

Marine Matters Ecological Almanac

Spring Birding

by Margo Hearne

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What are all those Brown Geese?

They're the talk of the town, those wonderful, wild geese that settled on Haida Gwaii at the end of April. They landed in fields, airports, golf courses and lawns; anywhere they could get a bite to eat and a bit of shelter from the strong northwesterlies that have blown over us since mid-April. On their way to the nesting grounds in the Yukon River Delta, the geese were held here by strong head-winds. *They are Greater White-fronted Geese, Anser albifrons, and the number seen here in late April and early May is the largest known flock size ever to appear in spring in British Columbia.*

Upwards of 7,000 geese were counted, 5,000 in Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary alone. It's a phenomenon. A friend in Tlell told me that she had "just sat down outside for a cup of coffee and suddenly had the strange feeling that she was not alone". When she turned, she saw upwards of 300 White-fronts in the field behind her. "They landed so silently," she laughed. "And suddenly, just as silently, took off again. How do they do that?"

A group of birders from the Vancouver Natural History Society, here on a birding trip, made these geese their motif, seeing not only geese but shadows of geese that drifted down outside as they sat inside on one of their short breaks. One evening such a huge flock landed in Delkatla that we had to rush off to find someone to share the adventure. The birds seemed to pour down from the sky and, restless as the wind themselves, take wing again.

So where have they come from and where are they going? According to the book 'Birds of British Columbia' by Campbell and others, *the Greater White-fronted Geese migrate along the Offshore Pacific flyway winter in the Central Valley of California and nest in the Yukon River Delta.* They feed on fresh grass shoots, bulbs and roots; and like a bit of freshwater around. They're mighty hungry and unless given a chance to feed, many could die on the northern nesting grounds, unable to withstand the toll of a cold migration and the rigours of the nesting season. It's a wild, uncertain life they have, and long may they fly.

One afternoon the last week of April, we stood in a field in Tlell and watched the migration of birds offshore for hours. Dabbling and diving ducks, brant, loons, black-legged Kittiwakes, grebes, jaegers; you name it, it passed by.

Hecate Strait and Dixon Entrance are still undiscovered country when it comes to migratory birds. Other than some limited aerial surveys in the 70's, no recent surveys have been done on the millions of birds migrating north along the offshore Pacific Flyway. The shallow seas east and north of Haida Gwaii are a mecca for migrants. Upwellings along the Dogshead Shoal, running seas at Rose Spit and Sandspit, and the trench between the islands and the mainland attract birds by the million.

Why? Well, when you have a relatively sheltered, shallow body of water between two landforms, living things thrive. Euphausiids, those tiny shrimp-like creatures that are eaten by everything from herring to whales, abound in the shallows, sandlance skitter along, and herring and halibut follow in their wake. And, of course, birds, described by fishermen as 'feed' for they mark the spot where fish can be found.

If there's feed, there's fish; if there's fish, there's shrimp; if there's shrimp, there are whales; if there are whales, there's feed. It's called the 'food chain'. All this must be considered by human developments such as offshore oil and gas and offshore windfarms.