

WILD KINGDOM

How to be a friend to wildlife when birding, whale watching and driving in Atlantic Canada. By Jennifer Bain

TRAVELERS TO ATLANTIC Canada often have their hearts set on seeing the 'clowns of the sea' and the 'singers of the sea' - puffins and humpback whales. With viewing this glorious wildlife, though, comes responsibility. For instance, tour boats must keep a certain distance from whales.

There are traveler responsibilities even away from wildlife tours. Signs across Atlantic Canada warn motorists to slow down and watch for moose. If hit, these massive and majestic beasts can crash through windshields and flip onto vehicle roofs, causing injury and death for all concerned. Most accidents happen between dusk and dawn.

Seeing Puffins

Puffins pop up across Atlantic Canada, but the largest colony in North America is found at the Witless Bay Ecological Reserve, just south of St John's in Newfoundland. More than 260,000 breeding pairs return to these islands each year to nest and then prepare their offspring to follow the moon and stars to the North Atlantic Ocean.

How to explain the allure of the puffin, beloved provincial bird of Newfoundland and Labrador? Perhaps it's the comical way they fly just above the sea, like winged

cannonballs shooting through the air. Or maybe it's that those orange, yellow and blue-black striped beaks, outrageous orange feet and clown-like faces really do scream circus.

Atlantic puffins spend most of their lives at sea, but between May and September these small creatures with big personalities come to isolated rocky islands and grassy sea cliffs to establish burrows. Puffins typically mate for life and return to the same spot each year to breed.

Tour operators transport people by giant catamarans, Zodiacs and other vessels to see (but not step on) the protected islands. Tours are carefully regulated and respectful of the birds they've come to see.

Puffins aren't endangered, but Nature Conservancy Canada notes that populations declined drastically in the early 1900s, when puffins were hunted for meat, feathers and eggs. They still face threats from climate change, warming oceans and changes to the number and distribution of the fish they eat.

Visitors gravitate to boat tours that combine puffins, seabirds, whales and - early in the season - icebergs. These tours happen across Newfoundland and St Pierre and Miquelon, and, to a lesser degree, in Nova Scotia (Cape Breton and Peggy's Cove)

and New Brunswick (Machias Seal Island and Grand Manan Island). Prince Edward Island has endangered piping plovers but alas no puffins.

The Newfoundland town of Elliston offers the closest views of puffins from land in North America when several thousand nesting pairs take over the end of a rocky outcrop. Puffins prefer solitude but seem to tolerate the camera-toting crowds at the Elliston site. It's free to visit, but donations are gratefully accepted.

The Puffin & Petrel Patrol

Some pufflings (puffin chicks) get confused by light pollution. They mistakenly fly or swim to shore at night, drawn by the artificial lights in homes and businesses, and awkwardly waddle around until they're hit by motorists or killed by pets and predators.

That's where the Puffin and Petrel Patrol steps in.

Volunteers with the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society have rescued and released thousands of Atlantic puffin and Leach's storm-petrel chicks (though the latter bird garners far less attention). The program started in 2004 when two Germans, Juergen and Elsie Schau, were visiting their holiday home, spotted dead pufflings along the road and took grassroots action.

Now volunteers sign up to search the communities near Witless Bay at night (usually in August) for pufflings, capture them with butterfly nets, transfer them to pet carriers and bring them to a sea-side meeting spot. The birds are released to great fanfare the next day, either from a beach or from one of the lucky sight-seeing boats.

To manage expectations, it should be said that these birds are too young to have colorful beaks and feet and so they look a little drab. It's also illegal under the Canadian Wildlife Act to handle migratory seabirds without a permit, so don't mount rescues if you're not part of the patrol.

Saving young bird lives is the patrol's priority, but it also aims to teach people about light pollution and encourage everyone to dim their lights.

Whale Watching

Whales can be seen in all four Atlantic provinces, especially in the Bay of Fundy and all around Newfoundland. There are two dozen species in these waters, but the main ones are humpback, fin, minke, orca and Atlantic right whales. Porpoises, the occasional beluga, harbour seals and gray seals (aka horseheads) round things out.

Under federal rules, whale-watching boats must stay at least 100m away from most whales, dolphins and porpoises, since approaching them too quickly, coming too close or making too much noise can disturb, stress and harm them.

Binoculars are a responsible whale-watcher's friend. Move away if a whale approaches. Never feed them, or swim, dive or interact with them. Tour boats aren't allowed to encircle whales, entice them to move, park boats in their path or approach when they're resting. Reputable captains communicate with each other to make sure viewings are staggered.

'Interactions are entirely up to the whales,' is how Gatherall's Puffin & Whale Watch out of Bay Bulls, Newfoundland, frames it. 'We're just there to observe in a respectful manner.'

Wildlife sightings are never guaranteed. You might only see distant black outlines or blasts from blowholes. Or migrating humpbacks could perform a beautiful ballet of fin slaps, breaches, dives and vocalizations.

Here's an insider tip. Capelin (small silver fish) 'roll' with the waves onto the beaches of Newfoundland to spawn by the tens of thousands around mid-June or July. People follow the Twitter hashtag #CapeLinRoll20XX to places such as Middle Cove and St Vincent's Beach to take buckets of fish home to eat. Hungry humpbacks also follow the capelin, feeding and diving close to shore in a spectacle that nobody lucky enough to witness it will ever forget.