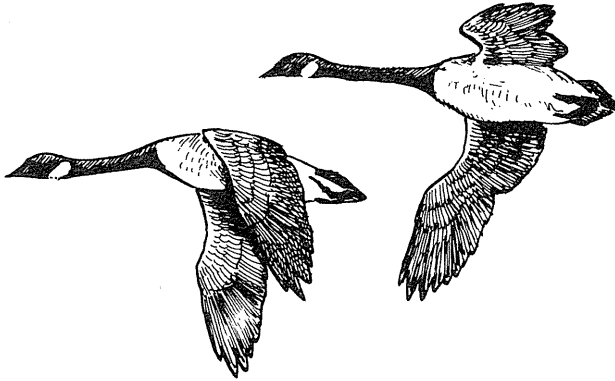


# Observations of geese and other birds in West Greenland, 1989 and 1990

OLE BENNIKE



(Med et dansk resumé: Iagttagelser af gæs og andre fugle i Vestgrønland, 1989 og 1990)

## Introduction

This paper describes a number of interesting bird observations made in the summer of 1989 and in the spring (April and May) of 1990, mostly as a by-product of Quaternary field-work. Most of the work took place in the coastal lowland areas of Disko, Nuussuaq and Svartenhuk Halvø in central West Greenland.

Physiographically, most of the region is made up of basalt plateaus dissected by U-shaped valleys. The uplands are devoid of continuous vegetation. The bird life is richest in the coastal lowlands, both in terms of the total number of birds and their diversity.

The region (Fig. 1, 2) lies within the low arctic biotic and climatic zone, with willow copses more than two metres high occurring in the most sheltered and sunny places on Disko. By contrast, the vegetation in the more exposed and foggy places is only 10-20 cm high, although the vascular plant cover in the lowlands is virtually continuous. Wetlands are common in coastal areas where they are mostly associated with estuarine river mouths and lagoons formed inside of recent, large beach ridges. Wetlands are also common in the valley bottoms and lakes are common locally.

The largest continuous lowland area is Narsaq on SW Svartenhuk Halvø. Large meadows, many lakes, several rivers and large lagoons make this an important area for wetland birds, including geese.

During the summer and early autumn of 1989 I camped at 16 different sites (Fig. 1). The camp was moved by the wooden cutter from the Arctic Station, University of Copenhagen, or by a rubber dinghy which was also frequently used for shorter reconnaissance tours. Otherwise, the Quaternary field-work comprised many hours of walking.

The bird life of the region has never been described in any detail, but general information can be found in the reviews on the birds of Greenland by Salomonsen (1950, 1967, 1974, 1979, 1981). Unfortunately, much newer information is published in limited circulation reports (in Danish) or remains unpublished.

The location of some of the observations appear in Fig. 1. The map also shows the location of the camps, but it must be emphasized that some sites were visited very briefly, and birding was not the primary focus of study. Thus, the absence of a certain species from any area only means that it was not observed there, and not necessarily that it does not occur in that area.

## Species account

### Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

On the outer part of Nuussuaq between Hollænderbugt and Kuussuaq five Cormorant colonies were counted between 30 June and 5 July. On 7 July a colony was observed on Kronprinsens Ejland south of Disko. On Hareøen six colonies were

counted on 19 August. Each colony consisted of 5–10 nests. It should also be mentioned that Cormorant no longer breeds on Skarvefjeld ("Cormorant Mountain") east of Godhavn.

These observations are included in this report because the colonies lie within an apparent gap in the breeding range of Cormorant as shown by Salomonsen (1974). The colonies on outer Nuussuaq and on Hareøen are established since the beginning of this century (cf. Bertelsen 1921).

### Tundra Swan *Cygnus columbianus*

A single Tundra Swan was seen on a lake near the coast at Nuugaarsuit on western Disko on 11 August 1989. It was shy and observed at some distance; the bill appeared to be all black, the plumage white. The bird fell an easy prey to a Greenlander because – as it turned out – it was flightless. New remiges were beginning to form. At close hand two small yellow spots in front of the eyes were conspicuous. The legs and feet were black. The total length of the swan was only 111 cm.

On account of its small size and small yellow spots on the bill, the swan was identified as Tundra Swan which breed in arctic North America. This taxon, whether regarded as a separate species or a subspecies of Bewick's Swan *Cygnus bewickii*, has not previously been reported from Greenland. However, in North America it breeds as far east as Baffin Island (Palmer 1976), so its occurrence in West Greenland is not surprising.

### White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons*

Breeding records and records of larger flocks are mentioned. One pair with two newly hatched goslings was met with in Hollænderbugt on NW Nuussuaq on 4 July, and two pairs, one with four and the other with five large goslings were seen at Qasigissat, W Disko on 6 August. A flock of 40 birds was also seen at Qasigissat on 6 August. At Kussineq, SW Svartenhuk Halvø, flocks of 10, 38, 20 and seven birds were seen on 6–7 September, and at Narsaq, SW Svartenhuk Halvø, a flock of 280 birds was seen on 10 September.

There are remarkably few breeding records of White-fronted Goose, especially when compared with Canada Goose (see below).

### Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*

Two pairs, one with three goslings and the other with six, were observed on NW Disko on 10 August 1989. The goslings were estimated to be 3–4 weeks old. The birds lay on a coastal lagoon, perhaps due to disturbance. The lagoon is surrounded

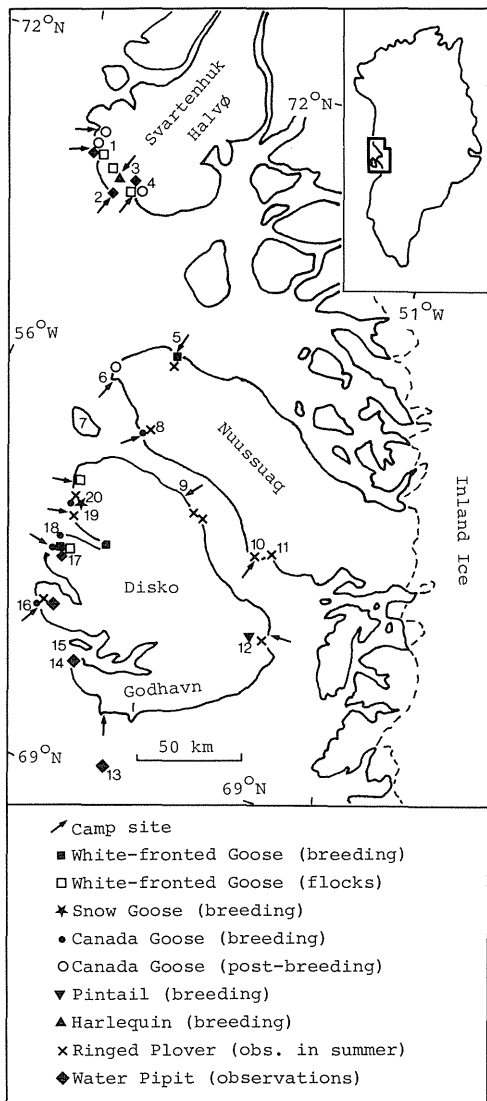


Fig. 1. Location of the most notable bird records and the place names mentioned in the text.

Lokaliseringen af de mest bemærkelsesværdige fugleagtigelser og stednavne nævnt i teksten.

1 Narsaq, 2 Qinniviuq Illoqarfia, 3 Arfertuarsuk, 4 Kussineq, 5 Hollænderbugt, 6 Nuussuaq Havn, 7 Hareøen, 8 Kuussuaq, 9 Asuk, 10 Tartunaq, 11 Sarqaq Dalen, 12 Kvandalen, 13 Kronprinsens Ejland and Assissut/Brændevinsskær, 14 Saattut, 15 Diskofjord, 16 Nordre Lakebugt, 17 Vesterdalen/Qasigissat, 18 Nuugaarsuit, 19 Rink Dal, 20 Hammer Dal.

by marshes and meadows. Another single bird, also an adult in white phase, was seen on western Disko 11 August, together with some Canada Geese.

In Greenland this species, until recently, only bred in the Thule area (Salomonsen 1981), but in recent years breeding birds have been recorded from central and eastern North Greenland (Bennike & Kelly 1986, Hjort et al. 1987). This expansion of the breeding range in Greenland is probably a consequence of the large increase in the number of Snow Goose in eastern Canada (anonymous 1981).

#### **Canada Goose *Branta canadensis***

On 6 July the following observations were made on the delta of Kuussuaq on W Nuussuaq: five pairs with respectively four eggs, three, four, five and six goslings; three adults with four goslings and three flocks of three, six and 14 birds. On 7 July two and three birds were seen at some lakes to the west of the delta. All goslings seen were a few days old. On W Disko the following birds were seen: on 5 August a single goose with four goslings estimated to be about three weeks old were seen at Nordre Laksebugt; on 7 August seven adult birds with 11 goslings were seen in Vesterdalen; on 11 August two pairs with five and seven goslings, a flock of approximately 20 adults and young, a flock of 18 adults and a single bird were observed between the mouth of Rink Dal and Hammer Dal; and on 11 August four adults with eight goslings were seen at Nuugaarsuit. On 1 September a flock of 11 Canada Geese were met with near Nuussuaq Havn, W Nuussuaq. On SW Svartenhuk Halvø the following observations were made: on 7 September two flocks of six and 12 birds were seen at Kussineq, on 9 September 32 plus 2 birds were seen on Narsaq, and on 14 September 18 were seen east of Svartenhavn. One of the birds on Narsaq was marked with a yellow neck band, but unfortunately the flock was too shy to allow me to read the code. The bird was banded on the winter grounds in eastern U.S.A., between New York and South Carolina, and the resighting is the first from Greenland (R. A. Malecki and A. D. Fox, pers. comm., 1989). In 1990 a pair of Canada Geese was seen near Fortunebay west of Godhavn on 25 May, and a single bird was seen near Godhavn on 28 May.

The birds are with hesitation classified as the subspecies *hutchinsii* which extends farthest into the Arctic (Palmer 1976).

All records of breeding birds come from coastal lowland areas with marshes and meadows, either in estuarine deltas or in areas with lagoons where the birds could escape from predating foxes. The largest post-breeding flock of 32 first foraged in a

marshy area covered with the grass *Dupontia ptilosantha* which was heavily grassed. When disturbed the flock moved to a *Carex stans* meadow.

There has been a large increase in numbers of Canada Geese in eastern North America since the late 1940s (Trost & Malecki 1985), and this increase has apparently been followed by a range extension to the northeast into West Greenland. Thus, in Salomonsen's first account on the birds of Greenland (Salomonsen 1950) only a few records of Canada Goose are mentioned. In his last account (Salomonsen 1981) the species is described as a rare and irregular breeding bird in the Disko Bugt area. It is clear from the number of Canada Geese observed in 1989 that there has been an upsurge in numbers of the species over the past decades, and it is now a common breeding bird in the areas visited by me, in fact the most common breeding goose species.

The largest concentration of Canada Geese in West Greenland that I am aware of come from east of Jakobshavn, where 75-100 geese were observed in September 1985 (anonymous 1985).

#### **Brent Goose *Branta bernicla***

On the night of 6 June, a total of c. 1800 Brent Geese flew west along the south coast of Disko (own observation and J. Durinck, pers. comm., 1989). The geese passed by at a low altitude. The occurrence of migrating Brent Geese near Godhavn during the spring is well known (Winge 1898).

On 9 September a flock of 19 Brent Geese were seen on the sea off Narsaq, SW Svartenhuk Halvø.

Most Brent Geese destined for NE Canada leave Iceland during the period 25-31 May (Alerstam et al. 1990). In calm weather they only need about one full day to reach West Greenland, hence they must have roosted during their 2400 to 3000 km route from Iceland to NE Canada, either in the Ammassalik region or in the Disko Bugt region (cf. Salomonsen 1967).

#### **Teal *Anas crecca***

On 8 May 1990 an adult female Teal (ssp. *crecca*) was brought to the Arctic Station. It had been shot just south of Godhavn. The specimen is now in the Zoological Museum, Copenhagen. The Teal is a rare visitor to the region (Salomonsen 1981).

#### **Pintail *Anas acuta***

On a visit to Kvandalen in eastern Disko on 23 July 1989, 12 adult Pintails were seen, one of which was attended by eight ducklings c. 10 days

old. The family foraged on a small eutrophic lake. Kvandalen is an outstanding wetland locality in West Greenland, with numerous ponds and small lakes, and extensive meadows (Frimer & Nielsen 1990).

There are only a few confirmed breeding records of Pintail from Greenland, all from eastern Disko or nearby Nuussuaq, and all from the period 1947-52 (Salomonsen 1981). Later, 2-3 adult males were seen in Kvandalen on 19 June 1979 (Kampp & Møbjerg Kristensen, unpublished).

#### **Harlequin** *Histrionicus histrionicus*

On 5 September a female with three large ducklings was observed on the sea near the head of the fjord Arfertuarsuk on SW Svartenhuk Halvø. At this time of the year the discharge of the rivers is small, and that probably explains the unusual occurrence in a sheltered place with calm waters. This record is one of the northernmost breeding records of Harlequin in Greenland, perhaps the northernmost confirmed one (cf. Salomonsen 1950).

#### **Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*

During the breeding period the following observations of Ringed Plover were made: on 3-5 July 10 birds were seen at Hollænderbugt on W Nuussuaq; three of them performed distraction display. On 6-8 July nine birds were seen at the mouth of Kuussuaq on W Nuussuaq, four of which were in pairs. On 17-18 July six birds were seen at Tartunaq and near the mouth of Sarqaq dalen in SE Nuussuaq. On 21 July six birds were seen at and near Asuk on N Disko, and on 23 July five birds were seen in Kvandalen on E Disko. During the period 3 August to 10 August 10 birds were seen in west and north-west Disko. Hollænderbugt, which appears to hold a dense population of Ringed Plover, is characterised by dry, barren sand and gravel plains almost devoid of vegetation, and most observations of the species were from this type of habitat.

From the number of birds observed, I suggest that Ringed Plover is a regular and quite common breeding species on Disko and Nuussuaq, although only three breeding records were confir-



Fig. 2. Typical landscape of Disko, here at the mouth of Vesterdalen. The lowland in the foreground has continuous vegetation, while the vegetation of the plateau-mountains in the background is very sparse.

*Typisk landskab for Disko, her ved munden af Vesterdalen. Lavlandet i forgrunden har sammenhængende vegetation, mens vegetationen på plateaubjergene i baggrunden er meget sparsom.*

med. Ringed Plover also breed commonly at for example Søndre Strømfjord and near the headwaters of Nordre Strømfjord further south in West Greenland (Fox 1987).

#### **Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria*

On 18 May 1990 an adult female Golden Plover was brought to the Arctic Station. It had been shot near the settlement Diskofjord a few days earlier. The specimen which belongs to subspecies *apricaria* (J. Fjeldså, pers. comm.) is now in the collections of the Zoological Museum, Copenhagen.

Golden Plover is a regular, annual visitor to West Greenland in the spring, but it rarely reaches as far north as Disko (Salomonsen 1950, 1967).

#### **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*

One bird in breeding plumage was observed at the mouth of Kuussuaq on western Nuussuaq on 6 July, on the transition between a marshy area with *Puccinellia* and an area of *Carex stans* meadows alternating with small gravel plains. The bird performed flight song display, suggesting that it might have bred.

The range of Dunlin is almost circumpolar, but the species is missing from the Davis Strait/Baffin Bay region, although there is a single breeding record from South Greenland (Olsen 1988). Dunlin has previously been observed a few times in the Disko Bugt area in June-July, but without indication of breeding (Salomonsen 1981; Pedersen 1980, 1984).

#### **White-rumped Sandpiper** *Calidris fuscicollis*

A single bird was seen foraging in a small meadow on western Nuussuaq 30 June 1989. On 10 September 1989 one bird was encountered in an estuarine area of SW Svartenhuk Halvø.

White-rumped Sandpiper breeds in arctic North America and is an occasional visitor to West Greenland (Salomonsen 1981).

#### **American Pipit** *Anthus rubescens*

A total of six birds were seen in breeding habitats, and another three were seen on the beach during autumn migration in 1989. On 4 August a single bird was observed west of Nordre Laksebugt on western Disko. It called almost incessantly, especially during flights, and also sang twice. On 5 August an adult attending a young was seen east of Nordre Laksebugt. On 7 September an adult attending a fledged young was seen at Kussineq on SW Svartenhuk Halvø, and on 8 September a young bird was seen near Qinniviup Illoqarfia on

SW Svartenhuk Halvø. On 9 September two birds were seen on the beach on SW Svartenhuk Halvø, and on 23 September one bird was seen on the beach of the small island Saattut on SW Disko. In the spring of 1990 one bird was observed on Assissut south of Godhavn on 24 May.

The habitat of those birds not seen on the beach was quite distinct. They were observed in dwarf-shrub heaths and snow-patch communities with *Salix arctica*, *Cassiope tetragona*, *Dryas integrifolia*, *Vaccinium uliginosum* and *Salix herbacea*. Big boulders were a conspicuous feature.

There are only a few breeding records of American Pipit from Greenland to date, and the species is considered rare (Salomonsen 1981, Wodell 1979). The observations of five birds on SW Svartenhuk Halvø during a short visit indicate that the species is quite common in that area. It is noticeable that all records come from the outermost land areas, while no birds were seen in the warmer, interior parts of West Greenland.

In 1990 the first Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis* at Godhavn was seen on 2 April. The first Wheatears *Oenanthe oenanthe* were seen on 10 May, the first Lapland Bunting *Calcarius lapponicus* on 18 May, and the first Redpolls *Carduelis flammea* on 21 May.

#### **Acknowledgements**

This paper was written during my period as scientific director of the Arctic Station (University of Copenhagen) in Godhavn, 1989-90. I thank Dr A. D. Fox, Slimbridge, England and Dr R. A. Malecki, New York, for information on Canada Geese. R. Caulfield and A. D. Fox kindly read and commented on the manuscript.

#### **Resumé**

##### **lagttagelser af gæs og andre fugle i Vestgrønland, 1989 og 1990**

Som videnskabelig leder af Københavns Universitets Arktiske Station på Disko, foretog jeg i sommeren 1989 og foråret 1990 omfattende kvartærgeologisk feltarbejde på Disko, Nuussuaq og Svartenhuk Halvø (Fig. 1). Arbejdet var centreret om de kystnære lavlandsområder, der også er de mest fuglerige.

Regionens klima er lavarktisk, med pilekrat på beskyttede steder. På udsatte steder er vegetationen lavere, men dog stort set sammenhængende i lavlandet.

Oplysninger om regionens fugleliv er sammenfattet i Salomonsens (1950, 1967, 1974, 1979, 1981) oversigter over Grønlands fugle. Der findes ingen detaljerede regionale beskrivelser, bortset fra Bertelsens (1921) over Uummannaq egnen. Megen nyere information er upubliceret eller blot publiceret i interne rapporter.

I 1989 fandtes to par ynglende Snegæs på Nordvest-Disko. Mens der kun blev gjort nogle få ynglefund af Blisgås, viste Canadagås sig at være den mest almindelige ynglende gåseart i de besøgte områder. Canadagås er dermed tiltaget markant i løbet af de sidste tiår. En halsbåndmærket Canadagås var mærket i vinterkvarteret i det østlige U.S.A. En anden art, der er tiltaget markant i dette århundrede, er Skarv. Af andre ynglefund skal fremhæves en Spidsand med ællinger fra Øst-Disko og en Strømand med ællinger fra Svartenhuk Halvø. Stor Præstekrave synes mere almindelig og udbredt end det normalt antages, og det samme gælder for Amerikansk Piber. Desuden beskrives fund af Tundrasvane, Krikand, Hvidrygget Ryle og et større træk af Knortegæs. I 1990 ankom Snespurv til Syd-Disko den 2. april.

## References

- Alerstam, T., G. A. Gudmundsson, P. E. Jönsson, J. Karlsson & Å. Lindström 1990: Orientation, migration routes and flight behaviour of Knots, Turnstones and Brant Geese departing from Iceland in spring. – *Arctic* 43: 201-214.
- Anonymous 1981: A Greater Snow Goose management plan. – Report, Can. Wildl. Serv., US Fish and Wildl. Serv., and Atlantic Flyway Council.
- Anonymous 1985: Kortlægning af kulturhistoriske interesser i forbindelse med vandkraftprojekt Paakitsoq, Ilulissat Kommune. – Report, Grønlands Landsmuseum.
- Bennike, O. & M. Kelly 1986: Bird observations in central North Greenland, 1984. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 80: 29-34.
- Bertelsen, A. 1921: Fuglene i Umánaq Distrikt. – *Meddr Grønland* 62 (2).
- Fox, A. D. 1987: Observations on the waders of Eqalungmiut Nunaat, West Greenland. – *Wader Study Group Bulletin* 49: 11-13.
- Frimer, O. & S. M. Nielsen 1990: Bird observations in Aqajarua-Sullorsuaq, Disko, West Greenland, 1989. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 84: 151-158.
- Hjort, E., E. Håkansson & P. Mølgaard 1987: Brent Geese *Branta bernicla*, Snow Geese *Anser caerulescens* and Barnacle Geese *Branta leucopsis* on Kilen, Kronprins Christian Land, Northeast Greenland, 1985. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 81: 121-128.
- Olsen, K. M. 1988: Sjældne fugle i Danmark og Grønland i 1986 og 1987. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 82: 81-100.
- Palmer, R. S. (ed.) 1976: *Handbook of North American birds*. Vol. 2. – Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Pedersen, B. B. 1980: Rapport fra Sjældenhedsudvalget for 1977 og 1978. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 74: 127-140.
- Pedersen, B. B. 1984: Rapport fra Sjældenhedsudvalget for 1981. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 78: 81-92.
- Salomonsen, F. 1950: Grønlands fugle. The birds of Greenland. – Ejnar Munsgaard, København.
- Salomonsen, F. 1967: Fuglene på Grønland. – Rhodos, København.
- Salomonsen, F. 1974: Fuglene i menneskenes land. – Det Grønlandske Forlag, Nuuk.
- Salomonsen, F. 1979: Fuglene i menneskenes land 2. – Det Grønlandske Forlag, Nuuk.
- Salomonsen, F. 1981: Fugle. Pp. 161-361 in: Salomonsen, F. (ed.): *Grønlands fauna*. – Gyldendal, København.
- Trost, R. E. & R. A. Malecki 1985: Population trends in Atlantic flyway Canada Geese: implications for management. – *Wildfowl Soc. Bull.* 13: 502-508.
- Winge, H. 1898: Grønlands Fugle. – *Meddr Grønland* 21(1).
- Wodell, S. R. J. 1979: Nesting of the American Water Pipit *Anthus spinoletta rubescens* (Tunstall) at Godhavn, West Greenland. – *Dansk Orn. Foren. Tidsskr.* 73: 177-179.

Received 11 June 1990

Ole Bennike, Geological Museum, Øster Voldgade 5-7, DK-1350 Copenhagen K, Denmark