

Birding in the Eastern Arctic

By Bruce Di Labio



Common Ringed Plover

In the fall of 2008, I worked as part of a team conducting aerial surveys in the high Arctic. The purpose of these surveys was to collect data on the abundance of marine mammals and birds. Between August and October I had a rare opportunity to visit and bird one of Canada's most interesting and picturesque areas – Baffin Island.

Located in the Eastern Arctic below Ellesmere Island, it is one of the largest islands in the world. Upon my arrival at Iqaluit, in early August, it was evident that the beginning of fall was well underway. Unlike Ontario, where fall is considered the most colourful of all seasons, autumn on Baffin Island is devoid of the majestic beauty of broad-leafed trees. Instead, scattered across the rocky terrain and gently rolling landscape is a variety of small Arctic plants, lichens, moss and shrubs that are clearly at the end of their seasonal beauty.

Iqaluit, however, offers treasures that can't be found in the south. Nothing can compare to the scenic beauty of icebergs floating in Frobisher Bay, standing against the setting sun and most important, the hospitality of the locals.

For birders, this unique habitat is home to species that we only encounter as migrants through Ontario in spring, fall and winter. Strapped into a Twin Otter, I had the opportunity to observe a variety of both birds and mammals in Foxe Basin, Igloodik, Cape Dorset, Hudson Strait and Iqaluit. Flying around in a Twin Otter was an experience in itself. In aviation, this plane is the workhorse of the Arctic, due largely to its ability to make short takeoffs and landings. Surveying over Hudson Strait at 500 ft. and 130 knots took some practice, but amazingly I became good at identifying most of the species of birds. Looking down at them flying or sitting on the water forced me to call on other birding skills, such as flight patterns and shape, for accurate identification.

Due to their size, the marine mammals were far easier to find and identify! Surprisingly, one of the rarest observations was an American Robin enjoying the last few days of warmish weather in downtown Iqaluit! With no trees and few grass-covered areas, this was the most unlikely 'vacation resort' I would have predicted for a Robin.

One of the rarest observations for me, personally was the Common Ringed Plover. This bird breeds on northern Baffin Island and southern Ellesmere Island and winters in Europe and Africa. Two juveniles

were photographed as they fed along the tidal flats in Iqaluit. There have been some sporadic sightings along the coast of Newfoundland, but there are no Ontario records.

A walk around Iqaluit in mid-August netted a family of Northern Wheatears, Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspur. The Common Raven – can you guess? Yes, it is by far the most pervasive landbird to be found.

Above the Arctic Circle in Igloodik, north of Iqaluit, there was an obvious change in bird life. On my visit in mid-September, more northern birds were evident. Highlights included two White morph Gyrfalcons, Purple and Baird's sandpipers, Red Phalarope and King Eider. On a shoreline aerial survey at the north end of Foxe Basin, 1000+ Brant and thousands of Snow Geese were observed. Mammals included 12 polar bears and two species of whales – the beluga and bowhead.

On my last visit to Igloodik, in mid-October, winter had covered the area in a blanket of snow, with very cold temperatures. Shoreline waters were beginning to freeze over and there was little bird life to be found. With increasing snowcover and blizzard-like conditions, it was becoming increasingly difficult to spot the grandest mammal of our Canadian Arctic – the polar bear.

Birding in the high Arctic is a challenge but very rewarding. It is great to be able to see some of our transient species in their summer domain.

