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Re-envisioning the seal hunt

Birds I View

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Thanking skipper Edison Easton for all the wonderful fruits de mer that he provides.

Lo and behold - the seal hunt is gaining some positive attention in the province. If we do it right we could return to a reasoned and sustainable use of these magnificent marine animals.

The Broadcast on CBC Radio is giving the benefits of the seal hunt lots of attention. A recent panel discussion on the future of the seal hunt explored the many positive dimensions of a renewed seal hunt (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGdRk2Pvfs8>). Some of this positivity could radiate outwards – a “build it and they will come” strategy.

As recognized by medical practitioners, nutritionists and users, seal oil is one of the world’s best sources of health-benefitting omega fatty acids. Seal oil helps promote prenatal

development, reduces cholesterol and enhances joint performance. The usage of seal oil is increasing.

Seal meat is tasty and can be prepared in many different ways. Recently my wife Janet and I were treated to a traditional flipper dinner prepared by Skipper Edison Easton of Carmanville. With carrots, turnip, potatoes and onions from his garden, the meal was beyond the pale – perfect. The meat flaked off the bone like pot roast and was just as delicious.

Ed gave us some flippers that I look forward to preparing. Cleaning the fat from the flippers is key to preparation. The ones Ed gave me are immaculate.

Recipes are available on the Canadian Sealers Association website - <https://www.sealharvest.ca/recipes-2/>, as are numerous other options on social media. Seal is a great substitute for beef, 70 % of which comes from two Alberta meat factories where half of the workers have contracted covid. Meat from a clean ocean is the better alternative.

Seal meat can also provide healthy nutrition for pets. I buy carcasses that I butcher and feed to the huskies in our family. Sometimes we mix the meat with chopped vegetable leftovers.

Seal skins are attractive, warm and have multiple uses. Some are basic and some are elegant – mitts, gloves, boots, hats, coats.

Focusing on the positive aspects of the seal hunt also helps move the public and political debate from inordinate emphasis on a self-defeating cull. Every time a possible temporary closure or quota reduction of a fishery is raised, a first reaction is that the seals are taking too many fish.

Seals and fish have evolved together in an interactive food web, and high numbers of seals have been associated with high abundances of fish. Issues that focus on the “over population of seals ” are aimed the symptoms of overfishing not at the problem. Calls to

“balance” the ecosystem are counter-intuitive in as much as our interventions are primarily disruptive. The sins of the fishery fall on the seals.

Long-term projections for the harp seal population in the North Atlantic are not good. Harp seals depend on sea ice to give birth to their pups. Warming ocean temperature is not acting in their favor. Arctic sea ice is melting at exponential rates and the extent and thickness of sea ice along our coasts and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence is lessening year by year. This year the ice did not move as far south as the traditional sealing area at “the front” off the northeast Newfoundland coast, and sealers had to work in ice off the tip of the northern peninsula and in southern Labrador.

So why is the seal hunt important? For human well-being, it is absolutely essential that we maintain our consumptive relationships with wildlife and the natural world. The sustainable hunting and harvesting of natural foods whenever and however possible is a life-sustaining process that must not be severed. Reducing dependence on industrially produced meat, fish and vegetables, especially when healthier, more environmentally friendly natural sustainable options are available is a prescription from which everyone could benefit.

Recent flooding

Following the torrential spring rains, flooding occurred around the Murray’s Pond lodge, over Ayre’s Road, and across and through many flooded driveways along Portugal Cove Road. Wetlands buffer flooding, and the infilling of the wetland directly across from Murray’s Pond very likely exacerbated the situation. By retaining and cleaning water in a natural state, wetlands provide environmental services that we destroy by infilling.

Birds in the area

On 27 April feeding frenzies of gannets from Baccalieu Island were plunging off Long Pond Manuals (Linda Gaborko) and gannets from Funk Island were plunging in Lumsden (John Melindy). Gannets were seen in Musgrave Harbour on 25 April. Feeding flocks of gannets in early spring are sure sign that Atlantic herring have moved inshore.

An injured gannet that was recovered from Portugal Cove beach by the intrepid Gail Gladney may have struck an object while diving on herring possibly fish in a gillnet. Dr. Laura Dominguez diagnosed the bird with a brain injury. She is treating the animal with a neck brace, acupuncture, vitamins, ice-packs and baths. The gannet is recovering, though we do not know if the bird will recover enough for release into the wild.

Returning loons have been seen on Gull Pond, Mitchell's Pond and Windsor Lake (Rita Anderson). Flocks of eiders were congregating off Anchor Brook on the northeast coast, and snipe were winnowing in Musgrave Harbour on 23-24 April (Marina Montevecchi). A rare sighting of a pair of sharp-shinned hawk was made on Neary's Pond Road in late April (Nick Montevecchi).

A road kill of a ruffed grouse found on the road to Aspen Cove had red body plumage and gray tail feathers. Ruffed grouse were introduced to Newfoundland and usually occur in one of two color phases – red or gray. Presumably the red/gray bird that was a hybrid between them?

Cavity nesting starlings are building nests. People are reporting birds in chimneys. To avoid problems, chimneys and other vents and household openings can be temporarily covered with hardware cloth

In St. John's, Ange Stokes was pleasantly surprised to find juncos nesting in a wreath on her front door. She barred off the entrance and is watching developments. Also in St. John's, Wendy Zebniak has a singing grackle at her feeder.

A flock of 50 – 60 robins were feeding in Max and Doris Smith's yard in Hodges Cove in early April. This is an annual spring event at the Smiths suggesting they are on a spring migration flyway that is used by robins returning to eastern Newfoundland.

The freezing rains and winds of mid-April did not dampen the exuberance of a Musgrave Harbour song sparrow in full, glorious and wind-swept song. A fox sparrow was singing in Ladle Cove on 23 April when a few lingering snow bunting were flitting along the beach (Janet Montevecchi, Giles Dodds).

It's spring – regardless of the weather there is just so much going on. Watch the unfolding.

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https://www.mun.ca/psychology/montevecchi/public_outreach/birds_i_view/