

Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Tour Report

16 – 27 July 2013



Reindeer at Alkhornet



Polar Bears on the pack ice



Polar Bear on the pack ice



Walrus at Sorgfjord

Report compiled by Tim Melling



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Day 1

Tuesday 16th July

A travelling day... We left the UK mid afternoon arriving in Oslo early evening where we had a hotel booked. We met up with Adam and Pamela who had travelled separately. It was quite late when we arrived so we had a meal and turned in.

Day 2

Wednesday 17th July

Longyearbyen: Svalbard

GPS 12:00 Position: 78°14.2'N / 015°36.6'E

Weather: 12°C, cloud: 4/8, sea conditions: 2, wind: 7kts

A morning flight from Oslo to Svalbard arrived on time early afternoon, giving us just a couple of hours to meet up with Al and Helen, and familiarising ourselves with some of the flowers and birds. Three people opted to visit the museum while the rest walked up to the dog kennels. We saw lots of Barnacle Geese with young, including a near-albino adult. Snow Buntings were feeding young and Arctic Terns were defending their nests against humans, geese and Arctic Skuas. There was a flock of about 30 Dunlin plus a few Purple Sandpipers but we also found a single Pectoral Sandpiper which is rare in Svalbard. Distantly on the fjord we could see many Glaucous Gulls and Eiders (all female). Just a few Eiders were nesting near the kennels.

We headed to the quay for 4:30 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

Thursday 18th July

Blomstrand & Ny-Ålesund, Kongsfjord

GPS 12:00 Position: 78°57.3'N, 012°02.1'E.

Weather: 13°C, cloud: Blue skies & sunshine, with a little light cloud, sea conditions: 1, wind: light.

We awoke to still, warm, sunny weather a few Puffins and Guillemots on the sea. After breakfast we had a talk about the code of conduct in the Arctic, then, fully briefed, we set off for Blomstrand Halføya. 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, Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Diver, Barnacle Geese, Pink-footed Geese, Snow buntings and Arctic Terns. But best of all were four Long-tailed Skuas that approached us to within 2 metres! We also saw a few interesting flowers including Hairy Lousewort, Mountain Avens, Moss Campion, Purple, Tufted and Yellow Saxifrages, plus several Whitlow Grasses.

After lunch we visited Ny Alesund and sent postcards from the most northerly post office on the planet. There were many Barnacle Geese with goslings and many protective Arctic Terns with chicks. We also saw Long-tailed Ducks, Purple Sandpipers, Ringed Plovers and Red-throated Divers but alas, no Ivory Gull (yet). We made a trek across the tundra to see the tower where Amundssen and Nobile launched their airship that sailed over the North Pole. On an island sandspit there were 12 Common Seals but no other mammals. We heard that the resident Arctic Foxes had been removed as the nesting productivity went down to zero while they were in residence. We then sailed out of Kongsfjord and headed north.

Day 4

Friday 19th July

Sorgfjord then travel north to pack ice

GPS 12:00 Position: 79°56.1'N / 016°44.1'E.

Weather: 14°C, cloud: 2/8 Stratocumulus, sea conditions: 1, wind: Light/variable

Overnight we arrived at Songfjord, site of a great battle between the French and Dutch navies over whaling. There were also graves of whalers who had died, marked with a small cross on a hill. A single Ringed Seal was spotted along with a few Reindeer, but an early Minke Whale was missed by most. Our main target today was Walrus and we were not disappointed. There were about 50 on the beach, with a few in the water. Some rather curious individuals approached us to within a few metres allowing great photographic opportunities against sunny blue sky. We also had time to trudge across the tundra where we saw Spider Saxifrage among commoner plants. Very few birds were seen, apart from a few Eiders, Arctic Terns and Arctic Skuas.

In the afternoon we headed north to reach the pack-ice but were distracted by two Blue Whales at the top of Hinlopen Strait. We watched these for over an hour and even saw their tail flukes several times. We continued north towards the ice near the seven islands and were treated to a wonderful Fata Morgana mirage. In the ice we saw several Harp and Bearded Seals, plus a couple of Ivory Gulls and eventually we spotted a Polar Bear asleep. We approached and slowly followed and had some great views. Most people stayed up until the early hours and saw at least two more bears, fantastic Walruses, Blue Whales and Polar Bears all in one day. What a day!

Day 5

Saturday 20th July

Pack Ice

GPS 12:00 Position: 80°54.7'N / 019°18.2'E.

Weather: 0°C, cloud: 8/8 Stratocumulus , sea conditions: 1, wind: fresh from East

We remained overnight in the pack ice, slowly drifting without anchor. Before breakfast there were several Ivory Gulls around the boat, a species in steep decline in Svalbard. After two days of warm sunshine today was grey and overcast. Before breakfast we had spotted a Polar Bear on a kill that allowed fairly close approach and had an Ivory Gull in tow. Other birds of note seen were Long-tailed, Pomarine and Arctic Skuas. We then spotted a second Polar Bear on a kill which allowed even closer approach and this one had four Ivory Gulls in tow. Everyone managed close, if a little gory, photographs of this magnificent species.

We then sailed about 4 miles and came across a Polar Bear on a kill that looked a little familiar, and comparison of scars and distinctive markings showed it was our individual from this morning. Yet the GPS showed it was 4 miles from our earlier sighting. By lunchtime it had started raining which made searching difficult, but we still managed to find two more Polar Bears a few hundred metres apart near a seal carcass. They appeared to be a mother and 2 year old offspring as they appeared to be very relaxed with each other. We watched them play fighting, rolling over and generally having fun, which was a real treat to watch. Rinnie said that in 25 years of tour guiding in Spitzbergen he had only seen play-fighting once before, and he said that sighting wasn't as good as what we had witnessed.

Day 6

Sunday 21st July

In the Pack Ice: North of 80° North

GPS 12:00 Position: 80°54.0' N, 22°06.80.6' E.

Weather: 0°C, cloud: cloudy and foggy in the morning, clearing up after midday with periods of light rain , sea conditions: A gentle swell even in the pack ice, wind: no wind

We remained overnight in the pack ice but awoke to foggy conditions, so common in this area. The morning was rather lean with just the occasional Ivory Gull or seal to keep us interested. After lunch the fog cleared and we spotted two Polar Bears. The first was a little skittish but allowed a few close photographs. We watched the second one stalk a Bearded Seal but as soon as the bear climbed out of the water the seal was off. This second bear was far more cooperative and posed for some great photographs, swimming and leaping.

Not long afterwards yet another two bears were seen which were a little curious of the boat. We were more than 81° north still (that is 540 miles from the North Pole) so we had much ground to cover so we headed south at about 5pm, aiming for the Hinlopen Strait. During dinner Rinnie announced that there was a huge male Polar Bear stood right next to the boat, which cleared the dining room in about 20 seconds! Sure enough, a magnificent male bear stood looking at us from about 20m away. He was pure white too, which according to Lars meant he had fed on Ringed or Common Seals, as Harp and Bearded Seals stain the fur yellow.

Day 7

Monday 22nd July

Alkefjellet & Lomfjord

GPS 12:00 Position: 79°38.0'N, 018°19.4'E.

Weather: 5.5°C, Cloudy morning / sunny afternoon, sea conditions: 1, wind: 3

We arrived overnight near the spectacular sea cliffs of Alkefjellet where about a hundred thousand pairs of Brunnich's Guillemot nest, along with smaller numbers of Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull and Black Guillemot.

The cliffs are volcanic basalt quartz dolerite, but this is sandwiched between two layers of limestone. Brunnich's Guillemots were crammed shoulder to shoulder on every narrow rock ledge. They had young chicks but we could not see these as they were being tightly brooded. The parent Guillemots flew to and from the pack ice to catch shrimps on which they fed their young. Even the guano had a pink stain. We also saw a spectacular glacier, and on top of the glacier was a Polar Bear. Good compensation for not seeing an Arctic Fox! Early morning Adam and Pam had seen a couple of Minke Whales but just before lunch we spotted another which got people out on deck looking. Within a few minutes we had spotted two Minke Whales, plus a mother and calf Fin Whale, plus a Humpback Whale. Quite a flurry of whale-watching activity!

After lunch we went for a walk at Fakesvagen in Lomfjord, and spotted a Polar Bear from the Ortelius, but fortunately he was on the other side of the fjord. We divided up into long, medium and short hikes and managed to see Ptarmigan, Purple Sandpipers, Snow Buntings and lots of flowers including Spider Saxifrage, Polar Campion and white Arctic Dandelions. The long hikers saw Brent Geese and more Reindeer, plus Walrus and a Harp Seal with a fish. Lars showed us some vertical sand ripples in sedimentary rock that were 400 million years old.

Day 8

Tuesday 23rd July

Edgeøya

GPS 12:00 Position: 78°11.8'N / 018°32.2'E.

Weather: +6.5°C, cloud: 6/8 cirrostratus, sea conditions: slight, wind: fresh from west

In the morning we were in the channel between Edgoya and Barentsoya, intending to land for a walk. However, Rinnie counted 11 Polar Bears (most of us only saw up to 7) so we had to land on Edgoya in a site where there were no Polar Bears. The tundra was full of flowers; Yellow Marsh Saxifrage, Tufted and Drooping Saxifrages plus Svalbard Poppy were the most prevalent. There were some distant Reindeer and Pink-footed Geese but few other birds. We did see footprints of both Polar Bear and Arctic Fox though. Adam also showed us some fossils he found among the slates.

After lunch we took the long voyage through Storfjord but several hours were in a fog bank. We saw the expected birds but no whales.

Day 9

Wednesday 24th July

Hornsund

GPS 12:00 Position: 76°59.6'N / 015°37.9'E.

Weather: 9°C, sunny, very calm sea and no wind.

Before breakfast we entered Hornsund and saw several Puffins and Skuas. We were offered a choice of visiting a Little Auk colony or going for a walk on a glacier. The group split mainly towards Little Auks which did not disappoint. There were thousands breeding among the scree, but regularly took to the air in a dread whenever a predatory Glaucous Gull flew by. We also saw several Reindeer, Barnacle Geese, Purple Sandpipers and Snow Buntings. The glacier walkers had an enjoyable time and saw Long-tailed Skua and some Barnacle Geese.

The sun was really warm in the afternoon as we sailed into Hornsund enjoying the views and birds. Late afternoon we took to the zodiacs and sailed close to one of the glaciers seeing Black Guillemots, Little Auks, Kittiwakes and an Ivory Gull. After this we had a deck barbecue.

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!

Day 10

Thursday 25th July

Tordenskjoldbukta & Alkhornet

GPS 12:00 Position: 78°17.3'N / 012°51.9'E.

Weather: 6.5°C, thin low cloud cover, calm sea conditions and westerly winds force 3

We sailed overnight into Isfjord and anchored at Tordenskjoldbukta on the southern shore. Here we again divided up into three lengths of walk. The tundra was full of flowers with Reindeer around. One group saw an Arctic Fox distantly. There were two pairs of Greater Black-backed Gull, Arctic Skuas and a single Great Skua. We also saw Purple Sandpiper with well-grown chicks, Ringed Plover and Snow Buntings.

After lunch we had one last tundra visit below the seabird cliffs at Alkhornet, where Rinnie knew of a fox den. Alas, the foxes remained elusive but we had fantastic views of Reindeer and Arctic Skuas, plus saw lots of flowers.

Day 9

Friday 26th July

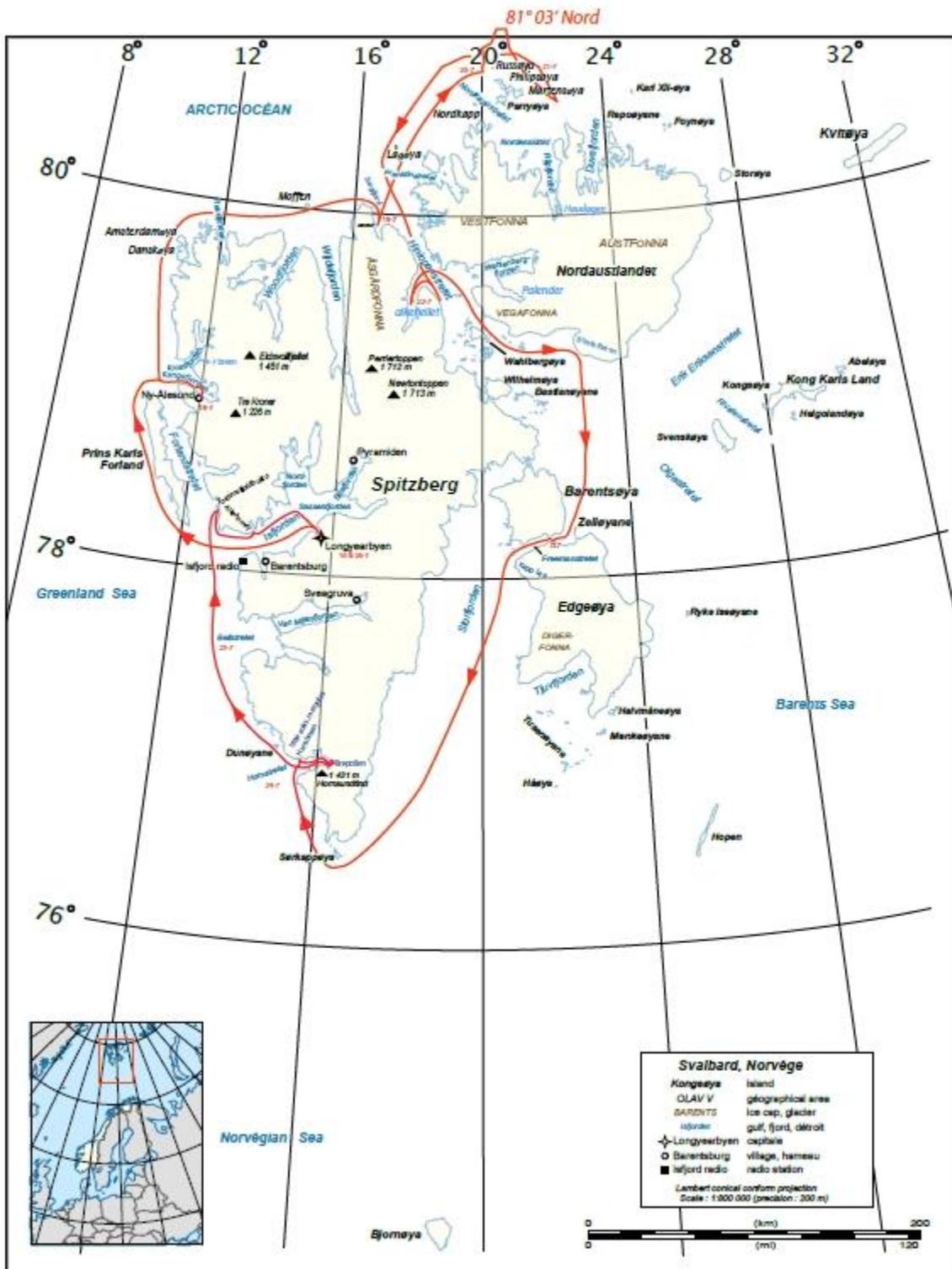
Longyearbyen

GPS 12:00 Position: 78°14.2'N / 015°36.6'E.

Weather: 7°C, Cloudy, sea conditions: slight, wind: N-3

We arrived at Longyearbyen at midnight and got off the boat at 9am after a last breakfast. Helen was taken ill, but the rest of us wandered around Longyearbyen looking in vain for Arctic Fox and Ptarmigan. We did see a Purple Sandpiper with two well-grown young, plus a Ringed Plover with some recently hatched young performing a broken wing display to distract us from her brood. We also got good photographs of two tame Reindeer in the town.

We caught the plane mid afternoon and arrived in Oslo early evening marking the end of a fantastic and truly memorable holiday.



Total distance sailed on this voyage:

1138 nautical miles / 2108 kilometres

Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	July									
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	23	24	25
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		4								
2	Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	400	200	500	100	100	100	100	100	100	20
3	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		2								
4	Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>						20				
5	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	80	200						100	20	30
6	Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>										
7	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>										
8	Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	50	100	50			20	20	3	5	20
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		4								
10	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>						1				
11	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		3							1	6
12	Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>										
13	Pectoral Sandpiper	<i>Calidris melanotos</i>	1									
14	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	30									20
15	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	20	4				5		6	10	5
16	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>										
17	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>						1			1	
18	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	2		2	1				1	6	4
19	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>		4		1				1		
20	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>				2	1					
21	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	100	50	100	200	200	900	100	500	900	400
22	Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>			2	10	2			1		
23	Sabine's Gull	<i>Larus sabini</i>										
24	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>									4	
25	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	50	2	10	30	30	50	10	10	20	10
26	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	50	200	20			30	20	10	10	30
27	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	100	50	500	30	30	100k	500	100	500	5
28	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	10	30	100	100	100	50	50	50	50	5
29	Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	20	30					2	10	10	
30	Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>	50	50	500		20		200	10k	200	30
31	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	50	20				10		10	20	20

Mammals

1	Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>			3	5	5	2	8			
2	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>									1	
3	Svalbard Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>		2	2			12	10	10	30	2

	Common name	Scientific name	July									
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	23	24	25
4	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>			50			2				
5	Bearded Seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>			5		2			1		
6	Harp Seal	<i>Phoca groenlandica</i>			10	5	10	1				
7	Ringed Seal	<i>Phoca hispida</i>			1		2					
8	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		12								
9	Beluga Whale	<i>Delphinapterus leucas</i>										
10	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>			1			4				
11	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>						2				
12	Blue whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>			2							
13	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>						1				

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