

WILDLIFE TRAVEL



SVALBARD

6th to 17th July 2026



Leader

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Derbyshire



Check <https://www.flickr.com/photos/wildlifetravel/albums/72177720334961627/> for a gallery of photos, and a handful of videos, from our trip.

Front: Brünnich's Guillemots on their nest ledges at Alkefjellet. Above: Polar Bear on Wahlbergøya.

Day One: 6th July. London to Oslo

An uneventful flight took us from London to Oslo where, once through the passport queues, we found our shuttle bus to the nearby hotel, for a short night's sleep...

Day Two: 7th July. Oslo to Longyearbyen, and onto the Plancius

An early start saw us back at the airport, and a few hours later we dropped through the cloud to Longyearbyen airport, well north of the Arctic Circle: welcome to Svalbard!

After being separated from our luggage, we took the bus into the 'big city' of Longyearbyen for a few hours' exploring.

We walked down through town, where family groups of Barnacle Geese were common, grazing the short vegetation, along with recently fledged Snow Buntings being fed by their busy parents.

Down to the coast, we walked east a little way, to the Hundegårdene, the husky kennels where a colony of Common Eider were nesting, their down nests much in evidence. A group of females on the small pool nearby were doing their best to protect their young from the attentions of a pair of Glaucous Gulls, while a pair of Red-throated Divers were displaying.

On the muddy shores of the Adventfjorden were a couple of Dunlin, a Ringed Plover and a handful of Purple Sandpipers, while Arctic Terns shouted at the Barnacle Geese, and an Arctic Skua flew over.

We reached the edge of the 'city limits' at the Polar Bear sign, beyond which it's not permitted to travel without a gun... time to turn back for the bright lights of Longyearbyen, including the Svalbard Museum and (for some) the Husky Café, before it was time to board the shuttle bus and, not long after, the MV Plancius, our home for the rest of the trip.

After going through the usual introductions to our cabins, the boat, her crew and safety features, we were finally on our way... and the boat very soon made a distinct turn back towards the harbour... not because we had left someone or something behind, but because a pod of Beluga whales were putting on a show back towards the shore, a fantastic start to the trip!

Day Three: 8th July. Signehamna and Ny-Ålesund

Our first excursion off-ship was a walk at Signehamna, where we walked up to the remains of a 'secret' German World War II weather station.

A Harbour Seal posed uncomfortably on a rock in the bay, and Kittiwakes were busy collecting nesting materials from the isolated Arctic lake.

In the afternoon, we travelled back south into Kongsfjord, passing four Minke Whales along the way, to the small harbour of Ny-Ålesund, the world's northernmost settlement, home to several countries' Polar research stations and a handful of Svalbard Reindeers, hanging out behind the

buildings. After some time in the village, with postcards sent on their way from the northernmost post office in the world, we headed back to the ship, just as a Humpback Whale passed by, fluking as he went.

An after dinner navigation took us down to the glacier front of Kronebreen, passing our first Bearded Seal floating on some ice, before we headed back out into the open sea, headed north...

Day Four: 9th July. Up amongst the pack ice...

We spent today up amongst the pack ice (and, alas, the fog) up beyond 80° North, just 1,000 km from the North Pole.

A handful of seals popped up amongst the ice, including another Bearded Seal, one or two Ringed Seals and a few energetic Harp Seals. Little Auks and Brünnich's and Black Guillemots were constantly flying back and forth, feeding amongst the ice floes, with Kittiwakes, Fulmar and Glaucous Gulls.

Day Five: 10th July. Monacobreen, Bockfjorden, Gråhuken

We started the day in front of the great glacier of Monacobreen, named after Prince Albert I of Monaco in the early 20th century: this glacier stretches back 40km into the mountains before ending at a 6 km wide and 60 metre high glacier front.

After breakfast, we set out for a zodiac cruise through the brash ice and towards the ice cliffs, where thousands of Kittiwakes were feeding in the nutrient-rich upwellings. Beneath the birds, a Beluga was joining in the feeding frenzy, and the icy theme continued with an Ivory Gull that briefly perched up on an iceberg alongside some Kittiwakes, before flying back into the fray, while a group of five King Eiders flew overhead, joining up with a party of Common Eiders and heading quickly away.

After a day and a half afloat, it was good to get our feet back on dry ground in the afternoon, with a landing at Bockfjord. The landing gave the geographers amongst us plenty to contemplate, with the presence of sulphurous hot springs, as well as the conjunction of black volcanic rocks at our feet and red sandstones on the mountains across the water.

Climbing the hill for a wider view, we found pink cushions of Moss Campion, along with four species of saxifrage: tall fine stems of Nodding Saxifrage, tiny rosettes of Polar Saxifrage, the clumped white flowers of Tufted Saxifrage and plenty of gone-over, low-growing Purple Saxifrage. Some showy clumps of Mountain Avens, a small patch of shrubby White Arctic Bell-heather, the going-over flowers of yellow flowered Golden Whitlow-Grass and Cushioned Whitlow Grass, and white-flowered Norwegian Whitlow-Grass, and some finished spikes of Hairy Lousewort were amongst the relatively rich tundra vegetation.

After a period of 'Arctic Silence', our attention turned to a small group of ducks off-shore beneath us: a trio of female Common Eider were joined by a male who, on closer examination, turned out to be a rather handsome hybrid between King and Common Eiders.

After dinner, we stopped at Gråhuken, the hut where the Austrian artist Christiane Ritter overwintered in 1934-35, along with her husband Hermann and his Norwegian friend Karl, and where we had a reading from her book 'A Woman in the Polar Night'.

Day Six: 11th July. Nordauslandet and the Seven Islands: Chernsideøya and Phippsøya

After a slightly bumpier journey overnight, we arrived at the island of Chernsideøya, off the north west tip of Nordauslandet. Our morning excursion took us over onto the terraced gravel beaches, where the creamy yellow flowers of Svalbard Poppy were dotted across the otherwise barren gravels, alongside tiny rosettes of Polar Scurvygrass and minute Polar Saxifrage, the low-growing Ice Grass and some clumps of Northern Wood-Rush.

Amongst the bones on the shore were a whale rib, Reindeer antlers and the skull of a young Polar Bear.

A small group of Common Eiders on the shore had a handful of ducklings, and an Arctic Skua came overhead, chasing Kittiwakes.

Over lunch we travelled north into the Seven Islands, the northernmost part of the archipelago, and landed on the shores of Phippsøya. Two pairs of Arctic Skuas spent much of the afternoon harassing passing Kittiwakes, while a pair of large Walrus dozed the day away on the shore, with a third bobbing about in the bay as we arrived.

The walk up the slope and around a small melt-water lake gave us views out over the north side of the island, with another group of Walrus swimming offshore, and an ancient pile of Polar Bear scat... no woods to be seen.

Day Seven: 12th July. Hinlopenstretet: Torellneset, Wahlbergøya, Alkefjellet, Bråsvellbreen

Today we were in the Hinlopen Strait, between Spitsbergen to the west, and Nordauslandet to the east.

Our morning landing was at Torellneset, where a 'heap' (there's no better word for it) of Walrus were piled up on the beach, while the nearby 'Arctic desert' was dotted with Nodding Saxifrage and Sulphur Buttercup, along with bones of long-dead Bowhead Whales.

From here, we back-tracked a little way, headed north for our afternoon excursion. Along the way, the 'shout' that we'd all been waiting for came over the tannoy: a Polar Bear had been spotted as we passed the nearby island of Wahlbergøya, and with some careful manoeuvring by the captain we were able to spend the next hour with him, as he wandered through a colony of Arctic Terns, no doubt munching on plenty of eggs and chicks...

A little delayed by the big white bear, our afternoon excursion was a zodiac cruise along the bird-filled cliffs at Alkefjellet, home to several hundred thousand Brünnich's Guillemots and similar numbers of Kittiwakes: the sounds and scents of so many nesting birds were something to behold.

After dinner, there was yet more to come, as we approached the Bråsvellbreen, the glacier front of the Austfonna ice cap, the third largest ice cap on the planet after Antarctica and Greenland. At 180km in length, the towering ice cliffs are the longest glacier front on the northern hemisphere. We cruised along the south eastern corner of this vast chunk of ice, with melt waterfalls pouring down from the cliff tops, before everyone finally turned in for the night...

Day Eight: 13th July. Heleysundet, Negribreen, Dunérbukta

A short night's sleep, with an early start to catch us passing through the narrows of Heleysundet, the straits that separate the northern tip of Barentsøya from 'mainland' of Spitsbergen. Just 600 metres across, the tidal currents through the strait can reach an impressive 10 knots, making this an exciting addition to our route, taken to avoid the strong winds around the south of Barentsøya overnight.

As if the exciting scenery and tidal race weren't enough, a sleeping Polar Bear on the cliff top by the strait raised his head to watch us as we zoomed by!

After breakfast, we found ourselves off the 12 front of Negribreen, where a zodiac cruise took us out amongst the icebergs, where an amazing dozen or more Ivory Gulls were perched up on the ice or flying about amongst the Kittiwakes.

After lunch, we had a walk across the barren muddy shores of Dunérbukta, where several old Polar Bear tracks were found amongst numerous Reindeer tracks.

Later in the evening we started on the long journey around the southern end of Spitsbergen, headed back to the sheltered western side of the archipelago.

Day Nine: 14th July. Hornsund: Gåshamna, Samarinbreen and Treskelodden

We spent today in Hornsund, looking for (and very successfully finding!) shelter from the windy conditions.

At Gåshamna, we found the remains of both English and Dutch whaling 'ovens', differentiated by the red or yellow bricks, with the ancient bones of Bowhead Whales still in situ. A few pairs of Arctic Tern were nesting out on the gravel flats, and made it obvious that our presence was not welcome, dive bombing those at the front of the group...

By the time we were heading back to the boat, the low cloud had burned off, and we took full advantage of the sunny conditions, enjoying a scenic ship's cruise along Samarinbreen, before headed to the promontory at Treskelodden for our afternoon walk.

Day Ten: 15th July. Alkhornet, Dahlbrebukta

The morning excursion was to the lush slopes of Alkhornet, where the nutrients drifting down from the seabird cliffs above have resulted in one of the most thickly vegetated corners of Svalbard.

Alongside all the now-familiar common plants of the tundra, this was the only spot where we found several species, including Iceland Purslane, Polar Campion, Dwarf Golden-Saxifrage, Tundra Buttercup and the endemic Svalbard Saxifrage.

The lush conditions were also appealing to Svalbard Reinder, with a small herd of these handsome animals grazing around us, seemingly unconcerned by the sudden appearance of 100 humans on their dinner table...

Back on board, and we headed north into the sheltered waters of Forlandsundet, where just as lunch finished the call of 'Blue Whale' went over the tannoy, and we all hurried on to deck to enjoy the largest animal on the planet as she fed quietly alongside us.

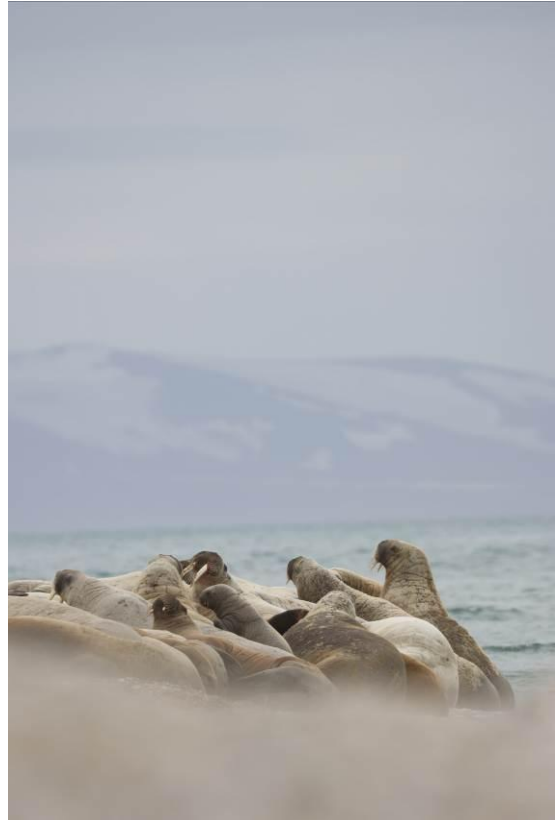
The afternoon excursion was quite the contrast, with a walk up the barren, muddy moraine at Dahlbrebukta, before the foolhardier on board took their 'Polar Plunge'...

Day Eleven: 16th July. Longyearbyen and back to Oslo...

We woke to find ourselves moored up alongside the Coal Harbour in Longyearbyen, back where we started.

And here we went our separate ways, at the end of a very successful circumnavigation of the archipelago, from Beluga to Blue Whale, via the pack ice and a Polar Bear.

Philip Precey, Wildlife Travel. August 2026



(clockwise, from top left): Svalbard Reindeer on the outskirts of Longyearbyen; Atlantic Walrus on their haul out beach at Torellneset; Ivory Gull on the ice at Negribreen; Svalbard Poppy on Chermsideøya

BIRDS

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	12 th	13 th	14 th	15 th	16 th
Family Anatidae (ducks, geese and waterfowl)											
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>	Several family groups around the church at Longyearbyen on 16 th									
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>	X	X				X				X
King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	A group of five males flying about the glacier front at Seligerbreen on 10 th									
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X
King x Common Eider	A male hybrid was with three female Common Eider at Bockfjorden on the afternoon of 10 th										
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Two pairs on the pools at Ny-Ålesund, 8 th									
Family Phasianidae (pheasants, grouse and allies)											
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus muta</i>	One heard calling on the edge of Longyearbyen on 7th									
Family Charadriidae (plovers and lapwings)											
Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	X	X			X			X		
Family Scolopacidae (sandpipers and allies)											
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	Two adults on the mud by the dog kennels at Longyearbyen, 7 th									
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	X	X		X	X			X		X
Family Stercorariidae (skuas)											
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family Alcidae (auks, guillemots and puffins)											
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	X	X	X						X	X
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>	X	X	X		X	X		X		X
Brünnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Family Laridae (gulls, terns and skimmers)											
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>				X			X			
One was (briefly) with Kittiwakes at the glacier front at Seligerbreen on 10 th , while 12+ birds showed well amongst the ice at Negribreen on 13 th .											
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X
Family Gaviidae (divers)											
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	X	X				X		X		X
Family Procellariidae (shearwaters and petrels)											
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family Calcariidae (longspurs and snow buntings)											
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	X	X		X	X			X	X	X

MAMMALS

ENGLISH NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	7 th	8 th	9 th	10 th	11 th	12 th	13 th	14 th	15 th	16 th
Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i> An adult causing chaos in an Arctic Tern colony on Wahlbergøya on 12 th was perhaps the highlight of our trip, hanging about long enough for the captain to move the ship as close as possible to the shore, giving everyone great views. A second animal was sleeping on the clifftop as we passed through Heleysundet, early on the morning of 13 th , briefly raising his head as we passed by at speed! The skull of a sub-adult animal at Chermsideøya and some (very old) scat on the hillside above the beach at Phippsøya, both on 11 th . Footprints at Dunérbukta on 13 th and Treskelodden on 14 th .										
Blue Whale	<i>Balaenoptera musculus</i> One showed well to everyone on board, feeding in Forlandsundet, near the entrance to Dahlbrebukta, 15 th .										
Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	X	X		X						
Bowhead Whale	<i>Balaena mysticetus</i> An ancient skull at Torellneset, 12 th and plenty of old bones around the old whaling station at Gåshamna, 14 th .										
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i> One off-shore at Ny-Ålesund, 8 th .										
Beluga	<i>Delphinapterus leucas</i> A large pod in Adventfjorden as we departed on 7 th , and at least one around the glacier front at Monacobreen, 10 th .										
Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i> Three on the beach at Phippsøya on 11 th , and a great heap of animals on the beach at Torellneset, 12 th .					X	X				
Bearded Seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>		X	X							
Harp Seal	<i>Pagophilus groenlandicus</i> A handful around the pack ice, 9 th .										
Ringed Seal	<i>Pusa hispida</i> A handful around the pack ice, 9 th .										
Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	X								X	
Svalbard Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus</i>	X	X		S	S				X	X

PLANTS

This checklist follows the taxonomy published by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew **Plants of the World Online** as updated by <https://powo.science.kew.org>

SCIENTIFIC NAME	ENGLISH NAME	Notes
PTERIDOPHYTA: FERNS AND ALLIES		
Equisetaceae (horsetail family)		
<i>Equisetum arvense</i>	Field Horsetail Alkhornet (15 th) and Longyearbyen (16 th)	
DICOTYLEDONS		
Brassicaceae (cabbage family)		
<i>Cardamine polemonioides</i>	Polar Cress Longyearbyen (7 th), Ny-Ålesund (8 th), Gåshamna (14 th) and Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Cochlearia groenlandica</i>	Polar Scurvygrass Common around coasts/tundra	
<i>Draba alpina</i>	Golden Whitlow-grass Bockfjorden (10 th), Dunérbukta (13 th) and Treskelodden (14 th)	
<i>Draba corymbosa</i>	Cushioned Whitlow-grass Bockfjorden (10 th)	
<i>Draba cf norvegicus</i>	(=Draba rupestris) Norwegian Whitlow-grass Bockfjorden (10 th) and Treskelodden (14 th)	
<i>Draba cf lactea</i>	Lapland Whitlow-grass Alkhornet (15 th)	
Caryophyllaceae (carnation family)		
<i>Cerastium arcticum</i>	Arctic Mouse-ear Common around coasts/tundra	
<i>Cherleria biflora</i>	Tufted Sandwort Bockfjorden (10 th), Dunérbukta (13 th) and Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Sabulina rubella</i>	Mountain Sandwort Dunérbukta (13 th)	
<i>Sagina nivalis</i>	Snow Pearlwort Dunérbukta (13 th) and Treskelodden (14 th)	
<i>Silene acaulis</i>	Moss Campion Common on tundra	
<i>Silene involucrata</i>	Arctic White Campion Longyearbyen (7 th and 16 th)	
<i>Silene uralensis</i>	Polar Campion Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Stellaria humifusa</i>	Arctic Chickweed Longyearbyen (7 th) and Gråhuken (10 th)	

Svalbard 2026: trip report and species lists

SCIENTIFIC NAME	ENGLISH NAME	Notes
<i>Stellaria longipes</i> subsp <i>longipes</i>	Tundra Chickweed Alkhornet (15 th)	
Ericaceae (heather family)		
<i>Cassiope tetragona</i>	White Arctic Bell-heather Bockfjorden (10 th) and Longyearbyen (16 th)	
Orobanchaceae (broomrape family)		
<i>Pedicularis hirsuta</i>	Hairy Lousewort Bockfjorden (10 th)	
Papaveraceae (poppy family)		
<i>Oreomecon polaris</i>	Svalbard Poppy (=Oreomecon dahliana) Chermsideøya (11 th), Torellneset (12 th) and Dunérbukta (13 th)	
Polygonaceae (knotweed family)		
<i>Koenigia islandica</i>	Iceland Purslane Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Bistorta vivipara</i>	Alpine Bistort Longyearbyen (7 th), Ny-Ålesund (8 th), Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Oxyria digyna</i>	Mountain Sorrel Longyearbyen (7 th), Bockfjorden (10 th), Dunérbukta (13 th), Gåshamna (14 th)	
Ranunculaceae (buttercup family)		
<i>Ranunculus hyperboreus</i>	Tundra Buttercup Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Ranunculus nivalis</i>	Snow Buttercup Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Ranunculus pygmaeus</i>	Pygmy Buttercup Gråhukén (10 th), Dunérbukta (13 th), Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Ranunculus sulphureus</i>	Sulphur-coloured Buttercup Torellneset (12 th), Dunérbukta (13 th), Alkhornet (15 th)	
Rosaceae (rose family)		
<i>Dryas octopetala</i>	Mountain Avens Longyearbyen (7 th) and Bockfjorden (10 th)	
Salicaceae (willow family)		
<i>Salix polaris</i>	Polar Willow Common on tundra	
Saxifragaceae (saxifrage family)		
<i>Chrysosplenium tetrandum</i>	Dwarf Golden-Saxifrage Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Micranthes nivalis</i>	Alpine Saxifrage (=Saxifraga nivalis) Signehamna (8 th), Phippsøya (11 th), Dunérbukta (13 th), Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Saxifraga aizoides</i>	Yellow Mountain Saxifrage Gåshamna (14 th)	

Svalbard 2026: trip report and species lists

SCIENTIFIC NAME	ENGLISH NAME	Notes
<i>Saxifraga cernua</i>	Drooping Saxifrage Common on coasts and tundra	
<i>Saxifraga cespitosa</i>	Tufted Saxifrage Common on coasts and tundra	
<i>Saxifraga hirculus</i>	Yellow Marsh Saxifrage Longyearbyen (7 th) and Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Saxifraga hyperborea</i>	Polar Saxifrage Gråhukken (10 th), Chermsideøya and Phippsøya (11 th)	
<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i>	Purple Saxifrage Common on tundra	
<i>Saxifraga svalbardensis</i>	Svalbard Saxifrage Alkhornet (15 th)	
MONOCOTYLEDONS		
Cyperaceae (sedge family)		
<i>Eriophorum schechzeri</i>	Arctic Cottongrass Longyearbyen (7 th)	
Juncaceae (rush family)		
<i>Juncus biglumis</i>	Two-flowered Rush Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Luzula confusa</i>	Northern Wood-Rush Signehamna (8 th), Chermsideøya (11 th)	
Poaceae (grass family)		
<i>Alopecurus magellanicus</i>	Polar Foxtail Longyearbyen (7 th), Alkhornet (15 th)	
<i>Koeleria spicata</i>	Spike Trisetum Longyearbyen (7 th), Bockfjorden (10 th), Dunérbukta (13 th)	
<i>Poa alpina</i>	Alpine Meadow-grass Common on tundra	
<i>Phippsia algida</i>	Ice Grass Common around coasts/on tundra	

thank you for travelling with us

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