



## **North Atlantic Odyssey and the Arctic: From the Netherlands to Svalbard and Varanger area**

*Valentin Moser, Ruben Vernieuwe, Inge Heremans, Saul Dewulf, Daan Dekeukeleire*

valentinmoser@hotmail.com

*End of May to mid-June 2024, we spend three weeks exploring the North of Europe. For the first part of the trip, we did a cruise with Oceanwide Expeditions starting from Vlissingen in the Netherlands towards Svalbard via Aberdeen, Foula (Shetland Islands), Jan Mayen and the pack ice (11 days), followed by a stay in Longyearbyen (3 days) and Tromsø to Varanger area (7 days). We focused on mammals (33 species) and a bit less on birds (168 species). Overall, we were lucky with sightings and good observation conditions for the first part of the cruise and in Longyearbyen again. The trip highlights include Polar Bear, Bowhead Whale, Walrus and Beluga, with 15 cetacean species. This report has a section on logistics and preparations, followed by an extensive trip report and a species list.*

### **Logistics and Preparations**

#### **Part 1: Cruise from Vlissingen to Svalbard**

For some of us, this trip had been high on the wishlist, and we were disappointed when cabins offered by Oceanwide Expeditions were booked out already early in the fall. Especially the cheapest cabins of four go quickly. We then learned that Inezia (<https://ineziatours.nl/>) reserved quite many places and offered this trip as well, so we booked through them. The emails were mostly in Dutch, but this was no problem with Google Translate, and the guides were happy to speak English. Maybe it's still good to team up with some Dutch-speaking friends if you book through Inezia. Most likely, Inezia will continue to reserve some places, so make sure you check their website. Ship choice can be important: Plancius (the ship we were on) is rather quiet, apparently important for shy species such as Bowhead Whale.

Our team/cabin was the most motivated to spot wildlife, along with the excellent Inezia guides and a few others. We were on deck as often as possible, shortening/skipping lectures/food when possible. Of the 107 passengers (+ 47 crew), only a small minority was on deck at a given time, and sometimes it was our small group alone. Guides from Oceanwide were often missing from the deck. This leads us to the most important advice for this part of the trip: Book early and fill some cabins with like-minded people! Besides having more people to chat with during these long hours, you will see more. It was obvious – the more eyes, the more we saw, and you cannot rely on Oceanwide crew to spot for you!

In our experience, the upper deck is the best spot to be, and thus, we spend most of our time there. Communication between the left and right parts of the bridge where we were (mostly) allowed to stand was, at times, difficult, and we were glad to have some walky-talkies. Take some, and it's also great if someone wants to warm up a bit or is napping when the Orcas are coming 😊. Take some extra to equip the keenest spotters as well! Also recommended are spotting scopes. In calm conditions, we could use them well; we also used them to scan the pack ice and in the fjords for bears.

Study the sea map on the bridge. Underwater ridges (I'm not sure to what depth is still relevant, but surely if going up to the first few hundred meters below the surface) are great areas. In open, deep water, some species still occur, but the frequency of sightings was smaller. At times, we timed our naps/food breaks in accordance with promising areas on the map. The captain and officers were also mostly happy to tell us when we would cross the next promising area.

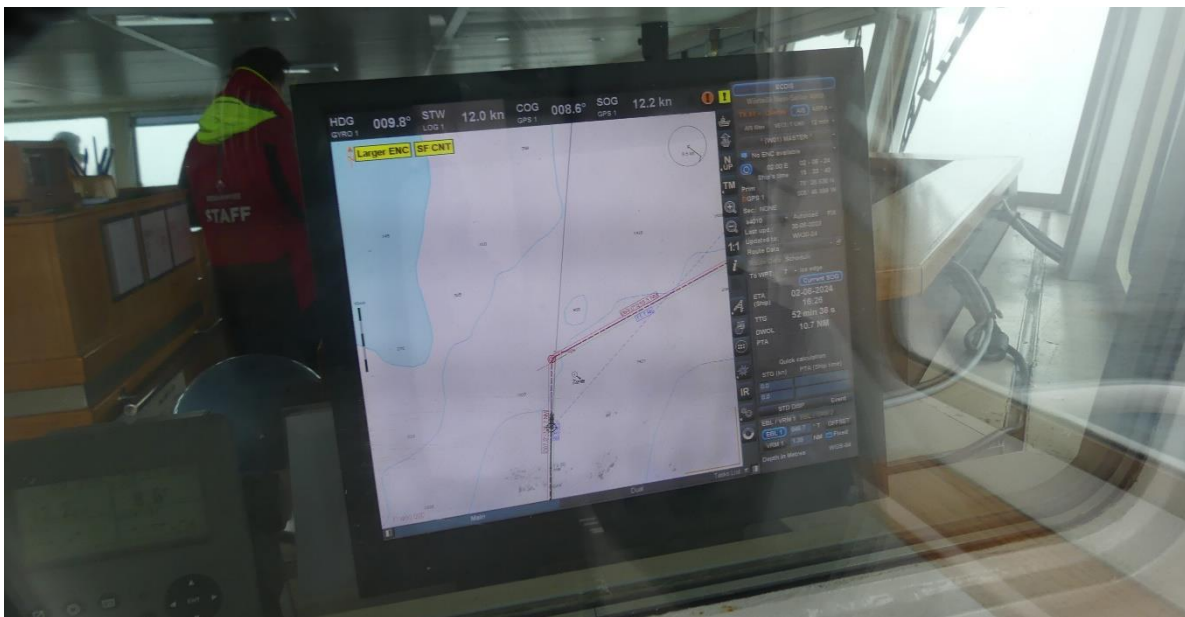


Image 1 Sea maps. Worth to check to see when the boat crosses good areas ©Valentin Moser

There is some good, specialized literature for marine mammals. We had Mark Carwardine "Handbook of Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises" and "Whales, Dolphins and Seals - A field guide to the marine mammals of the world" (Hadoram Shirihi, Brett Jarrett) on deck, and later picked up "Europe's Sea Mammals Including the Azores, Madeira, the Canary Islands and Cape Verde - A field guide to the whales, dolphins, porpoises and seals" (Robert Still, Hugh Harrop, Luis Dias, Tim Stenton), probably the best book for this region!

## Part 2 Longyearbyen and surroundings

The biggest limitation is Polar Bear Safety. Outside the Polar Bear Safe Zone, you are required to stay close to a car, be armed yourself or have an armed guide. Although we saw people going a bit further (for example, visiting the Coal Harbor with the Walrus haulout), it is not recommended. We did our (birding) excursions with Inezia and booked a hike and some boat tours beforehand. On days with big cruise ship landings, activities can be fully booked quickly!

## Part 3 Varanger, Norway and Ivalo, Finland

We drove from and back to Tromsø. Mammal target species were few. We mainly did birding and hoped for a lucky sighting of mammals, particularly rodents (1x), with hopes for lemmings (none).

We generally camped without problems. Mosquitos were usually fine, but beware of Rustic Bunting habitat (swampy forests). Friends provided spots for the birds (thank you!), but this is a mammal report 😊 Feel free to contact us for information. We saw most target species but the Gyrfalcon, whose most famous nest in Kongsfjord was poached last year...

### **General remark**

We had a good thermal with us, but barely used it. Many of the arctic animals are very well insulated and barely visible, as well as distances too big, so scanning by eye and binoculars is better. Snow hare and the Vole were visible though.



*Image 2 Lemming winter nest. Search these as an indication of recent lemming activity @Josef Senn – thank you!*

### **Detailed trip report**

#### **Part 1: Cruise from Vlissingen to Svalbard**

Valentin took the train from Switzerland and arrived a bit earlier. From his accommodation in Westkapelle, he observed Common Pipistrelle. We then boarded and left the Vlissingen harbor. This would be a good spot for seals (none were seen; check the banks) and Harbour Porpoises (one was seen very briefly).

We were then out on the North Sea for a full day, and except for another very brief sighting (1-2 persons) of a Harbour Porpoise and a few Grey Seals, we saw nothing. It was exciting to be on deck, but it was also a great stretch to prepare the equipment and get some sleep!

Landing in Aberdeen, we had a brief encounter with a Minke Whale, followed by many sightings of Bottlenose Dolphins in and around the port entrance. It seems to be a good spot for this species. The Aberdeen land trip added Grey Seal, Harbour Seal, Rabbit, and Roe Deer to the species list.



*Image 3 Grey Seal observed during the landing in Aberdeen ©Valentin Moser*

We left towards Shetland, with the promise of better Cetacean waters around these islands. The next day started very calm with no mammal sightings of note. We then landed on Rabbit-and Sheep-rich Foula with some Harbour seals in the – well harbour. We met a local who told us that the most frequent cetacean species are Risso’s Dolphin, Minke Whale, Humpback Whale and Orcas. That was extra motivation for a little seawatch, and indeed, we picked up on a pod of Risso’s Dolphins! It is highly advised to take a scope to the island because they were so far, we wouldn’t have picked them up using binoculars alone. Later, we tried to spot them from the boat with no luck but were marvelling at the bird cliffs with thousands of Gannets and other seabirds.



*Image 4 Seawatching from La Fouly ©Daan Dekeukeleire*

We then left for two sea days towards the island of Jan Mayen. In the evening, we had a Minke Whale in the last light. The next morning, we started early as we saw some promising underwater ridges on the map. Indeed, we were in for a great morning and an excellent day! The day started with two Minke Whales, then we saw some distant dolphins. We turned, and it turned out to be a pod of Atlantic White-sided Dolphins, associated with many Long-finned Pilot Whales. Quite a sight with both species around the boat. The quickest breakfast eaters were back on the deck for a pod of Sowerby’s Beaked Whales! The day continued with more Pilot Whales, including a pod with a Humpback whale. We missed a White-beaked Dolphin seen shortly by others and finished the day with two sightings of large whales, where one was a Sei Whale for sure.



*Image 5 Surrounded by whales ©Inge Heremans*

We slept a bit longer the next day, regretting it immediately when the expedition leader announced at the morning call that Northern Bottlenose Whales had been seen... We did not have the best timing this day because we were sleeping again when “Orca, Orca” came through the walkie-talkies. There was short chaos in the room with Ruben jumping on Inge's head, but we got to see the Orcas long and well: a pod of nine individuals hunting together. What a sight! The day ended calmly.



*Image 6 Orcas in the North Atlantic ©Valentin Moser*

We arrived early in the morning in the Jan Mayen area, a good place for the big whales. Indeed, we had some big blows before and after leaving the island but were unlucky as they were all quite distant and only 1-2 times seen. The landing on Jan Mayen had to be cancelled due to the swell going toward the beach we were supposed to land. With still optimal weather, we continued North, and soon, the Northern Bottlenose Whales started to appear. Until the evening, we observed 5 different small pods and one White-beaked Dolphin seen by a few. We also had the first seals that mostly dove quickly. Well, one group was not quick enough for Ruben, he got some pics: Hooded Seals.

We should have stayed on deck longer: The next day was foggy, foggy, foggy. Ruben was quick enough (again!) to snap a picture of a close seal: A Hooded! Other than that, we even started to get excited about birds... Unfortunately, the pack ice was also foggy, and it was starting to be a really long day. Only after dinner, with many people heading to bed, conditions started to improve and the fog to thin out. What followed were three amazing hours at the pack ice: Dozens of Harp seals, swimming dolphin-like all around the boat, all paired with the beauty of the ice and anticipation of one of the "big ones" made some excited faces on deck. Past midnight people started heading to bed, as we started to follow the edge of the pack ice with more distant views, planning to head for more stable ice to increase chances for Polar Bear. Valentin stayed awake and was rewarded with the 2<sup>nd</sup> and last Ivory Gull of the trip following the boat at 2:30 am, just about when the fog started to come in again.



*Image 7 Harp Seal at the Pack Ice. They can have a bit of a big nose as well, and from a distance, can be confused for Hooded, at least if you really want to see Hooded... @Valentin Moser*

The next morning, we realized that the ice must have been quite different to the crew's expectations, as we were mostly sailing west and east during the night (day) and not north. We were not going to reach the better pack ice for bears, we were still further from Svalbard than expected, and worse, the edge of a big storm would start to hit us earlier in the afternoon. Additionally, we had foggy conditions with changing visibility throughout the day. We were doing our best with increasing swell and wind, taking shifts at the scope, scanning the ice as far as the fog would allow. Inge saw multiple blows in a distant patch of open water between the drift ice, but just a moment later, it became foggier, and none of the others could see this (blows between the ice are typical for bowhead whales). Half an hour later, the ship's doctor Bastiaan (doing more scanning than some of the Oceanwide crew, what a legend) saved the day by spotting a Bowhead whale! We got some short but decent views. Later, our team found a second one. The ship is sailing close to the ice, with many people watching it. However, as the Inezia guides Eric and Willem told us, the whales are on the other side of the open sea, and usually, this one is neglected. For the second whale, this was the case. Often, it was the hard-core watchers taking the windy and boring sides. With the storm increasing to Beaufort 8, the amount of people on deck decreased. While the experience of stormy weather was "nice", conditions for wildlife were not great on this day. We scanned over 100 nautical miles of pack ice, and our team had not even a single seal all day long (one sighting by others), with wildlife probably retreating into the safety of the ice. We were glad to enjoy two brief sightings of Bowhead whales at least.



*Image 8 Scanning the Ice and the sea - a scope can be useful @Daan Dekeukeleire (left), Ruben Vernieuwe (right)*

The day after we had mostly a sea day towards Svalbard ending the day with a short transect along the continental shelf and visiting a fjord. Before the transect, we observed more Northern Bottlenose Whales. The transect was disappointing – we had some nice observations of White-beaked Dolphins and a larger whale that was probably a Sei Whale, but not much else in an area where in previous years they did not stop anymore for some of the whales because they had seen so many. Maybe with the late spring, the whales had not arrived yet, but wind up to Beaufort 8 (with difficult, but better

swell than the day before) did not help either. The fjord was nice with the first Reindeers and some Arctic Foxes. Unfortunately, we ran out of time and could not go all the way to the ice edge, where the chance for some seals would have been better.

The next day we landed close to a Walrus colony at Poolepynten and did a Zodiac cruise near a glacier in the Ymerbukta fjord. When approaching the Walrus colony, we were already worried, as we saw no Walrus from a distance. There were indeed only few, probably because of the storm the night before. We would not have to worry about it in general, as Walrus proved to be much more common around Longyearbyen than anticipated, with multiple sightings and good chances also scanning from shore. The Zodiac cruise focused on birds with some very distant views of Bearded seals, as well as close Walrus and some a seal, which was apparently a Harbour seal (there is a growing population on Svalbard). In 2022, they had a polar bear here, but we were not so lucky (yet). The next day we landed in Longyearbyen.

Overall, the whole cruise was a great experience with unusually calm conditions in the North Sea, a fantastic day between Shetlands and Jan Mayen with 6-7 cetacean species and some amazing hours in the pack ice. Our cruise was above average with the species list, but below average with quality of observations. Particularly, big whale sightings were more numerous in some years with close observations. In part, we were unlucky with big blows only far away, both around Jan Mayen and Svalbard, partly they seemed to not just be there this year in the same number, maybe a result of a late spring. The first part was above average compared with previous trips, with often very good Cetacean watching conditions, resulting in Beaked Whales and other species observed on few trips (Orca, Risso's Dolphin). The second part of the cruise from Jan Mayen was a bit disappointing compared to previous trips with stormy weather and fog, as well as overall few wildlife sightings and fewer quality observations. We also saw only one of the 4 big BBBB's (Bowhead whale, but no Blue Whale, Beluga or Bear).

## **Part 2 Longyearbyen and surroundings**

With 3 of the 4 BBBB's still missing (and all still possible), we were glad to have 3 extra nights in Longyearbyen. Reindeer are everywhere and close too. We did quite some birding, hoping to pick up a closer Arctic Fox, which we eventually did at the Little Auk colony (78.240423, 15.349773), with another seen across the Fjord while scanning for Polar Bear. You need a car to get to outside of town, including the Little Auk colony, as it is outside of the "Polar Bear safe zone". However, other people saw Arctic Fox inside the zone, for example, near the Coal Miner Cabins. Apparently, the evening is better with fewer people around. In the Coal Harbor, some Walruses were lying on the beach (78.245674, 15.553604), being approached (too) close by people. Amazing sight, but please keep your distance! They have been regular for a few years but not always there. We did see some more Walrus randomly in the water around town or during the cruises.





*Image 9 Arctic fox habitat. Loose rockfall on medium slope, where Little Auks are nesting © Ruben Vernieuwe*

If you want to maximize chances for the three BBB's (no Bowhead whale anymore), take cruises. We did a Glacier & wildlife cruise (6h) followed by "Captain's favourite" (4h) on the same day (both with the MV Bard by Hurtigruten). Steep prizes, but great chances for Polar Bear and Beluga. On the Glacier & Wildlife Cruise, we made great observations of a group of Beluga near Pyramiden/Billefjorden. These are apparently quite often seen; the guides were not in a hurry when we pointed them out 😊. They are mostly found around the glaciers, but they see them also from other places (including near the airport of Longyearbyen). Apart from Beluga, we had some distant Bearded Seals and Ringed Seal at the glacier. During the trip back, Valentin shouted 'BEAR', and we got the captain to turn around. Most people on board missed the animal, but some got a few second glimpses of this magnificent animal.



*Image 10 Beluga in the Ice ©Valentin Moser*

In the afternoon, we took the shorter Captain's favourite, which does not visit the far away glaciers due to time, so there is a lot less chance for seals and Beluga! With the Captain's favourite, we returned to the Polar Bear and refound it for some longer-scope views and new guests. The guides told us they see polar bears around 10% of the trips, but you can increase your chance a lot with scanning. Most guests of these cruises didn't look for wildlife, and the staff had a lot of work (even though they were actively scanning whenever they could, they would have missed the bear).



*Image 11 Polar bear and Polar bear compared with Reindeer from a big distance ©Valentin Moser*

We also did a hike with Svalbard Wildlife Expeditions (<https://www.wildlife.no/en>) to the “bird colony” (Fuglefjella) with good chance for Arctic Fox. Standing in the Little Auk colony was amazing, but no Fox, or so we thought... It turns out we heard some, but we only learned about the call later. The guides were not particularly knowledgeable about natural history and did not recognize the call. Time on the top was short, although potentially very good for seawatching. In hindsight, the guiding was average (also some other stuff less ideal, including unsafe path choice), but you need “a guy with a gun” to get the job done 😊. It was great for the birds and to get a better look at the habitat with many interesting plants along the way, as well as potentially good for Arctic Fox and seawatching from the top.



*Image 12 Reindeer are easy to observe and everywhere ©Valentin Moser*

### Part 3 Varanger, Norway and Ivalo, Finland

We did some seawatching for marine mammals. Seals were regularly seen when scanning the ocean, mostly Grey Harbour seal we saw at Laksev and a big colony at the Tana River Mouth (70.52517, 28.432368). Harbour Porpoise we saw from Vardø. The first Minke Whale was from Kiberg with the best place being Hornøya. This bird island was great in general, the waterscape full of blows. We observed Humpback, Minke, and Fin Whales, mostly with the scope. In general, also on the cruise, sightings of Minke Whales were always short. As we then had seen all realistic target species on the cruise or here, we did not do much more seawatching and focused on land. A rib boat whale watching tour is offered locally, which can be booked in the tourism center.

Snow hare is common, with sightings almost every day, sometimes from the car, sometimes while walking, and particularly near bushes/forest edges. The best place is the peninsula in front of Vadsø, where we saw several hares in a targeted search.



Image 13 Snow Hare on the peninsula in front of Vadsø ©Valentin Moser

We saw one rodent: Root Vole *Microtus oeconomus* near Vardø under some shrubs, found by movement and subsequently with the thermal. I think with a bit more time and patience in areas with rodent activity (tunnels, feeding paths) we could have seen more. Watch out for Lemming winter nests! We saw one early on, but then never again.

The Stoat was a chance encounter along the road, same with Red Fox. Arctic Fox apparently had a good season and was seen recently near Vardø. Eurasian Elks were visible with the scope from the bird hide (68.734792, 27.70123), as well as chance encounters in similar habitat (swampy lake edge), where we also saw a Roe Deer (68.664454, 27.738634).



Image 14 Honorary mammal of the trip: Ivory Gull, because of it's relationship with Polar Bear and ability to make every birder jealous ©Valentin Moser

### **Mammals species list**

Below are the sightings we had. Brackets () indicate the total number, including groups not seen by our team. Of course, some of these sightings are only by part of the team as well – it can be very quick, with one or two fins / blows only.

Root Vole <i>Microtus oeconomus</i>	1x Varanger (Vardø)
Snow Hare	4 x Varanger, 2 x Finland
European Rabbit	Aberdeen, Foula
Common Pipistrelle	Vlissingen
Arctic Fox	1 x cruise, 2 x Svalbard (Longyearbyen)
Red Fox	1 x Finland
Polar Bear	1 x Svalbard (Billefjorden)
Stoat	1x en route Tromsø area
Walrus	Several cruise + Longyearbyen
Hooded Seal	1-2 x cruise
Bearded Seal	1 x cruise, 1 x Svalbard (Billefjorden)
Grey Seal	3 x cruise, Aberdeen, 5 x Varanger
Harp Seal	Several cruise
Harbour Seal	Foula, Aberdeen, (Cruise), 2 x Varanger
Ringed Seal	1 x Svalbard (Billefjorden)
Eurasian Elk	3 x Finland
European Roe	Aberdeen, 1 x Varanger
Reindeer	Abundant boat + Svalbard (Longyearbyen, Billefjorden)
Bowhead	2 x cruise
Common Minke Whale	3 x cruise, 2x Varanger (Kiberg, Hornøya)
Sei Whale	1-2 x cruise
Fin Whale	1x Varanger (several from Hornøya)
Humpback Whale	1 x cruise, 1 x Varanger (several from Hornøya)
Long-finned Pilot Whale	3 x cruise including 2 massive groups
Risso's Dolphin	Foula
Atlantic White-sided Dolphin	1 x cruise
White-beaked Dolphin	2 (3) x cruise
Killer Whale	1 x cruise
Bottlenose Dolphin	1 x cruise
Beluga	1 x Svalbard (Billefjorden)
Harbour Porpoise	2 x cruise, 1x Varanger (Vadsø)
Northern Bottlenose Whale	6 (7) x cruise
Sowerby's Beaked Whale	1 - 2 x cruise

### **Link to sightings**

Below are the links to the logged sightings. Inge has the most complete list of mammals. Daan has many birds as well. Valentin's observations have pictures.

Link to the observations from Inge on observation.org (total trip): [Link](#)

Link to the observation from Valentin on iNaturalist (total trip): [Link](#)

Link to the observations from Daan on observation.org (Vlissingen up and including Varanger): [Link](#)