

The capelin are coming

Birds I View

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The marine ball has begun. The annual magical ocean dance is on – the capelin are coming. Following in close association are the cod, gulls, kittiwakes, puffins, murre, southern hemisphere shearwaters, the humpbacks and minke whales and dolphins.

Something is very basic and profoundly uplifting about a feast of such magnificent proportions. All are welcome to gorge on life-giving nourishment. Capelin permeates ocean life.

Our own draw to the beaches during the capelin run is testament to a primal attraction. I cannot help but feel joyful when I witness and experience this symphonic crescendo of life. Wonderment is an infectious sentiment shared among the toddlers and elderly beach-going revelers. All stare to the waves in anticipation and when the fish roll in or are caught, the spirits soar. I think that this instinctive human response is an essential rationale for the preservation and protection of wild capture fisheries that should never be sacrificed or compromised for the economic benefits of aquaculture farms.

And what about the capelin? They are the main course of the feeding frenzies? Why do they make this massive sacrifice? For the capelin, the aim is not feasting but rather spawning. The silvery smelt-like capelin are drawn on with a singular focus and purpose – reproduction. What a force it is. The capelin swim and are washed and

smashed by waves onto our beaches to spawn and kick-start the next generation – the end game of present one.

The timing of capelin has been “late” since the extreme “cold water” perturbation in 1991. Yet in recent years the timing of the capelin scull is returning to what it was in the 1980s and 1970s. What has seemed so unusual to us beach-goers is that capelin do appear to have increases in abundance during the last two decades after the overfishing and final decimation of their primary predator - the northern cod.

Cod were estimated to consume millions of tonnes of capelin each year. With the cod fished out of the system (by Newfoundlanders, Canadians and foreigners), these millions of tonnes “excess” capelin are not apparent. Some contend that seals have eaten the “excess” capelin (seals are blamed for many things for which they are not responsible). This remote possibility is highly unlikely, if even possible, given that harp seals are outside the range of capelin (and northern cod) for most of the year.

Capelin are still fished commercially for Japanese markets. The targeted fish are the earliest and largest female spawners – the mother load – the next generation.

So as with most magical events, this intriguing and life-giving and dying dance of the capelin along our shores is one that will never be fully comprehended. But we know more than enough to realize that these small silvery fish are the essential life force for the well-being of marine animals in the eastern Canadian ocean. Beyond mystery comes reverence and with reverence comes awareness of the need to protect the stocks of these small but hugely significant life-sustaining creatures.

Saving Sandy Pond in Long Harbour

Many parts of the province are experiencing an economic boom. Many of the industrial drivers focus their activities in Placentia Bay. The community of Long Harbour Placentia Bay is looking ahead to the development of Vale Inco hydro-met facility.

An unfortunate and unnecessary spin-off of the proposed development is Vale Inco’s proposal to dispose of hundreds of thousands of tonnes of toxic wastes each year into a pristine pond with a healthy population of brook trout and a pristine bay with a healthy populations of cod, lobster, seabirds, eagles, whales and otters.

The mayors of Long Harbour and nearby Placentia support this environmental “give away” to enhance corporate profitability. It has been contended that those opposed to this destruction are against the development and are do-gooder environmentalists who do not understand the needs of the local communities.

This argument is fallacious for many reasons – not the least of which is that many community residents and local residents are very concerned about proposals of unnecessary environmental destruction. The most significant falsehood in such mayoral arguments is that speaking out to defend one’s birth rights to clean water and a clean environment does make one an opponent to development. Why would anyone, no less a government official, ever want to give away such fundamental environmental rights? This is tainted third world economic logic.

Clearly it will cost Vale Inco more money to construct a lined retention pond that will prevent acid toxins from seeping into local water tables. It usually does cost more to construct rather than to destroy something. Such a constructive approach would presumably also create more local employment.

Both the provincial and federal governments need to approve the proposal to decimate Sandy Pond that is situated above Long Harbour. At the federal level this will require a formal amendment to the Metal Mining Effluent Act (read down-grading). This amendment if enacted will make it easy for mining industries to intentionally pollute natural water bodies in the province and elsewhere in Canada. Both levels of governments also have to approve the extraordinary levels of unhealthy wastes that will be flushed into Placentia Bay.

Premier Williams has emphasized that there will be no more provincial give-ways. We need to support this effort and help ensure that Sandy Pond and Placentia Bay are not given away for corporate profitability. Vale Inco has indicated its willingness to protect the nature environment. Government should assist the company in its highly principled orientation.

Large and late thick-billed Murre migration northward

A spectacular and massive movement of thick-billed murre was noted by Cape Race light-keepers, Cliff Doran and Michael Ward on 12 June. They had never witnessed anything like this before. Thousands of turrs were streaming past the cape in a northeasterly direction – one estimate was “about 10,000 in half an hour.”

Dave Shepard and Jeff Harrison found the movement to still be going strong 6 days later on 18 June! The flow began to slow on 21 June, when flocks were seen every 2 minutes compared to every 30 seconds earlier on, and was over by 22 June. Dave Sheppard has estimated that perhaps 10,000 murre per hour were flying past the cape for 10 days or so. This estimate would yield something in the order of 1,500,000 thick-billed murre heading for arctic breeding colonies.

Where did they come from? The southern Grand Bank? The Scotian Shelf? We don't know, but it is likely that that the birds were on our continental shelf or shelf edge. This summer colleagues from Carleton University and the Canadian Wildlife Service are attaching tracking devices to thick-billed murre at colonies in the Canadian Arctic, and we doing the same at colonies of common and thick-billed murre in Newfoundland and Labrador. When we recapture these birds in 2009, we will be able to map the routing and timing of their round-trip migrations and in a better position to possibly help solve this seabird ecology mystery.

Birds in the area and around the province

Folks dining at the Atlantica restaurant in Portugal Cove have had trouble keeping their seats while watching the plunging gannets just beyond their majestic dining room view (Wayne Turpin).

In Point au Mal on the Port au Port Peninsula, Brian Power has been watching a great blue heron perched in a tree overlooking a brook. Great blue herons nest in trees and one of these days, a pair just might build one in Newfoundland. If so, this will most likely occur on the west coast where great blues frequent the Codroy Valley, Sandy Point Island and Stephenville Crossing.

Dense flocks of white-winged scoters were bobbing at Point LaHaye, at St. Vincents and Biscay Bay at the end of June. Though the Osprey at Windsor Lake have

not been evident this year, Helena Woods and family have found osprey nesting in Torbay.

Red-breasted nuthatches are making intimate visits to Harry and Shonda Brown's feeder in Little Harbor East. Ground-nesting dark-eyed juncos are feeding chicks at Marilyn Hicks and family's house in the Goulds and in Nora and Dominc Lippa's yard in St. John's.

An encouraging family of 3 juvenile red crossbills are at Lester Rees' feeders in Whitbourne where adults are singing and will hopefully mate and rear more offspring. Stan Tobin had 6 red crossbills in Ship Cove – 3 males and 3 females.

Keep looking – stay vigilant – appreciate the dance.

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