

# Svalbard Summer Expedition Report

## 13 July – 24 July 2022





As always, we arrived at Longyearbyen a day before we were to board our ship for the expedition. There is plenty to see and photograph around here. We got to our hotel, Radisson Blu, a short drive from the airport. We checked in and went out for lunch at a café in the town centre, a couple of minutes walk away. The Radisson commands a convenient location, giving easy access to the town and harbour.

The snow on the ground had made way for the colourful tundra with hundreds of Barnacle Geese and chicks grazing. We spotted our first pair of Arctic Skua's close by to the row of houses and, on closer look, found they were nursing a chick. The Skua would fly low over the Geese, but that didn't bother them; the chicks had grown sizable not to feel threatened. We walked towards the harbour, following a gaggle of Geese headed towards the ocean; as they stopped on the way to drink in the pools of water, we got some photos. At the shore, we saw the usual suspects like Glaucous Gulls, Arctic Terns, Black-legged Kittiwakes & Black Guillemots, but not many ducks. We came across a flock of Common Eider females along the coast towards the blue Birdlife International shack. A resident walking his dog flushed them into the water! We photographed Arctic Terns hovering over a pool from a bench outside the Birdlife shack.

We walked onto the dog kennels passing by numerous pools and flat tundra on both sides of the road. Several Arctic Terns were on the left of the road, nursing chicks, while their aggressive mates mobbed anything moving close by, including us.

In the pools, there were a few Purple Sandpipers; most were banded and also a couple of Dunlins. A large pool just short of the kennels had a few Common Eiders and at least one King Eider female; the stand-out was a solitary Greater Scaup. I did the same walk early the following morning with two other participants who had arrived later in the evening and added a Ringed Plover to the list.



***Barnacle Geese***



***Dunlin***





***Barnacle Geese***



***Purple Sandpiper***



***Snow Bunting***



***Arctic Tern***



After breakfast at the Radisson (quite a feast), we hired a car to drive past the airport to the Baren Valley (Bear Valley in Norwegian). One of the birds we wanted to see was the Svalbard Ptarmigan; I had seen and photographed them here in April when they were in abundance and very approachable in their winter plumage (I have included a winter photo below). But we didn't find any! A bit disappointing. It didn't take long before we found some Svalbard Reindeer; their antlers seemed to have grown since I last saw them.

A rather shy, fleeing Arctic Fox was seen; Little Auks were on their usual nesting site at a cliff face at the end of the road. Common and King Eiders were in small mixed flocks far out in the ocean. One of the highlights was a Red-throated Diver with a chick on a busy pool full of Geese and some waders. After a brief stop at the Seed Vault, we drove back to town and checked out the hill behind the church, where we saw a flock of Pink-footed Geese with chicks. A surprise was a Northern Wheatear, the only other passerine seen beside the Snow Bunting.



***Svalbard Reindeer***



***Pink-footed Geese***



***Svalbard Ptarmigan (winter image)***



We boarded the Malmo at 4 PM, a standard time for all tours. This was the busiest I have seen the Longyearbyen harbour, with some monstrous size cruise vessels that can take anywhere from 100 to 400 passengers. One of the fancy yachts even had a submarine attached to it! Dropping our bags in our cabins, we met the other travellers; it was a friendly group comprising nine nationalities between twelve people. Our expedition leader/Polar guides were Jens Wikstrom and John Rodsted. I travelled with both of them to eastern Greenland in 2018, it was nice meeting them again and having them lead the trip. Between the two, they have done over 500+ Polar expeditions; besides, they are a great company. Jens has been with me on a successful Snow Leopard trip to the Himalayas. John happens to be a Nobel prize-winning photojournalist. The excitement built quickly; a pod of Beluga's was sighted as soon as we left the harbour. We sailed all night and most of the following morning to get as far north as possible. For obvious reasons, the guides are always eager to bag Polar Bears early on the trip.

Along the way, we passed by some flying Atlantic Puffins, Thick-billed Murres, the omnipresent Northern Fulmars and even some Walruses on ice floats.



***Atlantic Puffin***



***Black Guillemot***

In the late afternoon, we went on our first zodiac cruise to the island of Karl XII-Oya, on the northern edge of Svalbard. Our first bear was sighted here, a somewhat exhausted one. It looked like a “dirty yellow ice” patch on cleaner white ice, so no photos. These are the last few islands on the way further north and are often used by bears as a resting spot surrounded by open waters during summer. We also saw our first Great Skua perched conspicuously on a rock. Several hundred Kittiwakes were nesting on an adjacent island.

A Polar Bear on the move was spotted early the following day. He was hyperactive, popping in and out of the rock cavities on the shoreline. The zodiacs were launched in the waters, and we were on our way to meet him close. About thirty minutes passed as we checked every nook and corner where we had spotted him, but there was no sign of him. With the help of the crew on the Malmö, the bear was sighted more than a mile away. We positioned the zodiac, giving the Bear plenty of room to move and let him approach us. He swam in our direction, climbed up the rocks and moved towards a greener patch, searching for eggs perhaps. For the next two hours, we followed him peacefully. It was an intimate, long sighting, and we got plenty of pictures of this individual. Swimming bears are the hardest to sight.



***Polar Bear checking us out***





***Polar Bear shrugging off water***



***Climbing onto rocks***



***Climbing down***



***Bearded Seal***



The next day more Polar Bears came in the way of a collared mother and a cub on a grassy patch by a bird cliff. It was windy and unsuitable to put the zodiacs on the water, so we took photos from the ship. The next Polar Bear came within thirty minutes on our way to a glacier, sleeping on a patch of ice at a distance too far for a photo.



***On a grassy patch***



***Bearded Seal on glacier ice***



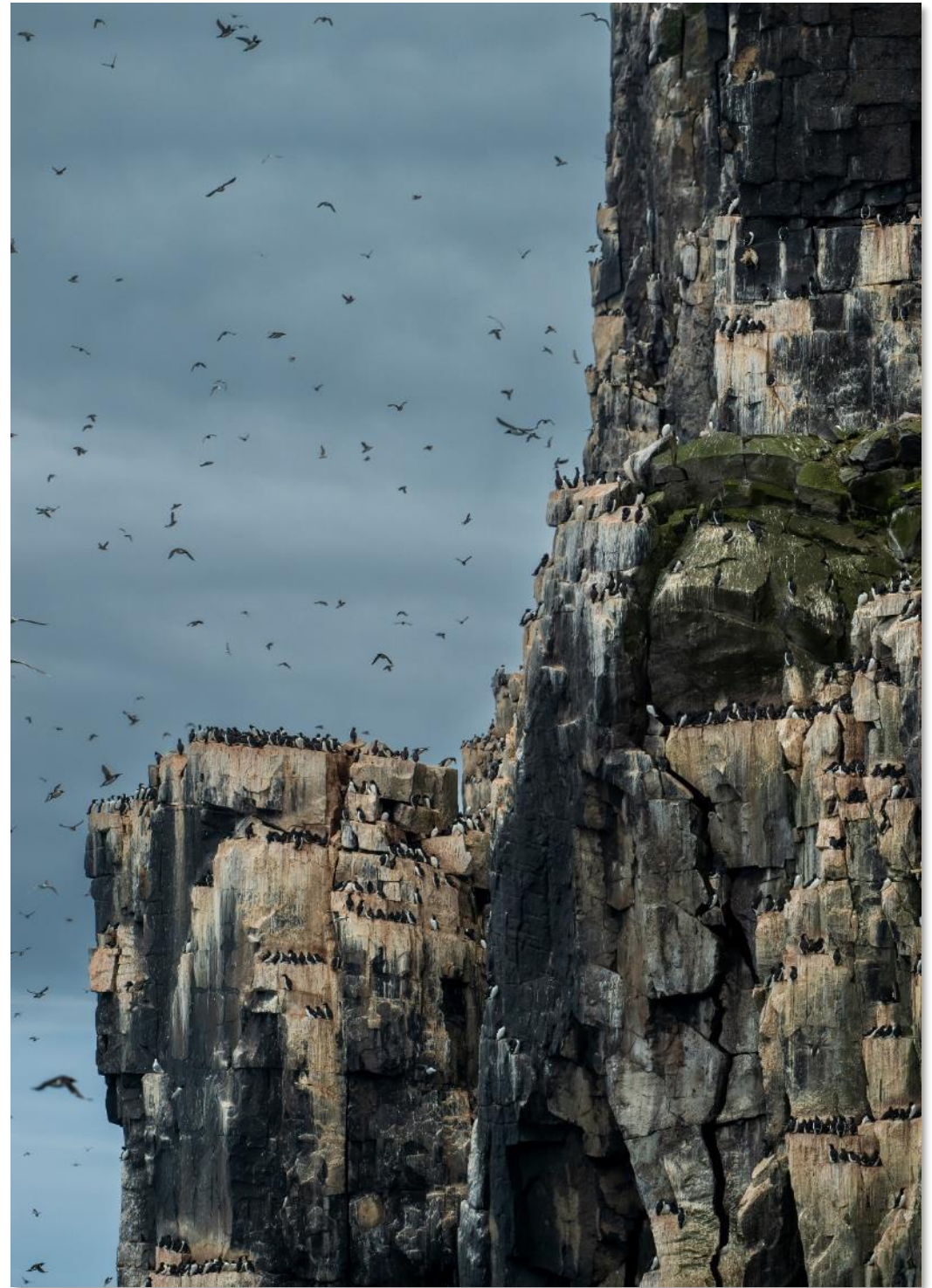
***Arctic landscape***



One of the highlights of a summer trip to Svalbard is the dolerite cliffs of Alkefjellet, which vaguely translates to Razorbill Mountain (although there are no Razorbills here). Around 100 metres tall and rising like sky-scrapers from the ocean, these cliffs teem with 60000+ Thick-billed Murres and a much smaller number of Kittiwakes & Glaucous nests here. Drifting at the edge of these cliffs on a zodiac, witnessing so many birds on the cliffs, and circling the skies is jaw-dropping. Easily one of the greatest avian spectacles on the planet. This area is prime real estate for Arctic Foxes, as we sighted at least three in their quirky summer coats. By this time, the fledglings jump from the cliffs to the water; the ones that fall short and land on the rocks are prey to Glaucous Gulls and Arctic foxes.



***Cruising at the bird cliff***



***Thousands of Thick-billed Murres***





***Thick-billed Murres***



***Glaucous Gull with fish***



***Arctic Fox yawn***



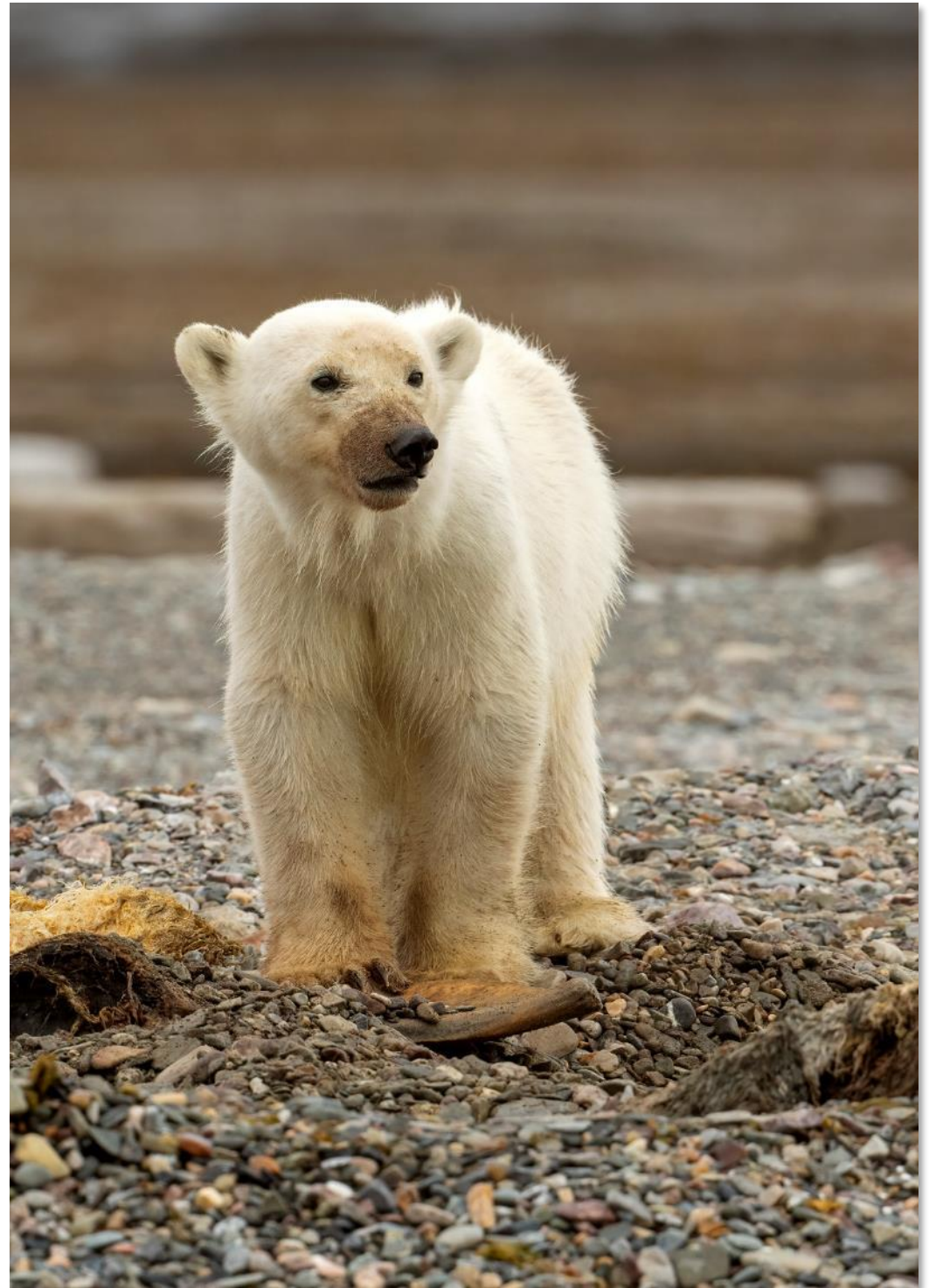
***Arctic Fox in his quirky summer coat***



After the immersive experience at Alkefjelleet, I was ready to give the cameras some respite, but that was not meant to be. We got the news that 4 Polar Bears were sighted close to the shore, feeding on a Walrus carcass. When we arrived on the site with zodiacs, the two cubs were digging on the corpse in the sand, a flock of Glaucous Gulls hanging around for scraps. The mother was resting about 50 metres away, keeping an eye on the surroundings. Further back away was a big male resting on his back with a belly full; he must have been the first on the pecking order. The Carcass was less than 5 feet from the shoreline; even while maintaining a safe distance, we could hear the sound of crunched bones and bears grunting. Once the cubs were done, they moved towards the mother, snuggled her and passed out. It was then the mother's turn to come feed. While this was going on, an Ivory Gull landed close to the carcass, giving us good looks, and some photos. We even saw our only Icelandic Gull here. Plenty of action for the night.



***Mother and Cubs***



***Cub***





***Cubs***



***Ivory Gull***



***Arctic light***



***Ivory Gull***



The following two days were relatively gentle as we sailed south, but we couldn't complain. We took in some glaciers and did a shore landing, producing more Reindeer and a bold Arctic Fox. A lone Mink Whale was also sighted one afternoon.

It's easy to lose track of days in this part of the world, at least I do, and I blame it on the midnight sun. But looking at the notes, on day eight, there was a knock at my door at 3 AM by Jens. Blue Whales! Out on the deck in no time, we could see this mammoth cetacean blowing. And then there were more. We reckon there were a total of five Blue Whales. Being at a distance, mostly all we could capture were their backs at a low angle. Exciting enough, nonetheless. Where I originally come from, fish seldom grow more than four inches!



***Mink Whale***



***Blue Whale***



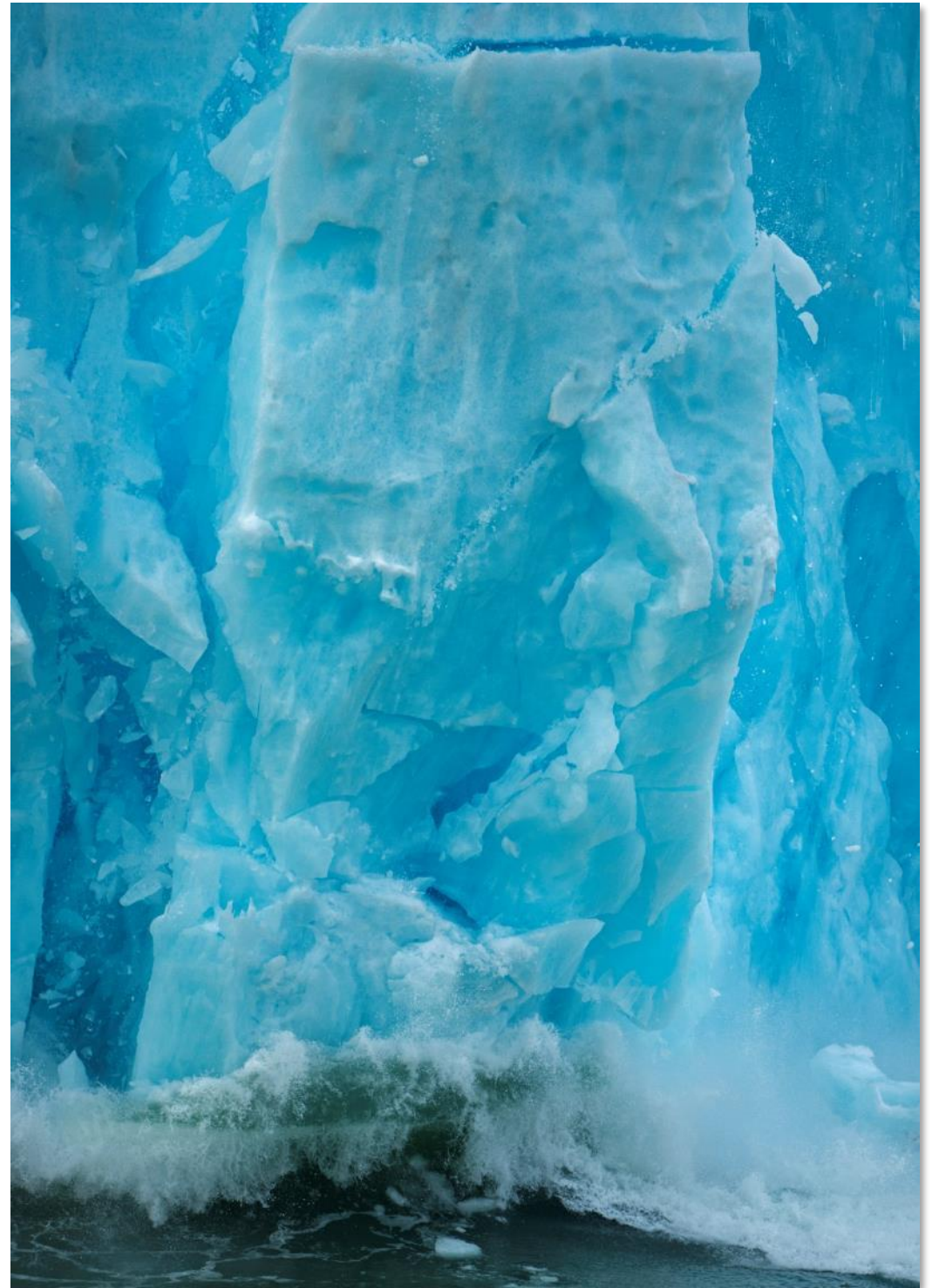
***Blue Whale***



Continuing our cruise, we visited the Monacobreen glacier, named after Albert I of Monaco, who sponsored much research work at Svalbard. I managed to get some pictures of the glacier calving. We spotted at least nine Ivory Bill among the many Kittiwakes we saw on the glacier front. We also landed at the Texas Bar, a trapper's cabin with an exciting story built-in 1927. Since it's abandoned and not a functioning bar, we carried our spirits! We walked to the vantage point here and could photograph the landscapes. A Red-necked Phalarope was seen flushed from a pool and a pair of Red-throated Divers was spotted on a flight.



***Kittiwakes by a glacier***



***Glacier calving***



Our expedition cruise was coming close to an end, and Walrus was the only prominent denizen of Svalbard we had not photographed well. But there was a plan in place for them. We made a shore landing at midnight at a Walrus colony. Since there were several young ones in the group, we did not approach them close, they could panic, and we didn't want to spook them out. A Ruddy turnstone was spotted near a pool of water here. The following day, we went out to another Walrus colony and made a landing where we got some nice pictures of them with a glacier in the background and even got them on the water from the zodiacs. A cruise around here also revealed a large flock of King Eiders and our only Long-tailed Ducks of the trip.



***Walrus***



***Walrus in water***



***Expedition ship - Malmo***



