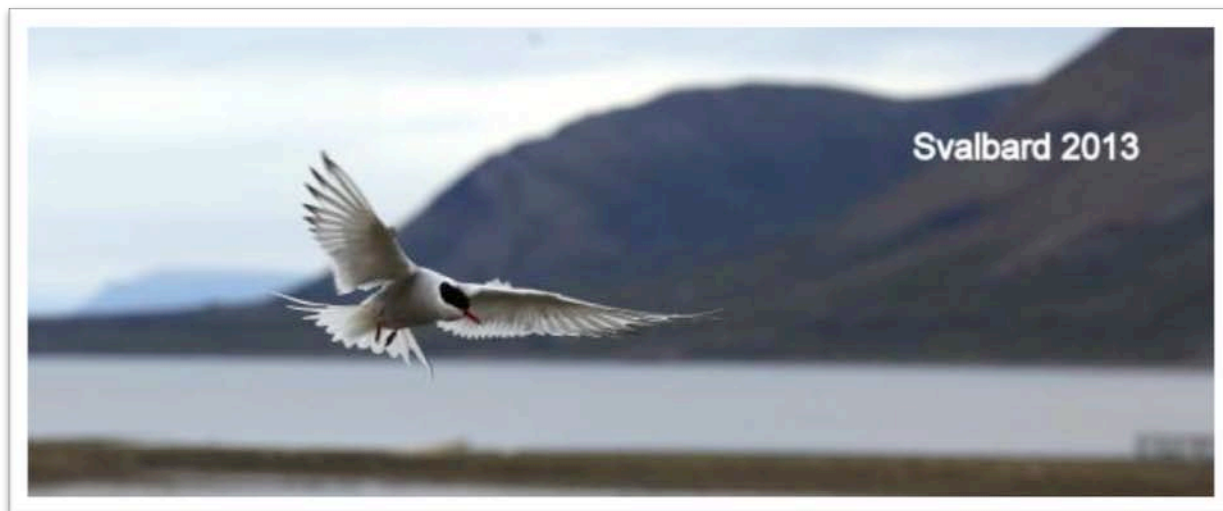


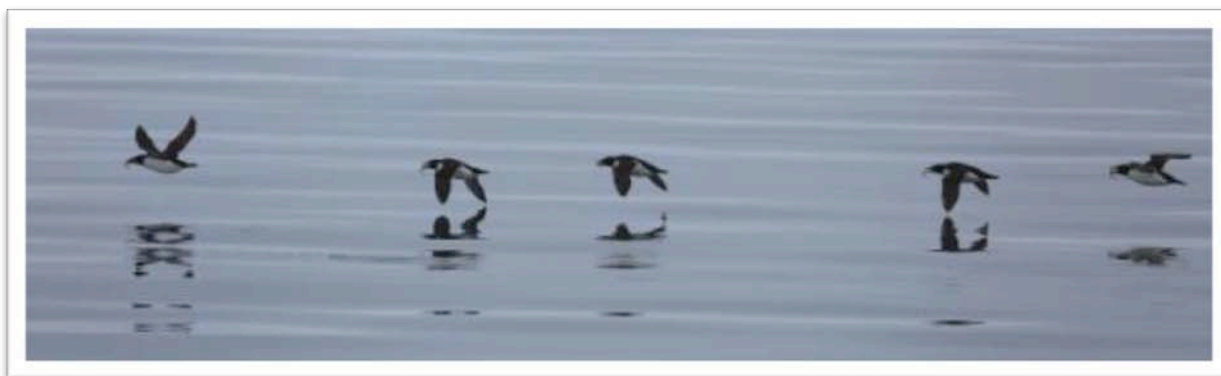
SVALBARD JULY /AUGUST 2013



DAY 1 July 27th

We left Sandwich just before 5am and had a clear journey all the way to Heathrow where Andy, Jim and I met up with Roger, Ray and Lyn. Colin and Sue were going to join us later as they were taking different flights. We checked in and all went very smoothly and we were soon in the air for our short flight to Oslo.

About three hours in Oslo airport followed by another short flight to Tromso where because of the Schengen regulations we had to get off with all our hand luggage. We picked up a few more passengers and set off for the final sector to Spitsbergen. As we arrived at the Raddison Blue Polar Hotel we finally found Sue and Colin who I was expecting to see at Oslo. A misunderstanding but least we were now altogether. They had already spent a day here and Sue had got some great shots of Arctic Terns. Something to have a go at tomorrow.



Day 2 July 28th

A late breakfast at 8 o'clock before setting off along the coastal road to do some birding and photography. Not many species of course but great to have close encounters with Arctic Terns even if they did want to attack you every time you walked near the nests. A pair of Arctic Skuas had a downy youngster and there was a constant battle between them and the terns.



It was good to see Dunlin in breeding plumage and some Purple Sandpipers were lovely too. A single Ringed Plover was noted. A large crèche of Pinkfeet were seen in the distance and Barnacle Geese were present in huge numbers with many chicks. Ray got a photo of an albino Barnacle which must have got him excited before he realised it was just a Barnacle. Snow Buntings were messing about in the high street amongst the tourists. I suppose they have to be common somewhere.

We re-assembled just before 5pm and caught our taxi down to the harbour where we joined the Noorderlicht (Northern light), a former lightship, which was going to be our home for the next couple of weeks or so. It is a beautiful Dutch two masted schooner. After a briefing about safety, house rules etc we set sail so to speak. No sails today, just the engine. It was cold and quite misty but still a few birds were noted from the deck. The first Puffin of the tour, loads of Brunnich's Guillemots, Little Auks and the blue phase of the Northern Fulmar.

We had a nice dinner after and a chance to meet some of the other passengers mostly from Holland and Germany. I retired soon after dinner because I needed a good night's sleep which I certainly got.

Day 3 July 29

A great breakfast at 8am. I don't think many were up very early this morning.

Birds first thing included thousands of Kittiwakes, a few Puffins and the usual Eiders including some nice drakes. It was raining first thing and although visibility was not brilliant one could see that the landscape is spectacular. We had a PowerPoint presentation about safety on shore in the event one gets confronted by a bear after which all went ashore. I was suffering from bad chest pains and Dirk and Jan who are both doctors recommended I should be checked out in a hospital. We were just an

hour away from Barentsburg, a Russian town in Svalbard but still under Norwegian jurisdiction. There is no need to go into detail other than to say the other passengers were quite happy to spend a few hours in a Russian coal mining town. Environmental concerns have not been heard of up here other than they were insulating large buildings on the outside. Given the all clear we returned to the boat and were nearly ready for another great dinner after which we set sail to continue our journey.

Day 4 July 30

The day started with a wake-up call at 03.30 with shouts of Belugas. Well it did not take long to get many layers of clothing on and get out on deck. It was a beautiful morning with blue skies and superb oranges and yellows in the landscape against the snowy scenes of the higher altitudes. Along the shore one could see white mushroom shaped blobs popping up in the water. They would disappear and re-appear somewhere else. Sometimes one could see the elongated shape of a Beluga Whale, but even with binoculars this was not easy to discern as like all other whales they don't have an obvious neck. However from photographs taken we could make out that in fact we had seen virtually the whole animal at times. The pod was about 15 strong and what a start to our holiday.



We had reached the area of the Recherche Glacier where we did a landing after breakfast. This was my first landing. Almost immediately Ray found an adult and an immature male King Eider but even with a scope they were a little distant, but they were in the bag. Some better views later in the trip I hope.

A Bearded Seal was hauled out on an ice flow which was added to Ringed Seal seen by others earlier in the journey.

The usual birds were seen again and I suspect that that will be the same every day. A Black Guillemot and a small group of Kittiwakes on small icebergs made good photographic subjects. About six Reindeer were found and were easily approached as they are not scared of people.

After lunch the group did another landing but as it entailed a fair bit of walking and uphill climbing I decided to stay back on the ship. The group had a great experience with a beautiful Arctic Fox while Colin and I photographed a small group of flying Eider which as I was taking the pictures I thought they included another immature male King Eider which proved to be the case on examination.

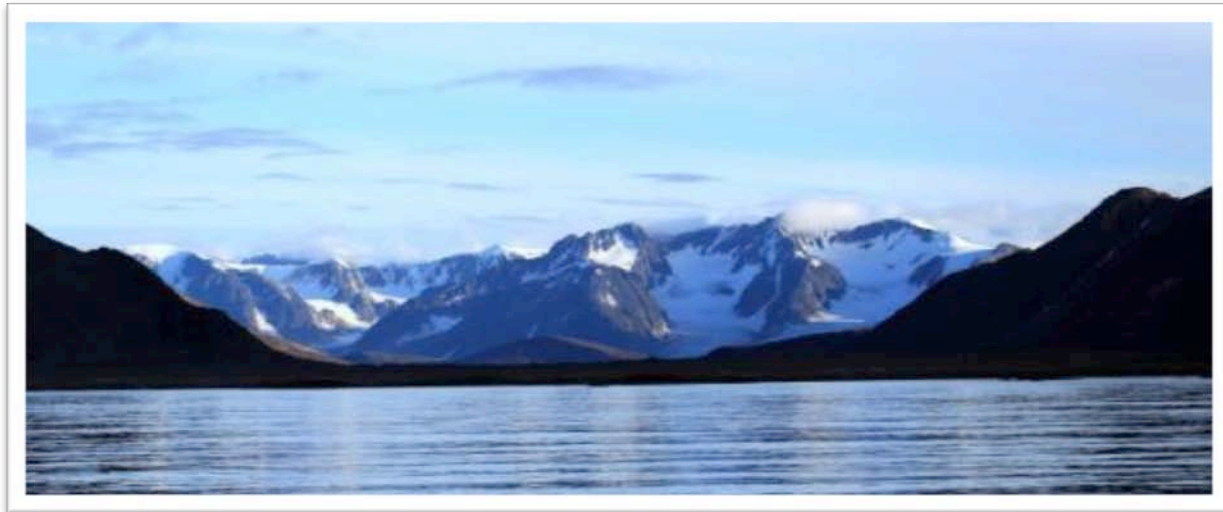
Everybody had had yet another great day.

Day 5 July 31

Overnight we sailed to Hornsund, initially under full sail but as the wind dropped so the sails were dropped and the engine reinstated. We arrived about breakfast time. It is quite something to think that while we were all soundly asleep in our bunks, the crew were standing outside with no cover all night long. It must be very cold and extremely tiring for them.

This morning was spent cruising the glaciers in the Bergenbukta fjord. The scenery was spectacular and amongst the Kittiwakes we managed to find four Ivory Gulls. A new bird for most of the birders albeit they were a little distant, but again we hope to get some more during the rest of our voyage.

We continued on and laid anchor for lunch when somebody spotted a female with pup Walrus not too far from the ship. A bit too far for good pictures but nevertheless great to see.



Day 6 August 1

After the crew had a well deserved rest overnight we set off again down the west coast at 07.45 but the weather was kicking off with quite a strong force 6-7 SW wind. It took until evening before we rounded the southern tip of Spitsbergen and set sail towards Edgeoya Island (Oya means island). A long journey which in total will take us at least 36 hours. Some of the passengers were unwell and even some of the crew were suffering. Another bouncy night meant most retired early.

No birds or wildlife of any consequence were seen today.

Day 7 August 2

The day dawned, if you can call it that in a place where the sun never sets at this time of year, with further bad visibility and a fair swell running and little sign of life other than the odd Fulmar and Guillemot. Eventually about 11am we reached our destination of Edgeoya but the mist still obscured the views. It cleared for a while allowing us to find a nice Eider flock consisting of both male and females, a number of Black Guillemots and some Brunnich's also. Some gulls in the distance were



probably Kittiwakes.

It was intended to a landing here but the swell prevented this from happening and this was disappointing as there may have been walrus on the beach although scanning the beaches in our clear patch of visibility proved to be negative. We had an early lunch and intend to sail a little further up the coast in search of perhaps our first Polar Bears!

Well what an afternoon we were to have. We cruised the shores of the Freemansundet fjord looking for wildlife and it was not long before somebody found a pair of Walrus lazing around on the beach. At least one of them had tusks but they basically appeared too lazy to lift their heads fully. A few distant pictures were taken. Soon after that the call went out "Polar Bear". A female with cub were found high up on the mountain side and although rather distant it was great to get them in the bag. We continued a little further and I found a beautiful adult Long-tailed Skua with full tail. That was a sight I had been looking forward to for years having only seen juveniles before.

A couple of Svalbard Reindeer were seen too and loads of Pink-footed Geese. We returned the way we came and Andy found another couple of individual Polar Bears. Again they were rather distant. Bear pictures will need to be improved upon. Bearded and Ringed Seals were also seen. Great what an afternoon!

We anchored off the north western point of the fjord for the night and a very calm night it ended up being. We had a great dinner again followed by a power point presentation about Polar Bears.

Day 8 August 3

We did an early landing just after breakfast on to Barent Island. A rocky shore followed by a steep climb and then a soft peaty walk across the plateau. Some Pink Feet were noted as were two Red-

throated Divers on a small lake and a couple of Barnacle Geese on another lake. A group of 5 Arctic Skuas were chasing a Kittiwake around for a bit and a Snow Bunting was found on the beach. We had noted a couple of Bears well into the distance on the tundra and from the ship they were able to ascertain they were coming closer and could reach us in half an hour should they wish. It was therefore decided to return to the ship ourselves.

It was a lovely if not a little hard walk, at least for some of us; bearing in mind there is quite an age range within the party.

Burgers for lunch and we were off again still travelling north.

We sailed up to the Negrebreen Glacier which is a most spectacular sight. The glacier face is about 6km wide as crow flies but probably double that in actual length. Thousands of birds mostly Fulmars, Kittiwakes and lesser numbers of Arctic Terns. We then found an Ivory Gull and then realised there were at least a dozen present. Two beautiful adult Sabine's were seen too.

We watched the glacier calving at times.

After an hour or two we continued our journey to Helleysund where we anchored up for the night.

Day 9 August 4

We awoke to misty conditions and a couple of Sabine's Gulls and a pair of Long-tailed Ducks while three Reindeer were grazing the slopes. It remained misty all day which wrecked the day until about 5.30-6 when it cleared up. The passengers now reappeared on deck and it was not long before Ray discovered something swimming up ahead which turned out to be a Polar Bear. We were treated to a spectacular display by this cuddly creature which came within ten metres of the boat displaying a string of seaweed for decoration on its head. We had about half an hour with this lovely creature.



Dinner was a little late as a result and we continued sailing while we ate. I heard the engine slow down and clearly the captain had seen something. It turned out to be a small party of young male Walruses hauled out on the beach. The place known as Augustabukta. We made a landing about 9pm and approached to within 20 metres and took lots of photographs.

On our way back in the Zodiacs we saw some Whale spouts in the distance but they disappeared and we will never know what they were, but we suspect Minke. Three further Walruses were seen swimming to the party on the beach.

Back on board a Bearded Seal on an ice flow close to the ship sealed the day. Overnight at Augustabukta and got to bed very late at about midnight.



Day 10 August 5

We left Augustabukta at breakfast time and sailed the Hinlopenstrete towards the north. It started off quite misty but once it cleared there was a sighting of a Minke Whale. We eventually arrived at the bird cliffs at Alkefjellet, aka "Mount Guillemot" where 60,000 pairs of Brunnich's Guillemots were breeding. It really was a most remarkable sight as guillemots pretending to be mosquitos were all around us and making loads of noise. All the ones returning to the colony were carrying fish. A Great Skua and a few Puffins were noted too.

We carried on sailing north and anchored in Sorgfiord at teatime anchored off Crozier Point. There was an evening walk to inspect some derelict cabin on the beach where no doubt some soul will have spent a harsh winter. Arctic Skua, Reindeer and Purple Sandpiper were seen.

We all had a late night as the light and weather seems to best round about midnight with the sun still quite high above the horizon.

Day 11 August 6

A leisurely calm breakfast was followed by raising the sails and finding some rougher conditions as we sped north celebrating the 80 degree N with hot chocolate and rum. Many passengers disappeared to their bunks but the rougher seas only lasted along the top coast and as soon as we dropped south again into the Raudfjord the sea returned to its glass-like state. All the sails had been hoisted and this was a great opportunity to get some photos of this beautiful vessel and so the zodiac was launched and groups of three circum-navigated the ship and took lots of pictures.



With calm seas we were beginning to spot whales. First two Fin Whales were found and as we approached these giants good views were obtained. Of course Fins don't do a lot but soon some Humpbacks appeared and these behave well. Lots of tail fluking and diving and many pictures were taken by all. Then a large whale turned up right next to the boat and it soon became obvious that this was a Blue Whale. It spouted on many occasions but apart from that it just lay in the water. What a bonus that was.

To top all this we then had a Minke which played games with us having us moving from one side of the boat to the other and then fooling us on several occasions as we tried to predict the next place it

would surface. I feel they have a great sense of humour and by blowing behind us it just sounded like a laugh, and as if to say "Caught you out again!"

A fantastic afternoon's entertainment.

It was approaching dinner time when a bear turned up on the beach. The light was low and golden and although perhaps a little distant we had great views for perhaps half an hour or more of this magnificent creature. The mountains looked great in this light and the sea took on many different colours as reflections of the sky played on its surface.

We had dinner and most of the passengers stayed up with a night cap to see the midnight sun which shone quite high in the sky and giving off warmth like we had not experienced yet on our voyage. It was about 11 or 12 degrees at mid night. Wonderful, but it was time to retire as tomorrow will be another day.

Day 12 August 6

After breakfast the group went on a long hike while we sailed round in order to pick them up later. I declined the walk as the trouble I had with my feet just a few days ago may well return giving me more grief. A bit disappointing but then it was not going to be walking on smooth pavements!

A pleasant sail round the north coast and back into the Raudfjord gave me an opportunity to catch up on the diary and load a few more photos such as last night's bear. Not too bad considering the distance.

We continued on to Hamiltonbukta where we spotted a mum and cub Polar Bear walking quite fast along the beach and stopping every now and then to look back. We soon realised that there was another bear on their trail and probably a male but it appeared not to be too bothered. We assumed it was a male but according to Robin, our guide, they only collar females as the collar slips off the thick straight necks of the male. So all a little confusing.

Then just along the fjord another bear was found asleep on the hillside on the other side of the boat. Great views were had of that one too.

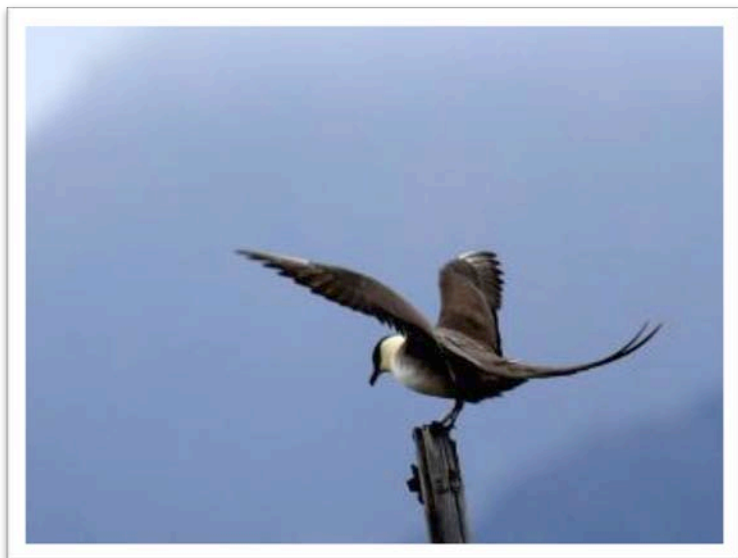
We moved on to Smeerenburg, an old abandoned Dutch whaling station. The zodiac landing was cancelled due to the mist which was just as well as a fifth Polar Bear turned up and walked along the beach we were about to visit. Lucky people. Great views of what was probably a male bear and the 13th for the tour.

Day 13 August 8

After sailing for most of the night we found ourselves anchored up in Ny London. We had breakfast and boarded the zodiac in order to do a landing at to inspect the abandoned marble mine and associated constructions. Lots of rusty equipment including steam boilers, a heavy crane, cooking stoves, all made in England and taken over by Ernest Mansfield and his merry men. It was a nice spot

with a pair of breeding Long-tailed Skuas which were quite intent on attacking an Arctic Fox which just wandered through our spread-out party. A lovely experience for all.

Most of the group went for a long walk across the mountains but did not see a lot. Sue, Colin, Israel and I stayed behind with Svenja and her trusted rifle. We had a look at the waterfall nearby and then had another experience with the fox and the skuas. We were able to get some great images.



We returned to the boat and the others followed not long after. Lunch and we set sail for a very impressive glacier, at the head of Kongsfjord, which apparently regularly calves and we were able to experience this too. The colours of the ice vary from white to green and bright blue as well as grubby pieces covered in moraine. We spent quite a while at the glacier face where Great and Arctic Skuas were seen amongst the Kittiwakes from the nearby colony.

During the late afternoon we berthed at Ny Alesund in light rain. We were able to go ashore and explored the town. Arctic Terns, Red throated Divers and Purple Sandpipers were present amongst the small amount of humanity of this small settlement.

This is the most northerly permanent settlement in the world at about 79 degrees north. We visited the shop and had another look at some Arctic Terns.

In the early evening we had a very informative and interesting talk on the ecology of Barnacle Geese by Martin Loonen, a Dutch scientist living in the town.

Day 14 August 9

The morning dawned, if one can say that, clear with blue skies and warm sunshine. We went for another stroll round Ny Alesund. Birds were the same as last night but at least we could take some pictures. We saw the Plancius coming in and disgorging its hundred plus passengers.



We spent a couple of hours exploring the town including the mooring mast for Roald Amundsen's airship with which he attempted to fly to the North Pole.

We returned to the ship and set sail back through the fjord to the 14 Juli Breen (glacier) where we did a landing and as we approached the glacier we were able to watch it calving creating quite a tidal wave.

This afternoon we visited a Puffin colony but the birds were not at home. Just a few were seen and some close-up photos were possible. The scenery however remains spectacular.

This evening Ted, our captain, gave us a power point presentation about history

of the ship. It used to be a light ship and when he bought it with his partner it was merely a rusty hull. They have done wonders designing and building a beautiful boat.

Day 15 August 10

We sailed all night and all day eventually arriving in Skansbukta having passed Longyearbyen on our starboard side. No landings today but Sue and I gave a slideshow to the passengers and crew this evening of some of our better photographs of the trip. Dirk gave a presentation on the Antarctic, a trip they undertook last year.

Day 16 August 11

We motored back to Longyearbyen and arrived late afternoon. We were asked to vacate the ship between 6 and 7pm as the crew wanted to prepare a surprise for us. Most people went ashore and on our return the place was all decked out ready for a five course meal. How did Dries prepare this in his small galley? Amazing.

Some of us did not feel too well and were unable to enjoy the meal as much as we would have liked and so an early night was called for by some.

Day 17 August 12

We were awoken at 2am and after a light breakfast some of us left the ship about 3 and boarded the bus to the airport. Some were still asleep as they were catching an afternoon flight.

We all said our goodbyes and went our separate ways.

Postscript

A most amazing trip enjoyed in the company of a wonderful multi-national list of passengers. The scenery was just spectacular and the wildlife mind boggling. The sheer numbers of seabirds and the 13 Polar Bears and five species of whale were much more than one could have hoped for.

The crew were amazing and ready for anything that may have been thrown at them. They worked extremely hard to ensure that all went safely and smoothly and to the satisfaction of us customers. I would like to thank them and as for the chef, well, amazing is probably an understatement.

It was a trip that will be in the memory of us all for ever more and will be repeated soon.

John van der Dol

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