

## Arctic murre die-off associated with inshore sea ice

### Birds I View

#### Bill Montevecchi



TBMU on ledge at Akpait Island (photo: T. Gaston)

On 28 and 29 March, Chantelle Burke and I picked up 20 emaciated dead thick-billed murres on the beaches of St. Philips and Portugal Cove. There was a widespread die-off, and more than 200 carcasses were retrieved and examined by the Canadian Wildlife Service. Just over 10 % of the dead birds were common murres. The dead birds were associated with the arctic sea ice that was jammed into Conception Bay.

Most of the carcasses were found on beaches in Holyrood, Clarke's Beach, Chapel's Cove and a few were picked up at Topsail Beach and in Foxtrap. Outside of Conception Bay, dead murres were found in Middle Cove, Outer Cove and at Cape Broyle.

As is their wont, eagles and gulls took advantage of the situation. Many got a feed of fresh but weakened and wasted turr.

You may recall a similar kill of murre along the coasts at about the same time two years ago. During April 2007, sustained northerly winds blocked the pack ice along the northeast coast entrapping the sealing vessels in the flows.

How can it be that hardy seabirds that breed on the wind chilled and icy cliffs of the Canadian Arctic and Greenland die when arctic sea ice is pushed in along the Newfoundland coast? It is clear that the birds had starved to death. They were not oiled, and according to the provincial vet they had no traces of avian flu.

### **Analysis of the kill**

In both years but more so in 2007, high numbers of first-year murre were among the dead. This suggested that inexperience may have played a role in their deaths. This is also the case among murre killed in the hunt, suggesting that adults may learn to avoid and escape hunters.

In 2009 and in 2007, more females than males were found dead on the beaches. With respect to adult birds, could it be that adult females readying for the upcoming laying season are more physiologically challenged than the males? In contrast, the hunting data that I have seen from suggests that more males than females are killed by hunters.

The extensive sea ice pushed the birds in shore. Then as the ice rammed tighter against the coast, it imprisoned the birds in small patches of open water. These areas were likely too small to allow the murre to secure food and in some instances too small to provide an adequate water runway for take-off. The birds seemed to avoid flying over extensive expanses of sea ice and also avoided diving under it.

Presumably the dying murre move on to the beaches to hold off the terminal icy grip of hypothermia. Our study is ongoing, but it appears that ice-imprisonment forced starvation that led to hypothermia and caused the deaths of these robust and hearty high arctic seabirds. We have witnessed another striking demonstration of the cutting edge of natural environmental power and uncertainty.

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

Sea ice has also been congregating other marine birds along our coasts. A flock of hundreds of eiders have been between Middle Cove and Torbay

(Rudolphe Devilliers). On Easter Saturday many hundreds of Black Guillemots were aggregated inside the ice off Cape Spear (Janet Montevecchi, Ann Marie Dalton).

The gannets are swirling around the Cape St. Mary's, and the horned larks are flitting on the barrens (Tony Power).

A flock of 35 evening grosbeaks has been visiting the Mayo's feeder near Neary's Pond. Bruce Porter has the first ever red crossbill at his feeder in Lewisporte. I received a very informative letter from Richard Northcott in Ramea which I will review in the next column.

A colorful male pine grosbeak has been visiting local feeders (Carolyn Mayo, David Artiss), the female is at our feeder up the road. They should soon be paired tightly.

For some time now, crows and ravens have been carrying nest material and nest-building (Linda Russell). Since on April 1<sup>st</sup> when the first foolish junco began trilling his spring proclamation from atop a tall spruce, the area has been enlivened with song. The robins, fox sparrows, chickadees are all attune, it is the essence of life and spring renewal that you hear. Keep listening, drink it in and keep looking - loons, osprey, snipe and warblers will all be arriving imminently.

### **Farewell Dad – Godspeed**

Tragedy has a paradoxical way of creating prospect. Just over three and a half years ago when my mother died, it tore a gaping hole in my father's heart. After 63 years of a caring and loving marriage and profound relationship that had danced and staggered through the deep joys and irreversible tragedies of a lifetime, healing was not possible.

But wounds even deep ones have a way of scarring over, and with willed determination one can go on. My Dad carried on through the anguish with his new half life. He prided himself in his independence but mostly he prided himself in his family. He took deep stock of many friends and neighbors who ranged in age from 20-somethings to 80-somethings; he could somehow touch and foster that plane of relationships.

We were fortunate that he could spend the Christmas holidays and winters with us here in Portugal Cove. With the exception of bird watchers tracking down arctic rarities, my Dad was one of the few who took his winter vacation in Newfoundland.

When the economic recession precluded my daughter Gioia's return to Cambodia, a new relationship blossomed between a Grandfather and Granddaughter that never would have been possible were it not for a failed opportunity.

As for me, after 60 years I really got to know an overwhelmingly positive man with an overpowering compassion that was heartfelt and awe inspiring. It was a deep touch and it was truly his greatest gift.

Thank you Dad for everything – Godspeed. Love Bill.