

# WildWings Spitsbergen Tour Report 2013

By Tour Leader Dick Filby

for photos see

[Dick Filby's Flickr Album of Spitsbergen 2013](#)

*A truly special trip with plenty of great sightings including several Polar Bears, Walrus, Beluga Whales on two different occasions, spectacular Little Auk and Brunnich's Guillemot colonies, fantastic sea ice (a big benefit of going early in the season), lots of King Eiders, including a pair that were almost close enough to touch.. incredible views of Fin Whales next to the ship, and a Humpback Whale that we saw tail fluke several times. Bearded Seals that showed well, and the Ivory Gulls were pretty good too!*

**18<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> June 2013**

The group flew to Oslo the day before, and stayed overnight at an airport hotel.

Day 1

Upon arrival at Longyearbyen airport at lunchtime, I was pleased to be able to take everyone straight outside, even before the baggage arrived, to view a splendid pair of King Eiders on the lagoon by the car park, as well as a pair of Long-tailed Ducks. What a way to start! We then got the bags, hopped on the bus and headed to the edge of town and did some birding before it was time to embark the ship. Excellent views of nesting Eiders, Arctic Terns, Barnacle Geese, Glaucous Gulls, Snow Buntings, Grey Phalarope, lots of Purple Sandpipers and a splendid adult Ivory Gull. We then walked along the road out of town in the hope of finding more King Eiders but in vain. Soon enough we were settling in onboard and we set off on our Spitsbergen adventure. Brunnich's Guillemots and Little Auks were soon seen in good numbers – both species we would be very familiar with by trip's end, along with Arctic Terns and Glaucous Gulls. We also saw our first Reindeer today, and en-route earlier in the day, a Brown Hare was seen in Oslo.

Day 2

We started the day in "First of July" Bay, where we zodiac cruised. Highlights included great views of Brunnich's Guillemots along the cliffs, as well as several pairs of Barnacle Geese, several Puffins, lots of Northern Fulmars, Glaucous Gulls. Black Guillemots gave great views on the water, and we were investigated by a very inquisitive Harbour Seal. Best of all perhaps, was another Ivory Gull, whilst on the slopes we could see many Reindeer. Nearby, many Common Eiders were roosting on a gravel beach, and a Bearded Seal showed distantly on an ice floe. We then sailed east for our landing in the afternoon, where we had a choice. Most of our group chose to visit a small colony of Long-tailed Skuas on an offshore island. A pair of Long-tailed Ducks provided a real photographic treat on arrival, and then we had simply magnificent views of the Long-tailed Skuas, both on the ground and in flight. They were literally frame-filling in the 'scope (see photos!). There was also a Rock Ptarmigan wandering around in the open, as well as two Pink-footed Geese, and several Arctic Skuas. Snow Buntings, which would grace every landing, were singing and showing very well too. Others

visited the small settlement of Ny Alesund, formerly a mining town, and now a scientific settlement. They were treated to many Arctic Terns, Red-throated Diver, and yet another Ivory Gull. The day concluded with an excellent 'ship's cruise' of the nearby glaciers, at the start of which we saw several Beluga Whales, though not especially close to the ship due to the fact that they were in shallow water so we could not approach, but scope views were very worthwhile. Shortly after, we had an interruption at dinner with a sighting of a Humpback Whale that emptied the dining room. We had prolonged views of it as the captain gently manoeuvred the ship, and we saw its tail flukes several times. With the backdrop of the glaciers and hills surrounding Kongsfjord, it was a great sighting. Soon after we were back in the dining room, only to leave again in a hurry to get magnificent views of two Bearded Seals on ice floes, one of which was particularly red-headed (see photos). What a day!

### Day 3

We awoke to an idyllic morning off the NW corner of Spitsbergen. Flat calm weather, lots of sea ice, and before long, we were spotting whale blows ahead. Steering a course towards them, we soon discovered that it was a large pod of Beluga Whales, and the next hour was spent carefully following them, giving us all great views against an idyllic Arctic backdrop. We estimated over 100 individuals, it was quite a sight. Eventually we went inside for breakfast, even the most ardent photographers seemed satiated!

Next we headed to the edge of the vast expanse of sea-ice that presented itself, and upon spotting a large male Walrus, Captain Alexei skilfully and ever so gently edged the ship up close to it as it slept on an ice floe, and although it awoke and looked at us, we were treated to prolonged and excellent views (and photos) before we left it to rest some more. We carried on cruising amongst the sea ice for several hours, with endless amazing vistas in gorgeous weather providing lasting memories of a sight that is disappearing as the Arctic ocean melts more every year. We had plenty of time to enjoy it today, and reflect on the future. We also saw at least four Minke Whales, and some 25 Bearded Seals, many of which provided good views as they lay on the ice as we passed them by.

Later, I spotted our first Polar Bear, as it walked along the shore, and soon every 'scope on the ship was trained on it. The captain manoeuvred the ship as closely as possible, given the shallow waters between us and shore, and we kept it in view for quite a while, luxuriating in the sighting of this great mammal. Later we got into the zodiacs, and cruised in search of King Eiders. We found at least seven, a pair of which gave the most exceptional views (see photos). Also we saw several Grey Phalaropes very close to the zodiacs, in their lovely brick-red breeding plumage, spinning on the sea as they fed on small insects.

Back on board we kept going and enjoyed the fantastic scenery of the huge, and rapidly retreating, Monaco Breen Glacier and eventually we headed to bed, expectant of more great days to come.

### Day 4

We started the day with a shore landing at Mushamna where we saw lots of Arctic Fox prints, but no sign of the mammals themselves. The tundra was still divesting itself of the winter snows, so the Purple Sandpipers were busying themselves thinking about setting up territories and finding a mate, and two Red-throated Divers were close inshore. Eight Pale-bellied Brent Geese were roaming around

too, looking for somewhere to settle. We admired the wooden Syssemmannen cabin that had its windows all shuttered up and protected from bears, and a tall platform outside for storing food out of reach of bears. The cabin itself was unoccupied, but we reflected that it would make a great place to stay a few days. Offshore there was a single Minke Whale seen near the ship, and from the beach we spotted a Walrus, as well as several Bearded Seals.

In the afternoon I spotted our next Polar Bear, informed the captain, and he stopped the ship for us and we got into the zodiacs for some excellent views as it walked along the shore and then crossed an inlet and headed off up a snow slope (see photos). Before leaving the bridge deck I offered the use of my scope to the captain and officers to look for more Polar Bears. Smart move! Shortly after the first bear had disappeared from view, the captain radioed us from the bridge – using the scope he had found a mother and cub resting on another shore, and they were still viewable from the bridge on one of the nearby islands. He directed us to them and we enjoyed watching them as they strolled around and then lay down to rest on some ‘fast ice’, and as an added bonus, in front of them there were several King Eiders for a while.

In the evening, as we headed back out to the mouth of the bay for the night, the captain slowed the ship as we spotted a group of five or more Fin Whales. We then spent the next hour or so watching these huge mammals as they fed close to the ship (see photos) on a flat calm sea. In the background there was yet another Polar Bear walking along the shore, but by now all attention was on the whale show, as we had already had good views of the bears earlier in the day.

Later still, as midnight approached, there were stunning photo opportunities of Northern Fulmars gliding very low over the mirror calm sea in lovely soft light (see photos), whilst lines of Brunnich’s Guillemots and Little Auks whirred by.

## Day 5

A grey start to the day at Raudfjorden, we set off on a zodiac cruise, in search of more wildlife and were not disappointed. There was plenty of activity from the seabird cliffs above, with thousands of Brunnich’s Guillemots and Kittiwakes, creating lots of noise, and plenty of action as Glaucous Gulls eyed up their opportunities. Most of us we saw an Arctic Fox searching the scree below the nesting birds, looking for fallen eggs or even a very early chick. Hundreds of Kittiwakes and many Black Guillemots gave great views around (and on) the bergy bits (small icebergs), whilst a drake Northern Pintail and an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull were unexpected. Yet another pair of King Eiders, plenty of Common Eiders, Purple Sandpiper, Pink-footed and Barnacle Geese were much appreciated. Back on board we headed off in search of more adventure for the afternoon, and we made a landing towards the south end of the fjord. Not so much wildlife at first, although a traditional trappers ‘weighted fox trap’ was of interest, and a dead adult Glaucous Gull gave us an opportunity to examine this arctic gull in the hand. Some had gone on a longer hike, but meanwhile the kayakers had spotted another Polar Bear, on the sea ice at the head of the fjord, so we hurriedly got into the zodiacs and headed off for a look. Sure enough, it was still on the ice as we arrived, making its way towards shore. It swam the final few yards, shook itself dry and headed off into the rocks. On the ice itself, at least one Ringed Seal was out by a breathing/escape hole. Meanwhile the ice had drifted in behind our boats, so we had to engage in some zodiac ‘icebreaking’ manoeuvres to get back to the ship. Dinner was an on-deck barbecue, a real Arctic treat.

## Day 6

After recent idyllic weather, today started as a snowy and very blustery morning at our planned landing site, a Little Auk colony, so for safety reasons we sailed on by and headed to a more sheltered option, the site of the old Dutch whaling station at Smeerenburg, in operation from 1614-1655. The beach here is covered in logs from northern Siberia, brought here by the ocean currents. The ship's staff headed off to keep a safe perimeter (for bears) and allow us to wander freely. On a small pool we found a pair of Red-throated Divers, whilst on the tundra nearby there were Purple Sandpipers nesting. On the beach there were several Sanderling in gorgeous summer plumage, whilst in the water we saw more Walrus, one of which had quite large tusks. On a rock there was a lounging Common Seal that gave splendid views until the rising tide submerged its rock and it swam away.

In the afternoon we had a splendid landing at a Little Auk colony in Magdalenefjord, where thousands of birds were wheeling over the scree slopes in which they nested. It was truly memorable hearing them call and seeing them at such close quarters in full breeding plumage. For those who didn't want to scramble up for the closest views, a zodiac cruise around the head of the fjord was offered. The visit was definitely yet another one of the major highlights of the voyage.

## Day 7

Our first landing of the day was at a Walrus haulout, which we approached carefully, being sure to keep our distance and stay quiet, so as the Walrus were not disturbed. We were successful, and they were very relaxed and posed wonderfully for photos huddled on the beach, whilst a couple of others approached us in the water, giving even better views (see photos). On a lagoon just behind the beach there were several lovely Grey Phalaropes and a pair of summer-plumaged Red Knots. All in all, this was a very special morning indeed!

In the afternoon we landed in St.Johnsfjorden at the site of an old trappers hut. The staff set up a boundary and we were free to roam. Time to reflect on what a successful trip it had been, plus great views of breeding Purple Sandpipers, an Arctic Skua with prey, Reindeer, and of course the hut itself. At the end of the landing some folks chose to take a Polar Plunge off the beach, an event more witnessed than participated in!

## Day 8

Disembarkation! We left the ship after breakfast and spent some free time around town, shopping, visiting the museum, or birding (or all the above!) before it was time to board the bus to the airport and the journey back to the UK (or to Norway for those who chose to extend their trip privately). The birds included many of the by now familiar Arctic specialities: plenty of Arctic Terns, Purple Sandpipers, Glaucous Gulls, nesting Eiders at very close range, Snow Buntings, and an adult Ivory Gull too.

It had been a splendid trip – thanks to all for coming and thanks to the captain, crew and staff for doing such a wonderful job.

## Species List

Red-throated Diver

Northern Fulmar

Pink-footed Goose

Barnacle Goose

Pale-bellied Brent Goose

Northern Pintail

Common Eider

King Eider

Long-tailed Duck

Rock Ptarmigan

Ringed Plover

Red Knot

Sanderling

Purple Sandpiper

Dunlin

Ruddy Turnstone

Grey Phalarope

Arctic Skua

Long-tailed Skua

Great Skua

Lesser Black-backed Gull

Glaucous Gull

Black-legged Kittiwake

Ivory Gull

Arctic Tern

Brunnich's Guillemot

Black Guillemot

Little Auk

Atlantic Puffin

Snow Bunting

## MAMMALS

Beluga

Fin Whale

Minke Whale

Humpback Whale

Walrus

Bearded Seal

Ringed Seal

Common Seal

Polar Bear

Arctic Fox

Reindeer

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