

SPITSBERGEN AND THE SVALBARD ARCHIPELAGO

Jun 23, 2012 to Jul 5, 2012

John Coons



Visiting the Dovekie colony was one of the avian highlights. The sight and sound was fabulous. (Photo by guide John Coons)

Our group enjoyed calm seas on our expedition to Svalbard where we had great encounters with so many prototypical arctic species. Polar Bear, Walrus, Arctic Fox, Ivory Gull, and Dovekie are species one has to go far north to see. And, far north we went. We reached 81° 21.026' N latitude which is 1000 miles north of the Arctic Circle and only 590 miles from the north pole. The spectacular scenery was a great backdrop for also seeing the massive bird cliffs filled with Thick-billed Murres at Alkefjellet, those colorful King Eiders swimming and standing on the ice, both Barnacle and Pink-footed geese, Red-throated Loons on the nest, breeding plumage Purple Sandpipers in flight display, Parasitic and Long-tailed jaegers, those always popular Atlantic Puffins, and numbers of Snow Buntings singing away. We were also all dived on by Arctic Terns. Most of our landings were made on the island of Spitsbergen, but we also went ashore at Torrellneset on Nordaustlandet and the smaller island of Phippsøya. We sailed a total of 1072 nautical miles (1233 miles). Since so few species occur on Svalbard, I added the appropriate subspecific names for those that I could find information.

The great food, comfortable seas and ship, and friends we made among the quite international group of passengers and staff made for a lovely expedition to the Far North. Thanks for making it a wonderful time for me, too!

--John

For more information about this tour, including future departures, visit our website at www.fieldguides.com. And to see this same triplist online, go to <http://www.fieldguides.com/triplists/spi12LIST.pdf> and you will find the list in its entirety.

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – We saw these on a handful of occasions with our first being seen on Blomstrandhalvoya. [E]

BARNACLE GOOSE (*Branta leucopsis*) – These were encountered on several days with our first on the green tundra at the edge of Longyearbyen where there were a few goslings. There were also a good number in Ny Alesund where the chicks were a little smaller. The population of this species in the 1950's was less than 1000 individuals but it has come back well.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We enjoyed great views of six individuals in Woodfjorden as we drifted in our zodiacs where we encountered our first Polar Bear. There were two adult males, three first-year males and a female with the group.

COMMON EIDER (BOREAL) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – The most common duck we encountered, there were good numbers in some locations including many with young at Prins Karls Forland. This subspecies is the same that breeds in Iceland, Greenland and northeastern Canada.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Surprisingly, we saw more of these than expected with our first at Ny Alesund. Most were males but a couple of females were also seen. Interestingly, there are no described subspecies for this duck.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – On our landing at Faksvagen some elected to stay on the ship or do the beach walk. Going higher up the ridge the group I was with found three Rock Ptarmigan with one strolling around in front of all. This is the only year-round resident of Spitsbergen and this race is only found on Svalbard and Franz Josef Land.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – We found two nests with attending pairs. Both birds on the nest were showing the characteristic prone position with the neck stretched out.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS) (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – Seen commonly each day. There was rarely a time when one or two were not gliding by the ship. The population in the Svalbard area is estimated at over one million pairs. All that we saw were dark morph individuals. This subspecies is the high arctic breeder in the Atlantic,

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – We enjoyed nice scope views of one at the pond near Ny Alesund. Another was seen at Faksvagen and a couple of us saw one at the pond in front of the airport terminal on our last afternoon on Spitsbergen.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – These were well represented with at least one or two seen at most landing throughout the trip. Several were engaged in flight displays and at least one was seen doing the lifted-wing display. Some of us saw a color-banded individual on the beach at Raudfjorden. I contacted some European banders who led me to a website that indicates this bird may have been banded in Sweden but that bander has not responded to my email.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – Our only encounter was a fly-by pair while we were enjoying the female Polar Bear and cub at the Andoyane Islands. Those that got on them could see the red color and white cheek of the more brightly-colored female.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (ATLANTIC) (*Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*) – These were abundant throughout the trip. We saw many on the nesting cliffs at Alkefjellet then several groups that congregated on ice floes in the fjords.



A highlight for all the passengers and staff was this Polar Bear mother and cub staying cool on the snow. (Photo by guide John Coons)

IVORY GULL (*Pagophila eburnea*) – One of the quintessential birds of the Arctic. We observed at least seven individuals in five different localities. The pair on the beach and swimming just offshore at Ny Alesund afforded the best views of this rarely seen species. Our first was at Longyearbyen where we got lucky and saw one on a pond near the dog town east of the community. A great bird!

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus hyperboreus*) – We saw this bird everyday of the trip. The Glaucous Gull is the main predatory species on Svalbard and, seemingly, fills the niche of Gyrfalcon, Peregrine and Raven here.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – These were around and aggressive at most of the landings we made. The nesting birds will really let you know they don't want you around. At least one of us got tapped on the hat at Ny Alesund where they can not be avoided.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – Only a few were seen and these were all from the ship as they harassed terns and kittiwakes.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – We saw a fair number of these "Arctic Skuas" throughout the trip. Some were chasing terns while our treks on the tundra took us near some nesting areas where both individuals flew just a few meters overhead before returning to the nest.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – At Blomstrandhalvoya we saw one of the few pairs of this species on Spitsbergen. The individual we saw well was banded and had a solar geo-tag. If this was the same individual that we saw last year, it had spent the previous winter off the coast of South Africa.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

DOVEKIE (*Alle alle alle*) – Although we saw many individuals flying past the ship, it was a trip highlight to sit amongst these calling birds in the nesting colony. About every 15 minutes a Glaucous Gull would pass over scattering hundreds of birds into flight. Not many birders have seen this species in its breeding plumage.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia lomvia*) – This was certainly the most numerous species we saw on the trip. The nesting cliff at Alkefjellet alone has 65,000 pairs. Hundreds upon hundreds were seen everyday from the ship. Throughout the expedition this species was referred to by its Old World name, Brunnich's Guillemot.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (ARCTIC) (*Cepphus grylle mandtii*) – We saw this species every day of the trip but not in big numbers. At the nesting cliffs at Alkefjellet there were only a handful of nesting pairs compared to the Thick-billed Murres and kittiwakes. Several seemed to be quite curious of the drifting zodiacs and came up for a close look where the bright red feet could easily be seen. This is the race that breeds in the arctic and is different from the form that breeds in eastern North America.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*) – This popular species was mostly seen in the southern portion of our expedition though a few were seen further north. Those of us that did the post-dinner zodiac cruise near the 14th of July Glacier saw a few nesting pairs on the rocky cliffs one of the furthest north colonies in the world.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*) – Starting in Longyearbyen we saw this beautiful little species, the only regularly occurring passerine on Svalbard, almost everywhere we landed that had any kind of tundra vegetation. Its song was always a delight to hear. The subspecies occurring here is the same one that winters in the United States.

MAMMALS

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) – Wayne Lynch convinced me that the first sighting of Minke Whale right off the bow by many on the ship was probably this species. The shape of the dorsal fin and size fit well. I wish we had seen it better.

COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – At least a couple of these small whales were seen.

FIN WHALE (*Balaenoptera physalus*) – I don't think any of us got up (Cynthia?) when the call went out that these were near the ship at 1:00 am. Near the end of the trip some of the late-nighters had a small pod of blowing individuals on the starboard side.



This Ivory Gull, one of the great birds of the north, showed well at Ny Ålesund. (Photo by guide John Coons)

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We did well with sightings of this entertaining species with good sightings at Alkefjellet and at Fuglehuken where we had the closest view.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – Wow! A trip highlight for all had to be the encounters with this magnificent creature. Our first was a male at Woodfjorden that was tending to a seal kill while another smaller bear made an approach before wisely moving on. Later that day we enjoyed a mother and cub lounging on a patch of snow on one of the Andoyane Islands. Amazingly, while most of the passengers were ashore at Murchisonfjord a Polar Bear swam up to the ship for some of the best photos of the trip. Another great sighting was the bear we found near the edge of the pack ice well north of 81° N latitude. We watched this one swim between ice floes before letting it resume its hunting. In all, I believe eight of these top predators were seen.

WALRUS (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – Another great spectacle was seeing this legendary animal hauled out on the beaches in at least four different spots. We had rather close encounters from land at Phippsøya and at Torrellneset where there were 20-30 individuals. All those that were seen well were males.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – We saw a good number of these at Fuglehuken which is the normal northern limit of their range.

RINGED SEAL (*Phoca hispida*) – A few of these were seen later in the trip. This species is the only one that is able to keep its breathing hole open in the thicker pack ice.

HARP SEAL (*Phoca groenlandica*) – A few were seen well later in the trip.

BEARDED SEAL (*Erignathus barbatus*) – Some folks had nice close views of one near the ship while many were ashore. We had another couple that we got in the scope on some distant pack ice. This is the largest of the seals we encountered.

CARIBOU (*Rangifer caribou*) – Good numbers of this endemic subspecies were seen. Known locally as Svalbard Reindeer, this form is smaller with shorter legs than its mainland counterparts. The subspecific name is *platyrhynchus* which means flat nose.



We enjoyed several encounters with Walrus including this haul out location at Torrellneset. (Photo by guide John Coons)

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 23 bird taxa and 11 mammal taxa