

RECENT OBSERVATIONS ON THE GREENLAND WHEATEAR

BY JOHN RIPLEY FORBES

ON JUNE 24, 1937, the MacMillan Arctic Expedition under the leadership of Commander Donald B. MacMillan sailed from Gloucester, Massachusetts, for Baffinland. I had the good fortune of serving as ornithological collector and taxidermist for Bowdoin College on this expedition.

On August 3, the *Gertrude L. Thebaud* lay at anchor in a barren, windswept harbor at Brewster Point, Baffinland, on the left-hand shore of Frobisher Bay, known as Hall Peninsula. Our anchorage was at the extreme end of Barrow's Peninsula, also the entrance of Peterforce Sound. Brewster Point is a small point of land surrounded by barren islands, which make a fine harbor and one that we could leave only at high tide. On the point was a settlement consisting of five tents where a small colony of Eskimos lived. Nearby was a deserted house which had formerly served as a trading post for the Hudson's Bay Company. Except for this deserted shack and the Eskimo tents, nothing else was visible on the point. A short distance from the settlement the rugged country became higher and except for small alpine plants and moss, little vegetation was evident. The rocks were covered with large and small boulders showing glacial action. Upon reaching the top of the cliffs one could see the country spread out, with numerous small and large pools scattered about.

While on a field trip but a short distance from the Eskimo settlement, I ran across the nest of an Eider Duck and, while looking at it, noticed several small birds flying about nearby. They had a call note which I had never heard before; it might be described as *chack chack*. I soon made these birds out to be the Greenland Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*). There were several flying about a short distance from me, halfway up a hill near a small valley surrounded by cliffs. I found the birds rather wary and difficult to approach. They would fly from one rock to another, and they had a habit of perching on the most prominent places such as the tops of boulders. They were shaped somewhat like a Bluebird, but smaller, with olive brown above and light cinnamon-brown under parts. Their wings were brown and the most prominent field mark was the white rump which, with the white along the sides of the tail, in contrast to the brown central tail feathers and the terminal band, made an inverted letter T on a background of white. One bird observed and later collected, was a male in typical plumage. Its upper parts were gray rather than brown, its wings black, and its cheeks were black with a white streak over the eye separating the black cheek-patch from the gray of the head. Its tail was black and

white rather than brown and white and the bird showed slight traces of moult.

As many as four of these birds were seen at one time. They would flit from place to place, usually perching atop a large round boulder or at the summit of a cliff where they could be seen jerking their tails as they flitted along from place to place, uttering their sharp calls: *chack chack*. One of these birds was seen with its bill full of insects and I felt sure that the young or a nest must be nearby. After watching this bird for some time I was finally rewarded by hearing the faint sound of young calling as the bird fluttered about near the top of a cliff. It did not stop but flew over the top of the cliff to a nearby boulder. Having heard the young I went over to the cliff and after a long examination, located the nest tucked in a crevice in the cliff about eight to ten feet high. There were four well-grown young about ready to leave the nest and a fifth bird was out of the nest farther back in the crevice of the rock. The young left their nest before the day was over, so I had found the nest none too soon. It was constructed of dry grasses and beautifully lined with the white feathers of the ptarmigan. The entrance to the crevice was so small that it would not admit my hand through the entrance. The crevice ran some distance back into the rock and, during another visit, I found the young had left the nest on hearing my approach and had retreated into the rock, to return after I had left. After stalking for some time the bird which had led me to the nest, I collected it and found it to be a female in the process of moult. Then, upon hearing the welcome sound of the cook's bell from the *Thebaud*, I returned to the ship to report my find.

After supper, I returned to the wheatear's nest with another member of the staff. We found the young birds had left the nest, and two of them were hiding among the rocks nearby. One was collected and another captured alive to be brought back to the ship for pictures. We then took pictures of the nest location and of the young birds which we had captured. A total of nine birds was observed in this one region during the day. Five young were found while two adult birds, whose actions indicated that they were the parents of these young, were seen frequently about the nest. Two other adult birds had been seen with these two, making a total of four adults and five young in the region of the nest. I believe there were also two other adult birds but I could not be certain of this for I did not see more than the four at the same time. However, if this were so, it would mean six adult birds and five young.

The following day, upon returning to the nest location, I removed the now empty nest by sections, for it was impossible to remove it otherwise from so small an entrance. The dry grass made up the larger part of the nest and the lining of ptarmigan feathers the rest. While taking some pictures we captured another young bird near the nest. A male bird in fine plumage

with but a slight trace of moult was collected as it flew about the top of the cliff where the nest was. Two adult male wheatears were collected nearly a mile and a half distant from the original location. However, no evidence of another nest or of young could be found in this region.

On returning to our wheatear nest, we saw the two remaining young under nearby rocks. Several adult wheatears were flitting about, but at no time would they allow us to approach them. With a skin series of three young wheatears, male and female parents of the young, and two adult wheatears collected a mile and a half from the original nesting site, we set sail from Brewster Point to continue our voyage. Leaving at least two young and two adults (and possibly two additional adults which we will not count in view of the fact we are not positive), at Brewster Point, we had identified a total of eleven wheatears.

The Greenland Wheatear is a common European bird, which breeds in the arctic zone from Ellesmere Land and Boothia Peninsula, east to Greenland and Iceland and south to northern Quebec. It winters in western Africa, migrating to its breeding grounds in the Arctic from Africa through France and the British Isles and is a common migrant in the British Isles.

Upon examination of 'The Auk,' I find numerous records of birds that have been seen or collected over a rather wide range. One specimen was found at Boulder, Colorado, in 1880. In 1885, three specimens of this bird were collected on the northern shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and represent a possible breeding record. Napoleon Comeau of Godbout, Quebec, tells of their probable breeding near there. At New Orleans, Louisiana, a male bird in winter plumage was shot within the city limits on September 12, 1888. Another specimen, now in the American Museum of Natural History, was taken on Long Island, New York. Two or three of these birds were seen and one was collected at Jamaica, Queens County, New York, in 1885. Bigelow, in 'The Auk' for 1902, states that this bird nests near Nachvak, Labrador, for the Hudson's Bay Company factor had nests which he had taken there. Bigelow did not, however, observe this bird while there. In 1920, Charles R. Lamb observed a wheatear at Gloucester, Massachusetts. In 1920, a bird was seen by Witmer Stone in eastern Pennsylvania; while in 1932 observations by Hutt on the wheatear at Belle Isle, Labrador, are reported in 'The Auk.' According to the literature it is evident that the wheatear has been observed over a very wide range, from as far south as Bermuda and Cuba to as far west as Colorado in various States and in New Brunswick, Labrador and Baffinland, Canada.

Although the Greenland Wheatear is listed as the rarest bird in Baffinland, I should say that its solitary habits, its wary nature and the type of habitat where it dwells, have made it seem rare; to give a more accurate opinion one would have to spend several summers in the region of Baffinland. I believe,

however, from our experience that the Greenland Wheatear is not as rare in Baffinland as ornithologists have been lead to believe. The very fact that we were at Brewster Point for five days and it was not until the fourth day that I discovered the bird, may in some manner explain its rarity, for many of us during this time had passed through and about the region where the wheatears were discovered without finding them. I noticed during our observations that these birds were seen in a very limited area and once beyond this location there was no sign of them. Therefore it would seem that since we found eleven of these birds in one location, they may very well be a more common nesting species in Baffinland (which is geographically ideal for their nesting) than we have heretofore realized.

Of the seven specimens collected, four are in the study collection at Bowdoin College and the three others are in the National Museum of Canada. Their measurements follow:

<i>No.</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Locality</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Weight in grams</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Extent</i>
1407	Female	Brewster Point, Baffinland	8/6	25	160	305
1411	Male	Brewster Point, Baffinland	8/7	30	155	310
1412	Male, young	Brewster Point, Baffinland	8/7	21.5	120	250
1413	Male, young	Brewster Point, Baffinland	8/7	21	110	230

Lee Museum of Biology

Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine