

## **Western Spitsbergen, July 2019.**

**Four days, 13 species, including polar bear, bowhead whale, blue whale, Arctic fox.**

### **Jon Swenson**

My wife, brother- and sister-in-law planned a cruise to Svalbard Archipelago. They have “only” an average interest in mammals and birds, so we could not order a specialized mammal-oriented tour. I spoke with colleagues who conduct biological research on Svalbard, considered prices, and considered our interests. We chose a cruise with Hurtigruten along the west coast of Spitsbergen. My colleagues told me that a more designated, mammal-oriented cruise should include the eastern coast, which is more arctic and has more polar bears and seals, but it takes much longer and is considerably more expensive.



**Our ship, the M/S Nordstjernen, now taken out of service, on the west coast of Spitzbergen Island, Svalbard Archipelago.**



**Our route along the western coast of Spitzbergen Island, Svalbard Archipelago.**

My colleagues and the personnel on the ship told me that seeing most mammals on Svalbard is “hit or miss”, but that chances to see walrus and seals were good. Therefore, to not be overly optimistic, I made a wish list that included four species; polar bear (50% chance on this cruise, I was told), Arctic fox (“seen sometimes, but especially in Barentsburg”), beluga (“not uncommon along the coast”), and walrus (“should see some”). I asked about blue whale, but this is rare, and bowhead whale, but this pelagic species is almost never seen. Even though this did not sound very promising, it turned out to be a productive and very successful trip for all of us.

July 25, 2019. We flew to Longyearbyen the day before our cruise started, so we could have time to explore this little and not very charming town on our own. One cannot leave the town without an

approved weapon, to protect against polar bears, but it was nice to have a relaxing start and experience the midnight sun. We saw no mammals.

July 26. Before the cruise, we were bussed to several sites in Longyearbyen (such as the very interesting museum) and sites east and west of the town. We saw some interesting birds, such as pink-footed and barnacle geese and the red-throated loon, and one **Svalbard reindeer** west of town near the airport. When we came to the ship, I was surprised to see Morten, who I had met earlier. He is very interested in birds and mammals and it was nice to have a fellow enthusiast to share sightings with. Then we started our cruise, heading west to Barentsburg. The weather was wonderful, and the sea was calm. In fact, the good weather lasted throughout our trip. After an organized walking sightseeing tour of Barentsburg (which is administered by Russia), we were on our own and visited the Orthodox chapel built in remembrance of the victims of an airplane accident. When we came out, we saw 2 **Arctic foxes** right along the road. They were obviously used to people.



An Arctic fox (*Alopex lagopus*) on a roadside in Barentsburg

After a nice presentation of Russian folk music and dancing, we went back to the ship. I was optimistic after seeing the foxes. Sure enough, as we left the harbor, we spotted a group of 10-12 **belugas** and soon after, still in the fjord, a **minke whale**. On our way north, a fellow tourist told me that he had taken a daytrip on a zodiac from Longyearbyen to the southern part of the Forlandsundet, which is a passage west-northwest of Barentsburg. There they saw several **walruses**. We did not, and could not, go there in our large ship, but this might be an idea to explore if you have a short time in Longyearbyen and want to see walruses.



**Belugas, or white whales, (*Delphinapterus leucas*) in Barentsburg Harbor**

July 27. We woke up in full sunshine, as the sun never sets. We were in the Magdalene Fjord on our way to visit a calving glacier. Just before we arrived there, we saw a few **harbor seals** around the floating ice. We walked to a very old graveyard for whalers and some of us even took a dip in the very cold fjord (I even have a certificate to prove it). On the far side of a side fjord, two **walruses** were basking on the shore. We then sailed through a narrow strait into Smeerenburg Fjord and the beautiful Smeerenburg Glacier, where we went on land to learn about glaciers. We saw some **ringed seals** among the ice floes and, when we left the fjord, we passed a flat island with a group of male **walruses** on the beach. It was really amazing; after two days, I had seen three of the four species on my list. After leading a research project on brown bears for almost 30 years, I REALLY did want to see the first mammal on my list, the polar bear. I even seemed to imagine seeing them on the ice floes (see below).

And, at 20:00 in the “evening”, we DID see a young female **polar bear** walking along the shore of Raud Fjord. We were able to follow her for several kilometers. It was a fantastic viewing of the fourth and most prioritized species on my list in perfect weather. Then we anchored in a protected bay for the night.



An “almost” polar bears (which is “ice bear” in Norwegian)



A real polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*) romping in the snow

July 28. Today was to be another very eventful day. As we sailed east along the northern coast of Spitzbergen, we saw one **reindeer** on an area called Reinsdyrflya, which was appropriate, because “reinsdyr” is “reindeer” in Norwegian. Then, just north of there, Morten pointed out the strange whitish light to the north, which he told me was reflection from the ice sheet. I looked with my binoculars to try to see the ice. I didn’t see any ice, but I saw a whale blow in the distance. There were two, perhaps a mother and a calf, and we could not see a dorsal fin. Morten was able to photograph them from the right angle when one blew. The V-shaped blow is diagnostic in this area for a **bowhead whale**. This was confirmed by the guide onboard who knew most about whales and by a marine mammal biologist who works on Svalbard. The guide had only seen them 2-3 times during his almost 10 years as a guide on Svalbard, We saw them right at the edge of the Svalbard shelf, so they were in deep water. Then we turned south into Leife Fjord, where we saw trappers’ cabins, a warm spring, beautiful landscapes, a couple of **bearded seals** on the floating ice, and **humpback whales**.

We had more coming up!! We turned north to head to Mofen Island, which is just north of 80° N latitude and has a huge gathering of male walrus. We were lucky, because this was the first trip of the season when the ice was far enough north that we could visit the island. During dinner, the captain announced that they had spotted a **blue whale**. I was not a good dinner companion, as I jumped up and ran to the front of the ship for a good view.



**A glacier under the midnight sun.**



**A blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*) at almost 80° N latitude**

We crossed 80° N latitude at 21:00 and celebrated with champagne. Not long after that, we came to Moffen Island. There were hundreds of male **walrus** on the island and some had even come out to meet us.

July 29. We woke up on our way to Ny Ålesund, stopping at a site where the British tried to mine marble and then going on to the settlement, which is primarily an international research station after a tragic accident resulted in the closing of the coal mine. It was a fascinating place to visit and, on an island just off the shore from the settlement, Morten and I identified a group of basking **harp seals**. This was the final mammal species we saw on the trip. We made it back to Longyearbyen at 17:00 and flew out the same day. It was a wonderful trip that could be combined for people interested in wildlife, history of Arctic areas, glaciers, geology, etc. The guides, service, and food were all excellent. Everyone in our party was very satisfied with this cruise.

I was surprised to see all the species I had hoped for, and then some. I had not been in the Arctic before, so I was happy to see so many of the possible species on Svalbard. I think the good weather contributed to that, but luck was also important. Of the mammal species I saw, all were sightings at a single site, except for walrus (3 sites) and reindeer (2 sites). We were told over the ship's speaker about mammals that the crew saw. Thus, luck is definitely a major factor. But, I definitely recommend a cruise in Svalbard.



A walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*) near Moffen Island

Mammal list, 13 species (8 lifers marked in bold):

Arctic fox (*Alopex lagopus*)  
**polar bear** (*Ursus maritimus*)  
**walrus** (*Odobenus rosmarus*)  
**bearded seal** (*Erignathus barbatus*)  
**harp seal** (*Phoca greenlandica*)  
ringed seal (*P. hispida*)  
harbor seal (*P. vitulina*)  
reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*)  
**bowhead whale** (*Balaena mysticetus*)  
common minke whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)  
**blue whale** (*Balaenoptera musculus*)  
humpback whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)  
**beluga or white whale** (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

We also saw 24 species of birds. The most exotic were king eider, ivory gull, and Sabine's gull.