



# SVALBARD

## SEASON REPORT

June 3 - September 10, 2017

# SUMMARY

In 2017, we had a total of 46 field observation days in Svalbard (against 27 in 2015 and 31 in 2016). This report provides an overview of mammal and bird species observed in Svalbard during those 46 days (with additional observations included anecdotally from 3 days spent in the high Arctic outside of Svalbard).

On NozoMojo Svalbard tours, there is a tendency for a few biases in the sightings. Both of these are really based on our focusing to the north and east much more than to the south and west. The majority of the Sperm, Northern bottlenose, Fin and Blue whales are further offshore to the west than we tend to get, so we tend to miss them (despite which we still see a good amount of not least Blue and Fin whales). Another bias is a result of our spending a proportionately large amount of time in the pack-ice, which means we spend relatively less time on the tundra and deep in the fjords. Thus there are local bird and land mammal species that we see fewer of than we otherwise would, and we also tend to miss areas with a greater likelihood of vagrants.

Despite those abovementioned aspects of NozoMojo Tours, in 2017 we managed to total 18 species of mammal, of which 17 were seen alive. Of the 17, 15 were observed in Svalbard. The biggest miss this year was Beluga, otherwise we pretty much sighted all the more common mammal species and a couple of less commonly seen ones as well. The bird species count for 2017 stands at 30 (with an additional 6 seen at Jan Mayen and the East Greenland pack-ice). Among the 30 were not many vagrants at all, but almost all the more common and expected Svalbard birds.



# TOURS & DATES

NOZOMOJO

In early June, Morten Jørgensen was Expedition Leader on a voyage that began in the Netherlands and ended in Svalbard, passing via Jan Mayen and the East Greenland pack-ice. Since then, Morten and Nozomi Takeyabu together conducted a NozoMojo tour on board the M/S Freya June 30 – July 10 (on which we had contracted with Rinie van Meurs to be the Expedition Leader), after which we spent a full month on board the M/S Malmö. From July 24 to August 13, we did one long 20-night NozoMojo voyage (again with Rinie as Expedition Leader), after which Morten and Nozomi stayed another 9 nights on board as Expedition Leader and guide for “Squiver”, a Dutch-based photography tour company. NozoMojo ended the season with a voyage on S/V Antigua, September 1-11, on which we had the delightful company of the polar bear specialists and co-guides Thor S. Larsen and Nikita Ovsyanikov.



# WEATHER



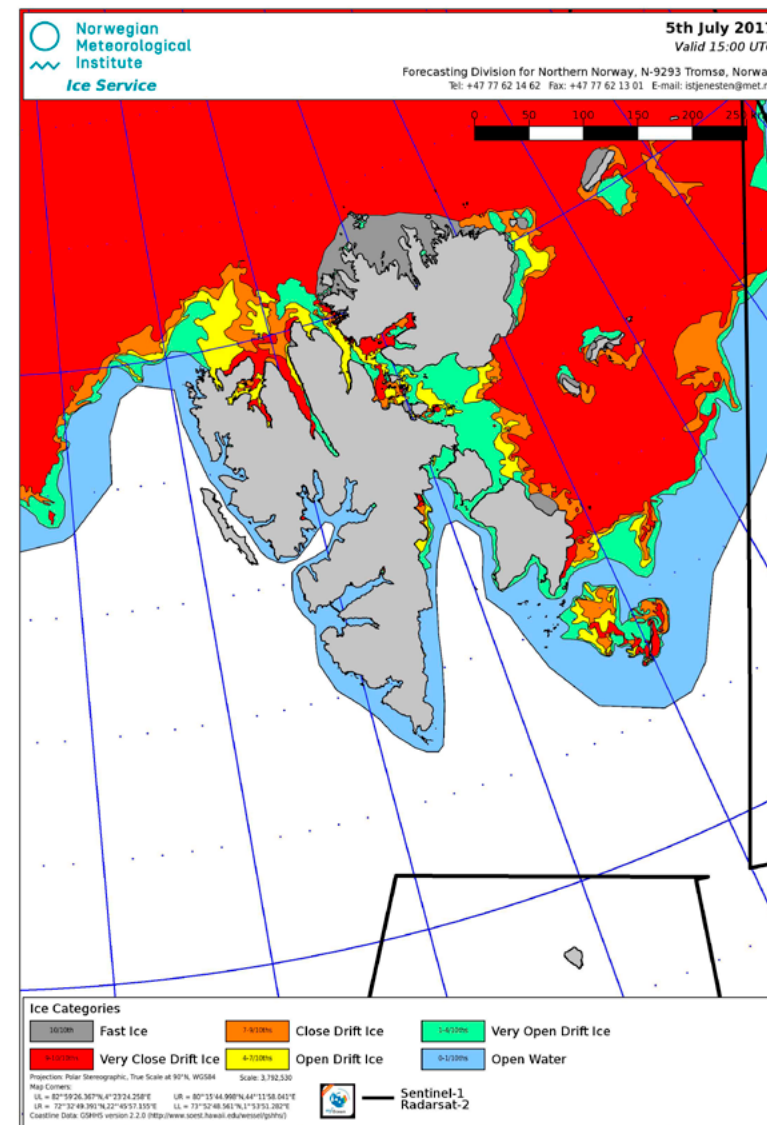
During our 2017 season, we saw a lot of great weather, including a lot of still days with very good visibility. We were lucky to avoid too much fog, although there were a few days during July and August when we got socked in. The temperatures were absolutely workable from June throughout most of August, although we did have a couple of quite cold days just after the middle of August, and then again in September there were a couple of cold days as well. The cold days coincided with low pressure systems with high winds coming through. The Freya voyage in early July, the last of the Malmö voyages around mid-August, as well as the Antigua voyage in September, all saw their itineraries influenced by the winds. On two occasions, this caused us to travel extra miles to avoid the winds (July) and to seek lee (August), while in September we spent a day at anchor waiting for the wind speed to drop to workable conditions.

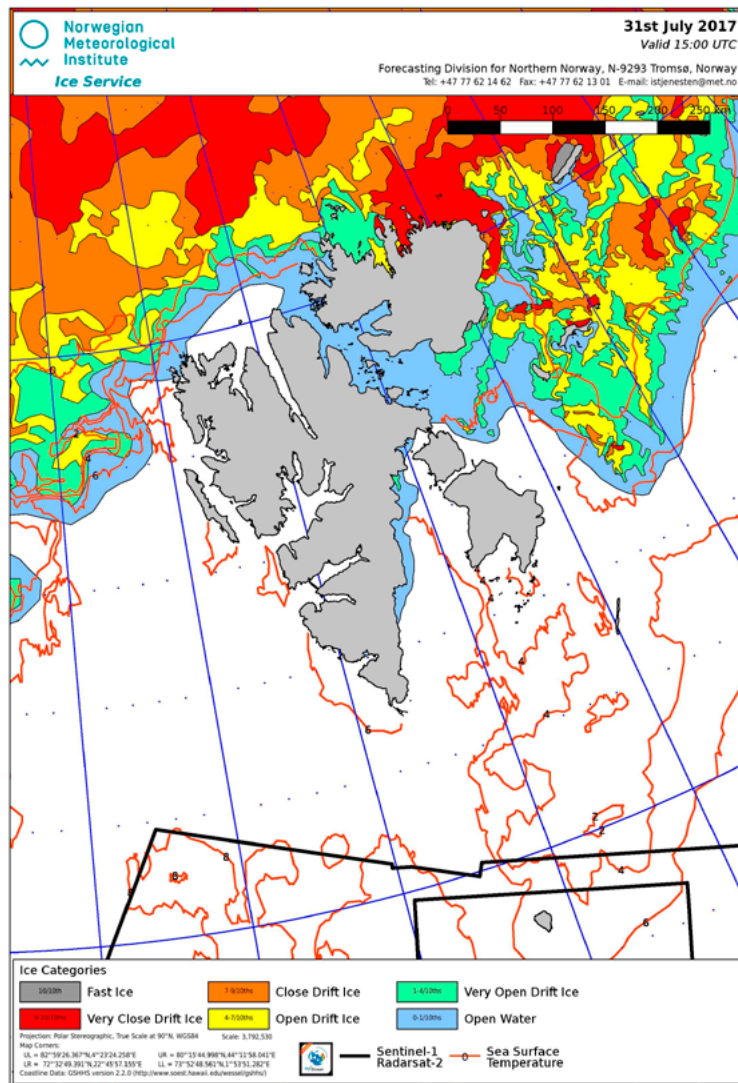


# ICE

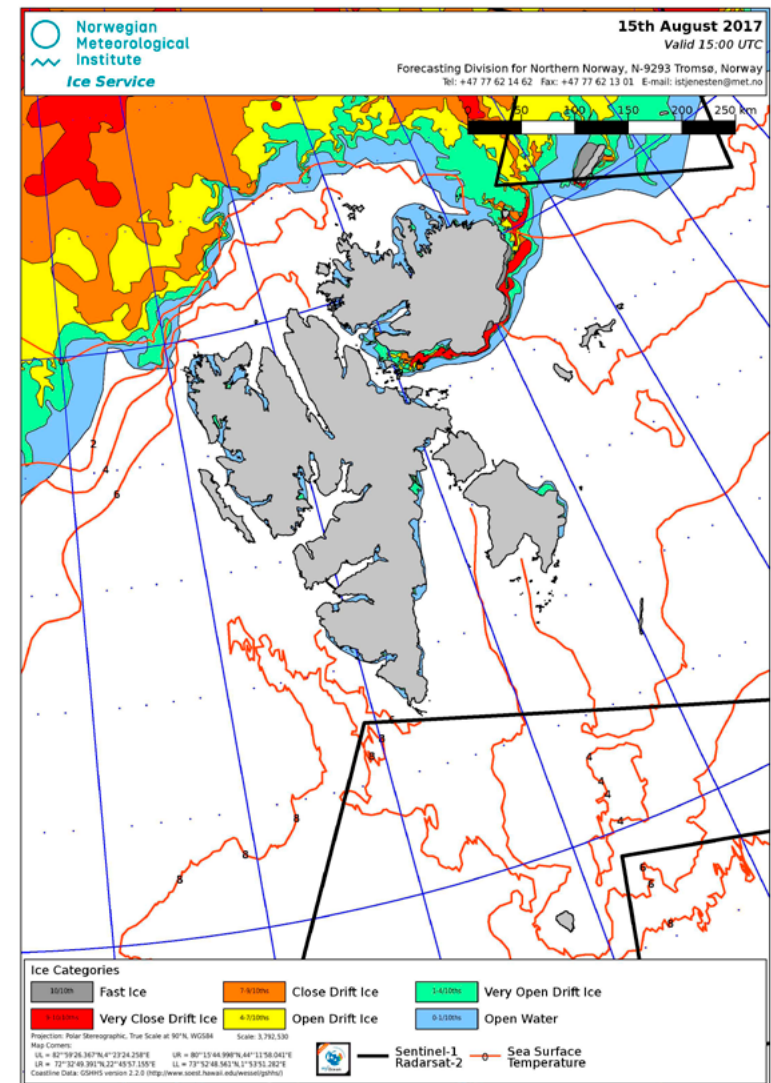


In early June, the pack-ice lay thick along the East Greenland coast, as is expected at that time of year. In early July, there was still a lot of ice on the north side of Spitsbergen, so much that there was no passing beyond the mouth of Woodfjorden in an easterly direction. It was however all open in Storfjorden to the south, and we got through Freemansundet and into Ol-gastretet and the south end of Hinlopenstretet, before turning around and heading back the same way (see ice chart from July 5).





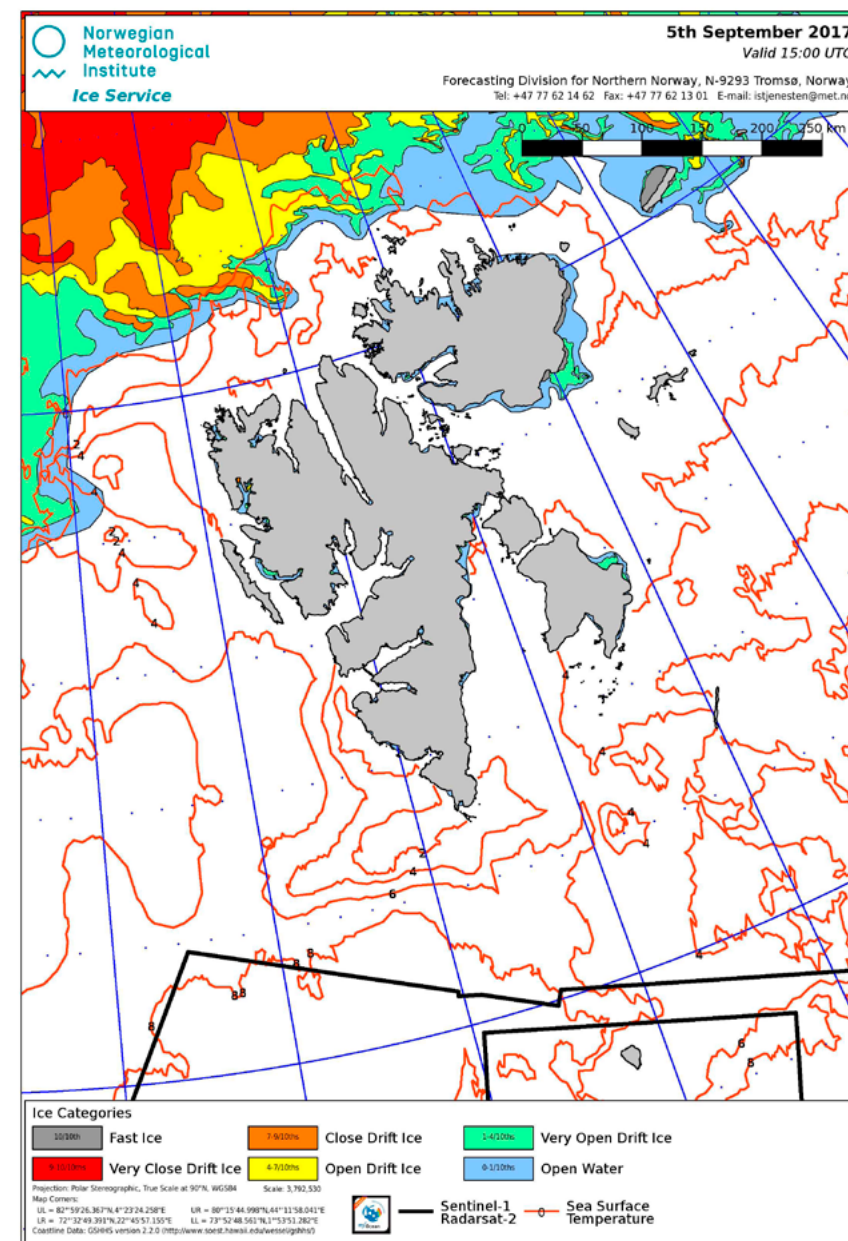
During the full month we were on board M/S Malmö, the ice changed dramatically. The end of July and early part of August saw the ice receding fast, with perfect conditions in the beginning still both to the north-east of Sjuøyane and also to the north of Kong Karl's Land, albeit with no possibility to circumnavigate Nordaustlandet yet (see ice chart from July 31).



Come mid-August, this ice had all but gone (see ice chart from August 15). In the north, it was now necessary to travel quite far east, and to or beyond 81.5 degrees north, to find good ice, and the ice further south had all vanished. We were only now able to go around Nordaustlandet.



During our September voyage, we only just touched on the outer fringe of the northern pack-ice up beyond 81 degrees north, to the north of Sjuøyane (see ice chart from September 5).



# SPECIES ACCOUNT

Each mammal species is detailed a bit in the following (to some extent in order of general popularity, predators first), and bird highlights after that.

## MAMMALS

### Polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*)

*41 sightings of a total of 73 individuals. Plus 2 in the East Greenland pack-ice June 4-5.*

Our 2017 season became a very memorable one for polar bear sightings. We made a large amount of exquisite observations, including many of bears right up against the ships, when we were in the pack-ice, but also of bears seen at very close range from the Zodiacs.

We saw bears feeding on or hanging out by no less than 5 different whale carcasses, of which 3 were beached Sperm whales and 2 were Narwhal carcasses in the floating pack-ice way out at sea. In the most awesome of incidents, we managed to spend 4 full days watching up to 22 bears, until there was nothing left but bones and the 2-meter tusk of the Narwhal. The East Greenland pack-ice bears, both adult males, both had recent kills at their feet.

Our sightings consisted of some distant bears that we could not tell much about, but of the ones seen well, there were approximately equal amounts of adult males and female (+/- 20 of each), we saw 6 family groups (4 females with 2 cubs-of-the-year (COYs), one female with 1 COY, and one female with 3 yearlings)! Many of these observations were outstanding, with the family groups spending time with the vessel. The observation of a female with 3 yearlings was very special too: We were able to conclude that this was a case of adoption, something probably not too rare, but certainly rarely documented.

The bears that we saw well enough to assign a condition score (1 being starving, 2 skinny, 3 normal, 4 fat, and 5 obese) averaged about 3.4. In other words, mostly happy and healthy bears. Among these there were no 1's, but there were a fair number of 5's. We were fortunate enough not to see too many collared bears.





### Arctic fox (*Vulpes lagopus*)

*10 sightings of a total of 29 individuals.*

A very high count by all standards. One sighting was of 7 in the same general area, possibly a somewhat dispersed family group (August 20), another of 8 attending a reindeer carcass (September 9). At the latter congregation was one blue morph (rare in Svalbard).

### Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)

*24 sightings of a total of approximately 1045 individuals.*

We did not get a chance to go all the way east this season, what with the pack-ice so dense for so long and then adverse weather towards the end of the season. Thus, we missed the very large herds of predominantly females with calves. The largest concentration we found in 2017 was of some 250-300 mostly males hauled out at Torellneset on July 31. As always, we had some awesome and very close encounters with these extremely charismatic beasts.

### Bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)

*26 "sightings" of a total of 88 individuals. Plus 1 in the East Greenland pack-ice June 4-5.*

As in previous years, we have lumped the observations on some long days of traveling through pack-ice into one sighting, even if the seals were technically mostly on their own. The majority of the sightings were again this year in the pack-ice and mostly to the north of the islands. An approachable species, this seal is always popular with the photographers.



### **Harp seal (*Pagophilus groenlandicus*)**

*15 sightings of a total of 170+ individuals. In the East Greenland pack-ice some 2.500+ June 4-5.*

A low count in Svalbard again this year.

### **Ringed seal (*Pusa hispida*)**

*22 "sightings" of a total of 119 individual.*

As in previous years, and as with Bearded seal, we have lumped the observations on some long days of traveling through pack-ice into one sighting, even if the seals were technically mostly on their own.

The 119 individuals is a fairly expected count for the time of year, and the locations we were mostly at.

### **Harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*)**

*8 sightings of a total of 31 individuals.*

The places we visit for Harbour seals are traditional resting places for the species, but the number of animals present varies a lot, not least with tide. The count this year was fairly low. The most interesting observation was perhaps a very small juvenile on August 10, evidence of an unusually late birth? (normal birth time early to mid-June).

### **Hooded seal (*Crystophora cristata*)**

*0 sightings in Svalbard. Ca. 17 identified to this species in the East Greenland pack-ice June 4-5.*

This species is generally not seen at all or only in low numbers in Svalbard. It was one of the two species that made the year list, but not for Svalbard (we registered one in Svalbard in 2016).

### **Sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)**

*1 sighting of 1 individual (plus 2-3 dead).*

Off to the west of Spitsbergen, near the continental shelf drop-off, we saw one adult male on June 6. Apart from that, only dead animals this year. One adult male from last year was hosting one polar bear in Forlandssundet, while one perhaps sub-adult male was attracting several bears (and many ships) over the course of the season in Smeerenburgfjorden. Nozomi additionally found the remains of a very long time dead and quite unidentifiable whale on the shores of Phippsøya, presumably also a Sperm whale. Also here one bear was lingering...

### **Beluga (*Delphinapterus leucas*)**

None!



## Narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*)

*0 sightings - but 2 dead.*

Considering the rarity of live sightings in Svalbard, our finding of two dead Narwhal in the pack-ice was pretty spectacular (even when we consider that the presence of Polar bears helped us find the whales). It is said that Narwhal are particularly susceptible to getting caught in pack-ice during times when the ice is forming rapidly or moving rapidly. Perhaps that was the case this year more than usual?

On July 28, a concentration of six Polar bears alerted us to the presence of the carcass of an adult female Narwhal in the pack-ice to the north-east of Sjuøyane. It was already more than half eaten, and on July 29, there was not much left. The bears dissipated, the fog came in, and we left the scene.

On August 2, a concentration of 10 Polar bears alerted us to the presence of the carcass of an adult male Narwhal in the pack-ice just to the north of Kong Karl's Land. We couldn't believe our luck! We spent the next 4 days here. We watched a total of 22 bears near this carcass (of which 16 participated on the feast), until on August 5, the last bear left the scene. Left behind on the floe were many bear poo stains, and of the whale just scattered ribs, the spine, and the skull with a 2-meter tusk.

We brought the skull and tusk back to Svalbard Museum. You can perhaps help getting it on display by pestering the employees there to see it (the initial statement by the museum director, upon receiving this donation from us, was the most disappointing message that they may display it in 10+ years, after their new building has been completed).



### **Northern bottlenose whale (*Hyperoodon ampullatus*)**

*0 sightings in Svalbard. 2 sighting of 4 individuals off Jan Mayen on June 3.*

### **White-beaked Dolphin (*Lagenorhynchus albirostris*)**

*1 sighting of 1.*

On September 5, one of our passengers spotted what was seemingly an adult male of this species. The location was quite far north and east, namely off Rossøya at 81 degrees north.

### **Bowhead whale (*Balaena mysticetus*)**

*1 sighting probably of this species. Approximately 7 seen in the East Greenland pack-ice on June 5.*

The lone Svalbard sighting was of a distinctly split blow in the pack-ice just south of Moffen on July 2. Although not diagnostic, this blow was almost certainly from a Bowhead.

On the voyage to the East Greenland pack-ice, this species was one of the prime targets. We saw about 4 really well, another few slightly off in the distance, and we communicated with Norwegian Polar Institute scientists who were in the same general area and heard that they found quite a few more. There are seemingly on a regular basis more Bowheads between Greenland and Franz Josef Land than what was believed until just a few years ago. More are found to be present during the summer near the pack-ice edge to the north of Svalbard as well. Maybe in 2018?

### **Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)**

*8 sightings of 21 individuals. Additionally, 1 seen June 6 approaching Spitsbergen from East Greenland.*

We did really well on Blue whales in 2017. 21 individuals is almost average one every second day! The prize sighting as numbers go were at least 11 individuals feeding to the north of Spitsbergen in Hinlopenrenna on August 9. For quality, several sightings compete - we saw many close up, we saw three different female/calf family units, one of which had a third whale in close attendance, we saw five different fluking Blue whales, and we even saw one roll over on its side right next to the ship, waving its pectoral fin at us.







### **Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)**

*8 sightings of a total of 17 individuals. Plus about 8 seen June 3-5 around Jan Mayen and along East Greenland.*

Fewer than Blue whales! The largest concentration was of 10 individuals seen feeding spread out over a few miles in Forlandssundet on June 30. One of these was seen fluking more than once, which is extremely rare for this species (unfortunately no photos).

### **Whale sp. (*Balaenoptera* sp.)**

We should for completeness' sake add that around Svalbard we also registered 4 whales that could not be identified closer than to Blue or Fin Whale. Additionally, there were 4 such near Jan Mayen on June 3 and 7 off East Greenland on June 5 (most of these probably Fin whales).

### **Minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)**

*9 sightings of a total of 11 individuals. 1 off East Greenland June 4.*

This is almost the exact same number as seen in 2016, which is again not many (and particularly considering that we had 70% more field days in 2017). The Norwegians are still hunting this species, also in Svalbard!

### **Humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)**

*3 sighting of a total of 5 individuals.*

This was the third year straight when NozoMojo had very few sightings of this charming whale. Maybe 2018 will turn the tide? One of the whales we saw in 2017 was seen twice in the same location with a whole month between the dates.

### **Svalbard reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*)**

*13 sightings of a total of about 260 individuals.*

A fairly expected number of sightings and individuals considering our typical range of activities. At three different locations on the west side of Spitsbergen we counted more than 50 individuals on the tundra.

## BIRDS

Most of the common and expected species were encountered, and no major rarities were found. We would like to dedicate a little more detail to the majority of the 30 species here in this report than we have done in the previous two season reports. An additional 6 species recorded elsewhere are listed as well.

Northern fulmar was everywhere. One Northern gannet was seen near Jan Mayen.

15 Red-throated divers / loons were not too many.

We had 12 sightings throughout the season of about 200+ Pink-footed goose total. The largest flock of Barnacle goose was 850+ at Colesbukta July 7. The local Pale-bellied brent / brant was seen with 82 on migration on June 7 in Forlandssundet, while 3 flew south in Woodfjorden July 2.

No dabbling ducks, but Common eiders commonly, King eiders with 6 sightings of total 28, unusually most of those in July (plus one sub-adult male at Jan Mayen), and Long-tailed ducks 4 sightings of 120+, of which 70+ was the biggest concentration at Andøyane, September 7. The locally rarest duck seen in 2017 was a pair of Red-breasted merganser, noted at Colesbukta July 7.

Shorebirds: Ringed plover and Ruddy turnstone were both seen in very small numbers. One adult Sanderling at either end of the season were also not many, but not unusually few either. Of Purple sandpiper we noted 11 sightings of 100+ birds throughout the season, mostly in the west. We had only one sighting of Grey/Red phalarope, 23 adults on July 7 at a landing site in Forlandssundet (8 of these in pairs). At Jan Mayen, one Whimbrel was noted.





The four most common species of auk were all seen throughout most of the season of course. For Atlantic puffin, numbers peaked in August and September (highest counts approximately 75 and 50). Brünnich's guillemot / Thick-billed murre was noted with 2 male/chick pairs as far north as past 81 degrees as late as September 5. A few Little auks / dovekies were in the same area on the same day. Black guillemot interestingly almost disappears from Svalbard coastal water during the fall (no-one knows to where), but we did see some throughout. The first juvenile Black guillemot was noted August 2.

Long-tailed skua / jaeger - only one adult. Arctic skua /Parasitic jaeger 95 total, of which 6 were dark morph, and only a few juveniles only in September. 13 sightings of Pomarine skua / jaeger with a total of 88+ birds, all seen during the first half of August, and all in the pack-ice. Largest flock was 18 birds together, 8 birds of the 88 were dark morph, and only one immature was seen. Great skua was noted with 14 individuals, not many, but probably due to where we were most of the time more than anything else. Another 8 Great skuas were noted June 3-5 between Jan Mayen and the East Greenland pack-ice.

Gulls are a major part of the bird fauna of Svalbard. We registered 7 species. Glaucous gulls are common, on three occasions we saw concentrations of more than 50, and we saw them in just about all the plumages they come in. Great black-backed gull is less common, mostly found right on the west side - we also saw one adult at Monacobreen on September 7. Lesser black-backed gull was this year noted only at Jan Mayen and in the East Greenland pack-ice. Also at Jan Mayen was a Common gull on June 3. The high Arctic speciality, Ivory gull, pleased us with at least 184 individuals, of which only one was a first summer bird and none were juveniles. We had more than 20 at once with the Narwhal carcasses, and also saw 15+ in front of Brepollen on July 8. In the pack-ice off East Greenland, 16 were noted altogether. Another high Arctic breeder is the exquisite Sabine's gull, we saw one adult really well at Bakanbukta on July 7 (and also 2 adults at Jan Mayen and East Greenland), and most delightfully one juvenile was seen between Moffen and Lågøya on August 15 - that must almost have been locally produced. Black-legged kittiwake is the most numerous local gull (and worldwide?), but this year's largest concentration was a mere 1.500+ feeding in the tidal rips of Heleysundet on July 7.



Arctic terns were generally present in expected numbers throughout the season. A couple of flocks of more than 250 individuals were the largest concentrations this year.

The Svalbard endemic subspecies of Rock ptarmigan only just made the list with one adult male at Colesbukta on July 9.

White wagtail and Lapland longspur are both passerines that are vagrant and rare in Svalbard, but less unusual on Jan Mayen and in East Greenland, where one of each respectively were seen (the longspur though at sea). Snow bunting is the only common passerine of Svalbard, we noted 40+ at Alkhornet in early July, that includes the local production of juveniles at the time. Our season ended with a singing male Snow bunting on September 10 on Coraholmen, perhaps the last song of the season (and fittingly the last observation of this report).





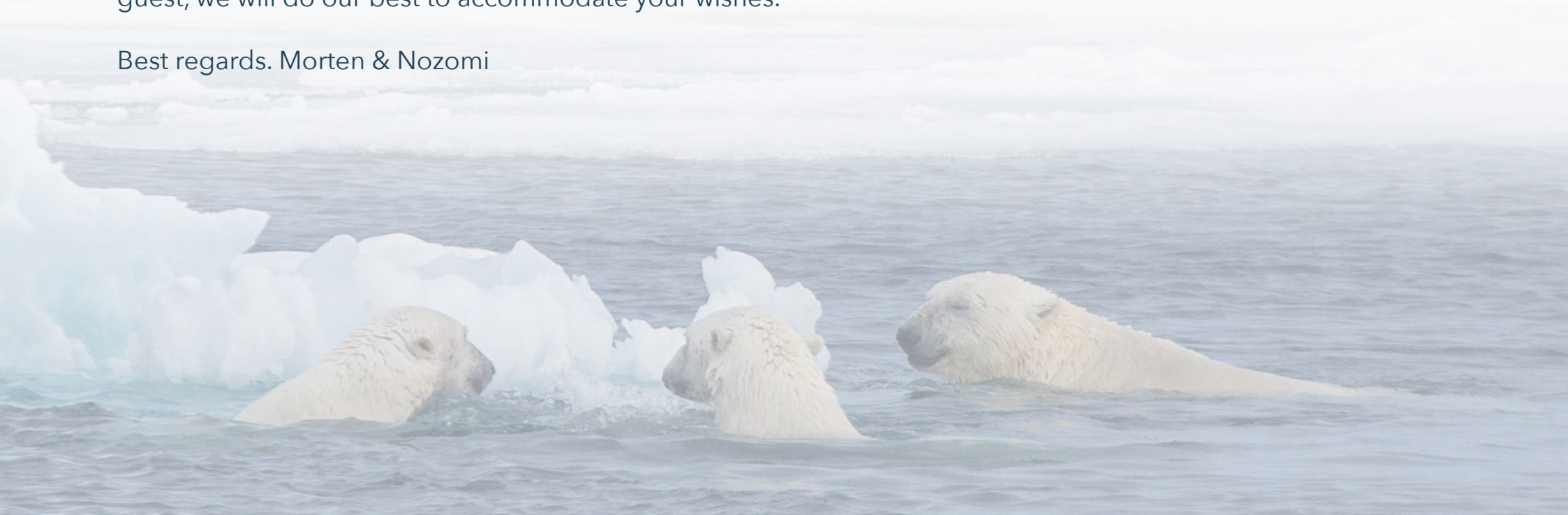
# IN CONCLUSION



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



This is the third SVALBARD SEASON REPORT from NozoMojo LLC ([www.nozomojo.com](http://www.nozomojo.com)). You may find this one, and the previous two, on our website ([nozomojo.com/trip-reports/](http://nozomojo.com/trip-reports/)).



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