

## Tour Report Svalbard Photo Expedition 3 – 10 May 2024

Walrus



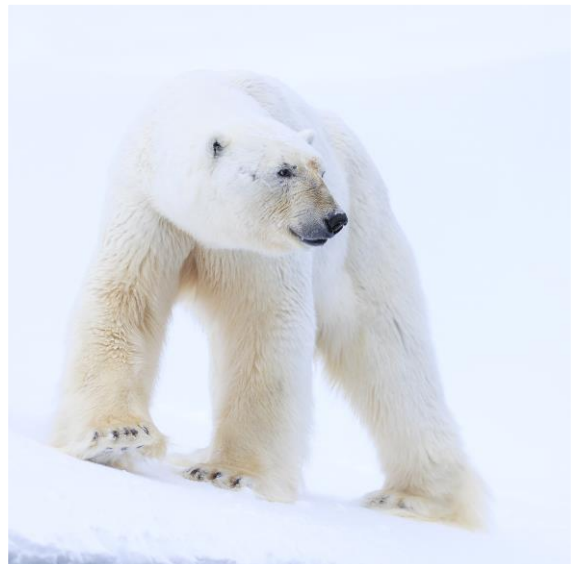
M/S Stockholm



King eider



Polar bear



Compiled by Bret Charman

We exclusively chartered the M/S Stockholm for a week searching for the wildlife of the Arctic and the incredible photographic opportunities they allowed us. We were blessed with some remarkable sightings and the photographs we were able to capture were out of this world.

## **Day 1:**

**Friday 3 May 2024**

Oslo to Longyearbyen, board M/S Stockholm

This morning the group were all flying from Oslo to Longyearbyen where we all meet for the first time. Thankfully, everybody's luggage arrived, and we were soon aboard our transfer into the town centre. Having arranged somewhere to store our luggage, we had a couple of hours free to explore, grab some lunch and enjoy the relatively warm sun.

Early May is a fabulous time to visit Svalbard, with the landscape covered in snow and plenty of ice still along the coastline. This is why we came, hoping to find polar bears, and other Arctic wildlife, in the most magical wintry conditions.

We all reconvened after lunch, collected our luggage, and boarded the bus down to the harbour where we would board the M/S Stockholm. Our expedition team, Christian and Beau, were there to greet us and help us with our luggage before showing us to our cabins and a brief tour around the boat's facilities.

With our luggage unloaded and everyone settling in, it was time for a safety briefing and general introduction to the ship and the crew members who would be making this expedition possible. The M/S Stockholm is a ship full of history and character, but she is incredibly strong and reliable and the perfect platform for an early season voyage such as this.

Our first meal aboard the ship was fantastic and there was a noticeable sense of anticipation for what lay ahead. It was a beautiful evening, but after a long day of travel it was time to settle into our bunks and enjoy a well-earned rest.

## **Day 2:**

**Saturday 4 May 2024**

Kongsfjorden to Fuglefjorden

We awoke to crystal-clear skies and a snow-laden landscape in magical calm waters of Kongsfjorden. You could make out the community of Ny Alesund, nestled on the edge of the fjord, while northern fulmars followed the ship as we worked our way through the icy waters. The ship worked its way into an ice-covered bay where a flock of king eiders made a flyby and a couple of harbour seals were hauled out on the ice floes.

After a fabulous start to the day, we sat down for our first breakfast of the voyage. What a feast it was! Hot food, continental and fruits meant we were well-fuelled for the day ahead, as well as plenty of tea and coffee. The expedition leaders explained the day's itinerary which included a Zodiac cruise after breakfast. We kitted up, putting on our survival suits and our life jackets before meeting on deck full of excitement.

Zodiac cruises are one of the absolute highlights of any Arctic expedition and we were blessed with perfect conditions for our first venture out. With only 5 people plus our expedition guides on each Zodiac, we had plenty of space for photography. We cruised along the edge of the water, enjoying our first close-up views of black guillemots, common eiders, and glaucous gull, as well as a distant great skua. The best moment was yet to come, we parked the Zodiacs on the ice-edge and were able to alight on foot. Walking on fast ice is absolutely incredible and a unique experience few ever get to experience. What made it even more magical was that the M/S Stockholm was able to approach the edge of the ice and park behind us, allowing some amazing group photos. It was something that the group will remember for years to come. What an incredible start to the expedition.



After such an amazing morning exploring Kongsfjorden, it was time to set sail further north, making the most of the fantastic weather. There was also the matter of lunch which was yet another fabulous meal (a recurring theme aboard this wonderful ship).

We sailed up the west coast of Spitsbergen toward the sheltered waters of Fuglfjorden. The sail up the coastline was spectacular. The light at this time of year is exceptional. Combining the light with the natural beauty of the snow-covered peaks, it is little wonder that people return to this wilderness time and time again.

The whole time we were at sail, someone was keeping an eye out for polar bear and any other wildlife of interest. As the sun lowered in the sky (it never sets at this time of year), we enjoyed a fine dinner before enjoying the comforts of the lounge. With another action-packed day lined up, the group soon retired to their cabins.

### **Day 3:**

**Sunday 5 May 2024**

80.7° North to Coast of Nordaustlandet

Another fabulous day in the High Arctic and we awoke to a world of ice. Overnight we had sailed north-east up toward the sea ice where we hoped to maximise our chance of finding polar bears and maybe some seals hauled out on the ice. We worked our way along the edge of the ice, navigating through small openings in the ice, finding polar bear tracks, but no bear presented itself. Spending a day in the ice is breathtaking, particularly on a small ship.



Scanning every which way, just hoping to glimpse that off-coloured white of a bear, we saw both Brunnich's and black guillemots, black-legged kittiwake, northern fulmar, and even ivory gull. As the day progressed the slightly overcast conditions cleared, and it turned into a beautiful afternoon and evening. What a privilege to be so far north (arguably the most northerly surface vessel on Earth) in such a pristine environment.



We continued north-east to the Seven Islands, situated off the north coast of Nordaustlandet where we parked the ship on the edge of the ice. A set of Arctic fox tracks lined a fissure in the ice, but the small canid was nowhere to be seen. It was still and the lower sun made for some magical scenes. Surrounded by pancake ice and a stunning backdrop, it was a landscape photographer's dream.

What a fabulous way to spend an evening. Completely on our own in this remote corner of Svalbard, there is a feeling that is hard to put into words. A sense of isolation. A magical quality which few ever get to encounter.

The evening wasn't done though. We started to make our way south, following the fjords and bays along the north-west coast of Nordaustlandet. The expedition guides spotted a very distant Arctic fox, but it was far too distant for photography, and it was moving fast. As we approached an area of fast ice (ice attached to the shore), I noticed something that didn't seem to fit in this white world. It was very small, but through the shimmer caused by the cold air over the water, I swore it moved. The scopes were deployed, and we changed our course – it was our first bear!

Most of the group were in the lounge, but a few had already retired to their cabins. We informed them of what we had seen and surprised them by telling them we were to head out on the Zodiacs and see if we could get a better look. The speed at which the group were kitted up was incredible and it wasn't long before we were out on the Zodiacs, slowly making our approach. As we made our way towards the bear, we left plenty of distance and let the bear choose whether to make an approach.



We thought we had lucked out as the bear walked along the coastline, seemingly unfazed by our Zodiacs. We headed further along the coastline, hoping the bear would continue its path and we would be rewarded with more wonderful photographic opportunities. Little did we know what just lay in store.



Christian and Beau parked the Zodiac bows on the frozen shore, with the outboards running in case we needed to move away. As we sat there, the anticipation built. Suddenly, over the snow-clad rocks, we saw some movement and the bear proceeded to roam towards us. Simultaneously we all seemed to hold our breath. There, right before us, was a fully-grown male polar bear. Everybody, in tandem, was photographing this once in a lifetime encounter.

I think we all had to pinch ourselves. Was this really happening? How did we get so lucky. All the while, the shutters fired, and the group gorged themselves on

world-class photographic opportunities.

In a better position, we could now make out the large wound on his shoulder. Luckily, it seemed to be clean, and he seemed totally unfazed. We hoped this wouldn't hinder him too much as he headed north toward the sea-ice. As he walked along the coast, he briefly stopped and looked at us, allowing us to capture some incredible portraits.

The bear continued to walk northwards, and we decided, having had the most wonderful encounter, to leave it be and head back to the ship. Everybody was elated, adrenaline flowed through veins and the joy was apparent on everybody's faces. It was now well after 11pm and as the adrenaline wore off, the group revelled in the evening's encounter.





As I sat on the bridge with the Christian and Beau, we headed into the next fjord and couldn't believe it when we spotted another bear. It was now well after midnight, and we parked the ship's bow into the fast ice. This bear was fast asleep and at quite a distance, and so we decided to call it a night and head to our cabins. The crew said that if a bear appeared, or the one that was there made any sort of approach, they would ensure we would be alerted.

**Day 4:**

**Monday 6 May 2024**

Wahlenbergfjorden & the Hinlopen Strait

This morning, we had planned to sail across to the bird cliffs at Alkfjellet in the Hinlopen Strait, but dislodged fast ice forced us to change our intentions. Although the Brunnich's guillemots wouldn't yet be nesting, we had hoped they would all be gathered on the open water underneath the cliffs. Instead, we headed across the strait to Wahlenbergfjorden, hoping the cliffs may be free from ice in the afternoon.

Exploring the bays along the northern coast of Wahlenbergfjorden, we were treated to exceptional views of the icecap that covers the island's north-west. It was here that we found polar bear number three (a very distant bear) and bear number 4. The fourth bear was working her way along the fast ice in front of a section of icecap that met the sea. There were several seals hauled out on the ice, obviously having holes where they could easily access the safety of the water. She could clearly smell the seals and started to make a slow but determined approach. Most of the seals disappeared before the bear was anywhere close to making an attempt to hunt them, and so the bear lowered itself to the ice, seemingly trying to ambush a seal that came back up.



There was still a lone seal hauled out on the ice a couple of hundred yards away from the bear. Rather unexpectedly, the bear made a high-speed dash for the seal, and it was clear very early on it wouldn't be

successful. The seal simply slipped away into the water and the bear was left frustrated by its failure. And so, we spent the next couple of hours, watching and waiting, hoping that the bear would become inquisitive and make an approach. Alas, on this occasion, we had to be content with what we had already witnessed – still an amazing sight.

The ice hadn't cleared up around Alkfjellet and so, with quite a lot of water to cover, we decided to set sail a little earlier than originally planned. We were heading north-west towards Moffen Island. This rather barren, low-lying island is usually home to a walrus haul out and we hoped we would arrive there first thing in the morning. As per usual, we were incredibly well looked after by all the crew with sumptuous meals and drinks readily available as and when required.

**Day 5:**  
Moffen Island & Woodfjorden

**Tuesday 7 May 2024**

We awoke to another fine morning with the announcement that we had arrived at Moffen Island. Better yet, there were around 20 walrus resting on the island and several others feeding in the surrounding waters. The photographic opportunities were limited but rewarding. It was hard to do justice to the group resting ashore unless you went for a panoramic-style image or alternatively an environmental shot. The light this morning was exceptional and with some ice behind the walrus, it made for a magnificent scene.



Having spent around an hour with the walrus here, it was time to head south-west and back toward the coastline of northern Svalbard. We were served another delicious breakfast as we set sail once more. It wasn't long until we came across more walrus hauled out on ice floes, providing more photographic opportunities as we slowly cruised by.

Our target for the afternoon was Woodfjorden and we made good time in the calm waters in this mind-blowingly beautiful landscape. The ship parked itself on the edge of the fast ice once again and this in turn allowed us to scan for more polar bears. Surrounded by polar tracks we were hopeful that we might be rewarded with another memorable sighting.

It wasn't long before Christian, using a high-powered spotting scope, found two very distant bears. They were not photographable, but it was lovely to have seen two more of these magnificent predators in this vast wilderness.

As we sat in the ice, sheltered from the wind which was starting to hit the island's west coast, it allowed





those that wanted to and opportunity to climb the mast and enjoy the magical views from the ships crow's nest. All I can say is that it was yet another privilege to experience the epic views and isolation. This is the magic of a small ship charter. Not only do you have complete control (working with the expedition team and skipper), but you enjoy the frozen wilderness as it should be. There is no noise pollution, nobody else around and you feel like you're temporarily inhabiting a pristine landscape filled with some incredible wildlife.

One of the distant bears spotted disappeared out of sight and we gambled that they may well cross the low-lying mountains to the next fjord. With that in mind, we set sail for Raudfjorden. It would be here where we planned to spend the night anchored on the edge of the fast ice. This would also mean that we would avoid the worst of the wind and enjoy a calm night in our very comfortable bunks.

We all settled down for a night's sleep, after another fantastic day, when the call went up for polar bear at just after midnight. There was a beautiful female bear walking towards the boat on the fast ice. She was walking right toward us and so we woke up the

group. Typically, she decided at that point to hide behind some protruding ice and disappear out of view. With a bear nearby, everybody waited and finally their patience was rewarded. The bear reappeared from behind the ice around 1am and walked diagonally past the ship. There was no way we could launch the Zodiacs and so we just enjoyed this magnificent sighting from the comfort of M/S Stockholm.

The bear continued to wander away from us, in the direction we were heading in the morning, and so we decided to leave her in peace and head back to bed.



**Day 6:**  
Moffen Island & Woodfjorden

**Wednesday 8 May 2024**

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Having managed to dodge the worst of the storm, the ship managed to stay anchored in the same spot overnight. First thing, some of the group were lucky enough to enjoy an Arctic fox as it trotted across the fast ice, right past the ship. There was also an inquisitive young walrus which came to have a closer look at us, providing some fun photographic opportunities.

We didn't set sail, from the spot where the polar bear left us, until after breakfast. Our plan for the day was to work our way round westward, exploring each bay and fjord as we tried to find more wildlife. I think, deep-down, we all hoped we would find the same bear again, but on this occasion, it wasn't to be. Instead, we enjoyed some exceptional views of the spectacular glaciers, particularly at the end of Fuglefjorden.

We continued to Smeerenburgfjorden where there were a couple of walrus were hauled out on the icy shore. The afternoon was passing by, and we made the decision to undertake a Zodiac cruise to see if we could get closer to the walrus. Well, we struck gold once again and enjoyed a sublime encounter with first rate photography. The two males were completely relaxed with our presence as we worked our way around them both, leaving plenty of room to avoid disturbing them.



To enjoy such prolonged and rewarding encounters with such large marine mammals is always a joy. You really can't grasp just how big they are until you're off the ship and down at eye level with them. It's one of those times where you just have to pinch yourself and remember that these are wild animals in their Arctic home. To top it off, we enjoyed a brief minke whale encounter as we headed back toward the ship.



We returned to Stockholm and our dinner was waiting for us. What another gastronomic delight. There are not enough words in the world to describe the quality of the food on board the ship. The level of detail in every element of the service from the ships crew to the expedition team is absolutely out of this world. Everybody went above and beyond to make everything run seamlessly. As we tucked into this culinary masterclass, we were under sail once again, returning to Fuglefjorden as the weather was meant to be improving all the while.

illuminating the magnificent glacier. It was time for what would turn out to be our last Zodiac cruise of the expedition, but it was certainly one to remember. Having boarded the Zodiacs, we made our way toward the glacier front, weaving through the maze of icebergs which had calved from the wall of ice that lay before us. It wasn't just the fascinating shapes and forms of the ice that kept us intrigued, black-legged kittiwake, glaucous gull and black guillemot all posed for us on this mesmerising evening.

Arriving in the fjord, the conditions were magical. The evening sun was filtering through scattered clouds and

Continuing along, running parallel to the front of the glacier, we rounded a small island and found a flock of king eiders. Luckily, they flew right by us and provided the group with some incredible shots. What luck!





What a fabulous evening to be able to be out on the water, enjoying the very best of what Svalbard has to offer. It wasn't over yet though as we had the opportunity to make a landing to the side of the glacier and revel in what had so far proved to be a trip which no superlative could ever do justice.

After a wonderful evening it was time to head back to the ship for our long voyage back down the west coast to Longyearbyen. We were expecting a decent swell and so we headed to bed where we could rest before our final day of the expedition.



**Day 7:**

Forlandsundet &amp; St Jonsfjorden

**Thursday 9 May 2024**

Having enjoyed a calmer night than expected we managed to enter the strait of Forlandsundet. We were unsure as to whether the channel would be free of ice as the week before it was entirely frozen. As luck would have it, we were able to chart a path through the ice – the first ship of the year to do so.



We were well sheltered in the ice-laden strait, avoiding any potential swell rolling in from the Atlantic. As we sailed, we constantly scanned for any signs of life. There was the odd walrus, while gulls and fulmars were also on the wing, but we never saw any sign of a polar bear.

Continuing our journey southwards, we cleared the ice and crossed the strait to St Jonsfjorden where we enjoyed a lunch sheltered from the swell. We had arguably our best view of Svalbard reindeer in the fjord, but they weren't overly cooperative and with the strong winds we were unable to launch the Zodiacs to get any closer.

It was a wonderful place to explore and search for bears, but again to no avail. Instead, it was time to set sail once again as we hoped to moor in Longyearbyen this evening. We made fantastic progress, enjoying a fabulous last dinner aboard the Stockholm.

This was certainly a voyage that I will remember for a long time to come. We were blessed with remarkably favourable conditions and the photographic opportunities were truly exceptional. It's rare that weather and wildlife come together in perfect harmony, but this was certainly one of those times. We had our end of

voyage drinks and a huge thanks were said to all those involved in making this trip such a massive success.

**Day 8:**

Longyearbyen to Oslo

**Friday 10 May 2024**

This morning, we awoke to a very different scene. Docked at the jetty in Longyearbyen, we were suddenly in civilisation. The chef prepared our final breakfast, and we were all a little quiet. We had enjoyed some of the most remarkable wildlife encounters of my career and the photography opportunities were out of this world.

With heavy hearts, it was time to say goodbye to the M/S Stockholm and the superb crew. We offloaded our bags onto a trolley and made our way along the jetty to the waiting bus. Within a few minutes we found ourselves in the centre of Longyearbyen. We had a couple of hours before we needed to head to the airport and the group split up. Some of us headed for the sanctuary of the husky café, while others found delight in photographing the resident reindeer. Upon arrival at the airport, everybody checked in and we caught our flights back to Oslo. The flight departed as scheduled, landing in Oslo without a hitch.

With many members of the group travelling home at different times, we said our goodbyes and promised to keep in touch. It goes without saying that many incredible memories were made and I'm sure they will be cherished for many years to come.

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