

Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report

29 June - 10 July 2014



Polar Bear & Glaucous Gull



Male Snow Bunting feeding young



Brunnich's Guillemots at Alkefjellet



Bearded Seal

Report compiled by Expedition Leaders & Naturalists

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Introduction

Eight Polar Bears were in the offering on this 11-day tour of Spitsbergen exploring the many different Arctic habitats around this archipelago. Beginning with the largest mammals on Earth, the Blue Whale and finishing with some of our smallest seabirds, the Little Auk, we had the opportunity to see some of the most spectacular polar scenery – the highlight being the ice flows north of Spitsbergen where Polar Bears, Bearded Seals, Harp Seals and Ringed Seals live. As each day passed we experienced more and more, from Walrus metres away coming to investigate us, to 60,000 pairs of Brünnich's Guillemots on their nesting ledges above our boats. We explored massive glaciers from the water, explored boggy tundra and saw many of the small, low Arctic plants just beginning to flower from Purple Saxifrage to the Spider Plant. Of the Polar Bears, some were out on the ice flows looking for seals while others in the south were foraging on the mainland. And one, looking for Eider eggs, gave the group incredible views from our boats as it sniffed around for nests.

Day 1

Sunday 29th June

Oslo Airport, Norway. Weather: + 15°C, overcast

During lunchtime and early afternoon our group of 90 guests and three leaders gathered together at Heathrow Airport and headed northeast to Oslo where we stopped for the night at the hotel just a few minutes walk away. Unlike most UK airport verges, the grasslands between the runways were full of vetches and other grassland flowers. Only a few degrees cooler than the UK and a little more overcast, most people headed out for dinner and an early night. A few birds were near the hotel including Jackdaw, Feral Pigeon, and a few Fieldfares.

Day 2

Monday 30th June

Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen

16:00 GPS position: 78°13.8' N / 015°36.10' E

Weather: + 6°C, overcast, wind from SE (Force 4)

An early breakfast and check in, we headed north by plane to Spitsbergen via a brief stop at Tromsø in northern Norway. Leaving behind the southern inhabited parts of Norway we flew over stunning snow-clad mountains and frozen lakes. As we flew into Tromsø we headed over the beautiful coastline and sea that neighbours the town. We got off the plane briefly to pass through passport control and got back on again to head north across the sea to Spitsbergen. The journey was largely a cloudy one but as we came over the archipelago we were presented with black mountains covered in snow and blue sea. After landing in the town of Longyearbyen in Spitsbergen we were quickly met in arrivals by Jan our expedition guide and his assistant Jordi who would be leading the overall programme.

After taking out our warm clothes from our luggage we boarded some coaches and headed into town. Our luggage was taken separately to the ship, M/V Ortelius, that would be taking us around this Arctic archipelago, and we had just under a few hours to explore the town named after the American, John Munro Longyear (1850-1922), who was one of the founders of the Arctic Coal Company (1906-1916). Coal is still produced in a mine near Longyearbyen but not in quantities like those in the twentieth century.

During our time looking around the town stunning black and white Snow Buntings were feeding metres away from people as they collected food for chicks. One was visiting a nest amongst the rocks close to where we were caught our Zodiacs across to the ship - the chicks could just be heard but were hidden away. Those in the group that ventured down to the sea and the quieter part of the town were soon watching the 50-odd Arctic Terns that nest here. We were also rewarded by breeding Eiders and a beautiful male King Eider. The Glaucous Gulls didn't miss a trick and were on the look out for food – after testing some Eider eggs one had success with an Eider duckling that it promptly swallowed. Out on the water Black Guillemots, Long-tailed Ducks, a few Arctic Skuas, and the odd Little Auk was frequently seen, while on the shore one or two Purple Sandpipers were feeding.

The cold thin soil was home to many plants that survive in the tough conditions here. The most obvious were the yellow-white flowers of Mountain Avens *Dryas octopetala* which seemed to be all over the town. But a closer look at the ground revealed the small, dark leaves of Polar Willow *Salix polaris* which was also common. Getting down closer to the shallow soil Alpine Bistort *Bistorta vivipara*, Arctic Cinquefoil *Potentilla hyparctica hyparctica*, White Arctic Bell-heather *Cassiope tetragona tetragona*, Hairy Lousewort *Pedicularis hirsuta*, Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna*, Arctic Mouse-ear *Cerastium arcticum*, White Arctic Whitlow Grass *Draba fladnizensis*, Golden Whitlow Grass *Draba alpina*, Drooping Saxifrage *Saxifraga cernua*, Tufted Saxifrage *Saxifraga cespitosa cespitosa*, Arctic Horsetail *Equisetum arvense alpestre*, and Arctic Chickweed *Stellaria humifusa* could all be seen. Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dablianum* was dotted around and looked very similar to the Mountain Avens with its broad pale yellow petals. And a more familiar looking flower-type was in fact the Sulphur-coloured Buttercup *Ranunculus sulphureus*. Some Moss *Silene acaulis* and Arctic White Campion *Silene involucrate furcata* were also growing in some places.

We took the Zodiac boats to the ship and had a warm welcome followed by a safety briefing, and our first of many delicious three-course dinners. Many of the group then donned their warm clothing to watch out for wildlife from the bow of the ship as we headed out on our expedition. We sailed out into the large fjord of Isfjorden and spent the rest of the evening watching the Arctic scenery gliding past us as we went west towards the open sea. Northern Fulmars glided past within metres of people, some almost inches from heads or the side of the ship. Most were of the 'blue' northern phase that looks darker than those we see in the UK. Kittiwakes were commonly flying past along with small groups of Brünnich's Guillemots. The latter were often sitting on the sea along with the odd Puffin. The occasional Arctic Skua and Great Skua also drifted past.

As we were leaving Isfjorden, south of Prins Karls Foreland, we had our first encounter with the larger wildlife living here. At around 9.45pm a whale was sighted towards the horizon close to a distant sailing boat. It had all the tell-tale signs of a Fin Whale and as we edged closer another whale appeared right by the boat – a Blue Whale, not often seen in these parts! The group had incredible views as the largest mammal in the world surfaced. Over the course of the next 30 – 40 minutes we had regular views of the whale as it made shallow surface dives to feed before coming back up for air with a tall blow.

At least another two whales were spotted further away during this time and when we left the Blue Whale, another four tall whale blows were spotted on the horizon but they were too far away to identify. By 10.30pm most of the group headed for bed or the bar, and meanwhile the sun shone just as brightly as it had done at midday. At 11.15pm another call went out for more Blue Whales – up to five were feeding nearby, one particularly close individual had a distinctive white area of skin on the front of its small dorsal fin and was regularly making shallow surface dives before coming up with an audible blow. The smell of the spray made its way over the ship – it smells a little like cabbage! Kittiwakes and auks were often in tow when it surfaced, in order to pick up any food that was close to the surface of the sea.

Day 3

Tuesday 1st July

Blomstrandhalvøya & Ny-Ålesund (Kongsfjorden)

12:00 GPS position: 78°57.3' N / 012°03.1' E

Weather: + 8°C, overcast, gentle breeze from SW (Force 2)

We awoke to some incredible views out across Spitsbergen and after breakfast and our safety/site briefing we dropped anchor and looked out across to Ny Ålesund and Blomstrandhalvøya. The water was flat calm with small blue icebergs hanging in the sea. Before breakfast some had already spotted a Pomarine Skua and a Great Skua. By 10am we met to set out on the Zodiac boats to the shore of Blomstrandhalvøya or “Marble Island”, named after a Swedish 19th century chemist, “Blomstrand”. The rock here is over one billion years old, and was metamorphosed into marble 400,000 years ago. Between 1910 and 1913 an Englishman Ernest Mansfield set up some trial mining here – but the marble disintegrated on its journey back to the UK as it warmed up and was dumped overboard. Some of the buildings and steam machinery still remain today.

As we arrived on the beach on the island a graceful Long-tailed Skua quickly greeted us, and Eiders were resting in the bay. One group on a Zodiac spotted a Great Black-backed Gull that then headed over the island. We explored the island in three groups – those going for a longer hike headed off first and those doing a shorter walk explored some of the nearby pools. The Spitsbergen subspecies of Reindeer, smaller and short-legged, was in evidence with hair and faeces, and it wasn't long before we spotted a white-haired individual with large antlers up on a ridge. During our walks we encountered a few more, including a young male with just small knobs of bone where his antlers will eventually appear. Up to four Long-tailed Skuas were flying around, often within metres of us and towards the end of the excursion one colour-ringed individual, FX, stood within metres of us on the ground. Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia* was the most common plant on the scree beneath our feet with its delicate purple flowers.

On one pool, that was frozen only a few weeks ago but was now free-flowing, a Red-throated Diver was incubating one or two eggs on a small island. The adult bird was sat on a nest of vegetation by the water's edge. In another pool nearby a pair of Long-tailed Ducks were sleeping – they were incredibly well camouflaged. A few pairs of Arctic Terns were displaying – one male had brought back a fish for his mate. While bringing it to the island he was intercepted by Long-tailed Skuas but escaped without losing his token gift. With excellent views across the bay and mountains the two longer-walking groups headed down through some snow and streams towards the remaining buildings and machinery from the trial mining times.

A large, male Rock Ptarmigan, a northern subspecies of the Ptarmigan, was sat out on the scree – his red ‘ear’ flanges were noticeable against a largely off-white bird with black wing feathers. The grouses’ long-cylindrical droppings were scattered across the terrain – and the third group staying close to the beach spotted some fresh Arctic Fox poo. They also saw a single Purple Sandpiper. A few Snow Buntings were feeding and against the backdrop of the hills a flock of 12 Pink-footed Geese flew past. Later we passed the nest of one – the eggs were snuggled into a bed of thick, warm, down feathers. As we headed back to the ship a pair of Long-tailed Ducks were mating in the bay and two Long-tailed Skuas were feeding along the tideline. A pair of Red-throated Divers passed over calling loudly and two Arctic Skuas flew low over the scree. One boat spotted a Bearded Seal with its long, thick whiskers (and in the morning before breakfast Peter saw a Common/Harbour Seal).

After a delicious lunch ranging from soups, salads, chicken and rice, and a cheeseboard, we met together in the lecture theatre for a briefing on our afternoon excursion to Ny Ålesund. We headed off around 3pm across the fjord known as Kongsfjord with its spectacular scenery of mountains and glaciers. Aside from staffed military stations in the Arctic, this is the most northerly settlement in the world and is home to the Norwegian Polar Institute where a huge amount of research is conducted on the wildlife, plants, marine life, climate, and the general polar environment. The town’s original coal mining is long gone and replaced by scientific stations. We were soon watching a Purple Sandpiper feeding on the yellow-coloured seaweed on the tideline. Further along the road the saltmarsh was thawing and with it a pool of water was developing. One and then two Red-throated Divers appeared and at one point they were doing a spectacular display on the water before one flew off. On the water’s edge a group of Eider Ducks rested joined by a male Long-tailed Duck, and a female on the ice. On the vegetated scree further behind the pool families of very young Barnacle Geese grazed – most goslings were no more than a few days old. The adults appeared to be colour-ringed with green rings as part of local research studies. Purple Saxifrage was abundant along the roadside flowering along with some Tufted Saxifrage. Arctic Terns began to entertain as they warned people away from their nests. One bird was snoozing on the melting snow very close to the path before waking up and stretching – her mate later displayed to her.

Further back on the thin sea ice a Harbour Seal was resting up – a few more could be seen on the other side of town by the water’s edge. Throughout Ny Ålesund, Snow Buntings were busy collecting food for chicks while Arctic Terns nested by the roadside in quite precarious but seemingly safe places! On the other side of the road by dog kennels, Ringed Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, and Purple Sandpipers were spotted. The latter were displaying – their song a beautiful sound ringing across the melting snow and mud and Curlew-like. A chocolate-breasted male Long-tailed Duck flew in to a melting pool with its distinctive coo-ing call before joining another male and a female. The three headed off overhead with both males clearly sparring over the sought after female. The odd Arctic Skua flew overhead and as we walked back towards the boats two were chasing each other and swooping down close in front of us. Peter had pointed out to his boat group a flock of Long-tailed and Arctic Skuas foraging near the ship as they headed across.

Before we left the mainland some of the group headed off to the airship mast just a few hundred metres east of the town – this was used by expeditions in 1926 and 1928 to reach the North Pole by air, and in particular in 1926 to hold the airship ‘Norge’. Bret managed a photograph of a big flock of flying male Eider Ducks – and on closer inspection one was in fact a male King Eider. As we headed back to the ship a Black Guillemot was resting in the small harbour and the Purple Sandpiper was still feeding close by on the tideline. Tens of Kittiwakes stood lined up along a walkway that jutted out into the sea.

And as everyone warmed up with some tea, coffee and pastries, two Puffins were swimming on the sea. These were pretty north for Puffins and are a slightly larger subspecies than the one we see in the UK. We had a few hours to relax before a recap in the bar at 7pm and then dinner at 7.30pm. However, at 6.15pm everyone was quickly back on the front of the ship to watch for whales. Two Minke and two Humpback Whales were feeding just below the surface of the sea in an area where the water suddenly becomes deeper in the fjord. The Humpbacks were hugging the coastline and occasionally showing off their pied-coloured flukes when they did a deeper dive. The Minke Whales meanwhile were feeding further away but showing their elongated bodies and falcate dorsal fins well. Brünnich's Guillemots, Little Auks, and Puffins were feeding in the water or flying past. After a well-earned dinner some of the group headed to the lecture room to complete the species checklist over the past few days while others retired for bed or went back up on deck to watch for wildlife.

Day 4

Wednesday 2nd July

Fuglesongen, Fugleholmane & Fuglefjorden

12:00 GPS position: 89°50.7' N / 011°23.4' E

Weather: +5°C, overcast in the morning and partly cloudy in the afternoon, wind from SW (Force 3)

After a smooth and restful night we anchored in the northwest part of Spitsbergen known as the Norwegian Western Islands. After a briefing we headed out at 9.30am to the island of Fuglesangen or "Birdsong", as it was known by the whalers due to its abundance of Little Auks. Surrounded by snow-covered mountains and a beautiful sunlit glacier we headed off to the island in the Zodiacs and ventured along the large boulders and rocky terrain. The boulders were covered in lots of dark brown, leafy lichens, amongst many other light yellow and dark coloured species. Viviparous Alpine Meadow Grass *Poa alpine vivipara* and Polar Scurvygrass *Cochlearia groenlandica* grew amongst the peaty soil and melt water. The droppings of Rock Ptarmigan and Arctic Fox were in evidence! Brünnich's Guillemots were seen flying past in small groups or single birds. A pair of Arctic Skuas greeted us and stood out on the boulders for the front of the group to observe. As we walked along the rocky coastline hundreds of Little Auks were flying around in small groups and as we edged closer large numbers took off around us calling.

We split into two groups and stopped for two hours either side of an area of snow and allowed the auks to rest and gradually come closer. Meanwhile, those who were less agile on the shore stayed on a Zodiac and had a coastal, sea tour instead. Over the two hours we watched Little Auks coming and going, preening, sleeping, courting, and visiting their nests deep down amongst the boulders. From time to time we could hear the calls of Little Auks coming out from the rocks – no doubt birds sitting on eggs. Every so often, particularly if a Glaucous Gull flew past, the colony took off in one large murmuration and sound, circled round low over our heads before settling back down on the rocks once more. They looked like miniature penguins and waddled along the rocks on their legs with a mixture of both agility and awkwardness! We headed back to the ship from around midday onwards leaving the Little Auks to their short, summer antics. After warming up and a welcome lunch we met briefly in the bar to run through our afternoon excursion which involved a Zodiac cruise between the little islands of the Fugleholmane and the glacier within Fuglefjord. In beautiful sunshine we all headed out and explored the glacial-scoured islands and waters before admiring the glacier and ice flows. Puffins were our first bird – with a few on the sea close to the ship, followed by others flying past.

Eider Ducks were common including a few 'coo-ing' males and it was clear to see how the male's contrasting plumage provides a good cryptic solution to avoid predation here in the Arctic. A closer look at the ducks also revealed at least three King Eiders – one early on and another two near the glacier. Arctic Terns, Kittiwakes, and Black Guillemots were frequent including one guillemot that came within inches of the boats dipping its head under water looking for fishes. Meanwhile a pair of Great Skuas appeared and staked out one or two islands nearby. A few Harbour Seals and a Bearded Seal were seen – the former resting out on rocks or ice, and one young seal had a surprise as it snoozed in the sunshine and was logging on the surface as one boat approached. Polar Bear and Arctic Fox tracks were evident in the snow all around the fjord.

We spent some time exploring through the ice floes, much of it having recently fallen in to the sea as the summer sunshine melts the glacier. The thunderous roar of the glacier could be heard from time to time, and for one moment we watched some ice, originally snow thousands of years ago, shear off and enter the water. This part of the glacier was cliff-like with steep sides and jagged edges. Another part of the glacier was smooth and rounded where it had simply been melted into the sea.

After three hours of glorious sunshine, scenery and wildlife we headed back to the ship, greeted by a hot chocolate and a brief rest. We met again for dinner at 7pm followed by a short re-cap on the day and some insights into the importance of kelp in the Arctic by Jordie, and a brief overview and photos of the Little Auks by Mick. Without even realising we had entered into the area with lots of floating sea ice – the scenery was really stunning and unbelievable. We really felt like we were in the Arctic now! As the recap ended and we had some liqueurs to celebrate crossing the 80 degrees north mark everyone quickly spilled out of the bar as a huge Bearded Seal was lying on some floating ice close to the boat. The ice it was on floated right by the boat giving the group excellent views – the animal was a sandy-chestnut brown colour, full of blubber and big, bulging eyes. In the end it slid into the water but didn't go far.

As we continued to watch out across the ice floes Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Black Guillemots and the odd Brünnich's Guillemot flew past or sat on any free water. Suddenly in the distance Kath called 'Polar Bear', and there, on the horizon, quite some distance away was a dark blob that on closer inspection with the binoculars was indeed a Polar Bear. We edged closer through the water and ice and passed a track with its huge paw prints. A dark form not too far from the bear was a seal, though this soon scarpered. We spent over an hour or more between 9pm and just after 10pm in full sunlight watching the bear walking along the ice, licking the air, and at one point swimming between two large areas of ice. Through the telescope the bear had distinctive scars on the face, a lamb-like tail, massive paws that looked like snow shoes with black pads and creamy-yellow shaggy fur. It was difficult to tell the gender or age of the animal, but Thea, our Polar Bear expert and researcher, felt it was most likely to be a female. We watched the bear disappear off into the distance, leaping across small areas of water from time to time, in between sniffing the air. During some moments one or two Harp Seals swam in the water close to the bear, perhaps inquisitive or letting the bear know they had spotted it. By 10pm many people headed for the bar or bed, while others stayed out to look out across the icy landscape and behind us the backdrop of snowy mountains – the ship was staying here for the night, floating along with the ice.

Day 5

Thursday 3rd July

In the pack-ice between Raudfjorden, Moffen & Hinlopenstretet

12:00 GPS position: 80°00.2' N / 013°41.4' E

Weather: +5°C, overcast, wind from E (Force 2)

We set off amongst the ice floes at breakfast and watched many Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots feeding and flying past – their food, crustaceans such as krill, must be abundant in this particular area. A group of Harp Seals swam in front of us and out on the ice there were numerous Ringed Seals resting up. A Minke Whale had also been spotted before breakfast.

At 10am Thea gave a 20-minute talk about Polar Bears, in particular how to tell the difference between male and females. And just as we were coming to an end the call came through that a Polar Bear had been spotted. By the time everyone was outside the bear was sleeping and low down but over the space of an hour we edged closer and gradually watched the female bear sleeping and occasionally raising her head. Eventually she got up and began walking east across the ice – we slowly watched her over the next hour and a half. She then swam across some water before eyeing up a Ringed Seal. The seal made a quick getaway and meanwhile the bear dived under water and the ice searching for it. Eventually she gave up and headed back west where we left her. A closer look at this bear revealed she had some discrete white ear tags and the number 33 sprayed onto her bottom. She is one of many Polar Bears being studied by researchers in Norway, and was also seen in a different location by an expedition last week. Birds of note included Glaucous Gull, Great Skua and Ivory Gull – the latter seen while we were watching the bear. It looked almost like a Kittiwake without the grey wings and black wing tips. By this point it was lunchtime and as we headed east towards Moffen Island we warmed up and topped ourselves up with soup and lunch.

After lunch it wasn't long before we approached Moffen Island, and a single adult Sabine's Gull was seen flying with a Kittiwake. Eiders and Arctic Skuas were nesting on the shallow island itself, while Glaucous Gulls were keeping a watch from tall lumps of ice. We passed a single Walrus that slipped into the water but then had prolonged views of half a dozen lying out on a large lump of ice. One had particularly long tusks compared to the others. These were lying towards this longer-tusked individual with their right flippers laid over their neighbour's backs. One on the edge of the group was a little unsure of us and edged towards the water where it dipped in for a short period before coming out again. We got very close to the Walruses and could see every detail from their bulging eyes, strong, sensitive whiskers, prune-like skin, and sea lion-like gait. They were also huge! As they left the ice they left behind quite a mess where they had been pooing – a mix of digested clams and the distinctive red colour from eating krill. A few more Walruses were spotted on the ice alongside some swimming in the sea. We left the ice flows for a while to avoid shallow water and headed northeast to more ice.

At 3.30pm Barbara gave a presentation all about the importance of the sea ice both for people, nature and world's ecosystems. And after that, around 4.30pm we spent the afternoon relaxing or watching for wildlife as we entered back into the ice flows. We were surrounded by lots of ice and as we broke through the flows Kittiwakes, Fulmars, and a few Glaucous Gulls followed in the wake to pick off food such as Arctic/Polar Cod. Out on the ice the odd Ringed Seal was hauled out and groups of Black Guillemots were often feeding amongst the ice flows. At least three bright white Ivory Gulls were seen briefly each time throughout the day passing by

the ship. Overnight we headed for the fjord Sorgfjorden but continued once it was confirmed Walrus were not resting up – spring was late and there was still too much snow and ice for them to come ashore.

Day 6

Friday 4th July

Faksevågen & Alkefjellet

12:00 GPS position: 79°30.2' N / 017°43.6' E

Weather: +4°C, overcast, misty and partly cloudy, wind from ENE (Force 2)

This morning we headed out in the Zodiacs to the rich, hilly tundra around towards the area of Faksevågen in the fjord Lomfjorden (“Guillemot Bay”), just off the corridor/strait of water known as Hinlopenstrait. We split into three groups again with the hiking group exploring further up the u-shaped valley along the glacial moraine where two spectacular glaciers stood and below which was a vast glacial river plain. On the tundra beneath our feet the sheltered valley was home to many different plants coming into flowers, and particularly noticeable were Purple Saxifrage, Svalbard Poppy, Mountain Avens, White Arctic Bell-heather, Drooping Saxifrage, Yellow Whitlow-grass, Moss Champion, Pygmy Buttercup *Ranunculus pygmaeus*, Sulphur-coloured Buttercup, Polar Sloniferous Saxifrage *Saxifraga platysepala*, and Hairy Lousewort.

There was evidence of animals all around us – lots of Rock Ptarmigan, goose, Reindeer and fox poo! And spread out across the terrain was half a dozen Reindeer of different ages and sexes, including one with a pair of spectacular antlers. We also spotted a few small shed antlers on the ground. One piece of rock showed the ripple marks of a preserved beach. As we trekked along the soft boggy tundra with permafrost only inches below, we spotted a few displaying Purple Sandpipers which sounded curlew-like in tone and two male Rock Ptarmigan. One stood out on the top of some rocks before flying across and creeping out again showing off his dark tail, red skin on his head, and feathered feet. From time to time we heard his guttural clicking call. Below us in the u-shaped valley light-bellied Brent Geese were grazing near some Reindeer. A group of eight were spotted at first, and later a flock of 25 took off and flew along across the plain. A few Eider Ducks were also present.

As we headed down and along the fjord back to the ship we passed several Snow Buntings, an Arctic Skua, and lots more flowering Arctic plants. While Stein was explaining about the deep breastbone of birds (with an example) an immature male Reindeer appeared from above and slowly trotted past. This was probably the first time he had seen humans! Back along the beach driftwood from Siberia was very much in evidence along with a few seal bones and a dead guillemot munched by an Arctic Fox and gulls. Out on the water the sea ice had moved in and as the last group waited for the Zodiac a distant Ivory Gull flew across the water and a few Black Guillemots swam on the sea. We played our role in helping preserve this unique habitat by helping to clear the beach of some of the plastic which had washed ashore.

After a delicious three-course lunch the ship headed back out into Hinlopenstrait and south to Alkefjellet (“Mount Guillemot”) for the spectacular Brünnich’s Guillemot breeding cliffs. We weren’t disappointed and at 3.30pm we all headed out in the Zodiacs and spent the next two hours working our way along the dolerite (‘basaltic’) near-vertical cliffs cut out by ice-age glaciers. Columns of rock and cliffs 100 metres high are home to over 60, 000 pairs of Brünnich’s Guillemots, alongside breeding Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls. The first colonies of guillemots seemed very quiet and were relatively small in number but as we edged along to the main

colony we were greeted by a swirling mass of birds in the air – the equivalent of the M25 but for guillemots! The columns of rock were packed with birds, some only 10 metres from the water and other 100 metres high or more.

Some birds were sleeping while others were facing in towards the cliffs on their tiny piece of rock where they were incubating their single eggs. The elliptical shape of the egg will only roll in a circle and not off the cliff into the sea. Down on the water lots of guillemots were swimming around the boats, dipping their heads under water to look for fishes before diving under using their wings to swim like penguins. The noise was immense – and above the sound of the auks the higher frequency calls of the Kittiwakes could be heard. They were nesting high up on the columns of dolerite and unlike the guillemots make a nest made out of vegetation and guano. Hundreds of Kittiwakes were flying at the top of the ice/snow covered cliffs coming from the south and headed for their nests. The Kittiwakes were already on eggs while the guillemots didn't appear to have any unless they were keeping them very well concealed below their bodies. However, a few pairs of Glaucous Gulls were sitting on nests and one pair had hatched chicks.

Amongst the mass of birds swirling around two Great Skuas flew through them. And on the water a Walrus surfaced to see what all the fuss was about before diving again! Some guillemots were sat on a small ice flow and high above us the mass of snow and ice was melting to form small waterfalls gushing down the cliffs. As we came towards the end of the colony where the columns of rock dipped in land slightly Kittiwakes began to take over the guillemots in numbers. Below on the gentler sloping grassy cliffs Barbara spotted a cryptically coloured Arctic Fox – it was incredibly well camouflaged. As it ran along the ground it was occasionally mobbed by a few Glaucous Gulls. We watched it make its way along the rocky bank before stopping against some rocks where it almost disappeared due to its colouration. We then admired an incredible glacier intruding its way down at the end of this line of cliffs before we headed back to the ship to warm up and exchange delight at what we had just witnessed.

Christophe and Barbara then gave short, illustrated talks on the guillemots and the Walruses before we went for a delicious dinner. After that we were encouraged to go outside and look at the stunning scenery of the high Arctic. During the evening we had crossed the Hinlopenstrait and entered into the huge fjord known as Wahlenbergfjord. It is rarely visited due to its remoteness and ice – but aside from icebergs our captain and team were able to guide the ship in to the end of the fjord where we anchored for the night. As we cruised along incredible glaciers and ice caps surrounded us. The sun broke through and the scenery looked even more beautiful.

We suddenly got the call that a Polar Bear had been sighted – a good mile or two away a bear was on a sheet of frozen sea looking downwards. Perhaps it had found a breathing hole of a seal – there were plenty of seals dotted around. While we couldn't get any closer it was a good sighting for the day. Meanwhile, an Ivory Gull flew past and a Long-tailed Skua sat on a few icebergs that we passed. For the rest of the evening and into the night everyone was able to admire the glaciers, ice caps and polar desert. The fjord is 10 kilometres wide and we had travelled 50 kilometres to where the water ends and the ice begins. At midnight many people were basking in glorious sunshine as the sun came out from the clouds in the north.

Day 7

Saturday 5th July

Kløverbladbukta (Wahlenbergfjorden) & Torellneset

12:00 GPS position: 79°45.9' N / 021°30.6' E

Weather: +5°C, sunny morning and overcast in the evening, wind from SSE (Force 2)

We headed out after breakfast in the Zodiacs to explore the fjord and an area of ice where a Polar Bear was out hunting. As we approached the bay in the boats over 30 Ringed Seals were dotted across the icy landscape as dark figures. We soon spotted the Polar Bear – it was a long way away and appeared to be looking downwards perhaps towards a blowhole of a seal waiting for one to pop up. We watched it walk along the back edge of the ice before settling and lying down – where it remained!

After a while we headed out into the bay to look for other wildlife. And over the morning we saw quite a lot. Eider Ducks were common in small flocks and King Eiders were intermixed. There was at least eight King Eiders, mainly males, but two pairs had a female in each allowing us to see the difference between them and a Common Eider. Up to three pairs of Long-tailed Ducks was swimming close to an island of glacial moraine – it looked like a dumper truck had deposited a load of mud in one place. However, this was a natural island and was covered in nesting Arctic Terns that flew over to see us off. On the shore of the island that was shingly, a pair of Grey Phalaropes was resting up. The male was clearly duller and more streaky than the brick-red female who had pale cheeks and a much brighter plumage. The phalarope is known for its role reversal when it comes to nesting – the male does all the incubating and rearing of the chicks and is hence more cryptic in colour. The female meanwhile goes off to find another male and lay more clutches of eggs.

A little later a Ruddy Turnstone flew in to join another – they may well have been nesting here. Across Spitsbergen there are only 50 pairs so this was a good sighting. A flock of four light-bellied Brent Geese were sat on the water, and later on land another two joined them – a bird that is less common here and not always seen in Spitsbergen. This population winters in Ireland. A surprise duck was a male Common Scoter – a rare bird for these parts and a first for even the expedition crew in these parts. He flew out across the water and a little later he was seen with a female. After enjoying the birds we headed towards a magnificent glacier in the sunshine, weaving our way between the icebergs and ice flows. We stopped to watch a Bearded Seal laying on an ice flow. We managed to get very close and to see this individual wore old scars from a Polar Bear attack – a bear at some point had clearly grabbed its left cheek and nose. However, the seal was looking healthy and fat, and its head was stained orange from the iron-rich mud in which the seal feeds looking for fishes, crabs, and molluscs. We headed on towards the glacier enjoying the ice in glorious sunshine and could even feel some warmth in the sunshine despite the temperature only being five degrees Celsius! A few Black Guillemots came within metres of the boats while an Ivory Gull and Arctic Skuas flew past. By 12.30pm it was time to head back to the ship for lunch at 1pm.

We then headed back out of the fjord in incredible sunshine and completely flat water allowing for beautiful reflections and scenery. As we headed back out into the Hinlopenstrait many guillemots were close to the boat fishing, while Kittiwakes flew past. A dead Polar Bear cub, the size of a lamb floated past – perhaps the melting ice flows as caused it to be parted from its mother. As we came out of Wahlenbergfjord we could see back across

to Alkefjellet and the adjacent snow-caps and glaciers. On the corner of the fjord a Minke Whale surfaced several times before diving deep. And on the cliffs behind we could clearly see the layered sedimentary rocks and an intrusion of darker dolerite rocks towards the top. Some of the upper parts of the cliffs as they moved inland were more vegetated and home to hundreds of Kittiwakes swirling around looking tiny from our position.

At 4.30pm whales were spotted and we had prolonged views of at least three Humpback Whales feeding – they were only shallow diving and surfaced regularly showing off their warty heads, small dorsal fins, black and white-patterned flukes, and fluke barnacles. Two were feeding very close and separate to another further south. As the whales surfaced and dived again hundreds of Kittiwakes moved in to scoop up any fishes or krill that were remaining. Another Minke Whale was also spotted briefly.

After an early dinner at 6pm, we geared up and headed out at 7.30pm to Torellneset, a sandy bar that is good for Walrus hauls. We weren't disappointed and 30 were huddled together at the end. We split into two groups – one went walking across the Arctic desert and the other visited the Walrus, and then both swapped. Three Walrus were in the water and came over to investigate us – they came out of the water and stood two metres away investigating us. We had incredible views of their whiskers, faces, scars and snot! They moved along the water's edge investigating all of us. We left them to slowly move as a group to watch the main huddle – they were sleeping together in one big mass and while we were unable to smell them there were all sorts of noises coming from their way. Most were lying down sleeping, but some in the middle were rising up to look and interact with each other before settling back down again.

Meanwhile, those on the desert explored the raised beaches and shingle, searching for the flowering plants growing along the edges of the polygons of larger pebbles, beneath which ice wedges exist, that provide moisture for them to survive. Purple Saxifrage, Pygmy Buttercup, Snow Buttercup, Drooping Saxifrage, Tufted Saxifrage, Svalbard Poppy, Snow Pearlwort *Sagina nivalis*, Polar Saxifrage *Saxifraga hyperborea*, Rock Whitlow Grass *Draba norvegica*, Alpine Mouse-ear *Cerastium alpinum*, and Scurvy Grass were the most obvious. Across the raised beaches we also found very ancient lower jawbones of Walrus, and a large part-skull of a probably Bowhead Whale that could be hundreds or even thousands of years old. Reindeer were also sighted. Down on the beach a few Arctic Skuas were picking around and chasing the odd Kittiwake. Two Ivory Gulls flew across the beach while a Red-throated Diver was seen in flight. One of the Walrus had to be encouraged away from the boats – their inquisitiveness can see them puncturing the Zodiacs! We headed back for 10pm and celebrated in the bar with drinks and did the checklist for the past few days. As we headed south we passed through some pack ice but left it behind over night.

Day 8

Sunday 6th July

Sundneset (Barentsøya) & Dolerittneset (Edgeøya)

12:00 GPS position: 78°12.2' N / 021°07.1' E

Weather: +5°C, overcast and misty, wind from SW (Force 2)

By the morning we were further south and heading for Freemansundat, a strait in the south-eastern part of Svalbard between the islands of Barentøya and Edgeøya. We were going to stop at Kapp Waldburg to look at a canyon and Kittiwake colony but a Polar Bear was on the slopes below the colony and we were unable to land.

However, from the ship we could see the bear on the gentle sloping green cliffs foraging – from a distance it looked like a big sheep! Meanwhile, hundreds of Kittiwakes wheeled round above or were on the cliffs nesting.

We continued on for another hour to the coastal plain of Sundneset where we had some small lakes and lowland tundra to explore. A Polar Bear was sleeping on a grassy/mossy slope further along the coastline but we were safe to land at our particular site. The area was full of tiny Arctic plants and across our walks we were treading on soft mossy ground interspersed with a whole variety of saxifrages, Snow Buttercups *Ranunculus nivalis*, Svalbard Poppies, Polar Willow, Polar Foxtail *Alopecurus magellanicus*, Hairy Lousewort, toadstools and lichens. The abundance of tiny plant life below our feet made it feel look a little more like an alpine garden. And despite it being only four degrees Celsius, there was also quite a lot of insect life – tiny flies visiting the flowering saxifrages and buttercups for a nectar meal and the chance for the plants to be pollinated.

We split into three groups again – Martin stayed with the leisurely group to examine the plants in more details while Ed and Pete covered the other two groups. A male Grey Phalarope greeted us on the beach, feeding amongst the flowering plants. And at our first pool a pair was interacting with each other while feeding. Three King Eiders (one male and two females) were resting up on the water itself. A pair of Barnacle Geese fed close by, the larger male keeping guard. And further back a flock of the same species flew past with the backdrop of the mountains and strait. As we headed up the rocks we had spectacular views and could still see the bear in the very far distance. A Reindeer fed close by and a few Snow Buntings were feeding amongst the rocks and plants. As we headed back down towards another lake over 30 King Eiders, mainly females (just two males) were resting on some remaining ice. Lots of droppings of different animals were beneath our feet including Reindeer, goose, Ptarmigan and also Polar Bear – the latter contained hair and also the remains of broken egg shell. Another dropping was found from a bear that contained seal hair and bones. Various Reindeer antlers were also lying on the terrain – an important source of calcium for animals such as Arctic Foxes.

As we headed back down from the rocks we came across a small herd of Reindeer with mothers and their calves. We stopped to watch them approach and check us out. The young calves looked a few months old and as they walked away up the hill one calf returned back alone – an independent character! Its mother came back down to encourage it back and away with the rest of the herd. We then quickly got a call to say an Arctic Fox was around and in front of us we watched a still very white fox walking across the rocky tundra sniffing rocks and searching for food. We lost it for a short while and it was lying down curled up at the base of some rocks. We stayed back and once it noticed us, it rolled on its back, did some scratching, scent marked and then carried on its journey for the other groups to see. When it reached the beach with the leisurely group, it came within five metres of them and curled up to rest, though still had an eye on everybody! It was moulting out its white winter coat and looked like it was wearing a sheep as the thinner, shorter grey coat was growing through in patches around its rump and back legs. Some of its soft grey fur had fallen to the ground – to touch it was incredibly warm and immediately insulated our fingers, keeping the heat in.

As we headed back round in a circle there was evidence that the bears and foxes had been feeding well – legs of Reindeer and a wing of a Long-tailed Duck. We even found two huge footprints of a Polar Bear in the soft mud and could even make out the claws prints left. Nearby rocks were bordered by lots of flowering Polar Willow and Svalbard Poppies. One pool adjacent was home to a pair of Red-throated Divers. Another saw a male Long-tailed Duck in residence, and the next one along had a pair of Long-tailed Ducks – the male's head was raised and was clearly keeping an eye on us! As we arrived back on the beach the male Grey Phalarope was back

feeding amongst the Purple and Tufted Saxifrages and giving incredible views just two metres away. And as the last group caught the Zodiac back a Purple Sandpiper came in for a fresh water drink and bath in the nearby stream.

During lunch we sailed further west and anchored up at Dolerittneset (Kapp Lee) on the north-western edge of Edgeøya – here the hiking group walked up 260 metres of the 355 metre high and misty rocky massif. Across the open plain below the mountains the bones of Walrus are scattered across. These remain from 300 years ago when people from the north coast of Russia known as Pomors, slaughtered the animals. Today the site remains with the bones and a few huts preserved *in situ* – and in turn the history and stories associated it. Moulded red bricks lying on the ground with some cut wood are remnants of those used by the Pomors to build stoves in the 18th Century. And the whole metal/felted huts were built later in 1904 (by Norwegian trappers) and 1968 (by researchers). The Walrus bones themselves are very heavy – they are made up of an intricate matrix of bone but also contain oil that helps the animals with buoyancy when alive.

As the groups walked along the beach two live Walrus were sleeping together on the shingle – both at opposite ends to each other! Across the vegetated rocky ground and bogs there was plenty of signs of life including the droppings of a few bears, one containing plants and looked like horse manure, and the other contained kelp. These must be hungry bears. A few wings of Black Guillemot and Brünnich's Guillemot were found – probably eaten by Arctic Foxes. And on the higher plateaux of Kapp Lee, which at 260 metres was a polar desert, we found the predated eggs of Kittiwake – probably taken by skuas. And on the grassland lower down the eggs of Snow Bunting, and Rock Ptarmigan.

Up high the mudstone shale broke away in thin layers and revealed pieces of rock eroded away into circular shapes. Svalbard Poppies were common here and on the barren top where we stopped Purple Saxifrage, Drooping Saxifrage *Saxifraga cernua*, Golden Whitlow-grass, flowering Moss Campion, Arctic Horsetails, and other plants were dotted around. Some iron-rich rock contained fossils and we spotted a number of fossilised spiral-shaped gastropods and lined bivalves. Large slabs of preserved ripple marks from fossilised beaches were also lying on the surface (and now a few hundred metres above sea level).

From here we also saw three or four Rock Ptarmigans, including one beginning to change into its cryptic summer plumage. The mist began to clear as we headed down revealing an incredible u-shaped valley and many different colours and textures of the rock and soils. Throughout the walks the ground below us was soft and boggy but covered in sponge-like mosses that oozed water when you trod on them. There were many more grasses here too and flowering plants were a lot more advanced with their colourful flowers opening out. Sulphur-coloured Buttercups, a variety of saxifrages such as Tufted, Arctic *Saxifraga aurea*, Purple, and Yellow Marsh *Saxifraga hirculus*, Mountain Sorrel, Arctic Mouse-ear, and Polar Willow were all found commonly across the terrain and in flower.

Along the coastline Kittiwakes were flying along in small groups – and towards the end a few Arctic Skuas were harrying the birds, including one persistent skua going after one particular gull above our heads! Snow Buntings were dotted around the grassland and on the sea Black Guillemots were swimming close to the boats. And unusually a Pomarine Skua headed over the beach harassing some Kittiwakes. The Walrus were now three rather than two – another had worked its way along the beach earlier and then joined its friends for a snooze on the beach.

For the rest of the evening and the night we headed round the southern end of Spitsbergen and north to Hornsund, the southernmost fjord in Spitsbergen.

Day 9

Monday 7th July

Hornsund: Burgerbukta & Brepollen

12:00 GPS position: 76°55.6' N / 015°21.6' E

Weather: +7°C, overcast to partly cloudy and sunny, almost no wind (Force 1)

We awoke to a calm smooth sea as we headed north along the west coast of Spitsbergen. Up to a dozen Kittiwakes were resting along the front of the ship, preening, sleeping and hitching a lift further north! During the morning Jordie, Thea and Stein gave talks on whales, Polar Bears and the history of Spitsbergen respectively. And outside others were spotting Fulmars, guillemots, Little Auks and Kittiwakes flying past. We arrived into Hornsund, a fjord with eight glaciers along its 30km length, at lunchtime. Rich for its mountains, glaciers, ice and wildlife (particularly seabirds) we headed out to part of the fjord known as Burgerbukta, looking towards Gnålodden (“constant humming sound”) where there is an impressive seabird colony. The scenery was stunning – and everyone went outside to take photos. It was like a picture postcard of Spitsbergen – but for real! This area is all part of the South Spitsbergen National Park.

At 2pm we headed out in the Zodiacs to explore the area. As we had anchored up a little earlier a bear was spotted on the vegetated slope by the Kittiwake colony where we had hope to land. Instead we sailed over to look for the bear from the water. It was no longer there – but after a short while a bear, probably the same individual, was swimming in the water. It was heading for a small island and we watched it climb out and shake its coat. It re-entered the water and climbed out again further along and spent some time searching the rocks for duck eggs – there was at least a dozen Eiders nearby keeping the eyes peeled for the bear. We checked with Thea and the bear looked like a young female. We spent some time watching her as she scouted around and then sat on her back legs a little like a dog. We left her to carry on her business and headed towards a glacier, stopping to view another bear sleeping on some scree at the base of a mountain. This was a huge fat bear and had no doubt been feeding well on seals over the past few months. It occasionally raised its head to look at us and then went back to rest.

We headed closer to the glacier, enjoying the sunshine, icebergs, and mountain scenes. The snow, ice, and rock made for some impressive landscapes. One ice berg was favoured by over 50 Kittiwakes resting up including one first summer individual with black wing markings – at one point they all flew and then ten seconds later the iceberg rolled right over! Across the water Fulmars glided low while high up Brünnich’s Guillemots flew overhead to their nesting ledges high up on the mountains above the Kittiwake colony. Black Guillemots were feeding in the water around us and at least four Puffins flew past. Glaucous Gulls, two Arctic Skuas, and a Great Skua were also around. In the backdrop was Spitsbergen’s third highest mountain, Hornsundtind (1,431m).

We arrived back at 5pm and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening enjoying the spectacular views as we headed further in to Hornsund. We had an Arctic BBQ on deck – some delicious meats and salad foods – before celebrating Dawn’s birthday with a fizzing candle and cake, and other yummy deserts. From where we were eating we could see several glaciers, perfect flat water, Kittiwakes foraging, and incredible mountains. After a few

photos of the whole group including crew, we dispersed and the ship headed out of the fjord and spent the night heading north to Bellsund.

Day 10

Tuesday 8th July

Bellsund: Ahlstrandodden & Vårsolbukta/Ingeborgfjellet

12:00 GPS position: 77°33.7' N / 015°02.5' E

Weather: +9°C, sunny, wind from E (Force 5)

Bellsund (“Bell sound” after bell-shaped mountain Klokkefjellet) is the entrance to an intricate system of fjords that make their way up to 80 kilometres in land. At the beginning of one of the fjord branches, Van Keulenfjord, we stopped for the morning at Ahlstrandhalvøya. In glorious sunshine we split into three groups to explore the tundra which had many flowers in full bloom. It was in relative terms quite warm here, six degrees Celsius, and we could see a shimmer in the distance. We stopped to see piles of Beluga Whale bones from whale hunting days in the 1930s when 550 were slaughtered – their skin was turned into leather and used as belts in machinery, shoelaces and ski sticks. There were also huts and a grinding stone from the same days. We were able to look closely at the skulls – you could see where the blowholes would have been and how they connected through bony tubes to the lungs.

Across the rest of the terrain we spotted a range of birdlife include a few flocks of Barnacle Geese (30+ in total) and a pair with goslings on the water, two Pink-footed Geese, a superb Ivory Gull that circled round very closely, loafing Glaucous Gulls, a Great Skua, an Arctic Skua chasing a Kittiwake, a Snow Bunting collecting food for chicks, a pair of Ringed Plovers, four Grey Phalaropes, six Purple Sandpipers, and unusually a first-summer Arctic Tern (most will be summering away from Spitsbergen and northern Europe). An Eider was also seen with ducklings. Alpine Saxifrage *Micranethes nivalis*, Alpine Mouse-ear, Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage, Moss Campion, Purple Saxifrage, Alpine Bistort, Pygmy Buttercup, and Tufted Saxifrage were all in flower. Martin also found the leaves of Polar Cress (Polar Cuckoo Flower) *Cardamine pratensis augustifolia* and Polar Willow was common beneath our feet. The Barnacle Geese and Glaucous Gulls were beginning to moult – with their feathers on the ground where they had been resting and preening. And the remains of one goose scattered across the tundra. The rocks were interesting too – one had the perfect fossil print of a deciduous leaf that looked a little like Hornbeam.

Over lunch we headed over to the north side of the fjord to Ingeborgfjellet near the branching fjord (off Bellsund) of Van Mijenfjord. In very warm sunshine and blue skies we landed on the pebbly beach and just across the moss 15 metres away we watched two male Reindeer feeding. Further away on the right half a dozen were resting and lying down on some snow. The Reindeer came very closer and the more mature male had large branching velvet antlers. In the rocks we came across at least three Snow Bunting nests – evident by the visiting adults and the buzzing call of the chicks. The squidgy moss revealed a Diamondback type moth from the mainland of Norway or further east into Russia. Above our heads hundreds of Little Auks flew overhead in flocks rather like roosting Starlings in the UK winter – they flickered like glitter in the sunshine against the blue sky. These alongside Brünnich’s Guillemots and Kittiwakes were flying very high towards the tops of the mountain cliffs above us. Kittiwakes were calling loudly and a few Glaucous Gulls were on the prowl. The Little Auks are normally lower down the slopes but today they were mainly out feeding, though many flocks were

returning as we prepared to leave. The ground was very soft and mossy. Freshwater streams flowed down the rocky slopes and in the moist grass Martin found lots of Highland Brook Saxifrage *Saxifraga rivularis* growing. Polar Saxifrage, some flowering Alpine Saxifrage and Alpine Mouse-ear was also growing.

A single Ivory Gull flew into the fog that had begun to move in. After gathering back together on the beach we headed off around 4pm into the fog on the Zodiacs (GPS in hand!) – keeping close together we safely found the ship and got on board to pack and prepare for our farewell evening together.

We headed towards Longyearbyen for the rest of the afternoon and evening, arriving just before midnight. Fulmars, guillemots, Little Auks and Kittiwakes had all been passing by on our journey, and as we neared the town some spotted a Blue Whale blowing in the distance.

Day 11

Wednesday 9th July

Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen

08:00 GPS position: 78°13.8' N / 015°36.10' E

After our last evening together we were up bright and early to leave the ship that had been our home for nine days and head into Longyearbyen for a few hours before checking in at the local airport at just before midday. We had a bright morning and everyone split their time between wildlife watching, buying souvenirs, visiting the museum, and drinking tea!

Further along the coast road from the museum around 200 female Eiders were congregating and looking after young ducklings. Some females were still on eggs and close to the husky kennels the bumpy grassland had Eider down strewn across the area from nests that had been used and since abandoned. On the other side of the road a dozen pairs of Barnacle Geese were tending their goslings and on the grassland nearer people's homes a pair of Arctic Skuas were keeping an eye on their single chick that was only a few days old (and had just been fed). Arctic Terns were attacking people on the road further along protecting their nesting territories and throughout Longyearbyen Snow Buntings were busy feeding chicks. A week on from when we were last here, many had now fledged and small young with tiny tails were making their first flights and 'buzzing' to calls to their parents. Those Barnacle Geese without young were feeding on the slopes nearby including one very white, leucistic individual. In some pools near the Eiders a colour-ringed Purple Sandpiper (ringed a month ago here) and a male Grey Phalarope were feeding, and a Red-throated Diver flew overhead. Out on the mudflats a four Dunlin and two Ringed Plover were also feeding. Those drinking tea and coffee by the dog kennels were rewarded with an Arctic Fox slinking off with an Eider duckling.

The plants were also further advanced in their flowering after just a week, including the Mountain Avens and Arctic Cotton Grass *Eriophorum scheuchzeri arcticum*. Arctic White Campion was growing alongside Polar Campion *Silene uralensis arctica*, and the tiny Tundra Buttercup *Ranunculus hyperboreus* was abundant where it was growing. One fortunate member of the group spotted Boreal Jacob's Ladder *Polemonium boreale*, a lovely plant with bright purple flowers. Alpine Bistort was abundant and much taller than anywhere else we had been.

We left a gloriously sunny Longyearbyen for the airport at midday – check in and security was quick and we had plenty of time to relax in departures surrounded by huge photos of bears, plants and birds. Our flight took us

over the snow-covered mountains, glaciers and fjords of southern Spitsbergen before we headed across the sea towards mainland Norway. We flew along the coastline and from the window could see wonderful mountains, islands and sandy beaches before touching down in Oslo where the temperature was 28 degrees Celsius – it felt like Spain as we arrived after leaving Spitsbergen in seven degrees Celsius!

We said farewell to those who were continuing their journeys that evening and went to the hotel with everyone who was staying overnight. Some spent the evening in Oslo itself while others did a spot of birding nearby.

Day 12

Thursday 10th July

Oslo, Norway

Weather: + 28°C, bright and sunny

After a leisurely breakfast we left Oslo on bright hot morning we arrived safely in London (or other airports) reflecting on such a beautiful holiday and the incredible landscapes and wildlife in a much colder wilderness.

Some managed a little birdwatching in and around the nearby car parks full of pine trees, yarrows, ragworts, harebells, lupins, raspberries and other grasses and flowers. Bird wise, Siskins, Redpolls, Fieldfare, Blackcap, Woodpigeon, Jackdaws, Yellowhammer, Icterine Warbler, Goldcrest, Robins, Swifts, Swallows, House Martins, White Wagtails, Starling, Blue Tits and Great Tits were all around.

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Species List (Longyearbyen to Longyearbyen)

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July										
			30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
1	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		10	✓			2	✓		2	2	
2	Pale-bellied Brent Goose	<i>Branta bernicla hrota</i>					20	4	2				
3	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	✓	✓	12		4		18	4	✓	✓	
4	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	1	1	4			9	33	1			
5	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>						2					
7	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>		12				6	2				
8	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>		2			3		2				
9	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	4					1	2				1
10	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		2			1					1	2
12	Ruddy Turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>		1				2					
13	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	✓	✓		1	2	2	2			6	✓
14	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>											4
15	Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	4					2	4			4	1
16	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>				3	3	2	1			2	
18	Sabine's Gull	<i>Xema sabini</i>				1							
19	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		2		1							
20	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>	2	1	2	1	2			1	2		
23	Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>		1		1			1				
24	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	2	6	3	1	1	3	2	2	4	✓	
25	Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>		4			1	4	1				
26	Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓	25	10		2	1	✓		✓		
30	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓

Mammals

1	Arctic Fox	<i>Vulpes lagopus</i>					1		1				1
2	Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>			1	1	1	1	2	2			
3	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>				15	1	30	3				
4	Bearded Seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>		1	4	3	2	1					
5	Harp Seal	<i>Pagophilus groenlandicus</i>			2	✓	1	7	✓	✓	✓		
6	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		5	1								
7	Ringed Seal	<i>Pusa hispida</i>				✓	✓	30+	✓				
8	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>		12			3	5	✓		✓		
9	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>		3		1		2					
10	Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i>	5+									1	
11	Fin Whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>	1										
12	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>		2				3					

Other Taxa

Polar Cod *Boreogadus saida*

Plants

Scientific name	Common name	Location
Pteridophytes	Ferns and there allies	
Equisetaceae <i>Equisetum arvense</i>	Horsetail Family Arctic Horsetail	Longyearbyen / Kapp Lee
Angiosperms	Flowering Plants	
Asteraceae <i>Taraxacum arcticum</i>	Daisy Family Arctic Dandelion	Lomfjorden
Brassicaceae <i>Cardamine pratensis ssp. angustifolia</i> <i>Cochlearia groenlandica</i> <i>Draba alpina</i> <i>Draba fladnizensis</i> <i>Draba norvegica</i> <i>Draba oxycarpa</i>	Cabbage Family Polar Cress Polar Scurvygrass Golden Whitlow-grass White Artic Whitlow-grass Rock Whitlow-grass Pale Whitlow-grass	Bellsund / Ahlstrandhalvoya Lomfjorden / Torellneset Longyearbyen / Blomstrandhalvoya Longyearbyen Tornellneset Lomfjorden / Sorgfjorcen
Caryophyllaceae <i>Cerastium alpinum</i> <i>Cerastium arcticum</i> <i>Cerastium regelii</i> <i>Minuartia biflora</i> <i>Sagina nivalis</i> <i>Silene acaulis</i> <i>Silene involucrata ssp. furcata</i> <i>Silene uralensis ssp. arctica</i> <i>Stellaria humifusa</i> <i>Stellaria longipes</i>	Pink Family Alpine Mouse-ear Arctic Mouse-ear Polar Mouse-ear Tufted Sandwort Snow Pearlwort Moss Champion Common Arctic White Champion Polar Champion Arctic Chickweed Tundra Chickweed	Lomfjorden Longyearbyen Blomstrandhalvoya Lomfjorden Torellneset Longyearbyen / Blomstrandhalvoya Longyearbyen Longyearbyen Longyearbyen Torellneset
Ericaceae <i>Cassiope tetragona ssp. tetragona</i>	Heather Family White Arctic Bell Heather	Longyearbyen / Blomstrandhalvoya
Papaveraceae <i>Papaver dahlianum</i>	Poppy Family Svalbard Poppy	Longyearbyen / Frequent around Svalbard peninsular
Polemoniaceae <i>Polemonium boreale</i>	Jacob's Ladder Family Boreal Jacob's Ladder	Longyearbyen
Polygonaceae <i>Oxyria digyna</i> <i>Bistorta vivipara</i>	Dock Family Mountain Sorrel Alpine Bistort	Longyearbyen Longyearbyen / Blomstrandhalvoya
Ranunculaceae <i>Coptidium X spitsbergense</i> <i>Ranunculus hyperboreus ssp. arnellii</i> <i>Ranunculus nivalis</i> <i>Ranunculus pygmaeus</i> <i>Ranunculus sulphureus</i>	Buttercup Family Svalbard Buttercup Tundra Buttercup Snow Buttercup Pygmy Buttercup Sulphur-coloured Buttercup	Longyearbyen Longyearbyen Lomfjorden Blomstrandhalvoya Lomfjorden Longyearbyen / Lomfjorcen
Roseaceae <i>Dryas octopetala</i>	Rose Family Mountain Avens	Longyearbyen - a frequent plant around

Scientific name	Common name	Location
<i>Potentilla hyparctica</i> ssp. <i>hyparctica</i>	Arctic Cinquefoil	Svalbard
<i>Potentilla pulchella</i> ssp. <i>pulchella</i>	Tufted Cinquefoil	Longyearbyen Sundneset / Kapp Lee
Salicaceae	Willow Family	
<i>Salix polaris</i>	Polar Willow	Longyearbyen - a common plant around Svalbard
Saxifragaceae	Saxifrage Family	
<i>Chrysosplenium tetrandrum</i>	Dwarf Golden-saxifrage	Blomstrandhalvoya
<i>Micranthes nivalis</i>	Alpine Saxifrage	Lomfjorden / Sundneset
<i>Micranthes tenuis</i>	Dwarf saxifrage	Sundneset
<i>Saxifraga aurea</i>	Arctic Saxifrage	Kapplee
<i>Saxifraga aizoides</i>	Yellow Mountain Saxifrage	Blomstrandhalvoya
<i>Saxifraga cernua</i>	Drooping Saxifrage	Longyearbyen
<i>Saxifraga cespitosa</i> ssp. <i>cespitosa</i>	Tufted Saxifrage	Longyearbyen / Ny Alesund
<i>Saxifraga hirculus</i>	Yellow Marsh Saxifrage	Sundneset / Kapp Lee
<i>Saxifraga hyperborea</i>	Polar Saxifrage	Torellneset
<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i> ssp. <i>oppositifolia</i>	Purple Saxifrage	Longyearbyen - a common plant around Svalbard
<i>Saxifraga platysepala</i>	Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage	Lomfjorden
<i>Saxifraga rivularis</i> ssp. <i>rivularis</i>	Highland Brook Saxifrage	Bellsund / Ingeborgfjellet
<i>Saxifraga svalbardensis</i>	Svalbard Saxifrage	Sundneset
Scrophulariaceae	Figwort Family	
<i>Pedicularis hirsuta</i>	Hairy Lousewort	Lomfjorden / Sundneset / Kapp Lee
Liliidae	Monocotyledons	
Cyperaceae	Sedge Family	
<i>Carex ursina</i>	Polar Bear Sedge	Blomstrandhalvoya
<i>Eriophorum scheuchzeri</i> ssp. <i>arcticum</i>	Polar Cotton-grass	Longyearbyen
Juncaceae	Rush Family	
<i>Juncus biglumis</i>	Two-flowered Rush	Longyearbyen
<i>Luzula arcuata</i> ssp. <i>arcuata</i>	Curved Wood-rush	Longyearbyen
<i>Luzula confusa</i>	Northern Wood-rush	Longyearbyen / Sundneset
Poaceae	Grass Family	
<i>Alopecurus magellanicus</i>	Polar Foxtail	Longyearbyen
<i>Arctagrostis latifolia</i>	Russian Grass	Longyearbyen
<i>Deschampsia alpina</i>	Tundra Hair-grass	Longyearbyen
<i>Festuca viviparoidea</i>	Viviparous Fescue	Longyearbyen
<i>Poa alpina</i> var. <i>alpina</i>	Alpine Meadow-grass	Longyearbyen
<i>Poa alpina</i> var. <i>vivipara</i>	Viviparous Alpine Meadow-grass	Longyearbyen
<i>Puccinellia phryganodes</i>		Longyearbyen

References

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| The Flora of Svalbard | <i>Olaf. I. Ronning</i> |
| Flowers of Svalbard | <i>Nowegian Polar Institute</i> |
| Longyear Flora - A basic field guide | <i>Hanne Ingebrigtsen, Heide Midtrum and Sigmund Spjelkavik</i> |

Other Taxa

Various flies, springtails and a small moth (similar to Diamondback Moth *Plutella xylostella*) were noted.



Whole group, leaders, guides & hotel staff