



Wintering Curlews *Numenius arquata* at 70°N in North Norway

Karl-Birger Strann

Karl-Birger Strann. Wintering Curlews *Numenius arquata* at 70°N in North Norway. *Wader Study Group Bull.* 71: 32-33.

The Curlew *Numenius arquata* winters yearly in a flock of some twenty individuals at Tromsø (70° N), North Norway. The number of birds that wintered varied little between 1974/75 and 1991/92. Information is also given about single birds or small groups wintering regularly in other parts of Troms and Finnmark counties. This paper moves the known winter distribution of the Curlew about 1,000 km further north. It is estimated that several hundred Curlews winter every year in North Norway. The origin of these birds are not known, but is supposed to be breeders from Finnmark.

Karl-Birger Strann, NINA, c/o Tromsø Museum, N-9008 Tromsø, Norway.

INTRODUCTION

The Curlew *Numenius arquata* is generally a migrant in its northern parts of its distribution (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Haftorn (1971) said that a group of 19 Curlews wintered in Trøndelag (63°50'N), mid-Norway in 1969 and this was the only observation of a wintering flock outside southern Norway. He also referred to a single bird that was wintering in Bodø (67°16'N), North Norway in the "sixties" and one bird was shot 17 November 1953 at Kiberg, Varanger (70°18'N 31°E). New Norwegian birdbooks that deal with the distribution of Norwegian birds also give Bodø as the northernmost known wintering area in Norway for Curlews (Lundevall 1989; Haftorn 1980).

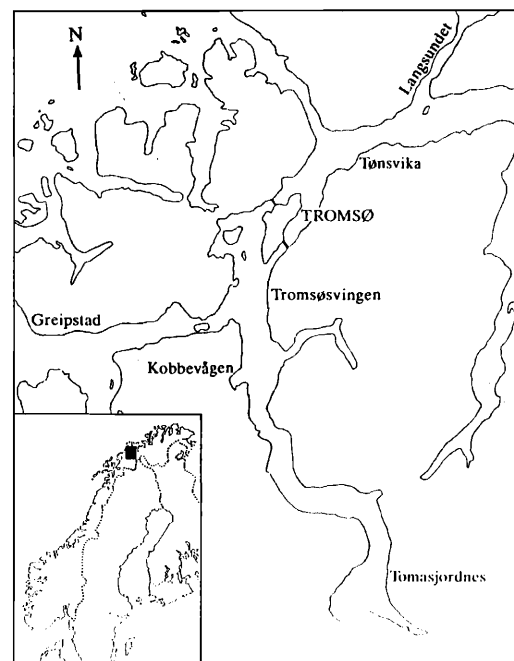
METHODS AND STUDY AREA

The study took place in Tromsø (69°40'N 19°E) in the winters from 1974/75 to 1991/92 (Figure 1). The coast from Tromsøvingen to Tønsvika consists of a mixture of rocky shore (c. 65%) and sandy/muddy shores (35%), but a considerable bulk of these shores has gradually been claimed in order to gain more land for industrial needs or new roads for the town.

Total counts were made several times every month between September and April along the shores in the study area (Figure 1). The number of birds found at high and low tides respectively were checked with each other to see if any of the feeding birds left for other high tide roosts.

Finally all information submitted to Tromsø Museum from the public in the period 1978 to 1992 was checked for winter observations of Curlews. Data is also presented from my own winter observation of Curlews, from outside Tromsø during the study period.

Figure 1. Map of the study area at Tromsø, North Norway.



RESULTS

Tromsø

The Curlew is a regular breeder at Tromsø and in the vicinity of the town. However, individuals leave the breeding grounds very early; nearly all birds are gone within the first days of September. During the first ten days of September the last few birds leave. There is a gap of fourteen days before the first few wintering birds arrive in the area.

The winter population usually arrived in late September and in October. The mean flock size varied little between November to March when birds gradually left for the breeding grounds (Table 1). The winter maximum was generally reached in January or February when the flock



size varied between 19 and 27 birds (Figure 2).

Table 1. Mean number of wintering Curlews observed at Tromsø, North Norway in September to April in 1974 - 1992. N = number of counts.

	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Mean	3	7	16	18	17	22	21	12	2
Min	0	5	10	10	8	12	11	4	0
Max	7	11	21	24	22	27	27	23	5
N	53	58	57	61	63	65	58	63	66

Outside Tromsø

During fieldwork on wintering seabirds and seaducks in Karlsøy during the winter 1989/90, I observed 2, 6, and 3 Curlews respectively wintering in Langsundet (69°55'N 19°30'E) (see Figure 1). Single birds and small groups up to four have regularly been observed at Greipstad, Malangen (69°5'N 18°15'E) during different winters (see Figure 1) and one single bird was seen in Lyngen in February 1989. In late November 1988 three birds was seen at Kobbevågen, Balsfjord (69°30'N 18°50'E) and two birds was seen and photographed in a flock of Purple Sandpipers at a high tide roost at Tomasjordnes, Balsfjord (69°15'N 19°28'E) in February 1992. Furthermore, information received by Tromsø Museum also state that single birds have been observed the following places; at Skjervøy (70°N 21°E) in January 1983, at Gisundet, Lenvik (69°15'N 18°E) in December 1984, at Bjarkøy (69°N 16°30'E) in February 1988, and finally near Vadsø, Varangerfjord (70°5'N 30°E) in March 1988.

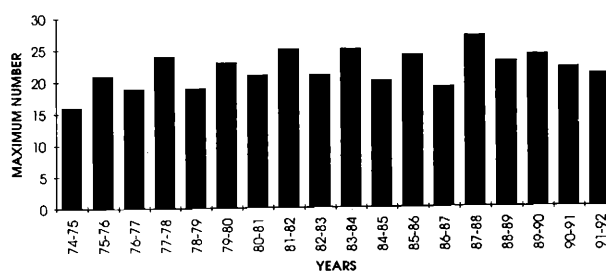
DISCUSSION

The site fidelity in the Curlew towards its wintering grounds is known to be strong (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Every winter between 1976/77 and 1983/84, one of the largest birds in the flock (a female) at Tromsø carried a metal ring on its right leg. This was obviously the same individual. Despite numerous attempts at reading the ring, I did not succeed; the birds are very shy and flew off at very long distances on approach. However, this ringed bird suggests that some birds return to the same site every winter.

I have no information of the origin of these birds, but since the species is a relatively common breeder in Troms county, and is also found breeding many places in Finnmark counties, it is possible that these birds are breeders from Finnmark.

The weather conditions during winter at these latitudes are usually very harsh compared to the wintering grounds further south in Europe. The period of daylight in the

Figure 2. Maximum numbers of Curlews observed wintering at Tromsø during the study period, 1974 to 1992.



arctic winter is very limited, and long periods of strong, northerly winds, often with heavy snowfall and temperatures down to well below -10°C, make the region a very rough wintering site for all shorebirds. However, due to strong tidal currents and warm Atlantic sea-water, the mudflats are never covered with sea-ice, except for in the inner-most parts of the fiords. This means that all the flats at Tromsø have no ice cover during the winter.

The fact that large flocks of Purple Sandpipers winter along the coast of North Norway shows that at least one species of shorebirds find satisfactory wintering conditions in the region (Summers *et al.* 1990). This species has no problem at all in finding enough food (Strann & Summers 1990), and I believe that the Curlew is also able to find sufficient food in the area. One should expect that if the wintering conditions were too harsh and that the food source were exploited the number of Curlews should decline during winter due to death or birds migrating out of the area. This is not taking place and this study show that the area can supply enough food for the observed number of birds through the winter without any problem.

The severe weather conditions and the very short period of daylight during the winter also give limited possibilities for people to go out birdwatching. This means that very little information on any bird species is reported to neither Tromsø Museum or the University of Tromsø. The overall number of Curlews that winter in North Norway as a whole is therefore undoubtedly underestimated and can most likely be counted in hundreds.

The single bird shot in Varanger in 1953 (Haftorn 1971) may well have been a bird about to winter in the area, and not a lost bird that as believed earlier. The information presented in this paper show clearly that the Curlew winters regularly in small numbers in North Norway, and that this behaviour is not even a completely new phenomenon in this region.

REFERENCES

- Cramp, S. & Simmons, K.E.L. (eds) 1983. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. III. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Haftorn, S. 1971. *Norges Fugler*. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo - Bergen - Tromsø.
- Haftorn, S. 1980. *Norges Fugler*. NKS-Forlaget - Oslo.
- Lundevall, C.F. 1989. *Fuglene våre*. H. Aschehoug & Co. Oslo.
- Strann, K.-B. & Summers, R.W. 1990. Diet and diurnal activity of Purple Sandpipers *Calidris maritima* wintering in northern Norway. *Fauna norv. Ser. C, Cinclus* 13: 75-78.
- Summers, R.W., Strann, K.-B., Rae, R. & Heggås, J. 1990. Wintering Purple Sandpipers *Calidris maritima* in Troms county, northern Norway. *Ornis Scand.* 21: 248-254.