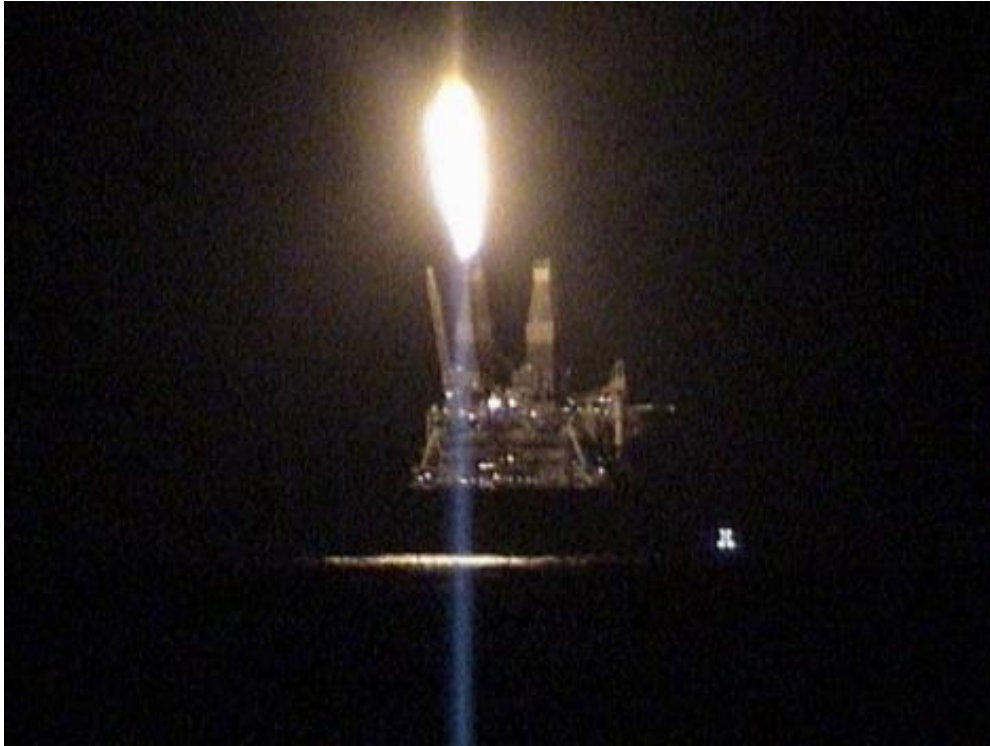


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**The ongoing plight of Mother Carey's chickens  
Birds I View  
Bill Montevecchi**



Flare on Hibernia platform that attracts kills nocturnal birds at sea (photo: Chantelle Burke)

You may not see these tiny robin-sized cryptic brown seabirds because they occur well out at sea and only return to their coastal island colonies at night. Yet they're out in the millions. With a name like storm-petrel you may not want to see them. Fishermen know them as carey chicks or mother carey's chickens. These names are derived from mater cara or dear mother that imply - depending on location and circumstance - either visions of hope from the blessed virgin or visions of doom from a sea witch.

My personal epiphany with the name came after years of reveling in David Blackwood's painting "The Sign" which depicts men with outstretched arms in an open boat in a terrible sea with a seabird in the foreground. I had surmised that the bird was signaling hope and survival. That is, until a fisherman from Blackwood's community referred to storm-petrels as a "pall caries" – providing me with a realization that the bird in the painting was indeed a sign of doom.

**Why worry?**

So if there are millions of them, why should there be concern about their population declining? There are many reasons. But foremost - a species' abundance is no guarantee of its long-term survival. Abundant species have often crashed rapidly to extinction. The most

striking bird example is the passenger pigeon whose flocks were said to block out the sun for hours on end. All too soon it became apparent that there couldn't be a few passenger pigeons, their social structure required that there be myriads of them or none at all.

Closer to home, we eradicated the last flightless bird in the northern hemisphere. Great auks were so abundant in our coastal waters that for the Basques they navigational indicators of the Grand Banks. And consider the populations of the ever so abundant cod and caribou showing clearly that a species' abundance is no assurance of its well-being.

### **Plummeting storm-petrel population**

Our initial census in the 1980s on Baccalieu Island, the largest Leach's storm-petrel colony in the world totaled almost 7,000,000 breeding birds. Since then a Canadian Wildlife Service estimate revealed only about 4,000,000 breeding storm-petrels there in 2013, about a 40% decline. The situation is worse in the storm-petrels' second largest colony in Witless Bay, where breeding number have declined by more than 50% since the early 2000s, with a loss of more than 600,000 breeding birds.

These losses comprise 40 to 50 % of the world population. Just consider what such devastation might look like for our human population. The situation is so serious that the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the body that designates species' statuses, has listed Leach's storm-petrel as Vulnerable or at risk of becoming Endangered (very likely to become extinct).

### **Causes of the decline**

Storm-petrels are vulnerable to many threats some human-induced and some not, and these threats may act in concert. Scientists in Newfoundland and Atlantic Canada focus on four potential causes of the population demise - 1) predation, 2) climate and food, 3) pollution and 4) night-lighting along coasts and on ships and offshore hydrocarbon platforms.

Gulls are the storm-petrels' primary predators, but they do not appear to be a major driver of the population decline. Gull numbers on Baccalieu are very low, and owing to the cod moratorium and reduced organic refuse at dumps, gull populations are declining.

Interestingly, Dr. April Hedd's long-term research is showing that storm-petrel breeding success is high indicating that summer food is sufficient. Studies are underway to better understand food availability outside the breeding season.

Surprisingly, storm-petrels have high body burdens of mercury. Studies by CWS biologist Neil Burgess show higher mercury levels among birds in the large declining Newfoundland colonies compared to colonies in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Not much is known about plastic ingestion but it is on the research agenda.

Maybe due to their exploitation of bioluminescent prey like lantern-fish and possibly to the use of celestial and lunar navigational cues, storm-petrels are highly attracted to light. In fact, they are the most vulnerable seabird to coastal lighting and to lights on ships and offshore platforms. Anecdotal evidence indicates that storm-petrels are disintegrated in flares, injured and

oiled during platform collisions, but without independent observations there are no estimates of the overall mortality imposed.

All of these sources of mortality can cumulate, yet there is only one that we can act upon directly – unnecessary offshore (and coastal) lighting and flaring.

### **What can we do to help?**

Research is clearly needed to better understand the causes of species' decline, so conservative management possibilities might be developed. This is critically important because over 20 years of offshore oil production under C-NLOPB regulation, nothing has been done about the brilliant illumination of offshore platforms. And true to the task of obscuring seabird issues, there are contrary to corporate testimonies as public hearings, no scientifically credible data about seabirds at platforms. So much could be done and is being done in other countries, including reducing flaring during night and migration periods and using green light to reduce bird attraction without compromising worker safety.

If Leach's storm-petrels were to disappear, would anyone even miss them?

### **Birds in and around the area**

Not that they don't have enough to contend with, during early October strong onshore winds stranded storm-petrels on land. St. John's airport was apparently littered with dead and dying storm-petrels being swept and sucked up by a vacuum truck cleaning the area. Ian Jones noticed a live storm-petrel trapped in the barrier nets at Kelly's Brook ballfield where it had been attracted by the lights. Some good Samaritans rescued wayward birds and released them by the sea at night

On 5 October, Rich Nugent spotted 37 Canada geese flying in V formation over the Village Mall. Five mourning doves are resident at his place in St. Philips. In Portugal Cove, Tim Cohen flushed an eagle likely feeding on a dead gannet in Goat Cove. In early November small flocks of white-rumped sandpipers and sanderlings were foraging for worm-like larvae on the lawns of Musgrave Harbour. Julie Huntington noted flocks of starlings feeding slugs in her yard in Portugal Cove.

Are gray jays becoming more conspicuous in local communities? During October in Portugal Cove, a gray jay enlivened the boreal forest on Marlene Creates' property, and two gray jays visited our yard (Nick Montevecchi).

In earlier October Cynthia Mercer of St. Philips posted some stunning pictures of a female hairy woodpecker on the Newfoundland Bird Watching Group website. A sharp-shinned hawk was seen in Musgrave Harbour harassing house sparrows roosting in the protected confines of a stack of lobster pots and American goldfinches flocks were feeding on the abundant fall crops of wild grass seeds (Janet Montevecchi).

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