

# TROPICAL BIRDING



## Spitsbergen: Arctic dreamland in the realm of the Ice-bear

Cruise: 16 – 22 June 2014



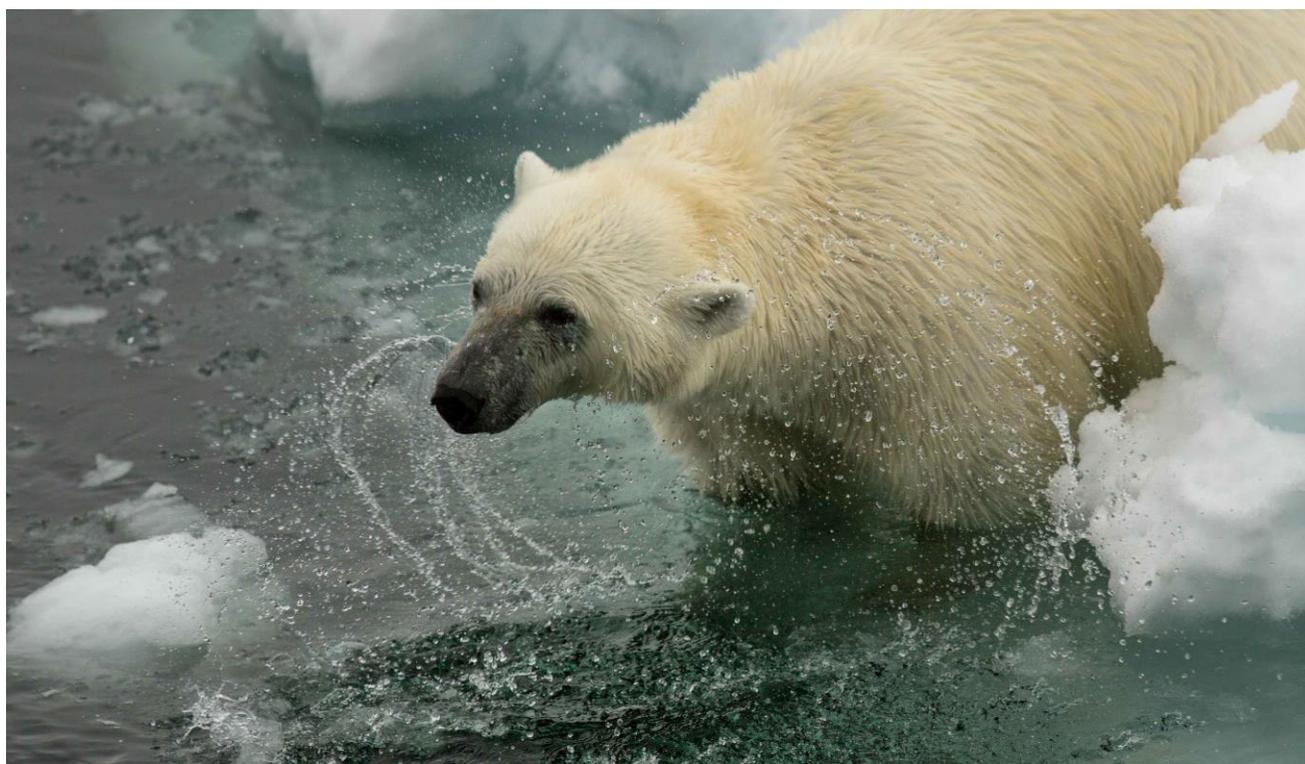
*Spitsbergen has a well-earned reputation for delivering amazing looks at Polar Bears. But it is the surrounding stunning wilderness and the fact that the bears are indulging in an array of interesting activities and behavior that takes most visitors by surprise.*



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**Tour Leader: Keith Barnes**  
**All photos taken on this trip**

This trip delivered everything that this Arctic dreamland promised. Most importantly, 14 encounters with the King of the Arctic - the Polar Bear - including brother bears sparring, a flirt female driving a courting male bear crazy, and several recent seal kills all made this everything an Ice-bear enthusiast could have hoped for. More people come to Spitsbergen (Svalbard) to see Polar Bears than anywhere else on Earth. The ease of travel, relative lower cost of the cruises, and regular sightings of the Ice-bears all make it a no-brainer.



*One of the best encounters was a pair of courting bears that spent 90 minutes with the ship. This young female put her face in the water and as she shook, the shutters on board all went crazy.*



*Longyearbyen is a strange but enchanting little town. The nearby Russian settlements of Barentsburg and other areas make for good excursions for those folks that choose to arrive a few days early in advance of the cruise.*

We started our journey in Longyearbyen, which is located at nearly 80 degrees north on the island of Svalbard, the largest and only permanently populated island in the Norwegian Arctic archipelago of Spitsbergen. Just a few miles from the administrative capital of Longyearbyen we were plunged into the extreme and remote wilderness of the high Arctic, replete with all the trappings of some of the best polar wildlife viewing on the planet, and all within grasp of some plush (albeit pricy) accommodations. Our first day involved some local travel to the best nearby hotspots, and we saw several species we were to encounter throughout our cruise, including Little Auk, Common Eider and Black Guillemot. However, we also encountered a couple of goodies that are rarer away from Longyearbyen, such as Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese, immaculate King Eider and a lovely Arctic Fox. The town was home to several ‘Svalbard’ Reindeer and the rocky crags revealed our fist Rock Ptarmigan. This wonderful bird was being stalked by the fox, but the feathered beast easily outwitted the furry one.





*Longyearbyen was one of the best areas for birds like this Pink-footed Goose.*

The following day, after our first night in the land of the midnight sun we set sail on our comfortable and well-appointed cruise ship. Not only is the large ship stable and well-equipped, but the meals are first class fare and there are a variety of amenities on board including a full bar and other services for when the weather is a little inclement. Our cruise director was a fabulously experienced polar specialist and naturalist, and he made the journey a wonderful experience for all on board.

As was explained to us at our first briefing, there would be not set plan. We would head north and ply various fjords and valleys in an attempt to see the best of the archipelago's wildlife. Given the massive success we had, one could hardly complain. A measure of success on these trips is always how many Polar Bears were seen. And while that does go a long way towards explaining the trip, surely a better measure is the nature of the encounters. Our 14 encounters

with 16 different bears over a period of under a week was exceptional, and I think the photos prove just that.



*Zodiacs – the taxis of the waterways (above). Rock Ptarmigan, an endemic subspecies and one of the star birds of the archipelago. (below).*

Our best encounter was probably the courting pair. A female, that knew how attractive she looked, seemed to be toying with a large male. He was constantly groaning and grimacing in frustration, and they came from a good mile away to investigate our ship. We also had a pair of youngish brothers that were sparring and playing. Watching that for over an hour was amazing as they rolled around, and play fought like a pair of domestic dogs. We also had three separate seal-kill encounters (*below*). Watching these apex predators disembowel a seal is a phenomenal experience. Last, but not least, we watched a hunt, which lasted for a good 30 minutes as the bear stalked a seal, but was ultimately unsuccessful!



*We saw hunting, we saw kills, we saw sparring, we saw courting. In fact, the list of things we did not see a Polar Bear doing is shorter than the list of things we did!*

However, although the bears are sure to be a highlight of any cruise, there is much more besides. The Walrus was an enthralling highlight (*See photos below*). These giant tusked relatives of seals are restricted to the Arctic, where they feed on bivalve molluscs and other benthic sea creatures. They are highly social, and watching the interactions is highly entertaining. We enjoyed time at a colony watching them snort, and lollop about on the land, and then those more active individuals swam and sparred nearby.



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The endemic Svalbard Reindeer and Arctic Fox were other mainland denizens, but marine mammals were common and included encounters with the amazing Bearded, Harp and Ringed Seal, and more widespread Harbour seals.



*Svalbard Reindeer (above) in stunning scenery and Bearded Seal (below).*

Although at these latitudes the bird diversity is low, we were able to witness some amazing spectacles and we also found one of the greatest specialties of the high Arctic, the ghostly Ivory Gull, that is probably more commonly seen here than anywhere else on Earth. We eventually had over 10 of these amazing birds, mostly attending the several seals killed by Polar Bears that we found.



*Ivory Gull was the ornithological highlight of the trip.*

The lovely breeding plumages of Red-throated Loon and Red Phalarope added a delightful splash of color, to the icy-blue and pale white backdrops. Breeding colonies of Thick-billed Murre and Little Auk added drama to the cliffs, and we also encountered rarer alcids like Black Guillemot and Atlantic Puffin. Arctic and the rarer Long-tailed Jaegers patrolled the coast looking for scavenging opportunities. Common and King Eiders were frequently seen seaducks, and we encountered several Rock Ptarmigan of the endemic subspecies on our on-foot traipses across the stunning landscapes.

Although the wildlife of this incredible place was a major highlight, the scenery does not play second fiddle and the seascapes, jagged and rugged mountains and stunning glaciers and beautiful fjords all added to the drama of this magical place. We returned to Longyearbyen after 6 nights on board. However, with the midnight sun it felt like we had been out for a good two

weeks, and as we had seen all the species and spectacles that are encountered by the longer voyages one really has to question why you would stay out for any longer. As this wonderful journey drew to a close we were left to reminisce about the awesome things we had encountered over the last week. The album of photos hopefully gives you an inkling as to what it was like. But remember that the pictures only tell a small portion of the story. This is a delightful experience, and offers the best Arctic experience in a nutshell.



*The immensity of the landscapes is hard to comprehend. Here our ship is at anchor in a fjord, and although it was a sizable vessel it is dwarfed by the glaciers and volcanic mountains that create a permanent panorama of stunning scenery throughout the voyage.*

## Bird List

**Red-throated Diver** *Gavia stellata*. Regularly seen on tundra lakes.

**Northern Fulmar** *Fulmarus glacialis*. Regular sightings throughout.



**Pink-footed Goose** *Anser brachyrhynchus*. A few at Longyearbyen and again at Ny Alesund.

**Barnacle Goose** *Anser leucopsis*. Scattered records including some cooperative individuals in Longyearbyen.



**Pale-bellied Brent** *Anser (bernicla) hrota*. NyAlesund.

**Common Eider** *Somateria mollissima*. Commonly seen throughout the cruise.



**King Eider** *Somateria spectabilis*. A small flock in the harbour at Longyearbyen were the only ones on the trip.

**Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis*. Generally scarce throughout, a handful of sightings only.

**Rock Ptarmigan** *Lagopus mutus* One was seen very well at Blomstrandhalvøya and others on the hills around Longyearbyen.

**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*. A few at Blomstrandhalvøya.

**Purple Sandpiper** *Calidris maritima*. Common and regularly encountered.

**Ruddy Turnstone** *Arenaria interpres* We saw three birds near Ny Alesund.

**Red Phalarope** *Phalaropus fulicaria* Fantastic looks near Poolepynten of several courting pairs.



**Arctic Skua** *Stercorarius parasiticus* Fairly common, with several pale and dark morphs.

**Long-tailed Skua** *Stercorarius longicaudus* Excellent encounters with a few birds at Blomstrandhalvøya.

**Great Skua** *Catharacta skua* Regularly seen throughout the tour.

**Sabine's Gull** *Larus sabini* One at Moffen Island.

**Glaucous Gull** *Larus hyperboreus* Regularly seen throughout the tour.

**Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus* One bird at a seal kill.

**Black-legged Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactyla* One of the most common bird around Spitsbergen, thousands seen.

**Ivory Gull** *Pagophila eburnea* A total of 10+ were seen on the tour, mostly at seal kills where they were fabulously cooperative.

**Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea* Regularly seen throughout the tour.



**Brünnich's Guillemot** *Uria lomvia* The most common bird around Spitsbergen.

**Black Guillemot** *Cepphus grylle* Regularly seen throughout the tour.

**Little Auk** *Alle alle* Common. Regularly seen in big numbers.



**Atlantic Puffin** *Fratercula arctica* Ones and twos seen throughout the trip.

**Snow Bunting** *Plectrophenax nivalis* The only passerine resident on the archipelago and seen regularly.



## MAMMALS

**Polar Bear** *Ursus maritimus*. A total of 14 bears included some wonderful encounters of courting bears and sparring brothers, and three with seal kills.

**Walrus** *Odobenus rosmarus*. A total of over 100 included the major haul-out at Poolepynten that was enjoyed at leisure.

**Harp Seal** *Pagophilus groenlandicus*. Just one seen briefly near Monacobreen.

**Harbour Seal (Common S)** *Phoca vitulina*. A few at Ny Ålesund harbour.

**Ringed Seal** *Pusa hispida*. Abundant, over 200 seen and several as Polar Bear kills.

**Bearded Seal** *Erignathus barbatus*. Fairly common including a few close encounters on the ice.

**Northern Minke Whale** *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*. A few were seen near Torellneset.

**Beluga Whale** *Delphinapterus leucas*. A small pod of four animals seen sailing north from Longyearbyen.

**Caribou (Reindeer)** *Rangifer tarandus*. Common throughout, but particularly common near Longyearbyen.



# GALLERY









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