

Privatizing the natural world around us



Partial albino white-breasted robin in Humber Valley [photo: Bill Montevecchi]

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi

The Paul Davis government has decided to reincarnate and upscale Wells and Tobin governmental legacies of deregulating and leasing public parks and natural areas. In the 1990s, the Liberal governments mercilessly gutted the magnificent provincial parks system by deregulating 56 of 77 parks [credit 28 to Wells and 28 to Tobin].

The privatizations have been desperate economic and environmental failures. Many formerly protected areas have just fallen by the wayside and are trampled by ATV damage and other destructive activities. A few survive in a relatively natural state.

The fiasco is exemplified in the Davis government's offering to those who lease the formerly public parks to buy them and putting other deregulated areas such as Topsail Beach, Northern Bay Sands and Middle Cove are up for sale. So much for safe-guarding the rights of public access to these special places.

Imagine the possibilities – fees for catching capelin on the beach, waterslides over the cliffs and jet-ski rentals on quiet ponds. The private venture capitalists have lots of options, we the original owners – the general public have few options and little latitude in these economic ventures.

Public trusts such as access to these natural areas are basic rights in a democratic society. They should not be sold to the highest bidder or to any bidder at all. Money cannot be the rationale for such decision-making.

The real estate sale announcement was made by the Minister of Municipal and Inter-governmental Affairs Keith Hutchings, not the Minister of Environment and Conservation. The environmental ministry sits so low in the cabinet hierarchy that its mandates and intentions are too often overridden when the economic cabinet drivers like natural resources and tourism want to scheme about and jump at the next quick-money grab whatever the cost.

It is difficult to even imagine, how a government with such out-of-control spending even be considered to be reasonably responsible for public trusts. They spend as though there's no accountability which there isn't. If you ran your credit the way government runs theirs [actually yours], you'd be in jail.

The big spenders are popular, before they move on to happy-time pension-land and appointments-ville. Our most recent – big spender retirees include Tom Marshall and Charlene Johnson. Just wonderful until somebody has to pay for it.

Perhaps video lottery terminals can be installed in natural areas to help raise capital. The personal, family and social damage inflicted by VLTs are crushing. VLTs are programmed with variable reward schedules that can condition users with diminishing chances of habit reversals. In extreme cases, VLT use leads to addiction and tragedy.

The long-term social and economic costs are staggering, but the short-term fast money keeps it fueled. Why do we support these psychologically addictive scams? Not because it can be justified on a rational or moral basis. Must money have to always fly in the face of moral decisions? Thank goodness that Lorraine Michael is speaking out about this profit-making social devastation.

Who's guarding thee Newfoundland?

We sing the ode, do the dance and talk the talk, but who is really walking the walk? Who is really guarding the environment of Newfoundland and Labrador? I have many many friends who are bird watchers, hikers, fishermen and hunters. They all love, respect and awe in our environment but where are they when guards are needed?

This is our greatest provincial paradox. On a per capita basis, Newfoundland and Labrador clearly has more people who engage the environment to make their living, who fish, hunt and hike, and who spent their free time with their families on our native land and sea.

On this basis one would expect or at the least hope that we would lead Canada in natural area protection and environmental ethics, passions and concerns. Instead, we look to British Columbia and Ontario to take leading roles. Our conservation principles are in many ways more reflective of urban ones than experiential, cultural and historic ones born of the land and sea around us. We love it and simply take for granted.

And when the shit comes down [dense housing developments in wetlands, destruction of Sandy Pond, overfishing, open-pen aquaculture killing wild salmon to mention a few], it's difficult to find any guards out there at all. There's just a ragtag mixture of wayward gentle folks and a few rebels, most of whom are old. God bless their souls.

“We're working our jobs
Collecting our pay
We believe we're gliding down the highway
But in fact we're slip-sliding away
You know the nearer your destination
The more you're slip-sliding away.”

Paul Simon

Birds in the area

It looks like massive reproductive failure for kittiwakes at Baccalieu Island. Though, they appear to be faring well in Witless Bay and at Cape St. Mary's. Capelin has been in short supply on the east and south coasts [Tony Doyle, Brian Careen] but are showing strong on the northeast coast from Fogo Island through Labrador [Jack Troke, others].

A brood of 8 – 10 robust young red-breasted mergansers are developing rwell on the Humber River off Humber Village [Nick Montevecchi]. Black guillemots appear to be nesting on Western Point in Portugal Cove [Kathryn Welbourne]. Many nest on Bell, Little Bell and Kelly's Islands.

A weathered belted kingfisher was grounded in Kathryn's yard in mid-July. She did the right things, that is - covered the bird with a plastic laundry basket to protect it from cats and provided water. A day later the basket was removed and the kingfisher flew off. That's as good as it gets. Given rest, quiet, warmth and water for stress-induced dehydration is often all a stranded bird needs to recover and be given another chance.

I was shocked to see an adult and juvenile osprey flying along the cliffs at Cape St. Mary's. Donalda Murley has been enjoying an Osprey family of five in Windsor Heights. Donalda and others are concerned about proposed development in the nearby natural area where the osprey and other wildlife abound. Will the town development ever be tempered?

Helen Forsey noted a beige juvenile northern shrike at Cape St. Francis. A few juvenile shrikes have been seen in Newfoundland in the past but this interesting sighting suggests a breeding record for the species. Black-backed woodpeckers were foraging in the forests below Beachy Cove Mountain [Janet and Misha Montevecchi].

Contacts – mont@mun.ca, 695-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h]