

Sanderlings in Iceland

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In his article on radio-controlled Sanderlings *Calidris alba*, Peter Evans implied that because the birds marked on the Tees did not turn up at the study area at Sandgerdi in south-west Iceland in May 1996, they could have flown direct to the breeding grounds in Greenland, or perished (*Wader Study Group Bull.* 80: 6).

From 15 to 26 May 1996 I walked along the north coast of Faxaflói Bay in west Iceland, from Alftanes in Myrar to Budir near the foot of the Snæfellsjökull. This is the most important known area for Sanderlings in Iceland and I walked through it at the peak of the migration season. I covered about 120 km of coastline.

Sanderlings do not begin to leave Iceland until 25 May.

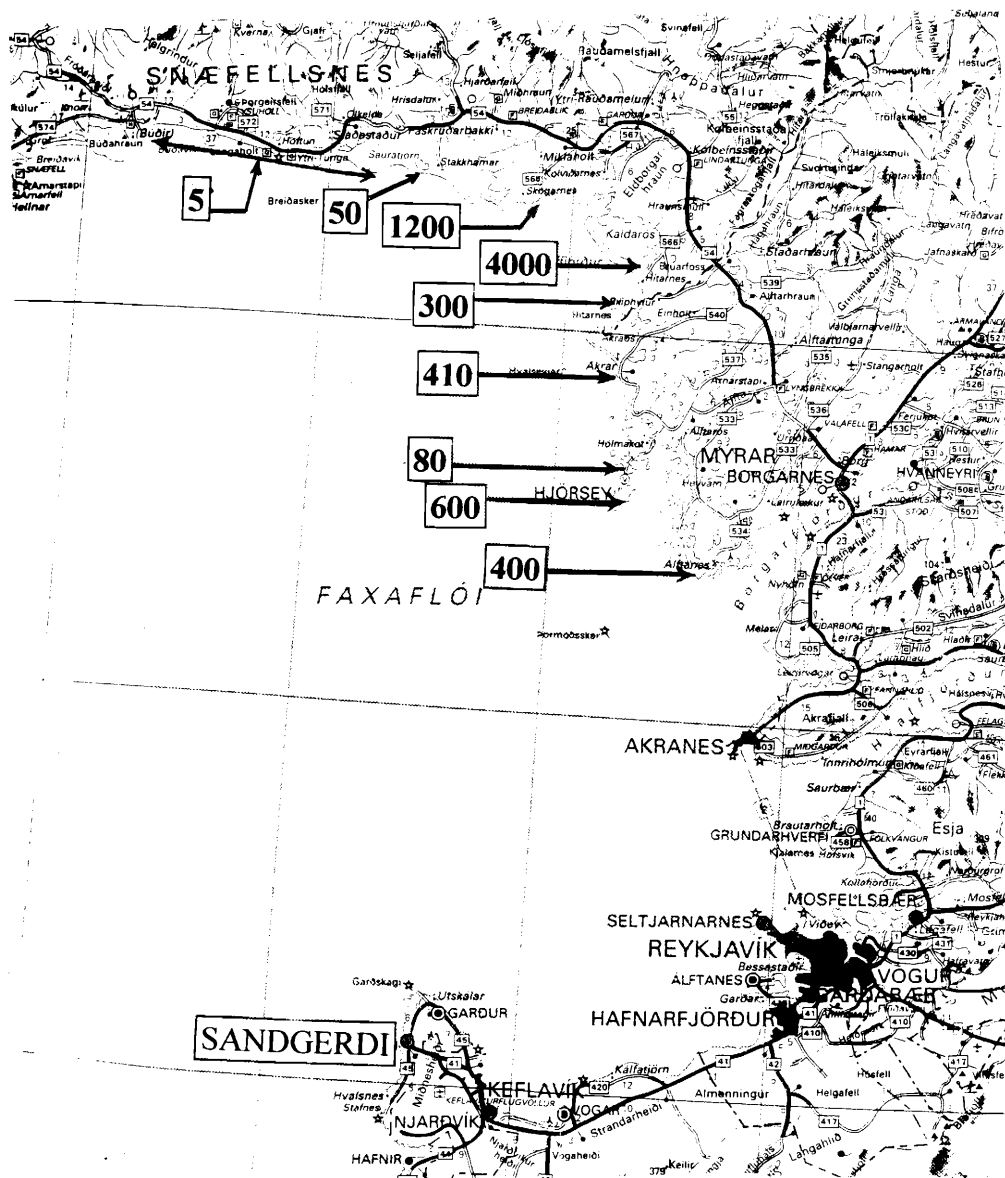


Figure 1. Locations of Sanderling concentrations located in west Iceland, 15 to 26 May 1996.

My itinerary was dictated by the tides as I followed the old horse trail across the tidal mudflats, and I had to cross the numerous rivers which flow from the mountains, at low tide. Although it was not my main aim to study Sanderlings, I did record all the flocks I found. I am familiar with much of this coast from previous years so in some areas I knew where I could expect to find Sanderlings and visited these areas within the limits set by my itinerary and the tides.

RESULTS

I counted a total of 6855 Sanderlings (Figure 1). Three were seen with colour rings, (details not yet received, but possibly from the Teesmouth study). One bird I had ringed on this coast on 2 June 1974 was recovered at Holy Island, near the Tees on 20 March 1975 and two Sanderlings colour ringed at Sandgerdi in 1989 were seen at Akrar in May 1990 (Gudmundsson & Lindström 1992). All the sites lie within 55 to 85 km of the Sandgerdi study area. Although Sandgerdi is the first suitable site which Sanderlings would pass in west Iceland in spring (if they followed the coastline) they would not necessarily all stop there. It is also not the site which has the most birds. The Tees radio-marked Sanderlings could just as easily been among the thousands I found in Iceland, as having flown direct to Greenland (or died).

All the roosting sites were on beautiful sand beaches, near mudflats or sandflats. The last part of my walk was along the almost unbroken 30 km stretch of golden sand between Stakkhamar and Budir where there are no associated tidal flats. Here there were few Sanderlings. It seems that the birds need the tidal flats for low tide feeding.

The flock of 4000 feeding on the mudflats at Hitarnes was a rough estimate, as the birds were moving all the time, following the falling tide, and looking through a telescope was tiring with a 25 kg rucksack on my back. I was also in a hurry as I had to cross the whole of Kaldaros Bay at low tide, and the route was unknown to me. The most recent account of this crossing which I have been able to find was written by Hendersen in 1815 and he stated that even on horseback he was worried about this route as the farmers said that people had been cut off by the tide and drowned. This site is only 8 km from where Gudmundur

Gudmundsson found a high tide roost of 7000 Sanderlings on the Akrar peninsula, Utnes, on 22 May 1990 (Gudmundsson & Lindström 1992). It thus seems that large numbers in this area could be a regular feature.

We now know of a minimum of 8000 Sanderlings in Iceland on spring passage, but there are possibly other significant concentrations which have not yet been located. Meltofte (1985) estimated 17 000 breeding pairs in Greenland. It is now highly doubtful that all these birds are in Iceland in May. It thus still seems probable that many east Greenland birds are overflying Iceland as previously suggested (Wilson 1981). This is also supported by increasing evidence from ringing and counting in Britain in the second half of May. The migration routes of the smaller populations in NW Greenland and Ellesmere Island are still unknown. One would expect them to migrate from the Old World, and stop over in Iceland in May, as do the Knots *Calidris canutus*, Turnstones *Arenaria interpres* and Ringed Plovers *Charadrius hiaticula* from these areas.

There is some evidence that not all Sanderlings in Britain in mid-May are from the Greenland breeding areas. For example one bird ringed on the Dee estuary in west England on 16 May 1972 was recovered on Great Ainov Island, near Murmansk, Russia, on 16 July 1974. One ringed on the Wash, north-east England, on 17 May 1969 was retrapped there on 18 August 1973 and 4 August 1974 and finally recovered at Langebaan Lagoon, South Africa on 13 February 1977. This was also possibly a Russian bird, although since Icelandic Sanderlings have been recovered as far south as Ghana (Gudmundsson & Lindström 1992) it cannot be ruled out that they could also reach South Africa.

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