

**Bird-watching at the Health Sciences Centre
Birds I View
Bill Montevercchi**



Wilson's snipe inhabits our bogs and wetlands [photo: Bill Montevercchi]

In the dime stores and bus stations
People talk of situations
Read books, repeat quotations
Draw conclusions on the wall
Some speak of the future
My love, she speaks softly
She knows there's no success like failure
And that failure's no success at all

Love Minus Zero / No Limit, Bob Dylan

The pond in front of the Health Sciences Center is an interesting place to watch birds. My opportunity arose while waiting for a dye-test (not die-test as I initially misspelled it) to check blood flow in a coronary artery. The wait at the HSC was something like a cross between an imprisonment and a monastic retreat.

Dairy – Night 1 – Emergency Room – “You’re old but you’re healthy”, the 20-something resident smiled down at me.

Day 2 – “You’ve had a microscopic heart attack, with restricted blood flow in the central coronary artery. We’re going to do a dye-test and put in a stent. You should be out of here in a couple of days.” Cardiologist delivered. Bed in the corridor. Peregrine falcon on ledge (bird #1).

Day 2 – Not on list for test. “You should be out by the end of the week,” cardiologist. Friends bring Italian spices (for later), books, encouragement, advice and warm smiles. The children seem more concerned than me but that’s how I always felt visiting a parent, relative or friend in the hospital. I’m fine and now they know. Muskrats, starlings nesting above window (amazing how hard those parents work from first light till last delivering food and removing fecal pellets), herring gulls and rock doves (birds #2, 3 and 4).

Day 3 - Not on list for test. “Your EKG was a bit better today. This is the apology round, if you were in the US, you’d be home by now,” cardiologist. Hospital room banter – “Great game – Crosby fell down.” “We can solve all the problems of the world in here.” “Family that’s what it’s all about.” “He can’t drive a nail straight but he’s book smart.” Sometimes sad – “It’s very frustrating and ... I can’t go home ...” Nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. Black ducks, robins (birds #5 and 6).

Day 4 - Not on list for test. I’m in for the weekend. Successfully lobbied nursing staff for corner room with best view of pond. Ring-billed gulls, crows, mallards (birds #6, 7, 8).

Day 5 - Not on list for test. Refuse blood thinner injections. Feels good to reassert some control. Osprey, female pintail x mallard hybrid, raven, black duck x mallard hybrid (birds #9, 10, 11, 12).

Day 6 (Saturday) – Cannot get day pass to walk around ponds. Cardiologist and health professional wife recommend blood thinner injections. I’m back on. Common tern and great black-backed gull spotted causally by wife with keen visionary sensitivity grown from outport-childhood (birds #13 and 14).

Day 7 – Not on list for test. No new birds. Possibilities include cormorant, teal, spotted sandpiper, yellowlegs, blue jay, swallows, chickadees, yellow and yellow-rumped warblers, sparrows, junco, goldfinch, the unexpected.

Day 8 – Not on list for test. It’s Gioia’s (daughter of wisdom) birthday. She’s another year wiser and more gioful. Two osprey over the pond – working hard ... look hungry. Son Nick scored a brood of four newly hatched mallard ducklings with mother. Nice. No new species.

Day 9 – Not on list for test. 7 am – First bird - male tufted duck with no tuft (bird #15) – could be a good day. “Don’t eat or drink, your test is on for this afternoon.” Hours later “Are you hungry? Here’s chicken wrap.” On list for tomorrow. Missed Grand Daughter Aspen’s first Birthday. Terns, osprey, mallard brood down to 3 ducklings. It’s getting real comfortable here – think I can understand what institutionalization is.

Day 10 – Slept in. Test day – things change rapidly from diagnosis - it's complicated. So it's Day 1 all over again – the real Day 1.

Day 11 – Lots to consider. Couldn't do it without and for family. Crisis is opportunity – trying to imagine what that opportunity is. It's not what happens that is important but how you use it going forward. "Do not let it define, you", Janet. But it does define me. It defines me completely. This is how I played the game. I don't have excuses and regrets aren't on the table either. It's just tough. Won't be able to teach field course in Gros Morne or make my annual pilgrimage to Funk Island. Juncos (bird #16).

Day 12 – Students in for research meetings ... so inspiring ... so privileged to have such a profession. Bid goodbye to a fisherman ward-friend who's going home after an intense procedure and a long stay "Feeling good." "Take care, sir." Reassuring to witness success - good people doing good things ... we must. Surgery scheduled for Day 16. Talk with surgeon. Starting to look forward to getting it done and getting back in the game. Tern diving in pond missing fish. Janet brings fish for dinner.

Day 13 – 5:09 am – fog ... crows organizing. Pond bubbling with trout feeding on insects ... where are the swallows? Tern's back ... so many dives and no fish. Persistence in the face of uncertainty - the best option. Snipe flies over hospital to marsh after dusk (bird #17).

Day 14 – Doctor says operation may be delayed due to emergencies. I feel prepared. Anyway I could use another day to get some more work done. Someone fishing at pond ... no fish ... leaves. Osprey flies in scores a lovely 9" trout. Persistence in the face of uncertainty.

Day 15 – Rain ... water running off of ducks' backs. Tree swallows arrived (bird #18). Lined up for surgery tomorrow. Later informed it was off. Subsequently informed it might go ahead, then told it was off. Mental prep gymnastics.

Day 16 – Surgery now set for day 18. Colleagues bring conversation and good spirits. Raven flushing pigeons likely looking for nests and eggs. Mallard brood down to 2 ducklings – the survivors.

Day 17 – First time I felt any discomfort since I've been here ... easily surmountable. Tern caught a fish. Tree swallow back.

Day 18 - As daughter-in-law Katie knows, "It's amazing what the human body can take." Looking forward to the reincarnation. Put me in coach, I'm ready to play.

Another crazy raven story

While away working in Fort McMurray, Johnathan Poulain of Harbour Breton had 10 of 14 windows in his new house smashed in by ravens! The birds seemed to be stealing the sealant strips around the glass and aggressively attacking their reflections. The ravens are likely nesting nearby and may have been seeking sealant strips for nest material or searching for insects around the windows which reflected perceived competitors and initiated the attack behavior (see video - <http://vocom.com/news/tenacious-birds-threaten-home-livelihood-in-harbour-breton/>). There was an instance a few years back of a crow stealing windshield wipers from cars. Even among highly intelligent animals like ravens and crows, some can develop dysfunctional behavior, detrimental to their well-being.

Birds in the area

Gannets have been plunge-diving for herring in the harbour entrance at Long Pond and in Seldom-Come-By on Fogo Island (Linda Gaborko, Gordon Slade).

On 25 May, two spotted sandpipers were spotted at Neary's Pond (Janet Monteverchi). On 30 May, Penny Kennedy of MUN Campus Enforcement sent a video of a herring gull on a nest under the camera on the roof of the new student residence.

In mid-May, Greg Malone sent me some impressive photos of a motley immature bald eagle at Clark's Beach. A fledgling robin fresh out of the nest appeared on our deck with a parent on 3 June (Janet Monteverchi).

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>.
Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 695-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h]