

Holiday Highlights

Spitsbergen

17 – 27 July 2014

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Guests: Sue & Peter Daley, Jean Davies & Jonathan Hannam, Jill & Rob Martin, Sheila Spikins & Keith Stedman, Jean Wardle, Sarah Sharland & Jane Walker and Tania Pedersen

Travel Day

Our flight from London to Oslo leaves right on time and we grab something to eat before heading to the gate for our second flight. The second flight proves quite spectacular with some stunningly beautiful cloudscapes and spectacular scenery as we get closer to our destination. Looking down we see snow capped peaks and ridges amongst the swirling clouds before we swing down over the bay and land just outside Longyearbyen.

Despite the lateness of the hour it is of course still full daylight for our short bus ride to the hotel where we are soon settled in - all excited about the coming days. It is so tempting to go for a walk to see what we can find but it is already well after midnight and we know we'll be better getting some sleep.

Day 1: We gather at the dining room for breakfast and find a superb buffet with a great selection of food. Then after packing our bags ready to be taken on to the ship we take a short walk. Outside the hotel we scan the skies above the hillsides to see flocks of Little Auks flying back and forth to their nesting colonies and also an Arctic Skua perched high on the skyline. We wander down towards the coast and Roy points out a few flowers - Tufted Saxifrage and Arctic Mouse-ear are growing at the roadside and we are just talking about the Svalbard Poppy that is in beautiful flower when suddenly Darren starts giving directions! "Get your binoculars on the sea between the two buildings in the dock, right of the one with the new roof," he says. We follow his instructions and two white shapes appear and disappear - Belugas!!! Flowers forgotten we race down to the shore to get better views, soon relocate them and enjoy fabulous views of these pure white whales as they surface not too far off shore. They are not a species that goes in for acrobatics very much but there is something very special about a white whale that lives in the arctic and we feel we have really arrived! We watch them for a while as they approach a small group of kayakers and realise there are four, then they swim further out and join another three more making seven in total.

We are still watching them when an Ivory Gull flies across right in front of us!! It is joined by a second bird and one swoops round and lands on the shore behind us. What an incredible view! It is really too easy - this is a bird you should have to wait for and hope to see in the pack ice feeding on Polar Bear kills but here it is within half an hour on our first morning! What a beautiful bird - completely clean white all over with a dark eye and pale tip to the dark bill - another real arctic speciality. The Glaucous Gulls nearby look like big thugs in comparison though they are also rather smart with their clean white wing-tips. On the shore below us there are several Purple Sandpipers, not looking even a tiny bit purple in their speckled breeding plumage. A single Ringed Plover appears and then scanning the water we find Black Guillemot, several Common Eiders and Jonathan finds a female Long-tailed Duck.

After enjoying these great birds and watching the Belugas some more we finally decide to take a short walk and head back to the road that heads out of town. The flowers are all arctic-alpine species - delightful little things like Arctic Mouse-ear, Svalbard Poppy, Arctic Chickweed, Alpine Bistort, Mountain Avens and White Arctic Campion. Further up the road we enjoy scope views of a pair of nesting Arctic Skuas, their little chick all fluffy and cute though beginning to get its first feathers. In the other direction is a flock of Barnacle Geese with a crèche of goslings, a mass of fluff all feeding on the sparse tundra grasses. In the distance a flock of Pink-footed Geese, also with goslings, are swimming along the far shore.

Walking on we have fun trying to avoid being attacked by the Arctic Terns nesting beside the road and in the wet roadside ditches we find a second Ringed Plover and a rather smart breeding plumage Dunlin. There are Snow Buntings all over the place including some feeding young and we get ridiculously close views of a smart male as he busily searches for insects just yards away.

We eventually reach a road sign that clearly means that any further and you are in Polar Bear territory. We decide not to go any further!! On the slope above us Darren picks out a Svalbard Reindeer, a separate race of Reindeer that is smaller with shorter legs. Their behaviour is different too being generally solitary or in very small parties rather than the big herds found on the mainland. We spend a little while scanning the area for birds and enjoying the spectacular scenery with snowy peaks all around before starting back towards the hotel. Pausing at one spot to identify some flowers we find Pygmy Buttercup, Drooping Saxifrage, various Whitlow-grasses (later identified as Arctic and Mealy Whitlow-grasses) and Arctic White Campion. There are big patches of Mountain Avens and both Tundra and Arctic Chickweed.

We are passed by a couple of husky pulled sleds on wheels then arrive back at the hotel where our packed lunch is waiting. We eat at the tables outside before having some free time to enjoy the town, visit the shops and go round the museum. A couple of hours later finds us meeting up outside the museum but before heading to the ship we pause to look at a selection of flowers here including a lovely big patch of Yellow Marsh Saxifrage. Arctic White and Polar Campions are growing side by side, a good opportunity to compare these two somewhat similar species. Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage is growing nearby and there are patches of the rather straggling Tundra Buttercup here too.

We then make the short walk down to the ship and are welcomed aboard with coffee and tea in the bar. We have a little time to settle in before meeting up for a run through the safety drill - which includes a practice run, putting on our floatation devices, meeting up at the muster point and going out to see where the lifeboats are. We then get to meet the captain and the various guides from the ship including historians, geologists, natural historians, marine biologist and more! They all seem very friendly and entertaining and then after another short break we meet up for our evening meal.

We finish the day with a run through the checklist amazed at how many species we have seen already from the rather short list - including a good list of flowers. Darren then shows us on the map roughly where we are hoping to travel in the next few days and describes a few places we might visit - but the weather and the ice may alter the plans and as the expedition leader, Jim, said in his little spiel, none of us is in charge, it is the weather and the ice that runs things and often plans change depending on where we can actually get to!

Day 2:

We wake to an announcement at 7:15am telling us breakfast is soon to be served and the temperature outside is 6 degrees. We are sailing towards the 14th July Bay and Glacier and poking our heads outside the scenery is spectacular with snowy mountains lining the sides of the bay. Flocks of Little Auks are passing the ship with Brünnich's Guillemots powering past them. Fulmars sail by on stiff wings looking noticeably darker than the fulmars at home and some very dark indeed! The buffet breakfast is very good and then it is time to sort out wellington boots for those who have not brought them, which is almost everyone! Then follows instructions on what to do during visits to shore and how to behave around the zodiacs to be safe. There is also a slightly sobering bit about how not to get eaten by bears!! Jim is a very friendly and humorous expedition leader but he makes it very clear that he is deadly serious about instructions regarding bears!

From the deck we can see a couple of Reindeer wandering along the grassy slope below which are small cliffs with ledges full of Brünnich's Guillemots and above are high cliffs covered in nesting Kittiwakes. The occasional Puffin flies past and Glaucous Gulls patrol the cliff faces. The compacted ice of the Glacier at the end of the bay is blue with impressive crevasses and a jagged front where pieces have broken off and lumps of ice are scattered in the bay like tiny icebergs.

A tannoy message tells it is time to get sorted out for our zodiac landing and fifteen minutes later we are all kitted up and walking down the steps to the zodiacs for the short ride to the shore. We pass beautiful pieces of sculptured ice en route, eroded into bizarre shapes - one is like a table on a thin pedestal and another is definitely a duck!

On shore we get wonderful close views of a pair of Arctic Skuas and on the slopes a group of three Reindeer are grazing. Hundreds of Kittiwakes are nesting on the ledges high above and out to sea Black Guillemots are fishing. Brünnich's Guillemots are scattered on the water and nesting on the ledges up ahead. The short turf is heavily grazed by the reindeer but there are still plenty of flowers including beautiful patches of Moss Campion covered in pink flowers. Steffi, one of the ships guides tells us that the temperature in the middle of these clumps is considerably warmer than the surrounding air! Purple Saxifrage is everywhere though mostly over flower and we find a scattering of Alpine Saxifrage.

Higher on the slopes we realise there are a few Barnacle Geese and at least one pair of Pink-footed Geese leading their goslings along the slope. We arrive at a small cliff covered in a veritable rock garden of flowers and realise there is a pair of Snow Buntings nesting here. We set up a telescope on the nest and enjoy lovely views of the adults feeding the chicks. The cliff face is covered in flowers including masses of saxifrages - Drooping, Tufted, Purple, Alpine and Hawkweed-leaved are all looking in fabulous condition - as well as Arctic Mouse-ear, Alpine Bistort and at least two Whitlow-grass species - Scree and Pale.

We walk on a little way and enjoy some nice views of Puffins through the telescope and also Brünnich's Guillemots on the ledges above us. A Great Skua flies through upsetting the pair of Arctic Skuas who see it off. Looking back towards the glacier the sun is trying to come through and the lighting on the surface of the glacier is beautiful, the blueness of the ice and the cracks and crevasses looking incredible. It is hard to grasp the scale of all this but a flock of kittiwakes are feeding at the bottom of the ice cliff at the front of the glacier

and you can't even see them with the naked eye! You then realise just how tall this cliff is and one of the ships guides tells us it is about 90 feet tall! Our time here runs out all too quickly and we head back to the ship where dinner is already being served.

After we have eaten we are soon gathering again to hear about the afternoon's excursion. We are now travelling towards the other arm of the fjord, Kongsfjorden, and as we sail there are lots of Little Auks. A flock of Eiders are close to shore when we arrive and a close Puffin on the water plus another Great Skua. This is Ny Ålesund and is considered perhaps the most northerly settlement of any size in the world. It is now entirely the preserve of scientists studying everything from Barnacle Goose behaviour to the Aurora and we head ashore in pouring rain. We make our way to a cabin with a sheltered area in the front that overlooks a small pool.

The pool has quite a lot of Barnacle Geese and a few Eiders while Purple Sandpipers and Snow Buntings are picking for insects round the edge. Of more interest is a lovely pair of Red-throated Divers that are asleep on the water and we wait for them to wake up so we can enjoy better views. They are very close and after a while one does indeed lift its head allowing us to see the elegant outline. We see Arctic Skuas, lots of Arctic Terns and a Turnstone flies through calling. A Long-tailed Duck flies in but looks quite nervous and eventually takes off and flies past as it heads back out to sea. There are sheets of Purple Saxifrage in full flower here and the whole area is scattered with little clumps of Tufted Saxifrage.

As the time approaches 5pm we walk over to the large bust of Roald Amundsen, the polar explorer. Here David, one of the two ship historians, is waiting to tell us some of the historical background of this interesting place. With the rather surreal backdrop of an Arctic Tern sat on the busts head we learn of the background to the town which was originally based on coal mining. We hear of two devastating explosions that resulted in the deaths of almost 50 men between them and the end of coal mining here. We also learn of the race to reach the North Pole and how Amundsen lost the race but changed direction as soon as he heard and went for the South Pole instead (where of course he was indeed the first!) Attempts were made using airships and planes and there were crashes and lives lost - including that of the great man himself while searching for Nobile - an Italian explorer who had crashed his dirigible in his attempt to get to the North Pole and who Amundsen had fallen out with some time before. We hear part of this story here and the rest beside the mast just outside town that was used to tie the dirigible to before they left for the North Pole. They were certainly tough in those days!!

But we can't resist further scanning for wildlife while we listen and we find a single male Eider and some females offshore - it is strange how there seem to be lots of females but hardly any males. But we can't help feeling a tiny bit sorry for David as while he is full flow talking us through the story, Simon, one of the ship guides, spots an Arctic Fox! He quietly comes to tell us and we are soon pointing it out excitedly to each other and following it through the scope. Others can't help but notice and poor David has soon lost half his audience! The fox eventually vanishes and after the talk we race over in the direction it was last seen - soon relocating it the other side of the houses. It is behaving quite oddly almost dancing around a Reindeer there! Soon it runs off up the slope and we follow it as far as we can, enjoying some wonderful scope views.

Time is flying by and we set off back towards the zodiacs but as we are passing the pool again suddenly the fox reappears causing all the geese to make for the water in a panic. The geese seem fascinated and follow the fox, swimming just off-shore where they are safe but perhaps creating a backdrop against which the fox is camouflaged. A pair of Barnacle Geese with three young walk straight down the slope towards it as if completely unaware it is there!! Clearly they want to get to the water but it seems crazy to walk straight towards a waiting Arctic Fox! They keep going until dangerously close and of course the inevitable happens - the fox makes its dash and grabs one of the goslings, gives it a shake and drops it on the ground. Leaving that one with legs waving in the air, it goes for a second grabbing it and killing it while the adults and their one remaining chick make it onto the water. The fox proceeds to pick up both in its mouth and head off to find a place away from the geese to eat them. Wow - how amazing to witness such a scene - we are thrilled and as someone says it is like being in a David Attenborough video!!

The fox eats the bulk of one gosling then heads up the slope a little way where it caches the second, burying it in the softer earth up the slope. We then get more wonderful close views as it makes its way back along the shore - simply beautiful to watch and providing scope filling views.

Back on the ship we meet up before the evening meal for a briefing about the next day and this is also a slot when one of the guides tells us a bit more about some aspect of the place we have been - today a little about the geology. Jim the expedition leader then tells us more about what we may have in store during the rest of the trip before we head for our evening meal.

Day 3: What an incredible start to the day!! Most of us are up early in the hope of spotting a whale in this northern part of the island as it is a good area for

MInke, Fin and other species. After a short time one of the ships guides spots a MInke Whale but while we are trying to relocate it Darren spots a group of Belugas close to the shoreline. Excited we follow them through the scopes and realise it is quite a large group so the captain takes the boat closer. We are never going to get very close with them so close to shore but we shorten the distance and the views are getting better and better when suddenly we hear the shout that above the whales, on a bank of snow, there is a mother and cub Polar Bear!!! It takes seconds to swing the scopes onto the bears instead and over the next twenty minutes or so we watch the mother and cub gradually make their way across the snow and the tundra heading down towards the beach then back up the slope, the baby having to run at times to keep up. At one point you can even see Polar Bears and Belugas in the same binocular view!

It is a lovely scene with the snowy mountains all around and the bears wandering slowly across the tundra and even a few Reindeer feeding on the flatter ground - when suddenly the Polar Bear notices the Reindeer. Generally speaking Polar Bears don't eat Reindeer much preferring seals with their calorific blubber - but suddenly the mother bear is running and gaining ground on a mother Reindeer with two calves!! We watch in astonishment as the Reindeer suddenly realise what is coming and run for their lives, racing away across the tundra, but the as they cut up to higher ground the bear sees a chance and cuts between the mother and one of the calves and suddenly the calf is racing off in the wrong direction with the bear closing the gap! For a moment it looks like the bear is going to get something to eat today but the Reindeer has amazing stamina despite being so young. The bear is more of a sprinter and after some time the Reindeer is widening the gap. It is an incredible thing to witness and more astonishing for the fact that the bear doesn't just give up! Instead the chase continues with the bear running on as the Reindeer tries to get back to its mum - running in a big arch which the bear tries to cut off and for a moment we wonder if it might succeed in making a catch after all. But it is hot work for a bear to run like this and eventually it simply has to stop or completely overheat. The bear watches the young Reindeer as it catches up with its mother who no doubt will have been almost as relieved as the calf! The bear meanwhile looks exhausted and soon flops down on the ground for a rest. What a sighting - and Jim's voice comes over the tannoy telling us that none of the ship guides had ever witnessed such a thing before.

With the bear now resting we relocate the Belugas, now some distance off-shore and enjoy some nice scope views which help us try and estimate how many are in this group. We finally conclude that the number is probably in the

mid twenties. The next announcement declares that we have enjoyed bears and Belugas and now it is time for breakfast!

After breakfast we gather in the bar to hear what the plans are for the day but first we hear a few Polar Bear facts from Kelvin - one of the guides - and learn about their behaviour, when they breed, what they eat etc. Then Jim tells us that we will be doing a zodiac cruise round some nearby islands.

We get changed and gather at the top of the ramp to make sure we are all together then we are on our way. We know that a couple of interesting birds are possible but soon a rumour of more Polar Bears is spreading! All the zodiacs race over towards one island which adds to our suspicions. Approaching the island we realise that what we thought was a big pale rock is in fact a huge male Polar Bear resting on the grass and down by the shore is a second smaller one. They don't seem the least bit interested in the approaching zodiacs and we stop just offshore and sometimes even with the tip of the zodiac resting on the shingle. Over the next hour or more we enjoy the most fantastic close views of these two Polar Bears. This close we can appreciate the sheer size and tell that the top one is certainly a big male with a rather roman nose. The lower one is a smaller male with a big scar on his nose. Male Polar Bears will often tolerate each other around a carcass and we notice that nearby there is a rather old carcass of a small whale or perhaps a White-beaked Dolphin. It is now just a few rather black looking vertebrae and ribs with a few Glaucous Gulls pecking at it as presumably the bears have stripped virtually everything else off it. The two bears continue sleeping a lot of the time though occasionally they lift their heads and look around but finding nothing of interest flop back down. Eventually the big bear gets up and has a walk of just a few yards before being attacked by Arctic Terns!! The bear seems completely un-phased and goes back to sleep! The smaller bear must be feeling a little too hot as it gets up and wanders over to a patch of ice before going back to sleep on this nice cold bed.

We are also distracted by lots of birds including plenty of Arctic Terns, Long-tailed Ducks and a lovely Arctic Skua but best of all is a little group of Red (Grey) Phalaropes that fly in and land on the shoreline. They swim around pecking delicately at the surface with fine bills and look absolutely superb in full breeding plumage. We are amazed how tame they are and at times they are very close indeed. We have to pinch ourselves to believe all this is real, we are really here - in glorious sunshine, with snowy mountain peaks in all directions, two Polar Bears and a flock of Red Phalaropes right there in front of us. What an absolutely wonderful place to be!

Thrilled with our prolonged views of the bears and other wildlife we eventually drag ourselves away stopping to admire a breeding plumage Red-throated Diver before we head over to a small bay nearby. We skirt round the edge of the bay finding more Red Phalaropes and a nice flock of Long-tailed Ducks plus several Eiders. There are a few males here as well as females and we can see the features that make these the northern subspecies, borealis, especially the more orangey stripe up the top of the bill. Simon then brilliantly spots a female King Eider and we get very good views while Roy and Darren point out the identification features of this species (and secretly wish it was a male). With time passing rather quickly now we head back towards the ship passing a group of over twenty Red Phalaropes as we go.

After lunch we cruise in the main ship to get a closer look at Monacobreen Glacier. It is absolutely glorious here with beautiful scenery and wonderful weather - the sun shining on the glaciers trailing down the slopes between the mountains here. The main glacier is covered in crevasses and the ice looks blue, while the lumps of ice in the water that have broken off have been eroded into all kinds of fabulous shapes. We pick out all kinds of things - pelicans, rabbits, whales, a snapping turtle and flamingos are seen amongst them!

Our next port of call is a little further out of the bay at a spot called Texas Bar! We land beside a small hut (which says Texas Bar on it though no-one seems to know why) which used to be the home of Norwegian hunter Hilmar Nois who spent a lot of his years here. The scenery is beautiful and we walk up the slope above the hut which is covered in a scattering of delightful Mountain Avens and Purple Saxifrage. Here and there are patches of Moss Campion and sheets of Polar Willow. We pass a small pool and are astonished to find a Red-throated Diver nesting on the far side. Through the scope it completely fills the view and at last we can actually see the red throat!

Delightful patches of flowers like Tufted Saxifrage and Moss Campion are scattered over the scree and other plants are growing in tiny crevices in the rocks above. Drooping Saxifrage is growing at the base of the rocks, the white flowers and red bulbils distinctive. New species include Mountain Sandwort, Purplish Braya and tiny patches of Polar Mouse-ear which creates much laughter as Roy explains that the identification key suggests that you can tell Mouse-ear species by their white flowers and furry leaves - yet this species has neither!

On the higher ground we are treated to fabulous views of a pair of Arctic Skuas. With a light breeze coming up the slope they simply hang in the wind

right in front of us - a nice photo opportunity! We enjoy close up views in flight and when they land.

We head back to the ship where we gather in the bar to hear about plans for tomorrow and also learn a little about Beluga Whales and Glaciers before our evening meal. We are now steaming north where we pass a low lying island called Moffen. You are no longer allowed to land at this nature reserve but scanning through the scopes we can enjoy the sight of several big Walrus pulled out on the shingle - a little distant but wonderful through the scopes. The sun is still blazing as we celebrate with a wee dram of whiskey very kindly provided by Rob to celebrate our first Polar Bears - a lovely end to an absolutely sensational day!

Day 4: Most of us are up very early in the hope of seeing whales in the northern part of the Hinlopen Strait. This might well have been successful as it is a great area to see Fin and Minke Whales -but fog definitely doesn't help and by breakfast time we have glimpsed a couple of Ringed Seals and seen the usual birds - but nothing else in the thick fog.

After breakfast we are soon ready for our zodiac cruise under the cliffs at Alkefjellet. As we load into the zodiacs we can't actually see any cliffs through the fog but the surface of the sea is dotted with Brünnich's Guillemots so we know it can't be far! We take a few moments to enjoy the lovely close views of the birds on the water and turning off the engine they are remarkably tame and inquisitive coming over and swimming right beside the zodiac and looking up at us as if wondering what these strange creatures are. Then we head in towards the cliffs which loom out of the fog above us.

Above us are pinnacles or rock and ledges and gullies and there are Brünnich's Guillemots everywhere!! Tens of thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots nest here with ledges and ledges of nesting birds from eye level down nearer the water to high up on the cliffs and pinnacles. The sound of their raucous calls fills the air as do the birds themselves as they come and go from the ledges - it is an incredible sight and the whole sky seems to be full of flying birds. The distinctive smell of auk colonies is disliked by many but some of us quite like it and it brings back exciting memories of visits to other auk colonies. Birds are flying in low over our heads, high over the cliffs and others are swimming around the bottom of the rocks. There are birds everywhere and it is a great chance to really see the detail of what appears to be a very basic dark and white plumage but which is a little more detailed in close up. The occasional bird crash lands splashes noisily into the sea beside the zodiac when it fails to land properly, others are squabbling over ledge space, many are just sitting

quietly with their chicks hidden beneath them and very occasionally one flies out with the slow exaggerated flap of a displaying bird, which seems strange so late in the season. Occasionally dozens leave the ledges together in response to a Glaucous Gull coming in search of chicks to eat. They have their own chicks to feed nearby and we watch one pair with two fluffy grey chicks in the scurvy grass on top of one of the pinnacles. There are much smaller numbers of Black Guillemots along the lower parts of the cliff and we see several on the water. Some of the Brünnich's' Guillemots on the water seem every inquisitive and come right up to the zodiac peering up at us inquisitively. It is a fantastic spectacle and we are spellbound. We are told there are 60,000 pairs here and our own rough estimate as we cruise by under the cliffs suggests at least 59,995 so it is probably about right.

At times we get very close to the cliff base and enjoy incredibly close views of birds that seem completely unbothered by our presence but we also go further out to take in the whole spectacle. Peering into the water close to the cliffs we find a few Comb-jellies and Sea Gooseberries holding their tentacles out horizontally into the water. There are one or two Winged Snails too - a strange beast indeed being a snail that flaps through the water with slow 'wing-beats' of flaps on the sides of its foot.

As we work our way along the cliff face the weather gradually gets better and better and soon there is blue sky and the fog has lifted. A call comes over the radio that an Arctic Fox has been found and we head to join the zodiacs already watching this beautiful animal. We enjoy fabulous close views as it searches the slopes for anything that has fallen from the ledges above. There must be rich pickings here below such a huge colony of birds and the fox is certainly very active searching up and down the slope. As this fox vanishes amongst the pinnacles another call tells us that a second fox is further along the slope. This animal works its way down the slope until it is right down near the shore then works its way through the rocks just above the shoreline - always on the move and only stopping now and then to smell the wind and pose for photos! There is even a third animal glimpsed high on the slope but only briefly.

The time has flown by and it is time to head back to the ship as we have a fair distance to go for our next landing later in the afternoon. After coffee we spend a little while scanning the sea now the fog has lifted but still the whales evade us and as we head south we are beginning to leave the best areas for the whales. After lunch there is a little free time to relax, catch up on sleep or watch the sea before our next briefing for this afternoons zodiac landing

where we are hoping there might be Walrus - but Jim has let slip that last time he came there weren't any!

We needn't have worried. As we approach our next landing at the shingle beach of Torellneset we can already see plenty of Walrus are hauled out on the shore. We make our landing at one end of the beach with strict instructions for how to approach the Walrus. With Kelvin at the front we slowly walk towards them until he raises his arm and we stop. The Walrus appear to notice us and look a little uneasy, raising their heads to look briefly and shuffling about a little but they soon relax again and we walk a little further and do the same again. Each time they even look the slightest uneasy we stop and when we get to about thirty yards away we make our final stop and the Walrus appear to be perfectly relaxed about us being there and most of them simply continue their afternoon nap. (Or is it a three day nap!).

They are huge!!!! Huge and strange and unbelievably improbable! How can such a strange creature exist and especially in such a remote place! Aliens from another planet would probably not look any more bizarre. They grumble at each other, occasionally sounding reminiscent of hippos and there is always something happening. Walrus come out of the sea and lump their way up the beach, Walrus lift their strange shaped heads and face off with the next nearest animal for space on the beach despite there being tons of space! Others make their way to a new position - the body so fat that as they make their way up the beach great ripples run through the fat below their skin making them look like they are made of heavy duty jelly!! The tusks are incredible - in the biggest animals they are perhaps two and half feet long with incredibly thick looking bristles arching down from above the mouth either side. Everyone behaves impeccably standing very quietly and watching this amazing scene. One Walrus decides to check us out, swimming towards us just offshore and coming up very close indeed to have a look at us. People comment about their eyes - they really do look like the eyes of old men, rather bloodshot with heavy eyelids, dark brown and somehow rather friendly looking! Huge wrinkles indent the skin and while some seem rather active and keep raising up and moving about others sleep right through our entire visit including one at the front with his front flipper over his eyes as if trying to keep out the light.

We are pleased to be allowed lots of time here to watch everything that is going on but eventually we have to go to let the next group visit them and we walk up the beach in search of interesting flowers and other things. There are pieces of Walrus bone and driftwood full of holes and we hear how the nutrients leaching out of these create little pockets of flowers where there is that tiny bit of extra nutrient. On the whole the habitat is very nutrient poor

and as a result - and also due to the dryness - the plants here are astonishingly different in form to others we have seen, even of the same species. For example, the Drooping Saxifrage plants all seem to consist of a single stem about two inches high at most with a single flower on top and the Tufted Saxifrage is making incredibly tight little cushions of leaves with the flowers tight to the top of the cushion. The Sulphur coloured Buttercups are almost completely stem-less as are the Alpine Saxifrages. The Greenland Scurvy-grass is making tight rosettes of flowers and leaves in a flattened circle tight to the ground and it is hard to believe it is the same species that was almost knee high to the Arctic Fox this morning! There is however one new plant about which Roy gets very excited indeed! He failed to find this on his last visit despite looking hard and so he is very thrilled to discover lots of Polar Saxifrage growing in the damper areas such as where the ground has cracked. This tiny plant has lovely little flowers with a reddish stripe down the middle of each petal and is red under the leaves.

Back on board we settle down to scan the sea as the plan is to now to head south and out of the bottom of the Hinlopen Strait before turning east towards a large patch of pack ice. After the evening meal we agree to meet in the bar but with five minutes to spare Darren pops up to the bridge to have a very quick check whether there are any whales - and immediately finds two Humpbacks!! Over the next half hour or so we enjoy fabulous views as they surface again and again. They generally surface shallowly three or four times before making a deeper dive to feed and on these dives the tail appears giving the classic fluke-shot! The backdrop of jagged, snow capped peaks and glaciers is spectacular and the scene is enough to move Tania to tears!

We finally get to do the checklist and we are informed that later we will be passing the enormous ice sheet on the east side of Nordaustlandet called the Bråsvellbreen. This is the third largest ice field in the northern hemisphere and we will be passing it at around 11pm so we have a chat and a drink in the bar and then head up to see what we can see.

It is a rather spectacular sight with waterfalls pouring off the huge ice cap and plunging into the sea 100 feet or so below. One waterfall seems to appear half way down the cliff face in an arch. Hundreds of chunks of ice are floating between us and the ice cliff and the sun is shining between layers of clouds, making the most beautiful scene. We spot one or two seals too including a couple of Ringed Seals and two groups of Harp Seals that pass by in a small group, porpoising as they swim and making quite a disturbance at the surface.

This is the first time we have stayed up late enough to witness the midnight sun. With the sun peeping between the layers of cloud we count down to the midnight hour and someone - no idea who - suggests we create a dance involving the various wildlife of the arctic to celebrate the moment! So the strangest of rituals takes form and we each choose a species of arctic animal then on the stroke of midnight, with the sun shining down to light up our craziness - we dance! There are Polar Bears, two Walrus, Harp Seals and Winged Snails in this crazy dance while Sarah does a cute Arctic Fox impression and perhaps the best of all is Rob's fantastic Brünnich's Guillemot with a look of complete panic on his face! (superb Rob!) It is all very bizarre but great fun and nothing to do with the red wine we have been quaffing honest - we only hope they weren't watching on the bridge!!

Day 5:

Today is our day in the ice and we are woken at a little after 5am by the sounds of ice scraping down the sides of the ship! Inside the ship it sounds remarkably loud and knowing this is Polar Bear country Roy and Darren are soon up on the bridge where the local guide, Simon, has just found something he thinks may be a bear! A quick check with the scope and it is confirmed and once a little nearer the announcement is made.

Everyone starts appearing on deck, some more bleary eyed than others, and what a bear it turns out to be!! The captain stops the ship but this is one very inquisitive bear and when it sees the ship it comes walking straight over to have a look. There are times when it is so close it is under the bow of the ship and we can only see it through the rope holes!! It stands peering myopically up as if trying to work out what these tasty smelling animals are that are just out of reach and the cameras are going crazy! Those with a zoom lens are getting pics of just the bears head. It is an amazing moment and we are astonished at the close views we get of this animal before it finally decides to wander off.

We travel on through the pack ice - which is a spectacular experience in itself! Huge slabs of ice are either shunted out of the way or broken it two or more pieces by the hull of the ship. It is incredible to watch small cracks develop into wider cracks as massive pieces of ice are split in two and separate to let us through. As huge pieces of ice collide they create small mountain ranges as they crunch together - like continents colliding! It is like watching tectonic plates moving. Huge cracks appear in sheets of ice a good couple of feet thick and the whole thing gradually breaks in two. Sometimes cracks that start small snake across the big ice sheets for a hundred yards or more as the crack gradually widens. Kittiwakes swoop down hoping for Polar Cod to appear from beneath the ice and Fulmars skim just a couple of inches above the ice and water.

Then suddenly another bear is spotted up ahead - this time a big male who wanders across the ice at an angle to our direction. It is fairly close and looks fabulous; a big bear in a wide scene that makes it look almost insignificant! Yet somehow it has a presence and we are in awe of this magnificently impressive animal that somehow makes its living in this unbelievably extreme environment. The Polar Bears look completely at ease somewhere we would struggle to survive for a day should the ship abandon us here! The sea ice goes on for miles in all directions and yet the bears wander casually around somehow managing to look like they own the place - and catch food here! They look to be in very good condition and look so impressive it is hard to capture in words. It slips into the water and swims to the next bit of ice hauling itself out with ease. A quick shake before walking on, then to squeeze any remaining water from its fur it rolls onto its back with its feet in the air! It does this two or three times as the cameras go crazy! It ambles away before lying down to rest, occasionally glancing across at the ship but with little interest at all in this strange thing.

After this it is a little while with no bears and we focus instead on seals! Although not common we do find a few including the occasional Ringed Seal either out on the ice or swimming between the ice sheets. They look like Common Seals though a little fatter and shorter making them look quite cute when on the ice. With more typical seal proportions and looking paler with a dark face, Harp Seals are fairly easy to identify but it is their behaviour that is usually the give-away and we see at least two groups swimming fast as if on a mission and porpoising as they swim and creating a bit of a splash. A single female is out on the ice too. We also see several Bearded Seals - the biggest species here. They are mainly distant but have a distinctive shape looking like fat sausages with tiny heads! We are delighted when one stays out on the ice when the ship gets very close allowing a fabulous opportunity to see the details and take photos. When it turns to look at us we can see the incredibly long curtain of whiskers either side of the mouth that give this seal its name. It stays put for ages and only after half an hour or more when we start moving the ship again does it suddenly look round as if it has never noticed this enormous thing before and slide into the water in fright! Perhaps there are not many brain cells firing in that small head - perhaps for Polar Bears catching these guys is not so hard!

There are remarkably few birds around but Kittiwakes constantly accompany the ship and there is a flock of Arctic Terns on the ice and the occasional one fishing. Amazing to think in a few months time they will be doing the same in Antarctica! The occasional Black Guillemot appears and a single Great Skua

and we are surprised when a single female Common Eider flies in our direction, does a circuit of the ship and flies on again.

Before lunch a Swedish guy we have befriended called Nils spots another Polar Bear some way up ahead and we watch as it crosses the ice ahead before resting in a thick jumble of ice to our left. We travel slowly past it - perhaps unable to get closer. Another bear is spotted some distance ahead and we get a bit closer to this one, though it seems completely uninterested in the ship. As it walks it frequently raises its head and sniffs the air.

Lunch is called and everyone disappears inside but as we are about to go Darren spots another bear which is wandering towards us but still a very long way off. It is decided to stop the ship and keep an eye on the bear while everyone eats so we dash to lunch and try to be out again as soon as possible.

When we come back out Darren's bear is much closer and a second bear is following in its path some way behind. Both bears seem to be on a mission, walking fast and also continually raising their heads to sniff the air. It is also interesting to watch how the tongue lolls out of the mouth at quite frequent intervals as they walk - effectively 'tasting' the air to aid in the smelling of food up ahead. And it is a long tongue! We enjoy watching them through the scopes before realising that there is also a third and fourth bear! One is eating a dead seal while the other is watching from nearby as if patiently waiting to have a turn.

We spend a long time here now watching the interactions between these bears. While one eats and the other watches, Darren's bear comes marching in from the right and the bear on the seal takes one look at him and walks off leaving the seal for him to eat. There is no fight, no face-off, nothing - it must have simply realised there was no point in trying to stop such a big bear. Now Darren's bear feasts for a while with the bear still watching and the bear that was following in his footsteps still coming. It is a fabulous scene. Bears scattered round the view, endless ice in all directions and Glaucous Gulls and two Ivory Gulls picking round the edge of the seal while Darren's Bear feeds close by. Glancing back to the approaching bear it would appear that something has spooked it as suddenly it turns tail and runs away across the ice! It doesn't look back but keeps running, slips straight into the water when there is a gap in the ice and straight out the other side then runs on! We wonder what upset it and hear later that it was someone's binoculars that swung down and crashed loudly into the metalwork of the ship! Big bear is not bothered by any of this but eventually wanders a little way away and Waiting Bear takes its chance and comes in. Now as it starts feeding Darren's Bear comes back

again but Waiting Bear has waited a long time for this and takes a couple of meaningful steps towards the bigger bear and opens its mouth wide as if to say, 'It's mine!' We are surprised to see the bigger bear simply turn and walk away as if it just can't be bothered to fight over it just now. He wanders off across the ice and into the distance.

When the final bear leaves the food we watch it wander around coming first a little towards the ship then away again before suddenly lifting his nose and turning back towards us. He starts walking straight and purposefully across the view as if going to pass behind the ship. We all run to the back and watch as he slips into the water swimming across a pool in the ice then climbs out, shakes himself and walks on, heading straight for another carcass. This carcass was pointed out earlier but we assumed there was nothing left on it to eat. Clearly this bear thinks otherwise and when it arrives it finds a big piece of skin which it proceeds to tear and eat. It holds down the skin with its feet while pulling upwards and tearing off pieces - fabulous to watch and so close! It doesn't look very appetising and seems to be just skin and soon there is not a lot left and after sniffing around the area it walks away and we say farewell.

We think this is going to be it and watching it go it feels like the end of the show. Most people are cold and head inside for a hot drink as the ship starts moving again. We have not gone very far when suddenly another bear appears walking in from our right! This is a beautiful and very inquisitive bear and it comes over to inspect the ship. We watch as it walks straight towards us, nose up and sniffing the air every few steps. Eventually it is very close and we are enjoying wonderful views but there are a few people on the ship who are not quite as quiet as they might be and the bear looks a little nervous, turning and walking quickly away and looking back over its shoulder ever couple of steps. It pauses again before plucking up courage to start walking back towards us. The smells from the boat must be overwhelming if your sense of smell is as good as theirs! Eventually, after looking at the ship for a little while and presumably realising there is no food to be had, he starts wandering away and we watch as he gradually becomes a distant dot in this vast landscape of ice. It is then we notice a final bear wandering away to our left though this one is not coming closer and we leave it be - making a total of ten Polar Bears today! What an incredible day it has been – one which none of us will ever forget for as long as we live.

Day 6: The ship stays in situ for the rest of the night until after breakfast, yet that does not mean we haven't moved! Studying the ship's route on the screen up on the bridge the map shows we have actually moved 7.2 nautical miles along with

all the ice around us. Wow - what a thought! That takes us over the 80 degree of latitude line to 80.2 degrees.

Heading to breakfast we are disappointed to discover thick fog outside. It feels very hemmed in with ice all around us and thick fog and we set off in a northward direction to see if we can reach one of the islands nearby but it is impossible and during breakfast we turn round and starts heading back south.

We are hoping to make a landing on a small peninsular on the coast of Nordaustlandet. Many of us spend a while on the bridge just watching the ice breaking up as we push our way through. It is mesmerising and in some places the ice is thick resulting in cracks spreading along way ahead of the ship and gradually widening as we push the huge slabs apart. Gradually there is more water and less ice and finally very few pieces of ice at all. With the fog we have to travel very slowly in case of growlers! These are big pieces of ice that are very dense and lie very low in the water and they can be quite dangerous to ships. All seems very quiet with nothing to watch as the fog is so thick, a perfect day for lectures. The ships guides are all giving lectures at some time in the voyage and so time passes as we learn about all kinds of things from bears to walruses to birds and the ice itself. Folk seem happy to catch up with the diary or read up on things but by late afternoon the fog is still with us and all we have seen is a few Fulmars and Kittiwakes, a single Little Auk and a few Brünnich's Guillemots.

After the evening meal they put on a film of Polar Bears taken by spy cams and everyone is inside enjoying this when suddenly we pop out of the fog which can now be seen behind us as a thick bank! We can now see a beautiful view of the amazing ice sheet that we passed on our way out and all the pieces of ice that are lying in the sea where they have broken off the front edge. It is a beautiful sight and studying the leading edge of the ice wall through binoculars it is amazingly broken up and crumbling. For the rest of the evening we then cruise slowly south along the edge enjoying this incredible scene and the fact that we can actually see something at last! There seem to be Fulmars everywhere! At one point we turn the boat and head right in close to the sheer cliff beside a waterfall and realise the scale of the cliff which must be 100 feet tall or more. There is water cascading off the bottom edge of the ice and dozens of fulmars feeding there as this input of nutrients creates a burst of life here.

Around midnight we start heading further out again and in the open sea there are scattered Brünnich's Guillemots and Fulmars and the occasional Harp Seals. The smooth surface looks perfect for spotting whales - but there are none

to be seen and eventually we drag ourselves to bed ready for an exciting day of landings tomorrow.

Day 7: After breakfast our intention is to make a landing at a rather nice Kittiwake colony in a small gully but as we are about to set anchor someone spots a Polar Bear climbing up the side of the gully!! It lies down at the top and that puts paid to that!! We watch from the ship to see what it does but it just goes to sleep. An Arctic Fox appears and trots up the gully then while trying to get people onto this animal we discover two are chasing each other right out in the open lower down the slope.

It is clear we can't land here but there is another spot we could try a bit further on and so we continue down the Freemansundet - the strait between the islands of Barentsøya and Edgeøya. We scan the land on both sides as we go and spot plenty of Reindeer and then bizarrely we realise there are in fact three more Polar Bears very distantly high upon the scree slopes! What on earth can they be doing up there? It appears to be completely barren scree and not even easy walking! Another is spotted later on and we are very puzzled. This brings our Polar Bear count to 19!

We arrive at a rather nice looking landing where even through the binoculars you can see lots of flowers and on the shore are plenty of Pink-footed Geese. There are Eiders too and just before we hear the pre-landing briefing Darren finds a nice male King Eider! Unfortunately the zodiacs are racing along the shore checking for bears and the bird is flushed heading off round the end of the headland never to be seen again.

The landing is superb! There are loads of flowers here and while the vast majority are species we have seen before, including masses of Marsh Saxifrage like buttercups in a lawn, we soon add a new Saxifrage - Foliose Saxifrage. This is a rather strange looking plant with no obvious flowers but little clumps of tiny leaves instead on the ends of the flower stalks, which later drop off to form new plants. Tufted Saxifrage is abundant along with Purple, Alpine, a few tiny bits of Polar and several Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrages. Snow Buttercup is also new to the list growing alongside Sulphur-coloured Buttercup which looks very similar.

There is a small pool just above the beach and on here there is a nice little flock of Long-tailed Ducks and a few female King Eiders providing much closer views than the single bird the other day. Through the scope you can see every detail of their plumage and even see little 'sails' on their backs. There are Barnacle Geese here too and we glimpse what might have been a Long-tailed

Skua fly over. There are a few Snow Buntings around including some feeding young.

Walking up the slope we find Hairy Lousewort and lots of Tundra Buttercup in the wetter areas then it comes over Simon's radio that they have found a Ptarmigan up ahead. As we walk up to see if we can see it we find a Purple Sandpiper and a distant Turnstone in full breeding plumage. We soon find the Ptarmigan and enjoy scope views before it disappears over the ridge. With time to spare we walk on to the top of the ridge from where we relocate it and enjoy further good views of this Svalbard subspecies.

Back on board we enjoy lunch before meeting up again for the afternoon landing. This is at a nice site called Kapp Lee and we come ashore on a shallow beach with a huge Walrus hauled out nearby. There is another in the water and they look fabulous in the scopes. Small huts mark the sites of old Pomor hunting huts from the 16 hundreds and there is evidence of where Walrus used to be killed and a few whales too - old bones scattered around the top of the shore, some slowly decaying into the tundra.

In the middle of the area are three elegant Arctic Skuas and in the distance on the slope is a loose herd of Svalbard Reindeer. Roy does some botany and finds a few lovely plants including masses of Marsh Saxifrage and some beautiful Svalbard Poppies of both colour forms - white and yellow. We find several plants of the Arctic Dandelion, a plant Roy was particularly keen to see being, as far as he knows, the only white species of dandelion while all the rest are yellow!

We enjoy lovely views Arctic Terns fishing in the bay plus Kittiwakes and a couple of Purple Sandpipers. Walking up the slope into the flower rich tundra we pass large patches of Mountain Avens then suddenly spot two Arctic Foxes running up the slope. We watch them through the scopes and one of the adults starts soliciting - crouching down on her front paws she sticks her rear up in the air waving her tail in a most inviting manner!! What a hussie!

We watch them for some time but Sue spots another trotting past and heading towards an area of rocks much closer. Scanning the area we find two all curled up with their tails wrapped round them. They look delightful and we decide to walk a bit closer. Arriving close to where they were we can't initially find them and then realise they must have clocked us and spot them walking along the edge of the rocks. They glance up at us and wander across a patch of tundra to some more rocks where they potter about a little before going back to sleep looking soooo cute!!

After watching the foxes for a while it is time to start back towards the ship and as we walk back we take a slightly different route resulting in finding three new flower species Tufted and Fringed Sandwort and lots of Snowy Pearlwort as we get closer to the beach.

The plan now is to head down past the tip of the southern end of Spitsbergen and then out to sea so it is a long cruise south during the rest of the evening. So we relax after our meal in the bar, celebrating Sue and Peter's anniversary whilst listening to old disco music and trying to remember who sang what songs - and Darren is scarily good at it!!

Day 8: We sail on through the night round the southern tip of Spitsbergen and out into the open ocean for a little way with the aim of reaching the drop off point where the sea suddenly plunges to much deeper water. It is a relaxed start with a later breakfast but some people are looking like they are not too keen to eat as there is a bit of a swell here.

After breakfast we are out on deck scanning up ahead as we approach the drop off zone - hopeful of whales. As we get close to the deeper water we scan carefully up ahead and for a long time there is nothing but lots of Fulmars and Kittiwakes. Interestingly the Fulmars here include many with pure white heads and bodies just like those at home. We keep scanning then suddenly we spot the first blow! Darren and Roy dash to the bridge to let them know only to find they have spotted a group of blows from the other side of the ship!! Two Humpback Whales appear together followed by a third with further blows a little to the right. A Minke Whale surfaces a little closer, looking rather small in comparison then, in the middle of all this, two Fin Whales surface together looking much longer than the Minke and with the typical swept back fin of this species. Its whale soup out there!! For a moment it is possible to see all three species one after the other without even moving your binoculars!! This is very unusual.

Whales scatter and spread out over a wider area and soon there seem to be whales in any direction you look and also a nice large group of Harp Seals. It is hard to estimate the number but we think at least 60 though some of the crew think there may be as many as a hundred! The Fin Whales are a little more distant now, but three Minke Whales cross the bow of the ship and then we become rather fixed on watching a Humpback that starts to lob-tail. It keeps raising its tail high above the water and slapping it down with a splash, again and again. It is a very impressive sight and we are amazed at how long it keeps this up as it looks exhausting! Over and over it smashes its

tail down - sometimes the bottom surface of the fluke slapping the water and sometimes the top as though the animal is upside down!

We watch the whales for a long time but eventually - with whales still all around - Jim says that we will move on and check a deep trench a little further on down the coast. We continue to watch the sea with great expectation but sadly this seems to be the end of the show and even when over the deeper water there is very little activity - just a couple of distant blows that never seem to result in any sightings.

We turn into the mouth of Hornsund Fjord. It is stunningly beautiful with high peaks and shapely mountains all around and glaciers dividing the mountains and sweeping down to the sea. Thin layers of cloud amongst the peaks add to the beauty and the sun shine makes it complete. Icebergs are scattered here and there and there are Puffins, Little Auks, Fulmars and Brünnich's Guillemots in numbers flying or scattering from the front of the ship. As we enter the fjord a Humpback Whale appears and surfaces a few times at its cuts across the bow of the ship. Then to complete it all we find a Polar Bear at the bottom of a distant scree slope! Through the scope it is quite a nice view as it wanders across the bottom of the slope then lies down and falls asleep.

Our intention was to make a landing here but there is too big a swell which makes landing difficult so instead we do a zodiac cruise. This proves very exciting as we head into broken ice and bergs floating in the arm of the fjord known as Burgerbukta. There are some quite big bergs in here and we learn a little about how they erode with small pockets and cup shapes, long grooves and ledges created by the salt water and currents. They erode faster under water and as the ice below the surface erodes away the weight distribution changes and suddenly the whole berg can turn right over or at least turn part way until it balances again - creating the amazing shapes and patterns in the surface we can see. Darren's zodiac has an exciting moment when one of the bergs turns over while they are close by and even splits in two creating a wash that bounces them around a little - you have to be careful of these bergs!

The other astonishing thing is the sound! As the depth of snow falling on the hills becomes deeper the snow at the bottom turns to ice. This process traps a lot of air which remains trapped in the ice that forms the glacier and is still visible in the ice floating in the sea that we are passing through. As the ice melts this trapped air bursts out with a crackle or a pop sounding just like Rice Krispies! It is astonishing just how loud it is and we cut the zodiac engine so we can really hear it properly - some of us even feel moved to record the sound.

It is quite a thought how long some of this air has been trapped and what might have been happening at that time.

Working our way through the bergy-bits – small pieces of ice too small to be called bergs – we find the occasional Black Guillemot and in the more open water the occasional Puffin. A flock of Kittiwakes is bathing and preening at the edge of the water and along the beach a small party of Barnacle Geese. Then things suddenly become a little more exhilarating when Darren spots a Polar Bear! It lifts its head out the water and looks round then vanishes!! The guides from the ship seem confident that a bear in the water is generally rather a nervous bear so we can safely investigate but we can't help feeling a little nervous as we weave our way through the ice chunks not knowing where the bear has gone! It is definitely a relief when we relocate it and know where it is and that we are not too close but soon it again slips out of sight behind the chunks of ice in the water.

While we search we are thrilled when suddenly a pod of Belugas appears very close by! They swim slowly along very close to the shore and amongst them we notice a very young animal that is quite dark grey. They are remarkably hard to follow as they work their way through the pieces of floating ice and we keep losing them then finding them again but at times they are very close and we can sometimes locate them by hearing their blows as they surface. It is very exciting and surprisingly emotional bringing some close to tears!

We eventually realise there are in fact two groups of Belugas and while we try to follow them it proves too difficult - they are much better at manoeuvring in this broken ice than we are! We do however relocate the Polar Bear which is now some distance away and swimming towards the shore. It walks out onto the beach and after a good shake walks up the slope and slowly makes its way higher up then walks along parallel to the shore pausing to look at us now and again. This may well be the last bear we see this trip so we are loathed to part company but eventually it walks away and we can follow no more and wave goodbye.

As we head back to the ship we realise how cold we are! Amazing how you don't notice when there are big white bears and white whales to watch. A warm drink in the lovely warm bar soon has us warmed up and then it is time for a barbecue! And what a magical place to enjoy a barbecue - with glaciers and beautiful mountains all around we sit outside eating burgers and sausages and a few even dancing to the music.

Day 9: Our morning landing is at a Little Auk colony at Ingerborgfjellet and we head ashore in the drizzle. It is a lovely spot though and quite rich in flowers with

many of the species we have already seen plus a couple of new ones as we walk up towards the bolder scree where the auks nest. Highland Saxifrage is abundant here forming large patches scattered with little white flowers. There are also some large patches of Iceland Purslane, sometimes two or three feet across and looking very different to the tiny plants that grow in the UK sites. Both of these plants are exceptionally rare in the UK.

Snow Buntings are feeding young and we get good views of Purple Sandpiper then we spot two Arctic Foxes running down towards the shore. There are some exceptionally tame Svalbard Reindeer that provide a good photo opportunity and the young ones look quite cute!

We carefully make our way up to the edge of the boulder scree and spend a while simply enjoying the Little Auks that are nesting here in their thousands. The boulders here are just the right size with big enough gaps for the auks to slip in to nest but small enough to stop Arctic Foxes squeezing in to take the chicks. Tens of thousands of Little Auks nest along this slope and there is constant coming and going. Birds perch up on top of boulders looking round before flying off over our heads, others are flying in then hopping from rock to rock to find the right hole. Some are just resting in little groups on the boulders and whenever a Glaucous Gull flies over huge flocks fly out in a sweeping arch - out over the sea then back round over the colony and then back out again - gradually landing back in the colony and vanishing in the rocks. All the time the air is filled with their laughter! There is no other way to describe it - a high pitched 'giggle' making them sound like the happiest birds on the planet! They are remarkably tame and look so cute through the binoculars but through the scope it is ridiculous - they completely fill the view and you can every feather.

While some walk down to have another look at the foxes most of us stay to enjoy this privileged view of these delightful birds and get the photos we want before joining them. Down the slope and further along we walk on where the foxes were last seen and discover that we have missed four cubs that were out and about earlier - however a single adult fox is now hunting amongst the boulders. After sitting very still for a long time suddenly she is very alert and staring a little way ahead. There is a sudden dash then again she stays still staring at a spot in the rocks. We can't see anything there but then a final dash and she has an adult Little Auk in her mouth! She walks off amongst the boulders and finds a spot with enough depth of soil to bury it. At this time of year they can catch plenty of food and cache much of it to eat later. With the four cubs seen before some of us arrived at this spot this brings the trip

total of Arctic Foxes to 15!! This is an astonishing number and a lot more than usual - indeed Roy's last trip saw only a single animal!

After lunch we cruise along the south sound of Bellsund and as we head into Van Keulenfjorden we notice groups of Arctic Terns and Kittiwakes plunge diving for fish. Suddenly, beneath one of these groups a group of Belugas appear!! We draw everyone's attention to them and scanning along the shoreline find there are at least 16 animals here. We enjoy prolonged views as they are swimming in the same direction we are travelling. Then they cross right across the sound behind the ship as we continue on - a lucky few even get to see a face of the occasional animal as it surfaces.

Our final landing site is at a beach called Bansebu and is the site of an old Beluga whaling station. There is a small hut and some upturned boats on the shore. It is somewhat saddening to see the piles of Beluga bones here, especially after watching the living animals such a short time before. There are several large piles of vertebrae plus several skulls and scattered amongst them the occasional vertebra or rib from a much bigger whale.

We have a degree of freedom on this landing as they have simply stationed 'guards' round the outside of a large area to watch out for bears and we can walk where we like as long as we are in this area. Folk are free to do what they like (within reason!) and while some simply walk along the shore others walk inland where there is lovely habitat of rather open ground covered in a scattering of saxifrages - Purple, Alpine, Tufted and Marsh being the most common species. It is nice to have the time to stop and enjoy what you find without being moved on as normally you have to stay with the group for obvious reasons.

The flowers are lovely and amongst the saxifrages we find Hairy Lousewort, Svalbard Poppy, Moss Campion, Snowy Pearlwort and a new flower - Polar Cress. This is closely related to Ladies Smock back at home but with pinker flowers.

Time runs out all too quickly and we are corralled back towards the zodiacs. We watch an Arctic Skua chasing an Arctic Tern, find lots of Common Eider with ducklings just offshore and there are Black Guillemots, lots of Barnacle Geese and some very close Snow Buntings. Further along the shore there are four or five Common or Harbour Seals - a very nice find in Spitsbergen as they are not actually very common here. This is the species we have at home and look like rather large Ringed Seals with a blotchy pattern without the rings.

Back on the ship it is now time to return the boots and pay bills and make all those other arrangements that signal we are reaching the end of the trip. We just have the journey back to Longyearbyen to make by tomorrow morning. It has been an incredible trip and after our evening meal we gather in the lecture room for our customary run through the checklist and roundup of the holiday. We traditionally do this by offering everyone the chance to tell us their favourite species (up to three on this occasion) a favourite place and tell us about a magic moment that they feel was particularly special.

It is always interesting to hear what people have enjoyed about a trip and we are amazed at just how many species are chosen given that there are a few very special species here. Arctic Dandelion even scores a vote as do Snow Bunting and some fun suggestions such as the ships baker, Rob the Guillemot and Harry Horsetwort (don't ask!). Several species score three votes - Little Auk, Red Phalarope, Walrus and Humpback Whale, with Beluga scoring four and Arctic Fox five - but nothing can compete with Polar Bear with nine points and this is our official species of the trip. Favourite place is almost a white-wash with very few votes for anywhere other than the pack ice. This was incredibly special and will be remembered not just for the Polar Bears but for the scenery and watching the ice breaking as we pass through amongst other things.

Magic moments are always rather individual and lots of things get a mention. Belugas in the ice, the fox hunting the Little Auk, round the clock daylight, the first Polar Bear in the pack ice that came right to the ship and the amazing sound the ice makes as bubbles of air crackle and pop and they escape, the wonderful time spent with the Walruses and the astonishing tail slapping Humpback Whale. There is so much that has been special but the most votes go for the time in Hornsund when we had the Polar Bear hiding in the ice and the Belugas swimming past just yards away - a simply magical moment that was indeed very special.

One thing we are all agreed on is that it has been the most incredible experience and we have seen many, many wonderful sights. It has been a wonderful holiday and Peter gives a lovely vote of thanks to the guides for their contribution and efforts in finding so much wildlife and being so informative. An envelope is then hand delivered to each by Rob the Guillemot in his own inimitable fashion to much applause.

We head up to the bar and sit for a while enjoying drinks and chatting about the trip. We are all relaxed and happy but have no idea what is to come!! Simon has joined us and at about 11:30pm one of the crew from the bridge appears and walks over to Simon and says there is a whale. Simon says he will

go and check it out but Darren and Roy can't resist it - they can't wait and head up to the bridge too. Within moments a tall blow explodes from the surface and rockets skywards in a narrow column and they look at each other in disbelief!! They both know what the other is thinking and watch as a rather pale grey back humps up out of the water and disappears again followed shortly by a tiny fin - yes - it's a Blue Whale!!! They run around making sure everyone is here as the whale surfaces again and everyone is hugely excited. Up it comes again and this time the back arches even more and the tail arches up out of the water before disappearing from sight! Everyone is jumping around in excitement and Roy dashes off to tell any people missing.

We watch in tense excitement waiting for the next appearance and it takes about six minutes before suddenly the blow powers up into the air. Now Jim is up on deck and he announces the sighting to the ship and soon more people are running up on deck some still in sleeping attire with dressing gowns or blankets wrapped round them. This time it is closer and we enjoy even better views of this enormous animal as it surfaces four or five times - each time with a massive gush of a blow towering into the air - but the final one again accompanied by the raising of the flukes as the animal dives - and everyone cheers! We are delighted to realise the captain is taking the ship in a big circle round the animal so we can get more views and soon enough it appears again. The cameras are clicking, some are videoing, some watch through the scopes getting the most unbelievable views and we can now see all the pale markings on the flanks and really appreciate the huge size - the biggest animal on earth that there has ever been! Some are close to tears it is such an emotional experience and again we watch the sequence of shallow dives followed by the deep dive at the end, water cascading off the huge slim flukes as they raise up out of the water and gently arch back in. Next time it surfaces it is a bit further away though still amazing to watch and the next time further still and eventually Jim decides we will leave it be and continue on our course. Then it is hugs all round and grinning faces and someone says, "Darren, can I change my Magic Moment please?"

Day 10: It is an early start with a wake-up call at 4:45am ready for a 5am breakfast! Our flight leaves at 8am and we have to be leaving the ship at 6am so after breakfast our bags are taken ashore soon followed by us and we say our fond farewells to the ship's guides and a few of the other passengers we have got to know.

Back at the airport we go through all the usual checks and security and gather in the lounge by the gate - but there is one last little surprise. An Arctic Fox is running around the edge of the pools outside being bombarded by Arctic Terns - that makes 16!

Birds

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

Mammals

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

Plants (some identified later from photographs)

Polar Horsetail	<i>Equisetum arvense</i> ssp <i>aplestre</i>
Dwarf Horsetail	<i>Equisetum scirpoides</i>
Polar Willow	<i>Salix polaris</i>
Mountain Sorrel	<i>Oxyria digyna</i>
Alpine Bistort	<i>Polygonum viviparum</i>
Iceland Purslane	<i>Koenigia islandica</i>
Mountain Sandwort	<i>Minuartia rubella</i>
Tufted Sandwort	<i>Minuartia biflora</i>
Fringed Sandwort	<i>Arenaria pseudofrigida</i>
Snowy Pearlwort	<i>Sagina nivalis</i>
Tundra Chickweed	<i>Stellaria crassipes</i>
Arctic Chickweed	<i>Stellaria humifusa</i>
Polar Mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium regelii</i>
Arctic Mouse-ear	<i>Cerastium arcticum</i>
Polar Campion	<i>Silene uralensis</i> ssp <i>arctica</i>
Arctic White Campion	<i>Silene involucrate</i> ssp <i>furcata</i>
Moss Campion	<i>Silene acaulis</i>
Snow Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus nivalis</i>
Tundra Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus hyperboreus</i>
Sulphur-coloured Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus sulphureus</i>
Pygmy Buttercup	<i>Ranunculus pygmaeus</i>
Svalbard Poppy	<i>Papaver dahlianum</i>
Polar Cress	<i>Cardamine nymanii</i>
Polar Scurvygrass	<i>Cochlearia groenlandica</i>
Golden Whitlow-grass	<i>Draba alpina</i>
Mealy Whitlow-grass	<i>Draba arctica</i>
Pale Whitlow-grass	<i>Draba pauciflora</i>
Lapland Whitlow-grass	<i>Draba lactea</i>
Cushioned Whitlow-grass	<i>Draba corymbosa</i>
Scree Whitlow-grass	<i>Draba glabella</i>
Purplish Braya	<i>Braya purprascens</i>
Dwarf Golden Saxifrage	<i>Chrysosplenium tetrandrum</i>
Purple Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga oppositifolia</i>
Hawkweed-leafed Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga hieracifolia</i>
Foliose Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga foliolosa</i>
Alpine Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga nivalis</i>
Yellow Marsh Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga hirculus</i>
Drooping Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga cernua</i>
Highland Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga rivularis</i>
Polar Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga hyperborea</i>
Tufted Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga cespitosa</i>
Arctic Cinquefoil	<i>Potentilla hyparctica</i>
Mountain Avens	<i>Dryas octopetala</i>
Woolly Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis dasyantha</i>
Hairy Lousewort	<i>Pedicularis hirsuta</i>
Arctic Dandelion	<i>Taraxacum arcticum</i>
Arctic Cottongrass	<i>Eriophorum scheuchzeri</i>