

Newfoundland in a Nutshell



Puffin echo

Fabiola Forns
Coral Gables,
Florida

<http://www.avianscapes.com/>

Breaching Humpback



For the second time in two years, a pair of photographers headed to Newfoundland, land of fog and icebergs, specifically to two parts of the Avalon Peninsula: Witless and Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserves. Witless Bay hosts the largest North American Puffin colony and the objective

was to photograph Atlantic puffins and Northern gannets. The reserve contains four islands, Gull, Green, Great and Pee Pee. Found there are also Kittiwake gulls, Common murre, Razorbills, Leach's storm petrels and Herring gulls, among other species.

All of these birds spend time at sea except in the breeding season, May to August, when they come to the islands to nest. The Parks and Natural Areas Division (Department of Environment and Conservation in the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador) regulates the approach to the area in an effort to protect and maintain the balance of the species. Boat traffic is controlled, and landing on the islands requires a scientific research or special access permit. Only a few permits are issued per year and this group was fortunate to obtain one that allowed landing in Gull Island, and being hosted by biologist Tony Power.

The permit allows one landing in a space of three days to make allowance for weather conditions, since there are no docks on the islands. On the second day, the wind was fair and with the guidance of Mr. Power, the group decided



Humpback and Zodiac

to go. The little Zodiac took about 15 minutes to get to the cove, and the landing and ascent to the Puffin area proved to be an adventure for this photographer, “a flat lander.” With the help of the expedition, and Mr. Power, it was possible to get over the steep rocks trying not to look down. Going through Herring gull territory, it was necessary to hold the tripod or walking stick high overhead to discourage irate parent attacks. A few minutes later, walking a trail through green ferns and tree trunks, the group made it to Puffin land. Puffins nest in burrows, surrounded by grass. Nearby trees may sustain root damage, due to this activity, so it was necessary to be very careful when stepping, to avoid disturbing the burrows.

Finally when we were able to set up, my heart almost stopped beating when a Puffin appeared only a few feet away. The bird didn't seem to be disturbed by human presence, but it was necessary not to make any sudden movement or noise. The full frame, Nikon D3, with the 200-400/f4 Vibration-reduction (VR) lens with the addition



Gannet family



Gannet flight

Photos © Fabiola Fornis

Puffin habitat



of the 1.7X tele-converter was placed on a tripod. Flash was not carried, and luckily, the weather around the island was overcast: fantastic to capture black and white birds without burning the whites, since by this time it was close to 11AM.

Puffins are very small birds, not fond of sudden movement unless they are in flight, which seems to be a painful experience for them. Soon, there were a bunch of them in front of different backgrounds: dark rocks, white foamy ocean or yellow lichen covering the rocks. Aperture value was used with compensation according to the background. Mainly, the compensation was 1 or 2/3s of a stop under for the dark backgrounds, 1/3 of a stop over for the white foam and mostly even for the lichen.

At this point, while shooting birds on the ground that did not move that much, this

photographer was able to capture the Puffins in pairs, alone and with or without Capelin, the fish abundant in the area.

After a while, the guide moved the group to another position to give the birds more freedom to move around. As the new location had great



Fabiola Fornes



Cape St. Marys



Descent from Gulls Island



Humpback spying

opportunities for flight, the camera was set to Manual mode, and as long as the birds were on the same light, one didn't have to worry about the background. To obtain a good exposure on the birds the sky was overexposed, since the day was totally overcast. This provided high key images, which posed no problem. If desired when post processing, Viveza® the PhotoShop® plugin, could be used to punch up the color in the skies. After a few thousand images, exhilarated with the experience, this happy photographer made the way down to the Zodiac, which was waiting at the bottom of the cliff.

The next day, something new: Whale watching! It was a little bit late in the month (mid July) to see any icebergs, but the whales were still there. Humpback and Minke were the most abundant, with six humpbacks spotted. They seemed to enjoy the company of the small Zodiacs, gracing them with breaching, tail displays, even facial displays.

The adrenaline rush when the little calf (little?) kept swimming underneath the boat cannot be described: another experience that will remain forever. The next day the experience was repeated again, this time with very foggy weather, adding to the mystique of the moment. I decided to keep the fog in the pictures, but could have avoided most of it by maxing the blacks in the computer when converting from RAW.

Last, was the visit to Cape St. Mary's Ecological Reserve, one of the most impressive places. A 1 km (0.625 mile) path takes you to the Rock, one of Newfoundland and Labrador's major seabird colonies. Mostly covered by fog, the rocks



*Atlantic Puffin in flight,
with Capelin*

go way down to the ocean, covered by nests and hundreds of birds in flight. When the fog lifts, the abrupt drop to the ocean becomes more steep and hypnotic. The sound of thousands of birds, led by the vocal Kittiwakes, is unforgettable music. Here, provided it is a clear day, you can do landscapes, wide angle bird scenes, medium telephoto flights and super telephoto isolations.

July is the foggiest month, with May and August yielding more clear days. July was chosen to coincide with the Puffins carrying fish to feed their young, but the group was rewarded with two clear days at the rock. Chris, the biologist at the park, kept saying that the Floridians had brought the good weather.

Newfoundland—a place where the fog is always waiting, close to shore, where the hospitality of the people warms your heart at every moment, a land of lakes and pines, pristine and unspoiled, and where we will come back many times. ■

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