

Murres tough it out through the Newfoundland winter
Birds I View
Bill Montevecchi



Murres tough out Newfoundland winters through persistent intense feeding activity.
[photo – Bill Montevecchi]

Many bird species invest very considerable effort in risky migrations from breeding areas in high-latitude temperate zones to winter in warm-climate areas where food is readily available. Shearwaters that breed off South Africa and the southern tip of South America spend the southern hemisphere winters in our waters during summer. Arctic terns that nest in the high Arctic and winter in the Antarctic have the longest migration of any bird and cover more mileage over their lifetimes than any animal on our planet.

Our most abundant seabird, the Leach's storm-petrel, makes trans-Atlantic migrations and some move to South African waters before returning in spring to nest. Gannets that rear their young in our ecological seabird reserves winter in the Gulf of Maine, along the southeastern US coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. Thick-billed murres from the arctic migrate to our coastal waters and on the Newfoundland – Labrador Shelf, as do millions of dovebies from massive colonies in northwest Greenland.

Yet the auks that breed in local colonies and that comprise many of our most common seabirds, including puffins and murres, make more modest migrations. They choose instead to cope with winter in the North Atlantic. Murres that breed in colonies in southern Labrador and eastern Newfoundland move to the Grand Banks, where winter survival is a more of a challenge than a given.

Murres have small wings for their body size – a design that permits them to fly both in air and underwater. Their flight in air is labored and energy-demanding while underwater they have a graceful agility that allows them to catch capelin on the wing. Their aerial flight limits options for long distance migration. Yet their wing design is of great benefit as it has allowed the murres to achieve the deepest dive depths of all other birds except penguins.

Recent research at Memorial University is providing insight into what murres have to do to survive the rigors of the North Atlantic winter. Chantelle Burke's doctoral studies involve applying micro-technology to explore the behavior of murres at sea. Light-weight bird-borne activity devices attached to a murre's leg provide information on how much time the bird spent flying, diving, swimming or resting.

To catch prey the murrens engage in intense deep diving during the middle hours of the short winter days when sunlight penetrates deepest in the ocean. The diving effort often pushes a bird into oxygen deficit. Yet the effort needs to be sustained, because to survive a murre has to consume 50% or more of its body weight in food each day. The food fuels the body through the long bone-chilling nights of winter. Storms also present other challenges that can prevent feeding. They pose an unpredictable but constant risk of life and death in the North Atlantic. Remarkably through persistence in the face of winter threats, most murrens tough it out

Implications for the murre hunt

Murrens that winter in coastal bays and along the headlands have similar survival challenges to surmount. And in addition, they are the target of murre hunters. Given the scale of the hunt, the speed of the boats that pursue them, and the power of the automatic weapons that shoot at them, the challenge for murrens to meet food requirements must often be highly compromised.

The murre hunt is valued for its food reality and tradition. To maintain it properly requires the highest standards of integrity and conservation. Murre populations are managed by hunter bag and possession limits, yet we are much less certain about the consequences of hunter disturbance of murrens that are not killed directly though may otherwise be lethally compromised in meeting their daily food requirements. Like the seal hunt, we cannot take the murre hunt for granted and must embrace a conservation attitude with respect to the animals that can help to sustain and enrich our lives in so many ways.

Rogue bulk tanker adrift off Cape St. Mary's

After running into major engine trouble off the Burin Peninsula in August 2014, the disabled bulk oil tanker has sat at dockside in Argentia with its crew abandoned and unpaid. During that time the former *MV Jana* changed owners, names and flags of convenience.

Renamed the *MV Baby Leeyn*, the vessel is owned by Blue Shark Ship Suppliers in Peru and flagged in Panama as country of origin. On 25 November, the tanker left dockside veered off course banged into the Marine Atlantic and kept going on a hit and run voyage. Within tens of kilometers the tanker was adrift off the Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve.

Through some highly skillful maneuvers by the crew of the tug *MV Placentia Hope* a rope was secured to the tanker as it bobbed off the rocks just south of Lear's Cove – a hotspot for harlequin ducks.

With the *MV Baby Leeyn* back at dockside Argentia, one can only wonder what's next? And what about the costs accrued to date, including docking fees, , tug and rescue expenses Marine Atlantic wharf damage We hear Captain Sid Hynes in the media talking about money all the time but not a peep on this one? When CBC questioned the harbor manager about docking fees and wharf damage, he answered with a vague complacency was uncomfortably disturbing. It will take a lot more than complacency to prevent these very preventable calamities from turning into disasters.

Christmas bird count

The St. John's Boxing Day Christmas Bird Count includes Portugal Cove – St. Philips, so if you are out and about or watching your feeder that day or even a few days beforehand and see any interesting birds, I would be very glad to hear about them.

Good, bad and onward

When we think back over the course of the year and the good and the not so good experiences that we have had, it is the good things that will sustain us. My gifts of family and privileges of work override the minor setbacks and detours, and I hope this holds for you as well.

It will soon be a new year, but really it's just another day. Another special day – the first day of the rest of your life. Use it wisely ... carpe diem.

Birds I View columns are at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>. Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 695-5305 [c], 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h]