

Tour Report Svalbard Wildlife Expedition 1 – 9 June 2025

Bearded seal



Arctic fox



Polar bear



Walrus



Compiled by Helen Bryon

If spending seven nights exploring the stunning Svalbard archipelago on a small ship with just 11 other like-minded clients sounds good, read on for more details. Our Svalbard Wildlife Expedition embraces the spirit of adventure aboard the more than comfortable M/S Sjoveien with a flexible itinerary entirely dictated by ice movements, the weather, and wildlife sightings. The draw card to the destination is undoubtedly the polar bear, and in addition to the four individuals that we came across this year, we enjoyed multiple seal, walrus, Svalbard reindeer and Arctic fox sightings. Birdlife is plentiful with stalwart species such as black and Brunnich's guillemots, little auks, northern fulmars, geese, skuas and Arctic terns supplemented by the potential to come across Atlantic puffins, ivory gulls and more. The landscapes impress on an epic scale, with mountains, glaciers and fjords laced with bergs and more types of ice than you can shake a stick at. Utilising the experience of our Expedition Leader and naturalist guide, we explore via Zodiacs on morning and afternoon excursions during which we may make occasional landings and undertake walks. We have the opportunity to do the 'polar plunge', warming up in the wood-fired hot tub afterwards, and onboard lectures add to the overall experience, often covering the incredible feats of early polar exploration.

Sunday 1 June 2025

Day 1: London Heathrow to Oslo

Weather: overcast, 15 degrees (at our destination)

With ten of the group flying out from London Heathrow, introductions were made at the departure gate and we pushed back half an hour behind schedule due to air traffic congestion. Tailwinds meant that we made up time in the air, landing in Oslo as planned shortly before 18.50. We re-checked our baggage in through to Longyearbyen and then walked the 600 metres or so along a covered walkway to our overnight accommodation at the contemporary and comfortable Radisson Red. Meeting the last two members of our party there who had flown in from Edinburgh, we had drinks, a welcome briefing, and dinner at 20:30 before heading to bed full of anticipation for what may lie ahead.

Monday 2 June 2025

Day 2: Oslo to Longyearbyen

Weather: overcast with occasional sunny spells, 4 degrees (at our destination)

Having breakfasted already, we met in the lobby at 07:00 and walked back across to the airport. With boarding passes already in hand, we relaxed before our 09:50 flight to Longyearbyen via Tromsø. As we started our descent into the Svalbard archipelago, clear skies facilitated our first views of land as the ice unfolded beneath us, looking like a giant soft meringue spread over the ocean.

Landing at 14.10, we were met by driver Kai, who whisked us directly into town to collect our hired muck boots. After a flying visit to the local Co-op to grab lunch on the go, we were transferred to the floating dock to be met by Expedition Leader Christophe, and naturalist guide, Patrik, who walked us directly onto M/S Sjoveien, where we were shown to our cabins. 40 minutes later, having had a little time to relax and settle in, we gathered in the lounge for official introductions. We met our First Mate, Zibi, who advised us of the whereabouts of the muster station in the event of an emergency, and we had our first safety briefing followed by an introduction to expedition cruising. Our final feat involved trying on our flotation suits, which certainly proved to be a giggle, but we eventually ventured out onto the deck and watched Longyearbyen fade away into the distance as we sailed west. We were off!

Accompanied by northern fulmars, Brunnich's guillemots, little auks, black guillemots and an Atlantic puffin fly by, we took in the vast, icy kingdom into which we were travelling. Solemn dark cliffs and low cloud to our starboard side contrasted greatly with the soft blue sky and sunshine on our left. One snow-covered mountain resembled a Big Top circus tent, and we gulped down great lungfuls of the freshest air. Scanning the landscape through our binoculars, an eagle-eyed client spotted belugas swimming in the distance. They

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were far, far off, tiny specks at the base of a cliff, but they were undoubtedly belugas. It was only 18:15 and we had seen our first cetaceans. The wildlife fest had begun!

At 19:00, dinner was served (including vegan and gluten-free options), and chef Alan excelled himself as he would all trip. We had salmon, mashed potatoes and vegetables, while Chief Steward, Ezequiel, looked after us with aplomb. Sampling the local pilsner, we got to know each other further, but after a long travel day, eyelids were drooping and we soon took ourselves off to bed knowing that we'd be woken up at any time in

the event of sightings. Hoorah for 24-hour daylight.

Tuesday 3 June 2025

Day 3: Magdalenefjorden and Smeerenburgfjorden

Weather: overcast, clearing to bright sunshine, 1 degree

Breakfast was scheduled for 08.00, but most of us were up and about well in advance of that. We'd sailed up the west coast overnight and as we motored into overcast but stunning Magdalenefjorde, we enjoyed the company of swimming brown giants, walrus! We could see their exhalations and mighty tusks as they raised their whiskered heads off the bow, and later, after we'd passed them, off the stern. We dropped anchor at the base of a beautiful glacier, its blue hues constantly changing with the light, and tucked in to breakfast, a veritable smorgasbord of cereal, fruit, bacon, eggs, Danish pastries, cold meats and cheese.

45 minutes later, we gathered for another two safety briefings, on Zodiac etiquette and polar bear safety, respectively. We then donned our flotation suits and ventured out to sea at 10:00 on the dot. A flock of king eiders flew low over the flat, calm water and Arctic terns were spotted standing on the edge of a low piece of ice. We slowly approached them, admiring their streamlined beauty as one fluffed its wings and tail feathers out wonderfully. A walrus was in the water and as we rounded a bend, we saw a number of them hauled out on a beach. We watched them for some time, silently in awe of their bulk as occasional heads were raised into the air, tusks prominent against the skyline.



Tails, too, waved upwards intermittently, fluttering gently back down into position not unlike flamenco dancers raising their hands. Two more, then a third approached the beach as a snow bunting scurried along it, jostling tusks slightly in the shallow and ridiculously clear water.

We left them to it and made our way towards a harbour seal that had been identified across the bay. It watched us from its typically elevated rock perch above the water as we cautiously inched closer, maintaining the required minimum 100-metre distance from it. It shifted position, turning side on and posing as we noticed groups of little auks flying above us, almost in a murmur. We followed their progress past sheer cliffs and through rapidly depleting clouds, then we slowly meandered along the coastline, passing a pair of glaucous gulls nesting on a small exposed rock just above the waterline. This precarious site could be jeopardised by freak waves coming through, caused by calving glaciers, so we were advised they were most likely new parents and somewhat inexperienced. We pressed on, reaching a historical site, a protected graveyard filled with the bodies of those who lost their lives working in the whaling industry that thrived here during the 18th and 19th centuries.

We returned to Sjøveien for a lovely lunch of salad, chicken wings, prawns and pesto pasta, during which we upped anchor and began moving towards Smeerenburgfjorden. We were all back out on deck in glorious, bright sunshine, revelling in our stupendous surrounds. The snow-covered mountains shone, and areas of exposed rock stood out like chocolate in a Walls Vienetta. The reflections were nothing short of insane and we tried to capture the scene on camera. It was majestic, breathtaking and staggeringly beautiful in equal measure.



At 14:45, we were back out on the Zodiacs gliding serenely across the snout of an enormous glacier. A bearded seal was seen way off in the distance so we slowly manoeuvred towards it, its tinted red head and whiskers, a giveaway as to its species. It had clearly been resting on the ice for a while as the sun was hitting its now dry fur, giving it a silky burnished copper.



A ringed seal appeared in the water, moving towards its bearded cousin, getting closer and closer, inquisitively checking it out before ducking under water and disappearing. As we continued into the next bay, we came across another one as we stopped to view an ice cave and later, the smooth, concave glacially carved hillocks of nunataks. The glacier calved, commanding our attention with the thunderclap of sound produced, and we watched the inevitable swell reach us a little later. More king eiders flew past, and barnacle geese stood atop bare rocks surrounded by icebergs. The sun continued to shine, showing off the scenery to utter perfection, and all too soon we returned home. Never have two and a half hours gone by so quickly! After spending time out on deck, we met at 18:15 for a recap on the day and to hear the plan for tomorrow. Having been talked through ice and wind maps, we were excited to hear that we were heading north to venture into pack ice!

After a laughter-filled delightful dinner of entrecôte steak with vegetables, we started to go our separate ways, some drifting off to bed and others going for a last sojourn on deck, when we heard that a polar bear had been seen by another vessel ahead of us. Donning our warm weather gear once again, we hot-footed it outside and eventually reached the edge of an area of fast ice lined with Brunnich's guillemots and bear foot steps. It had walked along the ice edge, and if it was the same buttery coloured blob that we could now see off the bow in the distance, it was a positively huge individual!

We trained our binoculars on the bear, watching it move this way and that, sniff the air, lie down, get back up again and before we knew it, half an hour had passed. Arctic skuas flew by, as did a purple sandpiper, and we eventually continued on our way, leaving Raudfjorden as we had around eight hours of travelling ahead of us. What an incredible first full day in the Arctic, though. One polar bear, a haul out of walrus, three types of seal, superlative scenery and masses of sunshine. Simply fabulous! A very good start indeed.



Wednesday 4 June 2025

Day 4: Pack ice

Weather: sunshine, clouding over later, -2 degrees

After smooth sailing for most of the night, the swell increased as morning arrived. Another sunny day beckoned, and many of us were out on deck bright and early, finding ourselves surrounded by ice. Patches of varying shapes, sizes and depths were represented, larger pieces glowing turquoise underwater. We moved through them slowly before finding ourselves in open ocean once again. Over and over, we repeated this pattern as we continued north to reach the floe edge.



The breeze was brisk and it was totally exhilarating being outside in the thick of it. Fortified by another superb breakfast, we hit the decks to embrace our surroundings and scan the pack ice for signs of life. Numerous seals could be seen dotted about in the distance, an encouraging sign, and the floe edge fluctuated from being relatively close to us to semi-distant. Most of the ice was well broken up, small pieces, shallow and easy to pass through, but at times, progress involved 'nudging' larger broken ice sheets. It was all very exciting.

Not being able to navigate using the sun, we lost all sense of direction, but just didn't care. We remained on deck for hours, keeping our eyes peeled for unlikely, but definitely possible, bowhead whales and narwhal in open water, and for polar bears and their prey on the pack ice. Gatherings of kittiwakes sat on fragmented ice while trios of black guillemots floated on the water and northern fulmars ducked and dived all around. We kept pinching ourselves that we were here as the sun shone brilliantly above us. All in all, it was an utterly intoxicating environment.



Late morning, it clouded over, creating a moody desolation and brooding atmosphere that left us in no doubt as to our remote location. Out on deck, two harp seals appeared in the water out of nowhere, coming closer and closer. One leapt almost clean out of the water, causing much merriment in the process, and they swam across our stern shortly before lunch was served. Afterwards, sustained by beef, chicken and another lovely salad, we were asked to prepare for an ice landing. Yes!

Kitting ourselves out in plenty of layers (it felt considerably colder than yesterday), we sped across an almost black sea and held on as the front of the Zodiac lifted up onto the pack ice. Warned to stay at least five metres away from the edge and to stay together as a group, the novelty of being on what was essentially a relatively small piece of ice, slowly drifting just nine degrees from the North Pole, well and truly went to our heads (well, Helen's anyway)! Snow angels were created, group photos were taken, and a foreboding bank of dark clouds filled the horizon. It was magic, pure magic. We had a moment of silence to contemplate our position and truly appreciate where we were and then made our way back to Sjoveien, where more excitement lay in store.

Not only was there cake, but four hardy souls had decided to brave 'The Polar Plunge'. Moments of doubt went through our minds as we stood in our swimmers (one adorned with narwhals, no less) and had a wet

belt placed around our waist for safety, but we went for it. One by one, we walked down the gangway in our woolly socks, launched ourselves into the ocean and made a hasty exit before ice cream headaches could set in! It was exhilarating, that's for sure. Having endured a few seconds of the one-degree water temperature, we made a beeline for the wood-fired hot tub and had a celebratory photo taken before departing for a hot shower to let other clients enjoy it.

Re-grouping at 17:00, Christoph delivered a lecture introducing us to the Svalbard archipelago, covering geopolitics, history through the centuries, industry and wildlife in the process. It was an informative hour well spent, and afterwards, much banter was to be had during our butterflied chicken with mash, asparagus and long-stemmed broccoli dinner. Our first two full days here had been fabulous!

Thursday 5 June 2025

Day 5: Wahlenbergfjorden, Alkefjellet and Lomfjorden

Weather: overcast, 0 degrees

We'd sailed back towards land overnight, passing through the Hinlopen Strait that separates the island of Spitsbergen from Nordaustlandet. Dropping anchor at 01:00 in Wahlenbergfjorden, when we awoke much later, it was to the sound of male bearded seals calling for a mate, their downward crescendo penetrating the utterly still air. It was a black and white world today with a thousand hues of grey in between. Our third full day here, and this was an entirely new experience. Low cloud was reflected in the flat, calm water and it almost felt wrong to utter a sound, breaking the purity of the scene. There can be few places left in this world where the peace is so profound that you can hear the silence.



After another hearty breakfast, we boarded the Zodiacs at 09:30 for an extended cruise through the fjord. Almost immediately, we came across a walrus lying on the ice. It moved its fore flippers across its whiskered face and then almost appeared to prop itself up on one. After watching it for a while, we continued to Bragebreen, where the glacier was reflected perfectly in the ocean below. Stretching for what seemed like miles, the enormity of it and the surprising quiet, with not a creak or groan to be heard, was difficult to comprehend.

Another walrus caught our attention, a large male with more substantial tusks, who this time held his fore flippers across his chest, lifting his head to look at us before lying back down again. We skirted the coastline searching for our predicted fast ice but it was nowhere to be seen. We passed numerous 'slabs' of what looked like asphalt lying on the water surface, which transpired to be super thin layers of broken-off fast ice, the dark skies above giving them a black, tar-like sheen. The enormous snout of Idunbreen lay ominous and foreboding as we approached Gyldenoyane, an island in the middle of the fjord. Famous as a resting point for polar bears who use its height as a vantage point from which to smell for food, there were tracks to be seen but they weren't fresh. Nevertheless, we tried to circumnavigate it just in case a stationary bear may be lurking, but the ice made it difficult. The song of snow buntings broke through the silence and Arctic skuas sat stationary on top. We also noticed a purple sandpiper displaying.

A bearded seal then swam into the vision of one client and we all watched it use its upper body strength to lift its head high above the water and then dive down. We cut the engine and stayed silent, hoping it might appear again. It duly did, twice, before disappearing below with a flourish and a huge splash. Returning to Sjoveien, we couldn't quite believe that we'd been out for two and a quarter hours. Lunch was served as we motored towards our afternoon location, and we dropped our beef in pepper sauce, pork, French fries and salad meal like hot potatoes at the sighting of a bearded seal on a block of ice that we were passing. This one had the most gorgeous little white face and we watched it watching us, wondering what was going through its mind.



We departed under still grey skies for our second Zodiac trip of the day at 15:00. Slowly cruising underneath the hugely impressive cliffs of Alkefjellet, we watched, heard and smelled the spectacle of around 65,000 Brunnich's guillemots gathering to nest.



Around and in front of the cliffs, the air was alive with a swirling mass of birds. Back feet splayed out like puffins, space was tight with every ledge crowded and occupied as they came in repeatedly to land. Sometimes they landed with superb skill, at other times they missed, setting one foot down but then losing balance and setting off to approach again. We witnessed much squabbling and fighting for nesting sites. They weren't beyond pushing each other off, chasing each other into the ocean and continuing the scrap below. Conversely, we saw several pairs mating, and at one point heard a distinct giggle arise from the cliffs. A giggle of guillemots, it would seem. How wonderful!

Other species were present too. Snow buntings sang as we observed them collecting nesting material, and kittiwakes sat atop their grass nests of previous years, now precariously tall. We could see a great skua pecking at the water surface and as we got closer, we discovered it was dining on a dead guillemot. A glaucous gull chased it off (who'd have thought it?) and joined in the feast. A little later, four great skuas were on another guillemot carcass and as we followed the base of the cliffs, a purple sandpiper appeared on the top of an exposed rock.

Having spent well in excess of an hour zigzagging back and forth, we were heading towards a beautifully marbled glacier face when movement was seen at the base of a snow-ridden scree slope. Our first Arctic fox! Far, far smaller than often expected, it scurried across the snow, its coat a moulting mixture of winter white and summer darkness. It began to trot, stopped, looked over its shoulder and then set off up the slope. We followed its progress with our eyes, binoculars and camera lenses as it climbed. Eventually disappearing into a crevasse between rocks, we were grinning with delight as we processed the sighting of our eighth mammal species so far this trip.



Back onboard later after a truly wonderful outing, we skirted the coastline of Lomfjorden, aiming for the fast ice at the end of it. We really took our time, checking every surface, gully, rock and ice formation for signs of polar bears. Bearded seals were hauled out in spades and swam in the ocean too, while black



guillemots swam in small groups along the ice edge, flapping their wings at speed and running along the water at our approach. Most flew away, but more than a few simply couldn't get up the required momentum, ducking under water, re-surfacing and trying again, leaving 'Spirograph' like concentric circles rippling on the surface. Giving up, they relied on their far superior swimming prowess instead, and we followed their progress underwater, watching their bright red feet and white wing patterns as they darted along under the surface, looking remarkably like penguins. An Atlantic puffin skimmed our bow and two red-throated divers glided by in perfect, beautiful symmetry. At the end of one steep cliff, ice blocks piled up in geometric shapes, looking as

though they'd been lifted from a cartoon.

After two hours of intense searching for bears on deck, we were feeling the chill and were leaving the fast ice behind us, so we ventured inside for our fish in caper sauce with a vegetable dinner. We'd had no recap today, preferring to scour the fast ice instead and we all agreed this was time well spent.

Friday 6 June 2025

Day 6: Raudfjorden, Hamiltonbukta and Virgohamna

Weather: glorious to start, clouding over later, 3 degrees

The day dawned full of promise. Bright sunshine, blue skies and stunning cloudscapes welcomed us as we returned to Raudfjorden, pushing through large slabs of broken-off fast ice covered in polar bear tracks. Glaciers positively shone and against a backdrop of high basaltic peaks and pristine snow, we scanned just above the waterline where the snow was also littered with tracks.

Tearing ourselves away at 08:00, we came inside for brekkie. Christoph joined us, and at one point shot out of his seat and we continued eating with baited breath. This could only mean one thing, couldn't it? A minute or so afterwards, Patrik stood in the doorway and almost apologetically said, "Excuse me for interrupting, but we have a polar bear". Never before have you seen a group vacate their seats so fast in all your life! Grabbing binoculars and cameras, we rushed outside and there, asleep in the snow, lay a bear.

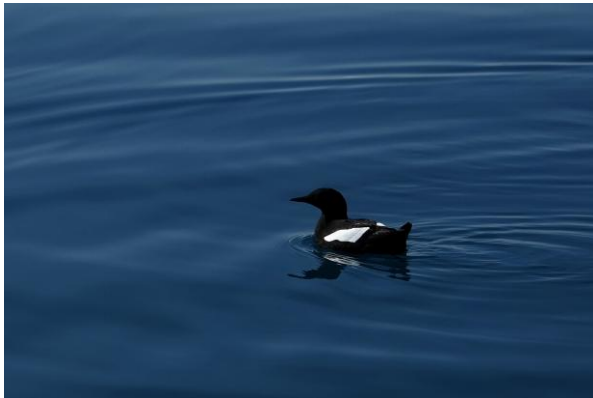
We were exactly 503 metres away from it (newly introduced regulations this year require a minimum distance of 500 metres), and although we could see it with the naked eye, the views through our binoculars and camera lenses were better. Located on an icy bank just above the water, it intermittently lifted its head, surveying the coastline. Two pairs of pink-footed geese swam in front of it and after watching it for some time, the bear got up and moved a few paces up the bank. Sinking back down, it appeared to rather clumsily face-plant into the snow and stay there. We felt it wouldn't move too much from its position so we returned to our breakfast and motored a little further on.

We were out on deck when we were asked to prepare for a Zodiac cruise. Helen had just begun moving around the group to make everyone aware when Patrik spotted another bear. No way! We couldn't believe it. Really not far from the other, this one was on a small beach, right on the water, and it had a fresh seal kill. Glaucous gulls were lined up on the snow behind it, waiting for their turn, but knowing that a polar bear is capable of putting away 70 kilograms in one sitting, we realised they may be waiting a while!

We watched the bear pulling at sinew and innards, switching position so that we could view its profile, head and backside in equal measure. It lay one front paw on the seal to steady it and ate, and ate, and ate. We lapped up the sighting, in continuing sunshine as long, low banks of cloud billowed halfway across the mountains behind. We watched the bear move into the water, just the line of its back now visible, before it got out and continued with its meal. The suggestion was put forward that it was a female due to its size, colouring, and the lack of scarring on its face.



Eventually, we pressed on with our planned Zodiac cruise and hit the calm, gorgeous waters of Hamilton Bay. Engulfed by guillemot strewn cliffs to our left that looked as though they'd been lifted straight out of the set of Lord of the Rings, ahead of us was a glacier and to our right, a mountain valley of the softest, most pristine snow we'd ever seen.



Black guillemots sat on tiny pieces of ice, posing beautifully, or graced the clear water around us, their marking just glorious. Directly ahead, two king eiders sat quietly, and as they too took to the water, we silently drifted with them for a while, the Zen Zodiac experience broken, quite rightly so, by the spotting of a bearded seal. It momentarily hauled itself out onto the edge of the remaining fast ice, posed, and then silently disappeared back down into its aqueous world.

We first heard, and then saw, a small avalanche take place high up a mountain before heading over towards small flocks of Arctic terns flying a little way away. We stumbled across a great skua chasing an Arctic skua, both of whom settled on a rock briefly, then took off again, this time mobbing and tumbling through the air with a kittiwake, presumably trying to stress it out in the hope it would regurgitate the contents of its stomach for them to eat. Barnacled geese stood on exposed rocks, just the tops of their necks and heads visible and we glided through hidden channels between low-lying islands, loving the overall experience.

We returned to Sjoveien for lunch and one last look at our previous bear. Thanks to one client, one bear became two, as another was seen lying just up the bank. We weren't going anywhere for a while! Whilst the female walked along the snowbank above the waterline, disappearing behind a snow bank, Christoph suggested that the second bear, not looking as large as the female, could be an older cub, perhaps in its last season with its mother. We didn't stay too much longer in the end, but were officially up to four polar bears and for want of a better expression, were chuffed to bits!

Lunch, although delayed, was delicious. Poor old chef Alan had had two meals on the trot disrupted by bears, and we looked forward to seeing what might turn up during dinner! By 13:00, all spare ribs, spaghetti bolognese, garlic bread and salad had been demolished and we were moving towards the historical site, Virgohamna. It was from here in 1896 and 1897 that three Swedes, Andree, Strindberg and Fraekel, attempted to be the first to reach the North Pole by balloon. We reached their landing site by Zodiac shortly after 15:30 and were greeted by the sound of laughing little auks. We were provided with just a few details about the



expedition and walked along a rocky beach to a monument established for them. Whilst viewing the site, an Arctic fox ran past our Zodiacs that were moored on the beach. We slowly walked towards it and despite it vanishing from view, we came across a washed-up Greenland shark. We took the opportunity to inspect this rarely seen creature of the deep. Its fin was by now just cartilage, but we could see its gills, open mouth and eye socket as our nostrils were assaulted by the rotting stench, akin to a fresh fish market.

We continued our Zodiac cruise, passing a small inlet where no less than 18 harbour seals could be seen looking like stepping stones, propped up in their usual pose on top of rocks. We then crossed over to Smeerenburg, the site of a former whale processing plant, and viewed ten walrus hauled out on the beach. The light was beautiful and strangely, it was raining lightly as we returned to the ship to rest and freshen up before a presentation from Patrik on the Andreas expedition, plus our daily recap and dinner.

Saturday 7 June 2025

Day 7: Krossfjorden, Lilliehookbreen and 14 July Glacier

Weather: overcast, 2 degrees

The only hint of colour in our monochromatic landscape this morning came from the soft baby blue hues of icebergs and the enormous seven-kilometre frontage of Lilliebrookbreen. Almost completely surrounding us, the tail end of the glacier, set against the opalescent light, was stained black by a huge buildup of dust particles and moraine, collected on its journey over millennia.

An optical illusion awaited us as we looked over the side of Sjoveien while we waited to board the Zodiacs at 09:30. It was as though we could see the ocean floor, lined by a blue and white mosaic tiled floor, that in actual fact turned out to be thousands of miniature organisms looking remarkably like jellyfish or frog sporn, known as ctenophores.



The cloud cover was dense and low as we set off listening to the effervescent snap, crackle and pop of air pockets being released from their icy prisons as the early summer melt continued. We approached a small flat piece of ice covered in resting Arctic terns, and they stretched their wings out, gloriously, with us snapping away until a pair of red-throated divers were pointed out overhead. The glacier and its bergs together put on a dazzling show as we rounded ice sculptures of all shapes and sizes.

Kittiwakes came next, a wonderful huddle on them on a larger berg. One in particular stood out for reasons unknown. Standing away from the others and facing the other direction, it was utterly gorgeous, having fluffed its breast feathers right out. We continued, moving along the glacier face, appreciating its towers, crevasses and the odd thunder clap, before passing through brash ice and eventually reaching a series of common eider and barnacle geese covered islets. Arctic and great skuas were bothering them as we looked for kings amongst the eiders but as the males sat, tucking their triangular heads into their feathers against the cold, they looked remarkably like a series of Christmas puddings covering the tundra! Little auks displayed, cocking their tails up and vocalising exuberantly and we took in the scene



before returning home for a warming cuppa and a chicken, beef, curried cauliflower and salad lunch.



We upped anchor and motored down the fjord towards the 14 July Glacier, not far away as the crow flies. Taking the opportunity to rest for an hour or two, we were back in the Zodiacs at 15:00, viewing the ice, taking in another kittiwake-filled berg, and then moving towards the thawed-out tundra slopes, home to our first Svalbard reindeer. White in colour, they sure-footedly grazed on sheer slopes littered with erratics, next to pink-footed and barnacled geese while kittiwakes soared high, high above us, calling repeatedly.

The coastline threw up coves and hidden beaches littered in metamorphic rock, as glacial moraine lay precariously above. This was 'Geology 101', and we were loving it! We were looking for Atlantic puffins amongst the nesting Brunnich's guillemots and were not disappointed. They appeared high on ledges, gazing curiously down at us, and they preened around us on the ocean as rain began to fall. A purple sandpiper put on quite a display, flying like a fighter pilot at speed, then we retraced our steps, stopping to observe the reindeer again as well as ice sculptures galore.



We were pretty damp by now, but just as we pulled up to Sjoveien, a bearded seal popped up and swam towards us. We killed the engine and it came closer and closer, literally passing us, as we grinned at our good fortune. It wasn't over yet, though, as once back on board, a commotion on the ocean had Patrik pointing out a glaucous gull essentially drowning a kittiwake twenty metres or so off our stern.

We gathered in the lounge at 18:00 for a presentation on polar bears from Christoph and an informative hour later, thoroughly enjoyed a BBQ dinner prepared on deck but eaten inside due to the continued rain. A brief interlude involving ABBA's Dancing Queen interrupted dessert (!), after which we chatted until disappearing off to bed. We had one last day here tomorrow and we intended to make the most of this utterly magical realm.

Sunday 8 June 2025

Day 8: Trygghamna, Borebukhta and Isfjorden

Weather: overcast with snow, 0 degrees



Thick cloud cover obscured the mountain tops when we woke up in Trygghamna, off Isfjorden, this morning. The early birds amongst us were treated to an Arctic fox running along the pebble beach that we were anchored next to, as well as a number of reindeer.

It snowed during breakfast, the Oreo cookie coloured tundra even darker when wet, with the horizontal strips of ice left being the filling in between. It began to clear, so we

set off for an extended Zodiac ride with the hope of perhaps landing too. We cruised along the fjord, stopping to observe hundreds of kittiwakes sitting in the snow, with, somewhat strangely, two Arctic skuas amongst them. They were pecking at the snow, perhaps eating algae, and with the melt underway, rivulets were running into the ocean, providing enough fresh water for a bathe and preen in.



We continued, visible peaks directly ahead emulating the Toblerone logo. Beneath them on a long, thin piece of ice, Brunnich's guillemots stood tall, looking very much like penguins. Some swam, some flew, but one thing they all shared was being part of a charismatic scene. A great black-backed gull was added to the species list and we turned around to cruise the rest of the rocky coastline. Across Isfjorden in the distance, mountains stood like dark ginger cake tray bakes dusted in inching sugar and we passed a 'snowlanche', fresh snow falling like a running river far above us.



We came across a walrus lying on top of a rock just offshore, slinking into the water as we passed. Firstly, it looked too young to be on its own, and secondly, the ocean floor here is not sandy, so feeding for molluscs would be hard. The future did not look good for it. Later, as we rounded a cliff at the base of a massive, majestic mountain, searching for a safe and suitable spot to land, the swell prevented us from doing so. We chose a pebble beach ahead instead and walked to an old trapper's hut that can now be rented by those looking for solitude and a weekend break.

As we disembarked the Zodiacs, an Arctic fox was seen scurrying over a series of hillocks in front of us, and we had a lesson in tracking. We identified reindeer and fox tracks and once above the snow line, saw their faeces too. We enjoyed the views from our elevated position and a bearded seal below caught a fish and gulped it down. Having stretched our legs, we returned home in time for our own fish lunch, with chicken, vegetables and salad available too. We then had a few hours downtime in which to relax and pack in readiness for departure tomorrow. Where had the week gone?!

By 14:30 we were at Borebukhta, the location for our final excursion, boarding the Zodiacs for one last time. The silhouettes of Svalbard reindeer dotted the hillsides and king eiders were out in force, flying by en masse as we navigated broken ice, heading towards a vast glacier. Dense chunks hindered our progress and as we started to move to the other side of the bay, towards some remaining fast ice and another glacier, an excited shout of, "Long-tailed skua!" stopped us in our tracks. We looked up and sure enough, there it was. It came towards us, flew away and then returned, passing right over to us. What a beautiful creature. We learnt how incredibly fortunate we were to see it, as there are thought to be a handful of pairs here due to the lack of their favoured prey, lemmings.



We reached the other side of the bay and once again, couldn't penetrate the ice, so we pulled both Zodiacs together to drift quietly, appreciating the view. Fortunately, the sun came out, illuminating the wintry

landscape to perfection, so we decided to take a group photo. This actually proved more difficult than it may seem, but also caused a lot of laughter in the process. Kodak moment, anyone?!

Returning home for the last time, we gathered in the lounge for a final presentation by Christoph, this time on Nansen's incredible attempt to get to the North Pole between 1893-6. A story worthy of Hollywood, he and his men defied the odds, returning home as heroes, despite not reaching their goal.

Afterwards, we raised a glass to toast a simply wonderful week and enjoyed a final dinner of fish with vegetables and mash. Finished off with a chocolate tart and ice cream, our waistlines were certainly ready for a break! We chatted for a while, then hit the hay dreaming of everything we'd seen and experienced thus far.

Monday 9 June 2025

Day 9: Longyearbyen via Oslo to the UK

Weather: overcast with light rain, 1 degree

Breakfast was served at 07:00 and an hour later we said our goodbyes to Christoph, Patrik and our fabulous crew before boarding our private shuttle bus into town. We dropped our checked-in luggage off at a pre-arranged hotel storeroom and then deposited our hired muck boots back. Being a bank holiday, shops and coffee shops were opening later today so we relaxed in the Svalbard Hotel lobby and then went out and explored a little later. We indulged in some souvenir shopping, grabbed a bite to eat and more than a few visited the Husky Cafe on Helen's recommendation. At 13:00, it was time to head to the airport for our flight to Oslo, and once there, our party of 12 became 10. The rest of us connected through to London Heathrow after an adventure epitomised by incredible landscapes, magical wildlife, knowledgeable and passionate guides and superb hospitality.

Thank you, Svalbard, and thank you to the team aboard M/S Sjoveien. Bring on next year!

Checklist for Svalbard Wildlife Expedition



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
	MAMMALS									
1	Beluga whale	<i>Delphinapterus leucas</i>	✓							
2	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	
3	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		✓			✓			
4	Bearded seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Ringed seal	<i>Phoca hispida</i>		✓						
6	Polar bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>		✓			✓			
7	Harp seal	<i>Phoca groenlandica</i>			✓					
8	Arctic fox	<i>Lepus lagopus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
9	Svalbard reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus ptyrhynechus</i>						✓	✓	✓
	BIRDS									
1	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Little auk	<i>Alle alle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Brunnich's guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
7	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
8	King eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
9	Snow bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
10	Glaucous gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
12	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Purple sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		✓					✓	✓
14	Arctic skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Ivory gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>			✓					

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16	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				✓	✓	✓		
17	Red-throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓
18	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					✓	✓	✓	
19	Great black-backed gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>							✓	
20	Long-tailed skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>							✓	
21	Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>								✓
22	Brent goose	<i>Branta bernicla</i>								✓

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