



ROCKJUMPER

Worldwide Birding Adventures

Spitsbergen / Svalbard

Trip report

16th to 24th July 2011



Polar Bear & cubs by Rinie van Meurs

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Tour Summary

The Arctic! The very word conjures up innumerable images, and if Polar Bears, iconic high arctic birds such as Ivory Gull, ice-caps, pack ice, the midnight sun, Walrus, tundra flowers and awesome glaciers are on your wish list, then there can surely be no better place than the Spitsbergen and Svalbard archipelago. Spitsbergen is also one of the few places left on Earth where it is still possible

to experience absolutely pristine wilderness, and we therefore considered ourselves very fortunate to have been here in this spectacular part of our planet!

Until recently, only researchers from various polar institutes and people with business interests (whaling in particular) were able to visit these islands, but in recent years sustainable eco-tourism in the form of expedition cruising has developed, and it is now relatively easy, given the right ice conditions, to circumnavigate the islands in the comfort of an expedition cruise ship; in our case the Akademik Ioffe. With a cosmopolitan crew of 41, the ship carried 103 passengers on our tour and the level of comfort was both pleasing and surprising. With many of us arriving in Spitsbergen at midnight, our first polar image was the midnight sun, and in fact it never went dark on our tour, while the weather was mostly beautifully calm and sunny with just occasional fog. The ice was also mostly kind to us, allowing us to reach 80° 49' north, a mere 555 miles from the North Pole.

On this journey we had numerous memorable experiences, including zodiac cruises below the magnificent Monacobreen or Monaco Glacier, navigating our way gingerly through dense sea ice, getting up close and personal with funky looking Walruses and, of course, who couldn't be charmed by the female Polar Bear that was accompanied by her two 18 month old cubs?! Yes, Svalbard was a splendid introduction to the Arctic and its wonderful wildlife. Read on for a more detailed report of our adventures....

Day 1. Saturday 16th July.

Our tour commenced in the island's capital of Longyearbyen. This was originally established by an American businessman, John Monroe Longyear, who first visited the island as a traveler on a cruise



in 1901. He then returned and formed the Arctic Coal Company in 1906, which he owned until selling it in 1915 to a Norwegian company called Store Norske Spitsbergen Kullkompani. The current human summer population is around 2,800, but this reduces during the long, cold and dark winter. Now the primary activity in Longyearbyen is tourism and its service-related fields. In addition, there are several scientific enterprises, including University courses on Svalbard, an aurora research station and a satellite station for contacting satellites in polar orbits, run in cooperation with NASA. The town also hosts a healthy population of

Arctic Foxes, and a few tour participants managed to see one of these dainty Arctic canids on our arrival day.

Following a chance meeting on the plane, three of us arranged a pre-tour walk from our hotel to a well-known stakeout for the beautiful Ivory Gull. Ambling along, we picked up some of the more common Spitsbergen birds, including bulky Glaucous Gulls patrolling the river and delicate Arctic Terns that bravely attacked anyone who got too close to their nests. These fearless birds are known to draw blood as they seek to defend their territories, but raising a hand or a 'scope is usually sufficient to prevent injury. A pair of Parasitic Jaegers (Arctic Skuas) also came in low and fast as they also defended their two fluffy young. Tundra waders were evident as well, with dumpy Purple Sandpipers and displaying Dunlins, while Barnacle Geese had nests and broods of small young. Three distant Pink-footed Geese flew over and we eventually counted 60 Common Eider. We even found a tightly sitting female on a nest, and from old nests were able to feel just how soft Eider down really is. Eventually we reached a small lake in front of which was a Polar Bear warning sign - another indication that we were in a very different world indeed!

Setting off back to our hotel, we were still missing our main targets, Ivory Gull and Red (Grey) Phalarope. However, a casual glance back down the road raised the question: “What are those photographers showing so much interest in?” A quick retrace of our steps soon gave us the answer: our much wanted, pristine adult Ivory Gull sat just 30 meters away! After enjoying this spectacle, we then set off back once again, only to find out later that just after leaving a Red Phalarope appeared on the same pool! C’est la vie; there would be more chances of this stunning Arctic shorebird later in the trip.

Pausing on the outskirts of town and scanning the sea, more Common Eiders were present, along with four Long-tailed Ducks and a female Common Goldeneye – a Spitsbergen rarity with less than 20 previous records. Now on my own, further searching finally produced a flock of the hoped for King Eiders, while a Common Ringed Plover also flew over. Rejoining the group, we then all made our way to the bus collection point in the centre of town for our transfer to the quay, and by 4 p.m. we were all on board the Ioffe. After a welcome glass of wine we attended the first of many briefings from our Expedition Leader (EL from now on), an Australian called Dutch. (Never did find out how that came about.) The first briefing was about the lifeboat drill



and what to do in an emergency, after which we were then free to bird from the deck whilst getting to know our group and the rest of the passengers. It didn’t take long before we saw our first Black Guillemots, Thick-billed Murres (Brünnich’s Guillemot), Northern Fulmars and, after some hard scanning, a party of six drake King Eiders, the only ones seen during the cruise. More birding from the deck after dinner produced our first comical Atlantic Puffins, along with increasing numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes and diminutive Little Auks. One by one we managed to drag ourselves off to bed after what had been a very exiting introduction to Arctic bird life.

Day2. Sunday 17th July.

Cruising overnight out of Isfjorden, by dawn we were heading up the west coast of Prince Karls Foreland, a long island separated from Spitsbergen by a shallow channel that the Ioffe cannot navigate. We were heading for a small settlement called Ny Ålesund, which until 1963 was the most northerly settlement in the world, and still boasts the most northerly post office and railway. Birding from the deck produced the by now familiar auks and also a pale phase Parasitic Jaeger.

Today was to be our first zodiac cruise, so after breakfast we had a mandatory briefing about Zodiac use and Polar Bear etiquette, the latter being very necessary as the bear is the top predator in the Arctic and we could be seen as food! Further birding from the deck produced our first distant and unidentified seals as well as Svalbard Reindeer, a smaller and stockier subspecies than those encountered on mainland Europe. Two Great Skuas also put in an appearance along with four more Parasitic Jaegers. Later in the morning we had our first distant view of an adult Bearded Seal and then it was time for lunch. However, this was abruptly interrupted when officers on the bridge found a pod of Beluga, the famous white whale of the Arctic, which after Polar Bear was the second most wanted species for the majority of people. Everyone therefore made for a vantage point to view these once common mammals. After ten minutes or so the EL called us back to lunch as we were going to launch the zodiacs to get closer views. As became swiftly apparent, flexibility in the daily schedule meant for some great wildlife experiences. We then spent a very enjoyable hour in the company of the pod, which numbered between 20 and 30, and although we mostly only saw

their broad white finless backs and occasionally the blow hole, it was nevertheless a wonderful experience that will not be forgotten for many a year!

Having had our fill of the Belugas, all but one of our group elected to go to Blomstrandhalvoya in search of birds rather than to Ny Ålesund, where the focus was to be on history. This is because Ny Ålesund is famous for its part in polar exploration, as is evident by the still standing anchoring mast used by Amundsen and Nobile for their airships Norge in 1926 and Italia in 1928 before their flights to the North Pole.

Once connected to the mainland by a glacier, Blomstrandhalvoya is now an island as the glacier has been bisected. Interestingly, an Englishman by the name of Ernest Mansfield set up the Northern Exploration Company Ltd to make his fortune quarrying marble on the island, but unfortunately it was worthless as it was cracked by frost. A wooden house bearing the name Mansfield still stands along with the scattered remains of equipment used in the mine, some of which made a convenient perch for a male Snow Bunting. This species was very common around Longyearbyen but we saw few away from this settlement.



Our primary target here was Long-tailed Jaeger. This species is a very rare breeder in Svalbard owing to the absence of Lemmings, but at least one pair is known to nest on Blomstrandhalvoya. Setting off up the beach with armed guides in case we chanced on a Polar Bear, we quickly spotted a Jaeger sitting on a ridge, though from the view we had we couldn't confirm whether this bird was in fact our target. We therefore circled round and climbed the ridge for a better view, and as we crested the ridge, there not 30 meters away sat a stunning adult Long-tailed Jaeger, the daintiest and undoubtedly the most attractive of all skua species. Many photographs were taken of

this bird and also of a very unconcerned Svalbard Reindeer. Eventually we saw three Long-tailed Jaegers plus a couple of Parasitic Jaegers and an obliging female Long-tailed Duck, but then it was time to return to the ship. Whilst enjoying dinner the captain repositioned the ship into Krossfjorden, one of the most picturesque fjords in the islands, and after our meal we were out again on the zodiacs, this time cruising along the 14th July Glacier. This glacier is over 50 meters high and our late evening cruise was a great way to end a fantastic day!

Day 3. Monday 18th July.

After being awoken and enjoying another hearty breakfast, we again boarded the zodiacs and headed off towards Amsterdamoya, where just offshore there was a flock of 60 Barnacle Geese. This island was the site of a Dutch whaling station in the 17th century, although all that remains from this period of butchery are the remnants of several blubber ovens and a burial field. We landed on the beach and the first group of hikers set off. As we readied ourselves to go next, a couple of Common or Harbour Seals were seen loafing on a rock offshore, and then the shout went up – Polar Bear! 200 meters ahead of the first group was a large male Polar Bear coming our way. In a quiet and orderly fashion everyone returned to our landing point, donned our lifejackets and retreated to the relative safety of the zodiacs. We were then able to watch this magnificent beast as he sauntered his way along the shore right through our landing spot, sniffing the air as he went.

At one point our zodiac became stuck on a sand bar in the shallow water, and as the Polar Bear ambled along the beach our fearless guide (me - eek!) had to get out of the boat and wade towards a second zodiac with a towline. Two of us then had to manhandle the zodiac as the other boat revved

its engine hard and eventually we got moving again. By this time the bear had had enough of Amsterdamoya and had started swimming across to Danskoya. This island was used by Danish whalers and, as on Amsterdamoya, several blubber ovens and graves remain. The island was also the site of several unsuccessful attempts to reach the North Pole by balloon, most notably by Andree in 1896-97 and Wellman 1906-09. The Polar Bear swam slowly to land and then ambled off up the slope, after which it was deemed safe to return to Amsterdamoya for a now shortened walk. The birdlife was similar to the previous two days and we added nothing new for the trip, so we instead took time out to examine the massive footprints left by the Polar Bear as well as the remains of a blubber oven.

After lunch we made another zodiac trip to Fugelsangen, the site of a very large Little Auk colony. After a strenuous climb over the boulders we were able to sit amongst these tiny auks as they flew into their nests, which are under boulders rather than on cliff ledges to protect them from marauding Glaucous Gulls. The photo opportunities were phenomenal, as was videoing them and thereby capturing their eerie wailing calls for posterity. Some people certainly managed some stunning shots of these great little birds, while those who didn't want to clamber over the rocks were able to view the colony from the comfort of a zodiac.

Later that evening we took another zodiac trip to Fairhaven, also known as Sallyhamna after a trapper's wife, and once again we were able to get very close to the face of an impressive glacier. We also saw the skeletal remains of a large (probably Fin) Whale, which for the previous two years had sustained several Polar Bears. Unfortunately all that now remained was a few bones and the bears had long gone. Our return to the Ioffe was very wet as a strong swell had developed whilst we were out, and we all arrived back on board soaked to the skin. Sadly, despite our best efforts, two of the group's cameras perished on that journey. Back on board we were soon dry and in the bar, reflecting on what had been another exhilarating day.



Day 4. Tuesday 19th July.

Overnight we had moved into the Hinlopen straight that separates Spitsbergen from the island of Nordaustlandet. Fortunately the straight was free of ice, which sometimes prevents access, and we had anchored opposite Alkefjellet, one of the largest sea bird colonies in the northern hemisphere and home to an estimated 120,000 pairs of Thick-billed Murres, along with smaller, but still impressive, numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes. We spent a very enjoyable few hours in the zodiacs, cruising along the base of the towering dolerite cliffs and approaching to within a few feet of the Murres, taking countless pictures while marveling at how so many birds could fly back and forth without a single collision. We also witnessed young auks that had launched themselves off the cliff-face whilst still unable to fly in order to be tended by the male birds in the waters below. In addition, it was very interesting to view the geological features of the cliffs and stacks (offshore pillars of rock), and as luck would have it our zodiac driver was also the ship's geologist, so we were able to get a better understanding of how the cliff face came to look the way it did. Scanning the base of the cliffs we searched for the ever-elusive Arctic Fox, but alas to no avail. We returned to the ship for lunch, after which more time was spent relaxing in the sunshine up on the deck where we also saw a Great Skua.

Boarding our zodiacs again at 1600, we set off in search of another target species, Walrus. As they are hardly skulkers, it wasn't too difficult to find them! Indeed we had located them from the deck

before even boarding the zodiacs. Zipping across to Torellneset, a small spit of flat land on the southwest corner of Nordaustlandet, as we landed some of us saw two fly-over Red-throated Loons (Divers). Splitting into various groups, we elected to visit the haul out second so that we could walk out on to the Arctic desert. This differed from the tundra in that the ground was dry and composed of small bits of gravel and rock on which few plants were present. Walking in a wide arc we soon came across a flock of about 55 Pink-footed Geese, whilst overhead six Glaucous Gulls, two Parasitic Jaegers and a Great Skua patrolled the shoreline. Eventually it was our turn to approach the Walrus haul out. Despite their huge size they are easily spooked, so we all had to follow strict guidelines set out by the EL. Everything went well and we were able to approach to about 60 meters from these immense beasts. A line was drawn in the sand and we began taking our many photographs. The Walrus were unconcerned, occasionally sitting up, having a scratch or shuffling around to get more comfortable before falling back into their mass of brown blubber. Presumably they were digesting their latest meal of shellfish. These strange looking creatures with long off-white tusks, scarred faces and bodies but rather sad eyes were our companions for a good hour before it was time to let the third group in for their visit. We slowly walked back to the zodiacs, coming across a pair of Barnacle Geese with two small goslings on the way. Very satisfied with our afternoon, we then returned to the ship for an evening of relaxation.

Day 5. Wednesday 20th July.

We awoke to find that we had reached 80° 27' north and that the temperature was a relatively warm 4.4°C. Our main excursion today was through the ice in Brennevinsfjorden in search of Polar Bears and seals, but all we found was a distant Bearded Seal. The birds were also slack with only the now expected Black Guillemots, a species that seems to particularly like the ice edge. The EL took the decision to abandon this venture and relocate to a different area given that the Polar Bears had obviously not read the itinerary, and by 11.30 we were back on board the ship. It turned out to be a good call for just as two of

us were passing the bridge a call came over the loudspeaker of Fin Whale. In very few steps we were on the bridge in time to see the whale dive for a third and last time. Not the best views and unfortunately out of the group only I connected with it, so it was a leader only sighting. Just before the whale call we did however manage to see another distant Ringed Seal.

After lunch more time was spent on deck where the highlight of the afternoon was two adult Ivory Gulls, Parasitic Jaeger, Great Skua and another Ringed Seal. Late afternoon saw us back in the zodiacs and cruising through dense sea ice. Another Ivory Gull put in an appearance as did two more Ringed Seals, but the most memorable event was landing on the frozen sea to partake in a cup of hot chocolate laced with a dash of Baileys, most civilized indeed! The evening was also excellent as we had a bar-b-que while floating amongst the sea ice, though it wasn't long before the warmth of the bar beckoned and we were able to look back on the days' events in warmth and comfort.

Day 6. Thursday 21st July.

This proved to be a very enjoyable day. While still missing two or three bird targets, this was soon rectified on our zodiac trip to Lagoya off the north-west coast of Nordausterlandet, one of the few places in Svalbard where Sabine's Gull breeds. As usual we were split into three groups and eventually the birders' group split further into two. Even before leaving our landing point the other group found a stunning Red Phalarope. Then it was our turn and we found a pair of summer plumaged Sabine's Gulls, surely one of the prettiest gulls in the world. Bingo, both targets scored before we'd even set off on our walk! The gulls were very obliging and we were able to get quite

close to them and a couple of Red Phalaropes that were feeding in close proximity. Two excellent Arctic species, both in summer plumage, side by side, what more could we ask for? A pair of Parasitic Jaegers showed more than a passing interest in us and we were also treated to good, prolonged views of a number of Purple Sandpipers.

Diverting our attention away from the show in front of us we became aware that there was another Walrus haul out along the beach, so we set off to get closer views. Once again we were able to approach these beasts quite closely and they remained completely un-phased by our presence. A couple even got into the sea and swam towards us; clearly inquisitive as to what these strange creatures were that had turned up in their domain. At one stage we had two Walruses less than ten meters off shore with a couple of Red Phalaropes for company. All too soon we had to leave, but our tally for the day included four Sabine's Gulls and no less than eight Red Phalaropes - Lagoya had indeed produced our hoped for targets!

The afternoon and evening were spent either on the bridge, on the deck or in the bar as we cruised through sea ice to the south of Sjuoyane ('Seven Islands'), a small group of islands to the north of Nordausterlandet that form part of the Nordaust Svalbard Nature Reserve. The largest of these islands is Phippsøya, which is almost 26 square km's in extent, but we couldn't make it there due to the ice. We did however reach our most northerly position on the tour, 80° 49' north, a feat marked with a glass of fizz and a speech from Dutch. Those of us who ventured onto the deck were rewarded with two more Ringed Seals, though five Harp Seals were missed by all participants except for the guide.



Day 7. Friday 22nd July.

Overnight we'd steamed steadily south, crossing back below the 80° parallel. Even before breakfast we had some excitement. While everyone on the tour wanted to see Polar Bear, and even with the impressive male we had seen a few days ago still fresh in our memories, a female with cubs was most peoples' ultimate desire. So when just after 7a.m. a female with two 18-month-old cubs was found on a nearby island, everybody rushed to a vantage point to watch this little family go about its business. Breakfast was then taken at double quick time as the EL decided we would launch the zodiacs earlier than intended to get better views of this mother and her kids.

We were now in Liefdefjorden, at the head of which lies the stunning Monacobreen (glacier), but before exploring that we took the zodiacs towards the bear family and enjoyed fabulous views of all three animals. Not forgetting the birds, we also saw a male Long-tailed Duck and a few Great Skuas. Eventually we had to make a decision: do we stay with the bears or do we go off to see the glacier? Our zodiac opted for the latter so we set off through the fog on an exhilarating high-speed ride. Our decision cost us a Great Black-backed Gull and the young bears diving into the sea after their mother, but all agreed that our decision was correct, as the sight of the Monaco Glacier was truly awesome. What's more, we were soon to connect with a very good mammal. The high ice face towered above us and small chunks of it continually collapsed into the sea, causing more than a ripple at times even though we were far enough away not to be adversely affected. The continual calving of the glacier causes an upwelling of currents, which in turn provides food not only for the ubiquitous Black Guillemots, but also for thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes. Amongst these we managed to find another adult Ivory Gull, whilst on the nearby icebergs an estimated 500 mainly adult Glaucous Gulls were also present. However, our most unexpected sighting was of a male Hooded Seal, the rarest Pinniped in these waters and a very welcome write in for the trip log. While

only up briefly it was on view long enough for all in our boat to see it, along with perhaps one other zodiac team. A rare sighting indeed and much appreciated by all!

After lunch the temperature reached 5.8°C and we were now positioned at 79° 48' north, just off Worsleyhamna on the northeast corner of Spitsbergen Island. At first we cruised round the islands by zodiac whilst expedition staff checked for Polar Bears, and while doing so we found a flock of about 150 Pink-footed Geese amongst which was a lone Brant (Pale-bellied Brent) Goose, our only one of the trip. Some of us also managed to connect with two flyover Ruddy Turnstones, again the only ones of the tour, before making our way to shore for some more land based birding.

Our expedition staff member, whilst making sure the area was safe, had discovered a pair of Red-throated Loons with a nest on a small loch. Passing a Red Phalarope en route, we therefore made our way up the hill to the small patch of water, where there was indeed a pair of beautiful Red-throated Loons. Scanning with the scope, about ten Long-tailed Ducks plus a number of other birds too far off to identify were spotted on a large lake below us; surely this lake would merit some further exploration?

Well, it would have but for the rather large white mammal just on our side of the lake and heading our way. Up went the cry of Polar Bear and then the call to evacuate the island, which as previously was carried out with the minimum of fuss. Back in the safety of the zodiacs we were able to watch



this leaner male bear as it walked slowly yet purposefully along the beach where we had been only minutes earlier. Once again we had great views but once again our chance of a tundra walk was thwarted, though we did manage to see more Purple Sandpipers, four Great Skuas and a couple of Parasitic Jaegers during our short time on terra firma. We were the last zodiac to leave and as we did so a Bearded Seal popped up next to us to say cheerio. Forsaking the bar for the deck after dinner, those present were rewarded with another Ivory Gull and two more Red Phalaropes, along with all four species of auk.

Day 8. Saturday 23rd July.

Today was very much a travel day as we made our way south past Prince Karls Foreland, heading for Isfjorden and ultimately Longyearbyen. Apart from our constant companions when at sea, the Blue Fulmars and occasional auks, the only notable species recorded was a Bearded Seal. This didn't mean it was a boring day, however; far from it. Approaching the fjord mouth it quickly became obvious that there was a lot of dense sea ice blocking our way, and that furthermore it was perhaps up to ten miles wide! Dutch wasn't his usual smiling self, the captain looked concerned and there was more than the usual three staff on the bridge. We'd got ourselves a problem.

Observing from a corner of the bridge it was fascinating to watch the situation unfold as we cruised along the ice edge looking for a way through. Back and forwards we went, the radio repeatedly crackling into life as other ships contacted us about the situation. Clearly we weren't the only ships trying to make it into port that day. At one point it looked like the Oceana, a Polish polar research vessel, was stuck but they declined our offer of help and eventually freed themselves. After much discussion between the EL, Captain, helmsmen and other officers, and following a conversation with another ship that had made it through the ice, the decision was made: we would try to get through. And so we did, very slowly, so slowly in fact that the captain missed our final dinner as he

was too busy on the bridge. It was an interesting afternoon and the thought and care taken by the ship crew clearly demonstrated how professional and skilled they are at polar navigation.

Day 9. Sunday 24th July.

By the time we were woken up the drama was over and indeed it had panned out to our advantage. We were now adjacent to the quay as a larger ship had failed to get through the ice, so no more zodiac rides for us. Our gear was collected and after a farewell speech from Dutch, that was it. Time for goodbyes to all our newfound friends and then off to our respective hotels. Our Canadian trio was flying off that afternoon but the rest of us met up mid-morning for some final birding on the outskirts of town. Six very distant male King Eiders could just about be identified through the 'scope, but about 40 Common Eiders were much closer. Both the Parasitic Jaegers and Arctic Terns continued their relentless defence of their nests and young and on the mudflats about 40 Barnacle Geese rested, including three or more leucistic individuals. We also found the faithful Ivory Gull, this time being very obliging; unlike the Red Phalarope that showed well but all too briefly. Dunlin and Purple Sandpipers continued to give good views as did three Common Ringed Plover, the latter being new for the guest's trip list. Also new was a male Eurasian Wigeon. And that was it. Returning to the hotel we had some final looks at Snow Buntings feeding their recently fledged young, while high overhead Little Auks and Glaucous Gulls continued to patrol the skies. Well, that was almost it. Three intrepid guests were not finished yet. They hired a car and set off in pursuit of their final quarry, Rock Ptarmigan, and managed to find two family parties totaling 21 birds. They also found some more King Eiders and Parasitic Jaegers whilst the rest of us indulged in a bit of sight-seeing and souvenir shopping.

And so ended our Arctic adventure. Our journey had taken us beyond the 80° parallel, further north than any of us had ever been before. We'd witnessed awesome scenery, the third largest icecap in the northern hemisphere, spectacular icebergs, beautiful fjords, barren Arctic deserts, deceptively attractive tundra littered with pink, purple and yellow flowers, 24 hour daylight and had enjoyed flat seas, good weather, challenging ice conditions and great company.



We'd also been fortunate to enjoy some incredible wildlife experiences such as our time with the Belugas, our first Polar Bear evacuation followed by some very close views of this magnificent beast, inquisitive Walruses and Bearded Seals, brief views of the rare Hooded Seal and close views of the Svalbard race of Reindeer. We scored all the expected bird targets, securing excellent views of Ivory and Sabine's Gull, Long-tailed Jaeger, Red Phalarope and Purple Sandpiper. Visits to auk colonies allowed unprecedented photo opportunities and we were able to marvel at the grace and agility of the blue Northern Fulmars that were our constant companions whilst at sea. Throw into the mix Red-throated Loons, three species of geese, King Eiders, beautiful Long-tailed Ducks, Rock Ptarmigan and, of course, the really cute Snow Buntings, and we certainly had ourselves a feast of Arctic wildlife!

One species, however, had eluded us on the main tour, Arctic Fox, which we'd failed to see at both Ny Ålesund and scavenging along cliff bases below the auk colonies. Undeterred and armed with fresh information, we decided to give it one last go. Awakening at 01.20 on the morning of our flight, some of us therefore set off to our stakeout. Even before reaching it we managed brief views of one animal, and then as we approached the prime habitat, the local kebab shop (!), one appeared

complete with takeaway and trotted across the road right in front of us. Perhaps not quite how we envisaged seeing it, but we were thankful nevertheless. It was a great end to our Arctic odyssey.

As is customary at the end of any Rockjumper trip, votes were cast for the top five birds and mammals. These were:

Birds

- 1st. Sabine's Gull
- 2nd. Red Phalarope
- 3rd. Little Auk
- 4th. Long-tailed Jaeger
- 5th. Red-throated Loon

Mammals

- 1st. Polar Bear
- 2nd. Walrus
- 3rd. Beluga
- 4th. Bearded Seal
- 5th. Hooded Seal and Reindeer

Photo Credits: Red Phalarope by Adam Riley, Common Eider by Elliott Neep, Reindeer by Adam Riley, Alcid breeding colony by Elliott Neep, Ivory Gull by James Wakelin, Walrus, Pack ice, Zodiac cruise and Polar Bear (see below) by Elliott Neep.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRDS RECORDED

Taxonomy follows the International Ornithological Congress World Bird List version 2.9 (July 10th 2011) but population estimates are taken from Birds and Mammals of Svalbard by Kit M. Kovacs & Chr. Lydersen.

TETRAONIDAE

Rock Ptarmigan

Lagopus muta hyperborea

Although not encountered on the cruise, on our final day three intrepid guests hired a car and soon found two family parties totaling 21 birds near Longyearbyen. These birds are certainly easier to see in the vicinity of the town and have in the past been seen near the graveyard. The subspecies *hyperborean* is endemic to Svalbard.

ANATIDAE

Pink-footed Goose

Anser brachyrhynchus

Three were seen in flight on the morning before embarkation at Longyearbyen; another, also in flight, was seen near the 14th July Glacier the following day; a flock of 55 was seen near the Walrus haul out at Torrelneset on Nordausterlandet; and a group of about 150 at Worsleyhamna. The population of Pink-footed Geese breeding in Spitsbergen (currently estimated at 52,000 individuals in 2005) spends the winter in Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Brant Goose (Pale-bellied Brent Goose) *Branta bernicla hrota*

The least common of the geese in Spitsbergen, with just one individual found lurking amongst the 150 Pink-footed Geese at Worsleyhamna. This species belongs to a discrete population of Pale-bellied Brent Goose that spends the winter in northern Denmark and around Holy Island (Lindisfarne) in northeast England. This is one of the smallest goose populations in the world, currently numbering about 5,000 individuals.

Barnacle Goose

Branta leucopsis

A widespread breeding bird in Spitsbergen that was seen well on all but three days, with the best views of pairs nesting and with goslings at Longyearbyen. The highest count was 130 on day one at Longyearbyen, with other notable counts including 70 at Amsterdamoya and a flock of about 50 after disembarkation, which included three or four leucistic birds. The entire Spitsbergen population of Barnacle Geese spends the winter in the Solway Firth in southwest Scotland before moving to the

Helgeland District archipelagos in West Norway in spring. This population has shown a dramatic increase from 550 individuals in the 1950s to about 27,000 in 2005 due to better habitat protection and greatly reduced hunting pressure throughout its range.

Eurasian Wigeon.

Anas Penelope

A male was seen pre-tour by one guest before we boarded the ship. Fortunately the same bird was still present on the last day of the tour, allowing several more participants to see this annual visitor and occasional breeder in Svalbard.

King Eider

Somateria spectabilis

A flock of 15 (13 males and 2 females) were a guide only sighting at Longyearbyen before we boarded our ship, though once on board everyone then managed distant looks at a group of eight males from the deck. On our last morning in Longyearbyen several of us saw six more but again they were quite far off. According to the latest estimates from BirdLife International, there are between 2,500 and 5,000 King Eiders present in Spitsbergen after the breeding season.

Common Eider

Somateria mollissima

A common species seen on all but one day and in good numbers. The highest estimates were 60 at Longyearbyen and the Monaco Glacier, where most were males. Around 30 were also recorded around Longyearbyen on the first day, including several broods of small ducklings and close views of a female sitting quietly on her nest. Population estimates range between 13,500 and 27,000 pairs, but in late summer this is thought to range between 80,000 and 140,000 birds (including young).

Long-tailed Duck

Clangula hyemalis

The guide and a tour participant saw a party of four at Longyearbyen before we boarded the Ioffe. A female was just offshore on day two at Blomstrandhalvoya and a male was seen in Liefdefjorden while watching the female Polar Bear and her cubs. Later the same day we also found a distant flock of ten. This is quite a rare species in Svalbard with a population estimate of 500 to 1,000 pairs.

Common Goldeneye

Bucephala clangula

Probably the rarest bird to be encountered, a female of this species was seen at Longyearbyen by two of the group during a pre-tour morning walk. There are less than 20 records for Svalbard.

GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Loon (Red-throated Diver) *Gavia stellata*

Although a fairly common breeding bird in Spitsbergen, we only saw this species on three dates. The first two were seen flying over Torrelneset on Nordausterlandet, another flyover was seen at Lagoya, while the best views were of a nesting pair at Worsleyhamna. It is estimated that between 500 and 1,000 pairs breed in Svalbard.

PROCELLARIIDAE

Northern Fulmar

Fulmarus glacialis

This common species was seen at sea on all days, with the highest count of about 100 recorded in Brennevinsfjorden. Many were of the dark morph, often known as the 'Blue Fulmar' typical of these high latitudes, but quite a few looked distinctly pale-headed, suggesting that they were from a more southerly latitude. It is thought that over half a million pairs breed in Svalbard.

CHARADRIIDAE

Common Ringed Plover

Charadrius hiaticula

One at Longyearbyen at the start of the trip was a guide only sighting, but during the walk at Longyearbyen on day eight three more were found and seen well. The breeding population is estimated at between 300 and 600 pairs.

Ruddy Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

This scarce summer visitor to Spitsbergen was only seen at Worsleyhamna, where two were seen in flight by some of the group. Between 50 and 500 pairs are thought to breed in Svalbard.

Purple Sandpiper

Calidris maritime

This species is by far the commonest breeding wader in Spitsbergen and we recorded birds on five dates during the tour. Ten were at Longyearbyen at the start of the tour with twenty there on the last day. Elsewhere, ten were on Lagoya and four at Worsleyhamna. There has been no reliable census of this species but the breeding population is thought to be between 2,000 and 10,000 pairs. There is currently a ringing programme being carried out by Norwegian ringers to ascertain where the Svalbard birds go in winter.

Dunlin

Calidris alpina

Only seen in Longyearbyen, where ten were found at the start of the tour with 20 there on the last day. Only a few pairs of Dunlin breed in Spitsbergen and this species is rarely encountered outside of Longyearbyen. The breeding population is thought to be as few as 100 pairs.

Red Phalarope (Grey Phalarope)

Phalaropus fulicarius

It was great to see as many as eight on Lagoya, some of which were very close, including one spinning next to a summer plumaged Sabine's Gull – what an awesome sight! One was seen the following day by a single guest on Worsleyhamna, with a guide only sighting that evening of two flying over the bow. The final sighting was after we had disembarked at Longyearbyen. The breeding population is thought to be between 200 and 1,000 pairs.

LARIDAE

Black-legged Kittiwake

Rissa tridactyla

After Northern Fulmar, Thick-billed Murre and Little Auk, this species is probably the most common species in Svalbard, with a population estimate of 270,000 pairs. Needless to say we saw many birds daily with the most impressive gathering of circa 5000 at the face of the Monaco Glacier. We did however only see one first summer bird, the rest being adults, suggesting that the young birds do not return to the breeding area until two years old.

Ivory Gull

Pagophila eburnean

Often used out of context, the term iconic surely applies to Ivory Gull in terms of Arctic species. Knowing that there is a regular bird on the outskirts of Longyearbyen, two of us made our way there on the first morning and were not disappointed. We returned to this bird on our last morning and were again rewarded with awesome views of this beautiful gull. In between these two sightings we saw four on day five of the trip, two in Brennevinsfjorden and two as we cruised through pack ice just above 80° north, while the following day one flew over the bow as we made our way west of Phippsøya. Between 200 and 750 pairs of this species exist in Spitsbergen.

Sabine's Gull

Xema sabini

We were treated to excellent views of a pair in summer plumage on Lagoya, which at one time was in company with a stunning Red Phalarope. Later in the morning a more distant pair was also seen. This is one of the rarest breeding birds in Svalbard, with only one to ten breeding pairs at perhaps just two or three sites.

Glaucous Gull

Larus hyperboreus

These huge gulls were both common and widespread and we recorded them on all but the penultimate day. Around Longyearbyen up to 50 a day could be found, otherwise day counts were of twenty or less, the exception being at the Monaco Glacier where an estimated 500 were loafing

around on icebergs. This species is a major predator of Little Auk. The breeding population is estimated at 4,000 to 10,000 pairs.

STERNIDAE

Arctic Tern

Sterna paradisaea

A common breeding bird throughout the islands that was encountered every day. This species was particularly noticeable at Longyearbyen where we were regularly attacked by breeding adults. The breeding population is thought to be less than 10,000 pairs in Spitsbergen.

STERCORARIIDAE

Great Skua (Bonxie)

Stercorarius skua

Surprisingly regular sightings of this bulky pirate were made, with one or two birds seen on five days both over islands and at sea, with a peak count of eight on day seven when four were seen around the Monaco Glacier and four more at Worsleyhamna. This species first bred in Spitsbergen in 1976 and now the population is thought to number between 150 and 350 pairs.

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua)

Stercorarius parasiticus

Recorded on all bar day seven of the tour but only in small numbers, generally six or less. All were pale phased birds (dark-phase birds are much commoner at lower latitudes), and at Longyearbyen we had a pair with two half grown young. On our last day the combined total of birds seen, including those seen by the intrepid Ptarmigan hunters, amounted to about ten. Between 1,000 and 2,000 pairs are thought to breed in the archipelago.

Long-tailed Jaeger (Long-tailed Skua) *Stercorarius longicaudus*

Those of us who visited Blomstrandhalvoya had prolonged close looks at one bird on top of a ridge. A second bird occasionally joined the first and at the end of our visit to the island a third individual put in an appearance. Breeding has only been proved a few times and it is likely that very few pairs of this elegant species breed in Spitsbergen. This is presumably because of the complete absence of lemmings, their preferred prey during the breeding season.

ALCIDAE

Little Auk (Dovekie)

Alle alle

A major target for one guest, this species was never going to be a problem given that the Svalbard population is estimated to be at least a million pairs. These cute little birds were seen on seven days, but our visit to Fugelsangen will probably remain our most exciting experience. Here we were treated to many hundreds flying back and forth to the boulders under which they nest. Their eerie calls added to the whole ambience of the event and the many photographs taken are testament to their tameness.

Thick-billed Murre (Brünnich's Guillemot) *Uria lomvia*

Very common at sea on most days and extremely abundant near their huge breeding colony at Alkefjellet in Hinlopen Strait. Here we watched many thousands flying back and forth without any collisions and occasionally we had males together with their young that had launched themselves off the cliffs for the first time. The total breeding population in Svalbard has been estimated at 850,000 pairs.

Black Guillemot

Cephus grylle

This dapper bird is common and widespread throughout the archipelago, particularly near the ice. Good numbers were seen each day with up to 200 a day noted, with quite a few being first summer birds showing dark markings on their coverts. The breeding population is estimated at 20,000 pairs.

Atlantic Puffin

Fratercula corniculata

These comical birds, sometimes called Sea Clowns, were seen on six dates with up to twenty a day recorded. Occasionally birds came very close to the zodiacs providing outstanding views, but more often than not they were only seen in flight. The entire population at Spitsbergen is estimated at around 10,000 pairs, but like many species no thorough census has been carried out.

EMBERIZIDAE

Snow Bunting

Plectrophenax nivalis

The only breeding passerine in the islands, it is common and conspicuous especially around Longyearbyen, where up to ten a day was seen both before and after the tour. Elsewhere, a male was seen at Blomstrandhalvoya, two were seen at Fugelsangen and another male at Worsleyhamna. In Longyearbyen several recently fledged juveniles were seen. The population has not been surveyed, but is thought to range between 1000 and 10,000 pairs.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF MAMMALS RECORDED

CANIDAE

Arctic Fox

Vulpes lagopus

Although we failed to see any on the actual tour, several guests saw a couple of these quite shy predators pre-tour around Longyearbyen, and acting on local information at least one was seen in the town in the very early morning on our day of departure. Although it is often assigned to its own genus *Alopex*, genetic evidence places it in *Vulpes* with the majority of the world's other foxes.

URSIDAE

Polar Bear

Thalarctos maritimus

Undoubtedly the highlight of the tour! The first of our five animals was a big male, probably seven or eight years old. While he put paid to any thoughts of a tundra walk on Amsterdamoya, the very close views as he ambled along the beach we had just vacated, followed by him swimming across to Danskoya and then gently strolling up the hill, more than compensated for this. The next sighting was early on day seven of the tour as we headed into Liefdefjorden on our way to the Monaco Glacier, and everybody moved to an open area on the boat and enjoyed sightings of a female with her two 18 month old cubs. Soon thereafter the Zodiacs were launched, allowing great views from the safety of the water with many photographs taken. The fifth and final bear, another male, once again put prevented a tundra hike, this time at Worsleyhamna in the north-eastern corner of Reinsdryfla, as he too ambled along the beach that we were supposed to be walking on. Our three Polar Bear sightings certainly lived up to expectations and were indeed truly awesome. They will linger for a very long time in our memories!

ODOBENIDAE

Walrus

Odobenus rosmarus

These gargantuans of the Arctic were first encountered on day four when we visited a haul out at Torrelneset on Nordausterlandet. Here we enjoyed close views of a group of about 40 males lazing on the beach, occasionally raising their heads to display their very impressive tusks or having a leisurely scratch. Our next encounter was on Lagoya, where we first found a group of twenty, one or two of which entered the water and approached us for a closer look. Then, as we went for a short walk, we found another small group of five. Our final sighting was of a single male (all the Walruses that we saw were males) as we cruised through the sea-ice. Another very memorable set of sightings!

PHOCIDAE

Harp Seal

Pagophilus groenlandicus

Five were seen as we cruised north late on day five, with two more the following day off north-eastern Spitsbergen. Unfortunately all were late in the evening and guide only sightings.

Common or Harbour Seal

Phoca vitulina

This is quite a scarce pinniped here as there is only one known colony on the archipelago. It is also shy on land and often difficult to see, so we were fortunate to spot two hauled out on an offshore rock at Amsterdamoya.

Ringed Seal

Phoca hispida

About five were seen as we cruised through sea ice in Brennevinsfjorden on day five of the tour and two more were seen in the sea ice around the Seven Islands the following day.

Bearded Seal

Erignathus barbatus

We saw many during the tour but unfortunately most were distant. Having missed one on day two we were pleased to see a large distant specimen as we cruised through the ice in Brennevinsfjorden. Later that day while cruising through more pack ice we found another two, and then late in the evening one popped up right next to the boat. At Lagoya we had great looks at another which appeared right next to the Zodiac, one more was seen in Liefdefjorden, and the last was seen as we negotiated drift ice at the mouth of Isfjorden.

Hooded Seal

Cystophora cristata

Having spent a good hour with the female Polar Bear in Liefdefjorden, our group elected to speed off through the fog to the Monaco Glacier where a male was found about 100m away as we were cruising along the glacier face. Despite not hanging around very long, everyone managed views of this, the rarest seal in Svalbard.

BALAENOPTERIDAE

Northern Minke Whale

Balaenoptera acutorostrata

Unfortunately, none of our group connected with this species although several were seen during the voyage. It was usually a case of none staying in view long enough for people to relocate to a position on the deck or bridge where they could see one. The Minke Whales are the second smallest of the baleen whales, with a maximum length between 8 and 11 meters depending on the sex of the animal. Males are smaller than females, but both sexes typically weigh around 4-5 tons at maturity and the maximum weight may be as much as 14 tons.

Fin Whale

Balaenoptera physalus

Fin Whale is currently listed as an endangered species following heavy hunting during the twentieth century. It was therefore somewhat unfortunate that when the only one of the tour was found, few people were on the bridge and it only showed three times. The Fin Whale is usually distinguished by its great length and slender build, and the average size of males and females is 19 and 20 meters respectively. It is known as one of the world's fastest cetaceans, sustaining speeds of 37 kilometers per hour!

MONODONTIDAE

Beluga

Delphinapterus leucas

Thanks to the sharp eyes of the ships officers we were very fortunate to see a pod of 20-30 of this widespread Arctic species in Kongsfjorden on day two. Initially watched from the ship, we were then able to cruise with them, eventually coming so close we could hear them blowing and see their blowholes. This species is sadly still hunted commercially, but in Svalbard waters it is protected and numbers are slowly recovering. This was an excellent sighting as this species is generally only seen

once in four or five trips. It is one of only three members in the family *Monodontidae* (single-toothed Whales), the others species being Narwhal and Irrawaddy Dolphin. After Polar Bear, this was the number two mammal of the trip and was very much appreciated!

CERVIDAE

Svalbard Caribou or Reindeer

Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus

We encountered this small subspecies of Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) on six dates during the tour, usually on areas of snow-free tundra, generally in groups no larger than three. The exception was the herd of 14 that we saw while cruising towards the 14th July Glacier. The endemic Spitsbergen race *platyrhynchus* is much smaller and noticeably shorter in the leg than Reindeer occurring further south.



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