

April 2015 - Polar Bear (re)quest



*13th of April 2015...After warming up, we drove out again. About half way to the fjord we stopped to take a look at some seals, all of a sudden Pieter-Jan said: **I have one...***



2014

Murphy's law interrupted last year's Svalbard tour. Although Polar Bears were located (and photographed) by Pieter-Jan while doing a prospective trip before the arrival of the 2014 clients. A combination of both bad weather (fog) and no luck resulted in no sightings of Polar Bear during the tour itself. Nevertheless despite this the clients were satisfied and happy. After all Svalbard has so much more to offer than just Polar Bears. The complete archipelago being a UNESCO world heritage site, means a vast and unique scenery not often seen by foreigners. Moreover, driving your own snow scooter is great fun and of course there are other mammals well worth looking for too. Given the situation of no Polar Bears on that tour one client promised to come back. He did! We say thanks to Peter Veryser for that! Below some pics by Pieter-Jan that were taken during the 2014.











Adult male Polar Bear, Svalbard, March - April 2015





Female Polar Bear with new born cubs, Svalbard, March – April 2015



So back to this year. After arriving around noon we went to settle in the guesthouse. On the way down from Nybyen to the snowmobile rental we stopped at Svalbar to fill up our empty stomachs. After picking up the scooters we took a short drive around town so everybody got the chance to familiarise themselves with the scooters and a bit of practice driving. After half an hour we found 2 playing Arctic Foxes. We stayed watching the foxes for the rest of the evening and took many pictures. One of the foxes was very curious and came within a couple of metres of the whole group!





The second day, which was the first full day in the field, we had a big trip planned. Pieter-Jan had seen some Polar Bears in Billefjorden the week before. There were also many seals in the fjord, so a good chance that the bears were still there! We drove out in the morning, the weather was really bad when leaving town, but with GPS tracking you can get anywhere. The weather forecast for the next day was better. After a not so smooth drive of over 100 kilometres we finally arrived in Billefjorden. The visibility was very poor but while driving over the sea ice we found the first fresh tracks of Polar Bears. After scanning the fjord and glacier fronts, but drawing a blank, we went to the hotel of the abandoned Russian settlement "Pyramiden" to check in and have a warm dinner.

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The bear was still 8 kilometres away, but everybody could indeed see a tiny yellow dot moving while watching through the telescope. We took out our photography equipment and went a bit closer so everybody could get a decent look. While getting closer, we could clearly see that it was a big male Bear who was out on his evening stroll in front of the glacier. We were lucky the bear had a bit of curiosity in him, so he came a bit closer to us. We took many safety precautions, one of which was that the scooters were all lined up, pointing away from the bear so we could leave fast and without incident if the bear came too close. After good views of the bear we drove home and went to bed happy and satisfied.





The next morning we drove out after breakfast to see if the bear was still hanging around in the fjord. We couldn't find the male, but found tracks of a female with 2 newborn cubs instead. The tracks were a maximum of one hour old, because it had been snowing and they were practically clear of snow. Unfortunately it was impossible to follow the tracks, so no luck with this one. After lunch we decided to go back to Tempelfjorden and then to Longyearbyen. While driving out of the fjord we found the same male Polar Bear from the day before, but we decided not to approach it so it could go on hunting seals undisturbed. We made several stops along the scenic route to take some landscape images. We drove up the steep mountain next to Tempelfjorden in order to have a good view over the frozen fjord and the open water of Isfjord. We returned tired but satisfied back to our guesthouse.



The third day out in the field we drove towards the famous east coast. The weather forecast was bad again, but we went anyway. Driving over the 30 kilometre long glacier in between Sassendalen and Mohnbukta, we already noticed that this part of the island had some extreme snowfall. There was around 70 centimetres of powder snow, which made it extremely fun to drive in. After having a warm field lunch on the sea ice, it stopped snowing and the weather cleared up. We drove around the fjord and towards the moraine, looking for wildlife in the stunning landscape, but unfortunately didn't see a great deal. No bears today...



The final day we drove south. Van Mijenfjorden is a big fjord that often freezes during wintertime. Approximately one week ago, our guide Pieter-Jan saw a mother with 2 cubs here as well. After entering the ice on Reindalen we photographed some ringed seals that were hauling out on the ice. When they dived in the water we departed and drove west over the frozen sea in the direction of Belsund. After a couple of kilometres Pieter-Jan spotted the same mother with cubs he found the week before!





We stopped the scooters and watched them play at a safe distance. The cubs were approximately one year old, but still very playful while the mother was occupied hunting for food. We watched them for the rest of the afternoon and drove back around 5pm. On the way back we stopped at an ice cave in the Longyear glacier. This is basically an igloo built on top of a melt water channel inside the glacier. Although the chances of seeing wildlife down there is zero, it still is a very nice experience walking in a cave made from ice that is thousands of years old.





So 2015 was a very successful year, not only in terms of wildlife observations, but we were also quite lucky with the weather and the amount of sea ice. Hopefully we will get the same conditions in the coming years!

 EUROPE'S BIG 5 



To end a trilogy (2013-2014-2015) of best pics taken by our guide and photographer PJ the previous years. Not surprising his pics are used by BBC these days! We really are proud PJ belongs to the EB5-team!

