

Rabies

When you hike in the wilderness of South Greenland, you should always be aware that there may be polar bears in the area. In recent years, the number of visits of polar bears apparently is increased. The polar bears most often arrive to South Greenland together with the field ice, which drifts down along the east coast of Greenland and further up the west coast of Greenland.

A confrontation with a polar bear can be disastrous. The polar bear is one of the world's most dangerous predators. But perhaps the risk is even greater from a far smaller predator in the Greenlandic wilderness: The arctic fox.

The arctic fox is a small fox to be found anywhere on the coast of Greenland from north to south. Usually it is shy and makes itself scarce, but when the fox is infected with rabies, the animal turns into an aggressive, biting beast.

This morning we are taking a walk on a dirt road. Along the road, we have seen the known birds of this land-

scape. Many young birds of the wheatears run confused all around us. The snow buntings and Lapland bunting are sitting on their observation posts and warn the mate and the young birds that we are arriving. Up on the mountain slopes, everywhere we can see the sheep with their lambs. Our faithful companion, the sheep dog, makes its marks to assert itself against especially the sheep. Constantly the dog scouts the surroundings and waits for us to give orders to an action.

But suddenly something happens. The dog is again ahead of us on the road. Now it lay on the ground, crouched as ready for a jump. Suddenly, we see the reason. A grey-black arctic fox is coming straight towards us with its tail raised high. The dog and the fox attack each other. The arctic fox shows no fear, and we quickly realize that it must have rabies.

It turns into a violent struggle. Finally the dog hunts the fox on the run. The dog has averted the attack, but it also has been bitten. Fortunately, it turns

out later that the farmer has vaccinated his dogs, so our dog has not been infected.

Rabies is caused by a virus that can attack the nervous system and is excreted in saliva. The virus disease makes the animal aggressive and later the virus kill the animal. When the fox is infected with rabies, it attacks people and the sheep, and humans and sheep can be infected through the bite. As a countermeasure, the local authorities offer a reward of 200 Danish Kroner per foxtail to get rid of the animals.

Rabies has been around in Greenland, as long back as anyone remembers. The local farmer tells us that there seems to be a cycle, which means that every third year, more cases than in the other years appear. The Greenland health authorities take the risk of rabies infection in humans seriously. The local farmer tells us, that he had experienced being evacuated by helicopter to the hospital when he a few years ago had been bitten by a fox with rabies.



The sheep dog and the arctic fox, June 2014