

North Spitsbergen: In the Realm of Polar Bear and Ice

June 18-25, 2024 | Trip Report | by John Carlson



With Guide John Carlson and participants Tom, Sherry, Cathy, Sandy, Eric, Laura, Linda, Larry, Jeff, and Eileen.



Tues., June 18 Arrivals | Red Phalarope | Boarding the Ship

We gathered this morning after some guide-induced confusion over which museum we were meeting at and ventured southeast from Longyearbyen along the road as far as we could go without needing a local guide. Barnacle Geese were plentiful in and around town and we even observed one individual that was all white. Purple Sandpipers and Common Ringed Plovers foraged in the ponds along the road and Common Eiders were, well, common. When we arrived at the ponds near the sled dog kennel, we got to observe many Common Eiders nesting around the facility and very tolerant of people walking by which gave us great looks at the beautiful feather patterns on the incubating female eiders. We also got great looks at a Red Phalarope pair a bit further along. For many of us it was the only time we had been able to observe the female phalaropes in their stunning breeding plumage. We walked back into town to check spend some time in Longyearbyen. Our luggage was picked up at the hotel and we met later in the afternoon to walk to the embarkation point and board our home for the next week, the ship *Ortelius*. Once all of us and our luggage were onboard, we headed north from Longyearbyen. Much of the evening was spent going through safety drills, getting familiar with the ship, and



getting introductions to Oceanwide staff. We gathered in what became our little corner of the dining room and enjoyed our dinner. We got to spend some time on deck as we headed north and observe our first Atlantic Puffins, Dovekies, and Black-legged Kittiwakes before the fog rolled in.

Wed., June 19 Minke Whale | Atlantic Puffin | Harbor Seals

The morning began with a wakeup call from Sara, our expedition leader, explaining that the ship was slowly making our way towards a Polar Bear and her two cubs feeding on a rather large Walrus carcass onshore at Krossfjorden. We watched the large female bear feeding on the carcass while her two cubs entertained themselves by wrestling in the surf. We also found more Svalbard Reindeer feeding in the uplands and our usual assemblage of Thick-billed Murres, Atlantic Puffins, Arctic Tern, Black Guillemots and Northern Fulmars foraged around the ship. All before breakfast on our first day! After breakfast we had our mandatory briefing on our behavior in the Arctic and Zodiac operations before we boarded the zodiacs on a beautiful sunny morning and visited the face of Lilliehöökbrean, a 7km wide glacier face (“breen” is “glacier” in Norwegian). We enjoyed the spectacular scenery and found Northern Fulmars, Arctic Terns, and Black-legged Kittiwakes foraging along the glacial face. Once back onboard the Orelus we headed towards our afternoon stop and along the way we observed a number of seabird colonies (including an Atlantic Puffin colony) and numerous feeding flocks of seabirds. Some of us even observed a Minke Whale that had joined the buffet. Our afternoon was spent onshore at Tinayrebukta. We hiked from our landing over the tundra to another beach where we were entertained by a Black Guillemot foraging just offshore and a few Atlantic Puffins a bit further offshore. A Harbor Seal (Gray Seal) was also quite curious about our group. There were bright Purple Saxifrage and yellow whitlowgrass flowers blooming in the rocky scree along our path too. Scattered amongst the rocks were lots of evidence that the Svalbard Reindeer had visited this area including reindeer scat, patches of shed reindeer hair, and even a few shed Svalbard Reindeer antlers. It was a bit of a challenging hike for the group with the pace, terrain, and distance being a bit more than we had imagined, but we all made it there and back again. This day exemplified the rest of our time in Svalbard – two excursions during the day, with enjoyable and delicious meals punctuating the beginning, middle and end of the organized activities. The rest of the day was spent onboard the ship with some guests watching from the deck late into the day since we did not experience darkness at any point during our trip.



Thurs., June 20

Rock Ptarmigan | Bearded Seals | Beluga Whales

Our morning excursion was onshore at a location known as Texas Bar, a small harbor with an old, but still actively used, trappers hut onshore. We had another rather adventurous hike with Oceanwide guide Christophe, an accomplished birder, who became our assigned guide for the rest of our excursions. Highlights included Pink-footed Geese flying by and nesting Barnacle Geese on the cliffs. A male Rock Ptarmigan watched over us from a high ridge during our hike. Flowers blooming included woolly lousewort and Purple Sassifrage and we observed more reindeer antlers and some fur along with ptarmigan feathers and scat. A pair of King Eiders were in the bay and as we worked our way towards the hut and the point beyond to get closer to that pair, we found another pair that soon swam out and joined the original pair. We also had distant views of a Long-tailed Duck in amongst the Common Eiders. As we were leaving another pair of male King Eiders flew by. The ship repositioned during our lunch, and we wound up at the face of a nearby glacier known as Monacobreen. We boarded the zodiacs once again and immediately started finding new wildlife. A few Bearded Seals were observed hauled out on ice flows or in the water and shortly after we started one of the zodiac teams reported Beluga Whales. We managed to find a couple of pods cruising along the glacier face and observed their white backs bowing above the water surface. We also got to observe more Black-legged Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls, and Parasitic Jaegers (or Arctic Skuas if you prefer the European name). One Ivory Gull showed up in a photograph of a flock of gulls along the glacier face but was never actually observed. A pair of Long-tailed Ducks were along the shore with a large group of Glaucous Gulls loafing in the background. There were many Black-legged Kittiwakes and Northern Fulmars foraging around the base of the glacier. Black Guillemots were curious and vocal and a few perched on a small piece of ice in front of us looking very much like little black penguins with coral-colored legs and feet.

Fri., June 21

Polar Bear | Alkefjellet | Thick-billed Murres

Our initial plan – a landing at Faksevagen in the morning was cancelled due to the limited visibility and safety concerns after a thick fog rolled in. Our alternative plan was to head towards some persistent fast ice in Hinlopenstrait between Spitzbergen and Wahlbergøya to look for ice associated wildlife. Along the way we had a couple of lectures from the Oceanwide staff. Within minutes of arriving at the ice edge we had our second Polar Bear encounter of the trip. I suspect many of us were looking forward to seeing Polar Bears on the sea ice and



we got that, however it was a poignant encounter. It soon became apparent that this bear was nearing the end of his life. He was scarred and gaunt and his teeth were well worn. He had lived a Polar Bear life and he was there, where he was meant to be, on the ice, at the end. We quickly and respectfully sailed on and left him in the foggy whiteness of his home and place in the world. Our afternoon dramatically countered our rather somber morning. After lunch we boarded the zodiacs in the fog and headed in the direction of the nearby Alkefjellet bird cliffs. After departing the ship we soon found large groups of Thick-billed Murres (or Brünnich's Guillemot for the Europeans) on the surface of the inky black water and then, out of the fog loomed an impressive corrugated wall of rock. Every slim ledge and flat spot of the basaltic blocks and spires was occupied by nesting murres or Black-legged Kittiwakes. The buzz of wingbeats and bird cries of 60,000? murres was palpable. One Common Murre (bridled form) surfaced quickly near our zodiac but dove just as quickly and wasn't seen again. At the end of our transit along the base of the cliff the fog started to lift and allowed us to see the full extent of the breeding cliff. We returned to the ship full of awe from the adventure, but also ready to warm up after a rather chilly afternoon on the water. The day with the longest daylight of the year didn't really mean much to us since we were so far north of the Arctic Circle at this point it only meant that it was the highest the sun would stay above the horizon the entire day.

Sat., June 22 Pack Ice | Ivory Gulls | Pomarine Skuas

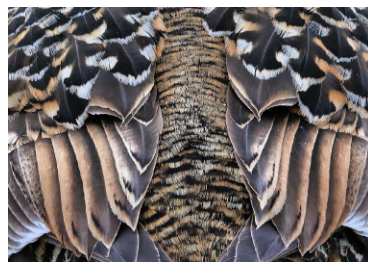
It was fitting that the day after the summer solstice we reached the most northerly point on our journey - 81°06.100' N. The day was beautiful – calm and sunny - and we spent the entire day in the pack ice north of the Seven Islands. There were lots of gulls observed throughout the day, mostly Black-legged Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls flying by and around the ship. One Lesser Black-backed Gull also made an appearance and flew past the ship heading into the ice. Thick-billed Murres and Dovekies flew back and forth through the pack ice and Black Guillemots seemed to be attracted to the open water and overturned ice produced by the ships passage. Finally, late in the morning we found Ivory Gulls in the mix of gulls around the ship and shortly after our first Ivory Gulls showed up a pair of Pomarine Jaegers (Pomarine Skuas) pursued some Black-legged Kittiwakes past the ship. We also had a wonderful encounter with a curious Bearded Seal and observed a few Ringed Seals and more Bearded Seals on a large flat ice flow we cruised by. That evening we enjoyed a barbecue on deck.



Sun., June 23

Walrus | Polar Bear | King Eiders

The next morning we were anchored off Smeerenburg, the location of a Dutch whaling station last used in 1655. In addition to the cultural and historical significance of the location, it is also the location of a known Walrus haul out location. Prior to disembarking we were able to find a Great Skua bathing in the inshore lake near the landing site. After breakfast we landed and explored the location of the old base. We had a Red-throated Loon fly over us and land in the shallow lake just inshore from the beach and there were many Arctic Terns and Glaucous Gulls in the area. We then made our way to where the Walrus were, and we watched them lounge and snuggle for a bit. Prior to departing the beach, all of us gathered rubbish from the landing area and nearby uplands to help clean up the area. Just as we were departing, we received a report that a Polar Bear had been spotted by the ship crew on opposite shore. Our Expedition Leader Sara quickly switched operations and soon all zodiacs were full of guests and in the water. We headed to where the bear was and to watch him amble along the shore and up into a snow patch. He seemed aware of us, but not at all concerned by our presence and we enjoyed the opportunity to get extended close up looks of the bear from the relative safety of the water. We reluctantly made our way back to the ship for our much-delayed lunch prior to heading to our next stop of the day. Our afternoon excursion was zodiac cruise at Wagonwaybreen in Magdalenafjord. On our way up the fjord we observed Dovekie nesting colonies in the scree along the steep slopes which we could discern by the relatively pale color of the rocks where no lichens were growing because the birds have been clambering over the rocks. Perhaps the best part about this afternoon was the King Eiders. We got to see a number of them out in the fjord – males, females, and yearling males. As we made our way along the edge of the fjord, we found a group of over 60 King Eiders in a pond behind a small lateral moraine and as we were watching them a group of the birds took off and flew out into the fjord and then turned and flew right past our zodiac! After that, we made our way to the face of the glacier and watched large flocks of Black-legged Kittiwakes foraging along the face and Black Guillemots approached the zodiac to check us out. We then headed back to the ship for dinner and an enjoyable evening after such an eventful day.



Mon., June 24 Arctic Fox | Alkorent | Touch the Glacier

Alkornet was our landing spot this morning. Alkornet is a mountain that looks like the bow of a ship and the cliffs are home to breeding Thick-billed Murres and Black-legged Kittiwakes. The Oceanwide staff set up a perimeter and we were free to wander around the tundra within that perimeter and just soak in the scenery and arctic life at our own pace. Highlights of the morning included good looks at the Pink-footed Geese flying around the landing area and a pair of nesting Parasitic Jaegers (which were actively chasing Black-legged Kittiwakes above us). Small groups of Svalbard Reindeer moved through the landscape including a group with some small calves. The stars of the morning were undoubtedly the Arctic Fox kits that were playing around their den while one adult headed towards the nesting cliff to find some dinner. After lunch we headed to Ymerbukta and we all loaded into the zodiacs to get up close and personal with a glacier. Esmarkbreen is a slow-moving glacier that has a portion of the terminal end on land and we were able to walk to the ice edge through the glacial sediment. It was impressive to see a glacier that close. There were a few seals lounging on ice along the glacial face and Common Eider and King Eiders were loafing on a flat iceberg at the base of the glacier. We returned to the ship, turned in the boots we used at landings, and prepared to depart the next day. We enjoyed another nice meal onboard the Ortelius and visited with the ship staff and crew that we got to know over the last week.

Tues., June 25 Walrus | Red-throated Loons | Longyearbyen

When we awoke in the morning, we were berthed at a place known as Coal Pier. Behind the ship on the point were two Walrus wrestling in the shallow water. We disembarked from the ship after breakfast and said goodbye to the ship staff and crew. We had a few hours before we needed to be at the airport, so we were dropped off downtown by a bus and since Linda had yet to see a Red-throated Loon we headed back out of town towards the dog kennel again. Four of us walked as far as we could go again and looked across the large lake there but weren't able to spot a loon. As we slowly headed back towards town Eric pointed out a bird flying towards us. It was a Red-throated Loon, and it flew past and landed in a small pond back at the dog kennel. We turned around again and headed back down the road, and we were rewarded with two Red-throated Loons building a nest in the small pond. Success! We returned to town, did a bit of shopping and dining and then caught the bus back to

the airport. We all boarded the plane and said goodbye to Longyearbyen as we headed south and each went our own direction towards our homes.

Photos by John Carlson: Group, Polar Bear, Ice, Walrus, Reindeer, King Eider, Common Ringed Plover, Common Eider, Atlantic Puffin, Northern Fulmar, Black-legged Kittiwake, Bearded Seal, Purple Saxifrage, Parasitic Jaeger, Dovekie, Thick-billed Murre, Ortelius, Walrus, Snow Bunting, Polar Bear, Scenic, Plumage detail, Barnacle Goose