

*Summer in Nanortalik District, southwest Greenland.
Photograph courtesy of Christian Vibe*



The Making of an Arctic Naturalist

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One of the greatest impressions of my life was my first visit to Greenland. I was a mere boy at that time, only sixteen years old, but it is an age when you are probably more sensitive than at any other. This visit to Greenland changed my life. I lost my heart to the Arctic and realized that I must return to learn more of the secrets behind the Polar beauty. This was not my birth as a naturalist, to be sure, since from early boyhood I had wanted to study nature and its creatures, but during this Greenland trip I received a special challenge: my endeavours were now directed towards a distinct though faraway goal. I felt quite sure of my life's destination: the arctic world was to be my battlefield, my private path towards the understanding of living beings. I knew it would be a toilsome way on which many obstacles must be met, but this made it only the more attractive and exciting. A very young man wants to feel his own strength, physically as well as mentally, and to show everybody that he is capable of mastering all difficulties. An easy victory is worth nothing; at least something similar was in my mind, although at the same time I felt somewhat unhappy because I realized that the life of an arctic traveller was not an easy one. I would have to face not only dangers — and they did not frighten me — but strong resistance from various quarters and continuous struggles for the necessary funds. Above all, what about my personal qualifications? Did I possess the strength, will, zeal, tenacity, and knowledge necessary for carrying out my plans? However, such doubts do not trouble you too much when you are sixteen years old; what mattered was a strong irresistible urge. But let me go back to the beginning of the story.

My first experience as a naturalist was gained at the age of six, and it was a sad one. Having spent my first years in the centre of a big city (Copenhagen), possibilities for contact with nature were very limited, but vaguely I felt that I wanted that contact, so when I discovered that our neighbours had an aquarium with freshwater animals I took the first opportunity to pinch a few tadpoles and snails, which I kept in a bottle for my own pleasure. I never tired of studying their movements and their appearance, but this soon ended when my stolen pets were given back to their owners under rather humiliating circumstances. My straightforward parents were seriously afraid that I might develop into a virtual criminal, and another mishap that took place rather soon afterwards confirmed them in that opinion. While visiting friends of the family I was fascinated with their photographs of tropical rain forests so took some of them home with me. Still, my regrettable conduct had an obvious explanation: the latent and unconscious interest in animals and plants was so strong in me that the temptation had been

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too great for me to resist. Here I may add that I shall not have to confess any further steps in the direction of a criminal career!

When in 1925 at the age of sixteen I joined Schiøler's Greenland expedition I had been a member of the Danish Ornithological Society and the Danish Natural History Society for two years, admittedly an extraordinarily young member. Of course, being a school-boy, I had had no opportunity to travel and only little time for making observations in the field, so much more eagerly I read the narratives of the great explorers and histories of geographical discoveries. Even zoological literature was devoured; I remember Boas' textbook of zoology and various volumes in the series "Denmark's Fauna", particularly the treatise of the echinoderms by Th. A. Mortensen, world-renowned for his monograph on the sea-urchins. In a short time I knew by heart all Danish species within this group, without having personally seen more than a few. I was interested in most animal groups, although favouring birds and various marine invertebrates.

During that time I made the acquaintance of Dr. C. G. Johs. Petersen, director of the "Biological Station", in those days the Danish institute for marine biological research. Dr. Petersen, well-known for his invention of the "Petersen bottom sampler" and his quantitative investigations of the animal communities of the sea-bottom, was about to retire, but with fatherly interest he took care of me, introducing me to the world of marine organisms. Together with another young enthusiastic zoologist, Gunnar Thorson, late professor of marine biology at the University of Copenhagen, I spent many evenings in Dr. Petersen's home, learning and discussing marine zoology. I was seriously inclined to choose that field, rather than ornithology, as my future specialty, until I met Ejler Lehn Schiøler, and one year later received the offer to accompany him to Greenland.

Schiøler was a remarkable man. He was a banker who became very wealthy but in his spare time he was an ardent student of ornithology and succeeded in gathering a collection of more than 25,000 skins of western palearctic birds, besides skeletons and eggs. He built a large museum for his collections with an ornithological library. Here I spent my time whenever I had an opportunity. Schiøler specialized in two fields within ornithology: geographical variation and moult. He worked along the same lines as several other well-known contemporary ornithologists, such as Hartert, Witherby, Ridgway, and Sushkin, but differed in his more untraditional methods. Naturally, I admired this great scientist, and in his study, when he showed me his birds and told me about the problems they posed, I gradually decided to be an ornithologist.

When we left for Greenland in 1925, altogether five men, in order to collect and study the birds of the west coast, it was still the old régime. The native population lived literally under stone-age conditions, mildly ruled by the patriarchal Danish government. The Greenlanders had not changed their ancient Eskimo-like habits, living in turf-houses, wearing their seal-skin *kamiks* and *anoraqs*, and sailing in kayaks and *umiaks*. While writing this I am sitting in a hotel in one of the modern Greenland cities, with factories, canneries, noisy motor traffic on the broad streets and in the busy harbour, certainly a far cry from the conditions during my first visit almost 50 years ago.

The primitive life of the Eskimos was, of course, something quite extraordinary for a school-boy who had just left his books. I tried to learn as much as possible about these people and their country in the short time, less than four months, in which we stayed in Greenland, and succeeded to a degree. The main thing, however, was the bird life. Series of practically all Greenland species were secured. The complicated moult of the ptarmigan, the old squaw and the king-eider became special studies. We worked in close cooperation with the Greenlanders, who possessed a thorough knowledge of their native birds. We followed the Eskimos in their *umiaks* and had them with us as hunting companions; we climbed the mountains with them, penetrated the interior country, at that time little known, and sometimes camped in tents far from our motor-boat. Thus, gradually, we acquired an intimate knowledge of the nature of this large country; we felt at home in its wilderness and wished that time would not pass so quickly.

On our forays we usually scattered in order to cover as wide an area as possible. I strolled about with a gun and secured various specimens for our work. On these lonely trips I really felt in close touch with the Arctic. I was well acquainted with the two groups of living beings which — one way or another — first attracted our attention: the birds and the plants. I was struck by the modesty displayed by all of them: the humble, trailing heath plants, with their minute gay flowers, trembling in the wind, and the small greyish and brownish birds inhabiting the interior, flitting about over the stony plains. Gradually I greeted these birds as old friends; they appeared so well fitted to the majestic arctic landscape. Their songs and notes were as subdued as their garb was modest and did not alter the impression of solemn silence which is so intensively felt everywhere in the Arctic.

I think it was the solemnity which fascinated me so much, a solemnity effected by the extreme quietness and the purity and severity of the country. Never shall I forget those summer nights with the pale midnight sun shining, the lakes without a ripple, mirroring snowcapped peaks and green valleys. The silence was complete, apart perhaps from the distant murmur of a waterfall or the low warble of the birds. I felt myself in a forgotten world, remote and lonely, resting in quietness, untouched by man, unspoiled. I could move around hour after hour; nothing disturbed the impression of beauty, and the changing horizons seemed endless. Here I was nearer nature's heart than anywhere else, and here I sensed a strange harmony.

I admit that not all people would feel that way. I know of many individuals, most of them sociable city-dwellers, who became severely attacked by *horror vacui* when visiting this empty wilderness. Once years later I myself had an unearthly sensation when on a small island in Melville Bay; my view in all directions was blocked by colossal, utterly lifeless icy walls which threatened to crush me, while the shrieking of some gulls appeared to me as the anguish of a doomed world. I felt hopelessly alone and had to resort to the hut of a friendly Eskimo, close by.

Still, this is not usual. Rather, in the Arctic one is more easily captivated than in the lush exuberance of the south. One appreciates a patch of tender verdure, a cluster of graceful flowers, a smiling streamlet, which elsewhere would be passed unnoticed.

Such vast barren regions appeal to naturalists, at least to those who have the fortitude to be alone with their own thoughts in a desolate waste, or to those rare individuals who wish to pursue distant goals beyond a fugitive horizon. I recall Charles Darwin's narrative of his travels in the deserts of Tierra del Fuego, and Henry Hudson's portrayal of the endless plains of the pampas. My enthusiasm for the Arctic in my mere youth was probably akin to the feelings so masterfully expressed by those great naturalists. Anyone who has experienced the feeling of absolute freedom when striding through such country holds a similar view.

At the same time the Arctic is so extremely simple and clear! Everything unnecessary has been removed; here there are no forests, no houses, no people; only the very backbone of nature is left. From a biological viewpoint it is significant that the number of animal and plant species is so reduced that their ecology, their mutual relationship, their adaptations to the environment are much easier to study in the polar than in the tropical regions. The number of ecological niches is very small, compared with that in the tropics, the disturbances by individual man are negligible, with the effect that most arctic plant communities reach their climax stage. All this makes the Arctic in some respects the ideal working ground for a biologist. I have studied in the tropics, too, and found it a wonderful, varied world, everywhere so full of life and activity. And yet, I prefer the more contemplative attitude of the arctic regions. There I found simplicity and modesty, quietness and immenseness, unchangeable grandeur and solemnity, with a touch of eternity.

Just as the six-year-old boy did not understand why he was fascinated by his aquarium with its stolen goods, the sixteen year greenhorn had only a faint idea about why this barren country, Greenland, influenced him so overwhelmingly and why always he has longed to return. The mature man gradually has understood; he knows that deep-seated sentiments were involved, that strong psychic chords were struck. In Greenland the boy came in contact with an environment which was in tense and intimate harmony with his own psyche. It stimulated him deeply; the reaction became almost painful.

This rapport with the arctic regions has brought continuing richness and rejuvenation to my life. I have been true to my first love, and I have made several later visits to the far north; it still provides a challenge and an inspiration. By many regarded as a godforsaken waste, the polar regions are to me a place where the divine manifestation is more apparent than in other parts of the world.