



Ivory Gull, Longyearbyen, June 14th 2006 © Jukka Hintikka

Birding in Longyearbyen and Spitsbergen 12th – 27th June 2006

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Why to Spitsbergen?

I spent 16 days watching birds on one of the most northern inhabited places in the whole world, the Svalbard archipelago (often referred as Spitsbergen, which is actually the name of the main island). I made a total of 40 species, which was more than I expected.

The major reason for my trip was to see arctic birds such as Little Auks in breeding plumage and Ivory Gulls, but I also paid some attention on other wildlife. First I spent one week birding in Longyearbyen. On 19th June I steamed out to northern Spitsbergen onboard on M/S Professor Multanovskij with 51 other nature tourists, many of them birdwatchers like me, including a group of BirdQuest. After the cruise I spent two more days in Longyearbyen, departing Svalbard in the afternoon of 27th June.

Many birdwatchers take part on an organized cruise to northern Svalbard or even take a vessel around the main island. Since these cruises are very expensive, another goal for me was to find out whether an active birdwatcher can see the most interesting arctic species in Longyearbyen. In another words, I tried to find out if the expensive cruise is really worth taking.

My main method was seawatching. During my stay in Longyearbyen I did a minimum of six hours of seawatching every day, a total of 52 hours. Also during the cruise I spent almost all of my spare time on the deck watching alcids, gulls and skuas – and yes, I admit it, searching for Polar Bears.

Facts about Svalbard

Longyearbyen is the largest settlement of Svalbard, located on the southwestern bank of the Adventfjorden Bay. There are approximately 3000 inhabitants in Longyearbyen; other major settlements are the Russian town Barentsburg (500) and the research station Ny Ålesund (100). The average summer temperature is 6°C, but during my trip the weather was relatively good (at least from a Finnish point of view): usually cloudy but also some sunshine on most days, occasionally rain and a little snow on 14th June.

The winter of 2005–2006 was moderate, and by the time of my arrival ice was already gone. The early absence of pack ice meant that polar bears were more numerous than in normal years, but it also made more difficult to find true arctic species such as Sabine's or Ross's Gull, which prefer the edge of the pack ice.

Accommodation in a hotel is very expensive, but there are two nice guesthouses on the outskirts of Longyearbyen with reasonable prices. I stayed at Spitsbergen Guesthouse (295,- NOK = 38 € per night including linens and breakfast). Food is expensive, but since Svalbard is a tax-free area beer and some other goods are a little cheaper than on mainland Norway.

Airplane (SAS Braathens from Tromsø) is the easiest way to reach Svalbard, and by choosing the right flights it is not even very expensive. For Finns interested in Svalbard it is good to know that there is a daily bus connection between Rovaniemi and Tromsø, which I found very practical.

Where to watch birds in Longyearbyen

I listed five hotspots for a birdwatcher in Longyearbyen, but there are also other interesting places – for example Vestpyntan on the road to Bjørndalen could be a optimal place for a keen seawatcher.

1. Kloakken is the best point for a birdwatcher. It is on the shore of Adventfjorden near the university buildings, next to the snowscooter rental buildings. This place offers good views to Adventfjorden, and with a good scope it is also possible to observe birds flying far on Isfjorden. This was my main seawatching place, since it is easy to reach and the buildings offer some shelter against the wind. Depending on the tide it is also a good place for shorebirds, and Ivory Gull and King Eider were both practically daily sights.

2. The dog cages are located less than 1 km from the previous place on the roadside to Adventdalen. Tens of Eiders breed near the cages to avoid the predation of Arctic Foxes, and there are lots of shorebirds and ducks on small ponds and tundra meadows. Due to the dogs there are more insects than on most other places, which makes the place interesting for vagrant passerines. Just behind the cages is the Isdammen pond, which holds breeding King Eiders and Red-throated Divers.

3. Adventdalen is a valley with large tundra meadows, numerous ponds and small streams. Grey Phalarope, King Eider, Red-throated Diver and Pink-footed Goose are common breeding species. A car, taxi or a bicycle is necessary, since the area is huge. The whole valley is absolutely worth birding, all the way from Isdammen to mine 7.

4. The ponds next to the camping place are a traditional place for Grey Phalarope, but there are also other shorebirds and ducks. Since this place is very close to the airport, these ponds are surely worth checking while waiting for your flight.

5. The Longyearbyen dump is located about 10 km away from the town, near the mine 6. The area is fenced, but all birds can be seen from outside. I visited this place only once on a relatively bad weather, but even on that occasion some tens of Glaucous Gulls were present with one Lesser Black-backed Gull. Since there are lots of insects the dump attracts passerines, and for example a Red-winged Thrush was observed there during my stay, even though I failed to see it.

Observations

This list includes mostly only my own observations, though I sometimes refer to observations made by other people, especially the BirdQuest group.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*)

LONGYEARBYEN: daily 2–5 individuals. Breeds on small ponds in Adventdalen, but comes to feed and to rest on Adventfjorden.

CRUISE: observed on 3 days, 1-3 individuals.

Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

LONGYEARBYEN: daily some tens of individuals, on windy days even hundreds of individuals. Most of Fulmars were observed far out on Isfjorden, but on windy days birds flew in to the Adventfjorden and returned to the sea. The differences in plumage colour were interesting, varying from very pale to blue and greyish birds.

CRUISE: daily hundreds of individuals out on the sea, many also following the ship. The largest numbers were on 24th June, as we visited a breeding colony at Skansbukta (thousands of individuals).

Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: observed on six days, 1–50 individuals. Most of the birds flew out from Adventdalen to the sea. One breeding pair nested very near the road in Adventdalen.

CRUISE: observed daily, 1–40 individuals. One nest was found on 20th June on Blomstrandhalvøya, and on Coraholmen (Isfjorden) were tens of breeding pairs on 25th June.

Pale-bellied Brant (*Branta bernicla hrota*)

LONGYEARBYEN: a flock of 10 individuals flew out to Isfjorden on 27th June.

CRUISE: 15 birds at Mofsen on 21st and 2 at Bockfjorden on 22nd June.

Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*)

LONGYEARBYEN: daily observations of 10–80 individuals. The species breeds high on the cliffs above the town, and it is also easy to see in Adventdalen or Isdammen.

CRUISE: 2-20 birds were observed on four days.

Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*)

LONGYEARBYEN: the most abundant duck in the area, hundreds of individuals daily. I saw the first brood (female + 6 pullus) on 17th June. On the same day there were at least 64 hatching-looking females by the dog cages, though some of them were probably non-breeding females just sitting in the short grass next to the nesting females.

CRUISE: some tens were observed daily. The only place the species was really numerous on the cruise was the archipelago of Andøyan, where we observed several hundred individuals.

King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*)

LONGYEARBYEN: observed daily, 1–25 individuals. The easiest place to see the species was at Isdammen, where were several breeding pairs, but single birds were sometimes

also in the ponds near the dog cages or in the ponds near the airport. Small groups of males were a common sight in Adventfjorden.

CRUISE: on 22nd June one male in a flock of Eiders at Bockfjorden, and some tens of birds in the archipelago of Andøyan. It was rather difficult to get good views of King Eider on the cruise, though the species was easily observed in Longyearbyen.

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)

LONGYEARBYEN: observed daily in low numbers, 10–15 individuals. A bird or two were usually present all the time at Kloakken.

CRUISE: observed on 4 days, 2–8 individuals.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

LONGYEARBYEN: two moulting drakes, which were observed almost daily.

Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one male in breeding plumage, observed almost daily.

Teal (*Anas crecca*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one female on Isdammen on 26th June.

CRUISE: two drakes on 25th June on Coraholmen.

Svalbard Ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one female was nesting just 10 meters from the guesthouse and was observed daily. In addition 0–3 other birds were observed daily, mostly on the cliffs around Nybyen and at the bottom of the valley behind the Longyearbyen school.

CRUISE: one male at Blomstrandhalvøyan on 20th June and two males and a female with 11 pullus at Bockfjorden on 22nd June.

Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)

LONGYEARBYEN: from 14th until 27th June there were daily 2–3 *Numenius sp.* birds present at the Adventelva estuary. These birds were usually a bit too far for a sure identification, because they were practically on the other side of the Adventfjorden. Only on 18th I managed to see two Eurasian Curlews in flight from a reasonable distance, even though I am pretty sure that these were the same birds that were present the whole period.

CRUISE: some people of the BirdQuest group observed one individual on Amsterdamøya on 21st June, which must be one of the northernmost observations of the whole world.

Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one individual on a meadow near the old cannon by the airport on 14th.

Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)

LONGYEARBYEN: 2–8 individuals observed daily. The best place was at Kloakken, on the shore next to the snowscooter rental, where was usually at least one pair all the time.

CRUISE: some pairs were observed during the trip.

Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*)

CRUISE: one individual in breeding plumage in Ny Ålesund on 20th June and another on Andøyan archipelago. The species is a scarce breeding bird on Svalbard.

Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*)

LONGYEARBYEN: abundant and virtually everywhere near the shoreline, daily 80–110 individuals.

CRUISE: observed on several landings, daily 0–10 individuals.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)

LONGYEARBYEN: the best place for this species was the tundra meadow near Isdammen, where I observed almost daily 2–6 individuals.

CRUISE: one pair in Ny Ålesund on 20th and two birds on Amsterdamøya on 21st.

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*)

LONGYEARBYEN: 1–5 birds were observed daily in the Adventelva estuary 12th–19th June, in addition one individual in the ponds near the airport on 14th June.

CRUISE: several individuals on Amsterdamøya on 21st June

Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)

CRUISE: observed on 20th, 21st and 22nd June, a pair each time in different parts of the northwestern Spitsbergen.

Grey Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*)

LONGYEARBYEN: On 14th June two females in the ponds near the airport, 16th June one pair near the dog cages, 18th June one female near the dog cages and a pair in Adventdalen and on 27th June one male and two females in the ponds near the airport.

CRUISE: On 20th June one pair in Ny Ålesund, on 22nd June at least eight individuals in the Andøya archipelago and on 25th a pair on Coraholmen.

Redshank (*Tringa totanus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: the last new species for my trip was a Redshank in the ponds at the dog cages on 27th June.

Pomarine Skua (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one bird on 12th and a flock of two birds on 17th June observed from Kloakken, all birds in breeding plumage with spoon-shaped tail feathers. The other bird on 17th was very dark, more black than any dark Pomarine Skua I have ever seen in Finland or in Norway. This species is no more considered as a breeding species on Svalbard, and even the old breeding records are somewhat suspicious according to my knowledge.

CRUISE: On 20th one bird outside Kongsfjorden, on 21st one bird near Møffen and another several nautical miles south of Møffen, on 22nd at least three individuals in the Andøyen–Monacobreen area, on 23rd one near Augustabukta and on 24th one outside Prins Karls Forland. All birds were adults in breeding plumage.

Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: by far the most common skua in the archipelago. There was one pair nesting on a tundra meadow next to the snowscooter rental buildings, and another pair apparently bred on the other side of the Adventfjorden. In addition some single birds were seen daily, maximum of 10 birds on the windy 15th June.

CRUISE: common, observed every day in varying numbers, 10–25 individuals daily.

Long-tailed Skua (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: on 13th and 19th June one adult bird in breeding plumage, on both occasions a local bird flying around Adventfjorden. The species is a very rare breeding bird on Svalbard due to the lack of lemmings.

CRUISE: a breeding pair at Camp Mansfield on Blomstrandhalvøya (though no nest was found) and three adult birds in Ny Ålesund on 20th June. In addition one adult bird was observed on Coraholmen on 24th June. It is not totally impossible that the observations of 13th, 19th and 24th June all refer to the same individual.

Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*)

CRUISE: Observed during the cruise almost daily in low numbers, usually single birds or pairs. The population of Great Skua is increasing on Svalbard and it is not a very uncommon sight in the Isfjorden area, but for some reason I managed to miss this species in Longyearbyen.

Sabine's Gull (*Larus sabini*)

LONGYEARBYEN: the highlight of my seawatching in Longyearbyen was an adult Sabine's Gull in breeding plumage on 17th June. I spotted the bird flying above Adventfjorden among Kittiwakes and it headed out to Isfjorden.

CRUISE: several individuals (2–4?) were observed on 21st on Moffen, all adults in breeding plumage. Moffen is the only known regular breeding place for this rare gull on Svalbard. The known population is only 1–5 pairs, but the local birdwatcher I met suspected that there are probably some hidden pairs breeding on Svalbard, perhaps not even very far from Longyearbyen.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus graellsii/intermedius/heuglini*)

LONGYEARBYEN: on 15th June one subadult bird flew out to Isfjorden and on 18th one subadult at the Longyearbyen dump. These observations may refer to the same individual. The species is vagrant to Svalbard.

CRUISE: one subadult south of Moffen on 21st and one subadult followed the ship 24–25th June, different birds by plumage.

Greater Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)

CRUISE: my only observation was two adult birds at Alkefjellet, Hinløpen Strait on 23rd June. The species is a moderately scarce breeding species in the archipelago.

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: Glaucous Gull is the main avian predator in the archipelago, and 15–60 birds were observed daily. Glaucous Gulls patrolling high on the cliffs were a common sight. I also observed one 2cy hybrid gull, which was probably a hybrid between Glaucous X Herring Gull.

CRUISE: observed daily in low numbers, but near bird cliffs the species was usually a little more numerous. At Alkefjellet we saw how one individual caught and swallowed an adult Brünnich's Guillemot. Glaucous Gulls are virtually everywhere in the archipelago.

Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one adult bird was observed almost daily, but on 16th June there were two adults at Kloakken. I observed also one very interesting-looking adult hybrid on 16th and 26th June. This bird was very similar to Iceland Gull (or Kumlien's Gull *L. glaucoides kumlieni*) but had some blackish on primaries, darker grey mantle and upperwing feathers and a distinctive white trailing edge on secondaries. There is a picture probably concerning the same individual on the Svalbard Birds website, www.svalbardbirds.com > news > picture gallery Svalbard > 2006 (by Stig Hammer, 21st April 2006)

Black-legged Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)

LONGYEARBYEN: some hundreds of birds daily. 2cy birds were observed nearly every day.

CRUISE: one of the most abundant birds of the trip, a common sight everywhere. Hundreds or thousands (or even tens of thousands) of individuals every day, depending on the sea bird colonies visited.

Ivory Gull (*Pagophila eburnea*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one bird was observed at Kloakken daily on 13th–19th June. In the morning of 14th I saw an individual with an aluminium ring, but in the evening I saw a bird which had no ring. On 26th–27th June there were two individuals without rings, which means a total of three different individuals, possibly four. All observed birds were adults.

CRUISE: on 20th June one bird in Ny Ålesund and four birds in Kongsfjorden, on 22nd June two individuals near Monacobreen glacier and on 23rd one bird at Lomfjorden.

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)

LONGYEARBYEN: observed daily. There were breeding pairs even very close to the town centre. I managed to see one 2cy bird on 16th and 26th June, but my fierce search for Common Tern was in vain.

CRUISE: some tens of birds were seen daily. Small breeding colonies were all over in the archipelago.

Brünnich's Guillemot (*Uria lomvia*)

LONGYEARBYEN: Daily sight in the area. Most individuals were far out on Isfjorden, but birds were regularly seen also on Adventfjorden, some even very near the shoreline.

CRUISE: probably the most abundant bird of the trip. We visited several breeding colonies, and on the biggest of them, Alkefjellet, there are at least tens of thousands of breeding pairs. Flocks of this species were observed everywhere on the sea.

Black Guillemot (*Cephus grylle*)

LONGYEARBYEN: a common sight in Adventdalen in low numbers. I saw some tens of individuals every day.

CRUISE: observed daily, usually some tens or maximum some hundreds of individuals. Most of the birds observed from a close distance had a brown stripe through the white upperwing patch, which is a feature of the subspecies *Cephus grylle islandicus*.

Little Auk (*Alle alle*)

LONGYEARBYEN: Little Auk is the most numerous breeding bird in Longyearbyen, but they breed very high on the cliffs, which makes them difficult to observe without a little climbing. Large flocks buzzed around the cliffs every day.

CRUISE: we did not manage to visit any colonies due to the weather conditions, but large flocks of this species were a common sight flying high above the cliffs or far out on the sea.

Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*)

LONGYEARBYEN: surprisingly scarce. Puffin was not a daily sight in Adventfjorden, and numbers of individuals observed daily were only 0–10.

CRUISE: a daily sight with maximum of some tens of individuals, but never as numerous as Brünnich's Guillemot or Little Auk.

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)

LONGYEARBYEN: on 18th June I met a Finnish birder Arska Salminen, who told me about a Wagtail he had seen by the dog cages. I managed to find the bird from the very same place after a short search. The species is a very rare breeder or vagrant to Svalbard.

Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*)

LONGYEARBYEN: very common breeder everywhere in Longyearbyen, tens of individuals daily. I saw the first juvenile birds already on 12th June, which means that the birds start breeding in early May.

CRUISE: seen practically on every landing, but never as numerous as in Longyearbyen. The species is the only common breeding passerine on Svalbard.

MAMMALS

Polar Bear (*Ursus maritimus*)

CRUISE: This huge predator is the main reason to visit Svalbard for many people. We observed a total of 13 individuals on Andøyen, near the Monacobreen glacier and on Hinlopen Strait. The species is usually less numerous, but since the pack ice was already gone in mid-June, many bears were this summer trapped to mainland and forced to find eider nests to eat.

This species is very rare during the summer in the surroundings of Longyearbyen, and this is one of the few species that almost certainly demand a trip to far north or to the eastern parts of the archipelago. However, bears may be encountered everywhere and they are extremely dangerous, even though they usually find humans uninteresting. Therefore a rifle is a must everywhere outside the settlements.

Beluga (White Whale) (*Delphinapterus leucas*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one individual very near shore on 17th June at Kloakken.

CRUISE: two individuals were observed on the mouth of Adventfjorden soon after our departure on 19th June. A beautiful flock of approximately 50 individuals was seen close to the Monacobreen glacier on 22nd June.

Minke Whale (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*)

CRUISE: 1 individual on Raudfjorden on 21st and on 22nd June 4 at Liedefjorden and 2 near Andøyen.

Arctic Fox (*Alopex lagopus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: One individual predated the tern colony near Kloakken and another stayed in Nybyen close to the guesthouse. Observed nearly every day.

CRUISE: Some arctic foxes were spotted during our cruise, usually near bird cliffs.

Svalbard Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: this species is very tame and common; you may see a deer even in the centre of the town. One day I managed to count 43 individuals from Kloakken, and with a careful count in Adventdalen I probably could have doubled those numbers.

CRUISE: I must have checked hundreds of white spots far on the shore, which were practically always reindeer. It was also observed on almost every landing. In fact, polar bears are clearly yellow, which makes it easy to tell a yellowish bear from a white reindeer from a very long distance.

Ringed Seal (*Phoca hispida*)

LONGYEARBYEN: The most common seal species in the archipelago. I saw single seals in the harbour area almost daily, which were most likely of this species.

CRUISE: Seals were observed daily, though usually a bit too far for sure identification. Majority of identified and probably also most of unidentified seals were of this species, and for example on 22nd June there were 172 seals on ice outside Monacobreen glacier, of which the vast majority were ringed seals.

Bearded Seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)

LONGYEARBYEN: one individual was observed on several days in Adventfjorden near Kloakken (possibly the same individual every day).

CRUISE: individuals were observed almost daily, but it seems that this species is never as numerous as the Ringed Seal.

Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)

CRUISE: two individuals on Amsterdamøya on 21st June, approximately 100 on Møffen Island on the same day and 25 at Torellneset on Nordausland. This species is uncommon in southern parts of the archipelago, and like the Polar Bear, observing this species usually requires a trip further outside Longyearbyen.

A week in Longyearbyen or a week on a vessel?

It seems that almost all of the arctic target bird species are possible to observe in Longyearbyen. Of the birds observed on the cruise I managed to see all but three species (Turnstone, Greater Black-backed Gull and Great Skua) also in Longyearbyen. None of

them is a real arctic speciality. On the other hand, I observed in Longyearbyen several species that were not observed on cruise, though most of them were vagrants from mainland Europe – of these only Iceland Gull is a true arctic species. In addition to this, I found it much easier to get good views of some species like King Eider or Ivory Gull in Longyearbyen rather than on cruise.

However, for some interesting and difficult arctic species like Sabine's or Ross's Gull the chances in Longyearbyen are very low (for Ross's almost next to zero, and I had good luck with Sabine's Gull), and skuas and many other marine birds are easier to observe from the vessel. Polar bears and whales are almost totally the privilege of the cruise vessels. Finally, at least I enjoyed the atmosphere onboard despite the expensive price, and consider the cruise the best seven days I spent on Svalbard.

From ornithologist's point of view, the best result will be achieved by spending several days birding in Longyearbyen before or after the cruise. After all, Longyearbyen seems to be the best single birdwatching spot in the area. Therefore all birdwatchers visiting Svalbard should try to spend at least a day or two in Longyearbyen to complete their lists.

If you have any questions or comments about my trip, please contact me by e-mail:
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Useful sites for a visitor:

www.svalbardbirds.com
www.spitsbergentravel.com
www.igp.no (rifle rental)
www.braathens.no

Three good trip reports in pdf-format:

www.tarsiger.com/images/pirpa/pirpa_huippuvuoret04/birding%20in%20svalbard.pdf
www.club300.se/Files/TravelReports/svalbard1999_PH.pdf
www.birdquest.co.uk/reportFiles/SPITSBERGEN%20REP%2006.pdf (The BirdQuest group trip report)