

High Arctic eiders and other winter birds

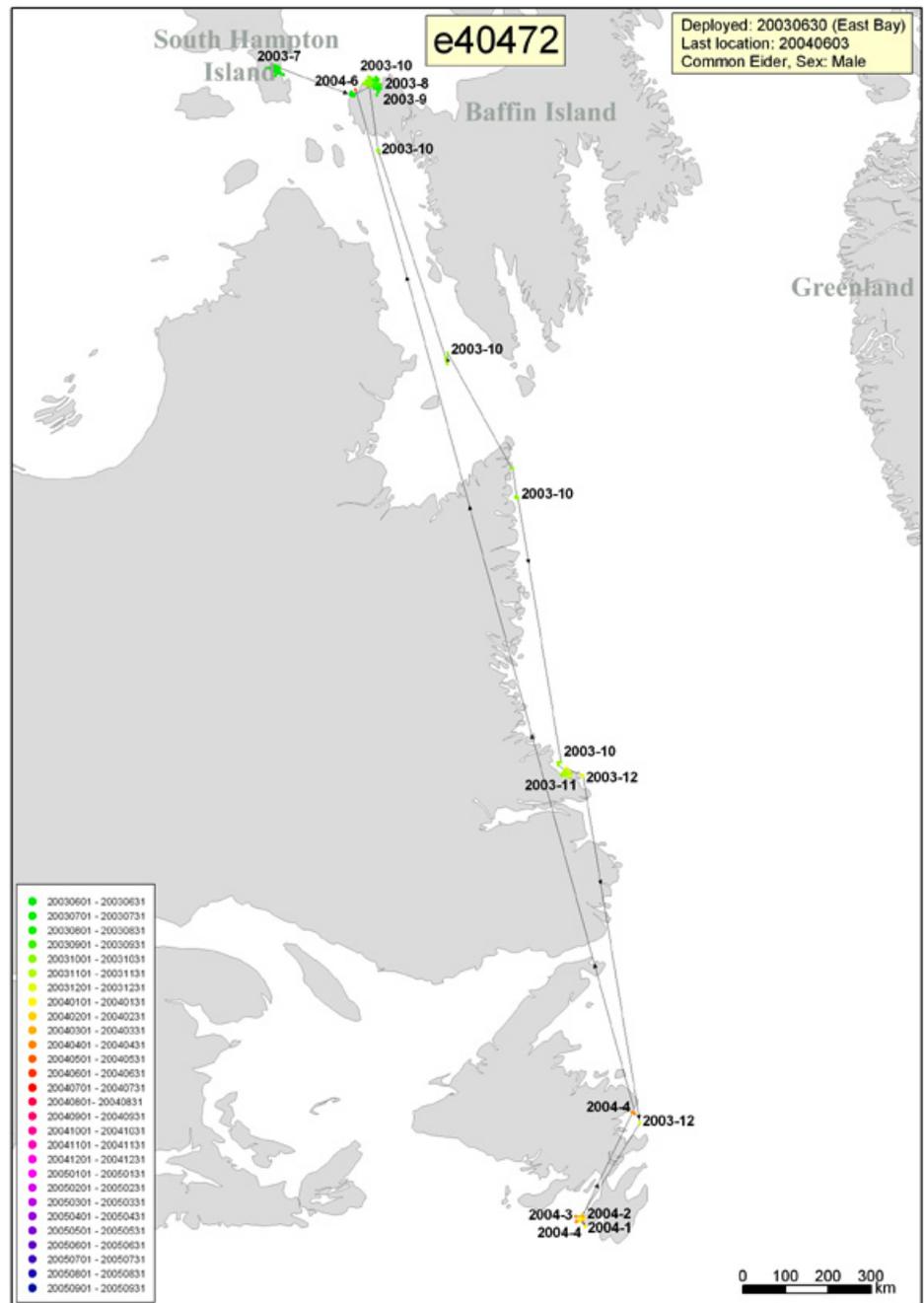
Birds I View

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The winter eider duck populations in Newfoundland and Labrador are magnificent expressions of how animals are integrated with their environments over very large spatial scales. Most of these ducks nest in the Canadian Arctic and move to our coasts during winter.

A case in point is provided by a drake eider that was shot in December by Arnold Foley of St. Brides. This bird carried a satellite transmitter that was implanted on 30 June 2003 by Canadian Wildlife Service biologists on South Hampton Island in the Canadian Arctic. Arnold kindly offered me the duck which was passed on to CWS.

During the 2003 winter, this eider migrated thousands of kilometres to southern Newfoundland. By June 2004, it was back at its Arctic nesting grounds when the battery on



the satellite transmitter expired. Again this winter, duck returned to Placentia.

CWS biologists and veterinarians will assess the eider's physiological condition and how the satellite tag might have affected its internal tissues. If the satellite tag is still functional, it may be implanted in another eider.

These studies aid in understanding the movement patterns of wild seaduck populations over Arctic and North Atlantic seascapes. It is incumbent on us to protect these environments to sustain the populations of these magnificent creatures.

New bird occurrence for province

A stunning white Ross's goose dropped in among the other geese and ducks at Quidi Vidi Lake on 16 December (Bruce Mactavish). The diminutive white goose looks like a small snow goose with a stunted billed. Ross's geese breed in the central Canadian Arctic and most winter in Texas and Louisiana. The species is a very rare visitor to northeastern North America. The goose at Quidi Vidi provided the first record for Newfoundland and Labrador and only the second for all of Atlantic Canada. The goose seems to have settled in and was included on the Boxing Day count.

Birds in area and around the province

Besides the Ross's goose, many unusual waterfowl are in the area. An immature snow goose was observed on the Cape Race Christmas Bird Count (Darroch Whitaker). Another snow goose that had been reported earlier at Trepassey was shot. A pair of small Canada Geese is at Quidi Vidi Lake.

Three northern shovelers, 3 wood ducks, 5 Eurasian green-winged teal, 9 tufted ducks, 7 Eurasian wigeon, as well as American wigeon were seen by St. John's Christmas bird counters. On the Cape St. Mary's Christmas Count, 159 harlequin ducks were tallied – a robust indication of a recovering population.

An immature black-crowned night heron found at Quidi Vidi Lake by Ken Knowles on 9 December. Soon after Terry Janes picked up the dead emaciated heron and brought to me at MUN. The snowy egret is still at Virginia Lake, and the great egret at Mundy Pond was last seen on Christmas Day.

A weakened American coot that was picked up by Jeff Hutchings and Sherri-Lynn Rowe at Bowring Park on 23 December succumbed. A robust purple gallinule captured by Chris Baird near the Newfoundland Hotel was released in the marsh at Long Pond.

Sharp-shinned hawks have been chasing avian visitors to David Artiss's feeder in Portugal Cove. Golden-crowned kinglets have been attracted to the commotion at Marlene Creates's feeder near Blast Hole Ponds in Portugal Cove. Tony and Janice Powers have had American Goldfinches at their feeder in Branch, and Dick Whitaker has seen 3 common grackles at Rushmere Farm in Argentina.

A few whales remain in the areas. In early December, 3 whales that from the appearance of their forward angular spouts appeared to be sperm whales were seen near Branch (Tony Power, Chris Mooney). In late December, a whale was seen in Bay Bulls by the O'Briens.

Birds of prey

An immature golden eagle was at Robin Hood Bay on Boxing Day. Three great horned owls were calling after dusk at Chance Cove and 3 snowy owls were recorded on the Cape Race Christmas count (Darroch Whitaker).

Darroch, Dave Fifield and Bruce Mactavish also watched a peregrine falcon at Mistaken Point was feeding on a dovekie. Without completely finishing the meal and with a bulging gullet, the falcon rocketed off the cliff and snatched another dovekie flying just above the water. The snowy owl pellets in the area were also well packed with dovekie feathers. On the edge of the North Atlantic, it's often feast or famine, or from the dovekie's perspective – life or death.

Bird vehicle collisions

A boreal owl that had apparently struck a car on Tolt Road in Portugal Cove is being rehabilitated at Salmonier Nature Park (Cynthia Mercer). It is hoped that the owl will soon be released in the area. Boreal owls hunt the roads for voles and other small rodents. They may also try to use the headlights of cars in their pursuits or be confused and drawn to the lights. Boreal owls are unfortunately a fairly common road-kill in our area.

An unusual report came in from a pilot, Darryl Reardon, who sent me a small patch of buffy-whitish tipped body feathers that were removed from underside of a plane. His Grenfell flight struck the bird at 6000 feet while departing from St. Anthony on Halloween. So far, it has been impossible to identify the feathers?

Christmas bird counting in Portugal Cove – St. Philips

Darroch Whitaker and 3 generations of Montevecchios (Al, Nick, Mairna, Bill) beat it around Portugal Cove – St. Philips on Boxing Day to make a local contribution to the St. John's Christmas count. The morning got off to a stunning start on Western Gulley Road when Darroch observed a sharp-shinned hawk in fir shredding a white-winged crossbill that it had just captured for its Boxing Day breakfast.

American goldfinches and pine siskins were flocking to Carolyn and George Mayo's feeder. In Portugal Cove Harbour, we had a bald eagle, a dovekie feeding along the rocks, black guillemots, and Iceland gulls among the herring and black-backed gulls at the sewer outfall. Our bird of the day was a female common goldeneye diving just at the edge of the rocks. This duck was soon after eaten by a local hunter.

More oiled seabirds

It's that time of year again. On 12 November, an oiled murre was found on the beach at Branch and an oiled dovekie washed up at Point Lance (Kyrin Power, Tony Power). Since then oil was found on the beach at Point Lance, and 2 or 3 more oiled murre were seen. An oil slick 240 miles SSE of St. John's was also reported at the time. On 26 November, Kyrin Power reported 35 oiled dovekies, 2 murre and a razorbill at Point Lance.

If you see any interesting birds or if you have any questions about birds, give me a call (895-2901) or send me an email mont@mun.ca

Keep looking up in 2006.