Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report 14 - 26 July 2009

Arctic Fox

Little Auks

Monaco Glacier

Polar Bear

Tour report compiled by Rinie van Meurs, Adam Garde, Daan Vreugdenhil, Kevin Elsby and Paul Harmes

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Introduction

The "Professor Molchanov" is an ex-research vessel from the Hydrometeorology Institute in Murmansk, Russia. She was built in 1983, in Finland, and was designed as an ice strengthened ship. She measures 71.6 meters (236 ft) in length and 12.8 meters (42 ft) across the beam. She draws 4.5 meters (15 ft), which enables her to move into relatively shallow waters. Professor Pavil Alexandric Molchanov was born in Russia in 1893. He was a famous meteorologist and specialised in the Arctic. He developed radio transmitters for weather balloons, which were at the same time very stable and sophisticated, and in 1931 was the first Soviet person to captain a Zeppelin Airship during an Arctic research trip. He drowned in 1941 during the German blockade of Leningrad.

Day 0 Tuesday 14th July

Travel from the UK

Day 1 Wednesday 15th July

Longyearbyen

GPS Noon Position: 78°13´N and 15°25´E

Air temperature: +10°C.

Longyearbyen is one of the World's most northern settlements, with 2000 inhabitants. We were met at the airport by Rinie and Adam and taken to town, while our luggage was being sorted out and brought to our cabins. This gave everybody a chance to see the town centre and the excellent museum in the large new university building. On display in the museum is both the whaling history of the archipelago and plenty of information about wildlife, early exploration and its history during World War II. Longyearbyen is named after the American, John Monroe Longyear, who was one of the founders of the Arctic Coal Company (1906-1916). Coal is still produced in Spitsbergen, mainly in the Norwegian Sveagruva mine, 60 km south of Longyearbyen, and to its west in the Russian Barentsburg mine on the south coast of Isfjorden. A fourth mine at Ny Ålesund was closed in 1962 after a major accident in which 22 miners were killed.

The 'Professor Molchanov' was anchored outside the harbour, and members of our Russian crew helped us out to the ship in zodiacs. After the welcome and staff introduction in the bar, we went through the obligatory lifeboat drill, enjoyed dinner, and spent the rest of the evening watching the Arctic scenery gliding past us as we went west in the low sun. On both sides of Isfjorden flat-lying sedimentary rocks only 45–60 million years old were exposed (i.e. very young compared to most other parts of Spitsbergen), carved by recent glaciers to display beautiful U-shaped valleys.

We started with a warm welcome on board, accompanied by a glass of champagne to toast the journey, in the bar. We met Rinie and Adam properly, also meeting Daan the third staff member. Kevin the ornithologist and Paul the botanist were also here to help us out with the flora and fauna of Spitsbergen. Sailing into the large fjord of Isfjorden, we were enjoying the views and watched the glaciers. Tired after the long journey and the new impressions, the bunks were found quickly.

Day 2 Thursday 16th July

Fjortendejulibukta (Krossfjord) – Blomstrand

GPS Noon Position: 79° 07´N and 11° 50´E

Air temperature: +6°C.

Following Rinie's instructions about sailing in rubber boats – and not least, how to get safely into and out of them – we went for a short zodiac cruise along impressive brown cliffs in Fjortendejulibukta, which host small colonies of Brünnich's Guillemots, Kittiwakes and the occasional Puffin. The cliff sides consist of rusty-brown coloured schists, clayey sedimentary rocks that were folded and metamorphosed during the Caledonian mountain-building episode, when the North American-Greenlandic and European-Asian continents collided with each other some 430 million years ago. Along the cliff sides we could also see the remnants of a major side moraine, which was left by an enormous glacier that filled the fjord only a few thousand years ago.

On the beach and narrow coastal strip of land at the foot of the cliffs we watched two Arctic Skuas 'play' with a couple of passengers who unwittingly had come too close to their nest, and also observed Pink-Footed and Barnacle Geese, Arctic Terns, Eider ducks, Black Guillemots and a few Puffins. Glaucous Gulls were on the outlook for easy prey, and on the beach we saw trails of its companion scavenger, the Arctic Fox. Higher up on the slopes a few tatty-looking Svalbard Reindeer were grazing, winter fur coming off. In a sheltered, south-facing spot at the foot of the cliffs, we found some exceedingly lush and pretty vegetation, helped by a steady supply of water rich in nutrients from the nesting birds above.

Here we began our early excursion into the flora we would be likely to encounter during our voyage. The Saxifrage family was particularly interesting, with several representatives. We found *Saxifraga nivalis* (Arctic Saxifrage), *Saxifraga oppositifolia* (Purple Saxifrage), *Saxifraga hieracifolia* (Hawkweed Saxifrage), *Saxifraga cernua* (Drooping Saxifrage) and *Saxifraga cespitosa* (Tufted Saxifrage). We also found *Campanula uniflora* (Arctic Harebell), *Draba alpina* (Golden Whitlow-grass) and *Erigeron humilis* (Snow Fleabane).

After lunch we went ashore at Blomstrandhalvøya in Kongsfjord, while the wind was picking up and the clouds gradually lowering. Blomstrandhalvøya is no longer a peninsula as its name implies, as the glacier which previously connected it with the mainland in the north has melted back.
A thick belt of impure, pale grey marble is exposed here, surrounded by impressive rusty schists with a distinct linear structure due to Caledonian ductile extension deep within the Earth's crust. An attempt was made in the early 1920s to quarry the marble, and some rather spectacular pieces of heavy old machinery remain on the site.

Nowadays Blomstrandhalvøya is visited for its scenic landscape and nesting Long-tailed Skua (which we enjoyed at close range), for its flowers, and for the opportunity to get close to the Svalbard Reindeer. We also saw several Snow Buntings, a Sanderling, and three Long-tailed Ducks and Red-throated Divers in a pond. Plants seen here included *Pedicularis hirsuta* (Hairy Lousewort), *Pedicularis dasyantha* (Woolly Lousewort), *Dryas octopetala* (Mountain Avens) and *Saxifraga aizoides* (Yellow Mountain Saxifrage). Some of us went for a hike up the marble hills and obtained a spectacular view of the outer fjord and the abandoned coal mining town of Ny Ålesund in the distance at the opposite side of the fjord.

Day 3 Friday 17th July

Raudfjord – Fuglesangen

GPS Noon Position: 79° 41´N and 13° 27´E

Air temperature: +2°C.

This morning we were located in Raudfjord in the far north-west of Spitsbergen. The weather was misty and drizzling as we anchored, but after a short while the mist lifted and we were able to take a zodiac cruise around this area with its impressive glaciers. All five zodiacs were used for our three hour cruise. A Polar Bear had been reported here the previous week, but sadly, all we found on this occasion were its tantalising footprints in the snow. Nevertheless, everybody admired the superb scenery and the bird life. We got some excellent views of Black Guillemots on the water surface, at times too close to the zodiacs to focus the camera. This is normally a shy species in Western Europe, so we were all glad to obtain some really close views. There were many Brünnich's Guillemots to keep them company, floating on 'rafts' in the bay area, but they were much more shy. We also saw Common Eiders (about 30 males and females in a mixed flock) and about eight Pink-footed Geese at the top of steep scree. There were also Kittiwakes and at least half a dozen Glaucous Gulls in the area, the latter species waiting for an easy meal of chicks of the other bird species. In addition, Snow Buntings were flitting around the slopes, although they were often difficult to observe well.

We turned the zodiacs back but were not yet done for the morning, as two Bearded Seals lolled around at the surface for a while, giving most passengers an opportunity to see them dive 'whale-style'. We eventually arrived back at the ship, and those who had become cold made it straight to the bar for a warming cup of tea or coffee.

Later in the day, we arrived at the Little Auk colony at Fuglesangen. The island of Fuglesangen with its large little auk colony consists of so-called S-type granites, which were melted out of sedimentary rocks during the Caledonian continent–continent collision between Greenland and Scandinavia about 430 million years ago.
The grey granite is very heterogeneous and rather ugly, with numerous dark rafts of un-melted sedimentary material, and it disintegrates into large, irregular boulders which form large screes all around the island. These boulders offer perfect hiding space for the nests and chicks of the Little Auks and protection against the ubiquitous foxes and Glaucous Gulls.

The zodiacs were soon on the sea and we made our way on shore. As we stood on the beach waiting for the last passenger, we watched a pale-phased Arctic Skua severely harassing an unfortunate Kittiwake right above our heads. Then, a Glaucous Gull joined in the chase. At one point a few white feathers were plucked from the Kittiwake, but eventually both the Skua and the Gull gave up and the Kittiwake seemed to get away with its crop full of food for its youngsters. It was a bit of a scramble to get into position to view the colony, but it was very much worth the effort. Thousands of Little Auks were gathered on the scree boulders, periodically flying off and out to sea in large numbers, only to do a wide circle and return to the boulders again, the site of their nests. This experience was sure to become one of the highlights of the trip. Little Auks seemed to be everywhere and this spectacle was made even more enjoyable by the regular trilling calls of the birds. We managed to get really close to them, and excellent photos were taken. All too soon it was time to move on again, but by now it was drizzling. Once again the bar became packed with smiling faces as we went in to warm up.

During dinner this evening we made our way towards Moffen Island, further east and north from the Little Auk colony. Here we encountered our first bergy bits and pack ice. Moffen Island is a nature reserve and cannot be approached closer than 300m. It was here that we got our first views of that wonderful marine mammal, the Walrus. There were several visible from the bow of the ship and the bridge, in the shallows around the edge of the island. Even from distance it was clear that some were very large males with massive body bulk and long tusks to match. Eventually, one animal came close to the bow of the ship before diving and being lost from view. Whilst we were in the vicinity of Moffen Island, we also saw at least four Sabine's Gulls and three Red Phalaropes. This ended a very exciting day with lots of special Arctic wildlife seen.

Day 4 Saturday 18th July

Andøyane – Monaco glacier

GPS Noon Position: 79° 33´N and 17° 44´E

Air temperature: +3°C.

We were woken up with the 'good morning' of our expedition leader Rinie in the normally beautiful surroundings of Liefdefjord. However, on this particular morning we had to trust his greeting, for the day began with dense fog, sleet and snow. Nevertheless, thanks to Rinie's experience, the first Polar Bear was spotted right after breakfast. While we were still excited by the short encounter, Rinie spotted a second bear on the next island of Andøyane (the duck islands), and after a few minutes the bear got on her feet, a yearling appeared behind its mother, and they started to walk towards us. An instantaneous decision was made, and the zodiacs were launched within ten minutes. Nevertheless, the moment we sat in the Zodiacs, the mother and yearling disappeared…

We cruised slowly along, and after passing a couple of Red Phalaropes, a Great Skua and some Long-tailed Ducks, a big male bear loomed in the horizon, looking down at us from the top of a low ridge with its kill. Slightly disturbed, it found a quieter spot nearby to continue eating its seal, but as we got even closer the bear was completely at ease and started stripping the seal to the bone. Zodiac engines switched of, the only thing we heard was the arctic silence combined with the zooming, beeping and rattling noises of cameras in action. Soon a smaller, hungry male bear came swimming out of the mist, attracted by the smell of dead seal. We withdrew to make room for the confrontation and watched the smaller bear approach the island.

At that point the big male showed itself, and its body language was enough to keep the small bear at bay. Then it walked a few metres away, possibly leaving the seal carcass as bait. The abandoned kill soon attracted a couple of Glaucous Gulls, and the confidence of the smaller bear was growing, but only for a short while. The owner suddenly reappeared over the slope, and the smaller bear gave up for the time being and swam away to a close island to wait for another attempt.

A nice warm lunch prepared by our Malaysian chefs Richie and Lee was most welcome after three hours in the boats. After lunch we went straight back into the Zodiacs to retrieve the mother and cub, which had been located in the meantime by the schooner 'de Noorderlicht'. We found them sleeping, stretching and apparently enjoying life. After a while they got up and strolled over the tundra in search for eggs, chicks and everything else edible.

The yearling was only just over half the size of its mother, with another year to go to become fully self-sufficient and able to hunt for itself. Cruising around the island we found over 50 Long-tailed Ducks, Red-throated Divers, a pair of King Eider, and a Ruddy Turnstone. Both the latter species are uncommon, and it is said that only one in 1000 Eiders is a King, and that there are only 50 breeding pairs of Turnstone in Spitsbergen.

Later in the afternoon we landed on a beach to find *Saxifraga platysepala* (Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage), also known as 'Spider plant' because it looks like a spider with its radiating red stolons (aerial roots). The plant is some three to four centimetres tall with a red stem and a yellow flower.

Other plants recorded here were *Saxifraga oppositifolia* (Purple Saxifrage), *Saxifraga tenuis* (Dwarf Saxifrage) and *Cassiope tetragona* (White Arctic Bell Heather). A Red Phalarope, also called 'the mixer', was busy spinning around clockwise in a small freshwater pond. Some of us approached it very closely and obtained some good shots of the little red beauty. In contrast to most birds, the female phalarope is better looking than the male. The female prepares the nest and lays the eggs, but the male incubates and rears the chicks. For this duty the greyish plumage of the male provides better camouflage.

With smiling faces all over, the ship made its way for a cruise the front of the Monaco glacier at the head of Liefdefjord. The sun was breaking through the mist and created a full rainbow. Kittiwakes were chilling on ice flows and catching fish and crustaceans, and Arctic Skuas were busy harassing them in order to catch a free meal. The sun was reflecting on the glacier, and Ivory Gulls and several seals made everybody come watch see the scenery from the bridge and top deck. A fifth polar bear was spotted high up a distant slope. A few of us remained on the bridge until the early morning to watch seals and minke whales cruising along the pack ice.

Day 5 Sunday 19th July

Faksevagen in Lomfjord – Palanderbukta

GPS Noon Position: 79° 33´N and 17° 44´E

Air temperature: +2°C.

Today began with a good number of us meeting on the bridge to scan for birds and marine mammals. During the night we had sailed out of Liefdefjord and around the northern tip of Friesland and made our way into Hinlopentretet (Strait) and were making slow but steady progress through the ice-floes. There was, however, little mammal activity, accept for a solitary Harp Seal, which watched us cautiously as we passed slowly by.
Bird-life was a little more active, with Kittiwake, Little Auk, Fulmar, Brünnich's Guillemot, Black Guillemot and the occasional Ivory Gull.

Rinie's early wake call announced breakfast at 07:30 hrs, and he also informed us that the wind had got up to between twenty and thirty knots. After breakfast it became clear that we would not be able to make the planned zodiac cruise to the Brünnich's Guillemot nesting cliffs at Alkefjellet due to the rough sea. Instead, we steamed into Lomfjorden, where we would gain some shelter and be able to make a zodiac landing at Faksevagen. As we travelled to this new locality, we recorded several more Ivory Gulls and a solitary Puffin. Adam again helped us reading the landscape, and pointed out a major dolerite sill, a black igneous rock that was emplaced as a huge tabloid body within the flat-lying, pale grey and yellow limestones. The sill is also the habitat of the Brünnich's Guillemot colony, with its numerous ledges and steep sides which are inaccessible for foxes.

Once the anchor was set, we took the zodiacs to the beach, where we would split into two groups. Adam led a walk up to the steep slope to an almost bare tundra plateau with well-developed patterned ground. The vegetated rims of the metre-sized soil polygons were dominated by *Dryas octopetala* (Mountain Avens) and *Cassiope tetragona* (Arctic Bell-heather), and a few grazing Reindeer followed us around the plateau.
We had magnificent views of a large inland glacier, and on the opposite side of the inlet the colourful, red, brown and greenish crests of a series of pre-Caledonian sedimentary rocks, which had been rotated 90 degrees into a vertical attitude during the Caledonian continent-continent collision.

The rest of us explored the beach and the immediate area above it, up to the boulder scree. This was an area of both wet and dry soil, which lies on top of the permafrost and slowly slips down towards the beach. Here we found *Saxifraga platysepala* (Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage), *Saxifraga cespitosa* (Tufted Saxifrage), *Ranunculus pygmaeus* (Pygmy Buttercup), *Silene acaulis* (Moss Campion), *Papaver dahlianum* (Svalbard Poppy), *Ranunculus nivalis* (Snow Buttercup) and *Saxifraga cernua* (Drooping Saxifrage). A single Ptarmigan was sighted as it flew into the upper part of the boulder scree. It was inconspicuous because it was still in its pure white winter plumage. All the members of both groups were able to see it clearly. It was now time to return to the ship for lunch.

After our meal, Rinie announced that we would now be crossing Hinlopenstretet and enter the bay of Palanderbukta in order to try and find some shelter, and the ship weighed anchor. It would take us some three to four hours to make the crossing, so Adam and Daan gave us two lectures. Adam's talk was on 'Plate Tectonics and How the Earth Works', and Daan's was on 'Barnacle Geese'. Both talks were most informative and well received. By now, we were entering Panderbukta, where we made slow and gentle headway into the free floating drift-ice, where we would spend the night. A further Ivory Gull was seen and another solitary Polar Bear, who kept us all busy until it was time for dinner. As Rinie had warned us of a possible early start, we were not long before retiring for the night.

Day 6 Monday 20th July

Palanderbukta – at sea

GPS Noon Position: 78° 55´N and 21° 43´E

Air temperature: 0°C.

The pre- breakfast zodiac cruise as was planned was cancelled as the waves were very prominent. Instead we headed for Wilhelmøya to seek shelter and maybe find some ice. It turned out to be a storm with gale force winds reaching speed up to 50 knots. Big white waves, dark clouds and snow storms hit the Molchanov. All decks were closed and we were bound inside the warmth of the ship. The staff decided to have lectures about various objects. In the morning half of the group had a talk about the adventures and the tight planning of the Barnacle Goose by Daan in the bar. The other half of the group got a general introduction about geology by our good lecturer Adam in the dining room. The storm continued in the afternoon. Rinie assured us that storms like this are very unusual in the Arctic so in a way we were lucky to see these conditions. Of course, the weather gods can not be influenced so we better enjoy! (same talks as yesterday, but to different audiences)

In the eye of the storm there was not the slightest change, no improvement, so we started to head for the pack ice in search for bears. While we were heading for the bears, more lectures were on the programme.

Adam talked about the life and death of ice. He showed us a lot of pictures of and about glaciers on Spitsbergen and Greenland, and of the Inland Ice of Greenland. He explained about all that happens from the snow falling on the Inland Ice till the carving of the glacier front which takes place many thousands of years later; how one can deduct the recent history of an iceberg from its surface itself; and about research on the Inland Ice like the drilling of ice cores to investigate warm and cold periods in the past. Rinie gave a talk for the other half of us about the food web. We found out that the algae living underneath the ice are the start of the chain. Copepods and shrimps feed on these algae and are eaten by the birds and seals. The top predator, the Polar Bear, eats the seals.

The seas are much more productive than the areas around the equator because the warm Gulf Stream mixes with the cold water of the Arctic. This causes both up-welling and down-welling with the result that oxygen and nutrients mix, supporting life. At the moment the lectures finished the pack ice came into site. Many of us jumped in our warm gear and went on the outer decks. Others found the bridge very warm and comfortable. The weather was still far from brilliant although it improved during the day. On the pack ice belt, lots of birds and some Harp Seals were seen. After dinner, we went into the proper pack ice and… a bear was spotted. The very first bear on an ice flow. The bear was not scared at all and we approached it closely. We all hung over the side of the ship when the curious bear watched us. The bear really made our day and after many looks were exchanged and lots of pictures were taken, the Molchanov left the scene and we headed for the bar to show and exchange the pictures of the King of the Arctic.

Day 7 Tuesday 21st July

In the ice west of Kong Karls Land

GPS Noon Position: 78° 47´N and 25° 00´E

Air temperature: +2°C.

Today was one of those days which will live long in the memory. We started the day in the pack and as soon as the ship's engine started we were scouring the ice fields for signs of Polar Bears. It was not long before we got to see one, albeit some distance away. We tried to manoeuvre the ship closer but were unsuccessful and so the search continued. Soon, we were pushing through ice which was about 3 feet thick. As we did so, we were joined by large numbers of Kittiwakes. They had been drawn to the presence of the ship by the lure of fish. As each piece of ice broke up, it had the potential to reveal to the surface, fish which had been browsing on algae underneath.

The Kittiwakes seemed to sense this and they were now hovering over the breaking ice looking into the water for a tasty morsel. Many times they were seen to be successful. As we were watching them they were joined by at least 8 of that most ghostly of gulls, the Ivory Gull. Though smaller than the Kittiwakes, it was clear which species was the boss at the breaking ice as repeatedly they chased away the larger Kittiwakes. It was a lovely sight, added to by numerous blue-phase Fulmars, some of which rested on the surface water to try and secure a meal. As if that was not enough, the cry soon went up for 'Pomarine Skua', and everyone had simply marvellous views as first one then two then three birds appeared, including a dark phased individual. All were intent on stealing a meal from the Kittiwakes or Ivory Gulls and sometimes they were successful.

As we watched the birds, more Polar Bears were seen. Frustratingly they were either in the distance or were moving away from us. Eventually, however, we came across an approachable female which kept company with the ship for a time before sauntering off into a snow storm – how atmospheric! Later in the day, we found another much more approachable bear. This individual was smaller and when we first got onto it, it was in the water. Luckily for us, it was swimming in the direction of the ship. It then reached ice and dragged itself out within 50 yards of the ship. It was when it started walking that we realised that it had a slight limp and was protecting its left front paw. Then it dawned that this must be the young bear we had seen yesterday. The position today was about 10 nautical miles from where we had seen it yesterday. It looked better than it did yesterday and hopefully will do well. It certainly looked relaxed enough as it rolled over in the ice and snow on a nearby ice floe. Immediately before that it had entertained everyone on board by coming right up to the ship and sniffing at the paint, particularly at the stern where it even stood up on its hind legs briefly.

As for other sightings, we had single Black Guillemot, Arctic Skua, as well as 2 or 3 Ringed Seals, a single Bearded Seal, numerous Harp Seals and a single Walrus (albeit briefly). It had been a marvellous day, and there were many smiling faces over dinner as people talked about the events and the wonderful photographic opportunities we had had.

Day 8 Wednesday 22nd July

Torrellneset – Alkefjellet

GPS Noon Position: 79° 29´N and 19° 50´E

Air temperature: +3°C.

We awoke this morning anchored in Hinlopenstretet, south of Torellneset, a prominent headland on the south-west corner of Nordaustlandet. While we were having breakfast, the crew manoeuvred the ship to an anchorage closer to the headland. From here, we could see a group of fifty or so Walrus hauled out on the shingle beach. At 08:30hrs we met briefly in the bar, where Rinie outlined the procedure for our proposed landing to see these curious animals. As we were preparing to leave, a distant pair of Ivory Gulls was seen. Entering the zodiacs, we made for the beach some two hundred yards south of the Walrus, in order not to disturb them unnecessarily. When we had all landed, we made slow steady progress, as a group and under Rinie's guidance, towards the animals, seeing several Purple Sandpipers and a small colony of Arctic Terns, as we progressed. There were a number of good photographic opportunities with one of the Walrus scratching continuously and several others in the surf. Even a short snow shower did not prevent us from making the most of this unique opportunity.

Pomarine Skua, Eider, Brünnich's Guillemot and Artic Skua were all seen, and as we returned to the ship a single Red-throated Diver flew past. The return journey was hampered by a large area of pack-ice which was drifting towards the ship, driven by south easterly winds and currents. Three of the five zodiacs managed to unload their passengers, but two had to wait a short time, while the crew weighed anchor and manoeuvred the ship out of the ice to a point where it was safe for the zodiacs to approach. At this point several group members saw a distant female Polar Bear with her cub, swimming in the pack-ice.

After thawing out with hot drinks, we met in the bar for a question and answer session with Rinie, followed by lunch. During this time, the crew had set a north westerly course, towards the wonderful sea cliffs at Alkefjellet.

After lunch, we again entered the zodiacs to take a cruise along the imposing sea cliffs of Alkenfjellet. These massive dolerite cliffs support a colony of nesting Brünnich's Guillemots numbering some hundreds of thousands. The dolerite is an igneous rock which was emplaced as a melt that spread out laterally as an internal, horizontal layer (a sill) in the sandwich of pale yellow older limestones. The dolerite dates back to the time when Spitsbergen began to be separated from NE Greenland during the initial opening of the North Atlantic Ocean. The dolerite is a hard and resistant rock which has resisted erosion, and its steep sides with their numerous and evenly spaced vertical and horizontal joints provide ideal nesting places for the Guillemots. We began at the southern end of the cliffs, approaching where a considerable waterfall was cascading out from the bottom of the glacier. Three Black Guillemots and a number of Fulmars were recorded.

We now worked our way slowly northwards along the cliffs while clouds of Guillemots flew overhead and many many more sat on the water. Every ledge seemed to support a number of adults. Kittiwakes also nested here and Glaucous Gulls patrolled looking for any opportunity of a meal. As we neared the northern end of the cliffs, Rinie spotted our first Arctic Fox, hunting along the snowline, and standing out well in its dark summer coat against the snow. Shortly after this a second, younger, Fox was spotted being swooped on buy Glaucous Gulls. There is only one word to describe Alkefjellet, and that is 'awesome'. Upon our return, everyone agreed that it had been an amazing experience and Rinie took some time to give us a short talk on seabirds, and the requirements of their way of life.

Since returning to the ship, we had been making steady progress north and out of the Hinlopen Strait and, by the time we had completed dinner, we found ourselves back in pack-ice and in glorious sunshine. Dinner tonight was a special occasion, as it was Bill Leakey's birthday. Many of the group positioned themselves around the ship on the lookout for more wildlife opportunities. It was not long before Harp Seals were seen, and a pair of Walruses and a Bearded Seal was spotted on the ice. The crew skilfully manoeuvred the ship in order that we could get very close and clear views.

The final highlight of this eventful day was the sighting of a Hooded Seal, a species normally associated with the western side of the Arctic, around Greenland. Rinie remarked that it was the first he had seen in this area for approximately twenty years. The day ended with our first genuine experience of 'the midnight sun'. This was enhanced by the location of a solitary Polar Bear in the distance. We managed to stay on him until after twelve, making him a 'two day' bear.

Day 9 Thursday 23rd July

Along the Ice Margin north of 80°N

GPS Noon Position: 80° 16´N and 15° 02´E

Air temperature: +4°C.

Finally the archipelago showed itself from its mildest side – with bright, warming sunshine during most of the day, and well deserved at that. We were cruising slowly along the southern margin of the immense area of sea ice that stretches to the North Pole and beyond, watching the occasional Bear, Bearded Seal, Ring Seal and Minke Whale.

We watched our familiar air passengers, the Fulmars, Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls taking advantage of the breaking ice and the food that becomes exposed to them, and today they were left to eat their catch in peace as Skuas were notably absent.

The afternoon was very quiet, a couple of people on the outlook on the bridge, others sunbathing in their down jackets on the bow, enjoying the 'End of the World' passing by in near-silence. However, at 6 p.m. Richie and Lee were ready with a lavish Polar BBQ at the stern. The vessel had been turned around and 'parked' in the ice, at 80° 30´055N, so we were sheltered from the evening breeze. Nevertheless we were still able to enjoy the sun, while we tested the hot wine, all sorts of other drinks, a lavish display of Russian vegetable salads, several kinds of meat, fish, cakes, and not least a very entertaining mix of Russian and Western pop and rock music. Some of the crew found strange hats in their workshop, and we were dancing away in the surreal mix of comfort, joy, Fulmars and Pack Ice.

Day 10 Friday 24th July

Poolepynten – Tordenskjoldbukta

GPS Noon Position: 78° 26´N and 11° 54´E

Air temperature: +10°C.

Our last and final day on board the Molchanov came with warm sunshine and a light breeze, and a lot of heavily overdressed passengers at our first landing at Poolepynten. This Walrus haul-out presented itself from its very best side, with an active group of very busy and curious Walrus in the water, which came right up to us on the beach – and several times. Poolepynten is constantly growing, due to a drop in the southward currents along the eastern side of Prins Karls Forland, and hosts a large collection of old Siberian driftwood as well as younger boat timber, whale bones, old-fashioned floats made of iron, and the like. Paul found a small community of *Mertensia maritima* (Oyster plant) growing on the south side of some old timbers, and everybody thoroughly enjoyed the landing and its non-Arctic temperature regime.

In the afternoon we made a second and final landing on Tordenskjoldbukta on the north side of Isfjorden. The low-lying area consists of low-lying Caledonian marble overlain by a few metres of ground moraine and recent marine deposits, now raised about 10-15 m above sea level due to recent isostatic rebounce following the melting of the Svalbard Inland Ice. Most of us joined Rinie and Adam for a long walk on the tundra, where we were closely followed by several Svalbard Reindeer now in their short, brown summer outfit, the males displaying large furry antlers. Rinie talked to us about the life cycle of the reindeer, while occasional Arctic Skuas, Purple Sandpipers and Barnacle Geese were busy in the middle and far distance. Back on board we joined in the bar before dinner, where Captain Leonid Ocheretny greeted us and wished us a safe journey home.

Day 11 Saturday 25th July

Longyearbyen

We disembarked the Professor Molchanov at 09-00hrs, bidding farewell to Rinie, Lillian and their staff, Adam and the ship's crew. Daan had had to leave us in the early hours to catch his plane back to Oslo and on to Holland.

We boarded the coach which took us to the Raddison Hotel where Borgy, Bill and Anine we staying, the Spitsbergen Hotel, where most of the group were staying and the Spitsbergen Guest House, where the remainder of the group were staying. Whilst unloading our luggage, an Arctic Fox was spotted trotting past the hotel.

The morning was spent relaxing or visiting the town. At 13-30hrs Paul and Kevin led a local walk to look at the birds and plants. By now, though, there was a steady drizzle, but it did not distract us. Snow Buntings were plentiful in the more open areas of the town, and down by the fjord, good numbers of Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls and Arctic Terns were also seen. A solitary Ivory Gull, three Dunlin, Ringed Plover, Barnacle Geese and some Purple Sandpipers were also recorded together with a pair of Arctic Skuas, with a chick which, together with the nesting Terns gave the group a hard time as we passed by.

Plants included the restricted *Polemonium angustifolia* (Boreal Jacob's Ladder), *Saxifraga hirculus* (Marsh Saxifrage), *Ranunculus hyperboreus* (Tundra Buttercup), *Silene furcata* (Arctic White Campion) and *Cassiope tetragona* (White Arctic Bell Heather).

In the evening we met up in the hotel restaurant for dinner.

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Species Lists

Plants

Scientific name	Common name	Location
PTERIDOPHYTES	**Ferns & Allies**	
Equisetaceae	**Horsetail Family**	
Equisetum arvense subsp. riparia	Arctic Horsetail	Longyearbyen
MAGNOLIOPSIDA (ANGIOSPERMS)	**FLOWERING PLANTS**	
	Magnoliidae (Dicotyledons)	
Asteraceae	**Daisy Family**	
Arnica angustifolia	Alpine Arnica	Fuglesangen
Erigeron humilis	Black Fleabane	Fjortendejulibukta
Taraxacum arcticum	Arctic Dandelion	Fjortendejulibukta
Taraxacum brachyceras	Polar Dandelion	Fjortendejulibukta
Boraginaceae	**Borage Family**	
Mertensia maritima	Oyster Plant	Poolepynten
Brasicaceae	**Cabbage Family**	
Cardamine bellidifolia	High Alpine Cress	Tordenskoldbukta
Cochlearia groenlandica	Polar Scurvygrass	Common
Draba alpina	Golden Whitlow-grass	Common
Draba daurica (D.glabrella)	Scree Whitlow-grass	Fjortendejulibukta
Draba norvegica	Rock Whitlow-grass	Longyearbyen
Draba oxycarpa	Pale Whitlow-grass	Faksevagen
Campanulaceae	**Bellflower family**	
Campanula uniflora	High Alpine Harebell	Fjortendejulibukta
Caryophyllaceae	**Pink Family**	
Arenaria pseudofrigida	Fringed Sandwort	Fjortendejulibukta
Cerastium arcticum	Arctic Mouse-ear	Common
Cerastium regelii	Polar Mouse-ear	
Minuartia biflora	Tufted Sandwort	Faksevagen
Sagina nivalis	Snow Pearlwort	Tordenskoldbukta
Silene acaulis	Moss Campion	Common
Silene furcata	Arctic White Campion	Longyearbyen
Silene uralensis	Polar Campion	Tordenskoldbukta
Stellaria crassipes	Tundra Chickweed	Longyearbyen
Stellaria humifusa	Arctic Chickweed	Longyearbyen
Ericaceae	**Heather Family**	
Cassiope tetragona	White Arctic Bell Heather	Common
Papaveraceae	**Poppy Family**	
Papaver dahlianum	Svalbard Poppy	Longyearbyen

Scientific name	Common name	Location
Polemoniaceae	**Jacob's Ladder Family**	
Polemonium angustifolium	Boreal Jacob's Ladder	Longyearbyen
Polygonaceae	**Dock Family**	
Oxyria digyna	Mountain Sorrel	Common
Polygonum viviparum	Alpine Bistort	Longyearbyen
Rumex acetosella	Sheep's Sorrel	Blomstrandøya
Ranunculaceae	**Buttercup Family**	
Ranunculus hyperboreus subsp. arnellii	Tundra Buttercup	Longyearbyen
Ranunculus nivalis	Snow Buttercup	Faksevagen
Ranunculus pygmaeus	Pygmy Buttercup	Fjortendejulibukta
Roseaceae	**Rose Family**	
Dryas octopetala	Mountain Avens	Common
Potentilla hyparctica	Arctic Cinquefoil	Fjortendejulibukta
Salicaceae	**Willow Family**	
Salix polaris	Polar Willow	Common
Saxifragaceae	**Saxifrage Family**	
Saxifraga aizoides	Yellow Mountain Saxifrage	Tordenskoldbukta
Saxifraga cernua	Drooping Saxifrage	Common
Saxifraga cespitosa	Tufted Saxifrage	Common
Saxifraga hieracifolia	Hawkweed Saxifrage	Tordenskoldbukta
Saxifraga hirculus	Marsh Saxifrage	Longyearbyen
Saxifraga hyperborea	Polar Saxifrage	Tordenskoldbukta
Saxifraga nivalis	Arctic Saxifrage	Tordenskoldbukta
Saxifraga oppositifolia	Purple Saxifrage	Common
Saxifraga platysepala	Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage	Andøyane Islands
Saxifraga rivularis	Highland Brook Saxifrage	Longyearbyen
Saxifraga svalberdensis	Svalbard Saxifrage	Tordenskoldbukta
Saxifraga tenuis	Dwarf saxifrage	Tordenskoldbukta
Scrophulariaceae	**Figwort Family**	
Pedicularis dasyantha	Woolly Lousewort	Blomstrandøya
Pedicularis hirsuta	Hairy Lousewort	Blomstrandøya
	Liliidae (Monocotyledons	
Cyperaceae	**Sedge Family**	
Carex misandra	Nodding Sedge	Tordenskoldbukta
Eriophorum scheuchzeri	Polar Cotton-grass	Longyearbyen
Juncaceae	**Rush Family**	
Juncus biglumis	Two-flowered Rush	Tordenskoldbukta
Luzula arctica	Arctic Wood-rush	Common
Luzula comfusa	Northern Wood-rush	Common
Luzula wahlenbergii	Raindeer Wood-rush	Tordenskoldbukta

Scientific name	Common name	Location
Poaceae	**Grass Family**	
Alopecurus borealis	Polar Foxtail	Longyearbyen
Calamagrostis neglecta	Narrow Small Reed	Longyearbyen
Deschampsia alpina	Alpine Hair-grass	Common
Festuca cryophila (F. richardsonii)	Arctic Fescue	Longyearbyen
Poa alpina var. vivipara	Alpine Meadow-grass	Common
Poa arctica	Arctic Meadow-grass	Common
Trisetum spicatum	Northern Oat-grass	Longyearbyen

Birds (A = abundant)

	Common name	Scientific name	July												
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Red-throated Diver	*Gavia stellata*			2		1				1		2		
2	Northern Fulmar	*Fulmarus glacialis*		50	500	100	20	20	50	500	200	200	50		
3	Pink-footed Goose	*Anser brachyrhynchus*			20	8	25	30							
4	Barnacle Goose	*Branta leucopsis*		2	30	3							40	150	
5	Brent Goose	*Branta bernicla*						50					1		
6	Common Eider	*Somateria mollissima*			10	50	200	30			30		10	30	
7	King Eider	*Somateria spectabilis*					3	3							
8	Long-tailed Duck	*Clangula hyemalis*			3		20						2		
9	Rock Ptarmigan	*Lagopus mutus*						1							
10	Common Ringed Plover	*Charadrius hiaticula*		1									3	2	
11	Sanderling	*Calidris alba*			1			1					3		
12	Purple Sandpiper	*Calidris maritima*					6				4		5	2	
13	Ruddy Turnstone	*Arenaria interpres*					2								
14	Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*												5	
15	Grey (Red) Phalarope	*Phalaropus fulicarius*				3	3						3		
16	Great Skua	*Stercorarius skua*		1		2					1		1		
17	Pomarine Skua	*Stercorarius pomarinus*							2	6	2	3			
18	Parasitic (Arctic) Skua	*Stercorarius parasiticus*		1		2	7	3	1	1	1	1	3	4	2
19	Long-tailed Skua	*Stercorarius longicaudus*							1	1					
20	Great Back-backed Gull	*Larus marinus*		1									2		
21	Black-legged Kittiwake	*Rissa tridactyla*		20	500	10	130	150	100	A	100	A	10	30	
22	Sabine's Gull	*Larus sabini*			3	1				1					
23	Glaucous Gull	*Larus hyperboreus*		30		30	20	20	3	20	30	20	10	20	2
24	Ivory Gull	*Pagophila eburnean*					3	21	3	15	3	4		1	
25	Arctic Tern	*Sterna paradisaea*		6	10	8	50	6	2	20	20	2	50	50	4
26	Little Auk (Dovekie)	*Alle Alle*		20	20	A	12	800	1	1	1	1	4	1	
27	Atlantic Puffin	*Fratercula arctica*		2	10	20	4	3		1	2	3	14	1	
28	Black Guillemot	*Cepphus grylle*		2	6	100	50	50	2	1	30	6	15		
29	Brünnich's Guillemot	*Uria lomvia*		100	200	150	30	80	10	1	A	500	50	10	
30	Razorbill	*Alca torda*						1							
31	Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	*Columba livia*	6	10											

	Common name	Scientific name	July											
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
32	Common Wood Pigeon	*Columba palumbus*		2											
33	Common Swift	*Apus apus*		5											
34	Common House Martin	*Delichon urbica*		1											
35	White Wagtail	*Motacilla alba*	2	1											
36	European Robin	*Erithacus rubecula*		1											
37	Mistle Thrush	*Turdus viscivorus*	1												
38	Fieldfare	*Turdus pilaris*	2												
39	Common Blackbird	*Turdus merula*	1												
40	Great Tit	*Parus major*	1												
41	Blue Tit	*Parus caeruleus*	1												
42	Common Magpie	*Pica pica*	1												
43	Western Jackdaw	*Corvus monedula*	3	20											2
44	Hooded crow	*Corvus corone cornix*													1
45	Common Starling	*Sturnus vulgaris*		1											
46	Common Chaffinch	*Fringilla coelebs*	1												
47	Eurasian Siskin	*Carduelis spinus*	1												
48	Snow Bunting	*Plectrophenax nivalis*		4	20	12	3	2			2		3	12	

Mammals

	Common name	Scientific name	July											
			14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Arctic Fox	*Alopex lagopus*									2			1	1
2	Polar Bear	*Ursus maritimus*					6	1	1	8	3	4			
3	Walrus	*Odobenus romarus*				10				1	50	2	30		
4	Hooded Seal	*Cystophora cristata*									1				
5	Bearded Seal	*Erignathus barbatus*				2	2		1	1	3	5			
6	Harp Seal	*Phoca groenlandicus*					1	6	1	6	3	2			
7	Ringed Seal	*Phoca hispida*					1	2	2	3	2	4	2		
8	Minke Whale	*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*				2	4						9		
9	Humpback Whale	*Megaptera novaeangliae*											2		
10	Svalbard Reindeer	*Rangifer tarandus*		10	6	3		13					40		