Rare Steller's Sea-Eagle Visits Terra Nova National Park

By Jennifer Bain
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Photographer Sandra Moss captured this shot of a rare Steller's Sea-Eagle in Terra Nova National Park in Newfoundland and Labrador in December/Sandra Moss

"Are you a birder?" the woman asked from the front seat of her pickup truck in the parking lot of a Newfoundland national park on New Year's Eve.

"Only for really special birds," I admitted.

"Yeah, well this is a special bird," the woman's husband said with a conspiratorial grin.

They weren't birders either. Just a couple of curious folks from a town called Eastport who'd heard how a rare Steller's Sea-Eagle from Russia had been spotted here in Terra Nova National Park and figured they'd make the 25-minute drive to look for it.

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The Newman Sound area of Terra Nova National Park is also the Terra Nova Migratory Bird Sanctuary/Jennifer Bain

Superzoom in hand, I had come from four provinces away, well aware that the odds of spotting a single bird on a single day in a 154-square-mile, ragged-shaped park were astronomically slim, but always looking for an excuse to visit my favorite place in Canada.

The Steller's Sea-Eagle normally breeds in eastern Russia and winters in Japan, Korea and occasionally China. It's on the International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species because fewer than 5,000 adults remain in the world.

This rare bird sometimes makes its way to Alaska, but since 2021 it has been spotted in Texas, Maine, Massachusetts, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland and Labrador.

Stella — as some people call the lone raptor, figuring she's female because she's huge — has been summering in Newfoundland since 2022. I inadvertently looked for her once in 2023 when Robert "Skipper Bob" Bartlett took me boating with Trinity Eco-Tours. Stella was nowhere to be seen that memorable spring day in Iceberg Alley, but that year there was a bumper crop of icebergs.

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Terra Nova National Park opened one of its roads from Dec. 21 to 31 so birders could look for a rare Steller's Sea-Eagle/Jennifer Bain

What drew me to Newfoundland on short notice for New Year's Eve, though, was the fact that Stella showed up in a national park in December.

"We have an unusual visitor in the park!" Parks Canada announced in a Dec. 21 Facebook post that soon made headlines across the country. "A Steller's Sea Eagle — one of the world's largest birds of prey, which has a wingspan of 8 feet and weighs about 13 pounds, these birds are about 25% larger than a Bald Eagle. They're usually found in the Russian Far East, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula. With fewer than 5,000 of them in the world, this is the only one of its kind known to be in the Western Hemisphere."

The seasonal park closed in October and wasn't set to reopen until May, but Parks Canada made the unusual move of reopening the Newman Sound Day Use Area Road from Dec. 21 to 31 "to let visitors see this fantastic bird" between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. each day except Christmas and Boxing Day. (Warm temperatures and minimal snow to plow helped make this possible.)

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The Terra Nova Migratory Bird Sanctuary is alongside Terra Nova National Park. A Steller's Sea-Eagle was spotted in December in the lower portion of the sanctuary/Canadian Wildlife Service

While I don't consider myself a true birder, I've been casually birding since I was a kid, have joined puffin patrols in Newfoundland to rescue young "pufflings" drawn to shore by light pollution, and enjoy writing about interesting birds in national parks and protected places (like Brown Boobies in Anguilla, Magnificent Frigatebirds in Barbuda and Yellow-Shouldered Amazons in Aruba).

I was also glum because the Christmas Bird Count in Rouge National Urban Park near my Toronto home had just been rained out. So instead of joining North America's longest-running citizen science project on a guided hike in Ontario, I searched alone for Stella in an entirely different province as a consolation prize.

"Good luck!" Jared Clarke said when I announced my intentions on Facebook. "It hasn't been seen since Dec 26 (neighbouring Port Blanford), and not in the park since Dec. 24 that I'm aware of. Lots of area that it can hide in."

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Bird the Rock's Jared Clarke leads a private winter birding tour of Cape Spear Lighthouse National Historic Site in December 2017/Jennifer Bain

I went to Cape Spear Lighthouse National Historic Site once with Clarke, owner of Newfoundland-based Bird the Rock bird and nature tour company, to see Purple Sandpipers from Greenland.

He calls Stella "a mega mega rarity." Hikers first saw it along the East Coast Trail near Bauline. Kayakers saw it next near Spaniard's Cove in Trinity Bay. Then for three summers, people on whale-watching boat tours out of Trinity often saw it along the coast. Clarke has seen the "dream bird" four times.

"My first time I managed to see it (rather distantly) by hiking out to the cove it was originally found in back in 2022 on a beautiful day — a very exciting encounter after I waited with bated breath for two hours in hopes it would appear. I saw it twice from boat tours in summer 2023, and again this summer — every time as wonderful as the rest, especially when sharing it with folks who were equally excited as me."

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At the Newman Sound Day-Use Area of Terra Nova National Park, birders spotted a Steller's Sea-Eagle from this viewing platform in December/Jennifer Bain

My journey involved a two-and-a-half hour drive from Newfoundland's capital (St. John's) to Terra Nova on the last day of the park's special opening. I scoured two Facebook groups — Bird Lovers of Newfoundland and Steller's Sea Eagle in Canada — for word of sightings and called the park's administration office for intel just as I arrived.

"If you do see it, would you mind calling me back and letting me know," a park official asked after conceding there hadn't been any recent sightings.

According to eBird, the Steller's Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) is an immense eagle with a large head and massive, hooked orange bill. The adult is striking with rich brown coloring and snow-white tail, belly and shoulder patches.

It's named for Georg Wilhelm Stöller, a German-born physician, explorer, botanist and zoologist who emigrated to Russia and changed his name to the Russian-friendly Steller. He was a naturalist aboard the Great Northern Expedition that attempted to map a northern sea route from Russia to North America from 1741 to 1742. While stranded on what's now Bering Island, Steller was the first to describe numerous North American plants and animals so the Steller's Sea-Eagle, Steller's Eider, Steller's sea cow (now extinct), Steller sea lion and Steller's Jay now bear his name.

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The Coastal Trail in Terra Nova National Park cuts through prime eagle-viewing territory in an oceanside boreal forest/Jennifer Bain

The Steller's Sea-Eagle feasts in open waters along coastlines and lakes, and steals food from other birds. It gorges on salmon in its Russian breeding grounds, but will eat cod and other fish, crabs, shellfish, squid, small animals, ducks, gulls and carrion (the decaying flesh of dead animals). It has even been spotted eating seals, which abound in Newfoundland.

In search of Stella, I set off on foot from the Newman Sound Day-Use Area parking lot. I scoured the sea in vain from two viewing platforms where others had recently stood and spotted the famous eagle in the distance. Thankful that winter hadn't really started, I strolled along the popular Coastal Trail through boreal forest and down to the Atlantic Ocean at low tide.

Terra Nova is proudly home to multiple nesting pairs of Bald Eagles but none were around. Parts of the park flank the Terra Nova Migratory Bird Sanctuary, which protects shorebirds, waterfowl and seabirds as they feed, rest and nest. There are 92 of these sanctuaries across the nation and they're run by the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment and Climate Change Canada.

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An American red squirrel forages along the Coastal Trail in Terra Nova National Park on a warm December day/Jennifer Bain

During the fall migration, the sanctuary attracts Canada Geese, American Black Ducks, Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers. In summer and early fall, shorebirds gravitate to the tidal inlets. The Southwest Arm portion of the sanctuary freezes in winter, but Newman Sound doesn't so it's a year-round waterfowl hotspot.

I paused to photograph an American red squirrel, a cute but pesky introduced species. I heard Chickadees and startled several species of ducks. For a few exciting moments, I hoped a bulky shadow on shore was Stella but alas it was a gorgeous Common Merganser (and yes I realize they look nothing alike).

Mindful that the December sun sets early in Newfoundland, I called it a day well before the park closed its gates at 4 p.m. so I could make it safely back to St. John's. In a province where motorists collide with hundreds of moose every year along the highways, it's wise to avoid driving between dusk and dawn.

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A Common Merganser rests by open water in Newman Sound in Terra Nova National Park in December/Jennifer Bain

Back in the city as 2024 turned to 2025, I didn't regret my futile bird hunt. But the next morning I called Sandra Moss to hear how she lucked into multiple sightings. The retired IT support analyst for the Department of National Defence lives in Eastport (just like that couple in the truck). She doesn't call herself a birder, just an amateur photographer who likes to shoot landscapes, wildlife and "slow birds" like Bald Eagles and puffins.

Moss first saw Stella from a distance from Skipper Bob's whale-watching boat back in 2023 in Trinity Bay. Then in December, she and her husband heard the famous eagle was in their area but when they couldn't drive through Terra Nova's gates they launched their boat from a nearby village and scoured the shoreline.

Once the park reopened for birders, she hiked around Newman Sound like I did but then followed a park worker/friend to a Parks Canada boat launch and spotted Stella not even 200 feet away. "I only had 10 minutes until they closed the gate again," Moss remembers. "She was on the shoreline in that tall tree. She never moved. Oh my god, I was so excited I didn't know what to do with myself. It was thrilling, very thrilling, I've got to say."

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The day that amateur photographer Sandra Moss got a good look at this Steller's Sea-Eagle in Terra Nova National Park, she took about 500 shots in 10 minutes/Sandra Moss

Moss took about 500 photographs during that brief but incredible encounter. She shared some of her shots with the park for its Facebook post and others with various news outlets — publicity that led me to Newfoundland and then eventually to her.

She soon saw Stella again from one of the park's viewing platforms, but the celebrity bird wasn't close enough for a decent shot. "She'll show up somewhere else," predicts Moss, pointing out that "last year she was on the missing list for a couple of months."

Clarke also expects the rare but well-known bird will winter in his province, feeding from ice-free bays and staying away from prying eyes before returning to Trinity Bay for a fourth summer. He figures he knows why this wayward Steller's Sea-Eagle has stuck around for so long. "Like many tourists," he told me, "this bird has explored a wide swath of North America and somehow managed to fall in love with Newfoundland."

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From Dec. 21 to 31, Terra Nova National Park opened the road to the Newman Sound Day-Use Area so birders could hunt for a rare Steller's Sea-Eagle/Jennifer Bain

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