The Arctic tundra is an extreme habitat. Even in summer, when the sun does not set, temperatures rarely rise above 5 to 10 degrees Celsius. And yet thousands of migratory birds breed in this largely treeless landscape. Ideal conditions for ornithologists to study the influence of light on the courtship behavior and the “internal clock” of birds. Bart Kempenaers from the Max Planck Institute for Biological Intelligence chose the surroundings of Utqiaġvik in Alaska’s extreme north for this purpose. The northernmost city in the U.S. emerged out of a winter camp established by the indigenous Iñupiat, which had existed here for centuries. In the language of the Iñupiat, the name means “place where we hunt snowy owls.” Over several summers, Kempenaers and his team investigated four migratory bird species with different ways of life: sandpipers, pectoral sandpipers, Lapland buntings, and gray phalaropes. The latter is one of the few bird species in which only the males take care of rearing the young. In contrast, male pectoral sandpipers display and fight intensively and almost non-stop in order to mate with as many females as possible throughout the short Arctic summer. The males who produce the most young are the ones who remain vigorous despite hardly sleeping at all. The predominantly monogamous Lapland buntings, on the other hand, maintain a strict 24-hour daily rhythm despite the lack of day-night changes. The “internal clock” seems to be much more flexible than expected, depending on social and environmental factors. Even though the scientists have solid ground under their feet and look out over the frozen polar sea, most of the tundra is swampy in the polar summer. And so the researchers spend most of their time standing in water at temperatures just above freezing, sometimes up to their thighs. The special boots keep them reliably warm and dry – and some of the team wonder why their winter shoes can’t do the same for them back home.