

# Bird Wing Report

November 2023



## Notices and Reminders



*"On the fifth day of Christmas", Renee Levesque*

**Christmas Bird Count (CBC):** North Bay's CBC is right around the corner, **Saturday, December 16.** Now that we haven't been doing the Birdathon, it is the most exciting group bird activity of the year. The field observers and their routes are in place and hopefully those of you who live within a 15 km or 24 mile radius of Dugas Bay on Trout Lake will be watching your feeders and reporting your results to Lori Anderson, our compiler. The circle can be seen on the Nipissing Naturalists Club website at: <https://www.nipnats.com/bird-wing/> under Christmas Bird Count, and if you are still in doubt, check with Lori at [lori.anderson58@hotmail.com](mailto:lori.anderson58@hotmail.com).

Earlier this year, Sue Gratton's husband, Darcy, designed a program for North Bay's CBC count to keep track of all our CBC birds seen over the decades, using the numbers Lori enters on Audubon, the official CBC site. Darcy and Sue will be going over this program with Angela Mills, our treasurer, and after Lori enters the numbers on Audubon, Angela will then enter the same numbers on our site. By using our program, we will be able to more quickly access all sorts of statistics



from our CBC. Angela will demonstrate the program at some point during the winter.

The Burk's Falls CBC is even closer, on **Thursday, December 14**. If you live in the Sundridge/South River area, you might want to take part in it. To find out more, contact the compiler for the Burk's Falls CBC, Craig Evans, who has taken over this year from Martin Parker, at [cpe4@hotmail.com](mailto:cpe4@hotmail.com) or by telephone at 905-716-5903.

**Bird Bash:** Our first Bird Bash of 2024 will take place over the **weekend of January 20-21**.

**Bird Wing:** Our next Bird Wing meeting will once again be by Zoom and will take place on **Tuesday, January 23, starting at 7:00 pm**.

**Birdwing Club Whatsapp:** If you are not already part of the Birdwing Club Whatsapp and wish to be part of it so you can be notified quickly of interesting and rare birds seen in our area, please let me know and I will pass on the information to June Telford.



# The mega bird: Fieldfare

*By Renee Levesque*

We don't often get a mega bird in our area. We get some rare birds certainly, but a mega bird, well, that is fairly rare in our area compared to southern Ontario, but it does happen – I am thinking of the Brambling seen in North Bay in November 2014, and other long-time area birders will be aware of more. So what constitutes a mega bird? It is a very rare bird that will be a lifer for most who see it.

On November 29, we learned that Julie Belliveau spotted an unusual bird in her mother's Sturgeon Falls yard. She wasn't sure what it was, but she says she knew what it wasn't! She managed to get a photo of it with her cell phone, sent it to Mike Burrell whom she knows, and got her answer back: a Fieldfare, a breeding bird of northern Europe. Finding and identifying it was actually quite a serendipity moment. Julie lives in Peterborough, likes to bird, was up visiting her mom but without binoculars or camera, and just happened to know Mike. What are the odds?



*Linda Stoner*

It was snowing heavily on November 29, so not many birders saw it on that day, but by November 30, the southern birders had arrived. Also arriving that day were Dick and I. And once in the area where the Fieldfare had been seen, we met up with Sheldon McGregor and about 35 to 40 other birders, most seemingly from Hamilton. Dick and I arrived at around 9:45 for



what is called a “stake-out” and finally saw the bird at 2:15. It wasn’t a terribly cold day for our 4.5 hour wait and time went by nicely talking to other birders.

Dick very generously bought lunch for one lone birder standing apart from the group and when Dick gave him the Dairy Queen sandwich, French fries and pop, the birder said that because of Dick’s generosity the bird would appear – and sure enough within half an hour it did. Probably a coincidence, but it is a lovely thought that what goes around comes around.

We had good views of the Fieldfare for at least a couple of minutes. I think it was spooked somewhat by the crowd that had gathered, and some shouted in excitement when they saw the bird, so it didn’t land on the Mountain Ash tree it had been feeding on but flew across the road and landed in a tree near the top where it stayed for a while. It then flew back towards the Mountain Ash, but did not land on it but a tree close by, and then it flew across the road again and disappeared.

I couldn’t help but feel that if we weren’t all standing around in a large group, it would have quietly had its afternoon snack on the Mountain Ash. I will admit, I do have concerns about a stake-out and many people gathering and waiting for a bird to appear. It’s not as if the bird can’t see us standing around and hear us talking, even quietly talking.

On the other hand, it is great that so many who would not normally see the bird can see it, and it is nice to talk to other birders we don’t often see or meet. (This is only my second stake-out experience. The first was the Brambling (at right), although I actually saw it privately with Vic Rizzo and Dick before other birders were notified, so it probably doesn’t count as taking part in a stake-out, but I did go to Vic’s area on a couple of occasions to witness it.)

This Fieldfare was not a lifer for me or for Dick. I saw one in my mother’s Northern Ireland backyard in June 2009, and Dick saw one in Holland and in Germany. So I really didn’t need to be one of the many, but when a bird has only been seen three times previously in Ontario and it has decided to come close to home, it’s hard to resist. It was seen in Ottawa in 1967, our Centennial year; in Long Point in 1975; and in Toronto in 1981. It was also seen in Quebec near the Ontario border in 1976 and that is when Stephen O’Donnell saw it.



*Renee Levesque*

The Fieldfare is a member of the thrush family and for those who saw it, you saw that its posture is very much like that of our American Robin. It breeds broadly across Northern Europe and Asia and parts of Russia and migrates through western and southern Europe to North Africa, Northeast India, Israel and Iran. Some winter in Britain, Ireland and Iceland where the winters are relatively mild, and most Fieldfares that winter in these countries are from Scandinavia, Finland and northwest Russia.

It is a species of least concern except in the United Kingdom, the extreme edge of its breeding range, where it was red listed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in January 2013. It does not breed in Northern Ireland, although the odd bird will summer there, so I actually saw a fairly rare bird for Northern Ireland in June 2009. However, it is a common winter visitor there.

It is a large thrush, 10 inches long, with a slate grey crown, neck and rump, a dark brown back and blackish wings and tail. Its breast with its yellow-reddish wash is heavily spotted. It is white under its wings, very conspicuous when it flies. The male and female are similar in appearance, with the females slightly browner.

Its name may have come from an old English word from the 11th century, feldfare, (pronounced over four syllables) meaning traveller through fields.

In addition to Dick and I and Sheldon, other local birders who saw it were Grant McKercher, Chris Sukha, Linda Stoner (whose photo is at the top of the article), June and Kevin Telford, Mary Young, Kim Stahl, Diane and Alvin Deagle, Michael

Arthurs, Craig Evans, Fred Pinto and Therez Violette who happens to live around the corner from where the bird was spotted and knows Julie's mother. Brent and Laura Turcotte and Luanne Chowns were there on two days, December 2 and 3, but unfortunately did not see it.

Although the Fieldfare was not seen after the weekend for two or three days, it showed up on December 6 to 9, so, as of the writing of this article, it is still around and hopefully will manage to get through the winter, always a concern when there is a bird here that should not be here.

For a hilarious perspective of a stake-out, you must listen to the late Stuart McLean's Vinyl Café talk about one. You will laugh out loud many times, so be sure to listen to it when you have time. Here is the You Tube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOe1PIQIwE8>.



*Craig Evans*

## Seeds and Cones

**The wonders of chickadees:** Over the winter months the most common bird at our feeders is the Black-capped Chickadee, a little black and white bird that always appears cheerful or at least makes us feel cheerful, especially when it comes to our hand to feed. Even its call, *chickadee-dee-dee*, sounds cheerful.

But maybe because of its small size, its cuteness, its unassuming colour, and its seeming cheerfulness, we tend to underestimate its intelligence.

In *BirdWatching* magazine, the April 2022 issue, there is an article on the wonders of chickadees. It is mainly about Mountain Chickadees, but applies to other species of chickadees. Research shows that chickadees may possess mental abilities that rival those of birds we know to be intelligent.

One of the leading chickadee researchers, Vladimir Pravosudov, Professor of Biology at the University of Nevada, Reno, says, “Absolutely all chickadees are incredibly smart in terms of learning and memory. They hold more answers to cognition and adaptations to harsh environments than many more colourful birds.”

We know that chickadees, all but the Mexican and Chestnut-backed Chickadees, cache food, hiding seeds and insects for when the weather gets cold or when they don't have access to enough food. If you have feeders, you will have noticed that Black-capped Chickadees almost continuously take seed from the feeders during the day. They must gain 10 to 15% of their body fat during the day because that fat is then burned off at night. If they don't gain this fat back, they die. So it becomes essential for them to recall where they have stored their food.

How they remember where they have stored their food is really quite remarkable, especially because they start storing hundreds of seeds and insects in very many places during the late summer and early fall, when the landscape is much different from the winter landscape. That's when their spatial ability as well as their astute memory comes into play. And because some Black-capped Chickadees live in areas with harsh winters, they will of necessity store more



*Renee Levesque*



seeds and insects, and, as a result, have better spatial learning and memory ability than those living in milder winter climates.

Professor Pravosudov has studied parids his whole career and concludes, “They are among the smartest birds, not far from corvids.”

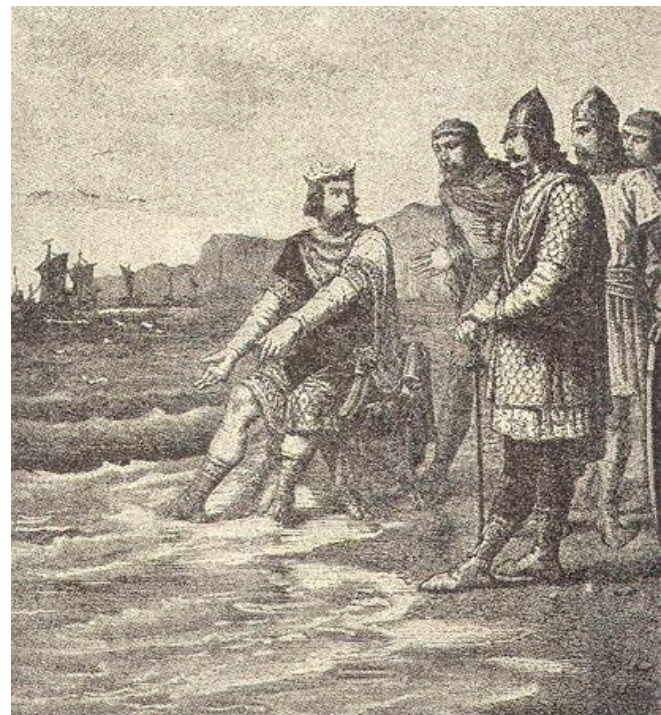
**Loon:** Every now and then, I get an email about a Bird Wing Report and in response to October’s report, I heard from Faye Oei about the loon articles: “I especially liked the loon report – I learned a lot. I believed loons mated for life, so it was an eye-opening that they don’t. When I was visiting friends at their place on Georgian Bay this summer, I saw a loon attack a Mallard that had the nerve to start swimming into the channel with its ducklings in the general direction of the loon and its chick. The loon vigorously flapped its wings and pursued the Mallard right into the swamp. The Mallard and her ducklings didn’t reemerge.” Smart Mallard!

I also received an email from Garry Waldram informing me he plans to build a loon platform next spring on a lake near his house.

**Red Knot:** Further to the article on Moonbird, the Red Knot, in October’s report, Dick Tafel informed me that the Red Knot is named after King Canute or King Cnut in Danish, “a strapping Viking who ruled the North Sea Empire – Denmark, Norway and eventually England in 1016. During his reign (995 to 1035) across his widespread kingdom, the successful monarch was worshipped as if he were a god.”

To demonstrate that he was a god, the King had his courtiers take him to the ocean’s edge so he could show that he was able to stop the tide (he couldn’t) or, as some believe, to show that he was not a god and could not stop the tide. (Illustration by Alphonse-Marie-Adolphe de Neuville at right.) Which version is correct remains a mystery. My feeling is both could be correct and that the King went down to the ocean to show he could stop the tide, but when it became evident he couldn’t, he used this inability to show he was not a god and that he should not be worshipped as a god. But was has this to do with the Red Knot?

Even though Red Knots gathered by the hundreds along the ocean shore to feed, they too were not able to control the tide and hence were named after the King whose name is pronounced ‘Knud’ or ‘Knut’, a close variation of ‘knot’.





This is a nice myth, so one hesitates to say that maybe Red Knots were simply named after their call, *knut knut*. (The temptation is strong to say, “Who’s there?”, but I will resist.)

**Lifers:** Yet again this month, Garry Waldram added lifers to his bird list, this time five lifers – Dunlin, Ruddy Duck, Long-tailed Duck, White-winged Scoter and Lesser Scaup.

**Linda Stoner:** There are recent articles in the *North Bay Nugget* and *Bay Today* about Linda and her book, *Chippy’s Family Helping Others*. The only thing missing from the articles is a mention that Linda is a member of Bird Wing! For those who haven’t read the articles, here are the links: <https://www.nugget.ca/news/north-bay-photographer-swamps-brides-for-chipmunks-in-latest-project>; <https://www.baytoday.ca/rooted/cheeky-linda-stoner-turns-wild-chipmunks-into-successful-models-7821413>

**Squirrel prevention:** Over the years, we have all used some strategies to prevent squirrels from eating bird seed and nuts from our feeders, but Steve Pitt found quite a creative way. (See photo below.) However, I don’t think Blue Jays can be fooled that easily! (I realize I showed a similar photo for Halloween in October’s report, but I particularly like the Blue Jay’s expression in this photo and the seeming stand-off.)



**Steve Pitt**

**Marc Buchanan:** Linda is not the only creative person on the Bird Wing team. There is also Marc Buchanan. As many of us know, Marc has been painting for many years and this year, his art work is on display at various venues. Two of the venues where you can see and/or buy Marc’s paintings are:

- **Petit Noel, Dufresne Gallery, Callander, Tuesday to Saturday, from now until December 23;**
- **Gallery 222, 222 McIntyre Street on the first floor halls of the Kennedy building, from now until January 10, 2024.**

In addition, one of Marc's paintings was selected in September by the Northern Ontario Art Association from all entries that were submitted. Congratulations, Marc!

The show will travel to 12 northern towns and cities throughout the year. Currently the show is in Sault Ste Marie. Former Bird Wing member, Sarah Wheelan, who now lives in the Sault, took in the show and had her photo taken (below) next to Marc's painting.



*Courtesy of Marc Buchanan*



## Birds Seen in November



*Hooded Merganser, Stephen O'Donnell*

*Dick Tafel:* Horned Grebe and Common Merganser. The Horned Grebe was seen by a few of us at the Government Dock in North Bay where it stayed for at least a couple of weeks. Common Mergansers were quite common in Lake Nipissing this November. There was also a Red-breasted Merganser seen by Grant McKercher, Dick and me.

But the duck Dick shockingly failed to mention was the Long-tailed Duck, a duck he searched for many times in Callander Bay until he finally saw it! It is a duck that was also seen by me and Grant – also by Garry Waldram, one of his five lifers this November. **Stephen O'Donnell's photo of a male graces the cover of this month's Bird Wing Report.**

Long-tailed Ducks are sea ducks that breed in the high Arctic and spend their winters along ocean coasts and large freshwater lakes, like Lake Ontario. In our area, we are fortunate to see only one or two of these elegant ducks, usually in November on their way south. They gather in large flocks during the winter where you can hear them yodel or hear their “oddly goofy, human-like voice” as one website describes their calls.

They can dive as deep as 60 metres (200 feet) to forage and are able to spend an inordinate amount of time underwater. In fact, they spend more time underwater than on the water. If you have ever waited for one to surface, you can wait some time! And if you watch them dive, you will notice that they do not use their feet to propel their dives like other ducks, but flap with partially opened wings.

Most ducks spend a good chunk of the year in their breeding or alternate plumage, and only a few weeks in their basic or winter plumage, a rather drab plumage. But the Long-tailed Duck has a more complex molt between three different plumages – alternate, basic, and

a supplemental plumage. From October to March, you will find the Long-tailed Duck in its basic or winter plumage, a plumage that is hardly drab in terms of this duck. By April, its alternate or breeding plumage emerges, a plumage that in males is mostly black with a white face patch as in the photo at right. As summer progresses, the supplemental plumage begins and the head and neck become whiter and the flanks a darker grey. In all plumages, this unusual duck has two magnificent tail feathers that are long and slender.



Charles J. Sharp, Wikipedia

Females lack the long tails and their plumage is predominantly white in the fall and winter and brown in the spring and early summer.



Renee Levesque

*Angela Mills:* Pine Siskins and Blue Jays. Most had seen a Blue Jay or two or three or more, but in addition to Angela only I had also seen Pine Siskins (at left). They are coming to my yard in very large flocks feeding on the seeds of the lilac and cedar trees.

*Linda Stoner:* A pair of Northern Cardinals and a White-breasted Nuthatch. Many had seen the White-breasted, but only Rick Tripp had seen cardinals. Linda saw a pair in Sweetman's Gardens and Rick by his place in Callander – also seen there by Grant McKercher. (Denise Desmarais saw one in Hamner, but although it counts as a great sighting and shows how these beautiful birds have migrated north, it was seen beyond our mileage limit!)

*Kim Stahl:* American Crows and a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Most had seen American Crows, a bird that will stick around town during the winter but in smaller numbers, but only Faye Oei, Dick and I reported having seen a Red-breasted Nuthatch.

*Denise Desmarais:* Dunlin and Greater Yellowlegs. Denise saw both at Verner Lagoon, although both were present also at Powassan Lagoon. They were also seen by Grant, Dick and



me. There were more Dunlins (photo of one below) present at both lagoons this November than I have ever seen at each.



**Garry Waldram**

The Greater Yellowlegs was a late arrival, present much after we expect to see them here. Also present at Verner Lagoon was a Lesser Yellowlegs, a very late arrival indeed. It usually appears here in the fall before the Greater. Other shorebirds present at Powassan Lagoon in November and seen by Dick and me and perhaps Grant were the Pectoral and White-rumped Sandpipers. I think the very warm spell over two weeks in October upset the usual order of departure and arrival.

*Brittany Tartaglia:* American Robin and Black-capped Chickadees. Brittany, like Garry Waldram, was in Costa Rica in November, so her two birds were birds seen earlier in the month. Most robins are gone by late November, but our cute little chickadee will stay with us through thick and thin. It is sort of like the postal service motto: Neither rain nor snow nor sleet nor hail can keep it from our feeders.

*Fred Pinto:* American Tree Sparrow and Cedar Waxwings. Lori Anderson had a flock of 24 American Tree Sparrows earlier in November and I have up to 4 coming to my yard. Only Fred saw the Cedar Waxwings, but Brittany saw a flock of Bohemian Waxwings by the YMCA – one



shown at right. More have since appeared around town. Oriana Pokorny recently saw a flock at Burrow's and Dick and I saw a flock in West Ferris.

*Faye Oei:* Dark-eyed Junco and Red-winged Blackbird. Some had seen the Dark-eyed Junco earlier in November, but Faye had seen it at her South River feeders just prior to our meeting and Dick has one coming to his feeders. Faye also recently saw the Red-wing and during November's Bird Bash, it was such a nice surprise when Dick and I saw one at Powassan Lagoon. During the summer, it is like, "Oh another Red-wing!", but in November, it can result in some excitement.

*Sue Gratton:* Downy Woodpecker and Hairy Woodpecker. As Lori observed there are a lot of Hairys around right now, except in Faye's case. She is grieving that no woodpeckers are coming to her feeders. They must be all going next door to Sue's, Faye! Maybe they like the Fort Knox suet feeders Sue and I got unbeknownst to each other for our birthdays, Sue's in November, mine in October.



Grant McKercher



Renee Levesque

*Lori Anderson:* A Broad-winged Hawk and a male Pine Grosbeak (at left). Although November is late for a Broad-winged Hawk, Lori saw one on Wasing Road, Chisholm Township. She saw the Pine Grosbeak at her farm. No one else present at the meeting had seen either this November.

*Rick Tripp:* Pileated Woodpecker and Common Goldeneye. Not too many had seen Pileateds, although I had one at my Fort Knox suet feeder. Common Goldeneyes were



quite common in Callander Bay this November.

*Grant McKercher:* Hooded Merganser (at the top of this report) and Purple Finch. The Hooded is, I think, one of the most beautiful of ducks and I know Faye will agree. Grant saw them in Callander Bay and they were seen there by a few others. On the other hand, only Rick besides Grant had seen the Purple Finch.

*Renee Levesque:* Glaucous Gull (at right) and Common Redpoll. I know Dick also saw the Glaucous Gull at Merrick Landfill Site, but at the time of the meeting, I am not sure anyone else had seen redpolls. They came to my yard to feed on the seed of the lilac trees for about three or four days and then disappeared until the writing of this report. They were usually accompanied by goldfinch and Pine Siskins and so to get an accurate count proved difficult.

*Other birds:* Some birds not mentioned during our naming of the two birds were Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, the Trumpeters, three of them seen in Callander Bay by Grant, and a large flock of Tundras seen in Lake Nipissing in Sturgeon Falls by Dick and me.



*Renee Levesque*



*Renee Levesque*

Two other birds seen were the Brown Creeper and the Ruffed Grouse spotted by Denise, with the grouse also being seen by Faye. Two others were the Red-tailed Hawk and the Rough-legged Hawk, at left, both on migration and both recently converging on Hwy 17 west.

*Other members present:* Also present earlier at the meeting were Therez Violette, Linda Conway and Katharine MacLeod.

- *Renee Levesque*

# A Trip to the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland & Labrador

*Text and Photos by Grant McKercher*

In August 2023 my wife Shirley and I visited Newfoundland and Labrador for a week's vacation. From our base in a cozy B&B in Conception Bay South, just outside of the provincial capital of St. John's, we explored some of the Avalon Peninsula: visiting historic villages, taking in the iconic coastal scenery, and viewing seabird colonies at the Witless Bay and Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserves.

St. John's is the eastern-most city in North America (excluding Greenland). The sheltered harbour and surrounding area had been a base for seasonal European fishermen since its

'discovery' in 1497, but it wasn't until sometime after 1630 that England established a permanent settlement on the site. Today it is the capital of the province of Newfoundland & Labrador with a population of ~212,000 (2021 census). With the collapse of the cod fishery in the 1990's the city's resource-based economy shifted from the ocean fishery to exploration of the oil and gas



Conception Bay



St. John's Harbour



reserves beneath the ocean bed of the Grand Banks. Today St. John's is the hub of the oil and gas industry in Eastern Canada.

In and around St. John's there are a number of historical sites including Signal Hill and the Cabot Tower which overlooks the harbour entrance. It has a long history as a military lookout and wartime battery, as well as the site of the first transatlantic wireless communication received by Guglielmo Marconi in 1901.



At Cape Spear, the most easterly point in North America (excluding Greenland!), there has been an operating lighthouse since 1836.

The fishing village of Quidi Vidi ("Kiddy Vidi"), in the eastern section of St. John's, is a picturesque harbour village which is home to the Royal St. John's Regatta, a number of historic military batteries, many local artisans' shops, and the popular Quidi Vidi Brewery (formerly a fish processing plant).



One of my favourite parts of our trip was the visits to two spectacular seabird colonies. The Witless Bay Ecological Reserve (<https://www.gov.nl.ca/ecc/natural-areas/wer/r-wbe/>) is about a half-hour drive from St. John's and a short boat trip out of Bay Bulls to the reserve itself. Here can be seen the largest North American colony of Atlantic Puffins - up to 260,000 pairs nest here during the breeding season in the spring to late summer; the remainder of the year the birds live off-shore on the ocean. The Reserve also hosts the

second-largest Leach's Storm-Petrel colony in the world, with more than 620,000 pairs coming here to nest. These seabirds nest in deep burrows and only come out at night to feed, so are rarely seen in the daytime during the nesting season. Other species of seabirds, present by the thousands during various times in the spring/summer, are Black-legged Kittiwakes and Common Murres. On our visit at the end of August many of the puffins had already

departed for their pelagic wintering grounds, but we were still treated to up-close views of many birds on the cliffs of the islands.



Black-legged Kittiwake



Atlantic Puffin



Common Murres - with one 'bridled' individual



Atlantic Puffin takes flight





Eastern Barrens Ecoregion

Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve is a breath-taking birding destination, especially on a sunny day! It is located about 200 km southwest of St. John's. Cape St. Mary's is within the Eastern Hyper-oceanic Barrens ecoregion, one of the world's most southerly expanses of sub-Arctic tundra. During the breeding season, it is home to 30,000 Northern Gannets, 20,000 Black-legged Kittiwakes, 20,000 Common Murres,

and 2,000 Thick-billed Murres. On our visit in late August we saw primarily Northern Gannets swirling around the shoreline, and tending their nests and young on the amazing "Bird Rock". Other species of seabirds were not as abundant, and the biologist at the interpretive centre said that many murres and kittiwakes had recently left their nest sites and headed for their wintering grounds.



Coastline view - Cape St. Mary's

The ability to walk up close to Bird Rock allowed for excellent viewing and photography. It really was magical to stand almost in the midst of the colony and watch all the activity, while the birds seemed remarkably unconcerned by our close proximity - a magnificent natural habitat and a 'must see' destination for all birders!



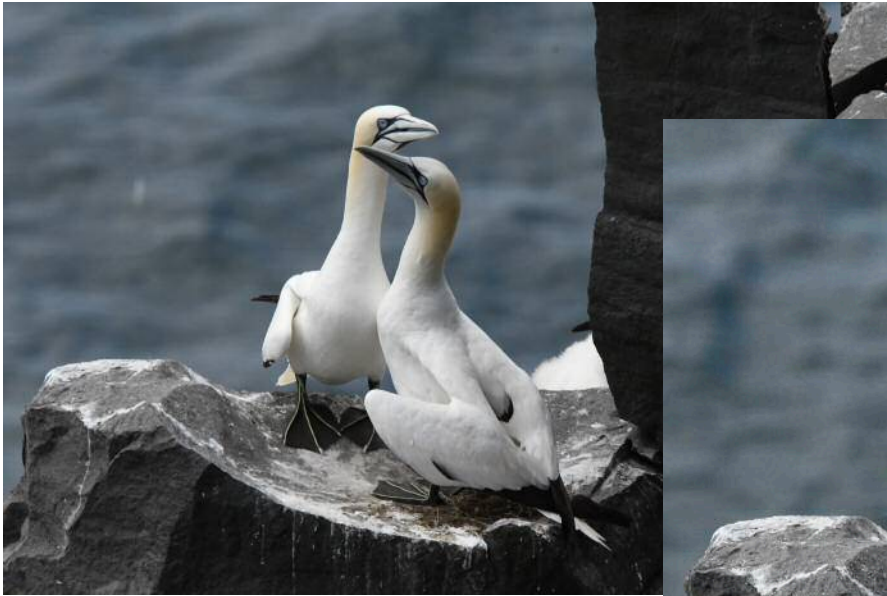


"Bird Rock" - Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve



Northern Gannet





Northern Gannet pair - greeting



Northern Gannets - adult and young