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Seabirds nest on islands for a reason
Birds I View
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Northern gannet that had been nesting on the mainland cliffs and was killed by a coyote (photo: Jonathan Fiely).

Seabirds nest on islands for a reason. And even on large islands like Newfoundland that reason is ever present.

Island nesting provides (for the most part) protection from land mammal predators. Though sometimes land predators including river otters and red foxes venture to seabird islands either by swimming or crossing on ice. As well, marine mammals such as arctic foxes and polar bears at times reach seabird islands via arctic ice floes during spring.

When a mammal predator reaches an island by ice transport and the ice recedes, the visitors can be "trapped" on the island until ice the following year offers a means of exit. This situation has occurred with red foxes on Baccalieu Island and with arctic foxes and polar bears on the Gannet Islands in Labrador and on Funk Island.

When the newly arrived predators take up residence – it greatly compounds risks for the birds. In some instances, ground-nesting gulls and terns have completely abandoned their colonies.

Caspian terns abandoned colonies on North Penguin and Ladle Cove islands on the northeast coast when red foxes were present during summer.

Introduced and invasive predators

While seabirds have evolved island-nesting preferences, introduced predators such as mink and invasive predators such as coyotes pose new risks that increase the seabirds' vulnerability.

Mink were introduced to the island of Newfoundland during a fur industry initiative in 1934. Through escapes from farms, they are now common in coastal marine and freshwater habitats. Excellent swimmers, they at times access seabird islands.

In 1985, coyotes made their way to Newfoundland via ice travel from Nova Scotia in the 1980s. They are remarkably adaptable animals and have spread throughout the island.

Mainland nesting gannets risk mammalian predation

The three gannet colonies in Newfoundland are at Funk Island, Baccalieu Island and Cape St. Mary's. The gannets at Cape St. Mary's nest on Bird Rock – a sea stack separated from the mainland by just tens of meters but also by a hundred meter deep ravine that protects the nesting birds from land mammals.

But circumstances are always changing. Northern Gannet populations have been increasing for some time. During the 1980s, Bird Rock was saturated with nesting gannets, and birds began nesting on mainland sites to the east and west of the stack. Today many thousands of gannets nest on the mainland cliffs.

At times red foxes take eggs, chicks and even adult gannets from the mainland cliffs. Though gannets are large fierce birds with sharp dagger-like beaks and pose a foreboding challenge for a fox. However, a larger and more dangerous predator has arrived on the scene.

For the past decade, coyotes have been attracted by the free-ranging sheep flocks that roam in the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Seabird Reserve. Soon the coyotes directed their attention to accessible gannets nesting on the mainland cliffs.

Towards the end of nesting season in September and October during 2018 and previously during 2016, the coyotes made substantial kills of adult and large gannet chicks on the verge of fledging. In 2016, 68 carcasses including 30 adults and 38 large pre-fledgling chicks were discovered above the nesting cliffs. During 2018, 42 carcasses with 20 dead adults and 22 large chicks were found in corresponding areas to the 2016 kills. In total the coyotes killed 110 gannets including 50 adults and 60 large pre-fledgling chicks.

Most birds were killed by bites to the head and broken necks and a small number were bitten on the breast. A few carcasses were fully consumed or were partially eaten with breast muscles removed and sometimes with internal organs and legs eaten. It is likely that the coyotes killed more birds than they consumed with the intention to return and eat the leftovers later.

The gannets did not abandon mainland sites following the predation events, and things look pretty much the same. What is occurring though is that the coyotes are increasing the pressure to not nest on the mainland. Similar circumstances with land predators during past millennia is what pressured seabirds in nest on islands originally. And given the dynamic patterns of the physical and biological environments, evolutionary history seems to be repeating itself.

Coyotes are here to stay

Coyotes are here to stay and after all why shouldn't they be. They came of their own initiative, perseverance and accord. And the former Newfoundland wolf population has been annihilated, so the coyotes may even have a niche to exploit.

General perceptions of coyotes are extremely negative. And while those perceptions might be expected among sheep farmers, coyotes get much more bad press than they deserve. For the most they are very shy in the presence of humans.

Coyote predation on seabirds can be expected to increase in some limited situations. For example, during the past summer a coyote was present on South Penguin Island, a nesting site for eiders, puffins, storm-petrels, gulls and terns.

Yet in the big scheme of things, coyotes represent a relatively natural change in the island's wildlife that will have an array of radiating influences. But there is plenty of room for them, and we just need to adjust to their presence.

Birds in and around the area

Being the fall fledging period, Leach's storm-petrels are back in town. On 2 October, one was being chased by five gulls over the parking lot at Churchill Square (Ian Jones). The chase went back and forth over the parking area several times, at one point a herring gull had the storm-petrel by a tail feather, but the stranded storm-petrel escaped and flew off. On the same day, Lancy Chang found freshly dead storm-petrel near Mundy Pond. Storm-petrels have a tough enough time at sea, but when they are blown on land, survival is a low and limited possibility.

Fifty northern fulmars including some tanned intermediate morphed birds, 25 sooty shearwaters, a single greater shearwater and an immature glaucous gull were seen on a cod gillnet fishing trip east of Offer Wadham Island on 1 October. The Gander River in Gander Bay South is a hotspot for water birds. A quick stop in early October, revealed flocks of Canada geese and black ducks, teal, greater yellowlegs and a pectoral sandpiper.

A juvenile black-throated green warbler apparently met its demise in a window collision in St. Philips and is indicative of the considerable mortality young birds suffer at this time of year. Also in St. Philips, Cynthia Mercer noted a ruffed grouse enjoying the fruit in a cherry tree.

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