

Svalbard (Spitsbergen): A Polar Wilderness Photography Tour Report 2019

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by Mike Watson

Some of the group have spotted an Arctic Fox at Alkehornet (Image by Mike Watson)

Our 2019 Svalbard (Spitsbergen) cruise aboard the wonderful SV Noorderlicht was another very enjoyable one and addition to our two Polar Bear sightings some great High Arctic photographic opportunities included point blank views of the Svalbard form of Rock Ptarmigan, breeding Ruddy Turnstone, Red Phalarope, Ivory Gull, Long-tailed Jaeger, a visit to the awesome Ingeborgfjellet Little Auk colony, thousands of Thick-billed Murres and, bizarrely, Ruddy Shelducks from goodness knows where. The great whales were back this year with excellent looks at both Blue and Fin Whales and we also saw Belugas and Common Minke Whales. Arctic Foxes and Walruses were probably our best yet and we also had a couple of very nice Bearded Seal encounters. The Arctic flora was simply stunning this time and as well as nice meetings with favourites like Svalbard Poppy, Boreal Jacob's Ladder, Whiplash Saxifrage and Woolly Lousewort we also found the rare Arctic Harebell. We managed to get just north of 80 degrees on the edge of the pack ice and focusing on the northwest of Spitsbergen we also found time to explore some excellent new areas, which we have not visited on previous cruises, like Gipsvika and Skansbukta. We even had time to include a visit to the Russian settlement of Pyramiden, where the eerie abandoned Soviet

era mining town is rapidly becoming a popular tourist destination. It is pretty amazing for Arctic Foxes too and just to the north of Pyramiden we reached our easternmost point on the cruise at the Nordenskjöldbreen. Finally, the weather was the calmest we have seen for at least four years, probably subdued by the proximity of the sea ice although we did not see much sunshine this time.



Group member Colin Macconnachie on SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)

Although the overall extent and thickness of the Arctic sea ice is undoubtedly in decline, it was not obvious this summer in Svalbard. In fact, we experienced conditions very similar to those of July 2017, with solid drift ice at only just over 80 degrees to the north of Spitsbergen and clogging up the Hinlopen Strait to the east. Again, we were not able get all the way around the main island of Spitsbergen (we have managed to do so five times from eight attempts since 2011). This severely impacted our Polar Bear chances in 2019, with only two sightings (of the same bear, around 22km apart), mostly owing to being unable to get far to the north and east but also due to reduced numbers of sightings in the west of Spitsbergen this summer generally. The main fjords in the west no longer freeze in winter, thereby reducing their attractiveness to the bears' favourite prey, seals. At least the bears will have an easier time this summer with so much ice in the north and east, but a huge concern is the fact that there were zero bears born in Kong Karls Land last winter, once home to the world's most dense denning area. I am not sure how long I can continue to say ' *sooner rather than later'* if you want to see a Polar Bear in Svalbard.



A close encounter like this at the famous Mary Ann's Polarrigg with a real one would be Mike's last (Image by Mike Watson)

Faced with the loss of more than 50% of our usual sites including the best bear areas we adapted our plans to make the best of the situation. Happily the northwest quarter of Spitsbergen has by far the most varied landing sites in terms of other fauna and flora in the archipelago so we had plenty to do and some of the landings were my best so far as we get to know this area in more detail as years go by. This year's more restricted itinerary, with less sailing, resulted in longer landings, during which we were able to explore sites more thoroughly. We even had a couple of packed lunch landings, which was a first for us in Svalbard. The flower reserve/bird cliff of Ossian Sarsfjellet in particular benefitted from this approach.



Peek a boo through some driftwood with Christina at London (Image by Mike Watson)

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, far less than some of the massive cruise ships that stop here. A little extra time also allows for a change in the weather and also a chance to catch a couple of the flashier Arctic birds at their best. Female Red Phalaropes and drake King Eiders have mostly left their partners behind by the end of the cruise and the vicinity of Longyearbyen is usually a good place to see them! I enjoyed clocking up more than 38,000 steps in my first 24 hours around Longyearbyen, photographing northern birds like Rock Ptarmigan, Arctic Skua (or Parasitic Jaeger), Purple Sandpiper, Red Phalarope and Snow Bunting, all of which can be found close to, and sometimes, even in the town. Spending a little extra time here is thoroughly recommended.

Longyearbyen to Trygghamna

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 harbor, we headed into town. Longyearbyen is a very charismatic town and apart from coal mining artefacts, 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 and this year was no exception, yet more buildings have sprung up in town since 2018. Our traditional first stop is an area of common ground in the town, where again sadly the gorgeous 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, both in quite good flower. We did manage to see a couple of other good Arctic plants in the form of Purple Saxifrage (the world's northernmost flowering plant)), Polar Campion (or Nodding Lychnis) alongside Arctic White Campion and, again, the uncommon Tundra Chickweed. With even less 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 or the birdwatching hut on the shore but we did manage to visit a nice stand of Boreal Jacob's Ladder overlooking the town. We managed 22 flora species, comfortably above my Svalbard benchmark of 20. Drone enthusiast Wen even managed a quick flight up Adventdalen from the Polar Bear sign, the closest place you can manage this to the town. 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 Mark Kemperman, the latest in a line of talented and resourceful ship's cooks on SV Noorderlicht. Mark also did a superb job, keeping us entertained in the process as he cooked 25 meals, three times a day for 16 days from a tiny galley and storage area.



Our excellent Ship's Cook Mark Kemperman at 80 degrees north (Image by Mike Watson)

We set sail on a lovely clear evening 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 a small number of which had pale tails) and past the first of very many squadrons of Little Auks and Thick-billed Murres (or 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, with buildings now clad in brighter coloured material! We had entered the midnight sun wilderness of Svalbard (although, as is becoming the norm, the sun was missing today and for most of the time this year). We anchored for the night in Trygghamna *('Safe Harbour'),* where there were some Reindeer on land and our first Arctic Fox was taking an interest in some kayaker's gear on the beach.

Trygghamna to Dahlbrebukta

We woke at anchor in pretty Trygghamna and enjoyed the first of many excellent breakfasts of the cruise. The fjord was beautifully calm early on but the weather was changing and a cold northwesterly wind was blowing. This morning we made our first landing at nearby Alkehornet *('Horn of the Auks'),* getting used to our tried and tested zodiac routine. It was a strange feeling returning to the site of my last zodiac landing in Svalbard in 2018, the one with the close Polar Bear encounter on land and happily we did not see one here today. The 'horn of the auks' hummed with the voices of kittiwakes and murres from their ledges far above us as we hiked via a viewpoint on the moraine to the tundra below the famous bird cliff at Alkehornet. Here the lush boggy landscape has been fertilized for thousands of years by seabird guano and always has a good show of flora. It was a bit dry this year but the floral highlight, if you can call it that, was adding Pygmy Buttercup to the list. There were more plants of Polar Campion and several species of saxifrage were also noted. It was still way too early to see Thick-billed Murre chicks jumping today but at least we were spared the usual sad sight of them being eaten by Glaucous Gulls. On another happy note the Reindeer at Alkehornet were crazy tame again and allowed some very close approach including for some nice backlit photos.



Second mate Svinda speeds back to SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)

It was an easy choice this year to sail north first in an attempt to catch up with bears reported in the recent intel we had, although ultimately they were all gone by the time we reached Kongsfjorden. In hindsight we may have seen more bears had we headed south and east, although that would have meant missing a lot of good fauna and flora, if we did manage to find some bears over there! The Hinlopen Strait was still impassable at the end of our cruise and the subsequent voyage on SV Noorderlicht was unable to circumnavigate as well. We cruised up into the Prins Karls Forelandsundet, scanning the shore along the way, as the weather worsened and we finally dropped anchor in Dahlbrebukta, a bay with a large glacier on the west coast of Spitsbergen. Thor Dahl (1862–1920) was a businessman and whaling shipowner from Sandefjord in Norway.

Dahlbrebukta to Engelskbukta

This morning saw a new landing for us on the southern shore of Dahlbrebukta, from where we could hike across some recently deposited moraine to the calving face of the Dahlbreen glacier. Unfortunately, it was raining and very dull today, but it is an ill wind and at least this enhanced the blue colour of the old glacial ice. At the landing site we had a crazily close encounter with an inquisitive Harbour Seal that appeared to want to get out of the water to check us out allowing some great photo opportunities. They are exploding all along the west coast as the winter weather becomes milder. Just after we had started hiking, sharp-eyed Steve Webb spotted an adult drake King Eider among the Common Eider flock and we also saw a nice drake Long-tailed Duck here. Flora was very limited on the moraine with only the first colonists present, nice Purple and Tufted Saxifrages and some Whitlow-grass. Nearing the glacier face we spotted a couple of large Bearded Seals hauled out on ice flows, gently bobbing on the waves created from time to time by calving blocks of ice, of which there were many. They offered some good animal in the landscape images along with the details of the glacier itself.



Nian photographing the Dahlbreen glacier (Image by Mike Watson)

We spent the next few hours cruising north to Sarstangen, our favourite Walrus haul-out. This is mostly because relatively few boats can visit it and therefore the animals do not come under the same pressure from visitors as places like Poolepynten, which is more accessible from Longyearbyen. It is also more photogenic. Michael Sars (1805-69) was a Norwegian zoologist and Professor at the University of Oslo and Jonas Poole was an English whaler, who visited Svalbard repeatedly in the early 17th century. As is usually the case, there was not much happening on the sea during this voyage, although we did tally four Great Skuas. Nearing Sarstangen we were happy to see that there were some Walruses present, so it was very much 'game on'! However, before we had even landed there was a cry of 'Beluga' as a pod of at least seven of these peculiar white whales swam right past Noorderlicht and then the first outbound zodiac, much to the delight of those on board. Fantastic stuff! Departing from our usual routine we landed on the west tip of the point, which afforded a different background and the chance to get much closer than usual to the birds that rest there, Great Skuas in particular. The Walruses were simply magnificent, and we saw up to around 20 coming and going from the haul-out. Some of the younger males came right up to the water's edge to check us out too thrilling our group with their snorting and belching only a few metres away. Lots of photos were taken here! There was even a female this time, which arrived with a couple of males and climbed into the pile on the beach. She did not stay for too long though, either unimpressed or uninterested. After this awesome encounter, probably my best so far, we continued north to Engelskbukta for the night. At the northern end of the sound, at the current shear we encountered a large flock of feeding seabirds that included kittiwakes, fulmars and auks. Also here were at least four Common Minke Whales, which put on a great show surfacing very close to SV Noorderlicht numerous times. A wonderful end to a great day in the Arctic.



Wen is happy to photograph a pile of walruses! (Image by Mike Watson)

Engelskbukta to Magdalenefjorden

This morning saw another new landing site for us at Engelskbukta ('English Bay'), the site of a former whaling station. Strange we never landed or anchored there before but then again we have always had a Dutch Expedition Leader previously and this was our first time with Englishman Phil Wickens in charge. We hiked across some fairly recently uncovered moraine above the beach, checking the flora as we went and seeing a few interesting birds. New flora included Fringed Sandwort, Purplish Braya (our first in Svalbard as far as I know) and Net-leaved Willow (overlooked and identified from photos later!). There were also some lovely Polar Campions nodding just above the beach here. Birds included a pair of Long-tailed Ducks on a small lake and a Parasitic Jaeger. However, the real highlight was some quite fresh bear tracks in the mud above the beach. Level one on the Polar Bear search scale.

In the afternoon we cruised north to anchor again in the shelter of Gravneset in Magdalenefjorden, passing more minke whales, the 'seven glaciers' of Albert I Land and a Walrus and some Harbour Seals as we entered the fjord. While the weather was still nice, we made a short glacier cruise at the fast retreating calving face of the Waggonwaybreen. Magdalenefjorden was named after the biblical character Mary Magdalene and Gravneset 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. It must have been daunting to arrive here as a young whaler and pass the graves of your predecessors. 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.



Wild Images tour participant Andreas Jarl at Ossian Sarsfjellet (Image by Mike Watson)

Magdalenefjorden to Holmiabukta

We made a very enjoyable landing in the morning at Gravneset, walking past the site of the whalers' graves and a short way towards Gullybukta *('Narrow Bay'),* although the weather was very overcast. Some Barnacle Geese were on the beach along with some Common Eiders, the Parasitic Jaegers were again nesting high on the beach (both pale morph birds this time though, last year this was a dark morph/pale morph pairing) and there were a few very showy Arctic Terns at one point chasing a rather shy Arctic Fox (I guess they have been hunted along this coast for a long time). Another laughing Little Auk colony was high on the cliffs above us and a couple of Snow Buntings were gathering food. A large male Walrus was in the fjord – we have seen them hauled out in Gullybukta in the past. The flora took a little more time to check and eventually I spotted the desired Highland Saxifrage right back where I started, growing deep in sheltered recesses between the rather exposed granite boulders. It was still very overcast but now the wind had now swung round to the south as we cruised out of Magdalenefjorden and north into Fair Haven, scouring the coastline of Danskøya *('Danish Island')* and Amsterdamøya *('Amsterdam Island*', both named after the nationalities of their whaling communities) as we passed, happy bear hunting grounds for us in the past but no luck this time. There had been bears here less than a week previously, but they had presumably left with the sea ice, which had now gone north. It had not gone too far though, we passed MV Origo heading in the opposite direction, having been thwarted by ice and unable to get to Liefdefjorden, which is where we were hoping to go.



Colin at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)

The afternoon saw a landing at one of our favourite spots, lovely Sallyhamna. Instead of hiking up to the glacial lake we headed east, after we had taken a look at the whaling artefacts, like the stunning whaler's grave, the best I've seen in Svalbard and the blubber ovens. Flora was very sparse here, the sea ice only just having cleared a week or two before, but we did see Mountain Sorrel, Purple, Tufted and Highland Saxifrages. That was it though, just four species. There were at least four Parasitic Jaegers around, chasing kittiwakes and the cliffs inland of the small bay were inhabited by a few Glaucous Gulls, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Black Guillemots, Atlantic Puffins and fulmars. A couple of Red-throated Loons were flying around calling and Arctic Terns were nesting on offshore islets. The continuing

absence of the usually common Purple Sandpiper was very odd, maybe owing to the late retreat of the ice from the northwest corner? We spent some quiet time listening to the running water under the snow and admired the truly stunning granite boulders and pebbles of the northwest coast. These emanated from the sharp-edged volcanic mountains that gave Spitsbergen its name. We were only a few minutes away from our anchorage for the night, Holmiabukta, one of our favourites in a southwesterly wind. The bay below the impressive glacier face was still as we called it a day. Sallyhamna is named after Sally Konstanse Kraemer (1902–87) from Tromsø, the wife of trapper Waldemar Kraemer. She wintered in his hut but after his death she remarried and took the name Jenssen. Holmiabukta is named after the latin for Stockholm.



Christina clears up some of the hazardous plastic rubbish that finds its way onto Svalbard's beaches (Image by Mike Watson)

Holmiabukta to Hamiltonbukta (via pack ice and 80 degrees north)

The failure of MV Origo to get into Liefdefjorden was a sign of how dense the ice was to the east of us but we decided that we could probably at least get to 80 degrees north and see the edge of the pack ice too, which in itself is an experience not to be missed. So, we set off in the rain and mist and hoped for the best. Thankfully as soon as we cleared the mountains that surround Fair Haven the weather improved and was actually quite nice. We continued heading eastwards, slowly approaching the magic 80 degrees latitude. Before we got there first mate Jonathan spotted some whales up ahead. Once they were below the distorting effect of the horizon, we could see that they were great baleen whales with very powerful blows. At least one of them looked to be a classic Blue Whale, with a very long, pale blue-green, marbled back and a tiny little hooked dorsal fin. It was diving and showed a massively thick tail too. Wow! There were some other whales, with which it appeared to be associating that appeared to be Fin Whales with classic features, although maybe one of them had a very slight mottled effect on its back. Hybrids between the two are not unknown so maybe? There were also a couple of minke whales around in the same area as the great whales, but these typically only offered the briefest of surfacings. Leaving the whales behind we could soon see a line of white on the horizon, the start of the sea ice. Its front edge was very open, and we could enter and cruise between some of the large broken floes for a while, but it soon became more dense and with an easterly wind forecast we retreated. It is not a good idea to get stuck indefinitely in one of the northern fjords if the ice returns, as it can do quickly. Unfortunately, we didn't quite make it to Moffen Island, one of Svalbard's few breeding sites for Sabine's Gull and apart from a couple of brief Ringed Seals and the now familiar ubiquitous seabirds there was nothing else of note along the ice edge.



Phil at Pyramiden jetty (Image by Mike Watson)

In the evening we reached Raudfjorden *('Red Fjord')* and made a landing on the Hamiltonøyane *('Hamilton Islands').* This was kept to a bare minimum to avoid disturbing the many nesting terns here, in fact we only just managed to step on a few rocks ashore. The first zodiac saw a female Red Phalarope, but this quickly disappeared around the shore and out of sight but the Arctic Terns kept our photographers occupied. Only one plant species was recorded here, Highland Saxifrage and the crew, with some help from Mick, did a great job in retrieving a massive green cargo net from the water here, which had thankfully not trapped anything yet. Hamiltonbukta is named after Count Hugo Vilhelm Hamilton (1859–1919), a Swedish naval officer.

Hamiltonbukta to Signehamna

After spending the night in the sheltered anchorage of Hamiltonbukta it was time for us to press on again. If there are white horses inside Hamiltonbukta then we could forget our planned landing on the exposed boulder beach of Fuglesongen, so we continued sailing down the northwest corner of Spitsbergen to one of our favourite fjords, the wonderful Kongsfjorden. There was a now a long-range forecast for southwesterlies to persist for the days ahead so we did not want to make a long sea journey in the worst of the weather. It would be

better to race to Kongsfjorden and do some landings in its relative shelter. Welded to the deck and scanning for bears I was getting rather worried about their non-appearance in areas where we knew they had been seen recently. It was a small consolation that all other boats we passed were failing to find them up here as well. We made good progress southwards, finally reaching Krossfjorden, a side fjord of Kongsfjorden, in the late afternoon. We paused at the entrance to pretty Fiortende Julibukta, fitting on 14 July, much to our French representative, Daniel's delight. *'Will there be any fireworks he asked?'.* Again, we scoured the coastline of Krossfjorden with telescopes in the hope of a bear but no luck except for a Bearded Seal spotted by Steve. There had been a bear in this area only just over a week or so earlier. Eventually, after an entire day spent sailing, we dropped anchor in Signehamna, the site of a secret WWII German weather station.



Inger Marie photographing the Bomstrandbreen in Kongsfjorden. Twenty years it used to reach the island in the background, Blomstrandhalvøya (Image by Mike Watson)

Signehamna to Blomstrandbreen

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 it was discovered by a Norwegian boat 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. We started our hike this morning at the lovely viewpoint of Gunnarpynten, which overlooks the fjord towards the massive Lilliehöökbreen, 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. The rocky tundra was strongly-patterned 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 (at last in reasonable numbers, including one off a nest with four eggs) 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. We followed up the hike with a cruise of the massive Lilliehöökbreen glacier face, seeing lots of kittiwakes and Parasitic Jaegers as well as a brief Ivory Gull for Mike only. In the evening we reached Blomstrandbreen and were shocked to find this glacier is now well anchored to the shore in places. We did witness the most spectacular calvings of the tour here, noticeable features disappearing within hours of our arrival but it does not have long to go until these will only be sporadic events and the face will become of much less interest to the gulls and fulmars that feed here.

We even had time to make a late evening landing here, hiking up the moraine on the eastern edge of the glacier to overlook it. This was another fine sight but also included a point-blank encounter with the heavyweight Svalbard form of Rock Ptarmigan. We saw a pair in fact, almost at our feet at times. Flora was very nice here with Yellow Mountain Saxifrage new and there was a lovely show of Mountain Avens with a few plants of Polar Campion here and there. As we returned to SV Noorderlicht a fine Long-tailed Jaeger flew over the zodiac. Magic!



Colin in the pack ice (Image by Mike Watson)

Blomstrandbreen to Ny Ålesund

Watching from deck in the early morning we enjoyed sightings of Long-tailed Jaeger chasing Arctic Terns as well as the (or another) Ivory Gull along the glacier face of Blomstrandbreen. We sailed after breakfast towards the flower reserve/bird cliff of Ossian Sarsfjellet, passing a nice Bearded Seal hauled out on an ice floe along the way. As always, once at Ossian, an Arctic Fox ran along the bird cliff 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 the rare Arctic Harebell (known only from 12 locations in Svalbard), Woolly Lousewort, Lobed Buttercup, Alpine Arnica, Arctic Chickweed, Polar Dandelion and Dwarf Golden Saxifrage (it is so easy to overlook this minute plant). A total of 27 species was by far our best tally of flora on the cruise. A few of us 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 close Reindeer delighted us and a Long-tailed Jaeger landed on a nearby hill top – we keep seeing them here so they must be breeding nearby? However, the star of the show today was the lovely little Arctic Fox that was so tame and unconcerned by our presence. Phil almost trod on it when he first found it asleep along the cliff top and we were all able to watch it for as long as we wanted. 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, which even included a meeting with the Sysselmannen (the governor's police officers this time). Georg Ossian Sars (1837- 1927!) was a Norwegian zoologist who made several expeditions to Svalbard in the late 19th century. Cruising back towards Ny Ålesund we passed through the ice of the Kronebreen where, again, we spotted a couple of Bearded Seals, one of which stayed put on an ice floe as Svinda guided the Noorderlicht right past it. So close and one of my best sightings in nice light too. Fab-u-lous!

In late 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. We moored here overnight next to the smart SV Antigua and made a tour of this small 'town', which included a visit to Amundsen's 1926 airship launch pylon. The gift shop also opened briefly for us, 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 undoubtedly the magnificent Ivory Gull that was seen several times around the harbor and the town, including on the deck for a lucky couple of observers. There were a few Barnacle Geese with goslings in tow as usual. A couple of flocks of King Eiders flew past the jetty also as usual. Sadly, we dipped on the Polar Cress, which previously grew in the same cage near the oil depot. It was not flowering this time. Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage near the Amundsen pylon was the only one of the tour though.



Phil gets down with a Ruddy Turnstone chick (Image by Mike Watson)

Kongsfjorden to Prins Karls Foreland

Before we had set sail, hardcore lister Steve Webb had nipped back to the lake by the pub/train where he amazingly found a flock of five Ruddy Shelducks! 'I don't think this one is on your list' he said. Wherever they came from it was an incredible surprise and is it really crazy to think they might have flown up one of the big Russian rivers to the Arctic? It is almost as far to Svalbard if they just flew north from say a feral population in western Europe. They even took flight just as we were leaving the quay and gave everyone a quick look as they headed north and out of sight. We later discovered that a flock of seven were seen at Longyearbyen on 12 July, but this flock was apparently still there at the end of our cruise on 22 July!

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 artefacts 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 a pair of Long-tailed Jaegers that have bred here for many years

and again put on a great show for us, allowing some close approach while resting on the hillside overlooking 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. 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 three pairs of Red-throated Loons on the small lakes above London. We also saw a couple of female Long-tailed Ducks here and a male red Phalarope, feeding under a frozen snow drift. However, best of all for me were the Ruddy Turnstones that were breeding here. There were at least two pairs with some still fluffy and ultra-tame juveniles, the males standing on prominent rocks calling. They also saw off an Arctic Fox that chanced by, fitted with a transmitter collar. I've not seen them with young before. Flora included nice shows of Drooping Saxifrage growing out of the abandoned machinery, Yellow Mountain Saxifrage and more Polar Campion. Phil also found some of the tiny Sea Sandwort in the stream bed above the huts. This plant grows in small cushions and has green flowers that masquerade as a non-flowering cushion of the likes of a saxifrage.



There is always a freshly brewed coffee on SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)

The afternoon was spent cruising south down the Forelandsundet. We had some intel that there had been two bears seen on a dead whale at Fuglehuken on the north tip of Prins Karls Foreland some days previously but that they had not been seen since the whale had been washed back out to sea. Well they must still be on the 80+km long island somewhere, so we kept a close eye on the shore, passing a large landing party bound for Sarstangen on the way. One of the beauties of SV Noordelicht is that she only has 3.2m of hull and keel under the waterline so we can sail all the way down the sundet without the need for a huge there and back detour, which most other boats do not bother with. As we crossed the sand bar at Sarstangen we had only 2.1m of water under the keel! We had planned to anchor overnight at Selvågen, about halfway down the east coast of Prins Karls Foreland but as we neared the entrance, there in the distance was a tiny mayonnaise-coloured dot in the scope that eventually moved and as the haze reduced as we got closer it revealed a head shape attached to it. Polar Bear! At last! Ten days in is a rather unprecedented time for us to find one, we have often seen our first early on day two! So, it was a huge relief that I would not have to return and explain how I was the first person to miss one at Birdquest. I might have opted to jump ship and stay in Svalbard rather than face that ignominy. Anyway, it walked out of sight heading south so we cancelled our anchorage plan and continued, finding it again just south of Dawespynten from where it walked steadily south to Kenmore. We could now see it was a female and bore a small grey neck collar. It was obviously being studied by someone, but I am told that it is some years since this type of collar was used so she must be quite an old bear. She went to sleep on the shore where we were now anchored, and we all went to bed rather relieved this evening.

Kenmore to Akseløya

I got up in the night to check on the bear at 1am and it was already gone out of sight. It had still been there at 10.30 pm so it had probably not gone far away? Wrong. We sailed south after breakfast towards the Walrus haul-out of Poolepynten and still no sign of it. However, just as we prepared for our landing the bear was spotted to the south of us towards Tistelodden. It had walked over 22km to get here! They can wander massive distances quite quickly. It was decided that a landing would be too risky even at this range bearing in mind how briskly they can walk so we cruised over towards it instead through the rather shallow water, getting some nicer views than the previous evening. When you see them at any kind of close range it is obvious how massive they really are! We left the walrus behind and cruised south, across the entrance to Isfjorden but unfortunately the southwest wind had now picked up and the sea was far too choppy to spot distant whales. The rest of the day was spent far out to sea from the shore, with a moderate ocean swell and many folks retired to their cabins. As we entered Bellsund, we were surrounded by swarms of thousands of seabirds feeding at the meeting of the currents and it was obvious that the surf on the shore at the Ingeborgfjellet Little Auk colony was far too big for a landing so we called it a day and went to our bunks, anchored in the sheltered lee of Akseløya. The 8km long by 1km-wide island was named after the schooner 'Aksel Thordsen' of Tromsø, chartered by A. E. Nordeskiöld's 1864 expedition.



Wild Images participant Wen Chen at the awesome Blomstrandbreen glacier (Image by Mike Watson)

Bellsund

Another 'best of Bellsund' day started with a morning landing on Akseløya. We landed as usual on the northeastern shore and walked up across the island, seeing numerous Purple Sandpipers along the way. A few Red Phalaropes were along the seaweed shore and Great Skuas (2 pairs) and Parasitic Jaegers (3 pairs) were active on the tundra, which was noticeably drier than usual. The jaegers were particularly aggressive towards the skuas, they must have a youngster nearby we thought. A stag Reindeer was silhouetted nicely against a mountain backdrop and a pair of Red-throated Loons was also in the area of small pools below the rocky spine of the island, one of them on a nest. 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. Happily, they were in flower, gorgeous little yellow trumpets supported by weird tent-rope-like stolons. Otherwise flora on the island is rather limited. Also here was a Harbour Seal showing some interest in the zodiacs on our return. 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.



Andreas has spotted something on the zodiac ride (Image by Mike Watson)

In the early afternoon we seized our chance during a break in the weather to make a landing at Ingeborgfjellet, Bellsund's famous Little Auk colony. 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. After leaving Ingeborgfjellet, we waved goodbye to pretty Bellsund and sailed north back to Isfjorden, while the weather was still fair. We still got bashed repeatedly by the southwest swell before we rounded Lågneset *('Low Ness')* and many folks again retreated to their cabins. However, overall the weather this year was the best I have seen since 2016, with nothing above force 5. We still like to avoid ploughing into any kind of headwind though. We anchored around midnight at Ymerbukta, the other sheltered anchorage on the northern shore of Isfjorden. 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.

Ymerbukta to Gipsvika

This morning's rather damp landing took place at the head of Ymerbukta but only after we had finished watching a flock of up to 17 King Eiders, which eventually made their way out of the bay. This included a few adult drakes still in good breeding plumage. The walk itself was very enjoyable slowly gaining height to a nice viewpoint over the glacier face, while admiring the pioneer colonizing flora on the recently uncovered moraine that included four saxifrage species and some Polar Scurvygrass, which was probably under-recorded this year. High up on the moraine Snow Buntings were singing and we flushed a Purple Sandpiper off its nest again, this one also had four greenish eggs. We followed its distraction display quickly so it could return to the nest.

We spent the afternoon cruising deep into Isfjorden, something, which we have not done before. There had been some bear sightings here and we figured that getting as close as we could to the ice out east was a good idea. The inner reaches of Isfjorden would be the furthest east we got on this cruise by far. It also offered the opportunity to make some very interesting landings. The first of these was at

Gipsvika, which has the best examples of raised beaches that I've seen, stretching for several kilometres inland up Gipsdalen. We explored the first few beaches beyond the hut, seeing some interesting birds including Pink-footed Goose, Red-throated Loon, Common Ringed Plover, Purple Sandpiper and Great Skua. The flora here was very nice but did not have anything new but there was some nice Yellow Bog Saxifrage and Polar Campion in particular. The highlight of the landing was probably the tame Reindeer that trotted over to meet us and later returned with a friend! Our return zodiac ride was by far the most adventurous on this cruise but unfortunately not everyone bothered to check how the first shuttle went, so they got wet. Gipsvika is named after its gypsum mineral deposits and overlooking it the impressive Templet has a rock glacier at its base, Phil explained this is a geological feature unique to Svalbard. A tractor that lies rusting by the old hut was used to carry equipment used in coal exploration deep into Gipsdalen.



Phil Wickens in the school building at Pyramiden, deserted as recently a 1998! (Image by Mike Watson)

Gipsvika to Pyramiden

The inner reaches of Isfjorden have always seemed a little tame to me. I have been keen to get out north and east to where I thought the action was. However, take a quick look at the map and you can see how close it is to Olav V Land, the huge ice cap that extends east to Negribreen on the east coast of Spitsbergen. It was noticeably colder as we approached the Nordenskjöldbreen glacier face this morning and there were hundreds of gulls, mostly kittiwakes, feeding in Adolfbukta, the bay it flows into. We added two new birds here, the first since 17 july, in the form of Sabine's Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gull. However, the biggest excitement was reserved for the Ivory Gulls, of which there were at least six patrolling the glacier face and one even came right over to check out SV Noorderlicht, amidst a whirr of camera shutters! This glacier is also now quite anchored, and will no doubt recede like the rest of them shortly but in the meantime there seems to be much for the gulls to feed on here.



Phil and Mick check out this Russian UAZ 452 at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)

Then came one of the highlights of the tour for many, our visit to the abandoned Russian settlement of Pyramiden (after the nearby mountain of the same name). The rickety old wooden jetty gave an idea of what was to come, a ramshackle decaying Arctic town, much of which is being allowed to lie where it falls. Pyramiden and its coal rights were bought in 1926 by Russia but it was not until after WWII that it flourished as a coal mining community. By 1989 there were 715 men, 228 women and 71 children living there. However, it was abandoned in 1998 owing to poor coal reserves and quickly fell into disrepair. We were picked up in a rather smart Russian bus and transferred to the hotel, which acts as the hub for the tourist activities, which are obviously growing in popularity. Phil remembers only a couple of people living here not so long ago but there are now 30, employed as guides and hotel workers. There is a large kittiwake colony here nesting on the old workers' accommodation building, occupying every window ledge. The settlement is a fascinating step back in time to the Soviet era and we were lucky to be allowed inside five buildings: the canteen, Yuri Gagarin Sports Centre, Swimming Pool, Cinema and the school. Most are now in an arrested state of decay, minus much of their furniture and some have been tidied up a bit unfortunately, presumably to make them a little safer. I particularly liked the canteen and its awesome polar scene mural in the main dining hall. It struck me that whereas I am usually amazed at how much older than expected other artefacts are in Svalbard, I was equally stunned to learn how comparatively new the derelict Russian buildings are, thanks to a combination of shoddy Soviet era workmanship and the harsh winter environment. It was not just the old buildings that were of interest, a pair of Long-tailed Jaegers flew over the jetty. Pyramiden is known an excellent place to see Arctic Foxes and we managed four, including two dark morphs (or *'Blue Foxes'*). Those up by the mine workings, taking numerous bits of kittiwake presumably to stash for the winter and the one that walked up to us by the jetty were awesome. The flora was good too, with Woolly Lousewort common (although now over) and of thistle proportions! Polar Dandelion and Arctic White Campion was growing everywhere among the buildings and Yellow Mountain Saxifrage was even growing in coal deposits. A few of us had an evening in the bar of the restaurant sampling some nice Russian beer before hiking back to the Noorderlicht

and the 21st century.

Pyramiden to Longyearbyen

This morning we left dreary Pyramiden behind and made a very nice landing at Skansbukta, the site of a gypsum mine. As we entered the bay a second calendar year King Eider swam by, three Great Black-backed Gulls were on the shore opposite and Steve counted more than 30 Purple Sandpipers. Soon after landing we found another Ruddy Shelduck, feeding the small runnels in the boggy area above the beach! What is going on up here we wondered? After it allowed some close approach for photos, we left it where it was, and wandered off to look for flowers. Polar Cress and some gorgeous Boreal Jacob's Ladder were growing near the entrance to the gypsum mine. We also found Dwarf Golden Saxifrage, Tundra Chickweed and Net-leaved Willow growing on this 23 species landing. The grand finale to our final zodiac landing was still to come, a visit to the colony of cliff nesting puffins at Kapp Fleur de Lys, where although most were a little out of reach up on their ledges a few of the crazy puffins appeared to try to land on our heads? Skansbukta means *'Redoubt Bay'* and in 1918 and 1930 the Dalen Portland Cement Works tried to extract gypsum here, however, the deposits were of anhydrite, not gypsum and therefore worthless. We spent the last afternoon cruising slowly back to port in Longyearbyen where our journey came to an end.

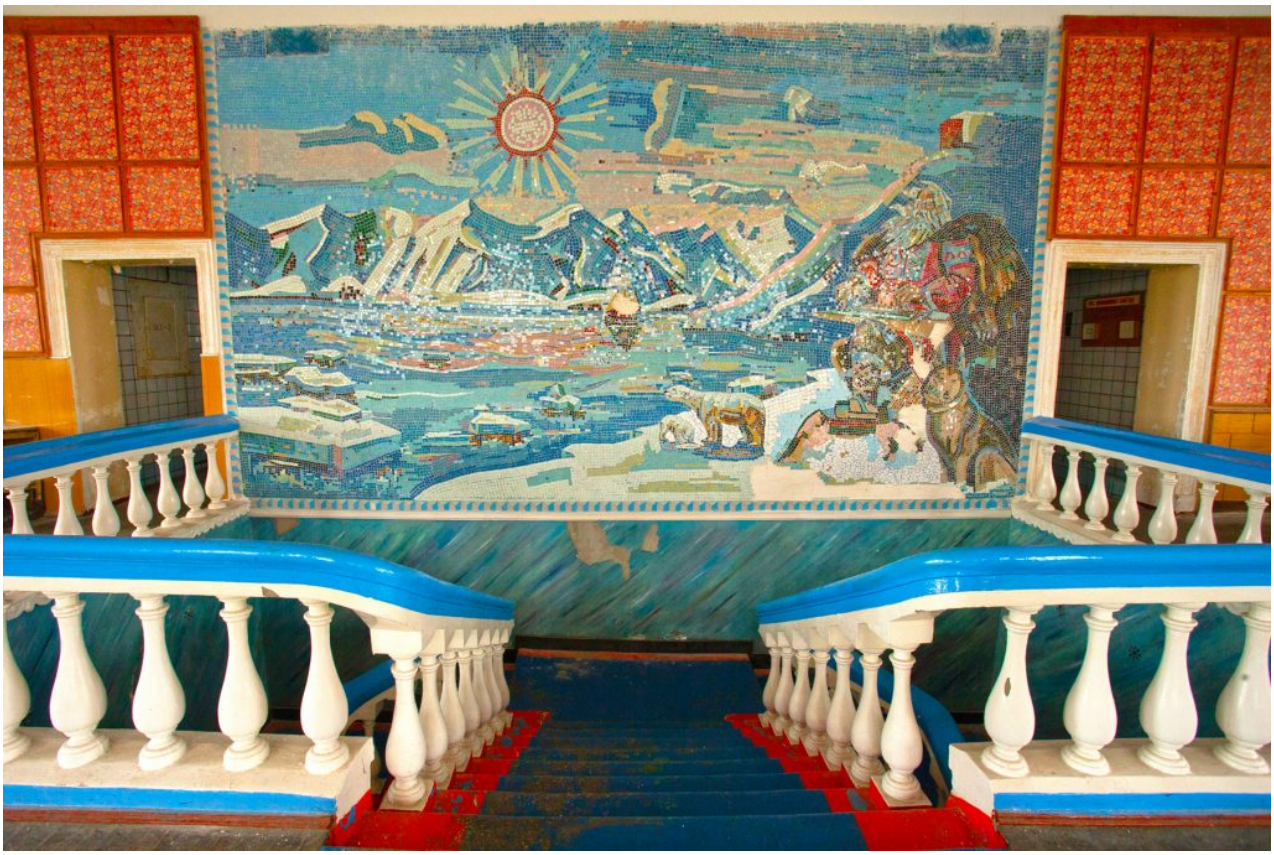


Phil leads part of the group at Ossian Sarsfjellet (Image by Mike Watson)

Finally thanks to everyone who made this tour a success, our excellent and very enthusiastic group as well as the crew of SV Noorderlicht, Captain Floris Spikermann Immink, First Mate Jonathan, Second Mate Svinda, Ship's Cook Mark Kemperman and our expedition leader Phil Wickens, without whose knowledge and expertise in Svalbard we would certainly not have seen as much as we did. We'll be back again in 2020.



A dark morph Arctic Fox (or 'Blue Fox') that helped itself to kittiwakes at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



An awesome Arctic scenes mural in the workers' canteen at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



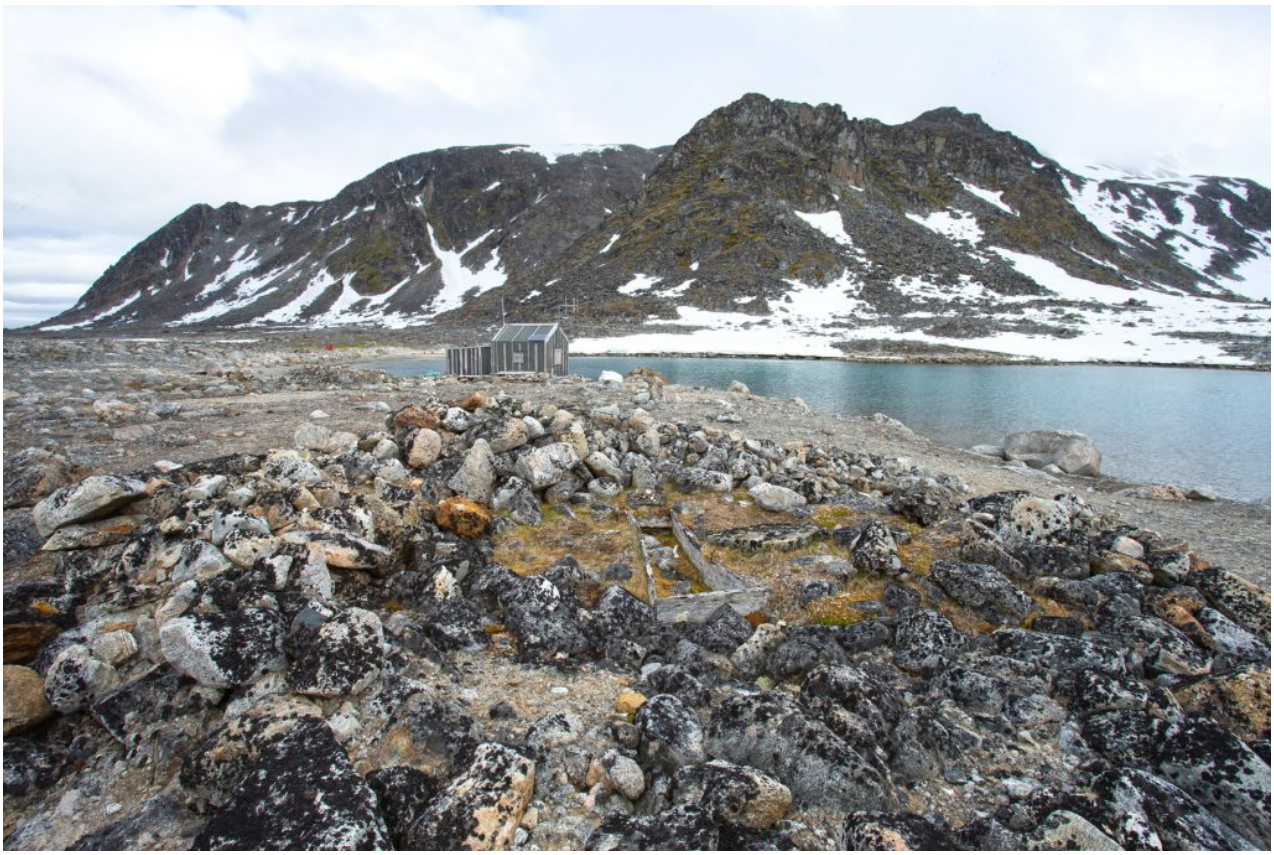
The entrance to the workers' canteen at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



The uncommon Woolly Lousewort can be seen easily at Ossian Sarsfjellet (Image by Mike Watson)



Whitlow-grass (Image by Mike Watson)



One of the best-preserved and accessible whaler's graves, Sallyhamna (Image by Mike Watson)



A cock Svalbard Rock Ptarmigan in Kongsfjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



Blue skies at Trygghamna ('Safe Harbour')! We did not see many of these (Image by Mike Watson)



Walruses frolicking in front of SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)



A curious young male Walrus at Sarstangen, approaching us on its terms only a few metres away! (Image by Mike Watson)



Male walruses hauled out at Sarstangen in western Spitsbergen (Image by Mike Watson)



– The lovely lines of SV Noorderlicht have graced the fjords of Svalbard for over 30 years (Image by Mike Watson)



Spider Plants or Whiplash Saxifrages at Akseløya, an uncommon High Arctic plant (Mike Watson)



The lord of the flies, a male Snow Bunting (Image by Mike Watson)



A male Ruddy turnstone stands guard at London (Image by Mike Watson)



It was a delight to see Ruddy Turnstones breeding this year (Image by Mike Watson)



A Ruddy Turnstone chick among the Arctic flora at London (Image by Mike Watson)



This Ruddy Shelduck was one of six that we found in Svalbard (Image by Mike Watson)



Purple Saxifrage is the world's most northerly flowering plant and is one of the first colonists of newly uncovered moraine (Image by Mike Watson)



The abandoned mining settlement of Pyramiden in the upper reaches of Isfjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



A view up Pyramiden's mine shaft railway (Image by Mike Watson)



Arctic Cottongrass growing on wasteland at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



A lovely female Red Phalarope (Image by Mike Watson)



A female Red Phalarope shows its half webbed toes (Image by Mike Watson)



This tame Reindeer trotted right up to us at Gipsvika (Image by Mike Watson)



Backlit and under-exposed Reindeer at Alkehornet (Image by Mike Watson)



A Purple Sandpiper at Akseløya (Image by Mike Watson)



Polar Campion looks like a gorgeous little Chinese lantern (Image by Mike Watson)



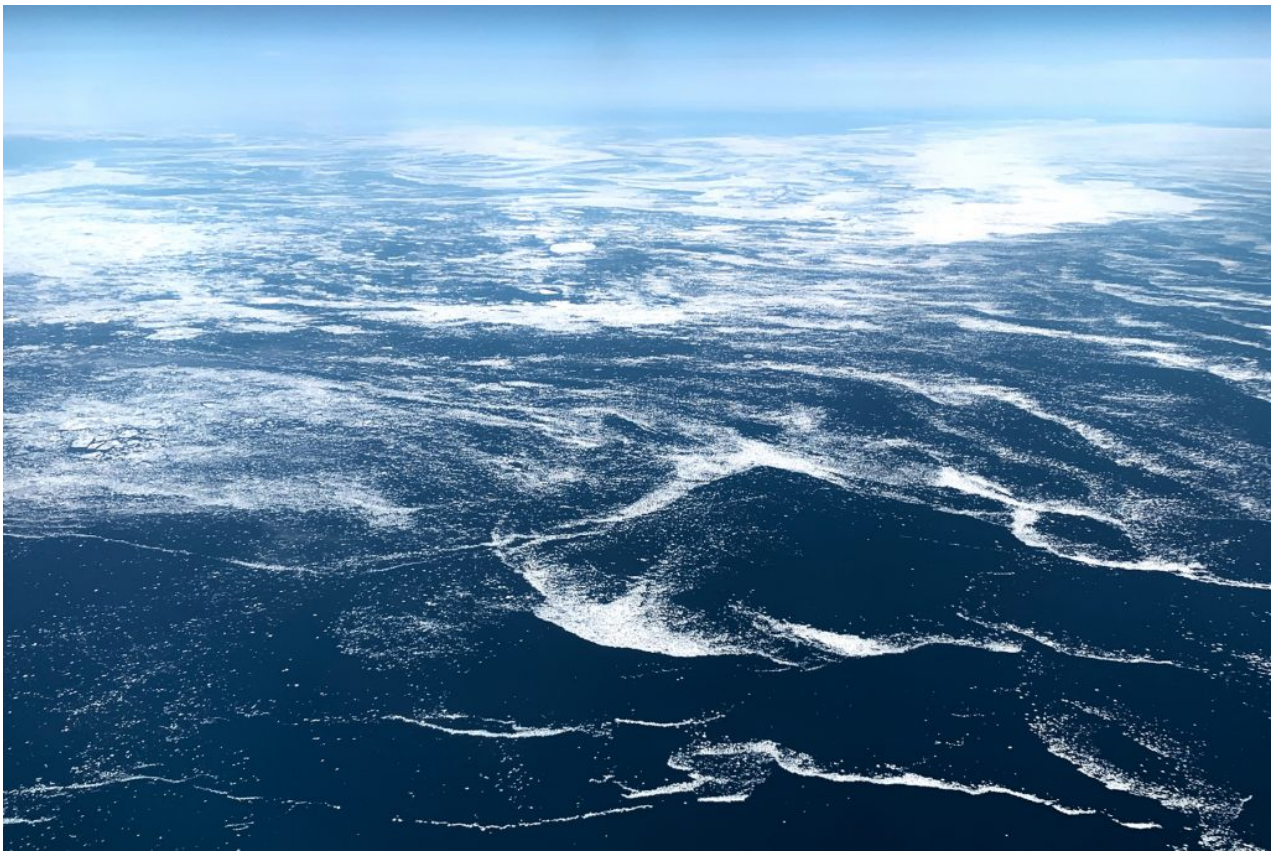
Polar Bear Tracks at Engelskbukta (Image by Mike Watson)



Polar Bear at Tistelodden (Image by Mike Watson)



A Northern Fulmar through the rigging of SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)



Pack Ice stretches across the entrance to Storfjorden south of Edgeøya (Image by Mike Watson)



Parasitic Jaegers breed in town in Longyearbyen (Image by Mike Watson)



A Long-tailed Jaeger rests on the tundra at London (Image by Mike Watson)



A drake Long-tailed Duck flies past SV Noorderlicht (Image by Mike Watson)



Little Auks at their amazing Ingeborgfjellet colony in Bellsund (Image by Mike Watson)



Little Auks are better suited to life at sea and they struggle a bit on land (Image by Mike Watson)



Catching the fast flying Little Auk in flight can be quite tricky! (Mike Watson)



Lenin overlooks the abandoned Russian mining settlement at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



Lenin outside the Yuri Gagarin Sports Centre (Image by Mike Watson)



Kittiwakes have taken over this playground in Pyramiden, disused since 1998 (Image by Mike Watson)



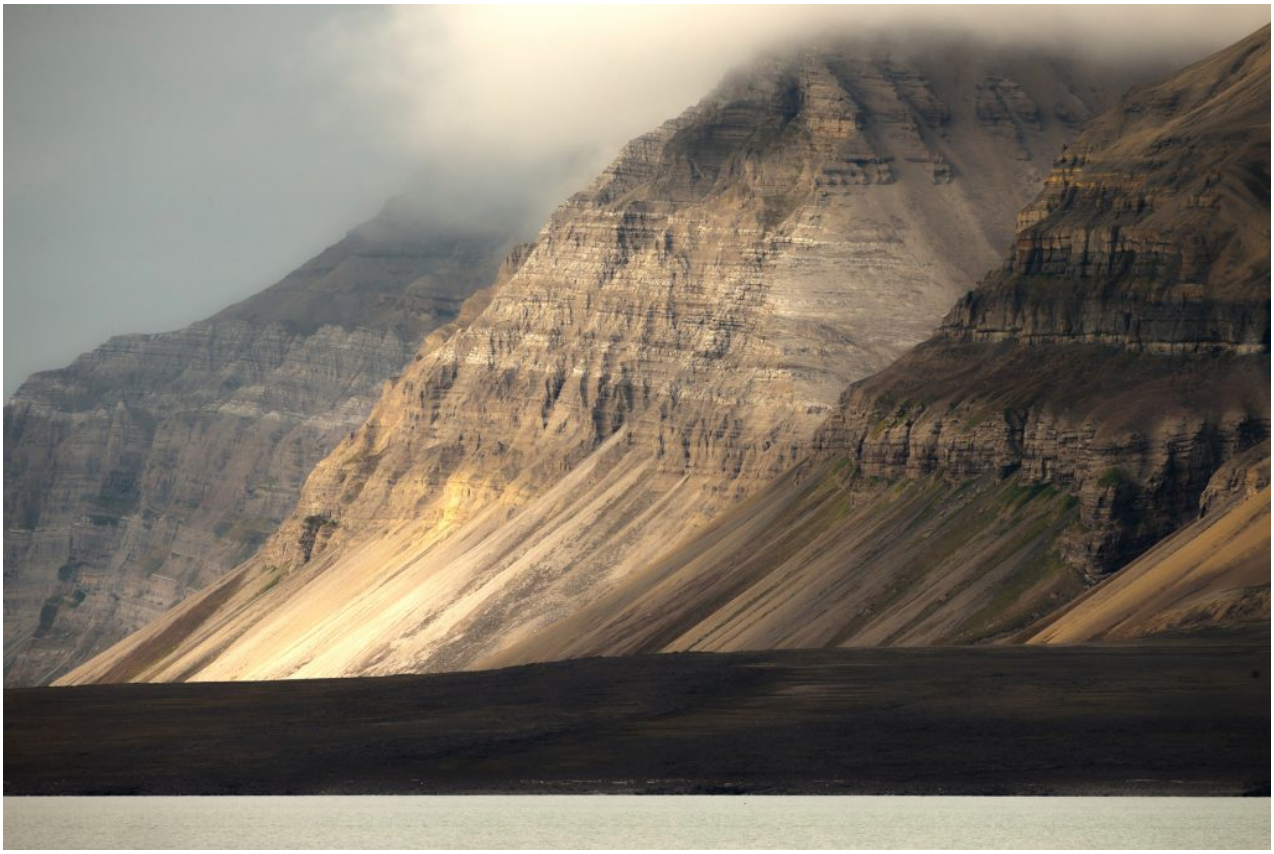
Raised beach swirls at Gipsvika (Image by Mike Watson)



Great Skuas at Sarstangen (Image by Mike Watson)



An inquisitive Harbour Seal at Dahlbrebukta (Image by Mike Watson)



Rays of sunlight catch some carboniferous era rock strata in Isfjorden (Image by Mike Watson)



Ivory Gull is one of our Svalbard 'big 5' so to get some nice views of this one at Ny Ålesund was very welcome (Image by Mike Watson)



A Kittiwake colony in the old workers' accommodation building in Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



Fringed Sandwort at Engelskbukta (Image by Mike Watson)



Crevasses piled up at Fiortende Julibukta (14th July Bay) (Image by Mike Watson)



Terminal moraine at Engleskbukta (Image by Mike Watson)



Glacial ice in Dahlbukta (Image by Mike Watson)



The Dahlbreen calving face showing some nice glacial features (Image by Mike Watson)



The crazy Atlantic Puffins at Kapp Fleur de Lys almost landed on our heads (Image by Mike Watson)



A Bearded Seal is dwarfed by the immense Dahlbreen calving face in west Spitsbergen (Image by Mike Watson)



The Bearded Seals in Kongsfjorden often have rusty pelts from foraging on the iron-rich sea bed there (Image by Mike Watson)



An immense Blue Whale surfaces off the north coast of Svalbard (Image by Mike Watson)



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



A lovely stand of Boreal Jacob's-ladder at Skansbukta (Image by Mike Watson)



A young Arctic Fox has a stretch after a long nap at Ossian Sarsfjellet (Image by Mike Watson)



Another crazy tame Arctic Fox at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)



This Arctic Fox at Pyramiden seemed to associate us with food for some reason! (Image by Mike Watson)



Another crazy tame Arctic Fox at Pyramiden (Image by Mike Watson)