



Field Guides Tour Report

THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC SPITSBERGEN & THE SVALBARD ARCHIPELAGO 2015

Jul 2, 2015 to Jul 14, 2015

John Coons

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



We ended up seeing at least eight magnificent Polar Bears, but none was better than the one that walked across the ice to investigate the ship. Photo by guide John Coons.

What a great time we had exploring the High Arctic of the Svalbard Archipelago! Bears, walrus, whales and (of course) birds all came together for a truly great experience. We arrived to wonderful weather in Longyearbyen, the furthest northern true town in the world. After checking in at the hotel, we did a bird walk and got our first taste of Arctic birds. We saw Snow Buntings feeding young right in town before walking to Longyearbyen's outskirts, where we also went the following morning. There, we found brilliant pairs of both Red and Red-necked phalaropes swimming quite close to us, as nearby a Glaucous Gull was being snapped at by several female Common Eiders protecting their young. It was a bit of a surprise to find both a Northern Pintail and Eurasian Wigeon there along with several Dunlin. In the afternoon, we boarded the ship and headed out. Over the next nine days, we had many great encounters. Some of the highlights were the show put on by the mother and calf Blue Whale, many Belugas close to the ship, a pair of Long-tailed Jaegers followed closely by a quite curious Arctic Fox, colorful King Eiders, close views of three Rock Ptarmigan, Atlantic Puffins passing the ship at all hours, Northern Fulmars passing the ship all the time at all hours, a rather uncommon Great Black-backed Gull at Ny Alesund, and the zodiac ride along the spectacular bird cliff at Alkefjellet.

However, three of the biggest highlights had to be the Polar Bears, Ivory Gulls and Walrus. We saw at least eight Polar Bears walking on the land and ice, with the most memorable one being spotted ahead on the pack ice. This bear was quite curious and ended up walking closer and closer ...right up to the ship for a good sniff before moving off. What a tremendous view! Again in the pack ice, we found a few beautiful Ivory Gulls flying about the ship, with one bird sticking around a bit longer and landing on the ice near the stern. It almost disappeared when it landed on the completely white ice. This is one of the truest Arctic birds there is. After seeing a few Walrus from the ship, we went ashore at Torellneset to approach a rookery of many lying in a pile on the beach. Before we knew it, several surfaced in the bay just off the beach and inspected us carefully with tusks completely emerging from the water.

It's not just the wildlife that makes this place so special. The scenery alone would merit a trip here, with deep cut valleys and mountains that have been carved by ice. I think some of the fjords we entered are some of the prettiest places I have ever seen. Overall, the crew and staff on our ship were extremely hospitable and they went out of their way to fulfill in our wants and desires. It was very strange to get back to Oslo and see the sun actually below the horizon and some semblance of darkness; now we are back to total darkness for many hours each night, but we'll always remember those long

days. I hope to see all of you again soon!

-- 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 didn't see a lot of these but we had some good views early on in the trip. Most of these breeding birds in Svalbard spend the winter in Scotland.

BARNACLE GOOSE (*Branta leucopsis*) – We had many of these during our visits to shore. There were a fair number with goslings and we saw groups of adults on the beaches, probably post-breeding males, later in the trip. This species numbered less than 1000 individuals in Svalbard in the early 1950's but they have certainly come back.

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Anas penelope*) – We saw an eclipse male at the edge of Longyearbyen which seemed a bit of a surprise.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – We found a female in the grassy marsh just east of Longyearbyen. A somewhat uncommon bird in the area but not unheard of.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – We first saw a group of six on our walk at Texas Bar that were hanging out with several Common Eiders. Then many of us had a nice close view of a pair as we cruised around the Andoyane Islands where we saw our first bears. This is one of the most colorful ducks in the world.

COMMON EIDER (BOREAL) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – We saw this common species on each day except during our visit to the pack ice. In Longyearbyen, we watched a group of females trying to protect their young from a marauding Glaucous Gull.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – There were a good number around Longyearbyen at the beginning of our expedition, then we had the odd pairs here and there the rest of the trip. Most seemed to be paired up.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – Always a tough bird to locate on Svalbard we were fortunate to see at least three individuals during our walk up the slope at Faksevangen. All these birds we saw well were males and had a dirty white plumage. One of the groups also flushed a female. This is the only bird that winters in Svalbard.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – A great bird to see on the breeding grounds we saw our first along the coast in Longyearbyen. We then saw a pair at the pond at Ny Ålesund and another during our zodiac cruise at the Andoyane Islands.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS) (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – A near constant companion of the ship throughout the cruise. All that we saw were gray morphs which is the expected form in northern Svalbard. The population of the area is estimated at over one million individuals.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – The old world version of the Semipalmated Plover, we saw a few around the tidal flats at Longyearbyen at the beginning and end of the trip. We also saw one at Faksevangen after our ptarmigan walk.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres interpres*) – We spotted one on top of a ridge during our visit to New London. The fact this individual was inland instead of on a beach makes one wonder if it was breeding locally. This is an uncommon bird throughout the area.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – Just outside of Longyearbyen we found about six individuals. On our return at the end of the cruise we found them again and watched a fantastic display. The male was calling as it slowly flew above a female and landed occasionally nearby.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – By far the most common shorebird we encountered. We estimated up to 40 individuals on our first day at Longyearbyen then we saw several more at landings throughout the trip. We heard and saw several in display on the tundra in various places.

RED-NECKED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – There was a beautiful pair of these quite local birds in the grassy marshy near Longyearbyen. We saw this pair on all three of the visits we made to the area as they swam around in the slough just below us.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – We had great views of all that we saw. A pair was in the marshy area near Longyearbyen that performed quite nicely for us with both the colorful female and duller male swimming about right below us. We also saw a slightly duller female during our last walk in Isfjorden.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – Not a common bird in these parts we did see a pair during our zodiac cruise at Hamiltonbukta, and one atop the hilltop at Ytre Norskoya where we had to retreat to the zodiacs. A few more were seen along the way by a few of us.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – After our first ones in Longyearbyen we encountered several during the rest of the week. Some dived at the people on the tundra and we watched a couple chasing Arctic Terns.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – We saw a quite close pair at New London where this has been the only known nesting area for this species in Svalbard. There may have been a third individual in the area as well. It is so great to see adults in breeding plumage.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

DOVEKIE (*Alle alle*) – This tiny seabird was seen everyday we were at sea with many small flocks passing the ship at all hours. They were especially numerous on the water when we were in proximity to the nesting colonies. We had a nice visit to a colony at Magdalenafjorden where we got rather close to several individuals in the nesting areas of the talus slopes while flocks of hundreds circled about further into the colony.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – Certainly the most numerous bird we saw on the trip, there were thousands of these Northern Hemisphere

penguin equivalents about each day. These "Brunnich's Guillemots" were especially common at Alkefjellet where 65,000 pairs are supposed to be nesting.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (ARCTIC) (*Cepphus grylle mandtii*) – This handsome seabird was seen daily but not nearly in the numbers of the other alcids. We had a few close approaches while we cruised in the zodiacs.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*) – Many were seen from the ship on several days, but mostly in the southern part of our travels and in Raudfjorden in the north. We did see at least one in the pack ice at 80° 40' N latitude which has to be reaching the northern extent of their range. Our plans to visit a nesting site at Ytre Norskoya got foiled when a bear showed up on the island and we had to depart.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Another species we saw in huge numbers. We noticed the majority of this species usually nested higher on the cliffs than the Thick-billed Murres. This looks like a small fragile gull and it is hard to imagine it putting up with the winters at sea.

IVORY GULL (*Pagophila eburnea*) – We had nice looks at this very uncommon species while we were in the pack ice around 80° 40' N latitude. One bird in particular landed on the ice behind the ship several times and offered nice flight views. I believe we had three birds for sure in one area and maybe as many as six but as they never appeared at the same time it was hard to tell. This is a species that has declined dramatically in the New World while the Old World populations seem to be doing much better.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – The closest there is to a raptorial bird in Svalbard, these large gulls seem to be the scourge of the Arctic. On our first day in Longyearbyen we watched one trying to grab Common Eider chicks while the mothers had them in a tight pack and snapped at the gull. While most gulls this far north are adults, we did see one first summer bird in Longyearbyen that was all white with a pink bill.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL (*Larus marinus*) – Bill spotted one flying towards us as we were on the pier at Ny Ålesund. It continued and flew right past us. This is a rather uncommon species here and only the second time we have seen it on the trip.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – Another species that was seen everyday. Their nesting seemed to be a bit delayed this year as there were relatively few places where they dived on us as we walked past nest sites.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – The only passerine we can reasonably expect on the trip, we saw them everyday except for the day at the pack ice. We also saw females feeding young at both the beginning and end of the trip.

MAMMALS

BELUGA (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – We had a couple of nice encounters with this white whale. On our first evening on the ship and again when we returned to Isfjorden we had a good number near the ship.

COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – There were a few seen here and there by folks with one that surfaced quite close to the ship on the day we were near the pack ice.

BLUE WHALE (*Balaenoptera musculus*) – It was a fantastic experience to see this behemoth, a mother with a calf, rather close to the ship on our second day at sea. Initially, we saw spouting well ahead of us and it took nearly an hour to close the distance. We watched as the pair surfaced two or three times then dived for about six minutes before coming up again. This is the largest animal to ever live on the earth!

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We had a great encounter with a quite curious individual at New London during our special landing. It came over a ridge and ended up passing us only about 50 feet away. This was after a couple of folks had seen one quickly along the beach in Longyearbyen. Later in the trip we saw two individuals at the bird cliffs at Alkefjellet where we realized how small they really are.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – Wow! After our first two on the Andøyane Islands and a few in the pack ice the next day it didn't seem it could get any better. Then we found one walking on the ice ahead of the ship. This individual ended up spending about 15 minutes walking closer and closer and finally came right up to the ship for a wonderful photo encounter and making us all glad we were aboard the ship. It was incredible. Later, on our hike on Ytre Norskoya the folks at the front spotted a bear over a ridge. This caused us to make a retreat and leave the island where, from the ship, we could see the bear being hounded by Arctic Terns.

WALRUS (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – Another iconic mammal of the far north we had close views of those swimming near shore as we watched a large group of them hauled out on the beach at Torollneset. There was quite a variation in tusk length of those we could see.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – This was the rather curious seal that approached in the water near the beach where we did the walk with all the reindeer. These are quite local on Svalbard.

RINGED SEAL (*Phoca hispida*) – This was the species that popped up the most as we sailed through the fjords, never really giving us a good look.

HARP SEAL (*Phoca groenlandica*) – This smaller and rather cute seal was seen a few times from the ship.

BEARDED SEAL (*Erignathus barbatus*) – The largest of the seals we encountered we never had a close one but saw a few on the ice at a distance.

CARIBOU ("REINDEER") (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*) – We saw our first in Longyearbyen near the town center but had a nice experience on our last walk where a handful would be quite curious and walk towards our group and stare, only to turn tail and dash off before repeating the process ten minutes later. This is a race that is endemic to Svalbard that has shorter legs than its counterparts on larger islands that get more snow and where wolves are a potential threat.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 29 bird taxa and 11 mammal taxa