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Hunting 'Turr' in Newfoundland's Frigid Waters

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Bonavista Journal

- Dec. 4, 2016

Image



Along Newfoundland's coast, hunters rise before dawn and motor their boats out into the open sea in search of turr, a migratory seabird. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

BONAVISTA, Newfoundland — Shannon Mouland steadied himself in an aluminum boat, shotgun raised, as a thick-billed murre skittered above the slate-gray waters of the North

Atlantic.

Boom! And the bird cartwheeled into the sea.

It's "turr" season on The Rock, as this massive inkblot of an island is affectionately known. Turr is the local name for the murre, which looks something like a diminutive, flying penguin, and men in boats are blasting away at it in the only legal, non-aboriginal hunt of migratory seabirds in North America.

The pastime harks back to the days when Newfoundlanders supplemented meager winter diets with fresh meat on the wing, eating everything from clownish puffins to the great northern gannet. Conservation efforts gradually put most of the island's estimated 350 seabird species off limits. But the taste for turr was so entrenched that allowing the hunt to continue became a precondition for Newfoundland to join Canada in 1949.

Image



Scott Butler shooting a turr. Most are hunted to provide winter meat for local families; selling the birds is illegal.Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

"Our fathers would come back with the boats piled high with turr," Mr. Mouland recalled, gripping a green rope to steady

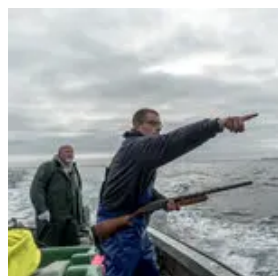
himself as the boat hammered over the steely waves.

Here along Newfoundland's treeless, surf-pounded coast, hardy men (and some women) rise before dawn and motor their boats out into the open sea in search of the birds that come to feed on small forage fish. They are remarkable animals, spending most of their lives on the ocean and visiting land only to pack tightly together on the rocky cliffs of northeastern Canada and Greenland for a few months each summer while the females lay their one speckled blue egg. The eggs are pointed on one end so that they roll like a top in a tight circle, preventing them from falling off cliff ledges and into the sea.

The murre's short wings act as flippers underwater, allowing them to swim nimbly and swiftly in search of fish. They are the deepest-diving flying birds in the world, capable of plummeting as deep as 600 feet in little more than a minute. But those wings make them less agile in the air and slow to take off from the water, leaving them an easy target for hunters.

"Turr!" Mr. Mouland shouted, pointing to his left, and Jerry Hussey, clad in a forest green slicker and matching overalls, swung the boat toward a small black-and-white bird bobbing in the waves 100 feet away. Boom, again. Mr. Mouland picked the bird out of the water and whacked its head against the gunwale to ensure that it was dead. Before long, a plastic bin in the boat was lined with the birds, their snowy white breasts and sleek coal-black heads flecked with blood.

Image



Jerry Hussey, left, and Shannon Mouland hunting off the shore of Bonavista, Newfoundland. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

The Canadian Wildlife Service estimates that about 100,000 murres are killed in the hunt each year. But the common murre population in Canada has increased over the past 15 years, while the thick-billed murre population remains stable. There are millions more murres elsewhere, making the genus one of the Arctic's most abundant seabirds.

But as the hunt intensifies, many people are beginning to ask whether the annual cull needs better regulation.

"Just because we don't have evidence of the population decreasing doesn't mean we shouldn't have strong conservation rules," said Bill Montevecchi, an ornithologist at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He supports the hunt but believes existing rules should be enforced more seriously.

In the old days, men hunted murres in rowboats with muzzle-loading shotguns, sending their dogs into the frigid water to fetch the fallen prey. Now, many hunters have fiberglass-hulled boats that cut through sea ice, and high-horsepower outboard

engines that can move boats faster than the birds. While regulations prohibit guns from being loaded with more than three shells at a time, most hunters these days use pump-action or semiautomatic shotguns that can fire those rounds in seconds.

Image



The birds are kept head down in tubes after being shot to let blood flow out into the boat. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

The murre hunt has a long tradition in Newfoundland, where seabirds, from great auks to eiders, provided sailors with much-needed protein after the long voyage from Europe. Eating seabirds and seals later sustained coastal populations through Newfoundland's long, frozen winters.

Murres and eiders were the most available sources of winter protein until the 1960s, when electricity and refrigeration changed eating habits. Before then, some families consumed as many as 400 birds a year.

When Newfoundland became a province, it fell under the Migratory Bird Treaty between the United States and Canada, which would have outlawed the hunt if the two countries had

not agreed to let it continue. The treaty was finally amended in the 1990s to specifically grant Newfoundland residents the right to hunt murre.

Under the treaty, hunters must buy permits, and Canada's environmental protection agency carved Newfoundland into four zones with progressively later murre hunting seasons that run from September to March. The regulations set a 20-bird limit on what each hunter can kill in a day, and a 40-bird limit on how many a hunter can possess at one time.

Image



Hunters off Bonavista. "Turr" is the local name for the murre, which looks like a small, flying penguin. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

But enforcement is lax, and abuses are common. Discarded carcasses reported around Newfoundland suggest that some hunters are killing more than the law allows or than they can consume. The most die-hard hunters now follow the season from zone to zone with their boats on trailers. It is not uncommon for there to be more than 100 boats chasing murre off Newfoundland's narrow bays, the boom of shotguns ricocheting over the water.

Newfoundlanders are well aware of the dangers of overexploitation. A mariner, Sir Richard Whitbourne, wrote in 1622 that great auks, a flightless relative of the murre, were found in “infinite abundance” along the Newfoundland coast. But by the mid-19th century, the birds had been clubbed to extinction, their feathers used to stuff mattresses. The less numerous Labrador duck and Eskimo curlew suffered the same fate.

Some people worry that murres may become vulnerable as global warming and overfishing deplete their food supply. Hundreds of thousands of murres died of apparent starvation in the northeastern Pacific Ocean earlier this year, the largest recorded die-off of the species.

Some murre colonies in Greenland, where hunters are allowed to target nesting birds, were wiped out decades ago and show no signs of recovering. Without stricter regulations to prevent overhunting, critics warn, a sudden environmental shock could send Newfoundland's murre population plummeting.

Image



Mike Fleming, left, and Mr. Mouland plucking freshly caught turrs. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

That frustrates Mr. Mouland and his friends, who say they are already fenced in by too many rules. They cannot, for example, catch two species of fish in one boat, even if they have a license for each.

“There’s food in your front yard, but you’re not allowed to take it,” Mr. Hussey said.

Still, there is a sense of resignation that more rules are coming.

“The law’s going to get stricter,” muttered Darren Abbot, painstakingly plucking pinfeathers from one of the dead birds in Mr. Mouland’s work shed. “They claim turrs are getting a little bit scarce.”

Mike Fleming, preparing a bowl of stuffing, responded with an expletive. “Some years they don’t migrate this way, but this year is a phenomenal year,” he said, his hands mixing torn-up bread, chopped onions and a sprinkling of savory, Newfoundland’s most popular herb.

The men fell into a spirited discussion about bureaucrats who make rules from offices far away without having ever spent time on the ocean. “They don’t like any hunt, but they like their Kentucky fried,” Mr. Fleming said, adding that he thought it was more humane for a murre to live its life in the wild and be shot than for a chicken to live its life in a tiny cage and be slaughtered.

Mr. Hussey said his family ate what he had killed or caught five

nights a week. Murre is on the table once or twice a month.

As the men bantered among themselves, the conversation became increasingly unintelligible to an outsider:

Newfoundland's rural accent is a thick stew of Irish and West Country English inflection, with a dash of Gaelic and French, that has bubbled together during a couple of hundred years of isolation.

Image



Stuffing a skinned turr before cooking it. The birds take two to three hours to roast. Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

Mr. Mouland put the birds in the oven, and the men turned to filleting the day's catch of cod. Though the stuffed birds weigh only about two pounds each, they take two or three hours of roasting before they are tender. One local joke is that you put a turr and a rock into a pot, and when the rock is soft, you know the turr is done.

Eventually, Mr. Mouland appeared back in the shed with the "scoff o' turr," as a meal of the bird is called here. The men dug in unceremoniously, slicing and forking and salting big bites until there was little left of two birds but bones and a bit of

gravy.

The meat is dark and oily and has a fishy aftertaste that divides fans from foes along fairly stark lines. But the rich protein is full of vitamin E and omega-3 fatty acids concentrated from the birds' steady diet of fish. It's no wonder that it became a principal part of the winter regimen.

Image



From left, Mr. Fleming, Mr. Hussey and Mr. Mouland settling down to dinner.Credit...Andrew Testa for The New York Times

Mr. Fleming recounted an old joke about a man who complains that the turr is tough. The retort: "It'd be a lot tougher if there was nothing to eat!"

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 5, 2016, Section A, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Frigid Hunt for 'Turr' (and Chafing at Rules) Off Newfoundland. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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