

**Merging perspectives on a common loon
Birds I View
Bill Montevercchi**



Loon grace our waterways and their ethereal captivate our imagination. (Photo: Rick West)

Why such a magnificent bird continues to be referred to as a common loon is beyond me. There is not much common about them – their elegance and grace and their enchanting ethereal calls endear them as iconic symbols of the Canadian wilderness.

Most of my up close encounters have been with loons that were injured or entangled. But my first personal encounter is my most indelibly memorable. It was my first visit to meet my then to be future mother- and father-in-laws, Katherine and Thomas Dalton, at their home in North Harbour, St. Mary's Bay.

From Janet, my then to be future wife, Tom knew that I had a keen interest in birds, and we would come to often talk about them. It gave us a sense of shared dialogue. As hunter, Tom had a keen knowledge of birds, their habits and habitats which he discussed with a rich fabric of Newfoundland dialect and names - Turrs, tinkers, hounds, winkers and wobbles.

With what might have been a twinkle in his eye, Tom said he had something to show me. We walked out to the shed, and there hanging by twine around its legs was a magnificent loon

that he had shot earlier that day. The loon was HUGE beautiful and had blood dripping from its beak.

I was aghast and had difficulty speaking ... cognitive flash ... it's not hunting season ... cognitive flash 2 ... it's illegal to hunt loons anyway. Cognitive flash 3 get a grip, focus ... "Yes, Tom that is one lovely bird. I didn't realize how big they were" [note past tense]. ... [and ultimately] "What do they taste like?"

I think Tom said good and maybe something about fishy but I was having trouble registering the recipe, as I didn't imagine that I would ever have the basis for comparison.

I've thought about that loon and Tom a lot and what has happened since. I don't think Tom ever shot another loon – the one in the shed was a prize. And what about me. When I think about and try to tally the birds that I've killed, injured or disturbed in my scientific pursuits, Tom's loon shot for food pales in comparison. Sometimes I stand horrified in the perception of birds that I have killed deliberately, by accident and by ignorance.

Has it been worth it from my perspective? It has to be. I've exploited birds for decades for scientific study and research objectives and for personal success as a seabird scientist. I did not exploit the birds for food but no different than a hunter I exploited them for enjoyment and personal benefit.

So in retrospect, and I've held that retrospect for a long time, Tom and I had very much more in common than I could ever have initially realized. Sometimes it takes a long time to understand these things. And most unfortunately sometimes we overlook them.

Self-regulations and self-reporting by oil corporations

Do we really know how much oil was leaked from the Sea Rose floating platform when it attempted to restart production in 30 foot seas? Husky Oil, a corporation which is liable for ocean pollution provided a figure of 250,000 liters. The regulator, the C-NLOPB repeated the company's information. All news media reported a spill of 250,000 liters no questions asked.

Yet there are reasons to be skeptical about these numbers. One is the complex way in which these estimates are made. The little I know indicates that such estimates are based on flow rates from pipes of specific diameters with potential errors arising in both the rates (affected by temperature) and durations of the flows. And all estimates need to have confidence intervals to account for inherent and unexplained errors.

Another reason for skepticism in volume estimates by vested interest oil companies is that they have a checkered history on the Grand Banks. Take for example, the spill at the Hibernia platform on December 18, 2013. It was not until January 3, 2014, that Hibernia reported this event, providing a volume estimate of 10 liters of crude oil. The C-NLOPB repeated the company numbers.

This was an ongoing event, because Hibernia also noted that between 0.009 and 0.8 liters of crude oil was on the water on December 27, 2013. Think about the precision of those numbers - 0.009 liters of oil would barely stain a tea cup.

During a talk to some hydrocarbon geologists, I gave an “oil in the tea cup” demonstration and contended that the oil companies are the self-reporting misinformation about oil spills on the Grand Banks. One of the larger hydrocarbon types in the audience blurted out very loudly that I had insulted everyone in the room. I had not - the insult was the misreporting by Hibernia.

As the self-reporting continued, on January 18, 2014 – Hibernia revised its estimate of the event from 10 liters to 6,000 liters. A correction factors of 600 times given a month after that original event was reported to have occurred. Now compare the magnitude of that error with the precision of the 0.009 liter report, and ask yourself what confidence you would have in these or other volume estimates by oil companies that are then are parroted by the regulator?

Birds in and around the area

While watching a male hairy woodpecker visiting one of our two suet feeders, I am also keeping a close watch for PCSP bird feeder police. Birds were flocking to feeders after the heavy snowfall of 6 December, and at least one sharp-shinned took advantage of the aggregation at the Mayo’s feeder by Neary’s Pond. Small flocks of pine grosbeaks have been moping about the forest near Blast Hole Ponds (Janet Montevocchi). A huge flock of 100 or so American Goldfinches is visiting Bruce Bennett’s feeder in Manuels – Long Pond.

Well, it’s that time of year when we often stop to ponder and evaluate. Take the opportunity and use it well. What you do really matters. Godspeed.

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