

## Features

July 7, 2006

### Bylot's gigantic gaggle of geese

*"You could hear them from one mile away"*

Each June about 60,000 greater snow geese descend on the southwestern corner of Bylot Island, turning one patch of tundra into the largest colony of the geese in the Arctic.

That many birds make quite a squawk. And this year, their presence gave a group of elders and youth from Pond Inlet and visiting scientists an opportunity to chatter about what they know of the geese and other wildlife.

"You could hear them from one mile away," said Simon Sangoya, 19.

He was the eldest of about 10 youth who camped out on the beach with elders and scientists earlier this month, from June 11 to 17, in Sirmilik National Park, about 15 kilometres from the geese colony.

The trip aimed to bring new understanding between scientists who have studied the ecosystem of Bylot Island for several years, and elders who have witnessed changes occur over a far longer period of time.

The project was started by Catherine Gagnon, a masters student in natural resource management at the Université du Québec in Rimouski.

One big change is a growing number of geese, fuelled by the growth of the agriculture industry in Quebec, where the migrating geese spend part of the year.



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Mathias Qaunaq, left, and Simon Sangoya carefully pack goose eggs for the trip from Bylot Island back to Pond Inlet. For a few weeks, Bylot Island hosts the largest colony of Greater Snow Geese in the Arctic. (PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATHERINE GAGNON)

Further down the migration path, along the St. Lawrence River, the number of greater snow geese counted during a census in the spring leaped from 417,000 in 1993 to 957,600 in 2004.

That population boom has led to geese destroying the tundra in other parts of the North.

Researchers want to know if that will happen on Bylot Island, too.

But so far there's no sign of that happening at the Bylot colony - just plenty of birds, which meant there was plenty of eggs and goose flesh for the campers to eat.

That food brought back memories for elders of how those animals were once hunted.

Greater snow geese spend several weeks on Bylot Island breeding and moulting - a stage of their lives when they shed their feathers and are unable to fly. That's when a group of hunters would circle the birds and herd them.

Usually hunters would herd the birds to a convenient frozen lake. But the group heard that in the past, hunters herded the birds all the way across the straight to Baffin Island and back to their camp near Pond Inlet.

When the birds tired, hunters would pick the geese up and carry them.

The cuddly moments would end when they reached their destination, however, where Inuit would spear or club the birds. It's food, after all.

Elders also spoke of how to trap foxes on the ice, by digging a hole and covering it with a thin sheet of ice covered with frozen blood.



[CLICK PHOTO TO ENLARGE](#)  
Pond Inlet elder Annie Paingut Peterloosie sews goose wings together for decoration during a land trip to Bylot Island this month.

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Rachel Panipakoocho looks into a box carefully packed with goose eggs, just after egg picking.

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And they spoke of how foxes venture out onto the sea ice in March and April each year.

That's of interest to researchers such as Dominique Berteaux, who has studied the population of about 110 fox on Bylot Island during the summer since 2003. Previously he had believed fox spent their whole winter on the ice.

To put this to the test, scientists have attached radio collars to fox this year, to follow their annual movements throughout the year.

Berteaux counts the number of red fox on Bylot Island, which have appeared more frequently over the last few decades.

"The elders, they all tell us that 50 years ago, they saw the first red fox," Berteaux said.

It could be one of many species to venture further north if the climate continues to warm, he said.

That could be one threat to the arctic fox population. But there could be other, more complicated, pressures at work as well.

In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway and Finland, red foxes threaten to squeeze out the arctic foxes.

In those countries, one reason for the decline in arctic foxes could be, oddly enough, reindeer husbandry.

That's because the reindeer industry in those countries has taken its toll on the tundra, and shrunken the habitat for lemmings.

Lemmings are an important food source for arctic foxes. So when reindeer push out the lemmings, the fox populations take a dive, too.

The spread of rabies through the fox populations also likely plays a role.



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Rachel Ootoova, left, and Moses Amarualik relax at camp. Behind them, Elijah Panipakoocho builds a box to carry goose eggs back to Pond Inlet.



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Elder Gamailie Kilukishak explains the old seal hunting technique of mimicking the seal, allowing him to sneak close enough to kill it with a harpoon.

Elders also shared their knowledge of Bylot Island's fox population, which researchers will test by tracking the movement of the animals with radio collars this winter.

These are the sort of complex relationships between different animals and plants that the researchers on Bylot Island hope to chart out in the years to come, Berteaux said.

"We're trying to understand how the tundra ecosystem works."

Other researchers are studying various shorebirds, such as plovers, tiny birds with long legs. These birds are declining in population across North America. "No one knows why," Berteaux said.

The campers also visited a Dorset archeological site called Ikpiugalik, and learned how elders used to stalk seals.

Evenings were passed with Gagnon, the group's leader, playing the fiddle, accompanied by an elder on the accordion.

The project received support from the Government of Nunavut's Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth, the Continental Polar Shelf Project, the Nunavut Wildlife Management Board, Parks Canada, Arctic Net and Polar Sea Adventures.

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