

*Northeast Avalon Times April 2017*

**The ice is in the bay and everywhere else  
Birds I View  
Bill Montevecchi**



Humpback whale being crushed by arctic pack ice in Ole Perlican, Trinity Bay  
(Photo: Mary Lou Riggs)

It's that time of year. During spring, arctic pack ice carried southward by the Labrador Current moves into the coastal waters of Newfoundland Labrador. In 2007, 2009 and this spring, onshore gales in late March jammed the pack ice in the bays along the northeast coast.

The coastal gridlock in early April 2007 coincided with the seal hunt and snared 250 vessels in its grip, creating the largest search and rescue operation in Canadian history.

These ice movements transport arctic animals into our waters and provide a needed substrate for harp and hooded seals to give birth and rear their pups. Polar bears and arctic foxes often travel with the herds - the bears preying on seals and the foxes scavenging placentas and

other remains. Recent sightings of polar bears have been made along the northeast coast from Bonavista to St. Anthony.

The ice flows can entrap seabirds, whales, dolphins and sea ducks in the bays and along the coast. In 2007 and 2009, hundreds of murrelets were trapped in Conception Bay primarily in Holyrood and also in Avondale, St. Philips and Middle Cove. The murrelets could not obtain sufficient food in the small patches of open water in which they were bound. They starved eventually dying of hypothermia in emaciated condition.

### **Marine animal entrapments**

So far this spring and events are still ongoing, a humpback whale was trapped close to shore when the ice pushed into Ole Perlican in Trinity Bay. After days of struggling in an ever shrinking opening, the massive animal succumbed agonizingly as it was slowly crushed in the tightening vice grip of arctic ice. The whale cried out, the local people cried and lamented, helplessly bearing witness to mother nature's indifference.

Just off Bell Island, 10 white-beaked dolphins were entrapped in ice. Local residents took action into their own hands. Somehow they managed to capture six of the animals and moved them to open water. One dolphin died in the process, five survivors were released in open water, and four were crushed in the ice. It is in our nature as it is likely in the dolphin's to want to help.

The ice moved off for a day then came back into Conception Bay, this time with hundreds of seals. They appear to be mostly hooded seals. Black guillemots were captive in the open water around the Portugal Cove wharf. Immature eagles perched among the seals looking for who knows what – feces or an inadvertent eye to peck out. Great cormorants circled and circled looking for open water.

Along the shores of Fogo Island tens of thousands of eiders have been entrapped nearshore. In Seldom-Come-By, fisherman Aubrey Payne noted that in 40 years he had never witnessed such an event.

This situation is a time dependent risk for the ducks. If they remain trapped in a small area of open water for a prolonged period, they could deplete the sea urchins and mussels that they feed on and eventually starve.

### **The lean and hungry month of March**

Through the course of human history in Newfoundland and Labrador, the spring flood of arctic ice was awaited in hungry anticipation. March was the time of starvation and famine. Following depletion of winter food supplies, nutrition was needed to make it through spring when the icy grips of the land and sea were loosened.

The settlements of the first people to occupy the Island of Newfoundland along the Strait of Belle Isle many millennia ago are testament to the vital importance of the seal bounty delivered on the arctic ice. Maritime Archaic Indian and Dorset sites at Port au Choix and Cape Ray are strategically positioned where relatively level coastal terrain would accumulate the

pack ice, allowing inhabitants to venture out and kill seals. It's a human tradition that has continued since people occupied Newfoundland 4,000 years ago.

### **The Nares Strait**

A Captain on the Coast Guard ice breaker *Terry Fox* speaking on CBC radio estimated that the ice field off the coast was 4000 km<sup>2</sup> in extent. Where does it all come from?

The Nares Strait at the top of the Kane Basin in the high arctic is a key site that influences the amount of pack ice that reaches Newfoundland and Labrador. This narrow 30 km wide and 500 km long pathway from the North Pole runs between the northern Greenland and Ellesmere Island providing a conduit for the southward flow of arctic ice. In most years ice blocks in the strait in much the same manner ice can block the Strait of Belle Isle. Extreme winds can keep ice moving through the Nares Strait, and in some years when the Strait is unplugged more ice comes our way. Interestingly the ice bridge has been open this winter, as it was in 2007 and 2009.

### **Birds in the Area**

The hard snows of winter have precluded many birds of prey from finding rodents. Hence many have been seen near human habitation where feathered predators seek out birds or rodents around feeders, composts and the like. In March, a sharp-shinned hawk and a boreal owl visited yards in St. John's and on Ramea (Kim Bell, Richard Northcott).

Beyond the scan of households, a great horned owl was flushed from a freshly killed herring gull on Winsor Lake (Chantelle Burke) and five bald eagles have hanging out on the flats by the Branch River estuary (Rose Nash).

The most unusual bird sighting at our feeder came during the crushing March gales when a single male evening grosbeak which is unusual for this winter flocking species dropped by to munch on black oil sunflower seeds. Yet the most unusual sighting was a young moose prancing through the suet feeders (Janet Montevicchi). Shock and awe can happen at anytime. Keep looking.

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