

# Goose observations from Scoresby Land, 1962

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## Introduction

THROUGHOUT the two months which the Oxford University East Greenland Expedition spent in the field, data on Barnacle Geese *Branta leucopsis* and Pink-footed Geese *Anser brachyrhynchus* were collected. The majority of the observations were from the Syd Kap area of southern Scoresby Land (71° 21' N., 24° 51' W.) as it was here that the expedition was based from 26th July until 5th September, 1962. Geese were also recorded on the north coast of Scoresby Land (72° 15' N., 23° 50' W.), near Mesters Vig, and near Revdal in the Schuchert valley. In September, Pink-footed Geese were observed migrating down Hurry Fjord across the mouth of Scoresbysund. These observations extend and supplement the findings of the goose-ringing expedition in Jameson Land in 1961 (Marris and Ogilvie, 1962). Details of birds other than geese seen in 1962 are not given here but can be found in a report by Hall (unpublished). I would like to acknowledge the assistance of other members of the Expedition who collected information on geese.

## Distribution

### *Northern Scoresby Land*

Labben peninsula near the Mesters Vig airstrip. On 18th July, geese of both species were seen accompanied by young: Barnacle Geese—10 adults with 15 goslings; Pink-footed Geese—6 adults with 3 goslings.

The staff at the Danish radio station reported that geese had nested and produced 'many geeslings' in the 'canyon' which is the river valley between the airstrip and lead mine. A visit up the lower reaches of this river revealed nothing, but by this time of year—mid July—it was perhaps too late to expect geese to be in their nesting area. The geese seen were all near the sea.

### *Schuchert Flod*

On its way from Mesters Vig to Syd Kap the expedition walked down the west side of the wide Schuchert Flod. South of the Bjørnbos river was an extensive area between the main river and the vertical limestone cliffs of the Karstrygge where there was a chain of ponds. On at least two of these Barnacle Geese were seen at a distance; perhaps 20 on each. Near Revdal, by the mountain wall, a camp was pitched on 25th July, by a pond where there were 26 Barnacles with 9 goslings. By the following morning there were only 18 adults present.

### *Southern Scoresby Land*

Konglomeratelv, Nordost Bugt. It was soon obvious that the place chosen by the expedition for its main base was a good goose area. The parachutes had been neatly dropped on the west side of Konglomeratelv near a series of fine ponds. These were midway between the estuary of the river at Nordost Bugt, where there were several acres of merse, and a large lake—one of two—the Holger Danskes Briller. The outlet of this lake widened into a shallow expanse of water with islands in it. Southwards were more ponds on an upland plateau, as well as round the coast towards Syd Kap. To the north was a low flat area with more small ponds.

The most accurate counts were made soon after the expedition arrived. These are summarised in Tables I and II. By the beginning of August, the flightless moult period was ending and the area was no longer undisturbed.

Table I. Geese seen south of Base Camp at Konglomeratelv, Nordost Bugt, 28th and 29th July 1962

	Adults	Pulli	Total
<i>Barnacle Geese</i> (all 28th July)			
Parachute Ponds (North) .. ..	28	26	54
Parachute Ponds (North)—flying .. ..	16	—	16
Parachute Ponds (South) .. ..	c.20	—	c.20
Konglomeratelv .. ..	c.50	—	c.50
Merse .. ..	19	16	35
Sea .. ..	65	—	65
Estuary .. ..	35	—	35
Total	c.233	42	c.275

*Pink-footed Geese*

Parachute Ponds (South) 28th July ..	c.136	—	c.136
Sea, 28th July .. ..	14	—	14
Total, 28th July	c.150	0	c.150
Parachute Ponds (South), 29th July ..	162	0	162

Table II. Geese seen north of Base Camp, 30th July 1962.

	Adults	Pulli	Total
<i>Barnacle Geese</i>			
Holger Danskes Briller .. ..	2	3	5
<i>Pink-footed Geese</i>			
Loon Lake .. ..	c.175	—	c.175
Holger Danskes Briller .. ..	25	—	25
	c.200	0	c.200

### Breeding

As in Britain, the spring of 1962 came late in East Greenland, with 40% snow cover remaining in early July at Mesters Vig. Both Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese had, however, nested here and reared young, and as already mentioned, parties of each species were observed on 18th July. Mesters Vig was the only place where young Pinkfeet were seen by the expedition, although adults were numerous further south.

Barnacle goslings were seen before the end of July in three areas: Northern Scoresby Land 15; Schuchert Flod 9; Southern Scoresby Land 45; 69 in all.

On three occasions it was possible to count the number of goslings in each family of Barnacle Geese:

	number of broods of				total young
	1	2	3	4	
18th July ..		1	3	1	15
28th July ..	2	2	2	1	16
30th July ..			1		3
total	2	3	6	2	34
mean brood size 2.6					

### Predators

The shells of four Barnacle Goose eggs were collected. Three were found near Konglomeratelv and one in Gurreholmsdal. These are thought to have

been robbed by Long-tailed Skuas (*Stercorarius longicaudus*).

Cases of 16 bore cartridges, probably dating from the time when Syd Kap was occupied in the summer by Eskimos from Scoresbysund, were picked up by some of the ponds in the Konglomerately valley.

### Moulting

The largest lakes in the Konglomerately area—Holger Danskes Briller—held the fewest geese. Their rocky shores, which rose steeply to the scree and crags of the surrounding mountains, left little room for vegetation, so that there was a shortage of feed for geese during the flightless moult period. Two other lakes—Loon Lake<sup>1</sup> and one of the Parachute ponds<sup>1</sup>—were large enough and provided easy access to adequate grazing for substantial numbers of moulting geese. There were 150-200 non-breeding Pinkfeet on each of these. At the end of July most of the Pinkfeet could fly when pressed but still sought the safety of the water.

The non-breeding Barnacle Geese, which were in smaller flocks than the Pinkfeet, could also fly when disturbed. In a party of 35 seen on 28th July, which swam out to sea, all but six eventually took off.

Geese of both species were seen throughout August feeding by the small ponds or flying to or from the estuary. As the large flocks gradually moved away, it was impossible to add to the total population recorded, even when seen in different areas. Feathers and droppings were found by several of the upland ponds where flocks of Pinkfeet which could fly—15, 21 and 36—were seen in the middle of the month. The most westerly record was on 26th August, when three Pinkfeet flew down Nordvest Fjord over the camp by the mouth of the Uranus glacier river.

### Migration

Both Pinkfeet and Barnacle Geese were still near Syd Kap at the beginning of September when the expedition was housed there. Between here and Konglomerately about 100 Pinkfeet and 30 Barnacles were reported on 3rd September. A Barnacle with a damaged wing spent 1st September near the house.

A quick visit was paid to the entrance of Hurry Fjord on 7th September. Here two skeins of about 37 and of 21 Pinkfeet were seen flying south down the east side of the Fjord, over Kap Hope and out across the ice-filled Sound towards Kap Brewster, which is due north of North-west Iceland.

### Breeding success in 1961 and 1962

There was little overlap in the areas of observations in 1961 and 1962 apart from the region around Mesters Vig, the 1961 expedition operating to the north and east of that in 1962. It is, nevertheless, of some interest to compare the apparent breeding performance of Barnacle Geese and Pink-footed Geese in the two years. The data are shown in Table III.

Table III. Breeding success in Jameson Land and Scoresby Land in 1961 and 1962. 1961 data from Marris and Ogilvie (1962).

		Barnacle Goose			Pink-footed Goose		
		Adults	Pulli	% young	Adults	Pulli	% young
seen, 1961	..	1640	144	8.1	1408	29	2.0
caught, 1961	..	556	133	19.3	—	—	—
seen, 1962	..	235	45	16.1	360	0	0

<sup>1</sup>These are unofficial names.

In both years appreciable numbers of Barnacle goslings were seen. The disparity in the proportions seen and caught in 1961 results partly from the fact that adults without families were less easy to catch than those with goslings, because they completed their flightless period earlier, but is also a consequence of marked differences in the composition of flocks in different areas. Thus it is not possible to say from these observations that Barnacle breeding success was better or worse in 1962 than it had been in 1961. In this connection it is relevant to note some observations by H. Boyd on Islay in autumn. Islay is the principal wintering place of Barnacle Geese breeding in Greenland (Boyd, 1961) and many marked in Jameson Land have been seen there. In November, 1961 the Islay population included 10.7% juveniles. In November, 1962 there were 7.6%, appreciably fewer. The mean November brood size in 1961 was 2.1 and in 1962 2.5—compared with 2.6 in July. These results suggest that in 1962 the Barnacle Geese of Scoresby Land were more successful than those in many other parts of East Greenland.

The scarcity of young Pinkfeet in both years seems to bear out the view that the Scoresby Land area is chiefly frequented by non-breeders, probably including "immigrants" from Iceland (Taylor, 1953).

#### References

- BOYD, H. 1961. The number of Barnacle Geese in Europe in 1959-60. *Wildfowl Trust 12th Annual Report* : 116-24.  
MARRIS, R. & OGILVIE, M. A. 1962. The ringing of Barnacle Geese in Greenland in 1961. *Wildfowl Trust 13th Annual Report* : 53-64.  
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