

Ugebrev 7 – den 19. juli 2009

“From pickled wasps to sniffing musk-ox” - impressions of a week in Zackenberg

I only have the one week at Zackenberg and will be off again on Tuesday, so there's lot to fit into this little letter.

Arctic summer

The evening I got here, there were still some big chunks of ice down at the harbour. A day and a half later, it had all melted completely, and the snow on the hilltops is diminishing rapidly. This is my first experience of summer in the Arctic. The Arctic poppies, white bell heather, cotton grass and all sorts of other flowers are blooming. The river is in full spate, an exciting time for Julie, who is looking forward to measuring it at its fullest. Not so good for getting over to the Zackenberg itself, it's too risky to cross. The weather has been amazing. I was prepared to feel a bit cold at times, but not for being too hot. Still, I'm very glad I brought all the layers of warm stuff recommended in the manual. It helps to keep the Grizzlies off (= Greenland mosquitoes).

Exotic species?

I was expecting to meet all sorts of wildlife here. Mosquitoes around the clock were not quite what I had been dreaming of. But in the world of scientists, every species has its fans.

On the way here, I already met Tomas and Gergely from Finland and Hungary. It was my first real encounter with people who get excited about creepy-crawlies and flying beasties in a positive way, as opposed to the ones who scream their heads off at the sight of them. They're easy to recognize around the place, with their white nets, poised, ready to pounce. Now I know I don't need to lie down and play dead if I meet a “woolly bear”. I have learnt a lot about moths, caterpillars and wasps and have caught myself sneakily wondering whether I should capture interesting-looking little spiders and take them home in my sandwich bag.

I was not the only one with such thoughts. I know that the Sanderling team, Jeroen, Toon and Koos, had a serious debate out on the hills about a particular caterpillar, wondering whether to capture it in a glass phial or just on camera. They opted for the latter –the wrong choice as far as Tomas was concerned. I don't know how many “beasties” he's persuaded them to bring home in their packs.

The Zackenberg menu

It has taken me a while to get used to the interesting creatures Tomas and Gergely bring to the dinner table: wasps, flies and other dainties, preserved in alcohol. This is for our edification, I hasten to add, not dessert.

One day Gergely caught something different in his hunt – a ring from some unfortunate once-upon-a-time bird. This introduced me to the enthusiasm and energy of Jannik, who jumped up immediately and rushed off to check his records. That's how we found out how he catapulted bird-monitoring at Zackenberg station into the digital age a couple of years back. There followed an interesting debate about the relative merits of record-keeping and data processing in different countries. Someone also mentioned a ring that had been found with a bird-leg still attached. I liked Jannik's explanation, which involved the strength of “Viking rings”.

There are some incredible mealtime conversations here, from dung beetles to the shape and content of casts and droppings. Still I manage to retain my appetite, thanks to Lone's cooking. Lone came in with me, at the start of her summer season cooking stint. It seems to me she fits in as if she's always been here. Although we are so far from civilisation, she has been dishing up a delicious menu every day. Tonight's ginger spice cake was an absolute treat. And not even the Scots have thought of using their left-over bread in porridge, but I must say her Danish version is a tasty basis for a day out in the fresh air. And every day is one of those.

It's Lone's day off tomorrow, and Philip and Tower are doing the Sunday dinner. Since we established tonight that the pizza service is not delivering, I'll be interested to see what the lads come up with.

Attention please

Philip, I soon found out, keeps order in the camp. Within minutes of his outline of the dishwashing procedure, all the new arrivals were standing to attention in the kitchen. He is also, of course, responsible for our safety. We were a mixed bunch at the shooting practice. Gergely is clearly a natural. Lone (presumably preparing to hunt future dinners) had at least handled a pistol before. The visitor from the media (!) had everybody ducking for cover – except the “polar bear”, who would be too busy laughing to do any harm to anybody. Fortunately Philip is a patient man – even in the face of persecution by blogging journalists.

(Philip, lucky there's no 50 kb limit on this one...)

Records of one sort and another

Jannik and Lars have been unsuccessful in their continuing attempts to find lemming nests this week. Clearly, it's not a good season for lemmings or breeding long-tailed skuas. (Excellent for a certain type of insect ...ZZZZ splat!)

I went out musk-ox counting with Lars, (who could win any Scottish hill-running race, I'm sure), striding across the valley, up hill and down dale, to see just a few skulking up on the hills, cooling off on the few remaining patches of snow. The others were laughing behind our backs, and waiting just across the river back at the station – outside the official monitoring area, of course.

Sarah's plots are looking good, but she has had a hard time with faulty electronic equipment this week. Fortunately Lars seems to be Mr (electronic) Fix it and helped avert data meltdown. Otherwise, this title belongs to Philip, who has just fixed the backup generator, which looked pretty much melted down when he showed me it yesterday.

Julie has also been battling dodgy electronics on the CO2 and methane monitors. I was impressed to see her sorting out the CO2 equipment, then standing in the river next to Tower with her waders and remote-controlled sensor boat. I've discovered you have to be of many talents to work at a remote high Arctic station.

The sanderling team get the record this week for long hours (close 2nd to our Finnish-Hungarian nocturnal caterpillar collectors) and long distances. 25 km yesterday, more than 30 today. I'd have loved to visit a nest with them, but would need some Olympic training to keep up. I was moved to hear separately from each of them about seeing a chick being taken by a skua. I am an absolute softie, but somehow it's good to know that even experienced ornithologists get upset sometimes when “nature takes its course”. I wondered if they ever felt tempted to intervene. Koos answered unasked when he said he had tried to chase the skua off – but it was too fast.

The closing headlines

Well, time is running out to meet Philip's deadline for this weekly letter. I will be unpopular if the letter is late and wastes paper by being far too long. I must still mention the sighting of mysterious large mammal tracks, mysterious marine mammals in the fjord (the Nessie of Young Sund?) and the strange sounds of the “Arctic elephant”. And the latest fashion news – the shorts came out on Friday (Koos and Jannik), while Lars' attempts to fool the musk-ox with a full camouflage outfit was foiled by the accompanying reporter in a bright red jacket and sunhat. I briefly felt worried that a musk ox might react like a bull with the proverbial red rag. But Lars assures me they're colour-blind. Phew!

Everyone I have interviewed so far has been a great talker. Deutsches Welle listeners will be able to see the fox pups popping in and out of the den when they hear Lars' whispered description – and his rendering of a “sniffing” musk-ox will probably be archived for ever.

Thank you everybody for taking time for me, making me feel like part of the team, for answering all my questions, for great interviews and your company this week. And when you get back to the outside world and an internet connection, maybe you'll enjoy looking

back on some of this week's experiences on the "Ice Blog". <http://blogs.dw-world.de/ice-blog>

And the radio programmes and articles, or the information on how/where to hear them, will be at www.dw-world.de/english (or leave out the English for the German versions, if you can understand German)

I'll be delighted to get an email from anybody who has time when I get back, and I'll keep reading your weekly letters on the net.

All the very best for the rest of your work,

Irene

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