

NWT/NUNAVUT BIRD CHECKLIST SURVEY

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2003



A program coordinated by the Canadian Wildlife Service since 1995

CHECKLIST DATABASE A GREAT RESOURCE

The Checklist database is becoming more valuable as it grows and demonstrates its utility. The database now contains approximately 70,000 observations from 7,000 checklists. Records have been received or compiled from 355 observers. While it may appear obvious, the permanency, accessibility, and security of the database have revolutionized how we share information about birds.

Each year the Canadian Wildlife Service receives requests for information on birds of specific areas, or requests about specific species. Providing standardized information was not possible prior to the existence of the database. The information provided was often biased by the knowledge (or lack thereof) and experience of employees about the specific area or species of interest. The database addresses that bias. While not all bird records from the north are in the database, more are added each year and the information produced is steadily improved. In the past year, the database has been used to update range maps in two new books (The Sibley Field Guide to Birds of Western [and Eastern] North America) and fill more than 15 formal requests for data. Please use the contact information provided at the end of this newsletter for any data requests.

WEST NILE VIRUS: COMING SOON TO THE NORTH?

West Nile Virus is spreading rapidly in North America. From the first known case in New York in August 1999, it has already spread to all but four US states and five Canadian provinces. Experts predict that the virus will spread to the remaining provinces this year or soon thereafter. In the old world, however, the virus is restricted to temperate latitudes, so it may not spread to northern Canada.

The virus was first documented in West Nile province, Uganda, in 1937. The virus is carried by wild birds, but affects some other animals, including humans and domestic species such as horses. The virus can affect hosts by causing swelling of the brain that may be fatal. Many bird species in the old world have immunity to the virus, indicating that it has been present for some time. North American birds have not been exposed to the virus, and do not have widespread immunity. The virus is present in blood and is transmitted between birds by mosquitoes.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) currently lists 124 wild species of birds that have been killed by the virus. The list includes all types of birds, from waterfowl to gulls to corvids to warblers. Corvids appear to be especially vulnerable to the disease. Many thousands of birds have already died from this virus.

If you see a freshly dead corvid during mosquito season, and worry about West Nile Virus, you may contact a wildlife disease specialist in your area. The first Internet link below contains all the information you need to find the right person in your area.

For further information about the West Nile Virus, please consult the following web pages and links therein:

The Canadian Cooperative Wildlife Health Centre: <http://wildlife.usask.ca/index.html>

Health Canada: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/pphb-dgspsp/wnv-vwn/>



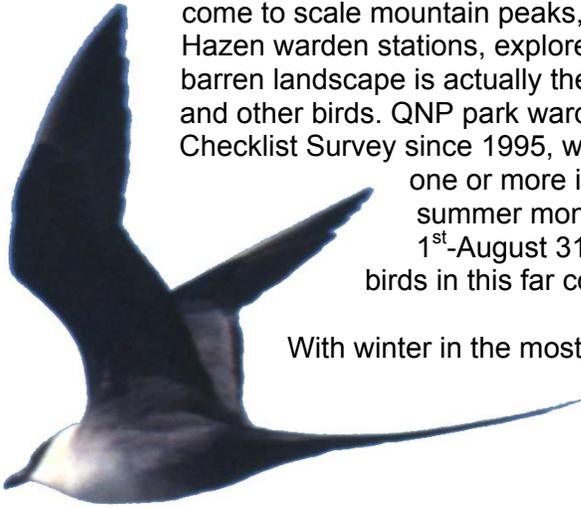
Corvids, such as the Common Raven, are especially susceptible to the West Nile Virus.

BIRDS ON TOP OF THE WORLD: A PEEK AT QUTTINIRPAAQ NATIONAL PARK

By Alana Demko

[Note: this article was written before the 2002 season records were added to the database]

Canada's second-largest National Park truly is on the 'top of the world', as its Inuit name, Quttinirpaaq, suggests. The park covers 37,775 km² of northern Ellesmere Island, Nunavut and was established in 1988. Quttinirpaaq National Park (QNP) doesn't attract typical tourists. The few visitors who do venture above the 81st parallel come to scale mountain peaks, hike the trail systems and glaciers near the Tanquary Fiord and Lake Hazen warden stations, explore the historical site of Fort Conger, and... to bird watch. This seemingly barren landscape is actually the summer destination of over 30 species of waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls and other birds. QNP park wardens and visitors have been noting their observations for the Bird Checklist Survey since 1995, which total 478 records as of spring 2002. (A record is an observation of one or more individuals of a single species.) Although these records only cover the summer months from May 29th-August 25th (the park is open to the public from June 1st-August 31st), they still provide valuable information on the status of breeding birds in this far corner of the High Arctic.



*A common bird in Quttinirpaaq National Park –
the Long-tailed Jaeger.*

With winter in the most northerly region of Canada lasting until mid-May, Quttinirpaaq National Park does not have much avian action until late May. The earliest brave migrants to venture this far north include the ubiquitous Snow Bunting and Rock Ptarmigan. Checklist records of first sightings for these two species in QNP are May 29th and June 7th, respectively; however, expeditions prior to the inception of the Checklist program have observed both as early as mid-April! As well, Long-tailed Jaegers and shorebird species like Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, and Baird's Sandpiper have all been noted by June 2nd. In mid-June, the final stragglers arrive at their breeding grounds. They include Red-

throated Loons, along with the occasional Pacific Loon, and Common Ringed Plovers, a Eurasian migrant species often seen in Greenland and Baffin Island during the summer. The birds with the longest voyage to QNP, however, are the Arctic Terns. They complete an epic 32,000 km journey from their winter home in Antarctica.

Thirty species have been recorded for QNP from Checklists to date, 15 of which are confirmed breeders (nests and/or fledglings have been seen). The majority of nesting observations, which occur from mid-June through to mid-July, are concentrated in certain frequently visited and comparatively fertile areas such as Lake Hazen, one of the largest Canadian lakes north of the Arctic Circle. Red-throated Loons, probably attracted by the plentiful Arctic Char in the lake, have been observed nesting in the area in all years. Seven species of shorebirds, including those on the Top Ten Most Spotted List (below), have been seen in the area by our agents (that means you!): Ruddy Turnstone, Sanderling and Red Knot have all bred successfully at least one summer since 1997. Rock Ptarmigan, Snow Bunting, and Long-tailed Duck are all common birds that also breed at Lake Hazen.

Nine-month-long winters, complete with 24-hour darkness, frequent blizzards, -40°C temperatures and little food mean that there are no year-round resident birds in Quttinirpaaq National Park. So, when do our feathered friends finally decide that it's too cold in QNP and head for warmer climes? Pre-Checklist records from Ellesmere Island indicate that most species remain until the first week of September, when freshwater lakes (like Lake Hazen) become frozen over. (Large lakes usually do not become ice free in a typical summer.) Shorebirds, gulls, and Arctic Terns start off the winter migration at this time, whereas the year-round inhabitants of NWT and Nunavut, such as the Snow Bunting, Rock Ptarmigan, and Snowy Owl, will "chill" in the park throughout September and early October. However, only 11 records are currently in the Checklist database from August 15th onwards, so an accurate comparison of departure dates to other sources of information cannot be made as of yet.

The Checklist survey program has helped to confirm the yearly occurrence of the usual suspects of QNP (see the Top Ten Most Spotted List). The Checklist Survey also helped document several new, northerly bird sightings for both the official QNP and Ellesmere Island species lists. On July 17, 1997, David Henry spotted a pair of Pacific Loons at Lake Hazen. A White-rumped Sandpiper was identified by two separate observers, Doug Stern and Bill Stott, on August 22, 2001 near Tanquary Fiord. Two other bird species, Common Loon (one sighting at Lake Hazen in 1995 and another at Tanquary Fiord in 1998) and Willow Ptarmigan (8 seen with young at Lewis Lake in 2000), are

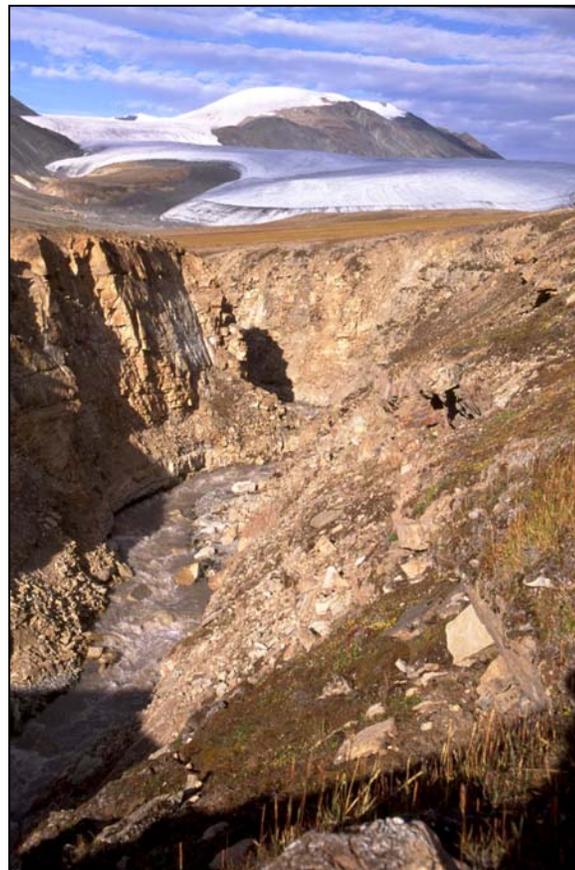
possible additions to the list; without photo/video evidence available, though, these sightings could have been misidentified (potential Pacific Loon or Rock Ptarmigan).

With continued observer efforts, including daily summer records of bird activity from late May to late August/early September at wildlife hotspots such as Lake Hazen and Tanquary Fiord, population trends for the birds of Quttinirpaaq National Park could be determined, and perhaps the known range of other bird species could be refined. We thank all of the dedicated bird watchers and Parks Canada staff for the many records sent in...any and all data is invaluable to increase our knowledge of this remote and truly unique Arctic region. And do keep them coming...we love checklists!

Top Ten Birds Most Often Recorded on Checklists

10. Baird's Sandpiper
9. Glaucous Gull
8. Arctic Tern
7. Rock Ptarmigan
6. Long-tailed Jaeger
5. Red Knot
4. Common Ringed Plover
3. Long-tailed Duck
2. Snow Bunting
1. Ruddy Turnstone

Extra information about birds in the park can be found in "Morrison, R.I.G. 1992. Avifauna of Ellesmere Island National Park Reserve. Technical Report Series No. 158, Canadian Wildlife Service, Ottawa, Ontario."



Looking towards the Cleaves Glacier as it flows from the Viking Ice Cap in Quttinirpaaq National Park, Ellesmere Island.

CHECKLIST DATABASE GOING ONTO THE INTERNET IN 2003

This is the year that the Checklist Database will be moved onto the Internet. Current plans are to launch the site by December 2003 or early 2004. The following features are planned for the site:

- Ability to directly download spreadsheet-format data from a user-selected area or for a selected species;
- Availability of dynamic, current maps of species distribution with a small selection of map layers such as territorial borders, major waterbodies, communities, and tree line;
- Full data entry over the Internet, with an easy-to-use format that should resemble the paper checklists;
- Ability to use a map on-line to find coordinates for the location of your checklist;
- Personal lists of checklists and birds for each observer, with saved information so you do not have to enter your name and other information unless it requires updating;
- Automated data quality control; your observations will be compared to known distributions for each species, and for dates when the species should be present. Any unusual records will be flagged and users will have to provide some clarification and justification of the observation before it is included in the database; and,
- We are checking if it is possible to also accept an electronic photo of unusual observations to accompany written descriptions. This would greatly increase the certainty and documentation of any unusual records.

A SAMPLING OF RECENT NOTEWORTHY RECORDS

Many interesting observations were submitted to the Checklist program (directly and indirectly) this year. Here are just a few that were surprising.

- **Lark Sparrow** near Fort Liard
- **Evening Grosbeak** over-wintering in Yellowknife
- **Sabine's Gull** passing through Hay River
- **Yellow-rumped Warbler** (Audubon's variety) and **Tree Swallow** on Prince Leopold Island in June
- **Bar-tailed Godwit**, Great Bear Lake (2001)
- **Rufous Hummingbird** near Fort Smith
- **Canada Goose** in Quttinirpaaq National Park
- **Gray Catbird** in Nahanni National Park
- **Eared Grebe** in Hay River
- **Long-eared Owl** nesting in Yellowknife
- **Green-winged Teal** in Baker Lake & Southampton Is.

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American Avocet is a rare shorebird in the Northwest Territories, only nesting near Fort Smith, just north of Alberta.

QUESTIONS? SUGGESTIONS? PLEASE CONTACT US!



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