

BENOÎT AUDET

**ÉCOLOGIE ALIMENTAIRE DES OISONS DE LA GRANDE
OIE DES NEIGES (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) EN MILIEUX
MÉSBIQUES SUR L'ÎLE BYLOT, NUNAVUT**

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RÉSUMÉ

L'objectif principal de cette étude était de déterminer le régime et la sélection alimentaire des oisons de la Grande Oie des neiges (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) et de les relier à la valeur nutritive des plantes dans les milieux mésiques de l'Île Bylot, au Nunavut. Nous avons utilisé deux techniques différentes mais complémentaires, soit l'étude des contenus oesophagiens d'oisons sauvages sacrifiés et l'observation directe du broutement d'oisons captifs imprégnés par l'homme. Cette dernière technique était innovatrice et nous avons démontré la fiabilité des données qu'elle génère ainsi que la compatibilité des résultats avec ce qui se passe en milieu naturel. Malgré une composition floristique plus diversifiée et une couverture de plantes graminoides plus éparse en milieux mésiques qu'en milieux humides, les plantes Graminées demeuraient l'élément principal dans le régime alimentaire des oisons et étaient fortement sélectionnées en milieux mésiques. Le reste du régime était constitué principalement de Joncacées, de Polygonacées et de Légumineuses, toutes faisant partie des plantes sélectionnées par les oisons. Le régime était très diversifié chez les jeunes oisons, mais à mesure qu'ils gagnaient de l'expérience et de l'efficacité, ils se concentraient sur un nombre plus restreint de catégories de plantes. La sélection alimentaire était influencée par les concentrations d'azote et de composés phénoliques des plantes mais c'est le ratio composés phénoliques : azote qui avait la meilleure association avec les coefficients de sélection ; la concentration de fibres n'influçait pas la sélection. La valeur nutritive des plantes et leur disponibilité étaient responsables du régime adopté selon les différents habitats mésiques visités.

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study was to determine the diet and food selection of Greater Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) goslings in relation to the nutritive quality of plants growing on mesic tundra sites on Bylot Island, Nunavut. We used two different but complementary approaches, which were the analysis of oesophageal contents of sacrificed wild goslings, and the direct observation of the feeding activity of captive, human-imprinted goslings. The latter method was innovative and we showed that it provided a reliable description of the diet and that the results were comparable to those obtained with wild goslings. Although mesic habitats have a more diverse floristic composition than wetlands and a sparse graminoid cover, *Gramineae* were dominant in the diet and were highly selected. The rest of the diet consisted mainly of *Juncaceae*, *Polygonaceae* and *Leguminosae*, all taxa that were selected by goslings. The diet was highly diversified in very young goslings but as they aged and gained experience and efficiency, they concentrated on a few taxa. Food selection was influenced by nitrogen and total phenolic compounds content of plants but the ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen showed the closest association to selection coefficients; neutral detergent fibre content did not influence selection. Both plant nutritive quality and availability determined the diet across different mesic habitats.

AVANT-PROPOS

Ce mémoire traite d'une branche de l'écologie qui m'a toujours fasciné autant sur le plan personnel que sur le plan professionnel, c'est-à-dire les interactions entre les animaux sauvages et leurs habitats naturels. À l'ère du néolibéralisme où l'argent est roi et maître, où les hommes consomment plus que jamais, polluent plus que jamais et exploitent plus que jamais, les espèces animales et végétales, elles, subissent les conséquences de notre mode de vie actuel et disparaissent à un rythme effréné. Par chance, l'opinion publique s'oriente vers une volonté d'adopter des sources d'énergie propres et durables, de protéger l'environnement et de sauvegarder les espèces en péril. Cependant, le grand réchauffement climatique déjà amorcé ne facilitera pas les choses. Bref, l'atteinte de bon nombre de ces objectifs nobles passera justement par une meilleure connaissance des interactions entre les animaux sauvages et leurs habitats naturels. En ce qui concerne ce mémoire, il s'imbrique plus spécialement dans le thème « relations plantes-herbivores » avec comme sujet principal la Grande Oie des neiges. La première partie consiste en une introduction générale qui résume les connaissances actuelles entourant l'herbivorie dans le monde animal, et ensuite de façon plus particulière chez les oies. On y retrouve également des informations concernant les choix alimentaires des oies en fonction des différents paramètres de valeur nutritive des plantes et on termine avec le cas spécifique de la Grande Oie des neiges à l'Île Bylot. Les objectifs principaux de l'étude et les hypothèses de départ sont aussi inclus dans cette première partie. La deuxième partie constitue le corps du mémoire et est écrit en anglais sous la forme d'un article scientifique ayant pour but d'être soumis à des revues pour publication. Je suis l'auteur principal de cet article et les co-auteurs sont Gilles Gauthier et Esther Lévesque, respectivement mon directeur et ma co-directrice de recherche. La troisième et dernière partie du mémoire consiste en une conclusion générale qui rappelle les différents résultats obtenus en soulignant particulièrement les éléments de cette étude constituant de nouvelles contributions à la science. Cette partie se termine sur une ouverture quant à l'utilité de ces données pour des applications dans d'éventuelles études scientifiques.

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TABLE DES MATIÈRES

RÉSUMÉ	ii
ABSTRACT	iii
AVANT-PROPOS	iv
Remerciements	v
TABLE DES MATIÈRES	vi
Liste des tableaux	viii
Liste des figures	ix
Liste des annexes	x
PREMIÈRE PARTIE : INTRODUCTION GÉNÉRALE	1
Utilisation des ressources par les oies	3
Sélection alimentaire et valeur nutritive des plantes	4
La réponse des plantes au broutement	5
Cas de la Grande Oie des neiges	6
DEUXIÈME PARTIE : FEEDING ECOLOGY OF THE GREATER SNOW GOOSE (<i>Chen caerulescens atlantica</i>) GOSLINGS IN MESIC TUNDRA ON BYLOT ISLAND, NUNAVUT, CANADA	10
RÉSUMÉ	11
ABSTRACT	12
INTRODUCTION	13
MATERIAL AND METHODS	15
Study area	15
Diet of captive goslings	15
Diet of wild goslings	16
Plant nutritive attributes	17
Statistical analyses	17
RESULTS	19
Diet and selection in captive goslings	19
Variations among habitats	19
Seasonal variations	20
Validation of the observation technique	23

Diet and selection in wild goslings	23
Plant nutritive quality	25
Seasonal variations	26
DISCUSSION	31
Variations in diet among habitats	31
Seasonal variations in diet	32
Validation of the captive goslings technique	34
Plant nutritive attributes and food selection	35
TROISIÈME PARTIE : CONCLUSION GÉNÉRALE	38
RÉFÉRENCES	43
ANNEXES	51

LISTE DES TABLEAUX

- Table 1.** Food items consumed (based on successful pecks), availability and selectivity (W_i , see methods for calculation) of captive Greater Snow Goose goslings in three different mesic habitats on Bylot Island, Nunavut 21
- Table 2.** Food items consumed (based on successful pecks), availability and selectivity (W_i , see methods for calculation) of captive Greater Snow Goose goslings in different periods of the brood-rearing season on Bylot Island, Nunavut 22
- Table 3.** Food items consumed (based on oesophageal contents), availability and selectivity (W_i , see methods for calculation) of wild Greater Snow Geese goslings sampled in different periods of the brood-rearing season on Bylot Island, Nunavut 24

LISTE DES FIGURES

- Figure 1.** Seasonal variations in the percentage of all pecks that were successful (*i.e.* resulted in the ingestion of one food item) by captive goslings in 3 mesic tundra habitats, Bylot Island, Nunavut (LS means \pm SE) 27
- Figure 2.** Nitrogen, fibre, total phenolic compounds, and ratio of phenolic compounds:nitrogen content (mean \pm SE) in leaves and/or flowers of 13 plant species harvested in mid summer (23-26 July) on Bylot Island, Nunavut. Distinction between plant selected and avoided was made following selection ratios (W_i) calculated on the global diet of captive goslings (see Appendix C) 28
- Figure 3.** Relationship between plant nutritive attributes (nitrogen, fibre, total phenolic compounds, and ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen) and selection ratios (W_i) calculated on the global diet of captive goslings (see Appendix C), Bylot Island, Nunavut 29
- Figure 4.** Seasonal variation in nitrogen, fibre and total phenolic compounds content of the leaves (left) and flowers (right) of 5 plant species consumed by goslings on Bylot Island, Nunavut 30

LISTE DES ANNEXES

- Appendix A.** Graphic representation of the significant interactions between the habitat and period factors in the statistical analyses presented in Tables 1 and 2 for three food items consumed by captive goslings on Bylot Island, Nunavut (LS means \pm SE) 51
- Appendix B.** Comparison of the plant taxa consumed by captive goslings based on direct observations of successful pecks and oesophagi contents of the same individuals sacrificed immediately after the observations. Data are presented in terms of mean number of pecks observed (or plant fragments counted) and in mean relative percentage (aggregate percentage of Swanson *et al.* 1974). Paired *t* tests based on percentages 52
- Appendix C.** Selection ratios (W_i ; mean \pm SE) calculated on the global diet of captive (left) and wild (right) goslings (N = 56 and 54, respectively) on Bylot Island, Nunavut 53
- Appendix D.** Relationship between selection ratios calculated on global diets (all periods and habitats combined) with captive goslings and with wild goslings (see appendix C) on Bylot Island, Nunavut 54

PREMIÈRE PARTIE :
INTRODUCTION GÉNÉRALE

Pour tous les animaux, un régime alimentaire équilibré satisfait trois besoins : il fournit l'énergie nécessaire à la respiration cellulaire ; il apporte la matière première organique que l'animal utilise pour fabriquer bon nombre de ses propres molécules ; et il fournit les nutriments essentiels, c'est-à-dire les substances que l'animal ne peut synthétiser lui-même et qu'il doit par conséquent aller chercher dans ses aliments (Campbell 1995). Cependant, pour les animaux qui ont un régime alimentaire herbivore, les contraintes sont nombreuses. D'abord, leur source de nourriture (végétation) est de faible qualité comparativement à un régime à base de chaire animale (Klasing 1998). Ils doivent compenser en ingérant plus de nourriture et donc passer beaucoup de temps à s'alimenter (Batzli *et al.* 1980). Cependant, ce faisant, les herbivores s'exposent de façon importante aux conditions environnementales et aux prédateurs. Ils n'ont donc pas la liberté de pâturer là où ils le veulent et pendant le temps qu'ils le veulent. En conséquence, ils sont généralement contraints de faire vite ou de demeurer près des endroits sécuritaires où ils peuvent trouver rapidement un couvert ou un refuge.

Une autre contrainte d'un régime alimentaire à base de végétaux vient du fait que les fibres, qui constituent la majeure partie des plantes, ralentissent la digestion ou sont plus difficilement transformées par les enzymes digestives. Comme les animaux ne peuvent pas effectuer eux-mêmes la digestion de la cellulose (une des composantes des fibres ; Schmidt-Nielsen 1998), de nombreux mammifères herbivores possèdent un long tube digestif et des chambres de fermentation particulières où vivent les bactéries et les protozoaires responsables de la décomposition de la cellulose (Stevens et Hume 1995). Par contre, la fermentation étant un processus long, ces animaux sont contraints de garder la nourriture ingérée longtemps afin d'assurer un maximum d'absorption des éléments nutritifs (Robbins 1993).

Aussi, la longue histoire coévolutive des plantes et des herbivores a mené les plantes à se doter de moyens de défense contre les herbivores tels la production de produits secondaires complexes dans les tissus comme les terpènes ou les composés phénoliques pour ne nommer que ceux là (Buchsbbaum *et al.* 1984). Les tanins, qui sont un groupe parmi les composés phénoliques, vont même jusqu'à rendre les protéines non digestibles

lorsqu'ils se lient à ces dernières. La présence de structures externes sur la tige et les feuilles telles les épines représente aussi un moyen de défense des plantes contre les herbivores. Finalement, les herbivores doivent aussi faire face à la variabilité temporelle et spatiale de la disponibilité et de la qualité de leur nourriture. La sélection d'habitat devient donc vitale pour un herbivore (Sedinger et Raveling 1984, Duclos 2002).

Utilisation des ressources par les oies

Les oies sont des herbivores stricts (Owen 1980). Les oisons sont des nidifuges et doivent donc s'alimenter par eux-mêmes. Ils adoptent eux aussi un régime herbivore (Sedinger et Raveling 1984) malgré qu'il s'agisse d'une source de nourriture à faible concentration de nutriments (Lepage *et al.* 1998) comparativement aux oiseaux nidicoles qui sont nourris par leurs parents avec une source de nourriture riche en protéines comme les insectes, les araignées et d'autres invertébrés (Klasing 1998). Contrairement à d'autres herbivores, les oies ne peuvent pas digérer la plupart des composantes des parois cellulaires végétales (Sedinger *et al.* 1989, Prop et Vulink 1992, Gauthier 1996). Elles n'ont pas le système digestif ni la flore bactérienne nécessaires pour briser les liens solides qui forment la lignine, la cellulose et l'hémicellulose (*i.e.* les fibres ; Batzli *et al.* 1980). Leur stratégie digestive est donc de consommer de grandes quantités de nourriture et de faire passer la nourriture le plus rapidement dans leur système digestif simple afin d'absorber uniquement le contenu cellulaire soluble (Mattocks 1971). Cependant, cela n'est possible que si les oies consacrent beaucoup de temps à s'alimenter, et c'est exactement ce qui est observé. En effet, elles passent jusqu'à 70% de leur temps en quête alimentaire durant l'été pour combler leurs besoins énergétiques (Owen 1972, Buchsbaum *et al.* 1984, Hughes 1992, Jefferies *et al.* 1994). Passer beaucoup de temps à s'alimenter est une chose, mais encore faut-il que l'endroit où le broutement est fait convienne aux besoins de l'oie. Habituellement, ce sont les milieux humides qui sont préférés par les oies (Hughes *et al.* 1994b). Les plantes Graminées que l'on y retrouve ont une très bonne valeur nutritive et sont abondantes (Manseau et Gauthier 1993, Piedboeuf et Gauthier 1999). Un effort de récolte faible combiné à un apport alimentaire de haute qualité sera garants d'un site d'alimentation prometteur pour l'oie. De plus, la proximité de plans d'eau servant de refuges contre les prédateurs comme le renard arctique (*Alopex lagopus* ; Laing et Raveling

1993, Hughes *et al.* 1994a) ajoute aux avantages qui contribuent à faire de ces milieux des endroits de prédilection pour l'élevage des jeunes par les oies.

Sélection alimentaire et valeur nutritive des plantes

Les oisons doivent atteindre une taille suffisante pour participer à la migration en moins de 50 jours (Lesage et Gauthier 1997) et ce malgré un régime herbivore strict. De plus, leur croissance démontre une forte sensibilité aux variations des conditions environnementales (Lesage et Gauthier 1998). Les oisons se doivent d'exercer une forte sélection alimentaire pour maximiser la valeur nutritive de la nourriture ingérée et par le fait même leur vitesse de croissance (Owen 1980, Lesage et Gauthier 1998). Pour compenser leur faible efficacité digestive, ils sélectionnent donc les plantes ou les parties de plantes avec une concentration élevée en nutriments (Ydenberg et Prins 1981, Sedinger et Raveling 1984, Buchsbaum 1985, Gauthier et Bédard 1990, Laing et Raveling 1993, Manseau et Gauthier 1993, Gauthier et Hughes 1995, Piedboeuf et Gauthier 1999). Comme la croissance rapide des oisons requiert beaucoup de protéines (entre autres pour la fabrication d'une quantité considérable de masse musculaire et d'autres organes à base de protéines), ces dernières sont donc un des facteurs les plus limitants de leur croissance (Gadallah et Jefferies 1995a, Lepage *et al.* 1998). Les oisons sélectionneraient donc prioritairement les plantes ou parties de plantes ayant la plus grande concentration de protéines, qui se reflète par la teneur en azote (Gauthier et Bédard 1990).

D'autre part, la digestibilité des plantes explique aussi la sélection d'un type particulier de végétation plutôt qu'un autre (Boudewijn 1984). Plusieurs facteurs affectent la digestibilité des plantes, comme par exemple la présence de métabolites secondaires (Buchsbaum et Valiela 1987, Summers *et al.* 1993). Ces composés chimiques, à base d'alcaloïdes, de groupement phénols ou de terpènes, sont synthétisés par la plante dans le but de décourager l'herbivore de la brouter en la rendant désagréable au goût, indigeste ou même toxique (Swain 1977, Rosenthal et Janzen 1979). Les fibres peuvent aussi affecter la digestibilité de celles-ci. Puisque les oies sont incapables de digérer la majorité des types de fibres (Prop et Vulink 1992, Sedinger *et al.* 1995), le temps de passage de la plante

fibreuse dans le système digestif est plus rapide et la métabolisabilité d'une plante est donc inversement proportionnelle à sa concentration en fibres (Bédard et Gauthier 1989, Sedinger *et al.* 1989, Piedboeuf et Gauthier 1999). C'est vers la fin de l'été, une fois la majeure partie de la croissance terminée, que les oisons accordent plus d'importance au contenu énergétique des plantes puisqu'ils doivent commencer à se construire des réserves (sous forme d'accumulations de graisses) en prévision de la migration automnale (Lesage et Gauthier 1997). Les fruits et les graines deviennent donc des éléments privilégiés puisqu'ils sont pauvres en fibres et riches en hydrates de carbone solubles et en lipides (Sedinger et Raveling 1984, Robbins 1993, Bairlein et Gwinner 1994, Biebach 1996).

La réponse des plantes au broutement

La réponse des plantes au broutement dépend de plusieurs facteurs dont le comportement des herbivores, l'intensité du broutement, l'effet de l'herbivore sur le recyclage de l'azote (via les fèces) et le stade de croissance de la plante au moment du broutement (Beaulieu *et al.* 1996). En ce qui concerne les plantes préférées des oies, les graminoides, le broutement peut maintenir des concentrations élevées en azote dans les feuilles (Cargill et Jefferies 1984b). En effet, les repousses des plantes broutées sont souvent de meilleure qualité parce qu'elles sont à un stade plus jeune que les parties de plantes non broutées (Ydenberg et Prins 1981, Gauthier *et al.* 1995). Ainsi, Beaulieu *et al.* (1996) ont démontré que les taux d'azote de *Dupontia fisheri* et *Eriophorum scheuchzeri* (deux espèces couramment consommées par les oies dans l'Arctique) ont été plus élevés chez les plantes ayant subi plusieurs défoliations que pour celles n'ayant été broutées qu'une seule fois. Les oies peuvent donc être en partie responsables d'une qualité et parfois aussi d'une productivité élevées des plantes de par leur pression de broutement. Par contre, il n'en est pas ainsi pour toutes les espèces de plantes. Pour qu'elle puisse facilement remplacer une feuille broutée sans hypothéquer sa reproduction, une plante doit bénéficier d'un type de système racinaire adéquat, c'est-à-dire qui peut accumuler de grandes réserves souterraines, comme c'est le cas avec les rhizomes (Hik et Jefferies 1990). En effet, Beaulieu *et al.* (1996) ont trouvé que les plantes broutées accumulent moins de réserves (hydrates de carbone solubles) dans les rhizomes que celles non broutées, ce qui démontre que la production de nouvelles feuilles suite à une défoliation se fait principalement aux

dépens des réserves souterraines des plantes touchées. Ainsi, si l'oie broute directement les parties sensibles de la plante qui procurent l'énergie nécessaire pour la repousse, le broutement sera alors beaucoup plus dommageable pour la plante (Prevett *et al.* 1985, Giroux et Bédard 1987) et il ne pourra pas être soutenu tout au long de l'été.

Cas de la Grande Oie des neiges

Il a été établi que plusieurs populations d'oies à travers le monde sont en augmentation considérable depuis les 30 dernières années (Madsen *et al.* 1999, Menu *et al.* 2002, Abraham *et al.* 2005, Fox *et al.* 2005). À l'image des populations d'oies en général, les populations de la Grande Oie des neiges (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) sont également en augmentation marquée depuis quelques décennies (Menu *et al.* 2002). Chaque été, environ 15% de la population mondiale de Grandes Oies des neiges se retrouve à l'Île Bylot au Nunavut pour y nicher (Reed *et al.* 2002). Depuis le moment où la colonie de Grande Oie des neiges à l'Île Bylot a été recensée pour la première fois (en 1983), il n'a fallu que 10 ans pour que les effectifs d'oies augmentent d'un facteur trois (Reed *et al.* 2002) et la colonie n'a pas cessé d'augmenter depuis.

Massé *et al.* (2001) ont estimé que les milieux humides de la plaine sud de l'Île Bylot étaient utilisés par les populations d'oies à $46 \pm 10\%$ de leur capacité de support au milieu des années 90. Par contre, cette valeur peut varier considérablement d'une année à l'autre à cause des fluctuations du nombre d'oies présentes sur l'Île (Reed *et al.* 2003) ou de la productivité des plantes selon les conditions environnementales. Même si la capacité de support des milieux humides de l'Île Bylot n'est pas encore atteinte, elle pourrait l'être éventuellement. Plusieurs signes laissent déjà entrevoir que les oies commencent à se sentir à l'étroit dans les sites d'alimentation optimaux (*i.e.* les milieux humides), eux qui ne représentent que 10 % de l'Île Bylot. En effet, Gauthier *et al.* (1995) ont estimé que, dans ces milieux, les oies pouvaient consommer jusqu'à 78% de la production aérienne annuelle de *Dupontia fisheri* et jusqu'à 100% de la production aérienne annuelle d'*Eriophorum scheuchzeri*. Le reste de l'Île (90%) est occupé par les milieux mésiques et xériques.

Bien que les oies utilisent prioritairement les milieux humides, elles fréquentent aussi périodiquement les milieux mésiques et xériques, par exemple lors de la fonte des neiges, durant des déplacements locaux pendant la période d'élevage des oisons, ainsi qu'à la fin de la saison pour la disponibilité de graines (Gauthier 1993, Hughes *et al.* 1994a, Duclos 2002, Mainguy 2003). Ces habitats pourraient donc contribuer significativement à la capacité de support totale de l'Île étant donné leurs grandes superficies. En effet, pendant que la population augmentait d'un facteur trois à l'Île Bylot en général, c'est d'un facteur 10 que le nombre d'oies fréquentant les milieux mésiques (considérés de faible qualité pour les oies) a augmenté au cours du même laps de temps (Reed *et al.* 2002). Cela pourrait être une indication d'un manque de nourriture de qualité dans certains habitats humides, résultant en une augmentation dans l'utilisation des habitats sub-optimaux. Aussi, certains effets dépendants de la densité ont déjà été détectés chez la Grande Oie des neiges. Par exemple, un déclin à long terme de la taille structurale et de la masse des jeunes a été mesuré à l'automne (Reed et Plante 1997). Ce déclin serait attribuable à une diminution de la disponibilité des ressources végétales *per capita* sur les sites d'élevage suite à l'augmentation de la population.

Les principales plantes consommées par les oies dans les milieux humides sont les Graminées et les Cypéracées qui sont faciles à digérer à cause de leur concentration relativement faible en fibres. Elles sont aussi nutritives de par leur concentration élevée en azote, leur contenu élevé en eau et en minéraux, et leur faible concentration en composés phénoliques (Sedinger et Raveling 1984, Buchsbaum et Valiela 1987, Manseau et Gauthier 1993). Cependant, les plantes graminoides en général sont peu abondantes en milieux mésiques. Par contre, une multitude d'autres espèces absentes des milieux humides se retrouvent dans les milieux mésiques qui présentent une plus grande richesse spécifique que les milieux humides, surtout en plantes dicotyles (Duclos 2002).

L'alimentation des oies en milieu mésique est un sujet encore obscur. Bien que les travaux de Gauthier (1993) et de Duclos (2002) nous donnent une certaine idée du régime alimentaire des oies en milieu mésique à l'Île Bylot (feuilles, graines, racines et rhizomes), aucune étude détaillée n'a encore été réalisée en ce qui touche les habitudes alimentaires

des oisons dans ces milieux. Le régime alimentaire des oies risque d'être plus diversifié en milieu mésique qu'en milieu humide compte tenu de la richesse spécifique plus grande des milieux mésiques (Duclos 2002). Étant donné que les populations d'oies augmentent continuellement, il faut aussi s'attendre à ce qu'une proportion sans cesse croissante d'oies doive recourir à ces milieux mésiques même s'ils sont en apparence des habitats sub-optimaux (Hughes *et al.* 1994a, Reed *et al.* 2002). Sachant que la valeur nutritive et la disponibilité de la nourriture peuvent fortement influencer la croissance des oisons et leur survie, il était important de connaître l'écologie alimentaire des oisons en milieux mésiques, ce que je me suis proposé d'étudier dans le cadre de ma maîtrise.

Les objectifs principaux de cette étude étaient de :

1. Déterminer le régime alimentaire des oisons de la Grande Oie des neiges (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) en milieux mésiques durant la période d'élevage selon le moment de l'été et les différents habitats mésiques.
2. Déterminer si les oisons font de la sélection alimentaire en milieux mésiques.
3. Expliquer le régime alimentaire et la sélection alimentaire (s'il y en a) des oisons en fonction des caractéristiques nutritives des plantes disponibles.

De ces objectifs découlaient les hypothèses suivantes :

1. Comme les milieux mésiques offraient une grande diversité de plantes, les oisons broutant dans ces milieux auraient un régime alimentaire diversifié.
2. Les différentes espèces de plantes n'ayant pas toutes les mêmes caractéristiques nutritives, les oisons broutant dans les milieux mésiques feraient de la sélection alimentaire.

3. Dans le but d'adopter une efficacité alimentaire optimale, les plantes sélectionnées par les oisons seraient celles qui auraient les meilleures caractéristiques nutritives.

Prédiction : les plantes sélectionnées seraient

- a. les plus riches en azote et
 - b. les plus pauvres en fibres
4. Les qualités nutritives de la nourriture en milieux mésiques décroîtrait au fil de l'été à mesure que la croissance des feuilles s'arrêterait ou que la sénescence débiterait.
 5. Afin qu'ils puissent conserver une alimentation de bonne qualité jusqu'à la fin de leur période de croissance, les oisons augmenteraient leur sélection alimentaire au cours de l'été à mesure qu'ils gagneraient de l'expérience et que les qualités nutritives des plantes diminuerait.

DEUXIÈME PARTIE :

**FEEDING ECOLOGY OF GREATER SNOW GOOSE
(*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) GOSLINGS IN MESIC TUNDRA
ON BYLOT ISLAND, NUNAVUT, CANADA**

RÉSUMÉ

Bien que la toundra mésique soit un habitat régulièrement utilisé par les oies qui nichent dans l'Arctique, l'écologie alimentaire des oies utilisant ce milieu est très peu connue. Les objectifs de cette étude étaient donc de déterminer le régime et la sélection alimentaire des oisons de la Grande Oie des neiges (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) et de les relier aux caractéristiques nutritives des plantes dans les milieux mésiques de l'Île Bylot, au Nunavut. Nous avons utilisé deux techniques différentes mais complémentaires, soit l'étude des contenus oesophagiens d'oisons sauvages sacrifiés (n = 67), et l'observation directe du broutement d'oisons captifs imprégnés de l'homme. Cette dernière technique était innovatrice et permettait l'élaboration d'un design expérimental rigoureux pour contrôler les effets de la date et de l'habitat sur le régime (n = 56 expériences de broutement). Nos résultats ont montré la fiabilité des données qu'elle génère ainsi que la compatibilité des observations avec ce qui se passe chez les oisons sauvages. Malgré une composition floristique plus diversifiée et une couverture de plantes graminoides plus éparse en milieux mésiques qu'en milieux humides, les plantes Graminées demeuraient l'élément principal dans le régime alimentaire des oisons (~50%) et étaient fortement sélectionnées en milieux mésiques. Le reste du régime était constitué principalement de Joncacées, de Polygonacées et de Légumineuses, toutes faisant partie des plantes sélectionnées par les oisons. Les oisons consommaient surtout des feuilles (~80%) mais les inflorescences (~20%) étaient aussi une part importante du régime, surtout au milieu de l'été. Le régime était très diversifié chez les très jeunes oisons (il fallait 8 catégories de plantes pour constituer 90% du régime) et comprenait même des mousses pendant la première semaine, mais à mesure que les oisons gagnaient de l'expérience et de l'efficacité, ils se concentraient sur un nombre plus restreint de catégories de plantes (à 40 jours, seulement 2 catégories de plantes suffisaient pour former 90% du régime). La sélection alimentaire était influencée par les concentrations d'azote et de composés phénoliques des plantes mais c'est le ratio composés phénoliques : azote qui avait la meilleure association avec les coefficients de sélection ; la concentration de fibres n'influçait pas la sélection. Les oisons en pleine croissance maximisent l'ingestion de protéines digestibles en se basant sur les caractéristiques nutritives des plantes et leur disponibilité pour ajuster le régime selon les différents habitats mésiques visités.

ABSTRACT

Although arctic-nesting geese commonly use mesic tundra sites, their feeding ecology in these habitats is poorly known. The objectives of this study were therefore to determine the diet and food selection of Greater Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) goslings in relation to the nutritive attributes of plants found in mesic tundra habitats on Bylot Island, Nunavut. We used two different but complementary approaches, which were the analysis of oesophageal contents of sacrificed wild goslings (n = 67), and the direct observation of the feeding activity of captive, human-imprinted goslings. The latter method was innovative and allowed the use of a rigorous sampling design to examine the effect of date and habitat on diet (n = 56 trials). Our results showed that this method provided a reliable description of the diet and gave results comparable to those obtained with wild goslings. Although mesic habitats have a more diverse floristic composition than wetlands and a sparse graminoid cover, *Gramineae* were the main plant taxon consumed by goslings there (~50%) and were highly selected. The rest of the diet consisted mainly of *Juncaceae*, *Polygonaceae* and *Leguminosae*, all plants taxa that were selected by goslings. Goslings ate mostly leaves (~80%) but flowering parts (~20%) were also important, especially in mid-summer. The diet was highly diversified in very young goslings (90% of the diet was accounted for by 8 plant taxa) and even included mosses in their first week but as goslings aged and gained experience and efficiency, they increasingly concentrated on a few taxa (by 40 d, 2 plants taxa made up 90% of the diet). Food selection was influenced by nitrogen and total phenolic compounds contents in plants but the ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen showed the closest association to selection coefficients; neutral detergent fibre content did not influence selection. Both plant nutritive quality and availability determined the diet across different mesic habitats as growing goslings appeared to maximise their intake of digestible proteins.

INTRODUCTION

Herbivorous animals have access to an abundant food source. However, plants have a relatively low nutritive value compared to animal tissues (Batzli *et al.* 1980, Klasing 1998), and plant quality can vary considerably spatially (*e.g.* across habitat types) and temporally (*e.g.* across seasons). Therefore, most herbivores will show preference for a specific habitat or food patches based on food quality (Langvatn and Hanley 1993, Wilmshurst *et al.* 2000, Ruckstuhl and Neuhaus 2002). However, many factors such as food depletion or movements between high quality patches may force animals to feed into less preferred or sub-optimal habitats at times (Whitham 1980, Hansson 1997). In some situations, high population density may lead to overgrazing or even destruction of preferred feeding habitats, forcing animals to move to alternative feeding habitats, often of lower quality. A prominent example of this is the population increase of the Lesser Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens caerulescens*) driven by events occurring on southern wintering grounds that allowed the population to exceed the carrying capacity of their arctic-breeding habitats on the west coast of Hudson Bay, Canada (Jefferies *et al.* 2004a, b, Abraham *et al.* 2005). This resulted in a severe degradation of their preferred feeding habitat, the coastal salt-marshes (Kerbes *et al.* 1990, Iacobelli and Jefferies 1991, Jano *et al.* 1998). Overgrazed salt marshes do not regenerate and geese are forced to move toward drier, sub-optimal feeding habitats (Gadallah and Jefferies 1995a).

Although many other goose populations have also increased considerably in recent decades (*e.g.* Madsen *et al.* 1999, Fox *et al.* 2005), most have apparently not yet exceeded the carrying capacity of their breeding habitats. For instance, the Greater Snow Goose (*Chen caerulescens atlantica*) population increased more than 10-fold since the early 1970s (Menu *et al.* 2002, Gauthier *et al.* 2005) but Massé *et al.* (2001) estimated that the food requirement of the population in the mid 1990s corresponded to only 46% of the carrying capacity of wetlands of the breeding colony of Bylot Island, Canada. Grazing levels were nonetheless sufficient to cause a reduction in standing crop in late summer and a decrease in the productivity of graminoids (Gauthier *et al.* 1995, 2004). Geese are sensitive to variations in quality and quantity of their food plants because they digest little if any of the cell wall content of plants (Buchsbaum *et al.* 1986, Sedinger *et al.* 1989, 1995). Goslings

are even more sensitive due to the high nutrient requirements imposed by growth. Indeed, Lepage *et al.* (1998) has shown that food depletion in wetland habitats can negatively affect gosling growth.

Because arctic-nesting geese prefer wetlands as feeding habitats during brood-rearing, their feeding ecology has been well studied in these habitats (*e.g.* Sedinger and Raveling 1984, Manseau and Gauthier 1993, Gadallah and Jefferies 1995a, Person *et al.* 1998, Cadieux *et al.* 2005). However, in the High Arctic, wetlands often cover a relatively small area of the landscape (*e.g.* < 10% on Bylot Island, Massé *et al.* 2001), and a significant amount of feeding may occur on upland mesic sites (Gauthier 1993, Hughes *et al.* 1994a, Duclos 2002, Reed *et al.* 2002). Use of mesic tundra by geese may occur for several reasons, including seasonal decline in food nutritive quality in wetlands, food depletion in heavily grazed wetlands, or during movements between wetland patches (Gauthier *et al.* 1995, Mainguy 2003, Cadieux *et al.* 2005).

In contrast to wetland habitats which are often dominated by a few graminoid species (Cargill and Jefferies 1984a, Gauthier *et al.* 1996, Person *et al.* 1998), mesic tundra have more diversified plant communities typically dominated by forbs (Muc and Bliss 1977, Zoltai *et al.* 1983, Bergeron 1988, Duclos 2002). Moreover, unlike graminoids, many forbs have significant amount of secondary metabolites such as phenolic compounds, which may negatively affect the palatability of plants to geese (Buchsbaum *et al.* 1984, Gauthier and Bédard 1990, Gauthier and Hughes 1995). Despite the floristic complexity of this environment, goose feeding ecology in mesic tundra is poorly known. However, this question has become a pressing issue as geese have expanded into those habitats due to continuing population increase (Reed *et al.* 2002). Our objectives were therefore to determine the diet and food selection of Greater Snow Goose goslings in mesic tundra habitats, and to relate them to the nutritive attributes of plants growing on those habitats. We used two approaches to determine the diet: 1) by directly observing the feeding activity of captive goslings in the field, and 2) by collecting wild goslings and analysing their oesophageal contents. The former method was innovative and allowed us to examine variations in diet and food selection across habitats and over the season under controlled conditions.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Study area

Field work was carried out in 2002 and 2003 in a glacial valley (50 km²) on southwest Bylot Island, Nunavut, Canada (73° N, 80° W), site of the largest nesting colony of greater snow goose in the world (Reed *et al.* 2002). The valley is characterized by wet meadows dominated by graminoids such as *Dupontia fisheri*, *Eriophorum* spp. and *Carex aquatilis* and by mesic tundra in better drained sites, sometimes referred to as uplands (Hughes *et al.* 1994a). Duclos (2002) recognized four main plant communities in mesic/xeric tundra: heath tundra, mesic meadows, dwarf-shrub tundra, and *Salix*-legume tundra. These communities are characterized by dwarf shrubs (*Salix arctica* and *Cassiope tetragona*), forbs (*Stellaria longipes*, *Oxytropis maydelliana*, *Polygonum viviparum*) and some graminoids (*Arctagrostis latifolia*, *Poa arctica* and *Luzula nivalis*) (Zoltai *et al.* 1983, Duclos 2002). Although geese prefer wetlands, a significant amount of feeding occurs in mesic habitats (Gauthier 1993, Hughes *et al.* 1994a, Duclos 2002).

Diet of captive goslings

On 4 July of 2003, we collected 25 newly-hatched goslings (1 per nest) and imprinted them on humans. Among the 21 surviving goslings, we randomly selected 16 and divided them into 4 groups (broods), marking all goslings with individually color-coded bands. The diet of goslings was determined by direct observation of birds at short distance, which allowed us to use a controlled experimental design. We carried out experiments in 3 different plant communities (hereafter called habitats) following Duclos' (2002) classification: heath tundra, mesic meadows and *Salix*-legume tundra. Those habitats are used by geese for feeding, and together they account for 70% of all mesic tundra found on the study area, representing respectively 6%, 53% and 11% (Duclos 2002).

For each habitat, we had 4 sites (*i.e.* replicates; one per brood) of ~200m², and experiments were conducted 5 times at approximately weekly intervals from 9 July to 17 August (age of goslings: 5 to 44 days; 3 habitats × 5 weeks × 4 sites, except the last week when only 2 habitats were sampled; total n = 56 experiments). For each experiment, we

selected and fenced off with chicken wire a different plot (6 x 1.5 m), and subdivided it into 3 equal sub-plots. Prior to each experiment, we visually estimated the cover of all plant species present in the plot to the nearest 5%. For cover percentages below 5%, we estimated to the nearest 1% and for very scarce plant species, we used 2 classes; “< 1%” and “< 0.1%”. A brood of 4 goslings was then introduced in the first sub-plot and we closely watched each gosling one after the other during 5-minute feeding bouts. Goslings were then transferred to the other subplots and the same observations were repeated. We thus cumulated 1 hour of observations per plot (4 goslings × 15 minutes). During the observations, we recorded each peck, determined if it was successful or not (*i.e.* if a food item was ingested), and identified the plant parts and species eaten. It took 4 to 7 days to conduct 12 experiments (3 habitats × 4 sites) and each experimental period was spaced out by 1 to 9 days. During periods without experiments, young goslings were kept in an enclosure outside and allowed to graze plants but also provided with duck chow. As they grew older (> 25d), they were allowed to graze freely on the tundra during the day but were brought back into a large enclosure at night where only a small amount of duck chow was provided.

We validated the accuracy of our observations by killing 13 captive goslings immediately after their last feeding trials and looking at their oesophageal content, comparing what was observed eaten (number of successful pecks recorded) and what had really been eaten (oesophageal content). Goslings had to be resting for > 10 minutes before we started the feeding trial and they were sacrificed after completing 10 minutes of continuous feeding. Oesophageal contents were analyzed as in wild goslings (see below).

Diet of wild goslings

We collected a total of 67 goslings (22 from 26 to 31 July 2002 and 45 from 15 July to 13 August 2003) throughout the brood rearing period (approximate age: 9 to 38 days following mean hatching date; 1 gosling per brood) after watching them feeding for some time to insure that food was present in their foregut. The GPS coordinates of all collecting sites were recorded and oesophagi were removed within a few hours of death. Oesophageal contents were sorted by plant species and plant parts, dried, and weighed.

To determine food availability, we revisited all sites where goslings had been collected (for goslings collected in 2002, the sites were revisited in 2003 on similar dates). Three 50 x 50 cm quadrats were randomly positioned in the path taken by goslings during the last 5-10 minutes of feeding before they were collected. We determined the percentage cover of all plant species present in each quadrat with the same estimation method used in captive goslings feeding plot.

Plant nutritive attributes

We sampled some of the plants available to goslings to determine their nutritive attributes. Because plant diversity in mesic tundra is high, we used two different sampling schemes. In 2002, we sampled 8 plant species at 8 different sites between 28 July and 4 August. These plants were *Alopecurus alpinus*, *Astragalus alpinus*, *Dryas integrifolia*, *Luzula confusa*, *Salix arctica*, *Salix reticulata*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and *Stellaria longipes* (nomenclature of vascular plants follows Porsild and Cody 1980). Plant parts (*i.e.* leaves and flowers) were sampled independently. Seeds and fruits were included in “flowers”. In 2003, we followed the seasonal change in nutritive attributes of 5 plant species by sampling them 5 times (1, 14, and 24 July, and 2 and 15 August) at 3 different sites. These species were *Arctagrostis latifolia*, *Luzula nivalis*, *Oxyria digyna*, *Oxytropis maydelliana* and *Polygonum viviparum*. Species were selected based on their presumed importance in the diet of goslings (Duclos 2002; G. Gauthier, unpublished data) and to be representative of various plant families. Samples were dried to constant weight at 45 °C a few hours after collection and brought back to the laboratory for analysis. We determined nitrogen, neutral detergent fibre and total phenolic compounds content following the methods described in Gauthier and Hughes (1995).

Statistical Analyses

The sampling unit used in the analysis of captive goslings’ data was the brood of 4 goslings. Because of the large number of plant species consumed by each brood and the difficulty that it represented to analyse each plant species independently, consumed items were grouped into functional categories (10 categories of plant species and 4 categories of plant parts). In order to keep the analyse to its finest level possible, *Stellaria longipes* and

Cassiope tetragona were both alone in their own plant species category because no other if not very little other plant species of their respective plant family were consumed. The final diet was expressed as aggregate proportion (Swanson *et al.* 1974) of successful pecks (sum of successful pecks of the brood on a specific plant category divided by sum of successful pecks on all categories). Dependent variables in the statistical analysis were the proportion of successful pecks in each plant category. Because data were not normally distributed, we could not use MANOVAs. We used instead a logit model with mixed effects where habitat and period of the summer were fixed factors and the brood was a random factor. The dependence structure between measures taken on the same brood was accounted for by a compound symmetric link using the *Glimmix* macro (Wolfinger and O'Connell 1993) in the SAS v8 software. Finally, we examined seasonal variations in overall proportion of successful pecks (*i.e.* sum of successful pecks divided by the total number of pecks recorded for all plant categories confounded) using factorial ANOVAs with habitat and period of the summer as fixed factors and the brood as a block.

We evaluated food selection of captive goslings with the selection ratio (W_i) of Manly *et al.* (2002). We compared food use to food availability in each plot with $W_i = \sum \mu_{ij} / \sum \pi_{ij}$ for $j = 1$ to n replicates of the experimental units (*i.e.* “brood of 4 goslings”), where μ_{ij} is the proportion of item i consumed by brood j and π_{ij} is the proportion of item i available to brood j . Sites where a given item i was not present were not included in the calculation of W_i . We assessed if W_i were significantly different from 1 using the Bonferroni confidence intervals ($W_i \pm z_{\alpha/(2L)} \cdot SE(W_i)$) of Manly *et al.* (2002) but we applied it sequentially, as described in Sokal and Rohlf (1995). For the smallest $SE(W_i)$, sequential Bonferroni's α is $1-(1-\alpha)^{1/L}$, where L is the number of categories; for the second smallest $SE(W_i)$, $\alpha = 1-(1-\alpha)^{1/(L-1)}$; for the third smallest, $\alpha = 1-(1-\alpha)^{1/(L-2)}$, *etc.* Two W_i values were considered significantly different from one another when their respective confidence intervals did not overlap.

We validated the observation technique used with captive goslings by comparing the percentage of plant fragments found in the oesophagus with the percentage calculated from successful pecks observed in individual goslings with a paired t test, using the same functional plant categories as above.

In wild goslings, the sampling unit was each gosling and the diet was expressed as aggregate percentage of dry mass. Food items were also grouped into functional categories. We used the same statistical approach as with captive goslings (*i.e.* logit model using the *glimmix* macro in SAS) to test the effect of the period of the summer. We did not examine the effect of habitat because goslings were collected opportunistically and could have fed in more than one habitat prior to collection. We calculated food selection ratios (W_i) as in captive goslings. Selection ratios were also calculated on global diets (all periods and habitats combined) for both captive and wild goslings and we used Pearson correlation coefficients to relate those two data sets.

We used nested ANOVAs to determine if plants selected by goslings (W_i in overall diet > 1) differed in nutritive quality (% nitrogen, % fibre, % phenolic compounds, and ratio % phenolic compounds:% nitrogen) from those avoided ($W_i < 1$). Plant species were nested into the selected/avoided factor. We used plant nutritive attributes data from the third sampling period (both years combined) because it was the period for which we had the most species sampled. We also used Pearson correlation coefficients to relate plant nutritive attributes with W_i . Seasonal variation in plant nutritive attributes was assessed using factorial ANOVAs with plant species and period of the summer as fixed factors and site of harvest as a block. We used least squares means to assess statistical differences between combinations of plant species and period of the summer. Everywhere, means are reported with standard-errors (SE).

RESULTS

Diet and selection in captive goslings

Variations among habitats

We cumulated 3220 minutes of feeding observations and recorded grazing on 34 vascular plant species. Overall, *Gramineae* were the most important plant taxon consumed (~50%; especially *Arctagrostis latifolia*), followed by *Juncaceae* (*Luzula nivalis* and *L. confusa*, ~20%) and *Leguminosae* (*Oxytropis maydelliana* and *Astragalus alpinus*, ~15%). However, the proportion of various plant taxa consumed by goslings varied among habitats (Table 1).

In heath tundra, goslings consumed mostly *Juncaceae* and *Gramineae*, along with *Polygonaceae* (mostly *Oxyria digyna*), even though these plants were scarce (Table 1). *Gramineae* and *Polygonaceae* were highly selected by goslings, as well as *Leguminosae* and *Stellaria longipes*. *Cassiope tetragona*, mosses, and *Salix* spp. were the most available plant taxa in that habitat but they were not eaten very much and all three were avoided by goslings. In mesic meadows, goslings consumed mainly *Gramineae* despite a relatively low availability, and thus showed a strong selection for them (Table 1). Mosses and *Salix* spp. were the most abundant plant in this habitat but both were strongly avoided. In *Salix*-legume tundra, goslings consumed mostly *Leguminosae* with *Gramineae* and *Juncaceae* being the next most important items (Table 1). These 3 taxa, along with *S. longipes* and *Polygonaceae* (mostly *Polygonum viviparum*), were all selected by goslings. *Salix* spp., the most abundant plant in this habitat, and mosses were again strongly avoided by goslings. In all three habitats, leaves were by far the dominant plants part consumed by goslings (> 84%).

Seasonal variations

In early summer, captive goslings fed on a wide variety of taxa, but they rapidly concentrated their feeding on few key plants (Table 2). *Gramineae* increased continuously in the diet to reach 61 % in late summer and were selected by goslings in all periods but the first one. *Juncaceae* and *Leguminosae* followed opposite seasonal trends: the former were most important in mid-summer (periods 2, 3 and 4) whereas the latter were most consumed in the first and last periods. However, as we have no data for the last period in the heath tundra habitat (where *Leguminosae* are uncommon), *Leguminosae* may be over represented in the diet for period 5. Although the proportion of *Polygonaceae* in the diet did not vary significantly over time, this plant taxon was selected by goslings in all periods but the last one. Many plant taxa that were well represented in young goslings' diet (Mosses, *Salix* spp., *Cassiope tetragona*, *S. longipes*, others) had almost completely disappeared by mid-summer. The high consumption of mosses during the first period was limited to the mesic meadow habitat but it had declined dramatically by the second period (interaction habitat×period, $F_{7,39} = 9.17$, $p < 0.001$; Appendix A).

Table 1. Food items consumed (based on successful pecks), availability and selectivity (W_i , see methods for calculation) of captive Greater Snow Goose goslings in three different mesic habitats on Bylot Island, Nunavut. A $W_i > 1$ indicates a food item selected and < 1 a food item avoided by goslings (* = $p < 0.05$). Values with the same letter within a column are not significantly different among them ($p > 0.05$).

Food item	Heath tundra			Mesic meadow			Salix-legume tundra			F value (df=2, 39)
	Consumed ^a %	Available %	W_i	Consumed ^a %	Available %	W_i	Consumed ^a %	Available %	W_i	
Plant taxa										
<i>Gramineae</i> ^b	28.9	1.5	16.8 * a	79.4	11.1	6.3 * a	28.0	3.2	7.7 * a	20.3 *
<i>Juncaceae</i> ^c	35.7	4.6	6.4 * a	4.9	4.1	1.1 b	19.8	3.3	5.8 * a	7.4 *
<i>Leguminosae</i> ^d	2.8	0.2	13.5 * a	0	0	n/a	39.3	10.8	3.5 * a	n/a ^j
<i>Polygonaceae</i> ^e	13.1	1.2	12.1 * a	0.1	0.2	0.7 cd	1.4	0.6	3.5 a	16.2 *
<i>Stellaria longipes</i>	5.1	0.7	8.8 * a	2.2	0.8	3.1 * ab	3.0	0.9	3.9 * a	5.9 *
<i>Cruciferae</i> ^f	3.5	0.9	4.6 ab	1.3	0.9	1.8 bc	1.3	0.6	2.4 ab	4.6 *
<i>Salix</i> spp. ^g	2.7	8.2	0.5 * bc	0.3	18.1	< 0.1 * e	0.6	37.4	< 0.1 * c	4.2 *
<i>Cassiope tetragona</i>	2.3	24.5	0.1 * c	0.1	1.6	0.1 * de	< 0.1	0.1	0.1 * bc	n/a ^j
Mosses	4.6	23.0	0.2 * c	9.0	46.2	0.4 * cd	3.2	15.8	0.3 * b	1.3 ^k
Others ^h	1.2	35.1		2.5	17.0		3.4	27.4		2.2 ^j
Plant parts										
Leaves	89.7	n/a		84.7	n/a		89.3	n/a		6.1 ^k
Flowers	4.3	n/a		3.8	n/a		6.4	n/a		1.6
Stems	1.1	n/a		1.2	n/a		0.9	n/a		< 0.1
Other parts ⁱ	4.9	n/a		10.3	n/a		3.4	n/a		1.3 ^k

^a n = 16, 20, 20, respectively

^b *Arctagrostis latifolia*, *Poa arctica*, *Alopecurus alpinus*, *Hierochloa alpina*, and *Festuca brachyphylla* (species always listed in decreasing order of importance)

^c *Luzula confusa* and *L. nivalis*

^d *Astragalus alpinus* and *Oxytropis maydelliana*

^e *Oxyria digyna* and *Polygonum viviparum*

^f *Cardamine bellidifolia*, *Eutrema edwardsii*, and *Draba* spp.

^g *Salix arctica*, *S. herbacea*, and *S. reticulata*

^h Other items consumed include: insects, lichens, *Pedicularis* sp., *Dryas integrifolia*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Papaver radicum*, *Ranunculus* sp., soil, *Cerastium alpinum*, *Potentilla* sp., gravel, *S. tricuspidata*, *S. hieracifolia*, *S. tenuis*, *Melandrium* sp., *S. nivalis*, *S. cernua*, *S. foliolosa*, *S. rivularis*, and mushrooms.

ⁱ Other parts are moss sporophyte capsules, insects, lichens, buds, roots, gravel, soil, and mushrooms.

^j For statistical analysis, the Others category includes also *Cassiope tetragona* and *Leguminosae* because these taxa were not represented in all habitats at all periods.

^k There was a significant interaction between factors habitat and period (see Appendix A); for Mosses and Other parts, habitat effect was significant at periods 1, 2 and 3, and at period 1 for Leaves.

Table 2. Food items consumed (based on successful pecks), availability and selectivity (W_i , see methods for calculation) of captive Greater Snow Goose goslings in different periods of the brood-rearing season on Bylot Island, Nunavut. A $W_i > 1$ indicates a food item selected and < 1 a food item avoided by goslings (* = $p < 0.05$). Values with the same letter within a column are not significantly different among them ($p > 0.05$).

Food item	1 (9 - 12 July)			2 (16 - 22 July)			3 (23 - 29 July)			4 (1 - 5 August)			5 (14 - 17 August)			F value (df=4, 39)
	Cons. ^a %	Avail. %	W_i	Cons. ^a %	Avail. %	W_i	Cons. ^a %	Avail. %	W_i	Cons. ^a %	Avail. %	W_i	Cons. ^a %	Avail. %	W_i	
Plant taxa																
<i>Gramineae</i> ^b	10.7	8.1	1.7 bcd	37.1	4.7	7.0 * a	54.2	3.8	13.4 * a	58.3	6.3	8.2 * a	61.0	4.9	12.2 * a	6.0 *
<i>Juncaceae</i> ^c	5.6	5.4	1.0 bcd	23.7	4.9	4.9 ab	25.3	3.4	8.0 * ab	20.8	3.7	5.8 a	4.7	2.3	1.9 ab	3.3 *
<i>Leguminosae</i> ^d	19.3	3.9	3.6 abcd	8.9	5.7	2.5 abc	8.3	2.9	2.2 bc	11.6	2.2	4.4 ab	30.7	4.4	6.5 ab	n/a
<i>Polygonaceae</i> ^e	10.7	0.9	11.4 * a	5.8	0.9	6.8 * a	3.1	0.6	6.8 ab	3.5	0.5	7.9 * a	0.1	0.2	0.4 b	1.0
<i>Stellaria longipes</i>	8.0	1.0	7.6 * ab	4.7	0.8	5.7 * a	2.0	0.8	2.7 ab	2.0	0.8	2.6 a	2.2	0.5	3.7 ab	6.7 *
<i>Cruciferae</i> ^f	3.7	1.0	4.0 abc	2.7	0.8	3.5 ab	1.5	0.8	2.1 bc	1.8	0.9	2.4 ab	0.5	0.5	0.9 b	2.1
<i>Salix</i> spp. ^g	5.2	23.5	0.2 * d	1.4	23.2	0.1 * c	0.5	20.8	< 0.1 * c	0.2	18.0	< 0.1 * b	0.1	23.3	< 0.1 * b	6.9 *
<i>Cassiope tetragona</i>	2.6	10.1	0.3 * cd	1.4	9.6	0.1 * c	0.3	9.0	< 0.1 * bc	0.2	10.0	< 0.1 * b	0	0.1	n/a	n/a
Mosses	27.2	25.7	1.2 bcd	9.0	25.3	0.4 * bc	3.2	32.9	0.1 * bc	0.9	27.2	< 0.1 * b	0.3	33.3	< 0.1 * b	28.8 ^k *
Others ^h	6.8	20.3		5.2	24.2		1.6	25.1		0.7	30.4		0.4	30.5		1.7
Plant parts																
Leaves	56.0	n/a		80.8	n/a		91.9	n/a		95.4	n/a		97.6	n/a		45.6 ^k *
Flowers	15.4	n/a		7.0	n/a		3.2	n/a		2.5	n/a		1.2	n/a		13.5 *
Stems	0.4	n/a		0.9	n/a		1.6	n/a		1.2	n/a		0.8	n/a		1.6
Other parts ⁱ	28.2	n/a		11.4	n/a		3.3	n/a		0.9	n/a		0.4	n/a		31.4 ^k *

^a n = 12, 12, 12, 12, 8, respectively.

^b *Arctagrostis latifolia*, *Poa arctica*, *Alopecurus alpinus*, *Hierochloa alpina*, and *Festuca brachyphylla* (species always listed in decreasing order of importance)

^c *Luzula confusa* and *L. nivalis*

^d *Astragalus alpinus* and *Oxytropis maydelliana*

^e *Oxyria digyna* and *Polygonum viviparum*

^f *Cardamine bellidifolia*, *Eutrema edwardsii*, and *Draba* spp.

^g *Salix arctica*, *S. herbacea*, and *S. reticulata*

^h Other items consumed include: insects, lichens, *Pedicularis* sp., *Dryas integrifolia*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Papaver radicum*, *Ranunculus* sp., soil, *Cerastium alpinum*, *Potentilla* sp., gravel, *S. tricuspidata*, *S. hieracifolia*, *S. tenuis*, *Melandrium* sp., *S. nivalis*, *S. cernua*, *S. foliolosa*, *S. rivularis*, and mushrooms.

ⁱ Other parts are moss sporophyte capsules, insects, lichens, buds, roots, gravel, soil, and mushrooms.

^j For statistical analysis, the Others category includes also *Cassiope tetragona* and *Leguminosae* because these taxa were not represented in all habitats at all periods.

^k Even though there was a significant interaction between factors habitat and period for these comparisons (see Appendix A), the period effect was significant in each habitat when tested separately.

Captive goslings did not succeed in ingesting plant fragments at every peck that we observed. However, their feeding efficiency improved throughout the summer in all habitats as the percentage of pecks that resulted in successful ingestion increased from a mean of 78% in the first period (5-8 d old) to 90% or more by the fourth period (28-32 d old; $F_{4,42} = 12.3$, $p < 0.001$; Figure 1).

Leaves were the most important plant part consumed by goslings, increasing from 56% in early summer to > 90% from mid to late summer. This increase was most prominent in the mesic meadow habitat between the first and second period due to the high rate of moss consumption in this habitat initially (interaction habitat \times period, $F_{7,39} = 5.93$, $p < 0.001$; Appendix A). Flowers and “other parts” were initially important items in the diet but decreased steadily over time and had almost completely disappeared in late summer, whereas stems were always negligible.

Validation of the observation technique

We initially assumed that each successful peck would correspond to one plant fragment in the oesophagus. However, we found that the number of pecks was 19% higher than the number of fragments found in the oesophagi of the same goslings. Nevertheless, paired comparisons showed no significant difference between the two methods for any food items when the diet was expressed in percentages (see Appendix B).

Diet and selection in wild goslings

The diet of wild goslings consisted of at least 31 vascular plant species, of which 26 were the same than in captive goslings; five new species were found in wild goslings but collectively they accounted for < 7% of the diet. The most important food item in the oesophagi was *Gramineae* (> 50% of global diet; mostly *Arctagrostis latifolia*), followed by *Polygonaceae* (Table 3). *Juncaceae*, *Cruciferae*, and *Equisetum* sp. were also relatively important (> 5% in most periods). All of the above (except *Juncaceae*) and *Saxifragaceae* were significantly selected ($W_i > 1$) by goslings in most periods of the summer. In contrast, *Salix* spp. were always avoided ($W_i < 1$). Insects were detected but they were a negligible fraction of the diet (< 1%, Table 3) as in captive goslings. Among the 8 plant categories

Table 3. Food items consumed (based on oesophageal contents), availability and selectivity (W_i , see methods for calculation) of wild Greater Snow Geese goslings sampled in different periods of the brood-rearing season on Bylot Island, Nunavut (no goslings were collected in period 1 and periods 4 and 5 were pooled because of small sample size). A $W_i > 1$ indicates a food item selected and < 1 a food item avoided by goslings (* = $p < 0.05$). Values with the same letter within a column are not significantly different among them ($p > 0.05$).

Food item	2 (15 – 22 July)			3 (23 - 30 July)			4 & 5 (3 - 13 August)			F value (df=2, 63)
	Consumed ^a %	Available %	W_i	Consumed ^a %	Available %	W_i	Consumed ^a %	Available %	W_i	
Plant taxa										
<i>Gramineae</i> ^b	47.7	2.8	12.9 * ab	50.4	4.5	4.5 ab	64.2	5.6	10.9 * ab	1.6
<i>Juncaceae</i> ^c	4.4	5.6	0.8 cd	11.0	3.7	6.2 a	3.8	6.6	0.8 bc	2.3
<i>Leguminosae</i> ^d	0.3	2.1	0.2 * d	0.2	2.6	0.2 * bc	5.9	1.9	2.1 abc	3.5 *
<i>Polygonaceae</i> ^e	22.1	1.4	12.8 * a	16.3	1.0	12.6 * a	6.9	0.5	18.4 * a	3.5 *
<i>Stellaria longipes</i>	1.3	0.8	2.6 bcd	1.2	0.6	5.8 abc	4.7	0.7	6.6 abc	2.3
<i>Cruciferae</i> ^f	4.4	0.8	5.6 abc	4.7	0.3	17.8 ab	8.7	0.4	24.2 * a	1.3
<i>Salix</i> spp. ^g	1.3	17.5	0.1 * d	0.8	19.7	< 0.1 * c	0.5	12.8	< 0.1 * c	0.7
<i>Saxifragaceae</i> ^h	2.9	0.8	7.2 * abc	1.2	0.3	8.1 abc	0.1	0.4	0.5 bc	1.8
<i>Equisetum</i> sp.	6.6	0.7	15.1 * ab	5.9	0.1	45.4 abc	0	0	n/a	< 0.1
Other plants ⁱ	8.7	67.6		8.3	67.3		4.1	71.0		0.7
Insects	0.8	n/a		0	n/a		1.0	n/a		< 0.1
Plant parts										
Leaves	71.4	n/a		64.1	n/a		80.7	n/a		2.2
Flowers	19.8	n/a		28.5	n/a		11.8	n/a		3.5 *
Stems	0.1	n/a		0.5	n/a		3.3	n/a		4.3 *
Other parts ^j	8.7	n/a		6.9	n/a		4.1	n/a		0.4

^a n = 29, 27, 10, respectively.

^b *Arctagrostis latifolia*, *Hierochloe alpina*, *Poa arctica*, *Alopecurus alpinus*, and *Festuca brachyphylla* (species are always listed in decreasing order of importance)

^c *Luzula confusa* and *L. nivalis*

^d *Oxytropis maydelliana* and *Astragalus alpinus*

^e *Oxyria digyna* and *Polygonum viviparum*

^f *Eutrema edwardsii*, *Cardamine bellidifolia*, and *Draba* spp.

^g *Salix arctica*, *S. herbacea*, and *S. reticulata*

^h *Saxifraga cernua*, *S. foliolosa*, *S. hirculus*, *S. oppositifolia*, and *Chrysosplenium* sp.

ⁱ Other plants consumed are: *Papaver radicum*, *Eriophorum* sp., *Ranunculus* sp., *Pedicularis* sp., *Carex* sp., lichens, mosses, *Cerastium alpinum*, roots, *Cassiope tetragona*, and litter.

^j *Equisetum* sp., lichens, insects, mosses, roots, and litter.

found in both wild and captive goslings diet, there was a close correlation between captive and wild goslings in overall selection ratios (W_i ; $r = 0.737$, $df = 7$, $p = 0.037$; see Appendix C and D). Leaves were the dominant plant parts of goslings (70% of the global diet) although flowers were also relatively important (23%).

Seasonal variations in wild goslings' diet were more difficult to assess than in captive goslings because none were collected in early summer (period 1) and few in late summer (period 5). Only *Polygonaceae* and *Leguminosae* varied significantly during the summer, with the former decreasing steadily over time and the latter increasing in late summer (Table 3). For plant parts, the consumption of flowers was highest in the middle of the summer whereas the consumption of stems rose slightly in late summer (Table 3).

Plant nutritive quality

Plants selected by goslings ($W_i > 1$; see Appendix C) differed in nutritive attributes compared to those avoided ($W_i < 1$; Figure 2). Selected plants had a higher nitrogen content ($2.4\% \pm 0.1$ vs. $1.4\% \pm 0.1$, $F_{1, 18} = 11.5$, $p = 0.003$), and a lower content in phenolic compounds ($9.6\% \pm 0.6$ vs. $16.2\% \pm 1.4$, $F_{1, 31} = 5.78$, $p = 0.02$), and therefore had a much lower ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen (4.1 ± 0.3 vs. 12.2 ± 1.3 , $F_{1, 17} = 37.6$, $p < 0.001$) than those avoided. However, fibre content did not differ between selected and avoided plants species ($34\% \pm 2$ vs. $33\% \pm 4$, $F_{1, 17} = 0.14$, $p = 0.7$).

The selection ratios obtained for individual plant species also tended to be associated with plant nutritive attributes (Figure 3). Indeed, nitrogen content was positively related to W_i ($r = 0.48$, $df = 18$, $p = 0.04$) and total phenolic compounds tended to be inversely related to W_i ($r = 0.39$, $df = 18$, $p = 0.10$). Again, the strongest association was found between the ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen and W_i ($r = 0.63$, $df = 18$, $p = 0.004$), whereas no relation was found between the fibre content and W_i ($r = 0.06$, $df = 18$, $p = 0.80$).

Seasonal variations

Plant nutritive quality varied among species and over time for the five species studied (for all constituents, $p < 0.001$ except fibre content of leaves, date effect, $p = 0.043$) but seasonal changes differed among species (all interactions, $p < 0.02$). Seasonal variations in nitrogen levels showed much greater amplitude in leaves than in flowers, but both followed a decreasing trend throughout summer, except in flowers and leaves of *Luzula nivalis* and flowers of *Oxytropis maydelliana* (Figure 4). In leaves, *O. maydelliana* had always the highest nitrogen levels and *L. nivalis* the lowest. Nitrogen levels of flowers were generally lower than in leaves of the same species except for *L. nivalis* and *Arctagrostis latifolia* at the first date. Flowers of *O. maydelliana* had again the highest nitrogen level of all species except at the first date.

Fibre content in leaves remained stable throughout the summer or showed a weak increasing trend (*Polygonum viviparum* and *Oxyria digyna*) in contrast to flowers where fibre level increased over time in all species (Figure 4). Fibre content was generally higher in flowers than leaves for the same species. At all times, *L. nivalis* had by far the highest fibre content (55 to 70%) and was followed by *A. latifolia* (40-55%), whereas all other species had lower fibre content (15-40%).

Total phenolic compounds content showed variable trends throughout the summer. In some cases, phenolic compounds contents remained stable or declined slightly (*e.g.* leaves of *O. maydelliana*, *L. nivalis* and *O. digyna*; flowers of *A. latifolia*) but in others it initially increased and decreased later on (*e.g.* leaves of *A. latifolia*, flowers of *O. maydelliana*, *P. viviparum* and *O. digyna*) or increased throughout summer (leaves of *P. viviparum*; Figure 4). Leaves and flowers of *P. viviparum* and flowers of *O. digyna* had the highest phenolic compounds levels, whereas *L. nivalis* had the lowest.

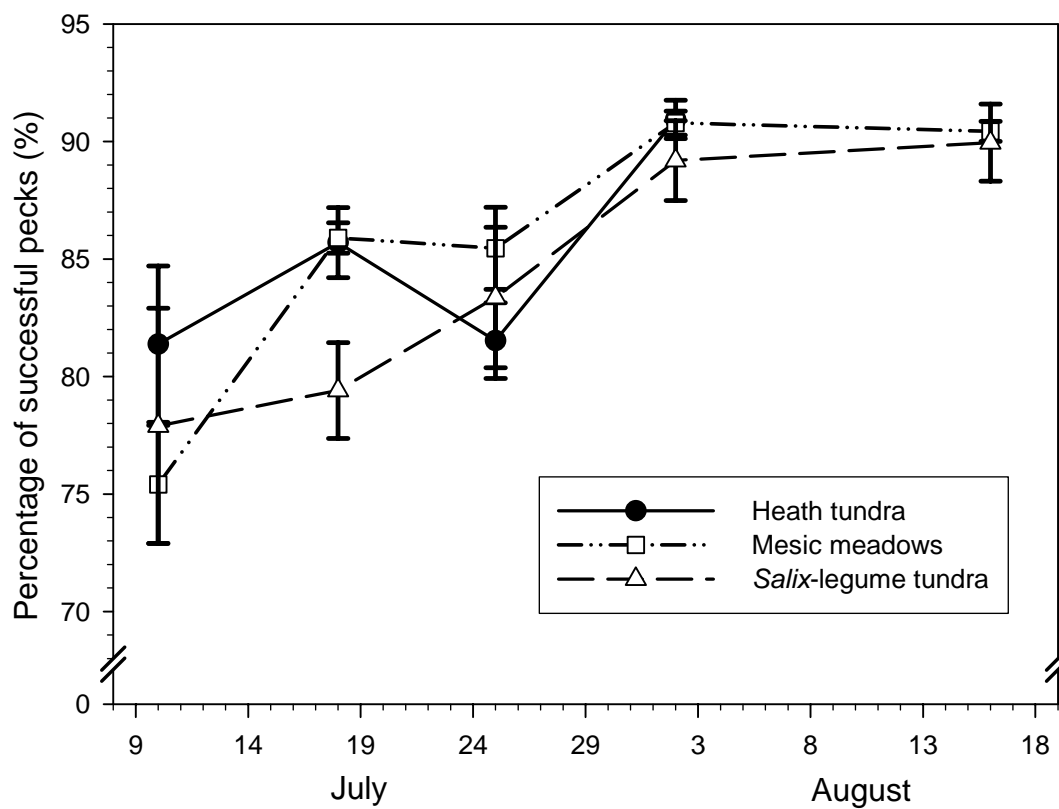


Figure 1. Seasonal variations in the percentage of all pecks that were successful (*i.e.* resulted in the ingestion of one food item) by captive goslings in 3 mesic tundra habitats, Bylot Island, Nunavut (LS means \pm SE).

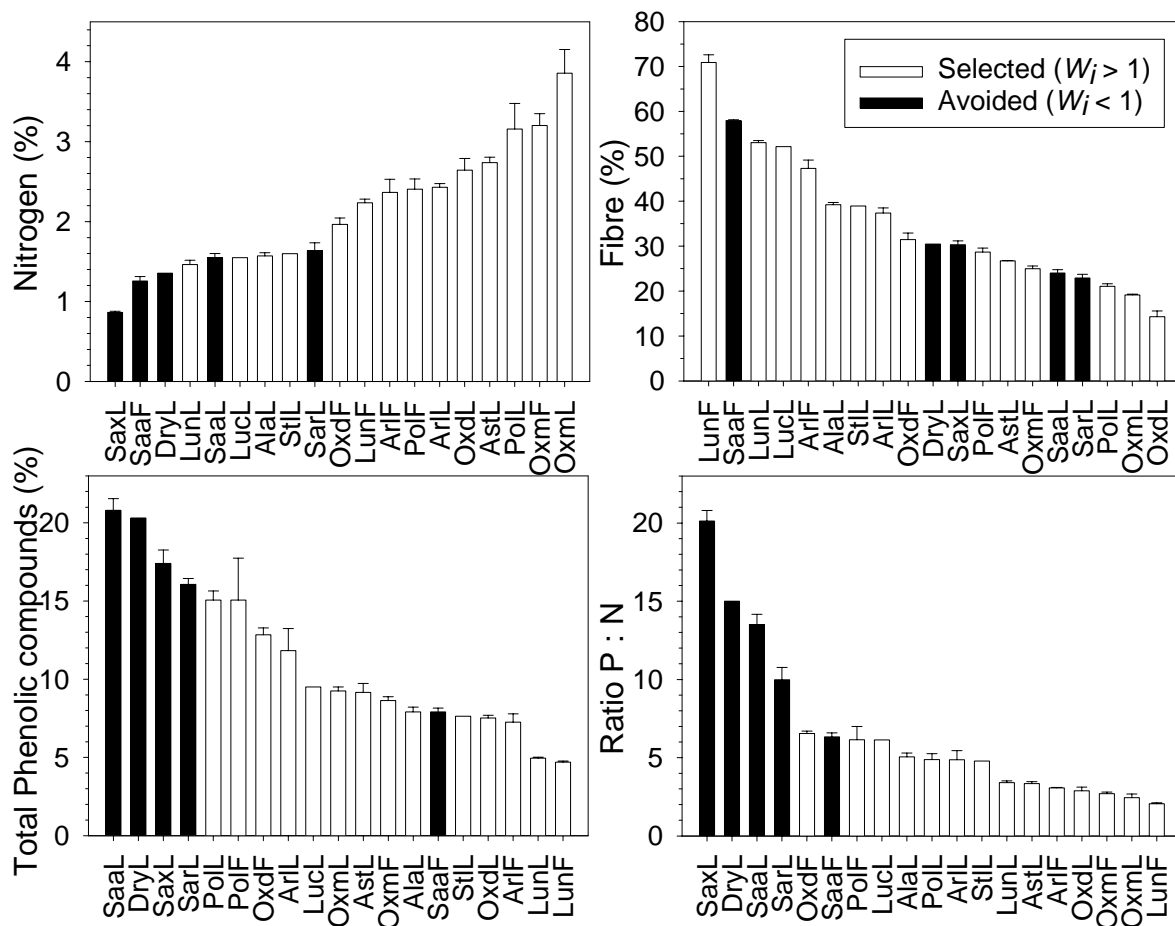


Figure 2. Nitrogen, fibre, total phenolic compounds, and ratio of phenolic compounds:nitrogen content (mean \pm SE) in leaves and/or flowers of 13 plant species harvested in mid summer (23-26 July) on Bylot Island, Nunavut. Distinction between plant selected and avoided was made following selection ratios (W_i) calculated on the global diet of captive goslings (see Appendix C). Sample sizes per species range from 1 to 4. Plant species codes are Ala: *Alopecurus alpinus*, Arl: *Arctagrostis latifolia*, Ast: *Astragalus alpinus*, Dry: *Dryas integrifolia*, Luc: *Luzula confusa*, Lun: *Luzula nivalis*, Oxd: *Oxyria digyna*, Oxm: *Oxytropis maydelliana*, Pol: *Polygonum viviparum*, Saa: *Salix arctica*, Sar: *Salix reticulata*, Sax: *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, and Sti: *Stellaria longipes*. The letter “L” stands for leaves and “F” for flowers at the end of 3-letter codes.

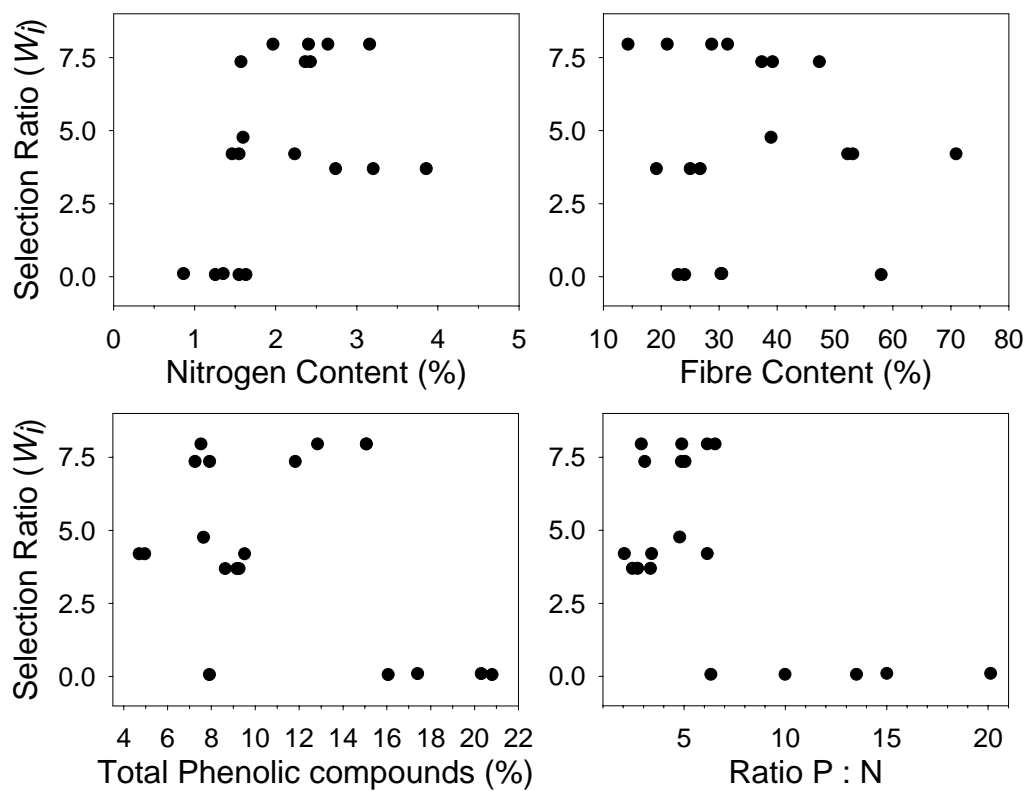


Figure 3. Relationship between plant nutritive attributes (nitrogen, fibre, total phenolic compounds, and ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen) and selection ratios (W_i) calculated on the global diet of captive goslings (see Appendix C), Bylot Island, Nunavut.

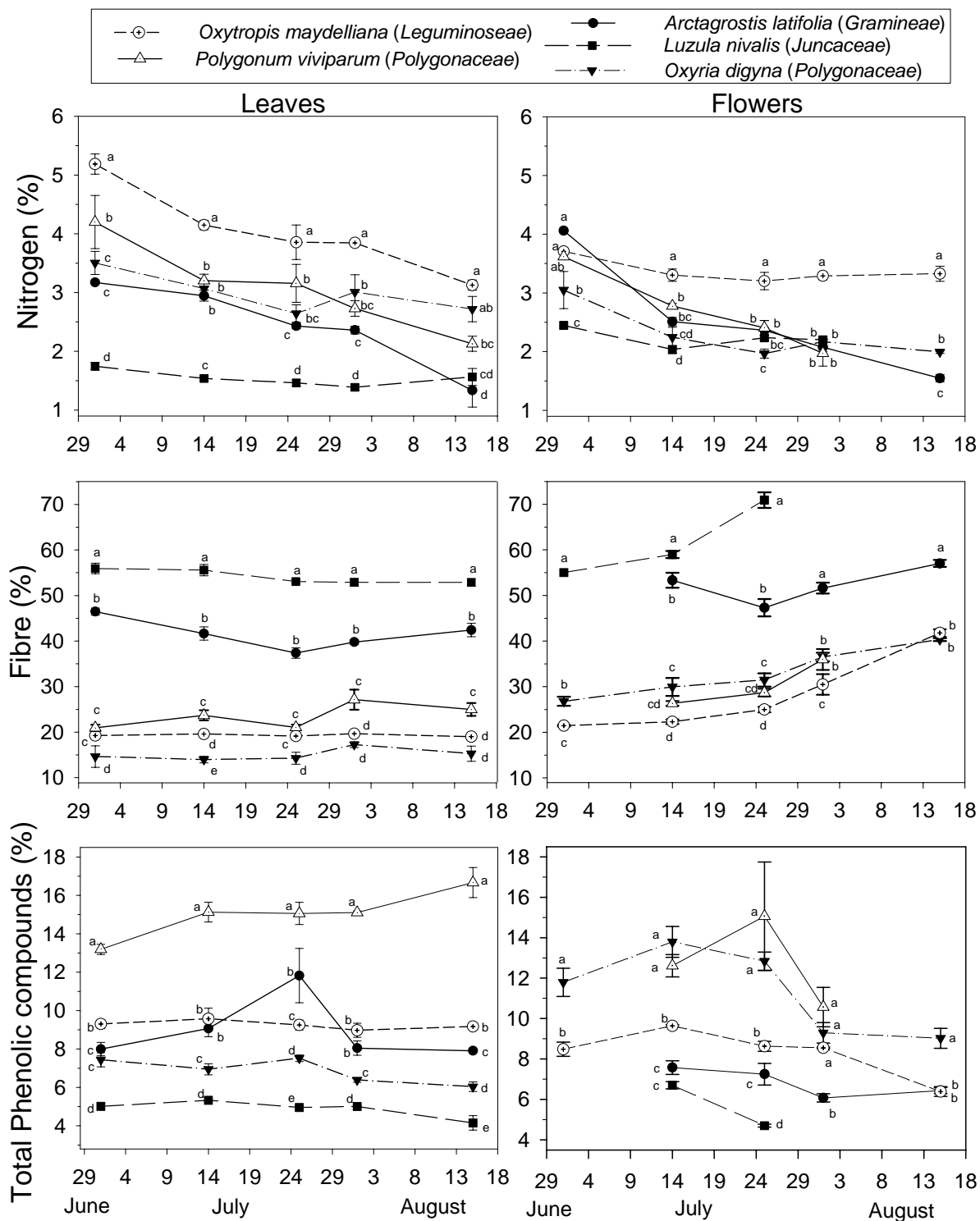


Figure 4. Seasonal variation in nitrogen, fibre and total phenolic compounds content of the leaves (left) and flowers (right) of 5 plant species consumed by goslings on Bylot Island, Nunavut. Values with the same letter within the same date are not significantly different ($p > 0.05$). Sample size for each data point ranges from 1 to 3.

DISCUSSION

Variations in diet among habitats

Even though mesic tundra harbors diverse plant communities (Duclos 2002), we found that goslings concentrated their feeding on four key plant taxa (*Gramineae*, *Juncaceae*, *Polygonaceae*, and *Leguminosae*), which collectively accounted for more than 80% of the plants eaten in mesic tundra. In arctic wetlands, goslings typically concentrate their feeding on a few species of *Gramineae* and *Cyperaceae*, which are usually the dominant plants in those habitats (Sedinger and Raveling 1984, Manseau and Gauthier 1993, Gadallah and Jefferies 1995b, Cadieux *et al.* 2005). We also found that *Gramineae* (mostly *Arctagrostis latifolia*) were the most important food item consumed in mesic tundra even though forbs were dominant in these habitats and graminoids were relatively scarce ($\leq 11\%$ in plant cover). In contrast, *Cyperaceae* were absent from the diet in mesic tundra because this family is rare in these habitats on Bylot Island (Duclos 2002).

The variations in goslings' diet found among the three mesic habitats sampled can be explained by differences in plant availability and possibly also differences in nutritive quality. Mesic meadows had the highest availability of *Gramineae* and it's also in that habitat that goslings consumed them the most. *Juncaceae* were the main plant taxon consumed in heath tundra (36%) but were a very small component of the diet in mesic meadows (5%), even though their availability were similar in both habitats (4-5%). This switch could be due to the large difference in availability of *Gramineae* between these two habitats, which were 7 times less abundant in heath tundra than in mesic meadow. Hence, even though *Juncaceae* had a lower nutritive quality than *Gramineae* (*i.e.* less nitrogen and more fibre), goslings may have partly switched to this taxon to maximise their feeding efficiency in response to the scarcity of *Gramineae* in heath tundra. This could also explain why *Polygonaceae*, which were hardly consumed in the other habitats, were highly sought after by goslings in heath tundra, with *Oxyria digyna* accounting for 13% of their diet there even though the availability of this plant taxon changed little across habitats. The abundance of plants of low palatability for geese (such as mosses, *Salix* spp., and especially *Cassiope tetragona*) combined with the scarcity of palatable plants (such as *Gramineae*, *Juncaceae* and *Polygonaceae*) in heath tundra apparently forced goslings to be highly

selective in their feeding there. Indeed, it is in this habitat that we found the highest selection ratio values. In *Salix*-legume tundra, the availability of *Gramineae* was also low (3% of plant cover). The high abundance of *Leguminosae* (11% of plant cover) combined with their good nutritive attributes (very high nitrogen and low fibre contents) may explain why geese predominantly fed on these plants in this habitat. Therefore, it appears that mesic meadow and *Salix*-legume tundra are mesic habitats of higher quality for goslings than heath tundra where they may have to spend more time searching for palatable plants.

Seasonal variations in diet

The diversity of the diet of captive goslings decreased considerably over time. Plants that decreased in the diet (mosses, *Salix* spp., and *Cassiope tetragona*) were also those that were avoided ($W_i < 1$), except for mosses during the first period. It thus appears that young, inexperienced goslings fed on almost anything available, but as they grew older and gained experience, they became more selective and concentrated on the most nutritious plants (*e.g.* *Gramineae* and *Leguminosae*; see also Buchsbaum 1985, Giroux and Bédard 1988, Cadieux *et al.* 2005). The high proportion of mosses in the diet of young captive goslings (5-8 d old) is surprising as mosses are considered a low nutritive quality plant for geese (Prop and Vulink 1992). However, goslings feeding on mosses concentrated on sporophyte capsules, a feeding behaviour that has also been observed by Martin and Hik (1992) in Willow Ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*) chicks. They suggested that moss capsules, despite their small size, may represent an easy source of adequate nutritive quality food to consume at a time when handling larger or coarser food items may be difficult for chicks. Thus, because moss capsules are frequently encountered in mesic meadows due to their high abundance and are easy to handle, we suggest that mosses can be a regular food for young goslings in this habitat.

Our suggestion that food handling is a problem for young goslings is supported by our observation of a high proportion of unsuccessful pecks (> 22%) in captive goslings at that time. For instance, we frequently observed young goslings trying several times to cut relatively coarse plants like *Salix* spp or even *Arctagrostis latifolia*. This could be another

reason for the relatively low consumption of these plant species in early summer. Some unsuccessful pecks also occurred when goslings obtained a plant fragment in their beak but spit it out rather than ingesting it, presumably because they judged the item to be unpalatable. The reduction over time in unsuccessful pecks indicates that foraging is a learning process where individuals acquire experience in selecting the best plants as well as strength and agility in cutting plant parts efficiently, thus reducing the need to sample alternative food items as they mature (Groves 1978, Goss-Custard and Durell 1987, Giroux and Bédard 1988, Bennetts and McClelland 1997, Willson and Brian 2002).

Juncaceae, one of the taxa preferred by goslings, showed a marked decline in the diet in late summer. Field observations, however, revealed that *Juncaceae* were mostly consumed for their flowering parts but by late summer, these had almost disappeared, which may partly explain why they were less consumed then. Generally, flowering parts decreased in the diet of captive goslings throughout the summer to the profit of leaves. However, wild goslings consumed more flowers than captive ones in mid-summer (20-29% of their diet vs. 3-7%, respectively), which suggests that flowers were under-represented in the diet of captive goslings (see next section). Thus, it appears that goslings may preferentially feed on the flowering parts of several species (especially forbs) in mesic tundra, as previously suggested by Gauthier (1993) and Duclos (2002). In contrast, stems were rarely eaten, presumably because this is the most fibrous part of plants (Raven *et al.* 2000) and their coarseness makes them more difficult to handle.

Several studies have reported that goslings include berries in their diet near or after fledging, a food source rich in lipids and soluble carbohydrates (Sedinger and Raveling 1984, Sedinger and Bollinger 1987, Cadieux *et al.* 2005). The only species producing berries at our study site is *Vaccinium uliginosum* but its abundance is low (Duclos 2002) and it was absent from our study plots in mesic tundra. Although it was not detected in wild goslings either, few goslings were collected at the end of the summer when berries started to ripen. However, due to their scarcity and late maturing date on Bylot Island, berries are probably a negligible portion of goslings' diet in mesic tundra, except perhaps after fledging.

Validation of the captive goslings' technique

The observation of individual pecks of captive goslings to determine the diet was an innovative technique but it needed to be validated. Comparisons of the diet determined by observations of pecks vs. by oesophageal contents in the same birds indicated that direct observations by trained observers of plants consumed provide a reliable measure of plants actually eaten by captive goslings. The higher number of pecks observed compared to the number of plant fragments found in the oesophagi could be due to some unsuccessful pecks that were misclassified or, more likely, to the passage of the first fragments consumed into the gizzard after 10 minutes of observations. Even though expressing the diet in percentages solved this difficulty, we suggest that future validations reduce the observation time to 5 minutes instead of 10 in order to avoid the loss of plant fragments to the gizzard.

The similarity between the diets determined in captive and in wild goslings collected at the same periods of the summer suggests that the diet of captive goslings was representative of the population. Nonetheless, there were a few notable differences between the techniques, with *Polygonaceae* being more abundant in the diet of wild than captive goslings, and the converse for *Leguminosae*. One reason for these differences was our inability to obtain balanced samples of wild goslings across the 3 mesic habitats due to the opportunistic nature of the sampling. As a result, we collected twice as many wild goslings grazing in heath tundra than in *Salix*-legume tundra (because the latter habitat patch was further from our camp). This could explain why the diet of wild goslings contained more *Polygonaceae* (a plant taxon mostly grazed in heath tundra) and less *Leguminosae* (a plant taxon mostly grazed in *Salix*-legume tundra) than the diet of captive goslings. Therefore, one advantage of the captive goslings' method is that it allows evaluating variations in diet across habitat patches and over time with a rigorous sampling design.

The similarity in the selection ratios W_i obtained for captive and wild goslings further suggests that both techniques gave reliable results. Selection ratios were probably more accurate in captive than wild goslings because the former were confined to an enclosure

where plant availability could be measured more accurately than in wild goslings. However, the latter assertion would be true only if plots are large enough and the feeding trials short enough to prevent depletion of preferred food items by goslings, which was the case in our experiments.

One limitation of the captive goslings' method is the absence of parents from which the goslings could learn more quickly the best food items to consume. This could partly explain the high proportion of mosses or other plants in the diet of young captive goslings. Goslings were also forced to feed in sites chosen by experimentators, and these could have differed somewhat from those selected by parents. For instance, the higher proportion of flowers in the diet of wild goslings compared to captive ones may be because parents selected feeding sites with a higher proportion of flowers than those that we used for the feeding trials. The diet of wild goslings collected in mesic tundra also included some plants typical of wetlands (especially *Equisetum variegatum* and *Eriophorum* spp.) that were not found in the captive goslings. *E. variegatum* is a plant known for its low fibre content and high protein and mineral contents, which is of particular interest for growing goslings (Prevett *et al.* 1979, Thomas and Prevett 1982, Cadieux *et al.* 2005). Therefore, this supports the observations of Hughes *et al.* (1994a), Duclos (2002), and Mainguy (2003) who found that even when foraging in mesic tundra, geese also exploit isolated wet patches, streams, and gullies whenever possible.

Plant nutritive attributes and food selection

Geese are well known for being highly selective in their feeding (Buchsbaum *et al.* 1984, Sedinger and Raveling 1984, Prins and Ydenberg 1985, Gauthier and Bédard 1990). Our results showed that goslings are also selective at a very young age in tundra habitats offering a large diversity of plant species. In contrast to wetlands, mesic tundra is characterized by a relative paucity of graminoids and numerous species of forbs, which may sometimes have high concentrations of secondary metabolites like phenolic compounds acting as feeding deterrents (Buchsbaum *et al.* 1984, Robbins *et al.* 1987). We found that goslings generally preferred plants high in nitrogen and avoided those high in

total phenolic compounds. Buchsbaum *et al.* (1984) suggested that plant palatability in geese is determined by a hierarchy of feeding cues where deterrent secondary metabolites have a dominant role over nutrients. Alternatively, Gauthier and Hughes (1995) suggested that the ratio of deterrent to nutrient content is more important in the food selection process than the content of deterrent alone. The much stronger association of the food selection ratios with the ratio phenolic compounds:nitrogen than with phenolic compounds alone supports Gauthier and Hughes's (1995) hypothesis. Therefore, it appears that goslings are willing to tolerate higher levels of deterring factors like phenolic compounds in plants with high nitrogen than in those with low nitrogen content. Presumably, this allows them to maximise their intake of metabolizable nitrogen as the protein requirement imposed by their rapid growth is very high (Manseau and Gauthier 1993, Lesage and Gauthier 1997, Lepage *et al.* 1998). Thus, goslings feeding in mesic tundra apparently maximised their nutrient intake and minimised their deterrent intake simultaneously.

Fibre content, the major constituent of plants, can influence on plant digestibility. Because geese are unable to digest most fibre constituents (Prop and Vulink 1992, Sedinger *et al.* 1995), plant digestibility is inversely related to its fibre concentration (Bédard and Gauthier 1989, Sedinger *et al.* 1989, Piedboeuf and Gauthier 1999). Thus, fibre content can also act as a feeding deterrent and has been found to affect food selection in geese (Hardwood 1977, Owen 1978, Ydenberg and Prins 1981) and ruminants (Hanley 1982, Gray and Servello 1995). However, we found little evidence that fibre content influenced food selection in goslings. Thus, despite the large interspecific differences in fibre content of leaves, it appears that goslings relied more on other constituents (*i.e.* nitrogen and total phenolic compounds) than fibre content as feeding cues when foraging in mesic tundra.

The nutritive quality of the key plants eaten by goslings in mesic tundra generally decreased throughout the summer, especially nitrogen content. Gauthier and Hughes (1995) reported that seasonal variation in plant nutritive attributes (in their case the ratio phenolic compounds:protein) could explain why nesting greater snow geese fed on willow leaves during a brief period of the summer only. However, seasonal variations in nutritive attributes of mesic tundra plants were relatively small compared to the large interspecific

differences in nutritive attributes, and the ranking in nutritive attributes among plants was generally consistent throughout the summer. The fibre content of leaves in particular showed little seasonal change in mesic tundra, as also found in arctic wetland graminoids (Manseau and Gauthier 1993, Piedboeuf and Gauthier 1999). This may be related to the stunted growth form of herbaceous arctic plants in comparison to those growing in temperate conditions. In contrast to leaves, the fibre content of flowers increased noticeably in some species toward the end of the summer, and could be an additional explanation for the decrease of flowers in the diet by then. Nonetheless, none of the key species apparently reached a threshold in nutritive quality that would have made them unpalatable to goslings, and thus may explain why they were consumed all summer long.

TROISIÈME PARTIE :
CONCLUSION GÉNÉRALE

La détermination du régime alimentaire est un sujet de premier plan en écologie animale. En effet, pour une espèce donnée, l'habitat utilisé et la nourriture consommée figurent parmi les paramètres essentiels à étudier, tant d'un point de vue théorique (*e.g.* études des relations trophiques) qu'appliqué (*e.g.* aménagement ou conservation de l'espèce). Plusieurs techniques existent afin de dresser une liste des ressources alimentaires consommées. Cependant, cette étude a de particulier la mise au point d'une nouvelle technique dans la détermination du régime alimentaire chez les oies. En effet, à notre connaissance, aucune autre étude auparavant n'avait utilisé des oisons captifs pour mesurer le régime par l'observation directe des espèces et des parties de plantes consommées à chaque coup de bec par l'oiseau. Nous avons pu démontrer que cette technique innovatrice est une façon fiable de répertorier et de quantifier les plantes consommées, dans la mesure où l'observateur est bien entraîné à ce type d'observation.

L'observation directe des plantes consommées par des oisons captifs comporte plusieurs avantages. D'abord, elle permet la conception d'un design expérimental élaboré et rigoureux afin de pouvoir comparer les régimes alimentaires dans différentes communautés végétales et aussi à différents moments de l'année. Ensuite, le fait d'observer le broutement à l'intérieur d'un enclos bien délimité permet un échantillonnage précis des plantes disponibles, ce qui favorise l'étude de la sélection alimentaire et la rend même plus précise qu'avec la technique plus traditionnelle de l'analyse du contenu de l'œsophage d'oisons sauvages sacrifiés. De plus, la forte corrélation entre les indices de sélection de la technique des oisons captifs avec celle des oisons sauvages suggère que l'utilisation des oisons captifs dans des expériences de broutement est une méthode qui donne des résultats fiables et précis. Finalement, la technique des oisons captifs requiert le sacrifice de peu ou pas d'individus contrairement à la technique d'analyse des contenus oesophagiens.

Par contre, il y a aussi certains biais qui peuvent être occasionnés par cette nouvelle technique, découlant principalement du fait que les oisons captifs soient confinés à brouter dans un enclos bien délimité. Bien que ce confinement permette une étude du broutement dans des communautés végétales bien précises (3 dans cette étude), il élimine la possibilité

de déplacement à grande échelle des oisons pendant la quête alimentaire, eux qui ont plutôt tendance à se nourrir dans une mosaïque d'habitats à l'état sauvage (observation personnelle). Ce confinement écarte aussi toute influence que les parents naturels pourraient avoir sur leurs oisons pendant le broutement en les guidant vers des sites d'alimentation particuliers comme ils le font à l'état sauvage (G. Gauthier, communication personnelle). Nous aurions pu éviter ces biais en utilisant une autre technique telle que la détermination du régime par les épidermes des cellules dans les fèces fraîches d'oies sauvages (*e.g.* Owen 1975, Holechek *et al.* 1982, Johnson *et al.* 1983, Carrière 1996). Toutefois, cette dernière comporte de nombreuses limitations dues principalement à la difficulté de distinguer certaines espèces par les cellules et la digestibilité différentielle de différentes espèces, ce qui biaise les estimés de quantités de plantes ingérées. Somme toute, c'est l'étude parallèle des œsophages d'oisons sauvages qui nous aura permis de surmonter les biais associés à notre nouvelle méthode en utilisant ces deux techniques de façon complémentaire. Nous pouvons donc affirmer avec confiance que le portrait final que nous dressons de l'écologie alimentaire des oisons en milieux mésiques à l'Île Bylot est fidèle et représentatif de la réalité.

Cette étude apporte comme nouvelle contribution à la science non seulement une méthode inédite pour l'étude de l'écologie alimentaire des herbivores mais aussi et principalement une compréhension accrue et des connaissances nouvelles de ce sujet chez un herbivore de la toundra arctique. En effet, avant ce jour, nous n'avions qu'une très vague idée du régime alimentaire des oisons en milieux mésiques dans l'Arctique (voir Gauthier 1993 et Duclos 2002), contrairement aux milieux humides. Les valeurs de sélection alimentaire disponibles (voir Duclos 2002) reposaient sur une méthode approximative et indirecte alors que les caractéristiques nutritives des différentes plantes se retrouvant dans les milieux mésiques de l'Île Bylot étaient inconnues durant l'été. Suite à cette étude, nous sommes maintenant en mesure d'affirmer que les plantes Graminées, elles qui étaient déjà les plus consommées en milieux humides, continuent de figurer en tête (~50%) du régime alimentaire des oisons en milieux mésiques et ce même si celles-ci sont beaucoup moins abondantes qu'en milieux humides. Le reste du régime est constitué principalement des plantes Polygonacées, Joncacées et Légumineuses, ce qui valide notre

hypothèse de départ qui voulait que le régime alimentaire des oisons soit diversifié en milieux mésique. De plus, nous avons aussi observé une forte consommation de capsules de mousses chez les très jeunes oisons qui pourraient les utiliser comme source alternative de protéines à un moment de leur vie où la manipulation de certaines espèces de plantes leur serait encore difficile. Effectivement, conformément à nos hypothèses de départ, les résultats de cette étude montrent que les oisons ont vraisemblablement besoin d'une période d'apprentissage afin de développer les habiletés et d'acquérir l'expérience nécessaire à la sélection alimentaire. Ceci fut démontré par la diminution significative de la proportion de leurs coups de bec avec insuccès et la concentration de leur alimentation sur un nombre réduit de plantes à mesure qu'ils vieillissaient.

À l'inverse des milieux humides, les milieux mésiques de l'Arctique offrent une grande diversité de plantes herbacées aux oisons mais ceux-ci ont démontré, dès leur plus jeune âge, une forte sélection alimentaire pour certaines espèces. Les jeunes ont sélectionné les plantes avec la meilleure valeur nutritive en se basant sur un faible rapport composés phénoliques : azote comme critère principal de sélection, contrairement à nos hypothèses de départ qui supposaient une influence marquée du contenu en fibres en tant que déterminant de la sélection. Nos résultats appuient donc l'hypothèse de Gauthier et Hughes (1995) qui ont suggéré que le rapport entre les constituants répulsifs/nutritifs pourrait être plus important que la seule concentration de composés répulsifs dans le choix alimentaire des plantes herbacées par les oies. La sélection des plantes herbacées qui présentent un faible rapport composés phénoliques : protéines permettrait aux jeunes de maximiser l'ingestion de protéines digestibles afin de favoriser leur croissance rapide avant la migration automnale. Cependant, considérant que la disponibilité des espèces de plante varie grandement d'une communauté mésique à l'autre, il semble que les oisons s'assurent d'une efficacité alimentaire optimale en ajustant leurs choix alimentaires parmi les quatre groupes clés de plantes consommées non seulement en fonction de leurs caractéristiques nutritives mais aussi selon leur abondance relative. Il faut aussi souligner que même en milieux mésiques, les oisons utilisent également les îlots de végétation humide longeant les coulées puisqu'ils y retrouvent les plantes à la base de leur alimentation dans leur habitat préféré, les milieux humides. En somme, toutes espèces confondues, ce sont les feuilles qui

représentent la partie de plante la plus consommée (~80%), mais les inflorescences représentent également une part importante du régime alimentaire en milieux mésiques (~20%), surtout au milieu de l'été où elles sont plus disponibles et moins fibreuses.

Maintenant que nous connaissons bien les ressources alimentaires utilisées par les oisons en milieux mésiques, il serait éventuellement intéressant de calculer la quantité de ces ressources qui leur est disponible sur l'Île Bylot. Ainsi, en considérant que les oies adultes devraient utiliser principalement les mêmes ressources que ce que nous avons observé chez les oisons expérimentés en milieu d'été, il deviendrait possible d'estimer la capacité de support des milieux mésiques de l'Île Bylot pour la Grande Oie des neiges. Ce calcul ayant déjà été effectué pour les milieux humides (voir Massé *et al.* 2001), il serait alors envisageable de déterminer la capacité de support totale de l'Île Bylot (milieux humides et milieux mésiques) pour la Grande Oie des neiges. Il s'agit là d'un enjeu primordial pour la conservation à long terme de populations saines dans des habitats de qualité compte tenu de la forte croissance démographique qu'a connue cette population dans les dernières décennies (Menu *et al.* 2002, Reed *et al.* 2002).

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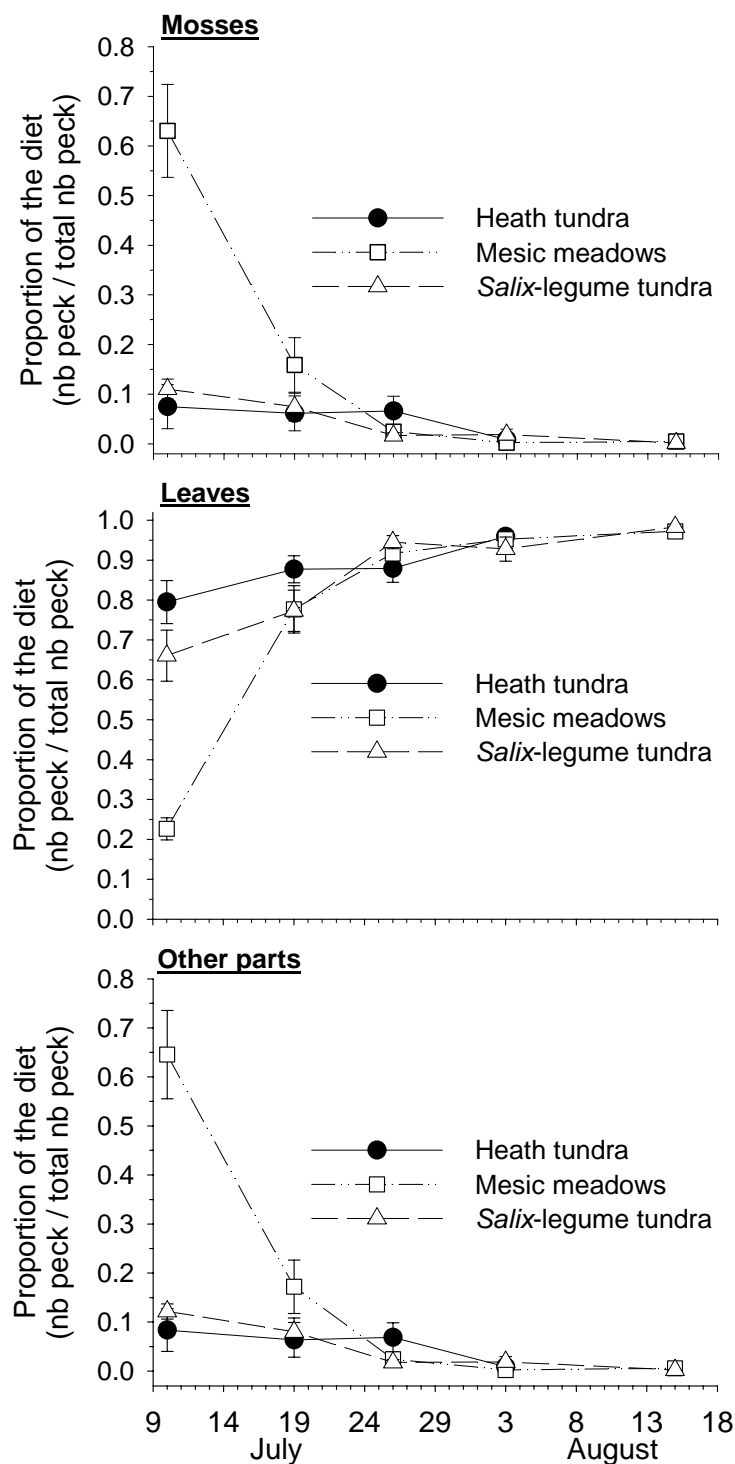
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Appendix A. Graphic representation of the significant interactions between the habitat and period factors in the statistical analyses presented in Tables 1 and 2 for three food items consumed by captive goslings on Bylot Island, Nunavut (LS means \pm SE).

Appendix B. Comparison of the plant taxa consumed by captive goslings based on direct observations of successful pecks and oesophagi contents of the same individuals sacrificed immediately after the observations. Data are presented in terms of mean number of pecks observed (or plant fragments counted) and in mean relative percentage (aggregate percentage of Swanson *et al.* 1974). Paired *t* tests based on percentages.

Food Item	Mean number of pecks or fragments		Mean percentage (%)		<i>t</i> value (df = 12)	<i>p</i> value
	Peck observed	Oesophageal contents	Peck observed	Oesophageal contents		
Plant taxa						
<i>Gramineae</i> ^a	140.6	77.1	51.1	34.5	-0.34	0.74
<i>Juncaceae</i> ^b	5.5	5.6	2.0	2.5	-0.08	0.94
<i>Leguminosae</i> ^c	118.4	127.6	43.0	57.1	0.35	0.73
<i>Polygonaceae</i> ^d	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	-0.56	0.58
<i>Stellaria longipes</i>	7.7	8.2	2.8	3.7	-0.06	0.95
<i>Cruciferae</i> ^e	0.1	0	< 0.1	0	-1.00	0.34
<i>Salix arctica</i>	0.5	2.2	0.2	1.0	1.39	0.19
<i>Cassiope tetragona</i>	0	0	0	0	n/a	n/a
Mosses	0.2	0.7	0.1	0.3	1.22	0.24
Others ^f	1.8	1.6	0.6	0.7	-0.70	0.50
Plant parts						
Leaves	270.7	216.2	96.8	98.4	-0.76	0.46
Flowers	3.2	5.9	2.7	1.1	0.75	0.47
Stems	1.1	0.2	0.1	0.4	-1.60	0.14
Other parts ^g	0.2	1.0	0.4	0.1	1.67	0.12

^a *Arctagrostis latifolia*, *Poa arctica*, *Alopecurus alpinus*, *Hierochloe alpina*, and *Festuca brachyphylla* (species always listed in decreasing order of importance)

^b *Luzula confusa* and *L. nivalis*

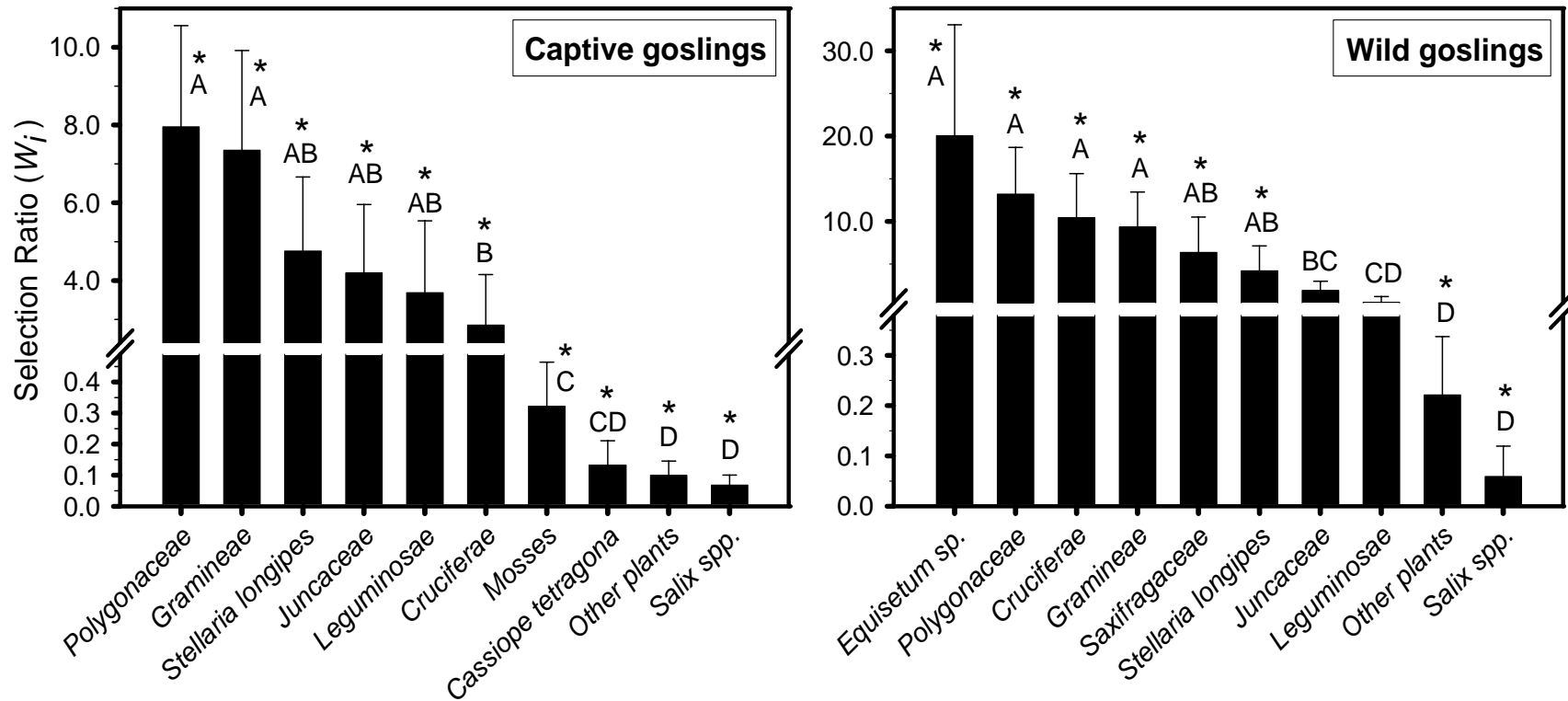
^c *Astragalus alpinus* and *Oxytropis maydelliana*

^d *Oxyria digyna* and *Polygonum viviparum*

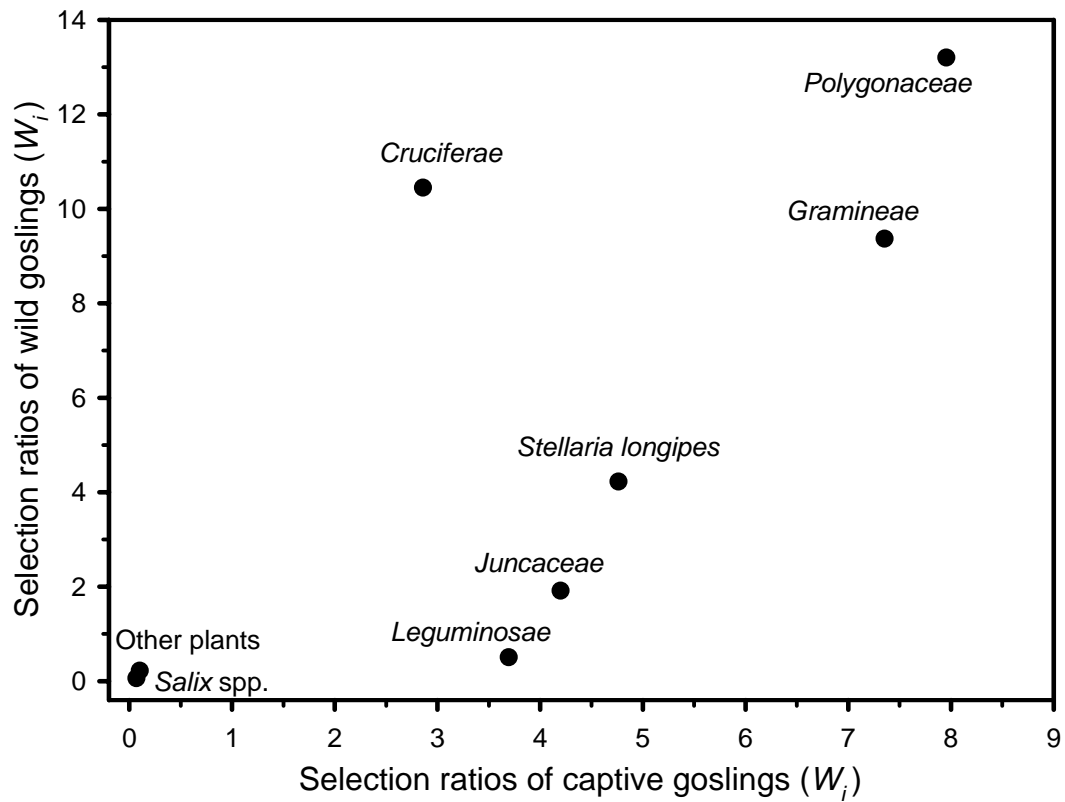
^e *Cardamine bellidifolia*, *Eutrema edwardsii*, and *Draba* spp.

^f Other plants consumed include: *Papaver radicum*, *Saxifraga tricuspidata*, *S. cernua*, litter, and *S. oppositifolia*.

^g Other parts are mosses, buds, and roots.



Appendix C. Selection ratios (W_i ; mean \pm SE) calculated on the global diet of captive (left) and wild (right) goslings ($N = 56$ and 54 , respectively) on Bylot Island, Nunavut. A value of $W_i > 1$ indicates a food item selected and < 1 a food item avoided by goslings ($* = p < 0.05$). Bars with the same letter are not significantly different among them ($p > 0.05$).



Appendix D. Relationship between selection ratios calculated on global diets (all periods and habitats combined) with captive goslings and with wild goslings (see appendix C) on Bylot Island, Nunavut ($r = 0.737$, $df = 7$, $p = 0.037$).