

Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*) in circumpolar folk ornithology

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Úrtak

Í fólksligari vitan og siðbundnum búskapi hefur havgás (*Gavia immer*) verið ein týðningarmikil fuglur. Hon eigur í Íslandi og í Bjarnoyinni, men vitjar ofta strendur og oyggjar í Útnyrðingsevropa um veturinn. Fuglurinn er vælkendur, við nögvum staðbundnum növnum bæði á norðurlenskum og keltiskum, og hann hefur verið nögv brúktur sum veðurmerki. Fólk hava eisini etið havgás og gagnnýtt hamin.

Abstract

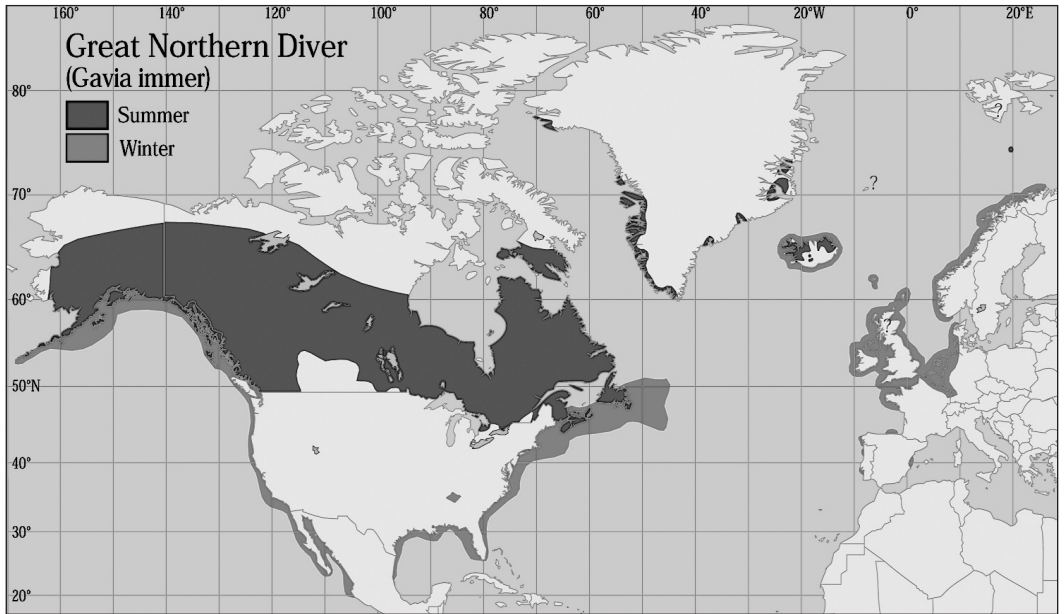
The great northern diver (*Gavia immer*) has played an important role in the folk ornithology and traditional economy of the various ethnic groups which lived within its domain. In Europe it breeds regularly in Iceland and a few pairs on Bear Island, but it is a frequent winter visitor to the coastal and island areas in north-western Europe. It has been a well-known bird, with many local names, both in Norse and Celtic traditions, and it was believed to be a weather prophet. Its meat and skin has also been utilized.

Introduction

The interest in folk ornithology – i.e. the local traditional knowledge about birds – has increased since the publication of the groundbreaking *Birds of My Kalam Country* by Ian Saem Majnep and Ralph Bulmer in 1977. This book has been regarded as a landmark in the development

of ethnobiology as a scientific discipline. The aim of ethnobiology is to reveal those meaning carrying systems that constitute traditional ecological knowledge. To do so, the researchers must take their starting-point in native classification systems, folk taxonomies and interpretations of the consistency that a people or local community have used and experienced about the biosphere around them (Silow, 1992; Berkes, 1998: 8). Ethnobiology could therefore be defined as the study of the bio-cultural domains that emerge in the activity contexts between human beings and other species. Such domains include the cumulative body of use, naming pattern, beliefs as well as empirical and old-established interpretations of behaviour, habits and interrelationships between species within an ecosystem (Svanberg, 2001; 2004a: 100–101; 2005; in press).

Ralph Bulmer and Chris Healey emphasize that such traditional knowledge does not exist “as a readily separable body of knowledge in traditional societies, where generally no distinction is made like that



Distribution of *Gavia immer* (Map sources: B. Muus, F. Salomonsen, C. Vibe, *Grønlands fauna*. København 1990; *Handbook of the birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*. 1. Oxford 1978; J. Ó. Hilmarrsson, *Íslenskur fuglavisir*. Reykjavík 1999; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.)

between science and other systems of knowledge in contemporary western culture. Consequently, the investigator is likely to be confronted with what may, at first sight, appear to be an unsystematic blend of detailed, credible information, mystical ideas and superstition. It is important to realize that such a mixture of what Europeans might consider rational, empirically based knowledge and mystical or supernatural beliefs must be understood within its cultural context” (Bulmer and Healey, 1993: 43–44). It must also be remembered that traditional knowledge is not necessarily only local. The beliefs can be shared over large areas and coincide with the entire range of a certain species (Svanberg, 2001; 2002; 2004b).

Traditional knowledge about birds and other animals has been integrated in the scientific growth of knowledge for centuries, while other material has been discarded.

Divers

Divers have always played an important role in the folk ornithology of people of the circumpolar area. Peasants, hunters, herdsman and others wandering in wetland areas and forests are well acquainted with their call, which can be heard over long distances in the evenings. Sometimes fishermen at sea have also encountered them. Five species exist within the area. The black-throated diver (*Gavia arctica*) and red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*) have

been most important in the folk ornithology over large parts of the circumpolar region. From north-east Russia and Siberia over to Alaska the white-billed diver/yellow-billed loon (*Gavia adamsii*) is of significance. In North America two other species, the Pacific diver (*Gavia pacifica*) and the great northern diver (*Gavia immer*), have been more important. The great northern diver or common loon is a widespread species that nests throughout the lake country of the northern United States, Canada, and Alaska (Gingras and Paszkowski, 1999).

The breeding distribution also includes Greenland and Iceland, where the population has been estimated to be 500–2,300 pairs, i.e. 1,500–6,900 individuals (thereof in Iceland only about 300 pairs in summer, 100–1,000 birds in winter) and the bird has been known to breed in Scotland, at least in 1970, and on Bear Island and possibly also on Jan Mayen Island and Spitsbergen (Cramp, 1978: 58; Muus *et al.*, 1990; Lundevall, 1989: 139; Petersen, 1999: 36; Anonymous, 2005). It is a fairly large species and is regarded as the most common diver, hence the name *common loon*, in eastern North America (Peterson, 1980: 32). Other North American names having been used at one time or another for this species are e.g. *guinea duck*, *imber diver*, *ring-necked loon* and *wallon* (Terres, 1980: 595).

The great northern diver has played an important role in the mythology and economy of the native peoples of Canada and Alaska (Armstrong, 1958: 63–64, 68; McIntyre, 1989: 1–6; Dregni, 1996: 9–

12; Rasmussen, 1999: 90). It has been locally known as *big loon*, *call-up-a-storm*, *greenhead* and *hell-diver* (Sayre, 1996: 92). In Quebec it was called for example *plongeon*, *plongeon huard* and *riche-poom* (McAtee, 1957: 2; Terres, 1980: 594–595). Among the Inuit of Alaska it was known under the name *kahroak*, a name used also for the black-throated diver (*Gavia arctica*), although they are aware of the differences between them (Nelson, 1969: 163). The Greenlandic name of the great northern diver is *tuullik*. It features in many North American Indian and Inuit myths and legends (Jones, 1880: 376–377; Ingersoll, 1923: 276–277; Martin, 1993: 111, 113; Friesen, 1999).

There exists for example a short myth among the great majority of Inuit (Eskimo) groups and some Indian tribes, about two birds painting each other in turn so that they came to look like they do today (cf. Rasmussen, 1926: 92). Most often the birds in question are the raven and the loon (great northern diver). The Danish ethnologist Inge Kleivan wrote an article about it in 1971, where she presented the Eskimo material in its entirety, i.e. all the 25 variants, found among the East Greenlanders, the South-East Greenlanders, the West Greenlanders, the Polar Eskimos, the Labrador Eskimos, the Baffinlanders, the Eskimos on the west coast of Hudson Bay, the Iglulik Eskimos, the Caribou Eskimos, the Natsilik, the Copper Eskimos, the Mackenzie Eskimos, North Alaska and South Alaska. The oldest known Eskimo variant of the myth was written down by missionary H. C. Glahn in his diary



Greenland postage stamp from 1967, with a picture showing how the white raven painted the great northern diver. The artist is Jens Rosing.

at Holstenborg in 1768 and thus belongs to the West Greenlanders. One of the two versions from the Iglulik Eskimos, first published by Knud Rasmussen in 1929, will be cited here though, because it also explains why the loon walks as it does:

“Once a raven and a loon happened to meet, and they agreed to tattoo each other. First the raven tattooed the loon, and when it was done, the loon set about tattooing the raven. But the raven was very ill pleased with its tattooing, and would not keep still, and again and again the loon said: “If you won’t keep still, I will pour the soot

I am using all over you.” At last the loon lost patience, and poured all the soot over the raven, and then ran out of the house. But just as the loon was on the point of disappearing, the raven picked up the fire stones that lay in the house and threw them at the loon. The fire stones struck the loon on the thighs, and it sank down and could hardly walk. From that day all ravens are black and all loons awkward on their feet” (Kleivan, 1971: 16).

Richard K. Nelson (1983: 85–87) tells from the Koyukon Indians of Alaska that according to stories of the so-called Distant Time, the man who became *dodzina*, i.e. the great northern diver, used his medicine to restore another man’s sight. In return he was given a cape with elaborate dentalium-shell decorations, and its pattern remains on the divers back and neck. The Koyukon people still keep stuffed skins of this bird as an object of beauty and often it is hung inside the house where people always can see it. This bird plays an important role in their folk ornithology.

Here we will deal with traditional knowledge and the importance in the past. Our purpose is to emphasize primarily on its importance in north-western Europe. However, it must be mentioned that the great northern diver population in some places of North America eats a lot of fish and it has therefore been viewed as being in direct competition with fishermen. It might therefore still be of economic importance, although negatively, for some people. On the other hand, many loons



The common loon as modern native art in Canada (Photo: Ingvar Svanberg, 2005).

are killed by fishing traps and are otherwise disturbed by human activities in and around the lakes they inhabit (Richardson *et al.*, 2000: 19–20).

Winter visitor in north-western Europe

From a European perspective, the red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*) and the black-throated diver (*Gavia arctica*) are well-known in traditional folk knowledge and have played an important role in local lore and the economy (Tillhagen, 1978: 327–331; Eriksson, 2000: 5). The regular breeding area of the great northern diver includes only Iceland in Europe. Outside Iceland, the great northern diver is a regular winter visitor in the Faroes, British Isles and the coasts of northern and north-western Norway (Timmermann, 1949: 407–408; Sørensen and Bloch, 1990: 65).

However, in those areas where the great

northern diver was a common guest during winter and sometimes as non-breeding summer visitor, the coast- and island-dwellers were well acquainted with it. Although it is a visitor to Russia as well, especially the Commander Islands in the east and Barents Sea and White Sea in the west, it is obviously so non-regular or rare that the locals do not have any name for it. In modern Russian handbooks it is called *polyarnaya gagara* ('polar diver'), which is an artificial fauna book name equivalent to Danish and Swedish *islom*, German *Eistaucher* or Finnish *jääkuikka* (Suolahti, 1909: 448; Il'ichev and Flint, 1985: 235). Since 1996 it has a clarifying prefix *svartnäbbad islom* in Swedish to differ from the white-billed species *Gavia adamsii* (Tyrberg, 1996: 13).

Naming

To study traditional animal and plant folk



Common loon as Canadian souvenir (Photo: Ingvar Svanberg, 2005)

names is of great importance for ethnobiologists. It gives us the possibility to understand how a people perceive, classify and cognitively process their world (Diamond and Bishop, 1999: 17). It also gives an insight about the historical depth of a local tradition (Fridell and Svanberg, 2005).

During winter time the great northern diver is a common visitor to northern British Isles. In some areas, such as the Orkneys, it is frequent at all seasons. Old birds are being more abundant during the winter season though. There was considerable confusion among early ornithologists about the identification of the various diver-species, because of the differences between summer and winter plumage, and the great northern diver was recognized as a separate species as late as in the year 1634. This name – the *great northern diver* – first appears though in 1766, in

Thomas Pennant's book *British Zoology*; Francis Willoughby having termed the bird *the greatest speckled diver or loon*, in his book *Ornithology* in 1678 (Swann, 1913: 106). In spite of the distinction made in the 18th century between black- and red-throated divers, the black-throated diver was still in some books of the 19th century thought to be the young of the great northern diver (Greenoak, 1997: 14).

In Gaelic the great northern diver was called *mur bhuachail* 'sea herdsman', writes Charles Swainson without further details (Swainson, 1886: 213). On the Hebrides it was called *bonnivochill*, according to Martin Martin's annotations from 1695 (Martin, 1884: 71). Lockwood interprets this as the Gaelic *buna-bhuachail* 'dumpy herdsman' (Lockwood, 1971: 58) or 'herdsman of the bottom' (Swann, 1913: 36). The shape of the bird, and the wild, far-reaching call has motivated the

name. The herdsmen used to call the cattle. Its name is motivated by “the plumpness of the bird and stentorian herdsman’s call” (Lockwood, 1971: 58). Lockwood regards it as a taboo name used by seamen (Lockwood, 1984: 37). In Manx Gaelic the great northern diver is called *arrag vooar* ‘big pullet’, which probably is a kind of taboo name used by the fishermen of the island (Lockwood, 1966: 103).

Other names for the species in Scotland were *gunner*, *naak* (*nauk*, *nack*), *astracannet* and *cobble* (Swainson, 1886: 213; Swann, 1913: 197). *Gunner* means ‘noisy talker, blusterer’ and is recorded from Ayrshire. It is first noted in 1837 (Lockwood, 1971: 53). *Naak* is a name in use on the Northumberland and Berwick coasts, also *nauk* or *nack* (Holy Island), and is a representation of its loud call (Lockwood, 1984: 107; Swann, 1913: 165). In Northumberland the word *astracannet* was used for this bird, and for the velvet scoter too (Swann, 1913: 8). *Cobble* is a name first noted in 1802. According to Lockwood, *cobble* is a round stone and the bird name is a “reference to the rotundity of these plump birds” (Lockwood, 1971: 54).

From Ayrshire and Argyll and from the Irish coast opposite this diver was known as *Arran hawk*, an Anglicization of a Gaelic word. It appears also in the corrupted forms *Allan hawk* and *Holland hawk*. The latter is known from Ballantrae in Scotland (Lockwood, 1984: 23, 84). The name *ring-necked loon* was also used for the great northern diver in East Lothian, Scotland, and Cork Harbour, Ireland (Swann, 1913: 197).

In Yorkshire, Northern England, the great northern diver and red-throated diver were called *Lëëan*. And in North-Wales the great northern had the name *trochydd mawr* ‘great diver’ (Swann, 1913: 140, 241).

Also the coast dwelling Sami in northern Norway were familiar with this diver species. Curiously enough, the Sami did not assimilate the Old Norse name. Instead the great northern diver has been categorized according to the Sami own native bird taxonomy and identified as a diver. The northern Sami of Karlsø and Gullesfjord give the name *åhpædovtta* ‘sea-diver’ (Sommerfelt, 1861: 75). Qvigstad (1902: 269) also mentions the Luli Sami name *åhpædavek* ‘sea-diver’. Both are genuine folk names reflecting the fact that Sami regarded it as a separate diver species found at sea. A Swedish folk name recorded from Blekinge province is *rutlom*, which probably refer to the great northern diver (Carlsson, 2000).

Norse *himbrimi* and its contemporary forms

The breeding area of the great northern diver also includes Iceland, as previously mentioned. There are many names for this species in Icelandic, the oldest written probably being *himbrin* (of unknown gender), an obscure word found in a rímarole associated with the Snorra-Edda; the latter is usually dated around 1220, but the rímaroles – i.e. listing of names for different things, e.g. dwarfs, worms, trees, sky, weather, fire etc. – are somewhat later and no-one knows who compiled them

(Bernström, 1965: 688). That goes also for the word's meaning, but speculations are numerous. Some think it is corrupt, a scribal error for *himbrimi*, while others strive to find another way to solve this great enigma (Lockwood, 1984: 58).

As to the meaning of the word *himbrin* or the name *himbrimi*, which is the presently accepted form in most books on birds in Iceland, no-one knows for sure, but according to Magnússon (1989: 326-327) it could be related to the female verb *híma*, cf. the Faroese *hím* 'vague light', coming from the feminine noun or adjective **himra-* 'light, pale colour', with the suffix *-ina-*; **himrina-* > **himrin* > *himbrin*, and thus giving the meaning 'the pale bird' or 'the one in the mist' or something like that.

But we should also bear in mind that the Latin noun *imber* means 'rain', and the Latin verb *immergo* 'to dive', which could give us 'the rainbird' or 'the diver' and so on. For a more thorough investigation and other etymologies see Gröndal, 1887: 596; Gröndal, 1895: 52-54; Lockwood, 1971: 54-56; and Ægisson, 1996: 51.

Jens Christian Svabo writes in the 1780s that the locals differed between *havgás* and the *imbrimil* (Svabo, 1959: 14). He assumes that the latter was a young, not full-coloured bird of the same species. According to Lockwood (1961: 64) this was a correct differentiation. This diver is a common winter visitor, but a rather scarce non-breeding summer visitor to the islands. British ornithologist Kenneth Williamson assumes that it could have been breeding in earlier periods, such as still in

the end of 18th century. No proof for that exists though (Williamson, 1970: 328).

The contemporary form in Faroese dictionaries is *imbrimil* (Jacobsen and Matras, 1961: 193; FO, 1998: 528). According to Lockwood the name must be placed with Old Norse *himbrin*, but at the same time distinct in that all have been influenced by *brimil* 'male seal'. The *imbrimil* exists in several 17th century records (Salomonsen, 1934: 88). Carolus Clusius (1605: 367) uses *Ildbrimel*, Lucas Debes (1673: 127) gives *Imbrim*, while Thomas Tarnovius (1950: 59) renders *Indbrimel*. Clusius' *Ildbrimel* as a name is interesting, because if it is genuine, it could be interpreted as 'male seal of bad omen' and accordingly emphasize its use as a taboo name (Lockwood, 1966: 104).

Males begin to appear along the Norwegian coast already during the summer and the species is rather common during the winter season along the northern coasts. Here also the Nordic name *immer*, alternatively *imber*, *emmer*, *ömmmer*, *ymmmer*, *hymber* and *hav-hymber* are used by the locals (Jensøn, 1646: 58; Strøm, 1762: 236; Leem, 1767: 269; Nilsson, 1835: 497; Solberg, 1942: 199; Falk and Torp, 1960: 462; Haftorn, 1971: 5).

The Old Norse name has survived in the areas of the British Isles once inhabited by Norse people. First record of *ember goose* is from Sir Robert Sibbald in *Scotia Illustrata* 1684. This is of course a remnant of the Orkney Norn language. On the Orkney Islands it was known as *immer* or *ember*. It is first recorded from the Orkneys in 1693. Marwick gives its contemporary

Orkney name as *emmer-goose* (Marwick, 1929: 38). It is known as *immer goose* in the Shetland Islands (Saxby, 1874: 275). This Norn name is also found in the Foula place-name Imberskerry (Lockwood, 1971: 54). The Irish called it *imber diver*, while the Scots named it *ammer* or *emmer goose* (Swainson, 1886: 213).

In German it has been called *Imber*, *Hymber* and *Himbrine*, in Danish *imber* and *havimber*, in Swedish *imber*, *hymber* and *havhymber* and in French *imbrim*. However, these names are probably not folk names, but loan words through handbooks and ornithological literature. Before it received its present scientific name, *Gavia immer*, it had various other names in that language, e.g. *Colymbus glacialis*, *Colymbus immer*, *Colymbus maximus*, *Gavia torquata* and *Urinator imber* (Sundevall and Kinberg, 1885: 1068–1070; Hantzsch, 1905: 99).

More names in Iceland and the Faroes

A name of quite a different origin appeared in the 17th century too; that is *brúsi*, a masculine word used locally in north and north-east Iceland (Olafsen, 1772: 556; Mohr, 1786: 26; Davíðsson, 1894: 282; Gröndal, 1887: 589; Thoroddsen, 1933: 512). It means ‘roarer’ or ‘surfer’ or ‘the bird that goes high up, or lifts itself’, or ‘the big one’. Closely related to the noun *brúsi* is the verb *brúsa* ‘to rise’, ‘to boil’, ‘to elevate’, ‘to get rough’, and a neutral noun coming from that verb, *brús* ‘foam’ (Lockwood, 1971: 56; Magnússon, 1989: 87).

From the 18th century there exists the

variation of Danish spelt *bruuse* (Olafsen, 1772: 556) and *bruse* (Mohr, 1786: 26). Since the early 20th century the Icelandic classification for the diver family (Gaviidae) is *brúsaætt*. And still another name coming from yet another direction is *þerrikráka*, meaning ‘the bird [actually crow or raven] predicting dry weather’ or ‘the weather prophet’ (Valdimarsdóttir, 1989: 324–325; Ægisson, 1996: 51).

Nowadays the Faroe Islanders use the denomination *havgás* ‘ocean goose’, a bird still well known among local fishermen. It seems to be a unique name without correspondence in other Nordic languages. Lockwood supposes that *havgás* was originally a taboo name, which has replaced the older word *imbrimil* in many places (Lockwood, 1961: 65).

From Suðuroy two more names have been recorded. One is *helsiont* (‘collar duck’), recorded by Mikkjal á Ryggi, and explained as a name for a ‘great northern diver in summer plumage’, while the other is *helsión*, which is a ‘great northern diver in fully developed plumage’ (Lockwood, 1961: 65–66).

Traditional folk knowledge

Fishermen in north-western Europe associated this solitaire large diver, which they encountered at sea, with many beliefs. Its loud call emphasizes that the great northern diver was a special bird. The call is remarkable and has been compared to “humans cry for help, in distress at sea” (Faber, 1822: 58; Nilsson, 1835: 489).

Some beliefs and habits were of course shared with other diver species. The Brit-



The great northern diver as a guard dog, according to Aron fra Kangeq (1822-1869) (From K. Thisted, "Således skriver jeg, Aron", 1999).

ish Chaplain at Christiania (Oslo), John Bowden, gives an interesting story about the creation of the great northern diver: "The peasants in Finmark believe that this bird was first made without legs, but that nature, becoming sensible of her mistake, got into a pet, and flung a pair of legs after it" (Bowden, 1869: 174). This story is a well-known legend used about the other diver species in Sweden, Norway and Finland (Sundblad, 1917: 153; Wessman, 1931: 624; Harbe, 1950: 115; Tillhagen, 1978: 329).

On the Faroes, according to Nicolai Mohr, the islanders believed that the great northern divers "hatch their eggs under their wings out at sea, since it has never been seen flying, nor sitting on the land" (Mohr, 1786: 37). The belief is also repeated by Jørgen Landt (1800: 261). This

belief, known about birds already since ancient times, was indicated already by Norwegian Henrik Höjer in the early 17th century (Clusius, 1605: 102). It has also been told in Norwegian 17th and 18th century literature (Jensøn, 1646: 58; Pontopidan, 1753: 131; Storaker, 1928: 225), and is mentioned in Thomas Pennant's book *British Zoology* in 1776 (Greenoak, 1997: 15). According to the Scottish author Sir Robert Sibbald in 1684 it made its nest under the water and also hatched out its eggs there (Swann, 1913: 106). Other strange stories about its breeding behaviour were passed on in the 18th and 19th century bird literature (Strøm, 1762: 237; Sundevall and Kinberg, 1885: 1068).

Emberdays

In the Norwegian calendar there are some

days noted as *imbredagar* and in the Icelandic calendar as well, called *imbrudagar*, *imbrudagavikur* or *imbruvikur*. Both meaning Emberdays or Emberweeks (Björnsson, 1993: 115–122). They are a recollection from the Catholic time, their full name in Latin being *jejunia quattuor temporum* or *quattuor tempora* (Magnússon, 1989: 420; Björnsson, 1993: 119–122). They usually fall three days in the week before Christmas, Easter, Midsummer Day and Michaelmas. In many places the fourth Sunday of Advent is still called *imbresundagen* (Ember Sunday). In some places in northern Norway, the so-called *Imbredagar* have been connected with the arrivals of the northern diver. The diver usually appears along the northern coast before Christmas (Pontoppidan, 1753: 131; Ægisson, 1996: 51). In Germany it was called *Adventsvogel*, for the same reason (Ægisson, 1996: 51). According to a Norwegian dictionary from 1646 the *Immervecka* ‘Ember Week’ comes the week before Christmas (Jensøn, 1646: 58).

However, this is probably a kind of folk etymology, since the names of these days have nothing to do with the great northern diver, according to Falk and Torp (Falk and Torp, 1960: 462). The word *imbre* is most likely derived from an old English word *ymbryne*, meaning ‘period’, as the Latin name for the days there became *ymbrendagas* or *ymbrenedagas* (Magnússon, 1989: 420; Björnsson, 1993: 119–122).

Weather forecast

It seems to be a common view in Eurasia and North America that the call of

various diver species can be interpreted as ominous. Also their flight can be read as a kind of weather forecast (Hammarin, 1987: 16; Svanberg, in press). For instance, the red-throated diver has been known as *rain goose* in the Shetlands (Spence, 1899: 113).

The belief that the behaviour or call indicates the forthcoming weather is also known about the great northern diver. The Thompson Indians of western Canada think that the calling of the great northern diver foretells rain (Armstrong, 1958: 63), and moreover that the bird could actually cause it, and even a human being imitating the cry could do likewise (Greenoak, 1997: 14).

This belief seems to be common among settlers as well as natives in many places in North America (Bergen, 1899: 46, 51; Lee, 1976: 61). On west Greenland the Eskimos said that if the great northern diver was crying this was a sign of approaching rain (Rasmussen, 1970: 9).

We have some specific evidence from north-western Europe also. In Iceland – and this was mentioned already by Ole Worm in 1654 – a flying great northern diver was viewed as forecasting long-lasting bad weather and storms (Bernström, 1965: 689; Anonymous, 1961: 625; Jónsson, 1961: 142; Sigfússon, 1982: 249). “When you hear its voice, bad weather is on its way, that’s what the old people said and truly believed and is surely as true nowadays as it was then”, writes Guðmundur Friðjónsson (Friðjónsson, 1938: 202). Several oral and unpublished handwritten records from various places in Iceland

confirm that the great northern diver has been seen as a weather prophet (ÞP 3828, ÞP 3836, ÞP 3915, ÞP 5338, ÞP 8016). “If you could hear the great northern diver a lot in the evening, it meant good and dry weather ahead”, states a female informant from Árnæssýsla in southern Iceland (ÞP 3826). A man from Skagafjörður in northern Iceland says: “When the great northern diver flew high above, with much laughter, it meant cold and wet days ahead; it never fails” (ÞP 3904). Also from Norway there is evidence that the coastal dwellers saw it as a weather prophet (Storaker, 1928: 225).

If the Faroese fishermen heard *havgás* in the mornings on their way for fishing, they used to say “it will be good weather, *imbrimilin* call this morning” (FO, 1998: 58).

Use of its meat

Some North American Indians, such as the Cree Indian tribe of Canada, utilize its meat as food. According to George Suckley in 1860, it was hunted by the Indians in Washington state: “In winter they are quite fat and are much sought after by the Indians, who are very fond of eating them” (quoted in Richardson *et al.*, 2000: 8). Alaskan Inuit usually give the meat to dogs, although old people sometimes have used it as food (Nelson, 1969: 163). It has traditionally been hunted and used among the Greenlanders (Fabricius, 1929: 140). Bone remains from archaeological sites on the coasts of Greenland indicate that the species has been exploited as food since ancient times (Gotfredsen, 1997). The

meat has also been utilized by the Icelanders (Bernström, 1965: 689). Its eggs are almost inedible, but the bird itself can be eaten, according to 17th century author Jón Guðmundsson (Hermannsson, 1924: 20). An ornithologist in the 20th century states that “the meat isn’t good” (Sæmundsson, 1936: 671).

It is supposed to be difficult to shoot, according to information from P. F. Petersen on Nólsoy at the end of the 19th century (Andersen, 1898: 234). Although it has been object for mischievous hunting, according to a couple of authors, by Faroese Islanders, it has never been used for any purposes on the islands (Dánjalsson, 1951: 58; Johannesen, 1983: 143). However, according to H. C. Müller, the meat is regarded as delicious (Müller, 1862: 35). Also a Faroese informant, Alfred Olsen in Vestmanna, has in December 2004 confirmed that the elderly generation, i.e. in the early 20th century, used to shoot this species for the meat, if they encountered it at sea. According to Leem the fat and meat is unpleasant (Leem, 1767: 269).

Diver skin

The use of diver skin for making cloth, caps, bags and other items are well-known from the circumpolar area. The utilization of diver skin is mentioned from the Sami area already by Olaus Magnus in 1555 and it has been used until today (Kiliatis, 1990: 229). Also the peasantry of northern Sweden has made use of diver skin (Hammarin, 1987: 16; 1990: 49-50; Steensland, 2000: 81). So did the Sami people (Fellman, 1906: 81). In his trav-

ologue of 1732, Carl Linnaeus noted from the Kvikkjokk mountains that “diver necks are used for making *karpuses*” (Linnaeus, 2003: 152). A *karpus* is a kind of cap or hood protecting the ears and neck. Also the Norwegian bishop J. E. Gunnerus has described, in an article from 1761, how such *karpuses* were made from the necks of divers (Granlund, 1953: 128–129). It was usually the black-throated diver that supplied the skin.

The skin of the great northern diver has been utilized in the Arctic. Richard K. Nelson (Nelson, 1969: 255) mentions loon-skin parkas among Alaskan Inuits made of this species, made entirely from the neck skin and feathers. They were said to be waterproof and very warm. The skin of the great northern diver and other species has been used until today by the Inuits in North America (Hoyo *et al.*, 1992: 168). Heads of the great northern divers were carried by Eskimos as talismans (Greenoak, 1997: 14) and also used on the bird skin blankets that were exported to Europe from Greenland in the early 20th century (Freuchen and Salomonsen, 1958: 40).

Its skin has actually also been used in Scandinavia. According to Leem, the coastal Sami of Finnmark used the skin of the great northern diver for manufacturing caps (Leem, 1767: 71). From Ranen in Norway, Iver Ancher Heltzen mentions in 1834, that its skin is very thick, and that he has seen it used for covers on chairs. The birds were usually captured in fishing nets (Heltzen, 1981: 97).

As to Iceland, ornithologist Bjarni Sæmundsson wrote in 1936: “[The great

northern diver] is of little economic value; [...] its feathers are hard and the bird itself rare, so trying to collect its eggs wouldn’t give much in one hand, also because of the great distances. Mostly it is killed for taxidermal reasons, in the spring, as many would like to have a specimen of the bird in its breeding plumage” (Sæmundsson, 1936: 671–672). The great northern diver is now regarded as vulnerable in Iceland (Náttúrufræðistofnun Íslands, 2005).

Other use

An interesting feature in this whole story is the fact that the great northern diver seems also to have been caught alive in Greenland in former times and used as a “watch-dog”, i.e. tied with a rope around its legs or neck and put somewhere high up (e.g. on a house-top or roof), “on guard”, so to speak, as it made loud sounds when it saw someone approaching, and thus warned the owner of coming visitors (Frederiksen, 1980: 70; Thisted, 1999: 154–156).

Conclusion

The great northern diver has played a significant role in the traditional environmental knowledge of the various people living within its range. Of course its impact has been greater in North America, where the species is common in the boreal and sub arctic areas. It has there been of great importance from economic, symbolic and cognitive aspects. However, its size, loud voice and its behaviour have also attracted the people on the island and coastal societies of the northern Atlantic sea. It has been a well-known bird both in Norse and

Celtic traditions and it has been seen as a weather prophet, but also its meat and skin, and the live bird have been utilized too.

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