

Birds in the Arctic



Photo: Lisa Haglund

Experiencing – without disturbing – Arctic birdlife

Birdlife in the Arctic is diverse yet unique. The Arctic summer is short and hectic and the weather can be a challenge even during the summer months. The large numbers of birds during this period is a distinctive feature, since most bird species only spend the summer in the Arctic.

Species living in the Arctic have a high number of natural challenges, primarily related to various predators. Although there are not so many different species of birds in the Arctic, ten thousand individuals of a single species can occur in one

general area. Especially the sheer number of birds in well-preserved Arctic colonies and the overwhelming sight and sound does not fail to impress. In large bird colonies, there are often several different species living side by side.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Brünnichs guillemot. The ideal nesting site is located with no access for predators.



Photo: Georg Bangjord

Glaucous gulls have their name from the Latin word "glaucus" denoting a bluish-green or grey color.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Grey phalarope, male, one of several arctic waders.

Respect and awareness

It is important that people visiting the Arctic are observant of the bird life around them in order to avoid unnecessary negative impacts. Show respect and sensitivity – especially in the most vulnerable periods and places. The individual species in the Arctic often have small margins for success in the breeding and growth period. There are periods during the summer when the birds are more vulnerable and sensitive. This is especially the case during pair-forming and throughout the breeding season, but also during molting and the juvenile stages.

There is considerable variation in nesting periods between different species of birds in the Arctic. Some lay eggs in the last half of May while others are still incubating in August.

Most species however, have finished the most vulnerable part of the breeding cycle in late July. It is generally difficult to spot the well-camouflaged eggs and chicks of Arctic birds. Be aware of where you set foot in order to avoid stepping on eggs and nests – particularly those of waders and the Arctic tern. Arctic terns are common in many areas of the northern high latitudes and will attack intruders to protect their eggs and chicks. Terns often nest in large colonies in places where there are little or no foxes. Adjacent to such colonies other species often nest to take advantage of the aggressive protection by terns.

Regulations

Regulations relating to nature conservation, bird protection and bird sanctuaries apply all over the Arctic. It is essential to know the regulations relating to environmental protection, birds and bird sanctuaries, including entrance prohibition, other prohibitions and safety zones.

Entrance to bird sanctuaries is normally prohibited during breeding season and may also apply to safety zones both on land and at sea. Disturbance and harm of birds are prohibited

by law in large parts of the Arctic and usually apply to eggs, nests and lairs, as well as the birds themselves. Sounding ship sirens, firing shots or producing other loud noises within specific distances to sanctuaries or larger concentrations of birds may also be a violation of local regulations.

Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Guidelines

Watching wildlife in its natural and undisturbed environment is a great experience. To avoid disturbance of birds, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

Birds on the water

Birds often feed on the sea surface, dive from it, or simply rest and bathe.

- Be careful when approaching groups of birds on the water
- Do not drive into large flocks
- Reduce speed
- Avoid sudden change of direction
- Do not separate chicks from the parents

Birds on bird cliffs

Birds in colonies try to build their nests in places inaccessible to fox, bear and humans. Geese often nest by the rich vegetation below bird cliffs. Birds nesting low on the cliffs are easily disturbed, especially at the time when the chicks are about to jump. Disturbance may cause "early jumping," which is not desirable.

- Be cautious when in proximity to bird cliffs and do not climb into bird colonies
- When birds are nesting low on the cliffs make sure to show consideration and avoid approaching too close
- Do not use ship siren, fire shots or produce other loud noises when in proximity of bird colonies
- Human presence should be avoided in the proximity of bird cliffs under which geese or eider ducks breed and nest, as they are very sensitive to disturbance

Birds on land

Birds that nest in open plains get frightened at considerable distances. If parent birds are blocked from returning to their nests, increased predation of eggs and chicks by skuas, gulls and arctic foxes can occur. You can also accidentally step on chicks or nests. Some species such as geese and eider ducks are especially vulnerable during the breeding season. If they are scared off the nest, predators may prey on the eggs or chicks, or the eggs might get cold. In July-August, geese and eider ducks are molting their wing feathers and are unable to fly. They are often found in large, dense groups on land or on water and are sensitive to disturbance.

- Keep your distance from nesting birds and be especially careful to avoid unnecessary walking in areas where you can see that the birds are nesting and raising their chicks
- Avoid landing in areas with concentrations of breeding birds, often on small islands, rocky islets, spits, points of land or areas beneath bird cliffs where there are often nesting geese
- If one discovers a nesting goose or duck, it is often just one among more in the same area. If this happens, retreat silently the same way that you came from
- When walking in areas with birds, watch where you set foot to avoid stepping on eggs. It is recommended to walk in the intertidal zone since most shore nesting birds will build nests above the high tide line in the dry sand of the upper beach zone.



Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

An Arctic tern will attack you if you come too close to its nest or chicks.

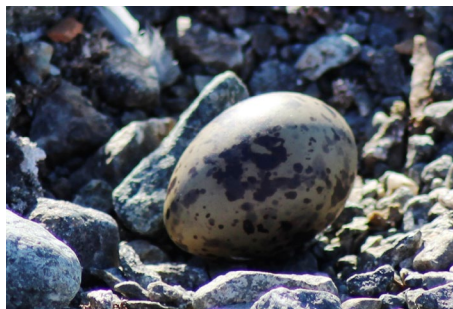


Photo: Ilja Leo Lang

Well-camouflaged eggs increase the risk of accidentally stepping on eggs.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Barnacle goose family. Adults with young are particularly sensitive to intrusion.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Guidelines

Attacking birds and birds pretending to be injured

While nesting, Arctic terns are very protective and will attack anyone who comes close. Typically, the terns will first fly shrieking in the air over the intruder, then they will "dive-bomb." Terns can deliver serious blows to the head. If Arctic terns start dive-bombing you, you are too close to their nests. If this happens you should:

- Hold your hand (or a stick) steadily above your head and move away in the direction you came from
- Proceed carefully and watch out for eggs and chicks on the ground
- Do not wave anything above your head. It may injure the bird
- Do not stay in the area as this puts potential eggs or chicks on the ground at risk of getting cold, which may be fatal

Skuas are also very protective if you get too close to their nests or chicks.

- If skuas attack – walk away from the nest and/or chicks

Waders, terns and skuas can pretend to be injured: walking or running with the wings hanging down if their nests are close by.

- If a bird acts as if it is injured, you should retreat in the direction you approached from, or follow the bird, as it will lead you away from the nest



Photo: Christian Kempf

Ivory Gulls are primarily seen in the high Arctic. Adult (left) & young bird (right).



Photo: Georg Bangjord

Atlantic puffins have a wide distribution range with breeding grounds from the sub-Arctic to the high Arctic.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

An Arctic fox is trying to prey on this Pink footed geese's eggs – without success.