

Holiday Highlights
Spitsbergen
14 – 25 July 2010

Leaders: Darren Rees and Roy Atkins

Guests: Sue and Terry Lee, Margaret Vernon, Lin Arney, Linda and Mike Pugh, Anna and John Hobbs, David Dennerson, Jean and Chris Parrott, Bruce Clark and Felicity Vigano, Maureen and Alan Caulkett, Jan and Mick McMahon and Susan Gormley

Captain Ernesto Barria Vargas and his Chilean and Filipino Crew

Expedition Leader: Christopher Gilbert

Assistant Expedition Leader: Philipp Schaudy

Guides: Valeska Schaudy, Karoline Baelum, Jordi Plana

Hotel and Restaurant Manager: Gemma Heaney

Bartender: Beverley Howlett

Chef: Marcelo Canel

Doctor: Renee Weersma

Day 1: After an easy journey to Oslo we make the short walk to our very comfortable hotel where we spend the night before travelling on to Spitsbergen tomorrow - a nice relaxed start to the holiday.

Day 2: Breakfast is a superb buffet with everything you can think of and we have plenty of time to really enjoy it before meeting up for the short walk back to the terminal where we check in our bags for the journey north. Suddenly it is beginning to feel more real that we are really going to the Arctic! The flight makes a touch-down in Tromsø where we wait on the runway for a little while before we make the final flight to Longyearbyen. The views below us as we approach are stunning. Unusually we fly up the eastern side of southern Spitsbergen over spectacular mountains still deep in snow.

Outside the airport we scan the surroundings while we wait for our bus to take us into the centre of town. There are masses of Fulmars out at sea and a flock of Eiders in the bay, Arctic Terns are fishing in some small pools below us and there are a few Barnacle Geese and a Glaucous Gull. It is surprisingly mild with beautiful sunshine and blue skies. Our bags are

taken directly to the ship while we are driven into the centre of town. The town looks an interesting mix of new and old with a scattering of shops and houses as well as a large new looking museum, while high on the slopes is evidence of its coal mining history. Above these slopes and crags are tiny Little Auks flying back and forth to colonies in the boulder-scrub high above us and a little way away a Svalbard Reindeer is feeding on the grasses and flowers - a shorter legged and 'chunkier' version of Reindeer in northern Europe. It's also great to see Snow Buntings flitting through the main street! We wander around town not sure whether to look in the shops or identify our first arctic flowers - Alpine Bistort, Arctic Cottongrass, Arctic Mouse-ear and Svalbard Poppy all close to where we alight from the coach. There is a huge stuffed Polar Bear outside one of the shops and we can't resist posing with it. A visit to the museum is recommended and it proves to be excellent with information about the fascinating history of the whole of the islands from arctic exploration and the first attempts to reach the North Pole to the hunters and shocking slaughter of the whales in the 17th and 18th centuries. There are stuffed animals including a variety of seals and birds which are useful to point out what we need to look out for when we hopefully see some of them in the next few days!

Outside the museum we find more Svalbard Poppies in the white and yellow flowering forms plus Yellow Marsh, Tufted and Drooping Saxifrages before we walk the few hundred metres to the jetty where we are to be ferried to our ship, the Antarctic Dream, by zodiac. The view from the ship looking up the bay to the mountains is spectacular and as we set sail with the sun gleaming off the snowy peaks we are all on deck or in the dining room taking photos. We pass our first Brünnich's Guillemots on the water and Fulmars glide alongside the ship almost close enough to touch their wing-tips!

We spend a while getting familiar with the ship and then gather in the dining room for Chris, our expedition leader, to introduce the crew and the guides who are to be our companions over the next ten days. The other guides include Valeska, Karoline, Phillip and Jordi, while other important people include Gemma and Beverly who look after the restaurant and bar and Marcelo the chef plus of course the ship captain Ernesto. Next comes the lifeboat drill which sees us gathered outside to see how everything works and then it is back into the dining room for our first meal with Fulmars looking

in through the windows as we eat. They look much darker than those in the UK being the northern race or 'Blue Fulmar' with rather mottly grey underparts and head. There are hundreds of Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots on the water and plus the occasional Kittiwake and John even photographs a Puffin flying by. It is incredibly difficult to keep track of the time with the sun never getting even close to the horizon and by the time we have eaten and then gather for a chat ourselves to give out checklists and talk about the next few days we are astonished how late it is! As we leave Isfjorden the scenery is superb and we enjoy just sitting in the dining room watching it all go by through the large picture windows before eventually heading to bed.

Day 3: Chris has the perfect voice for gently waking people from their sleep with a call to breakfast over the tannoy and each morning he starts by saying where we are, including latitude and longitude and also what the weather is like. Today we are at 78° 57.5'N, 012° 00.6'E with overcast weather but some of us didn't need telling that there was a strong wind as the sea had certainly been a little rough and walking up to breakfast was not so easy with the boat swaying back and forth! After breakfast we gather in the lecture room for a briefing on how to behave in the arctic and on the use of zodiacs before we make our first landing at Blomstrandhalvøya. Around 50 to 60 years ago the island was a peninsula connected to Spitsbergen by a glacier but due to the retreat of the glacier it is an island today.

The geology of our landing site is mostly old marble and between 1910 and 1920 Ernest Mansfield tried to exploit this by setting up a mining company here where the settlement was known as Ny London (New London!) which is rather amusing. The quality of the rock proved too poor and crumbled on reaching warmer climates so his company soon collapsed. There are erratic boulders scattered everywhere transported to their final resting place by the glaciers of the last ice age.

The total number of passengers on board the ship are around eighty and we split into three groups at each landing with some going for a fast long hike often to higher ground for a view, a middle group taking a more exploratory approach and a very slow group often including the photographers who are looking for interesting angles for photographs and not wanting to walk far

at all. We tend towards the middle group and after enjoying great views of some close up Reindeer we walk on, pausing here and there to identify the flowers. There is a spectacular show of arctic flowers here with masses of Mountain Avens in full flower. Purple Saxifrage and Moss Campion make cushions of purple flowers, and in wetter areas are small amounts of Yellow Mountain Saxifrage. Linda finds a couple of Hairy Lousewort flowers and there are several large patches of White Arctic Bell-Heather. A couple of Arctic Skuas fly overhead then land some way away on the bare ground. We walk over towards a couple of small pools passing a family of Snow Buntings and a Polar Bear print in the mud which Susan spotted and looks huge once you work out the outline! On the lakes are a couple of Long-tailed Ducks and we are delighted to find a Long-tailed Skua flying around in the background which then lands allowing great views through the scopes. This is a very rare breeding bird in Svalbard and we are conscious that if we don't see one here we might not see one at all!

Walking on to the next small pool we stop to examine the strange shapes that seem to be formed in the ground with the larger stones forming polygons with the smaller stones in the middle. Jordi makes a detailed explanation of how this happens but to be honest it doesn't entirely seem to make sense and asking one of the other guides, Karoline - who's background is geology and geography, she says that in fact it is still not entirely understood how it happens so no wonder he is having trouble explaining it! Every now and then a Long-tailed Skua flies over our heads and at one time two are circling around together looking absolutely beautiful with their buoyant flight and incredibly elegant shape with elongated central tail feathers. We are then very lucky when one comes in and perches on the rocks very close by as we walk back. It looks great through binoculars but through the scope is simply stunning!

As we enjoy lunch back on board the ship the captain repositions the Antarctic Dream to the other side of the fjord. Around half past two we were ready to land again, this time at the former mining town of Ny-Ålesund, the northernmost permanent settlement of the world.

This is the only 'dry landing' we are expecting to make and we arrive in the little harbour to find lots of Black Guillemots and Kittiwakes to welcome us.

There is a moment of shock as someone announces that one of the Kittiwakes has red legs!! There is a species in Alaska called Red-legged Kittiwake but it would be an incredible record here so we check it very carefully - but sadly it appears to simply be a common Kittiwake that just has unusual leg colouration and nothing more. Still, it is an interesting find and got a bit of adrenalin running! A nice looking pool a little distance away has Purple Sandpiper feeding around the edge and a flock of Barnacle Geese with goslings. There are Eiders too, Arctic Terns breeding on the shore and an Arctic Skua flies over. Today Ny Ålesund is an international science village with 30 to 250 inhabitants depending on the season and one of the huts has apparently got a family of Arctic Foxes living under it, so we spend a while waiting to see if they come out. They must be sleeping today but we get fabulous close up views of Snow Bunting while we wait and also find some nice flowers with lots of Drooping and Highland Saxifrages and Polar Cress but eventually the lure of the shops (there won't be any more!) gets the better of us and also the chance to stamp your passport with a Spitsbergen Stamp! Opposite the shop is a small mining museum with some old photographs of Ny Ålesund when it was a mining town (1916 – 1962). In the fifties up to 200 people lived here and there was a school, a small hospital and even a newspaper was printed.

It is also a place of great historical interest as the polar researcher Roald Amundsen chose this spot for his flight with the airship Norge. On the 11th of May in 1926 he started - together with Lincoln Ellsworth and Umberto Nobile - his journey into unknown parts of the Arctic and across the North Pole, before landing in Teller in Alaska 72 hours later. The anchor mast is still standing as a reminder of that event, so we walk out to it and gather around Chris who tells us the tragic story of how they fell out afterwards, quarrelling about which country should get the prestige - Italy or Norway. Nobile then decided to repeat the expedition but this time crashed, some of his men disappearing along with the ship and others injured including himself. The enormous number of people involved in their eventual rescue included Amundsen who went out to search for them in a plane - but it is believed to have crashed and was never found.

Near to the mast we find more interesting plants including Slender and Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrages and Arctic Buttercup. We then walk up to the

dog kennels at the far end of the town with Arctic Terns attacking us on the way and some have delightful fluffy chicks with oversized red bills. Sadly there is no sign of the Ivory Gulls that are sometimes hanging around the seal carcasses used to feed the dogs.

Back on board the Antarctic Dream the scenery is fantastic and Chris points out the landmark mountains of Kongsfjord, the "Tre Kroner" (Three Crowns): Dora, Svea and Nora - three pointed mountains at the end of the fjord. Then as we eat, Captain Ernesto takes the ship deep into the fjord to the glacier front of Kongsvegenbreen. The impressive ice wall in front of us, the large icebergs around us in the water and the surrounding mountain landscape are simply amazing! The sun is shining now and adding to the scene and the sea is dotted with broken bits of berg from the glacier - some incredibly bright blue while others are dirty brown with dirt scraped up by the glacier. Roy and Darren spot a small flock of King Eiders but they are very distant and only a couple of people are out on deck to see them! We pass a Brünnich's Guillemot colony high on the cliffs and spot a couple of Reindeer high on the slopes above. It really is an incredible place and we enjoy the stunning scenery as we enjoy our evening meal before going through the checklist and heading to bed.

Day 4: It is quite exciting to travel through the night and wake up somewhere new and when Chris wishes us good morning at 7am we find ourselves in Raudfjord or 'The Red Fjord' named after the iron rich rock forming the peaks on the eastern side of the fjord. On the west are jagged peaks of sedimentary rock containing fossils of some the first fish to swim in the sea!

Those who are up before the wake-up call watch the sea become calmer as we enter the fjord and the surface is scattered with hundreds if not thousands of Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots with the occasional Arctic Skua trying its luck to force a meal out of them. A lucky few glimpse a Minke Whale and a Bearded Seal watches us as we come to our anchor point. Though a little windy the weather is glorious and after a good breakfast we gather for a zodiac landing at Buchananhalvøya, a strip of land located between Chauveaubreen and Raudfjordbreen. Looking back at the ship it looks fantastic nestled amongst the jagged, snow covered peaks, the sun glinting off the water and ice. Walking up the slope it is initially quite

bouldery but soon evens out and becomes easier. We watch an Arctic Skua chasing a Kittiwake and marvel at their incredible twists and turns. Initially it looks like the flora is going to be rather poor as it is clear that there has been a lot of snow lying here and has only recently melted leaving the rather dead looking plants to recover, but as we gain height we reach areas where the wind has kept the snow clear and start finding large patches of Mountain Avens, Moss Campion and Purple Saxifrage, our first Sulphur-coloured Buttercups and Alpine Saxifrage, and at the top some small clumps of Polar Fir Club-moss. At the highest point the view is stunning with more high snowy peaks and glaciers and, in the fjord below, masses of broken ice. We find the remains of an Arctic Fox skull on the way up and at the top the skull of a Ringed Seal! We can only presume that it was carried there by a Polar Bear or an Arctic Fox as it is quite a height above the sea. As we head back down to the zodiacs Darren spots a distant Minke Whale in the fjord below.

After an excellent lunch back on board we travel the short distance to our next landing, again passing through huge flocks of auks with Puffins and Black Guillemots in small numbers and the occasional Great and Arctic Skuas. We are looking out for Minke Whales and Mick spots one which frustratingly doesn't reappear for the rest of us.

We arrive at the island of Fuglesangen, which translates to 'Bird Song' presumably because of the constant calling of the Little Auks which nest here in huge numbers and which are the reason for our landing. Once ashore we walk through the boulder scree to the edge of the colony and what a wonderful experience it is! We simply find a nice spot to sit and watch. Thousands of birds are nesting here and their calls and the sound of their wings are a constant background noise as we watch them come and go or just sit around. Little Auks feed a lot at night as well as during the day and many take a rest before heading back out to feed and are sitting around on the boulders apparently unbothered by our presence just a few feet away. They are calling constantly like a high hysterical laugh! The nearest birds sit around preening and looking around sometimes apparently watching us watching them - and all the time more birds are flying in and out of the colony. Occasionally something seems to disturb the birds higher up the slope - perhaps a Glaucous Gull or a Skua - and a mass of birds flies out

in a big sweeping arc out over the sea before swinging back in again, then repeating the same flight again perhaps a couple of times before landing back in the colony. Cameras are clicking as we can't resist taking a silly number of photos and Darren quietly sketches them. It really is fabulous to just sit quietly and watch their behaviour and the time we have here vanishes far too quickly.

After this wonderful treat we head back to the ship for our evening meal but the day is not over yet! During dinner we relocate to Holmiabukta where last year a dead whale was washed up on shore presenting a blubber buffet for the Polar Bears here. This year the remnants of the whale are submerged but there are still a few bears around. So feeling very excited at the prospect of our first Polar Bears we gather at the zodiacs again and with everyone in the zodiacs we all carefully approach the area. We round the corner and enter the bay and start scanning the rocks and there, sleeping on a ridge 30m from the shore, is the first bear of the trip. Slowly we take the Zodiacs a bit closer to land, taking care not to disturb Nanok - the king of the Arctic. The bear casts a glance at us, deciding we are of no interest and goes back to sleep to digest a belly-full of blubber. A little further round we find two more very well fed bears resting in the snow on the hillside, faces smeared dark with whale fat, one resting its head on the snow ridge and lazily observing us. The other one is sleeping but occasionally rolls over on its side or even onto its back raising its feet in the air. We cut the engines and drift for 30 minutes or so enjoying the silence as we watch these fascinating creatures. Polar Bears are carnivores and spend more than 90% of their time sleeping, resting and conserving energy so these first three bears are truly demonstrating their most natural behaviour! By 10 o'clock everyone is back on the ship where some enjoy a celebratory drink and enjoy the magnificent view as we leave the bay and head north for Phippsøya.

Day 5: With flat seas and calm weather we awaken to find ourselves approaching the northernmost islands in the archipelago - indeed of the whole of Europe - the Sjuøyane or 'the seven islands.' It is beautiful to be out on deck watching all the auks and Kittiwakes with the islands in the background looking very serene, and every so often we spot a seal. They are not easy to identify but one group are certainly Harp Seals and some of the closer singles we identify

as Ringed Seals. We then get excellent views of a single Harp Seal on which we can see the dark face and markings on its back as it dives.

After breakfast the zodiacs are launched and we head to a beach on the south-western side of Phippsøya. As we land a Purple Sandpiper is feeding along the shoreline and there are clearly a lot of Arctic Terns nesting nearby. Little Auks are flying to and fro to nesting colonies high above us on the rocky slopes and there is a Snow Bunting singing. In the water there are several Winged Snails! These are odd looking little beasties - dark brown and with wings that flap them along though they don't really seem to be going anywhere. They do have shells but they are thin and completely transparent so very hard to see. There are also lots of Comb Jellies with tiny pulsating cilia along the sides that catch the light.

The landscape is that of a polar desert creating a stony gravelly terrain with hardly any life other than a variety of different lichens and the few mosses growing in wind protected locations between the rocks. Sometimes these make rather beautiful collections almost like seaweeds in a rock pool. Above the beach are a scattering of tree trunks from logging operation in Russia now bleached by the sea. Jordi and Karoline lead a group of us across a field of rounded rocks up to a ridge from where we get a good view across Phippsøya to its northern and eastern side. In the bay below us a Bearded Seal keeps surfacing and there are distant Eiders with lots of ducklings. Those who went with Valeska saw some seals popping out from the water and a big flock of Eider Ducks with their chicks in the distance and a very well camouflaged female Eider sitting on her nest close by.

We head back to the ship for lunch and go north round Ross Island with a flat calm sea. It is slightly misty and very atmospheric as we travel eastwards towards an area where the latest ice chart showed quite dense pack ice. While we were sailing, Philipp presents a lecture on Polar Bears with interesting information underlined by beautiful pictures of bears. By the time the lecture is finished the first of the ice floes is in sight up ahead and soon we are all out on deck to experience this amazing 'landscape.' The ice comes in all different shapes and sizes, many floes with small pools of water on them due to melting. We pick out several seals in the water, again mainly Ringed Seals but also a nice group of Harp Seals and also the occasional seal out

on the ice including a couple of big Bearded Seals. It is mesmerising watching the ships progress through the ice, its bow pushing ice floes aside, some breaking up while others stay in one piece as they are nudged out of the way. There is the occasional Glaucous Gull and small groups of Brünnich's Guillemots and Little Auks are standing on some pieces of ice looking for all the world like little penguins!

Then comes the announcement over the tannoy that three Polar Bears are ahead of the ship on the ice! The excitement is tangible as we get closer scanning ahead with binoculars for any sign of them and soon we can pick them out - their fur a slightly yellowy-creamy colour unlike the white ice. The next announcement says that there are in fact four! Unbelievable - four bears in one spot! Three of them are close to a kill, where some left over bones, blood and some seal skin indicated the bear's dinner table. They are all asleep but as we get closer two of them get up and started feeding. They look magnificent! It is astonishing how well the captain manoeuvres the ship to get really close but without disturbing them too much and we enjoy astonishing views! They are now really close and we watch the three near the kill for a long time as they feed and wander around and sleep. There are a collection of Glaucous Gulls taking advantage of the kill and also at least four Ivory Gulls!! These are our first of this species and all are adults looking absolutely pristine in their clean white plumage. We can't take our eyes off the Polar Bears for long and watch all their movements. Bear number four is sleeping on a floe further away, so our captain carefully takes the ship closer. Eventually we are noticed and the bear gets up and walks slowly to the other side of the big ice floe - it is a truly superb looking bear- a big male. We returned to the other bears, which have fallen asleep again. They wake up and start walking around slowly. One of them - a female - is very curious and walks towards the ship. She sniffs around, approaches the ship and peers up at us as if not sure what to make of this big thing and all the little people looking down at her. Cameras are clicking away constantly and we are absolutely thrilled to get such a close encounter. She looks fabulous through the binoculars but through the telescope you can only fit her head and shoulders in the view and it is astonishing!! Eventually she turns round and makes her way across a few ice floes, sometimes jumping from one to the next, and then lies down. We stay close to the bears until 19:00 - amazed when we realise how long we have been here,

it has been four hours!! We get more excellent views of the Ivory Gulls too and Mick makes the point that the Glaucous Gulls seem to be getting blood on their heads and necks while the delicate Ivory Gulls stay absolutely clean. When we finally break for our evening meal we travel slowly back north until around 21:00, we reached our northernmost point of this trip - 81 degrees 32 minutes north (According to Mikes GPS device!) In celebration we gather on the bow of Antarctic Dream and enjoy a shot of vodka as the ship's horn is blown. What great ending our day in the high Arctic!

Day 6: We are still up at around 80° North as we get up for breakfast this morning. Some distance away is the island of Lågøya located northwest of Nordaustland and this is to be our first landing of the day. It is quite a long zodiac ride due to the shallow waters here but even from a distance we can see a big 'pile' of Walrus on the beach! As we approach the landing we spot a small flock of Grey Phalaropes (or Red Phalaropes depending on your preference) swimming around and feeding just off the beach. Some are rather dull looking males but there are some beautiful females in amongst them and they are just delightful to watch as they bob around on the waves picking delicately at the surface for food. It is interesting that the female is the brightly coloured of the pair in phalaropes as it is the male that sits on the eggs and tends the young.

Once on shore we divide into two groups. One group starts by looking at the Walruses while the group containing all the Speyside Wildlife guests head for a shallow pool nearby where we are told there is a pair of Sabine's Gulls. We have hardly arrived when Roy spots a stunning adult and calls to everyone that it is flying over the pool. Those who get on it quickly get fabulous views as it lands briefly then flies again, the lovely wing pattern standing out, but this time it heads away and out to sea! It is all over a bit too quick for some people to really get a view but we are soon distracted by more Grey Phalaropes flying in and swimming around on the pool and a nice flock of Purple Sandpipers and Ringed Plovers. Arctic Terns are constantly flying around overhead and a nice flock of Eiders flies through, then we find a stunning pair of Red-throated Divers which look fabulous through the telescopes. At our feet we find Tufted Cinquefoil and various saxifrages plus some lovely Svalbard Poppies.

Soon it is our turn to visit the Walrus pack on the beach and what astonishing animals they are! They are truly enormous and simply lie there draped over each other and over the rocks like huge slugs! It is hard to work out how many there are but we think perhaps 30 or 40 in total. They should be ugly yet somehow they are not - they have amazing faces with stiff whiskers or bristles and remarkably kind looking eyes like wise old men. The tusks are incredible and look like a complete nuisance to them. One is trying to lie on the sand on its belly and the tusks are buried into the sand but still hold its head up in a most uncomfortable looking manner. Occasionally they will all shuffle around and raise themselves up to look around. They shuffle over each other and moving their huge bulks looks like hard work, ripples running through the blubber as they move. There are a few animals still in the sea and they seem quite inquisitive, raising their heads out of the water to look at us before turning away again, only to come back in a few moments to have another look. They are certainly spectacular animals and much more impressive than I think any of us were expecting them to be. As we leave one climbs out of the water onto the beach and it is interesting to see how those that have been out of the water for a while are reddish brown while this one looks a greeny-grey colour. He will gradually change as he warms up and the blood starts flowing more into the skin. The big lumps on his neck which act as armour during fights seem more obvious than on those on the beach.

We finally drag ourselves away realising that there are now about 15 Grey Phalaropes on the sea behind us - making perhaps 25 in total here - and only then realise just how much the wind has picked up while we have been here. The waves are much higher than when we came ashore with some breaking over the zodiacs causing the guides to have to bail them out. They don't seem too worried but it makes for a different method of getting back in the zodiacs as people slide in over the side being helped by guides and other guests to get in any way they can. Some people seem nervous while others are clearly enjoying the excitement of it all as they are pushed out into the waves and turn to head back to the ship. Darren and Roy are asked to help with the final zodiac and with everyone inside we try and set off but the propeller immediately hits a rock and we have to manhandle it further along the beach before finally Roy, Darren and Chris leap into the zodiac and

we are on our way. It is all quite exciting and the journey back rather more bouncy than we are used to!

With everyone safely back on board we get dry and warm up as we enjoy lunch, then Valeska invites us to an interesting lecture on Walrus while we head to our next destination, Russøya, one of the small islands in Murchisonfjord. A few of us choose to chill out in the dining room and watch the world go by whilst enjoying coffee, biscuits and a chat, then we have a shock when another guest on board suddenly spots a whale! It is really big and at first we think it must be a Fin Whale but after it surfaces a couple of times Roy is convinced it is a Blue Whale!! There follows some discussion about its identity and the announcement over the tannoy that it is a Fin Whale doesn't help his cause. Blue Whales are rare here so for a while it goes down as Fin Whale but deep down Roy is still unhappy with this conclusion. Having seen a lot of Fin Whales this looked very different and when, after dwelling on it, Darren agrees that he also thinks it was a Blue, and also after checking the books as well, we conclude it was indeed a Blue Whale! The frustration is that so few people got to see it.

Our second landing is on the barren island of Russøya. It appears vast and empty at first sight but with plenty of small surprises at a closer look. Russøya is a relatively flat island with some small hills and we soon notice that the whole shore is made up of smashed up fragments of rock that are jagged and sharp. Karoline explains how water penetrates the rocks then freezes smashing them apart into these incredibly sharp fragments which are often still locked together in the ground. We find polygons again where the rocks seem to be sorted into shapes with larger rocks around the edge and soil or smaller rocks in the middle of each shape - they still seem to be very hard to explain but follow the shapes that the ground make when it cracks up when it dries. Karoline also points out the raised beaches, which are old beaches far inland and high above today's shoreline, that have been lifted by the isostatic rebound after the ice masses of the last ice age (last glacial maximum was 15000 years before present) had disappeared. This is the first place we have found old whale-bones, many half buried in the ground, and around each is a small oasis of life in this lunar landscape. The organic matter has a slow decomposition rate and supplies nutrients to the ground that allows the growth of a few saxifrages, mosses, Scurvy Grass and Polar Mouse-

ear with some forming little rock gardens that are incredibly picturesque! The emptiness of the place, the periglacial ground structures, the mix of rocks and the small boulders being pancaked apart by frost shattering, all give the place a very different feeling and despite its emptiness it is a fascinating place. There are even a few birds and we get excellent views of Red-throated Diver that flies past calling and even does a little display! Arctic Skuas are nesting here and feeding a chick. Out at sea we think we have spotted a whale for a moment which brings home just how big Walrus are - they even blow like a whale when they surface!

The Zodiac ride back to the ship is short and smooth and very different to our little adventure this morning. As we eat our evening meal we cruise down the Hinlopenstretet spotting a group of four more Walrus, arching their backs as they dive and surfacing again a surprising distance from where they dive. We go through the checklist before bed and Darren sets the scene for tomorrow suggesting people are up on the bridge for whale spotting before breakfast - he is confident and will be up there from 5:30am!

Day 7: With the sea flat calm the conditions are perfect and it does not take long for the first whales to be sighted, and it is soon clear we are in for an exciting time as more appear! When one surfaces very close to the ship the captain says it will be ok to tell everyone and those not out of bed are woken by Darren's morning wake up of "Good morning everyone - there is a Fin Whale on the starboard side!" Felicita is lucky enough to just look out of her cabin window and see this closest Fin Whale just as it surfaces and those who get up to join us are treated to fabulous sightings minutes later when five Fin Whale surface together - again quite close to the ship. Over the next half hour we spot at least three groups of two whales and more singles and all credit to Darren for making such a bold prediction as whales are certainly not always seen here in these numbers. By the time we head for breakfast 17 different Fin Whales have been seen - fantastic!

During breakfast we arrive at Alkefjellet - "the guillemot cliffs". The towering cliffs consist of basalt rock, a magmatic rock that has intruded into a thick limestone layer and solidified, forming these impressive vertical sky-scrapers where Brünnich's Guillemots nest in huge numbers. There are an estimated 100,000 pairs nesting in this colony alone with an addition of thousands

of Kittiwakes and a few Black Guillemots. Chris again arranges for our group to be in two zodiacs and we spend a fabulous couple of hours just drifting down the whole length of the cliffs enjoying the incredible close up views of birds here. The cliffs are covered in nesting birds but it is astonishing to scan the sea and the sky as well where the number of birds is astounding! Some of the Brünnich's Guillemots seem quite curious and swim very close to the zodiacs to investigate this strange floating object, others are perched on floating pieces of ice like little penguins, many are flying in and out of the colony while others watch us from the ledges - the noise and constant activity is spellbinding. One bird even crash-lands in one of the zodiacs! Some parts of the cliff-face are dominated by Kittiwakes giving a different background of calls and we also spot occasional Glaucous Gull nests with large fluffy chicks begging for food. One part of the cliff has a grassy slope below and we scan this carefully in the hope of finding an Arctic Fox but there is no sign, though the fact that the Barnacle Geese here have only one gosling might suggest one has been present. We also pick out Snow Buntings flitting around at this distance looking like little snow flakes. The clear water beneath the cliffs is also teeming with life - the most abundant being the Winged Snails and assorted jellyfish.

At the far end of the cliffs a Glacier comes right down to the sea and we take a look. It is beautiful to see this so close up and the blue of some of the ice is beautiful - a colour it only becomes after years of being compressed. Occasionally little pieces break off into the sea but nothing spectacular which is perhaps a relief! Kittiwakes are bathing in the fresh water at the foot of the glacier and then flying up to rest high above on the snow. It is a beautiful place and we cut the engines to enjoy the sounds of the birds and the creaking ice.

Time runs out all too quickly and back on board we get to see a couple of Winged Snails in close up as Karoline has brought a couple on board in a glass of water along with one of the Comb-jellies. Out at sea we spot a couple of Harp Seals and a Bearded Seal hauled out on the ice.

While we enjoy lunch the Antarctic Dream is relocated to Faksevågen, a small bay in Lomfjord just east of the Hinlopenstretet. The scenery is stunning with multi-coloured layered cliffs and valley glaciers and Karoline

explains about the ages of the tilted rock and how when the tectonic plates collided these rocks were pushed and bucked to the shapes we now see - in places completely vertical. We head ashore on the west side of the bay and soon start finding exciting flowers with the wonderfully named Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage growing just above the beach and causing great excitement! This is a wonderful plant with brilliant yellow flowers and bright red runners travelling away from the plant across the surface and then rooting so that each plant looks like some kind of long legged spider - hence the alternative name Spider Plant. As we follow the ridge we find many of the plant species we have seen before, especially masses of Mountain Avens and different Saxifrages but also add Tufted Sandwort to the growing list. We get good views of Arctic Skua and a distant Ivory Gull flies up the valley. From high on the ridge we enjoy fabulous views over a big river delta with snow capped peaks and a large glacier as a backdrop. We spot a small group of waders down in the river delta below us which turn out on closer inspection to be Purple Sandpipers and Darren picks out a Little Stint in amongst them - a great find and a scarce bird here. There is a small group of reindeer higher up the slope including a mother with a young calf.

In the evening we head back out into the Hinlopenstretet and Darren and Roy are back on the bridge with anyone still keen to see more Fin Whales. We find a further four before it goes quiet and we join our chefs Marcello and Richie who have prepared a delicious arctic barbeque on the back deck. As the midnight sun moves across the northern sky we toast to polar bears, walruses, to the Antarctic Dream and to our arctic experiences and coming adventures, and the party continues into the small hours with lively music and dancing for those who can stay awake!!

Day 8: At around one o'clock the first ice-floes scrape the hull of the ship. Today the plan is to spend the entire day in the ice of the Olgastretet to the south Hinlopenstretet, an area full of pack ice at this time of year. A day in the ice - what can be more symbolic of a trip to the Arctic?

Sea ice is the habitat of Polar Bears and we are gently woken by Chris at 3am telling us that there are three Polar Bears ahead of the ship - a mother with two cubs! Despite the early hour we are awake immediately and full of excitement, we get dressed quickly and head up on deck. It still seems

crazy that the sun is high in the sky at this time of day as we enjoy fabulous views of this beautiful female with two large cubs that are perhaps a year and a half old and more than half her size. They seem slightly nervous of the ship and walk off across the ice, swimming between ice floes and climbing out onto the next - but never in a hurry. Ivory Gulls are here too and we see Ringed Seal, Arctic Skuas and our first Pomerine Skuas of the trip including a bird perched on the ice showing the spoon shaped central tail feathers. What an incredible start to the day - Polar Bears, Ivory Gull and Pom Skua and it is not even 4am! Our warm beds are calling us back however and when Chris wakes us for breakfast we almost wonder if it was a dream.

It is not long after breakfast before the next Polar Bear is spotted on the ice, with another one visible in the distance. The first doesn't seem very interested in us and walks a little way away before going back to sleep but the second does not wake up until we are quite close and has the shock of his life when he opens his eyes and sees us - he jumps to his feet and runs off over the ice then splashes into the water - swims to the next floe then clambers out and runs on! The next bear seems just the opposite and sleeps on, occasionally lifting his head to look at us but immediately putting it back down and sleeping on. Our next bear spends almost the whole time swimming between the ice floes and we learn that this is in fact their hunting method. It is much easier to surprise a seal resting on the ice this way than trying to catch it by coming over the ice towards it when you are far more visible. As the day continues we start losing track of just how many bears we have seen and some take on nicknames - 'Scaredy Bear,' 'Sleepy Bear' and of course 'Swimming Bear.'

As we slowly move through the ice we are shunting pieces aside and other bits break into pieces. The sea-ice itself is a remarkable environment, with a special ecosystem. Under the ice, small microscopic algae grow on the floes. They are grazed by little creatures, like amphipods. These are food for larger organisms, like Polar Cod, which are very much associated with these ice floes living in holes and caves under the water and as the ship causes the ice to crack and break the fish dart out and Kittiwakes dive down to try and grab them. They are frequently successful too and fly back up beside the ship trying to swallow a good sized fish before they are robbed by other gulls or Arctic and Pomerine Skuas that are also frequently hanging around.

Indeed we get some fantastic views of both these skua species as the day continues, as well as lots of Glaucous Gulls and several Ivory Gulls. The latter seem to circle the ship a couple of times before moving on and look absolutely stunning in the sunshine. The Glaucous Gulls are in all kinds of plumages and we pick out birds in their first full summer, as well as second and third summer birds all with various degrees of speckliness. The Pomarine Skuas look particularly impressive as they circle the ship and as well as many pale morph birds we also see a couple of all dark birds which if anything look even more menacing! One pale bird even chases a Glaucous Gull!

We see the occasional Ringed Seal amongst the ice and a group of Harp Seals and very distant Bearded Seal hauled out, but they are completely ignored every time a new Polar Bear is spotted! Next comes a female with a cub. He seems sleepy but she is wide awake and seems slightly irritated with his lack of energy. She starts rising to her full height and pounding her front paws down on the ice as if trying to smash it while the little bear just rolls around on his back with feet in the air seeming quite uninterested. She eventually decides to swim off to the next floe and the little bear doesn't even seem to notice she is gone for a while - then when he does he panics and leaps into the water all four feet in the air at once! He soon catches her up but then gets distracted by a large piece of fishing net and tugs at it as if checking his catch! Soon she has left him behind again and once more he swims as fast as he can to catch her up - a delightful scene. In the meantime we decide that the net should not be left there to endanger the wildlife here and the captain brilliantly manoeuvres the ship through the ice, bumping some bits out of the way, to get close enough for the net to be reached with a long hook and dragged on board.

During the afternoon we continue with another sleepy bear and another which remains distant due to the amount of ice making it impossible to get closer. Darren spots the next one ('Darren's Bear') then another appears which is a really rich creamy colour almost yellow! (Soon know as 'Yellowy Bear') We get great close views of this one but the next one is perhaps one of the best yet. He seems completely unbothered by the ship - even quite curious - and we spend a long time with the ship stationary beside him as he wanders about his piece of ice. Sometimes he seems really interested in us and stands looking up at all those faces looking down at him and you can't

help wondering what he is making of it all. He sleeps a bit then walks around the edge of the ice as if trying to work out if he might jump from this piece to the next. He bounces his front paws heavily on the edge of the ice to test its strength but it is a long jump and he seems unhappy about it and clearly doesn't want to get wet! The photographers are having an incredible time! He eventually ends up with the name 'Pooh Bear,' for obvious reasons, and after some time he eventually curls up and goes to sleep.

In the sunshine the light on the ice floes and bears is beautiful. While we do all this "bear watching", we hardly find time to enjoy the "Pack Ice Brunch". The kitchen have prepared a wonderful buffet: burgers, scrambled eggs, quiche, cheeses, cake, yoghurts and more and we feel privileged that we can be here in the middle of pack ice, sitting in a warm restaurant and looking out into this Arctic Wonderland. The afternoon continues with yet more sightings - 'Running Bear' simply runs off, slides into the water and swims away not liking the look of the ship at all, while other bears are completely unbothered and either sleep right through our passing or just look up in a disinterested kind of way. But having been so entertained with so many different bears with such different characters, and having watched some of their antics with such amusement what comes next is a bit of a shock..

We approach a large ice floe with apparently two bears at opposite ends. One, a female, is sat resting her head on her front paws then we suddenly realise - with shock - that the other is a big male and it is eating her cub!!! This is not a groundbreaking observation in any sense as it is known that males will sometimes kill the cubs of a female so that she will come on heat again and he can mate with her - but there is a big difference between knowing this piece of information and witnessing it. Perhaps the biggest shock was the size of the cub which was certainly not one of this year's and must be about a third the size of the male bear eating it. To have survived so long only to be killed by one of its own kind does seem rather brutal and the whole atmosphere changes on the ship as we watch in silence. The male bear seems a little worried about the presence of the ship and, with the photographers cameras going crazy, he drags the body of the cub, like a rag doll, off across the ice and into the water, swimming across to the next ice floe where it simply lifts it back out of the water as if it weighs nothing! It really brings home just how strong these bears are. He drags it a little

further before continuing to feed and we slowly draw away to leave them in peace as the female is looking rather anxious now and moving on to another ice floe. It is hard not to feel sad but this is nature!

It is incredible that when we count up the total number of Polar Bears seen just today we have seen 18, making the total so far 25 bears!! We have certainly seen them doing all kinds of things as well and after our evening meal Chris talks about the coming day and also tells us how lucky we are to have seen firstly so many bears but also bears doing so many different things! Even he is astonished. As we head to bed we set course towards the south-west, to the eastern mouth of Freemansundet, where we will sail between Barentsøya and Edgeøya during the night.

Day 9: We wake to find lovely weather as we head towards Sundneset on Barentsøya where we are intending to make a landing but unfortunately a Polar Bear is spotted on the shore and we get a message over the tannoy that we will have to try somewhere else. We enjoy a leisurely breakfast as we watch the beautiful scenery go by then a little further south make a landing instead at Rindedalen. This is a beautiful spot with flower studded tundra and we are soon finding sheets of Polar Willow, tufts of Hairy Lousewort and masses of different saxifrages including more delightful plants of Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage plus lots of Alpine Saxifrage as well as plenty of the more common species. We have rather ignored the grasses and sedges until now but the lovely heads of Alpine Foxtail are nodding in the breeze and we identify Cushion and Sooty Sedge. Linda is on top form finding lots of interesting plants and one of the best must surely be a Polar Champion with its distinctive inflated heads with thick purple veins. We have been seeing lots of Whitlow-grasses but they are always hard to identify which species, however one here with both flowers and seed capsules we identify as Tundra Whitlow-grass.

Higher up the slope we get good views of a Purple Sandpiper that seems to be displaying and at first we wonder whether it is trying to distract an Arctic Fox but soon we realise its attentions are focussed on another Purple Sandpiper nearby - both birds running with their wings raised above their backs. Hard to know if they are enemies or friends! There are also

a few Reindeer here and a couple of Arctic Skuas fly over but otherwise the bird scene is remarkably quiet.

Back on board we enjoy lunch while heading for Edgeøya and scanning the shore we pick out at least a dozen Reindeer and a big flock of Pink-footed Geese. We check through all the Eider flocks we see and finally arrive at an excellent site called Kapp Lee. This is a known Walrus haul-out and from the ship we can see a group of at least twenty to thirty of them resting on the beach. It looks great but as we are watching them Darren suddenly asks what we think the big creamy thing is just a little up the slope! We know immediately what it is, and he knew we would know, but almost immediately we hear Chris's voice over the tannoy telling us that there is a Polar Bear just up the beach a little from the Walruses and that we will not be able to land here either! We shift to Plan C, and head a bit more to the South to Diskobukta and with a bit of time in hand Jordi gives an interesting lecture on Polar Ecosystems and Wildlife adaptations. After the lecture we arrive in Diskobukta, but... surprise! For the third time a Polar Bear is spotted exactly on the landing site! We have to change plans again and the new plan is to cross over to the southeast side of Spitsbergen, to a location called Boltodden. This will take a couple of hours but as we cruise along the scenery is lovely, and it is very pleasant to relax in the dining room with a coffee and just watch it going by with Little Auks flying to and fro, Fulmars following the ship and the occasional Ringed Seal popping up. Karoline invites us in the lecture hall for a talk about the Geology of Svalbard - which is very interesting with a fascinating explanation about how the land looks the way it does after Spitsbergen's tectonic plate collided with Greenland!

After all the cancellations we enjoy our evening meal early then make our landing at Boltodden - a spot where no-one on board has ever been before - so we are really exploring! Once on land we enjoy the fantastic landscape, geology, birdlife and flora. There is a wide selection of the usual plants as soon as we arrive on shore and on a small pool we find a Red-throated Diver sat on a nest which looks great through the scopes. The backdrop of snow covered peaks is spectacular as we are now on the eastern side of Spitsbergen where the mountains are again very high and jagged and the snow is lying in huge amounts in the valleys. We cross a bank of snow and discover a dead Little Auk which strangely is in winter plumage! Does that

mean it has been here for months? There is an old hut strangely stood on a pile of snow and we guess that it must have slid down the hill from a higher flat level perhaps pushed by an avalanche! Amazing that it is still completely intact! There is a family of Snow Buntings on the roof and the young birds seem completely unbothered by our presence allowing close photographs to be taken while they wait to be fed. The place also seems to be visited by polar bears since we find droppings around the cabin, tracks in the snow and even a chewed beer can! I don't think I would like to meet a drunk Polar Bear!! It seems one of the more bird-rich places we have been with Arctic Skuas chasing the Arctic Terns down below, a nice flock of Eiders on the shore, some Barnacle Geese with goslings and out on the water a big flock of Long-tailed Ducks. Walking back to the zodiacs we find some Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage and a lovely patch of Net-leaved Willow - a scarce plant in Svalbard.

Around ten o'clock we were back onboard and Gemma and her kitchen staff were already waiting for us. They have prepared hot chocolate with rum and invite us to the foredeck. For those who stay up, the evening just becomes calmer and calmer until the sea is almost a mirror and dotted with thousands of Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots. Fulmars are reflected in the surface as they skim along beside us and the ship cruises south passing the wonderful jagged peaks of snowy mountains. The sun comes out giving us the chance to take some beautiful midnight sun photos and it is hard to drag yourself away despite the late hour. What a lovely way to end another fantastic day in the arctic.

Day 10: Overnight we sail round the southern tip of Spitsbergen and up the west coast a little to the southernmost fjord system on Svalbard - Hornsund. Spitsbergen translates to mean 'pointed mountains' and Hornsund is characterized by a dramatic landscape of high peaks and calving glaciers. This is truly the land of the pointed mountains! In the inner reaches of the fjord the 1431m high Hornsundtind is a spectacular land mark formed by folded and uplifted Silurian granite. It is the 3rd highest peak on Svalbard and one of the most difficult ones to climb. The fjord is also home to the Polish research station at Isbjørnehamna (polar bear harbour), on the north side of the fjord, close to the entrance. Today's first landing is at Gåshamna (goose harbour), a wide open bay on the south side of the fjord, just

opposite Isbjørnehamna. As we sail up the fjord there are many Brünnich's Guillemots with chicks being harassed by Arctic and Great Skuas as well as a few Puffins and plenty of Little Auks. Well prepared for the day, after a good breakfast and a great talk by Valeska on flowers of Svalbard and their fascinating variety, we head ashore in the zodiacs. Gåshamna has a long history and we are hoping to walk to the remains of houses used by Pomor hunters but first we stop to look at what is left of an English whaling station from dating from 1617 to 1658.

The landing site is scattered with whale bones and the place has a slightly sober feel to it as a result. Chris points out the remains of an area where they would have boiled up the whales to extract the oil from the blubber and all around it are the remains of skulls of Bowhead Whales, ribs and huge, arching jaw bones. There were hundreds of thousands of whales here before the hunting began and Chris tells us that one company killed over 65,000 Bowhead Whales in just over a hundred years. They were an easy target and were just about extinct in the area when they finished and are yet to stage any kind of recovery. Around some of the bones are little communities of plants where they have benefited from the extra nutrients in the soil. Above us on the cliffs is a Kittiwake colony and we find a couple of Puffins up there too.

We follow the shore passing a couple of old Arctic Fox traps. These were made so that when the fox pulled at the bait it was crushed by a pile of large rocks on a wooden construction above it, that way the pelt was not ruined as it would be if the animal were shot. We arrive at the remains of an old Pomor house where Christopher gives a short introduction to the site and Pomor history, explaining that these incredibly hardy people came here to hunt Arctic Fox and Polar Bears in particular during the winter as that is when the fur was at its best! It is hard to imagine what life must have been like with so little sunlight and the harsh winter weather. The Pomors were from the Russian Coast near the White Sea but life would be even harsher here. Interestingly you can identify the Pomor remains of houses from the way the wood is cut to form the base of the house and also the fact that they imported ordinary looking bricks to make the chimney and these are scattered all around the site looking most incongruous. While some of us enjoyed pottering around looking at the flowers and walking slowly back

to the beach others set off with Jordi up a ridge to get a view. The flowers are mainly species we have seen before but Snowy Pearlwort is new and we also enjoy views of Puffins and Eiders just off-shore. On the way back to the zodiacs, however, there is suddenly huge excitement as a group of nine Belugas suddenly appear near the shore! We are thrilled and watch in astonishment as they swim past surfacing regularly just ten or so metres away - fantastic! Those of us on the beach get really close views and count at least six but those with Jordi are just coming back down from the ridge and with the greater height can see them even better through the water and count nine! At one point it is just as though they are having a meeting to discuss what to do next with all the heads pointing into the middle before once more they are swimming along the shoreline and away. We are grinning from ear to ear as we head back to the ship for lunch. It turns out that Linda has got some incredible footage of them on her video recorder and there is a wonderful moment when Terry sidles up to her and asks, "Linda, can I see your Belugas?" They will be known as Linda's Belugas for ever more I think!

During lunch Captain Ernesto sails further into the fjord and we enjoy the fabulous scenery of Brepollen during our mealtime. There are so many glaciers coming down to the shore that the cruise becomes known as the Glacier Cruise but the high peaks shrouded in cloud add to the incredible atmosphere of the place as do the numerous lumps of shapely blue ice in the water and the scenery really is breathtaking.

In the afternoon we make a landing at Alpinistsletta (Alpinist plain), a tranquil beach backed by a steep mountain and flanked by an abandoned lateral moraine on one end and a pile of boulders on the other. As the guides spread out we are able to wander freely around the beach and the tundra, finding our own peaceful spot in the arctic. Some enjoy the solitude of just sitting and taking it all in while others potter around looking at the flowers and birds. We watch an Eider being seriously harassed by Arctic Skuas. It is a little hard to work out what is going on as the Eider we think was disturbed off its nest and the skuas seem to be bombarding it as if it is a problem to them in some way! Then once back on the nest one skua simply stands and watches and we wonder if it is going to just wait until the Eider has to leave the nest and will take the eggs. Once again we are

fortunate enough to get a visit from Belugas this time spotted by Mick as they swim past just offshore. At first there are just two - a mother and a youngster, the young one looking quite grey, then a further five white animals swim past and Felicita is thrilled as she did not come ashore earlier and missed the first ones.

After we return to the ship Jordi offers a talk on whales and how to identify them. It is a great talk and very appropriate for this evening, since we have not only seen Belugas today but are heading out to the edge of the shelf this evening in search of some larger whales! Sadly it proves a bit of a disappointment and those of us who spent the evening staring out at the sea from the bridge are rewarded with a single sighting of a distant Fin Whale that surfaces just once. Thank goodness we saw those whales three days ago!

Day 11: This morning we wake up in Bellsund at the entrance to a fjord system with several branches that cut up to 80 kilometres inland. Bellsund is the Norwegian translation of the old name "Klok bay", "Bell sound" after the bell-shaped mountain Klokkefjellet south of the entrance. Our plan is to go deep into Van Keulenfjord, one of the side branches of this fjord, for a zodiac cruise to view a surging glacier called Nathorstbreen. A surging glacier is one which does not move for years as the level of snow and ice gradually build up, then suddenly, when the weight becomes too much, it starts to move - often relatively quickly for a glacier - then stops again. This one apparently did not move for around 70 years but has moved about 3km in the last year!

From the ship it looks spectacular and we pass masses of broken ice and small bergs as we head up the fjord. Much of the ice is filthy as it has gathered soil and stones before breaking off and floating away from the glacier front. At 9am the zodiacs are launched and excited we start our glacier cruise. Looking at the different pieces of ice, we slowly work our way further towards the glacier front. There are some big icebergs, which by definition is ice carved from glaciers with more than 5 meters (15 feet) above the waterline. Most of the ice pieces are 'bergy bits,' which are the same as icebergs but smaller with 1-5 meters (3-15 feet) above water. Smaller still, with only 1 metre (3 ft) above the water are growlers. Small fragments of ice in the water are called brash ice. We see plenty of all types as we gradually work our way closer and marvel at the many shapes created

by the sculpting water. Roy's zodiac have a shock when watching one large rather interesting shaped piece that looked a little like two dragons fighting (you have to be a little imaginative!) suddenly the whole thing breaks in two and bumps firmly against the side of the zodiac as one piece swivels around in the water! Much of the ice is deep blue and some bits so dirty with soil and they look more like rock than ice! The glacier front is spectacular. Composed of huge towers of glacier ice at all kinds of angles the whole front looks shattered and fragmented and many bits look as if they could collapse at any moment. There is a huge area of ice jammed together in front of the glacier that we try to work our way round and occasionally nose into little inlets until Darren's zodiac discover a Polar Bear not far from the edge! It has a look at them and decides they are of no interest and goes back to sleep. Ivory Gulls are flying around over the ice and in front of the glacier giving incredible close up views and looking spectacular in front of such a stunning backdrop in the sunshine. Black Guillemots are incredibly tame and swim around the zodiacs and there are lots of Kittiwakes and the occasional Glaucous Gull too.

When the motors of our zodiacs are turned off, we can actually hear the glacier ice. The trapped air escapes making cracking noises and we can see air bubbles coming up to the water surface. With the sun now out, the scene is like a fantasy world of ice and when it is time to return we are amazed to discover we have been out here more than two hours! As Darren's zodiac heads back to the ship he spots a small flock of King Eiders flying across but they keep going beyond the ship and out of sight which is very frustrating. Roy and Darren immediately head up on the deck when they get back to try and relocate them finding instead lots of Common Eiders, Barnacle Geese, Arctic Skuas and a great Bearded Seal hauled out on a berg. Astonishingly another Polar Bear is found - spotted by John and Alan - this time swimming past the ship heading for the glacier! Bear number 30 for the trip!

Lunch is served and we enjoy the scenery through the windows as we sail to our next destination back at Bellsund where we wanted to explore the northern side this afternoon. There is a large Little Auk colony here at Ingeborgfjellet and we are excited about visiting another Little Auk colony (this one even bigger than the last!) but also it is a great place to look out for

Arctic Fox - perhaps the only species we were expecting and hoping to see that is genuinely likely. By 2:30pm we are ready for our next expedition when, as we approach our landing site, we spot yet another Polar Bear walking behind some rocks close to the beach. It is rather frustrating but can't be helped and the next announcement informs us we are now heading for Midterhuken, the mountain between Van Mijenfjord and Van Keulenfjord. Surely that is our last chance for Arctic Fox gone and slightly disappointed we scan the rocks as we move the ship to our next landing and Darren excels himself by finding two Great Black-backed Gulls!!

Shortly after 3:00pm we reach the anchorage position and are shuttled ashore. What a beautiful spot! A rocky coastline, with pebbly beaches in between lush green slopes and steep mountain cliffs in the background. As we arrive there is a flock of Barnacle Geese running down the slope towards the beach making a lot of noise and looking most upset! Clearly something has disturbed them from their feeding and as we look at them through the binoculars we realise why they are so excited - an Arctic Fox is chasing them! He is after the goslings and will kill as many as he can before they get away. The flock reaches the safety of the water, but not without loss, and we watch through the scopes as the fox climbs the grassy slope to stash the first of the goslings it has caught. It climbs a fair way up the slope before burying the gosling and we get fabulous scope views with enough time for everyone to get a turn for a long view. After burying the first one it comes all the way back down to pick up a second carrying that back up to another spot and doing the same. It is a beautiful animal with dark grey-brown fur and a white belly and a pretty face. Amazingly it returns for a third gosling and again heads back up the slope where it buries this one in another location before heading off across the slope and having a rest. There is a flock of rather nervous looking Pink-footed Geese up there which are incredibly well camouflaged against the rocks, but he pays them no interest at all and eventually curls up and goes to sleep. We are thrilled to have been so lucky when we had thought that our best chance for a fox had gone! The tundra on which we are standing is covered in flowers with plenty of Yellow Marsh, Tufted, Drooping and Highland Saxifrages, Moss Campion and a new plant - Svalbard Buttercup. It has been a fabulous last landing and with a long way still to go we head back to the ship and set sail for Longyearbyen.

There is much celebration as we sail and the Captain, expedition leader Chris and the staff sum up the trip and say their goodbyes and thank-yous with a glass of sparkling wine. Marcelo and Beverly, our good chefs, prepared a delicious farewell dinner and then we head down to the lecture room where Philipp has created an excellent slide show made up of pictures taken on the trip. It is great to be reminded of the places we went and the things we saw and some of the photos are very wittily annotated creating lots of laughter.

After that our Speyside Wildlife group adjourn to the library to go through the checklist one last time and enjoy reminiscing with our votes for species of the trip, place of the trip and a magic moment. There are too many exciting species to just choose one and Darren suggests three per person so it is no surprise when everyone chooses Polar Bear as one of them! Let's face it, they have been incredible with so many sightings and doing so many interesting things it would be criminal not to choose them! Some people single out a particular bears and 'Pooh Bear' and the 'Mother and Cubs' are both popular. It is then a race for second place and a surprising number of species get votes including all three skuas, Grey Phalaropes, Little Auks, Belugas, Ivory Gull and Brünnich's Guillemots but in the end it is Walrus that comes in second with Arctic Fox third. Of the many and varied places we visited the most astonishing has to be the pack-ice and this scores well above everywhere else in the favourite place votes. However, the Brünnich's Guillemot colony also scores with three votes and Alpinistsletta - the spot where we were able to just sit and take it all in - also scores a vote. The magic moment is often a more personal thing and the thoughts and memories are wonderful to listen to. The Walrus coming out of the water, the flowers, the Belugas, the Barnacle Geese and the Arctic Fox, the Guillemot landing in the boat the incredible surging glacier - the memories are many and varied and we also hear of others that nearly got their vote instead. But again it is the Polar Bears that will stick in many people's minds and the moment that several people found truly magic was being called up on deck at 3am to watch the mother Polar Bear with her two cubs. What an astonishing scene - ice to the horizon and there they were perfectly at home with Ivory Gulls and Pomerine Skuas for company. In many ways it is crazy

trying to choose a single magic moment - there have been so many - but it is a lovely way to remind ourselves what an incredible time we have had.

Day 12: It seems an early start as we meet for breakfast at 6am ready for our transfer to the airport and our flight home. With our final scan of the shore from the airport windows we find Glaucous Gulls and Eiders, Arctic Terns and Fulmars passing offshore just like they were when we arrived. Then we bid Svalbard a fond farewell and head for home.

Total distance travelled: 1178.2 Nautical Miles (2179.67 km)

Birds

Red-throated Diver
Fulmar
Pink-footed Goose
Barnacle Goose
Common Eider
King Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Ringed Plover
Purple Sandpiper
Little Stint
Grey Phalarope
Pomarine Skua
Long-tailed Skua
Arctic Skua
Great Skua
Glaucous Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Sabine's Gull
Ivory Gull
Arctic Tern
Brünnich's Guillemot
Black Guillemot
Little Auk
Puffin
Snow Bunting

Mammals

Walrus
Bearded Seal
Ringed Seal
Harp Seal
Blue Whale
Fin Whale
Minke Whale
Beluga
Polar Bear
Arctic Fox
Svalbard Reindeer

Plants (some identified later from photographs)

Polar Horsetail
Polar Fir Club-moss
Polar Willow
Net-leaved Willow
Mountain Sorrel
Alpine Bistort
Mountain Sandwort
Tufted Sandwort
Snowy Pearlwort
Arctic Chickweed
Polar Mouse-ear
Arctic Mouse-ear
Polar Champion
Moss Champion
Svalbard Buttercup
Snow Buttercup
Arctic Buttercup
Svalbard Buttercup
Sulphur-coloured Buttercup
Pygmy Buttercup
Svalbard Poppy
Polar Cress
Polar Scurvygrass
Whitlow-grasses
Tundra Whitlow-grass
Lapland Whitlow-grass
Purplish Braya
Purple Saxifrage
Hawkweed-leafed Saxifrage
Alpine Saxifrage
Yellow Mountain Saxifrage
Yellow Marsh Saxifrage
Drooping Saxifrage
Highland Saxifrage
Tufted Saxifrage
Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage
Slender Saxifrage
Tufted Cinquefoil
Arctic Cinquefoil
Mountain Avens
White Arctic Bell-heather
Equisetum arvense
Huperzia arctica
Salix polaris
Salix reticulata
Oxyria digyna
Polygonum viviparum
Minuartia rubella
Minuartia biflora
Sagina nivalis
Stellaria humifusa
Cerastium regelii
Cerastium arcticum
Silene wahlbergella
Silene acaulis
Ranunculus spetsbergensis
Ranunculus nivalis
Ranunculus hyperboreus
Coptidium spitsbergense
Ranunculus sulphureus
Ranunculus pygmaeus
Papaver dahlianum
Cardamine nymanii
Cochlearia officinalis
Draba spp
Draba pauciflora
Draba lactea
Braya purprascens
Saxifraga oppositifolia
Saxifraga hieracifolia
Saxifraga nivalis
Saxifraga aizoides
Saxifraga hirculus
Saxifraga cernua
Saxifraga rivularis
Saxifraga cespitosa
Saxifraga flagellaris
Saxifraga tenuis
Potentilla pulchella
Potentilla hyparctica
Dryas octopetala
Cassiope tetragona

Woolly Lousewort
Hairy Lousewort
Arctic Dandelion
Polar Dandelion
Arctic Cottongrass
Arctic Wood-rush
Northern Woodrush
Two-flowered Rush
Polar Foxtail
Cushion Sedge
Sooty Sedge

Pedicularis dasyantha
Pedicularis hirsuta
Taraxacum arcticum
Taraxacum brachyceras
Eriophorum scheuchzeri
Luzula arctica
Luzula confusa
Juncus biglumis
Alopecurus borealis
Carex nardina
Carex misandra

Other

Polar Cod
Winged Snail
Comb Jellies
Spider sp!