

Northeast Avalon Times June 2021

This land is not our land

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



“We respectfully acknowledge the territory in which we gather as the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk, and ... the Mi’kmaq We ... recognize the Inuit of Nunatsiavut and NunatuKavut and the Innu of Nitassinan, and their ancestors, as the original people of Labrador. We strive for respectful relationships with all the peoples of this province as we search for collective healing and true reconciliation ...” . (Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador Land Acknowledgement)

Among the many collateral environmental benefits of the covid pandemic, our craving for the great outdoors is pervasive. Changes in individual activities and lifestyles are evident. More people are hiking, walking, running, biking, gardening and doing it more than before.

Given this level of appreciation, now seems to be an opportune time to consider our relationship with our provincial lands and waterways. A constructive option is to read the Wilderness and Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee’s (WERAC) report on public feedback on the protected areas plan released on 28 May 2020 (<https://www.engagenl.ca/engagement-initiatives/home-nature-protected-areas-plan-island-newfoundland>). The feedback is telling.

The long-reach of provincial protected areas is evident. WERAC received about 900 written responses - a majority (56%) of which supported the Plan: 42% supported the Plan as a whole, while 14% of supporters had some reservations.

Those who did not support the Plan (44%) were either against the Plan generally (25%), or against protecting specific proposed reserves or a region (19%). Most of the potential protected area was on the Great Northern Peninsula-Baie Verte region, where about two-thirds of respondents were against the Plan as a whole or against protecting the region or specific reserves.

Major concerns focused on the potential loss of traditional activities. I share this concern. Living a good part of the year in Musgrave Harbour on the northeast coast, I am immersed in and benefit from wood-cutting, hunting, fishing, hiking and biking. This sort of community ambience makes living in rural Newfoundland so enriching and engaging. Protected areas should not and need not demise traditional ways of rural life.

Yet, there is absolute need for protecting areas where our footprints are minimized or even not allowed. We have to do this if we want to have any natural gauge or baseline of unimpeded environmental change. The land and the waterways are our environmental ancestry, and they are much too sacred to trammel.

Though it is common practice, it is not a tradition to drive ATVs through bogs or scream dirt bikes over sand dunes. It is not traditional to hunt caribou from powerful snow machines or to shoot murrelets with automatic weapons from fiberglass speedboats. It is not a tradition to construct aquaculture sites near the mouths of wild salmon rivers. These transgressions need to be checked. If not, it's like promoting an unhealthy diet or alcohol or drug abuse. There is no good and lots of harm to come from it.

As we try to move forward with protected area relationships, we must address the fundamental question of land ownership. The Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador land management statement above attempts to provide some sense of these relationships. This recognition and awareness is becoming widespread in Canada, the U.S. and globally. Protected areas are being considered in the context of colonialism and as part of the reconciliation process with indigenous peoples. As Innu elder Tshaukuesh [Elizabeth Penashue] writes, her presence "on the land" (*nutshimit*) "keeps the land alive". We must strive to do the same ... together.

Rescue of a nestling starling

European starlings are experiencing a population boom on the northeast Avalon. About 100 of these non-native birds were introduced from England to Central Park in New York City in the late 1800s. There well more than that number today in Portugal Cove alone. Owing to their

adaptability and resilience, starlings now breed throughout all of North America and nest inside the Arctic Circle.

Starlings get a lot of bad press. Much of this has to do with their nesting in chimneys, vents and other openings homes and other buildings. Yet starlings are truly “stars” in their own right

(https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=388188542569580&external_log_id=50352942-cb2e-4ccc-ae4e-ca34a4ec176c&q=starlings).

On 3 June, Randy Burry called me about a young flightless starling in his yard. We discussed the arduous task of attempting to rear such a young bird which even if successful, its released to the wild would unlikely. Randy returned the bird to its nest hole in the building adjacent to his property. As the parental bonds were still strong, a pair of starlings was soon delivering food to their rescued offspring. Randy thinks that the parents may have been watching all the time that the chick was out of the nest.

Birds in the area

A greater yellowlegs perched atop a rock in Musgrave Harbour on 17 May was a first sighting of the year (Janet Montevecchi). Another was seen on 19 May. Caspian terns were in Ladle Cove and near the mouth of Ragged Harbour River on 22 May.

A yellow-bellied flycatcher and male hairy woodpecker provided some free-ranging enhancements on a enjoyable walk on the Salmonier Nature Park trail. My one disappointment is with the housing of a peregrine falcon in a heavily forested aviary. The species inhabits open tundra, and the falcon in the park must be distraught in such a living arrangement.

On Ramea, Richard Northcott photographed a wood thrush on 5 May. Richard also sent me an interesting image of an unusual behaviour of crows feeding from salt water. Crows are clever and industrious birds that are constantly exploring feeding and predatory options.

May 27 turned out to be one of those exceptional birding days on Ramea. Richard watched two catbirds on his lawn all day long, and saw a female rose-breasted grosbeak, a chestnut-sided warbler, and a resilient one legged white- throated sparrow.

The persistence of a northern waterthrush’s song was ringing loud and clear by Neary’s Pond on the morning of 14 May. They seem to be everywhere. So far the bird of the year at Auk House in Musgrave Harbour is a white-crowned sparrow that was spotted by Aspen Montevecchi. White-crowned sparrows are usually found on the tip of the northern peninsula and in Labrador. A pesky song sparrow has been chasing the white-crowned sparrow around.

This is a busy time for birds rearing and caring for their young. There will soon be a flux fledglings flitting about the yards and forests. Stay alert.

Contacts = mont@mun.ca, 864-7673[w], 895-2901[h], 693-5305 [c]. Birds I View columns can be found on Twitter and Facebook and at https://www.mun.ca/psychology/montavecchi/public_outreach/birds_i_view/