

*Northeast Avalon Times July 2019*

**Pandering oil companies for environmental information  
Birds I View  
Bill Montevecchi**



The herring gull- sized Caspian terns are the largest species of tern. They are more common in western Newfoundland and southern Labrador than in the east.

A recent interview on CBC Radio's On the Go highlighted how information taken at face value can be insufficient to understand an issue and its implications. The interview focused on the new larger flow line connector that Husky will install to replace the smaller disrupted one involved in the November 2018 oil spill (<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/live-radio/1-47-on-the-go/clip/15724929-husky-energy-update>)

In the first instance, no clear answer was given about whether the smaller connector might have been inadequate for the challenging ocean conditions at the time of the spill. Instead, the malfunction was attributed to a hydrate freeze in the line during a "not normal" 20-hour shutdown. Why a 20hour or longer down time on a platform on the Grand Banks would not have been well considered in the company's response plans was not addressed. Presumably contingency plans are developed precisely for situations that are out of the ordinary. Surely a shutdown of longer than a day would be factored in an environmental assessment and in oversight by the C-NLOPB?

This lack of consideration may have been Husky's rationale to resume production in storm seas on 16 November, when the other offshore operators made prudent decisions not to. Despite substantially longer than 20-hour delays, the other platforms apparently did not experience malfunctions or spills when they resumed pumping after the seas had subsided.

The rupture occurred, when the bobbing platform was likely radically jerking the connector up and down weakening its integrity. If this is so, it needs to be clarified that it was indeed Husky's decision to resume production in high risk conditions that is the main causal factor in the spill. It is noteworthy that the C-NLOPB supported Husky's decision to resume pumping in storm seas even though that decision resulted in the largest spill ever on the Grand Banks.

And what do we know about the size of the spill? In the spill's initial phase Husky was uncertain if oil was leaking owing to the turbulent seas, yet the media inform us that the spill was 250,000 l based on the company's self-report.

The use and repetition of information from a biased source has to be taken for what it is. Oil companies notoriously under-report spill sizes. Note for instance the 1000-fold increase in self-reports by Hibernia of a spill during the winter of 2012-2013. How much credence can even be put in the final figure?

It is more than worrisome that our environmental conversations have become so casual, and so blasé that we are content to ask oil companies about the details of circumstances for which they are liable and then to accept their statements as evidence. Why is this approach acceptable with oil companies, while fishing companies are assessed with onboard arm's length observers? Why should we trust an oil company more than a fishing company? And how ludicrous would it seem to ask a fishing captain if he caught undersized fish. Yet we have no qualms about accepting oil company reports on how much oil they spilled and how they spilled it?

Soon another self-report will be made. When Husky replaces its connector, oil will be released into the ocean, but there will be no observers from the Canadian Coast Guard or Environment Canada present. Husky will tell what occurred.

If we do not more carefully interrogate the circumstances surrounding the largest spill on the Grand Banks, and if we continue to pander rather than critically question oil companies about their activities and lack of them, we will continue to rationalize inadequate environmental protection on the Grand Banks.

### **Caspian tern colony in Gros Morne National Park**

The herring-gull sized Caspian terns are the world's largest terns. While retaining their tern family elegance, their formidable blood-red beaks give them a commanding presence.

Caspian terns have a global distribution nesting on ocean coasts and large lakes. The world's largest colony in the Columbia River estuary on the border of Washington and Oregon has been mercilessly assaulted by biologists working with the USFWS and army corps of engineers. They blame the terns for preying on salmon fingerlings that are released in the thousands creating an artificial bird feeder at the river mouth.

In Newfoundland, Koskaeccoddee Lake in the Bay du Nord Wilderness Area is apparently related to a mi'kmaq word for Caspian tern. In the 1980s, North Penguin Island on the northeast coast had a substantial colony of 28 pairs, but the terns abandoned the island in the mid-1980s when coast guard demolished the light-keepers' house during the summer nesting season

The terns then moved to nearby Ladle Island off Ladle Cove where an estimated 40 – 50 pairs nested in the early 2000s. That colony was also abandoned when a fox reached the island on the winter ice and remained throughout the summer.

Good numbers of Caspian terns are sighted in the Lewisporte area, so there may well be a colony there yet to be identified. Caspian terns are seen frequently on the west coast, the northern peninsula and in southern Labrador. A recent census of seabirds in St. Paul's Inlet in Gros Morne National Park by ecologist Shawn Gerrow tallied 43 Caspian nests on Middle Island. This may be the largest colony in Atlantic Canada. We are fortunate that Caspian terns are among us.

### **Birds in the area**

In an unusual daytime sighting, a couple of Leach's storm-petrels were flying near Bell Island on 2 July (Saltwater Society, Nick Montevecchi). On Canada Day, a Saltwater Society cruise, encountered a flock of 12 razorbills flying up the bay presumably to nesting sites on Baccalieu. Two bald eaglets were flapping in a coastal nest below Brock's Head on the East Coast Trail.

Multiple broods of eiders with attendant females were just off Anchor Brook on 9 July. Two fresh gannet carcasses with ruffed plumages that were found in Musgrave Harbour (Janet Montevecchi) appeared to have been drowned in nearby herring nets. Jeanine Winkel of Molly Bawn Whale and Puffin Tours out of Mobile captured some stunning photos of a white Atlantic Puffin near Great Island on 8 July (see her facebook posts).

Kyle d'Entremont saw northern fulmar and a short-eared owl at Cape St. Mary's and had an early white-rumped sandpiper on South Penguin Island on 8 July. A female kestrel was on the wires along the Cape St. Mary's road (Mohammad Fahmy).

Eugene Ryan had an unexpected close encounter with a ring-billed gull that perched on the hood of his car parked at a nearby Wendy's. Eugene moved the car but the persistent gull moved with him. Six cedar waxwing enlivened our holly bush when they visited to feed on the red berries.

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