

# A SUMMER IN A RESEARCH CAMP ON THE ARCTIC TUNDRA

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by Sue Stephenson

Camp Finney is a research camp located about 40 km east of Churchill, northern Manitoba, near the center of a breeding colony of snow geese. This camp was originally founded about fifteen years ago by Dr. Fred Cooke to study the breeding biology of the snow goose. Since its founding the area of study has expanded to cover other birds besides geese, that also breed in the delta.

With the help of an NSERC grant, I was given the opportunity to spend a summer working at Camp Finney, working most of the time on one study, but spending a day or two on each of the other studies. In this article I am going to try and explain a little about the camp and the work being done there.

The camp itself was located in the subarctic tundra in the middle of a delta and consisted of two islands joined by a bridge. On these islands were five buildings - a dome shaped Quonset hut in which we all slept, a kitchen trailer where we cooked and ate our meals, the cook shack which was a wet and dry lab, the food shelter to store our supplies, and the equipment shelter. Last year we averaged about fifteen people in camp, occasionally dropping to around six and once reaching as high as thirty.

The work I was involved in was as a research assistant to Kathy Martin (from Stanhope, PEI) who was working on her PhD at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario under Dr. Fred Cooke. Kathy was doing a study of the role both males and females play in bringing up their young in the Willow Ptarmigan, a type of grouse.

In order to do this, each bird had to be individually identifiable, which was done by placing various combinations of color bands on the legs of the birds. This meant each bird in the study area had to be caught by means of an extendable 21 foot noose pole, weighed, measured and banded - two bands placed on each leg.

Once most of the birds in the area were banded, we concentrated our efforts on finding nests. This was quite difficult because the birds usually nested in the center of low willow bushes. Because of this, and the cryptic coloring of the hens, we used two trained bird dogs, both English setters, to find the nests for us.

Once found, the nests were monitored until the eggs hatched, then the chicks were wing-tagged, which means placing a small numbered metal tag on a flap of skin on the wing. In this way the chicks could also be identified individually and changes in the weights and sizes could be determined.

This work on the ptarmigan filled the whole summer, beginning in early May when the birds arrived to their breeding grounds, to June when the nests were started, through July when the nests hatched and the chicks fledged, to the middle of August when many of the birds had migrated out again.

During the summer, however, I did manage to spend some time on four other studies going on in the delta. Two of these were shorebird studies, looking at semipalmated sandpipers and northern phalaropes. The work being done on both of these was mainly gathering breeding biology data, looking at the number of eggs laid, incubation time and many other factors involved in the breeding cycle. They also color-banded adults and chicks and monitored nests.

Another study going on is a study of the effects of the feeding habits of the snow goose on the grass around the colony, done by the University of Toronto. To feed, the geese simply graze on large 'flats' of grass at the edge of the bay. This study set up enclosures to keep the geese out of certain areas and study the changes in the growth of the grass.

The other, and most important study taking place at Camp Finney, is the study of the snow goose. The work consists of three major phases: initiation, or the