Key Site 41: Backway, Newfoundland and Labrador

Location: 54°5'22"N, 56°54'50"W

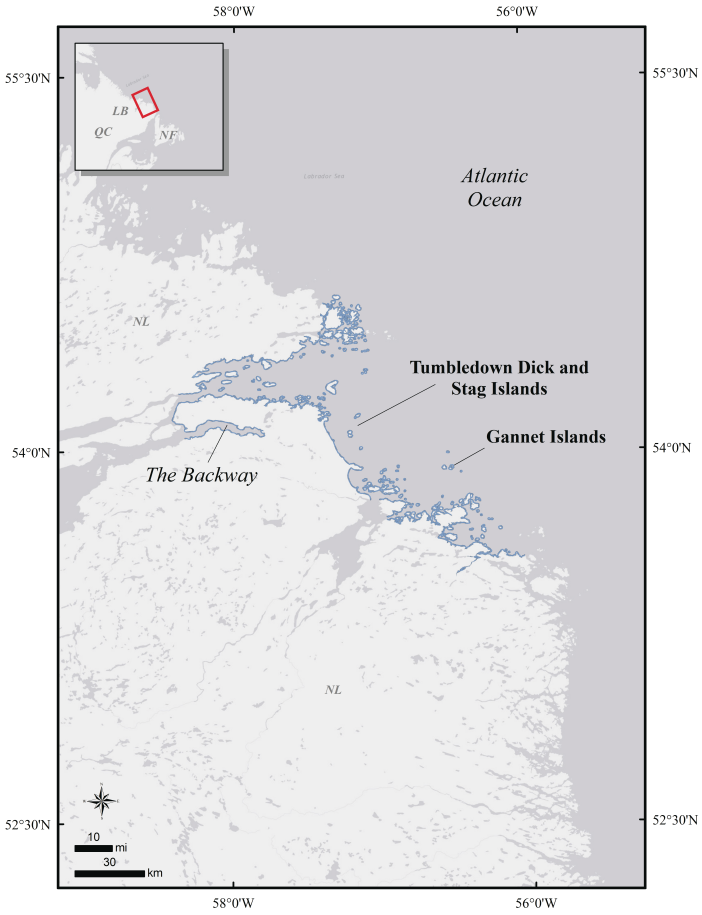
Size: 828 km^2

Description: The Backway key site is located along the Atlantic coast of Labrador in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. The northern part of this key site is in Nunatsiavut (Fish Cove Point and north) and the southern part (The Strand, etc.) is in Nunatuviut. The Labrador coast provides important habitat for numerous congregatory bird species, bird species at risk, and concentrations of colonial seabird and waterfowl species comprising 15 Important Bird areas (IBAs; Bird Studies Canada 2015), 10 of which intersect the Backway site.

The Backway key site encompasses coastal and offshore areas with Labrador Inuit Lands and Labrador Inuit Settlement Areas from Chance Island and Holton Island at the northern extent to Indian Tickle in the south, and extending inland to include Groswater Bay, Hamilton Inlet, and the Backway. It is fed by numerous rivers. It is also part of Bird Conservation Region (BCR) 8 (Boreal Softwood Shield), as well as the Marine Biogeographic Unit (MBU) 10 (Newfoundland-Labrador Shelves). Coastal habitat in MBU 10 includes estuaries, islands, bare areas, mudflats, rocky shoreline, saltmarshes, and sandflats (Environment Canada 2013).

Precision and Correction of Abundance Estimates Presented: Abundance estimates presented for this key habitat site have not been adjusted to account for incomplete detection or other biases. Abundance estimates should, therefore, be treated as minimum estimates.

Biological Value: This site is most important to molting Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*), breeding Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*), and molting Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) primarily between June and late August. The key site occurs at the approximate boundary between the breeding ranges of Northern (*S. m. borealis*) and American (*S. m. dresseri*) Common Eiders (Mendall 1980). Todd (1963) first reported large numbers of molting Surf Scoter and lesser numbers of White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta deglandi*) and Black Scoter (*M. americana*) along the Labrador coast. Surveys by



Lock (1986) in 1980 and by Gilliland in 1994 (unpublished data) found more than 20,000 and 41,000 scoters, respectively, and 14,000 and 27,000 Common Eider, respectively, along the Labrador coast in June. Abundance of scoters peaked in mid-August, with a maximum of 57,000 and 55,000 birds detected in August 1998 and 1999 (Gilliland unpublished data), respectively. There is remarkable consistency in the location of scoter flocks among years, with highest concentrations occurring around Nain and Backway key sites where molting birds coalesce into very large flocks.

Within the key site, scoters begin arriving in late May. Numbers of birds increase to 5500 to 17,900 birds in June and have reached a maximum of about 38,000 scoters by mid-August in 1998. During the molting period, concentrations of scoters are highest in the Backway (a maximum of 36,500 scoters in August 1999), between North Point and Cape Porcupine (a maximum of 5211 scoters in August 1998), and Table Bay (a maximum of 2603 scoters in August 1998). Dispersal from molt sites begins in late

August, with many birds leaving by early September (a maximum of 10,479 and 10,853 birds detected at the Backway key site in September 1980 and September 2001, respectively; Gilliland unpublished data). The number of scoters in the Backway IBA is the largest ever recorded in eastern Canada (Bird Studies Canada 2015).

Surf Scoter is the predominant species of scoter, comprising between 80 to 90% of birds on the coast of Labrador and in the Backway key site during the molt period, with the remainder comprising Black and White-winged Scoter (Gilliland and Savard 2021). Scoters specialize on mollusks during this part of the annual cycle (Bédard et al. 1997, Savard et al. 1998), and they are commonly observed feeding in the surf within a few meters of shore (Bird Studies Canada 2015).

Common Eider breed at the Backway site, particularly on the many islands in Groswater Bay and the outer coast of the key site (Lock 1986, Savard et al. 1999). A maximum of 13,314 male Common Eiders were detected in June 1994; accounting for undetected females, the total abundance of birds using the site at this time is estimated at 26,628. Numbers drop off rapidly by September (a total of 31 males detected in September 1980), suggesting that this region is not an important molting area for Common Eider. Birds breeding here could molt along Anticosti Island, where large numbers of molting eiders have been found (Rail and Savard 2003).

The Gannet Islands, Tumbledown Dick Island, and Stag Islands regions of the Backway key site are three of the most important regions in North America for molting Eastern Harlequin Ducks, supporting at least 5.6% of the continental population in August: Gannet Islands, 166 birds in August 1999; Tumbledown Dick Island, 55 birds in August 1998; Stag Islands, 47 birds in August 1998 (Gilliland et al. 2002).

Sensitivities: Sea ducks are sensitive to degradation of their staging, molting, and foraging habitats. Human disturbance such as boating can have negative effects on birds, particularly while birds are foraging or during the molting period when birds are flightless. Scoters are ranked second among Anatidae on the oil vulnerability index (King and Sanger 1979, Daigle and Darveau 1995). Scoters are also vulnerable to heavy metals contamination and hunting (Savard et al. 1998).

Potential Conflicts: Marine transportation of goods and petroleum products through the Lake Melville area is probably the greatest potential threat. Small illegal oil discharges and large accidental oil spills could have major impacts on birds and habitat here (Bird Studies Canada 2015). Oil spills are a growing threat with increased oil and gas exploration in MBU 10, and there is also a continued risk of fishing gear entanglement (Environment Canada 2013). Inuit hunting and egg collecting in the islands southeast of Nain has an unknown but likely minimal impact on birds and their habitat.

Status: Ten IBAs have been designated within this area: Gannet Islands, Quaker Hat Island, Goose Brook, Northeast Groswater Bay, South Groswater Bay Coastline, Bird Island, Cape Porcupine, Tumbledown Dick Islands, and Stag Islands. Backway and Table Bay provide breeding habitat for all alcid species occurring in eastern Canada (Bird Studies Canada 2015) and include important nesting areas for Common Eider. The site also includes the Gannet Island Ecological Reserve (both marine and terrestrial zones), which protects the largest Razorbill colony in North America and the largest and most diverse seabird colony in Labrador (Bird Studies Canada 2015).

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