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**Participating in an international seabird conference**

**Birds I View  
Bill Montevecchi**



MUN students who made presentations at the Pacific Seabird Conference at the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in San Diego, California. Left to right – Noah Careen, Tori Burt, Sydney Collins, Gretchen McPhail, Parker Doiron.

Owing to covid restrictions, it has been years since my students and I have had the opportunity to attend an in-person conference. These events provide opportunities to hone communication skills and present research ideas directly to groups of experts. It is a long-standing scientific tradition, and there is no substitute for direct presentation and critical assessment.

At an international conference, a presentation scores as a big league performance. Preparing for a conference also provides strong incentive to finish a thesis chapter or publication on which the talk is based.

The experience provides networking opportunities with peers working on different problems, in different geographic areas and in our case – different ecosystems and seabird species. The experiences can be formative, especially for students developing career skills. The opportunities are all the more engaging if the conference is being held in an interesting location that offers novel cultural or geographical experiences.

The first conference that I attended while finishing my Ph.D. was the international ethology conference held in Parma, Italy in the region of Emilia Romagna – where my paternal great grandparents came from. Montevicchi was a relatively common name, and I felt comfortable. My talk however was terrifying and less than remarkable. Yet even so, an editor of a major European animal behaviour journal invited me to send him some of my work for consideration for publication.

I met Konrad Lorenz (“the father of ethology”) and young Dutch, Italian and German scientists studying birds, chimpanzees and wolves. A local physician who had an interest in birds took me to lunch in cellar café where we dined on the special of day - catfish– different and delicious. That first conference was stimulating and illuminating in ways that paved much of my future direction and effort.

This year another such an occasion arose. During February the Pacific Seabird Group – to my evaluation best seabird conference in the world - held its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting at the Scripps Oceanographic Institute in San Diego. Participants included a nice blending of elders and youth, ethnicity, nationality and seabird researchers from five continents (all six if temporary residences in Antarctica are counted).

Our participating lab group consisted of three graduate students, two undergraduate honours students and me. PhD student Sydney Collins was the first to present and she overviewed her research on what is known about personality among seabirds. Next Masters students – Tori Burt and Parker Doiron – talked about their

research on light pollution and the attraction and mortality of Leach's Storm-Petrels at coastal sites and on fishing vessels.

When it was my turn, I summarized the dismal year that seabirds had in Newfoundland in 2022. It started with the spring die-off of murrelets, then as summer broke the avian flu killed tens of thousands of gannets and murrelets. During fall as occurs every year, thousands of fledgling storm-petrels strand near bright light pollution sources along the coast, on vessels and on offshore hydrocarbon platforms.

Next BSc Honors student Gretchen McPhail gave a stunning presentation on the avian flu and its transmission and consequences in Newfoundland. Gretchen was awarded an Honorable Mention prize for best presentation by a BSc student. Noah Careen another BSc Honors student presented a poster on the poor breeding success of the gannets at Cape St. Mary's during the avian flu pandemic and its interaction with the influences of a marine heat wave. Noah was presented with the People's Choice Poster Award.

As well, we squeezed in time to check some local seabirds, many of which are breeding in southern California at this time, and enjoyed some remarkable Mexican and Asian food. The conference and experiences have refueled and reinvigorated our work with the new perspectives and influences gained and with our communication with new and old colleagues with whom we share research interests and commitments.

### **Steady state growth for rural communities**

A mantra for sensible and sustainable environmental development has been – “think globally and act locally.” A quick assessment of the communities on the northeast Avalon show that such an approach has been cast to the wind.

Most communities appear hell-bent on expanding and developing well beyond the bounds of either sensibility or sustainability. The basic underlying and gnawing question is – WHY? This is basic philosophical query that town councils never address or even consider.

WHY? ... to generate more tax-base revenues? ... to expand fiefdom bureaucracies? ... to buy more equipment (e.g. trucks, noisy polluting leaf blowers vs. brooms)? ... more staff? ... to secure more government grants? ... WHY?

WHY? ... to remove more forest? ... to add more superfluous signage? ... to install more unnecessary street lighting? ... WHY?

Can any town council conceive of the notion of steady state community growth? Within such a scenario, there is more than ample room for development. All of our communities have vibrant small businesses, and many are being developed, modified and created. Investments in the quality of life are ongoing.

A recent face book posting by Peter Dynes clarified the issue. "First, there was 'sustainable' growth. Then there was 'smart' growth ... now 'green' growth. Growth is destroying the livable planet for all species. Growth is the problem. It needs to end." Does anyone have the vision to see this?

### **Avian influenza in the area**

The avian influenza is still present in the region. Bobby Blackmore informed me of a report from Virginia Connors of a strange acting male American wigeon that died recently at Quidi Vidi Lake and a mallard that died on Virginia Lake. The mallard was retrieved and is being assayed for H5N1. Virginia also reported two more dead ducks at Virginia Lake and by Kent's Pond.

A dying fox in the woods above Portugal Cove (Nick Montevocchi) tested positive for avian flu (Karen Gosse). The virus could be much more risky now that it has spread from birds to mammals.

Birds I View columns are available 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]