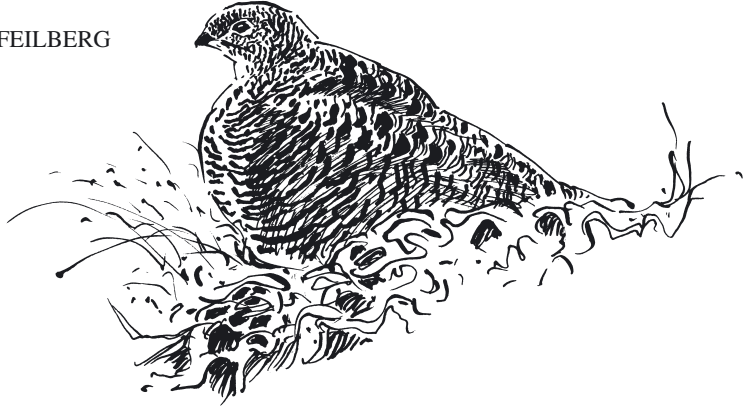


Bird observations in Washington Land, North Greenland, in 1999

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(Med et dansk resumé: Fugleobservationer i Washington Land, Nordgrønland, 1999)

Introduction

Very little is known about the bird life of Washington Land (WL) in North Greenland. A few bird observations were published by Feilden (1878), and bird observations made by Lauge Koch in 1921–22 and by Christian Vibe in 1940 were incorporated in Finn Salomonsen's monograph on the birds of Greenland (Salomonsen 1950). A bit more is known about the bird life of the area east of WL (Bennike & Kelly 1986), as well as the region south-east of WL (Boertmann 1994). During geological and botanical field work from 9 July to 22 August in 1999, a number of bird observations were made. During the summer, Ole Bennike camped at ten different sites, and Jon Feilberg at three of the same sites, but partly at different times (Fig. 1). Due to the scanty knowledge of the bird fauna of this rarely visited part of Greenland, it is justified to put our scattered observations on record.

Washington Land is bordered by the Humboldt Gletscher, the Petermann Gletscher and the Nares Strait. The provisional normal average for the warmest month of the year (July) is 4.9°C for the nearest weather station, which is situated in Hall Land (Cappelen et al. 2001). The sea is locally free from land-fast ice during the summer. Geologically, the area is dominated by limestone, supporting an extremely poor vegetation. Areas with sandstone are found in the south, and shale is fairly widespread in the north and north-west; these ar-

reas show a somewhat richer vegetation than the limestone areas.

Washington Land is an area of dissected plateaus and hilly landscapes. Lowlands are mostly restricted to valleys, and many coasts are bordered by steep cliffs. Meadows are rare and small. The flora comprises about 65 species of vascular plants (Bay 1992). The only mammals noted in 1999 were Collared Lemming *Dicrostonyx torquatus*, Arctic Hare *Lepus arcticus*, Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus*, Ringed Seal *Phoca hispida* and Walrus *Rosmarus odobenus*. In addition, Bearded Seal *Erignathus barbatus* and Polar Bear *Ursus maritimus* occur. Muskox *Ovibos moschatus* and Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus* bones are found on the terrain, but both species died out 100–200 years ago (Bennike 2002). Apart from a number of ice-dammed lakes, lakes and ponds are rare; their fauna includes Arctic Char *Salvelinus alpinus* and Tad-pole Shrimp *Lepidurus arcticus*.

Annotated list of species

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*

One pair was seen near camp 5, and another was seen near camp 6, in addition to four birds in a lake near camp 8. Koch (1926) likewise saw a few Red-throated Divers in south-western WL during his visit in 1921, and the species may be a scarce

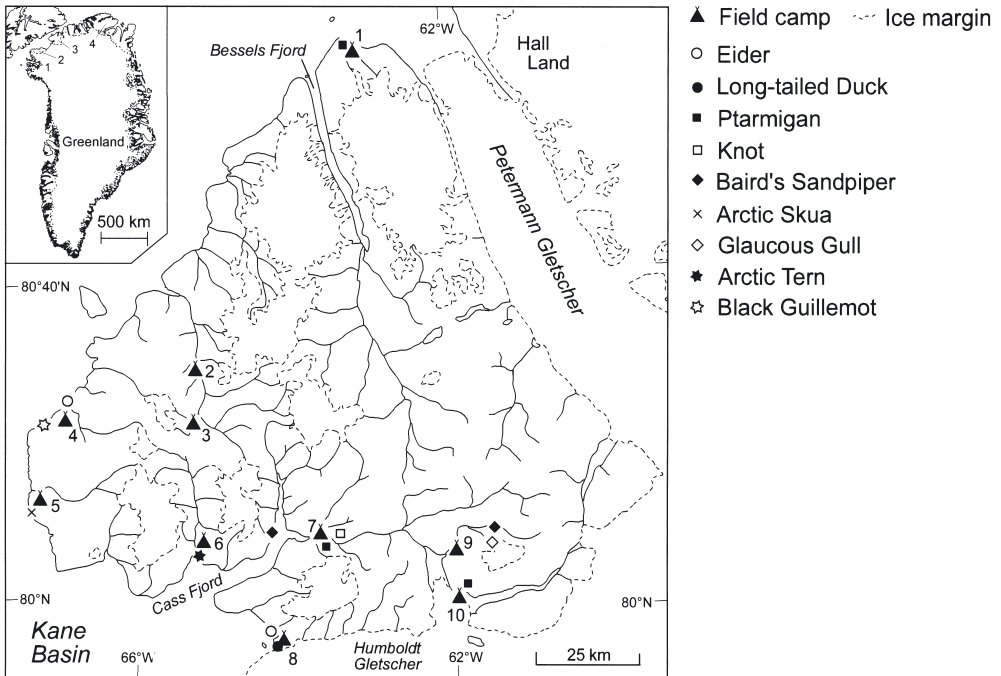


Fig. 1. Map of Washington Land showing place names mentioned in the text, and sites of confirmed breeding of selected species. Insert: Map of Greenland showing the position of the Thule area (1), Inglefield Land (2), Washington Land (3) and Peary Land (4). Camp sites have been numbered.

Kort over Washington Land i Nordgrønland, med ynglefund angivet for visse arter. Tallene på det lille oversigtskort viser Thule-området (1), Inglefield Land (2), Washington Land (3) og Peary Land (4).

breeder in WL as well as the region east hereof (Anonymous 1986, Bennike & Kelly 1986).

Snow Goose *Anser caerulescens*

A flock of seven birds were observed near camp 8 around 10 August (Claus Andreasen pers. comm.). The species is a rather common breeder in the Thule area and in Inglefield Land, and a rare breeder in other parts of northern Greenland (JF unpubl. data, Boertmann 1994).

Eider *Somateria mollissima*

A female with five ducklings was seen near camp 4 on 6 August, the ducklings having an age of about one week. Two other broods were seen on 12 August, one with six ducklings near camp 5, and one with five near camp 8; these ducklings were around two weeks old. Around 150 non-breeding birds were noted during the summer. On 23 August 1875 an eider with a brood of downy young was seen at the mouth of Bessels Fjord (Feilden 1878), and the species was also observed in WL in 1921 and 1922 (Koch 1926). WL is probably the northernmost area where Eiders regularly breed in west-

ern North Greenland; in East Greenland the species breeds north to c. 81°N (Hjort et al. 1988).

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*

A bird with three young were seen on 13 August in a lake near camp 8, and next day a flock of 65 birds were seen between the northern front of Humboldt Gletscher and the shore. This was by far the largest flock of birds seen in WL. Apart from these observations, 25 birds were seen, mostly at sea. The sea around the northern front of Humboldt Gletscher appears to be highly productive, as judged from the high concentration of eskimo ruins, and the large number of seal bones at one ruin site. Long-tailed Duck is widespread in North Greenland (Boertmann 1994), and a few were also observed in south-western WL in 1921/1922 (Koch 1926).

Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus*

Females, respectively with 13, 10, 7 and 8 chicks, were seen near camp 1, 5, 7 and 10. A female with chicks was also observed in 1921, on a small island near our camp 8 (Koch 1926), and in the same year Ptarmigan was also observed at Cass Fjord. In

1976 the species was seen near camp 1 (Dietz & Andersen 1984). Ptarmigan is widespread in North Greenland (Boertmann 1994), but rare in areas of limestone.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*

A possible breeder showed uneasy behaviour near camp 4 on 6 August. Only eight roosting birds were noted. The species is rare in northern Greenland between Inglefield Land and Peary Land (Bennike & Kelly 1986, Boertmann 1994).

Knot *Calidris canutus*

A bird showing distraction behaviour was observed near camp 7 on 18 July. The bird was found at an altitude of 300 m a.s.l., in an area with sparse fell-field vegetation. In addition, a total of 19 roosting birds were encountered. These appear to be the first observations of Knot from WL. Elsewhere in North Greenland the species is known as a rather scarce breeder, often at high altitudes (Bennike & Kelly 1986, Boertmann 1994).

Sanderling *Calidris alba*

About 100 birds were noted, about half of them in mid August in south-western WL. No proof of breeding was found, but one bird showed uneasy behaviour near camp 4. Sanderling, which is a rare breeder in central and western North Greenland (Bennike & Kelly 1986, Boertmann 1994), has not previously been recorded in WL.

Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*

A bird showing distraction behaviour was seen on 16 July west of camp 7, and another on 4 August near camp 9. In addition, five other birds were seen. The species has previously been recorded in WL by C. Vibe (Salomonsen 1950). Baird's Sandpiper breeds in the Thule area and in Inglefield Land (Boertmann 1994), but there are no confirmed breeding records from WL.

Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima*

One bird was noted near camp 5 on 20 July. The species breeds north to the Thule area, and a few stragglers have been observed north to WL and maybe Hall Land (Boertmann 1994).

Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*

22 roosting birds were seen, as solitary birds or in small flocks of up to 8 birds. No indication of breeding was observed. The species breeds both east and west of WL (Bennike & Kelly 1986, Boertmann 1994), but there is hardly any suitable

habitat for Turnstone in WL, from where the species was earlier reported at Bessels Fjord in 1976 (Dietz & Andersen 1984).

Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus*

A pair with a nest containing one egg and one newly hatched young was found near camp 5 on 19 July, and single birds were seen near camp 5 and camp 6 on 25 and 28 July, respectively. The breeding record is the northernmost for the species in Greenland, but a small breeding population of Arctic Skuas is known from the Thule area (Boertmann 1994). C. Vibe saw a single bird in WL in 1940 (Salomonsen 1950).

Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*

Two birds were seen near camp 5 on 17 July, a pair was seen at an inland locality near camp 7 on 18 July, and a solitary bird was seen at the coast near camp 8 on 13 August. The species was assumed to breed in WL by C. Vibe (in Salomonsen 1950), and it is known as a scattered breeder between WL and Peary Land (Anonymous 1986, Bennike & Kelly 1986).

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*

A Glaucous Gull was observed at a nest with two chicks near camp 9 on 2 August, an aggressive pair was encountered near camp 4 on 8 August, and a pair with two fledged young were seen near camp 8 on 13 August. In addition, c. 10 birds were seen near camp 5, a flock of 15 birds were observed from the helicopter on 2 August, and several solitary birds were also seen. Salomonsen (1950) considered Glaucous Gull a breeder in WL, based on L. Koch's and C. Vibe's observations; towards the east, in the area between WL and Peary Land, it seems to be absent except for the occasional straggler (Bennike & Kelly 1986).

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*

A pair at a nest with two eggs was found near camp 6 on 29 July, and 32 other birds were seen along the coast and at lakes. The species was already recorded in south-western WL in 1854 (Kane 1856), and again in 1976 (Dietz & Andersen 1984); it is known as a sparse breeder in the northern parts of Greenland (Boertmann 1994).

Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle*

A total of 95 birds were seen in western WL, incl. five birds at a breeding site among boulders below coastal cliffs near camp 4 on 8 August, approximately in the same area where Koch (1926) noted

the species. Black Guillemot has also been recorded nesting at the mouth of Bessels Fjord, in 1875 and 1976 (Feilden 1878, Dietz & Andersen 1984). WL is the northernmost regular breeding area for Black Guillemot in Greenland (Bennike & Kelly 1986, Boertmann 1994).

Little Auk *Alle alle*

Two bone fragments of Little Auk have been found in an Independence I ruin in western Hall Land (Darwent 2003), perhaps indicating that the species occurred further north 4000 years ago than at present.

Raven *Corvus corax*

Three solitary birds and a possible pair were observed, with no indication of breeding. Salomonsen (1950) assumed that Ravens seen north of the Thule area were non-breeders.

Arctic Redpoll *Carduelis hornemanni*

Two plus two birds, possibly the same ones, were seen in south-western Washington Land on 13 and 14 August. These birds may be stragglers from the Thule area or from Peary Land, where small breeding populations exist (Boertmann 1994).

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*

This was the only bird species met with throughout Washington Land – during some long days' foot traverse in central WL, no other bird species at all was seen. The total number seen during the summer was 64. The first fledged young was noted on 18 July, which is normal for high-arctic Greenland (Meltofte 1983).

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Resumé

Fugleobservationer i Washington Land, Nordgrønland, 1999

Washington Lands fuglefauna er dårligt kendt, men under kvartærgeologisk og botanisk feltarbejde i sommeren 1999 blev der indsamlet spredte observationer. Washington Land tilhører den højarktiske bioklimatiske zone og domineres af kalksten med en ørkenagtig vegetation. De fleste fugle findes i lavlandsområder, der kun udgør en

lille del af landet. Følgende arter blev konstateret som ynglefugle: Ederfugl, Havlit, Fjeldrype, Islandsk Ryle, Bairds Ryle, Almindelig Kjøve, Gråmåge, Havterne, Tejst og Snespurv. Rødstrubet Lom, Stor Præstekrave, Sandløber og Lille Kjøve er mulige ynglefugle, og desuden blev der set Snegås, Stenvender, Sortgrå Ryle, Ravn og Hvidsirken.

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