

## **Diary 4: 6 - 12 June 2011**

### **What? A polar bear? OK...**

So ... the polar bear couple was still on the ice a few km from the research station in the beginning of this week. Still mainly lying down. Lars Holst Hansen, my trusted colleague, even did some scan sampling from the couch in House 9 (the residential building) during the night, but saw no action! Just saw: standing a bit, walking a bit, stretching legs... nothing more. So we were pretty used to them by Monday.

On Tuesday, things turned to the more exciting! A mother bear and her two cubs suddenly appeared on the ice coming in from south, walking around some 4 km from Halvøen – a peninsula approximately 4 km from the research station. Suddenly looking at polar bears was more exciting again!

After a few hours, the mother bear and cubs disappeared over the ice again, disappearing in direction of Basaltøen and Clavering Ø. A while later, the male from the pair also started walking away, out through Young Sund. Eventually, the female of the pair also left the area, following a route quite far from here, closer to Clavering Ø.

All in all a very peaceful "meeting" with polar bears at Zackenberg. Always-watchful eyes towards them, so we were sure where they were. Good experience for all.

Even when we have no polar bears, we have lots of exciting stuff going on! The barnacle goose colony on the south face of Zackenbergfjeld's Orienteringsspids, is still active. Lars Holst Hansen and I went across to check it on Thursday, and saw a few birds flying from the shelves of the colony. Even with 60 times magnification, they were the size of pinheads! Quite far, up the mountain...

On the way over, we crossed the tracks of the polar bears and secured a stool sample from one of them – the female we believe, judging from the size of the footprints.

We also went up and took pictures from Nansenblokken (a large rock on the south-western slopes of Zackenbergfjeld) covering the whole valley. These pictures will be used to estimate snow cover. That also gave us a downhill ski experience between the "legs" of the mountain. Wet and heavy snow but a fine, if a bit steep, slope. Safe and moderately paced we descended in style. At least we hope anyone looking only saw the parts of our descent where we looked cool!

Also, automated cameras have been set up at several fox dens, and the cards have been changed in some of them already. It seems there are pups in 3-4 dens. Three of the dens furthest from here could still hold surprises!

Many more flowers have now started flowering, the latest being Arctic bell-heather, Arctic bladder-pod and Arctic poppy.

Snow is melting fast, and to use a Norwegian term, is "rotten" where it hasn't melted yet. Wet and slushy. Snowshoes are taking over from skis. Larger and larger parts can now be walked in rubber boots or hiking boots.

The first bird nests have been found, a dunlin nest and a long-tailed skua nest. The first was just started, just one egg of an expected four. The skua nest was also found with one egg. The following day we still found only one egg. They can have up to two eggs.

On Saturday, I started the first leg of the breeding bird census, in perfect conditions! Dunlins, sanderlings, red knots, long-tailed skuas, common ringed plovers, ruddy turnstones, long-tailed ducks and snow buntings were recorded as territorial. So I only needed four more days like that to cover the entire census area. But of course, the following day fog was hanging over the valley, disrupting my census. Here's hoping for bright sunlight and calm winds in the coming week!

Also on Saturday, the toilet house (House 10) was reopened. It has been blown partly off its foundation, so a new was built by Kim Simonsen, our new enthusiastic logistician. Now with a deck on the side, where the tap, sink and soap dispenser is. Also, east facing panorama windows – fitted perfectly to sitting height!

The opening was celebrated with newly baked goodies and refreshing drinks prepared by Dina Laursen, master chef of our kitchen.

Rounding off the week; Sunday, a polar bear couple, probably our old friends walk through Young Sund and disappeared around the corner heading towards Tyrolerfjord. And to round things off a third bear, a big male, came in towards our coastline, walking along it for a while. Much to the delight of the audience gathered behind telescopes, binoculars and big camera lenses. The bear came as close as the former delta, and then walked towards Clavering Ø. We eventually lost sight of it. So bears started and ended the week at Zackenberg.

More polar bear encounters this week than we have had at the station in total since 1995! Quite a week.

To the families concerned, Maria, Dina, Henrik, Kim, Herbert, Lars, Lars and I are all doing well, are in good health and go into the new week with enthusiasm and energy!

Also, the volleyball net will probably go up soon....

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