

A SPRING VISIT TO DENMARK

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DURING the spring of 1959, I spent a short time at the reserve of the Danish Naturfredningsrådet at Tipperne in West Jutland. My main purpose was to make observations on the flocks of Brent Geese which collect there in April and May. However, there is plenty to entertain an ornithologist at Tipperne in spring besides the Brent, and perhaps a general account may be of interest.

Dr. Matthews described Tipperne in an account of wildfowl conservation in Denmark in the *Tenth Annual Report*. It is situated on a peninsula jutting out from the south shore of Ringkøbing Fjord, and with the island of Klægbanken covers an area of some two thousand acres. Most of this area is a swampy grassland dotted with small pools, providing feeding for geese and nesting places for wildfowl and waders. Offshore, on the mudflats of the Fjord, grow *Zostera nana* and *Ruppia*, the principal food source for the Brent. The water level is controlled by a sluice gate, so that there are in effect no tides.

I arrived at Tipperne on 26th April, having made my way from the nearest village, 10 miles distant, on a hired bicycle. This was a hazardous undertaking, as the machine lacked brakes, and was made highly unstable by the bulky rucksack which I strapped on the back. However, I completed the journey without injury, and was greeted by a Danish student, Heine Klausen, who was staying at Tipperne until the end of May. After some coffee he showed me around the Observatory. The living quarters can only be described as luxurious, considering the situation of the buildings; I know of no similar British establishment of comparable remoteness which has electric light, water and full sanitation. In addition, there is a well equipped laboratory and even a photographic darkroom.

Beside the main building stands an observation tower equipped with a very large telescope mounted on a mobile tripod. Since the Observatory is situated on the tip of the peninsula, it commands a view over the marsh to the south and the Fjord to the north. Using the telescope for the first time, I was at once struck by the amount that could be seen without stirring from the tower. Scanning the fjord, I soon found the Brent I was seeking, far off to the north-east, and accompanied by a large number of Wigeon. Closer at hand, a large company of some 1500 Godwits was feeding on the mud, the majority of them Bar-tailed. Scattered along the coast were more Wigeon, with Mallard, Pintail, Shoveler and Red-breasted Mergansers, and here and there were groups of Mute Swans with a few Whoopers. Turning my attention inland, I found 3,000 Pinkfeet grazing over the south-east corner of the reserve, with little parties of ducks by the sides of the numerous pools, the majority of them Teal, with a few Garganey.

Even the Observatory telescope with a maximum power of over 100x and an enormous field of view had its limitations, however. In order to be able to determine whether or not Brent Geese were in first-winter plumage, I was obliged to pursue them on foot, armed with my more modest telescope of 60 diameters and a fraction of the field. This raised practical difficulties. In Essex I had been used to watching Brent from the cover of a convenient sea wall, as they floated close in on the high tide. At Tipperne, there was

no sea wall, and the birds fed a long way out on the fjord. I developed a technique of plodding across the mud, bent nearly double, and carrying a wooden box to sit on when I wished to use my telescope. Though several such attempts were frustrated by the flock going up, I managed to get the information I needed. Towards the end of my stay, they became more co-operative, and I was able to watch them from the cover of tall reeds at the shore as they fed nearer to land. After I left, they moved their feeding grounds to the West, and Heine was able to make further observations from the comfort of the tower. Even so, they never came on land this year as is frequently observed at Tipperne in spring.

'Mud crawling' had its aesthetic compensations however. Due to the lack of tides, hard mud and a very gently shelving shore, it is possible to go out a long way into the Fjord. Sometimes an onshore wind spread a few inches of water across the mud, giving the eerie impression that I was walking across the sea in defiance of the laws of nature. On one of these forays I was pleased to find a party of 6 Barnacle Geese feeding near the Brent. When the Brent went up, they moved with them, though always feeding a little way apart. The Brent, which numbered some 1,100 during my stay, were always accompanied by about twice as many Wigeon, congregated around the sides and the back of the flock. The Godwits on the mud were a particularly spectacular feature. The majority were in their russet summer plumage, and when a flock on the wing banked and caught the light, the whole great cloud of birds would suddenly turn copper-coloured. Looking at them through the telescope I noticed that the few that were still in winter plumage were nearly all Black-tailed, although the birds of this species nesting on the marsh were of course in full breeding dress.

The positions of all nests found at Tipperne are plotted each year on a large map of the reserve which hangs on the wall of the Observatory. On two days I accompanied Heine on a search for nests, taking us over a large part of the reserve. The most characteristic features of the reserve in spring are auditory rather than visual. Two sounds which are heard constantly are the squeaky song and tittering alarm note of the Black-tailed Godwits, with a continual grating accompaniment from a chorus of Marsh Frogs, giving an oddly tropical atmosphere. We found one Godwit's nest, as well as several Lapwings' and a Redshank's, but most interesting was a small colony of Avocets. Heine had discovered the position of this colony with the Observatory telescope. The nests were situated on two small muddy islands on one of the larger pools, and as we approached the occupants flew up calling, their pied plumage harmonizing perfectly with a blue sky and the golden-brown reeds flanking the pool. On the first island, about 8 feet in diameter, were five nests, three with 4 eggs, one with 5 eggs and one with 2 eggs. Besides these, one egg lay in a battered and apparently abandoned nest, while four others were scattered and half buried in the mud. Possibly this nest had been the victim of flooding due to a sudden rain storm. The second island held eight nests—four with 4 eggs each and four others with respectively 2, 5, 6 and 7 eggs. This wide variation in numbers seems to be unusual, and possibly the large clutches were the joint efforts of two females.

Another wader plentiful on the marsh but not yet nesting was the Ruff. We came across several motley parties of males bobbing and scuttling about on their display grounds, and were able to approach quite close. In another

part of the marsh I found a dead Ruff which had probably been killed by a tern; it had a neat hole in the back of its head consistent with a peck wound, and several Common Terns were nearby, mobbing me uncertainly as I passed. Once, looking through the big telescope, I found a Gull-billed Tern resting by a pool. This species nests in a nearby part of the Fjord, but is not often seen on the marsh. The only bird of prey I encountered was a Marsh Harrier beating over the reeds by the shore of the Fjord. Foxes are said to be plentiful, though I did not see one, and probably account for many of the Pinkfoot remains I found in the grassy feeding grounds of the geese. Possibly these dated from the previous autumn, when the shooting season was still open, and crippled geese found their way into the reserve. My only encounter with man as a predator while I was at Tipperne was when Heine went out onto the mud with a net and returned with two excellent Flounders, which we ate the same evening. Heine was given to experimentation, and after I had skinned the Ruff I found, he rolled the remains in bread crumbs and fried them. I was amazed to find it highly palatable!¹

Near the watch-tower stood a small fir plantation, which held a crop of night migrants early each morning. The majority were Chiffchaffs, Willow Warblers and Whitethroats, but on one day they were augmented by a Tree Pipit, a Robin and two Song Thrushes, and on another by two cock Redstarts, a Ring Ouzel and a Red-breasted Flycatcher. One of the Redstarts wandered into an outbuilding, and was rescued and released with the inevitable ring.

The atmosphere of winter was preserved on the marsh by flocks of Golden Plovers and Pinkfeet. In contrast to the autumn, when the shooting season is open, the geese showed little regard for the boundaries of the reserve, and moved about quite a lot. The evening flights were spectacular, for on three of the four evenings I was there, they stayed on the marsh for the night, after spending about half an hour at dusk flying round and round over the sanctuary. My best views of them were had on the last full day of my stay, when from the watch-tower I was able to find among them 11 Greylags, 2 Whitefronts and 2 Lesser Whitefronts. I believe the latter were only the second record of the species for Tipperne. With Brent and the Barnacles seen the day before, this totalled 6 species of geese seen in two days, and 15 species of wildfowl in all.

I concluded my visit by going to Copenhagen to meet Dr. Finn Salomonsen, who recently published an extensive survey of the status of Brent. I left Tipperne on the morning of 30th April, on the primitive bicycle which brought me, and continued from the village of Nymindesgård by bus and train to the Danish capital. I arrived about midnight to find that as the next day, 1st May, was a national holiday, all the hotels were full. I soon found myself one of a band of harassed individuals touring Copenhagen in search of a night's lodgings. Eventually I was lucky, and the next day I enjoyed the hospitality of Dr. Salomonsen and his wife at an excellent tea, and had a long and most interesting discussion.

¹When the Ruff was a common breeding species in eastern England, young birds were caught and fattened for the table (Eds).

I travelled overnight to Esbjerg, and spent the time that remained before I sailed by visiting nearby Ribe. This is a lovely old-world town, famous for its White Storks. This species is dwindling unfortunately, apparently unable to adapt itself to life in noisy modern towns. In quieter places such as Ribe, some may still be seen at their nests on buildings, or on platforms erected for the purpose. Two pairs were in Ribe during my visit, and I watched a magnificent display of soaring by one of the birds, looking strangely vulture-like, with its widespread, upward-curving black primaries. It was with this pleasing picture still in my mind that I returned at length to Esbjerg and boarded the boat for Harwich.

