

**Funk Island – It could be heaven or it could be hell**

**Birds I View**



Sunset over the cairn in the meadow of the Great Auk on Funk Island (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

**Bill Montevecchi**

Funk Island, a small seabird-covered rock about 50 km off the northeast coast of Newfoundland in the North Atlantic was home to the largest known colony of the extinct and last flightless bird of the northern hemisphere. The great auk was a meter tall erect elegant seabird that weighed about 10 lbs, walked about in breeding colony and was locally referred to as “penguin”.

I have been going to Funk Island each summer for the past 40 years. These experiences shared with fishermen, colleagues and family have carved indelible impressions on my perspectives. See Nigel Markham’s You Tube documentary – [funkisland.ca](http://funkisland.ca).

Old English definitions of Funk aptly include foul-smelling and place of panic. Skipper Bill Sturge of Bonavista Bay encapsulated the description with his succinct turn of phrase - “a marvelous terrible place.”

My very first impressions on my initial visit in 1977 were of the abundance of breeding murrelets – a cacophony of life and death, the smell, the stone cairn and the grassy meadow growing atop the composted remains of the extinct great auk.

My research focused on the feeding and foraging ecology of gannets and murrelets. Other analyses of great auk bones enabled us to probe their body sizes and diets. The bones that we collected were also used to construct the first two great auk skeletons in Canada – one is in The Rooms and the other in the national museum in Ottawa.

My connections with the great auk deepened over time, and during these years it was inevitable to consider European and Beothuk relationships with the extinct flightless bird.

### **Explorers and early settlers**

The first lucid written description of the avian inhabitants of Funk Island to rise above the bare-boned chiselling and secrecy of early explorers was penned by Jacques Cartier in 1534. His primary focus was on the large flightless auks which were herded into long boats to provision his protein-challenged crew. In doing so, Cartier essentially established North America's first fast-food takeout - an essential stop for many trans-Atlantic voyagers.

These interactions continued for centuries through the 1700s when fishers began exploiting the birds' eggs for food and the birds for bait. In the late 1700s, crews from Fogo Island stayed on Funk killing the auks for down feathers for mattresses, quilts and pillows. The flightless auks were corralled into stone pens, banged on the head, parboiled, stripped of down and discarded in heaps.

This killing and disturbance pushed the auks below the minimum population needed for resilience and recovery. By early 1800s, great auks were eradicated from Funk Island. In the late 1890s, many of the heaps of auk bodies, skeletons and bones were collected for the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. Otherwise the remaining bodies decomposed providing the substrate for the grassy meadow.

### **An earlier reality**

Humans first occupied Newfoundland about 5,000 to 7,000 years ago. We do not know what they called themselves, we refer to them as Maritime Archaic People. They made their living from the sea and hunted harp seals, salmon and seabirds.

Great auks held a special significance for them as evidenced by the inclusion of auk beaks in their burials. We do not know what importance the auks held for them, though we can explore some of the Beothuk's interactions with Great Auks and other seabirds to gain a wider view.

For much of the year, the Beothuk also lived a coastal existence, exploiting seabirds and salmon. Great Auk eggs were a valued food and they made extraordinary efforts to collect them.

During summer Beothuk crews paddled to Funk Island to collect the auk eggs. How they knew that the island was there and how they negotiated the often treacherous seas and risky

landings on the island are open questions. They clearly held profound knowledge of the seabirds, the ocean and the weather.

### **The spirit bird**

Shanawdithit, the last known surviving Beothuk, informed us that the Beothuk believed that a spirit bird delivered the soul of the departed to the afterlife. In insightful comprehensive analysis of the Beothuk's carved caribou bone burial pendants, Todd Christensen provided robust evidence that the fork-tailed pendants were representations of terns, likely the spirit bird (see DOI: 10.1017/S0959774313000036).

Arctic terns nested on Funk Island in the past and are truly magnificent candidates for a bird carrying spirits to the afterlife. Some arctic terns nest in the High Arctic and winter in the Antarctic. In doing so, these birds experience more sunlight and travel more than any species on earth. It has been estimated that during the course of their 20+ year life-times, some would fly the equivalent distance of three trips to the moon!

It also gives pause, when one considers the taxonomic name that biologists clearly with no contact with the Beothuk gave to the arctic tern – *Sterna paradisaea* – the tern of paradise.

### **The afterlife**

Beyond considerations of the spirit bird, Shanawdithit also informed us that the Beothuk envisioned the afterlife as “a happy island” over the horizon. An fitting description for Funk Island.

So were the risky voyages to Funk Island solely egg-collecting trips? Or were they something more? The Beothuk had many opportunities to collect seabird eggs and likely great auk eggs much closer to shore – on the Penguin Islands off of Musgrave Harbour, for example.

To push my speculation – if the Beothuk considered Funk Island as a representation of the afterlife, then indeed their voyages might be more pertinently seen as annual pilgrimages. And as the Beothuk had a strong proclivity for interring their dead in coastal ocean-facing sites, might Funk Island have been a site to deliver the dead?

The only physical evidence of Beothuk on Funk Island was a canoe paddle found in Indian Gulch the late 1800s. The gulch's eastward orientation gives it a glorious ambience as it catches the first light of the rising summer sun. The gulch also washes over during winter minimizing the probability of any remnants remaining over time.

And what about the relationship with the auks. While the Beothuk harvested the life-producing eggs of the auk, there is no evidence that they ever killed them or even made representation of them as they did with the terns. So we are left to ponder what the large erect auk inhabitants on the island over the horizon meant to them?

### **It could be heaven – it could be hell**

The marked contrast between the indigenous and European perspectives of Funk Island and its avian inhabitants are revealing. For indigenous people the seabirds and the island held a special spiritual significance, while for the Europeans it was a place of easy over-exploitation – a foul smelling place of panic.

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