



## Field Guides Tour Report

### The Norwegian Arctic: Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2019

Jun 26, 2019 to Jul 6, 2019

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



*Polar Bear. What more is there to say? Actually there is much more to be said for this most-wanted iconic Arctic mammal. This female, who could have been pregnant by the looks of her, was as at home on the pack ice as one could imagine her being anywhere. After a nap, she curiously approached the ship, before eventually sauntering off across the windswept, seemingly desolate sea ice which stretched to the horizon, and indeed beyond the limits of our sight. This was certainly the most anticipated moment by many of the participants on the ship, and with good reason. What a majestic creature! Photo by guide Doug Gochfeld.*

The Arctic. That word is one of the most evocative of any which describes a region on this planet. There aren't many places where you can easily access it, and none of those are as far north as Svalbard. Our journey not only got us up to some of the farthest north tundra, but it also brought us into the Arctic sea ice itself.

It all started with a flight from Oslo, the culturally rich capital of the northern kingdom of Norway, across the ocean where the Norwegian and Barents Seas meet, to Longyearbyen, the only substantial settlement on the Svalbard Archipelago. The windswept "city," along the southern shores of Isfjorden, was established as a coal mining settlement many moons ago, but nowadays there is only one very insignificant mine still active, and it has transformed into a tourism & research-centric town. Before we even left the airport we were already seeing exciting things, with the highlight being a couple of drake King Eiders seen from the parking lot while we were awaiting our bags (some folks even saw Svalbard Reindeer from the plane before we even touched down!). The afternoon's weather was harsh, but we still found one of our targets in Pink-footed Goose. Then, during a delicious dinner at our posh lodge, someone looking out the window asked offhandedly "What's that bird?". The answer was... a Rock Ptarmigan - visible from our dinner table seats no less - what a start to the trip! The next morning we took an excursion down the shore for a couple of hours, with the highlights being some more nice views of close King Eider, Purple Sandpipers galore, Red-necked Phalarope, and more Common Eider nests per square foot than we could've imagined were possible prior to coming here!

With some fun birds under our belt, we boarded the m/v Hondius, a brand new ship on only its third voyage ever, with an excellent expedition staff and crew. By evening we were cruising west out of Isfjorden, seeing alcids galore, including a bunch of diminutive Dovekies and their spiffy Atlantic Puffin cousins, before we had to pry ourselves away from the decks despite the fact that the sun was still up, and would remain up for the rest of week in this realm.

The next six days involved voyaging all around the Northwestern portion of Spitsbergen, making breathtakingly scenic landings and cruising through the seemingly endless sea ice. Searching for Polar Bears was the name of the game for much of this time, but that was by no means the only thing we were on the lookout for. Our very first zodiac expedition, in the Magdalenafjorden, provided us with not just a stunning glacier view, but with a close up Walrus encounter! This was the most wanted animal for several folks on tour, and watching around thirty of these behemoths rolling around on top of each other in a pile, groaning, flippering, snorting, and occasionally tussling with one another was a truly fantastic experience!

Our first sojourn in the pack ice was something quite special. Not only did we get north of 80 degrees of latitude (for the first time in the Hondius' young life, with some of the birders in the bow leading the way), and have a fleeting encounter with a pair of Ivory Gulls circling the ship, but we had our second Polar Bear encounter. Rewinding back a day, our first Polar Bear had been a couple of days prior, at Smeerenburgfjord, before we even got to Magdalenafjorden, and though we got some scope views of it sleeping on the ice, it seemed content to sleep out its day on the inaccessible-to-us ice, and so we let it be and went on our way. Fast forward back to the pack ice, and we eventually came across a bear that was resting on the ice. Shortly after we found it though, it got up and started moving vaguely towards the ship. However, after a few minutes we realized that it was decidedly not interested in us, and was taking advantage of a sudden onset of fog to try and sneak up on a Bearded Seal that was hauled out on the ice. After watching this Polar Bear stalk the seal for quite a while, including swimming underwater and periodically popping its head out of the water like a periscope, we bore witness to a near miss, as the seal caught sight of the Polar Bear when it was already on the same piece of ice as the seal and making its final approach from downwind. The Bearded Seal saw it about thirty meters away and dove back into its breathing hole and a last-second dash by the bear wasn't enough to stop it. Once we were done digesting this incredible wilderness encounter, we went back to enjoying the pack ice, which gave us more walrus on ice and in the water, and some Bearded, Ringed, and Harp Seals as well. As we neared the Archipelago once more, those who were interested had the opportunity to get out and walk around on the sea ice at the mouth of Raudfjorden. There was even a seal breathing hole right outside the safe perimeter, though no heads popped out while we were in attendance.

Moving back to the south, Fourteenth of July Glacier gave us more scenic glacier viewing, a lush tapestry of tundra flowers, the locally breeding Parasitic Jaegers pestering the locally breeding Black-legged Kittiwakes (and being pestered back), Atlantic Puffins at close range, baby Barnacle Geese, Glaucous Gulls, and Snow Buntings, and even a couple of drake King Eider in a large aggregation of Common Eider. On our way back out the Krossfjorden, we had another Polar Bear sighting, this time of a bear in the water which we watched until it made its way to shore and then stalked up over a hill and out of sight. The Kongsfjorden (The King's Fjord) was an all day exploration, which included watching a Polar Bear traipsing along the shore of Blomstrandhalvøya, flushing up a Long-tailed Jaeger in the process, and then several hours in the small research outpost of Ny Ålesund. This settlement has something on the order of twenty-one nations with a research presence, though the upkeep is the responsibility of the Norwegian government (to the tune of something like Eight Million Krone a year!). It also provided us with another flyby Ivory Gull, an entertaining museum, and good numbers of the common northern breeders right in town! On our way back out to sea we went to an area of ocean that has a raised bottom and is typically good for marine life, and we were rewarded with three exceptionally close and cooperative Blue Whales in the company of a Fin Whale. Seeing the two largest species of animal on the planet next to one another at such close range inspired a true sense of awe, and was the perfect cap to what had already been a superb day.

The next to last full day was spent back up to the north (even farther north than on our first trip to the pack ice), and another full day exploration of the truly magical pack ice. Another Polar Bear was spotted, and this time we got to spend some truly quality time with it, as it got up, stretched out, and came sauntering right up to the ship. We watched this one at our leisure before it became startled by a piece of ground up ice and wandered slowly off into the vast horizon-spanning ice-scape. This was the highlight of the tour for many folks on board, including several in our group, and it was an incredible exclamation point on what was a truly once-in-a-lifetime trip.

Our final landing was at Alkhornet, an idyllic headland in the Isfjorden, and a perfect place to wrap up our Arctic exploration. Alkhornet was as colorful as the prior day in the ice was colorless (except for whites and blues), with a lush green hillside tapering down from cliffs teeming with birdlife, Svalbard Reindeer galloping by us, and a curious Arctic Fox walking right through the group as it searched for tasty treats on the slopes. We disembarked the next morning, and began our various journeys home, though the whirlwind week we spent in this sublime region will surely live on in our memories ad infinitum. Thanks for joining me and the Kingfisher on this journey to the great white (and, it turns out, green, yellow, blue, pink and more) north. We had a blast traveling with such a cohesive, genial, and fascinating group of people, and we can't wait to see you all again, wherever in the world that may be. Until then, live, love, and bird on.

-Doug

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#### 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

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### BIRDS

#### Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

**PINK-FOOTED GOOSE** (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) – We saw a few individuals on our first afternoon during our walk in Longyearbyen, then another sighting out the coast road the next morning. A few of us also saw this species during our walk on the tundra near 14th of July Glacier. The majority of the Svalbard population of this species winters in Scotland.

**BARNACLE GOOSE** (*Branta leucopsis*) – There were a good number of these handsome geese around the edge of Longyearbyen. Most of the areas where we walked on tundra we encountered a handful with several seen at Ny Ålesund.

**KING EIDER** (*Somateria spectabilis*) – One of the most brightly colored birds of the Svalbard area; we saw a handful of males during our birding near Longyearbyen. During our time around Spitsbergen we found a couple or three more in various locations.

**COMMON EIDER (NORTHERN)** (*Somateria mollissima borealis*) – A quite common species, especially near Longyearbyen, that was seen everyday except one of our days in the pack ice. There were several females on nests near the Dog Town in Longyearbyen where they are protected from Arctic Foxes by the presence of the sled dogs.

**LONG-TAILED DUCK** (*Clangula hyemalis*) – We did not see many but there were a few individuals near Longyearbyen and a pair that we scoped on the lake that we walked to outside of Ny Ålesund.

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

**ROCK PTARMIGAN** (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*) – This was a species we were hoping to see during our afternoon walk in Longyearbyen but we struck out only to have a mostly white male fly in and walk around just outside the restaurant during our dinner. Wow! The following morning a couple of folks saw it from their hotel room window.

#### Charadriidae (Plovers and Lapwings)

**COMMON RINGED PLOVER** (*Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*) – This mostly Old World counterpart of Semipalmated Plover was seen a few times near Longyearbyen. Then we saw it later in the trip at Ny Ålesund and at Alkhornet.

*Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)*

**RUDDY TURNSTONE** (*Arenaria interpres interpres*) – A quite uncommon species in Svalbard. David spotted one at the edge of the pond that we got in the telescopes on our walk into Ny Ålesund.

**DUNLIN** (*Calidris alpina*) – This is a species that needs wet marshy tundra for nesting. The only suitable habitat on our route was out the coast road at Longyearbyen and we saw a couple on our first morning trip then a few more in the rain on our return on our last day.

**PURPLE SANDPIPER** (*Calidris maritima*) – Certainly the most common shorebird we encountered. There were only a few on our visit to the tidal flat near Longyearbyen but we picked up a few at several of the landings we made on Spitsbergen. On our return to Longyearbyen at the end of the trip there were more present in the tidal flats.

**RED-NECKED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus lobatus*) – Another uncommon shorebird that is at the extreme edge of its range here. We saw two nicely plumaged females on a small pond along the coast road outside of Longyearbyen.

**RED PHALAROPE** (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) – On our final day in Longyearbyen, after disembarking the ship some of us did a venture, thanks to Tom, out to a set of ponds where we encountered five individuals, including some very sharply marked and colorful females.

*Stercorariidae (Skuas and Jaegers)*

**GREAT SKUA** (*Stercorarius skua*) – This fearsome looking species showed a few times, mostly in the pack ice. A pair was seen feeding on the remains of a Thick-billed Murre while perched on an ice floe.

**POMARINE JAEGER** (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) – The least encountered of the jaegers in Svalbard. Several of us saw one flying in the pack ice NW of Spitsbergen. This was a quite long tailed individual.

**PARASITIC JAEGER** (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) – We saw this kleptoparasitic bird each day including a surprising number of dark morph individuals. A couple were seen chasing Black-legged Kittiwakes as they caught small Arctic Cod between the ice floes. Near Longyearbyen and another spot or two we found individuals on nests.

**LONG-TAILED JAEGER** (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) – As we were watching the Polar Bear on Bloomstrandhalvøya in Kongsfjord, Doug spotted one perched on the rocks that we got in the scopes. This is a rather uncommon species here but this fjord has been a reliable site.

*Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)*

**DOVEKIE** (*Alle alle*) – Though we could not get to a Dovekie colony due to high winds at the landing sites and a return to the pack ice, we saw a good number of these small alcid. On a couple of the days in the pack ice we had nice close views from the bow of the ship as we traveled through the floes.

**THICK-BILLED MURRE** (*Uria lomvia*) – This was certainly the most numerous species we saw on our trip. There were groups flying past the ship and perched in the water most of the time we were underway. We saw a few colonies on some high cliffs, but this was a late spring and it didn't seem that true nesting was underway. This was a bird called Brunnich's Guillemot by most of the Europeans on the ship.

**BLACK GUILLEMOT (MANDTII)** (*Cephus grylle mandtii*) – Most of those we saw were flying off in front of the ship, but we did have a few close encounters with birds swimming near us and showing their bright red feet during our zodiac rides.

**ATLANTIC PUFFIN** (*Fratercula arctica*) – We had several nice looks at this very popular bird. The first sightings were birds flying past the ship or perched in the water on our first evening on the ship. We did a zodiac cruise near the 14th of July Glacier in Krossfjord where we had a few rather close to us in the water, as well as about 20 individuals that were perched on the rock cliffs.

*Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)*

**BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE** (*Rissa tridactyla*) – A quite dainty and fragile looking gull, and there were certainly a lot of them on this trip. From big numbers on breeding cliffs to scores that were diving between the recently cracked ice floes for fish right next to the ship, we had great views daily.

**IVORY GULL** (*Pagophila eburnea*) – One of the iconic birds of the High Arctic, this was a species that proved elusive this year though we had a few encounters. Two individuals were seen flying about and landing on floes while we were passing through the pack ice. Another was spotted flying over one of our Polar Bears, and another flew over the village of Ny Ålesund and was seen by the last of us to head back to the ship. This is a species that faces peril from both climate change and a huge drop in nesting success due to toxins in the seal meat they consume.

**BLACK-HEADED GULL** (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – We saw a subadult individual hanging around the walrus colony in Magdalenefjord. This is evidently the furthest north record for Svalbard and perhaps for the world. Then during our zodiac cruise along the small cliffs near 14th of July Glacier in Krossfjord we saw another (maybe 2) fly past us along the coast showing a dark head and white leading edge to the wing. This is a quite uncommon species all over Svalbard.

**GLAUCOUS GULL** (*Larus hyperboreus*) – Another species we saw each day of the trip. This is the main predatory bird on Svalbard, as there are no true raptors. When nesting gets underway at seabird colonies, Glaucous Gulls are a constant pest to those birds on the ledges. We saw three fluffy-down young with an adult on our zodiac cruise in Krossfjord.

**GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL** (*Larus marinus*) – On our last landing at Alkhornet, as some of us were waiting for the zodiac taxi back to the ship, Tom spotted an adult flying past us. This is a quite uncommonly encountered species in Svalbard.

**ARCTIC TERN** (*Sterna paradisaea*) – We had daily encounters with this well-known species, with a few sitting on nests at Longyearbyen and Ny Ålesund.

*Gaviidae (Loons)*

**RED-THROATED LOON** (*Gavia stellata*) – We had nice looks at one on a nest not far off the road near Longyearbyen, with another just a bit further on. We also had a flyover or two, with one seen at Ny Ålesund. It is a real treat to see this wonderful bird in breeding plumage.

*Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)*

**NORTHERN FULMAR (GLACIALIS)** (*Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*) – While we were on the ship, we were rarely out of sight of this seabird. The estimated population of this species in Svalbard exceeds one million birds!

*Calcariidae (Longspurs and Snow Buntings)*

**SNOW BUNTING** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – The only passerine we saw on Svalbard, we encountered them at most landings with several seen around Longyearbyen. We heard a few singing and saw them in short display flights.

## MAMMALS

**BELUGA** (*Delphinapterus leucas*) – A whale of mostly shallow waters; we saw about eight or nine moving along the shore of a peninsula at Smeerenburgfjord.

**FIN WHALE** (*Balaenoptera physalus*) – As we were leaving Kongsfjord, a group of whales were seen ahead and we managed to get great looks at two of these huge animals, the second largest whale in the world. These two Fin Whales surfaced very close to the ship a couple of times, eliciting oohs and aahs from those on the bow deck.

**BLUE WHALE** (*Balaenoptera musculus*) – The largest animal that ever lived on earth. We saw at least three individuals near the Fin Whales as we were heading out of Kongsfjord. One seemed larger than the other two and though they stayed a bit further away than the Fin Whales, the quite small dorsal fin could easily be seen as they rolled. Wow, what a treat!

**ARCTIC FOX** (*Alopex lagopus*) – After some saw one in Longyearbyen on our first morning and a pair appeared during our walk up the ridge at St. Johnsford, we had our best view of a curious individual that walked up the slope at Alkhornet and circled us while only a few meters away. Back in Longyearbyen, we also had one cross the road ahead of our bus during the rainy morning there.

**POLAR BEAR** (*Ursus maritimus*) – One of the great animals of the world. We ended up seeing five different individuals on consecutive days, both on land and in the pack ice. We got to watch one swimming across a fjord a long ways before making it to shore and heading inland. Another was seen walking and swimming through the pack ice as it stalked a seal which got away. The best encounter was the last one that we found on our return to the pack ice. This individual walked toward the ship sniffing the air as it approached. It got fairly close to the ship but got spooked when a piece of ice cracked and popped up nearby, causing the bear to jog off about 100 yards before stopping to look back at us. This one ended up walking away from us on the seemingly endless ice. Yip! Yip! Yip!

**WALRUS** (*Odobenus rosmarus*) – We did quite well with this rarely encountered, but familiar pinniped. We saw several individuals swimming near the ship or lying on ice floes as we passed, but the best sighting was the visit to a haul-out site in Magdalenefjord, where about 20 individuals were lying, rolling, and softly grunting on the beach. This is a huge animal.

**HARBOR SEAL** (*Phoca vitulina*) – We saw a few on the ice and rocks on our way to the Walrus haul-out site, and then a couple more here and there. These are often IDed by their banana-like silhouette when basking.

**HARP SEAL** (*Phoca groenlandica*) – A quite entertaining seal when seen well, this species has the characteristic of bobbing up out of the water then looking backwards. We ran into a pod of about eight that were doing just this during our first visit to the pack ice, and one of our mornings in the ice produced several groups totaling dozens of individuals. We even got to see the harp-shaped markings on the backs of a few (only the adults sport this pattern that gives the species its name).

**BEARDED SEAL** (*Erignathus barbatus*) – This was the largest of the seals we saw. There were a few loafing on ice floes that showed the long whiskers that gives this species its name.

**SVALBARD REINDEER (CARIBOU)** (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*) – We saw these several times, with a few quite close to us on the tundra or in Longyearbyen. Usually referred to as Svalbard Reindeer, this is a subspecies that is endemic to the archipelago. This form is a bit different to those in Canada and Greenland, in that it has shorter legs. This is an adaption to the fact that snow doesn't get as deep to wade through and the shorter legs help to conserve body heat in the winter. Also, they are not required to run as fast since there are no wolves hunting them here.

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## ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

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**Totals for the tour: 29 bird taxa and 10 mammal taxa**