

A summer in Medusa Bay

Kathleen Calf

Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701

The Willem Barentz Biological Station at Medusa Bay, Siberia, slowly appeared out of the cold mist as the helicopter in which I had been for several hours descended through the cloud. I was terrified as I stepped out of the helicopter – a completely foreign landscape of snow and ice greeted me. The station soon became home and the inhabitants, Dutch and Russians, became like family.

I joined Hans Schekkerman, Ingrid Tulp and later Joep de Leeuw, Dutch scientists, in the field. I could never have imagined the magnificence of the open space, and of course the fantastic birds! My introduction to the tundra was walking on water, the ice of the bay, and then up “Hillary Slope”, the snowfield up to the study site. The study site was 4 km², and in search of nests we ventured to the north, east and south of the plot. My first few days were quite difficult because I had to get used to thermoregulating – it was a little chillier than anything I had ever experienced – in addition to coming to terms with all the new species.

It was a successful field season. The four of us found almost 300 nests, including those of Dunlin, Little Stint, Curlew Sandpiper, American Golden Plover, Turnstone, Longtailed and Pomarine Skua, Longtailed Duck, Stellar’s Eider, Brent Goose, Snow Bunting, Lapland Bunting, Wheatear, Shorelark and Common Redpole.

The season changed quickly. I arrived in the tundra at the end of June and in the following two weeks we found many nests. Then suddenly we had our first hatchlings, Lapland Bunting! The first waders, Dunlin, hatched mid-July, and they were soon followed by Curlew Sandpipers and Little Stints. The summer thaw had been quite late and, as a result, the waders started breeding

later and more synchronously than usual. It was incredible when we checked all 25 Dunlin nests and found all the eggs starved or pipped on the same day. If one discounts the few pairs that relaid, the whole Dunlin breeding season, from the beginning of nest building to fully fledged chicks, was not more than 60 days! How different from the long breeding seasons of the tropics!

The Little Stints were the least synchronous in hatching because their incubation and chick rearing periods are so short (c. 21 and 15 days) that they can lay a little later and still successfully rear chicks. We were able to ring most incubating adults and hatchlings of Dunlin, Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint nests. In addition, we attempted to recapture chicks to determine growth rates. Recaptures of Little Stints proved more successful than those of Dunlin and Curlew Sandpiper.

The main purpose of my travelling to the Arctic was to be able to make comparisons between chick energetics of resident species found in South Africa, and migratory species that breed in the Arctic. To achieve this we completed many successful doubly-labeled water experiments on growing chicks of Little Stint. In addition to time-activity budgets that were collected in this and previous seasons, we should get a good idea of how well adapted this species is to its breeding grounds and how their energetics and behaviour differ from southern hemisphere species.

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The Willem Barents Biological Station at Medusa Bay,
western Taimyr Peninsula.



An adult Little Stint brooding its chicks