

Northeast Avalon Times September 2018

**Letter to an island
Birds I View
Bill Montevocchi**



The dawn of a new day – Funk Island

Dear Funk,

It's been a while. I've been visiting you for most of my life. And now after four decades with a cumulated visitation of about one year, I surely have spent more time with you than any Beothuk, great auk killer, sealer or fisherman. So it seems appropriate to write.

I refer to you as Funk. The Portuguese called you "Y. dos Aves" [Island of Birds]. I wish I knew what the Beothuk named you with their reverence for the "island over the horizon" where the souls of the departed were carried by arctic tern spirit birds. I also know names don't matter to you. I'm Bill.

Lots of changes. Great Auk bones and skeletons for The Rooms and the national museum in Ottawa. Murre and gannet colonies expanding, kittiwakes decreasing and pioneering fulmars coming to colonize. ... And for me - marriage, children, the passing of parents.

Though none of these things are of consequence to you, your constancy provides a benchmark in the progression.

The capelin that the murrens pursued, caught and delivered to their chicks have gotten smaller through the decades. Fishermen are gone from your waters. The gannets no longer feed on mackerel and squid and now deliver capelin and billfish to their chicks.

Visiting has not always been easy. My students, family, colleagues and I have entrusted our lives to fishing families from Notre Dame and Bonavista Bays. Our experiences are much deeper and richer as a result.

The gannets and murrens have revealed how far they travel and how hard they have to work when fishing for food for their offspring and for themselves. Their adaptability and flexibility have allowed them to surmount challenges. Life goes on.

For me too. It was important to visit you again after the crucifixion. It was something like a reincarnation as most everything is these days.

Through everything that we've subjected them to in our research, the murrens and gannets have thrived. The murrens continue to guide their chicks to the sea in an annual rite of passage – a triumph of resiliency and survival.

For you with your ionic time scale, these events are not even fleeting. I've learned to value your indifference. You provide transient transformations with an annual touch point – a pilgrimage of sorts. And like all pilgrimages, they bridge the eventful with an interlude, a time out, a reckoning and though not always positive – they are always grounded and unfettered.

And though it matters not to you, our bond will not be broken, and through the changes yet to come I will hold your indifference dear.

I'll be seeing you. Godspeed, Bill

Gannets again abandon chicks at Cape St. Mary's Gannet

On 17 August, interpreters Edna White and Kyran Power noted and photographed a massive abandonment of parent gannets from Bird Rock and the adjacent mainland. On 20 August, I made a count at four sites that revealed about 60% of the chicks were unattended, with some chicks dead and dying.

As in 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2017, the abandonment occurred in early August when the ocean water heated rapidly exceeding 16° C which apparently influences the distribution of fishes making them inaccessible to parents who abandon their offspring to find food. Interestingly, the water temperature recorded by the smart buoy in Placentia Bay hit 16° C, the wind peaked over 20 knots/h and as is usually the case in these parental flights there were heavy rains on 15 and 16 August 2018 –before the mass abandonment.

Food shortage cannot explain the rapid onset of the abandonments, there has to be some environmental trigger that initiates the colony-wide response. Presumably social panic plays a role when the birds depart en masse.

Were the abandonments due solely by food shortage, we would expect to see poor parental feeding rates in the weeks prior to abandonment. We have some data on this but not enough to test

such a hypothesis. I am hoping that we might investigate this parental behavior in the future so that we might better understand the causes of these unusual but now frequent events.

While the birds were abandoning Cape St. Mary's, on 19 August Tony Power observed more than 300 adult gannets flying around and sitting on the water at Cape Race. He thought that they looked bloated with fish. There was also a continuous flight of thousands great and sooty shearwaters from Portugal Cove South to Cape Race also suggesting that local feeding conditions were good. Humpback and minke whales were also in the area.

In 2012, we considered the mass abandonments of gannet parents unprecedented, yet since then abandonments have occurred almost annually. These radical changes are no longer unprecedented. The gannets are telling us that something is changing in the marine environment, and it behooves us to attempt to understand just what it is.

During my visit of 6 September, things looked much better, though there were many large healthy looking but rather dirty and scruffy chicks that were unattended. Perhaps this is a new normal – new to us at least. 2018 is shaping up to be another poor breeding success year in a string of poor success years that have been ongoing since 2011. Stay tuned for updates.

Reports of people using light to take night photographs of the gannets on Bird Rock also create disturbance and induce panic and departures from nest sites. As well many gillnets have been set near the colony and close inshore and have reportedly catching numbers of gannets and murrelets this summer.

There is always so much for seabirds to content with – the survivors are tough and the lucky ones. We are fortunate that the Cape St. Mary's interpreters - Edna, Kyran, Wanda and Chris are monitoring the situation carefully.

Birds in the area

Loons and kingfishers were common at Neary's Pond in Portugal Cove during August (Janet Montevecchi). Merlins appeared to be on the move with shorebirds on the northeast coast in late August, when females were seen perching and chasing quarry around Musgrave Harbour.

Cedar waxwings have been seen on Bennett's Road (Wendy Decker) and in the forest below Beachy Cove Mountain (Janet Montevecchi). In late August, a pair of mourning doves were contentedly occupying a wire on Tucker's Hill in Portugal Cove. On 27 August, Richard Northcott observed a Brown thrasher on Ramea. Linda Somerton had purple finches and pine grosbeaks on Bennett's Rd in mid-August.

A red-breasted nuthatch, 8 pine siskins, a greater yellow and a very dirty snowy owl as well as a snowy owl carcass were unusual finds on Funk Island in mid-August.

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