



Peases Island is located off the southwest corner of the province, near Yarmouth. **LARRY PEYTON**

Finding wonder in the wind birds



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Tuesday morning, because I live with a dog that does not care that it has snowed in late April, I took a stroll along a country road where, for the first half hour, I didn't see a human being.

I did, though, see a cluster of buffleheads, the male version a distinctive black and white, bobbing in a bay, and a pair of loons solemnly float-

ing nearby.

Up around the bend, I think I saw the little yellow songbird that my neighbour, the notable birder Sylvia Fullerton, had told my wife was a palm warbler.

Although that may have just been wishful thinking on my part, just as I wanted to believe that the bird with the extraordinary wingspan that scattered herring gulls as it flew east, was the bald eagle which had recently been noted in these parts.

It was great, in these housebound times to think of it out there somewhere, soaring, wheeling and diving, eating whatever it could grasp in its talons, free as, well, a bird.

Just as it was great when I got home to check my emails.

There I found one from the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, announcing that Peases Island, seven kilometres from Pubnico, an important resting stop for shore and seabirds making the long migration home from their northern breeding grounds, now enjoyed protected status.

By coincidence I'm just reading Peter Matthiessen's book *The Wind Birds*, in which the only winner of the United States' National Book Award for fiction and non-fiction writes, "The restlessness of shorebirds, their kinship with the distance and swift seasons, the wistful signal of their voices down the long coastlines of the world make them, for me, the most affecting of wild-creatures."

I wanted to find out about this place where birds of a genus that can fly 3,200 kilometres in 35 hours like to alight. Even if I was supposed to stay the blazes home, 170 kilometres away, I wanted to be able to picture that island.

I wanted to see it in my mind's eye, because the mere fact that it exists, was a cheerful thought on an unseasonably cold day, in our challenging times.

So I called Alix d'Entremont, an ornithologist who studies tern habitat from Yarmouth all the way down to the Tusket islands.

When I asked if he'd been to Peases he paused for a second, then said "about 40

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times” since the first time he stepped on it in 2013.

Yet this 11-hectare island, which features an 18th century lighthouse to go with terrain that includes hills, coastal barrens and rocky beach, never gets old, he told me Tuesday.

“The nature of birding is that things are constantly changing and from season to season and year to year you are always discovering new things,” d’Entremont explained. “This island has something to offer birders and naturalists during all seasons.”

He’s seen thousands of shorebirds, at a time, feeding there, and has personally identified 18 different shorebird species.

Some of the names I knew, like sandpipers, killdeers and mockingbirds.

Some I did not, like the red knot, an endangered species



Sanderlings and semipalmated plovers take flight on Peases Island, near Yarmouth. **SIMON D’ENTREMONT PHOTO**

that is “known for having one of the longest bird migrations in the world,” according to the Nature Trust, having been glimpsed on Peases in the fall, on the way south from their summer breeding grounds in the Arctic.

Nor had I heard of the even-more-at-risk roseate tern. Its numbers have

dropped by more than half in the last decade to the point where all 70 pairs still surviving in Canada are found in Nova Scotia, most of them in the Tusket islands area.

The experts tell us that about one billion birds — about 30 per cent of the existing North American flock — have disappeared since

1970. According to the Nature Trust, 430 of the species that migrate through Canada, the United States and Mexico are considered “high concern” for conservation.

It was, therefore, good to hear that Peases, the red knot, the roseate tern and the rest of them now have a safe place to set down and rest for a

minute. It was, to be honest, just good to think about that mass migration of avian life.

What they do, flying those thousands of kilometres, carried seemingly by the wind, seems not just impossible but wonderful.

And God knows we could all use a little of that.