

## Old trails and new studies on Baccalieu Island

### Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



The seabird cliffs of Baccalieu. (photo: Bill Montevecchi)

This year was the first time that I had the opportunity to work on Baccalieu Island since 2002. That was the year the light-keepers were terminated. Without their assistance, it's not been safe to land by boat at the light station on the southern tip of the island. With helicopter support provided by the Newfoundland and Labrador Parks and Natural Areas Division of the Department of Environment and Conservation, Stefan Garthe from the University of Kiel in Germany, Holly Hogan, the Reserve Manager and I visited the island during mid- to late August.

### Many changes

Things have changed. The open door to the light-keepers' house was the first we encountered. The peeling paint was waving in the entry way like a field of ferns. A leak in the roof had damaged the kitchen ceiling and a mouldy smell greeted our nostrils.

Yet all was completely intact as the light-keepers had so fastidiously left things. There was a TV (but no electricity), stove, dining room table, chairs, sofa, new beds, dressers, pots, pans, cutlery, etc. and clean fresh water in the cistern below the house. With a bit of cleaning and lot of open airing, things soon felt like the good old days with the exception of the keepers.

On the island, many other changes were much more discomforting. The trails that the light-keepers had used and kept open for walking between the two light stations at the south and

north ends of the Island, for berry-picking and cutting boat ribs and planks from the forests were not the same. The paths on the barrens and bogs were relatively easy to follow. Though once they ducked into the tuckamoor or forest, things were a barely penetrable (and sometimes not) jungle of hooking, scratching and cutting limbs, and unseen fallen logs and vines. The mid-summer's heat and humidity made hikes to the seabird cliffs on the island's eastern side a challenge. Yet we adapted quickly and made good progress with seabird studies.

### **Tracking parental gannets**

Our research focused on tracking the foraging behaviour and migration patterns of the gannets. We attached small GPS devices and altimeters to the tails of gannets tending 4 – 5 week old chicks.

The gannets were provisioning their offspring with capelin (including one with eggs on 20 August!) and Atlantic saury or billfish. The GPS tracks showed they were making relatively short feeding trips and diving around headlands at Old Perlican and across Conception Bay at Cape St. Francis, as well as making some offshore forays. We are quite certain that the inshore trips were for capelin and that the offshore ones for saury.

When we recaptured the gannets and removed the GPSs and altimeters, we attached small geo-locators to their leg bands. In 2010, I hope to return to Baccalieu to capture these same bird and use the information stored in tiny geo-locators to map their migration routes and wintering areas.

### **Baccalieu Island Seabird Ecological Reserve**

Baccalieu is an ecological treasure. The island's massive size, and its undulating valleys and varied habitat of tundra, old growth forest and nesting cliffs make it a seabird capital of immense proportions.

There are more nesting seabirds on Baccalieu Island than on any other island in eastern North America. This is primarily because the island is home to the world's largest colony of Leach's storm-petrels. Counting breeding adults, chicks and non-breeders, about 10,000,000 petrels occupy the island.

The sparkling gannet colony is one of only three in the province and of only six in North America. There is a massive colony of Atlantic puffins, likely rivalling the Witless Bay Islands as North America's largest colony. Huge cliff high-rises are covered with kittiwakes and murre.

### **Seabird predators come and go**

Large seabird colonies attract predators. This is why seabirds nest on islands, vertical cliffs and in burrows. But predators still seek them out.

On Baccalieu, family groups of ravens claim hunting territories along many of the seabird-nesting cliffs. They are usurped by bald eagles and peregrine falcons that also frequent the cliffs for a kill of fresh flesh.

The eagles have taken a toll on kittiwakes. When they fly near the cliffs, thousands of kittiwakes take to wing at times knocking eggs and chicks from nests. The kittiwakes appeared to have had a near total breeding failure.

Yet the major paradox of Baccalieu's seabird community has been how the island can also be home to a resident population of red foxes. Foxes and seabirds don't make good neighbours. The foxes kill many storm-petrels as well as other seabirds and take their eggs and chicks. On the flip side of the equation, the foxes also keep the predatory herring and black-backed gulls off the island. My hypothesis is that though the foxes kill many seabirds especially the tiny and highly vulnerable storm-petrels, the birds likely reap net a costly but net benefit from the foxes' presence.

This relationship is also changing. No foxes were evident. It is possible that the heavy Arctic pack ice that crushed our coasts in March and allowed Arctic foxes to reach seabird colonies on Funk Island and the Gannet Islands off Cartwright Labrador may have also allowed the red foxes to leave Baccalieu after a long hungry winter.

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

Island-nesting storm-petrels curiously also visit coastal headlands especially during foggy conditions. The leave-no-stone-unturned creativity of the foxes is well tuned to these occurrences. Consequently, people are often surprised by the numbers of severed wings of petrels often found near coastal trails. This summer finds of petrel wings have been made at Spillar's Point in Bonavista Bay (Jon Joy), Fogo Island (Glen Blackwood) and Ferryland (Jim Tuck).

Claudelle Devoe emailed me an interesting photo of an unusual white chick in a small colony of great cormorants on the cliffs at Cape Anguille in the Codroy Valley.

On 31 July, Jim Tuck picked up a black-billed cuckoo that had been killed by truck in Ferryland. The bird was given a proper burial near the Ferryland archaeological site.

It's been a good season for cedar waxwings. Sarah Hansen reports one (a first) on her deck at Olivers Pond. Joanne Harris had a pair of juncos nesting in her greenhouse in Pouch Cove, and Lester Rees has the privilege of having rusty blackbirds feeding in his raspberry patch in Whitbourne.

### **Vote for the environment, the community and civility**

I tend to avoid local political issues in this column. I realize however that politics is important work and that many people in Portugal Cove–St. Philips have made extremely diligent and dedicated efforts in the best interests of our community.

During this election, many criticisms are being raised about the Residents' Coalition counsellors not having open dialogue with the community and fostering council secrecy. These claims are inappropriate. To have an open dialogue, there has to be an acceptable level of civility and decorum in council chambers. This clearly has not always been the case.

I do not agree with many things that current council has done. Yet I fully appreciate their many efforts to protect the rural nature of our community from the types of ravenous and environmentally threatening and frenzied developments that are accelerating all around us. On the basis of what I know and believe, I'm voting for the Residents' Coalition councilors. That is -

Steve Andrews for Mayor, and Joe Butler, Carla Foote, Kate MacDonald, Keith Mercer and Jon Seary for councilor.

When you vote for the candidates of your choice, realize it's much more than a vote for council. You're voting for your community and civil interactions and cooperation among all.