

# Norway Trip

## July 24-25, 2013: Oslo

Before we actually departed from San Francisco, we received email from Kathleen “Sully” Sullivan, a birder from Boulder, that her flight had been canceled and she would be arriving a day late to Oslo. So, we lost the third member of our birding group for the day in Oslo. Simon Rix graciously offered to cancel as the cost to us had increased, but we decided to go ahead anyway.

After a transfer in Frankfurt — not our favorite airport — we boarded a smaller plane for the short trip to Oslo, arriving in the afternoon of the 24<sup>th</sup>. One day was lost in the air. We considered a taxi from the airport to our hotel, but when we learned the price, around \$90, we decided to take the express train instead. That proved to be an excellent choice. We met a young woman, Tanya, on the train platform who offered to show us the way to walk to our hotel from the central station. It took about 10 minutes, but seemed longer. Fortunately, my obsession with packing light paid off as we each had only a small rollaboard and a heavy day pack.

After cleaning up, we found a small Thai restaurant nearby reviewed on Google as “the best Thai food in Oslo.” We decided to pass up the opportunity to sample Norwegian cuisine when we were told it included such delicacies as whale meat. The Thai food turned out to be delicious, but expensive. We have learned that Oslo is now rated as the most expensive city in world.

After a night when Linda peacefully snored next to me as my circadian rhythms tried to adjust, we ate a sumptuous breakfast in the hotel restaurant and met Simon Rix, our guide for the day.

We drove first to a nature preserve on the outskirts of town. I didn’t get the full name, something or other “Tung,” which means peninsula. It used to be a farm, and still had sheep grazing and some planted fields. The spring floods, which were especially severe this year, have deposited a lot of new mud in the area, so the peninsula is growing. We passed an observation tower on our walk that was no longer used as the area to be observed was much farther away.



River flowing into reservoir

The Norwegians are suffering thru a *heat wave* with daily high temperatures about 80 degrees Fahrenheit. We agreed it was a bit warm. Unfortunately, the birds thought it was miserably stifling, and were not as active as usual. Many were also molting into dull fall plumage. We worked on a succession of little brown birds flitting in the leaves. Tough birding, but ultimately rewarding us with nice looks. My favorite birds of the day were a pair of Common Cranes that stood in our path before flying off bugling. We had last seen the species in Delhi, India, in 2003. We saw several lifers in the area, including two Little Gulls conveniently sitting next to a Common Tern for size comparison.

We then went to Simon’s “regular patch,” an area near a large reservoir containing Oslo’s drinking water. Here’s a photo of the river that flowed into the reservoir. No activity by humans is allowed on the lake, which was protected by a fence. We added some more birds to the list, including a small flock of Greenfinches. Linda complained that they weren’t green. A nice new bird was the Red-backed Shrike,

an immature bird, but still clearly a shrike. It sat on a wire just like our shrikes. We heard a loud call in the woods along a river and spent some time tracking it down, finally getting a brief look at a juvenile Goshawk

that was unhappy with his parents for leaving him to fend on his own. He finally quit calling, so presumably one of the adults gave him some food.

The list at the end of the day showed a surprising 58 species, with 6 lifers, a good showing for the area, especially given the weather.

We met up with Sully and ate dinner in the hotel restaurant. Then Linda and I strolled around the downtown area for an hour, ticking two more species, the elusive House Sparrow and Black-headed Gull. The latter is interesting as the head is decidedly *brown*, not black. Then we collapsed into bed.

## July 26, 2013: On to Svalbard

Got up early thanks to lingering jet lag. At 4:45, we just gave up trying to sleep. It was light outside by that time anyway. Packed, worked the Friday NY Times crossword, which we found easy for a Friday, and went down for breakfast. At 7:00, we took a taxi to the central train station with Sully, who had finally made it to Oslo late yesterday. Although we appreciated riding versus walking, the trip showed why Oslo is rated as expensive. The fare was the equivalent of \$24, which was a lot for such a short trip. Apparently, taxis charge extra for each person and baggage.

We rode the train back to the airport, arriving well ahead of our planned time. We caught a train just before it left the station, which put us 20 minutes ahead of schedule. We didn't really need the time, as the self-service check in and baggage drop worked wonderfully.

In the security line, I was singled out for "random" checking, which I attributed to my good looks. The checker was a stunning Nordic beauty about the age of Lindsey, my niece. She asked if I minded her doing the check. "Not at all," I replied, curious just how thorough the pat down was going to be. It was complete except for an area she scrupulously avoided. This was all quick, leaving us with about an hour to kill.

The hour turned into a longer wait, as the plane we were supposed to take had some problem. SAS flew in a replacement, putting us about one hour behind schedule.

A brief 90 minute flight got us to Tromsø. That funny O is a vowel we need in English. It is pronounced "uh." We had to get off the plane and go to a different gate to get back on after passports were checked. Svalbard is some kind of semi-autonomous area different from the rest of Norway. Another 90 minutes took us to Longyearbyen, the only airport in the area. Then, we transferred to the harbor area for a brief Zodiac ride to the ship.



Our Cabin aboard Otelius

Linda and I actually rode three Zodiacs. When we got on one, I noticed that everyone was speaking French. "How curious," I thought, and managed to practice a bit. Of course, we were on the wrong Zodiac, which became apparent once we got to the wrong ship. No one was particularly sympathetic, instead showing amusement at the ignorant Americans. We had to return to the harbor in another Zodiac, and then get on one to take us to the correct ship. We arrived with a load of baggage, including my little blue case, the Little Niltava. Our cabin is shown at left. The Little Niltava conveniently fit under the bed, but the larger Silver Gull found a niche next to the desk.

One side issue: My laptop died on the plane ride from Tromsø to Longyearbyen. I was unable to get it to work

long enough to find out the problem. Finally, I guessed that the battery was not working properly, even though it claimed to have 60% power left. Once I got on the ship, I plugged it in, and now it all seems to work right.

After some orientation lectures and the mandatory safety drill, we ate supper and headed out onto the deck for some birding before bed. Linda left for bed a half hour before I did, and so missed the only really good sighting of the day: a *Great Skua* that snatched a baby Murre from the water before flying off. After that, I returned to the cabin to draft this note. Of course, it is still light outside, but we are going to try sleeping anyway.

## July 27, 2013: New London and Ny Ålesund

We had two excursions ashore today, both around the Kongsfjord (King's Fjord). First, we visited a site called "New London," where an English entrepreneur was convinced he would find gold. He enticed enough investors in the scheme to raise enough money to start operations. There was no gold or much of anything else exploitable in the area, and eventually he went broke and disappeared. All that remains is some rusting equipment and foundations of old houses. The houses themselves were moved to the other side of the fjord after WWII and can still be seen there.

We opted for the "medium" hike. The "Long Walk" looked exhausting. I noticed that when we were asked last night how many preferred the long option, fewer hands went up than the first day. The other option was "leisurely stroll," which sounded a bit too tame.

We walked toward some small fresh water ponds where we saw some of the expected ducks and relatives: Red-throated Loon (called a "diver" by the English) and Long-tailed Ducks. The latter were all females or young birds. We were hoping for a male, which can be spectacular. There was also a colony of Arctic Terns nesting on a small island with a couple of chicks.

Nearby we saw the Bird of the Day: A magnificent Long-tailed Jaeger. We had seen many of these in Denali in Alaska, in 1978 and 1984, and more recently on a pelagic cruise in south Texas in 2005. This one was in perfect breeding plumage showing a slight yellowish wash on the neck that is usually not visible. We wondered what it had to eat. In Alaska, they feed on voles and other small animals, but there is nothing like that here. Arctic Tern chicks was our best guess.

We moved on to another pond where we saw more of the same, including many more Terns. A couple of Barnacle Geese supplied an easy lifer. We saw many more of these during the trip.

In the afternoon, we had our first and only dry landing of the trip, at a research station called Ny Ålesund. This was once a coal mining operation until an explosion in 1962 closed it down for good. Now it is the northernmost continuously inhabited place on the planet, with about 30 people staying there during the winter. The population explodes to 130 during the summer. It serves as a research facility for scientific research by at least 10 different countries.

The most surprising bird we found there was not on the list: a vagrant Canada Goose in a large flock of Barnacle Geese. Several Purple Sandpipers added another item to our growing list of lifers, currently at 10 species.



Arctic Tern that Harassed Jim

At one point during the trip, I walked over toward an explanatory sign only to be attacked by a vigilant Arctic Tern. The bird swooped down and pecked at my hat twice before I managed to move out of range. This is the longest migration of any species, from the Arctic to the Antarctic each year, 40,000 km roundtrip.

A small museum on site had photos of life there during the 1950s and 1960s. It looked grim, but the people were smiling. One panel



talked about the joys of attending cinemas at the “Samfunnhuset,” which we believe means “some fun house.”

Linda found another part of the museum by the restrooms that highlighted scientific research done at the center. She was particularly interested in a study of *ecotoxins* in the local birds, isolated though they were. This led to banning of some dangerous chemicals.

Roald Amundsen launched his successful flyover of the North Pole in 1926. His airship used a steel mast that is still on the site, along with a bust of Amundsen, as a memorial. He died several years later in a vain attempt to rescue another expedition trying to repeat the feat. How strange to think that today dozens of planes carrying hundreds of passengers approximate the flight daily. They don't usually go right over the pole, but close enough.

We returned to the ship at 5:30 in time of a restorative hot chocolate, dinner, and some birding before bed. The most interesting sight was a large group of Kittiwakes in a cave in a glacier. The fresh water from a river under the glacier killed crustaceans, providing an easy meal for the thousand or so Kittiwakes.

Sleep is still a bit of a struggle. It is light all the time at this latitude (79°N) and we wind up awake about 2:00 in the morning. Linda is better at going back to sleep than I, who reserves naps for the lectures on the day's events.

We will probably adjust just in time to head home.

The ship is heading for another fjord, Liefdeffjord, which means something like *love fjord*, farther north. More tomorrow.

### July 28, 2013: Our first *Ursus maritimus*

Our first stop this morning was near a glacier where a trapper had built a small hut some time in the past and named the spot **Texas Bar**. There is no evidence that he ever had mariachi music or tequila for sale there, but we had a photo to prove that the name stuck.



Texas Bar

We hiked to get a view of the front of the glacier. Typically, we are offered three walks: long, medium, and leisurely. We always opt for the medium one. Today, there was a mini-revolt among the medium crowd when we saw the route our leader had chosen. “We’re going up there?” We managed to convince Jordi, our second leader, to split the group into those who preferred going around rather than over the large moraine left by the receding glacier. We always have to be near one of the leaders, who carry weapons to use as a last resort against polar bears.

In the end, it didn't matter much as all we saw was that the glacier was indeed receding, releasing a lot of water into a river along with silt that colored the ocean brown. We have photos showing the scene.

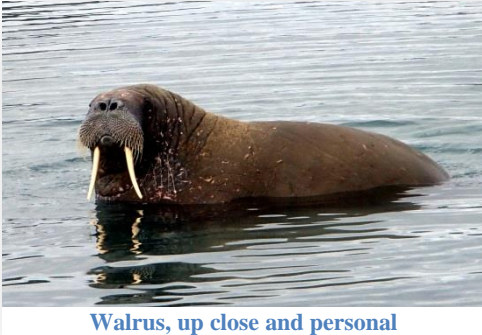
Some katabatic winds blew up in time for our return to the ship, and I had a few moments to remember [my Incident at Cooper Bay](#), but we got back on the ship without a problem. However, the afternoon excursion was canceled in favor of cruising on the ship around the fjord. That policy ended when we spotted a polar bear on a small island. In short order, the Zodiacs were launched and the entire body headed out for a better look. The wind had died down by that time.

Of course, we had no intention of landing on the island, but we were able to get close enough to try for photos of the bear. I doubt that any of ours will be publication quality. At best, they show that we have actually seen a live *Ursus maritimus* in the wild.

After a late dinner, we hit the sack ready for a planned excursion tomorrow to see walrus hauls out on a beach. Our fingers are crossed.

## July 29, 2013: Walrus and a late Polar Bear

Today, we saw walrus, lots of walrus. The scientific genus for walrus, *Odobenus*, means “tooth walker,” referring to the way they haul themselves out on the ice using their tusks. The species part, *rosmarus*, means “horse of the sea” in old Norse. Our first view was in the sea as we approached the island of Lågøya, where they were known to haul out. It was a fairly long ride in the Zodiacs to get to the island as the water was too shallow for the ship to get close. Several walrus were in the water swimming and feeding on shellfish in the sandy bottom between the ship and shore.



Walrus, up close and personal

Once on the island itself, we could see three separate groups of walrus, all young males, lying on the sand. Each group contained about 50 individuals with many different ages represented. We could spot the young males in the group by the smaller tusks. We were told that the tusks can grow to a length of one meter, and maybe some of them were that long. The animals are so huge that you tend to lose the scale.

We had a 5-star sighting of Purple Sandpipers where we saw the orange spot at the base of the bill. This is mostly a semi-mythical field mark as you have to be quite close to the bird to observe it. There were many of these shorebirds around and they were fairly tame.

Unfortunately, in our hurry to return to the ship, we missed seeing Red Phalaropes in breeding plumage, which the rest of the group saw.

In the afternoon, we visited one of a group of five islands known as Seven Islands. Apparently, the difference depends on what you call an island. We beached in a bay near a small sailing ship that was there for some reason. It didn't seem like much of a vacation spot to us. It did provide a good photo of a Svalbard Poppy, *Papaver dahlianum*, the unofficial “national” flower of Svalbard.



Svalbard Poppy



1936 Emergency Hut

A small, one-room hut was near the beach. We learned that it had been built in 1936 as one of a series of emergency shelters for scientists visiting the islands. Our guides checked it carefully looking for signs of polar bears, but didn't see any. We had another group of walrus that allowed us close enough for some excellent photos, providing us with a full day of walrus viewing.

After dinner, Linda went to bed while I tried, but failed, to stay awake for a short lecture about walrus. My snoring snort came at just the point in the lecture describing the sound walrus make, which got a great laugh from the audience. Having finally adjusted to normal time aboard the ship, we were both sound asleep when the call came over the PA system just before midnight that a polar bear had been sighted near the ship. We piled

out of bed and joined the scrum of people on the deck madly snapping pictures of a large male bear. This was a much better sighting than we had yesterday, so we forgave the staff for waking us.

## July 30, 2013: Early Polar Bears on Ice, Ivory Gull, and a curious female

The PA woke us from a sound sleep just before the schedule time of 8:00 to inform us that another bear was close to the ship. We pulled on clothes and took some more photos of a bear in even better position than before. Looking through the scope, I suddenly saw a pure white bird land next to the bear. We finally had an Ivory Gull to add to the list. It was gorgeous, the color of the ice with black legs and eyes. It waited patiently while the polar bear tried to find meat on a seal carcass, then moved in to scavenge. We rated the sighting another 5-stars. It was the 81<sup>st</sup> bird of the trip, counting those seen around Oslo, and it occurred at 81°N, less than 600 miles from the North Pole. We have several photos of the gull with the polar bear and carcass, but they will need some work to enhance the contrast. The gull almost disappears against the snow and ice.

That was the first of many polar bears we saw today. We relied on the staff for the count, but got conflicting answers. There were at least 12 different polar bears seen from the ship today. We spent the entire day barely moving thru pack ice. The captain has incredible eyesight and spotted one bear after another.

The best bear of the day was a young female (we learned how to tell males and females apart) who was curious about the ship. She came closer and closer until she finally disappeared from my point of view. I was observing from the bridge, the warmest place with a good view. Fortunately, the ship has an “open bridge” policy: we are welcome there anytime so long as we don’t get in the way. The captain recognized us as birders and wanted to make sure we had seen the Ivory Gull, a nice gesture. Now, he told me, “Go down there. You don’t want to miss the shot of your life!”

I went down onto the bow deck and finally got a place near the rail. People were taking turns at the rail snapping photos and videos. When I noticed that all the expedition staff and every member of the crew not actually on duty was watching the bear, I realized just how fortunate we were to get one this close. We are going to have our work cut out for us trying to select the best photo to use from the many available.

All in all, it has been a spectacular day. We’ve included a small gallery of Polar Bear Photos. Most of these were of the female that came close to the ship. One photo, of her rolling in the snow, even

shows her sex clearly. Usually, you need an expert to tell the sex.



Curiouser and Curiouser



Rolling in the Snow



Reflection



On the Ice





Showing the extent of the Ice



Barely Visible Ivory Gull

We've also included a photo showing the extent of the ice, and a poor one showing the Ivory Gull waiting for the Bear to finish eating. The Gull is the tiny spec behind the bear's right foreleg. It was easier to see in a telescope.

### July 30, 2013: Weather! More Polar Bears, a Bearded Seal, Whales and Birds Galore

When we looked out the porthole this morning, we saw little but ocean and clouds. The announcement over the PA at 7:00 reported that we were at exactly 80°N, the temperature was 3.7°C, and the wind speed was 30Knots. Our planned landing has been changed and we are searching for a more sheltered spot.

Later in the morning, after the ship had moved into Sare, "sorrow," Fjord and found calm winds and smooth seas, we had a "history" trip planned. The fjord is named for the many (13 to be precise) Dutch whalers killed in the northernmost naval engagement in the world. It isn't fair to call it a "battle," as it pitted French Navy ships against some Dutch whalers, not a fair fight. Naturally, the Dutch won in the end.



Spider Saxifrage

We joined the "medium walk" group as usual and calmly hiked around photographing tundra flowers, which are mostly less than an inch tall and unusual. The Spider Saxifrage is endemic to Svalbard and highly sought after. It is named for the red tendrils extending from the stem.

Then we got a radio call from the "long walk" group. They had spotted a polar bear at a great distance. We looked at the area they indicated and saw the bear, which was moving away from the group. Despite the bear's apparent lack of interest in hikers as food, we all headed back to the Zodiacs and then to the ship.



Bearded Seal

We had time for a quick clean up and then lunch earlier than usual. After lunch, we headed to another landing along the fjord. This time, the birders set out on a Zodiac cruise while the rest of the passengers set out for a short walk. We were hoping to find some King Eiders tucked in with the Common Eiders, but didn't see any. We contented ourselves with sights of a few walrus in the water.

All was not lost, however. We saw some Pink-footed Geese on the beach and swimming. The ones on the beach even had the decency to show their pink feet, upping the rating to 4.5 at least. While we

were in the Zodiac, a Bearded Seal surfaced nearby. The seal seemed to be playing with the boat, swimming around and popping up every so often. I was lucky to get one photo showing its head clearly, complete with the advertised beard. We had earlier identified a Bearded Seal on the ice by its large size and overall shape, especially the relationship of the head and body. This was much better.

As we motored along a Parasitic Jaeger (aka Arctic Skua) appeared from nowhere and dive bombed a Kittiwake. This took place within 15 feet of our boat, a spectacular sighting. We have seen several of these Jaegers on this trip, as well as a couple of sightings of Pomarine Jaegers. On the first day, we saw a Great Skua, so now we have seen all the Skuas.

Once back on the ship, we sailed down a strait between two islands on the way to a bird cliff. Along the way, we spotted two Blue Whales and probably three Fin Whales. Linda had a better look at the Fin Whales than I did, but we both had a view of the Blues.



Thick-billed Murres

After some presentations in the lounge area (an opportunity for a quick nap) we ate dinner earlier than usual to leave time for a Zodiac ride to the nearby cliffs. Zillions (a technical term) of Thick-billed Murres and assorted other species nested on the cliff. We burned many pixels trying to get photographs from the bouncing boat. The number of birds was amazing. Looking at the sky, we saw flocks that appeared like mosquitos. Several hundred swam in the sea around us. We watched as they flew in and landed on tiny ledges on the cliff. Supposedly there are young there, but we couldn't see them for all the adult

birds standing in the way.

We got a radio call that *another* polar had been spotted on the cliff itself. Fortunately, this time we didn't have to abandon the night's activity, and motored further down the cliffs. Sure enough, there was a polar bear, a young male our guide guessed. We were lucky to have the bear expert driving the boat. At first, we thought the bear was eating a bird, or perhaps an egg. However, it moved a bit and we saw that it was eating grass in the rare spot on the island where enough of it grew to make that possible. The birds probably provided enough fertilizer for the grass to grow.

I was getting cold by this time, but no one else in the boat wanted to leave. We stuck it out until a radio message from the ship told us in no uncertain terms that it was time to return. Some adjustments in the seating arrangements allowed the boat to plane during the ride, and we weren't the last Zodiac to return.

I stopped to clean my boots. "We didn't leave the boat," others complained. I explained that it wasn't mud I was cleaning off the boots, but a gift from the Murres. Several other passengers were similarly marked with good luck messages. Today was probably the most interesting day of the trip so far, but the polar bears on the ice was a close second. We have some good photos, especially one of the seal.

More tomorrow. Time for bed now.

### August 1, 2013: Freemansundet: Kittiwake City

When we awoke this morning, the fog was so thick we couldn't see the shore. We were sailing in Freemansundet, which means something like The Free Man Sound. It is a narrow strait between two large islands. The plan is to land on one of the islands after breakfast, provided there are no bears around. We wandered up to the bridge, where the instruments showed 12m of depth beneath the keel. Yesterday in the fjord by contrast, we had 300m beneath the keel.





Nodding Saxifrage

Finally, we got the OK to head over to the shore. Linda and I were in one of the first Zodiacs and wound up waiting for Peter Roberts, our trip leader, to arrive in one of the last. The weather was cold and drizzling, with fog evident on the top of the plateau. The ground is tundra, with much richer vegetation than we saw in the “polar desert” yesterday. Strangely, although there were more flowers about, there was less variety, and none of the special Spider Saxifrage to

be seen.

What there was to be seen were thousands of [Black-legged] Kittiwake nests, a cityscape on the cliffs. At sea, several Parasitic Jaegers harassed the Kittiwakes, trying to get them to regurgitate food. At one point, we saw 6 Jaegers following a single Kittiwake. Supposedly, the Jaegers can tell when the Kittiwakes have fed by the way they fly.

We walked to the cliffs where we had a close look at the nests, some of which contained fat, downy chicks. Several of us opted for an early exit while most of the group headed out for a longer hike. Frankly, after my experience in Antarctica, I am careful about staying out in the cold. I didn’t mind being back on the ship working on this write-up instead of marching around on the tundra.



Kittiwake Nest with Chicks

Our afternoon landing was canceled due to the weather, which remains nasty as I write this. We had two lectures during the afternoon to occupy the time. One was interesting, but the other was easily skippable. Of course, we didn’t know ahead of time that the History of Spitzbergen would be boring. Turns out there really isn’t that much history. The island was discovered by Barentsz, a Dutchman, in 1596, by mistake as he tried to find the “northeast passage” to China. He thought Spitzbergen, which he named for the “pointed peaks” he saw there, was part of Greenland.

The rest of the history told of various attempts to do something economically viable here, which proved to be too difficult. Coal mining was about the limit. The last big coal mine was at Ny Ålesund, which we visited earlier in the trip. It closed in 1963 after an explosion. Supposedly, there is still some coal mining going on near Longyearbyen, but from what we saw, the main occupation of the area is tourism.

We have been told that there is a chance to see Humpback Whales from midnight to 2:00 as we round the southern tip of Spitzbergen. We plan to sleep thru that. BTW, Spitzbergen is the name of one of the large islands in the archipelago as well as an older name for the entire collection of islands. The Norwegians have been renaming places to suit themselves, which is why the new name is Svalbard, which means “cold coast” in Norwegian.



Peter Roberts

Enough for now. Maybe tomorrow we will have better weather and can visit a Little Auk (aka Dovekie) colony. We had a choice of that or a strenuous hike to the top of a small Spitzberg. Easy choice.

### August 2, 2013: Rough Seas, Fog, and Little Auks

During the night, we had the roughest weather of the trip. The tipoff that we were in for some interesting sailing was the numerous sea sickness bags scattered strategically around the ship. As we slept thru the worst of it, I didn't especially mind, but Linda did. In the middle of the night she called out to me, "What is that damned noise?" "It's the ship hitting the water after a big wave," I replied. It didn't really mollify her, but she did go back to sleep.

In the morning, we looked out the window to see nothing but fog. At least we were in calm water, but we doubted that the day's planned activity would take place. Breakfast was noticeably more sparsely attended than usual.

By 9:00, the fog had lifted enough to show where the shore lay. We piled into Zodiacs and set out in two groups. We opted to hike to a colony of Little Auks, aka Dovekis, while the gung-ho group went to walk onto a glacier.



Little Auk, Full Throat Pouch

We would have had an easy time walking to the cliffs where the Little Auks nested, except we were instructed to walk on the stony area and avoid the nice soft mossy ground. We saw Reindeer browsing on the moss, so this made sense. However, walking on the stones set us up for a turned ankle at every step. We made it without injury, and took our place on any flat surface we could find. The Auks, cute pudgy little black and white jobs, took off when we got near, or when a Glaucous Gull flew past. In great numbers, they flew around chattering and trilling until they decided it was safe to land again. We had fabulous looks at them, close enough to see the throat pouch full of krill for the chicks, which were hidden from view beneath the rocks.

We found a Reindeer skull on the ground.

The nostrils are

amazingly large, designed to warm the air before it gets to the lungs.

From our vantage point on the hillside, we could see the ship out in the bay as it slowly disappeared into the fog. By the time we started back, it was difficult to see the shoreline. A long hike, avoiding the mossy area, finally got us back to the beach, where a sizable chunk of ice blocked the lone Zodiac. The sea lifted the Zodiac with each wave, making it possible to reposition it for return to the ship. Reinforcements arrived in another Zodiac.

We set off into the fog, using GPS coordinates as a guide. I joked, "...and they were never seen again." I took video of our two boats heading into a totally opaque white bank. The GPS proved its worth by guiding us thru the misty miasma until we saw the ship appearing before us. We had time for a shower and clean clothes before heading to the dining room for lunch.



Reindeer Skull showing Nostrils



In the afternoon, we made another landing near a glacier. Our group, the “medium walkers” hiked across a stony moraine to try to get a look at the glacier. The view was disappointing: a muddy, receding chunk of ice.

However, on the way we were treated to a couple of Parasitic Jaegers (called Arctic Skuas by the Brits). They must have had a nest in the area, as they flew around us calling repeatedly until we moved on.

After our disappointing view of the glacier, we took to Zodiacs, and had a much better look. We have some nice photos that will be in the final version of this report.

We have taken many photos of the arctic flowers, which are mostly small and unassuming, but lovely when you get right down on top of them. Besides the Spider Saxifrage, we have managed to ID several of them using a book of the Flowers of Svalbard and consultation with Katya, the local expert. She keeps reminding us that she is a chemist, not a botanist, but she seems to know the flowers better than anyone else, with the possible exception of Clark Friend, a geologist member of our birding group.

We returned to the ship in time for a farewell BBQ outside on the deck. The temperature was a balmy 6°C, so we ate fast. Tomorrow is the last day of the trip. Plans are for two more landings in a fjord that is supposedly fed by the Gulf Stream, and therefore warmer. We'll see.

### August 3, 2013: Our Last Day

We awoke to yet another foggy day, but as we sailed up Isfjorden, the fog dissipated and the temperature was noticeably warmer thanks to the Gulf Stream. The hillsides were green, instead of the barren brown color we have come to expect. We were able to land at the site of a former gypsum mine that failed for lack of gypsum. There was an old shipwrecked boat and a rather new hut nearby, the latter apparently occupied by whoever paddled two kayaks to the place.

We managed to see an Arctic Fox, the first on the voyage, albeit at a distance thru a scope. That more or less completes the list of land mammals for the trip.

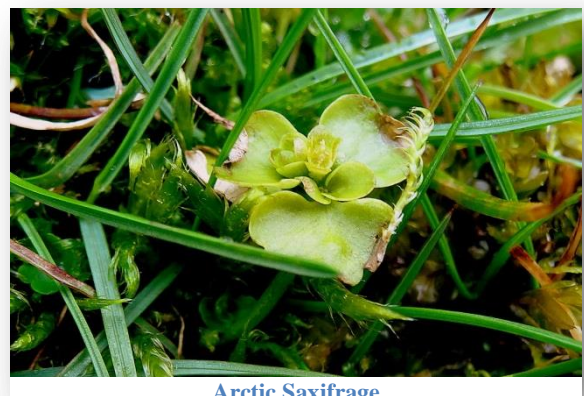


Boreal Jacob's Ladder

The highlight of the morning was several new arctic flowers, including one endemic called Boreal Jacob's Ladder that grew in a large clump, quite unlike the tiny flowers we have become used to. Another of the innumerable Saxifrages posed a final challenge to our ability to find the picture in Flowers of Svalbard. We still have one that doesn't seem to be in the book at all that we hope to ID before we leave. We finally got an opinion that the flower is Arctic Saxifrage, but it took

several consultations.

The remainder of the morning's outing involved sailing around the bay in a Zodiac looking for any birds that we haven't seen on the cruise. This proved fruitless, and a King Eider remains as the primary missing bird for the trip. Most of the people opted for other Zodiacs that promised views of [Atlantic] Puffins, which are common this morning. We learned later that there was a colony of Puffins in the area. One woman asked if she



Arctic Saxifrage



could join the “real birders” for a change. I overheard her admitting to Pia, one of our group, that she didn’t know what a Puffin was. “It’s an Alcid,” Pia told her.

We returned to the ship for lunch, which was advertised as Hamburgers and fries with all kinds of condiments. The offering did not include items we Californians have come to expect, such as avocado or grilled mushrooms. It’s the thought that counts. In general, the food was excellent, especially the bread, which was baked daily. Fresh fruits and salads were particularly welcome.

As I write this, we are on our way to our final landing site, another location on Isfjorden. Things are likely to be a bit hectic when we get back what with packing, etc., so I am going to close now. I’ll update everything with photos and send out a complete report later.

It’s been a very interesting trip to a place that Linda confessed she didn’t know existed before we got here.

All in all, it was a wonderful, once-in-a-lifetime excursion to a spectacular environment, which is foreign to us. Another trip to beautiful Alaska beckons in the future.



Chris, Clark, Pris, Roger, Sheila, Jim, Linda, Peter, Pia, Sully  
on our last afternoon on the ship, heading back toward Longyearbyen

Our group of ten birders, shown pictured at left, was interesting and congenial, as were all the passengers aboard. Nationalities represented included Swiss, Danish, British, Spanish, Germans, and a group of about 20 Chinese students with their chaperones. The students were obviously elite Chinese, speaking good English and toting many expensive electronic gadgets.

Phil Wickens, our expedition leader was superb, handling the inevitable problems with apparent ease.

The guides for the trip, besides Phil, were

- Jordi Plana, who was also on the Antarctic tour we took in 2010.
- Katja Riedel, a chemist who gave several interesting lectures about snow, ice, and atmospheric phenomena
- Rupert Pilkington, an expert on bears, including *Ursus maritimus*
- Mick Brown, a Welch bird expert
- Aad Wever and Victoria Salem who both lectured on the history of the area.

Two very basic ideas retained from Katja’s lectures:

1. Every snowflake starts with water attaching to a speck of dust and then crystallizing.
2. When salt water freezes, some of the salt is extruded from the ice, and the very dense cold water sinks to the bottom of the sea. This is the fundamental mechanism driving vast ocean currents moving across the planet influencing our weather. The Gulf Stream is the best known of these and is the reason the weather on Svalbard is so warm. Yes, you read that right. 6°C is much warmer than the temperature at comparable locations on Hudson Bay, for example.