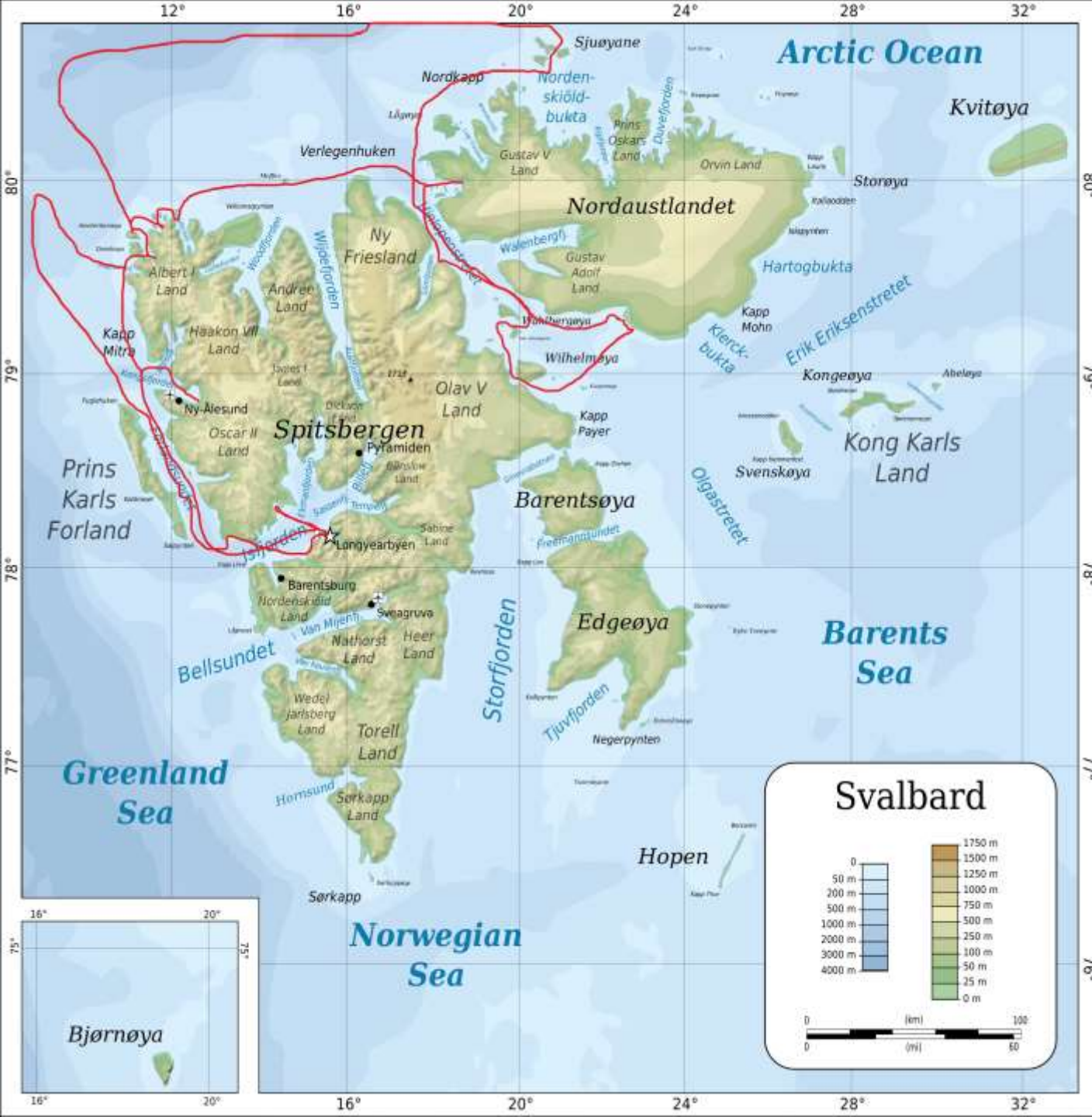


Svalbard

29th June – 12th July 2022





Introduction

We booked with Naturetrek on their Realm of the Polar bear Cruise to Spitsbergen, organization was fine and very good upfront information was provided. We flew with SAS from Heathrow, overnighed in Oslo before flying to Longyearbyen via Tromso. It all went smoothly apart from the fuff of disembarking in Tromso for passport control. It was here that some of the party were separated from their luggage. We were lucky and all our luggage made it. The cruise ship MS Quest would be our vessel for the trip it holds 53 passengers so our group was a sensible size and was one of the reasons I chose this trip. It was very stable and despite my tendency for seasickness I was fine on the whole trip apart from the first zodiac trip which was very rough.

The passenger group (all bar one who I disliked) were actually very nice and it was a good atmosphere on board and on the excursions, the Naturetrek leaders were very good, kept us informed of the flight issues and did their best to sort everything else.

The tour leaders from the ship were a little paranoid about polar bears whenever we landed and occasionally hurried those of us looking at the plants, this was probably the only criticism of the trip, apart from that they were very good. The food was very good and the crew all helpful.



30th June

After arrival in Longyearbyen we had a couple of hours free, we did a little shopping, had an ice cream and spent some time photographing the confiding snow buntings before our transfer to the cruise ship. We took a cruise across the Isfjorden into Borebukta and encountered our first mammals, a swimming walrus and a couple of bobbing common seals. We headed back to town to collect some of the lost luggage in the early hours and sailed to Sarstangen on the island of Prinz Karls Forland.



Snow Bunting





Svalbard Reindeer



Ny-London

1st July

After breakfast we headed out on zodiacs to Sarstangen where there was a haul out of Walrus, and several swimming in the shallows, the sea conditions were rough, so we were unable to land but had good maritime views. Back on ship we relaxed had some lunch as we cruised into Kongsfjorden. Here we stopped at Ny-London an abandoned mining village and took a wander encountering some nice alpine plants a confiding long tailed skua and our first reindeer of the trip.

We cruised to Kronebreen for a look at the glacier, here was a nice selection of wildlife, bearded seals hauled out on small lumps of ice, some nice ivory gulls amongst the commoner species.



Kronebreen



Ivory Gull

2nd July

First thing we located some drake king eiders in Bjornsund. Then after breakfast our zodiac trip was to Smeerenburg a former whaling outpost now home to a large walrus haul out. The beach also held several small groups of waders including some sanderling

The afternoon we landed at Fugelsongen to see the massive Little auk colony. The little auks were very confiding but occasionally disturbed by a passover skua or gull which made for an awesome spectacle.



Little Auk



King Eider



Walrus



Little Auk



3rd July

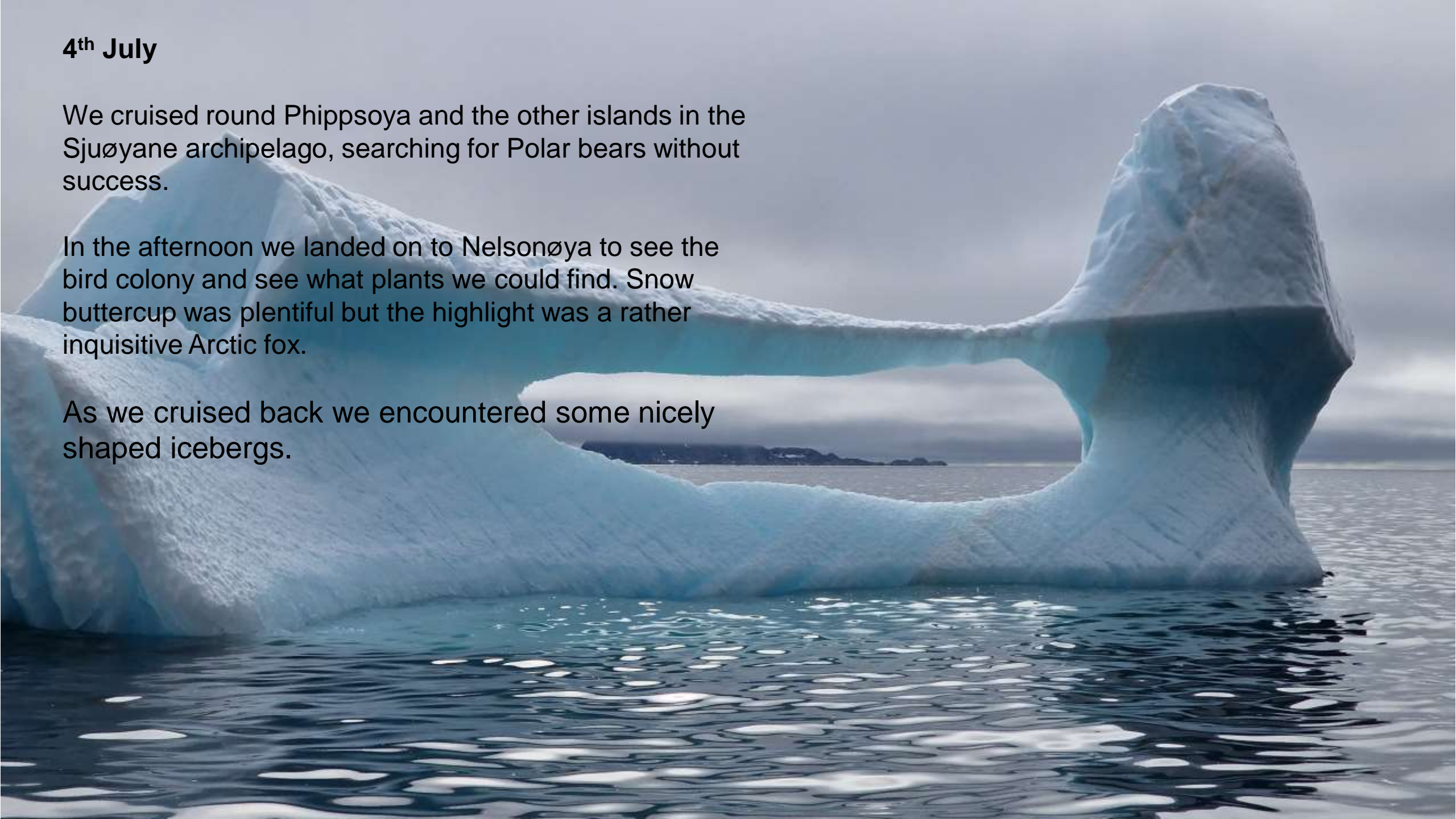
Overnight we had made it to the pack Ice and we spent most of the day cruising along its edge looking for polar bears getting to 80.9 degrees latitude. The conditions were mixed a few sunny spells but mostly very misty and cold. We had several harp seals and a few of the usual common birds, but no sign of any Polar bears. We did a zodiac trip landing on some pack ice before sailing south overnight.

4th July

We cruised round Phippsøya and the other islands in the Sjuøyane archipelago, searching for Polar bears without success.

In the afternoon we landed on to Nelsonøya to see the bird colony and see what plants we could find. Snow buttercup was plentiful but the highlight was a rather inquisitive Arctic fox.

As we cruised back we encountered some nicely shaped icebergs.





Arctic Fox

5th July

We landed at Waldenoya where a walrus haul out held a good number. But it was the birds that were the highlight here some cracking grey phalaropes and a sabin's gull.

Just after lunch we found the first polar bear on a shingle spit, it was a little distant and it had a cub and it was decided not to go closer. But our luck was in as we passed Langeoya where a Polar Bear, mother and cub were feeding on a walrus carcass on a beach. It was ideal for a zodiac cruise near to the beach so we headed off and watched them for sometime feeding before they sat down to digest, it was an excellent encounter and we left them in peace.

After dinner we headed to the impressive Bråsvellbreen Glacier to wrap up a cracking day.



Sabine's Gull



Polar Bear



Grey Phalarope



Polar Bear



Bråsvellbreen

6th July

The morning zodiac cruise was to a Brunnich's Guillemot colony at Alkefjellet. Here we encountered at least half a dozen Arctic foxes hunting in the colony, it was amazing watching their agility as they moved round the cliffs, nesting Glaucous gulls and kittwakes were scattered through the colony.

We spotted a Polar Bear and cub from the ship and monitored them for a while but they left the spit they were on and swam to an Island, they were hunting so we did not follow them.

The afternoon we landed on Florabugta this was an excellent botanical site and we had lots of amazing alpines – Arctic Dandelion, Alpine saxifrage, Highland saxifrage, Northern wood rush along with several Svalbard reindeer.

The evening meal was a BBQ on the back of the boat and I decided to go for my first beer of the trip as I had not been suffering from seasickness at all so far on the trip.



Brunnich's Guillemot



Tufted Saxifrage

7th July

Hamilton Bay was the location for our first zodiac trip, we landed for a wander mostly for flora. There was a good selection of plants.

The afternoon we cruised into Fuglafjorden and then in the zodiacs sailed upto the glacier, here we had some great views of the glacier calving and several ringed seals.

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/markhows/52600196109/in/dateposted/>

We headed towards the deep water and cruised south, distant whale spouts were seen and we headed towards them, a couple of Minke whales came close in and we had a humpback but there was a large pod of fin whales and we had excellent views of them for quite some time.

stayed up for the midnight sun for the first time during the trip

Fin Whale



Snow Buttercup

8th July

Our morning zodiac landed us on the shingle spit of Poolepynten, a haul out for Walrus but also some shingle specialist plants such as oysterplant, sea spurrey growing alongside alpines. We spent the morning here wandering round enjoying the sunshine.

The afternoon we landed on Alkhornet in glorious sunshine, it was very warm as we wandered about looking for Boreal Jacob's Ladder, locating a small plant in flower but some more was spotted higher up the hill so we headed off where some large patches were in flower. Some other nice plants such as polar campion, Fololosa Saxifrage and some very confident reindeer along with and a few common seals off shore. A glorious finish to our boat cruise.



Walrus



Boreal Jacob's Ladder



Arctic Skua

9th July

We had breakfast before disembarking in Longyearbyen, we dropped our bags at the hotel and discussed the SAS pilots strike and the cancellation of our flight home scheduled for the following day. It was uncertain when we would be able to leave. We took a walk down to the shore with the group, a nice selection of birds including an arctic skua eating an apple, a queen eider and some showy waders in the common eider colony.

In the afternoon a few of us went on a brewery tour sampling a nice selection of beers.



Longyearbyen



10th July

In the morning we took a walk round the old mining works mainly for plants but also to look at the industrial remains. There were plenty of plants to look at including some nice stands of Svalbard poppies, some Boreal Jacob's Ladder, mountain avens and polar campion.

We stopped at the brewery for a couple of beers at lunch time before wandering into town for food. I took by a wander round town to get my bearings for most of the afternoon. A lone reindeer seemed resident near the museum. There were some nice areas of Polar cotton grass. The evening we just relaxed.



Polar Cotton Grass

11th July

A touristy morning visiting the Svalbard museum followed by some lunch.

Late afternoon I took a walk to the south of the village to the limit of the accessible area, families of Pink footed geese were scattered along the roadside, showing well.

Some Glaucous gulls seemed annoyed by me but they were not nesting and the Arctic foxes arrival seemed to disperse them. The Arctic fox ignored me in its search for food interspersed by some time it spent rolling around enjoying itself. It wandered up the hillside and was lost to view, I noticed a purple sandpiper behaving strangely and it had a couple of chicks that it was feeding. I headed back into town finding a ringed plover with chicks.



Ringed Plover



Purple Sandpiper



Arctic Fox



Arctic Fox

12th July

We visited the North Pole Expedition Museum followed by a wander round the town. Early afternoon I took another walk to the far south of the village to find a tufted duck located by another one of the group earlier in the day, it was in the common eider colony.

Late afternoon we took a wander to find a few last plants Iceland purslane and Tundra buttercup.

We had to move hotel due to existing bookings, all sorted out by Naturetrek our new hotel had the most Northerly pub in the world so we had to have a meal and beer here. Another member of the group popped in to tell us that an arctic fox was outside and we watched it search round the hotel for food.



Tufted Duck



Iceland Purslane





Common Eider

13th July

We eventually flew home with a SAS emergency flight via Oslo again all sorted by Naturetrek (They did a great job keeping us informed on progress and sorting things out)



Lists

Birds - 37



Pink Footed Goose	Barnacle Goose	King Eider
Common Eider	Long Tailed Duck	Red Throated Diver
Tufted Duck	Fulmar	Ringed Plover
Ruddy Turnstone	Purple Sandpiper	Dunlin
Grey Phalarope	Sanderling	Kittiwake
Ivory Gull	Sabine's Gull	Great Black Backed Gull
Glaucous Gull	Arctic Tern	Great Skua
Long Tailed Skua	Arctic Skua	Little Auk
Brunnich's Guillemot	Black Guillemot	Puffin
Snow Bunting	Grey Heron	Common Gull
Redshank	Oystercatcher	Jackdaw
Hooded Crow	Jackdaw	Rock Dove
Tree Sparrow		



Mammals - 11



Arctic Fox	Polar bear	Walrus
Bearded Seal	Harp Seal	Common Seal
Ringed Seal	Svalbard reindeer	Minke Whale
Fin Whale	Humpback Whale	



Plants - 61



Polar Cottongrass	Black Fleabane	Polar Cress
Polar Campion	Fringed Sandwort	Holy Grass
Arctic Chickweed	Flagellate saxifrage	Polar Dandelion
Tundra Buttercup	Iceland Purslane	Arctic Dandelion
Field Horsetail	Polar Horsetail	Variegated Horsetail
Polar Scurvygrass	Alpine Mouse ear	Arctic Mouse ear
Tufted Sandwort	Polar Mouse ear	Snow Pearlwort
Moss Campion	Tundra Chickweed	Mountain Sandwort
White Arctic Bell Heather	Svalbard Poppy	Common Chickweed
Boreal Jacob's Ladder	Mountain Sorrel	Alpine Bistort
Tundra Buttercup	Snow Buttercup	Pygmy Buttercup
Mountain Avens	Arctic Cinquefoil	Polar Willow
Dwarf Golden Saxifrage	Alpine Saxifrage	Yellow Mountain Saxifrage
Drooping Saxifrage	Tufted Saxifrage	Yellow Marsh Saxifrage
Polar Saxifrage	Purple Saxifrage	Highland Brook Saxifrage
Svalbard Saxifrage	Fololosa Saxifrage	Oysterplant
Hairy Lousewort	Woolly Lousewort	Two Flowered Rush
Northern Wood Rush	Arctic Wood rush	Polar Foxtail
Tundra Hairgrass	Alpine Meadow grass	Creeping Saltmarsh Grass
Arctic Meadow grass	Sheep's Fescue	Sulphur Coloured Buttercup
Purplish Braya	Common Scurvygrass	