



Rurik Chemyakin

AT 70° NORTH

A LYRICAL PHOTO ALBUM ABOUT
NORTHERN NATURE



Rurik Chemyakin At 70° North. A lyrical photo album about northern nature. – Saint-Petersburg, 2009. – p. 224

The photo album book “**At 70° North...**” has been written and illustrated by a professional zoologist who has worked on the Kola Peninsula coast and Barents Sea islands for over forty years. Some photos have been taken at the White Sea.

The present book is a rarity in the national animalistic literature. Quite often, publications of this kind either contain many photos and little text, or, on the contrary, a voluminous text accompanied by a modest number of pictures. Here, almost each of several hundreds of photos is supplied with an extensive comment.

Obviously, the author is eager to tell more about the main characters of his photos, and it is not surprising, as many of them have been objects of his study and observation for quite a while. Hence is scientific impeccability of the text and biological accuracy of descriptions, although narration is seemingly easy thanks to sparing application of terminology and Latin names, as well as the overall lyrical tone of the book.

It should be noted that most photos have been taken in the specially protected natural areas, therefore the book offers the reference samples of the nature of the Kola Peninsula and, in particular, of the Barents Sea coast. This undoubtedly acquires special importance in the context of the forthcoming large-scale development of the oil and gas fields on the Arctic shelf, as the book sends a clear message about what must be saved and conserved when solving such an ambitious task.

Besides, the book has another – didactical – aspect related to nature protection. Delicate attitude of the author towards all the birds, plants and animals around once again stresses the idea that it is at least unethical for the modern Humans to consider themselves the kings of nature, while the caring and respectful attitude to it makes them nobler and richer.

And, finally, it should be noted with special pleasure that the scene of action is the North which is so dear to so many people, with its pale and discreet beauty so much loved by them, sometimes unconsciously.

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TUNDRA HOSTESS



In fact, there are two ‘hostesses’, that is, two grouse species occurring in the Kola Peninsula: the willow grouse and ptarmigan.

I had my first encounter with the willow grouse during the animal tracks count on the Kandalaksha Bay coast in winter. When investigating a maze of footprints, I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye. I looked narrowly and saw a strange black dot moving across the snow. This dot happened to be the eye of a running willow grouse, the rest of its body stayed invisible against the snow.

Without sufficient experience, differentiating these species is not an easy task. The main differences are in a black strip near the ptarmigan’s eyes, plumage shade and voice nuances, while beautiful red brows are proudly featured by both species.

It happened so that I had been less successful with the willow grouse. I failed to make any close portraits of them, so all photos in this double page spread are of the ptarmigan.

The ptarmigan, a typical inhabitant of the zonal and mountain tundras, occurs in the Kola Peninsula on the Barents Sea coast and inland hills.

One may quickly get accustomed to the abundance of these birds, but nevertheless would jerk involuntarily almost every time a ptarmigan darts out from under the feet with a cry, as its appearance is unexpected and the voice is shrill.



In spring, a ptarmigan couple occupies a nesting area and defends it all summer through. The brood is reared by both parents. The chicks acquire the capacity to fly when slightly over one week old, and it's amusing to watch the awkward flight of the brownish bob-tailed softlings which soon fall anywhere.



The ptarmigan have a curious habit that is convenient for a photographer. If one is patient enough to pursue ptarmigans persistently, though not too energetically, they will cease hiding and then running away at all.

This particular male ptarmigan finally allowed me to come so near that there was absolutely no necessity in moving any closer.







Great skua

UNIVERSAL SOLDIERS

Inhabitants of the tundra and sea coasts, the skuas resemble the gulls, though differ from them by a higher degree of universality, on the one hand, and by the expressed specialization, on the other hand. They can do anything: they can forage for themselves, feed on carrion, be predators or parasites.

The latter skill, unpleasant as it sounds, is nevertheless the most spectacular of the other abilities. Scientifically, it is beautifully termed ‘cleptoparasitism’ and virtually represents a pursuit, a chase of a bird that has some food in its beak, or, remarkably, even in its stomach.

Though one would always feel sympathetic to the victims, the action itself is impossible not to marvel at, as those trying to escape the skua are great fliers, too. Straight racing, diving, various pirouettes...

Nobody can escape, even such a tough fighter as the common puffin, or the virtuoso of curves – the Arctic tern. Eventually, the skua will inevitably compel anybody to drop the food held in the beak, or regurgitate it out of the stomach.

The Arctic skua is especially inclined to piracy, hence its expressive scientific name of *Stercorarius parasiticus*.

All skuas defend their nesting territory from individuals of the same species, from birds of prey, from animals, and of course from us, people.

Arctic skua chicks hatch coated with dense dark down. The second chick comes into the world a day later, as incubation starts with the

first egg. The chicks leave the nest just several hours later and stubbornly refuse to stay in it when brought back.

Down of the great skua chicks is as dense as that of the Arctic skua’s ones, but it has a deep red-brownish hue. This down makes the chicks look like plush toys.

Having grown a bit, the chicks start wandering in the neighbourhood of the nest, moving away from it for dozens or even hundreds of meters. Such walks, however, are safe for the chicks. It’s all the others who happen to be around by chance or intentionally, should be cautious not to get in trouble which can be caused by harsh parents.

Every now and then, panicky cries come from the area occupied by a couple of nesting skuas: these are cries of the birds that flew into the territory and got attacked. Even such mighty birds as eagles respect the skua, and only ravens and crows, these artful dodgers, always manage to evade and maneuver across the territory.



Nestling of the Arctic skua



Nestling of the great skua

Even the person accustomed to attacks of the Arctic skua, a medium-sized bird in general, will be troubled by an attack of the great skua weighing about one and a half kilos.

Quite often, they not only threaten, but also hit, and do it quite painfully.

Luckily, there exists a simple and harmless way of self-protection: it is sufficient to lift, for example, a dry stem over the head, and the attacking birds will be flying above it without touching the trespasser and getting on the person's nerves.



Not everyone will have guts to withstand a 'psychological attack' of a smaller-sized Arctic skua without bending down.

However, there are not so many reckless fighters among them. Most birds restrict themselves to threats only, or practice a humbler way of saving the progeny – by leading the danger away from the nest. When doing so, the birds feign helplessness, squeak lamentably, flap their wings and crawl away...

Arctic skua







The Arctic skua come to the nesting areas as established couples and settle at the previously occupied sites. Some couples, presumably of young birds, form on the spot.

Sometimes they occupy a territory and defend it, but do not proceed to reproduction, just 'reserving' the territory for the future, so to speak.

The skua show two colour morphs – the dark and light; their couples would demonstrate all three possible colour combinations.

The family in this photo is formed of two light morph birds.



Throughout the breeding season, the great skua protect their nesting area and monitor the maintenance of order from some hillock, or, if lucky, from such a boulder. If a trespasser appears, or in case of some disturbance in the adjacent territory, either one or both birds would go there to check out what's going on.

When an Arctic skua, taking care of its offspring and attempting to lure danger away from the nest, pretends to be wounded and incapable of flying, some neighbours may take this acting at face value and start attacking the supposedly helpless bird.





When watching these pictures, one may get an impression that the life of a skua is endless air fights. This is not quite true. Indeed, conflicts and fights are frequent in the beginning of the breeding season when territories are being distributed. Later on, things quiet down.

In a while, each neighbour learns what he is allowed and not allowed to do and tries not to upset the established order.

Tranquility can be disturbed only by the appearance of some trespasser ignorant of the circumstances, for example an eagle, a fox, a human being... It triggers a free-for-all... Like the one shown in these photos.



This particular great skua has convinced me that the occasional reports of people (women, as a rule) killed by attacking birds are not fictitious. For several days I've been paying no special attention to the harmless attacks of the couple. However, when crossing their nesting area another time, I was suddenly hit in the temple with such force that I got the message at once: it was no laughing matter anymore and thorough beating was coming. Also, it struck me why these were women who got killed more often: they, I reckon, are more fragile creatures than we, tough-skins, are...











WIND-DRUNK

In August, before kitty-wakes finally leave the bird cliffs, it may be noticed that their behaviour has changed significantly.

The birds obviously become more nervous and restless. Inhabitants of one or another gorge would suddenly dash off from the rocks and circle above the sea, now getting closer to their native gorge, now moving hundreds of meters away from the shore.

Sometimes a flock would sit down on water, forming interchangeable designs of different shape on the sea surface. Then, after sitting like that for a while, the mass of birds would equally unexpectedly take off and for several instants turn into an ascending and dissipating tight "braid".

The picture becomes really magnificent when inhabitants of several gorges join in such an action.

I've known it for quite a while that the gale-strength wind can make birds feel drunk, but only this year I had a chance to observe, so to speak, a combined effect of the wind – psychic together with mechanical, aerodynamic.

One day, when I was passing by a narrow gorge during a moderate storm, I caught sight of a kittiwake hanging in the air like a suspended wooden toy.



Its wings stretched horizontally, tail slightly up, and legs hanging limply. When I got closer to the gorge, I found all of its space to be filled with, as it seemed, ballet dancers, or acrobats.

It turned out that the wind happened to blow along the axis of the gorge and the resulting turbulent airstream has enraptured a considerable part of inhabitants of this colony.



Ballet steps, acrobatic tricks and “solo dancers” kept taking turns: some bird would hang in the same manner as the one I noted first, then it would dash down with an exalted cry, the front edge of its wing turning into a trembling fringe, then it would surrender to the wind and fall down in a shapeless lump, or, having approached the gorge entrance, would glide like a paper plane.

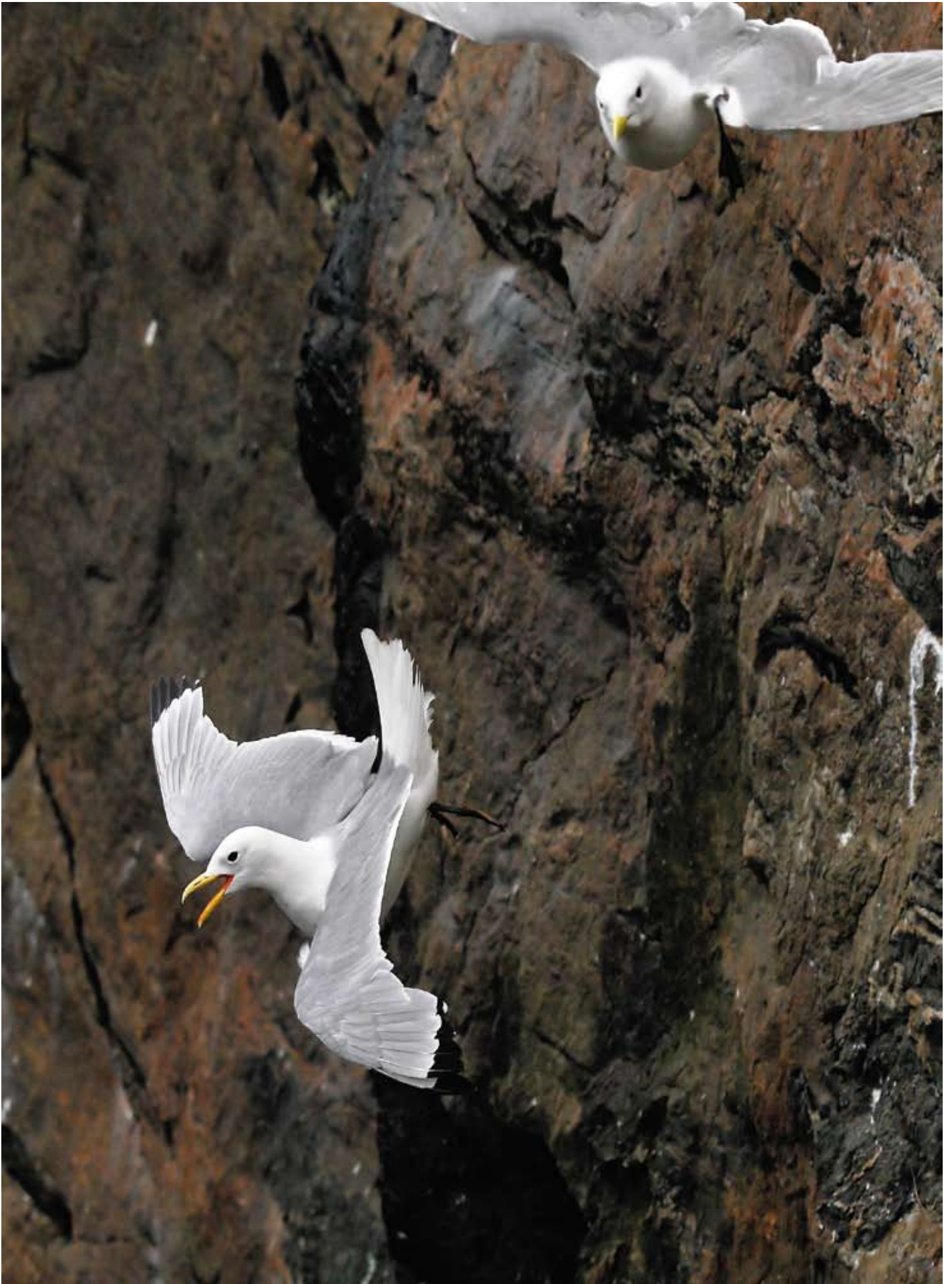


All the birds were obviously delighted with the wind, turbulent air and their own tricks. The most passionate performer among them was a one-legged kittiwake that kept making encores time and again. It seemed as if it was shouting loud: “Look at me, I’ve got just one leg, but I’m the best, the swiftest, the deftest of all!”



I never waited until the end of this performance, though I spent about two hours near the gorge. It is interesting that when I browsed through the taken photos on the computer at home, I found that many birds were looking into the camera, that is, at me, as if they really needed an audience. If so, I’m happy I could give them extra pleasure.







Gannets, like other birds, also get excited when impacted by the gale-strength wind. A part of the colony population would rise into the air and stay for a while suspended in the air stream with motionless wings.

Then some birds would make a circle above the sea and descend from a greater height back to the territory of the colony. When doing so, they acquire queer postures which depend on direction of the wind and, probably, on the "psychic mood" at landing.







Common puffins, despite their dignified appearance, also proved to be prone to “storm euphoria”. The lack of perfection in flying qualities makes the manifestation of their delight less spectacular, but still expressive in its own way.





In a gale, all population of a colony starts flying in circles above the sea and coast, now landing on a steep rock without a proper aim, then taking off, likewise, without a specific cause.

Sometimes, with the wind behind it, the landing bird turns into an obscure feathered figure which lands without caring if the place is occupied by anybody else.

The total absence of conflicts is noteworthy. The bird, onto which such a "chopper" with its wings flapping helter-skelter, is collapsing, would simply move aside without showing any displeasure.

When the wind is blowing in the face, the birds sitting on the slope and battling the wind bend forward and freeze in an equilibrium that seems awkward for an onlooker.







AUTUMN WHIMS

Sometimes autumns are so warm – and in recent years it's been occurring more and more often – that plants and animals keep feeling for a long time like it is summer and their well-adjusted mechanism of winter preparations goes faulty.

In September one may hear a black grouse muttering in the same manner it does when lekking in spring, or the woodpecker's drumming that usually sounds in March or April. Plants, however, get deceived more often and some of them start flowering amid Indian summer.

Among berry shrubs, cowberry is most credulous, and quite often one may see in autumn both berries and flowers on the same shrub at the same time. Trees are harder to mislead, but it happens to them, too.

The rowan tree in the picture below has been provoked by the abnormally warm autumn; in fact, flowers appeared on single trees only and weathered quite soon, although the weather continued warm.



These cowberry flowers will never become berries.



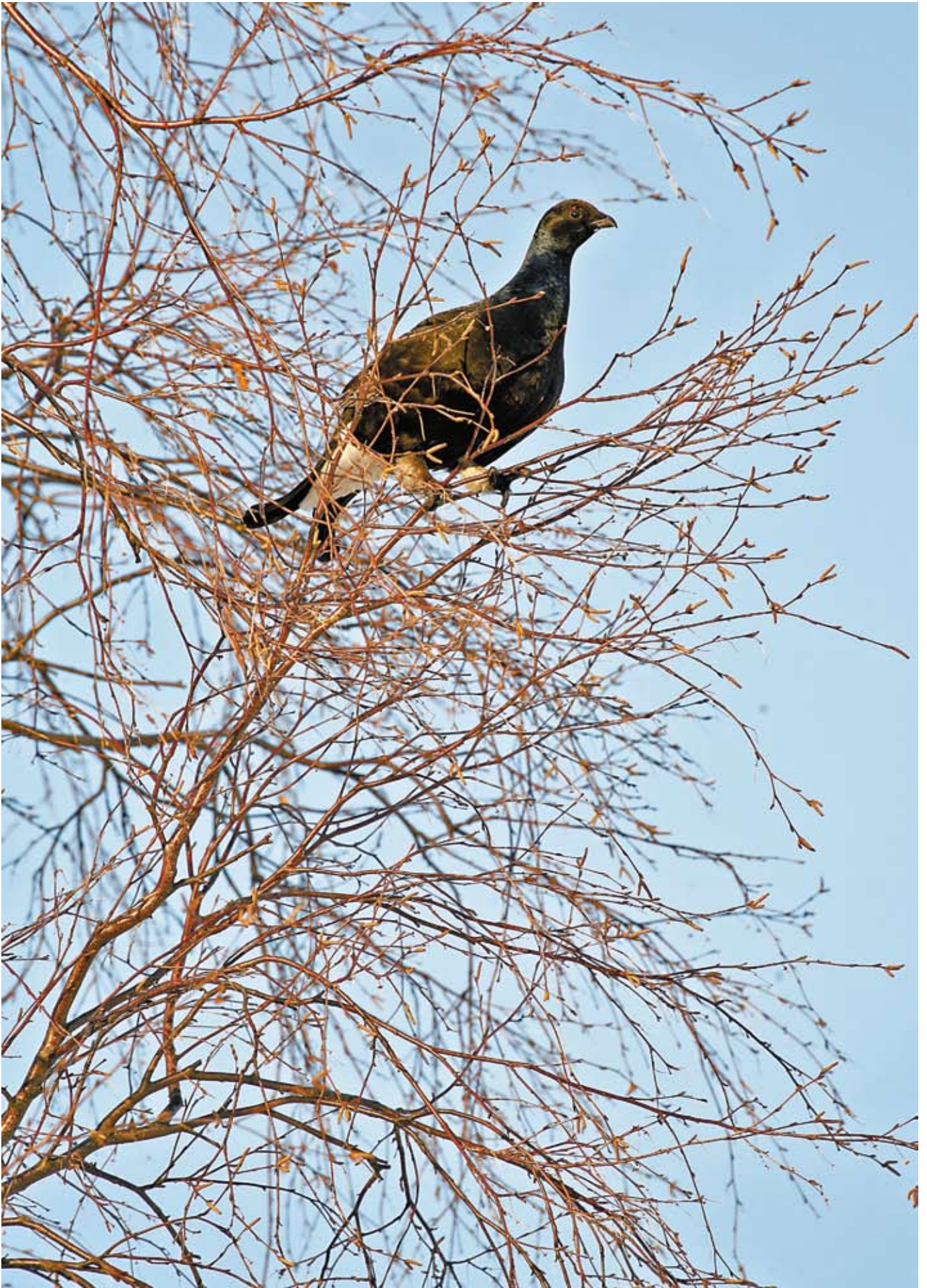
The excitement observed in animals in the autumn does not relate to the weather so much and in some species occurs almost regularly.

For instance, males in some passerine species start their singing and flight displays in autumn, though not as passionately, as in spring.

The woodpeckers' drumming – their means of communication and the love song – sounds in autumn more often and somewhat differently than in summer.

I would name the display song of the black grouse as one of the most romantic manifestations of the autumn love period. Sometimes, on a clear September day, you may hear murmur, as if a spring streamlet forces its way though the snow somewhere.

These are the black grouse males sitting on birch trees and singing their display songs. Although low-key, in the quietness of coppices their murmuring spreads out over hundreds of meters.





In contrast to late flowers, waxwings on the rowan trees is a typical sign of autumn.

Even a person not interested in birds will certainly notice energetic flocks of these beautiful birds actively flitting around and piping their pleasant warble.

Waxwings are borne nomads whose life is closely linked to rowan tree. They feed their nestlings with insects skillfully caught in the air, while adult birds feed mostly on berries.

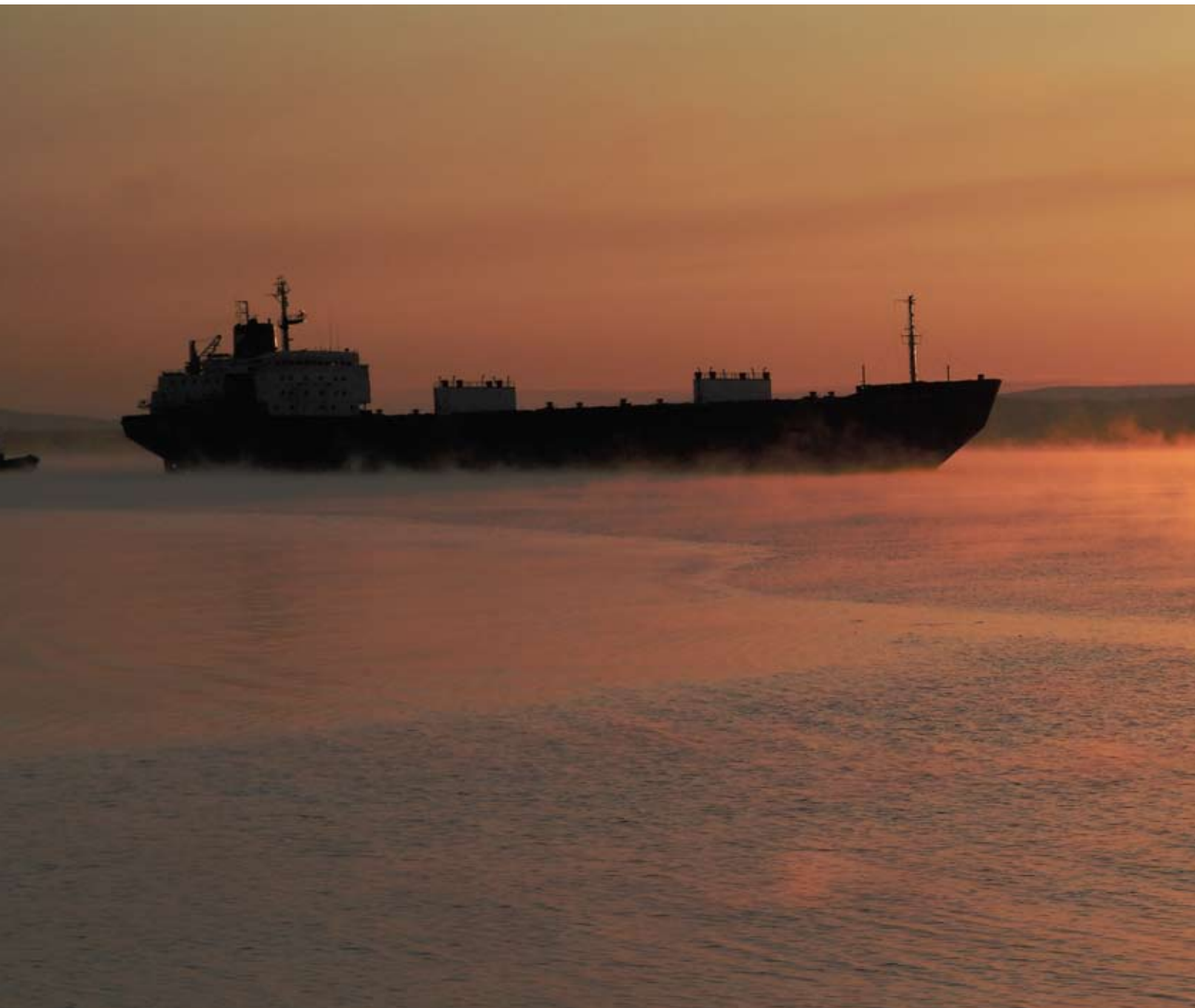
Rowan berry is their favourite; its yield is the main factor determining the routes and duration of waxwings' nomadic life spells.







When it is still warm enough down there at the sea level, it's already slightly freezing in the hills. Lakes get clothed in thin ice, while berries become coated in rime and turn stone-hard. Later, when the sun appears, the berries will thaw out and restore their "vendibility" for those eager to make a feast of them.













“Where shall we float?” – ice floes seem to be hesitant if they should venture into the open sea, or get back to the habitual estuary.

A decision for them will be taken by the wind that has quieted down for a short while before changing its direction.

