The Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) as Food in the Northern Circumpolar Region

Snjófuglur (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) til matna á økinum runt Subarktis

Ingvar Svanberg
Department of East European Studies, Uppsala University, Box 514, SE-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden.
Phone: +46 18 471 16 85, e-mail: ingvar.svanberg@east.uu.se

Úrtak

Í ferðafrásøgnini sigur J.C. Svabo, í stuttari viðmerking, at fyri føroyingar var snjófuglurin (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) krásamatur. Fuglurin var at síggja um várið, og tá varð hann tikin. Prógvini um nýtsluna í Føroyum eru tó ikki nógv. Harafturímóti var snjófuglurin hildin at vera ein góður biti, tá ið hann var at síggja á vári, hjá fólki í Norðurskandinaviu, Russlandi, Sibiriu, Grønlandi og í Norðurameriku. Nógvur fuglur varð tikin, ofta við snaru, og fólkið í subarktiska økinum brúkti fuglin til matna. Eisini hava fólk havt fuglin í búri. Í Grønlandi nýttu børnini fuglin sum leiku. Í einari frásøgn, frá seinnu helvt av 1800-talinum, verður sagt, at nólsoyingar tóku fuglin við einfaldum fellum. Sjálvt um ongar neyvar lýsingar eru um veiðu av snjófugli í 1700-talinum, benda tær fáu upplýsingarnar frá Svabo á, at føroyingar tóku snjófugl.

Abstract

According to a brief comment in J.C. Svabo's travelogue, the snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) was considered among the Faroese to make a delicious repast. The snow bunting appeared in abundance during springtime in the villages; it was probably at this time that it was captured for food. However, evidence from the Faroe Islands concerning its use is sparse. According to many records from elsewhere, however, the snow bunting was considered a fat little bird that could be caught during its northern springtime migration, when it passed through northern Scandinavia, Greenland, Russia, Siberia, and North America. People in the subarctic region caught it in large numbers (usually in snares) and used it as food. It was also kept as a cage bird. Children in Greenland even used it as a kind of toy. According to an account from Nólsoy at the end of the 19th century, the snow bunting was captured in primitive enclosure traps. Although we lack detailed data on the methods used for trapping this bird in the 18th century, Svabo's sparse account is a plausible one.

Introduction

Around 1782, Jens Christian Svabo wrote as follows about the snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) found in the Faroe Islands:

> During the winter and spring, when a heavy snow is falling, it is seen in large flocks, especially in the infields and near the houses. In the summer, it lives in the mountains. Its colour changes in winter from mottled grey to white. It is considered to make delicious food. (1959:21)

In those days, it was probably a breeding bird in the Faroes, or at least in the Norðuroyggjar (the northernmost islands). Nowadays, however, it seems only to be an abundant winter visitor and migrant (Sørensen

and Bloch, 1990: 166). According to Salomonsen (1947: 220), both *P.n. nivalis* and the Icelandic subspecies, *P.n. insulae*, are common winter visitors in the Faroes.

Svabo's account regarding its use as food is very brief and general, and it furnishes no contextual details, such as *when? where?* and *by whom?* Should we then regard his account as plausible or should we view it rather as an example of the kind of *ghost information* so common in general handbooks containing ethnobiological data (Svanberg, 1998)? These questions will be addressed later in this essay. The study of the cultural domains within which human beings make use of wild birds is a task for ethnobiology (Svanberg, 2000; Svanberg and Tunón, 2000).

Small-bird species have been rather uncommon in the Faroes. Several of the small birds seen nowadays are actually recent immigrants. Most of the species Svabo observed in the Faroes were larger sea birds. Both meat and eggs were readily available from these sea birds, especially the puffin (*Fratercula arctica*), the guillemot (*Uria aalge*), the razorbill (*Alca torda*), the black guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*), the great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*), the lesser black-backed gull (*Larus fuscus*), the herring gull (*Larus argentatus*), the kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*), the Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*), the Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), the great skua (*Catharacta skua*), the dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), the golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*), the whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), the greylag goose (*Anser anser*), the teal (*Anas crecca*), the mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), the red-breasted merganser (*Mergus serrator*), the eider (*Somateria mollissima*), the gannet (*Sula bassana*), the cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*), the shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*), and the Manx shearwater (*Puffinus puffinus*). With regard to the oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*), Svabo wrote that it is "regarded as good food, and most people consider it a useful bird in the outfields, especially since it is the sworn enemy of the raven, and chases it away with its sharp bill. It seems therefore to need protection everywhere". In Svabo's time, it was fully protected in Húsar on Kalsoy. The inhabitants of the other islands thought, however, that it scared the sheep with its shriek. According to Svabo (1959: 7–25), the islanders ate all of these birds and/or their eggs. The great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) was also once used for food in the islands (Debes, 1673: 130). During the 20th century, the fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) colonised the archipelago. Nowadays, it is the most important game bird in the Faroes (Olsen, 1998). Finally, according to Svabo, the fat nestlings of the storm petrel (*Hydrobates pelagicus*) were burnt as lamps on Mykines – an interesting ethnobiological note, since oil/fat-rich bird nestlings have been used for the same purpose in other parts of the world.

The Snow Bunting and Its Distribution

The snow bunting is known in the Faroes as *snjófuglur* (Jacobsen and Matras, 1928: 352). This term was recorded as early as 1673 by Debes (1673: 124). Jakobsen (1932: 849) has noted the name *snawful* in Shetland Norn. In Iceland, the same bird is

called *snjótíttlíngur* or *snjófugl* in the winter, and *sólskríkja* ('sun singer') in the summer (Gröndal, 1895: 37; Blöndal, 1920–24: 762). With their use of the prefix *snow-*, the Faroese and Shetlander designations (and the Icelandic winter term as well) probably refer to the white plumage of the bird. These names have their correspondents in Danish, *snespurv*; English, *snow bunting* or *snowbird*; and in German, *Schneeammer* and *Schneesperling* (Jørgensen and Blackburne, 1941: 78). Other German names are *Schneevogel*, *Schneeammerling*, *Neuvogel*, and *Winterling* (Suolahti, 1909: 108). The same may be said of the Norwegian local names, *e.g.*, *snofuggel*, *snøspor* (Oppdal), *snøføggel* (Nordtrøndelag), *snjofugl*, *snytetting* (Troms), *snetiting* (Finnmark), *titing*, *snjospikke*, *snekok*, and *fjellspurv* (Sogn og Fjordane) (Haftorn, 1971: 816). The common name in Sweden nowadays is *snösparv*, a term first recorded around 1695. This is probably also a genuine folk name, which was used at a much earlier point. It is also known under a great many local names, such as *hårdvädersfågel* (Uppland); *snösvala* (Medelpad); *vitsparv* (Ångermanland); *skarfågel* (Lappland); *stormpink* (Gotland); *snölärka*, *fjällsparv*, and *vitsparv* (Jämtland); *snöfågel, urvädersfågel*, and *västanvindssparv* (Härjedalen); *skvirra*, *snösvirra, snöskvirra*, and *vinterfågel* (Swedish Finland); and *aprilfågel*, *hårdårsfågel, illvädersfågel, urvädersfågel*, and *vinterfågel* (Dalecarlia) (Linnaeus, 1761: 83; Broman, 1912–54: 455; Modin, 1916: 325; Hortling, 1944: 33; Levander and Björklund, 1980: 951; Hammarin, 1987: 43; Hammarin, 1990: 123-124; Steensland, 2000: 111; ULMA 20 111). Similar names for the species are found also in adjacent countries, *e.g.* Vepsian, *tenkatkădai* ('road destroyer') (Zaitseva and Mullonen, 1972: 566); Finnish and Carelian, *tierikko* ('road destruction'), *tienrikkoja* ('road destroyer'), *kelinrikkojaine* ('road destroyer'), and *lumisirkku* ('snow siskin') (Mela, 1909: 129); and Estonian, *hangelind*, ('snowdriftbird'); *lõokese eestvoorimees* ('the forerunner of the lark's coachman'), *lumelõoke* ('snow lark'), *lõoke*, *lõo*, *lõgu* ('lark'), *talvelõoke* ('winter lark'), *tuulelõoke* ('wind lark'), *külmalõo* ('cold lark'), *valge* (*talve*) *lõoke* ('white (winter) lark'), *lumelind* ('snow bird'), *talvelind* ('winter bird'), and *talvepääsuke* ('winter swallow') (Mäger, 1967: 189). In Russian, it is known as *snezhurka* ('snow sludge, slush') and *snegurka* ('snow maiden') (Dement'ev and Gladkov, 1954: 504; Vasmer, 1955: 681).

Many of these Nordic and Finno-Ugric local names refer to the reputation of this bird as a sign of a forthcoming storm, snow, or cold (EU 27 761; ULMA 88:5; ULMA 95:7; ULMA 30 280:8:7). If the snow bunting appears in the village, according to a report from Transtrand in north-western Dalecarlia, it is a sign that the spring will be unusually cold (ULMA 3040:2). "When the white snow buntings arrive in large swarms around the village during the spring, it is a sure sign that there will be a pause in the spring and that the summer will be cold", in the words of an account from Jämtland (Anonymous, 1917: 92). According to a record from Tåsjö in Ånger-

manland, famine is to be expected, if there are large flocks of snow buntings (Modin, 1916: 325). The Sami too connect the appearance of this bird in inhabited areas with forthcoming snow or bad weather (Fellman, 1906: 92; Turi, 1917: 109-110; Qvigstad, 1934: 380). A record from Østerdalen in Norway says the weather will be bad, if the *uværsfuglen* arrives in spring. The belief in Senja had it that there would be snow, if the plumage of the snow bunting was white, but bad weather if it was dark (Hodne, 1998: 122). According to Danish folk belief in Jutland, more winter was to be expected, if the *snåkåkken* tarried too long in the spring (DFS, 1904/26). A record from Skive says there will be snow, if the *snekok* appears and comes to the houses (Schmidt, 1963: 225-226). It is a herald of spring, according to Estonian folk belief (Mäger, 1994: 111-112). The snow bunting's habit of gathering in large flocks of white males also earned it poetic names, such as *snowflake* in Scotland and the Orkney Isles (Swainson, 1886: 72; cf. also Chapman, 1896). In western Greenland, the arrival of the *kupaluarsuk* – of which the children were keenly observant – announced the end of winter (Le Mouël, 1973: 72). When the time for the arrival of this bird approached, the people of Greenland searched for it eagerly, and upon espying it, welcomed it enthusiastically as a sign of the forthcoming spring (Freuchen and Salomonsen, 1958: 117–118).

The snow bunting has a northern circumpolar distribution. It is found in Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Jan Mayen, Svalbard, Bjørnøya, Franz Josef Land, northern Scotland, Finno-Scandia, Russia, Siberia, Kamchatka, and the Aleut Islands. It is found as a breeding bird in the area of Finno-Scandia north of the tree line, and it is also a common breeding bird in Iceland. It was formerly a breeding bird in the Faroes, but there is no record of it breeding there at any point over the last hundred years. The scientific community has known of the snow bunting since the late 17th century, when Olof Rudbeck, the Younger, described the species during his Lapland tour (Rudbeck, 1987). Carl Linnaeus gave a full account of the species in 1740 (Fig. 1).

The Snow Bunting as Food

As Svabo explicitly stated, the few smallbird species in the Faroe Islands were usually not eaten. Of the wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*), he wrote that the Islanders ate "neither the bird, its egg nor the nestling". The wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) was not eaten either, he explained. Although Svabo devoted a whole chapter to the detailed description of the methods for trapping and hunting birds in the mountains, he gave no further information on the capture of the snow bunting. Details cannot be found in the available ethnographic information. It furthermore bears recalling in this connection that the starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*), according to a more recent record, was caught during times of food shortage in the early years of the last century (Olsen, 1998: 6).

The snow bunting is a ground-loving bird; hence, it is sometimes regarded in Nordic folk taxonomy as a lark. During its migration, it appears in large flocks and always in open meadows. It has been hunted

Fig. 1. *Snjófuglur, Snow Bunting, Plectrophenax nivalis (Olof Rudbeck, 1987 (1695))*

for food in many parts of the northern circumpolar area, particularly during its spring migration. The males arrive first at the breeding grounds in the northern circumpolar areas, and the females join a month later. Food is available around human settlements, where manure from animals, as well as a somewhat higher temperature, create fertile soil conditions for the vegetation eaten by the birds in the springtime. Huge flocks of male birds, therefore, seek out inhabited areas, where they are observed and sometimes hunted by the local inhabitants (Tinbergen, 1939; Parmelee, 1968: 1668-1671).

As early as 1740, Carl Linnaeus (1740: 367) wrote that the snow bunting makes a delicious repast, especially when it is fat, and that in its taste it closely resembles the ortolan (*Emberiza hortulana*), a bird that was greatly appreciated by the bourgeoisie on the European continent. According to Linnaeus, it was called *ortolan de neige* in French, which was probably a commercial name at the time, rather than a genuine folk name. 'Delicious birds to eat', wrote Pehr Gustaf Lindroth in a manuscript about birds at Söderforsbruk in Uppland in the late 18th century (Tyrberg and Haavisto, 1992: 57). In Moscow in the 1770s, snow buntings were sold in bundles during wintertime as titbits, according to the Swedish explorer, Johan Peter Falk (Falk, 1786: 397). Henry Linkmyer Saxby (1874: 93), who knew the bird from the Shetlands, regarded it as "a perfect luxury for the table". "I must plead guilty", he wrote, "to having slain scores of them." At the beginning of the 19th century, moreover, there was a demand for snow buntings in the Swedish Royal Kitchen in Stockholm (Anonymous, 1875: 112). The interest in snow buntings as a gourmet food survived into the early 20th century. This was a taste shared in North America. In 1903, William Dutcher reported that a state game warden had

found 80,000 snow buntings destined for the gourmet trade in a cold storage warehouse (Parmelee, 1968: 1671).

In northern Scandinavia, the snow bunting had the reputation of being able to fatten itself in a few hours, thus, it was fatter in the evening than in the morning. In Fatmomakke in Lapland, a man that got fat easily was said to be "as the snow sparrow". The saying in Ångermanland was similar: "You are as a snow bunting, you lose flesh fast"; or "You are fat in the evening and become thin in the morning" (EU 17 790; ULMA 21019:12; ULMA 10 107). For lack of better food, Finnish youngsters in Norrbotten often trapped the snow bunting in the early spring with the aid of horsehair snares (Bergfors and Neander, 1930: 48). Jacob Fellman (1906: 93) wrote that the Sami of Finland ate the delicious meat of this bird. The Finnish Sami preferred to catch the bunting in the evening, since the meat was fatter at that time. According to Knud Leem (1767: 255), the Sami of Finnmark noted how the bunting was lean during low tide and fat during high tide. Some Sami seem, however, to have disregarded it as a potential food source. In 1931, for example, a Sami informant from Arvidsjaur told Edvin Brännström that the capture or killing of this small bird was widely disliked. Many Sami regarded it as beautiful and considered it nice company (ULMA 4373a). Until rather recently, however, it was captured in great numbers in northern Norway, and sold in towns in the southern part of the country (Haftorn, 1971: 820).

Until World War II, the snow bunting was used as food in northern Scandinavia. There is much evidence from Lapland to suggest that it was caught with snares of horsehair. In many places, it seems to have been a kind of entertainment for children to capture the snow bunting, while it was important as food for the poor crofters in mountain areas. According to Itkonen (1941: 24), young boys among the Mountain Sami in Inari used to capture them in early spring. The fat, delicious birds were boiled and eaten. Other sources from southern Lapland and western Jämtland confirm that it was mostly children who were in charge of trapping the snow bunting. A skilled trapper could catch hundreds of the small birds in one day (Ekman, 1910: 199-200). For the children of Lapland, according to several records, it was both exciting to catch the bird and a nice change of diet to eat it, inasmuch as food was sometimes scarce in the spring, and very often monotonous in any event (Ryd and Ryd, 1989: 18). An inhabitant of Jukkasjärvi has explained that, during the springtime, a full cauldron could be filled each day with the delicious birds, even if the family was large. It was not uncommon for some fifty birds to be boiled at one time. A big eater could consume twenty birds at a single meal. In the years after World War I, when food was rather scarce in Sweden, snow buntings were sold for five *öre* each (Tillhagen, 1978: 102).

Traps

Evidence of trapping is quite abundant, both in the literature and in folk-life records. There were several ways of catch-

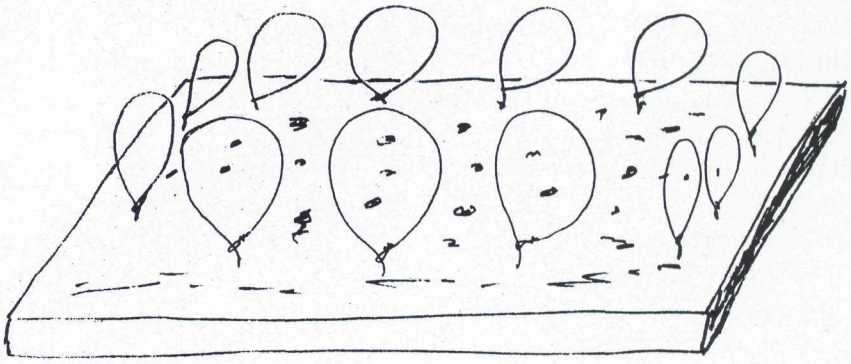

Fig. 2. *Snare board with horse hair snares from Vilhelmina, Lapland (Nils Eriksson, ULMA 21019)*
Mynd 2. Snara við lykkjum af faksi úr Vilhelminu, Lapplandi.

ing the snow bunting. According to Zetterberg (1925: 124), it was captured during its spring migration with a snare board fitted with upright horsehair snares (Fig. 2). Seeds were spread around the board. The birds that were caught were killed with sticks. Snare boards seem to have been used in many parts of northern Sweden (Kjellström, 1995:273–274; EU 17 790; ULMA 1846:2; ULMA 884:686; ULMA 8452; ULMA 10 107). Snare boards of a similar sort are known from northern Finland (Sirelius, 1919: 103; Itkonen, 1941: 24). Snare boards have also been used for the same purpose in Shetland. Snow buntings there were caught in corn-yards with horsehair snares fixed to a *snaa fowl brod*, as the board was locally known on the Fair Isle (Fenton, 1978: 522). The same kind of snare board is known from other parts of Europe, such as the Balkan Peninsula, where it has been used to trap songbirds (Gunda, 1979: 120-121). According to Knud Leem (1767: 256), the Sami of Finnmark caught snow buntings with snares of hair taken from a cow's tail.

The snow bunting could also be caught with a kind of deadfall made from a door, a cover, or something similar, which was then supported by a stick (Kjellström, 1995: 274). Enclosure traps have also been used. A record exists from Stensele in Lapland to the effect that a grain sieve was used for the fall (Fig. 3). A string was tied to the stick. When the birds gathered to eat the seeds scattered under the trap, one could capture them by pulling the string (EU 4193).

In Banffshire, peasants shot the bird with a gun. Its meat was a welcome change to their rather monotonous diet. The peasants would lay down a line of oats on which the snow buntings came to feed. Then the gunmen would open fire. The women first

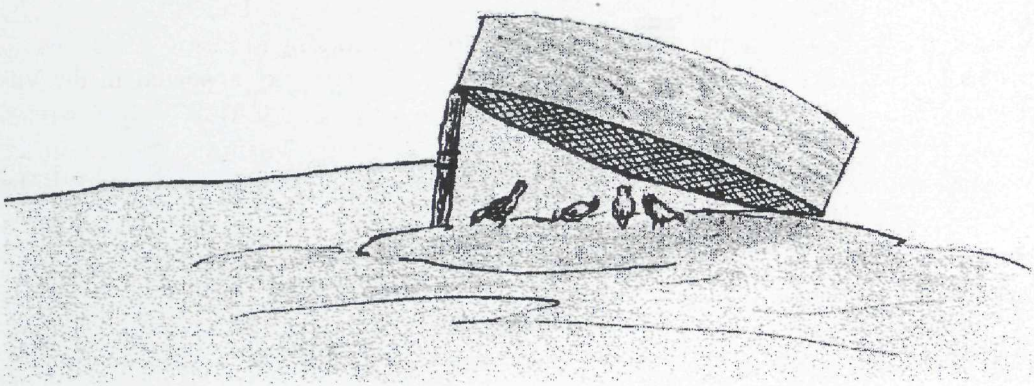

Fig. 3. *A grain sieve used for a snow bunting fall, Stensele, Lapland (EU 4193)*
Mynd 3. Kornsáld nýtt sum snjófuglafella í Stensele í Lapplandi.

plucked the birds and then boiled or roasted them. According to a Banffshire saying, "the heavier the snow falls and the longer it lies, the fatter the *ghallicks* get". Peasants in Invernesshire, Caithness, and Sutherland also hunted the snow bunting for food or to feed their dogs (Nethersole-Thompson, 1966: 168-169).

Otto Fabricius (1780: 119) wrote that it was known as *kupolarârssuk* in Greenland; the inhabitants of that island considered it of poor value, although they did dry its meat. Fabricius (1962: 74-75) stresses that only children caught the buntings, and that they did so when the birds came down to the houses in the course of their migration. The birds were either shot with small bows or captured with snares made from the small horsehair-like fringes found on the edge of baleen. The snow bunting was the first prey that the young boys of Greenland hunted (at an age of five or six years). The buntings built their nests close to the dwellings of the Eskimo. "Apparently they never realize that children are much worse than foxes. The Eskimo youngsters have no mercy at all with any living creature. All things alive can be killed and the future hunter starts proudly making snow buntings his first game." (Freuchen and Salomonsen, 1958: 153; cf. Holm, 1914: 63; 1935: 50; Bruhn, 1935: 50).

The Danish ethnographer, Kai Birket-Smith (1929: 117), observed that small boys among the Caribou Eskimo in the southern part of Barren Grounds, west of Hudson Bay, amused themselves by catching snow buntings in traps. These traps recall the deadfalls used in northern Scandinavia. They consisted of a small hollow in the soil in which a few berries were placed as bait. By the side of the hollow, a flat stone was leaned against a stick to which a long string was tied. When the bunting

picked at the berries, the boy pulled the string, thus causing the stone to fall. The natives of Alaska, for their part, saw the snow bunting as a harbinger of spring. The Eskimos of that state ate it, but the Athabaskan-speaking Koyukon people of the forest region did not use it as food (Nelson, 1983: 118). There are also records from Siberia indicating that snow buntings were hunted in that region. Collective farmers in Yakutia still regarded the bird as a delicacy in the second half of the 20th century (Nethersole-Thompson, 1966: 169).

Snow buntings have also been used as cage birds in Sweden, as well as on the European continent. Local bird-catchers sold them in the Swedish capital in the 1730s. Linnaeus himself kept them as cage birds when he lived in Stockholm (Linnaeus, 1740: 367). More recent literature also indicates that snow buntings were kept as cage birds in Germany (Bub, 1966: 36). According to an account from Greenland, moreover, adults would catch the returning buntings in spring, break their wings, and give them to the small children as a kind of toy. In Scotland, the snow bunting was regarded as a rare bird and British egg collectors considered it a blue-ribbon bird in the 19th century. From 1830 onwards, members of the Victorian Acquisitive Society would go to the Highlands to hunt for its eggs. Few such eggs, however, were actually found by the collectors (Nethersole-Thompson, 1966: 2).

Svabo's description of the use of the snow bunting as food in the Faroe Islands is brief, but it may be a reliable ethnobiological account all the same. In his era, the bunting was still a breeding bird in the Faroes. According to Jørgen Landt (1800: 271), snow buntings appeared in the villages during April. Most were probably migrating buntings returning to their breeding grounds in Greenland or Iceland. "The snow bunting is an abundant species throughout the Færoe Islands in the wintertime", wrote a mid-19th century author (Feilden, 1872: 3217). According to Salomonsen (1935: 167), the snow bunting usually arrived in October and departed in the first half of April. The appearance of large flocks of buntings must have been tempting for the villagers. "*Snjófuglar um bøin flykkjast, matin í seg pakka*" ("Snowbirds throng in the infield, quickly and greedily eating the food"), wrote Nólsoyar-Pall in his version of the *Fuglakvæði* (Jakobsen, 1966: 244). The flocks in the Faroes were often extremely large, sometimes containing thousands of birds. It was especially when the snow fell that buntings appeared in the villages (Patursson 1932: 126). At a time when food could be scarce or monotonous, these birds must have afforded a welcome change of diet. The snow bunting is usually unafraid and it was probably very easy for the Islanders to kill. Sheriff H.C. Müller (1862: 2) wrote that snow buntings were very abundant on cultivated land in March and April, and that he was able to kill thirty of them in a single volley of grapeshot. P. F. Petersen from Nólsoy supplied some details on how the Islanders hunted these birds. According to Petersen, the buntings were captured with primitive traps – made from an inverted sieve or box – reminiscent of the traps

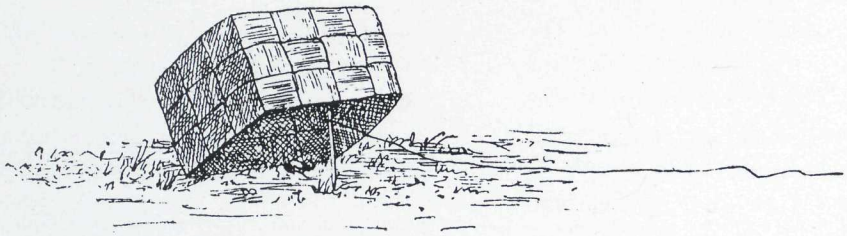

Fig. 4. Inverted box used as a trap to capture snow buntings, northern Finland (Schvindt 1905)
Mynd 4. Hálvdur kassi nýttur sum fella til at fanga snjófugl við úr Norðurfinnlandi.

known from northern Sweden and Finland (Andersen, 1898: 394; cf. Schvindt, 1905: 11, and Henriksson, 1977: 24) (Fig. 4).

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