

**Another Funk Island adventure**

**Birds I View  
Bill Montevocchi**



“Friday is the day,” Larry said on Wednesday. Larry knows. “We could meet in Musgrave Harbour next weekend,” Janet offered. Both options sounded good to me.

So at 3:15 am on Friday Mohammad Fahmy, a graduate student in my lab, and I met skipper Larry Easton and crew – Boyd Abbott and Jeff Chaulk aboard the long-liner Lady Easton docked in Lumsden.

Surely this would have been a day when the Beothuk launched their canoes from the Wadham Islands to paddle the 40 miles of open ocean to their sacred island over the horizon to collect the large precious eggs of the great auks. It would have also been a day in 1535, when Jacques Cartier’s crew sailing from San Malo would have landed their long boats to drive the auks into their waiting launches to replenish their depleted protein supplies.

“Well look at that - I’ve never seen that before,” Larry exclaimed as we approached the island at 7:30 am. Despite the mirror like sea, white water was slashing the offshore rocks and surging 6 – 8 feet at our landing site at the “bench” on the northeast face of Funk.

Given Larry’s countenance and my past experiences, I assumed landing would not be possible. Yet Larry and Jeff decided to check things out and jumped in the speedboat that the Lady Eason had been towing. At the bench the speed boat would be level with the ledge at one moment and in the next 8 or so feet below it. After a few minutes during a surge Jeff leapt cat-like onto the ledge. With Larry’s assist he soon had a boat ladder secured on the ledge.

Returning to the Lady Easton, Larry had Mohammad and I board the speedboat. This being the 44<sup>th</sup> year that I have been visiting Funk Island, I can be viewed a liability of sorts. While I don’t completely agree, many people including me are starting to find my research longevity

somewhat astonishing. Given the circumstances, Larry commanded “Mohammad – you go first then pull Bill on the island.” Though I didn’t need to be pulled.

Until recently, I was always the first to land and the last to leave the island. That was until about a decade ago when I mistimed my leap and with only a finger-tip hold on the slippery bird feces-soaked ledge, I began sliding into the water and yelled. Instantly Jeff jumped over me and pulled me by the back of my jacket onto the bench.

Once on the island we went to the southwestern part of the island where our gear was hauled up by rope – one speedboat load at a time. Then in a minute Jeff was off, and we agreed that I would call Larry on Wednesday for an update on work progress, weather and departure. Wednesday was when we learned that our satellite phone had not been set for international calling which was required from Funk Island. Luckily we could text.

Soon our Labrador trappers’ tent was up. A wayward pine siskin flitted by. My immediate shocking impression was of a thinned murre colony. There was much too much granite showing where murres were previously crowded.

## **Research activity**

We used long-poled dip-nets to catch flying murres returning to the colony with food for their chicks. Our catch and release secured 135 fish samples – mostly gravid capelin over the next 10 days. The sizes of the capelin will be compared with those obtained from murres in previous years to help assess the condition of the capelin stock.

In August 2019, we attached 25 geo-light sensors (GLSs) to the leg bands of murres. Our task this year was to retrieve them and to attach 25 new devices. GLS data reveal the murres’ migration tracks and wintering areas.

Retrieving the devices is a bit like salmon fishing. With a 15 foot noose pole we crawl slowly to the site where we attached GLSs to parental murres in 2019. Device retrievals are difficult because we cannot see the murres’ legs as they nest so densely often behind rocks. Trying to capture a bird with a GLS is essentially guesswork. Over 5 days we managed to get 25 new GLS attached but retrieved only 3 of the 2019 devices. This work is on the agenda for 2021.

We also recorded about 250 regurgitated prey landings from the roosting gannets. Consistent with the murre landings - most were gravid capelin though there were some squid – an indication of warm-water and a fishery. Mohammad collected some of the regurgitated squid, thoroughly washed it in saltwater then marinated it for 24 hours before frying our hors d’oeuvres. Soaked in hot sauce it was surprisingly tasty.

Texted Larry on Wednesday and received the reply “coming first calm day after Friday”. On Sunday texted “conditions good”; reply – “coming out in morning early.” At 6 am in a dense fog the Lady Easton returned. A crew of four students from the University of Manitoba landed to collect some samples, while we dismantled the tent and moved equipment to the boat.

Beyond the research, Funk Island is a place beyond. Beyond the reach of the trapping of a bustling and noisy civilization. When confined on the rock, the spatial and temporal scales of daily life both shrink and expand. A clear day with a 360° ocean horizon can pass quickly, while a fog enshrouded day passes a minute at a time. And it is always attitude that determines whether the experience is a prison-sentence or a pilgrimage.

### **Birds in the area**

In mid-July storm-petrels were blown ashore and preyed on by gulls in Fortune Bay (Suzanne Dooley) and at Holyrood Beach where starving petrels were feeding on dead capelin on the beach (Robert Blackmore, Sydney Collins, Kyle d'Entremont).

Seven dead great shearwaters on the Point Lance beach on 13 July (Chris Mooney) were likely victims of drowning in gillnets. Six freshly dead gannets photographed on the shoreline at L'anse-au-Loup, Labrador on 7 August by Vernon Buckle were also likely drowned in fishing nets just off the coast. A dead gannet collected at Point Lance on 9 August (Kyle d'Entremont) will be checked to try to determine if it too drowned in a gillnet.

In early July George Mayo photographed a dead Manx shearwater on Tides Cove Beach in Burin. On 28 July Peter Bull photographed 4 adult female eiders with crowd of 63 ducklings. Mike Shano sent an interesting photo of a bittern in Outer Cove in early August.

A young gull that fell from the roof of the Howley Building on Higgins Line was successfully returned to its nest by a maintenance worker (Chris Finch). Having lost her first brood to predatory blue jays, the robin in the aspen by our deck made an heroic second effort and fledged 2 nestlings.

Birds are everywhere this time of year – stay vigilant.

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/montavecchi/public\\_outreach/birds\\_ir\\_view/](http://www.mun.ca/psychology/montavecchi/public_outreach/birds_ir_view/)