



Svalbard 2016 Trip Report

July 24 - September 12, 2016

NozoMojo LLC (<http://www.nozomojo.com>) conducted three voyages around Svalbard on small expedition cruise ships this summer: August 2-14, August 14-24 and September 2-12. The first two voyages took place on board the small, Swedish owned, 12-passenger, 7-crew, ice-strengthened, expedition cruise ship M/S Malmö, while the third was on board the beautiful 32-passenger, 3-masted barkentine S/V Antigua. Both vessels are equipped with inflatable rubber boats for excursions and landings. Morten of NozoMojo LLC was the Expedition Leader on all three voyages, and Nozomi of NozoMojo LLC was assistant guide on the last two. Additional guides were Jon Cornforth (Aug 2-14), Tashi Tenzing (Aug 14-24), and Nikita Ovsyanikov (Sep 2-12). The first voyage was sub chartered by Kimberly Randal, the second by "Tenzing Asian Holidays", the third one by "Guide to Iceland". Prior to the above mentioned three voyages, Morten was additionally on board the M/S Malmö as Expedition Leader for "Squiver".

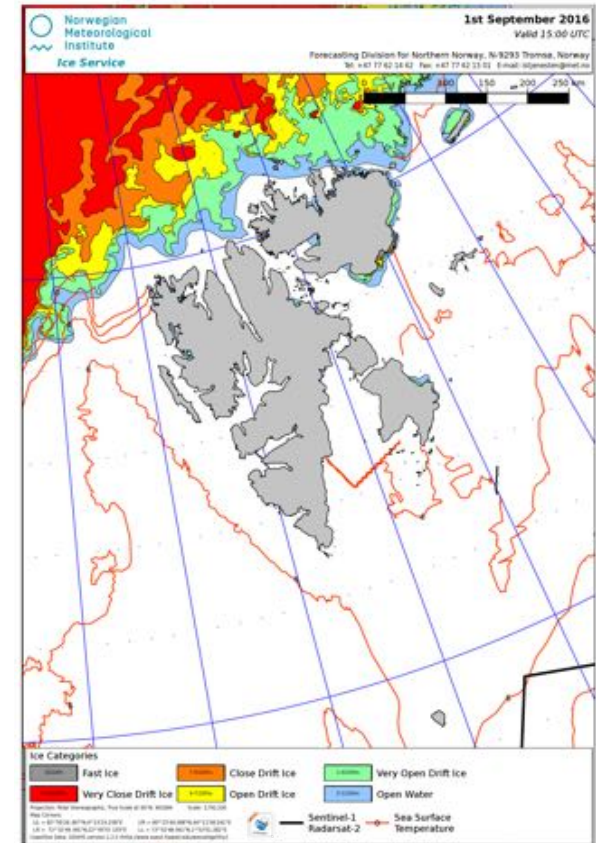
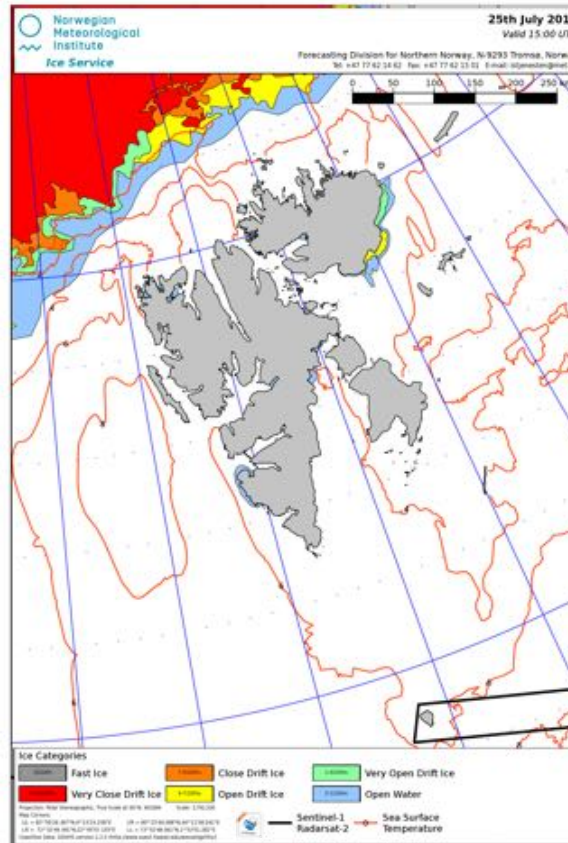
Once again, we generally had great weather! We generally had good visibility, but were annoyed by fog on some of our days in the pack-ice particularly. We had a majority of rather sunny days, but also some very grey, and a couple of heavy rain days on the west side of the islands. Winds varied. There were many calm days (and they were often sunny too)! The winds were mostly encountered near the NW corner of Spitsbergen, and in the Hinlopen or just north of there. We did also have one majestic gale, on September 6, but it lasted less than 24 hours. In July and August, we generally had temperatures between 2 and 8 degrees C, with a gradual increase in frequency of the colder temperatures. In September, we had it all, from minus 5 to plus 8, but generally light winds and a lot of sun, so mostly very pleasant.

This year, the pack ice was already in July distant, to the north of the islands, at an average latitude beyond 81 N. By mid-August, it had shifted somewhat closer, but was still mostly some 30-50 nautical miles offshore. In early September, there were tongues of ice almost touching land, but still the consolidated pack ice lay far north. Just like in 2015, huge fields of icebergs and brash ice, that had been calved off the surging part of Austfonna, provided spectacular sights to the south of Nordaustlandet.



Ice charts

from July 25
and September 1



The three voyages yielded sightings of a total of 15 species of mammal and 30 species of bird. Each mammal species is detailed a bit in the following (not strictly in systematic order, but rather mostly in order of general popularity), and bird highlights after that.

Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*):

31 sightings of a total of 38 individuals, plus one dead.

This is usually the most sought after species of these voyages, and often a lot of time and effort is dedicated to finding it. Numbers can vary greatly, and so can the quality of the sightings. The average condition of this year's bears was slightly on the skinny side, but close to normal.

Particularly memorable sightings this season were: A female with a cub-of-the-year (COY), both very white, except the cub bloody after enjoying some seal remains. A young, inquisitive, adult category 5 (= obese) female. And a healthy adult male on the hunt, alternating over six hours between swimming among ice and coming out on it to scout, finally succeeding in a stealth attack in taking out a young Ringed Seal that never saw it coming, after which it pulled it out on a separate ice-floe and ate the whole thing.





To date NozoMojo has not experienced a voyage without a sighting. The lowest number sighted in a weeklong voyage was one (in 2008), the highest approximately 65 on a 10-day voyage (in 2006). 10-15 years ago, the number of individuals seen on a 10-day voyage was often +/- 30, but in later years it has been more difficult to find that many polar bears. So far, though, Svalbard still remains perhaps the best place in the World to see polar bears in their natural habitat and behaviour. Contrary to popular myth, polar bears are not a danger to us, nor interested in attacking humans, as long as we travel in their country with insight, respect and humility. When humans shoot bears in (so-called) self-defence, it is invariably after making several mistakes that caused a simple situation to escalate out of control.



Pinnipeds:

Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*):

29 sightings of a total of approximately 1702 individuals.

The second-most sought after mammal species of Svalbard voyages. The population is increasing, and it would be hard to imagine a voyage around Svalbard without at least one good sighting of this charismatic animal. How many are seen depends on the nature of the voyage, the focus and prioritizing of the group, but also on ice conditions. If heavy ice prevents vessels from travelling east, fewer Walrus will be seen, although the numbers are increasing on the west side as well (these are mostly males).

This year, ice-conditions did not prevent superb Walrus sightings on any voyage. A couple of locations held the bulk of the animals, with more than 500 recorded at one site, and several hundred at other sites. Several sites held 30-80 animals, and singles, usually males, were also regularly seen. Some encounters were VERY close. The Walrus has a reputation for being aggressive, which is unreasonable and based again on lack of understanding of the beast. It is a quite timid, but also a most inquisitive and defensive animal.





Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus*):

19 "sightings" of a total of 192 individuals.

This beautiful and often very approachable seal is often seen really well in Svalbard. The majority of this year's very high number of individuals were seen during travels in the pack-ice, where they were mostly hauled out. The species is rather solitary and the low number of sightings does not indicate flocks, but rather that a full day of observations in the pack-ice of usually singles has been summarized into one sighting.

Ringed Seal (*Pusa hispida*):

18 sightings of a total of 94 individuals.

Early in the season, when the fjords are still frozen over, and the Ringed Seals also are hauled out by their breathing holes on the fast ice, we sometimes see this many seals at just one location - mostly as distant dots on the ice. During "high summer", the Ringed Seals are invariably in the water when we are in the fjords, and we usually see just a few - often one at a time - here and there. In the pack ice, we see them in the water as well as hauled out.

One of this year's sightings was of an only half-year old pup lying at the edge of an ice-floe, a seal that never knew what hit it, when a male polar bear suddenly lurched out of the water in front of it and crushed it's skull while dragging it into the water.



Harp Seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*):

10 sightings of a total of 663 individuals.

This highly gregarious species frequents the pack-ice edge during the “high summer”, and we never had a day in the ice without several flocks of porpoising Harp Seals. Typical flock-size this year was between 10 and 50 or so individuals.

Harbour Seal (*Phoca vitulina*):

4 sightings of a total of 93 individuals.

The Harbour Seal population in Svalbard is the furthest north anywhere, isolated, and doing well. The species is found primarily in the area of northwest Spitsbergen. All the animals seen this summer were essentially at one location that we revisited several times - the highest count was 48 individuals, mostly hauled out on rocks.



Cetaceans:

The bulk of the whales near Svalbard tend to be off the west coast of Spitsbergen, further west than we normally have time to travel on our relatively small ships and tight itineraries. Unless we target that area, we therefore rely more on chance sightings, mostly on the north side of the archipelago, although sometimes we meet these giants anywhere, also deep in the fjords.

Blue Whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*):

4 sightings of a total of 4 individuals.

Sightings of Blue Whales around Svalbard are happily becoming more frequent. This season we “only” saw four, but the quality of the sightings were superb - and two of the whales were continuously fluking, something most Blue Whales do not do.



Beluga Whale (*Delphinapterus leucas*):

2 sightings of a total of about 6 individuals.

While the Beluga is undoubtedly the most numerous cetacean in Svalbard waters, it is by no means the easiest to find. During the summer months, it frequently travels deep inside the fjords, often following the coastline, and often passing by or feeding in front of glacier fronts. But there is no predicting which fjord or glacier it will be in/near at any given time. We sometimes do not see Beluga at all on a voyage, other times we have 3-4-5 sightings in a week. Flock sizes vary from 1-2 up to more than one hundred.



Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*):

1 sighting of a total of 4 individuals.

While we sometimes find Humpbacks in good numbers, this year we had to make do with one sighting of 4 individual - at least they were bubble net feeding.

Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*):

5 sightings of a total of 5 individuals.

Much the same story as for Blue Whale. Fin Whales are however much more numerous than Blue Whales, also more than the proportion of sightings this year suggests.

Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*):

9 sightings of a total of 10 individuals.

The smallest, but also the most numerous of the baleen whales to frequent Svalbard waters. Proportionately, we should have seen a fair number more Minke's than we saw Blue's and Fin's, but the 10 individuals is only just the highest baleen whale number of the season. Still, a lot better than the 2015 count!



Orca (*Orcinus orca*):

1 sighting of a total of 6 individuals.

On September 10, the weather was so calm that we decided to head from the NW corner of Spitsbergen and out to sea. And did that pay off! One of the more surprising and very welcome sightings of the season was a pod of foraging Orca. We counted two adult females, one subadult male, two immatures and one calf. A species not often seen in Svalbard!



Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*):

1 (3) sighting(s) of a total of 3 individuals.

On September 10, we headed W into open sea from the NW corner of Spitsbergen (rounded Amsterdamøya and headed west, later south). We were only a few miles offshore when we saw the first Sperm Whale, and within a couple of hours we found another two! Only the mature males of this species travel as far as these high latitudes. Solitary as they are perceived, it is never-the-less not unusual to find several individuals within short distance of each other when there is good feeding to be had. It is known that Sperm Whales occur further out at sea, at or beyond the continental drop-off, and it was a pleasant surprise to find them this close to the islands in waters no deeper than 400 meters.

The Orca sighting mentioned here took place in the same area and at the same time as one of the Sperm Whales.

Svalbard Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*):

9 sightings of a total of 196 individuals.

This endemic subspecies of reindeer is found at many different locations in Svalbard, from the lush west to the barren east, and even on remote off-shore islands. Experienced guides will usually be able to accommodate guests' desires to have close encounters with these gentle herbivores. Fewer sightings than last year, but a total of more individuals.



Arctic Fox (*Vulpes lagopus*):

8 sightings of a total of 9 individuals.

Charming, charismatic and common - nevertheless, the Arctic Fox is not always the easiest mammal to tick on a Svalbard voyage. Their numbers vary from year to year, and so does their cub production, and their camouflage is excellent. One observation this year was of an immature fox eating the remains of an adult fox. We saw one "blue morph" this year, and the last observation on September 11th was of an individual already in its white winter coat.



Birds:

The high Arctic is characterized by low species diversity, but often with high individual numbers. 30 species were recorded this year, up two from 2015 - and that in spite of several more common species not found this year. Among the 30 were several rare or semi-rare finds: On August 10, in Eastern Svalbard, we saw an adult summer-plumage Great Northern Diver AND an adult summer-plumage Yellow-billed Diver together! And on August 23, on the west coast, a White Wagtail was briefly seen.





Apart from all the usual suspects, most of which are present in Svalbard in good numbers, many of them all the way into September, a few of the noteworthy sightings were:

Red-throated Divers: 26 total. A flock of 9 Rock Ptarmigan feeding on a hillside on September 9. All four species of skua, including 9 Long-tails and 116 Pomarine's total. 108 Ivory Gulls total, of which the best sighting was 28 in one day, including three family groups of presumably parent adults with their respectively 2, 3 and 3 juveniles fledged. Sabine's Gull - only one sighting of two birds, but a good sighting (such a bird is always worth a mention). 15.000 Black-legged Kittiwakes foraging in one flock at Monaco glacier front. Post-breeding flocks of Arctic Terns containing 600-2.000+ individual seen five times during late August and early September.



In conclusion:

Despite many years of going back to it, Svalbard has not ceased to awe, inspire and surprise.

NozoMojo LLC (<http://www.nozomojo.com>) runs trips in Svalbard every year, and to other destinations as well. If you are interested in a custom tour, in sub chartering your own departure, or in coming along as an individual guest, we will do our best to accommodate your wishes.

Best regards.

Morten & Nozomi



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