

# INDRI

Ultimate Mammal Voyages

## SPITSBERGEN/SVALDBARD TRIP REPORT

18<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup> August 2008

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The Arctic is one of the few places on our continent where one is still able to experience pristine wilderness. Only 500 miles from the North Pole, the islands in the Svalbard Archipelago were until recently a destination for expedition scientists rather than travelling wildlife enthusiasts.

If unusual birds, Polar Bears, Walrus and whales are amongst the reasons you wish to visit the Arctic, this circumnavigation around the Svalbard archipelago would have been the trip for you! As guests aboard the "Antarctic Dream" we were spoilt by some of the most dramatic scenery on our planet, along with incredible Arctic wildlife.

The Arctic summer was especially kind and gave us many long days of gorgeous sunshine. Although it took some getting used to, the 24 hours of daylight did indeed allowed us many late night opportunities to enjoy the wildlife. The seas encountered were generally calm and often as smooth as glass giving the

impression that the sky and sea were one. Sea fog occasionally closed in, but simply added to the mystery of this extraordinary "ultimate mammal voyage".

Ice conditions were favorable and allowed a safe passage to 81°N, before the thickness of ice blocked us venturing further north. Being this far north, we were able to enter the Hinlopen Strait, its cliffs most famous for some of the largest seabird breeding colonies in the northern hemisphere. We had many beach landings to Arctic tundra plains, near breeding seabird colonies and small settlements which allowed us the opportunity to enjoy much of the wildlife. The fauna was represented by no less than 11 different species of mammals and 28 species of birds. This is a low species diversity compared to other world destinations, but excellent by Arctic standards. Some of our highlights included 5 Polar Bears, 8 Arctic Foxes, over 50 huge Walrus, 2 Bowhead Whales (listed as critically endangered in these waters), a small pod of Minke Whales, 4 Fin Whales, a single Ross's Gull and at least 30-40 Ivory Gulls alongside countless thousands of breeding Brünnich's Guillemots and adorable Little Auks.

Our flights, via Oslo and Tromsø, seemed to take forever with the high level of excitement building for the trip. At Longyearbyen airport we had a bizarre sighting of our first polar Bear – albeit stuffed, standing on the island of the baggage conveyor belt! With our bags safely loaded onto a trailer we climbed aboard the bus that would take us to Longyearbyen, the capital of Spitsbergen, before boarding the "Antarctic Dream" a couple of hours later.



This stop-over gave us the chance to bird around the town before making our way back to the ship moored at the harbor some 15 minutes walk away. For some, a Rock Ptarmigan was definitely the bird of the day and a very relaxed Svalbard Reindeer gave everyone exceptional photographic opportunities whilst he grazed in and around the flowering Dandelions. Longyearbyen has a fascinating history which is closely related to the opening of several mines. An American firm, known as Arctic Coal, directed by John Munroe Longyear, started a coal mine in 1906 and called the ensuing mining shanty Longyear City. The mine was subsequently sold in 1915 to a Norwegian company called Store Norske Spitsbergen Kullkompani. Today more than 1,600 people live in Longyearbyen, where the primary activity is tourism and its service-related fields. There are several scientific enterprises, including University courses on Svalbard, an aurora

research station and a satellite station for contacting satellites in polar orbits, run in cooperation with NASA.

It was soon time to leave the bustling town behind us. Walking from town along the shoreline towards the harbor should only take around 15 minutes, but the Purple Sandpipers, Dunlins, Common Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks and Arctic Terns overhead continually dive-bombing us, made going rather slow! After a last quick sprint for the boat we speedily climbed on-board. We were then shown to our cabins with some time to settle in before assembling in the dining room for the Captain's address. In our briefing we were given the regulatory emergency procedures which found us donning life jackets and rehearsing dambering into the lifeboat pods. The pods remained suspended on the side of the ship

throughout our voyage – thankfully! Shortly after our lifeboat drill, dinner was served. This voyage was clearly not going to be the place to start a diet and I think we all had serious issues trying to watch our weight considering the fine cuisine that was served throughout the trip.

After dinner, and layering ourselves with plenty of warm clothes we found ourselves enjoying stunning vistas accompanied by numerous Northern Fulmars. These tube nosed birds almost hit us with their wing tips as they gracefully floated up the length of the boat on the icy breeze using the wind pushed alongside the ship to their advantage. At these close ranges, the small droplet of concentrated salt water hanging from the tip of each of their bills, discarded from the bird's water desalination system, was noticeable. It was amazing to track the color morphs of this species, they darkened as we ventured further north until at our most northerly point we only recorded the dark grey morph, typical of high latitudes. It did not take us long to become familiar with the other common species around our ship including Black-legged Kittiwake, Brünnich's Guillemot (also known as Thick-billed Murre), Atlantic Puffin, Black Guillemot and the diminutive Little Auk. It was relatively early to bed for most people with tiredness creeping in from a long day of travel and the excitement of special experiences. The anticipation of our first zodiac landing the next morning certainly kept me awake for some time.

At 6am the announcement that breakfast would be served got us going. Heading north along the west coast from Longyearbyen, the ship had anchored overnight in a beautiful Fjord called Krossfjorden. This scenic fjord would be our base for the morning's activities. After breakfast we gathered in the lecture room to get familiarized with the safety drill - quite serious considering that we were now firmly in Polar Bear territory. All the talk about Polar Bears got the hype going and increased the excitement to fever pitch as we eagerly loaded ourselves onto the zodiacs. It was our mission this morning to land on a nearby beach and walk to the face of the famous 14<sup>th</sup> of July Glacier. With almost no swell present, the beach landing was dry and easy. A colorful variety of flowers were still in bloom, while large numbers of Fulmars, Kittiwakes and Brünnich's Guillemots were nesting on the nearby cliffs. The slopes below the nesting colonies were surprisingly green, the guano fertilizing this vegetation making these areas lush and in stark contrast to the surrounding landscape.



A beautiful almost white Arctic Fox was seen patrolling the base of the cliffs looking eagerly for a hapless chick that might fall from its nest. This was the first of around 8 foxes we would sight. A couple of Arctic Skuas harassed the Kittiwakes in the distance with their mournful cat-like screaming, hoping for an easy meal regurgitated from a Kittiwake. The only interruption of the Skuas

calls was the infrequent but thunderous calving of the glacier which sent large columnar blocks tumbling into the freezing waters below. A small gaggle of Pink-footed Geese swam past while we walked back towards our beached zodiacs. Once aboard the zodiacs we took a short cruise past a series of low cliffs where

Atlantic Puffins nested, the comical birds sitting and craning their heads at us while we drifted below them perched on the rocks above.

We were back in-time for a hearty meal while our ship upped anchor and blazed north for a small research town called Ny Ålesund, the world's most northerly settlement. This was once a mining village served by the world's most northerly railway, which can still be seen today. Ny Ålesund was the only landing point on the entire cruise where we could roam freely within the limits of the settlement without the need to be near a rifle for Polar Bear protection. Close to the village we saw Barnacle Geese in numbers and were quite unexpectedly greeted by a very confiding Arctic Fox which gave us unrivalled photographic opportunities. The Arctic foxes on Spitsbergen are still hunted for their pelts and as a result are normally quite shy.

This little town has its roots steeped in the history of Arctic exploration, evident by the still standing anchoring mast used by Amundsen and Nobile for their airships Norge in 1926 and Italia in 1928 before their flights to the North Pole. It was a treat to have our postcards stamped and posted from the quaint little post office in the center of town. Soon it was time to head off and once we had boarded the ship we set sail for the continental shelf in a quest to seek out whales. We managed to locate some Fin Whales, which unfortunately did not hang around too long. After a late night on the deck looking at the birds we retired to our cabin for a well deserved rest.



We woke the next day to a crashing and lurching of the ship with worries that we had run aground, but we had hit ice and were now in prime Polar Bear and Ivory Gull territory. Overnight we had returned inshore and come into a vast stretch of broken ice. It was not long before we spotted our first Polar Bear. The Captain did a terrific job navigating over and around the pack-ice as we slowly followed the hunting bear. Once word got out it was all hands on deck as people scrambled to don their warm clothes (long before breakfast), others just rushed above deck rather under-dressed for the occasion and it was not long before they had to retreat back to their cabins to dress in somewhat more appropriate attire. After spending an hour or so with our bear we headed for a small nature reserve situated off the north coast of Spitsbergen known as Mofen Island. This site is renowned both as an important haul-out site for Walruses and as the only regular breeding colony for Sabine's Gull in Spitsbergen. Strict conservation laws prevented us from approaching closer than 300m at this haul-out area. There were at least 20 huge Walruses piled together on the beach, digesting their morning's meal consisting largely of shellfish.

Leaving the Walruses behind, we headed north into denser pack-ice. Here we spotted a few lone Bearded Seals dotted around on ice floes. Many Brünnich's Guillemots were scattered on top of the ice, all in attendance of their still small chicks. It was not long before we had set anchor near the mouth of a beautiful Fjord called Liefdefjorden, with magnificent open rolling tundra known as Reindeerflya (Reindeer flats) on the island of Andøya. As at many of our landing sites, we were given the option of splitting into groups. Often we would have

three groups: a slow group who could potter about looking at plants and investigating ruins; a birding group who would follow where the birds took them, and a group of hikers, who would head up the nearest mountain to enjoy the view. The only restriction was that with each group there should be at least one guide armed with a rifle – just in case we should meet up with an unfriendly Polar Bear. For this first walk, we just split into two, the hikers and the naturalists, and with no Polar Bears present, enjoyed our first walk on the fascinating tundra. A carpet of delightful Purple Saxifrage covered parts of the tundra, and as well as admiring the other flora, we soon found ourselves at a small pond where we watched a pair of Red-throated Divers (Loons) and some Svalbard Reindeer far off in the distance. Following our nature walk we sailed further into Liefdefjorden towards the face of the impressive Monaco Glacier. The waters of the glacier front are a favorite feeding spot for thousands of kittiwakes, which did not disappoint. They gathered literally in their thousands at the foot of the glacier to feed and bathe. After cruising past the impressive Monaco Glacier and enjoying another fine dinner we set sail for a nearby hot spring, a short walk up the side of a mountain and seemingly out of place in this frozen landscape. We spent considerable time pottering about the landscape enjoying some private time to ourselves and taking in the surreal surroundings before we had to head back to the ship at around midnight that evening – with the sun still shining!

Waking up to a morning enshrouded with a thick sea-fog, we anchored in a small fjord called Sorgfjord. Fortunately during breakfast the fog started lifting and revealed the stark beauty of this fjord. With everyone rearing to go we boarded the zodiacs and made our way to a group of small derelict trapper huts on the nearby shore. A few Purple Sandpipers flew past us and landed on the beach nearby. They gave us excellent views and time to get some great pictures before we potted off across the rocky landscape within the security of a perimeter that the armed guides had set up. The next minute, to our delight a young Polar Bear popped its head up over a rocky ridge. It was not long before our expedition leader called a quick retreat back to the boats. Without any further incident, we made our way back to the zodiacs, our walk and time on land cut very short by the presence of this amazing Arctic predator! Back on the ship, we scoped the animal and enjoyed views of it feeding on the remains of a Reindeer. As soon as it walked off the Glaucous Gulls flew in and scavenged what they could. We also picked up a few Bearded Seals lazing about on ice floes before setting sail for Sjuoyane, a small archipelago north of Nordaustlandet. Sjuoyane simply translates as “Seven Islands”, the largest island being Phippsoya which is almost 26 square km’s in extent. This group of islands is also part of the Nordaust Svalbard Nature Reserve.



Sitting down for breakfast after our aborted walk, a large Walrus was seen off in the distance resting on an ice-floe. We quickly diverted the Captain towards the animal and reduced our boat speed. Breakfast was again put on ice – so to speak! Soon the shouts of Bear were resonating around the dining hall – “Walrus, no Bear, where, there, Bear, no Walrus”. Confusion

reined until we realized that we had a beautiful big Walrus resting on an ice-floe

not 50 meters from a very large Polar Bear that was feeding on the remains of a baby seal. To top things off there were no less than 6 Ivory Gulls in attendance. The Bear gave us a sighting of at least an hour and we watched it swimming, grooming and lazing about very close to the ship. With the kitchen beside itself trying to keep our breakfast fresh and hot, we slowly retreated to the dining room to enjoy a hearty meal while watching the Bear out one side and the Walrus out the other.

The rest of the morning we pushed and barged our way through the pack ice until we could go no further north. We finally gave in at 80° 35' north – our northwards journey overcome by the immense pack-ice. The entire morning we were surrounded by Ivory Gulls, Pomarine Skua, Bearded and Ringed Seals and not forgetting Bears – what a spectacular wildlife experience this morning turned out to be. At one stage it seemed like the paparazzi were onboard with camera motor drives working overtime! We were all a little bit shell-shocked and either spent the rest of the afternoon drinking hot chocolate in the dining room or on deck taking in the scenery under the most incredible sunshine in a cloudless sky. We later continued our journey east before heading south into the Hinlopen Strait, something that is not always possible at this time of year due to ice conditions. We passed through without too much problem, heading for a gigantic alluvial glacial plain in the Lomfjord.

The immense size of this glacial plain was breathtaking and the surrounding mountains were dressed in different shades of blues, grays and reds. The remains of a baby Polar Bear was found, a cold reminder of the harshness of this last true wilderness we found ourselves in. Before long, and without being prompted, many of the group had started gathering the widely scattered rubbish discarded by fishing vessels hundreds of miles away. Unfortunately the currents deposit garbage on these beautiful shores of Spitsbergen. It took a single Zodiac to gather up the pile we had collected. Everyone who played their role made a great contribution of the "Clean up Svalbard" campaign and as recognition we all received a pin for our efforts.

Our next landing not far away was onto the toe of a glacier at the stone deposit zone, here we climbed up the very gradual ice toe onto the snow covered head where we all promptly had a massive snow fight. Hot showers all round were the order of the day before sitting down to a hot meal for lunch. After lunch we set sail for a visit to Alkefjellet, one of the largest sea bird colonies in the northern hemisphere and home to countless thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots, along with smaller, but still impressive, numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes. We spent a very enjoyable couple of hours in the zodiacs, cruising along the base of the towering cliffs approaching to within a few feet of the guillemots and taking countless numbers of pictures, before the wind picked up and forced us to head for the sanctity of the mother ship. As we sat down for dinner, we spotted a small pod of Humpback Whales cruising past our dining room windows. Dinner put on hold, we raced up to the deck. Unfortunately when we got there, there where no whales in sight, then far off to the port bow there was a small blow, and another, but somehow different to a Humpback. As we approached we got some quick pictures which we zoomed in on – to our utter amazement we picked up a large head, no dorsal fin, and then the clincher, a white lower jaw. There was no mistaking a Bowhead Whale, extinct in these waters for nearly 200 years! In this inhospitable place, with antiquated equipment, the efficiency of the early whalers was unrivalled and they managed to hunt the Bowhead and other species of whale to extinction in these waters. It was indeed a true privilege to witness this species returning to its ancestral hunting grounds.

The next day we woke to find ourselves anchored near Torellneset, a small spit of flat land on the southwest corner of Nordaustlandet. Walrus are known to haul-out here and we were not disappointed!

Once ashore, we were delighted to find our first Walrus just off the beach splashing about the surf. Lying on the beach just 30 meters away from us we



came across a group of 20 or so animals all piled up on top of each other. It was almost impossible to see which flipper belonged to which animal. All scarred and battered, they looked almost enraged with their bloodshot eyes and weather beaten faces. Their rather bizarre straight white tusks showed wear from constant use underwater, digging up shellfish – their main diet. After sitting with these animals for almost 3 hours, with hundreds of close-up pictures at almost every angle, we left to return to ship. The zodiac trip back to the ship yielded a small group of Black Guillemots. As we neared, they approached the zodiac with extreme confidence and stopped only a few meters away from us giving us an incredible opportunity to study their different plumage. Back on-board we upped anchor and headed through towards the pack-ice to our most easterly position below Nordaustlandet. Here we encountered the third largest icecap in the world, truly a formidable and impressive barrier. Little Auks were especially common in these parts and a large group of highly acrobatic and rather cheeky Pomarine Skuas followed our boat for long periods. These parasitic birds made short work of the fish meals that the Kittiwakes were hard at work gathering in our wake as we broke the pack ice. Here in the ice floes we enjoyed the most relaxed Polar sighting that we would have. The fairly young bear approached the ship and sniffed along its side, even peeking into the kitchen's porthole and nearly giving the poor chef a heart attack! After an hour or so we made our way southwards to a "safer" locality where we all disembarked the ship onto a large ice floe. Here we had a once in a lifetime experience walking around this huge floating block of ice, just like a Polar Bear hunting seals! The sun almost setting behind us, drenched us with amber light, today was the last day with a full 24 hours of sun. The next evening, the sun would dip over the horizon, and increase by 20 minutes a day until the middle of November when this magical land would be cloaked with darkness for more than 2 full months. Leaving the pack-ice and the many Harp and Bearded seals dotted around the ice floes, we headed south towards Edgeoya.

We woke the next morning to find we had anchored overnight well south of our previous evenings ice-walk off Kapp Lee at Edgeoya. The intention on this sun-drenched morning was to take a long walk on the Arctic tundra. Following our beaching, the familiar cry of "bear" had us scampering for the Zodiacs and bobbing not far off the end of land waiting. It seemed so pre-rehearsed and the bear popped out onto beach right on queue. Soon it seemed to get bored with the sound of our camera motor drives and wandered off from whence it came. The bear was most certainly a good enough reason for us canceling the tundra walk! The rest of the day was spent above board searching the seas. The time spent searching paid big dividends as we located the only Ross' Gull of the trip! This is a rare bird in these waters and only usually encountered late in the summer season on the eastern side of Spitsbergen. Once the bird had been

spotted it landed on the water and we managed to turn the ship around as quickly as possible. Unfortunately the gull soon disappeared without being seen again. Not long after, we encountered a pair of Fin Whales in Storfiorden. Their lunge-feeding kept us enthralled and had us following them around for hours. At one stage their large mouths lunging clear of the surface engulfing masses of krill could be clearly seen. The encroaching sea fog eventually set us on our way leaving the accommodating whales to themselves. After a long day we retired early and awoke with our ship still sailing towards a large fjord named Hornsund at the southern tip of Spitsbergen. We only arrived around lunch time into Hornsund and stopped at Goshama. Not wasting any time we boarded the zodiacs for a beach landing to search for Reindeer. It was not long before we located 2 animals, which were not overly relaxed and did not appreciate us approaching too closely. The one very old male was in the process of shedding velvet from his antlers. Off to the right of the Reindeer a pair of Arctic Skuas noisily and at times quite frantically tried to drive off a pie-bald Arctic Fox. The fox did its best to avoid the beaks of the dive-bombing birds. Walking back to the zodiacs, we passed some huge and moss draped whale bones, a cold reminder of the darker times in these waters.

Shortly after boarding we found ourselves heading deeper into Hornsund, where we anchored a safe distance from the huge glacier feeding into the head of the Fjord. The afternoon excursion broke up into 2 groups, those that wanted an easier paced short walk and those wanting to summit a rather large mountain adjacent to the glacier. All in all 11 people made it up the rather rugged mountain side to the peak and the mountain was named Mount Wilson after the oldest person in the summit team, Martin Wilson aged 64! The views from the top of the peak were nothing short of breath-taking. Being able to see 360 degrees around us and getting a birds eye view of the glaciers was a special experience. Making use of the snow draped slopes to slide down on our bums made the task of descent much easier than ascent. The sight of us all barreling down the slope in shrieks of laughter will stay with us all for a long time. Adam without his waterproof pants will maybe remember this part of the climb a little longer than the rest of us. With the sun out in all its glory we took a spectacular zodiac cruise at a safe distance past the toe of a calving glacier. With not a breath of wind the sea was as flat and the reflections of the ice and surrounding mountains in the water was magical. All this was rounded off with a fantastic barbeque. The smell of cooking meat would no doubt have been enjoyed by a far off Polar Bear as we could even smell it on the other side of the Fjord! What a way to end off another spectacular evening.



Overnight we had sailed north towards Longyearbyen from Hornsund into another Fjord known as Bellsund. Today would be our long tundra walk, provided no bears showed up! It was a walk we will not easily forget, apart from visiting trapper's huts and seeing their basic and hard lifestyle, we had a superb Svalbard Reindeer sighting of two massive males giving us unrivalled photographic



opportunities in breathtaking scenery. An emotional moment experienced by all was coming across the uncountable sun-bleached whale bones piled in heaps along the shoreline all processed from a single small whalers hut. The bones, belonging to the White Whale, or Beluga, as they are better known today, were nothing short of disturbing. Witnessing the aftermath of the inhumane wrath that the early whalers must have unleashed upon these beautiful creatures was yet another cold reminder of the darker side of the history of this area. Unfortunately we would not see Beluga in the flesh on this trip, although they still exist in smaller numbers here. The beach was however littered with feeding Purple Sandpipers and Arctic Terns, allowing the photographers in the group fantastic opportunities to capture them on film before retuning to the ship. In the afternoon, after another hearty lunch, we beached again near a massive glacier and walked across a large tundra plain where we enjoyed a flock of Brant Geese feeding on the roots of the mosses which they seemed to pluck out the ground with amazing dexterity. This evening we were entertained by Helmut and his amazing guitar skills closely followed by Walter and his accordion. Derek provided a stunning finale! It was a late but extremely enjoyable night for most.

We woke to find ourselves anchored to the east of Prins Karls Forland, close to a well used Walrus haul-out called Poolepynten. A quick landing and before long we were enjoying frolicking young male Walruses that were rolling in the shallow surf trying to playfully stag each other with their not yet fully grown tusks. The interaction was fantastic especially when they finally decided to haul-out and join their colleagues basking in the sun. The main group wallowed in the smell of rotting seaweed as steam rose up from their thick brown hides. The pushing, grunting and annoyed interaction gave us the privilege of better understanding the private life of a Walrus. This was as active as one could ever hope to see Walruses on land! The birding at the small lagoon behind the Walruses was fantastic and gave us a number of new species to add to our lists including Sanderling, Ruddy Turnstone, Great Skuas (or Bonxies) and Common Ringed Plover. To our utter amazement we found a Little Stint which was in full breeding dress and turned out to be only the 22<sup>nd</sup> record for Spitsbergen! That afternoon, we landed at St. John's Fjorden and enjoyed our last tundra walk and a plethora of colorful flora. This was an area of great scenic beauty with wide open expanses of snow-free tundra. It was a fitting way to end our trip in the high Arctic before we upped the anchor to sail back from whence we had come. It was a sad moment when we sailed into the harbour at Longyearbyen that evening at around 10pm. The sun was low on the horizon but bathed the town of in true Arctic sunshine.

After breakfast the next morning and saying our farewells to our friendly crew, we set off for some birding around Longyearbyen. We were extremely happy to find Dunlin, Long-tailed Duck and both Common and King Eider. All the walking built up an appetite for pizza and we all soon found ourselves gathered at the well known Trapper's restaurant in the centre of town. Here we celebrated in traditional style the end of our epic voyage before boarding our bus for the airport to return to the reality of civilization!

**Special note:** This trip report was written by James Wakelin just before his untimely and tragic death in an aircraft accident on 20<sup>th</sup> September 2008, it was the last document he produced after a prolific career in nature conservation that saw him publish numerous articles and scientific papers and a large section towards his PhD on Blue Swallows.

## **SYSTEMATIC LIST MAMMALS**

#### CANIDAE

**Arctic Fox** *Vulpes lagopus*: Although quite shy, we saw several of these cute predators, our first at the 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier feeding below the bird cliffs. Others included a very relaxed individual seen at close quarters at Ny Ålesund and at Goshama in Hornsund. Although it is often assigned to its own genus *Alopex*, genetic evidence places it in *Vulpes* with the majority of the other foxes of the world.

#### URSIDAE

**Polar Bear** *Thalarctos maritimus*: Probably the mammal that we all sought after the most. Of the five bears we encountered, the two sightings that will remain with us forever will be the huge bear that had recently killed a young seal and the young bear that nonchalantly walked around the ship when we were "parked" in the pack ice.

#### ODOBENIDAE

**Walrus** *Odobenus rosmarus*: Recorded on no less than 7 days, we found 4 groups that had hauled-out. We approached two groups on foot where we spent a considerable amount of time getting to know these massive beasts. At Moffen Island our Captain was able to bring the ship to within about 300 meters of the eastern side of the island where we saw our first Walrus hauled-out. The largest male recorded was the huge animal that had hauled-out onto the small ice-floe near the Polar Bear with its seal kill! We also enjoyed 2 different wonderful sightings of young Walrus playing in the shallow surf not 2 meters off the beach. We probably saw in the order of 50 Walruses in total, including those seen swimming.

#### PHOCIDAE

**Bearded Seal** *Erignathus barbatus*: The most common seal recorded. Large single animals were recorded on all the days when ice-floes were available for them to haul-out onto.

**Ringed Seal** *Phoca hispida*: A single individual was seen on the fast-ice in Liefdefjord.

**Common or Harbour Seal** *Phoca vitulina*: A single individual was seen in the water near Moffen Island. This is usually a shy animal on land and often difficult to see.

#### BALAENOPTERIDAE

**Northern Minke Whale** *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*: A small pod of at least 3 individuals were seen in Liefdefjord and passed us by rather quickly. This small whale is fairly fast moving and can stay submerged for up to 15 minutes. The minke whales are the second smallest of the baleen whales. Estimates of maximum length vary from 8 to 11 meters depending on the sex of the animal. Males are smaller than the females but both sexes typically weigh around 4-5 tons at maturity and the maximum weight may be as much as 14 tons.

**Fin Whale** *Balaenoptera physalus*: Like all other large whales the Fin Whale was heavily hunted during the twentieth century and as a consequence is now listed as an endangered species. Four individuals were seen, of which one pair gave an incredible account of themselves lunge feeding for the best part of an hour alongside the ship in Storffjorden. The Fin Whale is usually distinguished by its great length and slender build. The average size of males and females is 19 and 20 meters respectively and it is known as one of the fastest cetaceans in the world, sustaining speeds of 37 kilometers per hour!

**Humpback Whale** *Megaptera novaeangliae*: A small pod was seen rather briefly from the dining room windows just prior to us finding the Bowhead Whales. Unfortunately as the more common species worldwide, we focused our attention on the Bowheads. The humpback has a distinctive body shape, with unusually long pectoral fins and a knobby head. It is an acrobatic animal, often breaching clear of the water.

#### BALAENIDAE

**Bowhead Whale** *Balaena mysticetus*: We were lucky enough to find 2 Bowhead Whales in the Hinlopen Strait. While the species is not listed as Endangered globally, the Svalbard-Barents Sea (Spitsbergen) stock is classified as Critically Endangered. The lifespan of a Bowhead was once thought to be 60 to 70 years, similar to other whales. Discoveries of antique ivory spear points in living whales have however triggered further research leading to the reliable conclusion that at least some individuals have lived to be 150–200 years old.

#### CERVIDAE

**Svalbard Caribou or Reindeer** *Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*: The Svalbard Reindeer is a small subspecies of *Rangifer tarandus*. Males are significantly larger than females and have larger antlers. We encountered them wherever there were large areas of snowfree tundra, generally in ones and twos. A pair of very large males was found in Bellsund and was definitely the highlight for this species. These males had an impressive rack of antlers which had not yet started shedding their velvet. The endemic Spitsbergen race *platyrhynchus* is much smaller and noticeably shorter in the leg than Reindeer occurring further south.

### **BIRDS**

#### GAVIIDAE

**Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata*: This is a fairly common breeding bird in Spitsbergen, which we encountered on four days. Our best views were of two pairs at Poolepynten on the lagoon.

#### PROCELLARIIDAE

**Northern Fulmar** *Fulmarus glacialis*: Common at sea, these birds followed the ship on all days. Many of the birds seen were of the dark morph, often known as the 'Blue Fulmar' typical of these high latitudes.

#### ANATIDAE

**Pink-footed Goose** *Anser brachyrhynchus*: This bird was seen only once, with 7 individuals swimming past us at the 14<sup>th</sup> of July Glacier. The population of Pink-footed Geese breeding in Spitsbergen (currently estimated at 37,000 individuals) spends the winter in Denmark, the Netherlands and Belgium.

**Barnacle Goose** *Branta leucopsis*: This is a widespread breeding bird in Spitsbergen and was seen well on many occasions. The best views were had at Ny Ålesund. The entire Spitsbergen population of Barnacle Geese spends the winter in the Solway Firth in south-west Scotland and on the archipelagos of the Helgeland District in West Norway in spring. This population has shown a dramatic increase from 550 individuals in the 1950s to about 23,000 in recent years, thanks to increased habitat protection and greatly reduced hunting pressure throughout its range.

**Pale-bellied Brent** *Branta bernicla hrota*: This is the least common of the geese in Spitsbergen and was recorded on only two occasions. The first sighting was of about sixteen birds flying over Reinsdyrflya (Reindeer flats) and then again at Bellsund. This species belongs to a discrete population of the Pale-bellied Brent

Goose that spends the winter in northern Denmark and around Holy Island (Lindisfarne) in northeast England. This is one of the smallest goose populations in the world, currently numbering only about 5,000 individuals.

**Common Eider** *Somateria mollissima*: This is normally the commonest duck in the islands and expected to be encountered almost everywhere. Although we did not encounter great numbers as we visited the area rather late in the season, we encountered the species on several occasions, notably at 14<sup>th</sup> of July Glacier, Longyearbyen and Poolepynten.

**King Eider** *Somateria spectabilis*: Our only sighting of this species was at Longyearbyen where we saw about 6. According to the latest estimates from BirdLife International, there are between 2,500 and 5,000 pairs of King Eiders breeding in Spitsbergen.

**Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis*: This species was only recorded with the King Eider at Longyearbyen.

#### TETRAONIDAE

**Rock Ptarmigan** *Lagopus mutus*: A single very relaxed individual was recorded near the graveyard in Longyearbyen. The bird was dressed in its brown summer plumage.

#### CHARADRIIDAE

**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*: Two juveniles were seen at Poolepynten.

#### SCOLOPACIDAE

**Little Stint** *Calidris minuta*: Only full breeding plumaged individual was found at Poolepynten. This is only the 22<sup>nd</sup> record for Spitsbergen and is a mega rarity on this trip. This species is widespread but rarely ventures this far north during breeding!

**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*: About 6 subadult birds were seen near the mudflat where the river flows through Longyearbyen into the sea. Only a few pairs of Dunlin breed in Spitsbergen and this species is rarely encountered outside of Longyearbyen.

**Purple Sandpiper** *Calidris maritima*: By far the commonest breeding wader in Spitsbergen, this bird was seen every day and at almost every beach landing. We also saw a few individuals a long way out to sea.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres*: Only one bird was found at Poolepynten. This is a scarce summer visitor to Spitsbergen.

#### STERCORARIIDAE

**Arctic Skua** (Parasitic Jaeger) *Stercorarius parasiticus*: This was the most widespread and commonest skua in Spitsbergen. We recorded this species on every day, albeit in small numbers. We also recorded a few dark phase individuals scattered in-between the much more common pied individuals. Dark-phase birds are much commoner at lower latitudes.

**Long-tailed Skua** (Long-tailed Jaeger) *Stercorarius longicaudus*: Only one individual was seen in the vicinity of Nordaustland. Only a few pairs of this supremely elegant species breed in Spitsbergen, presumably because of the complete absence of lemmings, their preferred prey during the breeding season.

**Great Skua** (Bonxie) *Stercorarius skua*: Only 2 pairs were seen, one pair at Poolepynten and the other in the Storfjord.

**Pomarine Skua** *Stercorarius pomarinus*: Surprisingly, many Pomarine Skua followed our ship on numerous occasions. We observed no less than 20 individuals over the entire trip and they were particularly obvious south of Nordaustland. This elegant species spent most of its time harassing the Kittiwakes in an attempt to obtain a free meal.

#### LARIDAE

**Ross' Gull** *Rhodostethia rosea*: Breeding in the high Arctic, this species is a rare visitor to Spitsbergen. The only reliable time to see this bird is in the late summer when they move down the east coast of Spitsbergen. A single individual was seen in the Storfjorden.

**Glaucous Gull** *Larus hyperboreus*: These were common and widespread being the main predatory bird found on Spitsbergen.

**Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla*: This is an abundant bird throughout the islands, breeding in large numbers on the auk cliffs in Hinlopen Strait and commonly encountered far out at sea. Countless hundreds were seen on each day.

**Ivory Gull** *Pagophila eburnea*: This is certainly the iconic bird species for the High Arctic! At least 30-40 individuals were seen, some extremely close to the boat scavenging on the remains of the seal carcass left over by a Polar Bear. Our first sighting of this species was near Mofsen Island and then numerous individuals were seen at around 80° 33'. An immature bird was also recorded at Torrellneset high up in the mountains. There exist only about 240 pairs of this species in Spitsbergen.

#### STERNIDAE

**Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea*: This is a common breeding bird throughout the islands and was encountered on each day. This species was particularly noticeable at Longyearbyen and Poolepynten.

#### ALCIDAE

**Brünnich's Guillemot** (Thick-billed Murre) *Uria lomvia*: This bird was very common at sea on most days and extremely abundant near their huge breeding colony at Alkefjellet in Hinlopen Strait. Here we watched them call their young into the sea for the first time off their cliff nests. The total breeding population of this species in Spitsbergen has recently been estimated at 780,000 pairs.

**Black Guillemot** *Cepphus grylle*: This bird is common and widespread. Good numbers were seen each day including many first summer birds complete with dark markings on their coverts.

**Little Auk** (Dovekie) *Alle alle*: This is a sought-after miniature auk in the region. These tiny birds were seen on most days. It is thought that there are at least a million pairs of Little Auks breeding in Spitsbergen.

**Atlantic Puffin** *Fratercula arctica*: These comical birds were seen on numerous occasions and very well near the 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier. The entire population at Spitsbergen is only estimated at around 5,000 pairs.

#### EMBERIZIDAE

**Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis*: This is the only breeding passerine in the islands which is common and conspicuous. Our best views of this species were had at Ny Ålesund and Loneyarbyen.

#### **SOME PLANTS RECORDED**

Arctic Mouse-ear *Cerastium arcticum*  
Alpine Bistort *Polygonum viviparum*  
Dwarf Saxifrage *Saxifraga tenuis*  
Mountain Avens *Dryas octopetala*  
Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna*  
Moss Campion *Silene acaulis*  
Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia*  
Polar Campion *Silene uralensis*  
Polar Willow *Salix polaris*  
Snow Buttercup *Ranunculus nivalis*  
Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dahlianum*  
Tundra Chickweed *Stellaria crassipes*  
Tufted Saxifrage *Saxifraga cespitosa*  
Woolly Lousewort *Pedicularis dasyantha*

#### **RESULTS FROM THE MAMMAL OF THE TRIP VOTE**

1st Polar Bear  
2nd Walrus  
3rd Bowhead Whale  
4th Arctic Fox  
5th Svalbard Reindeer

#### **RESULTS FROM THE BIRD OF THE TRIP VOTE**

1st Ivory Gull  
2nd Ross' Gull  
3rd Little Auk  
4th Atlantic Puffin  
5th Brünnich's Guillemot

**Photographic credits:** Polar Bear by James Wakelin, Reindeer by James Wakelin, Arctic Fox by James Wakelin, Fin Whale by James Wakelin, Ivory Gull by James Wakelin, Walrus by James Wakelin, whale bones by Adam Riley, MV "Antarctic Dream" by James Wakelin.

