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Birds in the eye and mind of the beholder

Birds I View

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Old pen and ink sketch of the great auk.

There are no photographs only drawings, paintings and specimens remain.

As a scientist working with birds, I visit seabird colonies and remote and magnificent places around the province. I work with a dedicated group of students and colleagues who apply their skills to a range of research projects.

We have a toolbox of devices and techniques that were unavailable a few years ago and that allow us ask and answer questions about bird behavior that were previously beyond our grasp. We study birds when they are on land with their mates and offspring but we also track and study birds at sea.

We apply bird-borne GPS, geolocation and satellite tags to learn how they forage and fish, when and where they migrate and how they use ocean habitat throughout the year. We attach tiny pressure and activity sensors to learn about their diving behavior and underwater pursuit of fishes. Genetic techniques identify kin and population relationships.

The most exciting aspect of the work is when we learn something new and unexpected that changes the way we think about birds and their Olympian performances. This is not an infrequent occurrence. The more we watch and explore – the more surprises we encounter and the more we learn.

We can also study birds that no longer exist. We can work with the remains of birds that have vanished like the great auk and Labrador duck. We have specimens from which we can compare their dimensions and sizes. We can probe the chemistry of their tissues to learn about their diets during yesteryears. We can investigate their genetic relationships with living species.

Yet beyond scientific pursuit there are so many other ways that birds are envisioned. Even birds that have vanished are at times elevated and celebrated.

Indigenous peoples, bird and feeder watchers, artists, poets, musicians and a large portion of our population have always had an eye to the sky and ear to the forest. Perhaps it is a bird's ability to seemingly detach itself from the bounds of land-sticking gravity that intrigues us. Birds can be spiritual and even angelic in the mind, eye and ear of the beholder.

For some birds that no longer exist, we keep their spirits alive in writings, poems, paintings and sculptures and in our memories. In doing so, birds are reincarnated in the eye and mind of the artist for us to experience, to envision and to reflect on.

These messages were recently brought home to me. Jan Thornhill has created lovely new children's book. *The Tragic Tale of the Great Auk* [Groundwood Books] is a stunning affirmation of how the plight and mystery of a vanished bird can inspire captivating prose and exquisite artwork. Got kids – get this book.

And here's another opportunity to share. On 15 October at 2 PM, there will be a public opening of Toby Rabinowitz's exhibition – *Seabirds and Seascapes – A Bird's Eye View* – at Devon House. Toby has created a celebration of imagery and color that is so full of life that it will take you skyward. Not to be missed.

Storm-petrel wrecks and rescues

It's that time of year. In late September and early October, hundreds of thousands of young storm-petrels leave their nesting burrows on Baccalieu Island and in Witless Bay and elsewhere around the coast. Couple this proliferation of nearshore juveniles with onshore autumn winds and wrecks of land-stranded birds are bound to occur.

Storm-petrels have recently been rescued and given second-chance nocturnal releases by the sea in St. Philips [Metti Beiger], Portugal Cove [Roy Gilliard], CBS [Jennifer Lambert] and in Mount Pearl [Roxanne Butler and Leanne Guzzwell].

The largest concentration of stranded storm-petrels I learned of was in Bull Arm on the brilliantly lit Hebron structure. On the night of 28 September, many hundreds of birds were all over the rig; many were oiled and greased. Under the instruction of Kiewit-Kvaerner Contractor (KKC) environment manager, the stranded birds were treated like wind-blown litter.

A distressed rig worker reported that the crew was told to collect the birds in 25 gallon buckets and dump them over the side. Previously rig personnel working with a former environment manager followed proper protocols - housing the birds in boxes with toweling in dark warm places then releasing them at night away from bright lights when the onshore winds had subsided. The mishandling of birds and the mortality caused on the night of 28 September was illegal and charges could be laid.

Coyotes killing gannets at Cape St. Mary's

There are good reasons why seabirds nest on islands and sheer cliffs. The main one is protection from mammalian predators.

During the 1980s, the gannet colony at Cape St. Mary's grew filling the nest sites on Bird Rock. Gannets began nesting on the mainland cliffs to the east of Bird Rock. These are the cliffs where we access birds to put tracking devices on them. This is also where foxes and short-tailed weasels can access the birds though they posed no major threats to the gannets.

Enter the coyote and the gannets nesting on the mainland are now very vulnerably positioned. On 6 October, Cape interpreters Chris Mooney and Kyran Power counted and photographed a large kill of gannets. There were a lot of them – 31 adults and 37 large pre-fledgling chicks scattered over the meadow above the cliffs.

The coyotes venture into the colony at night, and there is no telling how many more they will kill. Will the gannets abandon the mainland cliffs? We will keep a close watch. These events will certainly make our research more difficult when we try to catch the gannets next summer.

Birds in the area

Keith Piercey reports increasing numbers of cormorants, mergansers and gannets in the inner Bay of Islands this summer. Cormorant numbers are rebounding and gannets are likely form the large colony in the Magdalen Islands. The Bay of Islands has long been a hotspot for marine birds, as the name Penguin Arm indicates great auks likely fished there in the past.

On 13 September, a semi-palmated plover scurrying in the empty early morning parking lot at the Voisey's Brook Trail was a pleasant surprise. I saw my first fall flock of 45 snow buntings at Deadman's Bay on 25 September. A peregrine falcon was loving and ripping into the gales at Cape St. Mary's on the evening of 1 October.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>

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