

Extensive liquid meltwater storage in firn within the Greenland ice sheet

Richard R. Forster¹*, Jason E. Box^{2,3}, Michiel R. van den Broeke⁴, Clément Miège¹, Evan W. Burgess¹, Jan H. van Angelen⁴, Jan T. M. Lenaerts⁴, Lora S. Koenig⁵, John Paden⁶, Cameron Lewis⁶, S. Prasad Gogineni⁶, Carl Leuschen⁶ and Joseph R. McConnell⁷

Mass loss from the Greenland ice sheet contributes significantly to present sea level rise¹. High meltwater runoff is responsible for half of Greenland's mass loss². Surface melt has been spreading and intensifying in Greenland, with the highest ever surface area melt and runoff recorded in 2012³. However, how surface melt water reaches the ocean, and how fast it does so, is poorly understood. Firn—partially compacted snow from previous years—potentially has the capacity to store significant amounts of melt water in liquid or frozen form⁴, and thus delay its contribution to sea level. Here we present direct observations from ground and airborne radar, as well as ice cores, of liquid water within firn in the southern Greenland ice sheet. We find a substantial amount of water in this firn aquifer that persists throughout the winter, when snow accumulation and melt rates are high. This represents a previously unknown storage mode for water within the ice sheet. We estimate, using a regional climate model, aquifer area at about 70,000 km² and the depth to the top of the water table as 5–50 m. The perennial firn aquifer could be important for estimates of ice sheet mass and energy budget.

The mass of liquid or refrozen melt water that could be stored in firn pore space throughout the percolation zone of the entire ice sheet is estimated to be between 322 and 1,289 Gt (ref. 4). In the western part of the ice sheet, the possibility of liquid water persisting within the upper ~10 m of the snow/firn⁵ or in moulins⁶ during winter is suspected. Discharge measurements at ice marginal streams indicate winter water release, suggesting that some melt water may be stored englacially or at the bed and is released months after the end of the melt season⁷. However, there has been no account of directly observed liquid water in the firn persisting through the winter on the Greenland ice sheet.

In April 2011, before seasonal surface melt onset, the Arctic Circle Traverse (ACT) expedition drilled into a liquid water layer in the upper 10–25 m of the firn in southeast Greenland. The ACT field party extracted four firn cores at sequentially lower elevations on the southeast coast (Fig. 1), where *in situ* snow accumulation observations were previously non-existent. Below 1,600 m in this area, spatially and temporally averaged accumulation rates of 1–4 m w.e. yr⁻¹ are simulated by observationally constrained regional climate models^{8–10}. On 30 April 2011, at ACT11-A2 (1,559 m a.s.l.), a 10-cm-diameter firn/ice coring drill extracted a ~1 m core segment from 10 m depth that was saturated with liquid

water (Fig. 1). The following day, 3 km to the east at ACT11-A (1,589 m a.s.l.), liquid water was found at 25 m depth using the drill. The thickness of the water layer could not be measured because the drill is not designed to operate in water. Air temperatures were –15 °C during drilling. During spring 2011, temperatures were below average and surface melt in the area did not commence until June¹¹. Therefore, the liquid water found in the firn no doubt persisted throughout the winter. The other two ACT cores were extracted at higher elevations nearby (1,806 and 2,081 m a.s.l.) and revealed no liquid water to the 61 m drilling depth (Fig. 1).

Ground-penetrating radar (GPR; Supplementary Information) profiles were completed between the core sites, as well as 10 km below the lowest site. A strong contiguous return horizon persists over the lower 25 km portion of the transect (Fig. 2). The horizon undulates between depths of 9–25 m and matches the depth of the water layer top found at both core sites to within <1 m (precision of identifying the depth is limited to the 1-m-length core sections drilled). We are thus confident that the GPR is tracing the top of the water layer.

The top of the water layer cuts across intermediate GPR horizons (Fig. 2), usually interpreted as corresponding with annual or event accumulation layers^{12,13}. Below the water layer horizon there are no coherent GPR horizons, which can be expected as minimal energy is returned from below a strong reflector with a high permittivity contrast such as water¹⁴. The bright horizon gradually fades at the 25 km location at a depth of ~27 m (Fig. 2), revealing internal firn layers to depths of ~50 m that are traceable up-glacier over the next 82 km to cores ACT11-B and C (Fig. 1).

The NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) Operation Ice Bridge (OIB) airborne accumulation radar¹⁵ overflowed the core sites and the ground traverse GPR transect 11 days before core drilling. A strong reflecting horizon is evident at the same location in the GPR transect (Supplementary Fig. 1). The depths to the bright horizon from the GPR and accumulation radar agree within 2 m over the 25 km transect and the undulations are very similar ($r^2 = 0.95$; Supplementary Fig. 2). The depth differences may be attributed to lateral discrepancies in the transect locations (<200 m), and differences in radar footprint size and radar frequency. Similar to the GPR data, the accumulation radar returns no obvious internal layering below the bright horizon (Supplementary Fig. 1). On the basis of the depth agreement and high correlation we conclude that the accumulation radar is

¹Department of Geography, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah 84112, USA, ²Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland (GEUS), Copenhagen DK-1350, Denmark, ³Byrd Polar Research Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210, USA, ⁴Institute for Marine and Atmospheric Research Utrecht, Utrecht University, Utrecht 3508 TA, The Netherlands, ⁵NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, Greenbelt, Maryland 20771, USA, ⁶Center for Remote Sensing of the Ice Sheets, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045, USA, ⁷Desert Research Institute, University of Nevada, Reno, Nevada 89512, USA. *e-mail: rick.forster@geog.utah.edu

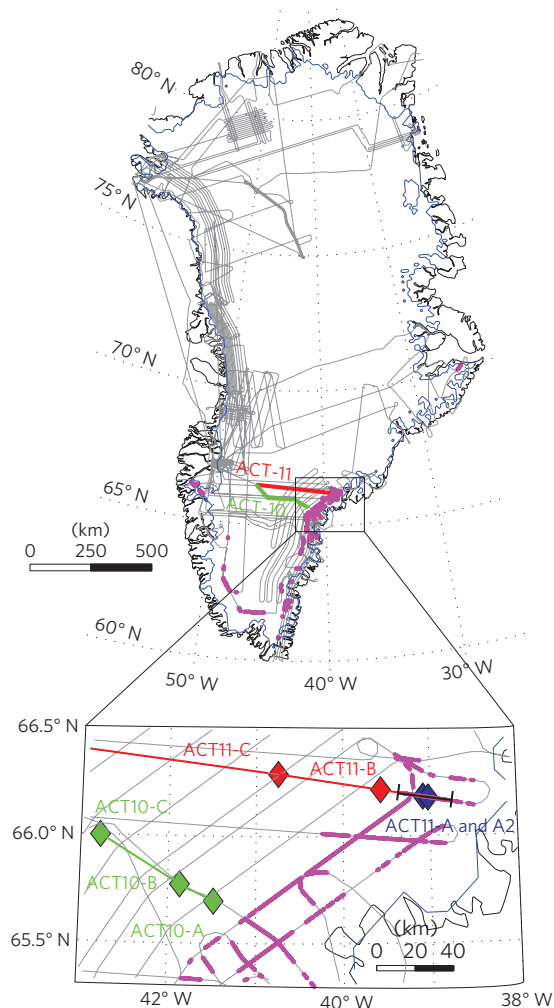


Figure 1 | Perennial firn aquifer (PFA) locations on the Greenland ice sheet detected by radar and firn cores in April 2011. NASA's OIB airborne accumulation radar flight lines are grey and locations of detected PFA are magenta dots. The red line represents the ACT 2011 with PFA firn-core locations and names (blue diamonds) and dry firn-core locations (red diamonds). The green line corresponds to the ACT 2010 that found no PFA evidence from firn cores (green diamonds). The ice sheet margin is blue and the black segment on the ACT-11 line (inset) matches the GPR echogram (Fig. 2).

capable of mapping the presence and depth to the top of the water layer within the firn.

In 2011, before melt onset, the NASA OIB accumulation radar gathered 40,512 km of horizontal flight line data over the Greenland ice sheet (29 March–16 May). All of these flight lines were examined for the presence of the water layer. It was identified and manually digitized in 843 km of these flight lines acquired between 8–26 April 2011 (Fig. 1). The water layer locations are concentrated in the southeast, but are evident in isolated locations in the south and southwest and on the Geikie Plateau (near 70° N, 25° W). The mean depth of the water layer top is 23 m with a range of 5–50 m (Supplementary Figs 3 and 6). In general the depths are smaller in the southwest compared with the southeast, but are influenced by local surface slope (Fig. 2), similar to terrestrial groundwater and firn aquifers on temperate glaciers^{16,17}. Thus, we refer to this liquid water reservoir that persists throughout the winter as a perennial firn aquifer (PFA). As the radar signal is not returning from below the top of the PFA, at present there is no direct measure of its thickness.

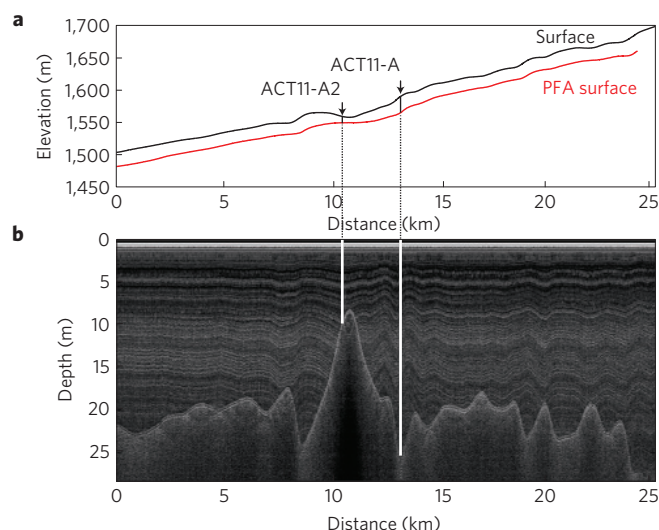


Figure 2 | Profile of the top of the PFA from GPR along the ACT-11 traverse including PFA firn-core locations (ACT11-A and ACT11-A2). **a**, Surface elevation profile from simultaneously acquired GPS and topographically corrected GPR PFA top horizon. This indicates that the depth to the top of the firn aquifer is influenced by the local topographic slope. **b**, GPR echogram with the top of the firn aquifer as the bright contiguous horizon cutting the numerous internal firn reflecting horizons. The location of the GPR profile is shown in Fig. 1.

The spatial distribution of the PFA suggests that its formation is associated with areas of sufficient surface melt coupled with high accumulation. We compare the PFA extent as determined by accumulation radar results with gridded climate fields. Here we use the accumulation field from the Calibrated Polar MM5 (ref. 10; Fig. 3) and output fields of accumulation, melt and rain from the regional atmospheric climate model RACMO2 (Supplementary Fig. 5). RACMO2 includes an interactive (with the atmosphere) snow/firn/ice model⁸. In areas where the PFA is found, the mean accumulation rate is $1.24/2.22 \text{ m.w.e. yr}^{-1}$ (10 and RACMO2, respectively; w.e., water equivalent). However, there is significant variability in the range of accumulation rate associated with the PFA (Supplementary Fig. 6). (See Supplementary Information for discussion of the differences in these accumulation grids.) Areas of high accumulation are found predominately in the southeast, but three other areas in the south and southwest are also identified with local accumulation maxima and also contain a PFA (Fig. 3).

The spatial pattern of the PFA extent for April 2011 simulated by RACMO2 is very similar to the accumulation radar results, with a concentration in the southeast and the three areas in the south and southwest (Fig. 4). In RACMO2, high accumulation ($>800 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$) and a large liquid water production (snow melt plus rain $>650 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$) are necessary conditions for PFA formation (Supplementary Fig. 7). As RACMO2 performs well in detecting the PFA, we use it as a first-order estimate of PFA spatial extent. As the model lacks treatment of potentially significant firn processes, that is, inhomogeneous vertical water flow (piping) that moves water to depth through cold snow/firn^{5,18,19} and horizontal water flow, which as Fig. 2 shows is an important process, an estimate of PFA volume is not given here. For uncertainty in the modelled PFA extent we use the variability in annual minimum extents during 1992–2011, which are typically reached in late April at $70 \pm 10 \times 10^3 \text{ km}^2$ (Supplementary Fig. 8). After the onset of the melt season, the extent of liquid water in the Greenland firn sharply increases, to reach $500 \pm 250 \times 10^3 \text{ km}^2$ in July, after which a gradual decrease is simulated.

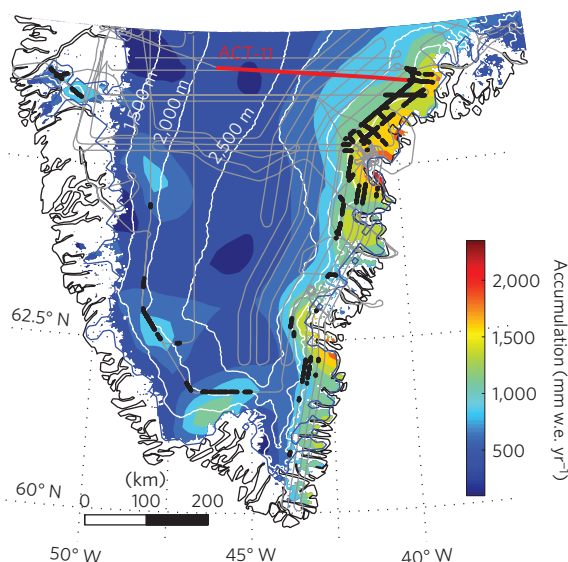


Figure 3 | Annual snow accumulation (1958–2008) from regional climate model with output calibrated by ice core values¹⁰ (colour). Terrain elevation²³ contours are white. NASA OIB flight lines are grey. The ACT-11 traverse is red. Locations of radar-retrieved firn aquifer positions from the OIB accumulation radar are illustrated as black dots.

Although the spatial patterns between the PFA as mapped by the accumulation radar and simulated by RACMO2 are similar (Fig. 4), potential reasons for their differences (apart from the uncertainty in the model results) are described here. RACMO2 simulated PFA not mapped as PFA in accumulation radar flight lines may exist for several reasons. First, water is present but subsurface returns from the radar are not detectable because strong surface returns (clutter) from rough crevassed surfaces mask the weaker water layer return. Second, water is present but returns from the water are not detectable owing to subsurface clutter from a high concentration of refrozen ice bodies above the water layer. However, detection of the PFA was still possible at the core sites where 9–16 ice layers with thicknesses of up to 23 cm were present. Third, liquid water is not present owing to internal drainage through crevasses, a process not included in RACMO2. Locations where surface crevassing is observed coincident with simulated RACMO2 PFA that is not detected by accumulation radar are shown in Supplementary Fig. 4. These three scenarios could explain the lack of mapped water layer along flight lines with modelled water over the lower elevation portions of the numerous outlet glaciers along the south east coast. The contrary situation, with mapped PFA that is not simulated, is isolated to areas in the southwest and could be associated with model uncertainty and limited model resolution.

The formation process of the PFA is not completely understood; however, its spatial correspondence with high accumulation and melt rates (Fig. 3 and Supplementary Fig. 7) leads to a general hypothesis intended to explain the broad pattern of PFA location. From the RACMO2 model results, we propose that high accumulation insulates the melt season's liquid water layer within the firn from the cold season atmosphere, thereby preventing complete refreezing. This allows liquid water to persist throughout the winter until the next melt season, when the PFA may be recharged (Supplementary Movie 1).

The PFA represents a new glacier facies¹⁸ and a previously unidentified liquid water reservoir. Its location in the southeastern ice sheet is consistent with few surface lakes, compared with other sectors of the ice sheet²⁰. The narrow (<30 km) ablation area with minimal bare ice area in the southeast, due to the relatively high accumulation gradients and therefore steep ice slopes,

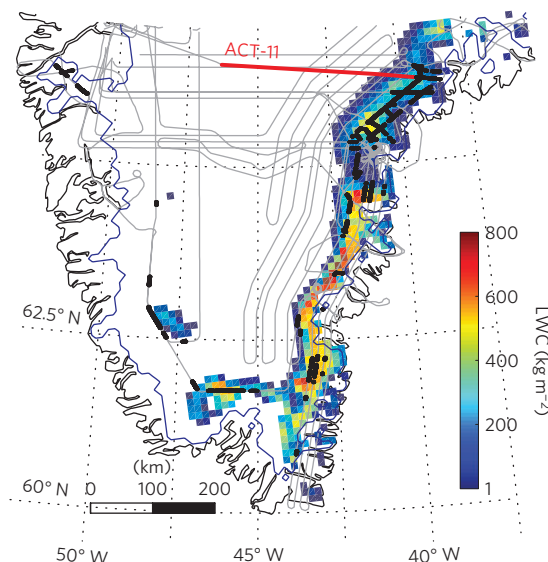


Figure 4 | Modelled liquid water content (LWC) in the firn and detected PFA from airborne radar. The simulation of liquid water content (LWC) is from RACMO2/GR for April 2011 (colour). OIB flight lines (grey), ACT-11 traverse (red) and locations of PFA from OIB radar (black dots) are all data acquired in April 2011. The LWC is integrated for the entire firn column from the surface down to approximately 20 m, varying with location (see Methods for details).

does not accommodate lake basin formation with accompanying supraglacial stream networks and moulins delivering water towards the bed as prevalent along the western portion of the ice sheet. In its place, the deep firn layer provides an alternative liquid water reservoir in winter, which may exceed the mass of liquid water stored in supraglacial lakes. This contrast in liquid water storage mechanisms implies that surface mass balance, thermal properties of the ice, and effective water pressures at the bed and consequently ice dynamics in the southeast are probably very different from those in the more extensively studied western and northern Greenland ice sheet. The persistence of liquid water in the firn also has implications for the ice sheet energy. If atmospheric warming ceases, refreezing the liquid water requires a significant amount of additional energy before the firn layer can start to cool. The PFA could thus represent an increasingly important mass and energy reservoir, as both melt and accumulation on the Greenland ice sheet have increased in the past²¹ and are projected to increase in a future warming climate²².

Methods

GPR data were collected with a Geophysical Survey Systems, SIR-3000 controller and a 400 MHz centre frequency antenna. The vertical resolution in firn is 35 cm (refs 12,13), finer than the annual layering in this area. The sampling was set at four traces per second, 2,048 samples per trace. To increase the signal-to-noise ratio, an initial stacking of six traces was performed. Post processing horizontal spatial smoothing involved averaging an additional eight traces, to increase the signal-to-noise ratio and minimize the influence of centimetre-scale vertical ice pipes or channels present in the percolation zone¹³. A time-dependent gain was used to compensate for signal attenuation within the firn. The maximum two-way-travel time (TWT) range was set to 500 ns, yielding a ~ 0.24 ns sample interval and allowing scanning of the top ~ 46 m of the firn. As the top of the water layer is mostly found in the upper firn column, radar TWT is converted to depth below the surface assuming a constant electromagnetic wave travel at 1.94×10^8 ms⁻¹ into the firn. This travel velocity corresponds to a depth-averaged firn density of 650 kg m⁻³. We compare this method with the TWT-depth conversion described in ref. 13 using the relationship between velocity in the firn and ACT11-A firn density profile²⁴. The difference between the two methods does not exceed 50 cm for the first 20 m of the firn column, and with the lack of detailed density profiles (except at our firn-core locations), we favoured the first method in our analysis.

The GPR did not have an integrated GPS (global positioning system), therefore a roving GPS unit was attached to the snowmobile towing the GPR sled

and collected a point every 5 s. GPS data processing was done using the on-line Canadian Spatial Reference Service—Precise Point Positioning. This processor uses GPS orbit and clock information to enhanced positioning precisions in the International Terrestrial Reference Frame from a kinematic processing mode. To geo-reference the final GPR radar data, the processed GPS data were used by matching the GPS time to the starting point of each GPR radar image in post processing to yield a 10-cm-scale topographic profile coincident with all GPR lines. A linear interpolation of the 5 s GPS points was made to obtain a GPS coordinate for each GPR trace.

The accumulation radar¹⁵ is a combined stepped-chirped system built by the Center for Remote Sensing of the Ice Sheets, and operates from 550 to 900 MHz when flown on a P3 aircraft typically 500 m above the surface with a vertical resolution in ice of 28 cm over an effective footprint of approximately 30 m (<https://www.cresis.ku.edu/>). All of the accumulation radar images (example: Supplementary Fig. 1) from the NASA OIB flight lines were manually inspected for the presence of a water layer representing the top of the PFA. This was characterized by a strong subsurface horizon with no internal layers below. The top of the PFA along with the snow surface was screen-digitized on the corresponding radar images. The time difference between the surface and reflection horizon was converted to depth to the top of the PFA using the same wave velocity of $1.94 \times 10^8 \text{ m s}^{-1}$ as was used for the GPR depth calculations. A direct comparison between the depth to top of the PFA derived from the GPR and accumulation radar is made for the 25 km segment centred on the cores that drilled to water (ACT-11A and ACT-11A2, Supplementary Fig. 2). The depth to top of the PFA along the OIB flight lines is shown in Supplementary Fig. 3.

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Author contributions

R.R.F. and J.E.B. conceived the idea of the analysis. M.R.v.d.B., J.H.v.A. and J.T.M.L. conducted the modelling. C.M. processed and analysed the GPR data. E.W.B. and C.M. collected the field data. L.S.K., J.P. and S.P.G. assisted with airborne radar data processing and identification of melt features. C.L., S.P.G. and C.L. developed the airborne radar and assisted in its interpretation. J.R.M. dated and analysed the firn cores. R.R.F. analysed the airborne radar. R.R.F., J.E.B. and M.R.v.d.B. wrote the manuscript. All authors commented on the data and the manuscript.

Additional information

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Competing financial interests

The authors declare no competing financial interests.