

Strictly for the birds

by Bethsheila Kent

Sandpipers and plovers are associated by local birders and non-birders alike with shorelines. This is a common assumption and one not without its various reasons - sandpipers and plovers encountered on Cape Breton Island are almost always found on or near beaches, along the water-line or among the wrack (debris thrown up beyond the high tide line) or flying out over open water. Yet there are species that prefer higher, inland elevations with nearby wetlands or wet woodlands such as American woodcock, Wilson's snipe, buff-breasted sandpiper and killdeer, a belted plover. A recent report received from Clarence Roberts of the presence of a lone killdeer feeding on wrack washed up at Orangedale during one of



December's memorable storms made me realize that this misconception required some clarification, thus the foregoing. Killdeer are not all that common here on Cape Breton Island but each year several are reported, and almost all sightings are associated with shorelines. Killdeer, however, are an upland species found all across North America at field margins, along wide river bottoms and in a variety of open habitats with nearby water. That Clarence Roberts found one in late December along the shores of the Bras d'Or is a testimony to the species' ability to withstand winter temperatures and, as well, its tendency to migrate late in the season.

Spotlight on the Killdeer:

A medium sized plover, killdeer measure approximately 10 1/2 inches in length. Its markings are distinctive - brown back, unmarked clear white breast and underparts, a white cheek patch, a white forehead patch outlined in black and two wide, black collars or "belts" across its chest. In profile, the bird appears elongated and horizontal as it often moves over the ground with head down searching out the insects that are the mainstay of its diet. A ground nester often fashioning a barely-recognizable nest of gravel or stones, the killdeer is a born actor putting on a great show of being injured and dragging a wing and calling plaintively while running back and forth away from nests when predators threaten eggs and nestlings. In periods of non-breeding, killdeer are quite tame and can be approached within a few feet. Killdeer lay 3-4 eggs with a good success rate. They are often found in urban settings such as parks and playing fields.

On the water:

While walking at Big Harbour recently I encountered a large raft of common

and red-breasted merganser, 75+/- birds strong. Among them were several great-black backed and herring gull as well as a good number (18) Bonaparte's gull and a respectable number (24) of common goldeneye. All birds were resting on the water which made me think that perhaps weather was going to move in later in the day but, thankfully, that did not happen. At locations such as the ponds along the Bay Road and at River Bennett (prior to the ice forming) and along the shores of St. Ann's Harbour, along the Bras d'Or from Baddeck to Whycocomagh and to the north

from English-town to Wreck Cove, American black duck were noted as were Canada geese, common goldeneye, common and red-breasted merganser, a few mallard outside of Baddeck, many black guillemot

and a few, lingering double-crested cormorant. On St. Ann's Bay were the usual (for this time of year) large, loose rafts of white-winged and surf scoter and a few common loon. Our usual gull species have now been joined by Iceland gull at Englishtown but the common tern noted there as late as December 14 have finally departed for warmer climes. Cassidy Best, Ingonish Beach, called to report the return of the purple sandpiper at "The Point", near the wharf at North Ingonish. A surf bird that has evolved to withstand the frigid temperatures of the north Atlantic during our famous (or infamous) winters, this plump, active bird has made that location its winter home for as long as I can remember.

Landlubber Report:

Cassidy Best also reported cedar waxwing feeding on rosehips, loads of black-caped chickadee and American goldfinch, some dark-eyed junco and even a song sparrow at North Ingonish. Here in South Haven, all those species are also present with the addition of mourning dove, blue jay, red-breasted nuthatch, evening grosbeak and European starling. There were even a pair of brown creeper hunting along the trunk of a red maple near one of the shrub beds. Out and about, boreal chickadee numbers remain high, pine grosbeak (also reported by Joan Kerr, Breton Cove), continue to show up in pairs or small flocks, all singing their fabulous songs. Jennifer Lundgren continues to nurture the female Baltimore oriole in Baddeck and I know you all join me in wishing her success in aiding this little bird's survival during the winter months ahead.

My thanks to Clarence Roberts, Cassidy Best and Jennifer Lundgren for their sightings reports. I can be reached at 295-1749 with your birding news.

Saoghal na Gàidhlig... The Gaelic way of living in the world

Anns an iris, The Canadian-American Gael, 1943, bha colbh Gàidhlig aig Calum MacDhòmhnaill às an Abhainn a Tuath, fear a bha 'na neach-teagaisg na Gàidhlig aig Colaiste na Gàidhlig, Baile Anna, 1941-1943. Am measg na sgrìobh e, gheobhar na faclan seo: "Ma leigeadh sinn a' Ghàidhlig air dìochuimhn' , caillidh sinn beul-aithris, eachdraidh is deadh bheusan nan daoine bho'n d'fhàinig sinn." Agus a-rithist, "Feumaidh sinn a h-ionnsachadh, a bruidhinn agus a leughadh dhaibhsan a tha a' tighinn na 'r déigh..."

Chualas an aon chomhairle dhian aig na Gàidheil anns gach linn bhon a dh'imrich iad gu Tìr a' Gheallaidh, iomadh uair anns an iris MacTalla (1892-1904) agus troimh na deicheadan às a déidh. Ann a' 1920, chuir còrr is 5468 duine bho 230 coimhearsnachd air feadh taobh an ear na h-Albann Nuaidh' an ainmean ri iartas chun na Pàrlamaid Bhig a' sireadh cead dhan Ghàidhlig a bhith air a toirt a-steach do chlàr-oideachaidh sgoiltean na Roinne. Ann a' 1921, dh'aontaich a' riaghaltas ris a' Ghàidhlig a chur mar chuspair roghainneil ann a' clàr-oideachaidh na h-Albann Nuaidhe. Ach air a' leisgeul nach robh luchd-teagaisg na Gàidhlig ri 'm faighinn, chaidh 'fhàgail aig buidhnean ionadail na coimhearsnachd a' chànain a thoirt seachad.

Chan eil cuimhn' aig mòran an diugh, às déidh stéidheachadh Colaiste na Gàidhlig ann a' Baile Anna, 1938, coisrigte dhan a' Ghàidhlig, a h-eachdraidh is a dualchas, air an teagasg leis na sgoilearan a b' fheàrr aig an àm, gun deach Roinn-leudachaidh na Colaiste a chur air dòigh cuideachd agus às a sin, chaidh clasaichean Gàidhlig a thairgsinn air an oidhche, a' tòiseachadh ann a' 1941-42 rè an fhoghair, a' gheamhraidh, agus an earraich, le Seumas MacNèill, deasaiche na Gàidhlig aig a' phàipear-naidheachd Post Record ann a' Suidnidh, agus D. Mac'Illeathain Mac na Ceàrda, mac sgoilear ainmeil na Gàidhlig, A. Mac'Illeathain Mac na Ceàrda, a' teagasg. A bharrachd air sin, chaidh 'Sgoiltean Gàidhlig' a chur air bhonn ann a' 14 coimhearsnachdan far an robh sgoil, le seiseanan-oidhche dhan òigridh, aoisean 10-15; agus do dh'inbich, aoisean 15-85. B' iad na coimhearsnachdan sin Badaig (aig an dà sgoil), Drochaid na h-Aibhn' a Tuath, An Acarsaid a Deas, An Caolas Beag, Aiseag Rois, Sanndraidh, Hogoma, An Cladach a Tuath, Suidnidh, Badaig Uachdrach, Drochaid Mhòir, Còbh Anndra—agus Boston, Mass!

Ach b' e àm a' chogaidh a bh' ann; agus tha an t-ainm Boston fhéin mar shamhla dhuinn de dh'imrich is de chaochladh. Nuair a bheir sinn sùil air ais air cùisean—ionadail, nàiseanta, cruinneil—darna leth na 20mh linn, 's urrainn dhuinn faicinn mar a bha iad a' tighinn le chèile gus cothroman a thoirt dhan Ghàidhlig 's a' là'n diugh.

In the magazine, The Canadian-American Gael, 1943, Malcolm MacDonald from North River, Cape Breton, who was a Gaelic instructor at the Gaelic College, St. Ann's (1941-1943), had a Gaelic column. Amongst what he wrote can be found these words: "If we let the Gaelic be forgotten, we will lose the folklore, history and the virtues of the people from whom we came". And again he says: "We must teach it, speak it and read it to those who are coming after us..."

The same urgent advice has been heard from Gaels since they arrived in what many regarded as the the Land of Promise, frequently in the newspaper/magazine MacTalla (1892-1904) and continuously in succeeding decades. In 1920, 5468 people from 230 communities throughout Eastern Nova Scotia signed a petition urging government to allow Gaelic in to the province's school curriculum; in 1921, Gaelic was allowed as an optional subject. However, on the pretext that no Gaelic teachers were available, the transmission of the language was largely left to dedicated local community groups.

Not many today remember that, after the Gaelic College at St. Ann's was founded in 1938, in addition to enshrining Gaelic language, history and culture as core of the College's mandate, taught by the best scholars available, it set about through its Extension Department, starting in 1941-42, to offer night classes, autumn, winter, and spring sessions, to youth ages 10-15 and adults, ages 15-85, with James MacNeil, Gaelic editor of the Sydney Post Record, and D.MacLean Sinclair, son of renowned Gaelic scholar Rev. A. MacLean Sinclair, as teachers. In the Elementary Gaelic class, the text book used was "Beginners' Gaelic" by MacNeil and Sinclair; while in the Advanced Gaelic Reading and Writing class, the Gospel of John and the Gaelic Bards were the chief texts. A class in "Gaelic Melodies and Songs or Celtic Music and Art" was also offered—this included Gaelic choral singing, precenting the psalms, Bagpipe music and Scottish folk art. In addition, evening 'Gaelic Schools' were established in 14 communities which had a school: in Baddeck (at both schools), North River Bridge, South Haven, Little Narrows, Ross Ferry, Iona, Whycocomagh, North Shore, Sydney, Upper Baddeck, Marion Bridge, Goose Cove—and Boston, Mass!

But the war years were intervening; and the last placename is symbolic of diaspora and change. And yet—in retrospect, events in the final decades of the 20th century, local, national and global, were combining to bring real opportunities for Gaelic in today's world.

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