



Field Guides Tour Report

THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2017

Jun 19, 2017 to Jun 29, 2017

John Coons

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A trio of Dovekies, just a few of the thousands present, perched quite near at the nesting colony in Magdalenafjord. Photo by participant Ed Harper.

Our expedition to the High Arctic was fantastic in so many respects. The abundance of birdlife, Polar Bears, whales, walrus and constant great scenery made for an unforgettable trip. The weather could not have been better from a comfort standpoint as it was sunny on most days with little wind making it downright balmy. We had some clouds the last couple of days which is actually better for bird activity. This year there was a lot of ice along the north coast of Spitsbergen. We were told that Svalbard was generally ice free two weeks earlier but northeast winds had brought a lot of ice down which made progress slow and it prevented a couple of landings that we probably would have made. The ice, however, was good for the bears as it extended their ability to hunt for seals from the ice.

A few of the many highlights included visiting the walrus colony on our first full day on the ship, where we got closer to walrus than most people do as a pair of King Eiders swam off the spit of land, a great experience with our Polar Bear that finally arose from its slumber when a Minke Whale surfaced nearby, our brief encounter with an Ivory Gull, the quintessential arctic bird, getting right into a Dovekie colony in lovely Magdalenafjorden, having two Blue Whales swimming off the bow for several minutes, and finding a Rock Ptarmigan on the last day. We also found a couple of local rarities, a Black-headed Gull in Longyearbyen and an Iceland Gull amongst the ice floes. We made it as far north as 80° 10' N latitude, only 660 miles from the north pole.

Thanks to all of you for all the great spotting along the way and the good humor and company. Also, thanks to all of the expedition staff, hotel and dining room folks and the crew for making the trip so enjoyable. I look forward to seeing you again which will likely be a site where the sun sets.

John

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

PINK-FOOTED GOOSE (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – After dinner on the first night, a few of us had nice looks at a pair on the tundra in Longyearbyen.

It has been determined that most of the Svalbard population winters in Scotland

BARNACLE GOOSE (*Branta leucopsis*) – There were several pairs including many with goslings in Longyearbyen. We also saw a few pairs here and there at some of our landings at Engelsbukta and Magdalenafjorden. In the 1950's the population of these was under 1000 but they have come back nicely.

KING EIDER (*Somateria spectabilis*) – Several of us saw a brilliant male along the coastline in Longyearbyen. Then we had a pair just off the spit at the Walrus site at Sarstangen.

COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN) (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – We saw good numbers around Longyearbyen and more at our landings in Spitsbergen. Interestingly, these birds usually nest alone but around the dog town in Longyearbyen they nest communally. This is probably because they are secure from predation by foxes near the dogs, but we did see our first Arctic Fox near the dogs enclosure.

LONG-TAILED DUCK (*Clangula hyemalis*) – Since we missed a few landings because of the ice we probably saw fewer of these than we expected. There were a few off the coast in Longyearbyen and some of us saw a pair or two on the lake below the airport.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

ROCK PTARMIGAN (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – It was a true surprise to see a male perched atop one of the taller buildings at the abandoned Russian coal mining site at Colesbukta. It seemed very content there but eventually flew down to the tundra. This is the only Svalbard bird to remain during the winter.

Gaviidae (Loons)

RED-THROATED LOON (*Gavia stellata*) – Our only sightings were in the bay off the coast of Longyearbyen. One individual showed well enough to see the red on the throat.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS) (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – This was one of the species we saw everyday of the trip. There were always a few sailing about the ship. The Svalbard population is estimated at over one million individuals.

Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

COMMON RINGED PLOVER (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – These birds seemed to still be arriving, as we saw no evidence of breeding from the few we saw. There were a few in the Longyearbyen area and I believe a few folks saw one on the beach at Engelsbukta.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

DUNLIN (*Calidris alpina*) – In the Longyearbyen area we saw a few individuals, some of which were engaged in full courtship with the male strutting around behind a female and giving their flight song. On our last full day we saw them again at Colesbukta. The Isfjorden area is the only place I have seen this species on Svalbard.

PURPLE SANDPIPER (*Calidris maritima*) – Several were seen in the area around Longyearbyen and a few more on the beaches at various landings. There were about six individuals at Sarstangen. Like the plovers, these seemed to have just arrived and were scouting out territories and we only heard a few in display.

Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

GREAT SKUA (*Stercorarius skua*) – We ended up with a handful of sightings with a few of these coming while we cruised through the ice. Our first was at Sarstangen where an individual came in to investigate us and the walrus. We also saw an individual perched on a small island in Fuglefjorden.

POMARINE JAEGER (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) – An adult flew past the ship on our return to the ice pack and a few of us got on to it. I wish I had. This is a quite uncommon bird for Svalbard.

PARASITIC JAEGER (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – We saw several of these "Arctic Skuas" and it was recorded on each day. On Sarstangen we had a dark morph individual which seems to occur with about one in twenty in my experience. From the ship we saw a few chasing kittiwakes about until they dropped their fish. There was also an aggressive pair at the edge of Longyearbyen that seemed to be at a nest.

LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – This is certainly the very long-tailed bird that flew past while we were hiking at Colesbukta. Unfortunately, I was a short distance away and didn't hear about it until it had passed. About five years ago there was only one known nest site on Svalbard.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

DOVEKIE (*Alle alle*) – Another bird that was seen everyday once we boarded the ship. There were individuals and small and fair-sized groups visible every few minutes. One of the trip highlights was going to the nesting colony at Alkekongen in Magdalenafjorden. We were able to walk up to the base of the talus slope and watch the free-wheeling flocks spiraling against the cliff face. After we settled in, some of the closer "Little Auks" got a bit used to us and perched quite closely...until a Glaucous Gull flew over and wreaked havoc. We did not see any sign of the birds dropping into the rocks on the slope so they must not have started nesting yet. Interestingly, we did see about 80 individuals loafing on a snowbank well above us. Most birders do not get to see this species so well and in its breeding plumage.

THICK-BILLED MURRE (*Uria lomvia*) – We certainly saw more individuals of this species than any other bird, as within any two minute seawatch from the ship one could see 100+ individuals. We were early in the nesting cycle and we never made it to a breeding cliff but we still saw thousands and thousands. This species was known as Brunnich's Guillemot to the Europeans on the ship.

BLACK GUILLEMOT (MANDTII) (*Cephus grylle mandtii*) – Another bird we saw everyday and we got a few close views from the ship as well as during the zodiac ride where the bright red feet could be seen.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN (*Fratercula arctica*) – While never a common bird, we saw several each day that were flying past the ship or floating next to Ortelius. Those that took the zodiac ride with Rinie had a close view of one right next to their craft. This is always a favorite.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE (*Rissa tridactyla*) – We saw thousands of these dainty gulls overall with many moving with the ship through the pack ice as we uncovered small fish from pushing ice floes.

IVORY GULL (*Pagophila eburnea*) – We had good but brief views of one in the ice as we approached one of the Polar Bears. It landed on the ice next to the ship before flying to the stern and coursing back and forth for a few minutes. Later that same day we had another fly past the ship. This species

has been in decline for many years and we learned its reproduction has been severely affected by pollutants accumulating in the fat of seals, the main source of food for these great birds.

BLACK-HEADED GULL (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – It was a bit of a surprise to find this out-of-range gull along the coastline in Longyearbyen. We saw it our first afternoon and again the next morning.

ICELAND GULL (*Larus glaucooides*) – Although, by name, a species that should be all over Svalbard, it is actually quite uncommon as they breed further south. We saw what was likely a first summer individual in the pack ice. Its slightly smaller size, short black bill, and rounded headed were the ID points. Immature gulls usually do not make it this far north as there is no chance of breeding and competing for food with all those experienced adults makes it less profitable.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Seen in fair numbers daily, this species is the major avian predator in Svalbard as there are no Gyrfalcons or Peregrines. This was quite evident by the flocks of excitable Dovekies that would fly off the slope each time a Glaucous Gull passed flew nearby.

ARCTIC TERN (*Sterna paradisaea*) – We saw these every day and they appeared to be just setting up their nesting activity in the Longyearbyen area, as they seemed to be paired up but were not aggressively defending nest sites by diving at every passerby.

Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

SNOW BUNTING (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – We saw several of these around Longyearbyen and they were at all of the landings we made. Their very pleasant song was quite evident on shore.

MAMMALS

COMMON MINKE WHALE (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – We had a few good looks at this smallish baleen whale. The one that surfaced between the ice floes appeared to be what aroused our Polar Bear and finally caused it to stir and get up.

FIN WHALE (*Balaenoptera physalus*) – There were two individuals that we encountered while staying with our Blue Whales. These are, of course, smaller than Blue Whales with a longer dorsal fin. This is the second largest of the whales and is referred to as the "greyhound of the sea" for its slim body and fast swimming ability.

BLUE WHALE (*Balaenoptera musculus*) – We had a great time with two of these giants after our return to the ice. They both appeared to be about the same size. Earlier in the trip there were two others that escaped us. This is the largest animal to have ever lived on earth. Yip! Yip! Yip!

ARCTIC FOX (*Alopex lagopus*) – On our morning in Longyearbyen we saw one along the shoreline that ended up running way up the mountain side. Then, on our last day on Ortelius we made a landing at Colesbukta and saw a female with three quite cute pups that were occasionally wrestling on the ground. As we made a wide arc around the family the female appeared right in front of us, as if she was leading us away. It is hard to imagine a predator this slight making it through a dark high arctic winter.

POLAR BEAR (*Ursus maritimus*) – We had a great experience with two bears and we spotted a third one at a distance. The first one was strolling along on the ice away from us and after getting as close as possible we watched its backend heading further onto the ice. Our next bear was spotted lying on the ice and we quietly approached in the ship. This bear was content to simply lie on the ice for quite awhile. After watching it for nearly two hours a Minke Whale surfaced nearby and the bear got up and decided to investigate us. It came quite close to the ship and at least a few photos were taken. Both of these were male bears. It is so great to see this magnificent mammal on its home turf.

WALRUS (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – Another great experience was visiting the walrus colony at Sarstangen. There was a group of at least 75 male walruses on the beach with several more swimming just offshore. Some of these came in quite close to investigate our group. A few of those on the beach had huge tusks and were obviously the beach masters. This is a mammal that is rarely seen this well in the wild.

HARBOR SEAL (*Phoca vitulina*) – A couple of groups of these social seals were seen at Engelsbukta.

RINGED SEAL (*Phoca hispida*) – These were certainly the smaller seals that were lying about on the ice at a distance. I believe Bart saw at least a couple where the white markings could be seen well. This is the main food source for Polar Bears in much of their range and bears need a minimum of about 48-50 individuals to make it through the year.

HARP SEAL (*Phoca groenlandica*) – We saw a few in the broken pack ice. These seals have the tendency to rise much higher out of the water when they surface, showing their heads and shoulders much better than in other seals.

BEARDED SEAL (*Erignathus barbatus*) – This good-sized species afforded our best views of any of the seals. The long whiskers are quite noticeable. We found a few hauled out on ice floes and quite content to remain there as our ship stopped nearby or the zodiac came in for a look. We learned that one Bearded Seal is equivalent to about four to six Ringed Seals in terms of nutritional value to a Polar Bear.

CARIBOU ("REINDEER") (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*) – We had good sightings of these around Longyearbyen, at Engelsbukta, and Colesbukta. This subspecies is endemic to the archipelago and known as Svalbard Reindeer. It is the same species that is called Caribou in Canada but has shorter legs and is smaller bodied than those found elsewhere.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Totals for the tour: 26 bird taxa and 11 mammal taxa