Spitsbergen: A Polar Wilderness Photography Tour Report 2018

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by Mike Watson

The stunning landscapes of Spitsbergen are incredible for landscape photography.

The spectacular landscape of Negribreen in Spitsbergen (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)

After last year's unusually icy voyage, this year's 15 days cruise in Svalbard aboard the wonderful SV Noorderlicht was back to the recent trend of no sea ice around Spitsbergen and we were able to get all the way around the main island unhindered again. However, our progress was not without challenges from time to time in the form of stormy weather. Happily we were able to dodge the worst of it and make many of our favourite landings this year including the stunning Ingeborgfjellet Little Auk colony, which we missed last time owing to a heavy swell on the landing beach. The main attraction, Polar Bear again produced a good number of sightings, slightly above par for us recently at 14, with most of them out east, partly owing to the weather allowing us to spend more time searching for them out there this year. Two of these were photographic opportunities. We tallied c.250 Walruses, again including some point blank encounters, six Arctic Foxes, 15 Ivory Gulls, nine Long-tailed Jaegers (or Skuas) plus seven Belugas and nine Northern Minke Whales. Unfortunately great whales were absent this year, a feature commented on by other vessels, maybe they were further north than usual towards the edge of the pack ice? Or perhaps the rough seas when we passed through our former hotspots meant we simply could not spot them? I've been on this cruise four times now and there is usually an unexpected highlight. This year's was undoubtedly the encounter with a flock of Sabine's Gulls in the far northeast, at our all time favourite overnight anchorage, indulging in courtship behavior! Wow, that was something! Our cruise was again a joint venture with our parent company Birdquest and whilst it was mostly an all round wildlife tour as usual there were again many good photo opportunities. We also get to land in places that the tours, which are basically Polar Bear and Walrus or bust do not and we pay a lot of attention to flora as well as fauna, now having good sites for most plants.

As usual we were also mesmerised by the glaciated landscape and the exquisite High Arctic flora. Plants included restricted range Arctic specialities such as Boreal Jacob's Ladder, Nodding Lychnis (or Polar Campion with its nodding miniature Chinese lantern calyx), Whiplash or Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage (or Spider Plant and flowering this time!), Svalbard Poppy and Woolly Lousewort. We also added another new species to our Svalbard list in the form of Dane's Dwarf (or Slender) Gentian. Although Polar Bear numbers were up a little this year they were still 8 short of my 2012 voyage. The message remains clear, if you want to see Polar Bears in Svalbard, do not delay. The future remains quite bleak for them. Although we did not see any painfully skinny bears, we did not see any 5/5 fat score individuals either and again we witnessed their dependence on birds' eggs and chicks at this time of year. It is unlikely that the bird populations will be able to continue to sustain such losses (4000 eggs were reported taken in the study areas in Köngsfjorden alone this summer for instance). Ivory Gulls depend on Polar Bear kills and follow them around so when the sea ice is far to the north, so are some of the gulls. Our total was up on last year at 15, boosted by our ability to reach Negribreen this time but again Ivory Gull was absent from both Longyearbyen and Ny Ålesund, where we used to enjoy regular sightings. If Svalbard is on your bucket list then a visit sooner rather than later is a good idea.

Many of our folks these days spend extra time in Longyearbyen prior to our cruises, to allow some contingency against unexpected travel delay as well as to explore the town and its surroundings. There is much to see here both in terms of interesting museums, galleries, shops, bars and, of course, wildlife, which lives side by side with the local population of around only 2,100 people, less than some of the massive cruise ships that stop here. A little extra time also allows for a change in the weather although this time it rained on me in Longyearbyen! This pegged back my steps but it is impossible to resist wandering around in the unfamiliar High Arctic habitat and I still clocked up more than 30,000 steps in my first 24 hours photographing northern birds like Rock Ptarmigan, Arctic Skua (or Parasitic Jaeger), Purple Sandpiper, Common Ringed Plover, Red Phalarope and Snow Bunting, all of which can be found close to, and sometimes, even in the town. A few King Eiders were in Isfjorden, a pair of Northern Pintails was by the dog kennels and a Svalbard rarity in the form of a Common Black-headed Gull was by the birdwatching hide on the shore.

15 July Longyearbyen to Ymerbukta.

Eventually the time came to meet the last participants off the flight from Tromsø in northern Norway and once our baggage had been dropped off in the harbour we headed into town. Longyearbyen is a very charismatic town and apart from coal mining artifacts, which are left standing in an arrested state of decay, its buildings are mostly neat and modern and are reminiscent of the houses and hotels of a monopoly board, and typically for the Arctic, painted in bright colours. Although every year sees a few more as its tourist economy continues to boom. Our traditional first stop is an area of common ground in the town, where again sadly Boreal Jacob's Ladder could not be found this year. However, it was still a great introduction to classic Arctic flora including: White Arctic Bell-heather and lots of Mountain Avens, albeit mostly going over as has been normal by this date in recent years. We did manage to find a couple of other good Arctic plants in the form of Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage, Polar Campion (or Nodding Lychnis) alongside Arctic White Campion and probably best of all the uncommon Tundra Chickweed. With limited time this year before we were due to be bumped off our mooring at the harbour we did not have enough time to hike all the way out to the famous Polar Bear warning sign on the edge of town but with four coach loads of selfie-takers already there we were not too keen anyway. We did see three Parasitic Jaegers (or Arctic Skuas) as well as Purple Sandpiper and Arctic Tern, Black-legged Kittiwake and Glaucous Gull. Some Barnacle Geese had already started to gather in moulting flocks, some with a few goslings in tow and pretty Svalbard Poppies (both yellow and white forms) were growing along the otherwise barren roadside verges here. Eventually we all wandered back to the port, where our lovely vessel SV Noorderlicht was waiting for us. Once aboard, we settled into our cozy cabins and enjoyed the first of many fantastic meals, served up by our talented and resourceful ship's cook, Andy Holland. Andy is the first English crew member I have sailed with on SV Noorderlicht (although he presumably qualified thanks to his name?) and our regular cook, Menthe Groefsema, was a very hard act to follow but Andy did a superb job, keeping us entertained in the process (as seems to be the ship's cook's other role) as he cooked 25 meals, three times a day for 16 days from a galley and storage area not large enough to swing a cat in.

We set sail on an overcast, cold and damp evening to the news that France had just beaten Croatia in the World Cup final and headed west down the huge Isfjorden *('Ice Fjord'*), with an escort of Northern Fulmars (as usual we saw a wide range of colour morphs throughout the tour and I noticed a pale-tailed bird this evening) and past the first of very many squadrons of Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots heading to and from their breeding cliffs. We passed the formerly very grim, Russian mining settlement of Barentsburg at the mouth of Isfjorden, which has started to clad its buildings with brighter coloured material! We had now entered the midnight sun wilderness of Svalbard (although, again, unfortunately the sun was missing today and for most of the time this year). We anchored for the night in Ymerbukta, where there were some Reindeer on land. Entering this sheltered bay we dropped anchor for the night. Ymerbukta *('Ymer Bay')* is named after the Swedish periodical of the same name, published by the Swedish Society of Anthropology and Geography, Ymer being a giant in Norse mythology

16 July Ymerbukta to Akseløya

We woke at anchor in pretty Ymerbukta and enjoyed the first of many excellent breakfasts of the cruise. The fjord was beautifully calm and we had some reasonable views of up to seven drake King Eiders on the glassy water. They were a little too far away for the DSLRs though. Our first Red-throated Loons of the cruise were spotted and we took advantage of the calm weather to make our first landing on the nearby tundra at Sylodden, getting used to our tried and tested zodiac landing routine. The tundra produced some nice Purple Sandpipers, one of which was singing as well as our first close Reindeer encounter. A Harbour Seal was resting on the shore here. Several new plants were added to our list – Polar Scurvygrass, Purple Saxifrage (the world's northernmost flowering plant), Alpine Saxifrage and Drooping Saxifrage. If you see a plant in Svalbard, there's a good chance it will be a saxifrage of some kind! The rolling tundra above the beach was very nice but soon it was time to get underway, cruising past the impressive bird cliff of Alkhornet (*'Horn of the Auks'*), across the mouth of the massive Isfjorden and south towards Bellsund. Birding was rather uneventful as we headed south, far from land with just the usual species passing by. After looking at the weather it was an easy choice to sail south and therefore circumnavigate Spitsbergen in an anti-clockwise direction. As well as being our favoured plan as it does not gamble on crossing the massive Stofjorden on our return into a southwesterly, which would be really horrible and also might cause us to miss landings while we caught up with our schedule, Captain Floris could see a gap in the weather in which we could sail up Storfjorden in a few days time with a tailwind. Late in the day we entered Bellsund, cutting through the choppy waters at its northern entrance and anchored in the lee of its barrier island, Akseløya. The 8km long by 1km-wide island was named after the schooner '*Aksel Thordsen'* of Tromsø, which was chartered by A. E. Nordeskiöld's 1864 expedition.



17 July Akseløya, Bellsund

Our 'best of Bellsund' day started with a classic morning landing on Akseløya. We landed on the eastern shore and walked up across the tundra, seeing numerous Purple Sandpipers along the way. A couple of Red Phalaropes were in the seaweed for those landed first and later we had a brief fly-by, which landed on a rocky slope before disappearing! The stars of this year's landing were the skuas. We found a pair of the rare Long-tailed Jaeger, the first we have seen here. They seemed to be hanging around but did not appear to have a nest or chick nearby and from time to time they were accompanied by the local Great Skuas and Parasitic Jaegers. It is not often that you have three species of skuas in a single field of view, especially on their breeding grounds! We managed a few shots of them. Up to three Red-throated Loons were also in the area of small pools below the rocky spine of the island but there was no sign of any other phalaropes either here or on the eastern shore, where we usually see them. Then followed the customary search for Whiplash or Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage (or Spider Plant), the other star of Akseløya. After some hiking through the vertical rock strata 'pathways' (literally walking back in time!), dodging the feisty Parasitic Jaegers, some Spider Plants were found. Better still they were all in flower this time and included an uncommon double-flowered plant. Otherwise flora on the island is rather limited. Also here were Harbour Seal, another slumbering on the shore and a distant Arctic Fox spotted by Karen. At the eastern end of the island is a group of huts occupied by the well-known local trapper Tommy Sandal, who keeps the traditional of over-wintering alive here.



Ingeborgfjellet, Bellsund

Our afternoon landing took place in sunny weather and a light westerly breeze at the totally awesome Ingeborgfjellet. Named after the heroine of the old Norse Fridtjovsaga this is a 714m high peak in the north shore of Bellsund. On our approach we could see the whitened rocks of the Little Auk colony, located on a large scree slope, only just above the beach and therefore one of the most accessible. We enjoyed a great session with the Little Auks, sitting around the edge of their colony from where we could watch their comings and goings as well as regular massed flights when a Glaucous Gull passed by. The Little Auks numbered several thousand but were more or less uncountable with all this commotion! A group of Reindeer grazed nearby seemingly unconcerned at our presence. Other birds noted here included some Pink-footed Geese of note. The floral highlight was our first Highland Saxifrage, growing in a small streamlet leading down to the beach from the Little Auk colony. After leaving Ingeborgfjellet, we waved goodbye to pretty Bellsund and sailed south down the Spitsbergen's west coast, continuing overnight to Hornsund.

18 July Hornsund

We arrived in this lovely fjord in the early hours but were unable to drop anchor safely owing to the amount of glacial ice flowing past! Therefore we paused by the massive cliff of Gnälodden, where a flock of c.150 moulting Barnacle Geese had gathered. Gnälodden means something like '*the incessantly humming mountain*', on account of its kittiwake colony. This was one of the best examples of the effect of the bird colony on the vegetation below it. Starting with the tiniest nutrients in the sea and passing through the small fish eaten by the birds it is easy to see how the birds' guano leads to the more fertile turf found below. Patches of green in the landscape in Svalbard indicate the presence of bird cliffs.

Hornsund is named after Poole's log from around 1610 when he wrote *'They brought a piece of a Deeres horne aboard, therefore I called this sound Horne Sound*'. In the northwest corner of the inlet, Burgerbukta is comprised of two arms, Vestre and Austre (West and East) and the name Burger belonged to Wilhelm Burger (1844-1920) an Austrian court photographer and member of Count Wilczek's expedition to Spitsbergen and Novaya Zemlya in 1872, which mapped and named the bay.

Vestre Burgerbukta is usually a very productive fjord and we opted to skip landings today and spend the morning cruising slowly to the massive calving ice face of the Paierlbreen glacier, with melting ice fizzing and popping all around us and occasionally knocking the bow of the Noorderlicht. This glacier is named after Georg Paierl, an Austrian alpine guide and another member of the Count Wilczek 1872

expedition. What a truly fantastic place this is! Although again there were no Polar Bears here this time we did see six gorgeous Ivory Gulls patrolling the ice stacked up towards the calving face of the glacier, occasionally standing on small bergs and affording some nice photo opportunities with blue ice in the background. The landscapes here were pretty good too. One of the advantages of the SV Noorderlicht is that owing to its smaller size it can approach wildlife immediately and there is no need to wait to be decanted into a zodiac as its deck is already low enough to the water for some great photo angles. In a hurry to cross Storfjorden before a storm arrived in a couple of days time we hoisted sails and hurried south immediately towards Sørkapp (South Cape).

19 July Kapp Leestasjonen & Dolerittneset

By morning we were gently cruising north up Storfjorden past Edgeøya, the third largest island of the archipelago. Covering more than 5,000sq km it is named after the English merchant and whaler Thomas Edge, who died in 1624, having seen the island in 1616. In the afternoon, after a minor detour, we went ashore at Kapp Leestasjonen near Dolerittneset *('Dolerite Point'*), a sheltered bay on the northwest tip of Edgeøya and the site of a Pomor hunter walrus massacre at the end of the 19th century. The sun-bleached bones of the unfortunate animals still litter the plain above the beach as another stark reminder of the terrible past. Some animals even made it well up the plain, towards the escarpment before they were finally speared. Again the local flora has benefitted from the added nutrients with many saxifrages taking advantage of the extra calcium provided by the bones over the many years they have lain here. The landing here, although overcast, was still worthwhile, notably for Walrus and ptarmigan. We were lucky to watch a couple of young Arctic Foxes among the rocks at Dolerittneset just above our landing spot. There was also a good count of reindeer, they are particularly numerous on the southeast islands. Notable birds included a male Svalbard Rock Ptarmigan, which perched up on rocks only a stone's throw from where presumably the same bird had been sat only a few weeks earlier. We could approach it more closely and line it up with interesting backgrounds before we retreated leaving it where we found it, magic! On our return to the beach Ellie spotted some Belugas, sneaking past very close to the shore as they almost always are. Not much of a sighting, again as is typical of them, a few white backs and then they were gone but exciting nevertheless. The highlight of the landing, however, was the haul-out of Walruses on the beach, a bachelor party of at least 11 animals. We were able to watch a couple of them at very close quarters as they swam over to check us out. An old bull appeared to be gently harassing a youngster. It was nice to see that they have returned to the site of the historic massacre. We also enjoyed some great views of Purple Sandpipers on the shore here. There was also quite a rich flora by Svalbard standards, being still in the '*High Arctic Polar Willow zone*'. We noted 20 species including the rare Arctic Dandelion, although sadly not in flower (easy to identify from its leaf shape and the fact that the other naturally occurring dandelion, is absent from the east of Svalbard). Polar Field Horsetail was also here and is know from only six sites in the eastern islands. The east coast of Edgeøya and neighbouring Barentsøya is barren polar desert in comparison. We spent the rest of the day cruising into the Freemansundet between Barentsøya and Edgeøya, where we hoped to find some shelter from the storm. Freemansundet is named after Alderman Ralph Freeman of London, who was one of the leaders of the Muscovy Company and visited Spitsbergen in 1619. The hut at Kapp Lee was built in 1968 by a Dutch scientific expedition.

20 July 2018 Walter Thymensbukta – at anchor

With the forecasted force eight Beaufort scale (62–74 kph) southwest gale now blowing, we spent all day dragging anchor back and forth across the moderately sheltered bay (you can barely call it a bay actually) in the lee of Edgeøya. The wind was still gale force here but at least the waves did not have a very long fetch and the white caps in the distance indicated it was much worse out in the open water. It turned out a sensible decision by our Captain. It was an interesting and fun day nevertheless. We had three lectures today, a new record for us, including a very thought-provoking one by Arjen about climate change and another by Captain Floris about the history of SV Noorderlicht, dating back to its role as a lightship in the Baltic and its subsequent restoration and conversion to a motorized two-mast schooner. Fascinating stuff and a good reminder about the very special nature of the vessel we were sailing on. Sadly we have not been able to find out anything about Walter Thymen. Eventually the wind dropped in the evening as the fast moving depression moved away and we were off again, this time sailing back west through the Freemansundet and following a hot lead from our friends aboard MV Ortelius, who chose to continue sailing in the bad weather. We had only seen five species of birds, all seabirds of course, while at anchor and we added Parasitic Jaeger as we sailed west, with a trail of fulmars and kittiwakes taking an interest in our kitchen vegetable waste.

Today turned out to be 'Polar Bear day' after all with a total of eight! First of all we spotted a female high up on the scarp slope of Skarpryttaren, where it almost climbed right to the top, it had a cub sleeping further downslope. Even though they were distant, it is always a special moment to ring one of Noorderlicht's bells! Soon afterwards we spotted another female on the same slope, this time with two cubs sleeping on her, their heads popping over her back every now and again. A little further west we spotted another female

bear, a mother and cub, both sleeping on the slope, also well above the beach. Finally the best of the series of distant sightings was a male, sleeping among the basalt rocks on the point at Sundneset (‘*Sound Point*’). It didn’t like the look of us though and as we got closer it got up and walked away out of DSLR range, as were the rest of the bears typically were today. This sighting also resolved our plans for the following morning. The landing at Sundneset was obviously now cancelled. It is also always nice to get off the mark as the expectation to see at least one bear builds as days go by without one, everyone well aware that some cruises have posted blanks in the past. Fortunately this was not really a possibility this year and thanks to the MV Ortelius intel we were all very happy when we went to bed tonight and we did outscore them 8–5!



21 July Barentsøya to Noorderlichthamna

This was easily the best day of the tour for me, and probably most others. A classic one in Svalbard, which had a bit of everything. The morning was spent cruising up Storfjorden in a moderate swell leftover from the gale force southwesterly wind, the avian highlight of which was a puffin, which circled the boat a couple of times in their typical fashion. Why do they do this we wonder, when none of the other auks do? Searching for more bears we passed through the Jakimovičøyane chain, a series of small basalt rock islets off the southwest corner of Barentsøya. Jan Kazimirovich Jakimovič, died in 1905 and was a captain in the Russian Navy, commanding the icebreaker ‘Ledokol II’. At the head of Storfjorden, the 15km long white calving face of Negribreen could be seen in the distance **.** It is ironically named ‘*Black Glacier*’ but after Baron Christoforo Negri (1809-96), who was an Italian geographer, who founded the Reale Società Geogra ca Italiana. As we approached it, large blue icebergs came into view, their colour indicating very old ice. Having been compressed within the glacier for thousands of years the gases trapped inside the ice alter the way it refracts sunlight. Still far from the calving face we came upon a heaving mass of bergs, shoved back up Stofjorden by the continuing southwest swell, some of them pretty big and rock hard. SV Noorderlicht bumped a winding way through them nearer to the face of the glacier face as camera shutters chattered furiously and a lot of video footage was taken, everyone is a photographer now! It was an amazing experience! Unfortunately, although there were a lot of kittiwakes and fulmars feeding along the base of the glacier, where it met the sea and the copopods were being stunned by freshwater we could not get too close as the ice became even more dense and the swell moved the mass of bergs around too much for us to risk a collision. We could still spot at least seven Ivory Gulls, pure white against the blue glacier ice at times but a little too far even for minimalistic DSLR photos. The edges of the glacier were very neat and smooth but those in the middle where the pressure of the glacier’s flow is greatest were a real mess of crevasses and huge slabs of ice waiting to be released to the sea.

Storfjorden is not really a true fjord being open to the sea at both ends but when it was named the early explorers were unaware that there was a channel connecting it with the sea at the northern tip of Barentsøya, the Heleysundet. We continued northwards and as we neared our anchorage for the night a mother Polar Bear and her two cubs were spotted beneath the basalt cliffs where we usually visit a Black Guillemot colony, another landing revision was now required! The current in the Heleysundet is so strong that it is not possible to stop here so we carried on around the corner and into an unnamed small, narrow fjord on the coast of Spitsbergen. It has been proposed as ‘*Noorderlicht Harbour*’ (this should really be Hamna in Norwegian to please the Governor’s office!) having been graced by the beautiful red-hulled schooner so many times. Hardly any other boats dare pass through the Heyleysundet with its fierce currents and shallow waters so we are always alone here. It has always been kind to us in terms of wildlife sightings too and this time was no exception. A small group of Sabine’s Gulls was spotted feeding along the muddy shore at the head of the fjord, near where a stream flows into it and by a small shingle beach. Luckily this was more or less where we had planned to go ashore. Soon afterwards we were watching them from land at quite close range, all of them in pristine breeding plumage and some of them indulging in courtship behavior, walking around in tight circles, bills open and calling to each other. They even chased off a Parasitic Jaeger. However, we did not see any evidence of breeding and it was surely too late to start now? We counted a maximum of 14 and this was the highlight of the whole tour for me, something different that I haven’t seen before anywhere and in the most perfect setting. We continued on our walk up onto the rocky tundra of Straumslandet above the fjord vaguely in the direction of the bears but far enough away not to be concerned about them. A couple of Purple Sandpipers were calling and we had a nice encounter with some reindeer in lovely low angle sunlight. The flora was also nice, we were in the ‘*Svalbard Poppy Polar Desert Zone*’ now with many good examples of this lovely plant still in flower although growing rather prostrate in such a harsh environment. Purple Saxifrage was also still in perfect flower here unlike in the west where it was mostly over. A light breeze was blowing from the nearby Pedasenkobreen as we spent some time quietly watching over the

fjord where SV Noorderlicht was at anchor and beyond into Olav V Land on probably the most pleasant sunny evening of the tour, perfect timing and a fitting end to a fantastic day in the High Arctic! Also here a couple of pairs of Barnacle Geese were squabbling on their nearby nesting cliff, a moulting flock of 21 Pink-footed Geese was along the shore and Bruce spotted our first Common Ringed Plover, we never had to wait so long for this one before! Pedasenkobreen is named after Aleksei Dmitrivich Pedasenko who died in 1909 and was a Russian astronomer and member of the Swedish Russian Arc-of-Meridian Expedition to Spitsbergen 1899-1902.

22 July Noorderlichthamna to Wahlbergøya

The day started more or less as the previous one ended, a perfectly calm still and sunny morning at anchor in the idyllic setting of Noorderlichthamna. There were still at least nine Sabine's Gulls on the shore, a couple of female King Eiders and a drake Long-tailed Duck flew past the boat and a Snow Bunting was singing from the goose cliff. The breakfast bell rang and we were off towards the Heleysundet again. Captain Floris had studied the tide tables and had chosen to sail through the narrow channel with the tide. He had also watched another boat on the radar overnight trying to pass through it from the other direction give up after making no progress for an hour. The mother Polar Bear and her two cubs were still present below the cliff on Straumslandet as we entered the main channel. This was another tour highlight for me to watch Captain Floris's skill in choosing his course and firing the Noorderlicht through the Heleysundet like an arrow, through whirlpools and areas where the water level was visibly higher than others. The Heleysundet is a very impressive but also daunting channel! We hardly felt a thing but our speed was showing 13.7 knots! More than double our usual. Wow! Sailing north to Kapp Payer (the most easterly point of Spitsbergen and named after Julius von Payer 1842-1915, Austrian officer and Polar Explorer and member of the Second German North Pole Expedition 1869-70) we saw lots of feeding walruses, the count reached 35 before we entered a bank of thick fog just north of the cape. The weather was changing again and the rest of the day was rather grim, with rain and fog persisting.

A brief interlude raised spirits when Hermann spotted our best Polar Bear of the cruise on Torkildsøya, a tiny basalt reef island in the Rønnbeckøyane, named after sealing skipper T.Torkildsen, just reward for his many hours watching from the bow. The bear was wandering around with a small cloud of Arctic Terns as it cleared out the young from their nests, some legs could be seen entering its mouth as it crunched them up. It also played hide and seek with us using the cover of the island's ridge to stay out of sight. Eventually we could sail around towards it where the fog lifted briefly and we enjoyed some nice views, a large female with a fat score of a good 3/5, in not too bad condition but without a cub in tow. Three King Eiders, including a drake and a Red Phalarope were also along the shore here but I don't think anyone else bothered looking at them? Three Great Skuas and a Parasitic Jaeger were more visible and as we continued north we started to see vast feeding flights of Thick-billed Murres heading south, squadrons of them flying in V formation low over the sea, presumably from the mighty Alkefjellet in the Hinlopenstretet just to the north of us.

We had planned a landing on Nordaustlandet at Torellneset, the southwest point of Gustav Adolf Land but as we neared the site of the Walrus haulout there we could see that the c.150 large lumps on the beach had company, a sleeping Polar Bear. Ah well! This is probably the best reason to cancel a landing and we moved on quickly towards nearby Wahlbergøya, another regular Walrus haulout site. Fortunately there were a few Walruses present on the point here and with no bears in sight we made a landing in rather bumpy conditions. The walruses obliged with some nice close views albeit in very poor dull light. There were a few bird species also present, Arctic Terns, Common Eider and kittiwakes but the main attraction was the flora habitat, again in the *'Svalbard Poppy Polar Desert Zone'* typical of eastern Svalbard. However, Tufted Saxifrage dominated with lots of plants scattered over the barren shingle with a lot of Sulphur-coloured Buttercups and both Drooping and Purple Saxifrages. There were of course a few Svalbard Poppies too, flattened to the ground by the harsh conditions as they flowered. It was cold here and the Noorderlicht was lost to sight as the fog rolled in. It was nice to return to a cup of hot chocolate after this one after we had helped everyone back on board. We anchored in the shelter of Wahlbergøya overnight. Torellneset is named after Professor Otto Martin Torell, 1828-1900, managing director of the Swedish Geological Survey 1871-97 (he led expeditions to Svalbard in 1858 and 1861) and Wahlbergøya is named after Swedish botanist and secretary of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science in Stockholm, Peter Fredrik Wahlberg 1800-77.

23 July Wahlbergøya to Liefdefjorden

Today was another big sailing day. With yet another storm on the way in a few days time we had to get around the NW corner of Spitsbergen and into some shelter when it passed by so we made a big hop from the Hinlopenstretet all the way to Liefdefjorden today. At least we had a moderate southerly wind to help us along today, nice while it was behind us but less so when it started hitting us in the side as we turned past the Verlegenhuken. Not long into the morning came another tour highlight, cruising past the bird cliff of Alkefjellet

('Auk Mountain'), probably the most impressive in the whole Arctic. Thick-billed Murres were dotted over the sea like insects as far as the eye could see as we cruised slowly along the base of the cliffs. The cliffs themselves were packed with their noisy partners and birds continued to swarm in the skies around them the whole time. Glaucous Gulls, which also nest here, patrolled the cliffs and Black-legged Kittiwakes vied for space on the already crowded ledges. Added to this spectacle, the smell of the immense bird-covered cliffs made this an unforgettable experience. The Noorderlicht is small enough to cruise along the base of the cliff so no need for a zodiac ride and we could sit back in comfort and admire the seabirds at close quarters. We even managed to spot the famous 'Royal Balcony' with its optimum breeding spots. We spent the rest of the day sailing north and crossed the 80th parallel in the afternoon, with the traditional jaegermeister shots served on deck by the captain. Sadly the sea was quite choppy in one of the best areas for great whales and all we saw were a couple of distant blows, which were quickly scattered by the wind so no real clue to their makers. Instead we had the Noordelicht's first pub quiz, which was won by a team of Pete, Liz, Kathrin and Steph. However, I was very disappointed to note that the majority of those on board did not know the difference between a Nunatak (a peak appearing from within an ice sheet or glacier) and a Pakamac (a foldable waterproof jacket popular in the 1970s)!

With mega views of Sabine's Gull, Walrus and 80 degrees north already safely in the bag we could skip Moffen Island this year (always distant views of everything there anyway) and fortunately as we passed the mouth of Wildefjorden the sea had calmed and we were delighted to see some whales at last. At least nine fast-swimming Minke Whales slipped past us before we reached Woodfjorden, typically only surfacing once or twice. We also caught up with some ocean-going seals, Harp and Bearded, both of which were notably generally absent this year. Small parties of Little Auks were fishing everywhere in the glassy waters of the fjord and as we ventured out for some midnight sun birding an Ivory Gull flew over calling, a fine drake Long-tailed Duck shot past and a Bearded Seal was loafing around near one of the islands.



24 July Liefdefjorden to Magdalenefjorden

We had breakfast at anchor in the lee of the Stasjonøyane *('Station Islands'*) before making a morning landing on the southernmost 'Phalarope Island'. This was again very productive in terms of getting close to Red Phalaropes at last. Again we could have hoped for better light but at least it wasn't raining this time. The phalaropes did not mind and allowed very close approach down to centimetres away as they fed actively along the shore. We estimated at least seven birds here, mostly females, albeit a little past their best, which is normal for this date. The roles of male and female phalaropes are reversed and males are left to incubate and tend the young, while females disappear and go off somewhere else, maybe even to lay again?

A small flock of five female King Eiders was a sad sight as they must have failed to breed now and there was also a large flock of moulting Pink-footed Geese nearby. They are incredibly wary when they are moulting and run/swim away from a vast distance. A couple of Great Skuas chased the Parasitic Jaegers off their island, some Red-throated Loons were gathered nearby and we added Red Knot to our Svalbard list, with a faded red bird on a small pool near the phalaropes. Arjen had seen Red Knot in this area before and we wonder it is breeding somewhere in the vicinity? We could at last look at some plants again, although the list was rather short with only Polar Willow, Tufted Saxifrage and Sulphur-coloured Buttercup. Arjen's Svalbard forest jokes sprung to mind about hiding behind trees and climbing them in the event of a bear encounter etc. The Polar Willows are of course only a couple of centimetres tall. Exiting Woodfjorden we had another Ivory Gull, which was scavenging something dead on the shore far away in the company of a Glaucous Gull.

In the afternoon we cruised west to anchor again in the shelter of Gravneset in Magdalenefjorden, passing familiar landing spots at Sallyhamna, Fuglesongen and Smeerenberg on the way. We needed to be inside the fjord when the next storm was upon us. Magdalenefjorden was named after the biblical character Mary Magdalene and Gravneset simply means *'Grave Peninsula*'. The area of 130 graves is one of the largest in Svalbard but is now fenced off to protect the fragile vegetation, which has suffered under the feet of thousands of cruise ship visitors over the years. The fjord is a very popular stop owing to its scenic beauty and accessibility, also it rarely freezes. The small bay here was the site of a British whaling station called Trinity Harbour, which continued until 1623. We made a very enjoyable landing in the evening here, walking past the site of some whalers' graves and into Gullybukta *('Narrow Bay'*). Some Barnacle Geese were close by on the beach along with some Common Eiders and we also enjoyed our best Parasitic Jaeger encounters of the tour here again (another pale morph/dark morph pair) as well as some very showy Arctic Terns. Another laughing Little Auk colony was high

on the cliffs above us, there were a couple of Purple Sandpipers on the beach here along with a couple of Snow Buntings. On our return we had a very nice chat with one of the Sysselmannen officers stationed in the hut here, who mentioned there had been a bear next to their cabin in the morning



25 July Magdalenefjorden to Kongsfjorden

After spending the night in the sheltered anchorage of Magdalenefjorden it was time for us to press on again, sailing down the northwest corner of Spitsbergen to one of our favourite fjords, the wonderful Kongsfjorden. There was still a heavy southwest swell and as soon as we were out of Magdalenefjorden our next rollercoaster ride started. We made slow progress southwards finally making it to Krossfjorden, a side fjord of Kongsfjorden, in the late afternoon. Most folks retreated to their cabins during this section of our voyage, we were far from land with little new to be seen and the bunk is the safest place to be when things get bumpy! There were occasional crashes of broken things to be heard today. Our afternoon landing in the rain was in Signehamna, the site of a secret WWII German weather station. In the winter 1941-42 a weather station codenamed '*Knopse'* was established at this secret location behind the hill at Gunnarpynten, one of four in Svalbard operated by German forces during WWII. A second was built, codenamed 'Nussbaum' (walnut) and operated during the following winter in the same place. However, in the spring of 1943 a Norwegian boat discovered it and one German was killed in the exchange of fire on the shore. However, a German submarine, which was supposed to pick up the weather station's crew, arrived soon afterwards and sank the Norwegian boat, with the loss of one Norwegian soldier. Very little recognisable remains to this day except for some foundations and oil drums with '*Kriegsmarine'* stamped on them. Most of the more interesting items have long since been removed. The rocky tundra was stongly-patterened here from the freeze/thaw action drawing stones to the surface in polygonal shapes but there were very few species of plants and only the usual birds like Parasitic Jaeger, Purple Sandpiper and a large flock of kittiwakes from a nearby cliff colony, which was bathing in a freshwater lake on the tundra. A few Reindeer were dotted here and there as we finished the walk with a hike to the lovely viewpoint of Gunnarpynten, which overlooks the fjord towards the massive Lilliehookbreen, named after Commander Gustav Bertil Lilliehöök, 1836-99, a member of Torell's 1861 expedition. Gunnarpynten is named after Karl Gunnar Tønnes Eide 1902-73, a Norwegian Chief of Police

26 July Signehamna to Ny Ålesund

It was still raining next morning as we swung by Lilliehookbreen's impressive calving face but we did not see much there (no Ivory Gulls) apart from a couple of minor collapses so we continued swiftly south pausing at Cadiopynten, a tiny puffin colony at the confluence of Krossfjorden and Möllerfjorden. We saw five birds around the cliffs in the rain (they are cliff rather than burrow nesting in Svalbard) before moving on. Cadiopynten is named after Josepf Cadio, 1857-1909, a seaman aboard the yacht of Prince Albert I of Monaco who took part in four expeditions to Spitsbergen 1898-1907. In mid afternoon we arrived at Ny Ålesund, at 78.55 degrees north, the world's northernmost community. Formerly a rough mining settlement (it was named '*New Ålesund*' after the mining company's HQ in Ålesund, Norway), it is now a centre for polar research. A permanent population of 30-35 persons is increased in summer by researchers and technicians (from all over the world) to around 120 and I think we must have seen all of them in the pub this evening but not after we made a tour of the small 'town', which included a visit to Amundsen's 1926 airship launch pylon. The gift shop also opened a couple of times, probably the best one in Spitsbergen, not that there are that many to choose from! Some Common Ringed Plovers were chasing near the pylon, a couple of Red-throated Loons was seen and Arctic Terns breed in the town's oil depot. The avian highlight was a confiding female Long-tailed Duck that could be seen in a small ditch on the edge of town. There were a few Barnacle Geese but birding was not as productive as in previous years, maybe thanks to the local Arctic Foxes? Again the most notable plant was Polar Cress, still growing in the same cage and no doubt being monitored by someone. There were also a few Harbour Seals hauled out in their usual spot by a nearby islet. Sadly the rain never really stopped here, dampening our enthusiasm to search for things. Captain Floris's instructions were to be on board by 7.30 next morning when we would set sail again and fortunately almost everyone resisted the temptation to carry on partying in Ny Ålesund.

27 July Kongsfjorden to Sarstangen

The sun came out again and we enjoyed another of the best days of the cruise on our ' *Best of Kongsfjorden*' day. If there is one place that good weather is hoped for it is here. Before we had even hauled anchor Hermann had spotted a pod of three Belugas around the old jetty and everyone eventually made it out of their cabins to see them, including some domed heads this time. At the same time an Arctic Fox was scurrying along the side of the harbor. Just another day in town in the Arctic.

London, Blömstrandhalvøya. We crossed Kongfjorden in the early morning to Peirsonhamna, Blömstrandhalvøya (' *Flower Beach Half-island/peninsula*') next to London, which was an adopted name used as a joke by the Norwegians. It came into general use on Blömstrandhalvøya, the site of a failed marble mining attempt by Ernest Mansfield, quickly abandoned in 1920 owing to the marble here being of very poor quality. There are still many artifacts like the large derrick crane used to load the marble into boats, several huts but the rusty old steam engine has been restored and now resides across the fjord at Ny Ålesund. We saw up to five Long-tailed Jaegers (sometimes all in the air together) that have bred here for many years and again put on a great show for us, chasing Arctic Terns and allowing close approach while resting on the tundra. This is a very uncommon breeding species in Svalbard, owing to a lack of lemmings, their main food source but they seem to hang on using piratic tactics. They were a delight to watch, beautifully elegant yet very feisty too, as they demonstrated by chasing away the Arctic Skuas that strayed into their airspace. The Long-tailed Jaegers here spend the winter off the coast of South Africa, however, geolocator studies have shown that Greenland-breeding birds travel even further and on into the southern Indian Ocean! Another highlight here was five Red-throated Loons overhead calling. Thankfully we did not need to make a more extensive hike for ptarmigan this time having seen it already on Edgeøya. Flora included nice shows of Drooping Saxifrage growing out of the abandoned machinery, Yellow Mountain Saxifrage and more Polar Campion. Also Arjen explained how an old Arctic Fox trap in a very nice setting would have worked.



Ossian Sarsfjellet

We set sail again for Ossian Sars on a lovely sunny morning. Despite a lot of scanning we didn't spot anything of interest in Köngsfjorden apart from some nice blue icebergs. Once under the cliff at Ossian, an Arctic Fox ran along the beach while we waited for the zodiac. As well as an impressive 136m high bird cliff, it is a flower reserve and we added some new species to our trip list including Bluff Cinquefoil, Alpine Arnica, Arctic Sandwort, Polar Dandelion, Dwarf Golden Saxifrage (c.20, it is so easy to overlook this minute plant), Woolly Lousewort (although gone over now), the recently described 'Arctic' Buttercup *Ranunculus arcticus* – it doesn't have an English name yet and best of all, the tiny *Comastoma tenellum*, Dane's Dwarf Gentian or Slender Gentian, a new plant for us on this tour. It is Red-listed as endangered in Svalbard and is known from only two sites. A total of 25 species was by far our best tally of flora. We were able to descend a little way down the cliffs to watch the kittiwakes and Thick-billed Murres nesting on the ledges there at close range picking our way down the best hanging flower garden of the tour. It is amazing to see how they can flourish in a milder aspect and without the grazing influence of Reindeer down on the cliff itself. Some more close Reindeer delighted and a Long-tailed Jaeger flew over again – we keep seeing them here and wonder if they might be breeding nearby? I should also mention the stupendous views to be had at Ossian, overlooking the head of Kongsfjorden and the 'Three Crowns', peaks named Dana (1175m), Nora (1226m) and Svea (1226m). This was another classic visit to Ossian. Georg Ossian Sars (1837- 1927!) was a Norwegian zoologist who made several expeditions to Svalbard in the late 19th century. Cruising through the ice of the Kongsbreen we spotted a couple of Bearded Seals, one of which stayed put on a berg as Captain Floris expertly guided the Noorderlicht right past it. So close and my best ever sighting. Fab-u-lous! Another Long-tailed Jaeger was chasing terns out here too. The rest of the day was spent at sea, in order to get into the shelter of Forlandsundet before yet another depression arrived. It had started raining already and visibility was not great. We arrived at Sarstangen before midnight to see a few Walrus near the beach but none hauled out yet. Sarstangen is named after Michael Sars, 1805-69, Norwegian zoologist and Professor at the University of Oslo.

28 July Sarstangen to Tryghamna

No walrus were visible this morning in worse weather so we abandoned this landing attempt. Much of the day was spent at sea in horrible conditions, it rained all day, sometimes heavily and visibility was very poor. Added to this a heavy southwest swell was in force and we felt this particularly as we entered the mouth of Isfjorden. There was much crashing and banging to be heard again!

We did manage a landing at Poolepynten, where there were eight Walrus, three of them in the sea but we had the company of three other boats, including two day-tripping from Longyearbyen. Birds included four Red-throated Loons on the inland lagoon and a crazy tame juvenile Purple Sandpiper, which walked right up to us. Visibility was generally poor in rain, photographic light was horrible so we did not linger long here. I couldn't find any plants either. Poolepynten was named after the English whaler, Jonas Poole, who visited Svalbard repeatedly in the early 17th century. We continued into Isfjorden, completing our circumnavigation and anchored in the Tryghamna, a sheltered fjord on its northern shore, formerly often used by whalers.

29 July Tryghamna to Longyearbyen

You could say our final landing was eventful! We made a morning landing at Trygghamna from where we hiked to the tundra below the famous bird cliff at Alkhornet. A second year Iceland Gull was on the beach at our landing spot as were eight Purple Sandpipers. The lush boggy tundra has been fertilized for thousands of years by seabird guano and always has a good show of flora. The highlights, if you can call them that, were High Northern Buttercup growing in a natural ditch here although not in flower, Polar Cress, also not in flower and a few plants of Polar Campion and several species of saxifrage were also noted. There were a few Thick-billed Murre chicks jumping today and we were very happy to see their parents guiding almost all of them to the sea. Maybe the Glaucous Gulls had already eaten their breakfast? The adult auks actually push their little ones on through the air by the tail! Up to four Parasitic Jaegers were bombing around (one pair had a large fluffy chick) and we enjoyed some nice views of puffins on the sea. On another happy note the Reindeer at Alkhornet were crazy tame again and allowed some very close approach. A Walrus swam past along the coast and we had a cracking view of an Arctic Fox, which ran past us on its way somewhere. It was time to leave and we started to make our way back across the tundra as the mist rolled in from time to time on the northwest wind. Arjen commented that the fox was barking and he kept looking back in the direction we had come from until suddenly sharp-eyed Karen, looking for the fox, called out 'Polar Bear'. Someone else who shall remain nameless said 'sheep?' and Richard said some other stuff as he put his binos to his eyes and it filled them. The bear had been following us and was sniffing the air as it approached. In line with AECO protocol, we need to avoid close encounters with bears on land so the rest of us formed a huddle and as the bear continued to approach, Arjen quickly fired an explosive charge from his pistol. A loud crack was heard when it left the gun followed by a terrific bang in front of the bear, a female in good condition, which scarpered towards the sea as fast as it could. Yikes, they can run really fast, with all legs off the ground at times. No way could a normal human outrun one. The bear remained in the sea as we walked back to the landing point where trusty Hendrick soon arrived with the zodiac. That experience had been a wake up call to any naughty 'tail-end Charlies' lagging behind more that the 30m rule, which happily no-one was this time, particularly as we had already heard the previous evening that another boat's guide had been attacked in the Seven Isles off Nordaustlandet that same day and the bear in question shot dead. Simply heart-breaking. Thanks to Karen for looking back when she did but to put things into perspective this is the first time in almost 20 seasons in Svalbard that Arjen had to do this.

Longyearbyen

The crossing of Isfjorden from Tryghamna was uneventful but when we neared Longyearbyen itself a flock of five King Eiders, one of them a drake, flew past. We moored at Longyearbyen harbor and while Andy prepared his masterpiece, a few plant hunters went for a walk to the edge of town where our US friends had found Boreal Jacob's Ladder pre-tour. This sounded a better alternative to peering at some high on a cliff face as we have done in the past here! After a while we put their clues together and located a superb stand of this lovely restricted range Arctic plant, with many delicate blue blooms still in flower more than two weeks later. Hermann particularly enjoyed this top-class botanical experience! A juvenile Purple Sandpiper was in a ditch next to some houses just across the road here. So ended our last wildlife excursion and we walked back to the harbor along the shore.

Finally thanks to everyone who made this tour such a success (despite again having to overcome some significant bad weather) our excellent and very enthusiastic group as well as the magnificent crew of SV Noorderlicht, Captain Floris, First Mate Hendrick, Second Mate Jana, Ship's Cook Andy Holland and our expedition leader Arjen Drost, again without whose knowledge and expertise in Svalbard we would certainly not have done as well as we did. We'll be back again in 2019.





The variously named Whiplash Saxifrage on Akseløya is a very special plant (Image by Mike Watson)



Walrus with the red hull of SV Nooderlicht in the background at Dolerittneset on Edgeøya (Image by Mike Watson)



A Walrus cavorts in the shallows (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)



Tusk action at Dolerittneset on Edgeøya (Image by Mike Watson)



SV Noorderlicht anchored in Noorderlichthamna in Olav V Land (Image by Mike Watson)



A Ptarmigan stretches its wings in Spitsbergen (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)



We enjoyed a wonderful encounter with a flock of Sabine's Gulls in Noorderlichthamna in northeast Spitsbergen (Image by Mike Watson)



Polar Bear on Torkilsøya. There is no escape from tidal debris, even in the Arctic (Image by Mike Watson)



The female Polar Bear on Torkildsøya was quite good at hide and seek (Image by Mike Watson)



A large female Polar Bear on tiny Torkildsøya in the Rønnbeckoyane (Image by Mike Watson)



A Parasitic Jaeger will soon let you know if you are near its young, like here on Akseløya (Image by Mike Watson)



This menacing dark morph Parasitic Jaeger has been nesting behind Mary Ann's Polar rig in Longyearbyen for some years now (Image by Mike Watson)



The spectacular landscape of Negribreen in Spitsbergen (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)



A flock of Murres flies over the ice cap in Spitsbergen (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)



A graceful Long-tailed Jaeger resting on the tundra at Bløstrandhalvøya in Kongsfjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



Little Auks swarming around their colony at Ingeborgfjellet. You can see why it is Svalbard's commonest bird speices! (Image by Mike Watson)



Little Auks fly past SV Noorderlicht, anchored off their colony at Ingeborgfjellet (Image by Mike Watson)



The incredibly beautiful Ivory Gull against some ancient blue compressed glacial ice, which is probably thousands of years old (Image by Mike Watson)



An Ivory Gull flies past at Burgerbukta in Hornsund, which is rich in iron deposits (Image by Mike Watson)



The Little Auk colonies on the slopes of Ingeborgfjellet show up as whiter patches of scree , where the auks' activity stops lichen from growing (Image by Mike Watson)



Pretty Arctic White Campion flowers (Image by Wild Images guest Michel Metayer)



Bearded Seal in Kongsfjorden could hardly be bothered to raise its head to look at us (Image by Mike Watson)



The beautiful Boreal Jacob's Ladder is one of the few plants in the Arctic with blue flowers (Image by Mike Watson)



Glacial ice in Burgerbukta, Hornsund (Image by Mike Watson)



John Mansfield's hut in London, Kongsfjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



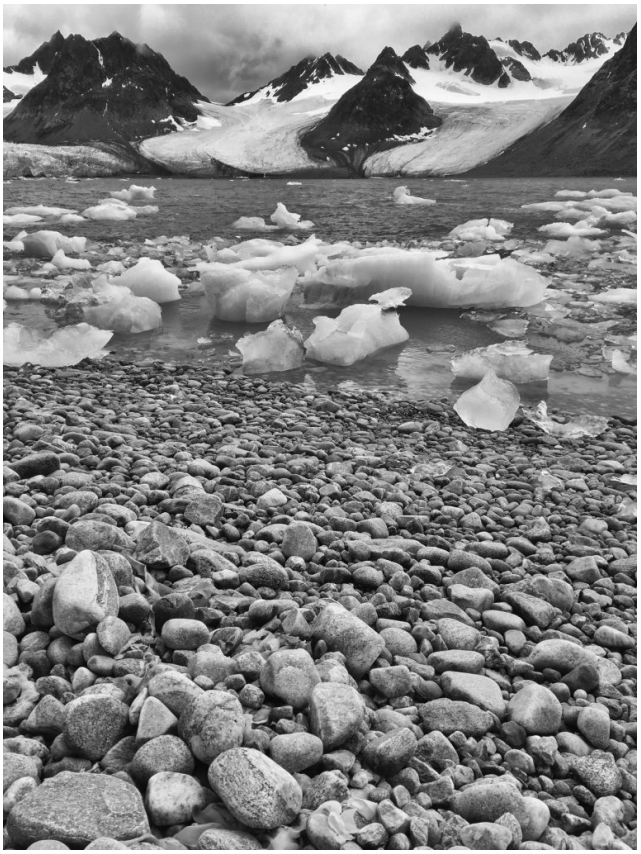
Great Skuas on Akseløya with SV Noorderlicht in the background (Image by Mike Watson)



The impressive bird cliffs at Alkefjellet are probably the most impressive in the whole of the Arctic (Image by Mike Watson)



An Arctic Fox shows an interest in some Pink-footed Geese on the outskirts of Longyearbyen (Image by Mike Watson)



The moody weather in Svalbard can look great in black-and-white - Gullybukta in Magdalenefjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



A Spitsbergen Reindeer grazing on summer grasses (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)



SV Noorderlicht and a photo-bombing kittiwake from the bird cliff of Ossian Sarsfjellet (Image by Mike Watson)



Purple-Sandpiper is Svalbard's commonest breeding shorebird and can even be found in 'gardens' in the small settlements there (Image by Mike Watson)



A gorgeous Polar Campion towers over the forest trees of Polar Willow at Bløstrandhalvøya in Kongsfjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



Rock Ptarmigans are rather uncommon on Svalbard, although when you do find one they are usually very obliging, like this male (Image by Mike Watson)



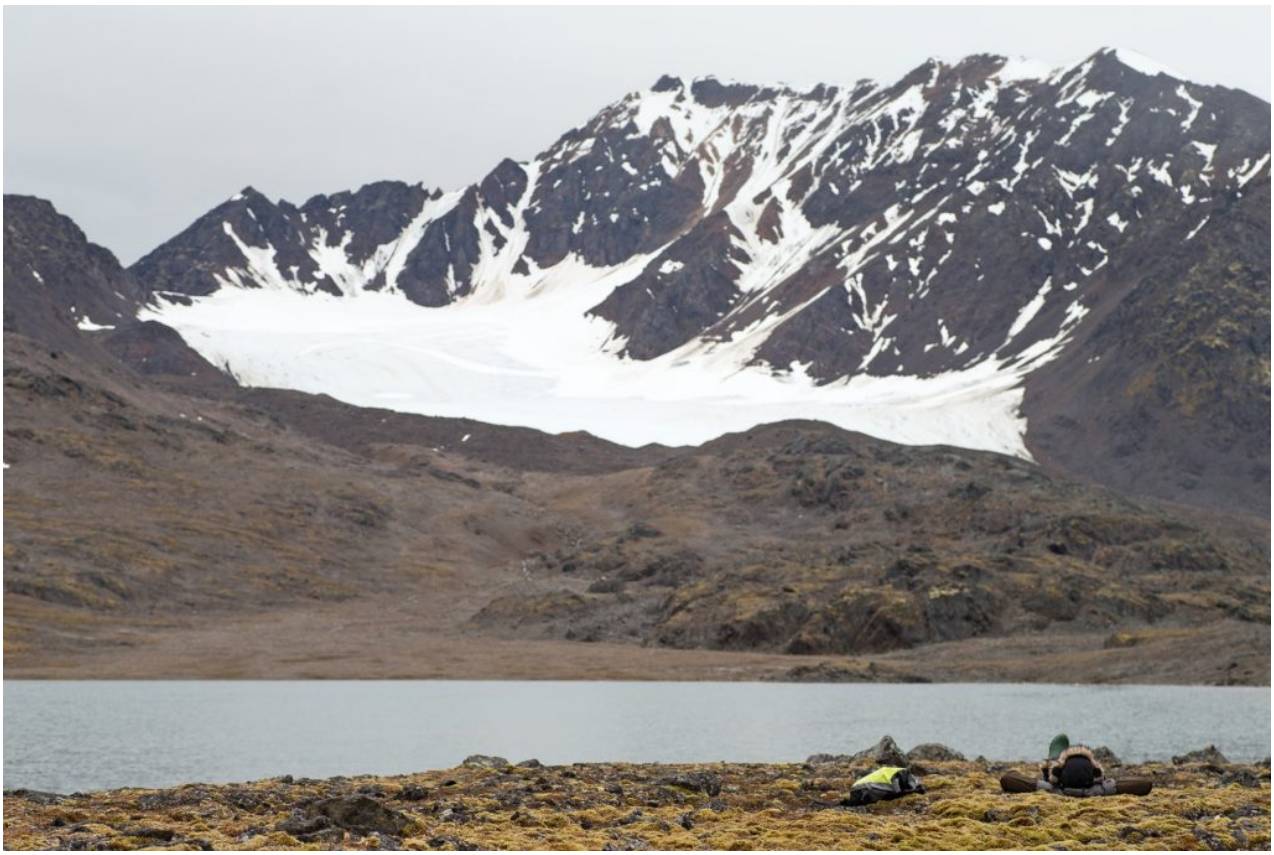
Ice from the calving face of Negribreen is encountered many km before you reach its source (Image by Mike Watson)



Feel the power of mighty Negribreen, countless tons of ice moving towards the sea (Image by Mike Watson)



An ice swan sighting in Spitsbergen (Image by Wild Images guest Johanne Charbonneau)



Karen takes a break at Signehamna in Krossfjorden, site of a secret German WWII weather station (Image by Mike Watson)



Captain Floris serves the traditional shot of Jaegermeister on deck as we reach 80 degrees north (Image by Mike Watson)



Our group hike back across Akseløya's tundra towards SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)



Fiona takes a nap by the wheel of CV Noorderlicht, happily she wasn't supposed to be steering! (Image by Mike Watson)



Our Expedition Leader Arjen Drost (Image by Mike Watson)



A meeting with the Sysselmanen at Gravneset in Magdalenefjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



A pair of Thick-billed Murres on the cliffs of Spitsbergen (Image by Wild Images guest Michel Metayer)



Tim is down with the Arctic flora (Image by Mike Watson)



Thick-billed Murre at Alkefjellet, a flying Arctic penguin! (Image by Mike Watson)