

SPITSBERGEN (SVALBARD): **A Polar Wilderness**



11-26 JULY 2016



The inquisitive female Polar Bear, which swam out to SV Noorderlicht at Sundneset. All photos by Mike Watson unless stated

Our 15 day circumnavigation of Spitsbergen aboard the wonderful SV Noorderlicht again delivered some impressive totals, including 11 Polar Bears, c.200 Walruses, 11 Arctic Foxes, 26 Ivory Gulls, 4 Sabine's Gulls and 7 Long-tailed Skuas plus 11 Belugas as well as Northern Minke and Humpback Whales, not forgetting the stupendous glaciated landscape and the exquisite High Arctic flora. Polar Bear numbers were down 50% on my last voyage here 4 years ago, surely owing to the reduced extent of Arctic sea ice this summer, however, some of them were still in good condition. However, the message is clear, if you want to see Polar Bears in Svalbard, do not delay. The future looks quite bleak for them. Ivory Gulls depend on Polar Bear kills and follow them around so when the sea ice is far to the north, so are some of the gulls. Again Ivory Gull numbers were low compared to my last voyage here when we saw around 80. Captain Ted also commented on how the glaciers have visibly receded over the last 20 years he has been sailing here. If you haven't been to Svalbard before then you would not notice the difference of course and the glacial scenery is still fabulous but yet again, a visit sooner rather than later is a good idea.

Many of our folks these days spend extra time in Longyearbyen prior to (and sometimes after) our cruises, to allow some contingency against unexpected travel delay as well as to explore the town and its immediate surroundings. There is much to see here both in terms of interesting museums, galleries, shops, bars and, of course, wildlife, which lives side by side with the local population of around only 2,100 people, less than some of the massive cruise ships that stop here. '*Do not come here to die*' is a local slogan and much of the population is young. A little extra time also allows for a change in the weather and the bright sunny and breezy weather immediately prior to the cruise was the nicest of my stay in Svalbard. It is easy to lose track of time here in the midnight sun and it is difficult to know when to stop. I got a bit carried away and my smartphone's health app recorded over 22,000 steps in my first 24 hours here! Familiar northern birds like Rock Ptarmigan, Arctic Skua (or Parasitic Jaeger), Purple Sandpiper, Common Ringed Plover, Red Phalarope and Snow Bunting can all be found breeding close to, and sometimes, even in the town.



Map of our route around Spitsbergen (Arjen Drost).



Common Eider (female) and next page: Purple Sandpiper and Snow Bunting (juvenile).

11 July Longyearbyen & Isfjorden

Eventually the time came to meet the rest of our participants off the flight from Tromsø in northern Norway and once our baggage was packed off towards the Noorderlicht we all headed into town. Longyearbyen is a very charismatic town and apart from coal mining artefacts, which are left standing in an arrested state of decay, its buildings are mostly very neat and modern and are reminiscent of the houses and hotels of a monopoly board, and typically for the Arctic, painted in bright colours. Our first stop was an area of common ground in the town, where sadly the hoped for Boreal Jacob's Ladder was not in flower and was therefore a less than impressive sight! It was clear that many flowers were at quite an advanced stage this year, given some warm (by Svalbard standards) and sunny weather. There was some other classic Arctic flora here including: White Arctic Bell-heather and lots of Mountain Avens but these were past their best.

Most of us then walked east towards the dog kennels and the famous nearby Polar Bear warning sign on the edge of town. Unfortunately there was no sign of a Red Phalarope but we did manage a pair of Arctic Skuas tending a large fluffy chick on a grassy area opposite the snow-ski outlet. Also here were four Dunlins, several Purple Sandpipers and a Common Ringed Plover. Arctic Terns were breeding on the foreshore nearby and monitored our progress closely along the road and both Black-legged Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls were present in good numbers. Wildfowl were represented by c.10 Long-tailed Ducks out in the fjord as well as more Common Eiders and Barnacle Geese, which had gathered on the pools by the dog kennels and included a leucistic bird.

Pretty Svalbard Poppies were growing along the otherwise barren roadside verges here. After posing for the obligatory photos by the '*Gjelder hele Svalbard*' ('all over Svalbard') Polar Bear warning sign we all wandered back to the port, where our lovely vessel SV Noorderlicht was waiting for us. Once aboard, we settled into our cosy cabins and enjoyed the first of many fantastic meals, served up by our talented and resourceful Dutch chef Menthe Groefsema, a Noorderlicht veteran.





Northern Fulmar (a slightly blueish individual).

We set sail in the evening sunshine, heading west down the huge Isfjorden ('ice fjord'), with an escort of Northern Fulmars (as usual we saw a wide range of colour morphs throughout the tour and again the pale birds were in primary moult, whereas the blue birds were not, surely different populations here?) and past the first of very many squadrons of Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots heading to and from their breeding cliffs. Unfortunately the skies were now clouding over marking the end of the fair weather on what generally turned out to be a very unusual grey and wet cruise this year. Leaving behind the grim 'Mordor-like' Russian mining settlement of Barentsburg at the mouth of Isfjorden marked the end of the (Russian!) mobile phone signal and we were off into the midnight sun wilderness of Svalbard (although unfortunately the sun was hidden most of the time this year).

Again this time there was very little ice around the islands and the pack ice itself was way to the north beyond 81 degrees latitude. Unfortunately (for the wildlife) the ice, which formed on the sea the previous winter was not very thick and, although currents have a smaller part to play, this is the main factor that governs how much ice is present in the Barents Sea during the following summer. In fact the summer of 2016 saw the least extent and thickness of Arctic sea ice in recorded history! Heading anticlockwise also allowed us to make the longest sea journey across Storfjorden ('large fjord') with a following wind without needing to gamble on the weather in this area towards the end of the cruise in two weeks time. The weather in Svalbard is notoriously difficult to forecast more than a few days ahead. This plan also allowed us to spend some time in the very attractive south of Spitsbergen without the urge to hurry back to Longyearbyen.

Birds: Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Northern Fulmar, Common Ringed Plover, Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Thick-billed Murre, Little Auk, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Flora: Polar Field Horsetail (*Equisetum arvense borealis*), Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Sea Sandwort (*Honckenya peploides diffusa*), Arctic Chickweed (*Stellaria humifusa*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Arctic White Campion (*Silene involucrate furcata*), Sulphur-coloured Buttercup (*Ranunculus sulphureus*), Svalbard Poppy (*Papaver dahlianun polare*), Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus compacta*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), White Arctic Bell-heather (*Cassiope tetragona*), Boreal Jacob's Ladder (*Polemonium boreale*), Hairy Lousewort (*Pedicularis hirsuta*), Arctic Cottongrass (*Eriophorum scheuchzeri arcticum*) and Polar Foxtail (*Alopecurus magellanicus*).



Black-legged Kittiwake & next page: Robin Allen sketching at Recherchebreen & the Mansfield Hut at Snatcherpynten.

12 July Recherchefjorden, Bellsund

Some of us were rudely awoken in the 'night' by the anchor chain, which was to become a familiar and welcome sound on this tour, just after we entered Recherchefjorden, a large southwestern inlet of Bellsund (which is named after the bell-shaped mountain Klokkefjellet on its southern shore). This pretty 8km long side fjord was named after the French corvette 'La Recherche', which carried an expedition here in 1838.

Asbestodden. Our morning zodiac landing, in overcast conditions and a cool breeze, incorporated a walk to a glacier lagoon across some nice tundra that produced our first Purple Saxifrages as well as some Pink-footed Goose families. The Barnacle Geese here also had goslings, although the pair of Ringed Plovers we saw was still at the egg stage of nesting. The songflight of a Purple Sandpiper was a delight here, a contrast to the way most of us usually see them at the water's edge in winter. A pair of Red-throated Loons was also new here. However, the highlights were undoubtedly our first encounters with land mammals. An Arctic Fox ran along the shore and six Reindeer of the small goggle-eyed Svalbard form *platyrhynchus* were grazing the tundra here.

Birds: Pink-footed Goose, Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Common Ringed Plover, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Arctic Fox, Reindeer.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus compacta*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*).





Polar Cress (Cardamine pratensis ssp. augustifolia) and next page: Reindeer and glacier ice (both Arjen Drost).

Snatcherpynten. After having lunch back on board SV Noorderlicht we made another landing in Recherchefjorden in the afternoon, this time in the southwest corner at Snatcherpynten ('Snatcher Point'), about 1km south of Renardbreen ('Fox Glacier') from where we walked from the dilapidated Mansfield hut across some very boggy tundra to Tomtodden ('dwelling site') in a cold wind with rain at times. The mild climate (by Svalbard standards) owing to its proximity to the West Spitsbergen current, means that Bellsund becomes ice-free in the spring earlier than Hornsund to the south and it was this, as well as the availability of sheltered bays, wildlife and minerals that made this area attractive to the early whalers. This site was also the first place that Europeans over-wintered on Svalbard, although not intentionally, when eight whalers were accidentally left behind in 1630! However, there were buildings here at that time, since disappeared under the advancing Renardbreen Glacier. One can only imagine their horror at discovering their vessel had departed without them but incredibly they managed to survive.

We managed to add Polar Cress and Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage to the plant list here as well as an unidentified Whitlow-grass, which are notoriously tricky to separate. Birds were much the same as the morning landing including another song-fighting Purple Sandpiper and three Arctic Skuas. There was another Arctic Fox and six Reindeer, including a very cute small calf.

Birds: Pink-footed Goose, Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Little Auk, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Arctic Fox, Reindeer.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Polar Cress (*Cardamine pratensis augustifolia*), Whitlow-grass sp. (*Draba* sp.), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hieracifolia*), Yellow Mountain Saxifrage (*Saxifraga aizoides*), Yellow Marsh (or Bog) Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus compacta*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*).





Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage (Saxifraga platysepala), Akseløya.

13 July Bellsund

Akseløya. We left anchor in Recherchefjorden and had breakfast as we sailed across the 20km wide Bellsund to the strange barrier island of Akseløya, at the mouth of Van Mijenfjorden, passing our first Atlantic Puffins on the way, amongst hordes of Little Auks and Thick-billed Murres. The 8km long by 1km-wide island was named after the schooner 'Aksel Thordsen' of Tromsø, which was chartered by A. E. Nordeskiöld's 1864 expedition. The morning landing was made on the west coast, from where we hiked through a strange lunar landscape of vertical rock strata dotted with deserted eider duck and goose nests, the duck's nests simply an untidy tangle of down but the goose nests were surrounded by a thick halo of droppings. Unfortunately the weather was still against us today, heavy grey skies with rain, becoming heavy towards the end of the hike.

We saw our first Red Phalaropes here, although only in flight, whizzing across the tundra in the wind and also here were five Red-throated Loons and three pairs of Arctic Skuas. The avian predator niche in Svalbard seems to have been filled by Great Skua and, as on my last visit here in 2012, we watched Bonxies attacking Barnacle Geese on the tundra that leads down to the eastern shore. Also breeding on the tundra were several Purple Sandpipers. The flora included our only Spider Plants (or Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage) of the tour, the tiny and weird, yellow-flowered saxifrage that sends out aerial shoots (or stolons). The first plant expertly found by Gay was the cause of some excitement amongst the botanists! We later found more of these most excellent little plants growing in the barren up-tilted limestone pavement here. It was nice to have something to photograph that was still OK in rain! Looking towards the southern end of the island is a group of huts occupied by the well-known local trapper Tommy Sandal, who keeps the traditional of over-wintering alive here.

Birds: Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, Snow Bunting.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Moss Champion (*Silene acaulis*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage (*Saxifraga platysepala*), Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus compacta*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*).



© Arjen Dröst



© Arjen Dröst



Little Auks, some with full crops, take flight & previous page: Akseløya (above) and Ingeborgfjellet (both Arjen Drost).

Ingeborgfjellet. Our afternoon landing took place at the totally awesome Ingeborgfjellet. Named after the heroine of the old Norse *Fridtjovsaga* this is a 714m high peak in the north shore of Bellsund. Although the skies remained overcast, there was only light rain, which mostly cleared later in a light easterly wind, by which time the sea had calmed as well. On our approach we could see the whitened rocks of the Little Auk colony, located on a large scree slope, only just above the beach and therefore one of the most accessible. We enjoyed a great session with the Little Auks, sitting around the edge of their colony from where we could watch their comings and goings as well as regular massed flights when a Glaucous Gull passed by or they spotted the nearby Arctic Fox, which we saw had taken at least two of them. The fox was barking regularly from a large rock, we thought maybe telling its cubs to remain hidden in our presence? The Little Auks numbered several thousand but were more or less uncountable with all this commotion! Other birds noted here included three Great Black-backed Gulls, a Bellsund regular and another flyby Red Phalarope. The tiny and insignificant Pygmy Buttercup was a new plant for the cruise here but there was no doubt about the highlight of the afternoon! After leaving Ingeborgfjellet, we waved goodbye to pretty Bellsund and sailed south down the Spitsbergen's west coast, continuing overnight to Hornsund.

Birds: Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, Black-legged Kittiwake, Great Black-backed Gull, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Arctic Fox, Reindeer.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmeus*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Polar Foxtail (*Alopecurus magellanicus*).



A Little Auk returns to its nesting burrow and next page: SV Noorderlicht in Bellsund.





© Arjen Drost



© Arjen Drost



Previous page: Reindeer in Bellsund and below: Beluga (both Arjen Drost) and above: a young Beluga, yet to attain the ivory white skin colour of its parents.

14 July Hornsund

We arrived in this lovely fjord in the early morning to another rather overcast scene. Hornsund is named after Poole's log from around 1610 when he wrote '*They brought a piece of a Deeres horn aboard, therefore I called this sound Horne Sound*'. In the northwest corner of the inlet, Burgerbukta is comprised of two arms, Vestre and Austre (West and East) and the name Burger belonged to Wilhelm Burger (1844-1920) an Austrian court photographer and member of Count Wilczek's expedition to Spitsbergen and Novaya Zemlya in 1872, which mapped and named the bay.

Vestre Burgerbukta is usually a very productive spot and we skipped a landing and spent the morning cruising slowly to the massive calving ice face of the Paierlbreen glacier. This glacier is named after Georg Paierl, an Austrian alpine guide and another member of the Count Wilczek 1872 expedition. What a truly fantastic place this is! Although there were no Polar Bears here this time we did see a much more difficult mammal in the form of a pod of Belugas. Arjen rated this as one of his best ever encounters with the normally shy animal. Once we were within around 100m of them Captain Ted switched off the Noorderlicht's engine and we waited in silence as they came closer to the boat, as if to have a closer look at us. They included at least one dark bodied calf, a contrast to the pearly white adults. A wonderful experience! Whilst watching the Belugas a couple of Ivory Gulls patrolled the calving face of the glacier, occasionally joining the kittiwakes feeding there. At least three Ringed Seals had sought refuge on the ice below the face of the glacier and another interesting sighting here was an almost completely leucistic (rather than albinistic) Black Guillemot. One of the big advantages of the SV Noorderlicht is that owing to its smaller size it can approach wildlife immediately and there is no need to wait to be decanted into a zodiac as its deck is already low enough to the water for some great photo angles. As we departed Burgerbukta Vestre, Menthe appeared on deck with a large pot of hot chocolate, what a nice surprise and a great location for something like this!

Birds: Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Ivory Gull, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin.

Mammals: Beluga, Ringed Seal.





Previous page: Arjen serving hot chocolate in Vestre Burgerbukta and below: Ilppo Kangas, who was returning to Svalbard 61 years after his previous visit(!). This page: Alpine Rock Cress (*Arabis alpina*), Gnälodden.

Gnälodden. After lunch we made a landing in Hornsund at Gnälodden to view an impressive bird cliff behind a Polish Research Station hut. The name Gnälodden means something like ‘the incessantly humming mountain’, on account of the kittiwake colony there. This was one of the best examples of the effect of the bird colony on the vegetation below it. Starting with the tiniest nutrients in the sea and passing through the small fish eaten by the birds it is easy to see how the birds’ guano leads to the more fertile turf found below bird cliffs. Patches of green in the landscape here indicate the presence of bird cliffs and the tundra here was very rich and consequently we recorded some new flora here in the form of Snow Buttercup and one flowering plant of the rare Alpine Rock Cress (*Arabis alpina*). This little white-flowered plant is found at only a handful of localities in Svalbard but it is incredibly widespread in world terms being found on mountains in tropical as well as temperate regions.

There was also a small colony of Glaucous Gulls nesting by the shore here, on isolated large boulders, around 4m high. They already had some large fluffy youngsters, two per nest. A flock of moulting Barnacle Geese was resting on the beach and both skuas, Arctic and Great, were buzzing the endless streams of incoming seabirds. In the late afternoon we cruised across Hornsund to our anchor at Gåshamna (‘Goose Harbour’) where our first King Eiders (four drakes) were spotted, amongst the Common Eider flock.

Birds: Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Great Skua, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Alpine Rock Cress (*Arabis alpina*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmaeus*), Snow Buttercup (*Ranunculus nivalis*), Whitlow-grass sp. (*Draba* sp.), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus compacta*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Highland Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rivularis*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Polar Foxtail (*Alopecurus magellanicus*).



Bowhead Whale bones at Gåshamna in Hornsund.

15 July Hornsund to Sørkapp

Gåshamna. We had breakfast at anchor in Gåshamna this morning before we made a rather dull and misty landing here near the remains of the whalers' blubber ovens and after some exploration we continued to the mouth of the fjord overlooking the open sea. The former sites of the blubber ovens could also be seen, as raised mounds, with a little more vegetation than the surrounding areas and some fragments of red bricks. The Bowheads were targeted in summer and were hunted for blubber, meat, oil, bones, and baleen (hence the absence of the latter on Svalbard's beaches). Like right whales, they swim slowly and float after death, which made them easy to hunt from small boats. There was much dispute over whaling activities here between the various European nations, which actually led to some armed conflict as equipment left behind over the winter was stolen or sometimes destroyed. There were a couple of small bird colonies on the cliffs, one of scattered Northern Fulmars and the other a tighter group of kittiwakes and the nutrients provided by the ancient Bowhead Whale bones here also aided a little plant life, however, the tundra here was particularly barren. In fact I only recorded three plant species on this landing. Birds again included both Arctic and Great Skuas but otherwise we saw the same familiar favourites. It was raining as we left the shore, ferried by our ever cheerful second mate, Zweitse, back to our warm and cosy cabins.

We had enjoyed our time in Hornsund but it was now time to set off on the longest sea journey of the cruise, south towards Sørkapp ('South Cape') and then northwest into Storfjorden towards the eastern isles. Still accompanied by flocks of Brünnich's Guillemots and Little Auks, along with a handful of Black Guillemots and Puffins, it was a little bumpy this evening where the Gulf Stream meets the East Spitsbergen current but much calmer than the last time I made this voyage. A beefy young Pomarine Skua flew over the boat on this stretch, our only one of the cruise.

Birds: King Eider, Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Pomarine Skua, Arctic Skua, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, Snow Bunting.

Flora: Polar Scurvy-Grass (*Cochlearia groenlandica*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*).



Purple Sandpiper at Kapp Leestasjonen.

16 July Storfjorden & Edgeøya

Kapp Leestasjonen & Dolerittneset. By morning we were gently cruising north up Storfjorden past Edgeøya, the third largest island of the archipelago. Covering more than 5,000km sq it is named after the English merchant and whaler Thomas Edge, who died in 1624, having seen the island in 1616. In the afternoon we went ashore at Kapp Leestasjonen near Dolerittneset, a sheltered bay on the northwest tip of Edgeøya and the site of a walrus massacre at the end of the 19th century. The sun-bleached bones of the unfortunate animals still litter the plain above the beach as another stark reminder of the terrible past. Some animals even made it well up the plain, towards the escarpment before they were finally speared. Again the local flora has benefitted from the added nutrients with many saxifrages taking advantage of the extra calcium provided by the bones over the many years they have lain here. In contrast to my last visit here the landing was very productive, notably for Arctic Fox. We watched one mobbed by the local Arctic Skuas, as well as foraging along the beach and another young fox was amongst some rocks at Dolerittneset.

The highlight, however, was the haul-out of Walruses on the beach, a batchelor party of at least 16 animals. It was nice to see that they have returned to the site of the historic massacre. There was also a good count of reindeer, they are particularly numerous on the southeast islands. Notable birds included another seven King Eiders and a Red-throated Loon. While sat on the beach watching the Walruses and foxes, we enjoyed some great views of Purple Sandpipers. There was also quite a rich flora by Svalbard standards, being still in the '*High Arctic Polar Willow zone*'. The east coast of Edgeøya and neighbouring Barentsøya is barren polar desert in comparison.

Birds: King Eider, Common Eider, Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Walrus, Arctic Fox.

Flora: Hairy Lousewort (*Pedicularis hirsuta*), Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmaeus*), Snow Buttercup (*Ranunculus nivalis*), Svalbard Poppy (*Papaver dahlianum polare*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Polar Foxtail (*Alopecurus magellanicus*).



Polar Bear, Sundneset.

17 July Polar Bear Day!

Barentsøya is named after the Dutch navigator and discoverer of Svalbard, Willem Barentz, who made three voyages to the Arctic in the 1590s but died while trying to overwinter on Novaya Zemlya in 1597, aged around 40. So it was fitting that our first bear was seen at **Sundneset** on the southwest corner of the island named after him. But not for long... it was a very inquisitive young female that could probably smell Menthe's bread-making and she leapt into the water and swam towards the Noorderlicht. She didn't come closer than around 30m though and eventually headed back to shore and continued her progress along the shore, stopping to play with some manmade objects including a plastic bottle at one stage. She was a very beautiful animal in good condition with not a mark on her. Polar Bears usually appear earlier on this tour so there was a lot of anticipation of this sighting. During the 'night' a group of 8 King Eiders had been near the Noorderlicht but they had gone by the time most folks stirred.

Our first bear sighting was followed soon afterwards by another, a large male sleeping on the tundra above the shoreline on a small islet in the **Jakimovičøyane** chain. He didn't do much and we were not keen to disturb him so we pressed on. Jan Kazimirovich Jakimovič, died in 1905 and was a captain in the Russian Navy, commanding the icebreaker 'Ledokol II'. In the afternoon we continued north, into the head of Storfjorden and towards the incredible Negribreen. There were some Pink-footed Geese on the Jakimovičøyane and a Red Phalarope flew past well away from land.

The grande finale to the day was an outstanding highlight of the tour. **Negribreen** is a very large glacier at the head of Storfjorden and has a calving face (Kapp Antinori) over 15 km long (Baron Cristoforo Negri (1809-96) was an Italian geographer, who founded the Reale Società Geografica Italiana). As we approached it, large blue glacier icebergs came into view, their colour indicating very old ice. Having been compressed within the glacier for thousands of years the gases trapped inside the ice alter the way it refracts sunlight. We noticed a Polar Bear sitting on a large blue berg amongst the mess of ice that had been calved by the glacier. As we edged closer it became apparent that it had just been injured, with bright red wounds on its neck. There was also a presence of Ivory Gulls here with maybe as many as 20 of these gorgeous gulls flying around and perching on the ice floes. As





Previous page: the losing bear and this page: the victor. Following pages: Negribreen scenes (Arjen Drost)

we changed position we spotted a second bear, a larger and more powerful looking male, swimming away through the ice with the remains of a seal in its jaws. It stopped after some time and dragged out its meal onto the ice, soon to be surrounded by gulls, mostly Ivory Gulls but a few Glaucous Gulls as well. It was obvious what had just happened. With food so scarce this summer the larger bear had clearly overpowered the smaller one, who now had some serious-looking injuries for its trouble, as it sat on its iceberg looking sorry for itself, a forlorn sight.

So that was a total of four bears today and in some very interesting circumstances, a day that we will all remember for a very long time. We cruised away from Negribreen and into the Heyleysundet, the narrow passage that separates Spitsbergen from Barentsøya, a place of wild currents only navigable safely by craft as small as the Noorderlicht. We dropped anchor in a very familiar inlet on the north side of the Heyleysundet, back on the island of Spitsbergen, which has been recently proposed to be named in honour of the lovely red-hulled craft, which has graced it so many times, Noorderlichthamna ('Noorderlicht harbour'). We were greeted by a close Bearded Seal, with a large set of whiskers as well as an Arctic Fox showing an interest in the Glaucous Gulls nesting here. There was also a distant pair of Ivory Gulls, a pair of white pin-pricks against the vast high arctic landscape of Spitsbergen that stretched back towards the Pedasenkobreen glacier and into the wilderness of Olaf V Land.

Birds: Pink-footed Goose, Common Eider, King Eider, Northern Fulmar, Red Phalarope, Black-legged Kittiwake, Ivory Gull, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin.

Mammals: Bearded Seal, Arctic Fox.



© Arjen Drost



© Arjen Drost





King Eider (female), Straumlandet.

18 July Noorderlichthamna to Lomfjorden

Noorderlichthamna. After more than a day and a half on board we were looking forward to a landing, although we would have appreciated some nicer weather! It rained the whole time during our hike over the Straumlandet tundra above Noorderlichthamna, to the sea cliffs overlooking the Heleysundet, which are home to a Black Guillemot colony. There had been a drake King Eider in the inlet and we found what was probably his mate on a small pool up on the rocky tundra. We also saw Purple Sandpipers here, one with small chicks in tow. There were also families of Snow Buntings buzzing around. The flora up here included a good show of Svalbard Poppies and some Hairy Lousewort.

After the landing we completed our passage through the Heleysundet past massive feeding flocks of kittiwakes, brightened up further by another pure white Ivory Gull amongst them. Our northbound progress in the evening up the Hinlopen Stretet included a nice encounter with a Humpback Whale that swam right past the stern only a few metres away. I wonder if it had seen the Noorderlicht before? A couple of minke whales were less co-operative and we also logged both Bearded and Ringed Seals.

Birds: Barnacle Goose, King Eider, Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake, Ivory Gull, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, Snow Bunting.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Snow Buttercup (*Ranunculus nivalis*), Svalbard Poppy (*Papaver dahlianum polare*), Whitlow-grass sp. (*Draba* sp.), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Hairy Lousewort (*Pedicularis hirsuta*).





Previous page: Bearded Seal and a wet group at Noorderlichthamna. This page: Rock Ptarmigan (female), Faksevågen.

19 July Faksevågen to Murchisonfjorden

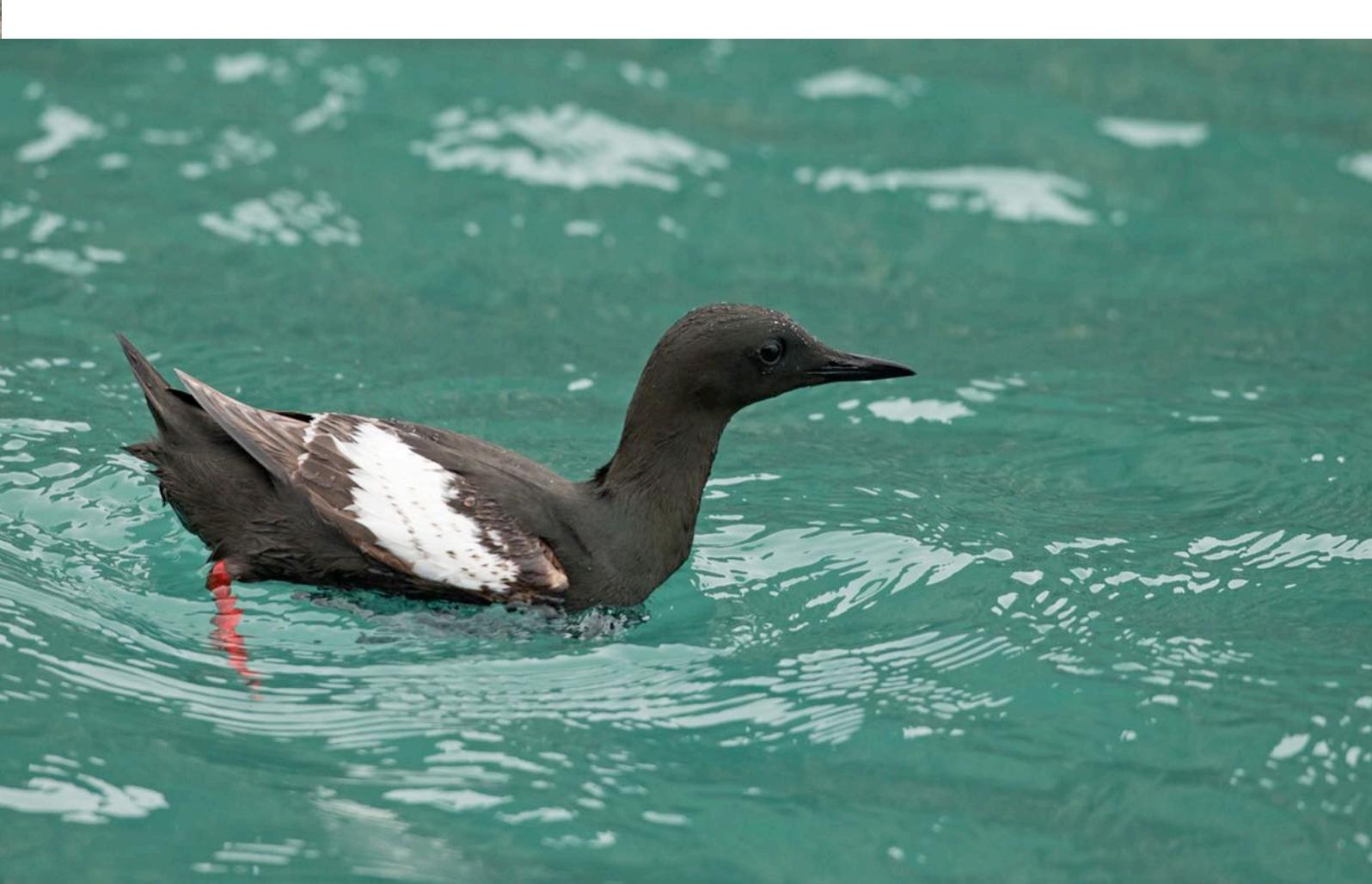
Faksevågen. Eventually we passed the bird cliffs of Alkefjellet and made our way around the corner into Lomfjorden ('Loon Fjord') and dropped anchor in Faksevågen, a lovely small side inlet on its western shore, which is named after Fakse - a horse in Norse mythology. A walk up the misty fjell beyond in search of Rock Ptarmigan was successful this time as we found a mother ptarmigan tending seven fluffy chicks. A Common Ringed Plover was along the shore of the fjord, a couple of Red-throated Loons flew over and we enjoyed some very nice views of Black Guillemots against the glassy water. The intermittent rain did not matter, we were getting used to it by now even though this much of it was extremely unusual. The temperature at a balmy nine degrees Celsius was also mild for Svalbard as we had lunch cruising out of Lomfjorden.

Birds: Red-throated Loon, Rock Ptarmigan, Common Ringed Plover, Black Guillemot, Arctic Tern.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria dygna*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmaeus*), Snow Buttercup (*Ranunculus nivalis*), Svalbard Poppy (*Papaver dahlianum polare*), Whitlow-grass sp. (*Draba sp.*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Arctic White Bell-heather (*Cassiope tetragona*), Hairy Lousewort (*Pedicularis hirsuta*).



This page: The Alkefjellet Thick-billed Murre colony's 'royal balcony'. Next page: Thick-billed Murre and Black Guillemot.









Previous pages: Alkefjellet scenes and this page: Humpback Whale, Hinlopen Stretet.

Alkefjellet

Alkefjellet ('Auk Mountain'), on the northeast coast of Spitsbergen is probably the most impressive seabird cliff in the whole Arctic. Brünnich's Guillemots were dotted over the sea like insects as far as the eye could see as we cruised slowly along the base of the cliffs. The cliffs themselves were packed with their noisy partners and birds continued to swarm in the skies around them the whole time. Glaucous Gulls, which also nest here, patrolled the cliffs and Black-legged Kittiwakes vied for space on the already crowded ledges. Added to this spectacle, the smell of the immense bird-covered cliffs made this an unforgettable experience. The Noorderlicht is small enough to cruise along the base of the cliff so no need for a zodiac ride like the flotilla of Chinese ecotourists, we could sit back in comfort and admire the seabirds at close quarters. We even managed to spot the famous 'Royal Balcony' with its optimum breeding spots. We spent the rest of the day sailing north and crossed the 80th parallel in sunshine in the evening as we continued towards Nordaustlandet ('Northeastland'). This island is uninhabited and is sheltered from the moist Gulf Stream the currents to the east of Nordaustlandet are cold. Local weather conditions are also subject to katabatic winds blowing down from the massive Austfonna ice cap, which is the world's seventh largest. The barren environment not covered by ice is mostly lichen-dotted gravel polar desert with tiny pin-pricks of colour such as the odd Svalbard Poppy and Purple Saxifrage. Entering Murchisonfjorden Barb spotted a Polar Bear sleeping above the shore not far from where we had planned to land the next day and another was seen marauding across a distant islet. Also here were both Harp and Bearded Seals and a couple of Reindeer. Sir Roderick Murchison (1792-1871) was an English geographer and geologist.

Birds: Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot.

Mammals: Polar Bear, Harp Seal, Bearded Seal, Reindeer.







Previous page: Nordaustlandet and below: Polar Bear, Kinnvika. This page: Svalbard Poppy, Krossøya, Nordaustlandet.

20 July Murchisonfjorden, Nordaustlandet to Liefdefjorden

Krossøya. Well the bear was still sleeping nearby next morning so our landing plans had to be changed. That sounds ungrateful doesn't it? Instead of a mainland landing we decided on a very interesting islet in the fjord, Krossøya ('Cross Island'). The Pomors (peasant hunters from the north coast of Russia) had at least one hunting station in Murchisonfjord and their wooden orthodox cross on Krossøya is one of only two original crosses left standing in Svalbard. We hiked across some nice looking "Svalbard Poppy type" polar desert here, mostly gravel but with patches of flora here and there, including both yellow and white forms of Svalbard Poppy and a big show of Drooping Saxifrage. Birding was good here too with two pairs of Red-throated Loons on the small lagoons on the island, a Red Phalarope flew by and there were two pairs of each of Arctic and Great Skuas on the island. A Glaucous Gull was eating the corpse of a dead guillemot along the shore.

A big male Walrus was offshore here and we spotted another two Polar Bears on other islets, one of which was thought to have been one from the previous day. We spent the rest of the day sailing west across the top of Spitsbergen towards Liefdefjorden including a stop at the low gravel island of **Moffen**, usually the first experience of 80 degrees north for folks on a clockwise cruise, which produced another pile of c. 100 Walruses as well as 3-4 Sabine's Gulls, which were dip feeding in the surf along the shore with kittiwakes (they breed here, one of only three regular sites in Svalbard in recent years). Some passing Walruses came to inspect the Noorderlicht offering some great views from the stern. An Ivory Gull past the Noorderlicht after Moffen was our last of the tour and an adult Long-tailed Skua (or Jaeger) was our first of the cruise. Moffen is a derogatory slang word used by the Dutch when referring to Germans.

Birds: Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Red Phalarope, Black-legged Kittiwake, Ivory Gull, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Long-tailed Skua, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot.

Mammals: Polar Bear, Walrus.

Flora: Svalbard Poppy (*Papaver dahlianum polare*), Polar Scurvy-grass (*Cochlearia groenlandica*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*).





Previous page: first summer Arctic Tern & Pomor Cross, Krossøya. This page: Polar Bears, Worsleyneset (Arjen Drost).

21 July Liefdefjorden to Sallyhamna

Liefdefjorden. While at anchor at Worsleyneset in the picturesque Liefdefjord ('Love Bay'!, origin unknown but possibly after a ship?), Menthe rang the bell early in the morning to let us know that he had spotted a big Polar Bear walking along the shore past the Noorderlicht. What a great start to the day! It was satellite-tagged and had a young cub, around 1.5 years old, following along behind. It continued on its way without stopping so maybe it would be OK for us to do a landing here a little later. However, before too long another bear was spotted from the same position, this time a collared one. There was clearly plenty of bear activity here! Well we still had the nearby Stasjonsøyane ('Station Islands') for a landing...until another bear was spotted on one of them, a tall skinny male, with number 73 painted on its hind quarters. Arjen had seen this bear before and it was a good to see that he was still surviving, by the look of things, on bird's eggs and whatever else he could get his paws on. As he wandered around on the islands, eider ducks flew up in a panic and a group of several hundred moulting Pink-footed Geese dashed to the water. Fortunately he had missed the gosling of a pair of Pale-bellied Brent Geese here, they are scarce breeders in Svalbard and we do not always find them. It was great to see them on their breeding grounds – they are a bird of my childhood, wintering on the vast mudflats of Lindisfarne in Northumberland. We skipped our morning landing and spent our time cruising slowly out of the fjord instead, picking up another Beluga, our only one in the north and not nearly as obliging as the pod in Hornsund had been as well as another couple of minke whales. The mother and cub Polar Bears were still walking along the shore but did not show any interest in a walrus hauled out there. As we left the fjord three Long-tailed Skuas flew past. The afternoon was spent cruising west to the pretty little bay of Sallyhamna. Visibility was reasonable but skies were again overcast and it rained more or less the whole time in a moderate westerly wind, which made our progress rather bumpy. The usual fulmars, kittiwakes and auks accompanied us on our voyage and towards land at Sallyhamna a few Arctic Terns and Atlantic Puffins appeared.

Birds: Pink-footed Goose, Pale-bellied Brent Goose, Common Eider, Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Long-tailed Skua, Little Auk, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin.

Mammals: Polar Bear, Walrus, Bearded Seal, Northern Minke Whale, Beluga.





Previous page: Northern Fulmar and SV Noorderlicht sailing. This page: A scarce dark morph Arctic Fox at Fugelsongen.

Sallyhamna. We made an evening hike to a small, although sterile, glacier lake called Birgervatnet above the bay, crossing a tricky boulder field in the process. Birds were few with only a couple of Purple Sandpipers on the shore along with a few Black Guillemots. The highlight was a couple of curious Harbour Seals, maybe the northernmost in the world? We dropped anchor and spent the night. Sallyhamna is a small sheltered bay on the east side of Fair Haven and was used by whalers in the 1600s who left the remains of several graves and blubber ovens. The hut here was built in 1937 by Norwegian trapper Waldermar Kraemer who wintered here together with his wife Sally, after whom the harbour is named. The hut itself stands on an old blubber oven with a whaler's grave inside!

Birds: Arctic Tern, Black Guillemot, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake.

Mammals: Harbour Seal.

Flora: Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmaeus*), Polar Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia groenlandica*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Highland Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rivularis*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*).

22 July Fugelsongen to Köngsfjorden

Fugelsongen. We were fortunate to have two landings at Little Auk colonies on this cruise. Weather and timing allowed us to make a second landing at probably the most well known of all, the impressive granite island of Fugelsongen ('the bird song', after its Little Auk colonies). A short way above the beach we worked our way up to the scree in which these endearing little birds nest. They choose a particular size of rocks in the mixed scree, where the gaps between them are big enough for a nest yet too small for a fox to gain access. Their maniacal laughing cries filled the air and we were treated to some great close views as birds came and went, occasionally flushed by a passing Glaucous Gull or an Arctic Skua. Given time to settle after each dread they could be amazingly confiding, birds fresh in from the sea had crops bulging with copopods. A rare dark morph Arctic Fox appeared briefly for those at the top of the scree. We spent the early afternoon continuing our voyage west to beautiful Magdalenefjord, a small but very scenic and perfectly formed fjord in the northwest of Spitsbergen named after the biblical figure Mary Magdalene.

Birds: Arctic Skua, Glaucous Gull, Little Auk, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Flora: Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmaeus*), Snow Buttercup (*Ranunculus nivalis*), Polar Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia groenlandica*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Highland Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rivularis*).





Previous page: Little Auk, Fugelsongen & this page: SV Noorderlicht in Magdalenefjorden and below: Gullybukta pano.

Magdalenefjorden. We made a very enjoyable landing in the afternoon at Gravneset ('Grave Peninsula'), walking past the site of some whalers' graves and into Gullybukta ('Narrow Bay') where there was a distant Walrus haul-out. The area of 130 graves is one of the largest in Svalbard but is now fenced off to protect the fragile vegetation, which has suffered under the feet of thousands of cruise ship visitors over the years. The fjord is a very popular stop owing to its scenic beauty and accessibility, also it rarely freezes. The small bay here was the site of a British whaling station called Trinity Harbour, which continued until 1623. We also enjoyed our best Arctic Skua encounters of the tour here as well as some very showy Arctic Terns. Another laughing Little Auk colony was high on the cliffs above us, there were a couple of Purple Sandpipers on the beach here along with a couple of Snow Bunting families. Soon it was time for us to press on again, sailing overnight down the north-west corner of Spitsbergen to one of our favourite inlets, the wonderful Kongsfjorden.

Birds: Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Common Eider, Purple Sandpiper, Black Guillemot, Thick-billed Murre, Little Auk, Glaucous Gull, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Walrus, Harbour Seal.

Flora: Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Highland Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rivularis*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*).





Long-tailed Skua, Ny London and next page: Arctic Fox trap (above) and Yellow Mountain Saxifrage (Arjen Drost).

23 July Köngsfjorden

Ny London, Blömstrandhalvøya. We anchored in early morning at Peirsonhamna off Blömstrandhalvøya ('Flower Beach Half-island/peninsula') next to Ny London or 'New London', which was an adopted name used as a joke by the Norwegians. It came into general use on Blömstrandhalvøya, the site of a failed marble mining attempt by Ernest Mansfield, quickly abandoned in 1920 owing to the marble here being of very poor quality. There are still many artefacts like the large derrick crane used to load the marble into boats, several huts but the rusty old steam engine has been taken away for some restoration. We saw a pair of the Long-tailed Skuas (plus another singleton nearby) that have bred here for many years and they had a large fluffy chick. This is a very uncommon breeding species in Svalbard, owing to a lack of lemmings, their main food source but they seem to hang on somehow. They were a delight to watch, beautifully elegant yet very feisty too, as they demonstrated by chasing away the Arctic Skuas that strayed into their airspace. The Long-tailed Skuas here spend the winter off the coast of South Africa, however, geolocator studies have shown that Greenland-breeding birds travel even further and on into the southern Indian Ocean! Another highlight here was a small colony of Long-tailed Ducks on a little pool up on the tundra. We counted at least six adults and saw a female with five tiny ducklings. Two pairs of Red-throated Loons had two chicks here as well. Thankfully we did not need to make a more extensive hike for ptarmigan this time having seen it already at Faksevågen. Flora included some very nice shows of Drooping Saxifrage growing out of the abandoned machinery and Yellow Mountain Saxifrage. Also Arjen explained how an old Arctic Fox trap in a very nice setting would have worked.

Birds: Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Arctic Skua, Long-tailed Skua, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Reindeer.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix Polar*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria digyna*), Arcic Mouse-ear Chickweed (*Cerastium arcticum*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Pygmy Buttercup (*Ranunculus pygmaeus*), Whitlow-grass sp. (*Draba sp.*), Purple Saxifrage (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), White Arctic Bell-heather (*Cassiope tetragona*).



© Arjen Drost



© Arjen Drost



Black-legged Kittiwakes, Ossian Sarsfjellet and following page: Arctic Fox and Dwarf Golden-saxifrage (Arjen Drost).

Ossian Sarsfjellet. A mild afternoon saw us cruise deeper into Kongsfjorden to the bird cliff and flower reserve of Ossian Sarsfjellet, not far from the massive 5km long Kongsbreen/Kronebreen glacier calving face. The highlight of our landing at Ossian was a brilliant encounter with an Arctic Fox and her cub along the base of the bird cliffs. Making our way down the bird cliff we had some excellent eye-level views of the breeding ledges of Thick-billed Murres and kittiwakes. It was a bit disconcerting to feel the turf we stood vibrate every time someone took a step though.

This is a fabulous place for flora and all around us were new plants for the cruise including Polar Campion, Bluff Cinquefoil, Polar Dandelion, Alpine Arnica and the tiny Dwarf Golden-saxifrage (which we almost stood on without noticing). Sadly, the best plant had gone over, Woolly Lousewort, which only occurs elsewhere in Novaya Zemlya and the Jamal Peninsula of Siberia... and it did not rain today! Georg Ossian Sars (1837-1927!) was a Norwegian zoologist who made several expeditions to Svalbard in the late 19th century.

Birds: Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Arctic Fox, Reindeer, Bearded Seal.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria dygna*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Polar Campion (*Silene uralensis*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Polar Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia groenlandica*), Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hieracifolia*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Yellow Mountain Saxifrage (*Saxifraga aizoides*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*), Bluff Cinquefoil (*Potentilla chamissonis*), Mountain Avens (*Dryas octopetala*), Arctic White Bell-heather (*Cassiope tetragona*), Woolly Lousewort (*Pedicularis dasyantha*), Polar Dandelion (*Taraxacum brachyceras*), Alpine Arnica (*Arnica alpina*), Dwarf Golden-saxifrage (*Chrysopenium tetrandrum*).





Purple Sandpiper chick, Ny Ålesund.

Ny Ålesund. The evening saw us make the short crossing to Ny Ålesund, at 78.55 degrees north, the world's northernmost community. Formerly a rough mining settlement (it was named 'New Ålesund' after the mining company's HQ in Ålesund, Norway), it is now a centre for polar research. A permanent population of 30-35 persons is increased in summer by researchers and technicians (from all over the world) to around 120 and I think we must have seen all of them in the pub this evening but not after we made a tour of the small 'town', which included a visit to Amundsen's 1926 airship launch tower. The gift shop also opened specially for us, probably the best one in Spitsbergen, not that there are many to choose from! Arctic Terns breed anywhere in town and the Purple Sandpipers here now had almost full sized youngsters. The small pool behind the pub also had Red-throated Loons as well as Barnacle Geese but birding was not as productive as usual this time. The most notable plant we could find was Polar Cress, growing in a cage and no doubt being monitored by someone. Captain Ted's instructions were to be on board by six next morning when we would set sail again and fortunately everyone resisted the temptation to carry on partying in Ny Ålesund, although there were a few stop-outs who could report that at closing time the pub opens its blackout curtains and puts the lights on!

Birds: Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Red-throated Loon, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Thick-billed Murre, Little Auk, Black Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Reindeer, Harbour Seal.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Mountain Sorrel (*Oxyria dygna*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Moss Campion (*Silene acaulis*), Polar Cress (*Cardamine pratensis augustifolia*), Alpine Saxifrage (*Saxifraga nivalis*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Tufted Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cespitosa*).



Walrus, Sarstangen and following pages Walrus scenes by Arjen Drost.

24 July Ny Ålesund to Tryghamna, Isfjorden

Sarstangen. We spent most of the day cruising down the inner passage of the Prins Karls Forlandsundet back towards Isfjorden to complete our full circle, passing numerous glaciers along the way and pausing to make a landing at another Walrus haul-out on the long gravel spit of Sarstangen. This proved to be another of the outstanding highlights of the tour. Happily the rain stayed away and we enjoyed a magical encounter with these amazing animals. We estimated around 50 males, including some very big tuskers and a few of them came over to take a look at us. They are much more confident in the water than on land though, where we do not approach beyond around 30m in line with AECO (Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators) guidelines. However, in certain circumstances they will approach you on their terms.

There were a few birds here including three Great Skuas but there was not a single plant on the gravel beach. The rest of the day was spent cruising south and eventually we completed our circumnavigation at the mouth of Isfjorden, where we dropped anchor in Tryghamna, a sheltered inlet, which was once a favourite anchorage of whalers. Sarstangen is named after the Norwegian Zoologist Michael Sars (1805–69) and Prins Karls Forland was actually named after King Charles I of England!



© Arjen Drost







Reindeer on the rich tundra at Alkahornet (Arjen Drost).

25 July Tryghamna to Longyearbyen

Alkahornet. As we returned to Isfjorden we saw the sun again and enjoyed a delightfully warm landing (too warm actually at 13.5 degrees Celsius) on the grassy tundra below the towering bird cliff of Alkahornet ('Horn of the Auks'). This is a refuge for Reindeer and ptarmigans in winter and was full of plants with particularly good shows of Polar Cress and Yellow Marsh Saxifrage. We also added the pretty little Tundra Chickweed. At last there were some guillemot chicks jumping from the bird cliffs far above but rather than witness some happy events we saw a couple of unhappy endings for these tough little birds. The Glaucous Gulls had been waiting for a free meal for some time and the chicks did not have anything like the kind of numbers for some of them to make it to the relative safety of their parents out on the waters of Isfjorden. I managed to rescue one, which had crash-landed on the tundra quite near to us but unfortunately as soon as I released it a Glauc came out of nowhere and eventually got its reward. Well at least the poor little auk chick experienced the feeling of swimming and diving in water for a few minutes before it met its end.

Birds: Northern Fulmar, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Skua, Common Eider, Snow Bunting.

Mammals: Arctic Fox (heard), Reindeer.

Flora: Polar Willow (*Salix polaris*), Alpine Bistort (*Bistorta vivipara*), Tundra Chickweed (*Stellaria longipes*), Sulphur-coloured Buttercup (*Ranunculus sulphureus*), Polar Cress (*Cardamine pratensis augustifolia*), Polar Scurvygrass (*Cochlearia groenlandica*), Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hieracifolia*), Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (*Saxifraga hirculus compacta*), Drooping Saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), Highland Saxifrage (*Saxifraga rivularis*), Polar Foxtail (*Alopecurus magellanicus*).



Red Phalarope at Longyearbyen (thanks to Andrew Moon!).

We reached **Longyearbyen** this afternoon and rather than being in the 'ptarmigan last chance saloon' again this time we still had not seen a Red Phalarope on the deck nicely. After mooring at the quay we hiked into town and were delighted to see one of these excellent little birds by a roadside pool near the husky kennels, in fact it felt like it came to have a look at us. A red male and not quite pristine but very smart nevertheless! What a way to finish the birding! Finally this evening saw our amazing chef, Menthe serve his masterpiece, a fine banquet, featuring an unbelievable dessert buffet, all conjured up in his tiny galley. We disembarked at an unearthly hour bound next morning for our very early flight from the High Arctic back to a rainy Oslo from where we went our separate ways.

My sincere thanks go to our amazing captain Ted van Broeckhuysen and the crew of the SV Noorderlicht, Robert, Zweitse, Menthe and our towering expedition leader, Arjen Drost, without whose expert knowledge, enthusiasm our cruise would not have been quite so special. Thanks also to the great bunch of people in our group who made it such an enjoyable and fun trip. Spitsbergen is one of my favourite destinations and there's no other way I would rather see it than on board the wonderful SV Noorderlicht. That's it!

Birds: Barnacle Goose, Common Eider, Dunlin, Common Ringed Plover, Purple Sandpiper, Red Phalarope, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Snow Bunting.



Arctic Skua, Longyearbyen.

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). IOC World Bird Names. This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.world-birdnames.org>.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).

Species which were not personally recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (NL).

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◇) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered 'special' birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species). Conservation threat categories and information are taken from Threatened Birds of the World, BirdLife International's magnificent book on the sad status of the rarest 10% of the world's avifauna, and updates on the BirdLife website: <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/home>

E = Endangered, V = Vulnerable, NT = Near Threatened, DD = Data Deficient.

Pink-footed Goose ◇ *Anser brachyrhynchus* First noted at Recherchefjord. Maximum c.350 Stasjonsøyane.

Brant Goose ◇ (Pale-bellied Brent G) *Branta [bernicla] hrota* A pair with one gosling Stasjonsøyane.

Barnacle Goose ◇ *Branta leucopsis* Only noted in the west except at Noorderlichthamna where there is a small colony.

King Eider ◇ *Somateria spectabilis* A total of 27 logged, the first at Gåshamna.

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima* Common throughout. See note. **NT**

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* c.10 Longyearbyen and a small colony at Blömstrandhalvøya. **VU**

Rock Ptarmigan ◇ *Lagopus muta* A female with 7 chicks at Faksevågen, Lomfjorden. See note.

Red-throated Loon (R-t Diver) *Gavia stellata* A scatter of sightings, the first at Recherchefjorden.

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* Abundant throughout. Our constant companion at sea.

Common Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* Noted at Longyearbyen, Recherchefjorden, Faksevågen & Ny Ålesund.

Purple Sandpiper ◇ *Calidris maritima* A common breeding bird throughout except for Nordaustlandet.



Common Ringed Plover, Longyearbyen and below the Pomarine Skua that flew past us near Sørkapp (Andrew Moon).

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Up to four at Longyearbyen.

Red Phalarope ◊ (Grey P) *Phalaropus fulicarius* Noted at Akseløya, Krossøya and Longyearbyen plus a couple at sea.

Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* Abundant throughout.

Ivory Gull ◊ *Pagophila eburnea* A total of 26 logged, with a maximum of c.20 at Negribreen. **NT**

Sabine's Gull ◊ *Xerna sabini* 3-4 at Moffen.

Great Black-backed Gull *Larus maritima* Three at Ingeborgfjellet in Bellsund and one at Gåshamna in Hornsund.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus* Common throughout.

Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* Common throughout.

Great Skua ◊ *Stercorarius skua* A total of 23 logged.

Pomarine Jaeger (P Skua) *Stercorarius pomarinus* A subadult at sea between Hornsund and Sørkapp.

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus* A total of 47 logged.

Long-tailed Jaeger (L-t Skua) *Stercorarius longicaudus* Four in the north and three plus one chick Blömstrandhalvøya.

Little Auk ◊ (Dovekie) *Alle alle* Abundant. Visits to colonies at Ingeborgfjellet and Fugelsongen.

Thick-billed Murre ◊ *Uria lomvia* Abundant. Tens of thousands at Alkafjellet.

Black Guillemot ◊ *Cephus grylle* Common throughout. See note.

Atlantic Puffin ◊ *Fratercula arctica* Common throughout, maximum daily estimate c.50 in Fair Haven. See note. **VU**

Snow Bunting ◊ *Plectrophenax nivalis* Common throughout.





Walrus, Sarstangen.

Mammals

Arctic Fox *Alopex lagopus* A total of 12 logged.

Polar Bear *Thalartos maritimus* A total of 12 sightings, two of which probably referred to the same animal. **VU**

Walrus *Odebenus rosmarus* A total of c.200 estimated at six locations. **VU**

Harp Seal *Pagophilus groenlandicus* A total of seven logged.

Harbour Seal (Common S) *Phoca vitulina* Two Sallyhamna, one at Magdelenefjorden and two at Ny Ålesund.

Ringed Seal *Pusa hispida* Three in Burgerbukta Vestre, Hornsund and one in the Hinlopen Stretet.

Bearded Seal *Erignathus barbatus* A total of nine logged, the best sighting was at Noorderlichthamna.

Northern Minke Whale (Minke W) *Balaenoptera acutorostrata* A total of 10 logged. See note.

Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* One in the Hinlopen Stretet.

Beluga (White Whale) *Delphinapterus leucas* c.10 in Burgerbukta Vestre, Hornsund and one in Liefdefjorden.

Caribou (Reindeer) *Rangifer tarandus* A scatter of sightings throughout, maximum 23 at Ingeborgfjellet. See note.



Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage, Recherchefjorden.

Vascular Plants

Polar Field Horsetail *Equisetum arvense borealis* Noted at Longyearbyen.

Polar Willow *Salix polaris* Common on Spitsbergen but absent from Nordaustlandet.

Alpine Bistort *Bistorta vivipara* Common in the 'High Arctic Polar Willow Zone'.

Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna* Common in the 'High Arctic Polar Willow Zone'.

Sea Sandwort *Honckenya peploides diffusa* Noted only on the shore at Longyearbyen. **NT**

Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed *Cerastium arcticum* Common on Spitsbergen but absent from Nordaustlandet.

Arctic Chickweed *Stellaria humifusa* Noted only at Longyearbyen.

Tundra Chickweed *Stellaria longipes* Noted only at Alkahornet.

Arctic White Campion (Arctic Lychnis) *Silene furcata* Noted only at Longyearbyen.

Moss Campion *Silene acaulis* Common in the 'High Arctic Polar Willow Zone' – the compass on the top of the world.

Polar Campion (Nodding Lychnis) *Silene uralensis* Noted only at Ossian Sarsfjellet.

Pygmy Buttercup *Ranunculus pygmaeus* Noted only on Spitsbergen and Edgeøya.

Snow Buttercup *Ranunculus nivalis* Noted only on Spitsbergen and Edgeøya.

Sulphur-coloured Buttercup *Ranunculus sulphureus* Common around Longyearbyen.

Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dahlianum polare* Noted throughout, particularly common on Krossøya.

Polar Cress (Cuckooflower) *Cardamine pratensis augustifolia* Noted at Recherchefjorden, Ny Ålesund and Alkahornet.

Alpine Rock Cress *Arabis alpina* One plant at Gnålodden, a Svalbard rarity.

Polar Scurvygrass *Cochlearia groenlandica* A scatter throughout, even on the most barren tundra.

Whitlow-grass sp. *Draba sp.* A scatter of whitlow-grasses noted but none examined.

Dwarf Golden-saxifrage *Chrysosplenium tetrandum* Noted only at Ossian Sarsfjellet.

Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage *Micranthes hieracifolia* Noted at Recherchefjorden, Ossian Sarsfjellet and Alkahornet.

Alpine Saxifrage *Micranthes nivalis* First noted at Gnålodden and commonly thereafter.

Highland Saxifrage (Brook S) *Saxifraga rivularis* Noted at Gnålodden, Sallyhamna, Fugelsongen and Alkahornet.

Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia* Common throughout, including in the 'Svalbard Poppy Zone'.

Yellow Mountain Saxifrage *Saxifraga aizoides* A particularly nice show at Blömstrandhalvøya.



Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage, Akseløya.

- Drooping Saxifrage** *Saxifraga cernua* Common throughout, nice shows on Krossøya and at Ny London.
- Tufted Saxifrage** *Saxifraga cespitosa* Common throughout, especially around whale bones.
- Yellow Marsh Saxifrage (Bog S)** *Saxifraga hirculus* Common, nice shows under bird cliffs at Gnålodden and Alkahornet.
- Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage (Spider Plant)** *Saxifraga platysepala* Noted only on Akseløya.
- Bluff Cinquefoil** *Potentilla chamissonis* Noted only at Ossian Sarsfjellet.
- Mountain Avens** *Dryas octopetala* Common in the west but almost all finished flowering.
- White Arctic Bell-heather** *Cassiope tetragona* Common in Spitsbergen but almost all finished flowering.
- Boreal Jacob's-ladder** *Polemonium boreale* Only noted at Longyearbyen, not in flower.
- Woolly Lousewort** *Pedicularis dasyantha* Noted only at Ossian Sarsfjellet, just finished flowering.
- Hairy Lousewort** *Pedicularis hirsuta* Noted at Longyearbyen, Edgeøya, Faksevågen and Straumslandet
- Polar Dandelion** *Taraxacum brachyceras* Noted only at Ossian Sarsfjellet.
- Alpine Arnica** *Arnica alpina* Noted only at Ossian Sarsfjellet.
- Arctic Cottongrass** *Eriophorum scheuchzeri* Noted only at Longyearbyen.
- Polar Foxtail** *Alopecurus borealis* Noted at several rich tundra sites.



The large-billed Atlantic Puffins in Svalbard are thought to belong to the form naumanni.

SPITSBERGEN: TAXONOMIC NOTES

BIRDS

Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*

The form found on Svalbard, *hyperborea*, breeds from NE Canada eastwards to Greenland and Iceland.

Rock Ptarmigan *Lagopus muta*

The form occurring on Svalbard and Franz Josef Land is *hyperborea*.

Black Guillemot *Cephus grylle*

The form in Svalbard is the High Arctic-breeding *mandtii*, which occurs from NE Canada to Svalbard and N Siberia to N Alaska.

Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica*

The northern populations including Greenland and Svalbard are considered by some authors to be a separate subspecies, *naumanni* but this is not currently recognised by IOC.

MAMMALS

Northern Minke Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*

Antarctic Minke Whale *B. boaerensis* was formerly lumped into this form with the name Minke Whale being used for the enlarged species.

Caribou (or Reindeer) *Rangifer tarandus*

The distinctive small and short-legged subspecies found on Spitsbergen, *platyrhynchus*, may merit specific status.



We had a lot of fun on the cruise! Clockwise from top left: Great teamwork from James and Helen at Gravneset, John in traditional Aussie dress in Isfjorden - it didn't rain all the time, Birthday time in the lounge, Ilppo and Allan.



SV Noorderlicht crew (clockwise from top left): Zweitse de Wit (2nd mate and zodiac driver), Menthe Groefsema (Ship's Cook), Arjen Drost (Expedition Leader) and Robert (1st mate).