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In the line of fire

What drives those who insist on endangering their own safety for the lives of Cormorants?

by **BRENDAN WEDLEY**

BRIGHTON – Four women, armed with nothing but cameras and binoculars, took to the water to put themselves in the line of fire.

“On this beautiful and sunny day, we’re going out to watch birds be slaughtered,” said Dr. Mary Richardson as the dingy pushed off from shore at Presqu’île Provincial Park.

It was a beautiful day.

The temperature hovered around 20 degrees Celsius and the water was fairly calm on May 25 as the boat approached High Bluff Island.



Sitting in the dingy were Dr. Richardson, Dr. Sandy Cook, and animal rights activists Julie Woodyer and Melissa Ryall.

The four had gone out the previous day when the shooting of Double-crested Cormorants had started on the island at 8 a.m. on May 24.

Dr. Richardson and Dr. Cook, both veterinarians, witnessed four shooters with rifles firing at the Cormorants.

That morning, the two veterinarians attempted to help two wounded Cormorants.

Dr. Richardson and Dr. Cook, in a canoe, paddled toward a bird floundering in the water about 20 feet off High Bluff Island.

Activists on the water to monitor 'inhumane' cull

They went with the intent of finishing the job of the shooters – to end the suffering of the bird.

“By the time we went to get the bird, it was dead,” Dr. Richardson said.

The veterinarians carried a euthanasia solution to inject into the Cormorants to humanely kill the animals.

The other bird they attempted to help landed on the shore, but before they could get to it, one of the shooters on the island picked it up and carried it inland and out of sight.

They were just two birds out of up to 5,500 that are to be killed this year through the implementation of the Cormorant management plan.

Last spring, the Ministry of Natural Resources killed 6,030 Cormorants.

Ministry staff are also oiling Cormorant eggs and disturbing birds off their nests in an attempt to bring down the number of birds on High Bluff and Gull islands.

Before implementation of the plan began in 2003, the colony had about 12,000 birds.

The ministry is conducting the cull to protect vegetation being killed by the Cormorant colony.

A number of animal protection groups – Animal Alliance, Animal Protection Institute, Canadians for Snow Geese, Earthroots, Environmental Voters, Peaceful Parks Coalition and Zoocheck – are challenging the ministry’s legal authority to keep activists outside a 200 metre restricted zone surrounding High Bluff and Gull islands.

But the two veterinarians, friends since vet school, came on their own accord to monitor the cull.



*Brendan Wedley
photo*

A dead Cormorant is inspected by Dr. Mary Richardson, right, and Melissa Ryall on May 25 as they float off High Bluff Island to monitor the cull.

“It’s inhumane,” Dr. Cook said.

They’re concerned for the birds that don’t die from the rifle shots; for the birds that suffer through bleeding out and drowning.

Dr. Richardson, a mother with a six year old and nine year old, travelled from Huntsville to Presqu’ile to monitor the cull.

If the ministry is going to try and manage the Cormorant population, then it should be done using humane methods, she said.

“Are they such good shots that they can guarantee instant death?”

“The level of suffering is unacceptable.”

So, together with the two animal rights activists, they circled the islands to monitor the cull and assist any wounded birds.



Brendan Wedley photo
A Cormorant, shot through the chest and wings, floats off High Bluff Island.

But with their presence, they also hoped to stop the shooting.

“We’re going to try to get into the line of sight,” said Dr. Cook.

To that end, they stayed out on the water all day watching the islands and the ministry staff.

“If safety is what we can call them on, then we’re hoping to be at risk,” Dr. Richardson said.

As the veterinarians and activists watched the islands, ministry staff stationed around High Bluff Island as spotters watched them in return.

Unlike the day before, though, the women didn’t witness any shots being fired.

Activists return to shore

The day was spent observing the Cormorant colony.

In the afternoon, they picked up a dead Cormorant out of the water. It had been shot in the chest and through its wings.

After a brief inspection, Dr. Richardson said it had most likely been shot the day before as rigor mortise had set in, leaving the bird stiff.

When the bird was pulled into the boat, the faces of those in the boat revealed deep sadness.

Up until that point, when it looked like there would be no shooting for the day, the veterinarians and activists seemed light hearted.

But the presence of the dead Cormorant quickly put a damper on the mood – the illusion that it was nothing but a summer day on the lake quickly evaporated.

As the boat headed back towards shore, Dr. Richardson considered her actions that put herself in the line of fire.

“You only do this if you really love the animals.”

The night before, after witnessing the killing of Cormorants and the suffering of those that were cheated of instant death, she had tossed and turned all night.

Heading towards camp, she knew it would be different after a peaceful day. “I’ll sleep better tonight.”



Brendan Wedley photo
Melissa Ryall, of Zoocheck Canada, observes MNR staff at High Bluff Island.