



Field Guides Tour Report

THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2013

Jul 10, 2013 to Jul 22, 2013

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A taste of the stunning scenery we enjoyed as we cruised the fjords aboard the Plancius. (Photo by tour participant Peggy Keller)

We had a great time exploring Svalbard and doing our first circumnavigation of Spitsbergen. Most of the staff of the Plancius were commenting on the wonderful weather we had during the trip. The early days were sunny with little wind, which is quite rare, but we did have a couple of cloudy and raw days later to remind us we were in the high Arctic. The seas were calm throughout, which is what to expect when we rarely get far from shore and spend a lot of time in fjords and inlets. Our trip through the ice floes at the edge of the pack ice was memorable as we pushed large ice floes away and reached our highest latitude at 80° 50' N. We had several encounters with quintessential Arctic species including many Polar Bears, Walrus, and Ivory Gulls, with the visit to the Dovekie colony being one of the unforgettable moments. The Pink-footed Geese, Rock Ptarmigan, Red-throated Loon on a nest, red Red Phalaropes, Sabine's Gull, Long-tailed Jaeger, and displaying Snow Buntings were certainly highlights as well. Inspiring was the visit to the huge nesting cliff of Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes at Alkefjellet.

The ship was quite comfortable and it was great to make friends among the international group of passengers and crew. And, it was wonderful to share this experience with all of you. I look forward to the next one.

--John

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*) – Our first ones were on the tundra at 14th of July Glacier and then we saw more the following day at Blomstrandhalvoya. Much of this population winters in Scotland.

BARNACLE GOOSE (*Branta leucopsis*) – Quite common in some places. We encountered many at Ny Alesund where they have been studied for many years. These have rebounded from a population of under 1000 in the 1950's to be widespread today.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We saw this uncommon species a few times. Most of the males were younger birds without the full head color but we did have a nice adult male in one of the flocks that flew by later in the trip.

COMMON EIDER (BOREAL) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – I believe this duck was seen everyday of the trip. Many of those encountered were "brown" females that had congregated on the beaches, but we did see a good number of nicely marked males as well.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – A few pairs were seen in the early part of the trip with our first sightings in the Andoyane islands. We saw both males and females.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – Robert saw one during a long hike early on in the trip then we saw a pair during our tundra walk on Edgeoya. This was a great sighting of this highly camouflaged bird.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – We had great views of a nesting pair on the small lake at Ny Alesund then another pair that flew around us as we watched the Common Loons at Andoyane.

COMMON LOON (*Gavia immer*) – We saw two, one in full breeding plumage and the other in full winter dress, in a small bay in the Andoyane Islands. This is a rather rare bird this far north and not to be expected.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS) (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – There were many circling the ship each day. When we were at the southern end of Spitsbergen we saw several light-morph individuals, the first I have seen in the Svalbard region. The population of this species is estimated at over one million for the Svalbard area.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula*) – We saw a couple of these in Longyearbyen on our first afternoon then we had some scope views at Ny Alesund before seeing another with the Ivory Gull at Longyearbyen on our return.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres interpres*) – This was a surprise find in the bay at Andoyane as we zodiaced our way around. This was certainly a post-breeding wanderer.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – I saw one with a few Purple Sandpipers at the pond on Edgeoya but it was in very bad light. Our plan to walk around the pond got delayed by a pair of Rock Ptarmigan and we could not locate it again when we finally got into position.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – This fine shorebird was seen on most days of the expedition. Most were along the beaches instead of on the tundra this year indicating they were probably getting ready to move. It is a treat to see this species in breeding plumage.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – We had great views of males and the richly colored females at Ny Alesund and in the Andoyane Islands. The first male we saw at Ny Alesund worked its way through the grass and settled into a nest with three eggs that was right next to a main pathway. Not many people have seen a nest of this species.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – One of the abundant birds we saw on the trip there were many on the higher cliffs at Alkefjellet. Our zodiac cruise through the ice floes passed another large colony and we saw many congregating on the floes.

IVORY GULL (*Pagophila eburnea*) – One of the great arctic birds, we ended up having a few encounters. Our first was a fly-by when most of us were on the top deck as we cruised near the pack ice. After a couple of additional brief sightings we had scope views near the Storbreen Glacier of four to eight individuals. We had four in sight at once but they kept dropping behind floes and it was difficult to get a true count. When we returned to Longyearbyen some of us had a relatively close encounter with one along the beach after we saw it fly over the storage building. All birds that we saw were adults.

SABINE'S GULL (*Xema sabini*) – We had pretty good views of an adult that flew from the shore on Mofen Island as we slowly sailed past. This quite distinct gull is very uncommon in the Svalbard area.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – This large predator was seen everyday of the trip. Since there are no Gyrfalcons or other raptors on Svalbard this species fills that niche. At the colony, thousands of Dovekies would take flight each time a Glaucous Gull passed over.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – Another bird that was seen every day. Many were protecting nests at some of the landings and we got dived on at Ny Alesund where they have set up territories right next to the roads.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – All of our sightings were along the northwest and northern parts of Spitsbergen as we saw a few chasing terns or kittiwakes to force them to drop their food.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – A good number of "Arctic Skuas" were seen throughout as they also harassed terns and kittiwakes. A few seemed to have nests on the tundra and passed quite close to us to investigate.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – We saw two birds at Blomstrandhalvoya, the old marble quarry, where the only known nest of this species in Svalbard is located. Two more individuals flew past the bow of the Plancius one morning near Oxfordhalvoya.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

DOVEKIE (*Alle alle*) – One of the highlights of the trip was a visit to the large colony of Dovekies at Bellsund. These "Little Auks" were quite close on the talus slopes where they nest between the rocks. Thousands would take off when a Glaucous Gull passed overhead then circle before settling back again. With all those that we saw flying past the ship each day it is nigh on impossible to estimate the total number we saw.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – The most abundant bird we encountered on the trip, we saw thousands everyday with a previously estimated 65,000 pairs at the cliffs at Alkefjellet. Most of the staff and the Europeans on the Plancius called this species by its Old World name, Brunnich's Guillemot.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (ARCTIC) (*Cepphus grylle mandtii*) – Also seen every day of the cruise, they were not in huge numbers but easily seen. The bright red feet were a contrast of color in the otherwise black and white world of the high arctic.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*) – Always a favorite, we saw a number of fly-bys from the ship before encountering several individuals nesting on the low cliffs near the 14th of July Glacier. We also had a few pass the ship while we were cruising the pack ice. There can not be many Atlantic Puffins that get further north than that.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – Visible at nearly every landing this handsome species is the only passerine to be expected on our trip. We heard many in display song.

MAMMALS

BELUGA (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – We had a pretty good view of 8-12 individuals skirting the coastline near the southern part of Spitsbergen.

COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – A few were seen early on in the trip. This small whale does not raise its flukes when diving.

HUMPBACK WHALE (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) – We had a few around the Plancius on our second day out. There was a great view of the flukes as these great animals headed deep to feed.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – A couple of individuals were seen at the top of the rocky slope as they worked the edges of the Dovekie colony at Bellsund.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – Certainly a highlight for most of the passengers we had multiple sightings of this great northern bear. I believe the ship's sighting total was 22 bears while I had 17 sightings. We watched the one on the pack ice as it walked along the edge slipping into the water and swimming to get to the next large floe. Our closest encounter was from the zodiacs of a large female on Barentsoya which had already prevented our landing. We saw it exploring a rocky cliff before finding it again later lying in a large patch of yellow flowers. Yip! Yip! Yip!

WALRUS (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – We saw these terrific beasts a handful of times with the best sightings being at Torrellneset where we watched a large male haul out of the water and "worm" his way to the others lying in a pile on the beach and proceed to disrupt everyone's nap.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – Our best sightings were along the western side of Spitsbergen.

RINGED SEAL (*Phoca hispida*) – These smaller seals made a few appearances along the east side of Spitsbergen.

HARP SEAL (*Phoca groenlandica*) – Several were encountered near the pack ice on our furthest travels north.

BEARDED SEAL (*Erignathus barbatus*) – The largest of the seals we saw, we had a few encounters with individuals that lay comfortably on ice floes allowing close approach by the zodiacs.

CARIBOU (*Rangifer caribou*) – This subspecies, known as the Svalbard Reindeer, is endemic to the region. We saw them on several occasions with some being quite close and curious. This form has shorter legs than those in other parts of the world, presumably because they do not have to deal with deep snow on Svalbard.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 27 bird taxa and 11 mammal taxa