

# The Canadian Field-Naturalist

VOL. XLIV

OTTAWA, CANADA, FEBRUARY, 1930

No. 2

## SOME ZOOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE CANADIAN ARCTIC EXPEDITION OF 1929

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**T**HROUGH the courtesy of the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch of the Department of the Interior, under whose auspices the annual Arctic expedition to relieve and supply the northern police posts is made, the writer as representative of the National Museum of Canada, was enabled to visit a most interesting and, ornithologically, comparatively little-known territory.

Leaving North Sydney, Nova Scotia, on the S.S. *Beothic*, we made the Straits of Belle Isle to Godhavn, Greenland; thence across north Baffin Bay to the Arctic islands and north to the shores of Buchanan Bay, Kane Basin, latitude about 78°45' N. From here we worked south along eastern coasts of the islands to Port Burwell off the north tip of Labrador, with a side excursion through Hudson Straits to Chesterfield Inlet, Hudson Bay. We returned to North Sydney September 4. En route stops were also made at Etah and Robertson Bay, north Greenland; Craig Harbour, southern Ellsemere Island; Cape Sparbo and Dundas Harbour, North Devon Island; Ponds Inlet, Clyde River, Pangnirtung and Lake Harbour, Baffin Island; Coats Island, Hudson Bay and Acadia Cove, Resolution Island. None of these stops was long enough for detailed local investigation. It was an unusually good season for voyaging in the eastern Arctic and in these uncertain seas the necessity of getting out of as well as into port while conditions were favourable precluded more than a brief reconnaissance at the various landings. However a rapid generalized trip over a large unfamiliar area may give a better view of the whole than can be gained by more intensive work on fragmentary parts of it. Such proved to be so in this case and the generalized concept of the eastern Arctic as a whole so gained will be of great assistance in evaluating the work of the past or planning that of the future. In spite of the exigencies and limiting requirements of the primary purposes of the expedition, a goodly number of specimens were taken, building up series in which the Museum was more or less weak or adding data on species of particular interest or about which questions have recently

been raised. Though the collections made are eminently satisfactory, not much in detail can be said of them until they have been more carefully studied in relation to the individual problems involved.

Much might be said of the varied interests of the trip. The opalescent colours of the icebergs twisted into fantastic shapes by the magic of mirage, the wonderful greens and golds of the Greenland coast, the forbidding rockbound shores, the midnight sun, the Eskimos with komatik and kayak. But all these have been told before and worthy pens and cunning brushes have failed to represent more than dimly the actuality. Though these are without the special field of the ornithologist it must not be thought they passed unnoticed or unappreciated. They are among the most valued memories of the trip and no account of that trip is adequate without at least a mention of them.

Probably the most generally distributed and conspicuous bird was the Fulmar. These powerful fliers were seen constantly all over Baffin Bay and Davis Strait and into Lancaster and Jones Sounds as far as we penetrated, but were not seen in or known to enter Hudson Straits, an interesting restriction in the range of a very widely spread species. Strongly beating about back and forth or sailing with tight torpedo-shaped body or horizontal, stiffly held, pointed wings they speed with bullet-like decision over all the sea gleaning from its productivity. Close to the surface they follow, up one side of a wave and down the other, disappearing from view between and just topping the crest. On the turns they bank in great smooth curves with one wing seeming to skim the water, though try as we might with powerful glasses we never could see a ripple to denote actual contact. In calm or storm it is the same. No matter how the gale may blow or the seas rise there is the same easy mastery of the elements, in fact the turmoil seems but to add to their joy of life. Occasionally very dark birds, quite as dark as the dark phase of Fulmar common on the Pacific coast were observed but the ratio as compared to the light ones was about one in a hundred and at irregular intervals of

the voyage they seemed practically absent. Breeding colonies were reported near Coutts Inlet and off Cape Searle, eastern Baffin Island. At one of these stations they were said to be preyed upon so heavily by White Gyrfalcons that the shore ice was covered with their wings and remains.

Glaucous Gulls or "Burgomasters" in few but fairly constant numbers were generally distributed and some almost solitary nestings were observed here and there, usually on almost inaccessible cliffs, and communal nestings were reported. The species was numerous at Etah and Robertson Bay where they probably prey on the immense hordes of Dovekies that nest in the loose soil and rock piles of the shore hills. Of six of these Dovekies shot at Etah, four were seized upon and carried off by these gulls before they could be retrieved by the collector. A sharp look-out was kept for the Iceland Gull but, in spite of the general impression of its commonness in summer on these waters, no white-winged gull that could be referred to this species was seen. The probability of the Iceland Gull breeding in the American Arctic grows less as the evidence is sifted.

The wonder of all observers to the northern parts of Baffin Bay is the immense numbers of Dovekies or Little Auks. Words like "immense", "enormous" "innumerable", "incredible" are trite adjectives that familiar use has robbed of force but no weaker words express the condition. In calm weather one steams for hours through miles of sea blotched or clouded with aggregating bunches of these little surviving relatives of the extinct Great Auk, while flocks like hurrying clouds of mosquitoes constantly speed across the course going to or returning from the feeding grounds. They are not known to nest in the American Arctic but do so in wonderfully populous rookeries on the northwest Greenland coast. At Etah and Robertson Bay the hills rising abruptly from the harbour are largely loose talus piles of broken rock scantily overlaid or intermixed with peat-like mossy humus. This soft, readily excavated subsoil is easily cleared out from the maze of cavities and passages between the rocks, and the surface of the hills for many acres along the hill face is honeycombed and porous with Dovekies' nesting burrows. With white shirt fronts and black jackets and hoods the little birds perch in stiff and proper upright attitudes on every little point of vantage before their burrows. In certain lights and positions their white underbodies all showing seem to frost the knolls with a silvery sheen. Flocks are continually coming or going or wheeling out over the bay, their many wings making a continuous dull roar while the thin, short, piping voices sound absurdly like the chorus that comes from an enormous pond of "spring peepers" in mating season. The flocks skim close to the hillside projections on

the landward wheel of their circlings and passings and the observer on salient points of the hillside is intermittently enveloped in a cloud of hurtling bodies while the sound of their wing beats rises to deafening intensity. It is from such vantage points that the local Eskimos take thousands for food in hand-nets. One Dovekie is only a tooth-full but, like peas, many make a meal, yet their myriads seem undiminished.

Kittiwakes were locally common and, though a few were noted occasionally far at sea, abundance usually made us suspect a gullery at no great distance.

Herring Gulls were decidedly not common. They evidently do not scatter their nestings in suitable locations all along the coast as they are inclined to do on the Gulf of St. Lawrence and that we did not touch at any nesting metropolis is probably the reason for their apparent scarcity. Birds taken at Dundas Harbour are of the northern, pale or restricted wing-tipped *thayeri* race while those observed south of Ponds Inlet appeared to be the common *argentatus* form that we get commonly on the Atlantic coast.

In the neighbourhood of their loomerics, Brännich's Murre were very common and showed partiality for the neighbourhood of open floe ice. In the middle of Hudson Strait off Cape Wolstenholme numbers were seen swimming accompanied by their still half downy young again demonstrating that this group of birds betake themselves to sea with their offspring before the latter are more than half fledged. Seeing Brännich's Murre for the first time in full plumage in life it was of interest to detect field marks by which it can be separated from its almost similar relative the Common Murre. Swimming in the water or flying by, the sharper angle of the white underparts into the black throat is rarely evident and the pale cutting edge of the upper mandible at the gape can be made out only under the most favourable circumstances. All things taken into consideration the obviously blacker head and neck seems to be the best guide to the recognition of the species in the field.

A few Jaegers, the Long-tailed, Parasitic and Pomarine were seen at various times. Their principal occupation seems to be robbing the gulls of their hard-earned provender. They are called "Jaegers" or "Hunters" but "Robbers" would be a much more descriptive title for they rarely hunt when they can despoil others of the fruits of the chase.

A comparative absence or rarity of waders or shore birds is some little surprise until one considered that the high, bold, shoreless coast of these eastern Arctic islands is no place for shore birds except such rock or surf-loving species as Purple

Sandpipers and Turnstones. On the occasional flats in coastal nooks in front of the backing hills where we happened to visit, Baird's Sandpiper seemed thoroughly at home and evidently, from their solicitude, nesting. Undoubtedly on the ridges between or in the neighbourhood of the tundra pools back from the shore other waders will be or have been found nesting but it is evident that the great wader highway of migration into the northern islands is up the low western side of Baffin Island rather than along the high forbidding eastern coast. This was more or less confirmed by our observation at Chesterfield Inlet where we were met in numbers most of the wader species that we have failed to observe eastward. Enormous numbers of these visit the Atlantic coast and inland in migration and seasonally disappear into or reappear from the mysterious north. Their comparative absence from the Labrador coast and eastern Arctic islands and their appearance at Chesterfield and also west Baffin Island as reported by Mr. Soper, suggests strongly that the main highway of the Atlantic birds is across country to Hudson Bay and up into the heart of the Arctic Archipelago by an interior rather than an exterior route.

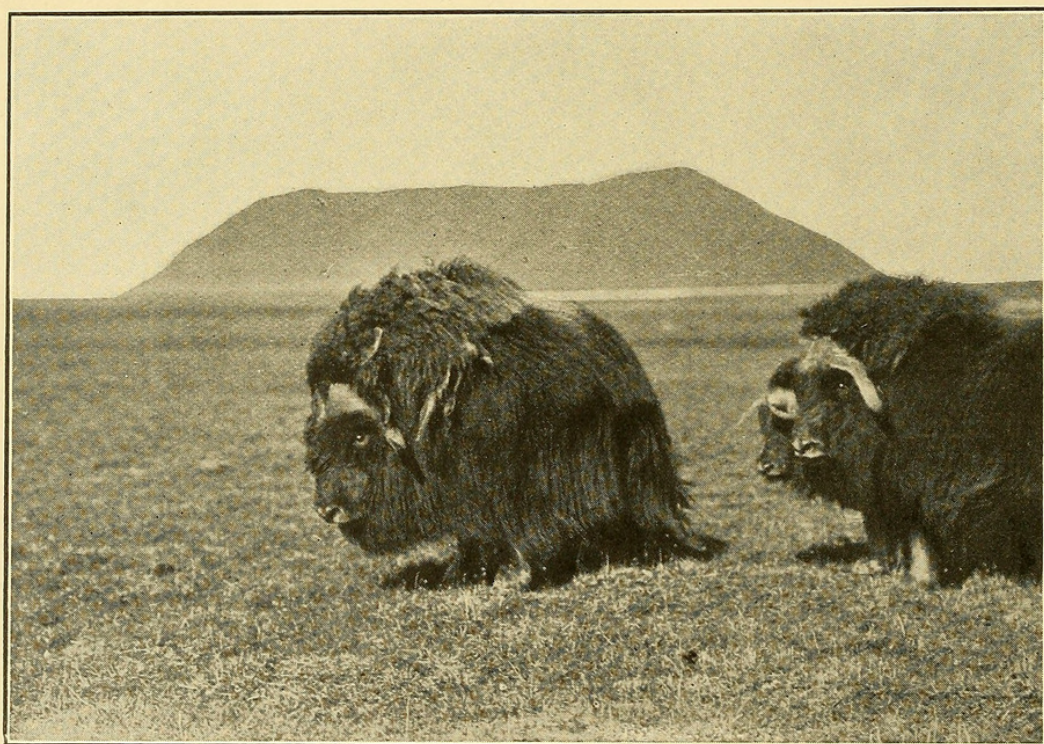
The most spectacular sight of the trip however was not ornithological but mammalogical,—the Musk Oxen at Cape Sparbo, North Devon Island. Thanks largely to explorers living off the "Friendly Arctic" the originally quite considerable herds of Musk Oxen have been sadly reduced within the past generation. However, if this Cape Sparbo herd is any criterion, the North Devon herd is coming back as rapidly as could be expected in the land of slow growth and limited resources and, if the present protective policy of the Canadian administration can be enforced, may regain its pristine number again. We found at Cape Sparbo bunches of seven and eleven and others to make up about twenty head of which a considerable number were calves which argues well for the natural increase. The Mounted Police who are watching them closely report others in the neighbourhood. At a distance and even at close range, with their long hairy locks draped to the ground about them they looked more like old hay-cocks, if such were possible in the Arctic, or erratic brown boulders on the little coastal flat where we found them, than like living animals.

If we had not been looking closely in expectation of them they would probably have escaped observation, even then it took motion to differentiate them from natural objects about and to confirm recognition. On first sight of us they galloped off but the loosing of a couple of dogs was enough to cause them to pause on the first knoll and bunch, heads out, tails in and the calves squeezed within as far as possible. The dogs though of husky breed were only pups, had never hunted, took no more interest in the animals than to enjoy a race with them and turned away to more interesting matters when the game seemed over. However they were too much like their hereditary enemies, the wolves, to be disregarded or trusted by the Musk Oxen who held to their traditional formation to repel boarders and permitted us to approach as near as we desired without breaking. We might have killed the lot with a .22 pistol had we so desired, but instead did our shooting with cameras and scored a big bag of interest in game. They would threaten and shake their heads, brandishing their very business-like and sharp-tipped horns at us, nose their feet, snort ferociously and make feint at charging but it was evident their first care was to protect their rears. Every step forward from the bunch exposed an opening behind that they were most painfully aware of, and their demonstrations forward never went beyond a step or so and were immediately followed by a hasty retreat into formation again. We moved them and still-pictured them until film and plates were about spent and then as they were finally forced into a wild stampede the last of the film was run off at their scampering away over the tundra.

Numerous pods of Walrus were seen heaving their great shoulders out of the sea and exhibiting their yellow tusks in the northern part of Baffin Bay, and on the ice floes well south to Davis Strait a number of Polar Bears were observed. It is surprising how yellow and conspicuous these comparatively white animals show on the absolute whiteness of the ice, especially how far their black noses and eyes can be seen. The Eskimos say that in stalking seal the bear hides his nose behind his paw or pushes a snow block in front of it. To fully capitalize its camouflage it should close its eyes as well, but of this report does not tell, and probably the bear does not see things that way at all.



*Musk-ox Herd  
Rounded up to resist attack*



*Musk-ox  
Cape Sparbo, North Devon Island  
August 1, 1929*



Taverner, P. A. 1930. "Some Zoological Aspects of the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1929." *The Canadian field-naturalist* 44(2), 25–27.

<https://doi.org/10.5962/p.339116>.

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