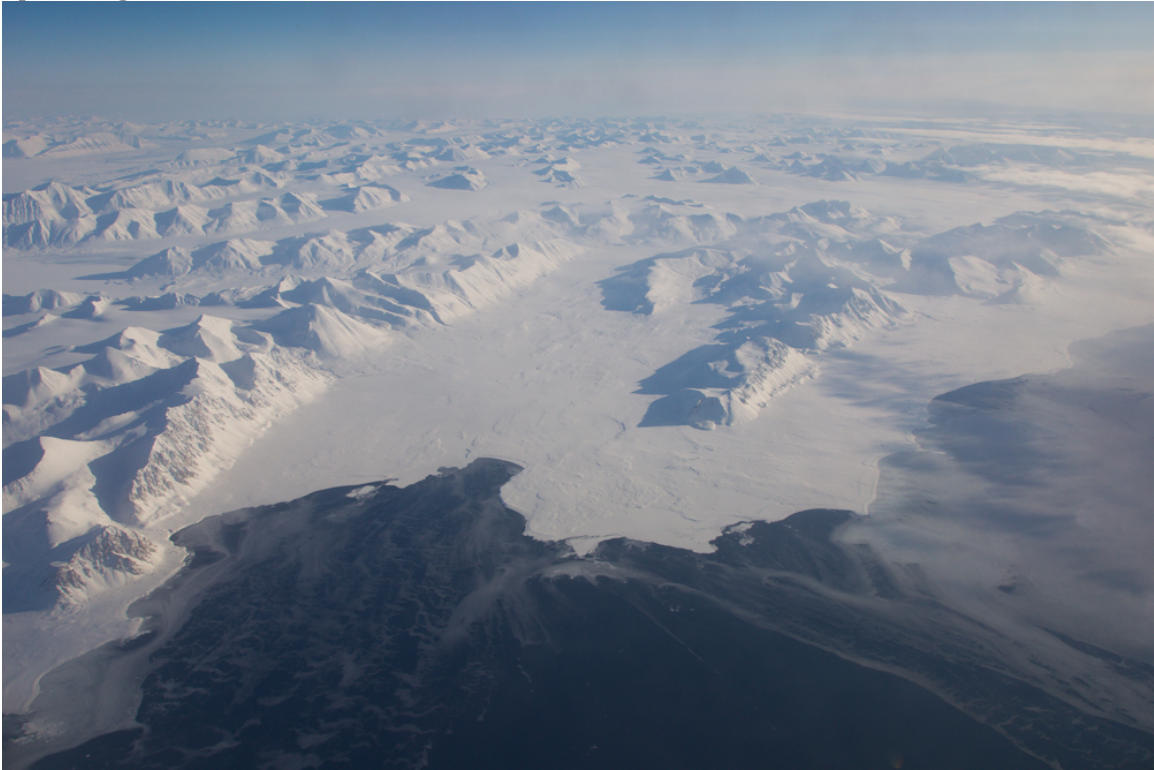


'Studying' in Svalbard

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When I went to an info session about going on Erasmus, I was bored every second I listened to the possible destinations offered by the university, however, studying abroad was something that kept playing with my mind. So I asked google for advice. When I found out that Svalbard had a University, I knew that this was it. I had to go there. Easier said than done but finally... March 2013 I got on a plane for 5 months Spitsbergen.



My course only started at the end of April, so I had more than a month of spare time to explore Spitsbergen and go looking for the white Nordic wildlife. My first days, I spent looking for grouses and foxes around town, but I soon discovered that it was almost impossible to get around without transportation. This time of the year, everybody in town is driving his snowscooter, so I figured I needed one myself. Renting for a long period was not an option but I could buy an old and rusty Skidoo formula 500 (the scooter being only 5 years younger than I am!) from a good friends neighbor. It was very unreliable, but it got me around town to the places I wanted to see.



The Svalbard Rockptarmigan is an endemic subspecies to Svalbard, and it's one of the only birds that doesn't migrate south to winter in more favorable habitats. They are quite difficult to find, but once you know the sound, it's feasible close to town where they are not hunted.



This is all very nice, but knowing that there are polar bears walking around the island, a mammal enthusiasts like me wants more than just a white chicken in a nice landscape.

Getting further away from town on my own would be incredibly stupid, since my scooter could break down any moment, I didn't had a satellite phone, emergency beacons or a rifle for protection. So I got myself a second hand German Mauser as safety guard. I only went further away when I could go with other people. Off course, this limits my time out in the field, since most of my friends there had a job during the week.

Luckily I found a good place for foxes a few kilometers from town. The low sun in the beginning of April is perfect for photography. The “golden light” can last for hours here this time of the year.





Lars, my friend that offered me a room in Longyearbyen told me that he would go on a weekendtrip to Van Mijenfjorden down south. One of the first fjords that freeze in Svalbard and I knew... where there is sea ice, there can be polarbears! We packed a

ton of gear and left on an adventure to an old minerscabin from the early ninteens. We scanned for hours in search of the white king of the arctic, but the only thing we could find where tracks from a couple of days old.

The lack of polarbears was made up by 2 walrus hauled out on a floating peace of ice and a couple of bearded seals near the ice edge. Brunnichs guillemots where flying into the fjord in large numbers coming back from there wintering areas south of Greenland.

It was a cold (temperatures below 30) but very nice weekend. I had the feeling of closing in to a polarbear sighting. The next trip, I would see one!





The following weeks, I heard some rumors about a polarbear with 2 cubs in a fjord close to town. I went looking a couple of days, but without success. Again: tracks, but nothing more.



Reindeer tend to starve when the winters are mild, because that sometimes causes rain on top of snow which forms a thick ice layer just above the ground due to

permafrost, so they can't reach the lichens below the snow and starve. A bad reindeer year means a good fox year. They can just sit around and wait for the reindeer to die, this provides them with plenty of frozen food during wintertime.



Around the end of april the first king eiders are coming back into the fjords, I wanted to photograph the species since it's probably the most colorful animal in Svalbard, and I haven't seen many pictures of it on the sea ice. So went out to the fjord, found 2 males and 2 females sitting ducks on a floating ice shelf in the middle of the fjord, but there was a mild wind blowing in my direction, so I delayed my breakfast to see how fast the ice was getting closer. After waiting for 1 hour a floating object caught my attention... My first guess was one of the bearded seals who call the adventfjorden home. But the second time it showed his back, I heard a typic whale-blow, so it must have been a Beluga, right? Dark grey with spots, without dorsal fin, all alone... Not perfect, but what else? OK, I admit it... The possibility that I found a Narwhal popped up into my head, but it was only the small wish inside my head that made me consider this. After waiting for a long time, I saw it 3 times in an hour, but I could not see his head or clear signs that could convince me, until..... It popped up is head after tempting my impatience for 20 minutes with only a blank sea in front of me. I clearly saw the tooth: - AMAAAAAZING!!!! - but it was quite short, I would guess about half a meter? Off course I was not prepared for this, so I missed the picture. A few minutes after, the Narwhal gave me a second chance by lifting his head only a little out of the water, but just enough for a picture that could proof this incredibly rare sighting here in the South. This is out of it's distribution when considered [this](#) map. And with the information I found on the website of the Norwegian Polar Institute: "In Svalbard, most recent sightings of narwhals come from fjords in Nordaustlandet and from Hinlopenstretet." I was sure that this was a nice vagrant I found! After 3 more hours of blank sea, I finally went back home.



Oh yeah, I got the King eiders as well, but who cares



OK, So I've seen a Narwhal, but still no polar bear...

The weekend after, Lars told me he was able to get a cabin at the east coast for the weekend. He asked me if I would join him and Astrid for a scootertrip.

East coast = sea ice = polar bears.

No doubt I would miss this trip!

I did the shopping: gasoline, gasoline, gasoline, an awful lot of food and.. a bottle of champagne, just in case...

When we came down the Ulvebreen we witnessed an ocean of ice as far as the eye could reach. Down at the glacier the first ringed seals were seen, but my eagle eyes were on the lookout for bigger things... At the cabin, Lars checked the Guestbook immediately, result: Last bears at that spot dated from mid-March, which was more than a month ago. I started a profound Polar Bear scan, and after only a couple of minutes my companions heard me screaming! A heavy male was running at about 3 kilometers away from us, but closing in quite rapidly. Again, an A-MAAAZING moment! I haven't been so happy since.. eum... Well, since the Narwhal from the week before. We followed the bear and it chased away a female with a 2 year old cub that caught a ringed seal a bit more to the South. The 2 backed off and abandoned their treasure for the much bigger male.

We approached as far as the sea ice was safe. At about 350 meter we stood there, watching the seal being pulled apart by the muscular king of the arctic. When he finished his meal, he followed the mother and cub towards the thinner ice. This gave

me the opportunity to get close to the carcass, which was interesting because of 2 scavenging Ivory gulls and a handful of Glaucous gulls.

After this bloody adventure we where in for a meal ourselves and with that, we cracked the bottle of champagne. Lars' reindeersoup was heated, which is becoming a nice tradition on weekend trips like this. When the stomach was satisfied, I decided to ride out for a fast and last check. I spotted another male, smaller than the one previous that evening. He was strolling towards the carcass. I drove out to the sea, and was hoping for a curious bear. And curious he was! At the leftovers, he lifted his head, smelling my sweet masculine sweat and came towards me. I started the scooter, loaded the gun and installed my 500mm on the tripod. The bear came as close as 200m, and than headed North, not close enough for a portrait, but the experience together with the huge amount of adrenaline and some atmospheric shots made me fall asleep with a satisfied memory...

After breakfast the next day I spotted 2 bears on 3-4 kilometers at sea, so I followed the coast for something interesting closer by. In a fjord a few kilometers North of the cabin, I found a napping female. After some time with this bear, I went back to my companions to plan the way back. After packing and cleaning, I did one brief scan, again 3 (!) bears, but on an enormous distance out at the vast pack ice...

Lars guided us back by a more adventurous route over the so called 'dead-glacier'. The way-back was not as 'boring' as the way we came, so we had some minor troubles, but that's part of the game!

In short, a weekend that will stay forever with me, largely thanks to Lars and Astrid, two fantastic friends who made this trip possible





After this trip, the holiday was over and school started...

I took a Biotelemetry course, which included some fieldwork: catching ringed seals and satellite tag them. Cool! We went out by scooter with the whole class. Arriving in the fjord where the traps were plotted, I took my bins and saw the mother polar bear with the 2 cubs in front of the glacier at the end of the fjord! I made myself popular amongst my new classmates since nobody but me saw polarbears before.

The day after we had to go back to the same area. This time, we went by boat because the ice was getting unsafe. Arriving at the same fjord, I took my bins out and there she was again, a big healthy mother with her new-borns.

A sighting from a kilometer away is very nice and safe, but a bit too far for pictures.

So I decided to go back the same night (because sun is up all night anyway), and try to take some pictures. I found the bear back as a sleeping yellow dot on the sea ice. A couple of hundred meters away from her, there was a red dot as well.. She just made a kill! Wonderful!

Bears can never be trusted, I had to make sure I was able to get away in a couple of seconds, because they can run fast and surprise you at a glance. So I kept my distance, but with a good telephotolens you can make nice shots anyway.







Very soon after this, plus degrees were reached and the snow and ice started to melt. The snowscooter season, which is the best season in Svalbard was over.

After my course I was able to work on a cruise ship as a guide and zodiac driver. This gave me a whole different view on Svalbard, the view that 99% of the tourists are getting, but it was a really nice job anyway, I got to see more polarbears, more walrus and more seals, but I missed my scooter a lot. The idea of going where you want to go instead of sitting on the ship and going where the captain brings you was something I missed a lot, and the bear sightings where often far far away.

After one month of guiding, my next course started. The arctic plant ecology course. It was nice to learn about the plants and surviving structures that evolved in the arctic, but besides this, I got back on a ship for an 8 day cruise around the island for our individual project. We found some nice things of which some endemic plant species like the rare *Puccinellia svalbardensis*, and a couple of distant polarbears and some displaying humpbacks.

My last days in Svalbard I spent on photographing the birds, because I haven't had time to do this since I was too busy with guiding, courses, and trips.

And so my "Erasmus" came to an end. The first month I was very much afraid of missing the polar bear, but when you go to the best places in the right time of the year accompanied by a good set of binoculars, you will eventually find them, although getting there might be challenging and adventurous!

Polar bear – snowscooter trip the sequel

As I am also guiding for my fellow Jan Kelchtermans (founder [europesbig5](http://europesbig5.com)), a sequel of this snowscooter polar bear experience will run as a new europesbig5 tour in the future. The following dates in 2014 are available starting and ending from Longaerbyen:

DATES OF TRIP ONE:

7 – 11th of April 2014

DATES OF TRIP TWO:

14 – 18th of April 2014

RFI's on the following emailaddress: europesbig5@gmail.com

Thanks a lot for reading!

Pieter-Jan