

# West Greenland - Bowheads & Icebergs!

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 May – 3 June 2015



Minke Whale



Red-necked Phalarope



Reindeer



Snow Bunting

Report & Images compiled by Tom Mabbett



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Tour Participants: Tom Mabbett (leader) and nine Naturetrek clients

## Summary

We had an exciting and action packed week seeing a great range of special wildlife and some truly spectacular scenery. Although not reaching our intended destination further north due to unseasonal sea ice, we still had a thoroughly enjoyable cruise with highlights including multiple sightings of Humpback Whales, a very obliging Minke Whale and lots of birds including hundreds of Red-necked Phalaropes and superb views of White-tailed Eagle. All this coupled with a lot of good fun along the way.

### Day 1

**Monday 25th May**

Most of the group met Tom at Heathrow airport, and after a short flight without any hold ups we arrived at Copenhagen. We went straight to our hotel and after checking in and meeting up with Elaine and Ralph, a few of us decided to go for a stroll to stretch our legs after the flight. We walked a short distance from the hotel and looked out over the water from a small marina where we watched Eiders on the water and a Glaucous Gull amongst a group of gulls on a nearby platform, while a Brown Hare ran close by us.

Following a nice buffet meal we went to bed, ready for our onward journey the next morning.

### Day 2

**Tuesday 26th May**

This morning we met up with Val and then caught our flight onwards to Kangerlussuaq, enjoying impressive views of the ice cap from the plane. Whilst waiting for our charter flight on to Sisimiut we watched our first Lapland Bunting outside, and a large, pale rumped Redpoll that gave all too fleeting glimpses.

After an impressive 20 minute flight over the dramatic open ice we landed at Sisimiut and were swiftly transported to the harbour. Phil, our expedition leader, explained that we had until four o'clock to look around the town before the boat was ready for boarding, so we spent the next four hours or so walking around the town, drinking hot drinks in the local café and more importantly finding some nice birds! Snow and Lapland Buntings were all over the place, 'Greenland' Redpolls and Wheatears were also seen well, whilst in the harbour were at least 40 King Eiders with a few Common Eiders and a single Red-necked Phalarope.

It was instantly apparent that wintery conditions were still very much here with lots of snow and ice, and after enjoying close views of some very smart birds and keeping topped up with hot drinks, we boarded the impressive Rembrandt van Rijn, our home for the next seven nights.

After a welcome and safety briefing we were on our way, heading south towards Amerdlog Fjord. The sea was calm and after initial cloud, the weather cleared a little as we entered the fjord. Both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls were seen from the boat and as we headed down the fjord it wasn't long before we spotted two Humpback Whales ahead. Following our first of many delicious dinners, we cruised closer to them and spent the evening and into the 'night' watching them feeding on the Capelin that had come into the fjord to spawn. They were clearly feeding on them and we even watched the bubble ring feeding behaviour and lunge feeding as they gorged themselves on this plentiful supply!

Around 40 Red-necked Phalaropes were seen in flocks on the water, and we had spectacular views of a White-tailed Eagle coming down to snatch a fish from the surface not far from the boat! Flocks of Eider and Long-tailed Duck regularly zipped past and we all dragged ourselves away from the deck to retire to our bunks at various times after a long day. With the sun not setting at this time of year, it is easy to stay up late into the night looking for wildlife!

## Day 3

Wednesday 27th May

We awoke in a sheltered spot on the fjord to a beautifully calm morning with clear blue skies. From the deck of the boat we saw flocks of Long-tailed Ducks, Iceland Gulls on the water, and a distant Great Northern Diver and three White-tailed Eagles (including a smart adult) sat on the ice. A Snow Bunting was seen, actually on the boat, and Wheatears were singing. A larger flock of gulls revealed they were mainly Iceland, with plenty of Glaucous, fewer Great Black-backed and six Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Following a hearty breakfast we carried on down the fjord, passing more rafts of Red-necked Phalaropes and further eagle sightings, and were able to hoist the sails for a short time with a few of us helping out with this.

We set anchor at the far end of the fjord and enjoyed lunch before taking to the zodiacs for the first time and heading ashore. We split into two groups, one intending a more lengthy and strenuous route than the other, and we all headed for a large frozen lake. It was great to be on the tundra and we navigated through some quite deep snow, but with the sun shining we were soon peeling off the layers! Lapland Buntings were singing and Snow Buntings flitted around us as we enjoyed stretching our legs.

After a short time a superb Arctic Hare was spotted on the mountainside and everyone had a good look through the telescope as it sat motionless, looking down on us. This species stays pure white the whole year round and looked very smart indeed.

We continued on with one group heading past the lake for the highest peak, winding up the mountainside as the weather was looking a little ominous. The views from the top were spectacular out over the fjord, and as a snow blizzard set in we took some photos before starting back for the boat. On the walk down we heard an Arctic Fox but could not see it, and before boarding the zodiacs we watched a superb flock of Lapland and Snow Buntings feeding on the shoreline: at least 50 of each and a great sight.

Heading back to the ship we noticed a huge number of feeding gulls and then the blow of a Humpback Whale. The weather conditions were not good with strong winds and choppy conditions but we still went to have a look. It was very atmospheric and exciting being in amongst the gulls with a feeding Humpback Whale nearby.

After an action packed afternoon we returned to the boat and enjoyed dinner and talking about the day's events. We then headed for a sheltered bay nearer the mouth of the fjord and moored here for the night.

## Day 4

Thursday 28th May

Today we headed out of the fjord and in to open water to travel north. A flock of around 40 King Eiders with Long-tailed Ducks and a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers saw us on our way.

Heading out to sea, the conditions were good and we spotted our first Brünnich's Guillemots on the water with seven quite close to the ship, along with two Razorbills and a couple of Puffins. Black Guillemots flew low across the water and a few Harp Seals were popping up to take a look at us but disappeared very quickly.

Continuing on, the conditions at sea got a little worse and a steady roll took over on the boat. With a few people retiring to their cabins, we continued north and started to see sea ice ahead. We saw our first iceberg and we stopped and circled it. Fulmars were shearing over the waves and flocks of Eider and King Eider were passing by the ship. It was this sea ice that was halting our progress north and our thoughts turned to what it was like further on!

In need of calmer waters we headed into another sheltered area and moored up in Syd Bay with a drake King Eider on the water and large flocks of Northern Eider in flight. Here we took to the Zodiacs again and clambered ashore. It was very cold and a stiff wind was blowing so our walk was short but exciting, and wonderfully scenic once again. Long-tailed Ducks and Eiders were on the water and our first Purple Sandpipers were on rocks nearby. We decided to cruise around the hidden inlets in the zodiacs and explored the area on the water searching for wildlife.

After a couple of hours we returned to the ship and enjoyed dinner. We were again shown satellite images of the ice.

## Day 5

Friday 29th May

This morning we left Syd Bay and headed down the nearby Nordre isotoq fjord. As we went we had a really nice flyby from eight Great Northern Divers, all in their stunning summer plumage, and large flocks of Long-tailed Ducks also flew past. Lots of Black Guillemots were seen and five Red-throated Divers were a new bird for the trip.

Upon reaching the end of the fjord we had lunch. We then took to the zodiacs and moved along the ice edge, getting very close to Glaucous and Iceland Gulls eating a washed up cod. After some persistence we had excellent views of lots of Black Guillemots and Long-tailed Ducks. The Long-tailed Ducks were particularly special as they flew close to us, calling away, with their slightly goose-like, higher pitched, calls.

We received the news that the ice movement had not shifted and had actually got worse further north with winds pushing the ice closer to shore. We were disappointed that our route appeared to be ice-bound but decided to get out into open water and push north anyhow and see how far we could get.

It was great conditions at sea and very calm as we slowly started to see ice in the distance. It was an amazing sight. At first it looked like a row of sailing boats on the horizon; then it looked like an impenetrable mass! As we approached closer however, it was in fact long floes of ice stretching for a few hundred metres. We were able to

navigate around it and slowly move on, dodging chunks of ice in the water and small ice bergs as we went. Harp Seals were popping up around us with one showing a little better to see some of its features, and a large flock of King Eiders flew close to the boat.

Unfortunately the sea ice looked to be worse up ahead. With a long way to go and no certainty of making it through, it was clear we could not continue and understanding the situation was easier now we had seen it. Nevertheless, it was a spectacular and unforgettable scene.

With the perfect conditions at sea it was time to scan, scan, scan in search of cetaceans but even with this near perfect glass-like surface, not a blow or a dorsal fin were spotted. A couple of Puffins drifted by and a single Brünnich's Guillemot was quite close to us. We all enjoyed dinner, eaten a little quicker so no time was lost on deck!

Following dinner we moved south again along the edge of the ice floe and the scene was quite breathtaking with all the sea ice and a perfectly flat sea. Late into the evening we entered Syd Bay once more and it was a beautiful evening. A few of us were still on deck as it approached midnight. The only Little Auk of the trip was floating on the sea at the mouth of the fjord and Razorbill, yet more King Eider, and an adult White-tailed Eagle were all seen as the sun lowered towards the horizon; not quite making it.

## Day 6

## Saturday 30th May

We awoke to clear conditions and headed along Nordre isotoq fjord. There was the option to go snow-shoeing and many of us opted to do this, while a few others went for a walk close to the shore. As we were preparing to go ashore a Harp Seal was spotted, hauled out on the ice. We looked at the animal in the telescope and could see it was an adult with a distinct dark semicircle showing when it turned sideways. The snow-shoeing was great fun and we were able to walk a considerable distance up steep slopes. With particularly deep snow in this area we would have seriously struggled without them! As we gained height we paused to watch Snow Buntings and look down on the group below us and the ship in the fjord. We could see a huge raft of easily 300 Eider and even from our elevated position could hear their wonderful call: the group close to shore had superb views!

As we climbed higher and paused briefly, Ptarmigan could be heard. After a little scanning, two birds were seen walking over the snow, still pure white and with no sign of moulting. One bird was then picked out feeding on an open area allowing some great telescope views.

We climbed as high as we could before taking in the stunning views all around us and taking some photographs before heading back down to the ship. We were certainly ready for some lunch! The other group also spotted two Ptarmigan, this time close to the shore.

Following lunch we left the fjord and headed back out to sea in search of cetaceans. We went out to the ice floe and carried on following it south. After a short time a wonderful Minke Whale surfaced not too far from the boat and instead of moving away, this animal was inquisitive and stayed with the boat for at least 20 minutes! We were rushing from one side of the boat to the other as the whale circled us and it was a rare treat to watch it under water powering along and turning on its side. We decided that it was displaying to the boat and it occasionally came up 'spy hopping' and taking a look at us. All the features could be seen and when it finally

realised that we were a ship and not another whale, it moved away. It was a special encounter and a privilege to be so close to it and to watch this amazing behaviour.

Carrying on, a fine adult Bearded Seal was spotted on the ice. Known for being less nervy than the other seals, it indeed proved to be that way as the animal stayed on the ice and everyone had excellent views.

We continued south for a few hours towards Ikertoq fjord and on arriving here, moored up in a sheltered bay. After a delicious BBQ style dinner we were offered a ride out on the zodiacs. We took to the water and enjoyed more close views of Black Guillemot and Long-tailed Duck with flocks of Eider flying nearby. As we moved slowly along the edge of a small island we glimpsed Greenland White-fronted Geese and Snow Geese flying up from the island, all too quickly disappearing over the island and out of sight. We had more close up views of Purple Sandpiper before slowly making our way back to the ship for a beer and bed. A few of us stayed up to watch the shoreline and saw four Greenland White-fronted Geese along with an Arctic Hare.

## Day 7

## Sunday 31st May

It was again a perfectly flat calm scene as we woke. We enjoyed the sea ducks near the boat and two Red-throated Divers were spotted amongst them. As we watched they displayed to each other, standing upright and calling loudly.

After breakfast we went ashore and had some time to explore the open tundra on a beautiful morning. Lapland Buntings were display fighting overhead and Redpolls chattered nearby. We made our way through some deep ice patches and with the group split in two, we circled each side of the island, keeping in touch with the radios should any wildlife be spotted.

It was a great walk and as we reached a high point, below us we could see Canada and White-fronted Geese, and Elaine glimpsed an Arctic Fox but all too briefly unfortunately. We sat and enjoyed the scene, scanning the area. Near to us we found an obvious plucking point and a large pellet which comprised solely of small white feathers. We came to the conclusion a Gyr was most likely responsible. With lunch time looming we made our way steadily back to the ship and after a quick Zodiac ride, were back on board.

We now sailed onward down Ikertoq fjord in perfect weather. Two Arctic Skuas were spotted and soon afterwards another Humpback Whale was seen. We watched the whale surfacing a few times before continuing down the fjord, noting one more pale Arctic Skua as we went. Some of the group soaked up some rays and had a lie down on the deck. Again we noticed the blows of two Humpback Whales and moved slowly towards them in the sheltered bay of Iterdlugssuuaq. They gave great close up views as they again seemed to be feeding on the Capelin close to the shore. We watched them surfacing and deep diving with the occasional lunge feed before they slowly moved away. We then moved slowly out into the fjord and continued south. As we went we enjoyed a delicious hot chocolate and rum, and with this extra warmth we sailed on.

As we sailed we passed yet more Red-necked Phalaropes on the water and a huge number of at least 100 Great Northern Divers which was an impressive sight indeed. All these birds were seemingly waiting for spring to arrive! We passed towering cliffs and on reaching the end of the fjord seven superb Reindeer were spotted on the tundra. We moved slowly closer to the shore and we were able to have fantastic views as they walked

through the snow. The males were sporting huge antlers with two young animals loitering behind. Moving on down the fjord an Arctic Hare was also spotted very high on the cliff side, and after spotting two more Reindeer and watching a huge Iceland Gull and Kittiwake colony, we moored up at Avatdleg at the end of the fjord. There were birds everywhere. A nearby small island was covered in both Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, whilst Kittiwakes were carrying nesting material to and fro.

After another great dinner, we had another look at our surroundings before turning in.

## Day 8

Monday 1st June

An early morning scan of the area revealed another small group of Reindeer. After breakfast we went ashore and again split into two groups. Phil headed on a more strenuous route, and Baldur and Tom headed towards a large frozen lake on flatter ground. It was again a thoroughly enjoyable walk with Wheatear, Snow Bunting and Lapland Bunting all around. Crossing the boggy Tundra, two Reindeer were seen ahead and we tried getting closer to them. Our stealthy tactics weren't too good however, and the Reindeer headed away. We made our way to a nice lookout area and sat and enjoyed our surroundings. Two Greenland White-fronted Geese were below us and a Reindeer walked out across the frozen lake. We stayed here a little while and as we scanned the area the other group could be seen high above as they enjoyed breath-taking views of the area and had a brilliant close up encounter with an Arctic Hare.

We headed back down towards the boat and as we went a Peregrine flew over us, and two Pintail were new birds on the shore. As we walked along the shore to the zodiacs, thousands and thousands of Capelin were washed up. They had spawned and died and it was these fish that were attracting the whales and feeding the gull colony. A stunning little Red-necked Phalarope was just a couple of feet off the shoreline and we took some photographs and enjoyed this cracking little bird.

After an exciting morning walk we enjoyed lunch and raised anchor to head on our way. It was time now to head back to Sisimiut and on the way we followed a party of Harp Seals leaping from the water. As Phil was giving a lecture another Humpback Whale was spotted and gave good views. The visibility wasn't easy here but moving along the shore was a steady passage of gulls with a few Arctic Skua with them. We kept vigilant for anything else.

Before long it was time for our last dinner on board and after this we enjoyed a glass of champagne and watched a great slideshow that Phil had prepared during the week. It was an impressive production and enjoyed by all. After mooring in the port, a few of us walked in to the village in the hope of Arctic Fox and although not seen it was an experience to walk through this town at gone midnight, still being broad daylight and snowing in June!

## Day 9

Tuesday 2nd June

This morning we were moving on. After breakfast we said our farewells to the crew and boarded the bus back to the airport. We had time for a short tour of the town, stopping at a viewpoint where two Peregrines were spotted.



Back at Sisimiut airport we sat and relaxed. A White-tailed Eagle was seen from the terminal, and stepping outside, a Lapland Bunting was displaying very close to us: a wonderful send off!

Our flights back to Copenhagen were trouble free and we all gathered for a send-off drink before retiring to bed.

## Day 10

Wednesday 3rd June

We had a relaxed start to the day and after a hearty breakfast, headed back to the airport for the short flight back to London where we said our farewells and went our separate ways after an exciting and action packed week.

Despite not making it all the way to the ice-bound north, we saw some wonderful scenery, fantastic wildlife and had really good fun along the way.

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## Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

**Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata*: Seen in small numbers on Ikertoq fjord and also 2 displaying here.

**Great Northern Diver** *Gavia immer*: Seen on all fjords with c100 on Ikertoq fjord. All in immaculate breeding finery.

**Northern Fulmar** *Fulmarus glacialis*: Often around the boat in small numbers at sea. 2 or 3 blue morph birds.

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*: Just 1 seen at mouth of Ikertoq fjord

**Greenland White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons flavirostris*: Seen in small numbers. 4 grazing on island at mouth of Ikertoq fjord. 7 in flight here.

**Canada Goose** *Branta canadensis*: The commonest goose. Encountered at various sites throughout.

**Cackling Goose** *Branta hutchinsii*: 4 small Canada Geese with canadensis in Syd Bay.

**Snow Goose** *Anser caerulescens*: 3 birds seen briefly in flight at Ikertoq fjord.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*: Common and seen every day.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*: One pair seen at head of Ikertoq fjord.

**Northern Eider** *Somateria mollissima*: Common and one raft of 300 was the largest. Rafts occasionally held 1 or 2 King Eider but usually separate.

**King Eider** *Somateria spectabilis*: Seen daily. Raft of c50 was the largest. Only 3-4 adult breeding males. Vast majority first spring males and females.

**Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis*: Seen daily in various flock sizes. One large flock c80 on Nordre isotoq fjord.

**Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*: Pairs seen in several locations usually in flight.

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus*: 3 seen. 1 on tundra near the gull colony at the head of Ikertoq fjord and 2 seen from Sisimiut on last day.

**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*: This spectacular bird was seen regularly with 3 together on Ikertoq fjord. Watching one coming down and taking a fish from the water was a treat.

**Rock Ptarmigan** *Lagopus muta*: 4 birds seen at snow-shoeing site. 2 higher up and 2 seen from the ship.

**Purple Sandpiper** *Calidris maritima*: The commonest shorebird and seen in flocks up to 9.

**Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus*: This stunning little bird was seen in huge numbers on the fjords and open sea, seemingly waiting for the lakes to thaw. Flocks of 20-30 common and regularly seen. 1 very close to shore at Avatdleg on Ikertoq fjord.

**Arctic Skua** *Stercorarius parasiticus*: A few were seen at mouth of Ikertoq fjord. Some moving with gulls along shoreline.

**Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus*: Seen regularly but in small numbers, 2s and 3s.

**Lesser-black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus*: 6 seen together but the most scare gull we encountered.

**Glaucous Gull** *Larus hyperboreus*: Common and seen throughout. Breeding at Ikertoq fjord

**Iceland Gull** *Larus glaucoides*: Very common and the most numerous gull. The colony at the head of Ikertoq fjord was impressive.

**Kumlien's Gull**: 1 bird seen on the water with Iceland Gulls looked good for Kumlien's with obvious black on primaries; well spotted by David.

**Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*: Seen at various points throughout in small numbers. Breeding on cliffs with Iceland Gulls at Ikertoq fjord.

**Little Auk** *Alle alle*: Just 1 seen still in non-breeding plumage on the water as we entered Syd Bay.

**Brünnich's Guillemot** *Uria lomvia*: Small numbers but regularly seen. Seven together largest group.

**Atlantic Puffin** *Fratercula arctica*: A handful seen in breeding plumage out at sea.

**Razorbill** *Alca torda*: 6 or 7 seen throughout.

**Black Guillemot** *Cepphus grille*: By far the most numerous auk. Largest numbers with c100 together and close to us at head of Nordre isotoq fjord.

**Greenland Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe leucorhoa*: Seen at several sites though not particularly abundant. Felt sorry for them after such a journey to find such a wintery scene!

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax*: Common. Seen all over the place including way out at sea!

**Greenland Redpoll** *Carduelis flammea rostrata*: A handful seen throughout but flight call heard at most landings.

**Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*: Common and seen daily. Always a treat.

**Lapland Bunting** *Calcarius lapponicus*: This stunning bunting was seen daily with its song the sound of the open tundra and a real highlight.

## Mammals

**Humpback Whale** *Megaptera novaeangliae*: Seen on 4 days with the most memorable being on the first evening with 3 animals together, working close to shore and feeding on the abundance of Capelin that had moved into the fjord to spawn. Lunge feeding and the bubble blowing feeding technique was witnessed.

**Common Minke Whale** *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*: A truly fantastic encounter with one individual. Staying near the boat for around 20 minutes it was seemingly displaying to the boat. A rare chance to see this species moving powerfully underwater and spy hopping, checking us out. A special sight.

**Arctic Hare** *Lepus arcticus*. Seen regularly with everyone having excellent 'scoped views and a close encounter for some on the final tundra landing.

**Arctic Fox** *Vulpes lagopus*. 1 seen by Elaine briefly in its winter coat.

**Barren-ground Caribou** (*Rangifer tarandus groenlandicus*) (the reindeer we saw). A medium sized race of reindeer that is also found in Canada. – These wild animals were seen on two days as we moved along Ikertoq fjord. A group of 7 individuals showing very well and we got close to them on land too. Impressive animals.

**Bearded Seal** *Erignathus barbatus*. 1 seen very well on an ice floe out at sea. Enjoyed by all.

**Harp Seal** *Pagophilus groenlandicus*. The most common seal. Parties seen moving through the water was interesting and impressive, popping up to check out the ship and an adult hauled up on the ice which we 'scoped was an adult showing distinctive markings.