

# WILDLIFE TRAVEL



## Svalbard 2017

## Svalbard, species list and trip report, 20 to 29 June 2017

#	DATE	LOCATIONS AND NOTES
1	20 June	Flew from the UK to Oslo for an overnight stay.
2	21 June	Flew from Oslo to Longyearbyen for lunch and a short exploration before boarding <i>Ortelius</i> and setting out west through Isfjorden
3	22 June	Morning landing at Sarstangen to visit a walrus haul out, returning to the ship for lunch before a landing at Engelsbukta for a walk over moraine. During dinner we sailed along the Kongsvegen glacier.
4	23 June	We spent the day in the pack ice searching for wildlife, which saw us cross over 80 <sup>th</sup> parallel north.
5	24 June	Another day exploring the pack ice in search of birds and marine mammals.
6	25 June	We had a morning visit to Magdalenefjorden with some of the group visiting a Little Auk colony and some enjoying a walk around Gravenesodden to look for wildlife. Following lunch, we took a zodiac cruise around Fuglefjorden.
7	26 June	We headed back to the pack ice in search of birds and marine mammals.
8	27 June	We started our progress back south along the coast of West Spitsbergen, looking for large whales in the deep channel of Isfjord before a landing at Colesbukta to look at Arctic plants, birds and mammals.
9	28 June	Disembarking <i>Ortelius</i> following breakfast we had some time for a visit to the museum in Longyearbyen and a little more botanising before our flight back to Oslo.



Above - Pack ice to the north of Spitsbergen. Front cover - Polar Bear still-hunting on the pack ice

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## **LIST OF TRAVELLERS**

### **Leader**

Laurie Jackson



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### Day One: 20 June. Arrival in Oslo.

Following our flights we arrived in Oslo for an overnight stay.

### Day Two: 21 June. Longyearbyen and departure on *Ortelius*.

Following breakfast we headed back to Oslo airport to board our flight to Longyearbyen on the island of Spitsbergen, the administrative capital of Svalbard, enjoying our first, spectacular views of the high Arctic as we came in to land.

In Longyearbyen we had some time for lunch and a stroll around the town surrounded by the aerial tramways, remnants of its mining history. Snow Buntings sang as they parachuted from their rooftop perches. With one eye to the slopes for Polar Bears, we stretched our legs on a walk out to the edge of town with a colony of Eider Duck, Barnacle Geese grazing the slopes, and nesting Arctic Tern and Arctic Skua. We found several plants on our walk including Arctic Mouse-ear *Cerastium arcticum*, Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna*, Greenland Scurvy-grass *Cochlearia groenlandica* and Tufted Saxifrage *Saxifraga cespitosa*.

Making our way to the harbour to meet *Ortelius*, Kath spotted two Purple Sandpipers feeding along the shore, and two Long-tailed Ducks joined yet more Eider out at sea. We were soon on board our home for the next week - *Ortelius* an ice strengthened ship built in 1989 now converted into an expedition vessel. As we set off on our course through Isfjorden we looked out for passing seabirds and the telltale blow of a whale. Heading over a deepwater channel, we spotted both Minke Whale and Blue Whale, along with Fulmar, Glaucous Gull, Kittewake, Black Guillemot and Brünnich's Guillemot. On midsummer's day in the Arctic, it's easy to find yourself still scanning from deck or simply taking in the stunning scenery under the midnight sun!



Left: Walrus. Right: Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia*

### Day Three: 22 June. Sarstangen, Engelsbukta and Kongsvegen glacier.

We headed out on our first zodiac landing in Sarstangen to visit a Walrus hauling out site. Slowly approaching the colony of over a hundred male Walrus on foot, we were kept entertained as they busily did little beside the odd scratch or vocalisation. In the water Black Guillemot paddled close by and we spotted a pair of King Eider, before our attentions were brought close to shore as we enjoyed fantastic views of a several Walrus watching us with curiosity, from only a few metres away in the water.

We then enjoyed a walk down the beach with Purple Sandpipers feeding along the water's edge, and those who wanted helped with a beach litter pick as part of the *Clean Up Svalbard* commitment to help tackle shipping and fishing debris that is carried here on the ocean currents.

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Rejoining *Ortelius* for lunch, we made our way onwards, enjoying the glorious scenery in the sunshine, with a brief appearance from a Minke Whale and Svalbard Reindeer grazing along the shore, while Kittewakes and Fulmar glided effortlessly passed.

During the afternoon we took another zodiac trip to Engelsbukta landing on a shoreline with nesting Arctic Tern. We set off for a walk on the moraine created by the two glaciers here; enjoying a profusion of Purple Saxifage *Saxifraga oppositifolia* and occasional Purplish Braya *Braya glabellas* ssp. *purpurascens* and Arctic Mouse-ear. We spotted a couple of Arctic Skuas on a mound before they were driven off by the Arctic Terns, and as we reached a high point on the moraine, we could see a relaxed-looking Bearded Seal hauled out on a sandbar in the middle of a small pool; an unusual spot for a species usually found on the pack ice! A group of Harbour Seals were swimming around in the shallows, and as we returned back to the shore their heads emerged from the waters periodically, as they kept an eye on us.

After dinner we sailed around the Kongsvegen glacier taking in the views and admiring the stunning blue of the oldest glacier ice, which has been compressed, squeezing most of the air out of it. We passed Ny-Ålesund, an important environmental research base and the launch point for a number of North Pole expeditions, before turning in for the night.

### Day Four: 23 June. Exploring the pack ice to the north of Spitsbergen.

We awoke to views of the approaching pack ice as we travelled ever north along the western edge of Spitsbergen. As we finished breakfast, *Ortelius* really came into her own; showing her ice-breaking capabilities as we struck out through the pack ice, eagerly pursued by a team of Kittewakes feeding on the Polar Cod visible in our wake. Both Black Guillemot and Brünnich's Guillemot could be spotted diving amongst the ice sheets and Glaucous Gull were often flying amongst the Kittewakes.

Breakfast was barely finished when our first Polar Bear was spotted. Still fairly distant on the port side, the bear gradually came into view, lying on the ice watching us approach, before getting up and stretching its legs. As we watched the bear an Ivory Gull was spotted on the ice, remaining only briefly before flying out of sight.



Left: Ivory Gull. Right: Polar Bear

We continued through the pack ice and soon another Polar Bear was spotted in the distance. As we slowly approached, our views of the bear's rear end continued to improve. Positioning ourselves downwind of the bears allows them to investigate our presence and make a decision on their next move. This bear chose not to move! Getting as close as we could without risking disturbing the bear, it was time to sit and wait. A third bear was spotted more distantly, but moving away from us it was soon lost out of sight. Beside the occasional glance in our direction, yawn and stretch, this bear seemed to be enjoying its siesta. As we patiently watched the bear snooze, a Minke Whale was spotted spy-hopping between the ice sheets. Reappearing periodically from its diving forays, it was the Minke that finally spurred the bear into action.

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As the whale came up to breathe close to where he was lying; curiosity finally got the better of our Polar Bear. Once he was up, it seemed the bear decided he may as well come and check out *Ortelius* too and he ambled over to the ship. The size of the bear and scars on his face told us this was a mature male, at least ten years old, and he inspected the ship to the delight of all on board, giving us views so good that he was obscured for some time by the ship's bow! Gradually he picked his way back over the ice settling down again at a seal breathing hole to still-hunt.

At 17.16 came the special announcement to let us know we had just passed the 80<sup>th</sup> parallel north, taking us to only around 1,100km from the North Pole. We spent the night stopped, enjoying the absolute calm and atmosphere amongst the pack ice.



Above: Bearded Seal

### **Day Five: 24 June. Exploring the pack ice to the north of Spitsbergen.**

A day spent amongst the pack ice enjoying the fantastic landscapes in the sunshine. A male Bearded Seal hauled out and drying off in the sun kept a watchful eye on us as we slowly approached, his rust-coloured whiskers clear in the sun; a result of iron-compounds in the seabed. Kittewakes were ever present; occasionally being mobbed by a Glaucous Gull following a successful plunge dive for Polar Cod. Amongst the distraction of rum hot chocolate on deck and a transfer of equipment to our sister ship *Plancius*, a juvenile Iceland Gull was spotted on the ice.

### **Day Six: 25 June. Magdalenefjorden, Gravenesodden and Fuglefjorden.**

As we left the pack ice and returned towards the west coast of Spitsbergen, Great Skua and Puffin were spotted from the deck before breakfast. There were several options for the morning landing with some of the group visiting Magdalenefjorden and some visiting Gravenesodden.

On Magdalenefjorden the target was a visit to a fantastic colony of Little Auk. A short walk up the scree slope brought us to the edge of the colony and we were soon enveloped in the sight and sound of thousands of birds. With whirring murmurations taking place around us, we quietly took in the spectacular scenery on boulders next to perched Little Auks, while Snow Bunting song drifted up from the valley below. Not far away another group was walking in Gravenesodden, enjoying views of the glacier and a wealth of wildlife finds including a sea urchin and some more arctic plants.

We continued on towards Fuglefjorden where we anchored and took a zodiac cruise around the bays of Sallyhamna and Holmiabukta, admiring yet another stunning glacier. Several small rocky islands here are



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home to nesting Eider and Barnacle Geese, and we spotted Arctic Tern and Arctic Skua flying over as Black Guillemots paddled within metres of us. Being out on the water also gave us an opportunity to appreciate the difference between the flat sea ice sheets and the chunks of ice breaking away from the glacier. Returning to *Ortelius* we enjoyed a barbeque on the deck absorbing fantastic views of the high Arctic in every direction - a great way to celebrate John's birthday!



Top: Magdelenefjorden. Bottom left: Little Auk. Bottom right: Black Guillemot.

### **Day Seven: 26 June. Exploring the pack ice to the north of Spitsbergen.**

A day spent amongst the pack ice with a number of different seals spotted. Both Bearded Seal and Ringed Seal were seen hauled out on the pack ice, and Harp Seals were spotted in the water alongside Minke Whale.

### **Day Eight: 27 June June. Isfjord and Colesbukta.**

As we continued our journey southwards we again re-entered the deeper channel of Isfjord keeping watch from deck for signs of the baleen whales that could be feeding here. Our efforts were richly rewarded with both Blue Whale and Fin Whale (the largest and second largest animals on the planet) feeding close to the ship. At one point the circling Kittiwakes nicely predicted the emergence of a Blue Whale only 15-20m off the starboard side, and with Fin Whale as close as 30m we were able to see the difference in the colour, and size and shape of the dorsal fin, in these two remarkable giants.



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Above: Blue Whale

Following this wonderful encounter we continued onwards to Colesbukta a small, abandoned Russian mining settlement, for our final zodiac outing. Upon reaching the shore we quickly found the leaves of Oysterplant *Mertensia maritima* ssp. *tenella*, along with flowering Moss Campion *Silene acaulis* and Golden Whitlow-grass *Draba alpina*.

Amongst the abandoned mine buildings an Arctic Fox kept a watchful eye on us, with three cubs playing close to her. A pair of Dunlin was spotted on a small pool, the male breaking into his trilling song, whilst Svalbard Reindeer grazed close by, and a Long-tailed Skua was spotted briefly flying over the bay. Our walk took us through carpets of mosses, sedges and Polar Willow *Salix polaris* amongst which we found many new plants including Mountain Avens *Dryas octopetala*, Tufted Cinquefoil *Potentilla pulchella*, Snow Buttercup *Ranunculus nivalis*, Alpine Bistort *Persicaria vivipara* and the leaves of Hairy Lousewort *Pedicularis hirsuta*. A Rock Ptarmigan spotted on the roof of an abandoned building, sailed down to his lek and could be heard occasionally giving his croaking call. When we returned to the shore to take the zodiacs back to *Ortelius*, the Dunlin had been joined by a Purple Sandpiper.



Top Left: Snow Buttercup *Ranunculus nivalis*. Top Right: Snow Bunting. Bottom: Svalbard Reindeer.



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### Day Nine and Day Ten: 28 and 29 June. Longyearbyen, Oslo and return to the UK.

With some of our fellow passengers disembarking *Oretelius* in the early morning following our docking in Longyearbyen, breakfast was a quieter affair. It was soon time to leave our cabins for the final time and return to Longyearbyen, where we had some time to explore the town further, and Pauline caught up with the Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dahliahnum*.

Later that afternoon we flew back to Oslo in time for dinner and an overnight stop before making our onward journey back to the UK.

Amongst the company of fellow travellers of 19 different nationalities, and in the safe hands of the *Ortelius* crew we reached our furthest north latitude of 80°09,8'N north of Spitsbergen. Thank you to our travellers for joining us on a fantastic trip where we enjoyed some really special Arctic wildlife. Thanks too to the Oceanwide crew, including the expedition team headed up by Rinie van Meurs.

**Laurie Jackson, Wildlife Travel.  
July 2017.**



Above: Two of our travellers enjoying the unique scenery of the pack ice.

## SVALBARD 2017: some highlights

### Selected Plant Species

Some plant species do not have English names and English names vary according to author. A common name is given as a guide to help those who are not familiar with the scientific name. If the English name is in brackets it is a general name for the group to which the species belongs. The **Scientific name** consists of the **Genus** (the first name starting with a capital) and the **species** (the second name, without a capital). Families are in alphabetical order (not in the order found in many plant books - which now changes frequently as the systematic order of families is changing rapidly due to clarification by genetic research). The English name of a family member is also given so you can relate the family to plants you may know. Some species have recently been transferred to different families and the names of species also change occasionally.

	SCIENTIFIC NAME	ENGLISH NAME	NOTES
<b>ANGIOSPERMS - DICOTYLEDONS</b>			
<b>Boraginaceae (Borage Family)</b>			
	<i>Mertensia maritima tenella</i>	(oysterplant)	Colesbukta
<b>Brassicaceae (Cabbage Family)</b>			
	<i>Braya glabella</i> ssp. <i>purpurascens</i>	Purplish Braya	Engelsbukta
	<i>Cochlearia groenlandica</i>	Greenland Scurvy-grass	Longyearbyen
	<i>Draba alpina</i>	Golden Whitlow-grass	Colesbukta
<b>Caryophyllaceae (Pink Family)</b>			
	<i>Cerastium arcticum</i>	Arctic Mouse-ear	Longyearbyen
	<i>Silene acaulis</i>	Moss Campion	Colesbukta
<b>Ericaceae (Heath Family)</b>			
	<i>Cassiope tetragona</i>	Arctic Bell-heather	Colesbukta
<b>Orobanchaceae (Broomrape Family)</b>			
	<i>Pedicularis hirsuta</i>	Hairy Lousewort	Colesbukta
<b>Papaveraceae (Poppy Family)</b>			
	<i>Papaver dahlianum</i>	Svalbard Poppy	Longyearbyen
<b>Polygonaceae (Knotweed Family)</b>			
	<i>Oxyria digyna</i>	Mountain Sorrel	Longyearbyen, Colesbukta
	<i>Persicaria vivipara</i>	Alpine Bistort	Colesbukta
<b>Ranunculaceae (Buttercup Family)</b>			
	<i>Ranunculus nivalia</i>	Snow Buttercup	Colesbukta
<b>Rosaceae (Rose Family)</b>			
	<i>Dryas octopetala</i>	Mountain Avens	Colesbukta
	<i>Potentilla hyparctica</i>	Arctic Cinquefoil	Colesbukta
	<i>Potentilla pulchella</i>	Tufted Cinquefoil	Colesbukta
<b>Salicaceae (Willow Family)</b>			
	<i>Salix polaris</i>	Polar Willow	Colesbukta
<b>Saxifragaceae (Saxifrage Family)</b>			
	<i>Saxifraga corymbosa</i>	Tufted Saxifrage	Longyearbyen
	<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i>	Purple Saxifrage	Engelsbukta, Colesbukta
<b>ANGIOSPERMS - MONOCOTYLEDONS</b>			
<b>Cyperaceae (Sedge Family)</b>			
	<i>Eriophorum scheuchzeri</i> ssp. <i>arcticum</i>	Polar White Cottongrass	Longyearbyen, Colesbukta
<b>Poaceae (Grass Family)</b>			
	<i>Alopecurus ovatus</i>	Polar Foxtail	Colesbukta

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	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
<b>Family Phylloscopida (Leaf Warblers)</b>												
*	Willow Warbler											◆
<b>Family Turdidae (Thrushes)</b>												
*	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>										◆
*	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>										◆
<b>Family Corvidae (Crows)</b>												
*	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	◆								◆	◆
*	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	◆								◆	◆
*	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>										◆
<b>Family Fringillidae (Finches)</b>												
*	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>										◆
<b>Family Emberizidae (Buntings)</b>												
	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		◆				◆		◆	◆	
*	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citronella</i>									◆	◆

	ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29
<b>MAMMALS</b>												
<b>Carnivores</b>												
	Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>				◆						
<b>Cetaceans (Whales and Dolphins)</b>												
	Blue Whale	<i>Baleoptera musculus</i>		◆						◆		
	Fin Whale	<i>Baleoptera physalus</i>								◆		
	Minke Whale			◆	◆	◆			◆	◆		
<b>Pinniped (Seals)</b>												
	Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>			◆							
	Bearded Seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>			◆		◆		◆	◆		
	Harp Seal	<i>Pagophilus groenlandicus</i>					◆		◆			
	Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			◆							
	Ringed Seal	<i>Pusa hispida</i>							◆			
<b>Artiodactyla (Even-toed Ungulates)</b>												
	Svalbard Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus</i>		◆	◆					◆		