create images of them but rather would make rigorous ocean pilgrimages to collect the life-giving gifts of the deceased – the eggs of the great auk.

A "marvelous terrible place" indeed.

Birds in the area

In early August a female Hudsonian godwit was an unexpected visitor on Funk Island [Marina Montevicchi]. In mid-August, while fishing off Bonavista Gerald Hussey observed thousands of sooty shearwaters likely feeding on late-spawning capelin.

Also in mid-August, a tropical relative of the gannet - a brown booby that nests in the Caribbean turned up in Placentia Bay. The booby was seen in the Haystack area about 10 km west of Southern Harbour. Carolyn Parsons sent me photos of the booby hitching a ride on her family's fishing boat. The bird looked a bit disheveled and its tattered tail feathers told of its long wayward journey.

In late August a male black-backed woodpecker was on the East Coast Trail near Blast Hole Ponds in Portugal Cove [Janet Montevicchi].

In early September, 150 Canada geese were lazily grazing along the shoreline of the Harricott Pond.

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

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 693-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h]