



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC: Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2014**

Jun 29, 2014 to Jul 11, 2014

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*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, [please VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE.](#)*



*Arctic Norway at Spitsbergen: Dovekies, snow-capped mountains, and the Arctic Ocean (Photo by participant Alan Abel)*

We had a great expedition cruise to a remote part of the world. We crossed 80° N latitude, only 650 miles from the North Pole -- few people ever get this far north. The weather was spectacular for most of the trip with sunny skies and little wind, and we found ourselves shedding layers during our land-based birding and hiking. However, some fog and mist rolled in the last day, curtailing a close land approach to Walrus. There was a lot of snow remaining on the tundra, which probably set back the nesting of some of the birds by a week or more. Early indications were that our route would be changed by ice in the northern fjords, but new satellite ice charts showed that much of the ice had moved out over the previous several days, and we were little affected.

Between our first birding when we saw Common Ringed Plover in Longyearbyen to our last day on the ship when we found male King Eiders, we squeezed in a lot of highlights. Some of these were the pair of Rock Ptarmigan on our first hike when the male flew right over our heads; several encounters with Great Skuas harassing terns; the Dovekies laughing as flocks circled over the nesting scree at Bellsund; cruising under the multitudes of Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes at the bird cliffs at Alkefjellet where some of us got souvenirs; Ivory Gull for a lucky few; Walrus on the ice floes next to the ship; great looks at a close Fin Whale on our first evening; several views of the seemingly tiny Arctic Foxes patrolling the bird cliffs and tundra; and of course the Polar Bears. We ended up with several great Polar Bear sightings including a female with a cub, another female working on a dolphin carcass, and a long study of a large male strolling along the ridge. One of more impressive sightings was the male bear on the pack ice since we got to see it in a place where they spend most of their lives.

And, we cannot forget our post-dinner birding walk near our hotel in Oslo where we found Gray Heron, Common Gull, White Wagtail, Eurasian Magpie, Jackdaw, Great Tit, Willow Warbler, Yellowhammer, Eurasian Goldfinch, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow.

We enjoyed quite an international cohort of travelers, with more than 20 nationalities represented. There was good food as well, and a great group of birders. I hope to see you all again somewhere else in the world.

--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*) – We saw these scattered around in a few of the tundra sites we visited. The majority of the population of this bird winters in Scotland.

**BARNACLE GOOSE** (*Branta leucopsis*) – We saw these just about everyday we went ashore. With the late-lingering snow there seemed to be fewer goslings this year. A good number, some with chicks, were quite close in Ny Alesund. The populations of this bird in Svalbard were less than 1000 in the 1950's but they have come back nicely.

**KING EIDER** (*Somateria spectabilis*) – After a brief and distant look at one on a pond near the airport on our arrival in Longyearbyen we had a view of

a few near the end of our cruise. During a zodiac cruise near the Esmarkbreen we found a few that included some nicely plumaged males, some immature males and females.

**COMMON EIDER (BOREAL)** (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – This was by far the most common duck we encountered. Some were paired up but in a few places the males and females had already separated into gender flocks. At Longyearbyen, some of us saw females sitting on nests when we did a walk on our final day.

**LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – I believe all of our sightings were of males. The females were probably on nests on the tundra.

#### Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**ROCK PTARMIGAN** (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – On one of our first excursions ashore, we spotted a white male on the tundra at the edge of a snow patch. It ended up flying right over our heads and landing below us. Eventually it flew back up the slope and we spotted a very well-camouflaged female next to it. This is the only bird that does not migrate out of Svalbard in the winter.

#### Gaviidae (Loons)

**RED-THROATED LOON** (*Gavia stellata*) – We saw two in the fjord near Ny Alesund for our first then another couple later in the expedition.

#### Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

**NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS)** (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – These were almost never out of sight while we were on the ship. The Svalbard population is estimated at over one million birds. In the southern part of our journey in Bellsund we did encounter a few light-morph individuals.

#### Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

**COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – Surprisingly, our only one was a good scope view along the beach at Longyearbyen on our arrival day. I'm sure we could have found a few more on our return to Longyearbyen if the drizzling rain had allowed us to scan the flats more productively.

#### Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres interpres*) – There was one at the edge of Ny Alesund that ended up flying over our heads. Another was seen along the shore at Longyearbyen when we returned at the end of the trip. These were probably post-breeding wanderers, perhaps from Greenland.

**SANDERLING** (*Calidris alba*) – Sherry and a few others saw one on the tundra at Sorgfjorden during their snowshoeing trek. This is one of the most northerly nesting birds in the world.

**PURPLE SANDPIPER** (*Calidris maritima*) – We ended up seeing several along the beaches and a few on the tundra where we found a bird with two small chicks at our last landing spot. We did hear a few in display at Ny Alesund but the lingering snow on the tundra may have delayed nesting this year.

#### Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

**GREAT SKUA** (*Stercorarius skua*) – We saw this large intimidating species on several days. Our first good close one flew right past us at Ny Alesund.

**PARASITIC JAEGER** (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – There were nearly daily sightings of these "Arctic Skuas" and we saw a couple of them at nests on the tundra. Somewhat unusual were the three dark-morph individuals we encountered.

**LONG-TAILED JAEGER** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – After not being able to land at Blomstrandhalvoya, a known site for this species we found at least two and perhaps three during our walk at the end of the fjord near Ny Alesund. This is a regular but rather rare species in Svalbard.

#### Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

**DOVEKIE** (*Alle alle*) – We saw these every day except one during the cruise. This is a species that few birders have seen on the breeding grounds. We had small groups and some large flocks passing the ship on a regular basis. We visited a nesting colony where these "Little Auks" were flying overhead giving their laughing-like call. Some of us scaled the steep slope and sat near the rocks where a group of about 30 birds landed quite close to us before being flushed off by a Glaucous Gull. These birds did not seem to be nesting at the site this year. It's hard to imagine these tiny birds spending the entire winter in rough northern seas.

**THICK-BILLED MURRE** (*Uria lomvia*) – The most abundant species we saw on the trip had to be these "Brunnich's Guillemots". The bird cliff at Alkefjellet had an estimated 65,000 pairs alone and we saw many other smaller cliffs and thousands flying past the ship each day.

**BLACK GUILLEMOT (ARCTIC)** (*Cepphus grylle mandtii*) – We also saw these every day but not nearly in the numbers of the other alcids we encountered. Several got quite close to our zodiacs as we cruised along the shores.

**ATLANTIC PUFFIN** (*Fratercula arctica*) – This great bird showed well on a few days. We got rather close to several on the nesting cliff just above the water at the 14th of July Glacier where we could hear them grunting. On one of our other zodiac cruises we had a few get to within inches of the boats.

#### Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

**BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Huge numbers of these small gulls were seen throughout. At the nesting cliffs the kittiwakes were usually found right at the top with the murres below them. We saw at least a couple of immature birds near the end of the trip.

**IVORY GULL** (*Pagophila eburnea*) – Unfortunately, we never connected well with this denizen of the far north. Cheryl and Alan saw two fly right past them while on the deck as several of us were near the bow looking the other way. Sherry saw one out her window a day or two later. Surprisingly, we did not find one around Longyearbyen on our return and walk there, but the rain curtailed some of our activities.

**GLAUCOUS GULL** (*Larus hyperboreus*) – This large gull is the only real predatory bird of the Svalbard area. A scavenger as well, I counted at least 42 individuals around the dolphin carcasses where we watched the female Polar Bear. Virtually all gulls that move this far north are adult individuals as it is a tough life and immature birds won't breed so it was somewhat of a surprise to see an all white 1st summer individual one day.

**ARCTIC TERN** (*Sterna paradisaea*) – We really had to keep moving and even duck along some of the roads at Ny Alesund as the nesting terns took issue with our presence. As we walked out of Longyearbyen we found the town had red plastic poles to carry above your head to deter the Arctic Terns.

#### Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

**SNOW BUNTING** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – The only passerine to be expected on Spitsbergen we saw these everyday. Though we saw a few "dirty"

looking individuals all were in nice black and white breeding plumage.

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## MAMMALS

**BELUGA** (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – We saw a handful of these northern whales moving along the shoreline of Spitsbergen early in the trip.

**FIN WHALE** (*Balaenoptera physalus*) – We had a great experience on our first evening after we sailed when we had two of these massive cetaceans that we followed and got quite close to. This is the second largest animal on earth.

**ARCTIC FOX** (*Alopex lagopus*) – Altogether we saw about four of these cute little predators. The one some of us saw during our walk at Fuglehaken was a mostly white individual but the others were mostly grayish-brown.

**POLAR BEAR** (*Ursus maritimus*) – One of the real highlights of the trip was encountering several legendary Polar Bears. After our first which was just a view of the head in the rocks we had several good looks including a female with a cub and a large well-fed male that we followed for a spell as it walked along the ridge just above the beach. Perhaps, the best view we had was the skinny female we watched at the two carcasses that turned out to be White-beaked Dolphins. Yip! Yip! Yip!

**WALRUS** (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – One of the great marine mammals, several of us saw one then two more quite closely to the ship as we cruised past an ice floe. Our goal of seeing them at a haul out site at Sorgfjorden was thwarted when the walrus were not home. We made another attempt at Poolepyten but the fog rolled in and we were not able to land due to not being able to see Polar Bears in the fog. The captain positioned the ship about 250 meters away and we could see the walrus with large tusks coming and going in the fog.

**HARBOR SEAL** (*Phoca vitulina*) – We watched a few in the water near the scuba divers during our walk at Fuglehaken.

**HARP SEAL** (*Phoca groenlandica*) – We saw a few of these smaller cute-faced seals in the northern areas we got to.

**BEARDED SEAL** (*Erignathus barbatus*) – We got our best view of Bearded Seals here and there atop ice floes. The long whiskers give this seal its apt name.

**CARIBOU ("REINDEER")** (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*) – This small subspecies is known locally as Svalbard Reindeer and is only found on the archipelago. It has shorter legs than the mainland forms presumably as a physiological adaptation because the snow doesn't get deep here and much body heat can be lost through the extremities.

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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**Totals for the tour: 24 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa**