Brief Communication: Precision measurement of the index of refraction of deep glacial ice at radio frequencies at Summit Station, Greenland

The RNO-G Collaboration *

*A full list of authors appears at the end of the paper.

Correspondence: Christoph Welling (christophwelling@uchicago.edu, authors@rno-g.org)

Abstract. We report on the measurement of the index of refraction of glacial ice at radio frequencies at Summit Station, Greenland. This measurement is of particular importance for the Radio Neutrino Observatory Greenland, an experimetnt currently under construction at Summit Station, that seeks to detect radio signals from ultra-high energy neutrino interactions in the ice. By correlating radio reflections in the bulk ice with features in the conductivity measurements from ice cores, we determine the index of refraction as $n = 1.778 \pm 0.006$.

1 Introduction

The Radio Neutrino Observatory Greenland (RNO-G) is an experiment for the detection of ultra-high energy neutrinos (Aguilar et al., 2021), currently under construction near Summit Station, Greenland. It aims to discover the first astrophysical neutrinos with energies >10PeV via radio signals from particle showers that are produced by the interactions of neutrinos in glacial ice. Doing so requires a good understanding of the optical properties of the ice at radio frequencies. We use the connection between radio echos from within the ice and abrupt changes in ice conductivity, which has been demonstrated for the site of the Greenland Ice Core Project (GRIP) (Hempel et al., 2000) to measure the index of refraction of the bulk ice, similar to the method employed by Winter et al. (2017). The index of refraction of ice plays an important role for the radio detection of neutrinos, specifically in determining the Cherenkov angle, i.e. the direction into which the radio signal is emitted.

2 Radio Echo Measurements

The radio echo measurements used in this paper were carried out in the summer of 2022 at Summit Station, near the GISP2 borehole. They are a follow-up to measurements done in 2021 with the goal of measuring the radio attenuation of the ice (Aguilar et al., 2022a, b). The setup is almost identical to the previous one with the main change being the replacement of the log-periodic dipole antennas with horn antennas, and the measurements being taken near the GISP2 hole.

Signals were produced by an IDL-2 pulse generator and split into two outputs, one of which was used as a trigger signal. The other was fed into a 145MHz highpass filter and then into one of the horn antennas, which together restrict the signal to a 145-500MHz band. The signal from the receiving horn antenna was fed into an amplifier of the same type as used by the shallow component of RNO-G and then recorded by an oscilloscope. Both antennas were placed on opposing sides of the GISP2 borehole, at a distance of about $51\mathrm{m}$ from the hole. To reduce noise, 12000 individual waveforms were averaged. Additional radio echo measurements were taken about $550\mathrm{m}$ from the GISP2 borehole, near the so-called "Bally Building". While the use of a more powerful pulser allowed us to observe radio reflections from deeper in the ice, the distance from the GISP2 hole made the measurements unsuitable for the index of refraction measurement. They did, however, confirm that the observed correlation between radio reflectors and DEP data holds to greater depths.

3 Index of Refraction Measurement

We measure the index of refraction of the bulk ice by associating radio echos with reflective layers identified at known depths through dielectric profiling (DEP). While the direct current conductivity has been measured for both the GISP2 and the GRIP cores, alternating current conductivity measurements are only available from GRIP (Greenland Ice Core Project, 1994; Wolff et al., 1995), which is located roughly $28\mathrm{km}$ from Summit. As the DC conductivity of both ice cores is very similar (Taylor et al., 1993), and most internal layers have been shown to be continuous between the two sites (Jacobel and Hodge, 1995), we use the DEP data from GRIP and correct for the difference in layer depths using (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Seierstad et al., 2014; Centre for Ice and Climate, Niels Bohr Institute, 2014).

The relation between the layer depth z and the signal propagation time t is given by

$$z = \frac{1}{2} \cdot \frac{c_0}{n} \cdot (t - \Delta T) \tag{1}$$

where c_0 is the vacuum speed of light, n is the index of refraction and ΔT as a free parameter used to account for time offsets due to cable delays, the different index of refraction in the firn, and a possible offset between our antennas and the $0\mathrm{m}$ mark of the ice core.

We average the ice conductivity over a $5\mathrm{m}$ sliding window and calculate the root mean squared of the deviation of the conductivity from this mean over a $2\mathrm{m}$ sliding window as an indicator of the change in conductivity. We also correct our radio echo measurements for signal attenuation using Aguilar et al. (2022a) and calculate the return power in a sliding $10\mathrm{ns}$ window. The index of refraction is then determined by converting the return times to depths using Eq. 1 and calculating the correlation between radio echo and conductivity data for different values of n and ΔT.

The result (Fig. 1) shows a clear maximum at $n = 1.778$. Plotting the radio return power over the DEP measurements (Fig. 2) shows that most abrupt changes in conductivity are matched with a radio echo, though there are a few exceptions. Similar inconsistencies between DEP data and radio echos have also been noted by other measurements (Eisen et al., 2003).

4 Uncertainty Estimation

The uncertainty of the index of refraction measurement consists of the uncertainties on the radio echo propagation times and the depths of the associated reflective layers. The first radio reflectors used for this measurement are at a depth of roughly $200\mathrm{m}$, well below the transition between firn and ice, which occurs at 75-77m (Gow et al., 1997). Including a global time

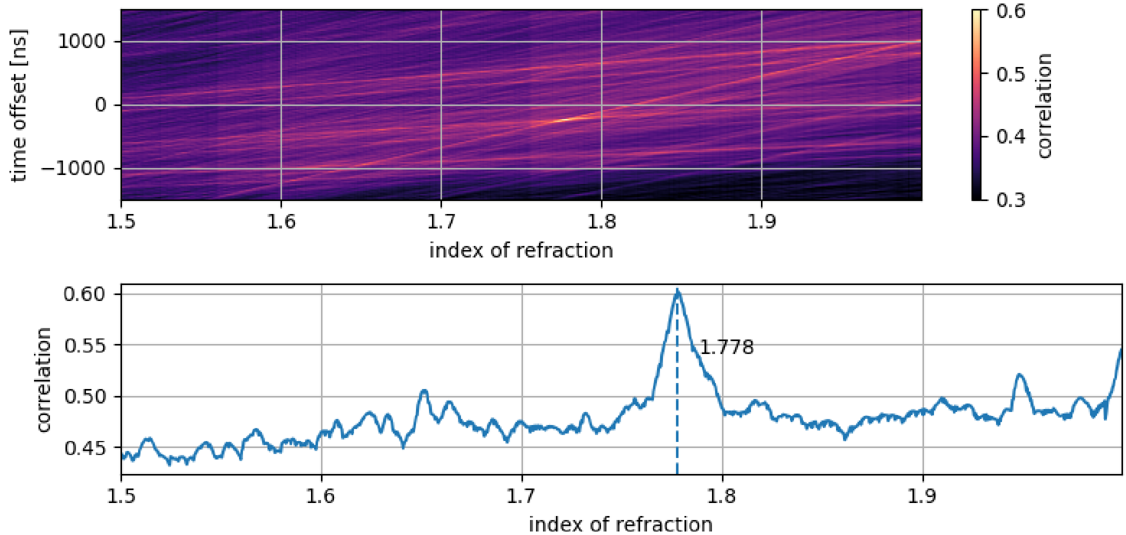

Figure 1. Top: Correlations between radio return power and $\mathrm{RMS}(\sigma_\infty - \sigma_{avg})$ for a given combination of index of refraction and time offset values. Bottom: Maximum correlation between radio return power and ice conductivity as a function of index of refraction.

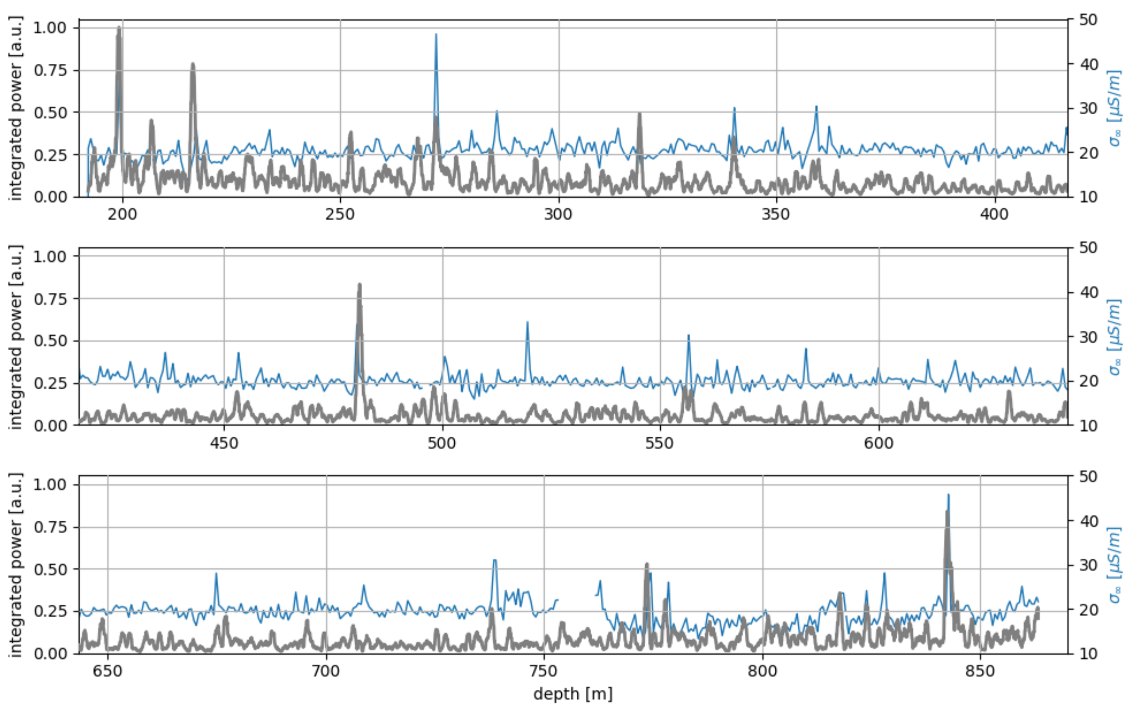

Figure 2. Radio return power as a function of the corresponding reflector depth, calculated using the reconstructed index of refraction n and time offset ΔT (thick gray line), overlaid with the AC conductivity of the ice (thin blue line).

offset as a free parameter removes uncertainties from the index of refraction of the firn, cable delays and the height of the antennas relative to the 0m mark of the GISP2 ice core, as these affect all reflectors equally. The dominant uncertainty on Δt is the 10ns window over which the return power was integrated. The first and last radio echos that can be clearly associated with a specific DEP feature are at about 2.5μs (195m) and 10.2μs(845m), resulting in a relative uncertainty of σ_t=0.1%.

The uncertainty on the depth of the GISP2 conductivity data is given as 2 to 3 m at 3 km (Greenland Ice Core Project, 1994). We take this as an upper limit, though over the ~650 m range in depth we are looking at, the true uncertainty is likely much smaller. The uncertainty on the matching between the GISP2 and GRIP ice cores is given as 0.5 m (Seierstad et al., 2014). Thus, the conservative 2 m uncertainty on the GISP2 depth scale is the dominant uncertainty. Over a depth range of 650m, this yields a relative uncertainty of $\sigma_z = 0.3\%$.

Quadratically adding the relative uncertainties on Δz and Δt results in a relative uncertainty of $\sigma_n = 0.3\%$, or $\sigma_{n,abs} = 0.006$ in absolute terms.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

We report on the observation of reflective layers in the ice sheet near Summit Station, Greenland and compare them to conductivity measurements from the GRIP ice core. We show that most radio echos can be attributed to features in the ice conductivity, and use this relationship to measure the index of refraction of the bulk ice as $n = 1.778 \pm 0.006$.

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Team List

Juan A. Aguilar[1], Patrick Allison[2], Dave Z. Besson[3], Abigail Bishop[4], Olga Botner[5], Sjoerd Bouma [6], Stijn Buitink[7], Whitmaur Castiglioni[8], Maddalena Cataldo[6], Brian A. Clark[9], Alan Coleman[5], Kenneth Couberly[3], Zachary Curtis-Ginsberg[4], Paramita Dasgupta[1], Simon de Kockere[10], Krijn D. de Vries[10], Cosmin Deaconu[8], Michael A. DuVernois[4], Anna Eimer[6], Christian Glaser[5], Allan Hallgren[5], Steffen Hallmann[11], Jordan C. Hanson[12], Bryan Hendricks[13], Jacob Henrichs[11,6], Nils Heyer[5], Christian Hornhuber[3], Kaeli Hughes[8,13], Timo Karg[11], Albrecht Karle[4], John L. Kelley[4], Michael Korntheuer[1], Marek Kowalski[11,14], Ilya Kravchenko[15], Ryan Krebs[13], Robert Lahmann[6], Paul Lehmann[6], Uzair Latif[10], Philipp Laub[6], Chao-Hsuan Liu[15] Joseph Mammo[15], Matthew J. Marsee[16], Zachary S. Meyers[11,6], Kelli Michaels[8], Katahrine Mulrey[17], Marco Muzio[13], Anna Nelles[11,6], Alexander Novikov[18], Alisa Nozdrina[3], Eric Oberla[8], Bob Oeyen[19], Ilse Plaisier[6,11], Noppadol Punsuebsay[18], Lilly Pyras[11,6], Dirk Ryckbosch[19], Felix Schlüter[1], Olaf Scholten[10,20], David Seckel[18], Mohammad F. H. Seikh[3], Daniel Smith[8], Jethro Stoffels[10], Daniel Southall[8], Karen Terveer[6], Simona Toscano[6], Delia Tosi[4], Dieder J. Van Den Broeck[10,7], Nick van Eijndhoven[10], Abigail G. Vieregg[8], Janna Z. Vischer[6], Christoph Welling[8], Dawn R. Williams[16], Stephanie Wissel[13], Robert Young[3], Adrian Zink[6]

[1] Université Libre de Bruxelles, Science Faculty CP230, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium

[2] Dept. of Physics, Center for Cosmology and AstroParticle Physics, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210, USA

[3] University of Kansas, Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA

[4] Wisconsin IceCube Particle Astrophysics Center (WIPAC) and Dept. of Physics, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53703, USA

[5] Uppsala University, Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, Uppsala, SE-752 37, Sweden

[6] Erlangen Center for Astroparticle Physics (ECAP), Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nürnberg, 91058 Erlangen, Germany

[7] Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Astrophysical Institute, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

[8] Dept. of Physics, Enrico Fermi Inst., Kavli Inst. for Cosmological Physics, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 60637, USA

[9] Department of Physics, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA

[10] Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Dienst ELEM, B-1050 Brussels, Belgium

[11] Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron DESY, Platanenallee 6, 15738 Zeuthen, Germany

[12] Whittier College, Whittier, CA 90602, USA

[13] Dept. of Physics, Dept. of Astronomy & Astrophysics, Penn State University, University Park, PA 16801, USA

[14] Institut für Physik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 12489 Berlin, Germany

[15] Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln, NE, 68588, USA

[16] Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA

[17] Dept. of Astrophysics/IMAPP, Radboud University, PO Box 9010, 6500 GL, The Netherlands

[18] Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA

[19] Ghent University, Dept. of Physics and Astronomy, B-9000 Gent, Belgium

[20] Kapteyn Institute, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

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