

Tour Report Svalbard Wildlife Expedition 23 May - 01 June 2024

Svalbard reindeer



Walrus



Polar bear



Brunnich's guillemots



Compiled by Helen Bryon

Our inaugural Svalbard Wildlife Cruise and private charter of the small ship, M/S Sjoveien proved to be a winner! Travelling in late May, our itinerary was deliberately loose as it would be dictated by the weather and the movement of pack ice in particular. During our seven-night voyage, we explored the fjords of the west and north coast of Svalbard's largest island, Spitsbergen, reaching 79 degrees north. Following the ice edge at all times on a constant quest for wildlife, our group of 12 had the use of two Zodiacs, manned by our superb Expedition Leader, Christian and Naturalist Guide, Gary. Their skill and experience got us as close to the action as possible without interfering with natural behaviour. The drawer card for the destination is undoubtedly polar bear, and we were fortunate to view five individuals, two sightings of which were quite frankly sensational. In addition, we saw walrus, a variety of seals, minke whale, Arctic fox, Svalbard reindeer and wonderful bird life. It would be an understatement to say that our expectations were well and truly exceeded. We visited and learnt about early polar exploration, too, as we traversed ever-changing and astounding scenery. There is a vast, desolate beauty to this stunning archipelago and travelling as part of a small ship expedition is the way to go!

Day 1:

Thursday 23 May 2024

London Heathrow to Oslo

Sunny with cloud, 23 degrees (at our destination)

Whilst four of the group had flown out ahead to explore Oslo, tour leader Helen met the other seven at the Heathrow departure gate. Pushing back on time, we landed in Oslo at 18:50 and, within half an hour, were within receipt of our bags and walking to our overnight accommodation at the Radisson Red. Comfortable and contemporary, it is located opposite the terminal building making it an ideal stopover option. We met in the lobby for drinks and dinner at 20:30 after which we enjoyed an early night.

Day 2:

Friday 24 May 2024

Oslo to Longyearbyen, board M/S Sjoveien, traverse Isfjorden

Overcast, clearing to sunshine, -2 degrees

We were in the lobby at 07:00 ready to walk back to the airport in time for our non-stop flight to Longyearbyen. Just two hours 55 minutes later, and we were in the Arctic! Walking across the tarmac to a winter wonderland, we breathed in the fresh, clean air and took in the snow-covered mountains around us. We were not due to board our vessel until 16:00, so we were dropped off in town, leaving our luggage at the Svalbard Hotel Polfareren, before setting off on foot to explore. Passing reindeer grazing next to skidoos, some of us visited the Svalbard Museum whilst others had a spot of lunch and enjoyed some shopping. At 15:00, those of us who had hired knee-high rubber muck boots for the voyage were able to collect them from an office a short walk away where we were greeted by two huskies outside. A few hugs and belly rubs later and we were being transferred to the wharf to board M/S Sjoveien.

Walking onto the ship, we were met on arrival by Expedition Leader Christian and Naturalist Guide Gary, who provided a quick tour of the communal areas before taking us to our en suite cabins. First impressions were hugely positive! We met shortly thereafter in the lounge for an introduction to life onboard and were taken through a series of safety briefings including a fitting of our individual (and very toasty) flotation devices and life jackets. We were taken through weather, wind and ice maps as we traversed Isfjorden in a westerly direction and learnt of our proposed itinerary (which is subject to conditions) over the next few days. We then had a little time to unpack and settle in before a champagne toast to celebrate the journey ahead followed by a delicious three-course dinner at 19:00. Consisting of creamy pumpkin soup, chicken fricasse with vegetables and cheesecake or fruit (a variety of dietary requirements can be catered for), it was absolutely lovely.

During our meal we continued west, coming into Dicksonfjorden bathed in bright sunshine despite the late hour. Christian disappeared on spotting duty and just as we were considering perhaps hitting the hay, he returned to say that he'd spotted something and did we want to come outside for a look. It couldn't be, could it? Grabbing our binoculars, we dashed outside, hearts in our mouths, and Christian showed us where to look. On the ice in the distance, he pointed out a speck that he described as a 'pixel bear'. He asked if we wanted to jump in the zodiacs for a closer look. Of course, we did! Donning all of our gear, we

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left at 21:00 scarcely believing our luck.

Conditions were calm and clear with no wind as we manoeuvred around small icebergs to get closer to our target. Two reindeer were beautifully illuminated on a snowy crest and the polar bear lay closer to the shoreline facing us, sound asleep. We pulled up as close as the ice and incredibly shallow water would let us get to him and watched him from 600 metres away. A pair of glaucous gulls mating to our port side and a black guillemot, its beautiful, bright red legs conspicuous in the crystal clear water caught our attention, but really, we just had eyes for the bear. Suddenly one front paw was lifted high into the air as he stretched it out slowly and luxuriously (an action that looked very much like a wave when captured on film)! He repeated the action with his hind paws and moved onto his back. Yawning, he lay, legs akimbo, and we watched him stretch a few more times before returning to the important business of slumber. We'd woken up yesterday in our own beds and now here we were experiencing this. Talk about brilliant...and talk about savouring the opportunity to make hay while the sun shines!

We didn't know how long it would be before the bear moved again so we decided to more closely inspect the icebergs around us. Spotting shapes in them, akin to what is often done with clouds, we saw rhino bergs, ET and a Michelin man doing a yoga warrior pose! With the main attraction still stationary and the wind picking up, we returned to Sjoveien at 10:10. A few gathered in the lounge to animatedly discuss a superb first evening whilst others turned in, aware that as we were at anchor here, we could be woken at any time during the night if the bear decided to move. Half an hour later the bear walked slightly to his left and ate from a previously unseen carcass. The few of us still up watched from the (open) bridge until forcing ourselves to retire at 23:30. What a start. What a day!

Day 3:

Saturday 25 May 2024

Isfjorden including Ekmarfjorden, Yoldia-bukta & Borebukta
Sunny then overcast with snow, -5 degrees

Most of us were awake and preparing for the day when we received a knock on the door at 06:50 advising that the bear was up and that we should prepare ourselves for a pre-breakfast Zodiac excursion pronto. We didn't need telling twice! Throwing on our flotation suits and muck boots, we gathered in no time at all at the stern and set off in his direction. He had barely moved (sorry, not sorry!) during the night and we could see his rather marvellous backside as he had his head down away from us, tucked into his kill. Occasionally, he'd lift his head to give us a profile view, and what a handsome profile it was! The ice had moved during the night making it difficult to get close to him once again in the increasingly shallow water. We therefore had to stop some distance away to watch him through our binoculars but it simply didn't matter. The sun was shining brightly (as, of course, it had been all night), the scenery was stupendous, and we had our eyes on a bear. We were as happy as Larry as we returned to tuck into the most beautiful breakfast platter of cold meat, smoked salmon, cheese, bread, pastries, croissants, bacon and eggs, fresh fruit, olives, cereals and more. We certainly weren't going to go hungry on this trip!

Afterwards, we set off from Dicksonfjorden heading east along the ice edge, gathering on top of the bridge to gaze with wonder at the impressive scenery surrounding us and at the edge of the fast ice beneath (ice that is connected to land). It was covered in Brunnich's guillemots who, when standing upright, look very much like penguins of the north. Ringed seals were specks in the distance beneath 'The Coliseum' (an aptly named mountain in Ekmarfjorden) and northern fulmars washed in the ocean, holding their wings aloft as they ducked their heads beneath oncoming waves in a distinctly caterpillar-like motion. Reindeer were spotted atop a distant ridge, and sometime later, Helen shouted "Walrus!" With tusks hooked onto a piece of ice, keeping just its head visible, a lone individual disappeared beneath the waves to appear again intermittently. After a few minutes, it turned away from us, arched its back (showing a huge girth as it did so) and under it went. We kept a lookout for it coming up to breathe three or four minutes later but no luck, it had disappeared.

At 10:00, we met up in the lounge for Gary to deliver an hour-long introduction to the birds of Svalbard which was highly informative. The weather closed in whilst he was talking, so we wrapped up well before heading back outside armed with our newly found knowledge, able to now identify the species around us.

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A hearty lunch required sleeping off by some of the group whilst others nattered in the lounge, getting to know each other, going through natural history books from the small onboard library and exchanging facts about creatures we hoped to see. The cloud cover lowered further, and it snowed steadily as we reached Borebukta, searching the ice for signs of life. King eider and great skua were added to our bird list and Christian then spotted walrus far off our bow. We hit the bridge deck as we cautiously approached, gliding ever closer to what turned out to be three colossal beasts. They lay closely together on the edge of the ice, lifting their heads and pectoral flippers now and then before settling back down again. We pulled up a respectful distance away and some fifteen minutes later, one of them slowly inched towards the water, lay down flat and then smoothly descended to the depths.

Continuing our journey, we enjoyed another presentation at 17:00 from Gary, this time on polar bears. We were then taken through our itinerary for tomorrow, as always, accessing the latest wind and weather maps to see the best course of action, and we planned to head north towards Lilliehook Glacier. After more time out on deck scanning for wildlife, we reconvened for dinner (sirloin steak with chips, mushrooms and vegetable tempura) and shortly thereafter departed Isfjorden. The sheer cliffs of the surrounding mountains held no ice at their base, so we were quite close to them, and it was undoubtedly majestic. As we rounded Alkhornet, a herd of reindeer saw us off as we turned north. We'd been warned it may be choppy, so we retired to bed to be lulled to sleep by the movement of the waves.

Day 4:

Sunday 26 May 2024

Krossfjorden, Lilliehook Glacier and Mollerfjorden

Snowy and overcast, clearing later, -2 degrees

Waking up in Krossfjorden, we dropped anchor during breakfast. It was snowing, and visibility was limited, but there was very little wind in our sheltered position, so at 09:15, suited and booted with extra socks, gloves and balaclavas on, we set off on a Zodiac excursion to explore Lilliehook Glacier. The cloud cover was low as we manoeuvred through freshwater icebergs, the result of previous calvings from the glacier, and we were immediately struck by their fantastic blue hues. Turquoise, mint green and baby blue, the colouring was no doubt heightened by the black, white and grey environment in which we found ourselves. We approached the eastern end of the impressive nine-kilometre glacier and its 40-metre high snout loomed above us. We cruised along in silence, words not required in this cathedral of nature. As we moved towards a series of super blue bergs, we noticed the head of a ringed seal moving from right to left ahead of us. It stopped and looked at us briefly before ducking under. Whilst waiting for it to re-appear (it didn't), we noticed moraine and rocks upended and trapped in their icy prison. We listened to the sound of air bubbles exploding from the bergs. Helen mentioned that on her last visit, she had likened it to the sound of 'snap, crackle and pop' from the former Rice Crispies advert. Thankfully the Zodiac agreed and didn't think she was utterly bonkers (yet)!

We began to hear thunder-like rumbles as the glacier creaked and groaned under its own weight, its icy depths twisting and turning on its tortured pre-destined route to the ocean. We cut the engine to take in the scene, the quiet only disturbed by the chattering of little auks in the distance. As we drifted closer towards them, they took off, their wings beating a rhythm as they went. After our 'Zen Zodiac' moment, we motored towards Brunnich's guillemots standing typically upright on more bergs. Some flew off at our approach, but others obligingly stayed, and we clicked away, capturing the moment. More bird activity became evident as the cloud cover lifted, revealing more and more of the glacier as well as the mountains around us. It was stunning. We'd been out for one and a half hours and just as our toes were beginning to feel the chill, we returned to Sjoveien for welcome and warming mugs of hot chocolate.

After lunch at 12:30 (lasagne and salad), we were encouraged to head to the bow for the next hour or two to enjoy the scenery. We wrapped up well and during the early part of the afternoon, passed a mountain known as the 'Viking Ship' and surveyed the eastern arms of the fjord. Hugging bays dwarfed by high cliffs shrouded in atmospheric cloud, we came across king eider, our first Atlantic puffins and large flocks of little auks gathering on the water before their breeding season. We kept to the warmth of the bridge as we passed through Mayerbukta, watching puffins seemingly running across the water at our approach...one even 'tobogganing' across a stretch of ice to our delight. They proved to be as popular and endearing as ever.

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We had hoped to land mid-afternoon, but poor visibility moved us on to Plan B (this happens a lot so flexibility is key), which was a visit to 14 July Glacier. Despite the presence of numerous king eider there, continuing snow and the rising waves thwarted our plans of a Zodiac cruise so we decided to cross over to an opposite bay, Ebeltoftbukta, to try our luck there. As we did so, the sun broke through, blue sky appeared, and the emerging landscape proved to be simply awe-inspiring. Pristine snow-capped mountains were bathed in beautiful light and reindeer walked across the ice edge in front of us.

We took full advantage of the new conditions, jumped in the Zodiacs and took off to inspect the frozen carcass of a walrus lying on its back next to the beach, tusks clearly visible above the ice. Further along the bay, we came across a lone ruddy turnstone and then we experienced our first landing. The Zodiacs were skilfully manoeuvred onto the ice, were secured by anchors, and we hopped over the sides to walk on water, frozen water, of course. Christian and Gary hit the ice ahead of us with their paddles to ensure it was firm and we followed in their footsteps. This was a novelty for most of us and two of us couldn't resist doing snow angels! The landscape was beyond beautiful. We were in a wide bowl-shaped bay and whilst behind us the sky was dark grey, moody and threatening with the odd creamy mountainscape breaking through, ahead of us it was clear with pristine, blinding white snow basking in bright sunshine. What a contrast. A single ruddy turnstone busied itself around us, attracting our attention with its beautiful song. We didn't walk far but it was great to stretch our legs, and by 18:30, we were back on Sjoveien having had a wonderful day.

Dinner was served as usual at 19:00 (mushroom soup, salmon and a creamy berry whip) and a few of us had G&Ts or vodka and tonics with glacial ice collected earlier by Christian. Afterwards, we gathered in the lounge to go through the plan for tomorrow which consisted of rounding the north-western part of Spitsbergen in a hopefully wildlife-rich area. Little did we know what was coming...

Day 5:

Monday 27 May 2024

North-west Spitsbergen

Sunshine, clouding over later -1 degrees

Three hours. Two zodiacs. One polar bear.

Sometimes you are in the right place at the right time. Sometimes the stars align. And sometimes, just sometimes, the wildlife gods look upon you so favourably that you experience one of the greatest wildlife spectacles you may ever have. Today was one of those days.

Trying to find the words to describe the events of that morning has been hard. Very hard. The day dawned innocently enough with Virgoamna's jagged peaks glistening to perfection in bright, gorgeous sunshine. Icebergs and clouds were perfectly reflected under the blue sky and there was not a breath of wind. The ocean was flat calm, and we were due to board the Zodiacs at 09:00. Due to a tasty morsel of information delivered after breakfast, however, that a stationary polar bear had been spotted on a nearby island, we gathered unsurprisingly early, chomping at the bit to get going. Once on the water, we were told where the bear was, but despite scanning with care through our binoculars, we just couldn't see him. Finally, his great creamy bulk became evident and we could distinguish him from his icy environment.

As we approached quietly in tandem, he was lying in the snow amongst rocks close to the shore. Facing us, his head was resting on his front paws and he lifted it to look at us. He sniffed the air, showing his profile and we could see his breath. He lay down fully again, rubbing his face in the snow and nibbling at ice crystals, seemingly unconcerned at our arrival. We held our position some way off from him and after a few minutes, he stood up. Appearing unsteady on his feet, he changed position to lay down again in a comical spatchcock position...it must be cooling! He continued to rub his head in the snow and we noticed he had a little colour between his eyes and down the bridge of his nose. Slowly, deliberately, and with great care, he began to lick his colossal paws, his dark tongue probing carefully between each claw. Every now and again he rested his great head before continuing to preen. He shifted onto his side and stretched out, facing us, and proceeded to snooze. He was magnificent. We watched him in awe and we correctly assumed that he must have a kill.

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A few metres to the right of him, blending into the rocks, was an old walrus carcass. It was doubtful that he had killed it himself as it looked quite weather-beaten, but there was plenty of it left.

Christian and Gary estimated him to be around seven or eight years old and he looked in wonderful condition. As he lay unmoving for some minutes, we decided to leave him to his slumber, intending to return later, and we moved on to get a closer look at some harbour seals balancing on rocks in a bay beyond him. Quietly negotiating turquoise blue icebergs to get to them, they too appeared relaxed in our presence and we watched as a fourth one approached the group, swimming up and down alongside them.

Returning to the bear, he had moved and was now lying closer to the walrus, directly facing it. He gently got to his feet, approached the carcass, and then bypassed it walking towards the island edge beyond. We repositioned the Zodiacs to maintain a full view of him and when he put his head down to sniff the ocean, we backed away softly, maintaining a respectful distance and giving him the space he deserved in case he entered the water. He maintained his stance on the boulder, all four paws together in a pose akin to the Fox's Glacier Mint bear. He sniffed the air and we waited to see what he would do next. Out of nowhere, using his left paw he swiped the boulder with a thump (the strength!), dislodging a piece of ice from it and proceeded to crunch it in his jaws. He stood there for an age, perfectly reflected in the still water below, and we just couldn't believe our luck.

In his own time, he walked towards the kill, giving his derrière a little shake as he went, and we could now see that he'd eaten more of the walrus than we had initially thought. His head disappeared inside a large hole in the carcass and we could see it moving around under the skin. Tearing off chunks of meat, he swallowed them when emerging, his dark tongue licking his lips. The whole carcass moved as he tugged and pulled at it until he used a paw to stabilise it. The girth of his neck was huge. When he'd had enough, he returned to the cooling patch of snow, lay down and rubbed his now filthy face in the snow once again.

Realising he'd given us a superb show yet again, we decided to leave him to it, and we moved the Zodiacs to Danskoya (Dane's Island), not too far away. It was from here in July 1897 that Andree, Strindberg and Fraenkel set off in a hydrogen balloon hoping to reach the North Pole. It was only a few days into their journey when they crash-landed intentionally (for safety reasons) shy of their destination. They were never heard of again until 33 years later when remnants of their expedition were found on the island of Kvitoya. We now know through their diaries and photographs that they spent 88 days moving south through pack ice trying to find dry land and stores that they had set up in advance. They never made it, perishing in October of the same year. How they died remains a mystery but, as with so many polar explorers, their story has captured the imagination of many.

Passing our bear island on our way back to Sjoveien afterwards, we noticed that he was once again standing above the carcass and we just couldn't resist going back for a final look at him. This proved to be a fortuitous decision as having eaten his fill once again, he walked down to the island's edge and proceeded straight into the shallows as we passed. He walked in to stomach level, stuck his head under the water and walked along the bottom. When he looked up, he had kelp in his mouth. Shaking himself dry, he ate the kelp and then lowered his head going in for more. He did this a number of times, perhaps needing the roughage after his protein-heavy meal, and we just watched gobsmacked (for want of a better word)! Our heads just kept shaking and our grins just kept widening as we tried to take in everything we had seen this morning. It was midday before we were back onboard. We had been so, so fortunate and for the rest of the day (make that the trip!), we tried to process the enormity of the sighting.

We upped anchor and continued our passage through the north-west islands in an easterly direction. Off our port side to the north, pack ice could be seen on the horizon while Atlantic puffins and black guillemots rested on the ocean ahead. We arrived at Fuglesangen (the literal translation is 'bird song') where the scree slopes were alive with thousands upon thousands of little auks arriving at their breeding grounds. Swooping at speed in a murmuration style, they swarmed like mosquitoes this way and that occasionally settling on both rocks and the snow itself. There was an audible hum from the cliffs as we scoured them keenly, searching for opportunistic Arctic fox. They eluded us for now, so we pressed on, watching incredible cloudscapes before reaching scenic Hamiltonbukta (Hamilton Bay) flanked by the Hamilton Glacier at

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around 15:30.

By 16:00 we were watching a bearded seal try to disguise itself as a turtle (just a small portion of its head and back were visible above the water) as we boarded the Zodiacs once again and headed towards rafts of Brunnich's guillemots floating on the calm black ocean as black-legged kittiwakes soared above. We gravitated towards the water's edge, listening to the distinct calls of the two species and again, searching unsuccessfully for fox. We landed briefly and Christian suggested five minutes of silence to fully appreciate our surroundings. Some of us sat in the snow, others lay in it and others remained on the Zodiacs as we lost ourselves in our thoughts. Later, and following the ice edge once more, we came across a group of eider ducks and beyond, seals in the far distance (too far away to be identified). Behind us, the sky turned peachy sepia and we navigated through a small series of islands, the snow cover overlaying the surface rock like an extended roof. Returning to Sjoveien close to 18:00, we warmed up in the lounge before our prawn cocktail, pork and ice cream dinner.

The stunning scenery and huge gatherings of seabirds in Raudfjorden saw most of us on the bridge for the rest of the evening viewing our one and only Arctic Skua of the trip and a few minke whales too. As we left the fjords to continue across the top of Spitsbergen heading east, we headed to bed grateful for a simply stupendous day.

Day 6:

Tuesday 28 May 2024

Mushamna & Liefdefjorden

Overcast, -1 degrees

It was our kind of wake-up call this morning when, at 05:18, there was a knock on the door followed by the words, "Polar bear!" Shooting out of bed, we had toothbrushes in hand when another knock a few minutes later said, "Make that a polar bear with a cub!" We were soon on the bridge, and there, off the port side of the bow, were two cream specks just above a snow cliff that, through the binoculars, did indeed turn out to be polar bears. They had a kill, so the decision was made to ready ourselves for a Zodiac excursion. We were on the waters of Mushamna shortly thereafter at 06:00.

As we slowly approached from the side, the female stood up followed by the cub. We could now see that the kill was a white-beaked dolphin that most likely died and was caught in the ice and washed up rather than having been killed outright by the bears. The cub began to make its way down to the beach. Mum initially watched from aloft but then followed. Tucking in, the cub pulled a piece of the carcass free and ascended the slope, once again with Mum in tow. Mum sunk into the deep snow up to her elbows and then settled into a spatchcock position (this must be a polar bear 'thing'!) facing away from us and laying her head on her paws. Occasionally, she looked up, sniffed the wind and relaxed again. After a while, the cub proceeded down the slope again, sliding its front paws down first, vocalising repeatedly as it went to feed again. Mum turned to face us and sank down in the snow watching her offspring as well as, no doubt, us.

Our attention was then drawn to the left of the action as an Arctic fox trotted across the snow cliff towards the scene. In a state of moult, it looked like it was wearing a shaggy tutu at its rear end which was rather scruffy! It danced along the snow and surprisingly moved inland, despite the fact that the cub's titbit would have been easy pickings.

Watching the cub again, it ate its way through the fleshy blubber and interestingly left the internal organs that were on full show alone. It used its paws to stabilise the kill, pulling pieces of sinew tight in its jaws and repeatedly licking its lips. Pushing up and down on its front legs in a bobbing action, it warded off the omnipresent glaucous gulls who were making a racket as they waited their turn. Its face and paws were a vivid shade of red from feeding when it moved towards the water line and to our delight, proceeded to walk into it. Face down, it reappeared above the surface in a somewhat cleaner state! Mum by now was also on the beach and they reunited as the cub shook itself free of water. Once again, Mum lay down some distance away and the cub went back for even more food. This little one shouldn't have any problem putting on weight!

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We spent nigh on an hour with the pair before leaving them to it and nipping to a nearby ice floe where a stationary walrus was sleeping. Rousing only when we changed position to check him out head-on, he noted our arrival and sank back down again. A few minutes later he raised himself up on his pectoral fins and proceeded to have a good scratch. Once the itch was alleviated, down he went again. One more scratch and we left him be, returning to Sjoveien for another huge breakfast. It wasn't even 08:00 and we'd had quite a morning!

Afterwards, we continued further into Liefdefjorden investigating the ice edge. It was flat calm from the bow, the ocean-like glass. The world was reduced to a vision of black and white. With no wind, snowflakes fell softly from the sky, melting upon impact. From diminished visibility rose tall and majestic mountains perfectly reflected in the ocean below, their layers of dark volcanic rock gradually exposed against the ice like the layers of chocolate in a Wall's Viennetta. A calmness descended, tranquillity personified if you will. Apart from the odd gull, there was complete and utter silence. Here was a chance to immerse ourselves in the vast desolation of this icy kingdom and embrace the solitude of the moment...something to cherish in today's mad world.

Our course took us into a thin layer of separated fast ice and the sound of our hull ploughing through it was nothing but impressive. Scissor cracks in the ice appeared ahead of us long before we felt the impact. A minke whale was spotted surfacing off the stern, reindeer appeared near a tracker's station and seals far out to sea dotted the horizon. It was magical. At 11:30, Gary delivered another informative presentation on seals, walrus and minke whales, and an hour later, we were sitting down to chicken, beef or vegetable curry with salad. The cake we had for dessert was a triumph!

Those who visited the bridge afterwards were rewarded with a very close sighting of another minke whale while others took the chance to relax in the lounge or rest. At 15:00, a few of us took advantage of the onboard wood-fired hot tub, which, would you believe, was almost too hot to get into. Seeing as the crew had been stoking the fire for five to six hours, we requested a douse with the cold hose and we managed to stay in for 15 minutes before coming out to cool off!

The waves picked up as we passed Worsleyhamna, so Christian presented a lecture on glaciers at 17:30. It was slightly delayed, however, by the sighting of another polar bear. Another one?! It was very much a pixel bear walking along the ice edge in the distance but with binoculars, it was as clear as day. Unfortunately, the fjord was far too choppy to consider launching the Zodiacs, but this was our fifth bear, and we were more than happy to appreciate it from afar. Later, armed with our new found knowledge of the difference between ice caps, shelves, icebergs and ocean currents, we enjoyed French onion soup, beef and carrot cake before collectively deciding on an early night. We'd had another superb day but were ready to hit the hay.

Day 7:

Wednesday 29 May 2024

Kongsfjorden and Ny-Alesund
Overcast, clearing later, 0 degrees

After a somewhat bumpy night coming down the west coast, we woke up in New London to an ethereal scene of low clouds and mist. Sea conditions were calm now that we were in Kongsfjorden, but while we prepared ourselves for a landing in order to learn about the marble mining history of the area, ice came flooding in on the tide and we were forced to make an alternative plan.

Continuing further into the fjord, we could see an icefield ahead with the tongues of various glaciers reaching down into the fjord. We passed icebergs of various shapes, colours and sizes (quite a few looked 'dirty' due to the moraine carried within them), watched bathing northern fulmars and had a minke whale swim by before eventually landing one Zodiac at the base of Ossian Sarsfjellet. A black-legged kittiwake nesting site, they were swarming above us en masse calling repeatedly. We set off for a walk, the group splitting into two. No sooner had we set off than we spotted our first ptarmigans, one female being pursued across the rocky slope by two pure white males sporting breeding plumage complete with distinctive red eyeshadow. We carefully avoided stepping on purple saxifrage, their tiny petals defying the elements and living up to their reputation as the earliest spring flowering plant in the archipelago.

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Six of us accompanied Christian up the cliff to take in impressive views over the fjord from the top, passing grazing reindeer, viewing snow bunting and eventually looking down into a few kittiwake nests perched precariously on extremely narrow ledges below. The others joined Gary to follow the lower slopes, also taking in reindeer, barnacled geese and the nesting cliffs from a different perspective. Heading back to Sjøveien, we negotiated bergs of the bluest blue, pushing flat sheets of fjord ice out of the way with the nose of the Zodiac.

Once back on board, we set off for Ny-Alesund, docking at around 14:30 and walking off the ship to explore this research centre on foot. After a little retail therapy at the small shop, we headed across the street to the very interesting museum to learn about the history of the area. Despite the many early trappers, hunters and whalers drawn to the archipelago from the 1600s onwards, the settlement was originally established for coal mining purposes at the start of the 20th century. Worked primarily by poor migrants from northern Norway, many lost their lives in a series of accidents here, a fact not often documented when considering the human history of the Arctic. Usurped by polar explorers, Ny-Alesund was the point from which several unsuccessful attempts at reaching the North Pole were made including Umberto Nobile's airship, Amundsen's flying boats and Bird & Bennett's Josephine Ford Fokker attempt. It was Amundsen who finally succeeded in 1926 flying over the pole and landing in Alaska two days later after 70 hours of continuous flight.

After the museum, we walked 500 metres or so to the mast from which the flying ship had been tied (now a historical monument) and then had some free time to return to the museum or see a little more of the town. Some did a slightly longer walk, viewing more reindeer and ptarmigan before passing a husky pen and heading back onboard by 18:00. A lucky few viewed the only Arctic terns of the trip en route too. The weather had improved throughout the afternoon revealing glaciers and mountains in all their glory. It was a beautiful evening as we sailed across the fjord to Blomstrand Glacier where we sat on the stern deck, listening to ABBA, Earth, Wind & Fire and more as we tucked into a BBQ. It was a rather unexpected and lovely treat in the high Arctic!

Day 8:

Thursday 30 May 2024

Isfjorden

Overcast with snow, 0 degrees

It was a black-and-white world that we woke up to with low skies and snow in the air. Plan A was to land at Skansbukta and have some 'free time' walking, sitting and appreciating the scenery between an area patrolled by, and demarcated by, Christian and Gary. Due to the weather and ice conditions, we shelved that and kickstarted Plan B which was to follow the ice edge at Billefjorden on a search for wildlife. We came across a bearded seal lying on a piece of fast ice in the distance and made a steady approach. We were able to watch it for some time before it slid beneath the waves. Atlantic puffins flew by, lead by their distinctive orange bills, and fulmar rested on pieces of floating ice, taking off as we neared. It was the different types of ice surrounding us that proved to be the real highlight of the morning though. From pancake to fast ice and small bergs too, the ocean itself moved from gently undulating waves to white horses. Ever changing, the ocean and mountains kept us out on deck trying to comprehend their sheer scale and beauty.

After lunch, we prepared for a landing back at our original site and boarded the Zodiacs accordingly. Moored beneath a northern fulmar breeding site, a veritable fortress of rock towered above us dotted with a number of stealth-footed reindeer. A gorgeous blue iceberg was just offshore, befitting its environment as it emulated the profile of a polar bear. We walked the length of the beach, a purple sandpiper following us, and, strangely enough, we came across a few flies. How on earth they were surviving up here was anyone's guess. We were passing the remnants of a gypsum mine and continuing towards a shipwreck when an eagle-eyed client spotted an Arctic fox running along the cliff face. Only our second individual, it was also in a state of moult, its forequarters dark whilst its fluffy skirt was pale grey.

We re-boarded the Zodiacs to check out an Atlantic puffin nesting cliff a little further on and, after quite a search, came across just two individuals amongst a number of Brunnich's guillemots (they are late arriving

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this year). The wind was picking up so we returned home to warm up and spend the rest of the afternoon spotting from the ship and packing in preparation for departure tomorrow. Following client requests, we also enjoyed a tour of the engine room and a culinary art fest as Norman, the chef, showed us how to create butterflies from carrots and dragonflies from courgettes! At 18:45 we gathered in the lounge to say thank you to our marvellous crew who had looked after us so well. Christian provided a synopsis of the trip and we toasted a wonderful holiday. Our borscht, lamb shank and tiramisu dinner was well received after which we had an early night.

Day 9:

Friday 31 May 2024

Longyearbyen to Oslo

sunny, 7 degrees

We'd spent the night at anchor off Longyearbyen as the wharf was proving to be busy, but we were able to moor alongside the coal dock from which we disembarked after breakfast. Three walrus were hauled out at the end of the beach to meet us and we said goodbye to M/S Sjoveien and her crew shortly after 09:10 when we were transferred into town. We had 90 minutes or so to visit the North Pole Museum, and various cafes and shops and were then dropped off at the airport to commence our journey to Oslo. Our flight routed through Tromso where we disembarked, officially re-entered Norway, ensured our luggage went on to Oslo and finally arrived early evening. Some were staying on here, and others had arranged their own flights, so our group was reduced from twelve to eight. We said our goodbyes and walked to the Radisson Red for dinner and another overnight stay.

Day 10:

Saturday 01 June 2024

Oslo to London Heathrow

Itinerary synopsis and significant sightings

Map courtesy of Expedition Leader Christian Engelke.



- 01 Longyearbyen
- 02 Dicksonfjorden (Polar Bear)
- 03 Borebukta (3 Walrus)
- 04 Lilliehöök Glacier (Ringed Seal)
- 05 Mayerbukta (Puffins :-)
- 06 14. July Glacier (King Eider)
- 07 Ebeltoftbukta (Fast Ice Landing)
- 08 Virgohamna (Amazing (!) Polar Bear)
- 09 Fuglesangen (Little Auks)
- 10 Hamiltonbukta (Many birds :-)
- 11 Raudfjorden (Minke Whales)
- 12 Mushamna (Polar Bear + Cub :-) & Arctic Fox)
- 13 Liefdefjorden (Jacuzzi at Fast Ice Edge)
- 14 Worsleyhamna ("Just another Polar Bear")
- 15 Ossian Sarsfjellet (Reindeer, Ptarmigan, Kittiwake Colony)
- 16 Ny-Ålesund (History, Reindeer, Ptarmigan)
- 17 Blomstrand Glacier (BBQ)
- 18 Billefjorden (Fast Ice Edge)
- 19 Skansbukta (Bearded Seal, Reindeer, Arctic Fox)

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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
	MAMMAL									
1	Svalbard reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus pltyrhynnchus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Polar bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
3	Ringed seal	<i>Push hispida</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
4	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>		✓			✓			✓
5	Harbour seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>				✓		✓		
6	Bearded seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
7	Minke whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>				✓	✓	✓		
8	Arctic fox	<i>Slopes lagopus</i>					✓		✓	
	BIRD									
1	Common eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	✓					✓	✓	✓
3	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	
4	Snow bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	✓			✓		✓		
5	Northern fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Black guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Little auk	<i>Alle alle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Glaucous gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	Purple sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	✓						✓	
10	Black-legged kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
11	Brunnich's guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	King eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		✓	✓	✓				

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13	Great skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>		✓		✓				
14	Atlantic puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	
15	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>			✓					
16	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>				✓				
17	Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>						✓		
18	Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>						✓		