

# **SVALBARD ARCTIC CRUISE**

**20<sup>th</sup> June to 28<sup>th</sup> June 2010**

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**6/7/10**

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## **Overview**

This report details the results of an Arctic cruise undertaken in June 2010 in and around the archipelago of Svalbard.

Svalbard is a group of islands lying on the edge of the Arctic Ocean at a latitude of approximately 79 degrees north. The largest island, on which lies the capital (and virtually the only significant human settlement) of Longyearbjen, is Spitsbergen. Though very cold during the long dark winter, Svalbard (or at least the westerly parts of it) are surprisingly mild during summer due to the moderating effects of the Gulf Stream and the presence of daylight throughout the whole 24 hour cycle. The permanent pack ice extends down to Spitsbergen through the winter, at which time many of the fjords are frozen with thick ice and are inaccessible to shipping. But in summer the pack ice retreats northwards and by July many of the fjords are open once again.

The islands have a long history of whaling, sealing and hunting which historically have had a serious impact on wildlife, some species being exterminated altogether and others only now making a slow recovery. Today Svalbard is a protected area and, with the exception of Longyearben and one or two other outposts, is virtually a pristine wilderness. There are few better places in the world to see species such as Polar Bear or Beluga in a completely natural and wild environment.

Our targets were Polar Bear, Arctic Fox, Walrus, the three Seals (Bearded, Ringed and Harp), Beluga and Minke Whale. There was an outside chance of Hooded Seal as well as one of the less common cetaceans (such as White-beaked Dolphin). Also, I harboured hopes of seeing the only known rodent on Svalbard: the Sibling Vole (which has been recorded in Longyearbjen). On the bird front, we hoped to see some of the rarer gulls (Sabine's, Ivory and Ross's), as well as King Eider, Grey Phalarope, Long-tailed Skua, Ptarmigan and maybe one or two uncommon waders such as Pectoral Sandpiper.

The cruise was arranged through Wildwings (who supplied a trip leader, the very amiable and knowledgeable Tony Marr) and executed by Quark Expeditions. The Wildwings group comprised 16 of the 64 (or so) paying passengers in total. Our ship was the Russian-owned and Finnish-built polar research vessel *Akademik Ioffe*. The Ioffe is ice-resistant and very stable – ideal for polar expeditions and wildlife spotting. It operates an “open bridge” policy whereby passengers are welcome on the bridge between 06.00 and 23.00 on the strict understanding that they behave sensibly and do not obstruct or interfere with the work of the crew on duty. Shore landings and cruises in water unsuitable for the ship are conducted with inflatable dinghies called Zodiacs. These are extremely stable and manoeuvrable and are perfect for getting around in shallow inshore water and for picking a way through myriad ice floes in the fjords.

## **Results**

We enjoyed fantastic results, missing only Harp Seal of the target mammal species. Our close range and protracted views of Polar Bear were virtually unprecedented and we had great views of Arctic Fox hunting Geese, Beluga with calf and Walrus both hauled out onshore and in the water.

We got two of the target gulls – Sabine’s and Ivory, the latter being sighted no less than five times! We had a flock of more than 60 King Eider (mostly drakes) at reasonably close range and moderate telescope views of Grey Phalarope. The visit to the Little Auk colony at Voglesungen was also memorable, allowing us to sit only a few feet away from nesting birds.

The weather was mostly fine with hour after hour of bright sunshine. Only once did temperatures dip below freezing. Of course, in such glorious weather the scenery of wild, snowy mountains, glaciers and rocky shorelines was doubly spectacular.

### **Daily Log**

#### **Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> June**

Caught the early afternoon flight from Heathrow to Oslo, meeting the tour leader Tony Marr and a few of the other participants at the departure gate. Uneventful flight, arriving at Oslo Gardemoen on schedule. Checked into the comfortable Clarion Hotel nearby.

With a little time to spare before dinner most of the (now assembled) group went on a very gentle birding walk in the area around the hotel. Pretty uninspiring suburban habitat but a few birds were recorded – Redwing, Fieldfare, Yellowhammer, White Wagtail, Barn Swallow, House Martin and Willow Warbler among others.

Outrageously expensive hotel dinner – nearly £40 for burger and chips and a beer!

#### **Monday 21<sup>st</sup> June**

Relaxed late breakfast before catching the late morning flight to Longyearbjen via Tromsø. At Gardemoen the sun was shining and the temperature was around twenty degrees but by the time we had reached Svalbard the sky had clouded over and a gloomy and rather breezy two degrees welcomed us to the high Arctic summer.

We had a couple of hours before we were due to board our ship, the Akademik Ioffe, and decided to explore the harbour at Longyearbjen to see if any interesting birds were around. Delighted to find an Ivory Gull in residence along with quite a few Purple Sandpipers and Brunnich’s Guillemots and the ubiquitous Glaucous Gulls, Arctic Terns and Fulmars. Strolling along the road to the quayside we found several Snow Bunting and a single Long-tailed Duck. And beside the road we recorded our first mammal of the trip – a group of three wild Reindeer. (There are no domestic Reindeer on Svalbard).

Welcomed aboard the Ioffe by the expedition leader Dutch Wilmott. The Ioffe is a Russian owned research ship which divides its time between the two polar regions according to the season. It is ice-strengthened and stabilised and thus ideal for expeditions such as the one on which we were about to embark. Up on deck to watch our departure we had a second sighting of Ivory Gull, probably the same bird we had seen in the harbour earlier.

After settling into our cabins we were gathered in the Dining Hall to be introduced to the expedition team and fed tea and snacks. A mandatory lifeboat drill was to be held over the course of the first 24 hours on board, we were told, heralded by seven long blasts on the ship’s horn. The exact timing was to be a mystery though I guessed it might come before dinner – and it did!

After dinner most of us went up to the top deck to look out for wildlife. This being the summer solstice the sun never came anywhere near setting and even at midnight it was as bright as a normal summer's day. The captain parked us for the night in a quiet fjord amid snow-covered hills and opposite a glacier. We had only Fulmars and Glaucous Gulls for company in this, our first taste of true Arctic wilderness.

## **Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> June**

Our plan for the morning was to go ashore at another quiet fjord nearby called Alkahornet. There were steep sandstone cliffs with nesting auks and it was common we were told for Arctic Fox to patrol the base of the cliffs looking for easy pickings. The sun was shining and the air was still and quite warm (about two or three degrees) – a perfect morning to look for wildlife!

We duly went ashore, using the inflatable dinghies known as “Zodiacs”, and divided into several groups – the “chargers” who (as the name suggests) were to energetically charge off into the wilderness, the “dedicated birding group” who would head for the cliffs to search for wildlife and “the contemplative wanderers” who would take an easy stroll and just admire the view. Each group was accompanied by an armed guide equipped with flare guns and a hunting rifle in case of meeting a polar bear.

Naturally we wildlife enthusiasts formed the spine of the Dedicated Birding Group and led by Sam (a laconic but very knowledgeable Tasmanian) we set off for the base of the cliffs. Almost immediately we spotted an Arctic Fox on the skyline at about three or four hundred metres. However, he had also spotted us and quickly fled the scene. Slogging our way through boggy ground and through drifts of wet snow we met Reindeer (about a dozen in all) and nesting Pink-footed Geese. And, as expected, on the cliff face were hundreds (if not thousands) of nesting Brunich's Guillemots. We scrambled over a saddle in the rocky scree to see if our fox was still around and, taking a detour to avoid disturbing the geese, moved out into an open, boggy area. Barnacle Geese were visible a few hundred metres ahead and it was while we were watching these that someone spotted the fox again – this time to our rear. He had managed to slip round behind us without our seeing him which of course is a typically foxy thing to do! For a few moments we watched him silhouetted against the sky on the rocky saddle we had recently climbed through. But then he ducked down and re-appeared on open ground to our left. Obliging he moved round in a complete semi-circle in full view at a range of around one hundred and fifty metres before eventually disappearing in dead ground. A great start to the expedition!

Back at the Zodiacs we met the chargers (led by the British geologist “Bronny”) and the wanderers (led by the Canadian marine biologist “Lynnski”). Most of us were happy to take a Zodiac back to the ship for a well-earned cup of tea but a hardy group of enthusiasts (idiots?) took the challenge of a “polar plunge” – ie a swim in the freezing waters of the Arctic. Not one lasted more than about ten seconds though two particularly demented individuals actually went back for a second attempt!

Early afternoon saw us receive the mandatory Zodiac and Polar Bear Briefings, instructing us in the correct use of the Zodiacs and on how to behave in the event of encountering a bear whilst ashore. We should be so lucky!

Our second shore landing of the day was to be at Poolepynten, a well known haul-out location for Walrus. Poolepynten lies on the East side of King Charles Island in the sound that separates the island from the “mainland” of Spitsbergen. It also happens to be about as far north in the sound as the ship could penetrate, the water thereafter being too shallow. We gathered on deck to scan the shoreline for Walrus and, sure enough, in the distance there they were hauled out on a sandy beach. We went ashore on the Zodiacs once more and quietly crept along the beach to get a closer view.

Along the way, to our left, were several interesting freshwater pools recently freed from ice and snow. Red-throated Divers were in town with one fine specimen already on its nest. We also spotted an unusual looking wader – which we identified as Sanderling – and three Grey Phalaropes in full breeding plumage.

We gradually drew closer to the group of Walrus, eventually getting to within about fifty metres before silently crouching down to enjoy the spectacle and take photographs. The group consisted of some twenty-two animals, all tusked and therefore all male. (We learned later that Walrus were still in the process of re-colonising Svalbard after years of persecution by hunting and that “pioneer” Walrus were predominantly male). The most dominant animal occupied a central position in the group and periodically asserted himself by sitting on or prodding with his tusks his fellows. We watched the Walrus for about an hour before slowly withdrawing back along the beach to the waiting Zodiacs. One last treat was a large and well-tusked Walrus splashing his way ashore to join the main group a short way behind us.

That evening the ship re-traced its way southwards into the mouth of Ijsfjorden and headed out to sea on a long semi-circular loop around the western side of King Charles Island. Dawn (if there is such a thing in an Arctic summer) saw us in freezing mist on the north-western tip of Spitsbergen.

### **Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June**

After breakfast we went up on deck to take stock. We were parked just offshore of an ancient and long defunct Dutch whaling station called Smeerenburg. The weather had deteriorated overnight and the air temperature now stood barely above freezing. A mixture of very light sleet, snow and hail fell intermittently through the cold, damp fog.

However, with absolutely no wind at all, conditions were good for sea-watching and I was very pleased to pick out three Bearded Seals quite near to the ship. Their brownish colour, long necks and prominent vibrissae were well visible making their identification easy. Our leader, Tony Marr, was scanning the shoreline with his scope and announced that an Arctic Fox was present. A fox it certainly was though not well seen at a distance of around eight hundred metres and through a blur of mist and sleet.

We went ashore shortly afterwards, having first sent guides out to check for Polar Bear. (No landing would be attempted if bears were sighted). In the seventeenth century Smeerenburg would have been a hive of activity with whales being hauled up the beach to be rendered – ie cut up and the blubber boiled down in vast open-air ovens to make whale-oil. The sites of the blubber ovens were still visible as were various items (for example capstans) from old whaling ships. Quite an eerie place in the freezing gloom!

We picked our way along the beach for about a kilometre finding only the usual Arctic Terns, Common Eiders and Glaucous Gulls. Grey Phalarope and King Eider had been found here on earlier trips though none were around today. We noticed that quite a lot of snow remained here and that the pools were still frozen over, in contrast to Poolepynten the day before. We surmised that it would still be a week or two before summer reached this more northerly latitude and the thaw allowed birds to find clear ground for nesting.

Back on ship we headed north-east along the coast of Amsterdam Oya and took lunch. However, the meal was pleasantly interrupted by the announcement by Tony Marr of a Polar Bear on the shoreline to our port side! Lunch was abandoned (to the bemusement of the staff) and we rushed up to the bridge to see our bear. Tony Marr was in situ with his scope trained on the bear and we took turns to watch the creature making its way slowly along the shore. The captain obligingly took us as close in as he could and slowed the ship to a crawl, giving us excellent views at about four hundred metres. We followed the bear for about ten minutes before it finally slipped into the water and gave us a practical demonstration of Polar Bear swimming technique. As we had previously been told bears are powerful swimmers and it had no trouble in crossing the fjord ahead of us before disappearing into the distance. As it did so I noticed a small back head appear in the water about a hundred metres to our port side. This was our first Ringed Seal, obviously keeping close tabs on its deadly enemy. Even the sun was now beginning to burn off the freezing mist and a few warm rays took the chill off the cold, damp air.

The afternoon saw us land at a well-known Little Auk colony on the island of Fuglesongen. Dire warnings of a difficult (wet) landing, slippery rocks and deep snow drifts limited numbers but for those, like myself, determined to see the spectacle it was worth the effort. We were able to sit just a few yards away from thousands of Little Auks who seemed to take absolutely no notice of us whatsoever. In contrast, hundreds of birds took to the air in panic each time one of the resident Glaucous Gulls appeared overhead before shortly afterwards resuming their occupation of the rocks and ledges.

That evening I decided it was time for a bit of serious whale-watching and as we sailed eastwards along the northern coastline of Spitsbergen a small group of us took up position on the bridge. It had become a very fine evening; the mist and cloud had completely dispersed and brilliant sunshine lit up the snow-clad hills on the shore to our right. The sea was calm and I felt hopeful that something might put in an appearance. And it did! I had only been watching for about twenty minutes before a black, falcate fin broke the surface about three or four hundred metres to starboard. For a moment I wondered if I had imagined it but then it re-appeared, this time revealing a big, black expanse of back and tailstock. I alerted my companions and we watched the animal re-surface perhaps three or four more times before it went on a deep dive and we lost it. It could only be Minke Whale, a species which I learned subsequently was common along this coast.

#### **Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> June**

The fine weather of the previous evening was a distant memory as we woke to a cold, cloudy and very windy morning. The plan this morning was to Zodiac cruise the bird cliffs at Alkefjellet, a site where sheer granite cliffs descended vertically into the sea offering perfect nesting sites for thousands of Brunnich's Guillemots.

The sea was quite rough and even inshore where we were parked white crests were breaking the surface. Boarding the Zodiacs was therefore a tricky operation, the gangway swaying from side to side and the platform at the bottom being washed with water. The Zodiacs themselves were bobbing up and down like corks in a washing machine. Our joy was complete when it started hailing!

But, made of stern stuff, we set forth and took our tour of the cliffs. We first went to the northern limit of the cliff-face where a nameless but nevertheless spectacular glacier reached the sea. Then we worked our way into the wind along the cliffs where thousands upon thousand of Guillemots filled every tiny ledge and crevice. By the time we had worked our way back one of our number had been seasick (the other Zodiacs also took casualties!) and we were all feeling the cold. (That is to say our faces were stinging from the hailstones and our fingers had long since lost all feeling). Our driver, the Tasmanian bird expert Sam, offered us an early return for a cup of tea and, unsurprisingly, no-one demurred.

We sailed east into Wahlenbergfjorden and, in true Arctic fashion, the weather underwent another sudden and spectacular transformation. The wind dropped, the clouds disappeared and brilliant sunshine once more lit up a tranquil scene. The hills surrounding the fjord were barren and snowbound and the fjord itself still full of ice. But what a staggeringly beautiful scene! We went as far up the fjord as the ice allowed, spotting Ringed and Bearded Seals en-route as well as a very distant Polar Bear. Eventually the fast ice was too solid and the captain decided to stop. This was our chance to explore further in the Zodiacs an opportunity which, this time, everyone was eager to take!

Cruising around the fjord, littered with huge ice floes, we spotted Reindeer on the hills and got close views of Bearded Seal. An Ivory Gull flew directly overhead and Black Guillemots seemed to be everywhere. We had intended to cruise for at least a couple of hours but ahead of time we got a radio signal from the captain that we had to return to ship – a breeze had sprung up and the drifting fjord ice was beginning to present a potential hazard. (In principle we could find ourselves “captured” by ice, a fate which might lose us a lot of time and fuel to free ourselves). However, just as we had turned round a big splash about thirty metres to our right attracted our attention and moments later a big male Walrus with impressive tusks surfaced. We had of course previously had protracted views of Walrus on land at Poolepynten but somehow this fleeting glimpse of a Walrus at close range in the water seemed more dramatic.

Back on the ship an interesting rumour was gaining currency – that a dead whale had been found somewhere not too far away and that a large number of Polar Bears was feeding on the carcass. After dinner, the expedition leader, Dutch Wilmott, came clean and admitted it was true. Moreover, we were already sailing at full speed to the GPS location we had been given by the ship which had found it a day or two previously. Dutch warned that we might not be the only lucky recipients of this information and that one or more other cruise ships might already be making their way there. Thus he suggested the immediate abandonment of our erstwhile schedule in favour of rushing to the scene of the action. We could not possibly have had better news and there was great anticipation and excitement.

## Friday 25<sup>th</sup> June

We awoke to find ourselves parked half a kilometre offshore of a small, shallow fjord called Fair Haven, the supposed location of the now famous whale carcass. Already Tony had spotted a Polar Bear onshore with two cubs and, though very distant, we were able to get modest views in his scope. But we wanted close-up views and were itching to get into the Zodiacs and see what Fair Haven had to offer. And soon enough we were bouncing across a choppy sea into the calm, sheltered waters of the appropriately named Fair Haven.

As we rounded the headland into the fjord the masts of the Dutch schooner "Nooderlicht" became visible (a ship we had seen a few days earlier sailing out of Longyearben). Obviously they had heard the news about the dead whale too. But before we had had time to reflect on that our first bear came into view – a nice male asleep on the rocky shoreline barely a hundred metres distant. And as we turned into Fair Haven itself a second bear, another even more impressive looking male, appeared directly ahead standing in the icy water. Then more bears up on the snowy hillside: a mother with cubs, then more and more..... We got about seven or eight before we finally spotted the carcass, or at least what little remained of it. A row of bare pinkish-white vertebrae stood proud of the water, with the tail end wedged into ice and rocks on the shore. The head (or what we presumed to be the head) lay submerged in the water. And yet another Polar Bear stood on top of the carcass pulling greedily at the blubber and sinew not forty metres away.

The big bear we had seen in the water now marched purposefully around the shoreline and hussled the first bear out of the way so that it could feed undisturbed. When it had finished it wandered off to allow its junior rival to continue. Meanwhile, a female bear and cub (who up to now had been waiting patiently up on the hillside) decided that they too might like a bite to eat and began their journey down the slope – easy going for the huge mother but a struggle for the cub which at every step slipped down to its armpits in the snow. They eventually reached the carcass and faced up to the young male. I expected the female to exert caution but to my surprise she charged the male and squared up to it in a dramatic face-to-face confrontation. Faced with much roaring and spitting the young fellow quickly retreated, his face spattered with the female's saliva. Looking humiliated he withdrew and sat down, his submission obvious. The female now climbed down the ice onto the carcass and began feeding, the cub following and copying her actions (though at only about six months old it was not yet weaned and probably took little actual meat). The female glanced round and, clearly feeling that the young male had not withdrawn to a sufficiently respectful distance, gave it a second charge. This time the young male retreated immediately to a full forty metres and, now satisfied with her work, the female resumed feeding. All the while an Ivory Gull was sat only a few feet away, together with a few Glaucous Gulls and Fulmars. The photographers among us got shots of mother and cub *and* Ivory Gull – an improbable shot indeed!

The big male, who had been resting somewhere in the snow on the hillside, now returned for another nibble. Clearly this time the female would have to give way; the big brute would surely be way out of her class. But to our amazement she squared up to the the big boss too, giving him a full charge! He hesitated but more or less held his ground. We watched, spellbound, wondering what the fate of the cub might be. Surely he was in mortal danger if his mother carried on in this reckless fashion? But she skilfully kept bearside of the cub using her body as a shield. The big male wasn't about to be intimidated by this brash behaviour, though at the same time it appeared that he wasn't

particularly looking for a fight. He took a detour around the female and climbed down onto the carcass. Both bears had made their point it seemed and the mother slowly withdrew up the hill, the cub keeping close to her side.

The whole while this drama was going on our six Zodiacs had been slowly arcing round in a circle, allowing each boat in turn to get close to the action. We had been watching the bears for nearly two hours and had witnessed interactions that very few observers would ever see. Our guides, all very experienced Arctic people, unhesitatingly agreed that this was the best and most impressive sighting of Polar Bear they had ever seen. We totted up a tally of around thirteen or fourteen bears (with much coming and going it was impossible to be exact). To see so many bears at once, at such close range and with so much unusual interaction was virtually unprecedented. We had been phenomenally lucky!

With all the Polar Bear we could possibly want safely "in the bag" we decided to do something a little different and head north to see how close we could get to the permanent pack ice. It was impossible to say exactly how far north it might be but a reasonable guess might be three or four hours sailing time. (There are no weather forecasts up here!). And it remained to be seen what we would find when we got there. Perhaps we might be able to sail right up to the ice sheet or perhaps loose sea ice might keep us several kilometres away.

I got myself up to bridge for the ride north, watching the electronic screens for the moment we passed 80 degrees latitude and monitoring the depth changes as we went out beyond the coastal shelf into ocean proper. I was hopeful we might encounter whales at the point where the depth slid away from 200 metres to 700 or 800 metres and so it proved. The drop-off is usually a very fertile marine environment, attracting lots of fish, and at the critical point we duly came across a small pod of Minke Whale. I counted at least two animals though there probably several more. In the open ocean I hoped for big whales, possibly a Bowhead, but we had had enough good fortune for one day and all we saw was empty and increasingly cold and foggy sea.

We began to encounter loose sea ice which gradually became thicker and more hazardous. Eventually the captain decided that we were close enough and stopped. If we wanted to go any further it would have to be in the Zodiacs. It was an eerie scene: swirling fog reduced visibility to a couple of hundred metres but there was no wind and the sea was absolutely flat calm. In all directions there were ice floes and below us a thousand metres of cold Arctic ocean. But the air wasn't especially cold; the ship's instruments read minus one degree, which is quite mild for the Arctic.

And so we set off into the gloom in our Zodiacs to see how much further north we could go. (We were still an estimated 550 miles from the North Pole itself). About a kilometre from the ship the ice got too thick even for the Zodiacs to negotiate and we were forced to give up. We had reached a latitude of eighty degrees, thirty-nine minutes and two seconds north and guessed that we were probably the most northerly civilians on the planet at that moment. (There might have been a Russian or American nuclear submarine beneath the polar icecap!). Ahead of us was an unending expanse of ice, broken and jumbled at first but increasingly solid and permanent as it receded into the distance. Anyone wishing to reach the pole would now have to get out and walk! We did the next best thing and beached the Zodiacs on the best piece of ice we could find. Then we got out and toasted the pack ice with a shot of rum and photographs were taken. I had hoped for Harp Seal up

here on the edge of the permanent ice but apart from a few Fulmars and Black Guillemots there was no sign of life.

The journey southwards was uneventful, though I spent the evening scanning hopefully from the bridge, along with the usual hard core of fellow enthusiasts. The bridge itself is a completely sealed environment, well heated and kept spotlessly clean. Either side is a small area of open air deck from which good views of the sea ahead are possible. The bridge area is also quite high and offers the chance to look down between the waves – ideal for cetacean watching in choppy water. It was common for we whale-watchers to spend perhaps thirty minutes outside on the side decks before coming inside again to warm up. This lack of hardiness obviously amused the Russian crew no end though I observed that they were quick to close the doors to keep out the draught when we carelessly left them ajar!

### **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> June**

Coming down to breakfast I was galled to hear that a pod of Beluga Whale had been sighted just an hour or so after I had gone to bed the previous evening. The lucky observer was one of the American group who had gone up on deck for a smoke. Apparently one of the Russian crew spotted them first and called the guy over to point them out. The smoker, on board for the general Arctic wilderness experience rather than the wildlife, hadn't known what they were and certainly hadn't appreciated the significance of the sighting. I couldn't believe it. The chances of one Beluga sighting weren't great but the chances of a second would be close to zero – or so I thought!

We were now back on the northern coast of Spitsbergen and our immediate target was a sheltered fjord called Liefdefjorden. This had produced Grey Phalarope and King Eider on previous trips and held the possibility of Seals and Bears if enough ice still remained. I was still brooding over the missed Beluga opportunity.

As we waited to board the Zodiacs someone called "Sabine's Gull" and I raised my binoculars just in time to see a light, tern-like gull with a black hood heading away from us across the fjord. Unfortunately few others were quick enough to get onto it and so a much-wanted bird got away unobserved by most of the serious birders in the group.

We split up the Zodiacs into three groups of two, our pair heading into a quiet bay in one corner of the fjord where King Eider had previously been recorded. Several groups of Reindeer were spotted on the surrounding hills but no birdlife apart from the usual gulls and terns. But then, as we started back into the main fjord to explore elsewhere, our driver Noz got the word on the radio that a Beluga had been spotted. Scarcely believing our good fortune I was anxious to know where and whether we could get there in time. It transpired that the Beluga had been seen right at the other side of the fjord about one and a half kilometres away. Noz opened up the throttle and the Zodiac reared up with its nose clean out of the water as it hurtled across the fjord at breakneck speed. We had an agonising wait while we traversed the fjord, made worse as we approached the scene by the news that the Whale had deep-dived and hadn't been spotted for about five minutes. Some way ahead of us the other four Zodiacs were already gathered and I could see the occupants scanning in all directions, obviously not having relocated the Whale.

We slowed down and crawled quietly into position on the end of the line. The fjord was dead calm and a slight mist hung over the scene. All around was scattered loose glacial ice. The atmosphere was surreal but I was sure that we had missed our chance and we would be left admiring only the view. Then, quite suddenly, about two hundred metres ahead, a huge creamy white back broke the still surface and slid gracefully back, leaving a heavy swirl and a vortex behind. We crawled slowly forward our engine almost stalling till we reached about one hundred and fifty metres from the Whale. It surfaced a second and then a third and fourth time in quick succession. I heard a ripple of interest from the other Zodiacs and could see binoculars and cameras now trained as one on a single object. It soon became apparent that we were watching a single adult animal (Beluga normally form pods of twenty or so) and that this was a female as a much smaller dark calf was accompanying her, keeping close to her side as she surfaced. For thirty minutes we watched in awe at this marvellous spectacle. The Beluga had not eluded me after all!

Then, Tony (who was in our Zodiac), announced that he had potted a distant raft of what he thought were King Eider in his scope. (It is of course far from easy using a scope in a Zodiac!). We made the difficult decision to leave the Beluga at least temporarily to check out the King Eiders, particularly as this was a premium species for the birders present and as important to them as the Beluga had been for the mammalists. We got to within one hundred metres before cutting the engine to avoid flushing the ducks. Sixty one King Eider were present, together with about half a dozen Common Eider. Most were drakes and in the pale sunshine made a splendid sight. Everyone was happy now and as a last treat we made our way back to the Beluga, which was still present and performing well, for a final look.

We spent the afternoon on the nearby Woodfjorden where we went ashore to explore an area of recently de-frosted pools. Ruddy Turnstones were around, as were two Purple Sandpipers, a group of four Long-tailed Ducks and a few Snow Buntings. The keener birders among us spotted a Pale-bellied Brent Goose in the distance through their scopes. A Bearded Seal surfaced quite close to us in the fjord but otherwise things were fairly quiet. But we were unconcerned; we had been so successful so far that with a full day still to go we had more or less run out of targets.

Dinner that evening consisted of an open-air barbeque on the aft deck. In keeping with our outrageously good fortune the weather perked up and we enjoyed an evening of radiant, warm sunshine. We headed northwards out of Woodfjorden under an azure sky and flanked by towering snow-covered mountains and sweeping glaciers. Later, taking a celebratory whisky in the bar, we were called hurriedly back on deck to see a pod of three or four Minke Whales about three hundred metres astern. They surfaced three or four times, revealing the white patches on their flippers, before deep-diving and disappearing. This was getting ridiculous!

### **Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> June**

Our last full day saw us heading for the research station at Ny Alesund. But first we took a short Zodiac cruise around the fjord slightly to the north containing a very pretty glacier called Fjortende Julibukte (the 14<sup>th</sup> July). The weather was unseasonably warm, possibly as high as fifteen degrees, and in glorious sunshine we cruised up to the glacier for a closer look. Loose glacial ice floated around us in varying sizes and shapes, the larger chunks serving as roost sites for resting Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls. It was interesting to hear a continuous popping as smaller pieces of ice melted

and released trapped bubbles of air. We were pleased to see several Puffins fly past, as well as a bonus drake King Eider.

Cruising along the shoreline beyond the glacier we found steep sandstone cliffs which were home to many thousands of nesting Brunich's Guillemots and, we were reliably informed, one pair of vagrant Razorbill. Some of the cliffs fell vertically into the sea, prime nesting sites indeed as the ledges there would be completely inaccessible to terrestrial predators. However, some of the cliffs were set back from the water's edge with grassy foothills and scree slopes at their base. I felt hopeful of an Arctic Fox here and, sure enough, we heard on the radio that one of the other Zodiacs had spotted one. It didn't take us long to find him ourselves and we enjoyed great views of him patrolling the cliff base.

We also found several Reindeer and a nice pair of Pink-footed Geese., the latter standing on open ground facing out to sea. Meanwhile the Fox had worked along the cliffs and was approaching the Geese. But the contours of the ground here prevented the Fox from seeing the Geese or vice versa, even though by now they were getting quite close. Suddenly, as the Fox crested a small ridge, he spotted them and stopped in his tracks. He was now only some fifteen metres away but the Geese, still gazing seaward, hadn't seen him. He ducked down and squatted in what little cover he had available to plan his attack. The wind was not in his favour, the ground being too open to attack from downwind. So he crept as close as he could from the Geese's rear before launching an all-or-nothing rush. At the last moment the Geese saw the danger and took off, the Fox's flying leap missing one of them by inches. We continued along the cliffs looking for the infamous Razorbills but to no avail. Instead we found Puffins, Barnacle Geese and many thousands of Brunich's Guillemots, every available inch of ledge space being occupied by nesting birds of one species or another.

That afternoon we made our way into Ny Alesund, home to a small research community of around a hundred people and the world's most northerly Post Office. The cynic in me wondered if a postcard posted and franked here might promptly find its way back to Oslo on the same ship and planes as us, but nevertheless I went through the ritual of writing one.

Ny Alesund has innumerable nesting Arctic Terns which pick nesting sites as close to the houses as possible (in the hope, probably vain, of avoiding predation by Arctic Fox). For the same reason the area around the husky dog kennels is a particularly popular site; the Foxes apparently dread the smell of huskies and won't come anywhere near. Thus we headed straight for the kennels to see if any interesting birds were around. Indeed they were and we quickly found a nice Ivory Gull, several Purple Sandpipers and, of course, lots of Arctic Terns (who greeted us with ferocious aerial attacks). Later, Tony and fellow birder Andrew found what they suspected to be Lesser Yellowlegs though the bird flew off before a definitive identification could be confirmed.

I checked everywhere for Arctic Fox (which I'm told are often to be seen loitering with intent around town). But all I could muster was a nesting Red-throated Diver on a pool near to the quayside together with all the usual avian suspects: Black Guillemot, Common Eider, Kittiwake and so on. The number of apparently unmolested breeding birds led me to believe that Foxes were perhaps not as common here as was claimed.

Back on board we set off for the final leg of the cruise: the semi-circular loop around King Charles Island and onwards into Ijsfjorden and Longyearben. The western coast of King Charles Island is relatively shallow and is warmed by what remains at this latitude of the Gulf Stream. I therefore held

out hope of a last Beluga or Minke – or maybe even a White-beaked Dolphin - but despite a long final vigil on the bridge it wasn't to be.

### **Monday 28<sup>th</sup> June**

A pre-breakfast turn on deck gave us a last look at Isfjorden and before long the small town of Longyearbjen came into view. Our cruise had run its course.

With a few hours to kill before the flight back to Tromso and Oslo we undertook some gentle birding along the waterfront, accounting for Long-tailed Duck, Dunlin and yet another Ivory Gull. Longyearben has a husky kennel and here there is a well-known breeding site for Common Eider, the ducks choosing the site for its Fox-free credentials, as in Ny Alesund. Our final sighting of significance, on the walk back into town, was the rather gruesome one of an Arctic Skua devouring an unlucky Eider chick.

Then it was time for the long flight home, though a window seat afforded fantastic aerial views of the Spitsbergen snowscape and we passed over innumerable mountains, glaciers and tarns of ultramarine blue before leaving the archipelago behind and setting forth across the cloudy Barents Sea.



Redwing	Turdus Iliacus	*								
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus Trochilus	h								
Black-billed Magpie	Pica Pica	*								
Rook	Corvus Frugilegus	*								
Jackdaw	Corvus Monedula	*								
Chaffinch	Fringilla Coelebs	*								
Yellowhammer	Emberiza Citrinella	*								
Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax Nivalis		*	*	*			*	*	*

Total species recorded (Svalbard) = 28

Total species recorded (overall) = 39