

Baffin Island

2016 Voyage Report

By John Brodie-Good



A voyage on the Akademik Ioffe from Iqaluit to Resolute

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**WILDWINGS**

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30th July

To Canada

After a pleasant Air Canada B767 flight from Heathrow (nearly all male flight attendants) we overnighted in Canada's capital, Ottawa, a mixture of the old and a large building site it seemed. We took a short walk from our downtown hotel for a bite to eat, it was a holiday weekend and everyone seemed out either slowly cruising by in their cars, or walking and drinking/eating at the various cafes and bars. After a quick fish n chip supper we retired for the night, an early start beckoned. We had already realised that Canada seemed more 'have a nice day' than the U.S, which takes some doing!

31st July

Gatineau National Park

After a fantastic breakfast spread at the hotel, we gathered outside in the summer morning's sunshine. Tony Beck and his good lady Nina arrived in a rented SUV for our day's birding excursion. We took to them immediately, Tony seemingly a right character, a photography ambassador for Nikon and a former kick-boxer amongst his many talents. As it was a Sunday and a holiday weekend some of the park roads were shut for a cycling event. So, we drove into the park itself, which lies to the north west of the city, passing a Woodchuck on the verge on the way in, parked up by the entrance gate and went for a short (in distance) walk. The park is an area of woodland with small lakes and a forested escarpment, bordering farmland. A complete contrast to the habitats we were expecting further north. The first spot could best be described as an area of damp bushes and trees, we were soon enjoying some great birds. The first of many Hairy Woodpeckers appeared, both Red-breasted and White-breasted Nuthatches, lots of Black-capped Chickadees, Gray Catbirds, Cedar Waxwings (a slightly strange bird to see in summer for us Brits), American Goldfinches plus we enjoyed a selection of warblers including Black and White, American Redstart, Yellow Warbler, Yellowthroat, a male Chestnut Sided and a Mourning Warbler (bird of the day for Tony & Nina). Northern Cardinal and Indigo Bunting added more colour, and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are always good to see. The local Grey Squirrels were of the dark, black form. We also had views of an American Red Squirrel, and slightly oddly found a dead Jumping Mouse and a dead Short-tailed Shrew within a few yards of each other on the same stretch of path. We drove back out of the park and headed further north west, via a coffee and donut stop to an area of arable farmland. A brief Eastern Meadowlark and our first Eastern Kingbirds of the day plus a few butterflies. We commented on the lack of the latter, given the perfect weather. Tony & Nina confirmed this year as one of the worst summer for 'flies they could remember, agricultural chemicals were their suspect. Still we did see a few, a Crescent wing, a few Giant Swallowtails (flying hankie) and a Monarch.

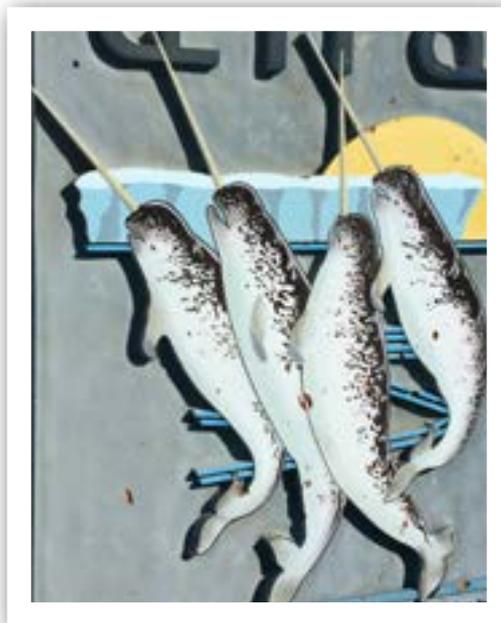
We next enjoyed a shortish walk along a real forest path up on the top of the escarpment, a natural lake twinkling behind the near trees. A Great Spangled Fritillary joined our butterfly list, more birds, some 'meadowhawks' (dragonflies to you and I) and a rather smart Mink Frog. A Beaver dam could be seen as we drove back out. We made a short lunchstop at a roadside café, notching Wild Turkey plus an exquisite male Eastern Bluebird kept me happy whilst a pair of Ospreys were nesting on a nearby farm building. In the afternoon, more roadside birding in the 'lowlands'. Highlights included brief but good views of a male Pileated Woodpecker, a male Scarlet Tanager and a male Magnolia Warbler nicely finished a day in which we could have gone for a 'bigger list', but we just enjoyed what we saw. A brief stop by the city's huge river added a distant Caspian Tern to the day list. They dropped us off at a grand hotel back in the city for a somewhat lightweight pre-voyage briefing, which did include a great fresh fruit cocktail each and some nice cheese however.

1st August

Frobisher Bay (Baffin Island)

Up early again, this time taxi to the airport. We were asked to be there early for our 0915 First Air departure to Iqaluit (Frobisher Bay), our great Canadian Arctic adventure was about to begin. It was in the mid-twenties on a lovely morning in Ottawa when our B737 took to the sky and headed north east. First Air have clearly never heard of budget airlines and provided a delightful crew and full catering service. After a choice of two breakfasts the smiling ladies came back down the plane with trolleys of piping hot cookies in bags to finish off. The land below was becoming starker, the trees had gone, large areas of water often had small pieces of ice in them now. We turned and soon landed on Iqaluit's incredibly long runway and taxied in. The terminal was an amazing yellow 'pod' on stilts. It was rammed full of people and we waited a while for our baggage to come through, before boarding the bus to the information centre in town itself.

The province of Nunavut, 'our land', is the size of Europe and inhabited by only around 35,000 people. These are predominately native Inuits, who only a generation or two ago were still being born in igloos, and lived in fur-walled tents in the summer, but are now of course very much in the 21st century. Modern housing, supermarkets, fully loaded 4x4s, speedboats, skidoos and high powered rifles. They currently also fully claim their traditional harvesting of all animals and birds rights, which in their present world of seemingly rapidly melting ice, I feel needs reviewing. This frontier town is the capital of the province, 6000+ people, all the building being on stilts. Raven was the only land bird we noted, we took a short walk along the shoreline, the tide was out, our expedition vessel could be seen in the distance, at anchor, the sunshine glinting off her. It was still the holiday weekend and plenty of people seemed to be around, with kids playing in little streams as they finally reached the beach. Out over the water hundreds of Glaucous Gulls milled around, distant groups of small dark shapes appeared and disappeared again, presumably Harp Seals. We didn't find any shorebirds, only a distant trio of Great Northern Divers. A quick look inside the visitor centre yielded an excellent wildlife display plus free maps of the province and a decent tourist board magazine. I had had little luck with finding any decent maps or books about the



region whatsoever, even in Ottawa. We boarded the bus again and were driven to a shingle spit, from which we boarded the zodiacs for the ride to the Akademik Ioffe, now loaded with our baggage and ready to sail. We were welcomed onboard and were soon throwing stuff into cupboards in our cabin. Lifeboat drill out of the way, we were soon out on the bows as the ship started sailing south east down Frobisher Bay, on a glassy sea, with a fiery 'sunset' building nicely behind us. A few small pieces of ice floated by, the odd seal head, Ringed. Our first birds were a few Black Guillemot pairs and two small groups of Grey Phalaropes sitting on the sea. The skies behind us were now red, orange and purple, the twilight lingered for hours.

Our expedition leader was Boris Wise, supported by an excellent team, including birder/naturalist Jacques Sirois. Jacques is an immensely likeable Canadian, with a French accent, and a twinkle or ten in his eyes. He birds his local patch on Vancouver Island by kayak from his house, the patch being a group of small islands offshore. Jacques was a mine of interesting background information and had sailed these waters a number of times before. We also had an Inuit 'hunter' onboard, Ted, also extremely likable and interesting. The first evening had also added young Kalin to our lives, a very enthusiastic 13 year old lad from B.C., who was a bit of a whizz with his Canon SX-60 powershot camera.



2nd August

Lower Salvage Islands

We awoke to a sunny, clear morning, with no wind, which pretty much remained the weather conditions for the entire voyage, apart from a few foggy patches. This meant we could fully enjoy the wild scenery and ice-scapes which we travelled through. Throughout the morning we slowly sailed for this small group of uninhabited islands, lying at the southern entrance to the bay. Whilst many of the greenhorn passengers spent the morning in briefings, boot and waterproof fittings, we spent the morning on deck. It was pretty slow going really, our first Fulmars, the majority being of the 'white' nominate race, about 1 in 25 being the 'blue' phase (mid to dark grey in most cases). Other constant birds of the trip were to be Brunnich's Guillemots, more Black Guillemots, our first Kittiwakes, more Glaucous Gulls and our first skuas, two Pomarines, one with 'spoons' plus a flock of 20 or so eider sp flew by. After lunch the Captain moved the ship close into shore and we boarded the zodiacs for a cruise in amongst the islands. We flushed a few summer plumaged Red-throated Divers but otherwise we were just seeing more of the same few bird species, plus a close encounter with a Harbour (Common) Seal, a species which seems to be moving northwards in summer in recent years. We gazed at a distant bit of snow/bear high up on a cliff face above us but left it unidentified for sure after a few minutes. We were gently cruising forward again when the call came from Ursula, a German lady onboard our zodiac, "Polar Bear swimming!" Sure enough, directly ahead of us, a white head was moving right in the water, just under the rocks. The other zodiacs were called on the radios and all soon were present, we grouped together on the water and watched. The bear quickly clambered out of the water and was standing on some rocks, sniffing and surveying us, whilst we watched him. Like all the bears we were to see during this voyage, he was in seemingly rude health, looking pure white, very clean and well fed. After a few minutes he started walking further right, stopping again to survey the scene, before disappearing over a ridge behind. Much celebration on the water, a great start to the trip, and many had got their first half decent pictures too. We finally began moving again and soon found ourselves in a narrow channel, which turned out to be a dead end. As we manoeuvred I glanced up just as bear number one came down the rocks above us, he stopped, slightly surprised, as I was.

'More bears' came a shout, a mother and two small cubs could be seen on the other side of the water, in the distance, rapidly ascending quite a steep hillside. She had spotted him too, and he potentially posed a danger to her youngsters. The other little boats soon joined us and we spent about 10 or so minutes, effectively blocking his lordship from crossing. He continued to remain nonplussed about our now very close presence, the views were just extraordinary! He came right down to the waterside at one point, then easily climbed back up and posed against the mountains and blue sky behind for a short while. Four bears in an hour, wow! We returned to the ship via a quick blast to a decent iceberg on the way. At 1815 Boris called us downstairs for a briefing on the voyage ahead, sounded a bit ominous? Both Bill and I had been looking at the Canadian ice-charts online prior to departure from the UK. They clearly showed the southern part of eastern Baffin Island hemmed in by some serious sea-ice. The big question was, when, and how quickly was this going to break up? Boris to be fair, showed a series very recent maps, including today's. It was immediately clear that plans for the first few days were going to have to change. Whilst there were areas of less ice, these would have seriously slowed us down, impacting further on the planned itinerary later on. It had been decided to effectively skirt the outside of the sea ice, and see where we could get into the coast, further north. It sounded like one, or even two settlement landings were under threat as a result. This was no skin off our noses but Isabella Bay (the Bowhead sanctuary) was also currently blocked in. I realised we would have to work even harder, and try and find some sooner ideally.

At dusk, we had just returned to our cabin when an announcement on the PA told us 'Pilot Whales' were on view from the stern. I pelted down the hall and stairs and then back outside. A few passengers were milling around with cameras in their hands but no one seemed to know what was going on. I joined young Kalin at the stern and started scanning, I immediately picked up a line of about 30+ dolphins in the now poor light. They were heading to shore but were already way back behind us. Kaslin blasted away on his bridge camera and eureka, he nailed them. A couple of his images, blown right up, clearly showed the animal's markings, they were White-beaked Dolphins, sweet. As was to become the case on this voyage with a number of the things we saw however, better views desired....



Bear with breakfast on sea ice (taken with an iPhone thru a Leica scope.)

3rd August

Davis Strait (Lady Franklin Island area / Ice Pack cruising)

Sun and blue skies again, as we pretty much spent the whole day slowly cruising along, and in the edge of some decent sea ice. We didn't travel many miles overall, but just soaked in the wonderful icy seascapes as we continued our search for wildlife. Harp Seals were widely scattered hauled out on small pieces of ice, in ones, twos and small groups. The younger animals having just dark blotching on their sides. We picked out two 'blue-backs', young Hooded Seals, the sealer's favourite apparently. Small seal heads appeared in the water too, probably Ringed. None of them were very close, bringing my scope and tripod was making all the difference to my views of things. This ship, and it's sister, Vavilov, are so stable you can scope from them a lot of time. The WildWings team continued the bear count with both Ann, and then Sarah-Jane spotting animals which quickly took to the water. Following the moving heads, with their small wake amongst the ice floes was an interesting exercise for many. I was scanning distant ice thru my scope when I realised I was looking at bear number three for the day, sitting on it's haunches on a piece of ice. Boris decide to go for this one, and as suspected, she was guarding a fresh kill, a half-eaten young Harp Seal. The Captain, slowly, and gently moved the ship much closer and everyone came out to see. She did take to the water briefly but was soon back out by her lunch. Our onboard bear researcher felt she may even have been pregnant, the short neck being one of the best ways to sex bears. She certainly had a big bum, and once again was in stunning condition with her seemingly pure white fur. From a distance, Polar Bears look distinctly cream-coloured however, one of the best ways to spot them on ice or against snow. The ship was so stable I was able to take some 'phone-scoped' footage of this bear too. In the afternoon, a stop was made and a short Zodiac cruise into the surrounding ice was offered. I declined, I had already spoken to Ted who had confirmed we were already in prime Bowhead and Narwhal country, so Sarah-Jane and I stayed on the ship and continued scanning from it's higher elevation. Birdwise the day had yielded a few new trip species, a nice Long-tailed Skua, an Arctic Skua plus two Purple Sandpipers flew past. Already a higher proportion of Fulmars were now 'blue' but we were only a few miles further north than we had been yesterday. Perhaps they prefer ice to open water?

The day ended with a slightly chilly bar-b-q dinner on the back deck with fog rolling in around 8pm. A check outside later on revealed it had cleared again and we now had an orange red twilight over the brash ice.

4th August

Davis Strait

We spent the entire day 'beating the ice', and continued sailing north through the Davis Straight. Blue skies, no wind, brash ice and thicker stuff on our

port bow, add mirror-calm seas and this was a potentially good whale day. It turned into such, and also made you realise how few ships ply these waters, what else is up here? Bill kicked off the cetacean proceedings with a group of 5 Fin Whales early on. As I came outside after breakfast, a group of 15 or so Long-finned Pilot Whales swam south on our starboard side. The A-Team started on bears next, Bill found the first, I found the second, both again on fresh seal kills on sea ice. Our onboard bear expert told us the kills had probably been within the previous hour or so, a hungry bear being able to eat a seal in around 30 minutes! Again the ship was carefully positioned close to both of them for more photos and videos to be taken. Bear number one's small piece of ice actually gave way beneath him so he had no choice but to swim for it. We sailed back on course, occasionally seeing Kittiwakes being chased by skuas, high into the sky and then back down to just above the sea again. After lunch more Pilot Whales, at least two groups, perhaps around 100 animals in total. We slowed down and at times they swam very close to us, the loffe having a very low sonic footprint, affording everyone great views and good photos. Small calves tightly tucked in next to their mums were nice to see too. Shortly after that I picked up two 'logs' on the water, a quick gander in the scope revealed them to be 'small' whales, but which ones? They were classic 'beaked whales'. To my delight, Boris slowed down and went off course for them. Ultimately they dived but we did seem them surface again several times and almost certainly more of the same species later in the afternoon too. Very soon after, a group of at least three Northern Bottlenose Whales appeared, these too gave good views, swimming around the ship. On at least two occasions a male multiply breached too. Again, we saw at least another small group, and possibly a third group too. The day wasn't finished though. I had noticed four little prongs of ice in the water close by but dismissed them as the last gasps of a berg. A minute or so later I overheard a passenger saying something about close seals. I lifted my bins this time. F' me, four faces in the water were looking back at me, a mother and three small Polar Bear cubs swimming together out in the middle of the open ocean! I yelled through the open bridge door at Boris and all hell broke loose. He made an announcement that if you weren't out on deck you were nuts! People rushed around everywhere, including out onto the bows close to the swimming family. She turned towards the ship briefly, each youngster tightly tucked in behind her. They then turned away again, you could see her turn her head and start 'chuffing' at the cubs. Totally amazing. Boris or our bear guy had never seen four bears together in the water before. What were they doing there? Was she giving them a swimming lesson? Was she escaping a male bear threat? We hoped they safely made the pack-ice we could see on the horizon and left them in peace. The day finally ended with small groups of Little Auks appearing on the sea, drifting south from West Greenland already. Later that night, I sent Dick Filby an e-mail asking him to research online beaked whale records from the Davis Strait and we retired very happy, if still a bit nervous about the coming days.



5th August

Sunshine Fjord & Akpait National Wildlife Area, Baffin Island.

During the night, the Captain had sailed through a 'gap' in the heavy sea ice so we could attempt some landings. We sailed through the narrow entrance to Sunshine Fjord in the morning, which just straddles the Arctic Circle. After a celebratory group photo on the bows, most of the passengers went ashore to check out a freshwater pool and take a hike. The landing was on a beach on the south side, Bill and Ann went. A pair of Rough-legged Buzzards were nesting on the cliffs above the landing site. In spite of Ann's radio calls from land, we couldn't get onto the now flying birds. They found a Semi-Palmated Plover pair with young, and saw a few Buff-bellied Pipits and Snow Buntings. 5 Canada Geese also flew over, 'with a different call from the UK variety' said Bill. The first butterflies were also seen, Arctic Fritillary, and a number of plants were flowering ashore including Arctic Poppy and saxifrages. We stayed on ship scanning for Narwhal. This type of steep-sided fjord are their classic summer home. In spite of looking so fantastic in the books, they are often very unobtrusive, and people who have seen them before have often said they were 'underwhelmed'. They don't like ships or zodiacs which makes them even harder to see! Still, nothing like a challenge. I spent the morning slowly scanning the sides of the fjord with my scope. I was struck by how large it was, and how distant birds looked. This was not going to be easy. I saw a few Brunnich's and Black gullies, Glaucous Gulls and low numbers of Eider, including a female with three small ducklings. I also noticed four separate Puffins, all flying towards the fjord mouth. Jacques commented that they were another species expanding northwards. With everyone safely back on board, we hauled anchor and started heading back out into the ocean.

I stayed out on the bridge scanning. A few Kittiwakes were flying across the entrance of the fjord. A local, very cold wind blew up, and as I was waiting for a call on the radio for the main course of lunch, Boris suddenly pulled open the bridge door and said 'whales, probably Bowheads!' I ran through the bridge and managed to see three animals blowing right next to the cliffs on the south side, the blows turning into V's. I called down on the radio and grabbed my scope from the other side. Boris put out an announcement on the PA and surprisingly only three people came up behind the rest of our crew. Another set of blows (vertical only) and this time some black body too. The Captain slowed down but said no charts, he wasn't able to change course, and we were soon in the fogbank offshore. I had just learnt that this was also the summer home of Bowheads, which are often found around the immediate entrance of fjords such as this. They too are not keen on ships either I was told...Frustrating, but at least a glimpse of high Arctic whale number two on my list of targets. (Noteworthy that the sister ship Vavilov had the same three animals at the same spot, 24 hours later.)

The fog was fairly quickly blown away by an offshore breeze, we cruised north along the spectacular coastline, miraged ice bergs in the distance, and for the first time on this voyage, white caps, the fulmars finally being able to glide and arc as they were born to. Numbers of Brunnich's were now rapidly building as we headed towards a colony of over 100,000 pairs. We arrived late afternoon and the zodiacs took us on a short cruise beneath the towering cliffs, splattered with centuries of guano. Kittiwakes occupied the lower levels with the auks higher up. The tops of the cliffs had been eroded into spires by the winds, above which the guillemots flew like midges. On some small pieces of ice, small numbers of guillemots sat, looking like penguins down south. Quite a few seemed to be feeding just under the cliffs, coming up with small fish in their bills, Arctic Cod. Suddenly a shout on the radios, another pair of Bowheads, in front of the ship, I turned just in time to see a blow! We cruised over to the area where they were heading and waited. Ann & Sarah-Jane saw a fluke which was sadly not followed up by our driver and that was it. We cruised back to the ship, which then turned back south. Boris informed us that the latest ice chart meant we couldn't continue north along the coast but had to swing out east and then head north, missing Isabella Bay. I hadn't woken up this morning thinking I would see Bowhead today, and I went to bed knowing that I had only partially seen a Bowhead. Missing out their main breeding location in this part of the Arctic didn't make me feel much better.

6th August

Davis Strait – at sea, sailing north then north west.

The sea was calm again but fog persisted for most of the day, moving in and out, and we just steamed in open water, 'skirting' the sea ice inshore. We saw a few Fulmars, Little Auks, Bill had a small flock of Grey Phalaropes and I added two Common Guillemots (yet another range expander according to Jacque) in the afternoon.

After dinner the fog finally lifted. The calm grey sea was covered in Little Auks drifting south, flocks of 20s, 50s and 100s, perhaps 5000+ overall (this ship estimated three million in one day previously!), all Greenland breeders.

7th August

Baffin Bay and Gibbs Fjord

We spent the morning at sea, still foggy at times. Another 1000 or so Little Auks first thing with the usual suspects, Fulmars, Brunnich's and Black Guillemots, Ringed Seals and three Long-tailed Skuas. It was time to get back to the coast and our whale quest, we had lost valuable time. We spent the afternoon cruising slowly along the 15 miles of this spectacular fjord, although most of the upper half of the sides were shrouded in cloud still. Occasionally the sun broke through, highlighting the different colours of the melt waters from the glaciers to the seawater, with sharp delineations clearly visible between the two. The colder ice water was effectively floating on the saltier water below. We enjoyed glaciers, ice cliffs, scree slopes and hanging glaciers whilst we constantly scanned the fjord edges. I was again quietly concerned at the scale of this landscape, and the distance we were from the edges, where our quarry was likely to be. We did see a flock of eider, which through the scope included some still decent male Kings. But that was about it. All too soon we had turned around and were now steaming much faster back out again. Boris had hoped we might still be able to turn back south towards Isabella Bay but the sea ice still held so we were going to head north. However, we had a day in hand so we would try a potential 'Narwhal' fjord instead, that sounded much brighter at least. Dick had replied re the beakies, it seems they were likely to be Sowerby's, known to occur in the lower Davis Strait from previous records, the descriptions we had fit, cool.

8th August

Buchan Gulf & Icy Arm

We sailed into fjord mouth, lots of Fulmars (a colony is nearby) wheeled around us briefly. After a hurried breakfast back up on the bridge wings. I started scope scanning below the cliffs on north side, I was feeling low again, it was another big area, surely no chance. I just finished a scan at a little headland when I saw little puffy blows and then grey shapes appear in the water below them. I knew, I just knew. I screamed 'Narwhal' into the radio and into Boris's ear who was just inside the bridge door. The ship slowed and stopped and soon everyone was out on deck. We had come to a stop in front of a small river flowing into the bay, black cliffs to the left, and then a picture perfect small glacier flowing into the bay further left again, with mountains above all of it. We only had four scopes between us but with Boris and others assistance we worked out that there seemed to be at least two groups of animals. An American lady appeared with an expensive Austrian scope and tripod but didn't seem to know how to set it up. Jacque quickly sprang into action, and started watching the Narwhals through it. He turned to her and quipped, "are you married?" The initial small group were now in front of the river mouth, and smaller groups were spotted swimming right along the edge under the black cliff, which were actually closer. The photographers, even those with the biggest lens, didn't stand a chance, way to far away. Kalin got a bit of grainy video footage of course! I didn't even try, I wanted to see and watch them. Through bins they were small, through the scope you could get decent views. You picked them up by their quick, rapid blows, slight splash and then rolling backs. Even so, it took a good hour's worth of views to get an even fairly complete picture, little showed for long. At one point though, I got even luckier, a white-tipped black tusk came out of the sea in my field of view followed by the beautiful jet black body with the pure white mottling of an adult male. The smaller females were brownish but almost equally beautiful as their backs broke the dull grey water's surface and the younger animals seemed greyish. The lack of dorsal fin was apparent, and the ridge along the back was visible on several occasions too, as was two views of their rather small flukes. As the most left-hand group approached the glacier front Sarah –Jane said "Polar Bear". To cap the spectacle, a bear had appeared to get up and start walking across in front of the glacier. At one point, I briefly had the glacier, a Polar Bear and two



Harp Seal feeding frenzy



Arctic Fritillary

Narwhals in my bins field of view! The bear entered the water and swam for a bit. He then exited and climbed up an adjacent hillside. When we sailed past back out in the evening, he could be seen stretched out laying down, dozing. What a morning, what an animal Narwhal is, they deserve a lot more than to be hunted.

We sailed on deeper inland to Icy Arm, where Boris planned a landing, a new site. We encountered the same, or different Narwhals again, swimming very close to shore, in the same direction. They soon turned, the views not as good as the morning. Boris mentioned if we were very lucky, once we were at anchor and the main engines off, they may come back. He admitted this had happened to him once, they stood on land with Narwhals in the water yards away from them, and for as long as they wanted! Needless to say, it didn't happen today. But we were still very happy. We enjoyed a short walk ashore in the afternoon sunshine, examining the various flowers, seeing three species of butterfly (!) and the infamous Arctic Bee, a bumblebee that can survive this far north. One of it's tricks is to warm itself up sitting in Arctic Poppy flowers. We found a bear print and poo, clambered up the side of a waterfall and found Caribou bones too. The scenery was spectacular, the sheer-sided cliffs and mountains being still capped by ice above. It was actually the first time we had been ashore, good to stretch the legs, Boris and Ted stood guard with rather serious looking shotguns. As we sailed back up the narrow arm we spotted the Narwhals again, but they disappeared rapidly ahead of us into a bay to the left. We also saw around 100 eiders, at least four of them male Kings. We reached the open sea and headed north again, the stunning mountains and glaciers of Baffin Island on our port side in the evening sunshine.



Brunnich's Guillemots on Ice



9th August

Pond Inlet & Eclipse Sound

Another blue-skied, no wind day dawned, we went ashore after breakfast, this community of around 1500 people being the gateway to the far north. Rose our local guide, was standing on the beach dressed in the most beautiful traditional sealskin smock, with a baby in the hood. We wandered slowly along the beach, seeing Ravens and a few Lapland Buntings (females and juveniles only) plus four rather cute Husky pups and three Airbus A380s flying way high above us, probably heading for San Francisco from Europe. From the ship before landing we had seen Red-throated Divers, which were catching fish for their young and then flying inland, calling, to their little freshwater breeding lakes. A small flock of four Long-tailed Ducks flew past, and a few minutes later could be seen flying back the other way. We walked along a road towards the community centre, where a show about their former traditional lives was being put on for us. Ann had discovered the Narwhal meat store on the way and had been brave enough to go in, a small building with freezers inside. The reality of 'harvesting the local wildlife' was now staring us in the face. We assembled in the purpose built hall and I spotted a box of Narwhal badges on a counter. Perfect 'medals' for members of the Narwhal club! Before the excellent little performance began, a few words were said and two things became clear. The first was they, the locals, were worried about the warmer summers and melting ice. The lady pointed out that the group of mountains across the water from us, which had a few patches of snow on them, was covered by glaciers only 20 years ago! Secondly, they seemed acutely aware that many in the outside world had issues with their continued hunting lifestyle. In fact, I had been hearing that the regional council of elders seemed to be trying to ban all shipping from Eclipse Sound and both Milne and Navy Board Inlets, to 'protect their traditional hunting grounds'. Or perhaps to stop 'outsiders' witnessing what goes on? Subsistence hunting in canoes with hand help harpoons is one thing, mass slaughter using rifles, speedboats, snowmobiles and sometimes fuelled by alcohol is frankly just a turkey-shoot. With a Co-Op supermarket stocked with many of the produce and products we can all buy at home in the settlement, the hunting argument becomes weaker still. There is no protection for Narwhals and Belugas at all. Bowheads are limited to five animals a year. It has recently been discovered that some Bowheads are over 200 years old. An animal like that, which only just survived the hunting slaughter of the white man during the previous two centuries as a species, I think has earned it's right to complete peace. Most of the animals and birds we saw during the voyage seemed wary of man, not surprising really. The government estimate the annual 'harvest' is worth C\$40M per year, and that the replacement 'food value' would be C\$5M p.a. With the province's income from mining and fishing exports shooting up, the C\$5m would not even be noticed. I feel the time is coming for the Inuit to sit down with outsiders and discuss the future of their region's wildlife, at the very least, serious moderation is required? Perhaps they could follow examples set in other parts of the world and become wildlife guides, and not hunters? The show included demonstrations of their unique Northern sports, dancing and throat-singing. Some local art was for sale, we could not buy much of it of course (banned animal products) but I did purchase some rather nice Polar Bear cards.

The Co-Op was somewhat surreal. As you walked in, one of the ladies from the information desk was standing by the desk, to greet everyone, but she was holding a Narwhal tusk in each hand! A ship was in, and they knew it. One of the now whitish polished tusks was just over 6 feet long, I briefly held it, it was pretty heavy, C\$1300. Thankfully, no one from our vessel was tempted enough (only the Canadians could have purchased them legally). Unfortunately another passenger did return to ship with a portion of Narwhal flesh (meat), as a gift for Ted. It appeared in the dining room that evening and a surprising number of passengers tried small slivers. Needless to say we declined. (OOE have since given us assurances that this situation will not occur again, on any future voyage.) We walked back outside and down towards the landing beach, looking for Snow Buntings which we did see, but alas no males. We bumped into Kalin, he had seen a male, it was in the talons of a Peregrine which had flown over, look, a perfect shot in the back of his bridge camera! Two adult Thayer's Gulls were loitering around on the beach. We genuinely thanked our hosts and headed back to the Ioffe.

We spent the afternoon cruising west in the middle of Eclipse Sound, with the vast nature reserve of Bylot Island off our starboard side. Being in the middle of this quite large body of water meant Kittiwakes were the predominate bird species. Pleasingly, a good number of Long-tailed Skuas were also present, totalling about 50 in total with a close group of six birds at one point. But for us, Bylot Island was simply too far away. I bumped into Boris downstairs on a loo break and said 'any chance of moving into the coast more please?', I could see the bridge had accurate charts. He said he would see what he could do and shortly appeared up on the bridge and spoke to the watch officer. We turned north and started cruising quite a bit closer now. After only a few minutes Boris popped his head out and pointed out a group of 20 adult Harp Seals in the water, right under our noses. A few minutes later he was out again, 'Bowhead ahead'. We had been out on deck for hours with little joy, he comes up to the bridge and spots the good stuff within minutes! I locked on to the blowing whale in the distance before it dived properly, it was off a headland ahead of us. I glanced at my watch and noted the time. The ship slowed down and we waited, scanning all around. After nearly 25 minutes it came up again, this time parallel to us but heading astern. I got my scope on it straight away and started soaking it in. The 'two humps' effect was now clearly visible when the animal surfaced, I was also looking straight into the animals blowhole too, 'elephantine' is a good description. As this could have been our last Bowhead (and it was), the order was given to follow the whale for a while. We turned back and began slowly moving again, the Captain perfectly staying away and behind where we thought the animal was heading. After about another 20 minutes it came back up to multiply breathe again before sounding. Annoyingly, in spite of what appeared to be a few big rolls on the surface, it didn't show it flukes at all. After our 4th view we turned back on course and left it in peace. Even when you are watching them, these Arctic Whales don't give up their secrets very readily! I guess it's part of their mystery.

As we were now closer to shore it was worth scope scanning the land. Small groups of Snow Geese could be seen in the distance and at one point I watched an Arctic Fox trotting around a hillside. We had now turned north into Navy Board Inlet and shortly went to anchor mid-channel.

August 10th

Low Point & Navy Board Inlet

This morning we went ashore on some Inuit owned land called Low Point (Baffin Island) and enjoyed a decent tundra and then shoreline walk back to the landing beach. We were in rather a large, talking group though. I spotted a fairly white Arctic Hare legging it away from us, at least our immediate party got brief views of it before it went over the ridge. We 'stalked' a flock of about 30 Greater Snow Geese resting on the tundra. This group included at least three lovely Blue morph birds too. We got pretty close before they flew, calling with the mountains of Bylot Island behind them, great stuff. Some of the party had had brief views of what seemed to be an American Brown Lemming running around some rocks. As we slowly walked back along the shore a 'brown' Arctic Hare was spotted. This time it paid little attention to the 20 odd people standing close by and continued feeding allowing great photos to be taken. Suddenly one of the younger members of our group (a girl aged about 7), ran out towards it. I suspect she may have wanted to take it home. The hare did move this time but even then, not that far way. Lucky for it, we were not locals..... Two more groups of calling Snow Geese flew over, getting ready for their long journey south east to the USA for the winter. We also enjoyed decent scope views of a Ringed Seal hauled out on a small piece of ice. Both Ann and I separately saw what we thought to be a large dark shape in the water looking towards Bylot, both of us thought the word Bowhead but nothing further was seen.

We spent the afternoon slowly cruising north through Navy Board Inlet which was very quiet indeed, apart from the usual suspects. Two small hunter boats were spotted, and the water now had small whitecaps, hopeless for trying to spot the smaller whales. Just as dinner finished I noticed two or three Fulmars appear briefly, but very close to one of the dining room windows. This struck me as slightly odd and I picked up my bins and went outside. Feeding frenzy! In fact there two or three frenzies going on around us, with Fulmars and Kittiwakes piling in from above, whilst the water below them almost 'boiled' with Harp Seals. An announcement went out on the PA and the ship was turned around. There were 100s, if not 1000s of adult Harp Seals in each group, usually surfacing on their backs. Jacque suspected 'sea butterflies' were the prey, a kind of small swimming mollusc. In total we enjoyed the spectacle for well over half an hour, and felt around 5000 was the total number of Harp Seals present! Boris told me later that some of the passengers had come up to him afterwards and said it was the best wildlife spectacle they had ever seen. Amongst the Fulmars, there were at least 2 or 3 'brown' individuals, birds which must have come from the North Pacific via the North West Passage surely? A quiet afternoon but a very special evening.

August 11th

Devon Island

We had sailed through Lancaster Sound and the Parry Channel during the night and arrived at Dundas Harbour early this morning. With cliffs on our left and a few grounded bergs in the little bay we had breakfast whilst the scout party went ashore. Amongst the Glaucous Gulls were certainly a good few Iceland Gulls, a new species for the voyage. The bad news from the shore was two bears were present, so it was going to be a zodiac cruise instead of a landing. We loaded up and went round the little headland into the next bay where the old RCMP Station is located. This spot is often good for Walrus but no sign today sadly. Ann quickly spotted the bears, a mother and small cub, but they were laying down on a slope to our right. As always, difficult to get decent views from a zodiac due to the constant movement, but junior appeared stretched out on mum's lower back whilst she occasionally lifted her head and gazed in our direction. Ann then spotted a white Arctic Hare by the little cemetery. We returned back to the bay with our ship in it and landed, leaving a staff member keeping an eye on the distant hopefully still dozing bears. We took a short walk around a small freshwater pool, which had strange tadpole-like creatures in it. A pair of summer plumaged Red-

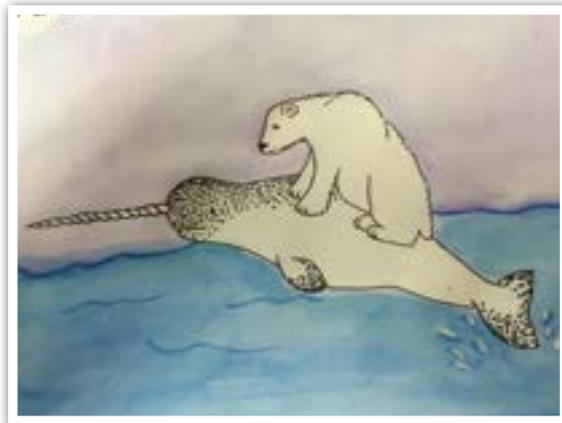
throated Divers landed briefly and we found a few young Snow Buntings by some rocks. Ann then spotted a dead Musk Ox up on a nearby hillside and a few minutes later, I picked up five or so live ones on a distant hillside, but they were just specks even in the scope. At one point I thought I heard a plane. I looked up to see an Emirates Airbus A380 flying over at great height, I noticed Boris had spotted it too. We cruised around the grounded bergs taking photos before returning to ship for lunch. Jacque mentioned he had seen a Bearded Seal during the morning, another new one for the trip.

We sailed west along the coast for a few hours and then turned into Croker Bay and towards a decent sized glacier face at the end. Most went out on a zodiac cruise, Sarah-Jane and I stayed onboard, still scanning for more Arctic Whales. Needless to say we didn't see any but did enjoy a Hooded Seal hauled out on ice. No sign of the expected Ivory Gulls here either, in fact, Jacque told an alarming tale that he had heard there were now thought to be less than 200 left in the whole of Canada, which is extremely concerning. Bill and Ann had seen four more distant Musk Ox on the way in, I 'scoped a distant group of Brent Geese. It was lovely and quiet on the ship, we enjoyed the stunning surroundings, with cotton grass seeds floating past, ice fairies! The zodiacs returned, having seen a few more Bearded Seals (all in the water, none hauled out). We pulled the anchor and headed back out across the Parry Channel.

12th August

Prince Leopold Island & Beechy Island

The last full day of the voyage dawned, and for the first time grey skies, with some wind which thankfully quickly died down. We were just off the towering cliffs of Prince Leopold Island and it's massive Brunnich's Guillemot colony. Most of us braved an hour long zodiac cruise along the narrow beach, just under the cliffs. A big group of Kittiwakes were on the water and we first sailed amongst them. Further along the beach we came across two 'jumpers' in the water. Juvenile (and flightless) Brunnich's, which should have been closely escorted by their fathers. The second youngster wasn't and was quickly under pressure from a trio of predatory Glaucous Gulls, which had their own young on the beaches. Jacque commented that probably thousands of youngsters would be jumping in the next few days. He watched a youngster not make it, hitting a scree slope just above the beach. Soon the young and their male parents will start their long migratory swim southwards, growing and learning to fly as they go, quite amazing. He had worked previously on the island as a biologist (you can fly onto the top) and told us there were almost certainly bears on the top, the other side of the island having a



gentle slope up from the sea.

We sailed back across the channel for our final landing site. The sea was generally quiet but I managed three Red-necked Phalaropes and a Razorbill flying under the bows within a few minutes of each other before lunch, both new species for the trip. Razorbills seem also to be extending their range north, yet another sign of the dreaded 'global warming'. As we closed in on Beechy, we switched to Gyr alert mode. In fact Bill and I were still inside the bridge when Ann knocked on the window from outside. She had just had a Gyr come over the ship and go ahead of us. Bill, Jacque and I joined her out on the bridgeway, there were birds going in all directions, high-flying Fulmars, Kittiwakes and Black Guillemots. Jacque picked it or another up ahead of us but lost it going right. I then picked up a bird going ahead of us in my bins and reached for my scope. I was looking at a big falcon, going away, it's long wings held level in a majestic glide. We were unfortunately looking into the light, it suddenly turned and started gliding back towards us, and on two brief occasions I got glimpses of head colour, white! I was trying to talk the others onto it but knew I had to keep watching it in the scope at the same time. It suddenly banked sharply, revealing it's full silhouette, with tapered tail and then I realised it had targeted a Black Guillemot which had come off the cliffs and was heading out to sea. The gully started twisting and turning, it knew it had been targeted. Then I lost them..... We keep an watchful eye out for the rest of the afternoon but no further sign. We anchored in the romantically named Terror and Erebus Bay, the names of Franklin's ships. Beechy is lump of rock with some shingle beach inside it, connected to nearby Devon Island by a low-tide bar of shingle. We raised our glasses and

drank a Whisky toast ashore to the men whose graves adorn this lonely beach, three of them from those very same ships. The staff strictly enforced the 'no closer' than 10 metre rule which was good to see. After only a few minutes fossilling and plant-hunting Jacque came over and sort of said "Pstt, do you wanna come for a zodiac cruise?" I rounded the gang up, a couple of photographers joined us and we went to explore the bay further. We started by the bar and then went past the landing beach and cruised under the cliffs. Jacque was expecting to give us great views of Thayers Gulls, which breed high above, sitting around on the sea ice. Problem was, no sea ice! Still, it was a nice idea.

The kitchen team really pulled the stops out for the Captain's Dinner, and both Bill and Ann enjoyed nice surprises. Ann won the writing competition, which had been started after our Narwhal encounter, the theme being whose arm was it in the Buchan Gulf (Icy Arm). It was the cause of great interest by many of the passengers and could be heard being discussed all around the ship for days so good for Ann, she wrote a poem. Bill won the 'lucky dip' and was presented with an exquisite wooden model of a traditional Inuit sled that Ted had handmade.

August 13th

Resolute & Edmonton

Early morning found us in yet another blue-skied day, having sailed through the Barrow Strait during the night. We went to anchor just off the airport on this barren island. Fulmars were our last seabirds, a few Glaucous Gulls, a Raven and a few Snow Buntings from the bus as we were transferred to the small terminal. We had said our goodbyes on the ship's gangway and landing beach. Time passed quickly in the airport, the gift shop opened, the lovely Inuit lady proprietor had some very strange things in stock, I picked up another nice local artist made card. At about 1230 an elderly, and rather noisy Canadian North Being 737-200 landed on the long gravel runway. As it taxied in, with a 'dust-storm' behind it, we pondered on the upcoming take-off. As we walked out to the aircraft you could see a 'tray' type arrangement behind the nose-gear. As I strapped myself in I noticed a long pipe protruding from under the engine, with small nozzles pointing downwards. The tray and the 'air-jets' were special modifications to prevent stones and grit getting into the engines on take-off I happily then read in the inflight magazine. As we got airborne the pilot banked sharply to the left, the Ioffe at anchor in the bay below us. The incoming passengers were heading further west including to Cunningham Inlet to look for Belugas. We envied them although ultimately had no reason to complain after our wonderful voyage. As we climbed towards altitude we could see into the North West Passage itself, on the right hand side of the plane, large amounts of sea ice including some really big floes.....it looked amazing...maybe one day.....

The three incredibly friendly female flight attendants got distracted at the end of their first drinks run and ended up sitting down in a row of seats with one of our fellow passengers, enjoying some of his photos of the expedition. After about five minutes one of them remembered they were working and they broke off giggling as they went aft to sort out everyone's lunch. We overnighted at a very comfortable airport hotel at Edmonton and Air Canada safely delivered us back to Heathrow the following morning after that. We had just been to one of the least visited parts of the world, and we had seen the Unicorn, they do really exist.

Thanks to One Ocean Expeditions, the Captain and crew of the Akademik Ioffe, Boris Wise and his excellent team of staff.

Species Lists

Baffin Island Voyage

1st – 13th August

Mammals

Bowhead
 Fin Whale
 Northern Bottlenose Whale
 Long-finned Pilot Whale
 Narwhal
 Sowerby's Beaked Whale
 White-beaked Dolphin
 Bearded Seal
 Hooded Seal
 Ringed Seal
 Harbour (Common) Seal
 Seal sp
 Harp Seal

 Polar Bear
 Arctic Fox
 Arctic Hare
 American Brown Lemming
 Musk Ox

Birds

Eider
 King Eider
 Long-tailed Duck
 Greater Snow Geese
 Brent Goose
 Canada Goose
 Red Throated Diver
 Great Northern Diver
 Fulmar – nominate white birds
 plus blue and brown morphs.
 Dunlin
 Purple Sandpiper
 Semi-palmated Plover

Pomarine Skua
 Long-tailed Skua
 Arctic Skua
 Glaucous Gull
 American Herring Gull
 Thayer's Gull
 Kittiwake
 Rough-legged Hawk
 Gyr
 Peregrine
 Guillemot
 Razorbill
 Brunnich's Guillemot
 Black Guillemot
 Little Auk
 Puffin
 Grey Phalarope
 Red-necked Phalarope
 Raven
 Snow Bunting
 Lapland Bunting
 Buff-bellied Pipit
 Other wildlife
 Arctic Fritillary
 American Copper
 Hecla Sulphur
 Arctic Bumble Bee
 Arctic Cod
 Sea Butterflies
 Jellyfish sp

Gatineau National Park

31st July

Mammals

White-tailed Deer
 American Red Squirrel
 Grey Squirrel (black form)
 Woodchuck
 Eastern Chipmunk

Birds

Double-crested Cormorant
 Night Heron
 Turkey Vulture
 Canada Goose
 Blue-winged Teal
 Osprey
 (Red-shouldered Hawk)
 Broad-winged Hawk
 (American Kestrel)
 (Peregrine)
 Wild Turkey
 Spotted Sandpiper
 Ring-billed Gull
 Caspian Tern
 Mourning Dove
 Ruby-throated Hummingbird
 Hairy Woodpecker
 Downy Woodpecker
 Pileated Woodpecker
 Eastern Wood-Pewee
 Eastern Phoebe
 Great Crested Flycatcher
 Gray Kingbird
 (Blue-headed Vireo)
 Red-eyed Vireo
 Blue Jay
 American Crow

Raven
 Tree Swallow
 Bank Swallow
 Black-capped Chickadee
 Red-breasted Nuthatch
 White-breasted Nuthatch
 Eastern Bluebird
 Hermit Thrush
 American Robin
 Gray Catbird
 Starling
 Cedar Waxwing
 Northern Parula
 Yellow Warbler
 Chestnut-sided Warbler
 Magnolia Warbler
 Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warbler
 Blackburnian Warbler
 (Pine Warbler)
 Black and White Warbler
 American Redstart
 Ovenbird
 Mourning Warbler
 Yellowthroat
 Scarlet Tanager
 Chipping Sparrow
 Savannah Sparrow
 Grasshopper Sparrow
 Song Sparrow
 Northern Cardinal
 Indigo Bunting
 Red-winged Blackbird
 Eastern Meadowlark
 Common Grackle
 House Finch
 American Goldfinch