

A Zoologist on Baffin Island – 1953

By Adam Watson. 2011. Paragon Publishing, 4 North Street, Rotherrsthorpe, NN7 3BJ, UK. 241 pages. 49.99 USD. Cloth.

I have skimmed, read, re-skimmed and re-read this book, savouring its account of the days when groups of young men (almost exclusively), many of them non-Canadian, were doing almost all the field research in arctic Canada. (My wife and I, living alone in a tent and researching Ogac Lake, on Baffin Island in 1957, were among rare exceptions.) The cover and title page are unusually expansive: “By husky and foot over sea, snow and tundra;” “A zoologist has the time of his life in his Arctic paradise, by Inuit dog-sledge, foot, snowshoe and ski, on sea-ice, coast, valley, mountain, with a special study of snowy owls and lemmings;” and “four months of Arctic adventure.” And so is the book. The author was one of the 14-member 1953 expedition by the Arctic Institute of North America to Pangnirtung Pass and the nearby mountains and glaciers beyond Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island, and now largely within Ayuittuq National Park. The main part is a daily narrative compiled from field notes and published accounts by the author and others, and is focused on days in at the “Bio Camp” in the Pass, but also gives

space to the work and adventures of other groups (and mis-adventures, including a tragic death in a raging meltwater stream). Everything is permeated by the joys of adventure and the stamina needed to contend. The book is illuminated by a large number of stunning, mostly colour, images, themselves a priceless glimpse into those wondrous days.

“Part B” has chapters on the author’s zoological work, not as intended on the then low-cycle ptarmigan, but largely on breeding biology of Snowy Owls and their links with lemmings, on passerine birds, flora and insects, and short biographies of expedition members, in more detail for some. There are two afterthoughts – both really laments. One, in the chapter of biographies, is “a look back at the expedition’s scientific work after 58 years.” The other is in the final chapter on “Then and now.” There is no doubt that the 1953 expedition was productive of good science, and that funding has been curtailed for such multi-disciplinary expeditions, along with large-scale, long-term research. And I certainly share Watson’s concerns about pres-

ent focus on arctic sovereignty and economic return. However, his rant on “Health and Safety laws and Nanny State jokers” (p. 235) might have been tempered by his memory of one death (chapter 15) and one “near-death experience” (chapter 16) during the 1953 expedition. In truth, smaller groups and individual researchers using modern technologies can now address old questions more easily, and ask new ones unanswerable in the 1950s. Glaciologists’ arguments about locally non-glaciated “nunataks,” are now settled by small samples from rock surfaces to determine if and when they were sheltered from cosmic rays by ice cover. Much of the behavioural biology of birds so well studied by Watson can now be more rapidly and extensively understood using DNA samples, video recorders, data loggers, and tiny transmitters with much less slog-

ging in the field. The author also seems strangely dismissive of the evidence for global warming and hostile to papers linking population trends and predictions about birds, etc., that can be obtained from large, admittedly ill-controlled data sets by non-scientific observers (think: Breeding Bird Surveys); modern statistical inference can squeeze important results out of large amounts of such data.

Despite its idiosyncrasies and rather disorganized structure, I strongly recommend this book as a delight to read and for its insights into how arctic field research was done in those far-off days.

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