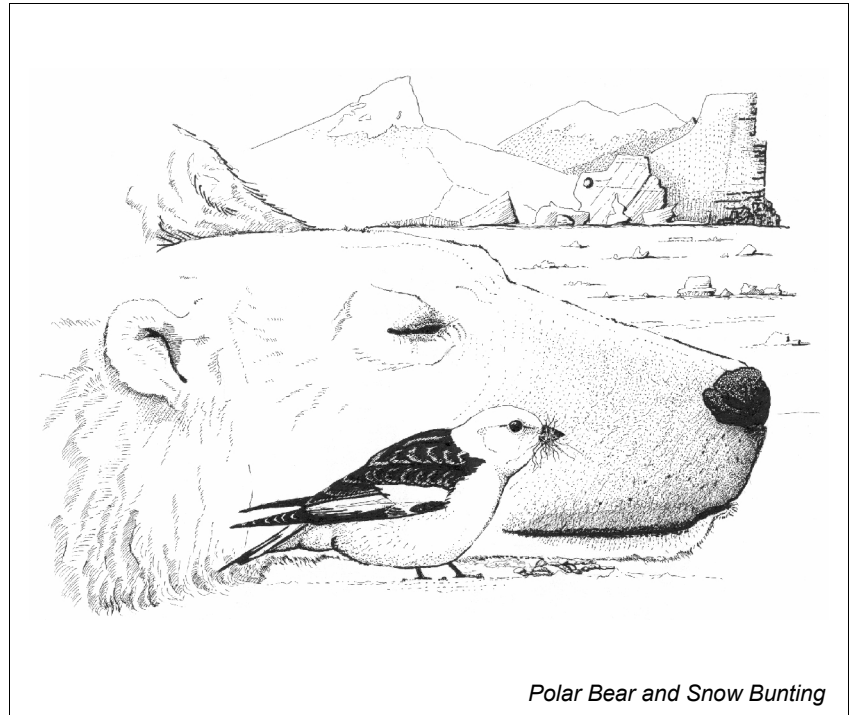
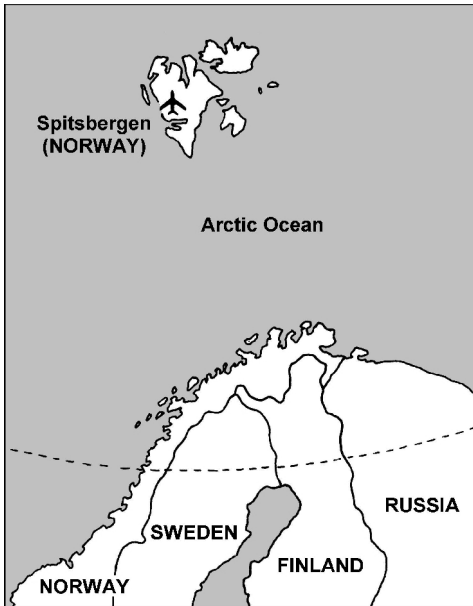


# SPITSBERGEN

*polar bears, walrus and breeding birds of the arctic*



*Polar Bear and Snow Bunting*

The Arctic is one of the few places left in the world where one gets a true feeling of being in a pristine wilderness.

Only 600 miles from the North Pole, the islands in the Svalbard Archipelago were, until recently, a destination for expedition scientists rather than travelling wildlife watchers.

We have the combination of birds, mammals and plants in a breathtaking arctic landscape. Little Auks, Brünnich's Guillemots and Ivory Gulls have seen the long polar winter release its icy grip on the massive cliffs and spectacular fjords to allow the birds to breed under the glow of the midnight sun. We will search for the arch-predator here, the Polar Bear, which can be found hunting Walrus and seals on the pack ice. Massive whales feed offshore and the colourful tundra provides a brief summer home for Barnacle Geese, Grey Phalaropes, Purple Sandpipers and Red-throated Divers.

The best way to reach the secret corners of this wildlife-rich archipelago is by boat. Our comfortable, ice-strengthened research vessel allows us to cruise the islands in search of the best wildlife, with the flexibility to make diversions based on the latest information. Unlike the large cruise ships that visit the area, we have the facility to make landings in remote areas where there are no roads, airstrips or human habitation. This wildlife expedition is a once in a lifetime experience.

It is possible to find shorter, less expensive cruises to either north or south Spitsbergen, but our long experience in the region tells us that this is the best option; a nine night cruise during which we attempt to circumnavigate the whole island.

## **ITINERARY**

On day one we fly to Longyearbyen (via Oslo), capital of Svalbard and transfer to our hotel for the night. The next day, we will look around the town and surrounding area before joining our ship. Dainty-looking Snow Buntings sing from rooftops while Glaucous Gulls, Arctic Skuas, Arctic Terns, Barnacle Geese and Dunlin can be found nearby.

In the afternoon we will board our vessel which will take us out of Isfjorden as we head north past towering cliffs hosting thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots, Puffins and Little Auks. Opportunistic Glaucous Gulls will be in attendance while Great, Arctic and perhaps a migrant Pomarine Skua follow the terns and Kittiwakes heading out to sea.

We begin a route that circumnavigates Spitsbergen, the largest island in the group. Ice conditions dictate our ultimate route as our experienced crew keep a regular check on the weather and also act upon the most recent information regarding sightings of Walrus and Polar Bear. The captain's knowledge is invaluable as we attempt to see the ultimate arctic predator in its natural environment. Almost a quarter of the world population of the ice bear lives here!

The usual daily routine is to use the ship's large Zodiacs to approach the pack ice, glaciers and fjords. We may choose to cruise amongst the ice to approach Ringed or Bearded Seals more closely. Polar Bears are often found stalking seals amongst the pack-ice, and we normally tally double figures during the cruise.

We regularly land on the shore to explore the tundra. Conditions permitting, excursions lasting three to four hours are made each morning and afternoon. These are accompanied by an expedition guide who will impart his knowledge and safeguard us from the attentions of Polar Bears.

Walking across the tundra carpeted in arctic bell heather and dwarf willow, we search for herds of endemic short-legged Svalbard Reindeer that graze the numerous arctic flowers. We hope to find Pink-footed, Barnacle and Brent Geese. Crèches of goslings attract skuas, foxes and Polar Bears. Pools of water may hold Red-throated Diver, Long-tailed Duck, northern race Common Eider and Grey Phalarope. There is a chance of King Eider amongst their commoner cousins. If we are lucky, Long-tailed Skua will complete our set of northern skuas.

Purple Sandpiper and Dunlin breed, and look splendid in their cryptic summer dress. Small numbers of Sanderling, Ptarmigan, Turnstone and Ringed Plover also breed. Arctic Foxes are often found scavenging around the huge seabird colonies. Mountains and cliffs form a spectacular backdrop to the wheeling swarms of Little Auks. Up to 15 million nest in these islands! Thousands of Brünnich's Guillemots will have young at the time of our visit.

Glaucous Gulls are common and we shall be keeping a watchful eye for the rarer gulls. Sabine's Gulls occur in small numbers and have bred. One is always hopeful of seeing a Ross's Gull. They have attempted to breed and regularly migrate past Svalbard during late summer. The star bird is of course the ghostly Ivory Gull whose whole life is spent at the edge of the pack ice. They are so adapted to the polar conditions that they rarely bathe for fear of freezing. They survive the dark arctic winter by scavenging on seal and Walrus carcasses and, in summer, they attend Polar Bear kills. About 400 pairs breed here and we can expect several sightings.

Time at sea provides the opportunity to study the Blue Fulmars that breed here and the Minke Whales that are regularly sighted in coastal waters. Beluga, Orca, Sperm and Humpback Whales all occur but sightings are rare. On some visits we have been fortunate in seeing many Beluga and Fin Whales. The southern limit of the pack ice provides our best chance to see Walrus. These magnificent creatures often allow a close approach by Zodiac and some colonies such as those at Mofen offer the best chance to observe them in good numbers.

Cruising the calm, mirror-like waters where spectacular glaciers calve into the sea, we are likely to find Black Guillemots, the odd one out amongst the auk family in that they are more solitary than their cousins. They are common here and often feed around the small pieces of sculpted blue ice that drift in the fjords.

The human influence on these islands is fascinating and we may see abandoned whaling stations or the remains of explorers' camps and graves.

Photographic possibilities are endless. The landscape is dramatic and much of the wildlife is approachable.

Returning to Longyearbyen on day 11, we say our final goodbye to the crew and disembark. We may have time for a little more birding or shopping in town before we transfer to the airport. Our flight leaves in the early hours and we arrive back in the UK mid-morning.

**Please note:** The itinerary is flexible and dependent on weather and ice conditions at the time. It is not always possible to circumnavigate the island. The daily itinerary will be decided by the expedition leader and ship's captain. Bird Holidays has no direct control over this.

## CLIMATE AND PACE

At the height of summer it is surprisingly mild in Svalbard. We can expect calm waters and often sunny days, though rain is certainly possible. When we enter the pack ice the temperature drops dramatically, but we can always view from the warmth of the ship's lounge. Excursions are made most mornings and afternoons and there is usually a choice for varying interests and pace. The Bird Holidays leader will accompany the group but you will be free to join any excursion group you prefer.

## ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided with one night in the Spitsbergen Hotel in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, followed by nine nights aboard ship. Our ship will be the Ortelius, owned by Oceanwide, a Dutch company. The ship takes a maximum of 116 passengers. Hotel rooms and **all cabins on the ship have en suite facilities.**

## PRICE INCLUDES .....

All sea and land-based excursions with Bird Holidays leader and expedition staff, full-board accommodation (starting with breakfast on 1<sup>st</sup>, ending with dinner on 10<sup>th</sup>), soft drinks at meal-times, onshore transport and international flights.

## WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

## INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Flights are from London Heathrow to Longyearbyen (via Oslo), using the scheduled services of Scandinavian Airlines. Outbound flight departs late afternoon; return flight arrives back mid-morning. **Domestic flights from Manchester and other UK airports are available on this tour. See booking form for details.**

**A cruise only price is available. Please phone.**

<b>11 nights including one overnight flight:</b>	<b>31<sup>st</sup> July to 11<sup>th</sup> August 2018</b>
<b>Principal leader:</b>	<b>Phil Palmer</b>
<b>Maximum group size:</b>	<b>10 clients with one leader and expedition staff</b>
<b>Cost with discount (if you book before 17<sup>th</sup> April 2018):</b>	<b>£5980 per person sharing in a twin cabin (with porthole)</b>
<b>Full Cost:</b>	<b>£6080 per person sharing in a twin cabin (with porthole)</b>
<b>Cabin with window:</b>	<b>£400 supplement per person</b>
<b>Deluxe cabin:</b>	<b>£720 supplement per person</b>
<b>Superior cabin:</b>	<b>£1490 supplement per person</b>
<b>Single supplement:</b>	<b>please phone</b>
<b>Deposit:</b>	<b>£1000 per person</b>