



Tripreport Svalbard 2016



By Lennart Verheuvell

After reading a lot of trip reports on this site I thought I would contribute a little with a report of my only mammal focused trip (yet), so here it goes. The trip is in no way as challenging as the trips in some reports I read on this website, but even so, when do polar bears ever get boring? Anyway, from June 15th till June 22nd I was part of the so called Polar Bear Special organized by the company OceanWide Expeditions. I booked the trip just a couple of weeks before it actually took place, this had to do with the huge discount the company was offering for this trip. A trip which would normally cost about €3000,- was now available for €1500,-. Although I had not planned a trip in the Arctic in the immediate future, I couldn't resist and after looking at some pictures of polar bears I was definitely sure and booked the trip. Flying was possible for a little more than 500 euros from Schiphol Airport to Longyearbyen and back. This to give you an idea that mammaling in the Arctic can actually be very affordable under the right circumstances.

Anyway I flew on Tuesday evening to Gardermoen Airport at Oslo and slept on the airports floor. This was the first time I did this and the floor turned out to be not that comfortable. I got about four hours of sleep (this due to the before mentioned floor, a Nordic gentleman who appeared to enjoy talking loudly into his phone at 2 am and the just as loudly speaking cleaning crew at 4 am). Anyway at 9 o'clock my plane left and around noon I landed at Longyearbyen Airport. Finally at Spitsbergen (we Dutchies proudly call the whole archipelago Spitsbergen, due to our illustrious forefathers that named the place, but I learned later on that this name is actually just for a part of it and that Svalbard is a better name, so that's what I will call it from now on, in this piece at least). I was picked up by a staff member of the ship Ortelius and could drop my luggage there. I should mention that I was actually very lucky to be even going on the trip because the ship I was supposed to go with (the Ortelius) got engine trouble in the middle of the Arctic the week before and had to be dragged back to Longyearbyen. Because I read a blog of a Dutch travel agent, I knew about this pretty early and quickly contacted the company. At first they told me everything was going to be fine, but later it turned out that problems were a bit harder to fix than it first appeared. As soon as this was clear my travel agent could quickly book me on another ship, the Plancius, which left a day later. Later I met an American birder from Connecticut on the ship who told me that he was originally going with a group of 26 but that in the end only three of them could board, some of them were even in Longyearbyen that very week... They all had booked months before, while I had done this just some weeks before and with a discount, I felt pretty lucky!

June 15th and 16nd Discovering Svalbard

Anyway, on the first day it was down to a bit of birding for which I took a rental bike from the Longyearbyen camping. Mammalwise this was not very interesting because very few mammals can be seen from Longyearbyen. Spitsbergen Reindeer is an interesting subspecies (still, but I wouldn't be surprised if it turned out to be a species), and can be easily seen. I was told Belugas could be seen in the fjord and I knew even a blue whale was spotted there the week before but I was not so lucky. Also (young) polar bears apparently walk sometimes through the village later in the year, but this of course did not happen while I was there. I also saw an arctic fox that was harassed by arctic skuas. It was moulting and had partially white and brown fur.



For the rest I got almost all my birding targets on this day and also some on the next day: June 16nd. This included some nice views of an Ivory gull, King Eiders, Rock Ptarmigan and a Stellers Eider, the latter is pretty rare on Spitsbergen and was still new for me, which was nice. On the afternoon of the 16nd we boarded the ship and shipped out. The birding list grew but just after dinner we got our first mammal highlight. I was already on deck when I saw a great splash pretty far away in front of the ship. Apart from a lost humpback in the Netherlands I had never seen a whale before, but I presumed it would be a minke or a humpback because they were supposed to be more likely to breach. I turned out to be something bigger, in fact it was the biggest mammal on earth! Seeing a blue whale breach is pretty amazing, even if it is far away. I had hoped for this species but I would never have imagined that the sighting would be this good. When we got closer it did not breach anymore but it was still nice to see. We also saw two others. This was a nice way to start the trip and it left us hoping that the next day would be even better.



June 17th First full day on the water

The next day got us more acquainted with the Arctic. We saw our first pack ice and we saw some bear food lying on it. Both bearded seal and ringed seal could be seen easily although they did not let us get very close. The afternoon was mostly about some touristy walking in the snow with snow shoes. You really depend on your travel company and your expedition leader for the activities that are being organised. My travel company was pretty good with quite a lot of mammal and bird enthusiasts, but there a still some things you can't avoid. This day brought some new mammals but did not bring the hoped for target of the trip.



Above: ringed seal, below: bearded seal



June 18th Bear Day!

The title has of course spoiled the events of this day already but I couldn't resist. I woke up pretty early (3 am) to see the Hindelopen Strait, but it turned out to be not that interesting because we were sailing right in the middle of it and it is pretty wide, so I went back to sleep. Still I stood on deck again at 6 am (going to sleep is really hard with 24/7 day light, because you always fear you miss something). This turned out to be a good decision. We approached a large area of caked sea ice that could be good for bears. I pointed my spotting scope on it, and while I shared in the morning conversations with other passengers I suddenly saw a tiny yellow spot moving in my scope view with four tiny legs under it, I had seen my first polar bear! I quickly notified the other passengers and then shouted the good news into the lounge which caused a little stampede to the deck, thereby ruining the careful approach of the crew that wanted to avoid such a thing. On a side note: this went so far that they did only report animals that were likely to remain for a while, for floating harp seals or a popping up minke whale you were on your own. As soon as I noticed this I went to the upper deck and bridge where the expedition crew also stood and this reduced the chances of missing something. Of course it is understandable that they want to avoid at all costs that one of the passengers would get hurt (which could affect all passengers), but it was still frustrating to miss animals because of this. Also the passengers turned out to be pretty sensible people, that were not likely to go rampaging as soon as something was spotted.

Anyway as soon as I raced up the bridge to tell the crew that I had spotted a polar bear they already announced it, having probably already seen it for quite a while. Still I was pleased to have found my first polar bear myself. As we approached we got great views of the animal as it walked over the ice.





In fact the ice contained no less than eight polar bears, including a mother and a cub. Some of which were hard to see, but with patient scoping I eventually saw them all. Time for breakfast! The ice had melted an extraordinary lot this year and we could sail to places, that are normally not available until the end of July. Luckily we could still find floating sea ice and we saw no less than eighteen polar bears before dinner! They were hunting, climbing, walking over the ice and rolling through the snow, really awesome! On top of that we saw our first walrus among which was a large male that was very approachable.



Above: 'to walrus or not to walrus, that is the question'. Walrus looking like he is quoting Shakespeare

After dinner would however come our very sweet desert. As I was sifting through my photos in the lounge suddenly the sighting of three polar bears was announced. We had enough time to get ready and we quietly waited for the things to come. We sailed almost straight at the bears and the captain skilfully moved the ship so the bears were not startled. In fact they came up so close that binoculars were no longer needed and we could just watch them with the naked eye. At first we thought we were dealing with a mother with two large cubs, but as I turned out it was a big male, a full grown female and a two year old cub. This was a very strange sighting as the mothers try to avoid the males at all cost in this time of year and the male appeared to be wanting to mate. He sometimes howled as he followed the female. The crew explained that this could have to do with the hormones of the female being affected by plastic in the water and that there actually already had been some scientific study to back this up. However it may be, it was a still a strange sighting, but one we very much enjoyed! At one point the female grew tired of the males attention at with a growl she moved towards him, it did not come to a fight, which was wise of here since the male was much larger than she was but it was clear that she did not like to be followed around. This all happened under our noses. Eventually the bears went further, leaving us in excitement behind. The day would end with a total count of 21 polar bears! A company record on one day, a new record had actually been set the week before, but we saw one more! It was a great way to end the day and already the trip was more than successful.













June 19th

This day we saw the longest glacier of Europe and we visited a colony of walrus (I know there is a fancy name for that but I forgot, o yes, it is called a haul out!). It was nice to stand close to these large animals (a male can weigh up to 1500 kilos where a male polar bear will only reach 750 kilos!), and see them behave naturally. They were just males, apparently the sexes split up (I did not know that). In the afternoon we visited a colony of about a 100.000 Brünnichs guillemots. Along the ship sometimes we also saw groups of harps seals and occasionally a minke whale would appear.



On this day we would reach our most Nordic position of the trip: 81 degrees, this went with the anticipation that we would see more polar bears as we would be closer to sea ice. We reached the 'Seven Isles' on this day, which was apparently a big deal because normally they would still be in ice at this time of year. It was of course sad to see this symptom of global warming so clearly with our own eyes. Still we found some bears. The first ones were still far away and prevented a landing on the shore (good), it got better as we sailed to a field of ice shelves. Along the way we encountered seals and nice birds like Ivory gulls. At about two pm we saw two polar bears that were eating from something. It turned out to be a seal (probably harp), the fattest of the two bears moved away as we approached but the other remained, giving us great views. We watched at a safe distance for almost two hours as the bear devoured the seal. This was the one activity that I still hoped to see and there it was! The bear was visited by 14 Ivory Gulls that hoped for a piece of the pie, they quickly notice it when a bear has a kill. Before we saw no more than two together. Finally we moved further.







I could not resist to put at least this bird in the report...

I was standing on the bridge, with Jeff, an Englishman. We both were the most fanatic passengers for seeing animals and we constantly scanned for anything interesting. Still it was a German guy that said that he saw a whale! A whale this far north was very interesting (a whale is always interesting), it quickly dove under. Jeff and I quickly snapped some pictures and on Jeff's camera it could already be seen that the whale had a double blowhole and no visible dorsal fin. It had to be... could it be? Quickly some extra crew members and the expedition leader were called up and after some minutes it reappeared right in front of the ship, it was clear: a Bowhead Whale! At the same time another polar bear was discovered and we found ourselves in the extraordinary position to watch a bowhead whale and a polar bear at the same time against a brilliant scene of floating pack ice! I had not dared hope for a bowhead because I knew they were more common around Greenland (still scarce though) and very rare around Svalbard. None of the guides had ever seen one around Svalbard and couldn't believe their eyes. Apart from beluga I had seen all my mammal wish species and apart from Sabine's gull also my bird wish species. I did not yet know how special the Bowhead really was and I was surprised to hear that they can get up to 200 years old (or more), making it the oldest reported mammal (that I know of). It is astonishing to think that Amundsen might have seen our whale...



June 21st Another successful day

There was not much left to wish for. Still we looked with eagerness to see yet another new bird or mammal. Ignoring an organised talk about, no doubt, an interesting topic some of us preferred to stay on deck. I would Google all the interesting things back home and would for now focus on the things to see while I was actually here! We were rewarded with four whales, probably all blue whales but they were pretty far away. In the afternoon we got on shore to take pictures of reindeer. When we sailed back from the trip to open water we got our best species of that day. I heard a guy mumble 'beluga?', and quickly stood next to him. When I saw a white back appear I shouted it through the lounge. The last species on my mammal wishlist! We got good views of them and I found it interesting to notice that they never lifted their tails out of the water. I was a group of probably 30 individuals, but they were hard to count. It was a fitting end to the day and we could return home with our heads held high. During a speech by one of the guides a minke whale was so nice to pop up next to the lounge so I also got some photos of that species.



June 22nd It is getting to an end

The trip was almost over and we were sailing back. In the afternoon a landing was planned to get some good views of Svalbard reindeer. I didn't care much about that because they aren't hard to see and I already had some good views of them back in Longyearbyen, they look nice though.



I kept looking for a bear, but nothing showed. On the way back we sailed again through the waters where we had the blue whales on our way up. I saw again some blows in the distance of which I was pretty sure that they were also blue whales, but didn't get any better sightings. The afternoon brought indeed some good sightings of Svalbard reindeer, another group saw belugas again, but we didn't see them. During the evening we sailed back to Longyearbyen and just at midnight we harboured.

June 23rd The end

I used my last day on Svalbard to get some better views of long tailed duck (in which I very much succeeded) and I also saw my last new birding species, that I had hoped for, a few summer plumage red necked phalaropes. I got a few hours sleep in my tent before my flight departed at 3 o'clock (am...) and just when I was getting out of my tent an arctic fox ran across the camping. It was the last mammal I saw on Svalbard and a nice ending.

Some general comments

I know people have very different thoughts about doing a cruise while watching mammals. I was on a boat with about a 100 people so if you are used to mammaling on your own or with a few others I understand it might feel a little crowded. However my experience was also that for the most part of the trip you stand outside with a few other animal enthusiasts while the rest of the ship stays nice and warmly in the lounge. They only come out when a good bird or mammal (mostly just for good mammals) is found. Then people usually stay quiet and you can have a nice view. The Italians are known for their gaggling, but a firm loudly hushed 'QUIET' will usually get them to shut up. The guides also urge you to stay quiet as it will give you more chance of a bear approaching the ship. He told me that on another tour there was a guy that dropped his lens cap just when a bear was approaching. The bear ran immediately and his fellow passengers were ready to use this person as bait.

An advantage of this way of travel that it is really the most relaxed way of mammaling. Basically you sleep in a floating hotel/restaurant. To explore Svalbard and to see polar bears I think it is also the most effective one. We were very lucky to have this much polar bears (our total count was 26 polar bears...) but as long as it is not very misty, a polar bear is pretty much guaranteed.

Finally I would like to make a comment about Observation.com. As a Dutchman I have used the site waarneming.nl to keep track of my bird sightings in the Netherlands. Observation.org is the international equivalent of this and makes it very easy to keep track of your sightings through the

app ObsMapp (it can be used offline with GPS). It is available in almost every language and you can upload literally any species you want. I have not found a better alternative for it, so I thought I would point it out to you guys. You can find all my Svalbard sightings through this link:

<https://svalbard.observation.org/user/view/47799>. You probably won't find any polar bear because the organisation has the ridiculous idea that obscuring the location of a polar bear in Svalbard will make them better protected. I think this is ridiculous because bears are very mobile and most sightings are on pack ice. Anyway, I thought I'd point it out to you.

Mammals on the list:

1. Arctic fox
2. Polar bear
3. Walrus
4. Bearded seal
5. Harp seal
6. Common seal
7. Ringed seal
8. Reindeer
9. Bowhead whale
10. Minke whale
11. Blue whale
12. Beluga