

FAR AND AWAY IN GREENLAND

Seeking to renew his love of solo nature experiences, **Morten Strange** set off with his camping gear to Greenland. The wilderness was there, but alas much of the wildlife was not.

Photos by **Morten Strange**



Since I first came to live in Singapore in 1980, I have watched our nature areas shrink, and the remainder getting more manicured and crowded with visitors. I appreciate the public enjoying nature; it is just that there is no sense of remoteness or tranquility anywhere in Singapore, or in the region. Parts of Thailand (such as Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary) and Indonesia, and the mountains of Papua, are immense but you cannot go there on your own; regulations require you to hike with a guide. To experience true wilderness you have to go further afield.

I do not really enjoy long, trans-continental trips any longer, and I am aware of the carbon footprint you add when you fly. However, I allow myself one trip abroad per year, so when my son (age 31) invited me to visit him in Greenland during the summer of 2019 I accepted. My son teaches English at a high school in the town of Aasiaat (3,200 people) along the Disko Bay area in western Greenland.

Greenland is a vast place, but the geology, sea currents and climate is such that only the south and most of the west coast is fairly sheltered and ice free for most of the year. The east and north coasts are rugged, steep and inhospitable, even in summer they are mainly ice-locked, and drift ice extends into the sea almost reaching Iceland. All the interior of Greenland is covered in a permanent ice cap, the so-called Greenland Ice Sheet, 3km deep in places and now often in the news as it melts due to higher global temperatures and the melt water contributes to raising sea levels. So, actually Greenland is full of ice, and Iceland is fairly green.

Left: Aasiaat island in Disko Bay looking south-east toward Sarqardlip Nuna island in the far distance.

Greenland is a self-governing territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. The Inuit are around 88% of the 56,000 population.

Aasiaat is a small island with a town of the same name, just 5x7 km in area, but there is a short runway – where Dash 8 propeller airplanes can land – and a sheltered harbour that is ice-free most of the year, sometimes the entire winter. You get there by flying in from Kangerlussuaq some 40 minutes by air to the south; from there you connect up to Copenhagen, Denmark. Nuuk, further to the south, is the largest town in Greenland and the capital.

Even on the small island of Aasiaat you can easily get away from it all. In a little pond below my son's apartment block I found several pairs of Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) breeding. The last time I

saw a flock of those was far from the beach in Bunaken National Marine Park off Sulawesi; this small freshwater shorebird morphs into a pelagic marine species during its long-distance winter migration to tropical waters. Also in that pond we had breeding Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), that widespread and hardy duck.

Passerines are scarce in the Arctic, but the delightful Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) was everywhere around town, singing from the rooftops and feeding its newly fledged young on the rocks.

Greenland has no sediments or top soil to speak of, the bare fell habitat started just behind my son's home, and the two of us would often go for walks to the far corners of the island. In the extreme east of Aasiaat island we found breeding evidence of

Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) and Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*). However, with plenty of spent 20-gauge shotgun cartridges on the ground here and there, it was also obvious that local hunters kept the wildlife density severely in check.

As noted earlier, my visit to Greenland was in part to get out of the city for a while and enjoy some alone time. Surveys have shown that while it is not good for you to be lonely, it is great to be alone! In fact, I enjoy my own company; so in my older age – with the kids all grown up – I plan a bit more time alone in nature. To prepare for future hikes into remoteness, I invested in a brand new backpack, a good pair of boots and cold-weather camping gear. So I wanted to put my equipment to the



There is a stark contrast between Greenland's rugged and inhospitable east coast (top) and the sheltered west coast (above) where most people live; even here you can glimpse the famous Ice Sheet starting further inland.



A delightful shorebird, the Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*), morphs from breeding in small Arctic freshwater ponds into a pelagic offshore migrant during the winter season. Here a colourful female.



The Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) is widespread and numerous in Greenland, both in the fell and near houses; here a male singing.



The Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) is a hardy and widespread duck; it breeds on Aasiaat island.

test in Greenland and check how far I can walk these days. I used to hike through the North like that when I was young, and I want to do so again. I do not follow trails; I find my own way across the terrain and camp wherever I want, this way I am sure that my aloneness will not be disrupted.

Just south of Aasiaat is another much bigger island, Sarqardlip Nuna; some 40km long and 11km at the widest point. It is uninhabited; there are a few recreational cabins and shelters along the north coast, but no one lives there permanently. You cannot find this island on either Wikipedia or Tripadvisor, I am not even quite sure of the spelling, but this was where I wanted to go. I had a man from Aasiaat town with a small speedboat drop me off right there on the rocks; his uncle picked me up again from the same spot four days later. With 15 kg on my back, I could not walk as



In Greenland you can camp anywhere you want; all you need is a freshwater source nearby, and there are plenty of those.



On the rugged and remote south coast of Sarqardlip Nuna, a Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*) has found a secure spot to build its nest.



The Purple Sandpiper near its nest.



I never saw the Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*) on Aasiaat, but on Sarqardlip Nuna it was plentiful; this is a male singing from a high perch.



Another classic northern bird: The Common Raven (*Corvus corax*); it occurs everywhere in Greenland. On Sarqardlip Nuna I managed to get close to a pair breeding on a steep cliff face.

SUMMER INSECTS

During the short Arctic summer a surprising number of insects emerge. Here an Arctic Fritillary (*Boloria chariclea*) and an Arctic Bumblebee (*Bombus Polaris*) feed on one of the many tiny flowers that light up the landscape across the fell.



far as I had planned. The terrain was good for hiking in the sense that there were no trees or bushes, but I had to be careful navigating across the rocky landscape; there were swampy bits with tricky tussocks to cross and many steep and awkward sections that slowed me down. I could only manage some 1 to 1.2 km/hr, and with plenty of breaks I covered about 10km per day, some 40km in all.

This was the end of June, over 200 km north of the Arctic Circle, so the sun never set completely – it just moved low all along the horizon day and night. The air temperature was max 9°C and at night it would drop to 2-3°C. I had a small propane stove and made soup and instant noodles at night, hot coffee in the morning, but otherwise I lived on biscuits and power bars. Water for drinking and bathing was plentiful; there were clean streams and lakes full of melted snow everywhere. Following the Leave No Trace ethics, I brought a small trowel and buried whatever I had to leave behind.

The south coast of Sarqardlip Nuna was stunning, it is hard to describe in words: the crystal clean air, the total silence. Waking up in the tent listening to the call of the Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*) – a loud, haunting yodel – coming from the lake nearby. I tried to photograph some of the birds I came across, the birdlife there was much better than on Aasiaat island. I got a few, but others such as Long-tailed Skua (*Stercorarius longicaudus*), Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) and the magnificent Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) flying by I simply couldn't capture.

Non-bird vertebrate animals are few and far between in Greenland. In the whole of western Greenland including the Disko Bay area there are only three. No, this is not a typo: 3! Arctic Fox (*Vulpes lagopus*), Caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) and then the only one I saw: Arctic Hare (*Lepus arcticus*). Further north in Greenland a few more mammals occur, including the Northern Collared Lemming (*Dicrostonyx*

While there are not many terrestrial animals in the Disko Bay area, this part of Greenland is a hotspot for marine biodiversity and abundance of sea birds and marine mammals. Or rather, it used to be. Today western Greenland's marine life is devastated; there are virtually no birds, mammals or even fish left...



A classic high Arctic bird that you will only find in remote parts of Greenland, near towns they have all been shot out: the Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*), here a male calling from an elevated perch.

groenlandicus) as well as the charismatic Muskox (*Ovibos moschatus*) which has been introduced into some other areas recently. Invasive rats and mice might occur in some towns, but they cannot survive in the fell. That hare, still in its white winter fur, jumping away from me on Sarqardlip Nuna was the only terrestrial mammal I saw during my stay in Greenland.

Yes, the Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*) occurs in western Greenland as well, but as the Latin name indicates, it is classified as a marine mammal, and it is rare. During my son's time on Aasiaat, a few have been spotted near the local shrimp factory in the winter time, when the bears can walk from island to island; they are then attracted by the fishy smell. It is a bit of a paradox that as Polar Bears are getting rarer, they are seen more often by people all over the Arctic. With food being scant for bears, and the sea ice retreating, bears increasingly often venture into human settlements and camps to scavenge.

Greenland's Ministry for Fishing and Hunting estimated in 2018 that there were 2,826 Polar Bears living in the wider western Greenland area

facing Baffin Island in Canada. Polar bears are still hunted by the Inuit in Greenland; there is a quota for 140 kills per year, 92 of those in western Greenland.

So while there are not many terrestrial animals in the Disko Bay area, this part of Greenland is a hotspot for marine biodiversity and abundance of sea birds and marine mammals. Or rather, it used to be. Today western Greenland's marine life is devastated; there are virtually no birds, mammals or even fish left, according to *A Farewell to Greenland's Wildlife* by Danish investigative journalist Kjeld Hansen. It is a chilling account of wildlife mismanagement and over-exploitation by the local Greenland population and political leadership. Some sensible put-and-take hunting takes place on introduced herds of Caribou and Muskox, but everything else is unsustainable – the onslaught on sea birds has been especially catastrophic.

Once a week a large cruise ship visits Aasiaat on its way from Nuuk up to Ilulissat, another similar town some 90 km across the Disko Bay, near the Ilulissat Ice Fjord where three



A shrimp boat near Ilulissat in the Ilulissat Ice Fjord. In Greenland, most large fishes have been fished out. In the 1960s, more than 400,000 tons of cod were caught each year, today that volume is less than 10,000 tons. The shrimp fishery is still doing OK.



A Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) in the Ilulissat Ice Fjord.



Today the Disko Bay area is largely devoid of birds. All you see today are a few gulls and this one: the Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*).

major glaciers empty into the bay, a UNESCO world heritage site.

My son and I took this ship to Ilulissat and back to check out the bay area. We passed right by Grønne Ejland, a sanctuary for breeding birds in the Disko Bay region made famous by Arctic researcher Dr Carsten Egevang's work and publications. It was a beautiful cold but sunny and calm day, you could see for miles and I spent all the time up on deck, 9 hours of continuous watching with binoculars.

The only regular bird was the Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*). There were a few Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) and Glaucous Gulls (*Larus hyperboreus*) near the shores. I saw not a single Brünnich's Guillemot (*Uria lomvia*) during the crossing, not a single Common or King Eider (*Somateria mollissima* and *S. spectabilis*). No Black Guillemots (*Cepphus grylle*), Atlantic Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) or Little Auks (*Alle*

alle). All those species used to occur by the thousands, some by the hundreds of thousands.

While we were pulling out of Ilulissat, a few speedboats came racing up through the drift ice near the cruise ship, and the point-man riding shotgun in front of the boat started blasting away at a few of the Fulmars, that was all that was left in Disko Bay to kill. I have been told that Fulmars have a fishy taste and make for poor eating. The many elderly eco-tourists watching from the ship – they pay a small fortune to come and experience Greenland's wonderful nature – were not impressed.

Unreal as it might seem, the hunting takes place on state subsidies. To keep the local culture alive, Greenland's government subsidises purchase of speedboats by registered hunters with up to 70%. Those outboard engines of course suck up a lot of petrol, but petrol is cheap: DKK5.21

(S\$1.07) per litre in Aasiaat's marina, less than half the price you would pay in Denmark. NSS member and Arctic expert Richard White, who has guided wildlife tours to western Greenland and visited Aasiaat, told me that more than anything else, boat ownership has contributed to the devastation of Greenland's wildlife. On the face of it, the Arctic appears infinite, but Kjeld Hansen shows in his book a map of Greenland indicating that virtually every remote island and sea bird colony is now within reach of hunters in fast boats. Today the Disko Bay area is an almost empty sea; there is little life left there. It is an ecological crisis that not enough people talk about.

Wildlife has been devastated; an animal like the Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) today only occurs in the remote north-east of Greenland, an area where people never lived and which today is a national park, the only national park in the country. My son has lived five years in Aasiaat and sailed around Disko Bay many times, he has never seen a seal!

During my 18 days in Greenland I saw one whale, two seals, one terrestrial mammal, and 22 species of birds. But I had savoured again the experience of being alone with nature and look forward to more. 🌲

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Financial analyst Morten Strange was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, served in the Danish army, studied economics and worked in the offshore oil industry. He moved to Singapore in 1980 and has been a member of NSS since 1984; he is a former Editor-in-chief of Nature Watch and currently Honorary Secretary of the society.