

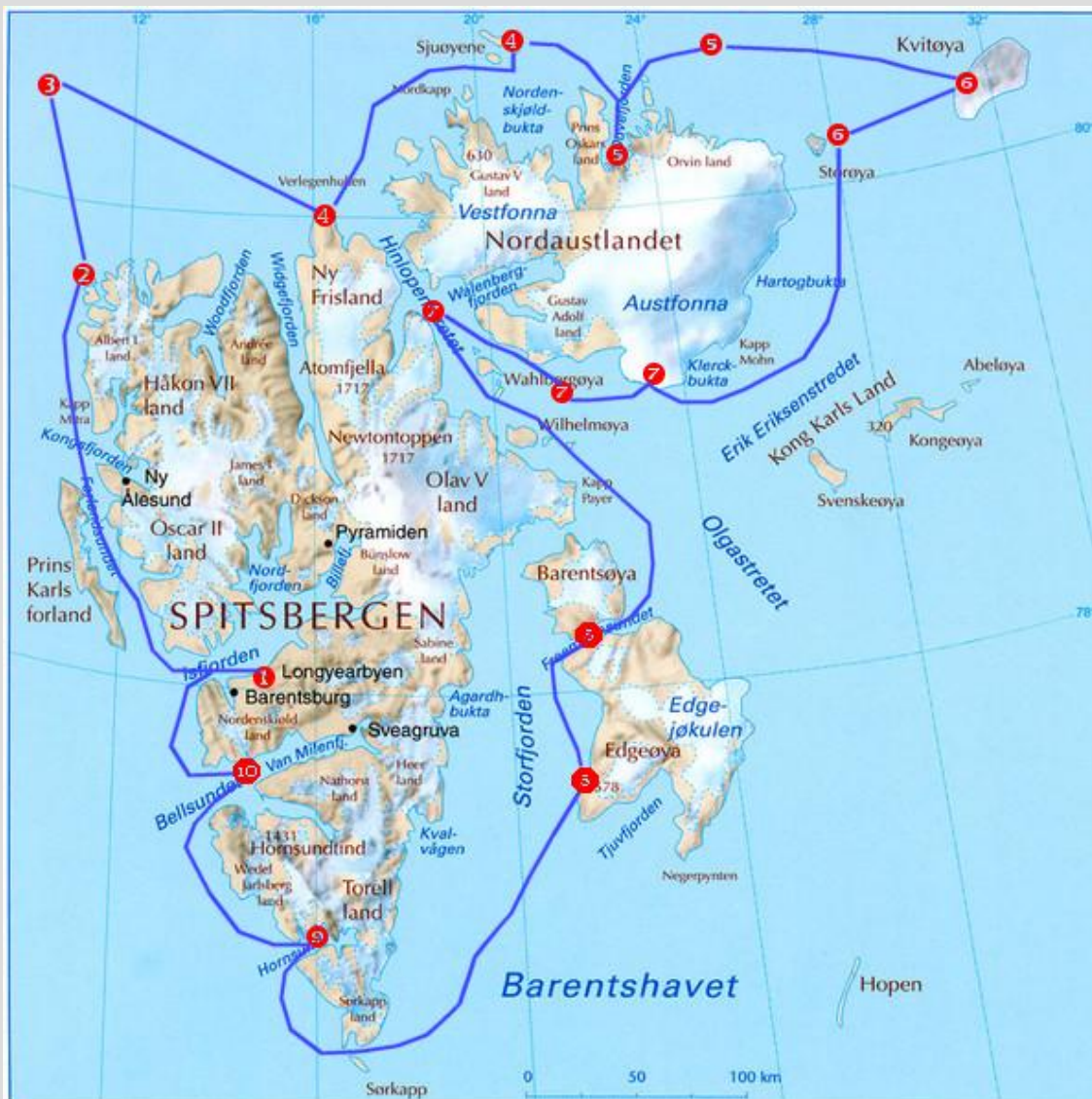
Svalbard



Norway



10th to 20th August, 2012



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Day 2	West coast of Spitsbergen to Smeereburgodden
Day 3	North to the Pack Ice (82°N 9°E)
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Introduction

One of the major wildlife spectacles on our shopping list of holidays was that of Polar Bears in their natural environment, and this was to be the year to do it. The first idea was the classic one for many – Churchill in Manitoba, Canada, where the bears can be seen at very close quarters from the tundra buggies in October and November. The case for this was complicated by a visit to the Manchester travel show, where the Canadian representatives outlined the fact that Polar Bears could be almost guaranteed in July at the same spot, but there was also the



addition to the list of Beluga Whales and other possible wildlife goodies. And this for the same price with an extra day included. Yet both tours were very short, with extensive travel involved (UK to Toronto to Winnipeg to Churchill), so we looked at option three – a Summer circumnavigation of Svalbard, Norway, on an expedition ship voyage. This also had a huge chance of Polar Bear sightings (in fact, Explore, the company we eventually plumped for, offered a bear guarantee, which was a free trip if no Polar Bears were logged), was for far longer (8 or 11 days), and also offered additional goodies such as potential Walrus, Arctic Fox, Reindeer, and a variety of seabirds, cetaceans, seals, and dramatic scenery.

The fact that this was conducted from a ship as a cruise was incidental, since we had decided some time ago not to go on a cruise for the sake of it, and this worked very well. The ship we were on was the MS Expedition, and the "Realm of the Polar Bear" tour run by the parent company of Gadventures could be found on various travel agent sites. The embarkation port is Longyearbyen on the island of Spitsbergen (Svalbard islands), and we arranged flights to here and overnight accommodation in the town ourselves. The mix on the cruise was varied and the staff always thinking ahead in terms of potential wildlife sightings, safety and interest of the tourists. An itinerary can be found on the website and also is sent following booking, but that is more or less ripped up and the eventual journey planned from day to day depending on conditions and potential for current sightings. Whenever a major sighting occurred while on board, the ship's tannoy announced this to all, so there was no excuse for missing anything. In addition to sighting wildlife from the decks, of which there are plenty for all to be accommodated, the crew tried to plan at least one excursion on to land each day using the zodiac landing craft, or at the very least a "zodiac cruise". This included walks in the Arctic terrain, and groups of people were allocated depending on ability and want for different grades and speed of walks.

Tips:

- The temperature was on average cold (3-5°C), and even dipped to under 0°C when the wind chill factor was brought in, so full cold weather gear is essential

- The landings from the zodiacs are invariably into shallow water, and also much boggy and even wet ground is covered. Wellington boots of standard sizes are provided and more than adequate, but they didn't carry under UK size 5 for ladies as documented
- Very little if any sign of midges or other annoying insects was seen
- Food on board is excellent, but there is also a gym for the over indulgent
- The viewing from the decks is invariably stable enough for a telescope and tripod
- Any toiletries used on board should be biodegradable
- Despite \$US being the only currency taken on board, a tab can be used for all purchases (including the dreaded "voluntary" tipping) and paid for by credit card at the end of the voyage
- An overnight stay at either the start and/or end of the voyage is often needed in Longyearbyen. The Raddison Blu and the Spitsbergen Hotels are popular for this. The former has the benefit of being the pick up point for the voyage, but the latter is perhaps the more comfortable to stay in (better lounge area and free waffles and coffee between 4-6pm!). Both included complimentary breakfast in the price.



Radisson Blu Hotel



Spitsbergen Hotel

Diary

Friday, 9th August, 2012

(Day 1)

Embarkation from Longyearbyen

Our travel to the island, and ultimately the leaving port of Longyearbyen on Spitsbergen, was by 3 flights from London (via Oslo and Tromso). Having left London at 10.20 am, and arrived at Longyearbyen at 12.30am the next morning, it was a little surreal to still be in the daylight (or is that nightlight?). We must have been staying ahead of the setting sun as we flew north from Tromso. The town of Longyearbyen certainly has a northern outpost type of a feel to it, with the wooden Nordic designed buildings being scattered rather than planned across the edge of the bay, and surrounded by the treeless fells on either side. There was also the welcoming site of the glacier at the head of the valley. We had prepared for very cold weather, but the 10°C that welcomed us was almost balmy. There would be plenty of time to utilise the cold weather gear as we headed further North.

The habitat in and around the town is fairly straight forward – open sea water of the inlet, rugged fells, shoreline, and bare open ground between the buildings. Most of the obvious birds were seabirds, mainly crossed when we had a walk around the town following breakfast and before embarkation at 4pm. Arctic Terns are easily the most obvious, not only by their numbers and presence, but even the polite signs posted asking people to respect their right to breed in peace. Small and scattered numbers of Black Guillemots were on the sea, which was endearingly calm and good for watching, are always a welcome sight. Looking up the bay towards the mudflats exposed by the receding tide, a decent sized group of Barnacle Geese were picked out in the distance. An Arctic Fox was hoped for, but the calm disposition of the geese pointed to no such small predator.



Longyearbyen harbour and town



The low tide exposed mud flats

The boat finally left the dock at 6pm, and made our way in peaceful waters, passing many Black Guillemots and single Puffin on the way. After the evening meal, and before bed, the rear of the boat was blessed with the sight of a plethora of Fulmars, which seemed to be homing in on the calm air behind the vessel, and then veering up and round one side. Many of the birds passed within inches of where I was stood. An impressive sight despite the increasing heavy drizzle in the light of the late hours.



Our ship - the MS Expedition

Saturday, 11 August 2012

(Day 2)

West coast of Spitsbergen to Smeereburgodden

We awoke this morning to find the views not too clear due to a smattering of fog. The announcement was that this may make any expeditions in the zodiacs more difficult, but that the day would be reviewed as it progressed. Thus, after the mandatory orientation session regarding the use of zodiacs, and then visit to the mud room to be fitted with wellington boots, we attended a lecture by one of the ship's crew on the wildlife of Svalbard. Mouthwatering no doubt, but after we then toggled up on cold weather gear,

we headed to the viewing decks, where the fog and drizzle started to clear quickly. We were informed that we were to go through the narrow fjord/channel that is on the way to Smeereburgodden, which although slightly obscured by the fog, would still be quite impressive. After only a short time on the top viewing deck, and with murmurings of possible walrus or seals in the water at the bow, a Polar Bear was spotted on the rocky shore. This was some distance away at first, but what we hadn't realised at the time was that we were going to follow this large male for three hours as he slowly made his way along the edge of the water – never really close (just as close as the ship was able to go before being beached!), but sufficient to almost call him a friend.



Lunch interrupted this bearathon, and he could still be seen from the restaurant as we munched away. Once finished, we went back on deck to find a huge Walrus planted on a boulder off the shore, not far from the still sauntering bear. Even more, a Common Seal was also placed delicately on another rock in the next bay – the hope that the bear may have a go never emerged. We then went back to our bear watch, when he obliged our patience by entering the water and swimming for some distance, unnerving a few small families of Barnacle Geese on the way. The first three Little Auks of the trip flew past in front of the ship while watching.



Landing using the zodiac



The view from the landing to the glacier

It was now time to utilise the zodiacs for the first time, crossing the short distance between the ship and a promontory in the land. We were assured that the staff vessel had already cleared the area for no bears, and also set up a perimeter so that we happy tourists could venture forth and explore. However, they hadn't counted on the second Polar Bear of the day, slipping in on the blind side by swimming in between the boat and our land based location. It was fortunately seen by one of the group, and summarily "encouraged" away from us to another exit point. With that small distraction out of the way, we picked out a couple of Reindeer in the distance, and a single Red-throated Diver on one of the small lagoons. Another two subsequently flew over our heads. The Skuas were represented by a trio of Arctic which landed not too far from us, and a pair of Great

Skuas perusing their options from a rock just offshore. The last treat of the day (fauna related) was a couple of Walrus just a few metres away from the beach, looking as though they fancied beaching themselves but for our presence. Huge, slow and impressive. As we made our way back to the ship on the zodiac, an impressive copper sulphate blue ice berg was slowly floating in front of one of the glaciers – our driver resisted the temptation to take us closer due to her other awaiting passengers back on shore!



Sunday, 12th August

(Day 3)

North to the Pack Ice (82°N 9°E)

The Gulf Stream exerts its effect right up to skirt the North of Svalbard, resulting in a denuding of the ice around the islands in the Summer months, which meant finding pack ice for hunting bears was not far off impossible around the archipelago. So the captain decided to head North through the night, away from Spitsbergen, to reach the edge of the ice – this meant being around 600 miles from the North Pole. Although no further North than some of the Svalbard islands, the returning cold currents we were heading for created longer lasting ice for this time of year. The journey through the night was very calm, and we had been informed that we would reach the beginning of the ice by 4am. Some hardy souls took this to heart and were up at the crack of (continuous) dawn, but the sensible amongst us failed to miss out when the first of the ice was met much later in the morning (around breakfast time to be precise). The drill for the day was to stay on the ship and patrol the edge of the ice, which also entailed the ship navigating through loose ice floes, and scan for wildlife. The morning session wasn't bad, with the odd (presumed) Harp Seal followed by a young Hooded Seal on floating ice – apparently a very uncommon sight here. The first two Brünnich's Guillemots conducted a flypast, and a reasonable number of small groups of Little Auks were either flying past or swimming close to. Just before lunch, a group of at least 8 Harp Seals were spotted swimming away amongst the ice.



After lunch, it was decided that better ice needed to be found, so the ship headed back into open water in a westerly direction until more ice was located. This decision proved to be spot on. Shortly after reaching the ice, a huge concentration of resting Harp Seals (perhaps ~2000) was discovered lounging in a loose group along multitudinous ice tables. And where there are groups of seals in the Arctic . . . ! A polar bear was spotted swimming towards the edge of the group, with an obvious intent. It took some time to reach the first of the menu, and it demonstrated almost perfectly how to hunt a seal on ice. It took a sneaky peak over the ice, disappeared, then rushed from under the water on to the ice – almost perfect but not quite, since the seal managed to escape into the water, despite having been bitten by the bear.

Undaunted it mounted another ice table to simply pick up the single seal which was laid there, as if it was either injured or already dead. The bear carried its prize a little way, seemed to take a few nibbles, and then played with the body a little, walking away a few metres each time. Then the amazing happened – the seal was still alive and tried to escape. Over the next half an hour or so, the bear played with the poor captive,

sometimes entering the water, only to lunge back out when the seal tried to escape. Finally dead, the bear grew bored and abandoned its kill, leaving a carcass only stripped of its skin and no more! Some patience watching the scene paid off, when a single Glaucous Gull feeding on the remains was joined eventually by a couple of Ivory Gulls.



Polar Bear with kill



Ivory & Glaucous Gulls at the carcass

This should have been sufficient as an experience, but the Polar Bear was picked up again, swimming towards another group of seals, which were wiser to the approach, but it did appear shortly after with another kill. The skin again appeared to be the main target, but with less play (this seal seemed dead straight away) than the first. According to the bear expert on board, this was surplus killing, and had not been documented by this species before. While the weather had been cool ($\sim 3-5^{\circ}\text{C}$), the visibility throughout was good, but the fog began and light but freezing drizzle pushed down from the North, so the ship turned around with the intent of heading towards the next day's destination.

Monday, 13 August 2012

(Day 4)

Lågøya

The aim of today was to land on two of the walrus haul outs on some of the northerly Svalbard islands using the zodiacs. After the staff landing craft had scouted the shore for Polar Bears, and with the weather looking calm and clear, we followed an earlier breakfast (6.30am) with ferries on the zodiacs to the landing beach. The smell of the Walrus was obvious before we even landed – an upwind position is more than preferable. All the animals here are apparently males who are in moult, with the females and calves elsewhere. A small group of up to 10 were loafing around on the beach near to where we waded ashore, with ~ 4 in the water only metres away. They seemed totally unperturbed by our presence, allowing us to stand and watch them at our leisure. We also moved around to the far side of them, finding a less obvious and somewhat larger group wallowing in a "mud bath" of black slime. Most of the animals were covered in this, and



the occasional tussle broke out in the centre of the throng.

The haul out area is based on a very low and flat lying area of shingle and lagoons, so we circumnavigated the closest pool, paddling through shallow water occasionally, and so utilising the wellington boots provided by the ship. There was plenty of activity from the nesting Arctic Terns throughout, and also small numbers of Common Eider (some with ducklings) on the water and the sea. Amongst the small numbers of Purple Sandpipers were two separate Grey Phalaropes, both unfortunately in their plainer winter outfits by this time of year. A trio of Arctic Skuas earlier over the lagoons were followed later in the walk by a pair of spooned Pomarine Skuas, intent on maximum harassment of the terns. The first group of ~15 Pink-footed Geese flew in to the area and landed, but their preferred spot was some way along the lagoons.

Sjuøyane (Phippsøya Island)



Walrus haul out on the beach



The third bear

The ship then travelled three hours to the East (and slightly further North to the northern most island group in Svalbard – Sjuøyane) to anchor beside the island of Phippsøya. The plan was to use the zodiacs again to land on the beach next to a Walrus haul out, and then to do some walking on the rocky island. The three Polar Bears located by the scouts had other ideas. Even as the anchor was dropped, one could be seen strolling along just behind the beach and away from the cluster of Walrus. This meant a change of plan, resulting in a 1½ hour zodiac ride to watch the animals rather than a landing. The 6 zodiacs approached the beach, and the two other bears could be seen on the slopes above and to the left of the Walrus, one asleep (where it stayed the entire time) and the other having a potter amongst the rocks just nearby. Once the staff were happy that the bears weren't going to intimidate the Walrus with our presence, we took in some excellent views of them, with 50 or so in a tight huddle on the beach, and ~5 in the water. The latter occasionally looked as though they might show some interest in us and approach closer, but this didn't materialise.

After watching them for some time, and seeing the more active bear move down the slope and out of sight behind the Walrus, we made our way along the beach for some way to view the third Polar Bear which had been relocated (this was the one first seen from the ship) at the base of the slope just behind the beach. As we viewed it from some distance, it was slowly strolling along, but by the time we arrived nearby, had decided to take a nap, splayed out on the rocks like a bear rug, only occasionally lifting its heavy head! The return to the ship to allow the second wave on the zodiacs could have had even more interest with a couple of swimming Walrus which hinted interest in close approach, but they thought the better of this and dived from sight.

Tuesday, 14 August 2012

(Day 5)

Plan for today – land on two uncharted islands for which the only information the guides have is a black and white photograph of each. The adventurer in them seemed to have taken over, but sometimes you have to have faith in folk who have experience in their

fields. We awoke to see the first of the two quarries from the cabin window, Kapp Platen, an island which looked to the untrained eye to have rather a lot of angular scree falling straight into the water. However, the scout boats reported that the sea was too rough for safe landings, and this was combined with gathering winds which further complicated the scenario. So we set off for somewhere more sheltered, and after an hour or two came across Innvika at the end of Duvefjorden, a large inlet which had also not been explored previously by the ship. On the way, many coastlines were scoured unsuccessfully for wildlife, but amongst the regular Kittiwakes, Fulmars, and Black Guillemots was a passing Ivory Gull.



Kapp Platen



Innvika

The fjord was in much calmer waters, and so landings were the way forward. The waters around the boat were lively with scattered Black Guillemots, some close to the ship, and also small groups of flying Little Auks. In the distance, a Kittiwake colony on a cliff face above the beach could be seen – this was to be our initial destination once ashore. With the presence of such a large concentration of birds, there is always the (optimistic) chance of Arctic Fox, but none were seen despite constant searching. Scats of both fox and even Polar Bear were found, and even plenty of Reindeer poo, but no animals seen. The Kittiwake colony seemed to have no other birds nesting with them, but at least one Glaucous Gull, tried its hardest to catch a young Kittiwake before the pursuer and pursued disappeared around a corner.

With the landings taking so long, the plan to then go to the second uncharted island of Karl XII-øya was shelved. In its stead was the unique chance to pass very close to a particularly large iceberg for the Arctic, which had been seen earlier on our way out. When we arrived at the site of the iceberg, the captain thoughtfully circled it three times for prolonged views. An added extra was an Ivory Gull which slipped past on the third circumnavigation.



Wednesday, 15 August 2012

(Day 6)

Kvitøya

The first planned destination today was the most Easterly point of the voyage – the iced island of Kvitøya. First views were impressive – a mostly ice covered island with a strip of exposed beach, and some impressive ice cliffs to the North. This was one of the first mornings at sea when we could see blue sky, and there was a deceptive swell. The message came over that there were bears near to the Walrus haul out on the beach, so a zodiac cruise was the best way forward. Unfortunately (it seemed) for us, the first group to wasn't ours, which seemed frustrating at the time, because we could see 2 Polar Bears on the beach from the observation decks. Time seemed to stretch watching these from the distance of the ship, before we were called to the zodiacs. This is where the slight swell seemed even higher, and we had to almost jump on to the craft.

The journey to the beach passed one or two Pomarine Skuas, but the best was yet to come. Our timing had been perfect. The larger of the two bears had made its way along the small rocky peninsular to the lying Walrus during our approach, and gave prolonged views not only at its closest point, but even of an attempt at charging the Walrus from the rocky blind side. The bear sat forlornly looking at the baying Walrus in the water for some time, before finally admitting defeat and meandering back to the beach. During all this, we had small groups of inquisitive younger Walruses come near to the zodiacs for an inspection, with the odd Pomarine Skua and 4 Red-throated Divers over. The return to the ship was even more hairy than earlier, with a heightening swell making return on board more than a little tricky.



Storøya

Three more hours following the morning landing, we were again moored off another barren shoreline backed by a landscape of ice, with two Walrus haul outs the target. All clear of bears and a perimeter set up – or so went the theory. The landings from the zodiacs were quite long and a little choppy, with a decent step off on to the shore. A Pomarine Skua flew over us on the journey there, and a couple of Arctic Skuas were intent on harassing the reasonably sized Arctic Tern colonies dotted around the shingle. A pair of Red-throated Divers flew over, and later a pair were seen on one of the shoreline lagoons. The third and least common of the local Geese, a trio of Brents, were found on the promontory of shingle which led to one of the Walrus haul outs. The whole scene was one of serenity – the perimeter was now the visual sign of the walking area for all, with plenty of shingle, and more shingle, to peruse and meander over. Another pair of Arctic Skuas were watched chasing more terns, and a pair of



Sanderlings were found at the edge of the diver lagoon, when a calm command to return to the zodiac site was given. The as ever efficient bear detection system had found a sleeping bear just around the corner, and what's more, the group of kayakers had stumbled across it on their own landing! A slight complicating factor was that all but one of the zodiacs had returned back to the ship, waiting for a leisurely return some time later. We were eventually returned in order to the ship, to be told the news that the last two zodiacs had actually watched the Polar Bear round the corner just beyond the Walruses! A close call, but an exciting tale to tell once back in one piece!

Thursday, 16 August 2012

(Day 7)

Bråsvellbreen



Turning away from the wildlife as the central focus for part of the voyage, this morning we parked the ship next to the rather impressive sea cliffs which form the edge of the ice sheet on the mainly ice covered island of Austfonna. The sea was almost smooth, in contrast to the 2 metre swell of yesterday, making the zodiacs a much more pleasant place to be. We were also lucky to have Bob as our guide – a self confessed iceberg nut, so we headed straight away from the rest of the flotilla to have a closer look at the impressive array of small icebergs which littered the sea. The variation in form, colour and even sounds close to was astonishing. Small groups of Kittiwakes were on some to add some spice, and the usual motley collection of light to dark Fulmars were passing particularly close to our vessel.

We did traverse part of the (vast) length of the ice cliffs, and came across various types of waterfall and cuttings where some ice had cleaved off. One of the waterfalls even fell internally into one of the enclaves, hitting the water below with some force. A couple of Bearded Seals made an appearance at this point, with a group of 3 Black Guillemots flying past, but the morning belonged to the geology rather than the fauna. The excitement hadn't finished yet though – as we were about to leave, the left hand wall of the cave with waterfall we had been in front of not too much earlier sheared off for a third and most impressive time, causing its own mini tsumani.

Alkefjellet

We left the smooth waters of the ice cliffs to head North to the cliffs holding thousands of breeding Brünnich's Guillemots. However, we were held up for some hours by a pod of feeding Humpback Whales. The sea by now had become much rougher, and even more impact on us was made by the bitter wind blowing from the North. This didn't take away from the display of the whales, which could be seen bubble feeding, with an attendant flock of Kittiwakes trying to pick off scraps, or even occasionally breaching. Two

particularly obliging chaps were happy to feed in front of the ship for some time. We were due to arrive at the sea cliffs at 4pm, but didn't leave the whales until around 1½ hours after that time.



As we sped from the site, the weather closed in, with very poor visibility, but this improved again as we neared the seabird colony at around 6pm. The commotion from the many thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots was tangible from some way off, and this also dispelled the worry that we may have just been a little late for the birds still nesting on the ledges. There are reputed to be around 60000 pairs here, and it certainly seemed that a sizeable portion of these were still in the vicinity. They seemed to be buzzing around everywhere – past both sides of the ship, many above, hundreds on the sea, and of course, thousands still on the nesting cliffs. Occasional opportunistic Glaucous Gulls could be seen amongst the throng. And this also gave the opportunity of one of the guillemot's main protagonists – Arctic Fox. The cliffs were possibly too steep for them in most places, but many searching eyes from the ship soon picked up a leucistic fox trundling its way along the grassy slopes below some of the nesting birds. It could be picked out easily with the naked eye, as it weaved its way along the green below the rocks. After observing the impressive glacier at the colony edge, the ship turned back South, when the fox was again picked up for the second and last time.



Nesting cliffs



Arctic Fox patrolling the base of the cliffs

Friday, 17 August 2012

(Day 8)

Sundneset (Barentsøya Island)

The overnight sailing led us to the calmer waters in a large straight between the two large islands of Barentsøya and Edgeøya, and the plan was to walk on the arctic tundra. This was usually a little too far South for Polar Bears, but the scouting crew were again out as we gorged on breakfast looking for any potential danger. We opted of the "slow

exercise" walking group on shore, which wasn't a bad call when we saw the "fast" group yomping up one of the nearby fell tops – not a bad thing to do at home, but not totally conducive to taking in the arctic tundra scenery. Our group set off along the shore (after spotting a pair of Long-tailed Ducks over the static ship), through a stream and then a wet bog, which was intent at pulling on wellies as we plodged through. The decision to opt for this group was underlined when we came across a Black Guillemot colony, where the birds on the cliff edges were very approachable. Then even better – an Arctic Fox sprung out from the cliff edge in front of us, and then lay down a little way on, still in full view.



Reindeer had been spotted at the base of the slopes in the distance, so we made our way across the impressive open and sparse tundra towards them. A huge stag was being approached by another group in the open lower ground, so we continued on our way towards a loose group of 8 animals, 4 of which were lying down. The others were approached slowly, and rewarded with very close views, with a line of tourists snapping away as they fed on the ground vegetation. As we watched, the same or a second Arctic Fox appeared to our left, and again seemed pretty well unconcerned by our presence. It was seen again just above us as we made our way down back to the awaiting zodiacs. On our trudge across the open bogs, a pair of Arctic Skuas made themselves obvious above us, and one even seemed to be doing a distraction display on the ground. As we traversed the stream for the return, a couple of Purple Sandpipers fed unconcernedly at the water's edge.

Russebukta (Edgeøya Island)

The midday sailing of three hours took us further South still, to the Western shores of the next large island of Edgeøya. The drill was very similar to the morning, with zodiac landings on a beach with a medium paced walk across the Arctic tundra for 2-3 hours. This was slightly flatter than the morning one, and this time backed by bare slopes encrusted by rough glaciers. This walk met up with more lakes than we had on any other



trip out, and the reward was small groups of Long-tailed Ducks, and the odd lagoon holding Red-throated Diver. The terrain underfoot was very wet and boggy, which was probably a reflection of the higher precipitation here as compared with the arctic desert conditions we had been in further North. As we headed further towards the slopes, two small groups of Reindeer were seen, and a single Pink-footed Goose was some distance away in another direction. There was plenty of faecal evidence of large numbers of geese to be seen, but that was to be only one here.

Saturday, 18 August 2012

(Day 9)

Hornshund

A slight swell and rolling of the ship during the night wasn't an indication of the almost glass like quality of the sea as we entered Hornshund fjord. We had rounded the southern tip of Spitsbergen, and entered the mouth of this wonderful fjord on the south-western tip of the island, with clear blue skies and almost no wind to compliment the 4°C temperatures. This was to feel much warmer as the morning, and the continuous sun, progressed. The views as we sailed along the length of the cutting were superb, with glaciers flowing from high peaks. The terminus of the fjord was even more spectacular, with large glaciers flowing down to the water's edge as rugged ice cliffs. This was to be the zodiac destination of the morning, running the length of the ice at the North end. It was obvious that numerous calving events of the ice stacks from the main sheet occurred, shown by the multitudes of small icebergs in the bay. We did hear some cracking, and one or two small boulders of ice gave way, but no mass fall this time.

Even from the deck, one or two birds could be seen plying to and fro. The strangest was a Purple Sandpiper which circled the ship before making towards the shore. A lone Arctic Skua ignored the Arctic Terns which were in small numbers over the water. While one or two Black Guillemots had been seen from the ship, the closest encounters were from the zodiac. Some birds were highly inquisitive, and almost came within touching distance. One small group was the only one to contain 2 juveniles. After a Glaucous Gull flew over the ice edge, it was followed by two sightings of Ivory Gulls. The most frustrating was a group of 3 Ivory Gulls, which flew over our heads and landed on the iceberg we had just left behind!



For the afternoon, we headed back towards the head of the fjord, and then into an offshoot which again had a glacier at the end. On the way up here, there was plenty of ice floating by, and there were 2 Bearded Seals on a couple of these, more than content to lay and snooze as the ship parked itself close by. The zodiac cruise took us straight back to where one of the seals was still trying to rest, until it eventually tired of our

presence and left. We then set off towards the glacier ridge, and drifted close to a group of Kittiwakes perched on some ice. There were also a few Black Guillemots near to the ice edge, and the driver of the zodiac coaxed a pair closer by wiggling his fingers – unbelievable but it worked! The sun on the valley was lower than earlier, but the fjord was stunning.



Sunday, 19 August 2012

(Day 10)

Bellsund



After the stunning views of the ice lined fjord yesterday, this morning's mooring found us next to a much bleaker shoreline in a longer and wider fjord, with low cloud covering the peaks. While the temperature was a little warmer at 6°C, there was something of a swell as we boarded the zodiac for a morning walk. This time, the scouts had set up a perimeter of safety, allowing the whole group to wander within it at will. We were bounded on the landward side by some steep, scree covered slopes, with the sounds of Kittiwakes on the ledges, but the hoped for Little Auk colony had left already. I also kept an eye out for Arctic Fox, but without any luck. We completed a two hour clockwise circuit, which followed the stony shore to larger boulders at the end, then through moss and bog to the other end of the perimeter. Of huge interest was a group of 9 Reindeer feeding totally unconcerned in the centre of the rambling tourists. Not quite as nonchalant were a pair of Arctic Skuas with a well grown but still immature chick, which disappointingly failed to attack any of the walkers who often seemed to be approaching too close. Along the shoreline were small numbers of Purple Sandpipers, with the odd Glaucous Gull perched around. Overhead, two groups of Barnacle & separate Pink-footed Geese flew over. Near to the end of the walk, amongst the larger boulders, a few Snow Buntings were flying and fro.

The post lunch period found us on the opposite side of the fjord for a "mini walk", with not even enough time to take off our life jackets. The idea was to have a short walk on

the opposite shore of the fjord to the morning, and this was supposed to be a historic jaunt. A couple of huts and masses of old beluga bones later, and we conducted the walk in no time. There was predictably little to see wildlife wise on this short stroll, although a few Purple Sandpipers were on the shore, and two Reindeer in the distance. As we turned back towards the zodiacs, a Bearded Seal popped its head up in the sea just in front of the landing site.



Abandoned whaling boat



View East from the landing

We left here to sail to the head of the fjord, where a rather impressive, and apparently fast travelling, glacier was to be seen. The waters here were brown with the silt from the base, and the captain reported only 7 metres of distance from the keel to the bottom, even though the charts suggested this should be more than 30 metres. Also, the distance charts showed the ice to be 10 miles away, when it was in reality only 1 mile. Both were indicative of the speed of movement of the glacier since the last survey two years ago. The wind had picked up again as we turned the ship back to down the fjord, but some birds did pass by on our travels, notably Ivory Gull, Red-throated Diver, Barnacle Goose, and an Arctic Skua chasing a Kittiwake.



SPECIES SEEN

Pink-footed Goose

Anser brachyrhynchus

1 on tundra of Edgeøya; Two groups of 2 & 3 flying over Bellsund in the morning, and 3 in the afternoon

Brent Goose

Branta bernicla

This is the least common of the three breeding geese on Svalbard, and we only saw 3 on Storøya, at the point where the Polar Bear subsequently appeared after our departure

Barnacle Goose

Branta leucopsis

Group of ~30 North of Longyearbyen, perhaps ~80 on lagoons next to the airport, and ~12 grazing in the centre of town; ~4 small family groups Smeereburgodden; Two groups of 6 & 16 flying over Bellsund, and a single later from the glacier in the same fjord



Eurasian Wigeon

Anas Penelope

1 female on the inlet at Longyearbyen

Common Eider

Somateria mollissima

No full plumaged males were seen – all birds were dark, which seemed to indicate eclipse plumage in any males present. ~50 on the shoreline at Longyearbyen; Quite common West of Spitsbergen; ~30 birds, some with ducklings, at Lågøya; 3 flew past the beach at Storøya; 2x2 flew past ship at Barentsøya; ~12 with young on the sea from Bellsund



Long-tailed Duck

Clangula hyemalis

2 flew over ship at Barentsøya; ~25 in small groups on small lakes on Edgeøya

Red-throated Diver

Gavia stellata

All birds seen were still in full breeding plumage - 1 on lagoon, and 2 overhead at Smeereburgodden; 4 overhead at Kvitøya; 2 on lagoon and 2 overhead on Storøya; ~4 on lagoons at Russebukta; 1 flew from the head of Bellsund

Fulmar

Fulmarus glacialis

This was THE common bird seen throughout, seen from the southern tip of Svalbard, to the ice floes of the North-west, and also in the fjords



Sanderling

Calidris alba

2 on lagoon at Storøya

Turnstone

Arenaria interpres

All birds in non breeding plumage - 3+3 at Longyearbyen; Group of 5 on Lågøya

Dunlin

Calidris alpina

3 non breeding plumaged birds with Purple Sandpipers on open mud at Longyearbyen

Purple Sandpiper

Calidris maritime

Quite easily the most common wader seen, with all birds in non breeding or mainly non breeding plumage - Small numbers along shore at Longyearbyen; ~20 Lågøya; 2 feeding at stream edge at Barentsøya; 1 flew around the ship in Hornshund; ~8 on the shoreline at Bellsund



Black-legged Kittiwake

Rissa tridactyla

Behind Fulmatr, this was the second most regular bird seen during the voyage - Small numbers amongst Fulmars at sea following boat; Common West of Spitsbergen and off Smeereburgodden; Reasonably common in the pack ice; Small numbers at Lågøya; Colony of nesting birds in at the head of Innvika, Duvefjorden; Regular Kvitøya & Storøya; Common Bråsvellbreen, with some perched on icebergs; many followed feeding Humpback Whales on way to Alkefjellet; Small colonies heard in the low cloud on the rocks above Bellsund

Ivory Gull

Pagophila eburnean

Perhaps personally the most sought after of the potential gull species which could be seen. The 2 at the Polar Bear carcass in the pack ice were almost predictable, with the ice watched for some time after the bear had departed for these typical scavengers. In addition, 1 flew past ship on way to Innvika, Duvefjorden, and 1 later past the iceberg; 3 birds flew over the zodiac and landed on an iceberg in Hornshund, with 2 single sightings early on; 1 flying towards glacier at head of Bellsund



Common Gull

Larus canus

1 bird on the sea at Longyearbyen

Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus

1 en route to Smeereburgodden

Glaucous Gull

Larus hyperboreus

This was the only commonly seen large gull throughout - Fairly common around Longyearbyen; Fairly common West of Spitsbergen; 1 at the Polar Bear kill within the pack ice; A few birds flying around Lågøya; 1 next to Walrus on Phippsøya Island; 1 chased juvenile Kittiwake from the colony at Innvika, Duvefjorden; 2 over beach at Kvitøya, 2 over Storøya; Few birds amongst the auks at Alkefjellet; 1 at Black Guillemot colony, Barentsøya; 1 at Edgeøya; 1 over ice at Hornshund; ~5 on Bellsund



Arctic Tern

Sterna paradisaea

Very common around Longyearbyen, where there were many breeding birds with chicks; Common West of Spitsbergen; 2 birds near to the pack ice; Common and nesting on Lågøya; 2 reasonably large colonies at Storøya; 2 on beach harassing Arctic Skua on Edgeøya; Few in Hornshund

Great Skua

Stercorarius skua

2 on rocks just offshore at Smeereburgodden; 2 over the boat as we left Storøya

Pomarine Skua

Stercorarius pomarinus

All birds were light phase with full spoons - 3 over sea at Kvitøya, 1 over sea at Storøya

Arctic Skua

Stercorarius parasiticus

All adults were light phase - Groups of 3 and 5 flew over Longyearbyen in South-easterly direction; 3 on Smeereburgodden, with 2 separate birds over Smeereburgodden; 2 on ice floe in the pack ice; 3 over Lågøya; 2 pairs harassing terns Storøya; Pair on tundra at Barentsøya; 1 being harassed by 2 Arctic Terns on Edgeøya, with 2 over; 1 in Hornshund; Pair with single well grown chick on Bellsund, and 1 chasing a Kittiwake further up the fjord



Little Auk

Alle alle

Disappointingly, the potential colonies which we could have visited had all departed by the time we arrived (a sign in Longyearbyen even seemed to indicate the presence of one up the valley towards the glacier) - Group of 3 flying and 1 on sea off Smeereburgodden; Small groups of 1-6 swimming or flying in the pack ice; Groups of ~8 and ~12 flying around Innvika, Duvefjorden

Brünnich's Guillemot

Uria lomvia

2 flying in front of the ship on the edge of the pack ice were the only birds we saw until we reached the colony at Alkefjellet. We were lucky that the colony was still mainly present here, despite there being estimates of 60000 pairs at its height. The cliff faces still looked full of birds, as did the air around us, and even decent numbers on the sea



Black Guillemot

Cephus grille

These were seen regularly, usually in small numbers. Some birds on the sea could be coaxed closer by twiddling fingers next to the water – strange but it seemed to work! ~10 on the sea and flying over at Longyearbyen; Common West of Spitsbergen; Occasional near to the pack ice, including a pair of juveniles ~10 around Phippsøya Island; Regular on journey at and within Innvika, Duvefjorden; 3 over seas at Storøya; 3 flew past zodiac at Bråsvellbreen; few birds at Alkefjellet; ~20 birds seen at cliff colony, Barentsøya; 3 past beach on Edgeøya; Small numbers in Hornshund, including 2 juveniles; A few birds off Bellsund

Atlantic Puffin

Fratercula arctica

1 on sea as boat left Longyearbyen; group of 3, and ~ 6 singles West of Spitsbergen, 2 off Smeereburgodden; 2 just South of the pack ice

Snow Bunting

Plectrophenax nivalis

This is the only passerine regularly seen here. Perhaps the easiest place to see them is in Longyearbyen, where they are quite mobile - 2 single birds and group of 3 (including male) shoreline at Longyearbyen; 2 on beach at Edgeøya; ~4 in the boulders at Bellsund in the morning, and 1 in the afternoon

TOTAL SPECIES = 26

MAMMALS

Arctic Fox

Vulpes lagopus

The first was a leucistic variant patrolling the grassy slopes below the Brünnich's Guillemot colony at Alkefjellet; 1-2 seen x3 from Black Guillemot cliffs to lower slopes above tundra at Barentsøya



Polar Bear

Ursus maritimus

This was likely to be the main reason for most of the passengers on the ship coming on this voyage, and they most certainly didn't disappoint. The likelihood of seeing them is increased further North, and this is where we saw all of ours. We were also fortunate to see some uncommon to outright rare observations, including surplus killing of seals, an attempt on a group of Walruses, a 3 hour long visual of our first bear, and a swimming bear between the ship and our shore landing area - 2 separate individuals, at Smeereburgodden; 1 made two kills in the pack ice; 3 (2 together) on Phippsøya Island; 2 on beach at Kvitøya; 1 (not seen by myself) at Storøya, rounding the corner of the shingle beach as the last of the zodiacs was boarded

Walrus

Odobenus rosmarus

Many haul outs are known, and we visited a few of them. All had at least some animals present, and all allowed close approach of the crowd - 1 on rock and pair in water at Smeereburgodden; Two groups totalling ~60 Lågøya haul out; ~50 on Phippsøya Island; ~200 Kvitøya, 2 haulouts of ~ 60 at Storøya



Hooded Seal

Cystophora cristata

Immature on ice in the pack ice



Bearded Seal

Erignathus barbatus

1 behind ship in water at Smeereburgodden; 2-3 near to zodiac at Bråsvellbreen; 2 on ice in second channel at Hornshund, and a third as we left this channel later; 1 off the landing site in the afternoon at Bellsund

Harp Seal

Pagophilus groenlandicus

Large group of ~2000, with smaller groups of 2-8 in the pack ice

Common Seal

Phoca vitulina

1 on rock at Smeereburgodden

Reindeer

Rangifer tarandus

These are very easy to approach, with some groups in the past having been reported as walking through watching tourists - 2 in the distance while walking on Smeereburgodden; 9 on tundra walk, Barentsøya; ~15 on tundra, Edgeøya, some with calves; 9 on the moss at Bellsund



Humpback Whale

Megaptera novaeangliae

At least 8 feeding on the channel towards Alkefjellet. This group displayed many behaviour patterns of interest, including breaching, bubble fishing, and also smacking the water with flippers



TOTAL SPECIES = 8