

**Lessons learned from falling out of a boat  
Birds I View  
Bill Montevecchi**



As a seabird biologist, there are lots of adventures. Some are with birds, some with boats, some with fishers, some with remote islands, and all of them are with the ocean. [photo: Stefan Garthe]

If you spend time on the sea, you will be challenged often when least expecting it. And if the experience isn't lethal, it is usually a valued lesson in survival. Early learning can be pivotal, as it was for me when I was a young boater conducting research on gull nesting success in the Brigantine Wildlife Refuge in southern New Jersey.

Yet salty experienced fishers also make missteps. I remember stopping in Young's dockside diner for some fried green tomatoes, where I met a dejected Jumbo - the iconic fisherman of the marina with a leg cast and crutch. "What happened?" "I tripped over the wharf rope getting into my boat ... I've stepped over that rope 20,000 times!"

My work required extensive daily small boat time negotiating the creeks and thoroughfares of the coastal tidal marshes. A small fleet of 12' aluminum boats with 20- and 25-HP outboard engines were well used by our student contingent. As the sands of the waterways in the marsh shifted constantly with the daily and lunar tides and coastal storms, it was easy to ground a boat suddenly, unexpectedly and especially if one was speeding to damage an engine. Much to my dismay and to my thesis supervisor's, I had many groundings that required engine overhauls.

These were the days when we used hard flotation devices as seat cushions not as personal gear. As green graduate students we held certain boating lore sacred, such as - don't fall in the water with your hip waders because they will fill with water and you will sink like a stone. Always start the outboard engines at low throttle.

For most part we fared well, though I did require a nocturnal search and rescue after an attempt to return our island field station in a dense fog at dusk. My seminal experience however came one day in the middle of Great Thoroughfare where a sluggish outboard sputtered and stalled. This wasn't going to be an easy fix, the engine was really nonresponsive.

So breaking start-up rule number one, I gradually increased the throttle from low to mid-range - nothing. The engine was likely flooded though that didn't occur to me at the time, and I was anxious to get moving. A few more hauls on the starter rope - not a gig. Time to go for

broke – engine cranked to full throttle and to add fuel to the flame I broke the absolute cardinal rule of engine starts – I stood up in the boat to get my best and strongest pull on the engine cord. Heave away my jollies, heave away.

For a split second it was exciting to hear the roar of the engine. Then it was arse over heels as I flew out of the boat. It seemed that I was in the air for a very long time – plenty long enough to regret that I was wearing hip waders and that this might my last breath of fresh air.

A couple of unexpected things occurred as I sank in the water – my hip waders rolled down and did not fill and my oil skin poncho filled with air opening like an umbrella before I had hit the water. Owing to these fortuitous events, I shot out of the water like a buoyant cork blown off a champagne bottle. I sucked in the elation that I wasn't going to drown. Then horror of horrors for a graduate student trying to validate his mettle and his worth, I saw my boat speeding away flat out with no one in it. The brilliant red Rutgers University stenciled on the boat's side struck me light a lightning bolt. What could I possibly say to my thesis supervisor who was a stickler for boat maintenance and who didn't consider me the sharpest tool in the box. I was panicked

But this was real time and contingencies were changing rapidly by the second. The boat started turning in a wide arc. With no one steering the outboard, the engine had shifted to the side against the transom, and the boat was in a high-speed circular trajectory and heading back to me. This seemed interesting and even a bit encouraging. That is until it was clear that the speeding vessel was headed directly at me and was going to run me over. Soon all I could see was the red under-belly of the bow looming up over my head. I reached up with both arms and the momentum of the boat dragged me along the side. Somehow I managed to tumble into the boat where the momentum landed me in the driver's seat with my hand on the steering arm. Without much thinking, I straightened the vessel and continued on course.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the entire affair was the fact that there was a witness. A solo fishermen in a boat about 50 meters away had watched the whole show and to my chagrin there was no way that I could not pass close by him in the channel. We neared and locked eyes in looks of astonishment, and I yelled "I always start my boat this way" as I zoomed by. Interestingly, I never told anyone about this for decades – it all seemed too unbelievable for words.

The mistakes made are obvious and numerous. There are tragic examples of boaters getting mangled by outboard props. I was lucky that time. Because I had the opportunity - next time I was wiser.

## **Local Christmas bird count**

The Boxing Day Portugal Cove – St. Philips component of the St. John's Christmas Bird Count had a record number of participants and a low count of 22 bird species. The cutting winds kept the land birds hunkered down in the forest and moved some seabirds into our bays. Interesting species observed included a long-tailed duck and red-breasted mergansers in St. Philips, and bald eagles, a sharp-shinned hawk and purple finches in Portugal Cove. Bird of the count went to Nick and Gioia Montevecchi who identified a female golden-crowned kinglet in the meadow below Beachy Cove Mountain. We were hoping that we might pick-up the mourning doves that visit Rex Porter's feeder on Tolt Road, we didn't but two doves showed up

on 27 December. Meanwhile on the 27<sup>th</sup> in St. Philips, Rich Nugent found a dozen doves sheltering under his deck.

### **Birds in the area**

A snow goose and a male wood duck are unusual visitors to the estuary in Branch [Chris Mooney]. Dovekies or bullbirds have been blown to the coast with some stranding on land from Labrador to the Southern Shore.

A flock of American goldfinches was seen in Portugal Cove within days of the Christmas Bird Count when they went unseen [Janet Montevecchi]. A fox sparrow is scratching at Wendy Decker's feeder in Portugal Cove, and there are reports of evening grosbeaks visiting a feeder on Tolt Road.

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