



WildWings

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# Spitsbergen Tour 2011

Trip report by Tour Leader Dick Filby

Friday 15<sup>th</sup> July

Most of the group were leaving from Heathrow and everyone arrived in good time. The flight left on schedule and we were soon in Oslo to meet two more of our party and our onward flight up to Longyearbyen. Some of the group saw Common Swifts inside the terminal! We took the chance for a meal and then boarded our second flight. We landed around midnight, in daylight of course as we had arrived in the land of the midnight sun. After a short bus transfer the hotel staff were ready and waiting for us and we were soon checked-in and asleep in the very comfortable beds.

Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> July

We enjoyed a fantastic Scandinavian buffet breakfast as Glaucous Gulls flew past the window, and Little Auks and Brunnich's Guillemots could be seen flying high over hillsides, our Arctic adventure had begun! We left for our morning bird walk at 0830, greeted by Snow Buntings singing outside. It was cool with a slight breeze, high clouds which made it almost overcast but they started clearing nicely with some sun later and the day became pleasantly warm. We walked through the settlement with more Snow Buntings and Glaucous Gulls and then down to the waterfront where we saw Black Guillemots, a few Brunnich's Guillemots, Purple Sandpipers, Dunlin, Common Eider, five Long-tailed Ducks, a single Common Goldeneye, Kittiwakes and more Glaucous Gulls. We then walked to the dog kennels, seeing a nice pair of nesting Arctic Skuas along the way. Around the kennels were more Common Eider, with lots of eider-down and at least two birds still apparently incubating. Earlier in the spring there were currently about 200 pairs here – the presence of the dogs keeps Arctic Foxes and bears away. Also seen were Ringed Plover, a gorgeous Grey Phalarope, in full summer plumage and we found a nest with four eggs. We naturally stopped at the Polar Bear warning sign but added Barnacle Goose to our slowly growing list. We returned back into 'town' and had a few hours free time. Some went shopping and had lunch, others to visit the museum and some stayed in the field. We left the car park at 1500 and as our vessel was at anchor the life-vest briefing was held on the quayside before we were taken over to her by Zodiac and were aboard by 1600. After the welcome briefing from Dutch (the Expedition Leader) and his team was followed by the lifeboat drill. Nine, sadly distant, King Eider drakes seemed to be a good omen for our voyage ahead. After dinner back out on deck to see two Pink-footed Geese but no King Eiders. We sailed at 2100 after waiting for some delayed luggage and added Puffins, Fulmar and Kittiwakes to the day's tally plus more Little Auks and Brunnich's Guillemots and just enjoyed the scenery as we sailed along.

Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> July

We spent the morning on a gentle sea, sailing north towards Ny Alesund and Blomstrand. The ship's team gave briefings on the Arctic visitor guidelines including safety around Polar Bears and also Zodiac operations safety, interspersed with Brunnich's Guillemots, Little Auks, Glaucous Gulls and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Lunchtime saw our arrival at Ny Alesund, the northernmost community in the world. The officers of the watch interrupted lunch however, when they spotted a pod of Beluga Whales close to the shore, and clearly visible from the ship. An opportunity not to be missed as they are not seen on every voyage to Spitsbergen by any means. Most of us dashed to the outside deck to get decent views with bins and scopes, whilst Dutch, our Expedition Leader hastily re-wrote the afternoon plans and soon had us in the Zodiacs, and we enjoyed a magical hour drifting close to them, some passing within a few metres of our little boats. Again, we were spoilt with choices to be made as we were then offered a landing in search of Long-tailed Skuas, or a visit to the settlement. Most of us chose the chance to try and find Spitsbergen's only Long-tailed Skuas (rare because there are no lemmings here). We were not disappointed and had excellent views of at least three birds, as well as great views of a fairly confiding Reindeer. The weather was idyllic and we felt extremely fortunate. Those that visited the village had breeding Red-throated Divers and many Arctic Terns at a breeding colony, as well as the opportunity to post mail from the northernmost community. Unfortunately the Arctic Foxes that are often seen here were nowhere to be seen. Back on board we sailed a short distance over dinner, and then had an after dinner zodiac cruise at the 14<sup>th</sup> July Glacier. With 24 hour daylight it didn't even seem like evening, apart from the fact that we had already had three great meals and our watches said it was 20.45. Low cliffs near the glacier provided great views of Brunnich's Guillemots, and a few Black Guillemots too. Closer to the glacier the sea was filled with ice, "bergy bits" of all shapes and sizes. A magical end to an action packed first full day.

Monday 18<sup>th</sup> July

We had sailed throughout the night to reach the north-westernmost corner of the archipelago, Amsterdam Oya. The weather remained excellent and it was with high hopes that we set off for a shore landing at "Blubber Town", a whaling station established in early 17<sup>th</sup> century – worked by up to 200 men in its heyday. What a shame that the whales have been so slow to recover from their massacre. The keen walkers were first to set off from the beach with Boris, our trusty Assistant Expedition leader, whilst the birders and naturalists were enjoying the Common Seals, Barnacle Geese from the beach head in a more leisurely fashion. We were soon to receive great news: the hikers had spotted a Polar Bear, at some distance however. Looking over in their direction we could see it too, but as it was heading our way we all retreated in an orderly fashion into the Zodiacs so as not to endanger ourselves (or the bear). As we gathered the final participants from the beach, the bear ambled purposefully right up to where we had landed, walked into the water and swam the couple of miles to the adjacent island, and proceeded to stroll along the coast there, flushing a couple of Reindeer as it did. Keeping a respectful distance in the Zodiacs, we were afforded a great experience and lots of photos, especially for the folks with longer lenses. The Zodiacs headed back to Amsterdamoya and we were offered the chance of a landing or back to the ship. Some already more than fulfilled with their morning's excursion took the back to ship option. On shore the walk did not yield any extra birds or mammals, but was an excellent end to a thrilling morning.

Whilst we ate lunch the ship repositioned to Fugelsongen Oya (Bird Song Island) where we had the option to either go ashore on a boulder beach, or a Zodiac cruise. Most of the group chose to brave the boulders as this was our chance to see breeding Little Auks that nest in the crevices between the rocks. It was soon apparent from whence the island got its name as the calls of the Little Auks filled the air. After carefully picking our way to a vantage point on the edge of the colony, we sat for a while and thrilled to the comings and goings of these tiny seabirds (the smallest North Atlantic auks).

Trying to photograph them in flight as they whirred low and fast over our heads was a great challenge. Far easier was to photograph them on the nearby rocks, and best of all, with the luxury of a powder blue sky as a backdrop. It was, quite simply, amazing!

For the second day running we had the option of an after dinner excursion. This time we were to explore a sheltered fjord where a Fin Whale carcass has washed ashore a couple of years previously. The vertebrae were readily found, all still joined and snaking their way in the water. Cruising the waters nearby, we had great views of many Black Guillemots, all in splendid breeding plumage, as well as several Common Eiders, the omnipresent Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls, and for some a high flying Ivory Gull. We also saw a remote hunters' cabin. The ride back to the ship was a little bouncy, with some Zodiacs catching more splashes than others but even the very wet enjoyed the thrilling ride.

Two very thrilling days completed, and it was still broad daylight at midnight. With the dramatic Arctic scenery of Spitsbergen sliding by it was hard to go to bed and rest before day three..

Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> July

Heading south now, through the Hinlopen Strait, that separates the main island from Northeastland, which hosts the third largest icecap in the world (after Antarctica and Greenland). Again calm seas greeted us and there were several, albeit brief, sightings of Minke Whales. Our first destination was the amazing bird cliffs of Alke-fjellet (Auk Mountain) where we got into the Zodiacs for a close up and personal view. First though we had some spectacular Kittiwakes on a small iceberg, that provided great photographic opportunities, especially with a glacier behind them, which itself was worthy of a photo or two! The geology was very interesting too. We finally reached the Brunnich's Guillemots which have been estimated variously at 100,000 to 200,000 birds. With a mist setting over the top of the cliffs making the scene even more dramatic, we thrilled to the sights, sounds and yes even the smells, as clouds of these large alacids filled the skies and seemingly every available ledge. We cautiously approached ledges close to the water line, managing great views without disturbing the birds. At times the Zodiac was surrounded by Brunnich's Guillemots, so close that you could swear they were within arms reach. Occasionally a white "present" would arrive from above, and Tony, once in receipt of said guano on his jacket, immediately vowed it would remain as an undying memento of the trip. Hope Liz understands when he gets home! I think he was the only "lucky" recipient – but there may have been others. Time to leave – but the ship had disappeared in the mist that had also enveloped the upper tiers of the colony. A call on the radio soon gave us their position and we steered by GPS to find them within a few minutes. Back on board we regaled ourselves of another great meal and hoped the fog would lift before our next destination.

Our luck was in and the fog did indeed lift as we approached the western shores of Northeastland. From the ship we could already spot the Walrus hauled out on shore, even before we stopped and got into the Zodiacs. Once onshore, it was a short walk over the Walrus. To keep our presence at the haulout as quiet as possible we split into three groups, again divided by our walking and wildlife desires. Most of our group chose the medium walk, and we enjoyed some great plants, a party of Pinkfooted Geese before we arrived at the Walrus. To be less than 100 yards from a group of male Walrus huddled on the beach, as they indulged in minor arguments and jousts, was simply fantastic, even better when watched in the telescope, or filmed on video. After we had had our fill, we strolled back to the landing area, enjoying a family party of Barnacle Geese, a pair of Arctic Skuas, and more great botanising and landscape photography. Offshore were some spectacular pieces of ice, and in the distance, the main island of Svalbard, it's peaks and snowfields resplendent in the evening sun.

Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> July

We headed off after breakfast in the Zodiacs to explore the edge of the “fast” ice in a sheltered bay. As we approached a Bearded Seal had slipped off an ice floe, and as we marvelled at the now “rotting” ice we were surrounded by splendid Black Guillemots, often intrigued by our presence whenever we switched off the engine and enjoyed the utter tranquillity of our setting. Far from the hum of distant cars, and the sound of jets that seem to pervade even the seemingly most remote places, here we had found some peace, on an idyllic sunny morning, and out of earshot of the ship’s generators.

Moving on we headed even further north, to the very tip of Northeastland and the “seven islands”. Here we reached the pack ice, stretching in front us as a surreal and marvellous seascape. After sailing along the edge for several miles, we slowed to a halt and got into the Zodiacs. Beforehand, Tony spotted two adult Ivory Gulls from the ship’s deck whilst waiting to board the Zodiacs. A great start to the afternoon’s excursion! As we explored this surreal world, we came to an ice floe where we found the bar staff and Dutch! We were soon on the floe with them, enjoying a celebratory hot chocolate with Baileys and a unique photographic experience. Heading back to the ship, another Ivory Gull flew over the Zodiacs.

We set sail again along the edge of the pack ice, before heading into open water for the remainder of the night.

Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> July

We awoke still north of Spitsbergen, off the island of Lagoya, in calm and bright conditions. Dutch, our expedition leader and captain soon decided that we could do a landing on this exposed shore so off we headed again in the Zodiacs. On the beach we were soon watching Purple Sandpipers, Grey Phalaropes – looking very red, and some stunningly gorgeous adult Sabine’s Gulls, plus more Walrus on the beach and in the water. The photographers were thrilled, as were we all with great views of all the above. In the afternoon we sailed into the pack ice off the Seven Islands, and our northernmost point of the voyage. We saw Ringed Seal hauled out on a piece of ice, Walrus on another plus several Harp Seals. We toasted the northernmost point, 80.48 N – just 550 nautical miles from North Pole. A distant Ivory Gull was also spotted as we turned back away from the ice and headed **south** towards Spitsbergen – who can say they have done that !

Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> July

We awoke entering Woodfjorden just before 0600, then we turned to the west into Liefdefjorden, flat calm, grey skies, proceeding towards the Monaco Glacier. The usual suspects were around, Brunnich’s Guillemots, a few Little Auks, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and then, just before breakfast, Pauline spotted a mother and two cub Polar Bears on a small rocky island off the port side of the ship. The staff were all at their regular morning meeting, so it took a few seconds to get the word out, via the captain. Dutch chivvied everyone into a quick breakfast whilst the Zodiacs were readied and we set off to view them from closer range. Soon we were just a few yards offshore whilst the bears put on a casual and indifferent air, strolling the beach and rocky promontories whilst we clicked and cooed. A couple of times the mother disturbed a female Common Eider, which made her jump as it exploded into the air in front of her. The two cubs were 19 months old. We lingered for an hour or more, before the boats started peeling off and heading down the fjord towards the glacier at it’s head. We soon found some Long-tailed Ducks and Common Eiders along the way, as well as some fantastic

pieces of ice floating eerily on the glassy calm water. Soon we were navigating by GPS in bright fog, passing sitting Fulmars, becalmed by the lack of wind, until we came across some brash ice, and as we paused, we could hear the glacier calve so we knew we were nearly there! As we continued our approach the mist lifted and revealed a truly spectacular vista. Jagged mountains, parted by glaciers that tumbled towards us in the fjord, joining company before finishing in a wall of ice that floated in the water. At first, shrouded by mist, then, as we approached, bathed in warm sunshine under a powder blue sky. Initially it was hard to imagine the scale, but we were soon helped as we spotted, way off, perhaps almost a mile ahead, a wheeling mass of gulls, fluttering in front of the ice wall like tiny snowflakes. As we approached, nosing our way past increasingly frequent and fantastic ice sculptures floating in the water, often bedecked with Glaucous Gulls, we could see that the throng ahead was comprised mainly of Kittiwakes, along with many Glaucous Gulls, a couple of Arctic Skuas, a few Great Skuas and, seen by some, a couple of Ivory Gulls, all engaged in a maelstrom of activity. The horde was concentrated around the spot at the foot of the glacier wall where the freshwater from an under-glacier river bubbled up in a boiling motion. Hundreds, even thousands of birds were constantly landing on the water to lunge after food, to be swept along in the rapid current before then lifting off and returning to the water once again. Noisy, frenetic, and at least a million times more scenic than watching gulls at any rubbish tip I know! One Zodiac spotted a Hooded Seal but it slipped away before the rest of us could latch onto it. All too soon it was time to go, we had spent the entire morning here, yet so enthralling and fantastic had it been, that it seemed like only a few minutes!

Back on board, lunch, and back into the fog. It soon cleared and we went on another Zodiac cruise, in fjord at Worsleynesete, with the intent of landing. The weather remained idyllically calm and sunny. We headed at first to some small offshore islets. Arctic Terns were much in evidence, nesting on the raised beaches, and fishing offshore. First some more Pinkfeets (including one ringed – of which we await details via Tony) and a Pale-bellied Brent Goose with them. We enjoyed more Eiders and then landed by a hut. We found some Red-throated Divers (with nest) and a pair of Purple Sandpipers by the snow patch and some lovely plants. Then another Polar Bear was spotted, back into the Zodiacs for great views of this, a four year old male according to our bear guide, Evan.

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> July

Heading south off Prins Karls Forland we hoped to land at Alkehornet in the afternoon. Continuing fine weather boded well, and we enjoyed our by now familiar companions: Brunnich's Guillemots, Little Auks, Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls, Fulmars and then some more pack ice – a little unusual in mid-summer on the west side of Spitsbergen, and an increasing distraction as we discovered that it totally blocked the entrance to Isfjord ( Ice fjord ) and our route to Alkehornet and Longyearbyen itself! We searched for a route through but none was apparent. We contacted by vhf radio another expedition ship that was also trying to reach Longyearbyen and found that it had given up and was heading for Iceland instead. Well our captain and more importantly, our ship, was made of tougher stuff and we slowly but surely pushed our way through. It took several hours of manoeuvring through one of the most surreal landscapes one can imagine. Kittiwakes were our constant companions, seeking out the food that our ice breaking exposed in noisy and squabbling fashion. Male Brunnich's Guillemots, accompanied by the earliest fledged youngsters of the year, scurried hither and thither to avoid the 6,000 tonnes of ship slowly approaching them. Small parties of Little Auks whizzed past as the ice floes yielded to the inexorable onslaught of the RV Akademik Ioffe. By the end of the afternoon we were again in ice-free water and Longyearbyen was well within reach. By midnight we had arrived. Meanwhile we had enjoyed our farewell dinner, recap of the voyage and a splendid slideshow of "best-of" pictures contributed by us and our fellow passengers. Having picked up a copy on a One Ocean memory stick of this slideshow, as well as other trip notes and copy of the daily news

sheet, there was a last chance to celebrate at the bar before a last few hours in our bunks and a final breakfast. Richard and I took a beer outside at midnight to celebrate the trip and witness our approach to Longyearbyen in the midnight sun. On returning inside I was asked where we had been, "Spitsbergen" was my jocular reply. How great to be able to step out of the bar into another world!

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July

We had packed so much into the past week that it seemed scarcely possible that it had been a mere eight days since we had set sail. After breakfast we bade fond farewells on the dockside to the ship's staff and crew who had looked after us so well. It wasn't over yet! We had a few hours around town and we enjoyed it until the last. Some of us headed back out to look for Ivory Gull again, and after running the gauntlet of the Arctic Terns as we walked down the road, were rewarded with terrific views of another (different, unringed) adult at point blank range, as well as Barnacle Geese, Common Eiders, some distant King Eiders, Arctic Skua and Snow Buntings. Back in town others (alas not in our group) managed to find a couple of Arctic Foxes, and another was seen at the campsite. Some had an excellent lunch at the hotel prior to departure for the airport, saying goodbye to where somehow we had conspired to save the best wildlife sighting of the day until last. With some of us already through security, and everyone else in line, a pod of Belugas was spotted just offshore and we were able to watch them through the picture windows as they cruised slowly by. Surely the ultimate airport tick, and an amazing way to conclude our visit to Spitsbergen. With the whales still in view we boarded the plane and headed south.

After a brief stop in Tromso where we bade fond farewells to John and Pauline as they continued with their round Scandinavia trip in their camper van, and a plane change in Oslo from where Evan and Willy left us to fly directly home, the rest of us were back at Heathrow mid evening, to be efficiently re-united with our bags and make our farewells.

Thanks to all who came for the great companionship and enjoying a truly wonderful trip.

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