

SVALBARD 7th-17th JUNE 2017  
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This is a personally orientated report on the chartered trip organised by John van der Dol of Sandwich Bird Tours to Svalbard on the Noorderlicht.

We met at Heathrow and flew to a barmy Oslo airport and were soon tucked up in nearby hotels for an early flight to Longyearbyen on Spitzbergen the next day. After a safe landing on an unusual runway with speed humps we were met by the crew of the Noorderlicht and our Russian guide who transported our bags to the ship. We then looked around the town, some visiting the excellent museum, others to the shore and all enjoying coffee and cakes before boarding the ship at 5pm. Although cloudy and 3°C, there was little wind and it was quite pleasant walking about; some lucky people saw a House Martin, an unusual bird this far north. It was good to hear Snow buntings singing and to see the males in their lovely summer plumage, Eider were about to start nesting (when we returned 10 days later, there were no females to be seen) and Arctic Terns were yet to establish territories. Our captain Floris welcomed us aboard, explained safety procedures and life on the ship; we were to proceed quite quickly to the North as the weather forecast later in the week was deteriorating. We sailed west to anchor for the 'night' in the sheltered bay of Trygghamna. Brunnich's Guillemots, Little Auks were continually seen with fewer Fulmars, Kittiwakes and Puffins. At 2330, while still bright daylight, we reluctantly retired to our bunks.

8<sup>th</sup> June. A bell at 0530 warned of a sighting of interest, an Arctic Fox was trotting along the shore. Although a long way off, we could watch it well; still mostly in white winter coat but a black saddle indicating moult into summer had begun. We made our first zodiac landing after breakfast, accompanied by the compulsory rifle-carrying guide. Andre was an enthusiastic leader and fount of knowledge, having spent a considerable amount of time doing research in the White Sea area. Two Ptarmigan were briefly seen, Arctic Skua, Pink-footed and Barnacle Geese, Purple Sandpiper added to the bird list. As we were leaving, an inflatable came across from a large grey vessel; these were officers of the Sysselmannen, the regulating body of the Norwegian government on Svalbard. They keep control of all ships visiting and authorise landings, an enormous task given the huge tourist pressure, but essential if the islands are to be preserved for future generations to enjoy. I was aware of more plastic rubbish on the beaches than on my previous visit two years ago, but I think this

was from the ocean rather than local tourists. We returned to the ship for lunch, helping the crew to haul the zodiac up to its position over the stern. In the afternoon we landed at Poolepynten, on the East coast on Prins Karls Forland. By now the cloud had cleared and we were to enjoy the next three days in continuous sunshine. Poolepynten is well known as a haul-out for Walrus; we counted about 78, all males of various ages, totally relaxed, snuggled close together, just opening an eye occasionally to look at the odd visitors. Downwind, their body odour is one of the memorable experiences of Svalbard! 8 Brent Geese, 2 Red-throated divers and a pair of the sexually liberated Grey Phalaropes with brightly plumaged female were swimming on the sea. The latter, together with divers and terns were waiting for the ice to melt on the nearby lake before starting their breeding activities. A Bonxie flew past as we relaxed on deck after dinner. We sailed north all night in calm sunny conditions.

9<sup>th</sup> June. We continued north until midday, picking our way through increasingly thick ice, often with one of the crew perched on the bowsprit instructing the helmsman by walkie-talkie. Many Fulmars feeding on the surface of the open water, picking at small items. A Pomarine Skua flew north giving us good views of its curious central tail feathers, several Tysties, many Brunnich's but fewer Little Auks, although we were now quite close to the huge Little Auk colony of Fugelsongen to the east. Perhaps they too are waiting for the ice to retreat. However, we reached 80°N and celebrated with a hot chocolate and dash of rum with cake! We turned and weaved our way through the ice, a wonderful experience on a calm and sunny day on a comfortable ship, well fed by our hard-working chef who produced three meals a day for 25 people and made fresh bread from a galley about ten feet square. In spite of his tee shirt which bore on the back "they call it the tourist season, so why can't we shoot 'em?" Menthe looked after us cheerfully. We entered Raudfjord following information that a bear had been seen there by an earlier cruise ship. Eventually a Polar Bear was spotted, possibly  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile away – a yellowish dot on the ice, eating something. During the day we also saw a Minke Whale, 3 Ringed Seals and a Bearded Seal. We cruised into Fuglefjord and close to the glacier cliff of some 25 metres – many birds feeding on the disturbed water caused by ice crashing into the sea, but nothing to add to our list. On the way to our anchorage in Virgohamna we called into another bay, as usual with a glacier coming down to the sea. Here we watched our second Polar Bear, much closer (400m), as it walked along the shoreline below the glacier before turning inland and setting purposefully off up an enormous snowfield – which brought home the warning that one can expect a bear almost anywhere.



10<sup>th</sup> June An overcast day, 4°C and calm. We landed at Smeerenburgreen and had a walk on a pebbly beach with melting snow drifts. A Sanderling in summer plumage disconcerted us, used to its winter colouring, for a moment. Dunlin, Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone and Ringed Plover completed the wader species. There were 7 Walrus on the beach. Although we were discouraged from fraternising with other tour groups, we had landed close to a group from the Akademik Joseph and from them learned the result of the UK General Election, two days after the event. We then returned to our glorious isolation of no internet access! Sailing south we encountered a flock of 800 Little Auks, swirling like Starlings, around a scree slope. We anchored for the night in Krossfjord, by the July 14<sup>th</sup> glacier. The cliffs were 150m high, full of Kittiwakes – I estimated 4500. Below the cliffs was a steep scree slope with 7 Reindeer feeding on small patches of vegetation, walking with no concern on the precipitous terrain. After dinner, sitting below deck, talking to Andre, he suddenly said “can you hear that – Bearded Seal”. It was a long note of about 5 seconds, declining in pitch. A beautiful sound, not loud, but once it was brought to our attention we heard it many times, and even while on deck. The value of having an expert on board!



11<sup>th</sup> June Landed below the Kittiwake cliffs; those on the first zodiac landing saw a Glaucous Gull kill an adult Kittiwake which was washing in a fresh water pool. Many Kittiwakes were busy nest building, gathering moss from the valley stream before flying high to their nest site. About 300 Brunnich's Guillemots were also nesting. Those who had remained on board were rewarded by seeing about 9 Beluga Whales close to the ship. After lunch, we continued up Lillehookfjord with Daan on the bowsprit guiding around the bigger bergs which had calved from the glacier. 4

Bearded Seals on icebergs, huge bodied animals with a small head and wonderful long whiskers (no beard!). Menthe came up with a lovely apple tart to celebrate a birthday of a passenger – amazingly we had three birthdays during the trip, all marked by some extra delicacy! Toasts were chilled with glacier ice hauled from the sea! Astoundingly clear air, mountains twenty miles away appeared much nearer. An after dinner talk from Andre on Domesky Island, Franz Joseph Land where there are up to 2000 Ivory Gulls. A sudden lurch of the Noorderlicht signalled a large piece of ice had broken from the glacier sending a wave which rocked us. We went out to look and saw 3 King Eiders. The captain set up a camera to record any falls during the night.



12<sup>th</sup> June 9 King Eider this morning, with 12 Common Eider and 15 Fulmars resting on the water around the ship; 4 Arctic Terns, 4 Black and 6 Brunnich's Guillemots. An Arctic Fox in dark coat on the shore. Sailed southeast to Ossian Sarsfjellet and landed, climbing some 300m up to where a Norwegian couple were were surveying a Kittiwake colony. Kittiwakes are doing well apparently, but not the Brunnich's Guillemots. An exciting zodiac landing, pushing through drift ice which had mostly cleared by the time we returned. The best birds were a pair of Ptarmigan which wandered past us to within 50m, the male still in winter plumage was very conspicuous while crossing areas from where the snow had melted. On to Ny London after lunch, the site of a British marble mine which failed because of the poor quality of the marble. Much of the machinery, steam engine, boiler, tracks, stove with coffee pot are still to be seen a hundred years after the enterprise was abandoned. A pair of Long-tailed Ducks were swimming in the harbour and a Long-tailed Skua (a ringed bird and our fourth skua species!) was wandering amongst the buildings. A pair of Red-throated Divers were flying about, anxiously awaiting their loch to become ice free. 3 Reindeer, antlers beginning to grow, grazing ceaselessly on lichen, still in their white winter coat allowed us quite close approach. Crossed the short distance to Ny Alesund where we docked for the night. Arctic Terns nesting in the town; two pairs on their first egg – quick to attack anyone approaching too close, but rapidly back on the egg in this cool temperature.



13<sup>th</sup> June We walked to the Amundsen balloon mast, past fenced areas showing what vegetation regeneration can be achieved with protection from traffic and grazing. 3 Ringed Plovers and 4 Snow Buntings – the latter seem much more abundant where people are living. Sailed at 1100, seeing a few Minke Whales in the distance with a tight frenzy of feeding Kittiwakes. 5 Common Seals also seen as we motored west to Collethegda searching for a reported Polar Bear. A sharp-eyed passenger spotted it, swimming through the drift ice, occasionally pulling up onto an iceberg to look around. With engine turned off we drifted towards the bear but could not get very close because of the ice. An interesting, long observation of an animal in its natural habitat. We then motored west out of Kongsfjord, enjoying a late lunch after the delay watching the bear. Soon after eating, the bell rang – some-one had seen a whale blow and the captain increased speed. When closer to the repeated tall, narrow blows, the engine was turned off and we drifted. Two whales were close together, a blow followed by a long low grey back then a small fin and finally a tail raised into the air – Blue Whale! The sound of the blow was loud when close and the hole could be seen opening then closing. A couple of Puffins were near the whales during their breathing but were completely unafraid of the huge creatures just beside them. There were three or four Blue Whales and also two or three Minkes. Everyone, including all the crew, was on deck enjoying the spectacle. Anchored in St Jonsfjord for the night.



14<sup>th</sup> June We landed on the north side of the lateral moraine of the St Jonsfjord glacier, a fascinating area of frost shattered rocks with outcrops of marble and walked up on to the moraine. 9 Pink-footed geese, a Ptarmigan and the usual species. We raised the sails after lunch; Geloen instructing the passengers to help haul the main, schooner, outer and inner jib sails, followed by rope coiling lessons. Very hard work, it was unfortunately the only time we had enough wind to warrant sailing, so did not have the chance to improve our fitness! After an hour the sails came down and we turned into Isfjord entrance to land in a small bay. Here the geology was different again, gravelly beach and vertically tilted yellow sandstone. 27 Barnacle and 1 Pink-footed geese, 36 Eider, 2 Grey Phalaropes, 1 Purple Sandpiper, 1 Ringed Plover, 4 Snow Buntings, 4 Fulmar, 4 Great black backed and 2 Glaucous gulls, 4 Arctic Terns. Interestingly, two years ago we saw just a single Great black backed Gull, this year at least 12. Anchored in Ymebukta. A talk from Andre on the Pomors – Russian hunters who lived on Svalbard until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, chiefly trapping foxes for their winter skin. Heavy rain in the night was the only precipitation of the whole tour!

15<sup>th</sup> June Attempted to land on the beach, but shallow water with rocks made navigation difficult, and after hitting the propeller on one, we returned to the ship. Back to the glacier and landed, seeing a group of some 80 ducks appear from behind the ice. A group then went in the zodiac towards the ducks, counting 19 King, 57 Common Eider and 4 long-tailed Ducks. At the glacier foot, a new terminal moraine was being formed – all glaciers are retreating rapidly. There were more flowering plants here than we had so far noted – Mountain Sorrel, Whitlow Grass and Purple Saxifrage. We continued sailing east down Sassenfjord, enjoying Menthe's famous pea and ham soup when a shout of “divers!” brought us on deck. Swimming on the sea were a pair of **WHITE-BILLED DIVERS**.



The captain cut engines as we approached and we moved slowly past the birds, who were anxious but not alarmed enough to take flight – another example of the skilled,

professional tour operator. They were of similar shape to Great Northern, with steep forehead, however the bill was held slightly raised, a distinction at long distance. At close range of only about 50m we could clearly see the beautiful black and white patterning of the male and the pale bill which had an upturned lower mandible rather as Red-throated. 700 Brunnich's, 500 Little Auks, 180 Fulmar, 20 Puffins, 2 Glaucous Gulls and 4 Kittiwakes as we motored NW to anchor in Skansbukta. As we entered the bay, we saw a Ptarmigan on the roof of an old shed, it then flew down on the beach, briefly! A walk on the beach after dinner, below sandstone cliffs with some 2500 Fulmars nesting. The number of the blue phase Fulmars varied between 40 and 90%, in this area they were mostly of the darker type. There were 200 Kittiwakes collecting nest material for a colony further round the cliff. We watched a pair of Arctic Skuas chase a Kittiwake, forcing it to drop the moss it was carrying. A pointless exercise I would have thought, but perhaps they do it to show their prowess to tourists. Several Reindeer feeding on the scree below the cliff.

16<sup>th</sup> June Sailed up Billefjord to Adolfbukta and landed at Brucebyen – a flat boggy area with an abandoned mine at the south end. 15 Pink-footed Geese, 120 Arctic Terns, 80 Glaucous Gulls – all 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> summer, 1 Ringed Plover, 2 Purple Sandpipers, 3 Grey Phalaropes, 2 Turnstones, 2 Arctic Skuas. An Arctic Fox was trotting across the tundra when it came across a pair of Pink-footed Geese; the gander opened its wings and hissed, at which the fox diverted its route. After lunch, some of us landed closer to the glacier and clambered over a rocky knoll to a small beach below the foot of the glacier. A close encounter with an inquisitive Bearded Seal as we travelled in the zodiac, was good. There was some wonderful water-eroded rock, and ice of many shades of blue. We spent an hour watching many birds in this attractive, sheltered haven. 200 Kittiwakes including two juveniles, 8 Glaucous Gulls and excellent views of 3 Ivory Gulls, strikingly white, the dark bill with yellow tip was conspicuous as they flew past the snow covered glacier. A Long-tailed Duck was swimming in the open water and a drake Teal was an unusual bird to add to our list. 2 Long-tailed Skuas also among the 12 species we saw at this place – almost half the total number of Svalbard bird species! Back to the Noorderlicht, which had not been able to anchor due to the depth of the water, we motored slowly through the ice which had broken from the glacier, seeing some 15 Bearded Seals resting on floes. They were of various colours from brown to quite bright orange. We crossed Billefjord to land at Gipsdalen where a Redshank was new to my list, 15 Pink-footed Geese, 9 Barnacle Geese included a leucistic bird and 5 Reindeer with two calves/fawns which Andre thought about 2 weeks old. To Longyearbyen where we explored the town again, finding a new species for the trip in the form of a 2<sup>nd</sup> summer Black-headed Gull. We had all been asked to leave the ship for the afternoon and returned to discover the reason; the windows had been blacked-out and a candle-lit dinner with wine on-the-house was waiting for us. A wonderful gesture from our hosts who had looked after us so well for the past ten days and shown us sights we will never forget



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