

WildWings



# The North Atlantic Odyssey 2017

**(Scotland to Spitsbergen)**

By Tour Leader Nigel Goodgame.  
Aboard M/V Ortelius 22nd May - 31st May 2017

## Day 1 Aberdeen and at sea

The trip started in Aberdeen, and with a mid-afternoon sailing, it was time for a leisurely breakfast before a short walk down to the quay to ensure the Ortelius was moored and ready to go. We gathered by the gangway just before 16.00 and checked in. Our cases were then taken to our cabins. We sailed at 18.00 being towed by a tug boat until it became wide enough for our vessel to move out of the harbour. Just after leaving the harbour wall, the resident Bottlenose Dolphins were seen. Our first birds were logged – thousands of auks flying along with Goosander, Sandwich Terns, gulls and Common Terns. Once we had set off it started to rain a little but because of the mandatory health and safety demonstrations this was not an issue. The good news was that we had calm seas with very little wind.







### **Day 2 Fair Isle and northwards through the Shetlands.**

Some of us met on deck and 05.30 to a calm and sunny morning. With Fair Isle only a few miles away, there were already respectable numbers of auks, fulmars and gannets and a line of European Storm- Petrels. In fact, it was amazing to see the sheer number of birds. In every direction, there were birds flying or sitting on the water. It was a great spectacle. With good sunny conditions and a light wind, it made our first zodiac rides into North Haven hassle free (59 32 N / 001 25 W). With such glorious weather and so many things to see some the group went to look at the Puffin colony and some of us went exploring. There were substantial numbers of Bonxies and all you could hear were either Lapwings, Oystercatchers or Curlews being chased around the island! There seemed to be good numbers of singing Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and Wheatears on the island which was a more lovely sound. The Swiss guys found a female Hen Harrier and Hobby. Other birds of note were Redstarts, Spotted Flycatcher, a lone Swift and Whitethroats. A nice selection of birds but nothing too mouth-watering. The short Zodiac ride back to the ship produced close views of Black Guillemots. We set sail at 18.00 northwards with the Shetlands Isles on our starboard

side. We stayed up until the sun set for any further sightings of storm-petrels but to no successes. The distance from Fair Isle to Jan Mayen is 700 nautical miles (1300km)!

### **Day 3 At sea towards Jan Mayen.**

Another early start and great viewing conditions. At 05.30 we found 2 pods of Long-Finned Pilot Whales each side of the vessel. A little surprise on the helipad was a Golden Plover resting! Also, an adult Great Northern Diver flew past the ship. During the day, we had more good whale sightings including Harbour Porpoise, three Northern-Bottlenosed Whale with one individual just under the bows of the ship, 15 Long-finned Pilot Whales, one breaching Minke Whale and three Fin Whales. All in all, a very good day's observations in glorious sunshine. With the clock change some of us went to bed early to ensure an early start the following morning.

### **Day 4 At sea towards Jan Mayen.**

We were greeted at 06.00 with little fog, no wind and flat calm seas. So, a cup of tea was needed! By the time we had drunk our tea, the fog had cleared with the sun appearing through the cloud. Within a few minutes of going back on deck the group of Dutch birders spotted a pod of Orcas, so I ran around the ship collecting our group.

This coincided with breakfast, so there was a little bit of panic on board! With a little great steering from the Captain we were ensured good views, including a fine male. Happy with our sightings we then settled down to breakfast. Just as we had finished breakfast we had a tannoy announcements that we were about to cross The Arctic Circle (66 53N / 005 34 W). So, we all gathered on the helideck for rum and hot chocolate to celebrate this achievement! We started whale watching with a Bottle-nosed and Minke Whale being observed. During the afternoon, the wind picked up which made whale watching a little less easy. At 18.30 we all gathered in the bar for a debrief on what on the activities for the following day on Jan Mayen. Fingers crossed for fine weather!

### **Day 5 Jan Mayen (70 38 N / 008 25 W)**

An early rise with high expectations and we were greeted with fine weather but the wind was fairly strong. However, we were still two hours from Jan Mayen. The good news was that the closer we got to Jan Mayen, the wind decreased. At 09.30 we got the green light and we all toggged ourselves up for the day's adventure. This is a difficult place to land and visit, so to be blessed with great weather, this was a fantastic opportunity to explore. We had two options; a 10km



hike across the island or a cruise around the southern tip of the island. The walkers went 1st and had a brief introduction from the Norwegian commanding officer. Some of us then went inside the main building to get our passport stamped. There were a few passerines around the buildings - Wheatears, White Wagtail and Meadow Pipit. We counted thousands of Fulmars and Little Auks flying overhead, a great birding sight. Along the 10km walk we saw over 60 Glaucous Gulls and a lone Redshank. At Kvalrossbukta there is a breeding colony of Little Auks which gave excellent views and entertainment. Out to sea there were 100+ Eiders, 400+ Brunnich's Guillemots and thousands of Little Auks wheeling around calling. Off the beach, Fulmars were feeding in their thousands. We also, started to see our first northern or 'blue phase' form in good numbers. Also, at least five individuals showing large areas of orange stain on their feathers, signs of feeding on whale poo. Back on board ship at 18.00 we up'ed anchor and sailed slowly away with great memories of a great location and experience. During dinner, we sailed close to the coast of Jan Mayen, with the glaciers showing out of the starboard side windows.

#### **Day 6 At sea due north towards the pack ice.**

Another early start with no wind and flat calm sea. Within the first hour five Northern Bottle-nosed Whales and seal sp. Good numbers of Little Auks and Brunnich's

Guillemots and two passerines on board ship - Snow Bunting and Greenland Wheatear! Just before breakfast we spotted another pod of Orcas. The good news was they were heading towards the ship. During the 30 minutes, we had excellent views of seven individuals including again a large male and young. They circled the boat three times and came within 20 meters! Just a fantastic experience. A quick breakfast and back on deck our first Harp Seals found! During the day over 400 Harp Seals were recoded and 50 Northern Bottle-nosed Whales. At 18.30 we had our usual debrief by the Expedition Leader Claudia, who spotted our 1st Ivory Gull out of the window! After the log at 20.45 we discussed the evenings strategy for Polar Bear watching. We all went outside on deck full of anticipation and excitement. We were now sailing through the ice pack! We were only on deck for 30 minutes when we spotted a large yellow lump about 500 meters away on the ice pack. At the same time the bridge had also spotted the same yellow lump and the ship started to steer towards the yellow lump. Within a few seconds, it was obvious it was a Polar Bear and maybe with a couple of cubs! We drifted very slowly and quietly towards the bears and the female stood up to see what was going on - a female bear with two cubs. What a magnificent sight and so quickly! We managed to get within 50 meters of the bears and they came to have a look at what was going on! Both the female and two cubs seemed very curious about us. All

you heard was cameras clicking and most of us got some reasonable photos. The bears looked in excellent condition and it was just a magical moment. We had fantastic views for around 15 minutes before we left them in peace. What was also interesting there was the four Ivory Gulls walking around the bears too. After we had left the bears high 5's and hugs all round. The Dutch boys brought out the Jägermeister and we toasted in true style. This was an unusual location so far south - (75 47 N 005 00 W). The ship drifted slowly through the ice pack and at 00.30 the ship stopped for the night and few hearty soles staying out to keep watch. What a day - fantastic views of Orca and three Polar Bears, so close and up personal!

#### **Day 7 Around the East Greenland Pack Ice Pack (75 51 N 004 44 W).**

Another early start but this time as we had stopped for the night in the pack ice we had a few birds around and on the vessel - this time 10 Snow Buntings were resting on the ship. We set sail at 07.00 and moved very slowly through the ice. The unique wilderness was just fantastic and a little eerie, with no wind and sunshine gleaming on the ice. It is very difficult to put into words how to explain this temporary landscape. Total silence apart from a few birds calling - Ivory Gulls and Kittiwakes, a truly surreal and unforgettable experience. We had good numbers of Hooded Seal along the way with a few young ones, unusual at





this time of year. During the day, we counted 31 Ivory Gulls and 14 Hooded Seals. While I was writing this report in the evening we had a tannoy announcement – Ross's Gull in front of the ship! A quick dash to the bow of the ship but I sadly missed it but a lucky few managed to see this elegant bird in full summer dress.

### **Day 8 At sea towards the Northwest Svalbard, cruising along the continental shelf.**

A 05.00 start with no cloud and a wind of around 22knots but good visibility. During the night, we had sailed out of the pack ice and heading towards Svalbard 200 nautical miles to the north east. The first birds of the day were Ivory Gulls calling as they flew by. Also, a few distant blows turned out to be more Fin Whales. On the horizon, distance blows of a Blue Whale could be seen but alas we could not relocate it. On the bird front, the number of Little Auks passing the ship was incredible. Every time you scanned the sea there were hundreds passing the ship. After lunch, we had a mandatory debrief on Polar Bear awareness for tomorrow's Zodiac lands on Svalbard. During the afternoon, the wind increased with limited sea watching so most of us retired to our rooms to rest and shower.

### **Day 9 Spitsbergen and Landings (Poolepynten & Ymerbukta) – 78 26 N / 011 56 E)**

A very early start for whale watching produced numbers of sightings but no definite IDs. The weather was glorious with wall to wall sunshine however. The snow-capped mountains in the distance gleamed in sun. Our first landing of the day was Polepynten, Prins Karl Forland. The outside temperature was 8c but there was still a lot of snow on the ground. We spilt into three groups, with all staff carrying rifles. We slowly walked to the point for our first sightings of Walrus. There were about 22 individuals lazing on the beach with a couple in the sea just being nose. After a couple of minutes the two Walruses in the sea became a little curious and moved within a couple of meters from us. They were so close you could hear them breath. There were around 20 Arctic Terns along with Snow Buntings, Purple Sandpipers and a few Glaucus Gulls along the beach. We sailed south after lunch in glorious sunshine and just after lunch four Blue Whales were spotted and gave good views. The largest animal on Earth!

We then sailed on our final Zodiac ride, at the Esmarkbreen Glacier in Ymerbukta. During the cruise we enjoyed six King Eiders sunning

themselves on the frozen sea ice in front of the spectacular glacier. A lone Ivory Gull flew over as we made our way back to the ship, a very fitting to end to the trip. Back on ship we slowly made our way back to Longyearbyen. After a few us went to bed around 01.00am but the Swiss lads stayed up and found an Arctic Fox around 02.15 – good effort boys!

### **Day 10 Longyearbyen**

We arrived at the port of Longyearbyen and at 08.30 we disembarked into the Zodiacs as there was a large cruise liner with 2,200 people occupying the pier. We were shuttled to the pier with the waiting coaches to take us into town. We took a walk to check Adventfjorden and we found a couple more King Eiders but no sign of the apparently present Steller's Eider. We walked back to catch the bus back to the airport only to find we had been dropped off at the wrong location, so no waiting bus! A quick dash to the local hotel to book a couple of taxis ensured we caught the plane home. A wonderful and excellent trip was had by all. Thanks to everyone for their company.

**Total distance 1.620 nautical miles (3000km). Furthest North: 78 26 N / 011 54 E.**







## Birds

1	Red-throated Diver
1	Great Northern Diver
000's	Fulmer (including loads of the Northern/Blue-phase)
16	Manx Shearwater
	European Storm-Petrels
000's	Gannet (especially around Fair Isle)
40	Cormorant
25	Shag
50	Pink-footed Goose
5	Greylag Goose
63	Barnacle Goose
50	Pale-bellied Brent Goose
3	Mallard
2	Tufted Duck
270	Eider
11	King Eider
7	Long-tailed Duck
30	Common Scoter
1	Goosander
1	Hobby (Fair Isle)
1	Hen Harrier (Fair Isle)
4	Lapwing
3	Ringed Plover
1	Golden Plover
1	Grey Plover
31	Knot
31	Purple Sandpiper
3	Common Snipe
3	Eurasian Curlew
2	Whimbrel
1	Redshank

1	Common Sandpiper
2	Turnstone
12	Pomarine Skua
15	Arctic Skua
76	Great Skua
	Great Black-backed Gull
	Herring Gull
1	Sabine's Gull
	Ivory Gulls
1	Ross's Gull
1	Sandwich Tern
000's	Common Guillemot (Scotland and Fair Isle)
1000+	Brunnich's Guillemot
80	Razorbill
311	Black Guillemot
000's	Little Auk
000's	Puffin (especially around Fair Isle)
10	Rock Dove
2	Collard Dove
1	Common Swift
30	Skylark
10	Swallow
2	House Martin
61	Meadow Pipit
13	Rock Pipit
4	Pied/White Wagtail
2	Fair Isle Wren
1	Robin
2	Common Redstart
25	Northern Wheatear
4	Greenland Wheatear
1	Blackbird
1	Song Thrush

1	Redwing (dead Jan Mayen)
3	Common Whitethroat
4	Chiffchaff
2	Willow Warbler
1	Spotted Flycatcher
10	Hooded Crow
15	Raven
100+	Starling
30	House Sparrow
2	Twite
2	Linnet
49	Snow Buntings

## Mammals

22	Walrus
30	Grey Seals
c400	Harp Seal
14	Hooded Seal
1	Seal sp.
1	Harbour Porpoise
2	Bottle-nose Dolphin
55	Northern Bottlenose Whale
12	Orca
15	Long-finned Pilot Whale
6	Northern Minke Whale
10	Fin Whale
4	Blue Whales
3	Polar Bears
1	Arctic Fox
60+	Spitsbergen Reindeer
14	European Rabbit (Fair Isle)