



Field Guides Tour Report

THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2016

Jul 6, 2016 to Jul 18, 2016

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One of the great birds of the Arctic, Ivory Gull showed well for us when we found one on the outskirts of the research village of Ny Alesund. (photo by participant Michael Martin)

We enjoyed a wonderful time in the far, far north aboard the *Ortelius*, while seeing great birds, bears, walrus and fantastic scenery. We started out in Longyearbyen, where we got our birding underway with close views of Red Phalarope, Purple Sandpiper, and Common Ringed Plover, a locally rare Iceland Gull, King and Common eiders and lots of Barnacle Geese, while the songs of Snow Buntings chimed in. We boarded our ship in the harbor and (after the necessary orientation) we were underway, with Northern Fulmars and Thick-billed Murres in constant attendance. Our first landing found us at a historic marble quarry, where Long-tailed Jaegers flew about and an Arctic Fox scampered right past us, while Red-throated Loons swam on a nearby pond. We had great views of Ivory Gull that afternoon, near the farthest northern town in the world, Ny Ålesund. This ghostlike bird showed well for us here, and we saw a few more as our voyage continued. After being tantalized by two Polar Bears on shore, we headed north to the pack ice, where we had a couple of incredible encounters with the "Ice Bear", as two individuals walked quite close to our ship. It was here that we reached our furthest northern point, at just over 81° 36' north latitude, only 570 miles from the North Pole. Heading south to the fjords and inlets of the Svalbard Archipelago, we cruised in zodiacs to glaciers, polar deserts, beaches, and tundra strewn with flowers, where we found huge colonies of Black-legged Kittiwakes and Thick-billed Murres with marauding Glaucous Gulls. At Kapp Lee, we visited a Walrus haul out site and got close to more than 30 of these huge pinnipeds, all with tusks. Many small and medium flocks of Dovekie were seen from the ship, but our landing at a colony was thwarted by dense fog near the end of the trip. Not being able to escape the fog near the west coast, we headed into a fjord and went ashore at the small Russian coal mining town of Barentsburg, a first-time visit for almost all of the staff and crew. This interesting site was a step back in time, as the 50's and 60's era buildings seemed out of a movie. Some of us found a distant Dovekie colony on the slopes of a mountain at the edge of town and had a nice experience with another Arctic Fox. We were back in the fjord near Longyearbyen for our final night before flying out the next morning. We had an afternoon at our hotel near the Oslo airport for some birding, where we had almost forgotten what trees looked like. The list of those birds is at the end of this report.

We shared wonderful meals with quite an international group of passengers, and we were well looked after by the expedition staff, the housekeepers, the folks in the dining room, and captain and crew on the bridge. All of them helped to create a great experience.

-- 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 =

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – We were not able to get ashore at one of the sites to see this species due to fog near the end of the trip. Linda and I saw a pair on a steep slope at Longyearbyen on our first morning and we had a distant raft of 80-100 individuals near the shore in Leifdefjorden just after we watched our first bear from the ship.

BARNACLE GOOSE (*Branta leucopsis*) – These were quite numerous in a few locales. There were lots of them with chicks at the edge of Longyearbyen including a nearly all white individual. Good numbers with more chicks were also at Ny Alesund.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – On our afternoon walk on our first full day, we found two males on a sandbar in the tidal flat near Longyearbyen. Later a female flew past the ship at Kapp Waldberg but a rather thorough search around the Andoyane Islands did not encounter any.

COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – We saw many of these northern ducks on several days of our trip. Our first were in Longyearbyen where there were a fair number of females with young at the edge of town. The males seemed to be joining together as many ducks do post-breeding.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – There were a few in the water at the tidal flat in Longyearbyen before we sailed then another on the Andoyane Islands.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – Our only sighting was a male that Linda and I saw on our first morning at the edge of Longyearbyen. Perfectly camouflaged, we heard it give a call up a steep slope and after a search we spotted it on the tundra. Later in the trip we found a few feathers but had no luck spotting another.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – During our hike up the slope at New London we came upon a freshwater pond that had two adults with two fair-sized young. The following day on our zodiac cruise of the Andoyane Islands we saw a few more.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS) (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – There were only a few instances when one or two of these were not visible from the ship. The population in the Svalbard area is estimated at over one million individuals. Most of the birds we saw were the gray-morph individuals but, unusually, we saw a good number of light-morph birds as well.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – We saw a couple of pairs of this Old World version of the Semipalmated Plover along the river in Longyearbyen and again on the outskirts of town near the dog town.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

RUDDY TURNSTONE (*Arenaria interpres interpres*) – A quite rare bird in the Svalbard area we found one in breeding plumage on a beach in the Andoyane Islands where we also found a group of three Red Phalaropes.

SANDERLING (*Calidris alba*) – Michael saw one on the beach with the Walrus at Kapp Lee on Edgeoya. This is a quite uncommon nesting bird in Svalbard.

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – We saw a single individual in breeding plumage two days in a row in the roadside ponds on the outskirts of Longyearbyen. I would expect a female was sitting on a nest on the nearby tundra.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – This is the most common nesting shorebird on the archipelago. We saw them at several locations with our first ones in Longyearbyen where they were numerous in the tidal flat. We saw about 12 on our first afternoon walk there then saw 52 standing on two sandbars the next afternoon. On the beaches and ponds we birded from the ship there were usually only single birds and we also heard and saw a few in display on the tundra.

RED PHALAROPE (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – A real beauty in breeding plumage which all of our birds were. We saw a male along the road to the dog town at Longyearbyen the we saw three sets of three birds as we cruised the Andoyane Islands. In two of the instances there were two females and male.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – A wonderful bird of the north, we saw a pair on one of the Andoyane Islands during our zodiac cruise. We later saw one near Kapp Waldberg and then another in the open ocean when we headed west to get out of the fog that was feeding on a Black Guillemot.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – Called Arctic Skua by our European friends on the ship, we saw several with singles visible from the ship chasing terns and other seabirds, and pairs on the tundra where we had to steer clear of potential nest sites. A couple of individuals came in for a quite close look. During the zodiac cruise at Alkefjellet we saw a dark morph bird which is quite unusual.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – We enjoyed great views of three individuals at New London on Blomstrandhalvoya where we saw them flying and perched. One was at a nest site but the young were over the lip of the hill and not visible. Later that day we saw another fly past us at Ny Alesund. This is a very local species in Svalbard.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

DOVEKIE (*Alle alle*) – One of the smallest of the seabirds and a species that most North American birders have not seen in breeding plumage. We saw them passing in numbers nearly every day from the ship. Unfortunately, our efforts to visit a colony and get close to them on land were thwarted by the fog on our last two days that prevented us from going ashore. During our visit to Barentsburg, a few of us located a breeding colony on a steep slope behind the village. We could hear a good number calling and saw small flocks flying out and individuals perched on the rocks but they were a good ways off. These were called "Little Auks", a fitting name, by the European passengers on the ship.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – Certainly the most numerous bird we saw on the voyage, there were groups visible from the ship at all hours as well as large colonies on cliffs. We got quite close to many during our zodiac cruise at Alkefjellet where there have been estimates of 65,000 pairs. Called "Brunnich's Guillemot" by the Europeans a good number seemed to be on nests but we saw no chicks on the cliff ledges.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (MANDTII) (*Cephus grylle mandtii*) – Another species we saw nearly everyday but not in the numbers of some of the others. We had a few close encounters at Alkefjellet where we could see the bright red feet.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*) – Always a very popular species we never got to see them on a nesting cliff but had a handful on a few days from the ship. During our zodiac cruise near the glacier at Bergenbukta we had one close to our boat.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – Second only to Thick-billed Murres in terms of numbers we saw thousands and thousands of these on ice bergs, nesting cliffs, and flying about. Typically the kittiwakes nested along with the murres on cliff faces but usually near the tops of the cliffs. On our zodiac cruise at Bergenbukta we got close to several on the bergy bits and we spotted one immature bird that also had a winter type plumage remaining.

IVORY GULL (*Pagophila eburnea*) – We had a few sightings of this very far northern specialty. Our first was in Ny Alesund where we watched it at the bay and then saw it head to the dog town where we scoped it before getting quite close to it. It then returned to the bay for another go-round. We also had one in the pack ice and a couple more on the eastern side of Spitsbergen including one on the beach with the Walrus at Kapp Lee. This is a species that has declined in numbers in the Canadian arctic but, at this point, seems to be hanging in there in the Russian arctic. One of the great birds of the north.

ICELAND GULL (*Larus glaucooides*) – An unusual sighting for the area, we saw an adult with 6-7 Glaucous Gulls on a bar in the tidal flat at Longyearbyen. Its smaller size was quite evident next to the larger Glaucous Gulls.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Rather numerous in some areas, we encountered this northern species each day. All that we saw were adult birds and some were seen at nests with fuzzy gray young. This is the only true predatory bird species on Svalbard and it fills the role of a raptor.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – A quite handsome species we encountered many and were harassed by a few when we got too close to nest sites along some of the roads. We found an especially ornery individual that dived on our zodiac for a hundred yards or more and even deposited a souvenir on one of us as we were headed to one of our Polar Bears.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – This is the only expected passerine on Svalbard. We saw a few at nearly all of our landings. A few of these handsome black and white birds were feeding grayish young on the tundra.

MAMMALS

WHITE-BEAKED DOLPHIN (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*) – Those of us on the bridge had a fair look at three individuals out at sea during our trip to the continental shelf when our landing sites were fogged in.

BELUGA (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – When Helen, Ron and I arrived there were a few, probably 3-6, individuals that we spotted way across the fjord from the airport parking lot. Surprisingly, we did not see them again.

COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – A couple or three individuals were seen early in the voyage but they, unfortunately, did not stick around.

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – We had a fabulous view of this wonderful species at New London where it walked right past our group then headed to the beach where we later saw it snoozing on a soft mossy looking patch of the tundra. We saw another from the zodiacs at the canyon at Kapp Waldberg then a few of us saw one at the edge of Barentsberg at our last landing. These foxes seem so small and fragile and it is hard to imagine them spending a winter here.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – We had a few great experiences with this iconic northern creature. Our first was quite visible from the ship as it walked along the shore, then one was found during our zodiac cruise in the Andoyane Islands that was lying down on the top of the island for our entire viewing. The best encounters were two different individuals, a female then a male, that we spotted in the pack ice and they proceeded to walk over the ice floes and come right up to the ship for a look before continuing on their way. Another interesting occurrence was the bear that prevented us from visiting the kittiwake colony at Kapp Waldberg. We watched from the zodiacs that were close to shore as the bear wandered up the slope and got dived by kittiwakes and terns before giving up. I believe, that folks from our group saw a total of eleven Polar Bears during our voyage.

WALRUS (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – After our less than satisfying views of two asleep on the beach at Phippsøya we went ashore at Kapp Lee and had great looks at a pile of loafing Walrus that included 31 individuals. We saw, heard and smelled these unusual creatures from the back of the beach and from a rocky headland. A great beast that is rarely seen this well.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – These were the seals that were in the small boat harbor at Ny Alesund.

HARP SEAL (*Phoca groenlandica*) – Two or three groups of a few individuals were seen along the edge of the pack ice as we got north. They seemed to be frolicking along the ice.

BEARDED SEAL (*Erignathus barbatus*) – Our only real sighting was one on an ice floe near the Monaco Glacier. The ship passed quite close to it and we could easily see the long whiskers on its beard. It is unusual to get this close to loafing Bearded Seals as they are quite shy and usually slip into the water.

CARIBOU ("REINDEER") (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*) – Surprisingly, our only one was a fair-sized male at Kapp Lee that we saw before venturing over to the Walrus. This is a small subspecies of the familiar caribou of northern Canada that is endemic to Svalbard.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Here are the species we recorded on our afternoon walk in the vicinity of our hotel near the Oslo airport.

Wood Pigeon

Common Swift

Eurasian Magpie

Eurasian Jackdaw

Barn Swallow

Eurasian Blue Tit

Great Tit

Willow Warbler

Spotted Flycatcher

Fieldfare

White Wagtail

Eurasian Greenfinch

Eurasian Siskin

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

Totals for the tour: 27 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa