

SVARLBARD AND INTO THE PACK ICE



The whole trip was extremely successful. My wife and I went on a 9-night circumnavigation of Svarlbard in July 2025 which included going into the pack ice just beyond 82 degrees north. We also stayed in Longyearbyen for two days. This was on the Oceanwide ship Plancius, the smaller of the three main ships that Oceanwide take to the Arctic for the summer. Around just under 100 people on board and judging by some fellow travellers' comments that had been on a similar trip before on larger ships they stated it was a better overall experience. This ship was smaller, and apparently has better and more available viewing areas on various decks, better for photography and feels more cosy and friendly than the larger Oceanwide vessels. That's not to say the trips on the larger vessels aren't good, they all said they were excellent just a bit different and if a choice they would choose the smaller ship.

Other reports on here are more extensive and give excellent detailed information about this type of trip so I will just summarise our sightings and post a few images. As mentioned elsewhere the guides on these type of trips do have an extensive knowledge in their specialist areas but they do not have the detailed analytical and identification experience of most mammal watchers or birders so ensure you identify yourself the species you see, particularly seals. Modern digital photography is a great help if some are distant or brief sightings.

Mammals :

Polar Bear – five individuals seen. Four in the pack ice including two attracted to a Sperm Whale carcass. One on land in North Spitsbergen with a fast abandonment of a shore excursion when it suddenly appeared 400 metres away heading towards the people who had already landed. The closest expedition guide was understandably visibly shaken when he arrived back onboard. I also have to commend the other people onboard who, with no exception, remained absolutely silent as one of the other Polar Bears seen at distance slowly approached within 30 metres of the stationery ship whilst in the pack ice.



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Polar Bear

Walrus – Several individuals seen swimming or hauled out on beaches including during shore landings. Around 80+ at a regular haul out site and very close views during a shore landing.



© Andrew M Allport

Walrus

Bowhead Whale – A single individual gave great views as it came very close across the bow of the ship and eventually dived under the pack ice.



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Bowhead Whale

Minke Whale – Seen on most days in and around the fjords. Usually only 1-3 at the same time. Seemed to be a tendency to often be around the mouth of fjords but could be anywhere.

Beluga – A party of five seen at distance and then two separate groups of up to thirty were seen for extensive periods while cruising in zodiacs close to glacier fronts.

Humpback Whale – A single individual was surface feeding extremely close to the ship for half an hour while at anchor.



Humpback Whale

Arctic Fox – Seen patrolling the bottom of the cliff inland of the town at Longyearbyen on three occasions including very close to the road up the valley. Four other individuals seen at varying distances on shore excursions.



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Arctic Fox

(Svalbard) Reindeer – Common around the town of Longyearbyen and seen on many land based shore trips.



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Harp Seal – By far the majority seen along the edge of and in the pack ice. Groups of up to 10-15 was not unusual but usually smaller groups of 2-6. Only a handful hauled

out on the ice. They seem to have a habit of swimming upside down along the surface. Most were wary and would often disappear quickly.



© Andrew M Allport

Ringed Seal – Several seen on the pack ice and seemed less wary than others staying hauled out on ice flows as the ship went past.



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Hooded Seal – A single individual (female/imm) hauled out on the sea ice and possibly a couple of others but inconclusive views due to distance and photos couldn't help.

Harbour Seal – A small number seen in and around the fjords mainly along the western coast.

Bearded Seal – Several seen hauled out on ice but usually at distance. One came very close and gave superb views. You could see it clearly underwater to a couple of metres depth.



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Bearded Seal

Bird Highlights

The pack ice had lots of Ivory Gull, Glaucous Gull, Black Guillemot, Brunnich's Guillemot, Black legged Kittiwake and individual Long-tailed Skua, Pomarine Skua and Grey Phalarope.



© Andrew M Allport

Ivory Gull

Northern Fulmars were everywhere from the fjords, at sea and in the pack ice.

Ptarmigan were seen on a few shore excursions and on the edge of Longyearbyen town.

Snow Bunting, Barnacle and Pink-footed Goose were common particularly around Longyearbyen along with Purple Sandpiper, Common Eider, Arctic Terns, Dunlin, Ringed Plover and Arctic Skua.

Little Auks and Brunnich's Guillemot were present in huge numbers in and around several cliff colonies as well as out in some fjords and Puffins also in smaller numbers.

Several inner fjords held King Eiders and we saw Brent Goose, Great Skua and Great Black Backed Gull as well as a pair of Red Necked Phalaropes not far from Longyearbyen. Long tailed Duck and Red Throated Diver were also around Longyearbyen area and a few other inner fjords.



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King Eider

The highlight of the trip was clearly the Polar Bears and particularly I think seeing them in this awesome environment. I think we were probably lucky with the circumstances of sightings with some very close and prolonged encounters. As is normal with wildlife these types of trips can be very different each time and how much you see also depends how much time you put in as an individual from the deck and that is particularly the case with seals and whales. It is 24hr daylight at this time of year and you perhaps need some sleep (occasionally). Here are a few more images from the trip to give a flavour of what it can be like.



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Polar Bear on Sperm Whale carcass



© Andrew M Allport

Walrus



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Arctic Fox



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Red-necked Phalarope



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Polar Bear and Sperm Whale carcass



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