

MAMMALS on Svalbard

observed Aug 24 – 31 2015

Stefan Lithner



Polar bear and walruses

This trip on board M/S Origo, Gothenburg, was a photographic expedition managed by Røvdjursland, Magnus Fredriksson, and Bo (Bosse) Kristiansson in collaboration with Arctic Adventures, Jens Abild.

Participants were : Mart Marend and Annika Marend Luning Holm, Caroline Otterhag and Bo Anzén, Ingrid Jansson and Arne Talving, Bengt Blom, Kjell Göransson, Birgitta Hammarkvist, Mikael Thesslund, and Stefan Lithner, all from Sweden.

Expedition leaders and guides were Lisa Ström and Audun Slate.

Crew on M/S Origo: Emil Heijel (captain), Jonas Fröberg (mate), Daniel Persson (engineer), Loreta Mikalajuniene (chef), Amanda Ackeskog and Mieze Sahlén (mess), Elinor Utbult and Richard Jensen (seaman/seawoman).

Aug 24

M/S Origo's trip started from Longyearbyen at 16:00.

Due to improper managements by Norwegian Air, I was directed to embark at Ny-Ålesund following day.

Aug 25.

In the morning of Aug 25 the group made a Zodiac trip along glacier Kongsbreen. After my embarkation in the afternoon we went ashore on the island of Ny-London. Thereafter we continued northwards and passed Danskøya around midnight. The weather was clear and offered us a humpback whale in midnight-sun Aug 25-26 at 80° N.



Midnight sun Aug 25 – 26 at 80° N



Humpback whale



Humpback whale

Aug 26

Those of us who were not awake at 05:00 were awoken near Moffen Island at 80° N because whales were sighted. We identified at least two fin whales. Later this morning we took a Zodiac trip to Lågøya and studied walruses and a polar bear at closer range. We then entered Hinnlopen. At Kapp Fanshawe where we encountered several large whales. Late in the evening we visited Alkefjellet.

Aug 27

After breakfast we took a Zodiac trip and stepped ashore on Torellnåset and closed in on a group of walruses. We then continued towards Austfonnaglaciären, Bråsvellbreen where we made a Zodiac trip along the edge of the glacier. Thereafter we continued towards Freemansundet (Freeman Strait), Edgeøya.

Aug 28

We continued through Freemansundet, passable for the first time this year. We made a quick stop in Disco Bay. Later we made a Zodiac trip along the shoreline of Kvalpynten. We stepped ashore on Å-Kongen, Kong Ludvig Islands, where we were shown an old whale skeleton, probably consisting of parts from more than one individual. After dinner we made a Zodiac trip to Zieglerøya, Tjuvbukten, where a group of walrus wanted to study us at close range. We then continued towards Hornsund.



M/S Origo behind bearded seal

Aug 29

We searched for polar bear along shoreline of Hornsundfjorden. In the evening we continued towards Isfjorden.

Aug 30

We continued spotting for bear, and found two at Alkehornet. Later we anchored at Trygghamna, made a Zodiac trip and also went ashore. Here we saw a ringed seal. Thereafter we continued towards Loneyarbyen.

Aug 31

Breakfast and then disembarking.

MAMMALS

Taxa presented in order according to Duff/Lawson; *Mammals of the World, a Checklist 2004*. Names also follow Duff/Lawson except for recent changes.

arctic fox

Vulpes lagopus

One was seen at a distant during Zodiak tour on Kongsfjorden Aug 25.

polar bear

Thalarctos maritimus

On Aug 26 we found one bear walking along the shoreline hoping to surprise a some prey. Bosse Kristiansson watched the event from M/S Origo, and later told us that the bear became interested in us when we approached with our Zodiak boats. The bear lied down and pretended to sleep. According to Bosse Kristiansson this is a typical behaviour when its prey (we) isn't close enough and also aware of the bears presence. If the prey does not come close enough the bear rises and walks away. Then it sneaks around its contemplated prey, and approaches from another direction. When it is close enough it makes a quick attack. When we didn't come any closer this bear disillusioned walked around and in among the walruses.

A walrus may weigh up to 2000 kg, while a polar bear may weigh up to 800 kg. Bosse Kristiansson estimated the weight of this individual to be around 400 kg.

Two bears were also seen from M/S Origo near Alkehornet in the afternoon of Aug. 30. We spent time here to study the animals spending their time.

walrus

Odobenus rosmarus

Walrus was seen every day during the trip, sometimes only in small groups. A herd of about 30 males was seen on Lågöya Aug 26, where the inferior polar bear without illusions walked around and among the walruses.

In the morning of Aug 27 a herd of about 30 males were gathered on Torellnäset. Here we went ashore and approached the animals. On Svalbard walruses on solid land must not be approached from water closer than 300 metres. Approaching from land is allowed, since walruses then have free escape-route to open water.

On Aug 28. during a late Zodiak trip at Zieglerøya in Tjuvbukten we found about 30 on



Walrus; younger male



land. A group of six or seven younger males were curious, plunged into the water and approached the Zodiak, surveilled by a fully grown male.

A walrus' tusks grow throughout their lives, but are also worn throughout their lives. A walrus could easily perforate a Zodiak with his tusks. This has never happened in Svalbard, but such an incident is known from Frans Josefs Land (Russia).

ringed seal

Phoca hispida

Two single were seen shortly before boarding and one seen while boarding M/S Origo after Zodiak-trip along Bråsvelbreen in the afternoon of Aug 27.

One was seen in Trygghamna Aug 31.

bearded seal

Erignathus barbatus

One was seen briefly in the afternoon of Aug 25. Two singles were briefly seen on Aug 26.

During Zosiak-trip along Bråsvelbreen in the afternoon of Aug 27 three single individuals were seen. One of these was most cooperative and stayed on an ice-flow while we slowly moved around it. Two were seen during Zodiak trip along the coast of Kvalpynten Aug 28.

Whales

During the trip we had a round-the-clock watch for whales, particularly by guides, captain, mate and seamen, but also by rest of crew as well as trip managers and guests.

Our first whales we encountered in the evening of Aug 25. They proved to be minke whales. Shortly before midnight near Fair Heaven we found our next whale. This proved to be a humpback whale, much more cooperative than the previous ones. At about 05:00 the following morning near Moffen Island at 80° N whales were sighted, and seemed not to be particularly disturbed by our presence. We followed them for a while and eventually identified them as fin whales, but could not confirm whether they were two or three.

In the evening of Aug 26 we entered Hinnlopen. Near Kapp Fanshawe we encountered a group of lagre whales. At one occasion a fin whale blew. About ten seconds later another fin whale blew less than 20 metres from the first one. About half a minute later another whale blew about 75 metres from the second one. The blow from this one we believe came from a blue whale.



Fin whale

A little while later seven blows were observed within 100 metres from each other during about seven minutes.

The whales were eagerly photographed. Later I sent photos of each animal we had ID-ed, for confirmation to Kit Kovacs, Prof. Biodiversity Research Section Leader at Norwegian Polar Institute. He confirms all the whales we had ID-ed.

During this study I photographed whales with a somewhat different blow, two jets and not so high. This whale Kit Kovacs initially felt uncertain about. I was recommended By Carl Kinze www.hvaler.dk to contact Mads Peter Heide Jørgensen at Grønlands Naturinstitut (Greenland Institute of Natural Resources) with more experience of bowhead whales than most “cetacean-watchers” in the world. After correspondence and a second check among my photos we identified these whales to be bowhead whales.

minke whale

Balaenoptera bonaerensis

About four hours by boat north of Ny-Ålesund in the evening of Aug 25 we sighted a few minke whales at a distance. Their number was difficult to assess, but there were at least two, probably three. The minke whale is still allowed to hunt in Norway, which may explain their shyness.

blue whale

Balaenoptera musculus

Having entered Hinnloben, and near Kapp Fanshawe in the evening of Aug 26 we encountered a group of large whales. We identified fin whale and blue whale, but how many specimen of each we could not assess.

Blue whale we saw and photographed several, but no more than two at the time (same photo).



Two blue whales

Kit Kovacs states in e-mail that there has been lots of Balean-whales in this area this year. Among other observations up to 20 blue whales were seen “on a platform”. Hence there were probably several more individuals than two.

fin whale

Balaenoptera physalus

Near Moffen at 80° N in the early morning of Aug. 26 we found the first fin whales. We watched them from the boat for a while. We saw only two at the time, but there may have been one more.

Around 21:30 we found a group of large whales. Among these we saw two fin whales at the same time. There may have been more.

humpback whale

Megaptera novaeangliae

One was seen and photographed around midnight between Aug 25 and 26. near Fair Heaven

bowhead whale

Balaena mysticetus

At Hinnlopen, Near Kapp Fanshawe in the evening of Aug. 26 I took series of photographs of what I believed was “another species of whale”, with a somewhat different blow. It was two jetted and bushier than the previous whales. This type of blow I photographed at four instances (21:17, 21:33, 21:43 and 21:48). Two individuals were seen. For determination I consulted Kit Kovacs, and Mads Peter Heide Jørgensen.

Kit Kovacs emphasizes that bowheads are known to be rare in these waters. On the other hand we know that the bowhead is continuously recovering from its low abundance before protection.



Bowhead blowing at 21:17



Centre: bowhead blowing 21:48, left: not identified



Bowhead at surface 21:33, blowhole a clearly elevated hump and clear depression behind

caribou/reindeer*Rangifer tarandus*

This taxon inhabiting Svalbard is described as a different subspecies; Svalbard reindeer *R. t. platyrhynchus*. It is the smallest and most short-legged subspecies of reindeer and it is endemic to the Svalbard archipelago.

We spotted at least a few reindeer almost every day.



(Svalbard) reindeer

**Acknowledgements**

I acknowledge Kit Kovacs for confirming the whales we identified on M/S Origo, Mads Peter Heide Jørgensen for his decisive participation in determining bowhead whale, Carl Kinze for connecting me with Mads Peter and Magnus Fredriksson for proof-reading my manuscript.

Litterature

For identification of mammals on this trip we used Shirihai & Jarrett; *Whales Dolphins and Seals, A Field Guide to the Mammals of the World*.

For listing mammals: *Duff and Lawson; Mammals of the World A Checklist*.

Adresses and links

More photos: bear and Walrus http://www.pbase.com/stefan_lithner/polar_bear_and_walrus

Whales: http://www.pbase.com/stefan_lithner/whales_svalbard

Rovdjursland home page: <http://www.rovdjursland.se>

Managing Director of Arctic Adventures AS: postmaster@arctic-adventures.no

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Sea monster