

Svalbard 11/1-4/12 1999

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INTRODUCTION

During 1999 I had the opportunity to spend a year on Spitsbergen, Norway, as a student in Arctic Biology. Beside studies, the possibility to get acquainted with some arctic avian and mammal wonders was one of the key intentions for my stay there. During the last week of July 2000 I went to Spitsbergen together with my family and I have supplemented the species list with observations from 2000. This report has formerly been published in Swedish at the club300.se website. It was rewritten during 2004 and somewhat updated.

In this report I'd like to pass on some experiences from birdwatching on Spitsbergen. In addition to a species list (50 species short!) I will also give a description of some of the best days from a birdwatcher's point of view. As I spent most of the time in the area around Longyearbyen, where I lived, this report deals mostly with that area. I will also tell something about life on 78° north. In the report Norwegian names are given in brackets. Those of you who are interested in going to Spitsbergen for animals or studies are very much welcome to contact me.

GEOGRAPHY/CLIMATE

Spitsbergen (Svalbard in Norwegian and Swedish) is a group of Islands in the extreme northern Atlantic Ocean. It stretches from 76°50' N in the south to 80°70' N in the north and between 9° E to 34° E. This group of Islands is under Norwegian responsibility but all countries that has signed "the Svalbard treaty" from 1925, has the right to explore the natural resources of Spitsbergen. There has for example been a Swedish coal mine in "Sveagruba" (now Norwegian) and there is still a Russian settlement, Barentsburg. There is also a Polish research station in Hornsund. The administrative centre is Longyearbyen, the largest Norwegian settlement (pop. 1200) where the only airport is. The link to the mainland is through Tromsø, approx. 900 kilometres south of Longyearbyen.

The by far largest island is Spitsbergen where all settlements are located. Spitsbergen is roughly 350 kilometres long and 150 kilometres wide at its widest. Other large islands within the group of islands are Nordaustlandet, Edgeøya and Barentsøya.

Glaciers cover 2/3 of the land area and mountains, fjords and wide valleys dominate the landscape. The bedrock is chiefly sedimentary and heavily weathered. Due to the harsh climate, vegetation cover is restricted to a minimum and no trees except for dwarf birches are found. That is, vegetation hardly rises more than 20 cm above the ground anywhere. The mountain areas often lack vegetation completely, which makes it uncomfortable to go trekking. Fortunately, most of the birds are found in the valleys and in the fjords. In the valleys, often wide, the tundra stretches with several small ponds and lakes. In the inner part of the fjords, there are often delta areas where the rivers enter the sea. The delta areas are often the best bird spots and they attract various species of gulls, waders and ducks.

In comparison with other pieces of land on the same latitude, for example Greenland, the climate on Spitsbergen is rather mild and is characterised by the marine environment. Particularly the western parts of Spitsbergen are under strong influence of the Gulf current. Still, visitors with no previous experience of the Arctic will hardly consider the climate as mild. The average July temperature is only 4 °C in Longyearbyen. The coldest month is March with an average temperature of -14°C. During the winter, the temperature almost never drops below -30° C. Precipitation is low and is often less than 200 mm annually. Precipitation is highest during February - March and the snow in the valleys has melted in the beginning of June. Although Spitsbergen is surrounded by sea the air is remarkably dry, which is nice during the windy and cold winters.

That the precipitation during the summer (or no-winters!) is low might lead one to think that the sun is shining instead. That is not the case! Summers are often cloudy and the sunniest period is often between March and May. Spitsbergen's northern location gives a good portion of midnight sun making 24-hour birding possible from late April until late August.

MAMMALS

Concerning terrestrial animals, the most likely to be confronted with is the Svalbard reindeer, which is thought to originate from North America. Compared to Scandinavian reindeer, the Svalbard reindeer is considerably smaller with short legs and a large body, an adaptation to the harsh climate. The Svalbard reindeer is extremely non-shy and moves only when you're a few feet away. The only other terrestrial animal is the arctic fox, which has a stable population in Spitsbergen. As the arctic foxes in Spitsbergen mainly predate on eggs and birds in the bird-cliffs, the fluctuation in numbers is low. Rodents are almost totally absent, which explains why there are no long-tailed skuas or snowy owls breeding in Spitsbergen. Anyhow, there is a rodent that in the last years has colonised Barentsburg and also Longyearbyen, the latter to a lesser extent. The rodent is the "sibling vole" that is thought to have arrived in Spitsbergen with hay-ships from Russia. Perhaps surprising, the Russians have had cows to which hay was transported. Nowadays there are no cows left but there are still pigs and poultry in Barentsburg. There have been experiments with introducing muskoxes and polar hares in Spitsbergen but they are now extinct.

The marine mammal fauna is considerably more diverse than the terrestrial and is represented by polar bear, ringed seal, bearded seal, Greenland seal, beluga and minke whale to mention a few of the most common. The risk of encountering a polar bear in the Longyearbyen area is rather small during the summer as most of them are in the ice-covered areas east of Spitsbergen. Some polar bears occur close to the glacier fronts during summer. The Monaco glacier in the Liefdefjord where most cruise-ships go, use to be a reliable site to watch them.

SETTLEMENTS

The largest settlement in Spitsbergen is Longyearbyen. The population is approximately 1200, most of them Norwegian citizens. Longyearbyen was formerly a mining community but as the profitability has gone down during later years, tourism and science nowadays dominate the community economy. Due to the isolated location, most modern conveniences are available in Longyearbyen. That is for example, two grocery shops, several sport equipment dealers, four restaurants/bars, post and bank office, hotels, swimming pool, a museum and last but not least a night-club! As there is absolutely no domestic food production in Spitsbergen, besides Barentsburg, everything must be imported from the mainland. Still, almost everything is available in the grocery shops and as there is a small health food corner it is even possible to survive as a vegan in Longyearbyen, at least I did!

The other settlements in Spitsbergen are Barentsburg, Ny-Ålesund, Sveagruva and Hornsund.

Barentsburg is a Russian coal mining settlement with 800 inhabitants 60 kilometres Southwest of Longyearbyen. During the summer day-trips by boat are arranged from Longyearbyen and though the settlement is rather depressing it's well worth the effort to go there. In addition you will see a lot of seabirds as the boat passes the largest bird-cliff ("Fuglefjella") in Isfjorden.

Ny-Ålesund is an international research station located in Kongsfjorden a 100 kilometres Northwest of Longyearbyen. Approximately 30 humans live there all year round but during the summer the population rises to about 250 people as scientist from all over the world go there. From a birdwatcher point of view, Ny-Ålesund is definitely more attractive than Longyearbyen, with a long list of vagrants including breeding American golden plover!

Sveagruva is a Norwegian mining settlement at the end of the Van Mijen fjord about 70 kilometres Southwest of Longyearbyen with a handful of inhabitants. Sveagruva is an ugly place and there are few interesting bird reports from that area. In addition it is difficult to get there during summer.

Hornsund is a Polish research station 120 kilometres south of Longyearbyen. About ten souls live there in an environment that is said to be stunningly beautiful. There are several rich bird-cliffs in the area. I haven't been there myself and it is difficult to get there all-year round. If you go there bring fresh vegetables and fruits and you will have friends for your life!

Besides these settlements there are inhabited radio "stations" on the Island Hopen to the southeast and Björnöya halfway between Spitsbergen and the mainland. The former radio station at Kapp Linné, 70 kilometres SW

Longyearbyen, is now abandoned but from April until August there is a small guesthouse located in the old station. Highly recommended!

In addition to these civilised spots on Spitsbergen some hunters still persist on different outskirts of the archipelago.

There is no native group on Spitsbergen and has never been.

GETTING THERE

To reach Spitsbergen, Tromsø, the largest city in Scandinavia north of the Arctic Circle, is a natural starting point. Many visitors to Spitsbergen are taking part of some kind of cruise, which starts in Tromsø. If you don't, the only way to get there is by air. Scandinavian Airlines travel between Tromsø and Longyearbyen almost daily. (The possible exception is Saturdays). It takes about one and a half-hour and with clear sky it's possible to view Björnøya.

Students have discounts in Norway and if there is space on the plane you might buy a stand-by ticket.

To reach Tromsø, the most convenient way is to fly from Oslo. It's also possible to go by train to Narvik and continue northwards by bus. Takes a lot of time, almost 24 hours from Stockholm, but it's price-worthy.

If you have a reliable stomach, it is also possible to travel with some of the cargo-ships travelling between the mainland and Spitsbergen. Contact the tourist-information in Tromsø or Longyearbyen for more info.

While waiting at the airport in Tromsø, just step out of the main entrance with your tri-pod and look for birds in the nearby fjord. From the pavement, I have seen king eider, shelduck, purple sandpiper, snow bunting, shags and of course white-tailed sea eagles amongst other species.

LODGING

There are three hotels in Longyearbyen. Funken Hotel, SAS Radisson Hotel Longyearbyen and Basecamp Spitsbergen. These are medium or top end hotels and definitely out of the question for the budget traveller. Expect at least 150 Euros per night for a double. In the "Nybyen", about 3 km north of the "city centre", there are former mineworker's barracks, now transformed into hostel. Which can be rented from "Nybyens Gjestehus" or "Svalbard Wildlife Service". Singles should cost about 50 Euros per night.

There is also a camping ground close to the airport, about 5 kilometres Southwest of Longyearbyen. The location, is to say the least, far off! At the other hand, it is cheap and you pitch your tent at one of the best birding localities close to Longyearbyen. It should be noted that camping any closer than 2 kilometres from Longyearbyen is prohibited.

GETTING AROUND SPITSBERGEN

Organised boat-trips

Once at Longyearbyen and Spitsbergen, participating in an organised boat trip is almost a must, as the Longyearbyen surroundings just show a little of what Spitsbergen has to offer. A wide variety of trips are available, a popular one takes you along the westerns shore of Spitsbergen with stops at Ny-Ålesund, the Magdalenafjord and the Liefdefjord. The Liefdefjord is a good spot to see polar bears. This trip also brings you to the Island of "Moffen" where walruses hang out during the summer. Going ashore is strictly prohibited but you get good views from the ship. This island is also the only known breeding site for Sabine's gull in Europe, though not every year.

If you're planning to participate on such a trip it's probably a good idea to wait until at least mid-July as the ice-cover earlier in the season makes it impossible to reach "Moffen". When I went to Moffen in the last week of July in 2000 we were the first group to reach these waters that year due to the ice conditions. At the other hand,

species like polar bear, Ivory gull and Ross's gull are strictly connected to ice-covered waters. That is, a trip with close contact to ice-covered waters earlier in the season probably increases your possibilities to see Ross's gull. Ivory gull and polar bears should be encountered in other areas too.

As mentioned, there are several possibilities to get around Spitsbergen by boat and especially so in the Icefjord (Isfjorden) where Longyearbyen and Barentsburg is situated. For more information, get in contact with Spitra or Spot through the addresses mentioned later.

Car/Bicycle

To reach the sites around Longyearbyen some kind of vehicle is recommended, at least if you want to reach the inner part of the "Advent Valley" (Adventdalen) or Vestpynten and the birdcliffs at Björndalen. Bicycle, mopeds and cars are for rent in Longyearbyen. The best option is probably "Svalbard Reiser" who offers used cars for around 300 Nkk/day. Taxis are also available in Longyearbyen. There are in all 47 kilometres of roads around Longyearbyen.

POLAR BEAR

It should be pointed out that it is stupid and dangerous to move anywhere outside the settlement of Longyearbyen unarmed. Three people, all unarmed, has been killed during the 90's in Spitsbergen and several incidents regarding polar bear encounters are reported annually. In general, polar bears are rare in the Longyearbyen area and all of the western parts of Spitsbergen during the summer. This is due to the fact that the polar bear is a strictly marine species that feed mainly on seals caught in ice-covered waters. A polar bear that has come ashore does not thrive and aim to reach ice-covered waters a.s.a.p. During the summer months the sea west of Spitsbergen is open and the polar bears that are shore on western Spitsbergen this time of year has big problems in finding food (seals). If you meet a polar bear ashore during the summer it is probable that it looks upon you as prey. During winter, fjords are ice-covered and the seal supply is far better, which makes bear encounters during the winter often less threatening. Still, polar bears are always curious, and seem to eat almost everything that is not ice or stone. There are several reports on polar bears eating snow-scooter cushions, motor oil and even weather stations!

Rifles can be rented at several shops in Longyearbyen. No license is needed but you need to be 18 years old. Shooting a polar bear will put you into a lot of trouble and you need to convince the police that the encounter was indeed life threatening and that all precautions were taken to avoid a life-threatening encounter.

SITES

Longyearbyen

Longyearbyen is situated at the Adventfjord that is part of the large Icefjord (Isfjorden). At the base of this fjord, the wide Advent Valley continues to the southeast. In the Longyearbyen area there are in general four sites that are interesting from a birdwatcher's point of view. These are (1): the Advent river (Adventelva) delta, (2): The Advent Valley (Adventdalen), (3): The camping ground ponds and Vestpynten and (4): the birdcliff "Fuglefjella" close to Björndalen to the SSW of Longyearbyen. Maps over the Longyearbyen area are available at "Norsk Polarinstitut" and at "Svalbardbutikken" in Longyearbyen. A suitable map covering the entire area is "sheet C9 ADVENTDALEN Spitsbergen".

1. The Adventfjord/the Cloak (Adventfjorden/Kloakken)

A good starting point for birding in the Longyearbyen area is where the sewage sludge from Longyearbyen enters the Adventfjord. The site is called "Kloakken" literally the Cloak, by the local birders. The idea is that the sewage sludge should be led through a pipe far out in the fjord, but this pipe is almost constantly broke, which satisfies Ivory gulls and birders! From this point you get a good overview of the Adventfjord and its surroundings. To get there, pass the road leading towards the Advent Valley (Adventdalen) behind the UNIS-building (the University, painted in dark brown with red corners). There are two snow-scooter rentals in this area

and behind them there are used trucks and barracks, which give good shelter from the wind. The sewage sludge pipe enters in the southern part of the area. As in many coastal areas, birds are most numerous during heavy tide. Flood and tide schedules are available at the library or at the tourist information office.

This area is by far your best option to watch Ivory gull. More than 100 individuals have been counted here during April. Even in the summer Ivory gulls can be seen here, and “the Cloak” is the best spot to see them. But, Ivory gulls may be elusive during summer so you might need some patience. A lot of other gulls may be seen here and at it’s best, up to ten species can be seen at the same time. The best time for gulls is probably late May and the beginning of June. The commonest gull is by far kittiwake followed by glaucous gull. Regular visitors include Iceland gull, herring gull, common gull, black-headed gull, lesser black-backed gull and Sabine’s gull. Vagrants include Ross’s gull (not annually in the Adventfjord) and ring-billed gull. Arctic skuas, sometimes long-tailed and great skuas, parasites on the foraging kittiwakes and arctic terns.

The largest amounts of waders are generally seen during early June and September. Absolutely dominating species is the purple sandpiper on its way to or from its breeding grounds. More than 500 are not seldom seen. Dunlin is the second most common species. Sanderling and knot are often seen, though in low numbers during early June.

2. The Advent Valley (Adventdalen)

To the southeast of Longyearbyen, the wide Advent Valley stretches for several tens of kilometres. A 17 kilometre long paved road leads from Longyearbyen to Mine No. 7 (Gruve 7). If you want to cover all the sites along this road a car is probably necessary. Some of the best spots though are pretty close to Longyearbyen. About 500 meters away from Longyearbyen is the Ice-pond (Isdammen), which provides Longyearbyen with freshwater. The pond or lake is about 2 kilometres long and 7-800 metres wide. From the hills to the west and to the south of the lake give good views. Red-throated divers, king eider and barnacle geese should be seen. To the southeast of the lake are small ponds, which are a reliable place for king eiders but also grey phalaropes can be seen.

Standing at the road next to “Isdammen” also provides distant views towards Northeast over the marshy areas called “Fivelflyane” at the other side of the Advent Valley. In the area from the Adventfjord to a small cottage called “Förstehytta” (literally, “the first cottage”) up to a 1000 geese roost during the last ten days of May every year. Pink-footed geese and barnacle geese predominate but rarer species are seen every year. Snow goose, greylag and white-fronted goose (*flavirostris*) are seen almost every year. Vagrants include red-breasted goose, lesser white-fronted goose and bean goose. Brent goose (*hrota*), the rarest of the three breeding goose species on Spitsbergen, roost in more coastal areas and is difficult to see close to Longyearbyen.

The distance to the geese is far from this point and a spotting scope is necessary.

If you have a car it is a good idea to continue along the road towards Mine No. 7 and check the small ponds along the road. There is also a garbage dump (“Söppelfyllinga”) where glaucous gulls in all plumages and possibly also some vagrant herring or lesser black-backed gull can be seen. During my stay on Spitsbergen I saw at least three different grey-backed lesser black-backed gulls. Unfortunately I was never able to identify them to subspecies. The road stops at Mine No. 7 300 m above the sea where one get splendid views over the Advent Valley and the Icefjord.

3. The Camping ground/Vestpynten

If you don’t have a car it’s a better option to save the effort of going towards Mine No. 7 and move towards the Camping ground instead. The camping ground is about 5 kilometres west of Longyearbyen towards the airport. A few hundred meters before the airport there is a sign “Camping” and “Bjørndalen”. Along this road, running along the coastline, there are ponds that should be checked for waders. Next to the Camping ground, about 1 kilometre along this road, there is a larger pond that attracts waders, gulls and terns. Fulmars sweep around your head and arctic skuas harass the roosting kittiwakes. Sabine’s gulls are regularly seen among the kittiwakes during the summer. Grey phalarope has bred with at least one pair in the large pond the last years and this site is the most accessible and reliable for the species in the Longyearbyen area. Red-necked phalarope has attempted to breed some summers and single birds can be seen during the summer. Further on, ruddy turnstone and ringed plover breed with a few pairs each while purple sandpiper and dunlin are often seen with about ten individuals

each. Sanderling is sometimes seen and the possibility to find rarer *Calidris*-species is definitely good. During the breeding season, early June until September, it's wise to stay on the road (good views) as the nests of arctic terns and purple sandpipers are numerous around the pond.

From the Camping ground one can continue west along the road towards "Björndalen". The road runs along the shoreline and loads of auks and fulmars are seen in a convenient distance. The mouth of the Adventfjord is marked by the lighthouse "Vestpynten" which is a four meters high beacon. Out here it's a constant bird activity 24 our a day. The number of passing fulmars, Brünnich's guillemots and little auks often exceed a hundred, per minute! Flocks of kittiwakes pass by as does single glaucous gulls. Along the shoreline and in the fjord, flocks of eiders forage together with single king eiders and black guillemots. Arctic skuas are common and great skuas are often seen. Pomarine skuas are rare but regularly seen from this point.

From mid-August, when the Brünnich's guillemots and little auks has completed their breeding, they leave the breeding grounds and become surprisingly rare in the Adventfjord. As a matter of fact, I can't guarantee you to see Brünnich's guillemots if you visit Longyearbyen in the end of August! Puffins, who breed later than the other auks, become more visible during August as the amounts of little auks and Brünnich's guillemots disappear.

4. Björndalen/Fuglefjella (The bird cliff)

After bumping along the last kilometres to the end of the road, you're at Björndalen (literally the Bear Valley). In the valley there are several ponds where barnacle geese and purple sandpiper commonly breed. Great skuas have attempted to breed here. Still, it's the bird-cliff "Fuglefjella" that is the top attraction out here. It's possible to see some birds if you follow the shoreline westwards looking up. For better views you need a good portion of courage to climb the mountain. Once up there you'll be rewarded with close-up views of Brünnich's guillemots, little auks, fulmars, kittiwakes and glaucous gulls, in addition to splendid views over the Icefjord. During the summer it's also possible to view Beluga whales from this point.

Ny-Ålesund

Ny-Ålesund is a pronounced science community and is most probably visited by the visiting tourist as part of an organised boat trip. Instead of wasting your time at the Amundsen statue or in the souvenir shop, the keen birdwatcher should use the visit to search through the ponds around the community. It must be kept in mind that birds breed almost everywhere in Ny-Ålesund, watch your steps! The arctic terns of Ny-Ålesund must be among the most aggressive in the world and hardly avoid any threat. An arctic-tern encounter often ends up in bloodshed! The best pond is located east of the community and is seen immediately you step on the pier. Breeding grey phalarope is regular as well as red-throated diver, barnacle geese and waders. In the marshes in the western part of the community more waders and snow bunting are common. Next to the dog's house (Hundegården), Ivory gulls can often be seen foraging on seal carcasses.

Kapp Linné

Kapp Linné is an abandoned radio station about 70 kilometres west of Longyearbyen at the mouth of the Icefjord. During the sunny season a small guesthouse is run there. The area is attractive both for birds and birdwatchers. Kapp is Norwegian for cape and from late March until September huge amounts of seabirds on their way to or from their breeding grounds in the Icefjord. Migrating eiders including king eiders are best seen during April and May. As long as there is Ice on the fjord, the chances of spotting Ivory gulls are good. One of my best ornithological moments of my life was out here during early April. In Longyearbyen, spring was still long gone, but out here the fjord was teeming with life. I had shelter from the strong southeastern wind behind the former outdoor toilet and saw migrating fulmars, kittiwakes, auks, eiders and a few Ivory gulls. When stiff-frozen, it was just a short walk to the fireplace in the lounge room where I could enjoy a cognac waiting for the dinner to be served.

To the south of Kapp Linné, the wide coastal plain "Nordenskiöldkysten" (the Nordenskiöld coast) stretches for about 40 kilometres south towards Kapp Martin at the Van Mijen fjord. Birders seldom visit this area, but there are several ponds and the position must be attractive for Yankee vagrants.

LITERATURE

Bangjord, G. 1997. Pattedyr- og fuglregistreringer på Svalbard i 1995. Norsk Polarinstitutt rapport 99. In Norwegian with comprehensive English summaries.

Bangjord, G. 1999. Pattedyr- og fuglregistreringer på Svalbard i 1996. Norsk Polarinstitutt rapport 111. In Norwegian with comprehensive English summaries.

Mehlum, F. The mammals and birds of Svalbard/Spitsbergen

All of these publications can be ordered from the Norsk Polarinstitutt's website www.npolar.no

Map "sheet C9 ADVENTDALEN" covers the area around Longyearbyen. This map and others can be purchased at "Svalbardbutikken" or at "Norsk Polarinstitutt" office in Longyearbyen.

DIARY SHEETS

990313 Longyearbyen, -8°C, clear sky, gentle wind.

Excursion by bike to the airport in splendid weather. The sun has been above the horizon for about a month. Among the ice-floats in the mouth of the Adventfjord, the first black and Brünnich's guillemots of the year were seen. In addition a few glaucous gulls and a few hundred fulmars farther out on the Icefjord. Hauling on the ice were several tens of seals, probably mostly Greenland seals but also bearded seals and ringed seals. I met the Ecologist Ole Gunnar Støen who showed me a turtle dove carcass found in Ny-Ålesund last autumn. Last week a polar bear was seen close to Ingenjör Paulsens snow scooter rental in Longyearbyen.

990408 Kapp Linné, -15°C, clear sky, 10 m/s southeastern wind

Back on Spitsbergen after celebrating Easter in Sweden, I was met by laughing little auks in Longyearbyen. I left Longyearbyen immediately for a snow scooter excursion with the Ecology classes at Nordenskiöldkysten and Kapp Linné. At Kapp Linné I found a calm place where I could sit and watch migrating fulmars, auks and kittiwakes at a close range. Several hundreds per minute! Top moments include 2 + 1 Ivory gulls. In all about a hundred common eiders migrated eastwards towards the Icefjord. Southwards along "Nordenskiöldkysten" we saw two arctic foxes as well as two more Ivory gulls. No polar bear this time, but we saw several footprints.

990419 Longyearbyen

21 Ivory gulls were seen at the "Cloak" today, two of which were 2nd cy birds.

990420 Longyearbyen

One adult Iceland gull and 8 Ivory gulls at the "Cloak".

990421 Longyearbyen

15 Ivory gulls at the "Cloak". The snow buntings has arrived to Longyearbyen today and singing birds are heard everywhere. Spotted a sleeping polar bear close to "Sveagruva" on a snow scooter trip today. Midnight sun is here!

990514 Longyearbyen 5°C, eastern breeze, cloudy. Spring is here!

10 adult Ivory gulls at the "Cloak". At least 48 males king eiders together with hundreds of common eiders. In addition two pairs of pin-tailed duck, one pair of tufted duck and one adult black-headed gull. The first pink-footed goose was seen flying towards the Advent Valley. As usual about 20 glaucous gulls in different plumages.

990519 Longyearbyen 2°C, strong southwestern breeze. 21-23 YANKEE!

Biked down to the "Cloak" after dinner and took place at my favorite spot among the truck wrecks. As always I am alone on the spot. Once in position I immediately discover a small gull in flight with grey back and black primaries. 3rd cy common gull is my first thought as they are regular visitors here during spring. When it lands on the beach I see black markings on the outer parts of the tail feathers. When perched I can also see a black band around the yellow bill. Might it be? MUST BE! Ring-billed gull! Ahhh, life couldn't be better! The bird seems to thrive on the beach and since there is midnight sun since a month, light is no problem. I call the known birdwatchers in Longyearbyen who arrive in a few minutes and they can confirm my observation. Other

interesting species this evening was five pairs of teal, a few herring gulls and the first purple sandpipers of the season. The ringbilled gull was seen until the 22nd of May when it disappeared. On the 3rd of June it returned and stayed until the 7th.

990525 Longyearbyen 2°C gentle wind and clear sky. 1645-1900

Standing at my ordinary spot among the truck wrecks down at the “Cloak” thinking about whether I should go towards the airport and the camping ground or if I should go towards the Advent Valley to look for geese. At the last glimpse over the fjord I discover a large white heron landing a hundred metres away! Adrenaline switch, on! Luckily, I have the conscience to use the camera and I get two usable photographs. The heron takes off almost immediately and continues towards the Advent Valley where I can see it landing a kilometre away. The observation time so far has been short and the bright pink legs of this bird confuse me a bit. As any egret on this latitude is a great surprise, an American species can’t be excluded and at the time I didn’t know very much about the American egrets. Still, it had large plumes and the size indicated great white egret. I called my local allied, Mikael Lagerborg and stutter something about a large white heron in the delta and ask him to come a.s.a.p. He did and together we could follow the egret on its way towards the Advent Valley. At some occasions it lands but always for a very short time and the last sight we get of it is when it harassed by glaucous gulls slowly continues east towards Sassendalen and an assumed death! A new species for Spitsbergen and probably the northernmost observation of the species ever! Later on, after literature studies I can conclude that some great white egrets have bright pink legs during the beginning of the breeding season. Other species this day were one pair of wigeon and the first ringed plover.

990527 Longyearbyen-the Airport

In the Advent Valley in the vicinity of the “first cottage” (Förstehytta), in all about a thousand pink-footed geese and barnacle geese. In the Icepond (Isdammen) I saw one pair of king eiders. At the camping ground, one male teal, one long-tailed skua, a pair of arctic skua, one arctic tern, three golden plovers and about 35 purple sandpipers. In the evening we ringed an Ivory gull at the “Cloak”.

990531 Longyearbyen-the Advent Valley. 0°C gentle wind, cloudy. 2045-0015.

I am spending my time photographing Ivory gulls being happy with six brent geese (*hrota*) that recently flew by. A common gull is still in place as is a pair of pin-tailed ducks. When trawling the Advent Valley with my spotting scope I discover a white “thing” out on the tundra. A snowpatch or at best an arctic fox are my thoughts. Several pink-footed geese around, can’t be an arctic fox then. The white “thing” soon has a neck and soon I am riding my steelhorse towards the Advent Valley. Standing on the road close to the Icepond I can clearly see that it really is a bird. Snow goose is much more common than swans in Spitsbergen and my heartbeats rises. I walk as far as I can before the tundra swallows me entirely and I can confirm the pink colour of the beak. After a while I can see the beautiful black markings on the primaries. As it is about the same size as the pink-foots and that the beaks seems large should exclude Ross’s goose but of course it should have been nice to view it in a shorter distance, that is, less than 1,5 kilometres. Along with the geese is also a greylag and about 50 barnacle geese and a golden plover is also seen.

990601 The Advent fjord-the Advent Valley. 0°C, cloudy. 2030-0030.

The snow goose is still in the Advent Valley. Two common gulls, seven Ivory gulls, two Iceland gulls, one ringed plover, two knots, 150 purple sandpipers and more are resident in the delta area. In the Advent fjord, a male walrus has been drifting around on an ice-float all day.

990608 The “Cloak”-Moskushavna-Fivelflyane.

Together with a friend of mine we succeeded in forcing the Advent river and continued walking towards Moskushavna at the other side of the Advent fjord. In the delta we saw five sanderlings, two pairs of ringed plovers and three long-tailed ducks. In one of the ponds close to the “first cottage” (“Förstehytta”) we saw a pair of grey phalaropes at a very close range. In addition a pair of red-throated divers and a few pairs of king eider in the ponds.

0990817 The “Cloak”-the Advent Valley. 4°C strong eastern breeze. 1245-1330

Back in Longyearbyen after spending most of my summer in Sweden. Thousands of kittiwakes together with about a hundred arctic terns forage in the inner part of the Advent fjord. In addition a few hundred purple sandpipers, 50 dunlins, one juvenile ringed plover and 4 adult Ivory gulls.

990827 the pack Ice about 8115°-8200°N and -13°E till ca 21°E. On board F/F Jan Mayen, the Science trawler of the University of Tromsø. Excursion in Arctic Marine Biology.

When I woke up we had reached the pack-ice belt north of Spitsbergen. We continued northwards during all day and finally stopped at 8200° N where we made some investigations. After a quick breakfast I spent most of the day on the deck or at the bridge. In the wake of the boat there were plenty of fulmars and glaucous gulls and at most, 64 Ivory gulls. After a few hours of penetrating the ice pack I discovered a small gull with light and pigeon-like flight approaching the boat. Could it be? Yes indeed, Ross's gull! What a creature, that in contrast to the other species here didn't seem to be very interested in the boat. Most of them just passed by and in all I noted at least eight individuals. Close to the boat were also little auks, black guillemots and kittiwakes. After a while we anchored to a huge ice-float and spend rest of the day in the area.

Someone shouted BEAR! and we could view a polar bear strolling northwards on the ice pretty far away. In the same moment a silent fog covered everything around us. After an hour BEAR! was repeated and this time it was just below the deck of the boat. After watching each other for half an hour the bear went back the same way it had arrived. So did we and during our way back through the ice the sky cleared. In the wake of the boat, besides the Ivory gulls, three juvenile pomarine skuas and an adult long-tailed skua were seen.

990906 the Advent fjord

Autumn arrives early in Spitsbergen and already at this date the number of species and individuals has decreased dramatically. 88 purple sandpipers, two dunlins, one Ivory gull, a juvenile arctic tern and a 2nd cy male king eider is all that is written down in my notebook. Eiders, glaucous gulls and fulmars as well as a few purple sandpipers, auks and snow buntings persist for another month or so. Later, birds are almost totally absent in Longyearbyen and later on they are also impossible to see due to the dark season! From mid-November its completely dark 24-hours a day. Hardcore birders then look for auks under the piers with help from torches!

Species list

Based on personal experiences and what has been written (Mehlum XXXX, Bangjord 1997, Bangjord 1999) I have tried to estimate the abundance of the species in the species list. There are probably some errors in it but my intention is to give the visiting birdwatcher an idea about what can be expected. B stands for abundant breeder, b for rare breeder, R for regular visitor (annual in general) and V for vagrant. If you see something extraordinary please write to Georg Bangjord at gbangjord@online.no.

Norwegian names are also given

Red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*) smålom B

First seen the 26/5 in the Adventfjord (single ind.) One pair seen at Fivelflyane 8/6. Up to three individuals in "Isdammen" during June. Also seen in other lakes in the Advent Valley. Rather common breeder in tundra lakes. At least three pairs Ny-Ålesund 24/8.

Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*) havhest B

First seen the 13th of March at "Vestpynten". Latest observation, several tens in the Icefjord 9/10. Abundant breeder in the bird-cliffs, for example in the "Fuglefjella" in Bjørndalen. Several thousands often follow your ship when travelling around the fjords.

Gannet (*Sula bassana*) havsule V

A subadult bird were seen to the west of "Prins Karls Forland" when onboard F/F Jan Mayen 78°30N 10°10E the 28/8. Nearest breeding colonies are in Vesterålen and Varanger in in northern Norway.

Great white egret (*Egretta alba*) egrethevre V

One adult bird in breeding plumage were seen in the Adventfjord and the Advent Valley 25/5. The first observation ever in Spitsbergen.

Pink-footed goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) kortnebbgås B

First seen on 14/5 in the Advent Valley. Unfortunately, I never counted the roosting pinkfoots in the Advent Valley. Anyway, numbers should have peaked around 23-25/5. On the 31/5 when I was looking at the snow goose, I estimated the amounts of pink-footed geese to about 75 in the Advent valley. It is the commonest goose in Spitsbergen and breeds on the tundra but also in the bird-cliffs. Several hundreds roost every spring in the Advent Valley, chiefly in the area around the "first cottage" (Förstehytta).

Greylag (*Anser anser*) grågås R

One individual, the “first cottage” (“Förstehytta”) 31/5 together with pinkfoots. Single individuals are seen almost every year together with the other roosting geese in the Advent Valley

Snow goose (*Anser caerulescens*) snögås R

One individual, the “first cottage” (“Förstehytta”) 31/5-1/6 together with pinkfoots. Single individuals are seen almost every year together with the other roosting geese in the Advent Valley. The origin is of course unclear but a more truly “wild” experience of the species in Europe is unheard of!

Barnacle goose (*Branta leucopsis*) hvitkinngås B

First seen the 21/5, 4 ind. the Advent Valley. As for pink-footed goose I have no estimates on the numbers. Barnacle goose have increased in numbers during the last years and is now almost as common as pink-footed goose. Abundant breeder on the tundra but seem to prefer somewhat drier areas in general (slopes etc.) than the pink-footed goose. Does also breed in the bird-cliffs

Brent goose (*Branta bernicla hrota*) ringgås B

18 individuals at Diabasodden 30/5 were the first brent goose seen by me. In all 38 individuals were counted between Diabasodden – De Geerdalen that day. (An area in the Sassenfjord, east of Longyearbyen). In addition 6 individuals migrating towards northwest the Adventfjord 31/5. The population of Brent goose has decreased during later years and is much harder to see than the other breeding geese of Spitsbergen. Greenland brent geese have been proven to use Spitsbergen as a stopover on their way to and from the breeding grounds. During the spring, at least one individual with *nigricans* characters were seen on Prins Karls Forland, though not by me. Mixed breeding with *bernicla* brent goose has been proven on some occasions.

Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) brunnakke R

One pair were seen in the Adventfjord 25/5. Wigeons as well as other dabbling ducks are almost annually seen in the Adventfjord during early May and the beginning of June.

Teal (*Anas crecca crecca*) krikkan R, b

One male in the Adventfjord 16/5 was the first to arrive. At best six males and four females were present in the Adventfjord 19-21/5. Six males and two females, probably the same as previous day were seen at “Nordlystationen” in the Advent Valley 22/5. At least 16 eclipse-plumaged teals were seen in Ny-Ålesund 24/8. During autumn there were no teals in Longyearbyen. The most frequently seen dabbling duck in Spitsbergen and is almost annually proved breeding.

Pin-tailed duck (*Anas acuta*) stjertand R, b

One pair in the Adventfjord 13/5. Two pairs were seen in the Adventfjord between 13/5-1/6. Three pairs 16/5. Pin-tailed duck is together with teal the most frequently seen dabbling duck. No dabbling duck is treated as a regular breeder in Spitsbergen though pin-tailed duck on some occasions have been proved breeding in the Advent Valley.

Tufted duck (*Aythya fuligula*) toppand R

One pair in the Adventfjord 14/5. Next observation is the 24/5 when four males and a female were seen in the Adventfjord. Between 26/5 and 29/5 five males and a female were seen in the Adventfjord. These were also seen in “Isdammen”. The species was last noted on 31/5 in the Adventfjord. Tufted duck is a regular visitor in the Adventfjord during late May and early June.

Common Eider (*Somateria mollissima*) aerfugl B

A few flocks were seen migrating eastwards at Kapp Linné 8/4. As for the geese reliable estimates of the roosting numbers is lacking. Several hundreds were waiting for the Ice-cover to leave in the Adventfjord 13/5. Common breeder.

King eider (*Somateria spectabilis*) praktaerfugl B

First seen at Kapp Linné 5/5, a male migrating east together with common eiders. In the Adventfjord, at least five adult males 13/5. At least 48 adult males in the Adventfjord 14/5. At least 45 adult males and 12 females in the Adventfjord 29/5. Six pairs in “Isdammen” 31/5. One eclipse male was in the Adventfjord until at least 6/9. Due to the long distance it was impossible to estimate the real numbers of females in the large mixed eider flock in the Adventfjord during May. In the Adventfjord, there was approximately one king eider for every ten common eiders during May. Breeds with several pairs in lakes in the lower parts of the Advent Valley.

Long-tailed duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) havelle B

One pair in the Adventfjord 26/5. At most, seven males and five females in the Adventfjord during May. One pair was also seen in the ponds in Smeerenburg 25/8. Fairly common breeder.

Black scoter (*Melanitta nigra*) svartand R

One pair flying by Hiorthamn in the Adventfjord 14/6. Irregular visitor.

Rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus hyperboreus*) fjellrype B

First observation was a female seen in the complete darkness outside the University building 15/1. Spitsbergens subspecies is a bit larger than the nominate race but is identical in other respects. The only species wintering on mainland Spitsbergen. Early mornings it might be seen displaying sitting on roofs like shelducks in Öland!

Ringed plover (*Charadrius hiaticula tundrae*) sandlo B

First heard in the Advent Valley 25/5. Two pairs at the "Cloak" 4/6, three pairs at the camping ground 5/6, two pairs in Moskuslavna (opposite Longyearbyen) 8/6. Three adults and a juvenile at the "Cloak" 19/8. Fairly common breeder.

Golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) heilo R, b (?)

Three individuals at the camping ground 27/5. One male Mälardalen-Fivelflyane 31/5. Regular summer visitor, breeding has been suspected at some occasions.

Knot (*Calidris canutus*) polarsnipe b

Three individuals the Adventfjord-Moskuslavna 29/5. Two ind. on the same place 1-4/6. Probably a rare breeder in Spitsbergen.

Sanderling (*Calidris alba*) sandlöper b

One individual the "Cloak"-the Adventfjord 4/6. Five individuals the "Cloak"-Moskuslavna in the Adventfjord 7-8/6. Three ind. at the camping ground 11/6. One ind. the "Cloak" 14/6. Regular breeder in low numbers.

Pectoral sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*) alaskasnipe V

One adult was seen at close range in the ponds at Smeerenburg 25/8 together with purple sandpipers.

Purple sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*) fjaereplytt B

First seen in the Adventfjord 19/5. At least 150 individuals in the Adventfjord 30/5. At least 270 ind. Moskuslavna-the "Cloak" 4/6. About 200 the Adventfjord 17/8. 88 ind. the "Cloak" 6/9. Four ind. in the "Cloak" 6/10. Two individuals at the Barentsburg "Cloak" 6/10. The by far most numerous waders in Spitsbergen. In particular in the Advent Valley the nests are so close to each other that you constantly are in their breeding territories.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) myrsnipe B

First seen in the Adventfjord 29/5-1/6. One pair at the "Cloak" 3-10/6. Five or six displaying males at Fivelflyane, the Advent Valley 8/6. About 50 individuals in the Adventfjord 17/8. Two individuals the "Cloak" 6/9. The second most numerous wader in Spitsbergen. Fairly common in the Advent Valley.

Ruddy turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*) steinvender B

First seen at the camping ground 28/5. One pair at the the camping ground 5/6. Fairly common breeder.

Red phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*) polarsvömmesnipe B

One pair in a pond at Fivelflyane, the Advent Valley 8/6. One pair in the pond just outside the University building 14/6. Three juveniles at the camping ground 21/8. The ponds at the camping ground are a reliable site to find the species, but small ponds in the tundra in the Advent Valley also house a few pairs. Still, you need to check several ponds before you find one! The females leave Spitsbergen already before the end of June.

Pomarine skua (*Stercorarius pomarina*) polarjo R

One adult female was seen in the Liefdefjord 26/8. Three 1st cy birds were seen in the pack ice (81°70N 13°40E) from F/F Jan Mayen 27/8. Regular visitor during autumn, chiefly in the eastern waters.

Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) tyvjo B

First seen at the camping ground 27/5. Three 1st cy birds were seen in the "Cloak" early September. A common breeder close to bird-cliffs.

Long-tailed skua (*Stercorarius longicauda*) fjelljo R, b

One adult the camping ground 27/5. One adult (possibly the same) the "Cloak" 4/6. One adult in the pack ice (81°70'N 13°40'E) were seen from F/F Jan Mayen 27/8. One adult bird in the Adventfjord 27/7 2000. Rare breeder in Spitsbergen, probably not more than ten pairs, most likely due to that rodents are absent.

Great skua (*Stercorarius skua*) storjo B

One pair at Björndalen 13-14/6. One adult Daudmannsöyra 23/8 seen from F/F Jan Mayen. One ind. Moffen 26/7 2000. One individual the Adventfjord 27/7 2000. The population has increased a lot during the last 30 years. Is often seen in bird-cliffs.

Black-headed gull (*Larus ridibundus*) hettemåke R

One adult in the Adventfjord 3-7/6. One 2nd cy bird in the Adventfjord the "Cloak" 3/6. Rare but regular summer visitor.

Common gull (*Larus canus*) fiskemåke R

Alltogether at least five individuals in the Adventfjord-the "Cloak" between 30/5-4/6. Rare but regular summer visitor.

Lesser black-backed gull (*Larus (fuscus) graellsii/heuglini*) sildemåke R

In all three lesser black-backed gulls with dark grey back were seen in the Longyearbyen area during May and June. Due to insufficient literature I couldn't be positive about the subspecies. The distance to breeding *heuglini* or *graellsii* is about the same and I guess that both subspecies could arrive in Spitsbergen as vagrants.

Herring gull (*L. argentatus*) gråmåke R

At least seven individuals were seen in the Adventfjord between 16/5 and 4/6. Rare but regular summer visitor. The nearest breeding grounds are at Björnöya, halfway to the mainland.

Iceland gull (*L. glaucoides*) grönnlandsmåke R

One adult were seen in the Adventfjord on different occasions between 20/4 and 14/6. Nevertheless, two adults were seen together in the Adventfjord 1/6. In addition one adult were seen from F/F Jan Mayen, which might well have been the same individual that were seen in the Adventfjord later. A 2nd cy bird was seen at the "Cloak" 14/6. During autumn one adult was seen in the Adventfjord 19/8. Rare but regular visitor during spring and summer. Probably overlooked! Nearest known breeding grounds are in eastern Greenland.

Glaucous gull (*L. hyperboreus*) polarmåke B

First seen in the Adventfjord 13/3. Last observation was at least 80 individuals, mainly 1st cy birds, in the Icefjord 9/10. Common breeder and is the chief bird predator of Spitsbergen as birds of prey are absent. Breeds in bird-cliffs.

Black-backed gull (*L. marinus*) svartbak B

First seen at Kapp Linné 8/4. I never recorded black-backed gulls in Longyearbyen, which is surprising, as I saw nine other gull species there!

Ring-billed gull (*L. delawarensis*) ringnebbmåke V

A 3rd cy bird was discovered at the "Cloak" on the 19th of May and remained in the area until 22/5 when it suddenly disappeared. On the 3rd of June it was rediscovered at the "Cloak" and stayed there until 7/6 to the great joy of the local birders. The second or possibly the third finding in Spitsbergen

Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*) krykkje B

Thousands at Kapp Linné the 8/4. Last seen in the Icefjord 9/10 (about 15 ind.). Numerous breeder.

Ross's gull (*Rhodorestria rosea*) rosenmåke R

At least eight individuals, most of them in winter plumage, were seen from F/F Jan Mayen along a transect from 81°57'N 12°19'E to 82°00'N 11°58'E on the 27th of August. Has bred once in Spitsbergen (1950's I think) and is rarely seen outside ice-covered areas.

Ivory gull (*Pagophila eburnea*) ismåke B

First seen at Kapp Martin, The Van Mijenfjord on the 8th of April (two adults). From 14/4 and onwards until 14/6 I saw Ivory gulls daily at the "Cloak". Largest amounts were 21 ind on 19/4 of which 19 were adult and 2

2nd cy birds. On the 21th of August I saw a juvenile at the “Cloak” being fed by an adult ringed in Longyearbyen the same spring. On the excursion with F/F Jan Mayen in the pack ice 27/8, maximum numbers were 64 individuals around the boat. Last observation was 4/9, an adult bird in the Adventfjord.

Arctic tern (*Sterna arctica*) rödnebbterne B

First seen 27/5 at Vestpynten. From 4/6 and onwards, terns were commonly seen in Longyearbyen were they are also breeding. Breeding seemed to have failed completely as I only saw one juvenile in Longyearbyen during autumn. At the ponds in Smeerenburg a 2nd cy bird were seen together with adults 25/8.

Black guillemot (*Cephus grylle*) teist B

First seen in the Adventfjord 5/3 when three summer-plumaged birds were seen. Fairly common breeder.

Little auk (*Alle alle*) alkekonge B

Thousands at Kapp Linné 8-9/4 were the first observation. From 13/4 and onwards little auks were heard from the mountains surrounding Longyearbyen. Incredibly common but leave the breeding areas during August and are almost absent from the fjords from late August.

Brünnichs guillemot (*Uria lomvi*) polarlomvi B

Single individuals viewed from Vestpynten 13/3 are my first observation of the species. Thousands were seen off Kapp Linné 8-9/4. Two individuals in “Grönnfjorden”, Barentsburg 9/10 were the last seen. Incredibly common but as the little auks they leave their breeding grounds during August and become difficult to view in the inner parts of the fjords.

Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*) lunde B

Only two observatins during the spring, one at Diabasodden 30/5 and two individuals off Vestpynten 13/6. During the excursion with F/F Jan Mayen, puffins were the most frequently seen auks inside the fjords as the Brünnichs guillemots and the little auks have left their breeding grounds by then.

Turtle dove (*Streptotelia turtur*) turteldue V

A carcass found in Ny-Ålesund previous autumn was shown to me by Ole Gunnar Stöen 13/3

White wagtail (*Motacilla alba alba*) linerle R

A male was at the camping ground 11-13/6. White wagtails are seen almost every year during spring-summer.

Northern wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe(leucorhoa?)*) steinskjett R (b?)

One male was seen at the ponds and the cottages in “Björndalen” 16/9. Northern wheatear does probably breed in certain bird-cliffs in Spitsbergen, the subspecies is so far unknown but shouldn't it be *leucorhoa*? The birds that are seen during autumn are probably of Greenland origin

Snow bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) snöspurv B

From 20/4 and onwards, snow buntings were present in Longyearbyen. Very common breeder, especially in settlements.