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**We calls em hagdowns and bawks
Birds I View
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Great shearwater – a trans-equatorial migrant that spends its winter [our summer] in Newfoundland waters

On the south coast we calls em hagdowns. “Let me fish off Cape St. Mary’s where the hagdowns sail and the fog horns wail.” On the north coast we calls em bawks. “We’ll have to live on crows and hawks, for there’s a bloody law agin the killing of the bawk.” The dark ones we calls black bawks and the small ones black above and white below we calls skerwinks.

As the songs sing us, shearwaters go by many different names in Newfoundland waters. And - they are good to eat. Enter Bill and Murdoch (lightkeeper) on Green Island off the southern tip of the Burin Peninsula, July 1990. Bill, “What did you have for lunch?” Murdoch, “Liver.” “Beef?” “No bird.” “Chicken?” “No hagdown.”..“Wow! ... For desert?” “Partridge berry pie.” So – who needs Raymond’s?

The common shearwaters in our waters are the great shearwater (depicted in photo) and the sooty shearwater (black bawk). They are long-distance migrants from nesting grounds in the southern hemisphere to wintering grounds in the northern hemisphere. And though they have to make Herculean efforts to do so, these birds live in a perpetual summer climate – the best of both hemispheres.

During summer, great and sooty shearwaters occur here in the millions. There were reports of the Argentia ferry steaming through seabirds blanketing kilometers of water in Placentia Bay in early July. The birds were sooty and great shearwaters and were likely feeding on large schools of capelin or herring (Harry Brown, Pierre Ryan).

The Cory's shearwater is a warm-water shearwater that nests on Portuguese islands and the Azores. It is rare visitor to our cold low arctic ocean.

.....The Manx shearwater (skerwink) is the only shearwater that breeds in North America. Their small but significant colony in the Lawn Bay Ecological Seabird Reserve is the species' tenuous continental stronghold. In the 1970s when the Newfoundland this colony was founded, bird bands indicated that some of the pioneering shearwaters came from the large Welsh colonies on Skomer and Skokholm. On Middle Lawn Island, the Manx shearwaters have been preyed on by mink and short-eared owls.

.....And it's not an easy life at sea. In the northwest Atlantic, shearwaters are caught on baited long-lines and entangled and drown in gillnets. They are attracted to offshore oil platforms where they are at risk of oiling and collisions with structures. As well, shearwaters often ingest considerable quantities of plastic litter.

..... It's tough being a shearwater in Newfoundland, though we might be able to improve their conditions. When Jon Lien and Anne Storey discovered and documented the Manx shearwater colony, Jon devised a few artificial nest boxes with stove pipe entrances simulating a nest-burrow entrance. Some of these burrows attracted nesting shearwaters. Given the species' circumstances in the Middle Lawn Island colony, now is an opportune time to lend the species a helping hand. I am working to try to develop some community-based (Lord's Cove and Lawn) research initiatives long these lines. We can make a difference.

Robin tales

Two robin success stories were came to my attention. Ed Churchill of Indian Meal Line in Portugal Cove brought me a robin's nest that was woven with blue nylon strips gleaned from an old deteriorated tarp (there is a picture of the nest on my facebook page). I often see plastic in gannet nests but this was the first time that I had seen so much plastic woven into a land bird's nest. The nest-builder was clearly a debris scavenger, and the nest also contained monofilament line and twine. Like the plastic cord and netting in a gannet's, plastic and nylon lines can ensnare a nestling or adult leading to long slow excruciating death. Ed came across a young robin hanging out of the nest with its leg entwined in a strip of the blue nylon.

He released the young bird and replaced it in the nest. Remarkably the parents continued to feed the nestling and the next day the bird was gone hopefully as a successful fledgling venturing off on its next adventure.

Sally Goddard of Middle Cove was concerned about a robin's nest near her front door. Good fortune and no doubt some vigilant parental and householder caution resulted in the successful fledging of two birds from the nest.

Birds in the area

Bill Bryden of Lumsden is a keen bird observer. He notes a snowy owl in the Deadman's vicinity in late July, two pairs of loons without young in Lumsden (this may be a widespread occurrence this year), a pair of short-eared owls at Cape Freels and a blue grosbeak in Newtown.

Bill also has many bird concerns. Purple finches are being infected with frounce at feeders in Lumsden, and there is high red squirrel predation on birds' nests this summer (possibly related to a mild winter and enhanced survival). He notes the lack of young whimbrels arriving from arctic breeding grounds, and the reduced numbers of goshawk nests from 2017 despite an abundance of rabbits. Good news comes in form of a pair of kestrels nesting in one of his woodpecker boxes installed in Lumsden.

At Pouch Cove, Helen Forsey is seeing numbers of cedar waxwings, robins and pipits.

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