

Diary 6 – 13 July 2010

New girls on the block

Having no more Frenchmen at the station, the Dutch remained the most exotic members of the crew of M/S ZERO in the past week. This, their final week here this season, proved very exciting – both in terms of their important work with sanderlings, and not least since they were the only people at the station who could still follow the football World Cup with any sense of national pride. On the last evening of the week came the word from the Old World that the Spanish had taken the title, leaving the Dutch second. The news was taken with calm by our Dutchmen – after all, they'd just had their most productive day in terms of ringing individuals (sanderlings). One of the birds was named after Giovanni van Bronkhorst, who scored against Uruguay in the semi finals.

Staying with the birds, this week a clutch of five ruddy turnstone chicks was found – and later eaten (most likely by an Arctic fox). The usual clutch size is four, and we're not unfamiliar with clutches of three or two. Five eggs in one nest are unusual though!

Regarding the foxes this week proved interesting as well – and a little worrying.

Firstly, a pack of up to five fox pups have started frequenting the research station regularly. The mill that grinds our food waste, have been inadequately covered, and they've been eating out of the few scraps available. Although very popular objects of affection – very popular photo objects, not least – this trend is worrying, as we're here to study arctic foxes in their natural environment, and not foxes reliant on human food leftovers. Consequently, this week procedures around garbage handling and disposal have been discussed and refined. Jón and Michael have gone to great lengths to try to avoid this in the future. The pups are still quite comfortable around the station, but we hope to scare them off and change their affinity for the research station (I am talking fox pups here, not Jón and Michael.)

Early in the week, the Frenchmen left for Hochstetter Forland, and we were glad to get an email from them recently confirming their safe arrival and a good start to their studies and collections. The same evening (Monday), the pilots had a night stop here at Zackenberg. David and his colleague even brought Lillian (several times co-editor of the ZERO annual report, editor of Zackenberg.dk etc., etc.). Lillian had been in Akureyri to meet with people from Norlandair, and the opportunity arose to come here for a short visit. She'd only just come off the plane when she was met by us – and, to her obvious delight, several fox pups, who decided to put on a little display for her. Playing around – and under – house 6. So few minutes on the ground, and she already saw fox pups. Other years, people have been here for months without seeing them. Her luck ran out later in the evening though, and a planned walk around the area was thwarted by an incoming fog, that just became thicker and thicker as the evening became night.

The next morning, however, the fog lifted and Lillian could join Spanggård and Gergely out of Zackenberg – home to Denmark and Finland, respectively. In the afternoon, we received new faces to the station: Michael returned to the coast once more. The former Sirius soldier, begun his second stay at ZERO this week, and have done very well since he arrived. Also on the plane, legend on the coast, Charlotte, arrived with the new GeoBasis assistant, Kirstine. Also, Charlotte brought me a pivotal supply of sorely missed wine gums. The arrival of these two young women means that another young woman will be stepping down as GeoBasis-chick after many years. This, her fifth season, will be Julie's last for GeoBasis, as she is now committed to her Ph.D. at Lund University. Of course she'll be doing her field work here, and her supervisor – yet another young woman! – Lena, arrived with this same plane on Tuesday. Unfortunately, they ran in to a spot of

trouble, as the screen on a vital piece of equipment refused to comply. A black screen is hard to work with! A new one should be flown in on the plane coming next week.

"So many young women?" I hear you ask! Yes, and I'm not done yet! Ditte is back, and once again she'll be working with long-time visitor to Greenland, Christian, who's here to register the flora along our long transect, the "ZERO-line" for the third time. They've come far already, started from sea level, and are well past the airstrip. Heading for the top of Aucellabjerg. I am sure our final young woman - queen of the station, Dina - will agree when I write that we need blokes too. We found a young, specimen this year: Jesper, the assistant of Pollinator X ... erm, Claus. (Sorry, Jan, I nicked that one ...). Jesper has since his arrival, been staring at flowers with Claus, waiting for flies to visit, as well as showing us how to remove a tongue stud. Impressive young lad.

"Surely, there's more about birds? You've hardly mentioned birds!?" Of course there is! Lots! Sirius was once again great sports, counting the nests of their impressive eider colony. 2889 nest - which is more than the last couple of years. (Actually, they counted them last week, but since it is such exciting news, I thought I owed it to you, faithful readers of Zackenberg Weekly, to put it in print!)

Also, we have a - for Zackenberg - rare breeding bird this season. The Lapland bunting (laplandsværting) male had been singing a few days before a female was discovered, and the sanderling team, Jeroen and Jan, took their eyes off sanderlings for a short while, and found the nest. I'll have to check, but I think it might be the first breeding record of the species for Zackenberg. Nice bird too - for a passerine (spurvefugl).

The barnacle geese have fairly large goslings by now - although we see very little of them. This week none have been seen during our counts every third day. However, during the weekly musk ox count on Saturday I saw three families through the telescope, with a total of five goslings at Østersøen, a lake further east in the goose protection zone. So they're there - if only a few of them.

We do however have just fewer than 50 immature barnacle geese in the part of the goose protection zone that is closer to the station. These immature will be changing their flight feathers until they leave us again.

Several birds that are not breeding (either not breeding at all or having lost their nests) have started to gather in flocks, preparing the southward migration. 27 long-tailed skuas were seen yesterday, and also flocks of sanderlings, red knots and ruddy turnstones have been recorded this week.

The first juvenile snow buntings crawled out of the nests this week, and lots of wader chicks have already been ringed, weighed and measured. The summer is drawing to a close, and within the next few weeks, we'll see fewer and fewer birds by the day.

Lars has been working tirelessly on flowers, musk oxen ringing, setting up data collection systems. Dina has cooked wonderful dishes and a plethora of cakes. (That is not a complaint!) Jeroen and Jan of course, have done their daily 18-22 km hikes up and down Aucellaelv gorge, finding many sanderling nests/broods. Claus, as I mentioned, have been staring at flowers and flies, but also proved enthusiastic in solving mysteries of the fish fauna of the area! His collection of pdfs of literature on many subjects is impressive. Michael and Jesper also took part in the solving of the misroties, finding a reference to "catching 'salmon' in the Zackenberg river" in a book on the trapping era, and an

explanation that the word "laks" (meaning salmon) is often used in Greenland for arctic char, while salmon is often referred to as "skællaks" ("scale salmon"). Because of Claus, we now know, that the most recent literature we know of, say that salmon should not occur here (which we believe to be true), pink salmon (pukkellaks) is a remote possibility, and – as expected – Arctic char is common. Also, according to the literature, the dead threespined stickleback (trepigget hundestejle) that was found last year, (more dead specimens collected this year) is far north of the believed distribution. Another win for science!

The volley ball season started this week, with already two matches played. Very serious this year! We've played with a backline! We might consider side lines later. Some old school Zackenberg volleyball players frown at this new development, and a move back to Zackenberg rules (i.e. hardly any rules at all), can not be excluded. We'll keep you posted. As something entirely new, talk of a possible game of football has been reported. We'll see how it develops....

Next week I predict overcast on Monday, with rain around 12 o'clock. Other than that, I have no predictions as *this is Northeast Greenland*. Also, I already messed up with ice predictions, not only in the internal bet at the station, but also when advising Gormsen from Sirius about the coming day's ice situation near Zackenberg. "Won't cause you any problems" ... hours later it had all drifted into Zackenberg Bugt (bay).... [Sigh] what do I know ... I'll say no more about ice than this: On Sunday, it had still not broken fully through past Kap Breusing. No winner of the bet ... yet.

Out Zackenberg

.... Jannik H.