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**Bar Harbor, Acadia National Park, Downeast Maine**

This article was published in the January 5, 2012, edition of *The Bar Harbor Times*. In this week's column, Rich shares observations from a pelagic boat trip to Mount Desert Rock, 25 miles offshore. He also summarized the results from the 2011 Maine "Big Year" birding competition.

## **Nature Notes ....**

By Rich MacDonald

Happy New Year!

The advancing calendar marks more than the passage of another year. We have now concluded the annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) season. Bar Harbor, Blue Hill, Deer Isle, and the Schoodic Peninsula are our four Hancock County counts (for those not familiar, CBCs are a national citizen science program conducted by volunteers annually since 1900—during one 24-hour day, participants tally as many birds as possible within a 15-mile diameter circle). This year's counts were remarkable for their seeming dearth of birds and lack of notable species. It will require large scale spatial analyses to put our results into a larger perspective.

That said, the current conventional wisdom is a complex answer involving abundant food supplies across the northern forests this winter and a mild start to this winter, coupled with minimal snow all make for relatively easy foraging.

The end of 2011 saw the successful completion of another Sea Bird Count. On December 30, I was invited to join a group of College of the Atlantic students and Diver Ed and the League of Underwater Superheroes on a trip to Mount Desert Rock. The two-hour trip from Northeast Harbor was filled with a complete run on the alcids (puffins and their cousins) and gannets.

Shortly after clearing the Duck Islands, I saw my first Razorbills: a flight of seven. Razorbills are typical of pelagic bird, spending most of their year on the open sea, coming to shore only to nest. We are at the southern

end of their range with their nearest nesting colony being Petit Manan Island. Like all alcids, Razorbills have small wings and need to beat them rapidly for flight, reminiscent of those wooden lawn ornament birds with the twirling wings.

Among the 27 avian species observed during the trip were 152 Long-tailed Ducks, 55 Northern Gannets, 10 Black-legged Kittiwakes, 8 Iceland Gulls, 3 Dovekies, 1 Common Murre, 11 Thick-billed Murre, 36 Razorbills, and 6 Atlantic Puffin. Perhaps the most unusual bird sighting of the day was a female Common Goldeneye foraging in a pool at Mount Desert Rock. Maybe it was the 26 Purple Sandpipers, entirely unconcerned by our presence, flying directly under us and the landing ramp. Of course, given the presence of a lone Peregrine Falcon, they may have decided we were the lesser threat.

The real highlight, though, was seeing three Gray Seal pups on the rocky shore of Mount Desert Rock. Allied Whale research associate Peter Stevick said the smallest was only hours old! We watched as its mother nudged it into the water. Later, as we were readying to depart, the curious little pinniped kept trying to investigate our boat, the r/v *Starfish Enterprise*. Meanwhile, mother Gray Seal would corral it away (photos may be found at [www.facebook.com/TheNaturalHistoryCenter](http://www.facebook.com/TheNaturalHistoryCenter), look for the photo album entitled “Mount Desert Rock, 30 December 2011”). I thought this seemed early in the season for pupping, but according to Peter, there is an evolutionary strategy here: the colder waters of winter are less attractive to sharks, a primary predator.

The New Year also heralded the end of the second annual birding competition hosted by The Natural History Center. For 2011 we tried something different, expanding the competition to encompass the entirety of Maine. The friendly competition saw five of us—Jim Bright of Mount Desert, Chris Bartlett of Eastport, Tony Linforth of Trenton, and Ed Hawkes and myself, both of Town Hill—traversing the state to see who would win the Golden Crow award, earning bragging rights for having seen the most birds. This was more of an excuse to find and watch birds than a true competition. Any combination of us regularly went birding together. In fact, one of the last species Jim, Ed, and I added to our list was a Northern Hawk Owl observed December 13 in Palmyra.

So...drum roll, please...the results are Acadia National Park interpretive ranger Tony Linforth in fifth place with 200 species, local lobsterman Jim Bright's 206 species puts him in fourth, yours truly claims third place with 241 species, Maine Sea Grant extension associate Chris Bartlett is in second place with 243 species (darn you, Chris; had I known we were so close I would have chased a few more birds...), and retired teacher and

master bird carver Ed Hawkes wins the 2011 Golden Crow award with an impressive 256 species tallied across Maine in 2011! Well done, friends.

Oh, and as for the 2012 birding competition, we will return to our roots, focusing this friendly event on Mount Desert Island and immediate surrounding islands—Thompson, The Twinnies, the Porcupines, the Cranberries, the Gotts, Bartlett, and any islands between them and MDI. The rules are simple: you must positively identify the bird, write down the date and location, and be willing to submit to the friendly teasing banter of your fellow competitors. If this is appealing, please contact me to declare your intention to participate.

Among the other observations of the natural world reported during the past two weeks, Snowy Owls continue as the highlight. If you don't mind a two-hour walk uphill, Cadillac Mountain is the best place for a chance to view this stunning bird. The most recent report comes from Dave Small who saw one along the South Ridge Trail January 2. Jim Bright and Harriet Wittington have also seen them several times on Day Mountain, the most recent report being one December 18.

Jim recently followed the saga of a Northern Goshawk, an unidentified duck, and a Red Fox that began December 23. He saw a "first year Goshawk on top of a duck out on the slush covered pond. After quite a struggle to get the still flapping duck to the shore a feast was held. The carcass then lay untended till [Christmas] morning when the Goshawk returned to try and pick at the frozen remains." Later that day a Red Fox came out of the woods and made off with the carcass.

Ducks are the abundant bird this time of year. Look for them anywhere there is open water. For a pair of Hooded Mergansers, it is only a matter of time before their small area of unfrozen water at Northeast Creek freezes over and forces them to move on. That said, they were still there as of December 29.

Carol Muth reported her first Purple Finch of the season at her Town Hill feeders December 30. Let's see if this heralds the beginning of increased feeder activity for the winter.

Don't let the short nights and cold temperatures keep you indoors. An exciting natural world awaits you this time of year.

*Rich MacDonald runs The Natural History Center, located in downtown Bar Harbor, alongside the Village Green. If you would like to share your observations of the natural world that is Mount Desert Island, you may contact him at*

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