

Bird observations on Kilen, northeasternmost Greenland, 1985

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(Med et dansk resumé: Fugleobservationer på Kilen, nordøstligste Grønland, 1985)

Kilen is an ice-free enclave in Kronprins Christian Land, northeasternmost Greenland, situated about 30 km south of Nordostrundingen and reaching some 35 km into the Flade Isblink ice-cap complex (Fig. 1). The glaciers surround it on all sides except along the 15 km coast towards the Nordøstvandet (Northeast Water) polynya. The landscape of Kilen is extremely flat – mostly silt covered plains with low beach ridges. There is a central ridge about 15 km inland, reaching 70-80 m a.s.l., covered by moraine and beach gravel and surrounded by some shallow lakes. High terrain is not met with until farthest inland where, through a series of low foothills, mountains reach about 450 m. Vegetation cover is generally less than 1%.

No ornithologists had visited Kilen before 1980 when, as members of reconnaissance parties from the Geological Survey of Greenland and the Ymer-80 expedition, we made some observations there (Hjort et al. 1983). The *Kilen-85 expedition* (30.7-25.8 1985) was basically a geological venture too, although with an ornithological sub-program. One of the

issues under this program came to be the documentation of a hitherto unknown large population of Brent Geese *Branta bernicla hrota*, and breeding Snow Geese *Anser caerulescens* (Hjort et al. 1987a). The present paper gives a species-wise account of the more important non-goose observations made during the expedition. Additional observations are summarized at the end.

Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*

During our stay at the Sirius-hut 30.7 - 10.8, Fulmars were constantly moving along the coast or resting and feeding on the sea. But numbers were rather small – 18 birds during a 2-hour sea watch being the maximum passage. Colour phases could be identified for about 50% of the birds, whereof some 75% were D-birds (Fisher 1952, van Franeker & Wattel 1982), the rest intermediates – DD/D or D/L. No Fulmars were seen from the hut 21.-24.8, but that these birds have not entirely left the coast by late August was shown during the Ymer-80 expedition, when Fulmars were present at the breeding cliffs in Holm Land as late as 29.8 (Hjort et al. 1983).

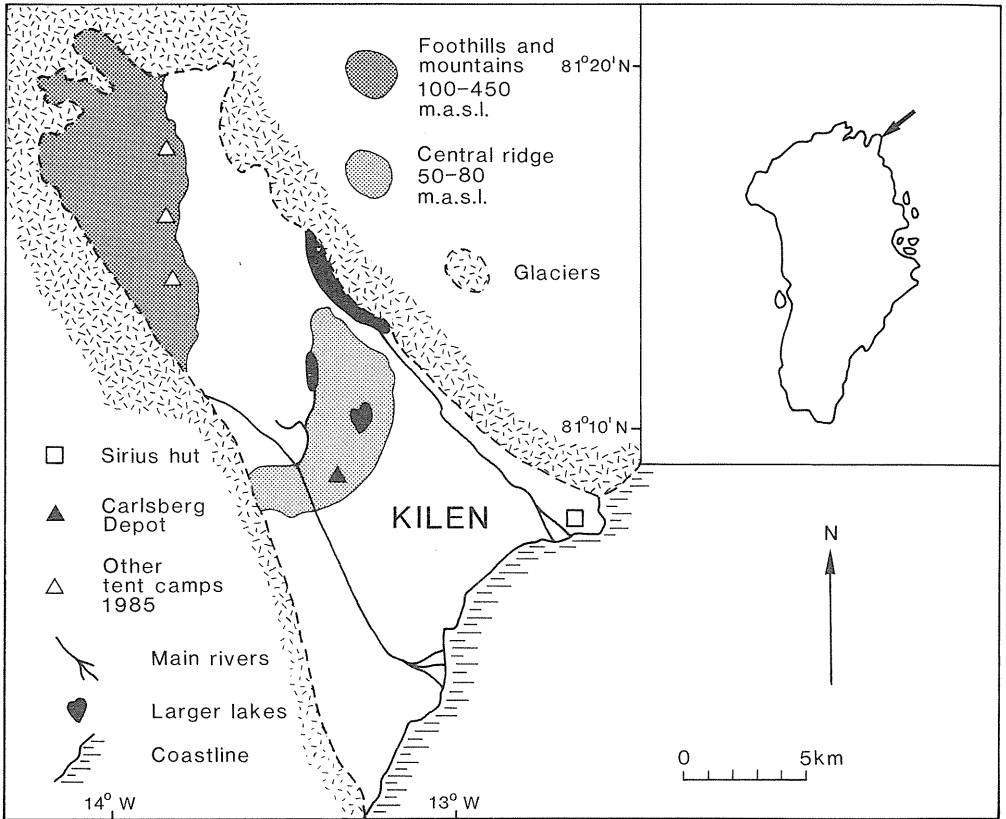


Fig. 1. Map of Kilen and Greenland. *Kort over Kilen og Grønland.*

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*

This bird was for the first time found breeding this far north in 1980 (Hjort et al. 1983). On our arrival 30.7 there were already females with young in the delta at the Sirius-hut, and 15 broods containing 2-8 young were counted there 3.8. One nest with 5 eggs near the hut hatched 3.8. Empty nests of the year, and predated nests with remaining egg shells, were found 2-3 km from the coast, and 5 females were seen flying inland about 3 km from the coast 2.8. Only 2 males were seen (on 30.7).

Knot *Calidris canutus*

No conclusive evidence of breeding, but passing migrants were frequently seen, coming in from N-NW and alighting on the wetter parts of the plains, near the coast as well as far inland. In all about 80 birds were seen, the largest flock containing 14.

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

Several indications of breeding on the inner

plains, although no proof. Resting migrants were regularly seen (in all 100-150), the largest flock being c. 50 birds at the Sirius-hut 22.8. Noted flight directions were S and SSE.

Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*

Two juveniles at the Carlsberg Depot 23.8 (examined with binoculars for 30 minutes at 10-25 m distance, and directly compared with Sanderlings).

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

No indications of breeding. Migrants (1-3 birds) came in from NW-NE, rested and/or proceeded towards S-SSE. The total seen was c. 30.

Grey Phalarope *Phalaropus fulicarius*

Between 30.7 and 10.8 a total of 22 were seen passing the Sirius-hut, or resting on a small lake there. The largest flock contained 5 birds. Some birds (4+3+1) were actually seen arriving from N-NE along the coast, but none were seen leaving on migration. The number observed on



Fig. 2. Sabine's Gulls *Larus sabini* near the Sirius-hut. Photo: Eckart Håkansson.
Sabinemåger ved Siriushytten.

Kilen 1985 equals the accumulated grand total for North Greenland up to that time (Dietz & Andersen 1984).

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*

One adult over the central plains 12.8, another 17.8. Both were lightphase birds, but individually separable. To our knowledge (Dietz & Andersen 1984) this species has not been observed in North Greenland before.

Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini*

A common bird along the coast of Kilen (Fig. 2). At least 12-15 pairs bred together with Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* on the beach ridges around the Sirius-hut and another 3-5 pairs in the delta just south thereof (c. 50 adults were seen in that general area 30.7). On 31.7 there were at least 6 pairs with c. one week old young near the hut, and 3 pairs were still brooding (one of these pairs had two 2-3 days old young 3.8). With an incubation time of 23-26 days (Lambert 1982), this means egg-laying around the first week of July. At the southern delta on Kilen c. 15 adults, 3-4 flying juveniles and some flightless young were seen 12.8. In all this makes 20-30 breeding pairs on Kilen – and then the central parts of the coast were never visited. Immatures

(2nd year) were seen near the Sirius-hut 4.8 (1) and 5.8 (2), cf. Boertmann et al. (1985).

In 1980 Sabine's Gull was found breeding on Henrik Krøyer Holme, some small islands 50 km south of Kilen in the middle of the Nordøst-vandet polynya (Hjort et al. 1983). In that year the birds had not yet arrived, or at least not started breeding, on 26.6, which fits well with egg-laying on Kilen in early July.



Fig. 3. Sabine's Gull *Larus sabini* nest, lined with Arctic Poppy *Papaver radiculatum* stems. Near the Sirius-hut 1 August. Photo: Per Mølgaard.
Sabinemågerede med stilke af fjeldvalmue.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*

One immature passed the Sirius-hut 9.8, possibly the northernmost record ever made of this species?

Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla*

A few adults passed at sea off the Sirius-hut; 31.7 (1), 3.8 (2) and 6.8 (1). As noted by Hjort et al. (1983), no Kittiwakes were seen at or around the former breeding colonies on Holm Land in 1980, and only two adults were seen from the Ymer in this general area – at the eastern edge of the polynya (Hjort et al. 1987b). The very few observations made in 1985 adds to the picture of a more or less total disappearance of the species from this coast.

Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea*

A common bird in northeasternmost Greenland (Salomonsen 1961, Håkansson et al. 1981, Hjort et al. 1983, 1987b). At the Sirius-hut in latest July and early August it was regularly seen passing up and down the coast, or in small parties (2-4 birds) in the delta, now and then making attempts to prey on Arctic Tern and Sabine's Gull young, and being fiercely attacked by the adults of these species when they appeared. All the Ivory Gulls seen then were adults. During 21.-24.8, when the Sirius-hut was visited again, there were constantly 30-40 adult Ivory Gulls in the delta.

There was also a regular passage of Ivory Gulls from the coast towards the inner parts of Kilen, and out again, obviously involving birds from the breeding colony discovered in 1980 (Hjort et al. 1983). This colony was visited twice in 1985; on 8.8 there were c. 40 adults present and at least 15 young in and around the nests, on 22.8 19 adults and 4 juveniles.

A ringed and very tame Ivory Gull was encountered in 1980 (Hjort et al. 1983). Probably the same bird was our constant camp-follower on central and inner Kilen 1985, eating anything from salami to very ripe cheese and, like a faithful dog, waiting outside the tent every morning. The ring number showed that it had been ringed at Station Nord 12.6 1966, aged »more than one year«, although it was not stated if in adult plumage or not (Fig. 4).

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

Something like 50 pairs may have bred on the beach ridges around the Sirius-hut and in the adjacent delta, associated with Sabine's Gulls.

At our arrival 30.7 there were both c. 10 days old young, newly hatched young and nests with eggs present – the latter hatching within the next 2-4 days. With an incubation time of 21-22 days (Glutz & Bauer 1982) this means egg-laying during the two first weeks of July, some perhaps during the very last days of June. The great spread in laying/hatching time between individual pairs probably reflects the gradual exposure of suitable nest-sites in this extensively snow-covered area. Between 10-20 Arctic Terns, including flying juveniles, were seen in the southern delta 12.8.

Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle*

Two adults flying north off the Sirius-hut 3.8, and another one 8.8.

Little Auk *Alle alle*

One bird off the Sirius-hut 7.8. Although not recorded breeding nearer to Kilen than Svalbard and south of 71°30' N in East Greenland (e.g. Kampp et al. 1987), fair numbers were encountered by the Ymer-80 expedition in and around and even north of the Nordøstvandet polynya (Hjort et al. 1987b).

Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*

One dead and mummified male (wing 101 mm) was found near the Sirius-hut. Very few observations of this species have been made this far north (Håkansson et al. 1981).

Other observations

One Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* flew past the Sirius-hut 31.7. A female Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* with newly hatched young was seen at the same place 30.7, and there were 8 adults in the nearby delta the same day (and scattered observations of single adults were made along the coast later on). One female King Eider *Somateria spectabilis* flying south past the Sirius-hut 8.8 was the only representative of that species seen. One Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus* was seen near the mountains 15.8. A female Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus* with 8 well-grown chicks was seen on the inner plains 7.8, and droppings were found around the Sirius-hut. There was also a single adult Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* on the inner plains 7.8. We had no indications of breeding Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus* on Kilen, but single migrant adults were seen on the coast 7., 8. and 9.8. During our second stay at the Sirius-

hut a flock of 10 adults was seen 21.8 and parties of 2-3 at different occasions 22.-24.8. Of Glaucous Gulls *Larus hyperboreus* only 10 observations were made around the Sirius-hut 31.7-10.8. Three immatures were seen together, but never more than one adult at a time. Occasional ones were seen also during our visit there 21.-24.8. Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca* pellets were found here and there, but no birds were seen and this, like the absence of breeding Long-tailed Skuas, probably reflects the very low numbers of lemmings (cf. Hjort et al. 1987a). As to Snow Buntings *Plectrophenax nivalis* no observations were made in the coastal area, but a few family flocks were seen in the interior, especially in the mountains.

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Resumé

Fugleobservationer på Kilen, nordøstligste Grønland, 1985

Den isfri semi-nunatak Kilen lige S for Nordostrundingen, der er et af de mest isolerede områder i Nordgrønland, er ramme om et relativt rigt fugleliv – specielt i tilknytning til kysten og de ekstremt flade, lave sletter, der dominerer området. Udover en nyopdaget ynglebestand af Knortegås og Snegås (Hjort et al. 1987a) har vi ved vore besøg på Kilen i 1980 (Hjort et al. 1983) og 1985 registreret tilstedeværelsen af ialt 29 arter, hvoraf 9 arter er konstateret ynglende.

I 1985 optrådte trækende småvadere (Stenvender, Islandsk Ryle, Sandløber) forholdsvis hyppigt, især omkring Sirius-hytten; herudover noteredes et exceptionelt stort antal trækkende Thorshøns (ialt 22 stk.) samt et par juvenile Bairds Ryler. Ny for Nordgrønland er Alm. Kjøve og Svartbag, medens Sabinemågens status som Nordgrønlandsk ynglefugl (cf. Hjort et al. 1983) blev yderligere befæstet ved konstateringen af 20-30 ynglepar på Kilen. Den tidligere fundne Ismåge-koloni i den indre del af Kilen (Hjort et al. 1983) producerede mindst 15 flyvende unger i 1985. En enkelt ringmærket, overordentlig tillidsfuld Ismåge genoptog den nære, fødebetingedede tilknytning til lejrene etableret allerede ved vores første besøg i den indre del af Kilen i 1980 (cf. Hjort et al. 1983) – iflg. ringens nummer blev denne fugl mærket ved St. Nord 12/6 1966 som (?) voksen.



Fig. 4. The Ivory Gull *Pagophila eburnea* »Mågens«, our faithful camp-follower in 1980 and 1985. Ringed at Station Nord 12 June 1966. Photo: Christian Hjort. Ismågen »Mågens«. Stadig gæst ved lejrene 1980 og 1985. Ringmærket på Station Nord 12. juni 1966.

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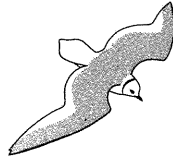
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