



*Field Guides Tour Report*

**The Norwegian Arctic: Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2018**

Jun 20, 2018 to Jun 30, 2018

John Coons

*For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).*



*Our zodiac cruise along the nesting cliffs at Alkefjellet gave us the opportunity to enjoy some sculptures of bits of melting icebergs as well as the nesting birds. Photo by participant Bob Leppard.*

We enjoyed a marvelous week of birding and mammaling in the High Arctic aboard the Plancius. Except for some fog that prevented a landing or two, and a couple of light drizzles, we had great weather for birding; cloudy skies make spotting things much easier. I was told early on there was not much ice around Spitsbergen and the pack ice was slushy and much further north than it has been in recent memory at this time of year. Despite this, we did very well with wildlife and the lack of ice may have helped us find the large pod of Belugas.

Our birding started the afternoon we arrived in Longyearbyen as we walked from town along the coast road to the dog town where the sled dogs are housed. We got a good start on the birding here, and we found a couple of birds we did not see again. A close fly-by of an adult Pomarine Jaeger was a surprise before we saw brilliantly colored Red Phalaropes, a single Dunlin, several Purple Sandpipers, a handful of Common Ringed Plovers, Common Eiders, a pair of Northern Pintail, and an all-white Barnacle Goose. We birded again the next morning before boarding our ship in the late afternoon. Over the next seven days we explored bays, fjords, straits, small islands, beaches, tundra and glaciers. We were fortunate to encounter a fair amount of sea ice just south of the Hinlopen Strait, and this is where we found three adult Polar Bears at a seal carcass, with four Ivory Gulls waiting for scraps. What great mental images to have for the rest of our lives! Also in the ice we were visited by a herd of Walrus that seemed to be very inquisitive as they bobbed up and down right next to the ship.

Another highlight was our visit to the Dovekie colony at Fuglesangen. After our first attempt was fogged out, Michael, our EL, got us back for a nice visit. Very few birders get to see this many "Little Auks", and it is a thrill to be sitting on the rocks and have them fly just a few meters overhead. Atlantic Puffins were seen daily from the ship, and we saw some closer ones on the cliffs and in the water near 14th of July Glacier. Our zodiac ride at the base of the Alkefjellet bird cliffs was impressive due to the height of the cliffs and the sheer number of Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes present.

Although we did not see many species of whales we had some great encounters. Three Fin Whales, the second largest of all the whales, that we followed for a spell, put on a good show and then there was the large gam of Belugas in Smeerenburgfjorden that was easily more than 100 individuals.

On our final day we went ashore and saw a pair of Parasitic Jaegers, which was just how the first day in Longyearbyen started, but this pair included a rare dark-morph individual. A somewhat curious Arctic Fox also made a close approach before we boarded the ship for the last time.

The expedition staff of the Plancius did a great job of getting us to and from the ship and pointing out wildlife and other cool stuff, and the staff on the ship did an amazing job of looking after us and keeping us well fed. The list of birds we saw near the hotel in Oslo is at the end of this triplist. Thanks to all of you for a very pleasurable trek in the Arctic. 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*) – We saw a family group way off on the hillside in Longyearbyen when we scoped it from the hotel parking lot. Then we saw another couple, including one sitting on a nest up the steep slope near 14th of July Glacier. Most of these Svalbard breeding birds spend the winter in Scotland.

**BRANT (ATLANTIC)** (*Branta bernicla hrota*) – We never had a decent look at this rather uncommon species here. We had a couple of distant birds on Moffen Island and another sighting or two that didn't last.

**BARNACLE GOOSE** (*Branta leucopsis*) – These were rather numerous along the road going out of town in Longyearbyen and we saw them at a few other localities as well. When we saw the mother bear with the two cubs, a few Barnacle Geese were flying about and harassing the bear on the small island, and it is likely that was the nest that the bear stopped to eat.

**NORTHERN PINTAIL** (*Anas acuta*) – An uncommon but regular species on Svalbard. We saw a pair in the roadside marsh outside of Longyearbyen. The male seemed to still be molting into breeding plumage.

**KING EIDER** (*Somateria spectabilis*) – There were two males and a female at Moffen Island and the pair ended up flying at us and circled the ship, causing us to dash from one side of the top deck to the other. Later, some of us happened to be looking out the window from the lounge and a group of eight flew past.

**COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN)** (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – These were quite common around Longyearbyen as well as being seen along the shores at most of our landings. We saw a couple birds with chicks along the walk to the dog town. These birds nest communally near the dog pens in Longyearbyen, where the dogs probably protect the nests from roving foxes.

**LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – A few of us saw one on our afternoon of birding at Longyearbyen, then we had a scope view of a male on a pond at New London where it was swimming in the ice-slushy water.

### Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

**ROCK PTARMIGAN** (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – At Faksevagen we had rather close views of three or four individuals. The female was still brown and quite camouflaged while the males were still mostly white.

### Gaviidae (Loons)

**RED-THROATED LOON** (*Gavia stellata*) – At one of the ponds at New London we found a bird on a nest on a small island in the middle. While we were still checking the pond the mate flew in and landed.

### Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

**NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS)** (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – Unless we were in fog, we were rarely out of sight of this ubiquitous bird while cruising the fjords and open waters. The Svalbard population is estimated at over one million individuals.

### Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

**COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – Surprisingly, our only sightings were near Longyearbyen, where we saw at least four birds on our afternoon walk after arriving.

### Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres interpres*) – This is a rather rare bird in the areas we visit, but we saw one at the freshwater pond at New London. We got it in the scope but it flew off before we could all get a scope view.

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*) – A single bird with a black belly patch was with some Purple Sandpipers in the roadside marshy area near Longyearbyen. The female was likely sitting on a nest nearby.

**PURPLE SANDPIPER** (*Calidris maritima*) – This is a rather common species in Svalbard. We saw many, including some in flight display. Several of those we saw around Longyearbyen had leg bands and were likely banded there in Isfjorden. Except for Snow Buntings, this was the only real bird song we heard during the trip.

**RED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – A pair of brilliantly colored birds were in the roadside marsh near Longyearbyen and we had another pair at New London. Another two birds were seen by some during the zodiac cruise at Torellneset.

### Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)

**GREAT SKUA** (*Stercorarius skua*) – We saw a few during the week with, perhaps, the best views being the two birds on the rocky island in front of the glacier in Smeerenburgfjord.

**POMARINE JAEGER** (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) – A quite uncommon species here; we had good views of an adult that flew right past us as we walked the road to the dog town at Longyearbyen.

**PARASITIC JAEGER** (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – Several were seen, and we nearly saw them everyday. Our best views were those in Longyearbyen on our first day but we also had great scope views of a dark morph individual that Michael took us to see. It was near its mate on a nest on our final landing in Bellsund. A couple of times we saw them chasing kittiwakes to steal their fish.

**LONG-TAILED JAEGER** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – Another quite local species on Svalbard, we had great scope views of two individuals at New London on Blomstrandhalvoya. This species is only known from a few nest sites on the archipelago.

### Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

**DOVEKIE** (*Alle alle*) – One of the highlights of the trip was going to shore at a nesting colony in the talus slope at Fuglesangen to see these "Little Auks", where we were quite close to them. The groups would fly off calling whenever a Glaucous Gull flew over. This small alcid was seen all but one day, and usually in good numbers, as they flew off the water as the ship approached. This bird is not seen in breeding plumage too often by birders further south.

**THICK-BILLED MURRE** (*Uria lomvia*) – This was undoubtedly the most numerous bird we saw during the trip. At Alkefjellet we saw tens of thousands perched on the cliff ledges at this huge nesting colony, but we seemed to be early in the nesting season and perhaps only a few had chicks.

**BLACK GUILLEMOT (MANDTII)** (*Cephus grylle mandtii*) – Although we saw these handsome alcids everyday of the trip, they were never in big numbers, usually only a few at a time. We did see the bright red feet as we were cruising in the zodiacs.

**ATLANTIC PUFFIN** (*Fratercula arctica*) – We saw this well-known and fan-favorite bird on most days. We did see a few on the nesting cliffs near the 14th of July Glacier.

### Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

**BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** (*Rissa tridactyla*) – This small gull was second to Thick-billed Murre in terms of total numbers. There were a good number nesting at the top of the cliff at Alkefjellet as well as many other high cliffs we saw throughout Svalbard.

**IVORY GULL** (*Pagophila eburnea*) – One of the great birds of the north. We saw four individuals standing on the ice floe and flying about the Polar Bears that were at the seal carcass. Photos of one of these birds may show some immature plumage. Another individual was seen flying past the day before by a few folks on the bow of the ship. This species has declined significantly in numbers over the last several years.

**SABINE'S GULL** (*Xema sabini*) – An adult individual was seen flying over Moffen Island as we scoped from the top deck. This is a very uncommon species in the Svalbard area.

**GLAUCOUS GULL** (*Larus hyperboreus*) – The only large gull we encountered on Svalbard, this is a rather common species and it fills the niche of the avian predator on the archipelago. They were seen around the bird cliffs as well as the Common Eider nesting area near Longyearbyen.

**ARCTIC TERN** (*Sterna paradisaea*) – A very handsome tern in breeding plumage, we saw these everyday of the trip. They seemed to be a bit late in their nesting this year as they were not very aggressive to us along the landing sites.

### Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)

**SNOW BUNTING** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – We saw these sharply marked birds at nearly every landing. This is the only songbird we would expect to see in Svalbard and their nice song was quite evident around the town of Longyearbyen.

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## MAMMALS

**BELUGA** (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – On the evening of the BBQ aboard the ship as we were leaving Smeerenburgfjord, the crew on the bridge spotted these white whales after many of us had gone to bed, and others were still enjoying the festivities. The call went out and we ended up getting into a group of over one hundred individuals. They were scattered about in a broad horseshoe in front of the ship. It was really an impressive number of these great beasts.

**COMMON MINKE WHALE** (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*) – A single individual popped up in the distance while we were engaged with the Fin Whales, but we never got a look at it.

**FIN WHALE** (*Balaenoptera physalus*) – After dinner, as we were headed to the Hinlopen Straits, three of these large whales were spotted and we ended up following them for a ways, getting great looks along the way. This is the second largest whale on earth and is called the "greyhound of the sea" due to its sleek body and fast swimming.

**ARCTIC FOX** (*Alopex lagopus*) – Our first encounter was along a slope at the Alkefjellet bird cliffs where we saw one dashing between rocks. Then at our last time ashore on the trip at Snatcherpynten, we were walking back to the landing site when a curious Arctic Fox walked right past us, posing for photos. They appear so fragile that it is hard to imagine them existing in these environs throughout the year.

**POLAR BEAR** (*Ursus maritimus*) – We had two great experiences with this fabulous denizen of the north. Just as breakfast started, we got a call that a bear was spotted ahead. The ship maneuvered through the ice floes near Vibebukta and closed in on a male Polar Bear on a floe that was feeding on a large piece of seal meat, while a smaller female lay on the ice nearby. After a while the male moved off the seal and the female moved in to eat. About this time a third bear, another male, that was behind us, walked and swam in and displaced the female. All three bears were loosely arranged on the ice only 100-150 meters from us while four Ivory Gulls tried to grab a bit of seal as well. Then, three days later just as dinner was finishing, we got a call that a female with cubs was ahead of the ship. The zodiacs were lowered as we dashed to our cabins to dress for the outing. The seas were choppy and we had to cross several hundred meters of open water to reach the island complex where the bears were seen. We eventually found a female with two adorable cubs that were being mobbed by Arctic Terns and Barnacle Geese. The rough water made getting long looks difficult and the splashing got us wet, but there were few complaints. We watched these three bears for about an hour before returning to the comfort of the ship. Yip! Yip! Yip!

**WALRUS** (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – We had several encounters with this wonderful and iconic northern sea creature. Our first sightings were at Moffen Island where we saw several in a pile on the sandbar while a few swam in the shallows of the island. The next day in the sea ice, we had a wonderful experience with many Walrus popping up next to the ship and entertaining us with their close approaches. We got to sample the odor of a large haulout at Torellneset, where we could not get to shore but had a few Walrus come close to the zodiacs. This was the most Walrus sightings I have had on any of my previous trips to Svalbard.

**RINGED SEAL** (*Phoca hispida*) – The lack of sea ice hampered our seal sightings, but we had a close Ringed Seal near the Smeerenburg Glacier that was on a small ice floe and initially appeared to be in distress but it eventually dropped into the water.

**BEARDED SEAL** (*Erignathus barbatus*) – We enjoyed nice views of one on an ice floe that we snuck up on near the Smeerenburg Glacier. This is the largest of the seals that occur in these high Arctic waters.

**CARIBOU ("REINDEER")** (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*) – We saw several at a few of the landings we made during the week, including a few males with full antlers. This is an endemic subspecies of "reindeer" that occurs on Svalbard. It is characterized by shorter legs than the mainland forms. There is not a lot of snow accumulation on Svalbard so these don't need long legs to wade through snow drifts.

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

These are the birds seen around our hotel near the Oslo airport at the beginning and end of our trip.

Common Swift

Eurasian Kestrel

Eurasian Magpie

eurasian Jackdaw

Eurasian Skylark

Great Tit

Lesser Whitethroat - this was the small gray and white warbler we initially IDed as a Garden Warbler

Fieldfare

European Starling

White Wagtail

Common Chaffinch

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

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**Totals for the tour: 29 bird taxa and 9 mammal taxa**