

Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Tour Report

27 June - 5 July 2010

Report compiled by Tim Melling



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Day 1

Sunday 27th June

A travelling day... We left the UK and stopped off at Oslo for a few hours where we saw a few interesting flowers; Twinflower, Common Wintergreen, and Chickweed Wintergreen among others. There was also a single Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary among several Common Blues. The only real birds of note were several recently fledged family parties of Fieldfare. The stop in Tromsø was rainy but fortunately short. The skies cleared as we approached Svalbard.

Day 2

Monday 28th June

We arrived after midnight and Dave managed to see a pod of Belugas in Isfjord from the plane. It was difficult to sleep in the 24 hour daylight, and the sun was blazing without a cloud in the sky. The tuneful Snow Buntings sang all night long, but we didn't really mind disturbances like that.

We had a lie in and met up after breakfast at 10am where we familiarised ourselves with the local flora. We managed to see Mountain Avens, Arctic Bell Heather, Hairy Lousewort, Oysterplant, Yellow Marsh, Drooping, Hawkweed-leaved, Tufted, and Purple and Alpine Saxifrages. Unfortunately the Boreal Jacob's Ladder wasn't quite in flower. Gordon and Dave ventured up the hill and took some great photographs of a Ptarmigan.

The group went to the dog kennels where huskies are kept and saw lots of nesting Eiders, plus Long-tailed Ducks, Arctic Skuas, Arctic Terns, Purple Sandpipers, Dunlins and Ringed Plovers. There were Glaucous Gulls and Kittiwakes but the regular Ivory Gull failed to show.

In the afternoon the group split to go to various places including the museum. Some went back up the hill and managed to see five more Ptarmigan and close views of Reindeer.

We were picked up at our hotels at 4pm and taken to the quay where we were shuttled aboard on the Zodiacs. There were several Black Guillemots and a single Brunnich's Guillemot but we were to see many more of those before the day was out. We were greeted with hot drinks and biscuits before the safety talk. From the dining room we saw a line of Eiders flying past, all males, which had two King Eiders among them. We had dinner then sailed out of Isfjord seeing hundreds of Little Auks, Black and Brunnich's Guillemots. We then had to tear ourselves away for a much needed sleep.

Day 3

Tuesday 29th June

Early this morning a few lucky people saw a Minke Whale but little else was of note in the misty conditions. After breakfast we had a talk about the code of conduct in the Arctic, then, fully briefed, we set off for Bloomstrand Halfoya. This was the site of an ill-fated marble mining venture. Apparently the frozen marble had crumbled as it warmed up en route back to London! Here we saw Reindeers with calves, Long-tailed Ducks, Red-throated Divers, Snow buntings and Arctic Skuas. But best of all was a breeding pair of Long-tailed Skuas that approached us to within 2 metres! We also saw a few interesting flowers including both Hairy and Woolly Louseworts.

After lunch we visited Ny Alesund and to our great relief, the resident Ivory Gull was right on cue, sat by the dog kennels. At "Sun Pool" there were Red-throated Divers, lots of Barnacle Geese with goslings plus an Arctic Fox, our first of the trip. Lots of nesting Arctic Terns were vigorously defending their nests. We made a trek across the tundra to see the tower where Amundssen and Nobile launched their airship that sailed over the North Pole. There was a single Ringed Seal in the bay, plus a solitary Great Black-backed Gull.

We then sailed to the Kongsfjord Glacier as the cloud lifted creating a magical atmosphere with the blue icebergs surrounding us. We had dinner among the icebergs before sailing out where we saw several Puffins and a single Walrus, among hundreds of Little Auks and Brunnich's Guillemots.

Day 4

Wednesday 30th June

Just before breakfast Tim spotted a huge pod of Beluga Whales in Leifdefjord. A quick announcement cleared the dining room and everyone managed to see them. They were blowing, and usually only showed their finless backs, but occasionally they popped their heads out. There were quite a few dark juveniles in among the white adults.

After breakfast we had a Zodiac trip around the Andoyen Islands where plenty of ducks breed. We saw eight King Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks and about 10 Grey Phalaropes, including males and brighter females. Also there were two Turnstones plus Great and Arctic Skuas, and a single Bearded Seal.

Best of all though, we encountered our first Polar Bear! The bear was quite accommodating and allowed a reasonably close approach. We even saw it swim from one island to the next. We also witnessed another bodily function that answered the age old question... “No, they don’t always do that in the woods”.

In the afternoon we trekked across scree and tundra at Jacobsen Bukta in Woodfjord but apart from Pygmy Buttercup and Arctic Cinquefoil we saw no new flowers. A few Purple Sandpipers and Pink-footed Geese were seen, plus a single Reindeer. The views were pretty spectacular!

In the evening we had a celebratory drink of vodka as we passed the 80th parallel. Late evening a lucky few saw two Walruses in the water close to the ship.

Day 5

Thursday 1st July

Overnight we sailed into the Hinlopen Strait and to the spectacular basalt cliffs of Alkafjellet. After a misty start the clouds cleared and we had blazing sunshine for the first hour to enjoy the hundred thousand Brunnich’s Guillemots nesting on every possible ledge. We also saw one Arctic Fox briefly at the start, right at the top of the cliffs. There were rafts of thousands of Guillemots on the water that allowed a really close approach in the Zodiacs. Apart from the Brunnich’s, we saw lots of Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls plus a few Black Guillemots. Later we sailed up to the nearby glacier but the mists had descended again and visibility was just a few metres. We also heard the loud groan and crash of the glacier calving, so we couldn’t approach too close.

After lunch we headed north for Sorgfjord where we landed at Eolusneset, the site of a Dutch Whalers’ graveyard. But far more interesting were about 40 male Walruses hauled up on the beach with a few in the water. We split the groups into two and approached slowly to about 30m. They were quite active in the water...much better than simply sleeping. We also looked at the graveyard and trapping paraphernalia, including fox traps. There were also a few interesting plants including Highland Saxifrage, Scurveygrass, Svalbard Poppy and the rare Teesdale Sandwort.

Day 6

Friday 2nd July

Overnight we sailed north to Phippsoya, the most northerly island in the Svalbard archipelago. However, the island had a skirt of sea ice so a Zodiac landing wasn’t possible. We sailed northwest instead as there was some close pack ice. Within minutes we had seen a Long-tailed Skua and a Polar Bear. Unfortunately the bear hurried off away from our boat. We carried on sailing northwest but after an hour the radar showed no pack ice for at least 25 miles, so we headed north east and hit some more quickly. There were a couple of distant Harp Seals on the ice and another Polar Bear. This one was too relaxed by our presence as he barely bothered to raise his head from his slumbers. He just kept on sleeping so we had to leave him. We then headed across the long stretch of open sea to reach the island of Logoya in late afternoon. A few Puffins en route kept us amused among the usual seabirds.

Because the sea around Logoya was so shallow we had to anchor the ship several miles away and make the journey in Zodiacs. Unusually we saw a Black Guillemot in winter plumage and an Arctic Tern in winter plumage too. There were about ten Walruses in the water and loafing on the beach.

Almost as soon as we landed we saw a Sabine's Gull, then another, then a nest with two eggs. We withdrew so the bird could incubate but our attentions quickly turned to eight Grey Phalaropes. We even witnessed them mating and females squabbling over the males. Unbelievably we also found a Pectoral Sandpiper consorting with the phalaropes. This should have been in North America! En route back to the Zodiacs we watched two inquisitive Walrus taking an interest in us close in shore. A bumpy ride back to the ship was followed by a welcome dinner.

Day 7

Saturday 3rd July

We arrived overnight near the island of Fuglesongen, our destination for the afternoon. Prior to that, we visited the sheltered cove of Fair Haven, (also named Sallyhamna after a trapper's wife). We came to this place because a long dead whale (probably Fin) was attracting Polar Bears. We saw a mother and cub on Fuglesongen before we left the ship, then three adults and one cub near the whale carcass. Two of the adults had radio collars fitted, including one with a cub that allowed a relatively close approach as it fed on the carcass.

The plan was to visit the Little Auk colony on Fuglesongen in the afternoon but there were two adult Polar Bears and a cub on the island, two of which were sleeping next to the landing beach. We therefore had a plan b, to go in zodiacs to the nearby Fugelsfjord Glacier. This turned out to be an excellent decision as the glacier was spectacular, but there was also an extremely cooperative and photogenic female Polar Bear on a small islet. This also was radio-collared, part of a scheme to discover the breeding areas of Svalbard's bears.

We set sail southwards and just before dinner John spotted some whale blows. An announcement was made and everyone crowded on deck to see numerous whale blows and visible whales. There were at least thirty whales with about 20 Fin Whales and at least 10 Minke Whales. There were plenty of Little Auks plus a few Puffins around but these pale into insignificance next to the whales.

Day 8

Sunday 4th July

We arrived early morning in St Jonsfjord where we saw a few Reindeer and Bearded Seals from the boat. One seal floated by at breakfast on a small piece of ice. A Polar Bear was spotted some distance away but it was too far away to prevent our landing. There was a trapper's nut with lots of antlers strewn around. The tundra was in full bloom with Mountain Avens and Moss Campion. We also found some more unusual plants like Woolly Lousewort and Polar Campion. Birds were also good, with two Ptarmigan, Pink-footed Geese with young, Snow Buntings, Purple Sandpiper on the nest and Arctic Skuas likewise. Our view of the glacier from the ridge top was pretty stunning.

In the afternoon we visited the flower rich tundra of Tordenskjoldbukta, near to the entrance of Isfjord. When we arrived there were four Grey Phalaropes on the beach, and we even found a nest with four eggs on the upper beach. There were lots of Barnacle Geese and our only Brent Geese of the trip, plus a single Great Black-backed Gull. An Arctic Fox was rather distant but two Reindeer were more cooperative. The flowers were interesting too, with Dwarf and Svalbard Saxifrages, Polar Cress, Svalbard Buttercup and Pygmy Buttercup.

Day 9

Monday 5th July

We arrived back in Longyearbyen at midnight and most of the guests left at 3am for an early morning flight. We all had a leisurely breakfast and walked into town photographing flowers, including Longyearbyen's only patch of Boreal Jacob's Ladder which was now fully in bloom. We walked along to the dog kennels once again but the Ivory Gull failed to put in an appearance this time.

At 12:30 the coach took us to the airport where we were reunited with our luggage. After checking, in several of the group members walked round the airport pools where we saw two Wigeon and a Long-tailed Duck. There were also an amazing twenty eight King Eiders offshore; seventeen were males with eleven females. A fantastic way to end a memorable trip!

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July							
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		7	4				2	
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	40	50	40	50	5
3	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		2	50	20			10	
4	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>							2	
5	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	30	50	20	20		3	30	30
6	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	1							2
7	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>			10			2		28
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	100	100	100	40	20	40	50	100
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	3	2	2					2
10	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>	5						2	
11	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	5							5
12	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			2					1
13	Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>					1			
14	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	10							5
15	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	50	15	20	6	10		10	20
16	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>			10		8		4	
17	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		3	2			2	3	1
18	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	3	10	5		3	3	8	4
19	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>		2			1			
20	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	4	100	100	1000	200	30	100	200
21	Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>	1	1						
22	Sabine's Gull	<i>Larus sabini</i>					2			
23	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		1					1	
24	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	30	50	50	100	20	40	40	40
25	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	30	100	100	50	30	20	20	30
26	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	1000	1000	1000	1000s	200	200	300	5
27	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	50	50	50	50	200	200	20	10
28	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		10			20	5	30	
29	Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>	500	500	500	50	200	500	500	
30	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	50	10	10	4	2			20

Mammals

1	Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>			1		2	7	1	
2	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>		1		1			1	
3	Svalbard Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	10	15	5				10	
4	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>		1	2	40	10			

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July								
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	
5	Bearded Seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>			1					3	
6	Harp Seal	<i>Phoca groenlandica</i>					2	4			
7	Ringed Seal	<i>Phoca hispida</i>		1							
8	Beluga Whale	<i>Delphinapterus leucas</i>			100						
9	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>		1	2			10			
10	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>						20			