



Kitsissunnguit – birds, nature and cultural history

Kitsissunnguit is one of Greenland's most important bird areas and with its many different habitats, wetlands and abundant bird life, it constitutes a unique nature location in Greenland. There is a greater variety of breeding bird species here than anywhere else in the country. One bird species in particular is characteristic for the archipelago: the Arctic tern. The Arctic tern has its main breeding grounds here in Greenland and the colony on Kitsissunnguit is among the largest in the world.

The archipelago is now a protected area with limited access during the birds' breeding season. The protection combines biological considerations and local interests such as fishing and access to ancient sites. The level of protection is flexible, ensuring that the birds are taken into consideration while also allowing both locals and tourists to use the flat green islands in Disko Bay.

The islands are also unique in an international context. The area is designated a "wetland of international importance" – a so-called Ramsar site, partly because the islands' Arctic Tern population is so significant that the area is important for the global population.



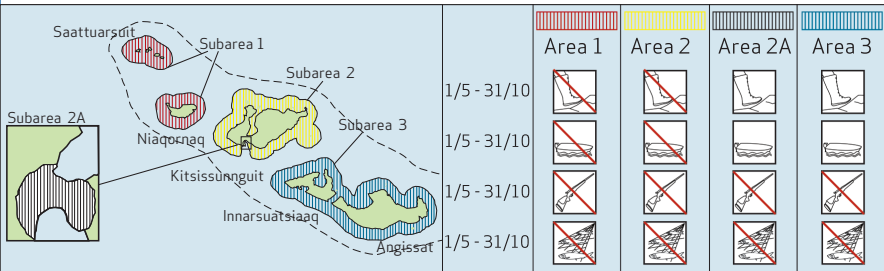
Photos: Carsten Egevang/ARG-PIC.COM

This leaflet has been produced by the Government of Greenland, with financial support from the Danish Ministry of Environment's Arctic Programme.

The Kitsissunnguit archipelago is protected – see Home Rule Executive Order No. 11 of 17 April 2008 on the protection of Kitsissunnguit. The islands can be used commercially and recreationally with certain restrictions, see the sections, maps and signatures below.

Fishing for lumpsucker is permitted in sub-areas 2 and 3 from 1 May to 10 June. In connection with lumpsucker fishing in sub-areas 2 and 3, fishing equipment must be removed by 10 June at the latest. The gathering of plants for fuel is allowed in connection with fishing, hunting and capturing. All fishing equipment must be removed and taken away before 1 May. No forms of waste – including fish waste, fishing tools and equipment – may be left in the protected area.


This is an extract from the Home Rule Executive Order No. 11 of 17 April 2008 on the protection of Kitsissunnguit. The content is therefore not comprehensive. For further information, contact the department by phone on +299 345000.



	Area 1	Area 2	Area 2A	Area 3
1/5 - 31/10				
1/5 - 31/10				
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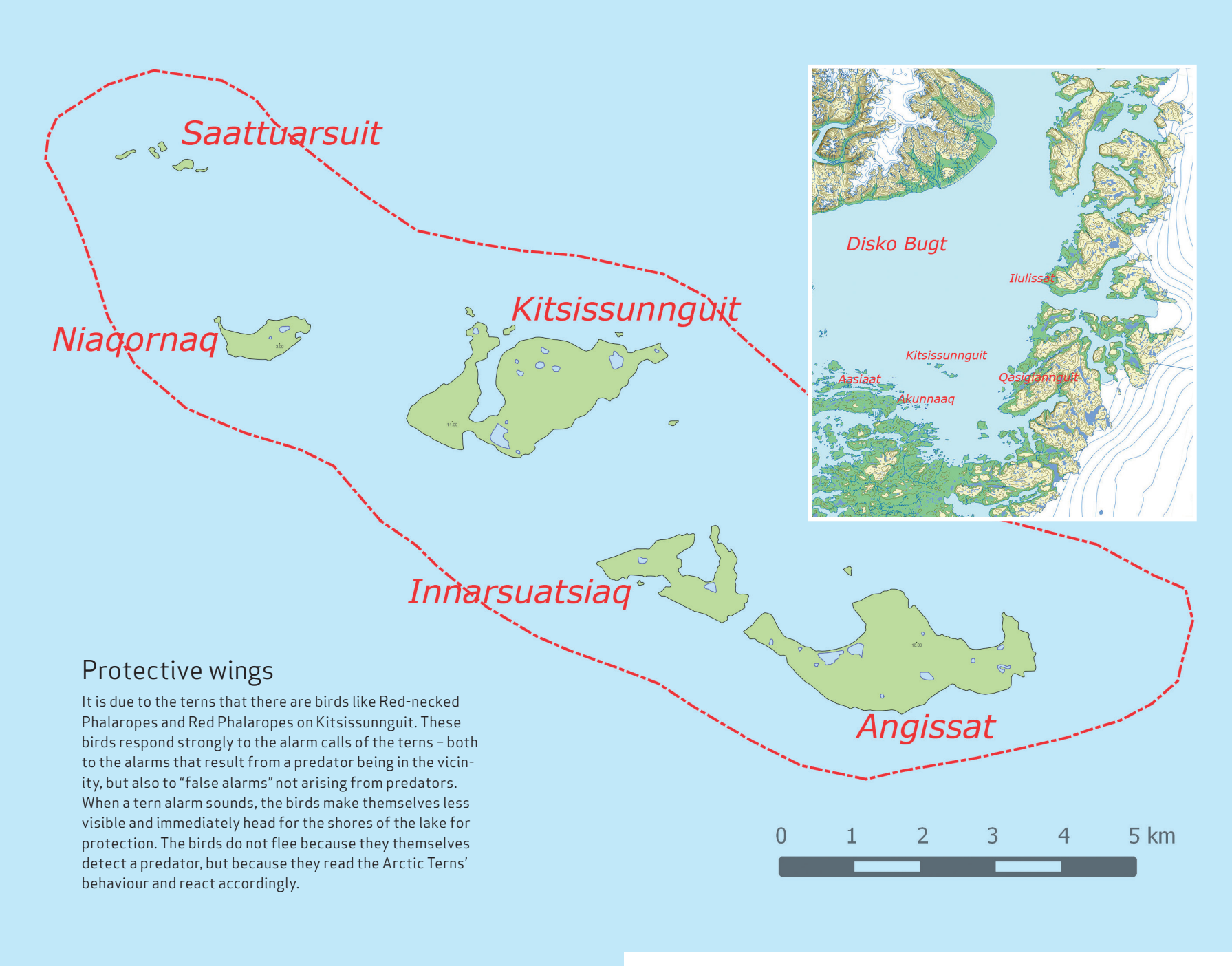
The Arctic Tern possesses an unmatched ability to protect its nesting area. A predator that comes too close to an Arctic Tern colony will be greeted by an inferno of screeches and pecking beaks. The tern's superior flying ability means that it can outmanoeuvre most other birds in the air.



The Arctic Tern – a small bird with a world record

The Arctic Tern is a real seabird. The species only has firm ground under its feet during the approximately four-month breeding season in the summer. It spends the rest of the year out on the high seas far away from Greenland. Every year, Arctic Terns make an impressive journey from their breeding grounds in Greenland to the other side of the world, where winter is spent in the Antarctic. The long journey is a return trip of 70,000 km and is the longest annual migration known in the animal kingdom. Arctic Terns leave Greenlandic waters in August/September and reach Antarctica in late November. In April, the terns begin flying back towards Greenland.

If one adds up the annual distance which the Arctic Tern travels, and multiplies this by the species' life expectancy of more than 30 years, the distance exceeds two million kilometres. This corresponds to an Arctic Tern travelling to the moon and back three times in the course of its life – truly an impressive distance for a small creature of about 110 grams, which gets its energy solely from small fish and crustaceans!



Protective wings

It is due to the terns that there are birds like Red-necked Phalaropes and Red Phalaropes on Kitsissunnguit. These birds respond strongly to the alarm calls of the terns – both to the alarms that result from a predator being in the vicinity, but also to “false alarms” not arising from predators. When a tern alarm sounds, the birds make themselves less visible and immediately head for the shores of the lake for protection. The birds do not flee because they themselves detect a predator, but because they read the Arctic Terns’ behaviour and react accordingly.

An archipelago of local and international value

Kitsissunnguit has meant a lot to generations of local Greenlanders – and is still important to people in the Disko area. In spring, lumpfish are fished around the islands, and the locals often use the islands as an excursion destination or go there to lay flowers on a family member’s grave. In the summer, cruise ships sail by on their way in or out of Disko Bay.

The archipelago has great international importance. Because the wetlands on Kitsissunnguit have such a rich bird life, the islands are protected under the international Ramsar Convention. They thus share the honour with more than 2,100 other important nature areas around the globe. However, it is essential that the areas can be used by local residents in a sustainable manner.

The Ramsar Convention covers wetlands that are habitats for characteristic plants and animals – such as the Arctic Tern. The agreement provides a framework for how the designated areas must be protected, and how international cooperation for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands and their resources shall take place.

The islands are one of Greenland’s 12 Ramsar sites in which the grounds for the designation, inter alia, have been the presence and the number of a range of bird species. Through the convention, Greenland works to ensure that populations of birds are not affected in a negative way, even though the area is also used by people. It therefore has to ensure that neither the birds nor their habitats and food resources are disturbed or spoiled. At the same time, it must also ensure that the entire ecosystem of a Ramsar site is sound and does not deteriorate.



The Red Phalarope is a rare breeding bird in West Greenland. It is found almost only where there are also colonies of Arctic Terns.



There are many Red-necked Phalaropes on Kitsissunnguit and the species is widespread in most of West Greenland – not least at a number of other sites in Disko Bay.

The past on Kitsissunnguit

The islands are currently uninhabited, but this has not always been the case. On every island, relics of former residents, who used them as important seasonal hunting grounds, can be found. Hunter families lived here for several months. The seas around Kitsissunnguit are teeming with life and are home to many of the quarries that were important for the hunting culture of that time. Kitsissunnguit lies on the small whales’ migration route and the most important quarries were narwhals and beluga whales. The large areas of Disko Bay could be surveyed from the high, steep cliffs on Niaqornaq which acted as a lookout for small whales.

A long hunting season

In the old days, families left the settlements around January-February and travelled by dogsled to Kitsissunnguit. The hunting equipment and the umiaqs (boats) were carried on the sleds. The boat was to ensure transport back to the settlement when the sea ice disappeared. In some cases, the tiled stove from the house in the settlement was also loaded on the sled, so that people could keep warm in the turf huts.

The hunt for small whales extended into May, after which the families left Kitsissunnguit. It was important to be back in the settlements by June, when shoals of the vital capelin (ammassat) arrived in Disko Bay and large quantities had to be caught for the winter stores.

The roofs of the old turf huts were made of driftwood or the ribs of large whales. Up close, lots of small bones can be seen sticking out of the turf walls. They are remains from the ancestor’s meals.



Around the islands lie man-made stone constructions. They are pre-Christian tombs, where bones and skulls can be seen on the graves that have collapsed. The graves are protected.

