

Some Notes on the Birds Observed in the Kungmiut and Tugtilik Areas of East Greenland during the Summer of 1967

By
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(Med et dansk resumé: lagttagelser af fugle i Kungmiut og Tugtilik områderne i Østgrønland, sommeren 1967)

INTRODUCTION

This paper contains a summary of ornithological observations made by the writer as a member of the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne East Greenland Expedition during July and August 1967. The expedition consisted of ten men, one of whom, BENT LAUGE MADSEN, was from the University of Copenhagen. Our programme included investigations in the fields of Geophysics, Limnology, Geology, Botany and Geomorphology. The writer was largely engaged in research in the latter, a task which demanded extensive coverage of territory, during the process of which he was able to make many ornithological records. The notes which follow are a summary of these but they cannot claim to be exhaustive in their coverage of the birdlife of the areas visited. Nonetheless it is hoped that they may serve to give a fair overall picture of the avifaunas of the areas, from which records are few.

The Tugtilik area appears to have been visited only once previously by an ornithologist. This was F. SPENCER CHAPMAN, a member of the ill-fated expedition led by GINO WATKINS which was based in the area from 1932-33.

Arriving at Kulusuk by air, the expedition alighted, then sailed up the Angmagssalik Fjord to the settlement of Kungmiut, where a delay of three weeks

was enforced by the ice conditions along the coast to the north. This delay permitted the investigation of the Kungmiut area, and visits were made to localities across the fjord at Maries' Havn and Imer-tevaa (Fig. 3).

When the ice was finally clear the party journeyed by open boat northwards for some 150 kilometres to its ultimate destination which was the small ice-free area between the fjords of Tugtilik and Nigertussoq (Fig. 2).

Having been advised in advance by Dr. Finn Salomonsen of the limitations of this stretch of the Greenland coast for bird life, it nonetheless still came as a slight surprise to note just how few species (and in what small numbers) of birds were to be found, and this theme is recurrent throughout these notes.

All Latin names used in the notes which follow are those used by SALOMONSEN in his »Birds of Greenland« (1950), and where races are involved these have been inferred from his accounts of their known distribution.

RECORDS

Observations made in the Angmagssalik Fjord area were concentrated on Kungmiut, Maries' Havn and Imertevaa (Fig. 3).

Maries Havn

The locality was a narrow north-south valley on the west side of Angmagssalik Fjord, entering Iksualak at 65°51' N, 37°09' W. This valley, together with the rock-basin lakes to its east, was covered for a period of three days, from July 7th-9th inclusive. Here bare rock and scree abound, flat land being confined to narrow gravelly or marshy strips in valley floors, and adjacent to the coast. Vegetation cover approaches completeness only on the valley floors and on isolated hillside patches which were usually below 300 m and free of scree. Locally dominant were *Vaccinium*, *Empetrum*, with *Cassiope* on drier slopes, replaced with *Carices* and *Eriophorum* on the wetter valley floors.

Fig. 1. A view of the mouth of the Jordan River where it enters Tugtilik, looking upstream (west) at low tide. The lake lies behind the low rocky ridge which descends from left to right in the middle distance.

Red-throated Diver *Colymbus stellatus*. One pair on large shallow rock-basin lakes to east of valley. A nest on a minute rocky islet in middle of largest lake. Still brooding 9th July.

Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus rupestris*. One pair had nest on gravel flat near large lake, with 6 eggs. Another pair held similar territory in main valley. The males of these pairs, together with two other apparently unattached males, were still showing very much white, with the browns of the summer plumage beginning to show through, on the crown and nape of only one individual.

Wheatear *Oenanthe o. leucorrhoa*. Only one bird seen.

Redpoll *Carduells flammea rostrata*. One pair probably of this species seen by Madsen by one of the lakes.

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax n. nivalis*. Commonest bird by far. 20-30 pairs seen

Mundingen af Jordan floden ved udløbet i Tugtilik, et vue op ad floden (mod vest). Søen ligger bag klippevæggen i midten af billedet.



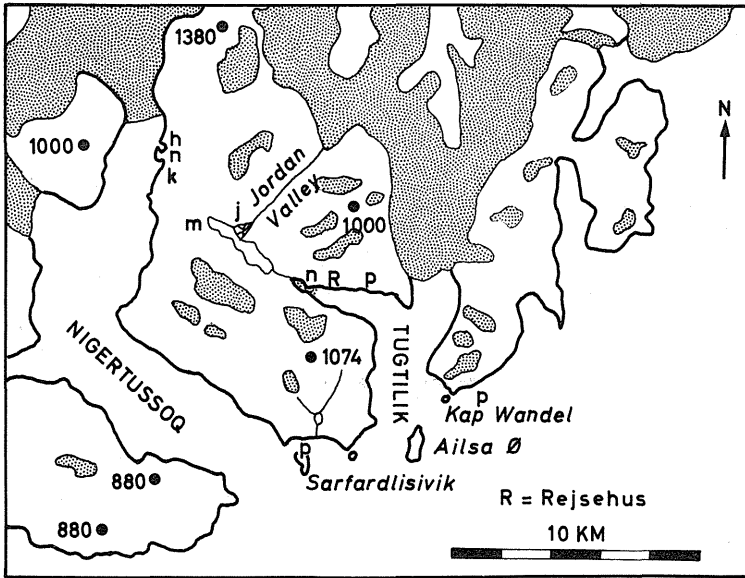


Fig. 2. The Tugtillik - Nigertussoq area, the main destination of the expedition. *Tugtillik - Nigertussoq området, ekspeditionens hovedmål.*

throughout the area, and thus at best thinly populous. One free-flying juv. near valley mouth on 7th July, while on 9th July an adult was seen near the lakes with a feather in its bill. Thus there is a distinct possibility of there having been double brooding that season.

Imertevaa and Sieraq

West coast of Angmagssalik Fjord, 8 kms. north of Maries' Havn (65°55' N, 37°10' W). The area covered included a basin containing two lakes and the mouths of two valleys which open into Sieraq, an inlet with several thousand square metres of tidal mud flats. Such a large expanse of this type of habitat is something of a rarity in this area, and in Europe might well be rich in bird life. The only birds in evidence here, however, were three Mallard. Altogether four days were spent in the district.

Red-throated Diver. A pair bred on the smaller of the two lakes in preference to Imertevaa, the larger lake. Madsen suggests that this may well be because the larger lake, being deeper and colder than the smaller lake on which the divers bred, was noticeably poorer in aquatic life. These factors would counter-balance the element of security which the larger lake offered to a greater degree. Neither lake contained islands, which offer the usual secure

site for this species. The pair had two young on 11th July, in post-first moult down (cf. pair brooding at Maries' Havn two days before).

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*. Two males and one female feeding in a shallow creek on the mud flats in Sieraq at low-water on 11th July. All in breeding plumage, but presumably non-breeding birds.

Ptarmigan. Two males only, one showing very little of the white winter plumage.

Raven *Corvus corax principalis*. One flying over the area 19th July.

Wheatear. Locally fairly plentiful, with an apparent preference for steep slopes with turf-covered rocky ledges and occasional boulders and rock outcrops. 10-15 pairs altogether.

Redpoll. Very local, with preference for open slopes, well vegetated with *Vaccinium*, *Empetrum* and *Salix* bushes. Four birds seen, one pair clearly in possession of territory in an area of dense *Salix* scrub.

Lapland Bunting *Calcaeus lapponicus subcalcaratus*. Eight seen. Two pairs in Sieraq Dal in possession of territory. One male in the east-west valley south of Sieraq Fjelde in company with three flying juveniles. Singing males' territories very similar to Snow Bunting habitat, being rocky, boulder-strewn slopes with patchy vegetation, but on more level ground near valley floor.

Snow Bunting. Again by far the most plentiful bird with numbers approximately equalling the sum of the other passerines. One nest with four well-fledged young found 11th July.

Kungmiut

Area centred on settlement of Kungmiut.

All the above species present with the exception of Red-throated Diver. Ptarmigan confined to higher slopes well away from settlement. Only three Lapland Buntings seen, two males and a flying juv., in Torssukatak 4 km east of the settlement. Two Redpolls seen with the buntings. Wheatears, and particularly Snow Buntings, fairly plentiful, with the latter well domesticated in Kungmiut. Other species of note were:

Mallard. Four males and three females by edge of fjord in Torssukatak. Breeding plumage, but presumably non-breeding. Two male Mallards were also hanging up outside one of the houses in the settlement.

Ringed Plover *Charadrius h. hiaticula*. One bird in Torssukatak.

Glaucous Gull *Larus h. hyperboreus* and Iceland Gull *Larus g. glaucoides*. Birds of both these species present all the time in small numbers, rarely in excess of ten birds observable on any given occasion. Both species were shot by the villagers for food. Majority of birds seen were adults.

Tugtilik and Nigertussoq (Fig. 2)

The Tugtilik-Nigertussoq area was the destination of the expedition. A boat journey was undertaken lasting 21 hours on 21st–22nd July, and passing some 80 miles of desolate coast. A constant watch was maintained throughout, though hampered by fog and semi-darkness for some 9 or 10 hours, and was most revealing in its largely negative results. The narrow ice-free margin of land was composed of large stretches of steep boulder and scree-strewn mountain slopes, broken by the mouths of fjords and occasionally accented by cliffs, usually less than 100 m in height. The only concentrations of sea birds were near such cliffs. – Birds observed whilst travelling were:

Fulmar *Fulmarus g. glacialis*. One bird seen near Kangerajikajik (66°04' N, 35°40' W).

Eider *Somateria mollissima borealis*. Eight to ten on sea at east end of Ikasak (65° 50' N). Six off mouth of Iliartalik (65° 55' N). A further six off Depotø (65° 05' N).

Glaucous Gull and Iceland Gull. Relatively frequent in ones and twos. Probably at least fifty Glaucous Gulls at a gullery on very steep cliffs on the south-east of Depotø. This would be quite a large gullery for the species on this coast according to SALOMONSEN (1950).

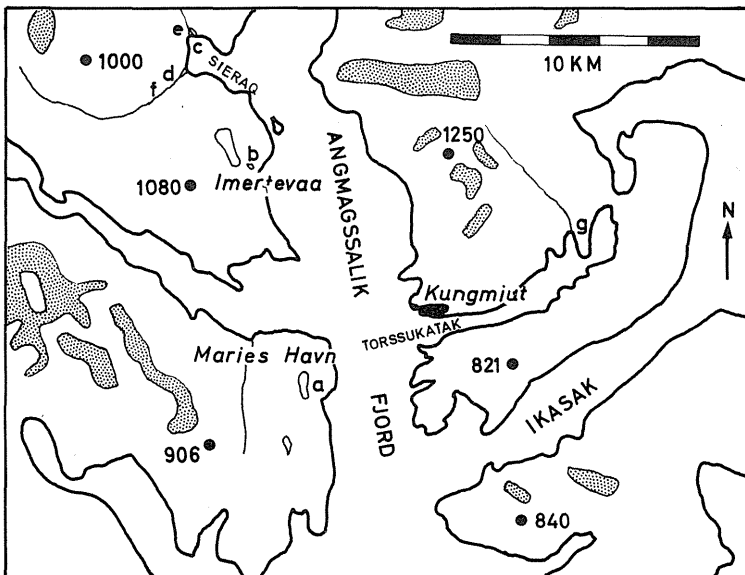


Fig. 3. The Angmagssalik Fjord with the settlement of Kungmiut and other localities mentioned in the text.

Angmagssalik Fjorden med udstedet Kungmiut og andre lokaliteter der omtales i teksten.



Male Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*, the only common land bird in the area. Photo Benny Génsbøl.

Han Snespurv, eneste alm. landfugl i området.

Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle arcticus*. The only plentiful species, yet not really abundant or widespread. Locally up to twenty or thirty birds in loose parties as at Depotø and in Ikasak (65° 55' N). Well over 100 around cliffs just north of Kap Wandel (66° 17' N).

The only previous ornithological records from the Tugtilik-Nigertussoq area appear to be those of CHAPMAN on Watkins' 1932-33 expedition. His records for the expedition are published in his book »Watkins' Last Expedition« (1934), and it is most interesting to note the several changes in the avifauna which have occurred in the thirty-five years which have since elapsed. These will be discussed briefly in the section which follows.

Red-throated Diver. Two pairs bred, one on a very small lake in the old lateral moraine of the Nigertussoq glacier, with one well-grown young losing its down by 7th August, and the other on the Tugtilik Lake which lies in the transverse valley between Nigertussoq and Tugtilik. The one chick of the latter pair did not hatch until 14th-15th August, very late in the season when the fjords were beginning to freeze at night. CHAPMAN has two records of

this species in summer, but none of breeding. Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*. Eight male and six female adults in summer plumage, but presumably non-breeding, on a small tidal lagoon in Nigertussoq on 4th and 7th August. May well have stayed longer. CHAPMAN has no records of this species in summer. Eider. Mixed parties of up to eleven adults on Tugtilik close to the base camp. Commonly between thirty and fifty on Nigertussoq, all in eclipse by 7th August. No signs of their having bred.

Pink-footed Goose *Anser fabalis brachyrhynchus*. Undoubtedly the most interesting species recorded in the area. SALOMONSEN (1950) records its known breeding range in Greenland as extending from the Hochstetter Foreland south to Mikis Fjord (68° 08' N), the Mikis Fjord birds severed off from the main population to the north by the barren Bløseville Coast. On 24th July four members of the expedition surprised two family parties of Pinkfeet which had been feeding near small pools in the gravels between the Lake and Nigertussoq: two pairs of adults, one with five goslings and one with two. The goslings were well grown, approximately 25-35 cm in length, still in down, and were very active runners. The parents, however, gave way to flight when pursued persistently. The nesting sites of these



Fig. 4. View of part of the fjord Nigertussoq, looking seawards, from a height of about 500 metres. The gravel outwash areas in the middle distance are those indicated as »h«, »n«, and »k« on Fig. 2.

En del af fjorden Nigertussoq fra ca. 500 meters højde. Grusområderne i midten af billedet er betegnet »h«, »n« og »k« på fig. 2.

geese were not found but the transverse valley between the fjords abounds with open grassy areas of the kind which Salomonsen states to be possible sites for such isolated pairs. This breeding ground lies 200 km south of the previous known southerly limit of the species' range.

Besides the breeding pairs there was a large flock of non-breeding free-flying Pinkfeet (possibly first year birds), first noted 31st July on the Lake. Numbers seen varied considerably from day to day, but the maximum count was twenty-one. The grassy area around the Lake was liberally scattered with the evidence of moult and with goose droppings. The birds were observed through until late August. They appeared to feed on, among other things, *Cerastium*, *Salix* and *Carices*, and luxuriant growths of *Carex bigelowii* were often found well cropped. The peninsular area between the two fjords would be expected perhaps to provide a good refuge for geese, and the only signs of contemporaneous occupation of the area by foxes were a set of tracks on a beach in Nigertussoq, together with some old tracks and droppings by the Lake; in total very little.

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*. Also a high arctic breeding species in Greenland, not breeding south of Scoresby Sund (SALOMONSEN 1950). Four non-breeding free-flying birds (possibly first year birds) summered on Tugtilik Lake, and it was noticeable that they rarely consorted with the Pinkfeet. CHAPMAN mentions finding goose feathers and droppings by the Lake in mid-August but has no sight records of geese in summer except one of a single Barnacle Goose in June. The geese in 1967 were very secretive and inconspicuous, and the non-breeding birds were overlooked for the first two weeks, although all the signs of a recent moult were in abundance, so it is perhaps possible that some did summer in 1932.

Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus candicans*. No sightings but plucked remains of gulls were found on two occasions and, together with large pellets containing the bones and feathers of what appeared to be a Snow Bunting, these were taken as being evidence of the recent presence of a raptor, probably of this species. CHAPMAN recorded a pair breeding above a gully off Kap Japetus Steenstrup, but the lack of local sea-bird colonies would presumably account for the non-residence of this species in the immediate Tugtilik district. Ptarmigan. Fairly common; groups of up to nine juveniles recorded and several family parties with free-flying juveniles after 4th August. One young pullus, however, only c. 6-8 cm and still in down, was caught and examined on 12th August, while the adult birds were nearby. Ringed Plover. Two pairs held territories on alluvial fans, one in Nigertussoq, the other near the Tugtilik rejsehus.

Turnstone *Arenaria interpes*. Eight adults in summer plumage seen on rocky shore in Nigertussoq on 4th August. One in winter plumage on gravels near river mouth in Tugtilik the next day. Up to four on tidal shingle by rejsehus throughout last ten days of August.

Knot *Calidris canutus*. Poor views of three on Jordan Delta on 2nd August, one of which was certainly in winter plumage. One red bird at the same place ten days later. Up to six on mud in Tugtilik at the end of August.

Sanderling *Crocethia alba*. One in winter plumage with Turnstones in Nigertussoq, 12th August. Up to eight on mud in Tugtilik at the end of August.

Glaucous Gull. Frequent over fjords and the Lake. On return journey to Kungmiut, 30th August, a large colony of very approximately 100 pairs was found on the steep cliffs just south of Kap Japetus Steenstrup. Many first year birds were present, but no other species were observed on the cliffs.

Iceland Gull. Very few positively identified and no evidence of breeding found in the area. This is in direct contrast to Chapman's records of »plentiful« numbers of the species in »Lake Fjord« around 22nd-29th August 1932. It may be that his birds were moving south through the area, for it is around this date also that he noted the coastal auk migration. He also makes reference to a gullery off Kap Japetus Steenstrup, with Iceland Gulls breeding, but in 1967 this species did not appear to be in evidence.

Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini*. Five small gulls, with the striking wing pattern of this species, were observed at long range as they inspected the salmon net at the mouth of the river in Tugtilik on 28th August, after several days of onshore winds.

Black Guillemot. A few pairs bred in small cliffs on the north shore of Tugtilik, with many more on the steep sides of Sarfardlisivik and at Kap Wandel.

Raven. Only three sightings of up to three birds.

Wheatear. Rather scarce, but locally more frequent, as in the Sieraq area. Few in lower Nigertussoq, and none seen in the barren valley which opens south towards Sarfardlisivik. Several family parties seen by mid-August. It is difficult to assess how this compares with Chapman's record of »several family parties« seen during a single walk past the lake in 1932.

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*. A species with a very recent history of colonisation in the Angmagssalik district (SALOMONSEN 1950); it was recorded by Chapman on 17th August 1932, near the rejsehus at Tugtilik, and also in large numbers further south near Angmagssalik. In 1967 the writer observed no bird of this species. It would be interesting to



Pink-footed Geese *Anser fabalis brachyrhynchus* in NE Greenland. Photo Benny Génsbøl.

Kortnæbbede Gæs i NØ Grønland.

know more of the present status of this species in East Greenland; as its foothold has been so recently gained, its population may be more subject to fluctuations than longer established species appear to be.

Redpoll. A very scarce species, only three pairs recorded, and no proof of breeding, although two pairs appeared to be occupying territories. On 17th-18th August 1932 Chapman recorded parties of up to twelve birds flying over the Rejsehus.

Lapland Bunting. Also very scarce. One fledged and free but as yet flightless juv. caught and examined by the lake on 24th July, and a pair of adults were seen in the same area the next day. Two adults with two juveniles in Nigertussoq on 13th August complete the total. Chapman's record of »a few Lapland Buntings« for 11th August on a walk from the Rejsehus past the lake perhaps suggests a greater abundance than this.

Snow Bunting. By far the commonest land bird, yet still rather thinly spread. No more than three pairs were in evidence in the valley op-

posite Sarfardlisivik. Together with a pair of Redpolls and a pair of Ravens they made up the total avifauna of this valley. Many family parties seen after 4th August when on a 7 km walk from the Rejsehus and past the lake one might encounter thirty or forty birds altogether. Contrast this with Chapman's records of parties of fifty or sixty birds seen near the base around the same time in August (18th-22nd). Preferred habitat were as in the Angmagssalik Fjord area. The species was very rarely encountered on the bare slopes above 500 m.

The return journey from Tugtilik to Kungmiut on 30th-31st August lacked in birds as did the outward voyage and this at a time of the year when the southward passage noted by Chapman might have been expected to be under way. A possible Brünnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia* near Amaqalit (66° 05' N, 35° 30' W) and ca. twenty-four Arctic Terns *Sterna paradisaea* moving down Sermiligaq (ca. 65..50' N, 36..25' W) were the only signs of



Female Ptarmigan *Lagopus mutus* in NE Greenland. Photo Benny Génsbøl.

Hun Fjeldrype i NØ Grønland.

such a movement, while the small wader numbers in Lake Fjord did not suggest a full scale movement of these species.

Unfortunately, lack of quantitative data, both for the 1932-33 and the 1967 expeditions, precludes the drawing of any firm conclusions. However, the records would suggest one of three alternatives:

(1) A considerably denser population of passerines in the Tugtilik-Nigertussoq area during 1932-33 than in 1967.

(2) A greater down-coast passage of passerines during 1932-33 than 1967, swelling the local population. Most of Chapman's large parties were seen after mid-August and were in flight, but he did record parties of twenty or thirty Snow Buntings as early as 1st August, which were all juveniles, the adults having »disappeared«. In 1967 no such obvious inflation of the passerine population was

recorded, there being merely a population with many juveniles, most of which were in family groups. This is such as might be expected as the fruition of a season's breeding. Furthermore, the areas to the north are severely restricted in terms of passerine habitats which could supply a passage population. Chapman makes no comment on whether or not the parties he observed appeared to be migrants.

(3) The coastal passage in 1967 may have either been delayed or taken place to seaward of the recording area. This does, however, seem unlikely in view of the numerous frosts after 13th August and the persistent onshore winds during the month. The small, but noticeable, influx of waders and gulls in the area suggests that the normal passage was in progress, having begun around mid-August.



Pair of Long-tailed Ducks *Clangula hyemalis* in Greenland. Photo Benny Génsbøl.

Et par Havlitter i Grønland.

DANSK RESUME

Newcastle Universitets Østgrønlandsekspedition besøgte den østgrønlandske kyst mellem Kulusuk (nær Angmagssalik) og Tugtilik (66° 24' N) i juli og august. Forfatteren havde mulighed for at gøre ornithologiske observationer, sideløbende med sit geomorfologiske feltarbejde. Resultaterne af de ornithologiske observationer viser, at fuglelivet er præget af, at der er få arter og i ringe antal. Det var muligt at undersøge biotoppræference for nogle af arterne.

Observationerne var koncentreret om tre områder:

1. I Angmagssalik Fjord.
2. I skærgården fra Kungmiut til Tugtilik.
3. I Tugtilik-Nigertussoq, hvor ekspeditionen havde base i 6 uger.
 1. 9 arter blev set her. Den eneste ynglefugl var Snespurv *Plectrophenax nivalis*.
 2. På strækningen, der blev gennemsejlet to gange dækkende en kyststrækning på ca. 150 km, sås kun 4 arter. En koloni af Gråmåger *Larus hyperboreus* iagttoges.
 3. I dette område havde forfatteren mulighed for en delvis sammenligning af fuglelivet i 1967 med de observationer, der blev gjort i 1932-33 af F. SPENCER CHAPMAN; da sidstnævnte deltog i den ulyksalige ekspedition ledet af GINO WATKINS. På trods af, at de tidligere observationer er noget mangelfulde,

er det dog muligt at sige, at fuglefaunaen har undergået visse ændringer, både hvad angår de fundne arter og disses antal.

Det interessanteste fund var 2 par ynglende Kortnæbbet Gås *Anser fabalis brachyrhynchus*, som ynglede på en lokalitet ca. 200 km syd for den grænse, som tidligere antoges at være artens sydgrænse. På samme lokalitet fandtes også flokke af ikke-ynglende Kortnæbbet Gås og af Bramgås *Branta leucopsis*.

Antallet af spurvefugle synes at have været meget større i 1932-33 end i 1967, skønt det er muligt, at tidligere dataer også inkluderer trækkende fugle. Det fremgår dog ikke tydeligt af Chapman's observationer, at en trækvej fandtes; en sådan fandtes ikke i 1967.

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