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Concerns about the turr hunt
Birds I View
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I enjoy a feed of turrs as much as the next person. I appreciate hunting as an important and vital connection with wildlife and the natural world. The experience can generate conservation commitments among hunters. In most instances it does.

For many years, I have received complaints from hunters and others from around the island about the low numbers of turrs and about the turr hunt. Yet hunters like fishers are wont to speak publically about their concerns. It's not easy, as there is compelling social pressure for silence. And though no one will speak out, some have asked me to do so. Here goes.

The Newfoundland turr hunt was and is essentially a term of the province's confederation with Canada. Allowing Newfoundlanders and Labradorians the right to hunt turrs involved amending an international treaty – the Migratory Birds Convention Act between Canada and the US. It was no small feat and it is no small matter. As a result, the turr hunt is the only legal hunt of a migratory seabird in North America. Besides Newfoundlanders and Labradorians – only people with aboriginal status have this right.

Two closely related species – the common murre and the thick-billed murre - are killed in the hunt. Common murres are anything but common, they are indeed extraordinary. They are the fastest flying seabird, propelling along in straight lines with labored wing-beats. Common murre can dive to depths of 150 meters or more, only penguins dive deeper. Under water they fly with rapid agility in three dimensions and catch fish on the wing. Common murres breed in coastal colonies, including Cape St. Mary's, Witless Bay, Baccalieu, Funk Island and the Gannet Islands.

Thick-billed murre are more northerly arctic breeders, reaching their southern breeding limit in Labrador and Newfoundland. During winter many migrate from arctic colonies to our coasts and bays. Thick-billed murre are the primary quarry in the hunt and discriminating hunters differentiate thick-billed murre as “turrs” and common murre as “murre”.

The hunt has come a long way from the pursuit of birds by wooden boats and single-shot shotguns to garner a meal for the family dinner table. Critical relatively recent technological enhancements of hunter capability involve faster ice-resistant fiberglass boats, more sophisticated automatic rifles, cell phones, and websites.

Hunters with pick-up trucks and trailers give the hunt a mobility that was nonexistent a decade or two ago. Hunters can now “follow” concentrations of murre from bay to bay. For example, hunters from Gander and the NE coast travel to pursue flocks of murre in Placentia Bay, where at times long lines of trucks wait to launch boats.

The hunting season opens first in the north and closes last in the south and there is a tendency for the murre to move southward, especially when pack ice is along the NE coast. Hence the mobile hunt can impose new and undue pressure on the birds. It is this greater hunter capability that needs accounting.

You don't have to shoot a murre to kill it. The birds need to consume an equivalent of 50% of their body weight each day to survive. This is particularly critical during the short cold winter days. So when the birds are chased from good feeding sites - it can impact their well-being. It can be lethal.

Hunters have a daily limit of 20 birds and a possession limit of 40 birds. Some hunters exceed these limits and also illegally sell birds.

Reports of plenty of birds are often inferred if everyone gets their quota. Inferences about bird abundance based on the numbers killed are similar to arguments heard when cod were being overfished before the moratorium - the catches are going up. But due to greater fishing efficiency and effort the catches were increasing as the stock was decreasing and soon collapsed.

The use of new technology that advantages the hunter and disadvantaged the hunted demands a precautionary approach. As a fleet commander for National Sea informed me about his capability for catching cod just before the moratorium— “We know where they are and we can get all of them.”

How are the murre populations faring? The common murre population appears stable, though the thick-billed murre population is less well-known. The Canadian Wildlife Service can provide this information.

What every concerned hunter tells me is that the complete lack of enforcement of hunt regulations is the problem. Environment Canada is responsible for regulating the hunt and to ensure that it is conducted properly. They have however abandoned their responsibility.

It's straight-forward to keep the hunt on an even keel if those responsible for regulating it did their job. The RCMP can also enforce hunt regulations, and provincial wildlife officers if requested can assist federal officers. Some provincial wildlife wardens are keen to help. The sustainability of the turr hunt depends on the presence wildlife wardens in different bays during hunting season.

If we don't want the turr hunt to go the way of the seal hunt, the risks must be reduced. Let's keep the seabird populations, the hunt and the hunters and viable and sustainable.

Birds in the area

Rex Passion reports two pairs of common goldeneyes in the waste-water bubble in Torbay and courting flickers and a huge flock of American goldfinches at his feeders and even surreptitious visits by a black fox. Flickers are pairing off and moving in groups. The high-count at our suet feeders is nine and counting.

Great-horned owls are calling in the forest around Maggies Place in Portugal Cove (Jenine Tucker). We're listening. I haven't seen any grouse this winter though have occasionally see their tracks while skiing through bogs.

Janet screamed that six or seven crows were viciously pecking one pinned on its back in the garden. I ran out and disrupted the attempted murder by crows. All flew off including the victim. Intense screeching continued long afterwards. I've observed this behavior by crows before. It is extremely unsettling.

Mary Alliston Butt obtained a beautiful specimen of a sharp-shinned hawk that had apparently collided with a house window in CBS. While snow-shoeing near Blast Hole Ponds, Marlene Creates and Don MacKay came across a couple of robins that survived the blizzard drinking in open water in the river.

Eight pine grosbeaks were foraging on dogberries around Neary's Pond on 21 January; two bright red males matched the color of the berries (Janet Montevocchi).

Shout-out

A shout-out to the PCSP employee in green town pickup who at 330 PM on Sunday February 9 drove by three of us trying to get a car out of a ditch on Neary's Pond Road. Watching in disbelief as he proceeded along without offering assistance or even simply checking on the situation, I waved to him. Eye contact but no response. Should town employees act this way? Neighbors don't and with their help we got the vehicle out of the ditch.

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