

Trip Report — The Norwegian Arctic: Spitsbergen & the Svalbard Archipelago 2026

July 1-13, 2026 with John Coons



It doesn't get any more arctic than Ivory Gull. We saw a handful of these great birds feeding along glacier fronts in the fjords, but Eric Gustafson captured this individual on a floe as we traversed the broken pack ice.

To begin our High Arctic adventure, we gathered in Oslo the evening before our flight to Svalbard. We had a chance to do some birding near our hotel where we saw a fair number of northern European birds, with the highlight being a group of four Northern Lapwings at the end of the airstrip. We flew to Longyearbyen, the capital and only town of size on Svalbard, and got into our hotel and had a few minutes to explore before dinner and an evening birding excursion along the tidal flats and ponds at the edge of town. We saw many of the regularly occurring Svalbard birds, including Barnacle Geese, Common Eiders, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls, Arctic

Terns, and Snow Bunting. We also found Pink-footed Geese, Dunlin, an uncommon Eurasian Wigeon, Common Ringed Plover, Purple Sandpiper, Parasitic Jaeger, and Arctic Fox.

The next morning, we did a loop walk up the valley on the roads. We got quite close to several pairs of Pink-footed Geese and just at our turn around, spot Sharon spotted a pair of Rock Ptarmigan picking about in the tundra. We then had a couple of hours to explore the museums and shops of Longyearbyen before heading to the pier to board Ortelius, our home for the next nine days. After the required safety and life boat drill, we sailed out of Isfjord to begin our circumnavigation of Spitsbergen, the largest island in the Svalbard Archipelago. We passed many Thick-billed Murres, our first Dovekies, a few Atlantic Puffins, and Northern Fulmars on the way.



Viewing from our zodiac, we had a great experience watching this Polar Bear swim along the glacier front then emerging from the sea and strolling along the beach for a few hundred meters before heading inland. Photo by Steve Rannels.

Our first two full days on the ship were spent in large sounds, Bellsund and Hornsund. At Bamsebu, we made our first landing and saw Common Ringed Plover, Purple Sandpiper, some Svalbard Reindeer, and a quite distant Polar Bear that we estimated at 1 ½ miles away. This caused us to return to the ship early. In the afternoon, we went ashore at Varsolbukta where we had a brilliant time watching Dovekies on the talus slope of the mountainside as they perched on rocks only to get flushed when a marauding Glaucous Gull appeared. Their wonderful calls are rarely heard away from the breeding grounds. In Hornsund the following day, we got a 6:15 am call for a Polar Bear on shore, another distant view but closer than the day before. We did a zodiac cruise in front of the glacier at Burgerbukta with Gabi as our driver. We spotted some belugas swimming about and had a pretty good flying view of an Ivory Gull. An afternoon shore excursion to Treskelen found Red-throated Loons on a small lake.

The following day, our morning landing was scratched due to rough water at the landing site so we carried on to nearby Strongbreen. I am glad we did. There were surprisingly not a lot of birds at this large glacier front, but we ended up encountering at least four Ivory Gulls flying about. We had one perch on an iceberg for a spell, and had three in one binocular view. It doesn't get more Arctic than Ivory Gull. That afternoon we did a cruise amongst some small islands at Hassensteinbukta adjacent to Edgeøya, the third largest of the islands in the Svalbard archipelago. We had nice views of Walrus in the water and on shore from the zodiac. A group of 80 Pink-footed Geese clustered together in the water was interesting, and we saw at least three pairs of nicely plumaged Red Phalaropes. And another Arctic Fox.



One of the real surprises of the trip was seeing this male Steller's Eider amongst the rocks at Kapp Lee. A real rarity here. Photo by Eric Gustafson.

We arrived at Kapp Lee on the northwest corner of Edgeøya early the next morning, where there is a large Walrus haul out site. A few Walrus were swimming about and we had terrific views of this well-known but rarely seen species. We cruised the rocky shoreline, poking in here and there and came across one of the trip highlights, a brilliant male and quite rare Steller's Eider hanging with a couple of Common Eiders. Suddenly, all the passengers on the ship and the expedition staff were birders! We crossed the strait to Barentsøya in the afternoon and went ashore at Sundneset. We walked to some freshwater ponds where we saw two female King Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, Red Phalaropes, and an odd-looking brown dabbler in cryptic eclipse plumage. We batted around a few possibilities before settling on Gadwall, which was Susan's initial ID. Gadwall is actually a rarer sighting here but for some reason it didn't quite have the same pizzaz as the Steller's Eider. Back aboard Ortelius, we scoped another Polar Bear on the slope of a steep mountainside. The next morning, we had hoped to land at Torrellneset and

walk closer to a Walrus haulout, but a Polar Bear along the shore spoiled it. We loaded into zodiacs, got closer, and watched the bear walking the shoreline then entering the water in front of a smallish glacier. It swam along the whole glacier front for at least 20 minutes and climbed out on the beach on the other side and shook off. We were watching from the restricted limit of 300 meters where we had great views. Back aboard our ship, we cruised north a short ways to the bird cliffs of Alkefjellet. Here we joined Gonzolo in the zodiac for a fantastic cruise along the base of the cliff where a huge number of Thick-billed Murres nest on the ledges. We started in the more sparsely populated suburbs at one end and went a mile or more and got to the central business district, where virtually every available ledge was occupied by a cluster of Thick-billed Murres. They were everywhere, with thousands flying about the cliff, with many heading out to sea, and lots of them landing in the water right next to our zodiac. This seemed to be the final stages of mating before egg laying. Along with Black Guillemots swimming right past us only meters away, a large number of Black-legged Kittiwakes were about as well, but they had not yet arrived in huge numbers. It was difficult to come up with a number but we estimated 50,000 Thick-billed Murres on the rocks. We spent a bit of time watching another Arctic Fox along a vegetated slope in the midst of the cliff. We returned to the ship and sailed on north but got a call after dinner and went to the open decks and the bridge to get nice views of a couple of marvelous Blue Whales with a nearby Fin Whale. Two of the largest animals to ever exist on earth. It was a great day.



Black-legged Kittiwakes were constant companions during our trip. We saw thousands overall with many getting ready to nest high on cliff faces and perched on ice floes near glaciers. Photo by Steve Rannels.

We rose the following morning as we were approaching the pack ice well north of the mainland of Spitsbergen. The broken ice floes seemed ideal for Polar Bears but despite hours of scanning by us and the staff we came up empty. We did get nice views of large Bearded Seals loafing on the ice and a few of us had close views of an Ivory Gull atop a chunk of ice right next to the ship. Northern Fulmars and a handful of Atlantic Puffins were flying about. We enjoyed a relaxing day in the ice under cloudy conditions and were fortunate to come across two more Blue Whales after dinner. We crossed 81° north latitude twice in our sailing, which is further north than most people ever get, 680 miles further north than Utqiagvik (Barrow), Alaska and only 600 miles from the North Pole.



We had a few nice encounters with Walrus swimming next to our zodiac or lying on the beach. When in the water they appear to be rather curious and can come closer for a look. These guys can get really big. Photo by Steve Rannels.

The next morning, we awoke to find our ship in Liefdefjorden sailing toward Texas Bar, with more Dovekies, Parasitic Jaegers, and Northern Fulmars on the way. We did a walk on shore at the historic cabin at Texas Bar. A few Parasitic Jaegers were about and it was a nice spot for wildflowers. Steve stayed on shore to do the Polar Plunge and we have pictures from Sharon to prove it. We did a beautiful zodiac cruise of Monacobreen, a huge glacier, that had thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes feeding in the water just in front of the glacier. We saw and heard some large sections of the glacier front calve. A dark morph Parasitic Jaeger that landed on a rock island was

interesting. We returned to the ship and enjoyed nice weather for the heli-deck BBQ that evening.



Everyone loves puffins. On our last full day on the ship we visited the low cliffs near the 14th of July Glacier where several Atlantic Puffins were loafing on the ledges. Photo by Eric Gustafson.

Needing to begin making our way back to Longyearbyen, we sailed around the northwest corner of Spitsbergen and made our way south and headed into Krossfjord. We did a zodiac cruise right along the low cliffs at the sea edge, where we found a handful of Atlantic Puffins perched on the ledges for our closest views of the trip. We continued around the rocky shore to the 14th of July Glacier for another beautiful vista and as we headed back to the ship, a rainbow appeared with Ortelius right in the middle. We made a short sail during lunch into Kongsfjord (Kings Bay) and pulled up on the pier at Ny-Ålesund, a former coal mining village but now a research station where several countries have their research buildings. Ny-Ålesund played an important part of the early exploration to the North Pole. It was the final jumping off point and still lays claim to be the furthest north permanent

settlement in the world (excluding weather stations and military installations). We were on our own to walk around town and visit the shop and museum as a light rain fell. We found another bright female Red Phalarope and a Common Ringed Plover at the edge of town and scoped some Harbor Seals in a bay. Back on the ship and preparing to sail, we got a call from the bridge that a Polar Bear had just appeared on a rocky island directly in front of us and just offshore from the village. It was a great way to finish up. Captain Ernesto Barria joined us in the lounge for a champagne toast and we watched a video compiled by Werner that included highlights of our trip.



We saw a good number of Pink-footed Geese on the tundra near Longyearbyen where many pairs had goslings in tow. Interestingly, the majority of the Svalbard population of these geese winter in Scotland. Photo by Steve Rannels.

When we awoke on our last morning aboard the ship, we were just approaching Longyearbyen. We disembarked on the pier after breakfast and got a ride to town where a rain put a damper on most exploring, though Bob and Susan intrepidly went in a quite successful search for Northern Jacob's Ladders blooming along the loop road. We took a bus to the airport for our

afternoon flight to Oslo and on to our hotel where we saw our first real trees and dusk in ten days.

It was great sharing birds, bears, whales, walrus and wildflowers with all of you amongst some of the greatest scenery on earth. It was truly a memorable experience. I hope to cross paths with all of you again.



Those aren't gnats but Thick-billed Murres flying near the huge nesting cliff at Alkefjellet. Photo by Eric Gustafson.

Mammals encountered during our trip included:

- Beluga (*Delphinapterus leucas*)
- Common Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)
- Fin Whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)
- Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)
- Arctic Fox (*Vulpes lagopus*)
- Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*)

Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)
Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*)
Ringed Seal (*Pusa hispida*)
Harp Seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*)
Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)
Caribou ("Reindeer") (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*)

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link: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/551367>

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-- John Coons



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Svalbard

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Species Observed

Checklists

LIFERS  1 

Species Observed

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197	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	  4
822	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	  9
1	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>	  1
1	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>	  1
1	Steller's Eider	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i> 	  1
9	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	  2
524	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	  15
35	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	  6
2	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	  1
3	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	  3
10	Red Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	  3
3	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	  1
28	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	  7
32	Parasitic Jaeger	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	  12
84	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	  6
791	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	  17
4748	Dovekie	<i>Alle alle</i>	  10
55,882	Thick-billed Murre	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	  14
14,889	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	  20
7	Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>	  3
322	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	  17

205	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	▶  13
8	Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	▶  5
239	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	▶  15
52	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	▶  12

