

*Northeast Avalon Times March 2020*

**Different ways to experience the world**  
**Birds I View**  
Bill Montevecchi



White ibis foraging in the sand and surf of Sanibel Island on the southwestern tip of Florida in the Gulf of Mexico. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

According to David Henry Thoreau there are two ways to see the world. One is to travel around it, and the other is to watch it grow through your garden. Some of us are fortunate enough to have both options.

A recent trip to Sanibel Island just off the southwestern tip of the Floridian peninsula in the Gulf of Mexico was an experiential eye-opener. Sanibel Island, deserving of its classification as a barrier beach island, protects and buffers the inner coast from the ravages of the open ocean.

These protective barrier beach islands extend southward from Cape Cod, the terminal terrain of the last glacial advance. It is here that the rocky coastline that extends from Newfoundland to New England shifts to a sandy substrate ribboned by barrier beach islands through to Florida. Saltmarsh islands and mangrove swamps teeming with fishes and wildlife abound.

And it is to these sandy coasts and islands that humans have been aggregating for centuries. This seaside attraction and its associated development has not been without its collateral environmental degradation.

The barrier beach islands and productive marshes and mangroves have been extensively filled, ditched, destroyed and paved over, while the sand dune habitats have been trammelled by sun-seekers. Coastal condos, golf courses and beach clubs have stolen the habitat of countless gulls, terns, rails, egrets, herons, ibises and shorebirds including piping plovers and oystercatchers.

The survivors are living affirmations of the resiliency of wildlife and the perpetuity of nature. Our ecosystems have the capacity for recovery if we simply temper our environmental assaults. The tropical habitat seems truly irreplaceable if we can merely accommodate it and let it be.

What goes around comes around. Rising sea levels associated with ocean climate change are in the process of reclaiming some environmentally inappropriate developmental proliferation that has destroyed these natural protective barriers and buffers. And it won't be an act of god when it all goes down but rather an act of man.

The trip also brought back images of my graduate school research that focused on the breeding success of laughing gulls nesting in a tidal salt marsh protected by a barrier beach island in the Brigantine Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey. A saltmarsh is in a continual ebb and flow with the rising and falling tides on a daily basis and on a lunar monthly basis when high spring tides occur on the new and the full moons, and the monthly lows the neap tides occur on the midpoints of the monthly moon cycles.

For any animal living in a saltmarsh, be it a fiddler crab, a clapper rail or a laughing gull, the tides regulate life. Laughing Gulls build floating nests constructed of dried hay from the previous year's growth of spartina grasses. The gulls care for their eggs and young chicks in those nests for six weeks, meaning that they will be exposed to three or more high spring tides depending the time they lay their eggs.

Egg and chick survival depends on the stability and integrity of the nests woven into the new growth of spartina grass. When high spring tides are accompanied by strong onshore winds or storms, the gulls' nests can be torn from their moorings, washed away and torn asunder. These events can kill many thousands of eggs and chicks.

This struggle for survival and the parental adaptations to nesting in the tidal marsh fascinated me. My research aimed to understanding the mechanisms of parental success. Why did some parents fare well in the face of natural storm floods and others not? It was this natural life and death drama in the saltmarsh – the survival of the fortunate and the fittest and the demise of others that lured me on.

It took four years of study to carefully document that the gulls tended to lay their first eggs when the tides were high in association with the new and full moons. This timing presumably allotted the parents some frame of reference about the extent of high tides over the

coming weeks. Successful parents built their nests in in the taller grass that grew near the edges of tidal creeks. As well, there was a survival advantage if the tallest grasses were on the northeast side of the nest – the direction from which the most destructive storm winds most often blew.

What did it all mean and what did I learn? It meant parental behaviour determined survival in a productive and challenging habitat. Parental gulls that constructed their nests in certain places and in certain ways reared more offspring than those that didn't.

I learned that life and death in tidal marshes is determined by behaviour that mediated environmental challenges. And that those challenges were more likely to occur in certain circumstances than others while the storms themselves remained unpredictable. Coping with environmental uncertainty is a basic survival strategy.

### **Birds in the area**

Spring is in the air. A substantial flock of Canada geese is loitering in the North Harbour River estuary (Dean Dalton). A nesting building adult bald eagle was seen carrying a large stick while winging its way to Logy Bay in early March (Sally Goddard). An exuberant junco and a determined boreal chickadee were proclaiming their spring aspirations with joyous songs at the end of February and early March. Flocks of evening grosbeaks are flitting about the area. Good numbers of robins are surviving the winter challenges, and Calvin Butt had a couple visitors on Tucker's Hill in Portugal Cove.

### **Retraction and apology**

It has been brought to my attention that in my column of April 2018 I mistakenly implicated that a fence and no trespassing signs on a community right of way to Neary's Pond off Round Pond Road had been erected on property owned by Robert Stapleton. The property in question is not owned by Mr. Stapleton and his family and they did not erect the fencing or no trespassing signs. I and the Northeast Avalon Times regret this error and apologize to Mr. Stapleton and his family. I have removed the column from my website.

Contacts = [mont@mun.ca](mailto:mont@mun.ca), 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h] 695-5305 [c]. Birds I View columns can be found at [http://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevicchi/public\\_outreach/birds\\_ir\\_view/](http://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevicchi/public_outreach/birds_ir_view/)