

LIFESTYLES

Last updated at 2:09 AM on 27/05/09



No evidence of gannet nesting; Cape St. George kittiwake colonies significant: professor

CAPE ST. GEORGE
FRANK GALE
The Western Star



Marina Montevecchi and her father Bill Montevecchi are seen aboard the Crystal Waters tour boat. — Star photo by Frank Gale

Since being on several boat tours to the headlands of Cape St. George, Bill Montevecchi is excited about the kittiwake colonies that nest there.

"It's certainly the most significant colony of kittiwakes here on the west coast of Newfoundland," he said during a tour on the Crystal Waters boat Monday evening.

Montevecchi, a university research professor of psychology, biology and ocean sciences at Memorial University of Newfoundland who specializes in the study of seabirds, estimates there are some 1,000 pairs of kittiwakes — 2,000 birds — at the first colony located on the hill just past the Boutte at the headlands, and another 5,000 pairs for about 10,000 birds on a rock face known locally as Square Cliff.

He said it's exciting as well that comorants are nesting on those hills despite the fact there are much smaller numbers than the kittiwakes. During the tours Montevecchi has saw murrens and lots of northern gannets.

Mayor Peter Fenwick of Cape St. George had questioned whether or not northern gannets breed on the Port au Port Peninsula, as the subject has created intense debate between the people of Cape St. George — who believe they do breed there — and the Canadian Wildlife Service, which maintains there is no evidence a breeding colony exists in that part of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

Fishing for herring

Montevecchi said while there are many northern gannets to be seen in the area, there is no indication of them nesting there. He said there is a huge population of them on the Magdalen Islands, and he believes they are coming to this area fishing for herring along the coast.

He said the gannets travel fast and the several thousand miles between the Magdalen Islands in the St. Lawrence Gulf off Quebec to the headlands of Cape St. George, is not uncommon.

Other species of birds Montevecchi witnessed in the area while at the Feathers and Folk Festival in Cape St. George included herring gulls, black back gulls and numerous black guillemots.

While in the community, Montevecchi gave a talk on seabirds to students of Our Lady of the Cape School. His daughter Marina Montevecchi, who is accompanying him on his west coast visit, spoke to students on the piping plover, an endangered shorebird species.

Despite not getting confirmation of northern gannet nesting in the area, Fenwick was pleased with the four-day Feathers and Folk Festival in his area, noting organizers had accomplished what they set out to do — bringing awareness and education of the birding colony to the community and beyond.

He said they had between 125 and 200 people booked in for the tours, however, due to unseasonably windy weather they could only get in six or seven of the 12 trips scheduled.

"The important thing is that a number of people had the opportunity to see what's out there on the face of those cliffs and while we already knew it we had the confirmation large kittiwake bird colonies do exist there and that's exciting," Fenwick said.

The Feathers and Folk Festival is a spring event for the southwest coast of the province designed to attract visitors in the tourism off-season as well as educate local people on the types of birds that make the area their home or their feeding ground.

27/05/09