WILD NORWAY & SVALBARD
ABOARD *OCEAN ADVENTURER*
MAY 17–JUNE 2, 2019

Little Auk – Dovekie © David Ascanio

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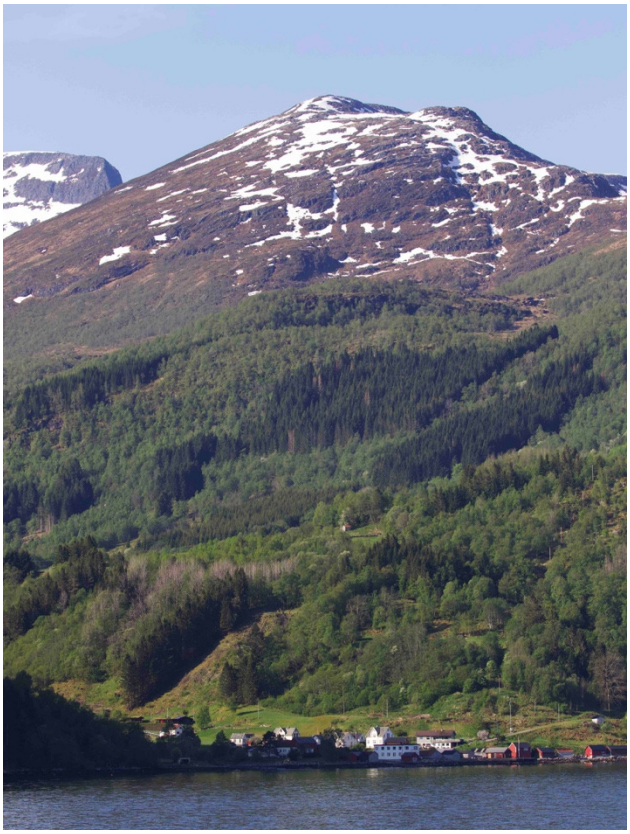
By David Ascanio

Photo album:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157709084318747/page2

I find it difficult to summarize in words the mix of landscapes, skies painted in all kinds of rich blue tones, unimaginable waterfalls reaching the sea, immensely huge glaciers, cliffs with thousands (or even tens of thousands) nesting seabirds, pale-blue ice packs, astonishing fjords, and a combination of wildlife so unique that you have to come and experience the Norwegian coast and Svalbard in the Arctic Circle to understand the feeling of being absolutely astonished.

The start of our cruise coincided with Norway´s Constitution Day, which began with a drumming celebration outside our hotel windows in Bergen. The day was filled with parades, fireworks, and hundreds of Norwegians dressed in their traditional clothing. It was, indeed, not only a holiday but the sunniest (and thus, the warmest) day of the year so far, so the Norwegians seemed very happy. In the evening, we met for the first time and enjoyed a delicious dinner as we were given a warm welcome and detailed information about our cruise and the activities for the day to come.



Geiranger Fjord. Photo: D. Ascanio

Our first day of birding found us in a wetland contiguous to Bergen called Herdland. Here, we were introduced to Graylag Goose, Common Eider, and Common Shelduck, as well as Tufted Duck and the vocal Northern Lapwing. As we reached the bird blind, we were welcomed by pairs of Common Ringed Plovers while the bushes gave us the opportunity to see Common Chiffchaff, European Robin, Fieldfare, and European Greenfinch. Upon embarkation, we said goodbye to Bergen and, with Lesser and Great Black-backed gulls accompanying our departure, we headed towards the sea.

The following day broke with splendid light and an immense fjord, with an endless number of waterfalls, rich green vegetation in the steep slopes, and the sea packed with Mew Gulls and a couple of Black Guillemots. Once we reached the town of Geiranger, we drove up to the mountains. Along the road, we managed to see Eurasian Blackcap, European Pied-Flycatcher, White Wagtail, and Meadow Pipit. Continuing north along the sea, our next stop was Runde Island, a bird sanctuary where scientists claim that more than half a million birds breed on its cliffs. We saw Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, European Shag, and a couple of thousand Northern Gannets nesting. Also, Black-legged Kittiwakes were seen nesting, and the impressive White-tailed Eagle was observed soaring over our heads.

Atlantic Puffin. Photo: D. Ascanio

Continuing along the coast of Norway, we visited Traena, where a brief birding stop allowed views of some of the common seabirds but also gave us the opportunity to see about 150 Arctic Terns, a species that performs one of the longest migrations of any bird in the world. We also made a stop in Kjerringoy, and after a very productive birding morning we added Green-winged Teal, Common Snipe, Eurasian Curlew, Willow Warbler, Fieldfare, European Greenfinch, and Reed Bunting. Later in the afternoon, we used the Zodiacs to approach Rost Island, and this time we were enthralled by almost a hundred Razorbills, more Atlantic Puffins, Common Murres, Black Guillemots, European Shags, a couple of hundred Black-legged Kittiwakes nesting, and a female Peregrine Falcon flying across the cliffs where many of these birds were nesting, obviously to catch distracted prey.

White-tailed Eagle. Photo: D. Ascanio.

Following were the Lofoten islands, and a bus ride across two of them allowed us to visit beaches, meadows, and wetlands. The mix of birds seen included Great Tit, European Pied Flycatcher, Redwing, Bohemian Waxwing (seen by few, unfortunately!), Eurasian Curlew, Long-tailed Duck, Tufted Duck, a pair of White-tailed Hawks, and a brief view of the spectacular Horned Grebe. As the ship continued its way north, we entered the Arctic Circle and stopped in Tromso, where we took a bus ride to explore the flooded meadows, as well as the coastal and freshwater wetlands. Here, we were able to expand our field checklist with views of Red-throated Loon, Willow Ptarmigan, Black-tailed Godwit, Common and Wood sandpipers, Gray Heron, Redwing, Fieldfare, a gorgeous Brambling, and a handful of Common Redpolls. It was time to leave the continent behind, thus this brief visit to the North Cape prepared us to head to

Bear Island, located approximately halfway between North Cape and Longyearbyen, in the Svalbard Archipelago.

Walrus. Photo: D. Ascanio.

On Bear Island we found strong swelling unsuitable for a Zodiac outing, thus we decided to continue our way north, this way extending our wildlife search in other islands of the Svalbard where an impressive show of wildlife awaited us. In the morning of the 28th I was scheduled for the Polar Bear search from the ship using the scope. As I walked to the bridge at 04:00 AM, I was astonished by the landscape before my eyes. The ship was surrounded by enormous ice packs, some very flat, others with unimaginable shapes. It all seemed like part of a modern-art museum exhibit. The intensity of blue colors varied from very rich in the sky (an almost impossible clean-blue) to pale-blue in the ice packs, and all of it was accompanied by a silence that I have experienced very few times in my life. In the background of this amazing scenery, a pod (group) of Walruses were resting, ignoring our presence.

Polar Bear. Photo: D. Ascanio.

The following four days were filled with what a lover of the Arctic Circle would dream to see: from Polar Bear to Walrus, 4 species of whales, and a fantastic mix of wonderful birds! Add to that gigantic and monumental fjords, incomparable good weather, Barnacle Goose in flight, Snow Bunting singing, a Harbor Seal exploring our Zodiacs, Sanderling in breeding plumage, and a jaw-dropping King Eider whose head ornaments have to be seen to be believed.

King Eider. Photo: D. Ascanio.

On our last morning we explored the surroundings of Longyearbyen, where we had a close encounter with an astonishingly beautiful Red Phalarope that was found swimming close to the shore. Also, we came across the rarely seen Tundra Swan. As we took off from Longyearbyen airport, I observed the grandiosity of this archipelago and its endless snow-capped mountains and impossible blue skies from the plane's window. These are images that will remain stitched in my memory. What a way to end this unforgettable cruise!

Red Phalarope. Photo: D. Ascanio.

Now that you have learned about the unique beauty of Norway and Svalbard, I want to invite you to join us in other destinations that are equally interesting and beautiful but remarkably different from this biome. Some are:

The Amazon Cruise
We charter a small ship and explore the upper Amazon River as well as two important tributaries, the Marañon and the Ucayali rivers. Every day we visit small rivers, oxbow lakes, and even explore a small forest trail. This cruise has been good for birds of prey, tanagers, and primates. There is an optional visit to a community.

Photo album (2019 cruise):
https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157707657587004
Video (2016 cruise)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b3xYG0cPSo

A birding Adventure in the Llanos of Colombia
A wildlife reserve in the heart of the plains or llanos of the Orinoco, in Colombia. Great photo opportunities and encounters with astonishing Jabiru, Orinoco Goose, and dozens of Scarlet Ibis. We bird different habitats in a safari truck and explore the gallery forest along a trail. Depending on water level, we might be able to explore the river as well.

Photo album (2019 tour):
https://www.flickr.com/photos/davidascanio/albums/72157689203918033

Thank you for joining us!

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WILD NORWAY & SVALBARD CRUISE
ABOARD *OCEAN ADVENTURER*
May 17–June 2, 2019

ITINERARY

19 May 2019. Herdla. Embarkation.
20 May 2019. Geiranger Fjord.
21 May 2019. Runde Island.
22 May 2019. Traena.
23 May 2019. Kjerringoy and Rost island.
24 May 2019. Reine and Stamsund islands.
25 May 2019. Tromso.
26 May 2019. North Cape. At sea.
27 May 2019. Bear Island. At sea.
28 May 2019. Storfjorden and Gnalodden, Svalbard.
29 May 2019. Van Mijenfjorden and Varsolbukta, Svalbard.
30 May 2019. Magdalena fjord and Smeeremburg, Svalbard.
31 May 2019. Isfjorden and Poolepynten, Svalbard.
01 June 2019. Longyearbyen. Flight to Oslo.

MAP SHOWING LOCATIONS

BIRDS

Ducks, Geese & Waterfowl / Anatidae

Graylag Goose. *Anser anser.* Common in Svalbard.
Pink-footed Goose. *Anser brachyrhynchus.* First seen in Varsolbukta. Later seen at close distance in Longyearbyen, Svalbard.
Barnacle Goose, *Branta leucopsis.* First seen in Traena. Later, a large group in Varsolbuka.
Whooper Swan, *Cygnys Cygnus.* A single individual was observed in Longyearbyen. Apparently, there are not many records of this species in Svalbard.
Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna.* Seen only in Herdla.
Eurasian Wigeon, *Mareca penelope.* Nice views near Tromso.
Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos.* One of the commonest species of the cruise.
Green-winged Teal, *Anas crecca.* Seen in Kjerringoy.
Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula.* We enjoyed views of this beautiful duck only twice, in Reine and Tromso.
King Eider, *Somateria spectabilis.* This spectacular species was seen by some of us in the Magdalena Fjord. Unfortunately, and despite much effort, we could not find it in Longyearbyen.
Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima.* Seen almost every day.
Long-tailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis.* Only seen twice. First a female was observed in Reine and later, a pair was seen in Longyearbyen.
Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser.* A unidentified individual (presumably this species) was reported in Kjerringoy.
Red-breasted Merganser, *Mergus serrator.* Common in Reine. Also observed in Tromso.

Pheasants, Grouse & Allies / Phasianidae

Willow Ptarmigan, *Lagopus lagopus.* What a great surprised to have seen this species right at the side of the road, near Tromso. A big thank you to Jim for finding it!

Grebes / Podicipedidae

Horned Grebe, *Podiceps auritus.* This species was seen briefly from the bus during the ride to Stamsud island.

Pigeons & Doves / Columbidae

Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon), *Columba livia.* Bergen.
Stock Dove, *Columba oenas.* Seen only in Herdla.
Common (White-necked) Wood-Pigeon, *Columba palumbus.*

Oystercatchers / Haematopodidae

Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus.* Seen every day of the cruise.

Plovers & Lapwings / Charadriidae

European Golden-Plover, *Pluvialis apricaria.* Seen in Herdla, Tromso and North Cape. It ews observed nesting in the last location.
Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus.* Great views of a pair (presumably with chiecks given its behavior) in Herdla. It was also seen in Tromso.
Common Ringed Plover, *Charadrius haticula.* A pair nesting weas observed in Herdla. Also seen in Tromso.

Sandpipers & allies / Scolopacidae

Eurasian Curlew, *Nimenius arquata.* We observed nesting pairs and single individuals in various locations.
Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa.* Observed in Tromso.
Red Knot, *Calidris canutus.* Observed in Tromso.

Ruff, *Calidris pugnax.* We enjoyed superb views of adult individuals in breeding plumage in Tromso.
Sanderling, *Calidris alba.* Superb views of an individual in breeding plumage in Poolepynten.
Dunlin, *Calidris alpina.* An individual in breeding plumage was seen near Longyearbyen.
Purple Sandpiper, *Calidris maritima.* Several individuals were found in Longyearbyen. It was also seen in Storfjorden.
Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago.* Superb views of an individual in Runde island. It was also reported in Traena, Kjerringoy and Tromso.
Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos.* Observed in herdla as well as Gerianger and Kjerringoy.
Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola.* Seen only twice, in Gerianger and Tromso.
Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus.* Great views of pairs or loose groups in Gerianger, Runde island and Storfjorden.

Skuas & Jaegers / Stercorariidae
Great Skua, *Stercorarius skua.* Two pairs nesting were observed (and photographed) in Runde island. Also seen in Tromso.
Pomarine Jaeger, *Stercorarius pomarinus.* Observed by some of us during a sunny midnight.
Parasitic Jaeger, *Stercorarius parasiticus.* A photo record confirmed this species in Magdalena Fjord.

Auks, Murres & Puffins / Alcidae
Dovekie (Little Auk), *Alle alle.* Seen towards the last days of the cruise, in Svalbard. In some cliffs we counted up to 1800 individuals. It was too early in the year and the cliffs were still packed with ice.
Common Murre (Common Guillemot), *Uria aalgae.* The commonest Alcidae along the Norwegian coast.
Thick-billed Murre (Brunnich´s Guillemot), *Uria lomvia.* This species replaced the previous one in Svalbard. Some cliffs had from 3,500 to 5,000 individuals!
Razorbill, *Alca torda.* Soma large flocks were observed in various cliffs, especially in Runde and Rost islands.
Black Guillemot, *Cepphus grylle.* Scattered individuals were seen in various islands and coastal areas.
Atlantic Puffin, *Fratercula arctica.* We were entranced when seeing several puffins either flying and taking-off from the water, or on the cliffs in Rost island. Few individuals were observed also in the Magdalena Fjord.

Gulls, Terns & Skimmers / Laridae
Black-legged Kittiwake, *Rissa tridactyla.* A very common species that was seen throughout the cruise. We observed individuals in adult and juvenile plumage.
Ivory Gull, *Pagophila eburnea.* There is no better way to have seen this species than the way we got it. It flew to eat the remains of flesh of a Harbor Seal left by a Polar Bear. So, we saw the bear and the gull in the same binocular view!
Mew Gull (Common Gull), *Larus canus.* The commonest of the gulls. It was observed during the entire cruise.
Herring Gull (European), *Larus argentatus.* Common in Traena. Seen also in Reine island and North Cape.
Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus.* Only one individual was observed in Herdla. Later, we found about 4 individuals in Traena.
Glaucous Gull, *Larus hyperboreus.* A lovely gull that replaced Herring Gull in the Svalbard. We saw nesting pairs and single individuals in flight and perched.
Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus.* Few records during the first half of the cruise.
Arctic Tern, *Sterna paradisaea.* This species performs one of the greatest migrations of any bird in the world. We noticed some migrating flocks at sea near Traena.

Loons / Gaviidae
Red-throated Loon, *Gavia stellata.* About 28 individuals were observed near Tromso.
Common Loon, *Gavia immer.* Common in Gerianger.

Shearwaters & Petrels / Procellariidae
Northern Fulmar, *Fulmarus glacialis.* The commonest of the sea birds. Seen almost daily and numbers varied from a handful to hundreds!

Boobies & Gannets & Suliidae
Northern Gannet, *Morus bassanus.* Thousands were observed nesting in Runde island.

Cormorants & Shags / Phalacrocoracidae
Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo.* Seen in Reine island and in Tromso.
European Shag, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis.* Numerous in Runde island. Also seen in Rost and Reine islands.

Herons, Egrets & Bitterns / Ardeidae
Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea.* Seen Kjerringoy, Reine and Tromso.

Hawks, Eagles & Kites / Accipritidae
White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla.* We were very excited to see so many individuals in the cruise! We came across this species in five locations. This eagle was once at the brisk of extinction and due to the conservation efforts, the populations have now recovered.
Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo.* A single individual was seen in Tromso.

Falcons & Caracaras / Falconidae
Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnuculus.* Seen in Gerianger by some cruise participants.
Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrinus.* An excellent view of an individual in Rost island. It was clearly hunting in the cliff where several kittiwakes and Razorbills were nesting.

Crows, Jays & Magpies / Corvidae
Eurasian Magpie, *Garrulus glandarius.* Common in most locations in Norway.
Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix.* Very common in all locations in Norway.
Common Raven, *Corvus corax.* Seen in Gerianger fjord. Also in Runde and Reine islands.

Larks / Alaudidae
Eurasian Skylark, *Alauda arvensis.* First seen in flight in Herdla and later seen again in Runde island.

Swallows & Martins / Hirundidae
Bank Swallow, *Riparia riparia.* Briefly seen in Herdla. Later, we observed a nesting colony in Stamsud island and about a dozen individuals in Tromso.
Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica.* Common in coastal Norway.

Tits, Chickadees & Titmice / Paridae
Coal Tit, *Periparus ater.* Seen briefly in Herdla.
Great Tit, *Parus major.* Reported in Reine and Tromso, Norway.

Nuthatches / Sittidae
Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea.* Reported in Stamsud.

Wrens / Troglodytidae
Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes.* Heard in Tromso.

Leaf Warblers / Phylloscopidae
Willow Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochilus.* Voice reported in most locations in Norway and seen in Herdla and Stamsud.
Common Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita.* A common voice in all locations in Norway. Seen in Gerianger Fjord, Traena and Kjerringoy islands.

Sylviids / Sylvidae
Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla.* Briefly seen in Herdla. Later, observed nicely in Gerianger Fjord.

Old World Flycatchers / Muscicapidae
1 European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula.* Superb nice studies of an individual perched atop a bare branch in Herdla.
European Pied Flycatcher, *Ficedula hypoleuca.* We came across this beautiful species about four times. We were able to scope it and enjoy at length!
Northern Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe.* A common and widespread species in most locations visited in Norway.

Thrushes & Allies / Turdidae
Redwing, *Turtdus iliacus.* First seen in Traena. Later seen well in Tromso.
Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula.* Nice studies in Herdla.
Fieldfare, *Turdus pilaris.* This species was quite vocal and conspicuous. Largest number of individuals for a single day happened in Kjerringoy, Norway.
Ring Ouzel, *Turdus torquatus.* Seen briefly by some in Runde island.

Starlings / Sturnidae
European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris.* Common and widespread in open areas. Seen in all locations visited in Norway.

Accentors / Prunellidae
Dunnock, *Prunella modularis.* A single individual was observed in Herdla. This bird family is endemic to the Palearctic.

Wagtails & Pipits / Motacillidae
White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba.* A widespread species seen in all locations visited in Norway.
Meadow Pipit, *Anthus pratensis.* A widespread species seen in all locations visited in Norway, including North Cape.
Rock Pipit, *Anthus petrosus.* Briefly seen in Runde island and later observed by all in Stamsud island, along the beach.
Bohemian Waxwing, *Bombycilla garrulus.* Some participants were lucky to see this unique species in Reine. This was a bit off-time and we were surprised to see them.

Finches, Euphonias & Allies / Fringillidae
Brambling, *Fringilla montifringilla.* Super views of a single individual singing in Stamsud and later, in Tromso.
European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris.* This wonderful little Fringillidae was observed in loose flocks in Herdla, Traena and Rost island. It was also heard in Reine.
Twite, *Linaria flavirostris.* First seen in Runde island (walk along the steep trail) and later in Traena where about 12 individuals were seen!
Common Redpoll, *Acanthis flammea.* A pair was observed in a feeder in Traena and later, about 5 individuals were seen in Tromso.
Snow Bunting, *Plectrophenax nivalis.* This is probably the only passerine that can tolerate the cold and

dark winter in Svalbard, making humans life a little happy. It was first reported in Gnalodden but a large number of individuals were reported later, in Varsolbukta.
Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus.* Only a pair were seen in Kjerringoy.

Old World Sparrows / Passeridae
House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus.* Seen in most landings and areas visited in Norway.

MAMMALS
Rorquals / Balaenopteridae
Blue Whale, *Balaenoptera musculus*. What a great surprise! As we were heading to Longyearbyen for our final morning field trip, this species showed-up nicely. This is the largest animal known to have occurred on earth. The Blue Whale was hunted almost to extinction, and due to international legislation they are still around. One standing applause to the conservationists and legislators that had worked hard to make sure that this species remains with us!

Blue Whale. Photo: D. Ascanio

Sperm Whales / Physeteridae
Sperm Whale, *Physeter catodon.* As we were cruising the sea to Gnalodden, this whale gave repeated opportunities for us to see it its flukes! This is the largest toothed predator. Females will give birth every four to twenty years. The calves accompany the female for up to the years. It was targeted by the whaling industry to use the spermaceti, a waxy substance that was used as lubricant and oil lamps.

Sperm Whale flukes. Photo: D. Ascanio

Narwhal & Beluga / Monodontidae
Beluga, *Delphinapterus leucas.* About a dozen Belugas were found moving at the edge of an ice pack in Mijenfjorden. This cetacean is found only in the Arctic and Sub-arctic waters. We noticed the absence of dorsal fin and its unique peach color.

Beluga. Photo: D. Ascanio

Walrus / Odobenidae
Walrus, *Odobenus rosmarus.* Huddle of this amazing species were observed at three locations in Svalbard. We learned that walrus tusks are used for defense as well as for cutting through ice to help themselves pull out of the water, the latter being one of the main causes of them breaking. They feed on clams, mussels, and benthic organisms. The largest pod observed was of about 70 individuals!

Seals / Phociodae
Bearded Seal, *Erignathus barbatus.* A single individual was seen on top of an ice pack in Smeerenburg. It is only found in or near the Arctic. Fossil evidence suggests that Bearded Seals once ranged south as far as South Carolina. They feed mainly on clams, squids, and fish.

Bearded Seal. Photo: D. Ascanio

Ringed Seal, *Phoca hispida.* We observed one individual briefly during the Zodiac outing in Storfjorden. Harbor Seal, *Phoca vitulina.* We came across this common species at various locations, but the nicest encounter happened when one individual came very close to our Zodiac as it was exploring us. They are, indeed, a very curious species.

Harbor Seal. Photo: D. Ascanio

Bears / Ursidae

Polar Bear, *Ursus maritimus.* I find it hard to explain my feelings and impressions when we came across a Polar Bear hunting a Harbor Seal, and seeing from the time it captured the seal to the moment it left some of the carcass. We were all perplexed and in deep silence. The huge bear looked insignificant in the huge landscape, but the seal had no way to offer resistance to the Arctic's top predator. It was crude and it was real. The bear ate much of the seal, and no other species even tried to approach it. Eventually, two Glaucous Gulls landed next to it and, as a ghost, the severely threatened Ivory Gull showed up. What a magical moment. An Ivory Gull and a Polar Bear in the same binocular view!

Polar Bear & Ivory Gull. Photo: D. Ascanio

Deer / Cervidae

Reindeer, *Rangifer tarandus.* We saw the population found in North Cape and later, the one found in Svalbard.

Reindeer. North Cape. Photo: D. Ascanio

Reindeer. Svalbard subspecies. Photo: D. Ascanio

Hare / Leporidae
Arctic Hare, *Lepus arcticus.* One was found in Reine, below the drying cod panels.