

The Snow Bunting in Finnmark



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

The Snow Bunting is a characteristic species along the coast of Finnmark in spring. In some years as many as several tens of thousands of Snow Buntings stay along the coasts in April and May, before continuing to their breeding grounds in north-east Greenland and Svalbard. The local breeding birds arrive at their nesting sites in May, and their main breeding grounds are in higher-lying areas. A reduction in the breeding population in parts of the outer coastal areas of Finnmark has been registered since the end of the 1980's. The reason for this decline is not clear.

The Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) is a handsome, robust and hardy passerine that can be met with all the way up to the highest mountain peaks. In summer plumage the male has a contrasting pattern of white plumage with black back and wing tips. The female shows less contrast with brownish and speckled head and back. Despite a relatively large body its flight appears buoyant. This is due to the Snow Bunting having long wings that are specially adapted to the long flight right across the North Atlantic. The males are also clearly larger than the females.

The Snow Bunting has a circumpolar distribution that stretches all the way across the tundra in northern Europe, Asia and North America. In southern Norway the Snow Bunting nests in the high mountains, whereas in northern Norway it also nests near the coast.

Distribution in Finnmark

The Snow Bunting has a wide distribution as a breeding species along the coastal and fjord areas of the whole of Finnmark. The greatest density is found in the more mountainous regions from Vardø westwards towards Troms. In the inner areas and where there is more vegetation on the plateau the species is scarcer.

Diet and ecology

In the summer period the Snow Bunting feeds almost exclusively on insects, and the young are fed entirely on



© Karl-Birger Strann

The older males arrive in Finnmark at the beginning of April. Not until a couple of weeks later do the females and young males arrive. Many of the first arriving males (photo) still retain much of the rust-red winter plumage on the head and breast.

insects and spiders. During autumn the Snow Bunting goes more over to seeds and berries, which are also the staple food when they arrive in Finnmark on spring migration.

In years with a deep snow cover, large numbers of Snow Buntings move into inhabited areas and seek out feeding stations. Here the Snow Buntings feed on various kinds of seeds that are laid out for tits, Bullfinches and Greenfinches. In years with an early snow-melt in the mountains, most of the Snow Buntings stop there. In such years one hardly sees Snow Buntings within built-up areas, and their absence is then often mentioned in the local press. This shows that the large flocks of Snow Buntings are an important sign of spring in large parts of the coast of Finnmark.

The nest sites are in stones and rocks, in terrain with little vegetation. The nest is well hidden within stony screes or under large rocks. It is built of dry grass and moss, and lined with feathers and the hair of reindeer. In years when the snow melts early the Snow Bunting can have two broods. This is usual first and foremost in the westerly coastal areas, where the snow-melt often occurs earlier than in the mountainous areas in the fjord districts. The first clutch is laid in late May and the beginning of June, and the second clutch is normally

laid at the end of June or in early July. In the mountain areas of the Varanger and Nordkinn peninsulas the Snow Buntings can breed in such numbers that they give the appearance of loose colonies.

Migration and movements

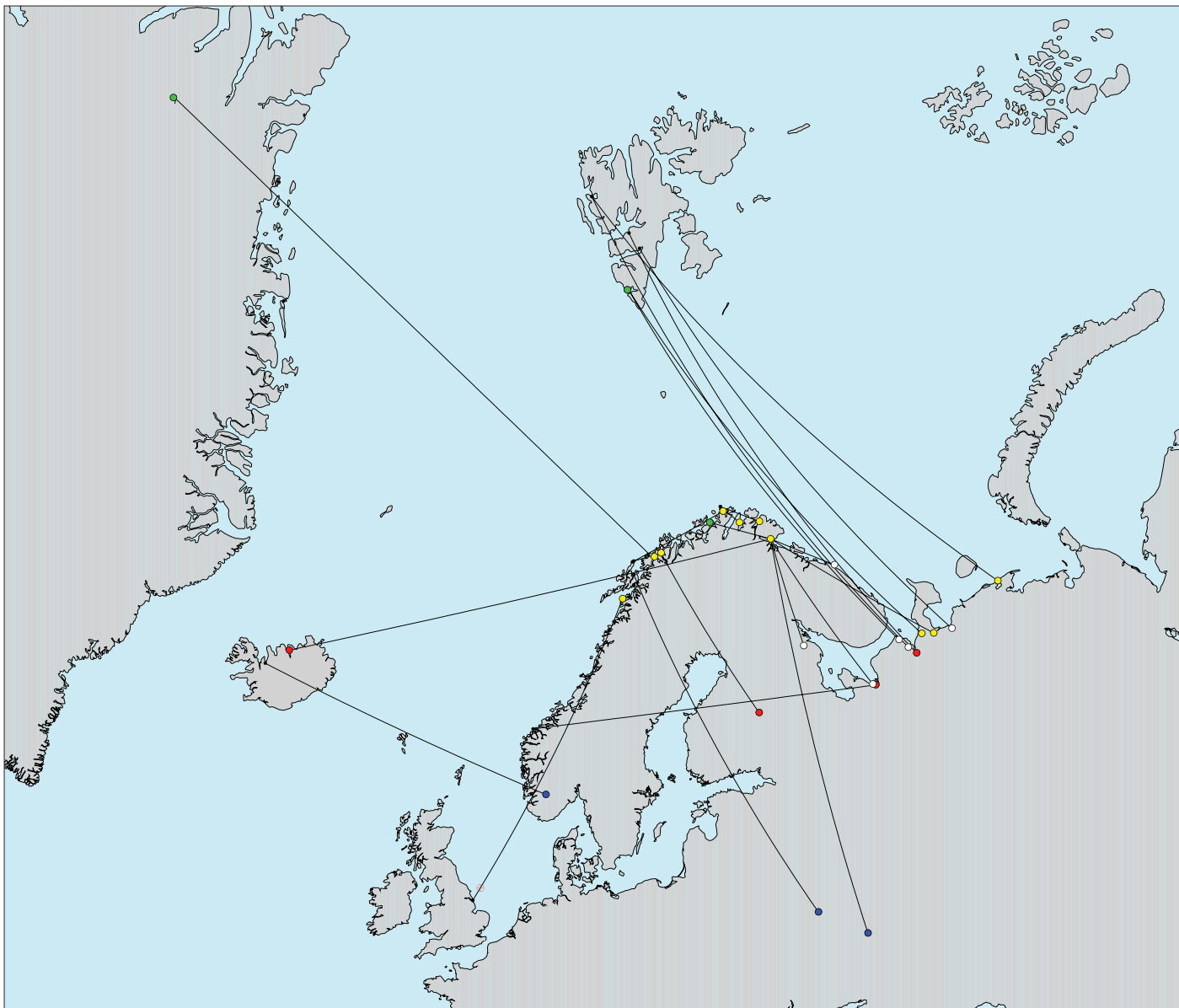
The Tromsø Ringing Group and NINA (the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research) have ringed almost 10,000 Snow Buntings in Troms and Finnmark. About 400 of these were ringed as nestlings in Finnmark. There are however no recoveries of Snow Buntings ringed as nestlings or nesting birds in Finnmark.

The great majority of the ringed birds were ringed during the spring migration. Only some few adults were ringed on the breeding grounds. The few recoveries reported prove that the major part of the springtime flocks are probably on their way to Greenland to breed. Several recoveries of birds ringed in northern Nordland and Troms, show that many of the birds from this area are on their way to Greenland. There is also one ringing recovery in Iceland of a bird ringed in Varanger. One can therefore assume that some of the birds in spring in Finnmark move to Iceland to breed. Several recoveries show that Snow Buntings in spring move northwards along the coast of Troms and Finnmark before leaving Norway.



© Karl-Birger Strann

In spring the Snow Buntings often move into inhabited areas and seek out bird feeding sites where they eat the seeds of sunflowers and oats. Some of the birds also eat berries that they find on snow-free areas nearby. This male shows obvious signs of having eaten crowberries before it came to the feeding site. It is reddish-violet around the bill and on its breast.



In autumn the Snow Buntings migrate in a south-easterly direction to wintering grounds in Russia and northern parts of the Ukraine. Many Snow Buntings stop over in Finnmark in spring on their way back to breeding grounds that can be local or on Greenland. The breeding population in Finnmark is however small compared to the numbers that move further to Greenland. Some of the birds that pass Finnmark can probably also migrate to Iceland. Probably few of the birds on their way to Svalbard have Finnmark as a staging site. On the basis of reports of ringed birds, it appears that the birds move directly to Svalbard from areas east of the White Sea, but their migration may well be more complex than the ringing recoveries indicate.



© Karl-Birger Strann



© Karl-Birger Strann

The male Snow Buntings often sit on top of a stone or, such as this one, on top of a melting snow drift, where they sing their attractive, melodious song. Together with their black and white plumage, they give a clear signal that the territory is occupied.

The ringing results show that the Snow Buntings on their way to and from Svalbard probably migrate on a route east of Norway. Possibly some of the Svalbard population in some years nevertheless migrate via Varanger on spring passage, but this has not yet been confirmed by ringing recoveries. There is however a spring control of a colour-marked Snow Bunting from Svalbard in Troms, and this shows that they also can take a more westerly route on their return to Svalbard.

The autumn migration takes place mainly during September and part of October. This migration is much faster than the spring migration, and the birds migrate mainly at night. Some small flocks may stop for a shorter or longer period out at the coast if they find food there. Ringing recoveries of the Snow Buntings from Svalbard and Greenland show that they to a large extent migrate south-eastwards towards the steppes in the southern parts of Russia and the north of the Ukraine. Our local breeding birds probably follow the same migratory pattern as those that nest on Greenland and Svalbard. There are no ringing recoveries indicating that our breeding birds migrate southwards towards the North Sea coasts such as was supposed previously (Banks et al. 1991).

The large numbers of Snow Buntings on spring migration led to many being caught and eaten in Finnmark up to the last world war. This was especially

Selected sources

- Banks, K.W., Clark, H., Mackay, I. R.K., Mackay, S.G. & Sellers, R.M. 1991: Origins, population structure and movements of Snow Buntings *Plectrophenax nivalis* wintering in Highland region, Scotland. *Bird Study* 38: 10-19.
- Bjørklund, P.K. 1994. Snytitingen. Fangsttradisjonar og folketru i Nordland og Troms. *Fugler i Troms* 3:23-28.
- Johnsen, I. 1983. Vårtrekket til snøspurven. *Krykkja* 2: 4-10.
- Ree, V. 1992. Snøspurv. I: Hogstad, O. Norges dyr. *Fuglene* 4:230-234.
- Rikardsen, F. 1985. Ringmerking av snøspurv i Tromsø. *Vår Fuglefauna* 8: 145.

common in hard times, and took place in most of northern Norway.

Threats

There are no known threats to the Snow Bunting. The decline in numbers that has been observed in some of the bird cliffs in Finnmark after the mid-1980's, can possibly be a result of conditions during migration or on the wintering grounds. There are no known conditions on the breeding sites that may be a cause of this decline.

This fact sheet is prepared by Vidar Bakken and Karl-Birger Strann (ARC)