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Ecological diversity deserves protection
Birds I View
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Iceland gull yellow H4 at Quidi Lake during February 2016. The gull was banded by a Memorial University class in 2013 and its final recovery was made at Burton's Pond in January 2020.
(Photo: Lancy Cheng)

We are fortunate to have some very special provincial legislation that sets land aside as natural wealth for perpetuity. The Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Act (WERA 1980) provides the basis for our outstanding provincial protected areas including the Bay du Nord Wilderness Area and the Mistaken Point Ecological Reserve.

Extending from Lawn Bay on Burin Peninsula to the Gannet Islands off Labrador ecological reserves protect our globally significant seabird colonies from development and disturbance. The nesting habitat of most seabirds is protected including the heavily visited seabird communities at Cape St. Mary's and Witless Bay.

WERA functions through an 11-member cabinet advisory committee - WERAC (the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee) that reports to government via the Minister of Fisheries and Land Resources. Unfortunately the process is failing

Standard WERAC procedure involved four annual meetings throughout the province often with community interest groups. Except for a brief conference call, WERAC has not met formally for more than a year. The appointments of committee members expired in 2017, and reappointments as required by legislation have been ignored. Government has choked the functionality of the WERA process to a halt.

In 2009 when Charlene Johnson was environment minister, three ecological reserves were given provisional status (Lawn Bay, Mistaken Point extension, Sandy Cove). Otherwise –

there have been no reserve designations in more than a decade. Our province is expansive with a rich environmental and ecological diversity that deserve better valuation and long-term consideration.

The inaction is not because WERAC has been idle. For more than 10 years, the committee and government staff have worked doggedly with to establish a broad network of representative protected areas in each different ecoregion throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. While minister after minister has paid lip-serve this land management plan, each in turn has committed nothing to secure a proactive provincial conservation network.

The integrity of the WERA process is dependent on the integrity of government regulators. By renegeing its responsibility, government has corrupted WERAC and in so doing has failed the people of the province.

Continuing to engage in this process would involve a complicity that I cannot justify. I will no longer be complicit with a government that has lost sight of its mandate and shirked its responsibility. Fortunately, we have ample opportunity to make where we live a better place. That path requires movement beyond the spinning shenanigans of a government with no clear vision for our land and sea in 2020 or beyond

Lethally injured gull at Burton's Pond

For about a week a severely injured gull with a detached wing hanging by tendons was surviving painfully on bread scraps on the ice at Burton's Pond on the MUN campus. Penney Kennedy of campus enforcement emailed me of the gull's plight.

On Sunday 12 January, with oat bread and nets I went to the pond to attempt a capture. This effort was unsuccessful as the wary gull moved to thin ice and open water. The next day I returned with noose poles. On arrival I met Nicole Krane, a local veterinarian assistant, who was trying to catch the gull.

Having to leave for a meeting I left the pole with Nicole who came close to noosing the gull – it's an acquired skill. Robert Blackmore, Kyle d'Entrement and I returned to the pond met Nicole and Kyle took a try with a pole. But the gull wanted no part of it, spooked and retreated to open water. After a bit, the gull moved back on the ice.

It was my turn. Captures of wild animals involve an interaction between the hunter and the hunted. The animal has to be at ease and "cooperate" in the process. Tossing bits of cracker ahead of me, I bellied on the ice toward the gull. This prone posture doesn't intimidate the gull as standing or sitting does.

Patience is essential. When gull was 15 feet beyond me, I put my head down eliminating eye contact and waited. Then it happened. The gull dragging its ice encrusted broken wing like a ball-and-chain walked directly towards me. I knew then that capture was likely. I managed to get the noose pole over the weakened bird, pinned and grabbed it (<https://vocm.com/2020/01/15/injured-gull/>).

Nicole kept the gull overnight and treated it to a last supper of crab and herring. The wing was beyond repair and the bird was euthanized at a local vet clinic the next morning. A sad tale with a sad ending though a better one than leaving the animal to suffer a slow hypothermic death on ice.

The Iceland gull hatched in the Arctic likely on Baffin Island or Greenland during summer 2012. The gull spent its first winter in St. John's where MUN students, Greg Robertson (Canadian Wildlife Service) and I banded it at Quidi Vidi Lake almost exactly seven years ago to the day in January 2013. It's been a sporadic but long and endearing relationship.

Birds in the area

Eric Button of Gander emailed me with some encouraging bird news. Following a year with a dearth of sharp-shinned hawks, he reported that the hawks were back in town – “Good news for birders, not necessarily for the feeder birds”.

I lamented about not seeing a sharp-shinned hawk in a long time. Then as if a plea was heard, a high-flying sharpie gave a stunning view as it flew over Western Gully Road on New Year's Day. And the next day a sharp-shinned hawk blazed through our bird-feeder complex striking fire in the souls of scattering juncos.

My most recent occurrence of a sharp-shinned hawk came as a sign rather than a sighting. A crimson red spot in the snow with a drift line of tiny gray feathers marked where a hawk had dispatched and began disassembling a junco. Though I had been watching the feeder regularly I missed this kill entirely. Stealth predation has a rapidity and unpredictability that allots the hawk an essential advantage over its victim and more often than not escapes the birdwatcher.

A pair of gray jays made a brief but surprising visit to our feeders on 18 December. Large flocks of robins and 30 waxwings are feasting on the still abundant dogberry supplies in the area.

The mid-January blizzard will reap a toll of land birds and seabirds alike. During the height of the tempest Owen Millan found a stranded dovekie at his doorstep in St. Philips. It remains to be seen what else the storm dispatches and delivers. Stay safe.

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