Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report 8th – 19th July 2026



Polar Bear (and Arctic Tern)



Sabine's Gull



Walruses



Arctic Fox

Tour report by Tim Melling
Photos by George Nicholson and Tim Melling

Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: George Nicholson, Byron Palacios and Tim Melling (Naturetrek leaders), Zet Freiburghaus (expedition leader), Hannah Lawson, Eivind Aksnes, Erik Evardsson, and Saga Lindgren (expedition guides) with forty-seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

This was a fantastic trip, with great camaraderie and lots of good sightings. We managed to see four Polar Bears, about twenty Arctic Foxes, and countless Beluga Whales. Everyone enjoyed landing on a slab of ice up in the pack ice, and watching Little Auks just a few metres away. The spectacle of tens of thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots was unforgettable, though a posing Arctic Fox stole the show. The flowers were wonderful too, with Svalbard Poppy and Boreal Jacob's Ladder being the most popular. The MV Quest was a great ship for wildlife watching, and the crew were great, especially the catering staff who delivered amazing meals every day. Everyone agreed it was a fantastic, once in a lifetime trip, which fulfilled all our expectations.

Day 1 Wednesday 8th July

Most people caught the afternoon flight from Heathrow to Oslo, though some flew direct from other airports. We all met up in the hotel to tell people more about the trip, before heading off for a meal, then bed.

Day 2 Thursday 9th July

We were up bright and early for a 5.00am breakfast, then headed straight to the airport for our 7.00am flight to Longyearbyen. Everything ran just about to time, and we took a coach and headed into town. Most people headed out towards the dog kennels, enjoying some of the flowers on the way, including Svalbard Poppy, Drooping and Yellow Marsh Saxifrages, Arctic Bell Heather and Mountain Avens. Snow Buntings were singing from the buildings: we saw males, females, and even a few chicks. There were lots of Barnacle Geese with goslings too. Of special interest was a white Barnacle Goose, which is very rare. We saw lots of female Eiders, some with young, harrassed by Glaucous Gulls trying to snatch a duckling. There were several Dunlins, Purple Sandpipers and Ringed Plovers by the dog kennels, plus a couple of Red-throated Divers and Long-tailed Ducks on the nearby lake. A single Arctic Skua was flying around, plus quite a few Arctic Terns. The valley behind Longyearbyen gave us many Pink-footed Geese with goslings, but no Ptarmigans.

At 4.00pm we caught the coach and boarded the MV Quest. After a safety briefing, we set off, enjoying lots of Fulmars, Little Auks, Puffins and Brünnich's Guillemots flying by. After dinner, there were three or four Minke Whales around the ship near the mouth of Isfjord, plus three Arctic and a couple of Great Skuas. In the evening we chanced upon a huge group of hundreds of Belugas, which allowed close approach. There were several dark juveniles with them.

Day 3 Friday 10th July

We headed north through the night, reaching Fugelsfjord in time for breakfast. Early risers managed to see three Minke Whales, including one that breached three times. Three Arctic Skuas (including a dark-morph bird) were seen, plus Red-throated Divers. We also saw our first Arctic Fox, on a beach close to the ship. After breakfast we headed out on the Zodiacs. We headed down to the glacier, and enjoyed really close views of Black Guillemots

and Kittiwakes on the ice. The glacier was really active too, with frequent calvings, accompanied a few seconds later by a thunderous rumble. We headed back, but stopped by a small island to view an Arctic Skua and a tern colony.



Belugas



Arctic Skuas



Bearded Seal



Arctic Cuckoo-flower

Then Zet radioed for us to come round the other side, as he had found something interesting. When we arrived, we saw our first Polar Bear, taking a snooze! It looked like a female, and she stretched and looked up a few times, but remained in her sleeping position. We headed back, but stopped to see a Bearded Seal sleeping on an ice slab, which allowed close approach. Finally, we had some male and female Eiders, plus a Great Skua. It had not been a bad morning by anyone's standards!

After lunch, we headed to Hamiltonbukta, where we had a Zodiac cruise. We sailed below some huge cliffs, with thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots, and had great views of another Great Skua, plus a dark-morph Arctic Skua. But most popular was a young male Walrus (with barely any tusks), which allowed a close approach. We headed north towards the pack ice, and two more Walruses were seen late on.

Day 4 Saturday 11th July

We arrived at the pack ice at about 6.00am. There were good numbers of Little Auks, Fulmars and Kittiwakes, with smaller numbers of Black and Brünnich's Guillemots, and Puffins. In the morning we saw just one Arctic Skua, and one Arctic Tern (a first-summer bird). A number of Harp Seals were seen, though they were always skittish, and all we really saw were brief heads popping up, then dropping back down again. Late morning, we took a Zodiac ride and managed to land on a slab of sea ice. We also managed to get really close views of Little Auks on the ice, and in the water.

After lunch, we continued through the pack ice and managed to see three Bearded Seals, and about ten more Harp Seals. But alas, we found no Polar Bears. The usual pack ice birds were seen, but among only about ten Arctic Terns, two were first-summer birds (this age class is rare in the northern hemisphere). We left the pack ice late, and headed south back to Svalbard.

Day 5 Sunday 12th July

This morning, our first stop after breakfast was a Zodiac cruise in the vicinity of Logoya. We were very lucky to see Sabine's Gulls, Arctic Terns, Long-tailed Ducks, Red-throated Divers and Pink-footed Geese. We also had a distant view of a Polar Bear sleeping on a snow field. On the way back to the ship, we managed to see a single Walrus in the water.

After lunch, we visited Sorgfjord: the wind was blowing strongly, so we had to choose the sheltered side for a landing. It looked rather like a polar desert, but when we explored we found many different flowers, including some scarce ones: Polar and Moss Campions, and Spider, Slender, Brook, Alpine, Hawkweed-leaved, Purple, Drooping and Tufted Saxifrages. There were also four or five distant Reindeers, plus Snow Buntings, Arctic Skua, Pink-footed Geese, Eider plus the usual auks. Polar Bear and Fox scat both attracted attention.



King Eiders



Ivory Gulls



Spitsbergen landscape



Black Guillemot

On the way south to Alkefjellet, we saw two or three Fin and a Minke Whale, plus several Arctic Skuas. Alkefjellet was wonderful, with thousands of Brünnich's Guillemot in the air, on the ledges and in the water. It was mesmerising to look up and see guillemots filling the air like a swarm of locusts. We saw several Glaucous Gulls with chicks too. But best of all was an Arctic Fox, which performed for about fifteen minutes, finding a dead guillemot and then feasting on it in full view.

Day 6 Monday 13th July

Overnight, we had sailed to Monaco Glacier in Leifdefjord. It was snowing at higher altitudes and settling, but at sea level we had rain. We enjoyed a Zodiac cruise along the glacier front, but at a safe distance, as the glacier was actively calving. We saw two Great Skuas, and lots of Kittiwakes and Black Guillemots, but best of all were two Ivory Gulls, flying round and perching together on ice bergs. We also saw several Arctic Terns, including yet another first-summer bird.

After lunch we visited The Texas Bar, an old cabin where the tradition is that if you stay overnight, you leave the remains of your drink for subsequent visitors. As a result, it has a bar well-stocked with spirits and liqueurs. There were very few birds, apart from a few Eiders and Arctic Skuas, but the flowers were interesting. There were abundant Mountain Avens and Purple Saxifrage, plus a few more interesting things like Hairy Lousewort, Polar Cress, Net-leaved Willow, Iceland Purslane and Polar Horsetail. The high walkers also found Yellow-mountain Saxifrage and a distant Reindeer.

Day 7 Tuesday 14th July

We had some strong winds and rough seas overnight, but by breakfast it had died down. We cruised the north coast looking for wildlife, and found four Harbour Seals on rocks in their characteristic 'banana' posture. We also started to see a few Puffins again, after a few day's absence. Heading down the Smeerenburg fjord, we encountered four Walruses and three Minke Whales, and at the spectacular glacier we had three more Harbour Seals. On the way back to Smeerenburg we saw one more Minke.



Ptarmigan



Little Auk



Puffins



Arctic Fox

After lunch we boarded the Zodiacs and disembarked at the old whaling settlement of Smeerenburg, where we enjoyed a group of about twenty-five male Walruses, with more in the water nearby. As we approached, many of the Walruses raised their heads to look at us, but they soon settled down when they realised we were not a threat. On the nearby lake were six Red-throated Divers, and on the adjacent beach were three Ringed Plovers and four Purple Sandpipers. Two Grey Phalaropes flew over, but did not hang around. On the beach, we watched a Glaucous Gull eating a Short-thorn Sculpin fish, which it eventually swallowed it whole. We reboarded the Zodiacs with watching Walruses in the water, plus a close Minke Whale, then headed across the bay, where we sadly found a dead Polar Bear, plus a Harbour Seal. Nearby, we had brief views of yet another Arctic Fox.

Day 8 Wednesday 15th July

We sailed overnight to Kongsfjord, with the intention of walking at New London. But as we approached, we spotted some Belugas in the channel, so we went out to see them. When we arrived. We were delighted to find a Polar Bear swimming close to the Belugas, a satellite-collared female. We stopped the Zodiacs at a distance and watched her swimming round; she eventually climbed out on shore close to where we wanted to land. Our plans had to change: we headed up and visited a glacier with some magnificent icebergs, with a few Belugas swimming among them. We did not see the hoped for Long-tailed Skua, but we did see four King Eiders fly past, plus six Red-throated Divers, and several Arctic and a Great Skua.

After lunch, we went to Ny Alesund. Soon after we disembarked, a flock of about a hundred male King Eiders flew past. On the lake were a pair of Red-throated Divers and a pair of Grey Phalaropes, plus a few Barnacle Goose families. A few Purple Sandpipers and many Snow Buntings were also around, with a Long-tailed Duck flying around. Many people managed to see an Arctic Fox wandering around town, and on the beach were about thirty Harbour Seals. Offshore, there were repeated sightings of Minke Whales. We went for a walk on the tundra, where we learned about Amundsen and Nobile's attempts to reach the North Pole by balloon. There were a few interesting plants on the tundra, including Polar Dandelion and Arctic Cuckoo-flower. There were plenty of Reindeer too, but alas many had plastic ear tags as part of a research project.

After dinner, we sailed to Crossfjord and the 14th July Glacier, where we saw two King Eiders, Bearded Seal and another Polar Bear!

Day 9 Thursday 16th July

We awoke to a beautiful morning by the 14th July Glacier in St Jonsfjord, and had some great views of two King Eiders from the boat. We moved round to Cardiopynten for a Zodiac cruise, where we had fifty or more Belugas surfacing close to our Zodiacs. They headed into a small fjord, so we left them and went to look for Puffins on the cliffs. Eventually, we found quite a few nesting on cracks and crevices in the cliffs, and some wonderfully confiding ones on the water. We also saw a Harbour Seal hauled out, and a Bearded Seal in the water. A single Reindeer was also seen enjoying the luxuriant vegetation below the bird cliffs. There were good numbers of Kittiwakes, Brünnich's Guillemots and Glaucous Gulls with chicks, and we also saw and heard nesting Little Auks.

After lunch, we headed to Lilliehookbreen glacier, where we saw some magnificent calvings and thousands of Kittiwakes, plus at least five Ivory Gulls. One Zodiac managed some really close views, but most boats had them distantly against the glacier edge. There were also two Bearded Seals, including a really confiding, close individual.

Then we were offered a 'polar plunge': only three people participated, including leaders George and Byron, plus Saga from the MV Quest's crew. After this, we had a deck barbecue, which was enjoyed by all.



Kittiwakes and the Lilliehookbreen glacier

Day 10 Friday 17th July

A Minke Whale was spotted by the early risers as we entered Isfjord, plus a few Puffins among the now 'usual' birds. We landed at Alkhornet, where there were lots of Brünnich's Guillemots and Kittiwakes flying around the spectacular, Matterhorn-like cliff. We headed across the tundra, enjoying abundant flowers like Drooping and Yellow Marsh Saxifrages, Polar Cress and Sulphur-coloured Buttercup. We also found several Boreal Jacob's Ladders growing by a large boulder of white marble. Among the Arctic Skuas was a dark-morph bird, which are rare in Svalbard, making up just five percent of the population here. The Arctic Fox den showed no signs of activity, so a group went to get close views of the abundant Reindeer. After about an hour, we trekked across to the other fox den, where we had heard there was more activity.

We saw three fluffy, dark Arctic Fox cubs sleeping on the grass. There were also three grey, adult-type Arctic Foxes hiding among the rocks, which looked a little larger than the brown ones. So we wondered whether these might be siblings from an earlier litter. Two Reindeer came lumbering by and startled the fox cubs into activity, giving some photo-opportunities before it was time to head back. A few people had a Zodiac cruise instead of going 'fox hunting': they saw an Arctic Fox scavenging the shoreline, plus several Harbour Seals, including one suckling a pup. There were also Purple Sandpipers, Eiders, Snow Buntings and Glaucous Gulls.

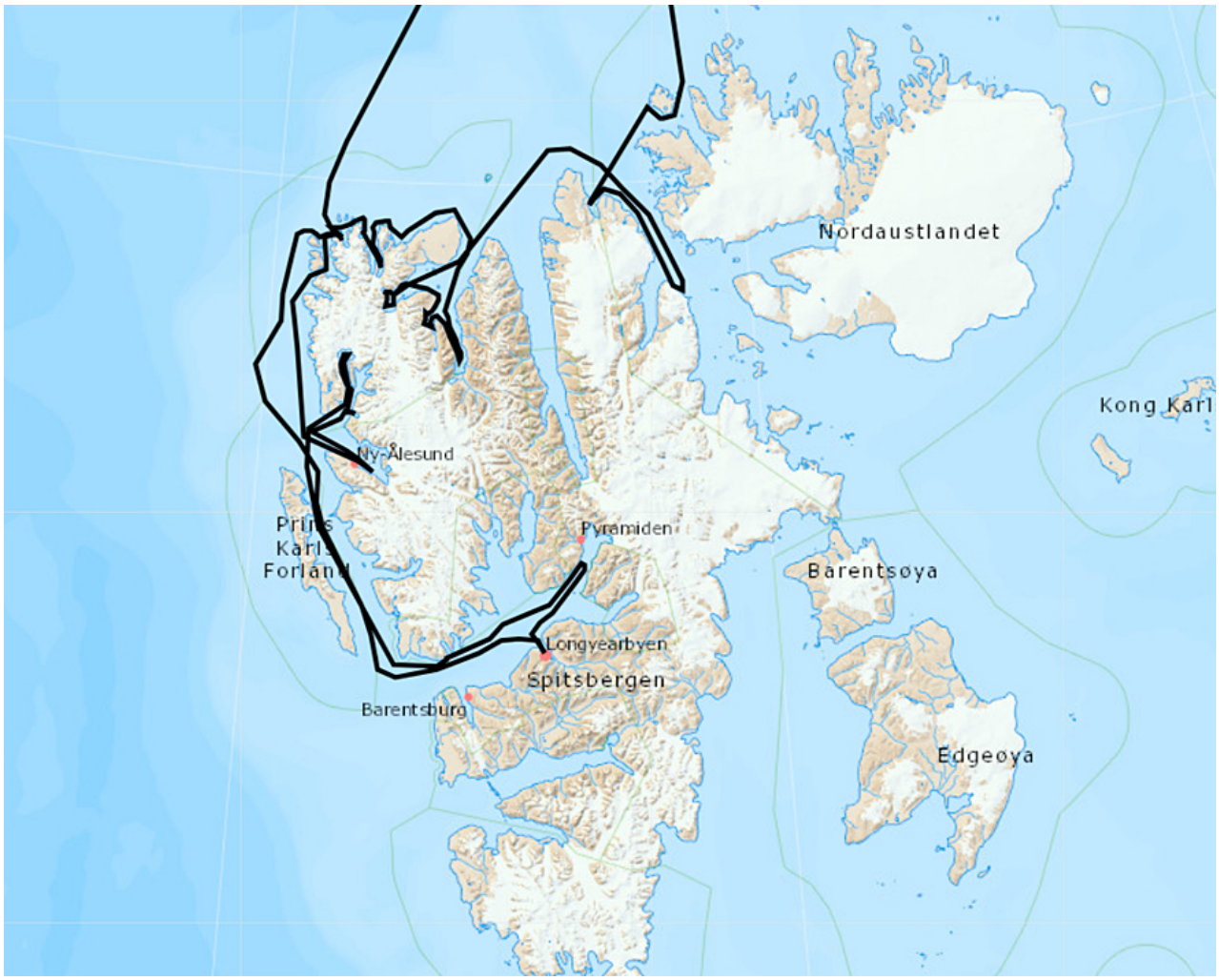
After lunch, we headed to Skansbuckta, but en route we saw yet another pod of Belugas. At Skansbuckta, we wandered around the scree slopes looking for flowers. We found plenty of interesting ones, including Boreal Jacob's Ladder, Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage, Arctic Cinquefoil, and Lobe-leaved and Snow Buttercups. There were also Reindeers and a beautiful dark Arctic Fox. We headed back to the boat for the final time.

Day 11 Saturday 18th July

We disembarked straight after breakfast, and had a walk round the town, seeing most of the usual birds and flowers. We were entertained by huge groups of Barnacle Geese with goslings wandering round town, most of the adults now moulting and flightless. An Arctic Fox was showing an interest in them. A few went on a wild Ptarmigan chase up the valley, and succeeded, but unfortunately the birds had disappeared by the time others arrived. Many enjoyed a visit to the museum, and we also managed to check in for tomorrow's flight and to return our hired wellington boots. We visited various restaurants for an evening meal. The Manchester travellers caught a flight this evening, while the rest overnighted ready to fly the next day.

Day 12 Sunday 19th July

We arrived at the airport at 9.00am, which gave time for a quick look at the airport pools. There were two Grey Phalaropes and a pair of Red-throated Divers with two young. Byron got his scope on them from the airport lounge, enabling those who had missed them at Ny Alesund a chance to see them, albeit distantly. It was then time for the flight to Heathrow via Oslo, which marked the end of a truly spectacular wildlife adventure.



Expedition map

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Species lists

Birds

		July 2026										
Common name	**Scientific name**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
Barnacle Goose	*Branta leucopsis*	✓	30		5		20	40	10	2	✓	✓
Pink-footed Goose	*Anser brachyrhynchus*	✓			✓		1		20		✓	
Long-tailed Duck	*Clangula hyemalis*	2			2			1				
King Eider	*Somateria spectabilis*							100	2			
Common Eider	*Somateria mollissima*	✓	50		5	10	30	30	✓	30	20	30
Rock Ptarmigan	*Lagopus muta*										6	
Common Ringed Plover	*Charadrius hiaticula*	4					3	2			2	2
Grey Phalarope	*Phalaropus fulicarius*						2	2				2
Ruddy Turnstone	*Arenaria interpres*						6					
Dunlin	*Calidris alpina*	4									1	
Purple Sandpiper	*Calidris maritima*	5	2		1	1	4	5		8	10	
Arctic Skua	*Stercorarius parasiticus*	4	3	2	5	20	8	10	2	10	4	1
Great Skua	*Stercorarius skua*	2	2			2	2	2	1			
Atlantic Puffin	*Fratercula arctica*	✓	40	10			10	20	50	20		
Black Guillemot	*Cepphus grylle*	5	✓	40	25	40	40	30	✓	✓	5	
Little Auk	*Alle alle*	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Brünnich's Guillemot	*Uria lomvia*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Arctic Tern	*Sterna paradisaea*	✓	50	10	50	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Black-legged Kittiwake	*Rissa tridactyla*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sabine's Gull	*Xema sabini*				✓							
Ivory Gull	*Pagophila eburnea*					2			5			
Glaucous Gull	*Larus hyperboreus*	✓	50		40	25	20	40	50	20	20	10
Red-throated Diver	*Gavia stellata*	2			2		6	8			2	4
Northern Fulmar	*Fulmarus glacialis*	✓	✓	40	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Snow Bunting	*Plectrophenax nivalis*	✓	2		10	2	2	20	4	20	✓	✓

Mammals

D=dead		July 2026										
Common name	**Scientific name**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
Fin Whale	*Balaenoptera physalus*				4							
Common Minke Whale	*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*	4	3		1		5	2		1		
Beluga	*Delphinapterus leucas*	c.200						40	50	20		
Reindeer	*Rangifer tarandus*	3			5	1		10	1	40		
Arctic Fox	*Vulpes lagopus*		1		1		1	1		9	1	
Polar Bear	*Ursus maritimus*		1		1		D	2				
Walrus	*Odobenus rosmarus*		3		1		30					
Bearded Seal	*Erignathus barbatus*		1	3		1		1	3			
Harp Seal	*Pagophilus groenlandicus*			12								
Harbour Seal	*Phoca vitulina*						7	35	1	8		

Plants

		July 2026										
Scientific name	**Common name**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
Equisetaceae	**Horsetails**											
Equisetum arvense	Field Horsetail					✓				✓	✓	
Juncaceae	**Rush Family**											
Juncus biglumis	Two-flowered Rush					✓				✓		
Luzula arcuata	Curved Wood-rush											
Luzula confusa	Northern Wood-rush					✓				✓		
Cyperaceae	**Sedge Family**											
Eriophorum scheuchzeri	Scheuchzer's Cottongrass	✓									✓	
Carex ursina	Bear Sedge											
Carex subspathacea	Hoppner Sedge											
Carex rupestris	Rock Sedge											
Carex nardina	Nard Sedge											
Poaceae	**Grasses**											
Trisetum spicatum	Spiked Oat-grass											
Puccinellia phryganodes	Arctic Saltmarsh-grass											

		July 2026										
Scientific name	**Common name**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
Poa alpina	Alpine Meadow-grass											
Festuca vivipara	Viviparous Sheep's Fescue				✓					✓	✓	
Arctagrostis latifolia	Broad-leaved Polar-grass											
Alopecurus magellanicus	Alpine Foxtail									✓		
Deschampsia cespitosa subsp. *neoalpina*	Tufted Hair-grass											
Papaveraceae	**Poppy Family**											
Oreomecon polaris	Spitsbergen Poppy	✓			✓						✓	
Ranunculaceae	**Buttercup Family**											
Ranunculus arcticus	Eskimo Buttercup											
Ranunculus pygmaeus	Pygmy Buttercup	✓			✓	✓				✓	✓	
Ranunculus nivalis	Mountain Buttercup				✓					✓		
Ranunculus sulphureus	Polar Buttercup									✓		
Ranunculus samojedorum	Subarctic Buttercup											
Saxifragaceae	**Saxifrage Family**											
Micranthes hieraciifolia	Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage				✓			✓		✓		
Micranthes nivalis	Alpine Saxifrage				✓							
Micranthes tenuis	Slender Snow Saxifrage				✓					✓		
Saxifraga hirculus	Marsh Saxifrage	✓								✓	✓	
Saxifraga flagellaris	Spider Saxifrage				✓							
Saxifraga svalbardensis	Svalbard Saxifrage											
Saxifraga oppositifolia	Purple Saxifrage				✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Saxifraga aizoides	Yellow Mountain Saxifrage					✓						
Saxifraga rivularis	Highland Saxifrage				✓							
Saxifraga hyperborea	Alpine Brook Saxifrage											
Saxifraga cernua	Drooping Saxifrage	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Saxifraga cespitosa	Tufted Saxifrage	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Chrysosplenium tetrandrum	Arctic Golden-saxifrage											
Rosaceae	**Rose Family**											
Dryas octopetala	Mountain Avens	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Potentilla pulchella	Beautiful Arctic Cinquefoil									✓		
Potentilla hyparctica	Ragged Cinquefoil				✓							

		July 2026										
Scientific name	**Common name**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
Salicaceae	**Willow Family**											
Salix reticulata	Net-leaved Willow					✓						
Salix polaris	Polar Willow	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Brassicaceae	**Mustard Family**											
Arabis alpina	Alpine Rock-cress											
Draba alpina	Alpine Whitlowgrass				✓	✓						
Draba oxycarpa	Pale Whitlowgrass				✓	✓						
Draba corymbosa	Corymbose Whitlowgrass											
Draba norvegica	Rock Whitlowgrass											
Draba subcapitata	Subcapitate Whitlowgrass											
Draba fladnizensis	White Arctic Whitlowgrass				✓							
Draba arctica	Mealy Whitlowgrass											
Draba lactea	Milky Whitlowgrass											
Cardamine polemonioides	Arctic Cuckooflower					✓		✓		✓		
Cochlearia groenlandica	Greenland Scurvy-grass	✓			✓	✓				✓	✓	
Polygonaceae	**Dock Family**											
Bistorta vivipara	Alpine Bistort	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Oxyria digyna	Mountain Sorrel	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Koenigia islandica	Iceland Purslane	✓				✓					✓	
Caryophyllaceae	**Campion Family**											
Cherleria biflora	Southern Sandwort											
Sagina nivalis	Snow Pearlwort							✓		✓		
Sabulina rubella	Mountain Sandwort					✓				✓		
Cerastium regelii	Polar Mouse-ear				✓	✓				✓		
Cerastium arcticum	Arctic Mouse-ear	✓			✓	✓				✓	✓	
Silene uralensis	Northern Catchfly				✓							
Silene involucrata	Spitsbergen Catchfly	✓									✓	
Silene acaulis	Moss Campion	✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Stellaria humifusa	Low Stitchwort									✓		
Stellaria longipes	Long-stalked Stitchwort											
Polemoniaceae	**Jacob's-ladder Family**											
Polemonium boreale	Boreal Jacob's-ladder									✓		

		July 2026										
Scientific name	**Common name**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**
Ericaceae	**Heath Family**											
Cassiope tetragona	Cassiope	✓						✓		✓	✓	
Asteraceae	**Daisy Family**											
Taraxacum arcticum	Arctic Dandelion											
Taraxacum	Polar Dandelion							✓			✓	
Boraginaceae	**Borage Family**											
Mertensia maritima	Oysterplant											
Orobanchaceae	**Broomrape Family**											
Pedicularis hirsuta	Mountain Lousewort				✓	✓				✓		