

SEAWATCHING

in Nova Scotia



David McCorquodale looking out towards Flint Island at Cape Percé, CB, June 6, 2018.
Photo by Alix d'Entremont.

Introduction

By Alix d'Entremont

This article covers some of the best seawatching places in the province, describing the locations as well as the birds that can be expected there throughout the year. Seawatching in Nova Scotia predominantly consists of observing birds as they fly past over the ocean. The province's coastline stretches about 7,400 kilometres, and exposed bits of land provide opportunities to see waterfowl, cormorants, loons, grebes, alcids, shorebirds, tubenoses, gannets, skuas, jaegers, gulls and terns. This type of birding can be enjoyed all year, although spring as well as mid-summer through early winter movements are the most impressive. In many parts of the province, seawatching is in its infancy, but in time, data accumulation via eBird will continue to expand our understanding of seabird movements.

The seawatching year can be broken down roughly into four periods: spring (Mar–May), summer (Jun–Jul), autumn (Aug–Nov) and winter (Dec–Feb). Impressive seabird migration occurs seasonally, as most birds ultimately move north during spring and south during autumn (with the exception of austral-breeding species, which do the reverse). Summer seawatches are typically dull because breeding-aged seabirds are busy tending to family needs, but Northern Hemisphere non-breeders as well as Southern Hemisphere breeding species such as Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Great Shearwater and Sooty Shearwater are also present here during summer. The waterfowl, loons, grebes, cormorants, alcids and gulls that move south from their northern breeding sites during autumn are with us until their spring departure. Seabirds migrate either through the Bay of Fundy, then through the land-crossing at the Isthmus of Chignecto, or take the longer route around the province. Observations seem to suggest that the truly pelagic

species such as tubenoses, alcids and Northern Gannets do not attempt the 25 km overland stretch at the NS-NB border but choose to take the longer route around Nova Scotia, which results in the best seawatching sites being located on open coasts rather than enclosed waters.

Species distribution, timing and abundance vary greatly with local conditions and along our coasts. Some regions are unique in that they host incredibly large concentrations of certain species. The tens of thousands of phalaropes staging near Brier Island during summer, the thousands of Bonaparte's Gull in the Northumberland Strait, and the immense rafts of Common Eider around Cape Breton Island are each unmatched in numbers at any other location in the province. Sea ice conditions during winter through spring off Cape Breton Island and in the Northumberland Strait ultimately influence the visibility of birds there but sea ice does not affect the remainder of the province. The recent and continuing surge of late fall Cory's Shearwaters along the Atlantic Coast is not observed in the Bay of Fundy, the Northumberland Strait or off western Cape Breton Island.

Arguably, one of the most substantial frequency and abundance changes in recent years is that of the Cory's Shearwater. It was considered almost annual here in 2012, but since 2014, sightings of this species have skyrocketed. Counts of this northeast Atlantic and Mediterranean breeding tubenose peak during October, giving highest estimates in the thousands. Their increase is likely due to the warming ocean since they feed on warm-water prey. The Gulf of Maine is one of the fastest warming parts of the world's oceans, so this trend will likely continue and we should expect more sightings there of warm-water species like Audubon's Shearwater, White-faced Storm-Petrel and Band-rumped Storm-Petrel. Southern terns

such as Sooty, Bridled, Least, Gull-billed, Forster's, Royal and Sandwich as well as Black Skimmer are also a possibility from spring through fall, especially after the passage of hurricanes. Brown Booby, Magnificent Frigatebird and Long-tailed Jaeger should be looked for summer through fall, especially following southern storms.

Identifying fast-moving waterbirds is challenging, and often features that are illustrated or described in general field guides are rendered invisible by distance. When migrating, many species form distinctive flock shapes and have strong intraspecies associations. Birders attempting to identify distant birds at sea must often rely on shape as well as individual and flock behaviour. A spotting scope is required if you want to make the most of a seawatching session, although some birds do pass close by, typically during windy days. Good reference books include: the *Peterson Reference Guide to Seawatching* (Behrens & Cox, 2013); *Multimedia Guide to North Atlantic Seabirds. Storm-Petrels & Bulwer's Petrel* (Flood & Fisher, 2011); *Multimedia Guide to North Atlantic Seabirds. Pterodroma Petrels* (Flood & Fisher, 2013); *Skuas and Jaegers. A Guide to the Skuas and Jaegers of the World* (Olsen & Larsson, 1997); and *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion* (Dunne, 2006). Words on a page do not replace field experience, however. Fortunate observers may also spot marine mammals; therefore texts like *Whales, Dolphins, and Other Marine Mammals of the World* (Shirihai & Jarrett, 2006) might also be useful.

Along with gulling, seawatching is a birding niche. Those that endeavour will enjoy the whirring wingbeats of alcids appearing to blur the outline of the wings, the acrobatic arcing of shearwaters and kittiwakes and the series of stiff wingbeats broken by glides of Northern Gannets occasionally punctuated by missile-like dives for fish.



Paul Gould scanning at Cape Forchu, Yar,
Apr 8, 2017. Photo by Alix d'Entremont.

Brier Island, Digby

By Eric Mills

Location



Brier Island lies at the western extremity of Nova Scotia, at the junction of the Bay of Fundy and the Gulf of Maine. The main oceanic circulation past the island moves north-eastward into the Bay of

Fundy past the island, moving back out of the Bay, combined with the Saint John River outflow, along the New Brunswick shore well north of Brier Island. More important than this mean flow is the intense turbulence caused by the huge exchange of water in the Bay of Fundy during each tidal cycle, combined with the presence of shallow rocky ledges running along a southwest to northeast axis just north of the island. As a result, deep water carrying copepods, euphausiids and other food items attractive to seabirds are often carried to the surface. Because of this combination of factors, Brier Island is one of our best seawatching sites, good all year, but best from mid-summer through early winter. The best flights of several species occur during fall, when there are west or northwest winds, particularly on rising tides. When food is abundant nearshore, the watching can be good even in calm conditions and at other times of year.

The journey to Brier Island is an event in itself and requires two ferry crossings, the first at Petit Passage (Digby Neck to Long Island) and the second at Grand Passage (Long Island to Brier Island). The best vantage points are Western Light at the end of Lighthouse Rd., and Northern Point at the northern terminus of Water St., which runs through the village of Westport. Warm windproof clothing is mandatory nearly all year.

Spring

All three scoter species occur on passage Apr–May and Sept–Nov. Common Eider is common year-round and flights of hundreds occur during April. Common and Red-throated Loons can be seen passing in good numbers during May. Northern Gannet is absent only in winter; spring and fall migrations of hundreds have been seen.

Summer

The adjacent waters serve as staging areas for Red-necked and Red Phalaropes mid-July–Sept, when it is sometimes possible to see tens of thousands of these species, rarely seen in such numbers during seawatches elsewhere in eastern North America. Atlantic Puffin is common summer through mid-autumn. Northern Fulmar is occasional in summer, but Northern Gannet is common. Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers as well as the less common South Polar Skua show up late summer. Sooty Shearwaters arrive quite early, often in May, increasing through July, but normally decrease in abundance late in the summer, replaced by hundreds to sometimes many thousands of Great Shearwaters. By mid-summer, Wilson's Storm-Petrels are usually widely scattered and sometimes very abundant.

Autumn

Constant passage of Double-crested Cormorants occurs Sept–Oct, with hundreds of birds some days. The small number of local summering Great Cormorants is augmented in November through winter by significant numbers from farther north. There is a steady passage of Common Loons Aug–Dec and good flights of Red-throated can occur during November. Good passage of hundreds of Northern Gannets occurs mid to late fall. Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers occur late summer



Northern Light, Brier Island Sept 3, 2012.

Photo by Alix d'Entremont.

through fall; Pomarine outnumbers Parasitic roughly 10 to 1. South Polar Skua is occasionally seen from shore from late July into October and there are occasional reports of Great Skua. While Black Guillemot is regular year-round, it is joined late fall by the often-abundant Dovekie, frequently appearing with the first gale in early November. Northern Fulmar becomes regular in low numbers from November through winter. Great and Sooty Shearwaters can occur in thousands or tens of thousands from early Jul–Nov, usually peaking in August, but a few Greats may be present into early winter. Manx Shearwater is regular in low numbers early Aug–early Nov. The year-round Black-legged Kittiwakes are usually present in large numbers, especially during gales, late fall through winter. There is a trickle of migrating Common and even fewer Arctic Terns Aug–Sept. The year-round Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls are joined by Iceland Gulls and the occasional Glaucous late fall to spring.

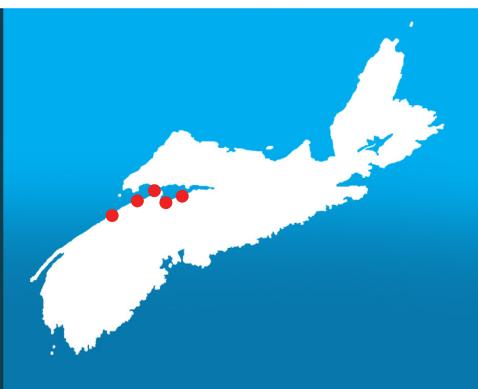
Winter

Razorbills are a constant presence from fall through spring because of a large wintering group nearby. Both murres are regular and often abundant during winter, but Thick-billed Murres usually outnumber Commons by 10 to 1 or more. Great Skua may be occasional in winter. Black-legged Kittiwakes pass in impressive numbers late fall through winter, especially during strong northwest winds, when tens of thousands have been counted. Wintering scoters and Common Eiders are frequent, and there is always the chance of a small group of Harlequin Ducks.

Inner Bay of Fundy, Annapolis and Kings

By Jake Walker

Introduction



The inner Bay of Fundy is a dynamic area boasting the largest tides in the world and very strong currents. Due to the tidal influence, the waters of the innermost portions of the bay and especially the Minas Basin carry

high sediment loads, making them very murky. This seems to deter many diving species due to poor visibility; scoters and Red-throated Loons can be observed regularly feeding in even

the muddiest water, however. West of Cape Split, the water gradually clears and the diversity of diving species increases as one ventures further down the bay. According to herring fisherman, truly pelagic species such as the tubenoses are seen regularly up to the Digby-Saint John ferry route, but sightings diminish rapidly farther in. Nevertheless, these pelagic species are sometimes blown up by strong s.w. winds and are possible during the appropriate seasons. Productive spots for seawatching follow, starting with the Minas Basin and heading out toward the mouth of the Bay of Fundy. While none of the locations in the upper Bay of Fundy would be as reliable for seabirds as sites such as Brier I., Seal I., or Baccaro Pt., the seawatching at inner Bay of Fundy sites can be spectacular during certain weather conditions. Additionally, the sites mentioned below are essential for those wishing to add seabirds to their *Kings* or *Annapolis* county lists.

Evangeline Beach and the Guzzle, Grand Pré, Kings

From Highway 1 in Grand Pré, follow the Grand Pré Rd. north to a “T”. A left at the “T” followed by a right on Evangeline Rd. will bring you to Evangeline Beach. A right at the “T” then to the end of E. Long I. Rd. and finally a 1 km walk to the beach brings you to the Guzzle. While these two spots are better known for shorebird concentrations, scanning the water with a scope may be productive near high tide. Red-throated Loons and scoters are the only regular seabirds; inclement weather sometimes deposits seabirds in the Minas Basin, however, and it seems that they do not easily find their way out. The Grand Pré peninsula juts out well into the basin, and these lost birds pass by close to shore at these spots. Examples of displaced birds that have been seen at these locations include Northern Gannet, Leach’s Storm-Petrel, Great and Sooty Shearwaters, Caspian and Forster’s Terns, Dovekie, and Thick-billed Murre.

Kingsport, Kings

The wharf at Kingsport provides a great vantage point for both the outer waters of the Minas Basin and the marshes and mudflats at the mouth of the Habitant, Canard, and Cornwallis Rivers. Large numbers of scoters are present at times, and a good variety of diving species have been seen from this location. Large concentrations of geese, dabbling ducks, and gulls can also be expected within season. Species seen at this location include Brant (formerly present in large flocks during spring), Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, and lost alcids.

Scots Bay, Kings

At the head of the Bay of Fundy, Scots Bay seems to collect large flocks of scoters during spring migration and may serve

as a staging area before they embark on overland flights to the Northumberland Strait. Loons are often numerous. At times, alcids, kittiwakes, gannets, and jaegers can be seen, especially during strong s.w. winds.

Cape Split, Kings

The mouth of the Minas Passage at Cape Split is rarely visited by seawatchers due to the ~13km round-trip hike from the trailhead near Scots Bay. The view at the tip is commanding, however, and the turbulent waters appear to provide foraging opportunities for diving birds. Large rafts of Red-throated Loons have been observed on the water in this area, and many other species of diving birds and pelagic species have been observed. Unfortunately, during ideal conditions for seabirds (i.e. strong s.w. winds), it is nearly impossible to bird from the tip due to lack of cover.

Black Rock Lighthouse, Kings

The shoreline of the upper Bay of Fundy from Scots Bay to Digby is relatively uniform, with steep basalt cliffs bordering the water. There are no pronounced points or bays that present obvious seawatching locations. Black Rock Lighthouse on Black Rock Rd., however, seems somewhat more productive than other spots. The lighthouse is at the tip of a modest point, and a bar just offshore provides a rip that often attracts diving birds. Additionally, alcids and other pelagic species seem to pass closer to shore here than at other spots along this coastline, perhaps because it is at the narrowest part of the upper bay, directly across from Cape d'Or. Large flights of alcids may occur Nov–Dec. Razorbills make up the majority, but both murre and Dovekie are often present too. It seems the alcids come into the upper bay to feed, and they can be seen flying out of the bay on falling tides. These alcid flights do not appear to be wind-driven, and often the calmest days produce the highest numbers. Large flocks of Black-legged Kittiwakes are also present at this time of year. Red-throated and Common Loons are usually present, and Pacific Loon has been recorded during winter. Harlequin Ducks and Purple Sandpipers are regular, as well as scoters and Common Eiders. In the summer and fall, birding Black Rock on westerly gales can be productive. Wilson's and Leach's Storm-Petrels, Great, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters, Northern Fulmars, phalaropes, and Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers have been observed.

Margaretsville and Port George, Annapolis

Margaretsville and Port George are both situated on small points, and birds observed should be similar to those at Black Rock. Several rarities have been sighted at these locations, including King Eider and Pacific Loon at Port George and Northern Wheatear on the rocks at Margaretsville.

Northumberland Strait, Pictou

By Ken McKenna

Unlike the Atlantic and Fundy coasts, opportunities for seawatching along the Northumberland Strait are limited to mostly waterfowl and few pelagic species. Black Guillemots have bred in the Cape George area



and Pictou I., and while very uncommon, are still the most frequently seen alcid, usually during spring and fall. There are very few records of any shearwater species or Northern Fulmar in the strait. There are times, however, when significant numbers of waterfowl, gannets, gulls, cormorants and terns can be observed from coastal areas like Caribou I. Lighthouse and Big I. Causeway.

The easiest route to Caribou I. is to take Route 6 from the Pictou Rotary and turn n.e. on R. Grant Rd. and then on the Caribou Island Rd. to the lighthouse. The area around the light offers a 330-degree view of Northumberland Strait and the entrance to Caribou Harbour.

Big I. Causeway is accessed by turning n. on Big I. Rd. from the Shore Rd. near Merigomish. There are a number of paths along the causeway to the coast where a scope can be set up to view the strait to the north as well as the inner part of Merigomish Harbour to the south.

While the strait has very few records of tubenoses and alcids, it makes up for it with remarkable numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls and ducks. The strait hosts the largest numbers of Bonaparte's Gull in Nova Scotia with yearly estimates of multiple thousands at Haliburton Gut and Pictou Causeway mid- to late-November. Greater Scaup gather in the thousands near Pictou Causeway during winter.

Spring

The strait ice breaks up by April and Red-breasted Merganser and Long-tailed Duck appear amid the ice flows. Iceland Gulls are often noted with the more common Herring and Great Black-backed. By mid-April scoters are often noted passing through, but Northern Gannets are infrequent.

Summer

Common Terns breed near Big I. Causeway and are frequent there through summer. Atlantic Herring appear in the strait

Sea ice at Point Aconi on March 25, 2005. This amount of drift ice from the Gulf of St. Lawrence can occur at both Point Aconi and Cape Percé in Mar–Apr and will severely limit the productivity of a seawatch. Photo by David McCorquodale.



to spawn by late summer, bringing large numbers of gannets, gulls and Gray Seals. Often the most common gull is the Bonaparte's Gull.

Fall

The abundance of Bonaparte's Gulls, Double-crested Cormorants and terns continues into early October with tern numbers strong until mid-October. Gannets, loons and grebes persist into late fall. Mergansers, scaup and Long-tailed Ducks reach peak numbers in fall. Eiders are not common in *Pictou*, but flocks can be seen the odd time although a handful often can be found much of the year at the Caribou I. light. All three species of scoter are routinely found at Big I., Surf being the most numerous. In September, flocks of Common Terns may be harassed by a jaeger or two. After strong nor'easters with winds greater than 60 km/h for more than 6-8 hours, storm-petrels might be observed at either site. Phalaropes or kittiwakes are possible but are rare after such storms.

Winter

In the past, winter would bring freeze-up of the strait, but in the last decade this period of ice has declined significantly. Ice flows come and go with shifting winds. Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers and Iceland Gulls can usually be found amidst the ice flows but there is often little reward in spending time in the cold seawatching in coastal *Pictou* during winter.

Cape Percé, Cape Breton

By David McCorquodale

Location



Cape Percé is the extreme end of the peninsula that extends out into the Atlantic near Donkin and Schooner Pond. Access from Glace Bay is via Route 255 to Port Caledonia and

then 5.8 kms along the Donkin Highway through Donkin to the turn to Schooner Pond. There is a rough gravel road to the left along the beach where you can park. From there it is about a 2.5 km walk, first crossing a small stream that empties Schooner Pond, then along a constantly eroding shoreline (pay attention to changes in the path). Just inland of this coastal walk is the recently opened (2016) Donkin Coal Mine. The mine has not affected access to the coastal path but has restricted access to some of the better areas for land birds. The best ocean viewing is from the grassy area overlooking Flint Island from which the trail turns right (south). There is a small memorial to shipwreck victims near the trail. From here you can see the ocean to the west, north and east. You can continue along the cliffs on a trail in and out of the woods for another couple of kms.

Cape Percé is the point of land on the north side of Morien Bay where South Head is the analogous point on the southern side. To the north, the next land is Newfoundland, to the east it is a long way to Europe. Gray Seals congregate when the ocean is ice-free. Whales, porpoises and dolphins are occasionally seen. About 5 kms to the s.w. are the tidal flats near Morien Bar, a very good location during fall migration for waders and congregations of waterfowl.

The Schooner Pond area is a focal point for birders from Cape Breton for two reasons. First, there are excellent opportunities for seawatching spring and fall. Despite the focus, it is not frequently birded and seeing other birders there is unusual. The second reason is that it is a vagrant trap for land birds during autumn. Prairie Warbler, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Dickcissel and Baltimore Oriole are regular fall vagrants. Records of unusual birds such as Swainson's Hawk, Prothonotary Warbler and Field Sparrow provide motivation to keep searching.

While Point Aconi, about an hour's drive west of Cape Percé,

isn't specifically covered in the seasonal breakdown below, it provides similar opportunities. Point Aconi Lighthouse is found at the end of Point Aconi Rd., about 10 kms from its junction with the Trans-Canada Highway at the Little Bras d'Or Bridge. Park near the rock barriers on the road and walk the last 200 m to the point. Near the foundations of the old lighthouse is a view of the ocean in almost all directions. The Bird Islands (Hertford and Ciboux) are visible to the west and Cape Smokey dominates to the northwest. The Bird Islands are an Important Bird Area because of the large numbers of nesting Great Cormorant, Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Black-legged Kittiwake and Black Guillemot. A boat tour around the islands provides an excellent opportunity for close-up views.

Spring

The amount of ice emerging from the Gulf of St. Lawrence along with winds influence the visibility of birds near shore March to mid-April. By mid-April there are migrating alcids (Razorbill and murre) and Northern Gannets. The first Black-legged Kittiwakes and Great Cormorants return to their nesting cliffs soon after the ice leaves in April. Hundreds of Common Eiders have been noted from late March, with large rafts of thousands Apr–early May. Of the scoters, Black is the most common. Long-tailed Ducks and Red-breasted Mergansers are regular during spring.

Summer

Great and Double-crested Cormorants and Black-legged Kittiwakes nest on the cliffs to the south of Cape Percé. A healthy population of Black Guillemots nests in the piles of jumbled rock around the peninsula. Recently, a few pairs of Razorbill have begun nesting on the cliffs near the kittiwakes. Both Arctic and Common Terns nest at Morien Bar and spend time foraging along the shore. Eiders nest on Flint Island and are often seen along with non-breeding scoters that spend the summer in Morien Bay. From mid-July on, it pays to watch carefully for shearwaters offshore. Strong n.e. winds occasionally bring them close enough to identify.

Autumn

Early fall shearwaters are possible, along with Leach's Storm-Petrels which nest by the thousands on nearby islands such as Scaterie. Gannets move past by the hundreds through October. Eiders, scoters and other sea ducks increase in numbers Oct–Nov. October is a good time to see several Red-throated Loons and Red-necked Grebes. Strong n.e. winds can bring large numbers of migrating alcids close to shore.

Winter

Winter flocks of eider, Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and

Red-breasted Merganser are present. Winter storms can bring in Dovekie and Thick-billed Murre. Ice conditions are a major factor affecting how many wintering seabirds can be seen. Harlequin Ducks have been seen in the surf and Purple Sandpipers on the nearby rocks. Recent storms influence visibility of Dovekie and occasionally Thick-billed Murre. Through the winter, Iceland Gull can be as numerous as Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls.

Louisbourg Lighthouse, Cape Breton

By David McCorquodale

Location

Louisbourg is about 30 kms from Sydney on Hwy 22. As you enter Louisbourg, the old Sydney and Louisbourg Railway Station is on the right, and about 150 m later turn left at



a sharp angle onto Havenside Rd. This road winds 3.2 km along the harbour opposite the town of Louisbourg, enters the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site and ends at the lighthouse, where there is plenty of parking available. The best viewing is a few steps up to a concrete platform that held automated beacons.

There are unobstructed views of the Atlantic to the south and east. In 2008, the Louisbourg Lighthouse Trail, passing through coastal forest with scenic outlooks, was opened. The trailhead is at the lighthouse parking lot. Across the harbour, the reconstructed Fortress of Louisbourg is worth a visit. The waters off the rocky headlands are prime lobster fishing areas from mid-May through mid-July. The spruce and balsam fir forests in the area are good for a variety of boreal birds such as Spruce Grouse, Gray Jay and Boreal Chickadee.

Spring

Louisbourg Harbour remains ice free most winters because the ice from the Gulf of St. Lawrence rarely drifts in along this south-facing coast. Wintering Harlequin Ducks and Purple Sandpipers are common here and can persist to April and rarely to May. Large Common Eider rafts or birds migrating north seem most numerous mid-season. Black Scoter is more frequent and plentiful than the other scoters. Black Guillemot



Adult male Harlequin duck at Peggys Cove. *Photo by Jason Dain.*

and Iceland Gulls can be numerous. Great Cormorants are reported all year and are joined by Double-crested Cormorants and Northern Gannets in April.

Summer

Great and Double-crested Cormorants, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Common Eiders, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls and Black Guillemots nest on the islands at the harbour entrance. Both Arctic and Common Terns forage along the shore. From mid-July it pays to watch carefully for shearwaters offshore. Strong n.e. winds occasionally bring them close enough to identify.

Autumn

Leach's Storm-Petrels, which nest by the thousands on nearby islands such as Scaterie, are rare during early autumn. Great and Sooty Shearwaters are possible, Manx might occur, and as of late, good Cory's Shearwater numbers during October suggest that it might be expected then. Gannets move past by the hundreds through October. Eiders, scoters and other sea ducks increase in numbers through October and November. October is a good time to see several Red-throated Loons and Red-necked Grebes. Harlequin Duck and Purple Sandpiper will have arrived by November to stay until spring, and of the three *Cape Breton* sites covered here, they are most commonly reported in the Louisbourg area. Strong n.e. winds can bring large numbers of migrating alcids close to shore: Razorbill, Atlantic Puffin, murre and Dovekie.

Winter

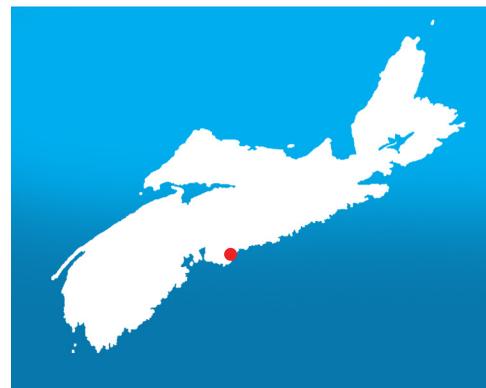
Harlequin Ducks and Purple Sandpipers are common through winter. Northern Gannet and Double-crested Cormorant effectively disappear by the New Year, but Great Cormorant is present year-round. Large counts of Common Eider and Black Scoter occur with smaller numbers of White-winged and Surf Scoters, Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser. It is a good spot for Red-necked Grebe. Recent or current storms influence visibility of Dovekies and occasionally Thick-billed Murre. Iceland Gull can be as numerous as Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls.

Chebucto Head, Hartlen Pt. and Peggys Cove, Halifax

By **Fulton Lavender, Andy de Champlain and Alix d'Entremont**

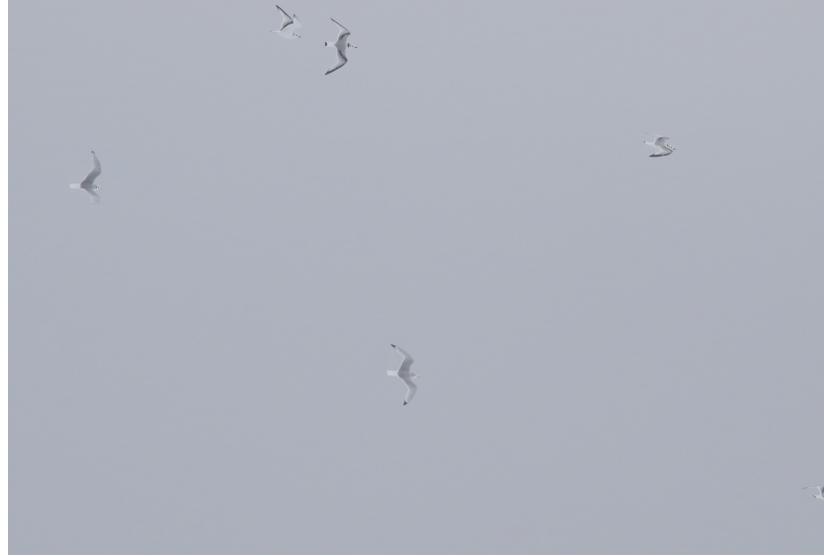
Location

Good seawatching locations near Metro Halifax include the Chebucto Head area, Hartlen Pt. and Peggys Cove. Chebucto Head is situated at the southwest entrance to Halifax Harbour. From Hwy 349 south of Halifax,



turn left onto the Duncans Cove/Chebucto Head Road and bear left to the light. You can set up for seawatching near the lighthouse, but there is also a bunker that can provide shelter. This site provides a 180° view eastward, across the mouth of Halifax Harbour. Hartlen Pt. is located at the southeast entrance to Halifax Harbour, about 10 kms ENE of Chebucto Head. Head south from Dartmouth along Pleasant St. then onto Shore Rd. to the Hartlen Pt. Canadian Forces Golf Club. Seawatching at Hartlen Pt. can be done from a vehicle along Shore Rd. or, if weather permits, near the Osprey nest where a 270° view of the sea is offered. To get to the nest, walk along the gravel road that leads east from Shore Rd. just before the golf course gate. Follow this road about 300 m to the nest and viewing site. Peggys Cove features the best-known lighthouse in Nova Scotia, a major tourist attraction. Peggys Point, near the light, offers wonderful seawatching opportunities. You can position yourself near Peggys Cove lighthouse to get a 180° view towards the south and southwest. Generally, these Metro Halifax areas seem to be the most productive when strong winds blow from s. to e.

Black-legged Kittiwakes passing Hell Point, Lun, Oct 26, 2017 during 60 km/h s.e. winds.
Photo by Kevin Lantz.



Spring

Some of the winter's alcids continue to be seen during spring with peak passage in April. Razorbills are most abundant, both murre and Atlantic Puffins are uncommon, and a few late Dovekies may sneak past. The omnipresent Black Guillemot continues throughout the year in low numbers. Northern Gannets and Common Eiders begin to stream by during April, and Double-crested Cormorant numbers climb as the month progresses. Great Cormorant numbers decline through spring. May easterly and northeasterly winds can bring Parasitic, Pomarine, and very rarely, Long-tailed Jaegers. During late April through the first three weeks of May, keen observers might pick out Red Phalaropes and the occasional Red-Necked, especially after a storm. Leach's Storm-Petrels arrive mid-May and persist into summer, although they are not commonly seen from shore.

Summer

While Sooty Shearwaters can appear during May, the shearwater action only truly begins during July with Great and Sooty being most common, followed by Manx. Summering non-breeding Northern Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes are few. The Leach's Storm-Petrels that appear in mid-May continue through June, and Wilson's can be seen in good numbers mid-June into autumn. Most jaegers have gone by the end of June. Terns (mostly Common) can be seen Jul-Aug when adults are foraging for food near the mouth of Halifax Harbour.

Autumn

While Great and Sooty Shearwaters are about equally abundant during late summer, Greats become the most abundant by August, sometimes surpassed in recent years by Cory's, particularly during October. While uncommon and often difficult to identify to species, autumn provides your best chance at bagging a skua. Greats and South Polars seem about equal in numbers until October, at which time Greats become the default species. Jaegers are most common late Aug-Sept but are possible Oct-Nov during strong easterlies. Leach's and Wilson's Storm-Petrels are present through to September and a few Leach's can persist into November. Scoter and Red-breasted Merganser numbers increase during September, but Long-tailed Duck appears to join them only during November. Alcid passage ramps up in November with Razorbills and Dovekie most numerous.

Winter

Harlequin Duck and Purple Sandpiper arrive in November and leave by April. Harlequins are reported most often from Peggys Cove. Being present in small numbers year-round, Black Guillemot is the most frequently observed alcid during winter. Movements of Dovekie, Razorbill and Thick-billed Murre can be observed. Northern Gannet virtually disappears after December, but Black-legged Kittiwake can still be seen through until the end of January. The year-round Common Eiders are joined by the scoter species during autumn, and all are regular throughout the season, as are Red-throated Loons and Red-necked and Horned Grebes. Most gull species are present during winter and into spring with hundreds of Iceland Gulls and the occasional Glaucous, especially at Hartlen Pt.

Western Head, Queens

By Eric Mills

Location

Western Head is the most easily accessed seawatching locality between the western part of the Halifax Regional Municipality and Baccaro Point in Shelburne County. It is located about 5 kms southwest of the



town of Liverpool, reached by following the loop of the Shore Road from the village of Mount Pleasant just east of the town. Access to the shore is via a deteriorating paved road that leads to the site of a light tower, with fog alarm and a radio beacon. The concrete pad that once was the foundation of a light-keeper's house is a good birding vantage point, giving a 180° arc of

vision seaward extending from well east of East and West Berlin in the northeast to Port Mouton Island in the southwest. The head is just south of the estuary of the Mersey River. It is located, depending on tide and wind, in the estuarine outflow of the river where it turns right (southward) along the shore. This gives an oceanographic complexity to the site that is unusual. There appears to be mixture of Scotian Shelf water and river water that varies with time, tide and wind. This combination makes the area of the head attractive to local fishermen, sometimes also to a Fin Whale or two, Harbour Porpoises, Harbour and Gray Seals, and in summer and autumn the occasional Ocean Sunfish.

This area is rather lightly birded, so much can still be learned about the seasonality of seabird abundance, and also the range of species to be expected. Occasionally there can be a surprise – for example a Royal Tern that passed by, not associated with a hurricane, in early July 2008, was the kind of payoff that can occur occasionally at this seawatching site. It can be worthwhile keeping an eye on the radio beacon tower, open field, wire-fence enclosure and spruce woods nearby – Peregrine Falcon, Bohemian Waxwing, Dickcissel, and Baltimore Oriole are among the terrestrial migrants that have been recorded during seawatches.

Spring

Winter conditions prevail through March, but the passage of migrant ducks and alcids picks up around the end of the first week of April. This includes frequent flocks of migrating Common Eiders, and significant numbers of Black Scoters. Common and Red-throated Loons pass by regularly. Northern Gannets begin to appear in large numbers through April. Murres can also be seen heading north. Black-legged Kittiwakes are possible at any time but are never abundant.

Summer

Double-crested Cormorants and Common and Arctic Terns from the nearby colony on Coffin Island forage just off the head, occasionally joined by a few Great Cormorants from their local isolated colonies. There is frequently a flock of non-breeding Common Eiders near shore. Black Guillemot is the most common alcid, followed by the occasional but much less abundant passing Atlantic Puffin and Razorbill. From early summer at least into October, shearwaters may pass by in numbers, often far enough offshore to require a telescope. Both Sooty and Great Shearwaters may be abundant in summer, and Manx Shearwater is scarce but probably regular. Occasionally a Wilson's Storm-Petrel will feed quite close to shore. Dark skuas, probably South Polar, have been reported twice in mid to late summer.

Autumn

Northern Gannets are most abundant in late summer and autumn. Eiders build up in the fall and are usually joined then by a flock of Black Scoters. Harlequin Ducks and Purple Sandpipers can be expected in late fall and winter, but may be hard to see on the complex, rugged shoreline, especially under windy conditions. Herring and Great-Black-backed Gulls outnumber other species by far, but careful checking of the gulls passing by a little way offshore will often reveal a Kittiwake or a few, at almost any season. Small numbers of Ring-billed Gulls may drift by beginning in late summer. Cory's Shearwater has been reported recently and should be regular in late summer through the autumn. Quite impressive numbers of Common and Red-throated Loons may pass by, frequently in small groups. In late fall, alcids are regular in passage, dominated by Razorbills, although murres of both species can be expected. Atlantic Puffins are quite regular in passage, especially from late summer into early winter.

Winter

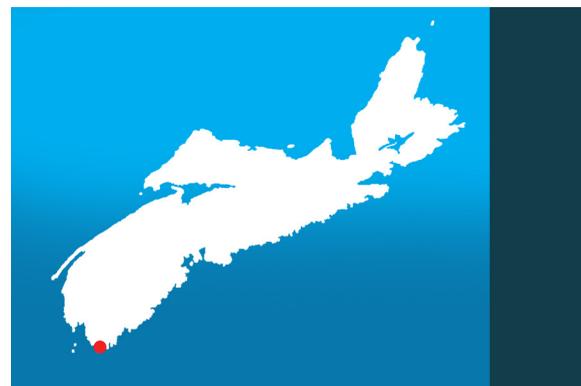
Wintering flocks of Common Eiders are regular, but can vary greatly in size, from a few dozen to a few hundred. King Eider should occur occasionally, although it has not been reported to date. The small groups of Harlequin Ducks and Purple Sandpipers that arrive in late autumn may be seen occasionally through winter. Razorbills and Thick-billed Murres are more common than Common Murre during this season, Dovekies are occasional, and numbers of all can increase during and after wind storms. Iceland Gulls frequently join the passing Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, especially in late winter.

Baccaro Point & Daniels Head, Shelburne

By Mark Dennis

Location

In terms of location, convenience and comfort, Baccaro Point is as good for seawatching as anywhere in southern Nova Scotia. Thanks to the handily located parking lot which faces east



toward the main seabird track, watchers can enjoy a 180° view

Razorbills and a Common Murre at Baccaro
May 14, 2017. Photo by Alix d'Entremont.

of the close passage of many species of seabird without the need to reach for a spotting scope. Park with your vehicle nose offset to the wind/rain direction and start counting. Setting up south of the lighthouse gives a 270° view but doesn't provide much benefit since there is little action to the west and doesn't allow for the use of a car as shelter. Baccaro is good year-round but is most productive from late summer through early winter, with seasons naturally governing the species mix. Generally, all birds will be passing through offshore (and going south) at varying ranges. An optimum Baccaro seawatch requires gale-force northerly winds, preferably overnight, which then moderate and swing to south-east. Rain squalls push birds in closer and mean that the rising sun is not likely to make the view a glassy mess, especially as the best time to watch is from early in the morning and on the rising tide. Summer seawatches work best late afternoon when the sun is less of an issue as it becomes positioned to the west.

Daniel's Head is the most accessible point for conducting a seawatch on Cape Sable Island, although you will suffer some exposure to the elements in adverse conditions. It is also possible to seawatch from The Hawk, specifically from Atwood Road. The species mix is the same as Baccaro, both spots being on the same flight line, although a good watch at Baccaro does not necessarily guarantee that CSI will produce too. Also, the CSI area generally has more birds already present, such as tern



flocks, to tempt jaegers in closer, and so birds that pass Baccaro briskly might spend more time off CSI feeding.

The track of passing sea birds generally follows depth-contours offshore where the sea becomes deeper at about 3 km south of Baccaro Point. At high tide the track moves closer to shore, especially if previously influenced by the weather, and the birds are easier to observe. An additional factor is food source, and when bait fish are close, migration pace slows as species take the opportunity to feed.

Spring

Heavy spring seabird movements in south-east Nova Scotia, notably Cape Forchu, are rarely reflected by similar movements off Baccaro or Daniels Head. Even fierce onshore winds fail to make much impact on distant passing flocks of sea duck and so only a fraction of what passes either site offshore is observable. Having said that, both sites do get clumps of Common Eider heading north and strings of scoters, mostly Black, heading the same way. The only other species seen regularly on active migration in spring is Northern Gannet and then only on good days; at other times movements are at best sporadic. Spring tern movements are hard to quantify; flocks do pass but whether they are local birds (southwest NS based) or migrants heading much further north is unknown. Late spring will typically provide Sooty Shearwaters and occasionally early Greats.

Summer

Mid to late summer watches will produce Great and Cory's Shearwaters as well as Roseate, Common and Arctic Terns. Sooty, and to a lesser extent, Manx Shearwaters also occur. Storm-petrels are present offshore during summer and through autumn. Wilson's Storm-Petrel can be seen regularly, especially on slick seas July through August.

Graham Williams, Bruce Stevens and Alix d'Entremont
at Cape Sable, Shel, Dec 30, 2014.

Photo by Ronnie d'Entremont.





Common Eiders passing Cape Forchu, Yar, Apr 8, 2017. Photo by Alix d'Entremont.

Cape Forchu, Yarmouth

By Alix d'Entremont

Location

From the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, Charlie R.K. Allen and others reported on the capacity of Cape Forchu as a landbird migrant trap. Later the area was well covered by Hubert and Helen Hall as well



as Eric and Barbara Ruff. At present, its alder-lined Thomas Road and Gerry Lane are often scoured by the new crop of birders during migration, but its potential as a seabird hotspot remains largely unknown.

Cape Forchu is positioned roughly halfway between Brier Island and Baccaro and is likely the best seawatching site in mainland Yarmouth County. It is where water from the inner Scotian Shelf turns n. to enter the Bay of Fundy along a seafloor that is rough and likely to induce turbulence. The effect of prolonged s.w. winds in summer will result in upwelling (due to the co-called “Ekman drift” of water offshore) and thus changes in the biota present for seabird food. A 15-minute drive will get you from Main St. in Yarmouth to Cape Forchu. Viewing is best from the exposed cliffs at the Western Cape. Park at the end of Thomas Rd. and walk through the gate for “Markland Estates”, a planned subdivision that was never completed. Take the first right and follow the driveway headed west to the ocean.

The lack of suitable places to watch from a car means that Cape Forchu has been seldom visited by birders for seawatching, especially during wind storms. This results in very limited knowledge of seasonal occurrence of species and optimal conditions; therefore, the information presented here stems from a few productive days. The best wind direction appears to be n.w. through to the s.w. and there might be benefit to watching during a falling tide.

Autumn

As autumn sets in, Black-legged Kittiwake passage hots up, peaking Oct–Nov, and with them come the attendant jaegers. Weather conditions that disrupt the seabirds’ normal movements through Nova Scotia waters can result in skuas coming within visible range too, although, particularly with size overlap, calling a skua ID in the sort of conditions that affect them can be tricky. In late autumn and into winter alcids stream past—mostly Razorbills—but Atlantic Puffins are regularly seen and both murres often sneak into the Razorbill packs as they file south. Dovekies also appear but are sporadic. Storm-petrels are present offshore during summer and through autumn. Leach’s Storm-Petrel, despite being an abundant local breeder, are less reliably observed, although heavy storms featuring onshore winds Sept–Nov will produce them—sometimes they are even found hurtling around the parking lot itself. Of the jaegers, Pomarine seems to dominate, followed naturally by Parasitic. Long-tailed has been observed and may be commoner than thought. Gulls are often ignored as components of seawatches, unless they are the rarer ones. By that I mean the truly pelagic Sabine’s and the overlooked Little Gull. Bonaparte’s pass too, as presumably does the odd Black-headed Gull. Late in the autumn Iceland Gulls can be seen moving through, as must Glaucous. Shorebirds pass Baccaro too, but really only Red and Red-necked Phalarope are of concern during a seawatch. Both species will raft offshore and both are difficult to identify at range given the conditions required to bring them inshore at all. Red-throated Loon passage can be seen Oct–Nov and less so into winter.

Winter

Sea duck movement is largely unspectacular and probably occurs too far offshore to observe effectively, judging by the many ragged flocks of unspecified sea duck that pass some days. Northern Gannets are omnipresent but Northern Fulmars can be hard to find; one tip is to check the shearwater rafts where their glowing whiteness makes them stand out.

Spring

Purple Sandpiper and Harlequin Duck may persist from winter through to April. Hundreds of Black-legged Kittiwakes can fly past per hour during March with a few Dovekies and other alcids. Small flocks of Brant have been seen in passage early April. Similar to other seawatching locations in Nova Scotia, the most impressive passage in spring seems to occur during April when hundreds of birds stream south past the Western Cape. Northern Gannets and Common Eiders far outnumber the loons, grebes, scoters and alcids. Black Guillemot is present year-round in small numbers. The most numerous alcid April–May is certainly the Razorbill; it as well as Atlantic Puffin and Black Guillemot nest 13 km away on Green Island. Careful checking of Razorbill lines should result in a few Thick-billed and Common Murres.

Summer

A few summering Northern Gannets should be expected as well as the year-round Common Eider and Black Guillemot. It seems likely that Great, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters might be seen through summer. These three tubenoses, along with Cory's Shearwater, were seen one day in late July off nearby Green Island. Razorbill and Atlantic Puffin from Green Island might be observed as they forage. Leach's Storm-Petrel has been seen inside Yarmouth Harbour during June and is likely uncommon at Cape Forchu.

Autumn

Migrant passerines are what draw birders to Cape Forchu during autumn, resulting in minimal seabird information for this season. Northern Gannets are common in small numbers during early autumn. Unlike nearby Seal I., Bon Portage I. and Baccaro, no significant passage has been recorded during Sept–Nov, perhaps simply indicative of a lack of effort. Black Guillemots are ever-present, and Atlantic Puffins and Razorbills might pass throughout the season, but Thick-billed Murre should be expected only in November. Harlequin Duck arrives in November to remain until spring, but it is more common nearer to the lighthouse. The scoters, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser and Red-necked Grebe are present from about October through spring. It is assumed that the four regular shearwater species should occur, but more observations are required to confirm. Good numbers of Black-legged Kittiwake have been recorded late Oct–early Nov as well as small groups of Pomarine Jaegers and Dovekie flocks.

Winter

Very little can be said about winter seawatching at Cape Forchu. The lack of shelter during this season inhibits comfortable watching during inclement weather. The scoters, Red-breasted Merganser, Long-tailed Ducks, grebes, loons, Harlequin Ducks and Purple Sandpipers that arrive during autumn continue through to spring. Black Guillemot is a given, but other alcids are likely rare. ■



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