

Spitsbergen Circumnavigation Cruise

Summer in the high arctic

24 July to 4 August, 2010

Pictures and words by Tim Earl

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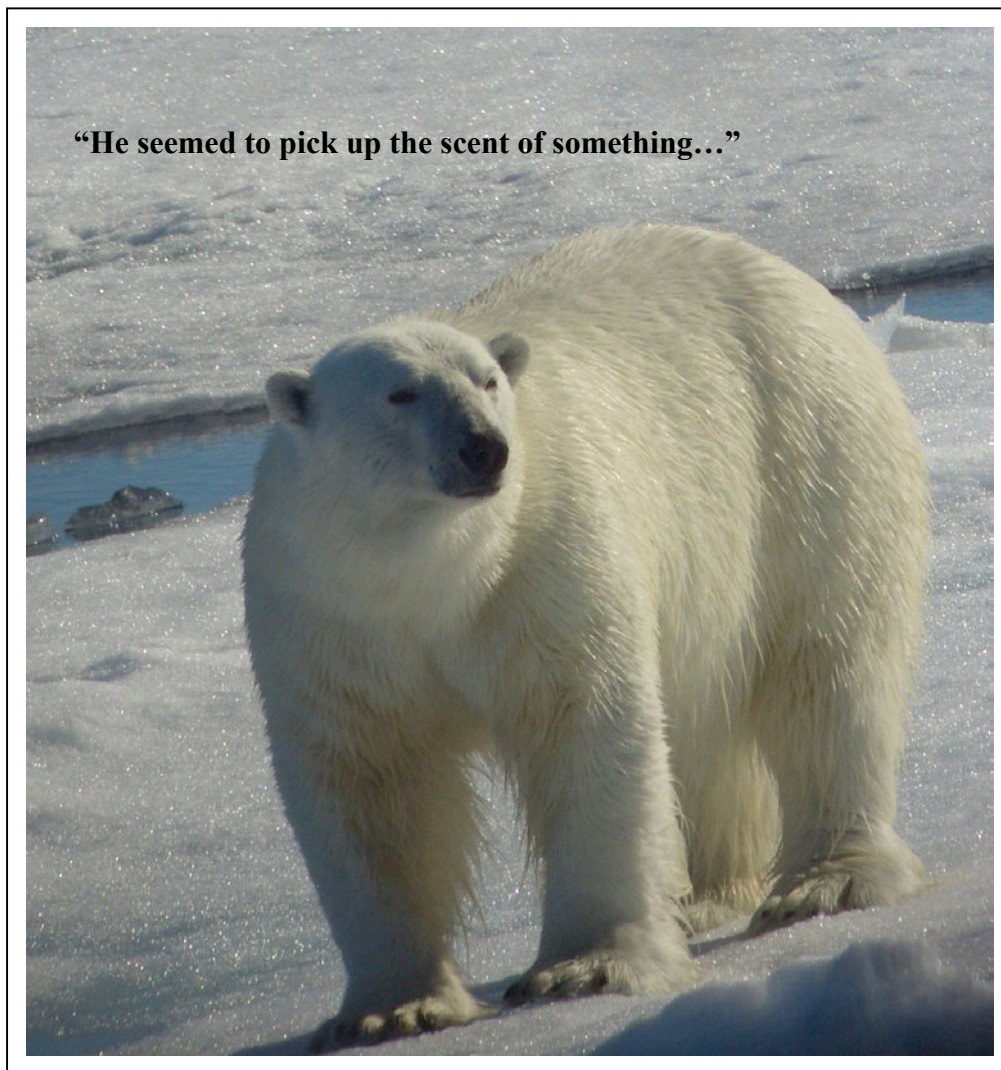
This is one of those holidays which stand out as lifetime highlights. We experienced much of the arctic habitats, animals, birds and plants in great numbers and often with wonderful close-up views. From our first encounters with Arctic Skuas in Longyearbyen, through Polar Bears in the pack ice, Walrus on shingle banks, colonies of auks, record sightings of whales, tiny polar plants to Belugas around the ship as we said our farewells, this was an outstanding and memorable cruise. We had excellent company within the group seasoned with new acquaintances (British, Flemish, German and Japanese) among the other guests on board *Antarctic Dream*. She was a dream too, most of the time, with superb facilities and crew to get us close to the things we wanted to see. At times it was a thought-provoking experience particularly when we visited the sites of former whale hunting stations or trappers' huts. Often it was adventurous – leaving a beach visit because a bear was around, getting splashed by arctic waters as we bounced along sitting on a rubber boat, watching the disintegration of a vast iceberg – but always there was fun and good humour.

It was a fantastic ten days in the group's company. I hope to see each and every one of you again soon.



Highlights (as selected by group members):

- Seeing our first Svalbard Reindeer in the mist.
- Encounters with gulls: sparkling Ivory, stunning Sabine's, gorgeous (cuddly?) Glaucous gulls all in their most natural of surroundings.
- All our 20 sightings of Polar Bears – up a scree slope with a cub, diving under the ice to catch a Ringed Seal, devouring the remains of a dead walrus, many swimming and one being chased by another.
- The many glaciers we saw and in some cases visited by zodiac – close enough to the faces to hear the crack and rumble as icebergs were calved, being close to a vast iceberg which disintegrated before our eyes.
- Seeing Long-tailed Skuas up close.
- Finding a seal skull high up a tundra hillside. It had been left there by a Polar Bear.
- The comfortable cabins on *Antarctic Dream*, good food and a great group of fellow naturalists.
- Being in the pack ice close to the North Pole and further south off eastern Spitsbergen.
- NOT being in the front of the zodiac which could be a wet and cold position.
- The Brünnich's Guillemot colony (50,000 pairs) on the auk cliffs of Alkefjellet and the Little Auk colony on the scree-slopes of Ingeborgfjellet.
- Our close encounters with Arctic Foxes at the huge Diskobukta Kittiwake colony – seeing one take a Kittiwake chick only to have its prize taken by another fox.
- Experiencing the Midnight Sun and Midday Moon.
- Seeing whale blows and enjoying the excitement of approaching Sperm Whales and White-beaked Dolphins, seeing the whales' tail-flukes as they dived deep and the dolphins' exuberant leaps from the sea.



Daily diary

Saturday 24 July

To Oslo, Norway

A fairly uneventful flight saw us arrive in Oslo (726 miles from London, 1,170km) an hour late. Hooded Crows and Jackdaws were seen on the way to our hotel just across the road from the air terminal. We turned in after a good dinner for an early(ish) night in preparation for tomorrow's 8am start.

Sunday 25 July

To Longyearbyen and the Antarctic Dream

Sunny, cold early on but a slightly lighter and warmer wind, 5°C in Longyearbyen

A few Rock Doves, Common Swifts, House Martins and a couple of White Wagtails were added to our list as we departed Oslo for Tromsø and Longyearbyen. A short stop in Tromsø added Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover, Arctic Tern and Common Gull to our Norwegian tally and it was onward to Spitsbergen – 1,979 miles (3,185km) north of London.

Here we enjoyed free time in the town of Longyearbyen where pretty Snow Buntings flitted around the houses (built on stilts) while ghostly Glaucous gulls patrolled overhead hoping to rob Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots returning to their mountainous nest sites high above us.

A walk along the coast produced sightings of nesting (hap hazardously) Arctic Terns, one with a vocal chick, Common Eiders and Long-tailed Ducks. A pair of Arctic Skuas was found feeding a chick only a few yards from the nearest house... wildlife in the garden for sure.

After a spot of souvenir and (in my case) last-minute shopping we walked or took a taxi to the jetty and boarded the Antarctic Dream by zodiac from the comfort of a jetty, perhaps the last we would see for the cruise. (This was rubbished the following afternoon when we landed by zodiac at a jetty to visit the scientific community of Ny Ålesund.)

Once on board, the ship was explored, safety drills carried out and we sailed on the start of our adventure. Dinner was eaten with the more common seabirds of Spitsbergen viewed from the windows – Northern Fulmars almost entirely of the dark 'blue morph' typical of high latitudes, dainty Kittiwakes, and the four common auks: Puffin, Little Auk, Brünnich's and Black Guillemots.

Mist dropped and an attempt at sea-watching after the call-over was aborted when it was clear that it had turned into fog.

Monday 26 July

Blomstrandhalvøya, Ny Ålesund and the Kongsvegen glacier

Cloudy with fog descending at times, cold wind, 3°C to 7°C

Our pre-breakfast sea-watch produced distant views of piratical Arctic Skuas as we sailed out of mist and into Kongsfjord. The by now familiar birds were admired in profusion: blunt-headed Little Auks, blue Fulmars and Brünnich's Guillemots.

"How Not To Be Eaten By a Polar Bear" was the title of our post-breakfast safety lecture, spiced with tips on ways of getting into and out of a zodiac.

It was followed by a practical session as we did our first wet landing on Blomstrandhalvøya. In translation, Flower-beach-peninsular sounded quite romantic but the place was, we learned, named after a bloke called Blomstrand and the peninsular is now an island following the retreat of a glacier.

The first to land were rewarded with fly-past views of an elegant Long-tailed Skua and a head-down nose-in-the-air Red-throated Diver. Later arrivals were still in time to enjoy moody views of two Svalbard Reindeer in the mist. We were shown the difference between their fur and that of a Polar Bear while some examined a shed antler.

Our shortened walk (the fog returned thus hiding any, albeit this was a little unlikely, hungry Polar Bears with travelling naturalists on their menu) took in an ill-fated marble mine and its associated plant. And writing of plants, we were shown Purple Saxifrage, Arctic Bell Heather and Mountain Avens, all in bloom.

Lunch was followed by a trip ashore to Ny Ålesund, in the company of hundreds of too smartly dressed French folk off a cruise ship.

No sooner had some of us set off from the jetty than a dazzling Ivory Gull flew past fast, heading out to sea. We think it had been disturbed from nearby husky dog kennels and it was not seen again all afternoon.

A hunting Arctic Fox was found, soon carrying a gosling for supper. This excited us but left two Svalbard Reindeer quite unmoved. We watched a flock of Barnacle Geese, three Long-tailed Ducks and a few Snow Buntings before moving off further into the town.

Our aim was a set of husky kennels at the far end where we saw several pristine Purple Sandpipers picking around pools. One small but self-sufficient chick was also watched. Arctic Terns seemed to nest all over the area and other people straying too close to their eggs or chicks were attacked.

A trip to the most northerly post office in the world was a must for most, followed by a walk to a huge 'Mechano' anchoring mast where flights to the North Pole in airships were started by Amundsen and Nobile in 1926 and Nobile on his own in 1928. Here the group spotted a passing Great Skua and had better views of the two Reindeer seen earlier.

Leaving Ny Ålesund, the ship took us back in time as we sailed higher up Kongsfjord, slipping past glaciers from the last Ice Age and zebra-striped hillsides, each gully still (and probably forever) filled with snow.

It was a brilliant highlight of our cruise as we passed ice-blue icebergs on which Arctic Skuas and Glaucous Gulls were sitting while around their bases swam Fulmars and Black Guillemots attracted, no doubt, by Ice Fish. Approaching the Kongsvegen another Arctic Fox was seen on a beach and our third stunning Long-tailed Skua of the day found with the stunning backdrop accentuating the delight of many.



Tuesday 27 July

Hamiltonbukta, Buchananhalvøya, 80°N and Moffen Island

Sunny, some broken cloud, F6 (20kn) cold wind, dropping, 2°C – 10°C.

We awoke to the most beautiful day with bright sunshine, gin-clear air and the best views of this incredible cruise so far. High lenticular clouds were being formed above the snow-topped mountains by a strong wind, however, and our plans for the day had to be changed.

We sailed around the corner to Hamiltonbukta where, as we anchored, a Polar Bear was seen on a scree slope. There were a few anxious minutes as zodiacs were launched and we set off towards the shore.

Half an hour at least had elapsed by the time we reached the shelter of the scree slope and its towering cliff. The bear was still there! It stood up as we approached and looked down on our little armada. We posed no threat and the animal laid down once more. It was some minutes later that a cub stood up behind the slumbering bear. There were two! The cub also paced around a little before copying its mother, lying down to sleep. We were elated.

The zodiac cruise continued to a glacier, Hamiltonbreen, where we gently edged into ice which had calved from its face. It was fantastic! We could hear the glacier dropping more icebergs into the water, reindeer were spotted high up on a snowfield while Brünnich's Guillemots whizzed to and from their colony.

Our afternoon walk was a hike up the rugged Buchananhalvøya peninsular to see the Chauvaubreen glacier (those on the longer walk went high enough up the ridge to get views of Raudfjordbreen glacier too). Both groups saw wonderful high-arctic plants such as Svaldbard Poppy, Mountain Avens, Purple Saxifrage, and Arctic Willow. Some toyed with the idea that we could not see the trees for the tundra on having the latter pointed out: Chris named the habitat Svalbard forest.

Dashing Arctic Skuas were plentiful, flying too and fro across the ridge occasionally chasing each other calling loudly, but we found no nests. A little group of six Snow Buntings was seen, each fluttering up the hillside like scraps of white paper in the wind.

Reaching our highest point, the medium-length group were shown a skull and asked to suggest how it came to be so high up an escarpment and what animal it was. Most suggested correctly that it had been taken there by a Polar Bear – a huge hole in the skull had been made by a massive canine tooth. Its identity, however, ranged from small Polar Bear to Yeti! Those who suggested a seal of some sort were correct – the triangular teeth indicated a Pinniped of some species. The long-haul group caught us up as we were addressing the problem, thinking they had wandered into a Shakespearean play: “Alas poor Yorick, I knew him well...”.

We returned to the ship for a delicious dinner followed at 9.30 with a special ceremony: our position was 80°N – just 600 miles from the North Pole. We celebrated on the forward deck with a tot of vodka to keep out the cold.

Antarctic Dream continued northwards passing the island of Moffen soon afterwards. A herd of Walrus was spotted on beach (at a considerable distance). Their long tusks could be seen clearly through telescopes despite falling visibility due to fog. Was this to hinder our day in the pack ice tomorrow, we wondered.

Wednesday 28 July

Into the ice!

Bright sun early, a little fog but then sunny later, cold wind 2°C – 4°C.

I went to make a cuppa at the moment Antarctic Dream entered the arctic pack ice at 6.30am. The sun was shining but a weird white rainbow-like crescent could be seen – a fogbow! All was well, however, as the day developed super conditions for exploring the pack ice.

We watched birds happily until 11am when the first Polar Bears were seen. Among the usual Fulmars, Glaucous Gulls (looking brilliant against the icy backdrop) and Kittiwakes were three fully-spooned Pomerine Skuas and two sparkingly white Ivory Gulls.

The bears stole the show and the day, however. Our first two were odd. One showed well and even walked down to a few metres from the ship while the second had stage fright and was seen on only a couple of occasions during the hour-long sighting. Its showy companion made up for that by swimming across channels in the ice, rolling in the snow (to freeze the water in its pelt, perhaps) and snow-boarding using its head and chest as a sledge.

The second bear turned up after a delayed lunch (we were all too busy watching the bears to think of eating) and started hunting immediately. It slipped into a channel and to our surprise dived from view. We assume it went under the ice and captured a Ringed Seal for when it reappeared the bear swam to an ice floe and emerged carrying the animal in its jaws. We were amazed. The Arctic King had obliged!



The bear began to devour its prey as our captain guided the ship closer for us to get a better view. It was joined by three shining Ivory Gulls (at times just their black legs, eyes and beaks were visible) and a similar number of Glaucous Gulls which waited patiently for the predator to finish its meal. Nothing messes with a hungry Polar Bear!

There seemed to be little left after the huge off-white animal had completed its meal. It spent time cleaning itself before moving away leaving the gulls to pick over the scraps.

Between bear sightings we enjoyed the rather unique experience of looking out over a pristine environment – no litter, sign posts (except the North Pole sticking up some 540 miles away for we had crossed 81°N), trails, interpretation centres, habitat management schemes or crops in sight. It was a joy. Our fourth bear was a huge male and seemed to be hunting. It ambled along at a tangent to the wind, lifting his nose as if sniffing every so often, and putting out his tongue to ‘taste’ the air. The bear must have picked up a scent as it turned into the wind and, walking parallel to the course we were taking, set off at a steady pace until he ran out of pack ice and slipped into the sea to swim across a large stretch of water, still seemingly sniffing his prey.

Many eyes contributed to the sightings: David found a superb Sabine’s Gull sitting with a flock of Kittiwakes on an ice floe and Judy saw two Long-tailed Skuas. A third came over the helicopter deck as we were watching one of the bears, a brilliantly marked bird in subtle shades of brown and grey, tail feathers quivering as it flew by.

One of our group found and reported the shy second bear to cruise guides who had not seen it. When it was reported in person a second time the sighting was met with some disbelief but by the time the animal put in a third appearance its existence was broadcast to the ship!

The day ended with a vigil to see the Midnight Sun... a strange thing to do as the sun was so high it seemed like mid-day. Only our watches and sleepiness told us the opposite. Pictures were taken and we turned in well pleased with our extraordinary day.



Thursday 29 July

Sorgfjord: Eolusneset and Lagunepynten; Murchisonfjord: Russoya and Ringertzøya

Brilliant sun, cool wind – 4°C - 10°C

Plans changed rapidly today when we dropped a hike to stalk a Polar Bear and exploration of an arctic desert island to creep up on a group of slumbering Walrus. We had entered Sorgfjord, the fjord of grief in translation, with high hopes of seeing a haul-out of Walrus. But hope curdled to despair when we discovered that the animals had moved on leaving only depressions in the pebbles and rather foul-smelling scat (some of which had small pebbles as its main ingredient).

We trudged sadly up to the ancient cemetery at Eolusneset where whaling ships’ crews used to bury their dead in graves which were shallow due to permafrost and covered in stones. These did not stop grave robbers in the form of marauding Polar Bears which ripped them open to devour the contents... a far from charming thought.

Traps for Arctic Foxes were examined – frames powered by 10kg stones fell on the unfortunate animals killing them instantly (what a morbid morning we were having!).

Four Svalbard reindeer and a few Eider were seen from the hill-top but then things really picked up. My room-colleague Andy Woodall spotted a Polar Bear eating a Walrus on the beach about two miles away. Radio messages went to and from the ship and soon we were returning to weigh anchor and motor around to Lagunepynten.

There we hopped into the zodiacs and approached the dead Walrus (now deserted by the bear) with caution. Suddenly the animal, a scrawny female, was spotted lying in a most unlady-like posture on a snow drift behind the carcass. She stood up and peered our way, probably scenting us, and started to slowly but nervously edge towards the back of the drift. Soon she had disappeared – only Marjorie, who had stayed on the ship, could see the bear through my telescope.

We examined the long-dead carcass (from the safety of the zodiacs: there might have been other bears around) and returned to the ship for a late lunch.

Crossing to Murchisonfjord we put in an hour's sea-watching with two or three Walruses as our reward. A group of eight was found on Russøya Island but once again our plans were changed when the guides found a group of about 40 slumbering males on nearby Rinertøya Island.

Most of the ship's guests were ferried to the island where we split into two groups, the first to visit Walruses, ours went off exploring for an hour or so. Large numbers of brilliant Red (Grey) Phalaropes were found feeding within inches of the shore, the drab males insignificant compared with the superbly dressed females. A pair of Red-throated Divers flew over and we found them (so we thought) on a pool inland. Another pair suddenly flew in, however, and we realized that the place held two pairs. Their little breeding pond was guarded by a dark-phased Arctic Skua which was watching its fluffy chick. A few Purple Sandpipers were the only other noteworthy vertebrate occupants of the island.

We swapped with the first group and stalked the sleeping Walruses silently. Each was resting in a bijou depression made by wriggling on their backs.

They were brilliant fun, fascinating to watch, and our allotted hour slipped past swiftly. We saw them interacting quite gently as a male tried to slip into the centre of the group like an embarrassed eunuch in a harem. Only the occasional growl indicated the serious side of their lives when heads reared up and half-hearted jabs were made with their vicious-looking tusks.

The group was made up largely of males. The females and pups – dependant on their mothers for up to three years – haul out separately.

We returned to the ship for another great supper and relaxing evening.



Friday 30 July

Alkefjellet auk cliffs, Palanderbukta, Nordausland

Hazy sun, some cloud, cold wind 2°C – 8°C

Seeing Fin Whales is a great start to any day and today we saw four at least as we sailed down the Hinlopen Strait. They were at a distance and only the early risers saw them but it was a great sighting with one or two extremely large individuals in the group.

Anchoring off the 100m high Alkefjellet (auk cliffs), the ship was surrounded by Brünnich's Guillemots while hundreds more flew past, blisteringly fast, to their nesting ledges on the cliffs. Through binoculars it was a breath-taking sight and we could hardly wait to cruise along them in the zodiacs. Open craft let us see and smell the colonies and we had ample opportunity for both.

The cliffs are made up of two thick limestone layers obtruded by a thick stratum of basaltic rock. They are topped by a glacier and outcrops of permafrost can be seen in the softer parts. The glacier melts in summer giving rise to quite large waterfalls and rivulets.

About 50,000 pairs of Brünnich's Guillemots nest on the narrow ledges which are stained white and pink (so were parts of our zodiac and a few anorak hoods by the end of the morning!). Kittiwakes nest higher up the cliffs in good numbers and a few small colonies of Black Guillemots are also present.

All that food gives rise to predators the main one being Glaucous Gulls which nest on the top of stacks and pinnacles. We saw several feeding on dead guillemots some pieces of which were destined for the three well grown chicks we saw at the top of a basalt pinnacle.

We were surprised that so few guillemots seemed to have young and that many of the returning birds were not carrying food in their beaks. This had not been the case on other smaller colonies and, indeed, we had already seen young Brünnich's Guillemots on the sea. These were early departures as the chicks leap off the cliffs when three weeks old, before they can fly, a simultaneous event leaving few birds behind on the ledges. Each male joins its chick, moult their flight feathers to grow new ones and the flightless birds, father and offspring, then paddle off to drift on the currents towards Greenland. All Svalbard Brünnich's Guillemots overwinter off southern Greenland or Newfoundland.

Having enjoyed watching these feisty birds for some time, we motored down to an adjacent glacier which had given rise to many of the ice floes in the area.

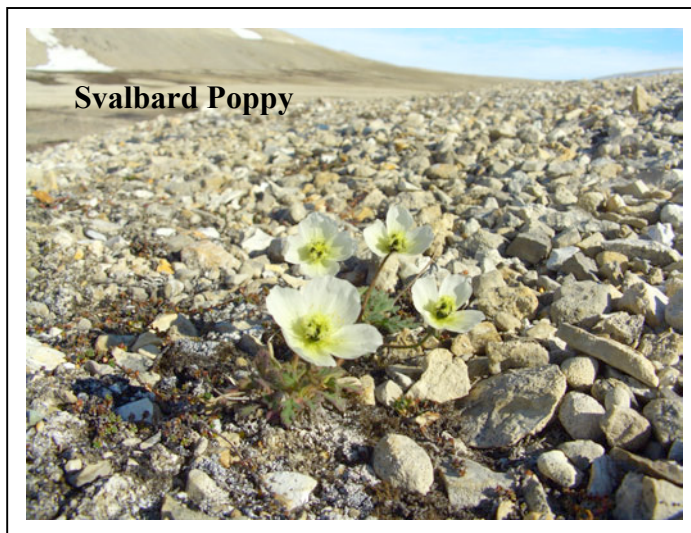
A Bearded Seal was seen loafing on an ice floe as we entered Whalebergfjorden after crossing the Hinlopen Strait over lunch.

Anchoring off Palanderbukta, we gazed out across the arctic desert of Nordausland. Pack ice had ground up the beach weeks before and we dropped our life-jackets in the depressions made.

Walking up to a nearby ridge we admired the few plants which were growing in this barren spot – Purple Saxifrage, Svalbard Poppy (which had produced a yellow shimmer in places where the desert had bloomed) and Arctic Mouse-ear.

In places there were whale bones which had risen out of the water when the ice caps melted and the land rose producing raised beaches. Each had a community of plants growing down the slope from it nourished to this day by the nutrients released as the bones decayed. We considered the immortality of those whales whose remains were serving such a useful purpose.

Once on the ridge we gained a view of the glacier which covers most of Nordaustland, the third biggest ice cap in the world. Unbeknown to us, the long-hike group had gained the summit of an escarpment at about



the same time and were enjoying a much better view of the same glacier from their elevated position.

Birds seen included several Arctic Skuas (Parasitic Jaegers) and a pair of Snow Buntings.

Many guests had been puzzled about the evening's menu – rotten Polar Bear and Beluga mattaq (skin), both popular Inuit dishes. This turned out to be a delicious (conventional) arctic barbeque served and eaten by many on deck, wrapped to the nines against the cool evening air. Beer and wines flowed freely on the house. It was followed by an arctic disco with a crowded dance floor and much jollity.

Saturday 31 July

Bråsvellbreen glacier and the Olga Strait (Olgastretet) ice pack

Sunny but dense fog at times, 6°C – 0°C

What a brilliant day: at least eight Polar Bears seen, more than 100 sightings each of Pomerine Skua and Ivory Gull with another day in the most pristine (not to say chilly) habitat on earth.

Most of us awoke to see a vast uniform glacial face with huge waterfalls running off it – the Bråsvellbreen glacier. This has the longest glacial face in the northern hemisphere, an amazing sight and start. Bearded Seals were feeding close to its base and we followed a distant Polar Bear swimming towards land for a short while.

Captain Vargas turned the ship southwards and we set off for the Olga Strait where Antarctic Dream's sister ship Plancius was enjoying the pack ice in sunshine. There were tense moments as we slipped into fog banks on the way down. These would not have served our purpose. But, as we came out of one there was Plancius and the pack ice.

A great deal of horn hooting and waving by the two crews made for a happy reunion before we slipped off into the ice to search for Polar Bears.

Which was fine because as we slowly eased through the ice other things found us. Pomerine Skuas came in to chase Kittiwakes that had caught fish in the ice, rather lazily I thought. One or two succeeded in a bit of (24-hour) daylight robbery but most hung around the ship in parties of up to a dozen at a time. The other great surprise was a constant stream of Ivory gulls. Where most previous trips have seen 15 or so in 10 days we topped the 100 sightings today alone! Most were adults and made a great distraction from Kittiwakes and the search for Polar Bears. One, following the ship, made a strange almost cat-like call.

But it was the bears which proved a highlight of the day. At least eight were seen (it was difficult to keep track at times). The early ones were all in the water and we watched from a distance to see if they would haul out onto an ice flow.

Later sightings included one which had been wounded, possibly by a wary Walrus although fighting with another bear was also postulated. This animal was asleep when we first saw it, waking after some time and scenting the air. As we left it to move on another bear was found close by and it soon became apparent that it was stalking the injured one. Both disappeared into the pack ice off to our right, the injured bear still pursued by the bigger.

We had seen a bear catch a seal by diving and again we able to see one using this technique. The Polar Bear repeatedly swam with his head under water and occasionally dived as is chasing something, although without success while we watched.

Dinner was delayed to accommodate the bear watchers so long did our wonderful time in the ice continue.



Sunday 1 August

Kapp Lee and Diskobukta, Edgeøya

“Fancy being chased off an island by a Polar Bear,” someone remarked as we swung into the zodiacs for a swift but orderly return to the ship. “That’s something to tell the grandchildren.”

Being chased was an exaggeration – the bear had not made one step towards us – but they are the most dangerous predators and Oceanwide Expeditions take no chances. It had been spotted two kilometers away when we were an hour into our hikes across Kapp Lee. The decision to return was taken immediately and back we went. The visit was still rewarding. About 12 Walruses were playing in the waves like children on a beach when we arrived. Several stopped and approached the zodiacs to get a better view of us, or pose for photographs.



A couple of Svalbard Reindeer had been seen from the ship when we anchored. They were just two of a small herd of nine which were grazing contentedly on the rich sward of the area. Snow Buntings were flitting around and a flock of Pink-footed Geese on the beach suddenly started calling as we walked inland. Perhaps they knew about the bear before us! Eiders on the sea were calling like old biddies at a church meeting that had just been told a juicy piece of gossip – “ohooo, ohooo”.

Our day had started well as we looked for whales during the run into Edgeøya. Judy spotted a pod of Belugas and the captain took us closer for a look. The adults were easy to

see once the general area was known (we were some distance away) but the grey juveniles were a little more difficult. We thought there were about 12 all together.

Our afternoon excursion was further down the coast at Diskobukta where we walked out to a huge Kittiwake colony. Three Arctic Foxes were seen before we even reached the canyon where the birds nest.

And when we got there... what a sight! Thousands of birds wheeling around the cliffs which held nests on every available ledge. A great wave of noise greeted us together with quite a pong. Several folk explored right up the canyon seeing several foxes. Those of us who remained watched lurking Glaucous Gulls waiting for their opportunity to pick up dropped food or snatch a chick. One came when a young Kittiwake, almost able to fly, dropped off its ledge and fluttered to the base of the colony. But it was not the gulls who seized the moment but a young fox. Before it could leave with its prize, however, another fox raced up and chased the youngster away. The dominant animal then returned, picked up the dead chick and took it off to its den, possibly to feed a second litter. Some people walked around the top of the canyon to look down on the colony before we returned to the ship after yet another excellent day.

Monday 2 August

Burgerbukta glacier and Gåshamna whaling station, Hornsund

Beautiful sun am, overcast and cool pm 5 - 0°C

The day started with frustration – four Fin Whales had been seen at 5.45am, an hour before we emerged on deck. Our reward was a sole Great Skua among the huge numbers of Little Auks and Brünnich's Guillemots.

Our last adventure into the ice was magical: a thick ice-pack with huge icebergs in a fiord bounded by towering mountains (snow-topped, with white valleys running down their flanks) and all bathed in beautiful sunshine. We were hoping to see a Polar Bear from the cruising zodiacs but this did not happen despite noting a couple of Ivory Gulls which indicated that the bears might be around.

Kittiwakes were nesting on one of the mountains, a few Glaucous Gulls were seen and among many Black Guillemots seen was a lone white leucistic one.

The occupants of one of the zodiacs had a brilliant view of a huge iceberg disintegrating: a huge chunk fell off causing the vast berg to become unbalanced. As it rolled to one side thousands of litres of water cascaded off it causing the iceberg to become even more unstable. As it rolled alarmingly the berg fell apart and settled into the water with a strange groaning sound. Wow! What a sight.



Returning to the ship, we had excellent views of the rarely seen Mt Hornsundtind ahead of us. At 1,431m. it is the third largest mountain in Svalbard. Its spectacular snow slopes stretched right down to the sea, glinting brilliantly in the sun.

Lunch was set among the most beautiful scenery, perhaps of the trip. Blue ice floes drifted on dark fiord waters, snow-topped mountains and grey bird cliffs all combined to form a breathtaking view.

The run ashore at Gåshamna (Goose Bay) whaling station across the water was short allowing a little time to find a flock of Barnacle Geese, an appropriate bird to welcome us. We learned of the station's sad history and saw the many remains of the whales which were slaughtered in the area and processed at Gåshamna.

Turning our backs on the memories, we set off on a brisk hike across a couple of headlands to the remains of Pomor hunting-huts. These were built by Russians who came across to hunt Polar Bears, Walruses, Arctic Foxes and gather the local geese eggs.

Dinner was eaten in a state of excitement by the naturalists on board who were keen to get up on deck and start the evening's main event – a session looking for whales and dolphins over the edge of the continental shelf. Here upwellings in the ocean currents cause a blooming of life starting with plankton and ending in small fish – life out here really is a conglomeration of organisms. These are the principle food of Whales and we had high hopes of seeing a few.

The first three Fin Whales were seen at 8.55pm and the action continued until midnight.

And what action – the first sighting of Sperm Whales ever for Spitsbergen! We had six sightings of at least four animals, all huge males, a fortunate stroke of serendipity. Two pods of White-beaked Dolphins were also seen brilliantly well while a fourth Fin was also recorded.

Tuesday 3 August

Ahlstrandodden and Ingeborgfjellet, Bellsund

Mostly overcast, foggy in the morning, some sun pm, 7°C – 2°C

A planned zodiac cruise to a glacier had to be cancelled when fog descended, a side-product of the settled weather we were enjoying. Instead we went to Ahlstrandodden to see a former Beluga Whale processing station. The landing beach was marked by five huge piles of bones, bleached white and testament to the activities of former years. We were shown the stakes to which seine nets were attached before the far end was rowed out to surround Belugas passing by.

There followed a medium walk which became slow medium, long medium and, as we passed some distant fishing boats, an extremely long walk. Long but pleasant with interesting stories about the area, its Polar Bears, trappers and Svalbard Governor's hut. Our most interesting find was an area nicknamed 'Fall in Svalbard' as the tiny leaves of its Polar Willows had turned yellow and red. An Arctic Skua was seen harrying a Kittiwake, tugging out feathers and eventually bringing the unfortunate bird down. They were both seen to fly off shortly afterwards, the gull presumably somewhat lighter having donated a meal to the skua.



One of the great highlights of the cruise (there were so many!) came in the afternoon when we visited a Little Auk colony at Ingeborgfjellet. What an amazing sight and noise.

The tiny auks flew in to their scree-slope colony in droves, settling on the rocks in fours and fives with much head-nodding and calling. This prompted many of their youngsters to emerge from their nests deep in the rocks to practice flying with great gusto. Every few minutes a patrolling Glaucous Gull would spook the birds which took off in great clouds calling loudly, reminiscent of the calls of Cherokee Indians coming over the hill in old Western films, one guest commented. The young birds dived for cover under the stones as the adults left – some not fast enough to prevent themselves becoming a late afternoon snack for the gulls.

High above the colony were further nest sites for kittiwakes and Brünnich's Guillemots which were taking some of the predation pressure off the auks below. Sadly, we saw no Arctic Foxes although the site is famous for being chosen by the BBC to film the animals for a documentary programme.

Our day ended with a rather jovial and convivial evening greatly aided by the generous production of half a bottle of Port from Steve and a considerable quantity of The Glenlivet which "had to be consumed... I'm not taking it home," according to its donor, Ged.

There were speeches from the captain and expedition leader, much congratulatory back-slapping and a few too many tales of adventures past. We turned in after packing our cases ready for the morning.

Wednesday 4 August

Longyearbyen and departure

Overcast but calm, 7°C

Belugas had surrounded the ship after we anchored off Longyearbyen and our last great sighting of this remarkable cruise thus came before breakfast. A large pod of possibly 50 animals with many young was seen.

A free morning allowed some of us to enjoy our last birding walk along the coast to "the kennels" where sledge-pulling huskies are kept for the summer fed on hunted seal and Reindeer. (Bear this in mind when next you fancy being pulled by huskies.) The carcasses fed to the dogs attract Ivory Gulls but not today. We were content with seeing Ringed Plover and Dunlin, the latter taking off and towering before heading off south, perhaps to be spotted by one of us again as they pass through in a week or two's time. Arctic Terns had chicks and the Arctic Skua's youngster seemed to have gone although an adult was still around.

We enjoyed a delicious pizza lunch before flying via Tromso and Oslo back to London and home.

Tim Earl

Principal Leader, Guernsey, August 2010.

ANNOTATED LIST OF WILDLIFE RECORDED

BIRDS

WILDFOWL		Family Anatidae
1	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
2	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
3	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
4	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
LOONS		Family Gaviidae
5	Red-throated Loon	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
SHEARWATERS		Family Procellariidae
6	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>

About a dozen on Edgeøya and a similar number at Kapp Lee, Edgeøya; 12 at Gåshamna whaling station, Hornsund.

A flock of six at Longyearbyen, 150 on the way home; lots breeding at Ny Ålesund; 27 at Gåshamna whaling station, Hornsund.

A few on each landing we made: more than 30 at Longyearbyen; a few at Blomstrandhalvøya, Ny Ålesund, Eolusneset cemetery; about 50 on Edgeøya.

One at Longyearbyen; one at Blomstrandhalvøya; three at Ny Ålesund.

One fly-past seen only by those in the first boats at Blomstrandhalvøya; two pairs, one bird incubating eggs on Ringertzøya Island; one off Longyearbyen on our final morning.

The dark 'blue morph' was abundant daily, a few pale morphs also seen daily; common in the pack ice at 81°N, and in the Olga Strait.

PLOVERS		Family Charadriidae
7	Common Ringed Plover <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	A few on the runway at Tromsø; two at Longyearbyen on our final morning.
SANDPIPERS, SNIPES		Family Scolopacidae
8	Purple Sandpiper <i>Calidris maritima</i>	Two on the shore at Longyearbyen, about 10 on our return; several, including a chick, at Ny Ålesund; one at Hamiltonbukta glacier.
9	Dunlin <i>Calidris alpina</i>	One fly-past at Longyearbyen; a flock of 10 took off calling excitedly, towered and headed off south from Longyearbyen. Was this the start of their autumn migration?
10	Red (Grey) Phalarope <i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>	At least 50 on Ringertzøya Island provided great entertainment.
GULLS & TERNS		Family Laridae
11	Glaucous Gull <i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	Common to abundant daily; lots in the pack ice; about 20 around the dead Walrus at Lagunepytten; several pairs at Alkefjellet auk cliffs.
12	Ivory Gull <i>Pagophila eburnea</i>	One at Ny Ålesund; more than 15 in the northern pack ice including two attending a Polar Bear kill; more than 100 sightings in the pack ice of Olga Strait; two in Hornsund. Voted bird of the trip.
13	Sabine's Gull <i>Xema sabini</i>	An adult briefly in the pack ice at 81°N.
14	Black-legged Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Common to abundant daily; common fishing beside the ship in the pack ice; many nesting at Alkefjellet auk cliffs; a huge colony at Diskobukta, Edgeøya.
15	Arctic Tern <i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	Common to abundant daily; a few in the pack ice at 81°N.
SKUAS		Family Stercorariidae
16	Great Skua (Bonxie) <i>Stercorarius skua</i>	Singles at the anchoring mast in Ny Ålesund, Holmiabukta, Moffen Island and Hornsund; two at Alkefjellet auk cliffs.
17	Pomarine Skua <i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>	Two in the pack ice at 81°N; more than 100 in the Olga Strait pack ice.
18	Arctic Skua <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> (Parasitic Jaeger)	A pair feeding a well grown chick at Longyearbyen; three at Blomstrand-halvøya; one at Ny Ålesund; six at least on Buchannanhalvøya peninsular; two in the pack ice at 81°N; one with chick on Ringertzøya; two in the Olga Strait pack ice.
19	Long-tailed Skua <i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	One fly-past seen only by those in the first boats at Blomstrandhalvøya; brilliant views of one sparring with an Arctic Skua as we left Ny Ålesund; one close to Kongsvegan glacier; three including one close behind the ship in the pack ice; two at the Bråsvellbreen glacier.
AUKS		Family Alcidae
20	Little Auk <i>Alle alle</i>	Common to abundant daily; two in the pack ice at 81°N; a few in the Olga Strait pack ice; about 2,000 pairs at a stunning colony at Ingeborgfjellet.

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| 21 | Brünnich's guillemot
(Thick-billed Murre) | Uria lomvia | Common to abundant daily; a few in the pack-ice; 50,000 pairs but with few young at Alkefjellet auk cliffs. |
| 22 | Black Guillemot | Cepphus grylle | Common to abundant daily; two in the pack ice; a small colony at Alkefjellet auk cliffs; several in the Olga Strait pack ice. |
| 23 | Atlantic Puffin | Fratercula arctica | A few daily. |

BUNTINGS & ALLIES

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| 24 | Snow Bunting | Plectrophenax nivalis |
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Family Emberizidae

A few at most sites we visited.

MAMMALS

DOGS & FOXES

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| 1 | Arctic Fox | Vulpes lagopus |
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Family Canidae

One with a gosling in its mouth seen through 'scopes at Ny Ålesund; one on a beach close to Kongsvegan glacier; at least six at the Kittiwake colony on Edgeøya where we saw territorial disputes and foxes taking chicks; three cubs under a house in Longyearbyen on our way home.

BEARS

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| 2 | Polar Bear | Thalarctos maritimus |
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Family Ursidae

A total of 20 sightings as follows: a female and cub on the scree slope at Hamiltonbukta; sightings of four bears in the pack ice at 81°N - two together, one which killed a seal and a fourth which was hunting by sniffing and 'tasting' the air; one in the water off the Bråsvellbreen glacier; at least eight in the Olga Strait pack ice including one with a leg injury which was chased by another bear, several swimming and a few sleeping; one at Kapp Lee, Edgeøya which cut our hike short; one swimming, two on land in the Hornsund.

EARED SEALS

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| 3 | Walrus | Odobenus rosmarus |
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Family Otariidae

Seven on Moffen Island with one off the beach; about 50, mostly males, hauled out on Ringertzøya island; one swimming in the Olga Strait pack ice; about 12 in the water off at Kapp Lee beach, Edgeøya.

EARLESS SEALS

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| 4 | Harp Seal | Pagophilus groenlandicus |
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Family Phocidae

Many parties of up to 20 animals in the northern pack ice; three parties of about 20 each in the Olga Strait pack ice.

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| 5 | Ringed Seal | Pusa hispida |
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A few sleeping hauled out in the pack ice; a couple 'bottling' noses up in the Olga Strait pack ice.

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| 6 | Bearded Seal | Erignathus barbatus |
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One as we sailed out of Raudfjord; two small groups in the pack ice; one on an ice floe at Palanderbukta; about six at the Bråsvellbreen glacier; two in the Olga Strait pack ice.

RORQUALS

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| 7 | Fin Whale | Balaenoptera physalus |
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Family Balaenopteridae

A pod of four in the Hinlopen Strait as we approached Alkefjellet auk cliffs; another of three and a single over the edge of Spitsbergen continental shelf.

SPERM WHALES

- 8 Great Sperm Whale *Physeter catodon*

Family Physeteridae

Three, possibly more, seen in six sightings over the edge of Spitsbergen's continental shelf. These are the first records for Spitsbergen ever!

MARINE DOLPHINS

- 9 White-beaked Dolphin

Family Delphinidae

Lagenorhynchus albirostris Two pods, each with about 15 animals, seen over the edge of Spitsbergen continental shelf.

SINGLE TOOTHED WHALES

- 10 Beluga *Delphinapterus leucas*

Family Monodontidae

A pod of about 12, which included a few grey calves, seen off Edgeøya; a large pod of at least 50 with many grey juveniles off Longyearbyen on our way home... what a way to finish!

DEER

- 11 Svalbard Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus* Common. A few seen on most landings.

Family Cervidae

FISH

SCULPINS

- 1 Arctic Staghorn Sculpin *Gymnocanthus tricuspis*

Family Cottidae

One in Longyearbyen, dropped by a passing bird; one caught by a Black Guillemot at Hamiltonbukta glacier.

COD

- 2 Arctic Cod *Arctogadus glacialis*

Family Gadidae

Seen commonly in the pack ice being caught by Kittiwakes and occasionally swimming.

**METEOROLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS
AND HEAVENLY BODIES**

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| 1 The Sun | The Sun was seen at its lowest at midnight... the 'midnight Sun'... |
| 2 The Moon | while the Moon was setting (and waning) at midday - the 'Midday Moon'. |
| 3 Lenticular cloud | Formed commonly over mountain tops on sunny days. |
| 4 Fog-bow | Formed twice on foggy days with sun. 'Personal halos' formed around people's shadows.
A fogbow is similar to a rainbow, but because of the small size of water droplets in fog, less than 0.05 mm, the fogbow has only very weak colours, a red outer edge and bluish inner. In some cases when the droplets are particularly small it appears white. Fogbows are therefore sometimes called white rainbows. Mariners sometimes call them 'sea-dogs'. |

BIRDS SEEN AT OSLO AIRPORT

PIGEONS & DOVES

- 1 Rock Dove *Columba livia*

Family Columbidae

A flock at Oslo airport.

SWIFTS

- 2 Common Swift *Apus apus*

Family Apodidae

A few at Oslo airport.

CROWS, JAYS

- 3 Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

Family Corvidae

A few at Oslo airport.

- 4 Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*

One on Oslo airfield.

SWALLOWS, MARTINS

- 5 Northern House Martin *Delichon urbicum*

Family Hirundinidae

One or two at Oslo airport.

WAGTAILS & PIPITS

- 6 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*

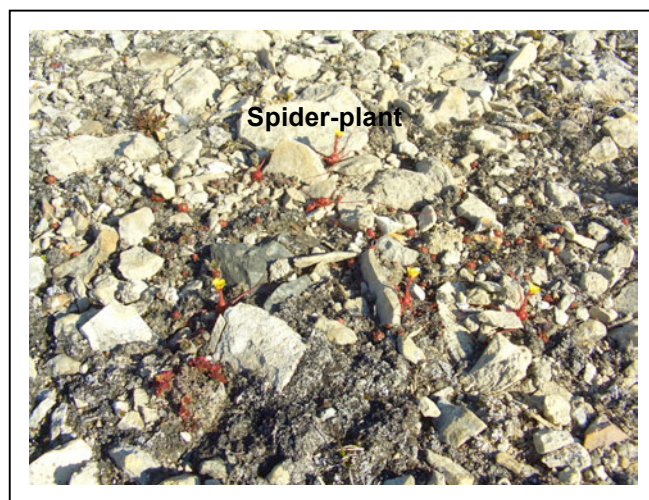
Family Motacillidae

Two at Oslo airport.

PLANTS

With thanks to Paul Harvey and Andy Woodall

Field Horsetail *Equisetum arvense*
Fir Clubmoss *Huperzia selago*
Polar Willow *Salix polaris*
Net-leaved Willow *Salix reticulata*
Alpine Bistort *Polygonum viviparum*
Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna*
Tufted Sandwort *Minuartia biflora*
Fringed Sandwort *Arenaria pseudofrigida*
Tundra Chickweed *Stellaria crassipes*
Arctic Chickweed *Stellaria humifusa*
Arctic Mouse-ear *Cerastium arcticum*
Polar (Nodding) Campion *Silene uralensis*
Arctic White Campion *Silene furcata*
Moss Campion *Silene acaulis*
Snow Buttercup *Ranunculus nivalis*
Sulphur-coloured Buttercup *Ranunculus sulphureus*
Pygmy Buttercup *Ranunculus pygmaeus*
Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dahlianum*
Polar Cress *Cardamine nymannii*
Polar Scurvy-grass *Cochlearia groenlandica*
Golden Whitlow Grass *Draba alpina*
Lapland Whitlow Grass *Draba lacteal*
Purple Saxifrage *Saxifraga oppositifolia*
Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage *Saxifraga hieracifolia*



Alpine Saxifrage *Saxifraga nivalis*
Dwarf Saxifrage *Saxifraga tenuis*
Yellow Mountain Saxifrage *Saxifraga aizoides*
Yellow Marsh Saxifrage *Saxifraga hirculus*
Drooping Saxifrage *Saxifraga cernua*
Svalbard Saxifrage *Saxifraga svalbardensis*
Highland (Brook) Saxifrage *Saxifraga rivularis*
Tufted Saxifrage *Saxifraga cespitosa*
Polar Stoloniferous Saxifrage
(Spiderplant) *Saxifraga platysepala*
Tufted Cinquefoil *Potentilla pulchella*
Arctic Cinquefoil *Potentilla hyparctica*
Mountain Avens *Dryas octopetala*

Arctic Bell Heather *Cassiope tetragona*
Hairy Lousewort *Pedicularis hirsuta*
Arctic Dandelion *Taraxacum arcticum*
Northern Wood-rush *Luzula confusa*
Arctic Wood-rush *Luzula arctica*
Arctic Cotton-grass *Eriophorum scheuchzeri*
Cushion Sedge *Carex nardina*
Nodding Sedge *Carex misandra*
Polar Foxtail *Alopecurus borealis*
Alpine Hair-grass *Deschampsia alpina*
Arctic Meadow-grass *Poa arctica*
Red Fescue *Festuca rubra*
Arctic Fescue *Festuca cryophila*
Viviparous Fescue *Festuca vivipa*