

# ARCTIC WILDLIFE

---

by Vicki Friesen, Sherwood

The wildlife of the Arctic has many awesome differences from that of P.E.I. and yet has many similarities. David and Winnie Cairns and I discovered this when we had the opportunity to observe the plants and animals of the Arctic in an archipelago off northern Quebec last summer.

The major component of the wildlife in our area was its birdlife, the most special aspect of which was its conspicuousness. Some of these birds never occur on P.E.I., and were a thrill to add to our personal checklists. For example, on two occasions a gyrfalcon ('ginaguk' in the Eskimo language) visited our island, resting on the rocks for a good half hour each time. The gyrfalcon, a large, slender white bird speckled with brown, is a rare sighting. Another treat was a two-week visit in August of a group of parasitic jaegers ('isungak'). These birds are built like terns but are the size of gulls, and are dark brown above and pale below, with a black cap and brown collar. Although not really 'parasitic', they obtain their food by stealing fish from other birds such as guillemots (see 'Studying Guillemots in Hudson Strait' in last month's issue). As the jaegers stopped by the island during their migration, I spent many hours watching their chases of the guillemots, as exciting as watching hawks hunting.

Some of the birds which we saw, visit P.E.I. on rare occasions. For example, every morning we could see a group of three to ten puffins ('akpukaluk') loafing around the island. A few miles from us there was a colony of hundreds of thousands of thick-billed murres ('akpa'), closely related to the smaller but otherwise identical common murre occurring throughout Atlantic Canada. The akpa nested on an island north of us, but their main feeding ground was to the south, so that flocks of from two to a thousand birds were constantly flying past our island in their typical 'V'-formation. Murres are a common food source for the Inuit. Arctic, common and red-throated loons, red-breasted mergansers, Arctic terns ('esuga'), common and king eiders ('mitik'), and glaucous gulls, all birds which are rare visitors to P.E.I., were almost everyday occurrences in the Arctic.

A few birds which are common in winter or during migration on P.E.I. raise their young in northern Quebec. A pair of snow buntings nested on our island, taking the business of catching insects for their chicks very seriously. Although Canada geese and snow geese nested further inland, we only saw them flying by. In addition a few birds which are common and may even be a nuisance here, such as the herring gull and raven, also occur in the Arctic. Noticeably absent was a group of birds taken for granted on P.E.I., namely the song birds; encounters with water pipits, Lapland longspurs and northern wheatears were exciting, occurring only further inland or during migration.

Fish are also a major component of the Arctic ecosystem, but unless one is a diver there is little opportunity to see them alive. A large part of the Inuit diet is made up of fish, especially Arctic char which is similar to trout but commonly weighs ten pounds or more. During our stay we also had the opportunity to taste sea trout and even sculpin!

In the area where we stayed mammals formed only an inconspicuous part of the fauna. Although giant herds of caribou occur in some parts of the Arctic, there are few in northern Quebec. Lemmings, Arctic hares, otters, Arctic fox, and polar bears were also said to occur in the area, although we never saw them. The one mammal we did meet was an unusually friendly one; while we were setting up camp, a weasel came to check out his new neighbours, investigating the tents and equipment and even sniffing our boots! This deficiency of land mammals in