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From heat wave to cold spell

This week has offered a vivid illustration of the extremes of Arctic weather. As entomologists, Gergely and I had been praying for some clear skies at Zackenberg. Still, the conditions prevailing upon our arrival with sun, 15 degrees C and low wind seemed simply unreal. When we walked the hills during the early part of this week, sweat was streaming down our backs, and the butterflies flocked in clouds.

But no good thing lasts forever. On Tuesday, the weather changed within minutes, with a quick drop in the temperature and the wind picking up to gale force. This change coincided with Irene's departure. What a way to go! Through the storm descended nothing less than the legendary POF. This Twin Otter has been through everything a plane can get through – and more. Starting out by dropping Special Forces in Vietnam, POF was later the first plane ever to refuel on an iceberg in the Southern Polar Sea. He [POF is considered a male, whereas other Twin Otters are addressed 'she'] has also visited both the North Pole and Antarctica twice, with detours to Africa and Mongolia – inter alia. As of July 9 this year, POF has been in traffic for 40 years; no wonder then that Philip was seen kissing the plane with respect.

Now the cold spell continues. Yesterday, we were down to a few degrees C only, with everything above 150(?) metres covered in fresh snow. Hence, the Austrian botanists arriving with POF face scraping the slopes like muskoxen to get down to their plants.

The sole good thing about the cold is that the mosquitoes are freezing their sweet abdomens off. After some really biting air last week, the valley is now next to free of profiteers. Everything with six (or eight) legs is hiding under stones. For us bug hunters, this does offer a challenge, since we need to abandon our nets and get down on all four to find our prey. Nonetheless, we have noticed a reserve of not hatched fritillaries under the rocks. Hence, as soon as the weather improves, we hope for a revival of our critters.

Yet, there are some which will not return. Many adult butterflies have certainly died from this weather – and so have even some birds. During the last few days, Jeroen, Toon and Koos have been trying to find the last few broods of sanderling scheduled to hatch this season. But after walking out on Tuesday, the sanderling team came swimming home through sleet and snow. Upon arrival, Jeroen was seen to pour water out of his boots, Toon of his backpack. Unfortunately, the same downwash that nearly drowned the Dutch did probably kill any newly hatched sanderling. Today, the team came home with some sad corpses – but also with the news of some last-minute ringing of newly detected broods.

During these cold days, Sarah is showing the most impressive stamina of us all. Spending full days on pressing a button with fingers so cold they will hardly bend is an impressive feat. Her performance is perhaps only paralleled by Gergely's, who is sniffing stiff alcohol 12 hours a day. Each night, he emerges from the fumes with the strangest smile on his face and reports seeing "astonishing wasps by the double". To sober up, he will be taking a long walk tomorrow.

Anyway, minor inconveniences caused by the weather is more than compensated for by the staff taking so well care of us at the station. Lone has continued to treat us with the most exquisite cuisine to be found north of the Arctic Circle. And since Gergely and I have noticed that our research project is called "High Arctic Food" in the station records, we take full advantage of the delicacies offered. We do hope that we can squeeze into the Twin Otter on our way home.

Given the bad weather, Cinema Arctica has offered not only one but two films this week. After seeing the Western "Appaloosa", several station inhabitants have been seen walking around the mountains with their hands near their hips, muttering short macho lines from the movie. On a more cultural note, the subtitles of "Reservoir Dogs" taught me some Danish vocabulary which I certainly did not know from before. Since the gentlemen in the movie all dressed in suits, I am sure it represents really cultivated language. To appear educated, I have decided to try out my new skills over dinner...

Tomas Roslin
University of Helsinki

P.S Here is where you can find me after the field season:
<http://www.helsinki.fi/science/metapop/People/Tomas.htm>
<http://www.helsinki.fi/science/metapop/metacom>