

The inhospitable kingdom of the
Polar  **bears**



Pablo Trilles Farrington

Photographic expedition to Svalbard

(August 2022)

The inhospitable kingdom of the
Polar  **bears**

By Pablo Trilles Farrington



*"Para la Margarita más bella del
jardín, la mejor mamá del universo."*



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Svalbard



Introduction

In August of 2022 I embarked on a thrilling adventure, to circumnavigate for 10 days the Svalbard archipelago, in the Arctic Sea, searching for wildlife and, specifically, to photograph the largest predator on the earth, the majestic polar bear.

To arrive at Svalbard it is necessary to fly from Norway to the town of Longyearbyen, capital of Svalbard. This archipelago is governed by the Kingdom of Norway.

Svalbard was, for many centuries, a mining center that was mainly exploited by Russia, as well as being the site of indiscriminate hunting of whales by Northern European countries. Now whale hunting is minimal and the whale population increases daily. It is possible to find abandoned towns from the time when mining was the heart of the town. But there is still a small population of about 300 inhabitants of Russian origin that still work on the exploitation of the mining resources. Currently Svalbard is a tourist attraction for those who enjoy nature, scenery and wildlife, especially the largest carnivore in the world, the polar bear.

In Longyearbyen I boarded the Kinfish, a small ship but very well prepared to navigate the cold Arctic waters that surround Svalbard, as well as the magnificent fjords and glaciers. There were twelve passengers, the captain and a small crew, as well as two guides.

All this was organized by Arctic Wildlife Tours and Northern Expeditions.

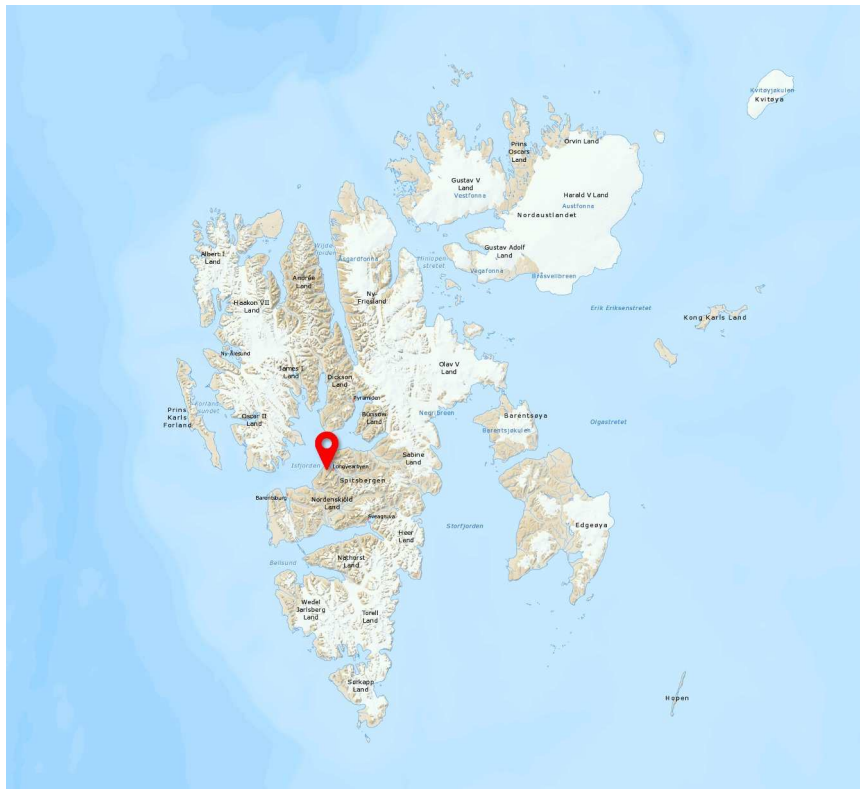


1. The starting point



Longyearbyen

The surrounding area of Longyearbyen is a natural setting that is very accessible and where wild fauna can easily be found. Longyearbyen has been transformed into the starting point for the Svalbard expeditions. The town, as well as the inhabitants, live almost exclusively from the nature tourism, whilst the mining has become a residual activity.



1.1 Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)



10 August I visited the surrounding area of Longyearbyen (Svalbard) and I had the opportunity to encounter an enormous walrus that was sunbathing on the seashore. The walruses are huge and can weigh up to 1,500 kg and measure 3.5 meters. They feed on mollusks that they detect with their rough whiskers and dig up with their tusks that can be 1 meter long and weigh up to 5 kg. They live in colonies and are temperamental and nervous animals.



1.2 Svalbard reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus*)

One of the most iconic animals to be found on these islands is the Svalbard reindeer. It is a smaller subspecies of the common reindeer and is native to the area. The reindeers graze all over the archipelago and are not very elusive animals. They are quite fast, so it is not easy for them to be surprised by the polar bears. Despite this, attacks on reindeers by the bears are becoming more and more common because of the difficulty in finding seals, their principal food. I saw several of them during the expedition. They were always quietly grazing around the green areas of the islands.

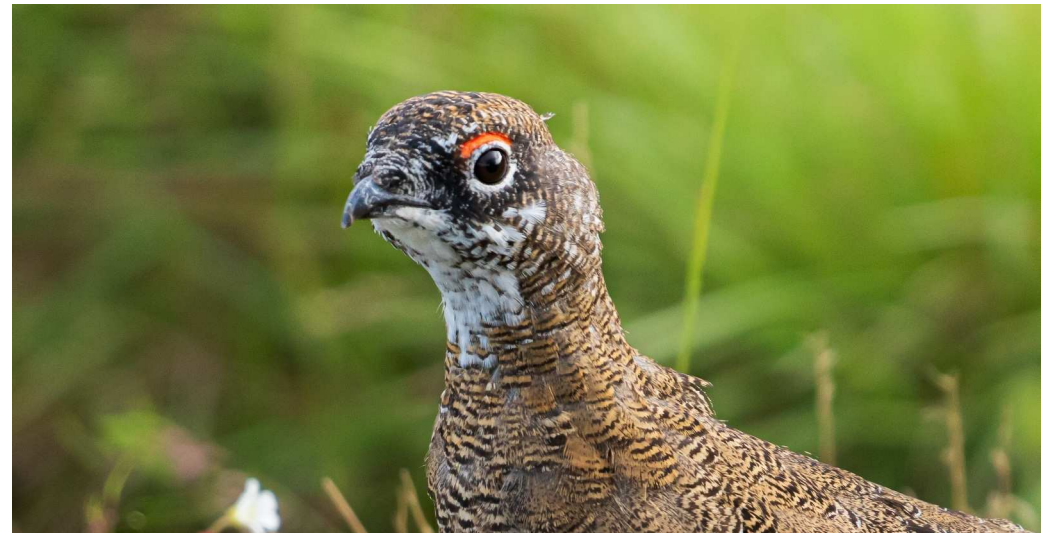
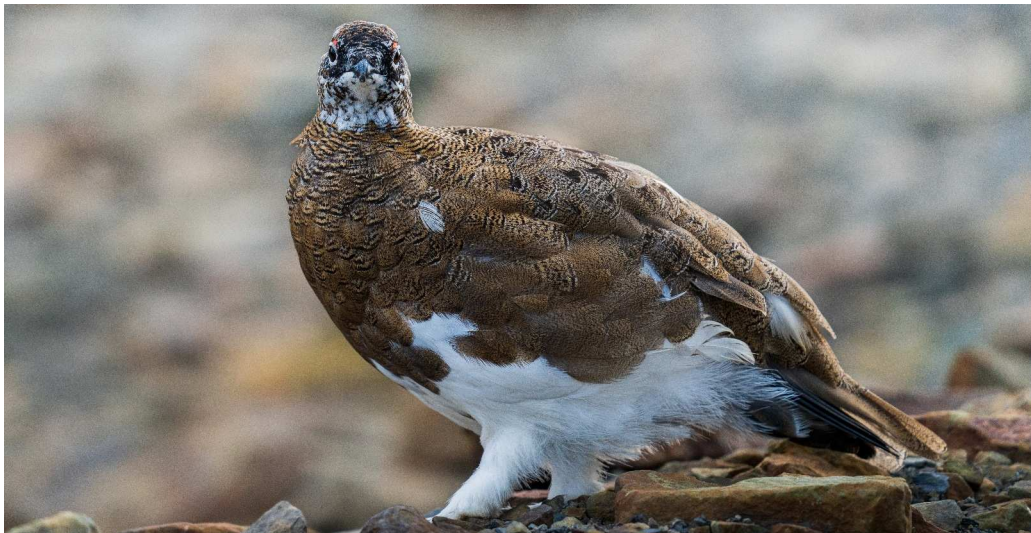




1.3 Svalbard rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta hyperborea*)

The Svalbard rock ptarmigan is a subspecies of the common rock ptarmigan, and is the one that weighs the most. They have a special characteristic because these fowl change the color of their plumage to have better camouflage in both winter and summer. I came upon one of them outside Longyearbyen and its attitude was very peaceful, while at the same time controlling all my movements continuously but appeared to be unafraid and continued to feed. Their camouflage for each season is highly effective. In the images it can be seen that the plumage has already started change from brown to white, in preparation for the first snow that will fall in one or two months.

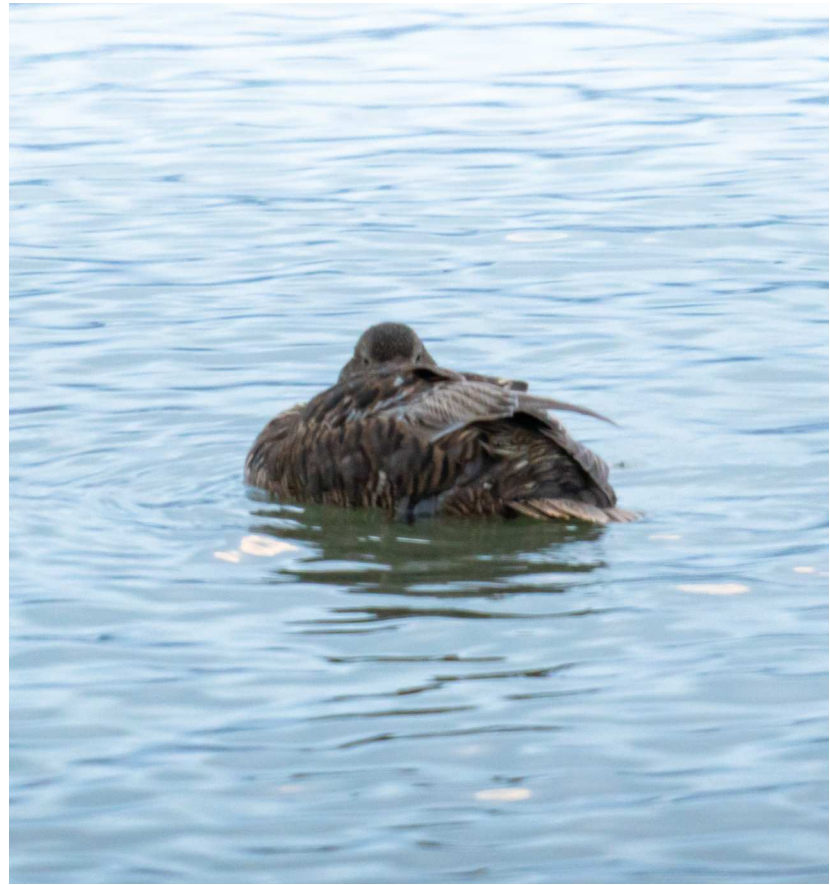




1.4 Barnacle goose (*Branta leucopsis*) & common eider (*Somateria mollissima*)

Other common birds in the Longyearbyen area are the barnacle goose and the common eider. The barnacle goose is a migratory bird and spends the winters in Scotland. There are numerous groups on the coast and near the lagoons. The common eider is a sea-duck that feeds in the Arctic. They live in groups and are also migratory. They can fly at more than 100 Km/h.





2. Comencing the navigation

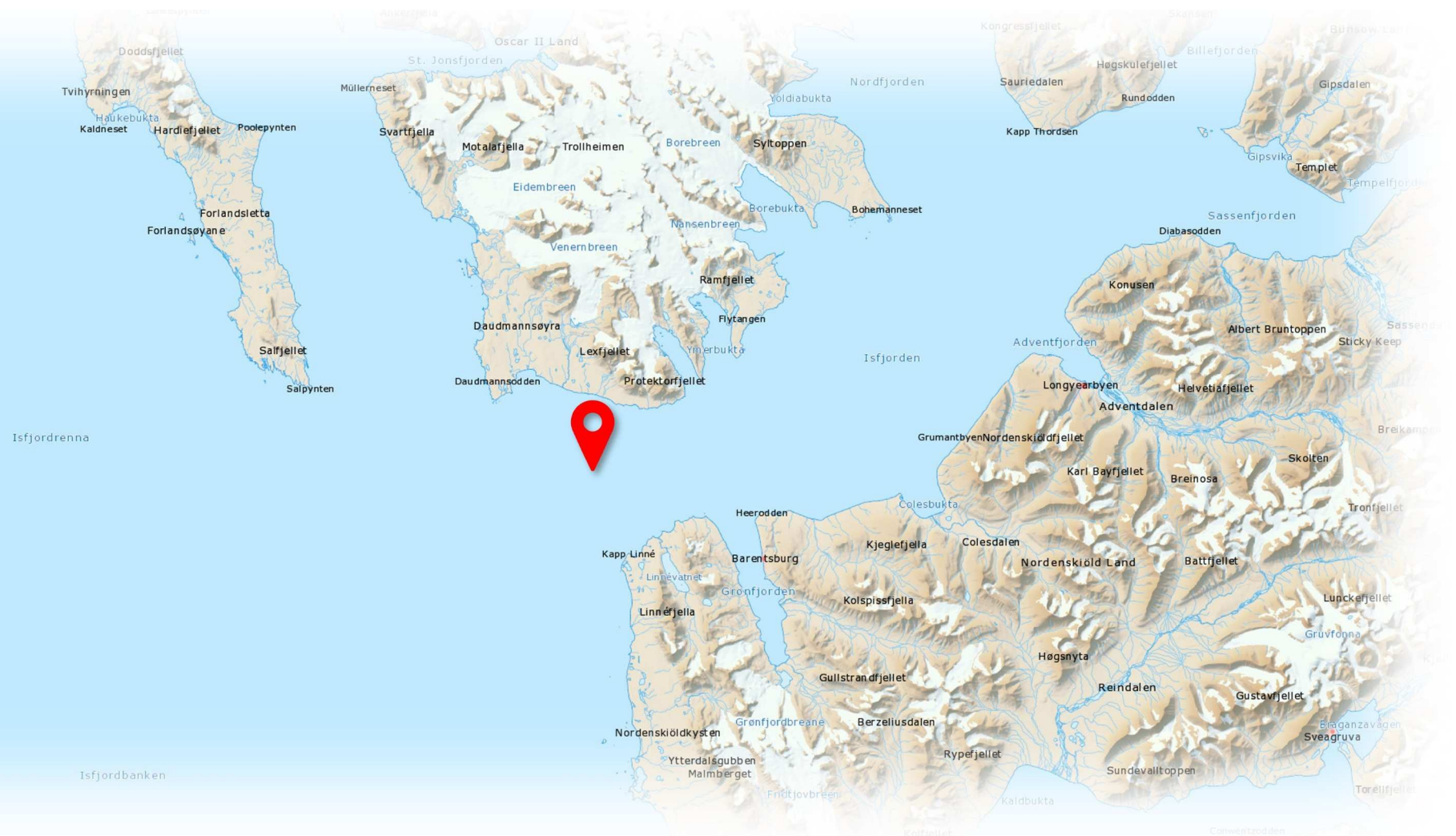




Isf Fjord

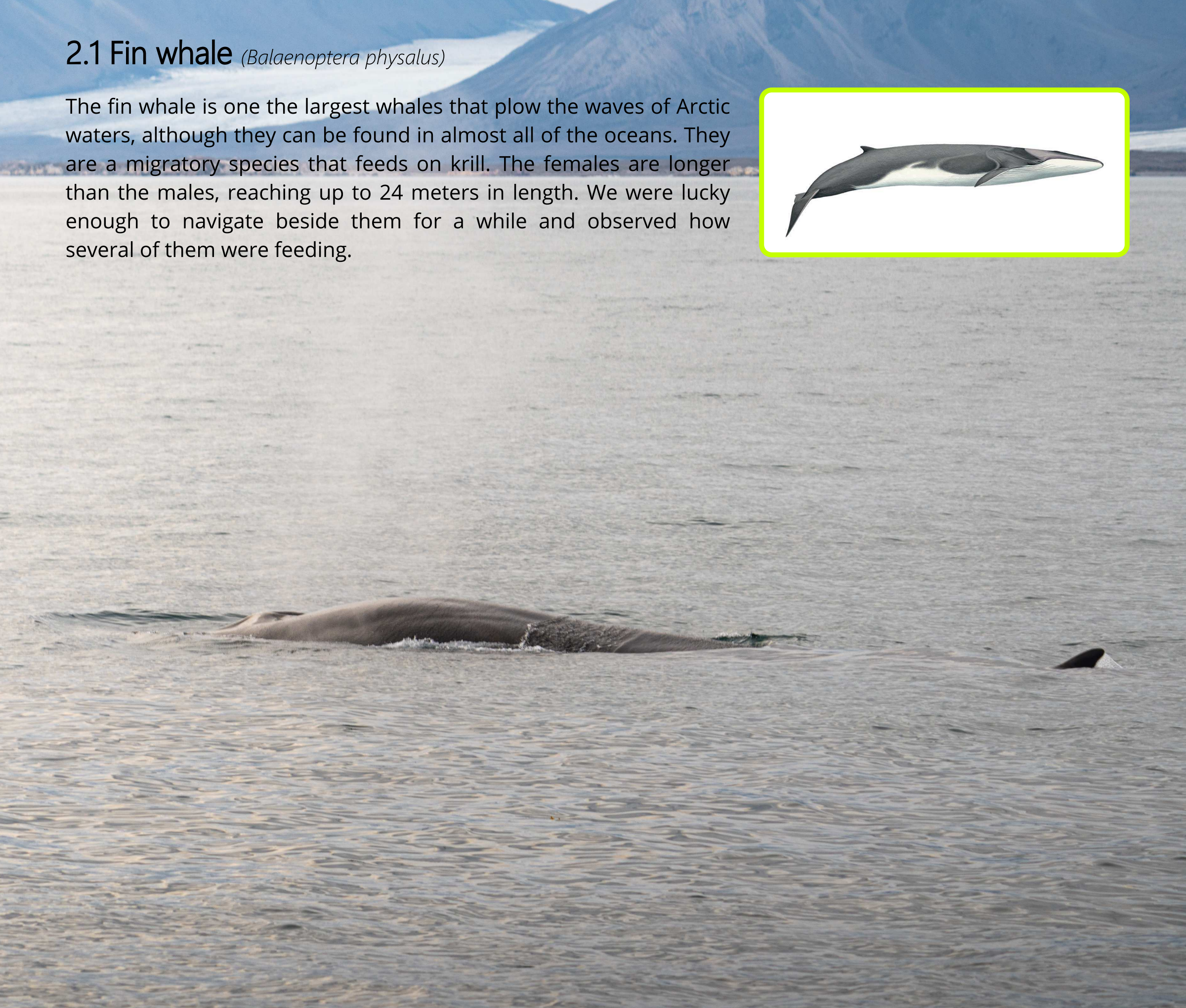
We departed from Longyearbyen in the afternoon. At this time of year the sun does not go down at night so we have 24 hours of sunlight. We are in the Arctic and the climate is continental, surrounded by fjords, glaciers and tundra. The weather is cold but not as cold as it should be.

The voyage began by navigating the Isf Fjord to head towards the north of Spitsbergen (the principal island of the Svalbard archipelago). During the journey we caught catch sight, far away, of 2 polar bears sleeping near to the coast.



2.1 Fin whale (*Balaenoptera physalus*)

The fin whale is one of the largest whales that plow the waves of Arctic waters, although they can be found in almost all of the oceans. They are a migratory species that feeds on krill. The females are longer than the males, reaching up to 24 meters in length. We were lucky enough to navigate beside them for a while and observed how several of them were feeding.

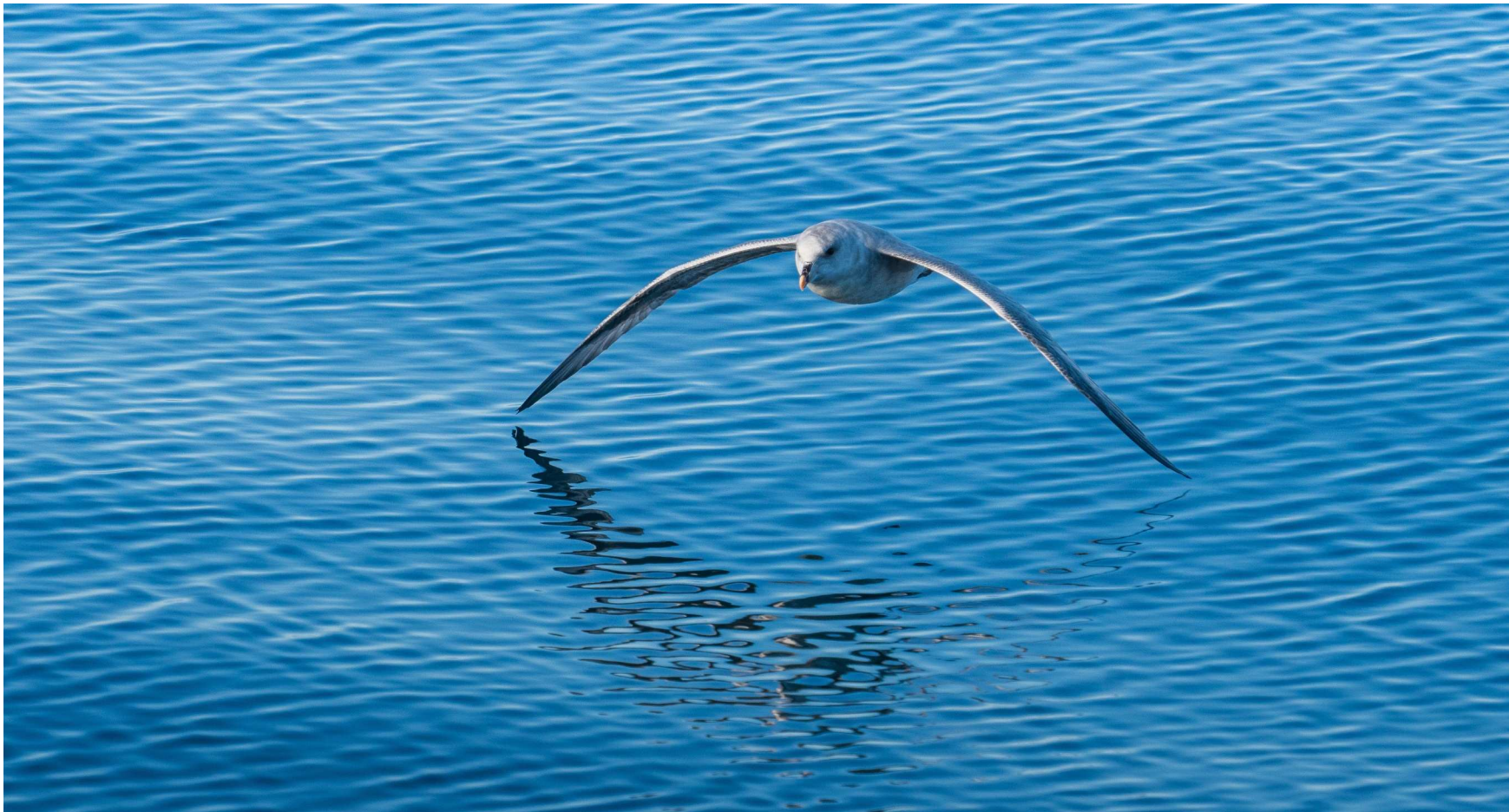




2.2 Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)



During the whole expedition we were accompanied by the northern fulmar, a seabird that tends to glide, almost brushing the surface of the sea and is one of the most elegant birds when in flight.



3. Course northwest





Smeerenburg Fjord

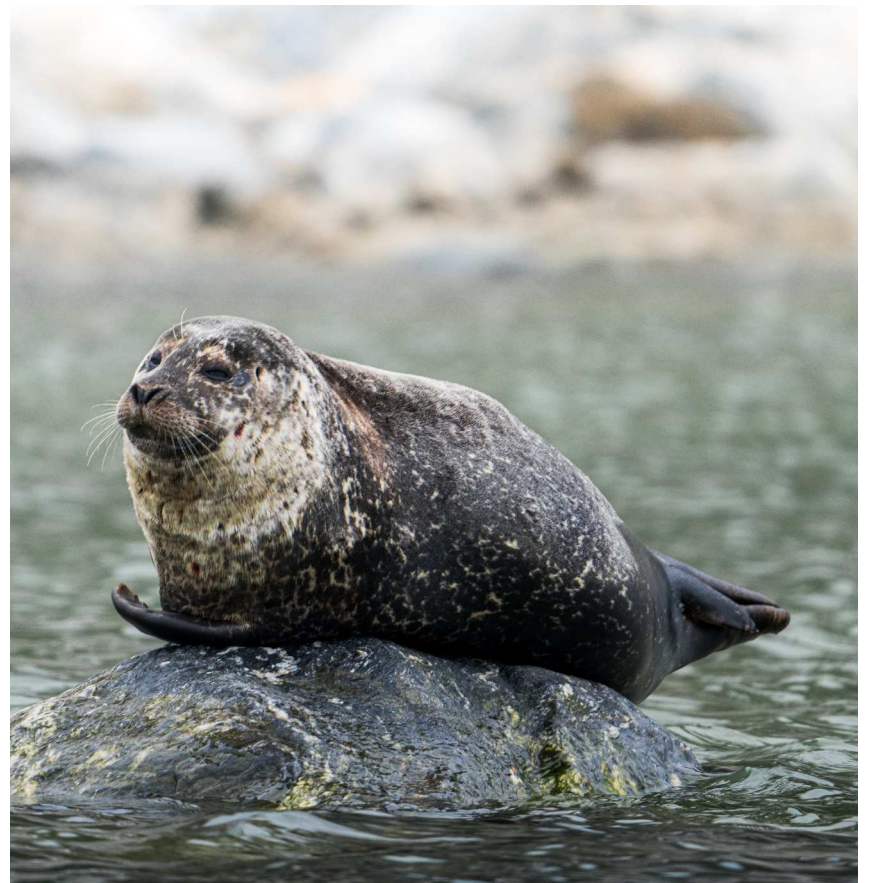
Svalbard is a unique place because of the number of glaciers that make up the archipelago. Arriving at the northeast we entered the Smeerenburg Fjord, where we could contemplate a beautiful and enormous glacier. Continuous breaking up of the glaciers walls is very common. The ship we were voyaging on is prepared for navigating these cold latitudes and its hull is designed to work as an icebreaker. But the ice that these ships can break up is that which is formed in the sea water because of lowered temperatures, not the icebergs that break off from the glaciers and have been compacted over centuries, and able to perforate very easily the hull of any ship. So it is vital to avoid them.



3.1 Harbour seal (*Phoca vitulina*)

The harbour seals tend to have very different colors. These animals are well known for resting on their side, balancing on a rock. To be able to get close to them we used Zodiacs, and wrapped up warm because of the cold. These seals come very close as they are curious and very playful. They can be seen resting in a small bay that protects them from predators like the polar bear.





3.2 Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)

After photographing the seals we continued with the Zodiacs to the north of the fjord to visit a colony of walrus that inhabit one of the beaches. Once the guide made sure that there were no polar bears anywhere around, we disembarked onto the beach at about 200 meters from the group of walrus and, little by little, we walked towards them until we were only about 10 meters away. Walrus tend to rest in compact groups where there are often disputes about who rests where. A large female that was in the sea, arrived soon after and joined the group to rest.







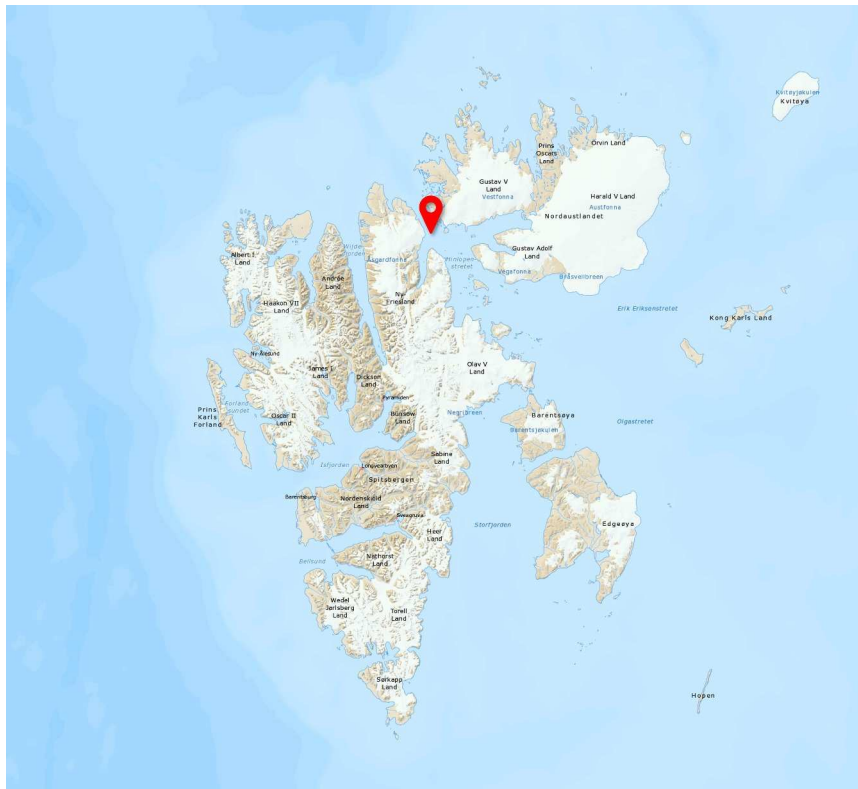


4. Everyone is hungry



Hinlopen strait

Svalbard is a rich enclave for migratory birds. The abundant food that these cold waters offer is a buffet, open 24 hours. Many birds arrive on Svalbard to feed and breed. The food is so abundant that sometimes the birds have difficulty taking off because of the large quantities of food they have ingested.



4.1 Atlantic puffin (*Fratercula arctica*)



On the way to Hinlopen, a channel that crosses Svalbard in half, from North to South, we penetrated the Raud Fjord where large number of Atlantic puffins can be seen. This likeable bird is recognizable by its peculiar and colorful beak, and also their sad expression. They migrate to Svalbard to feed. They are great divers and they feed on fish.



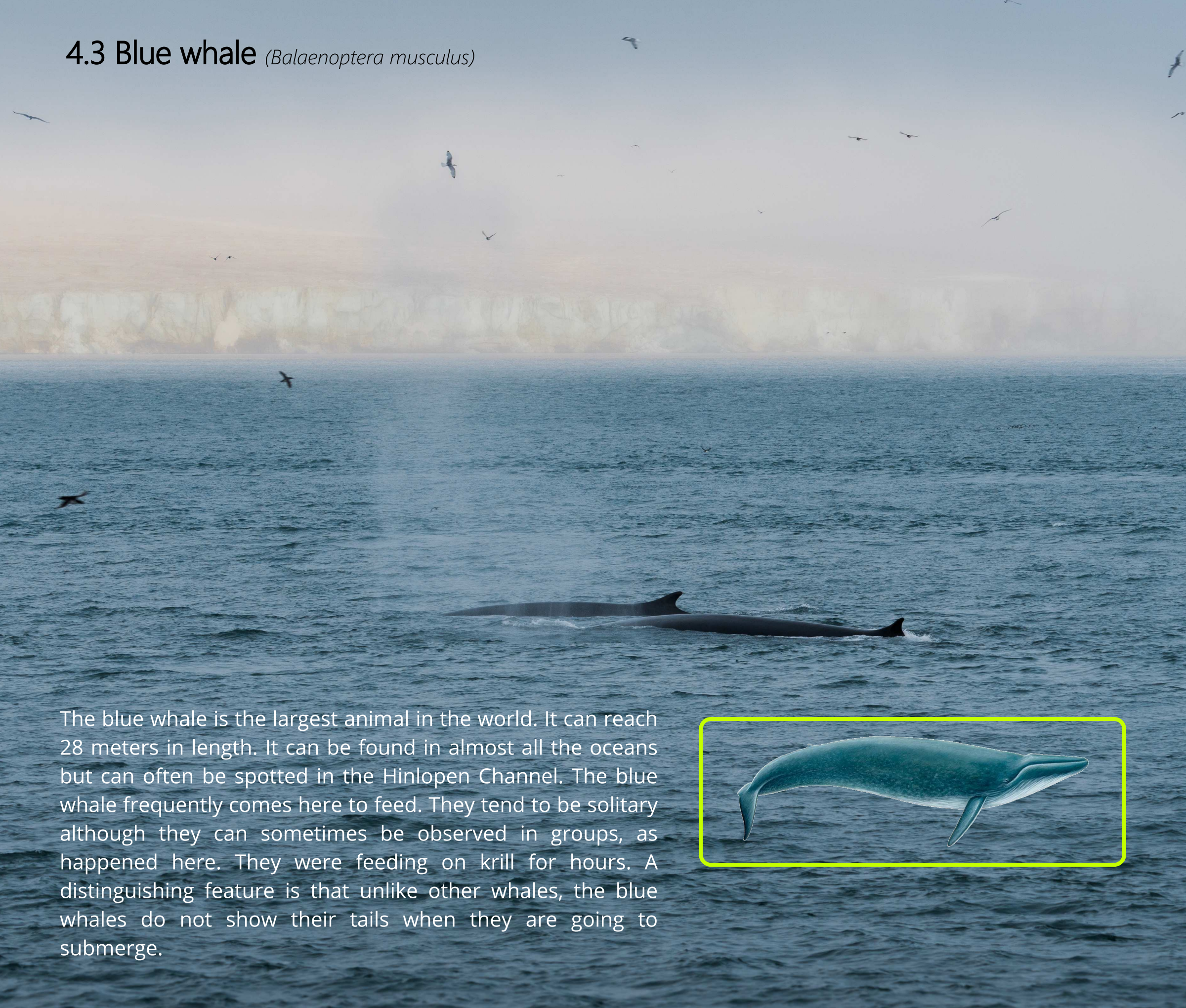
4.2 Black-legged kittiwake (*Rissa trydactyla*) & Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

The kittiwake and the Arctic skua are two medium sized birds. The kittiwake is the most numerous type of gull and also has the characteristic of being incredibly noisy. It is estimated that there are about 300,000 pairs on Svalbard. The Arctic skua is quite an aggressive bird and has learnt to get more food by harassing the gulls. Once the gull has gobbled down a fish, the Arctic skua pursues and bullies the gull until the fish is regurgitated. We witnessed this hunting technique several times. The kittiwakes cried out desperately while the Arctic skuas pecked and hunted them in mid-flight. Only when the kittiwake regurgitated the fish was it able to escape the Arctic skua.





4.3 Blue whale (*Balaenoptera musculus*)



The blue whale is the largest animal in the world. It can reach 28 meters in length. It can be found in almost all the oceans but can often be spotted in the Hinlopen Channel. The blue whale frequently comes here to feed. They tend to be solitary although they can sometimes be observed in groups, as happened here. They were feeding on krill for hours. A distinguishing feature is that unlike other whales, the blue whales do not show their tails when they are going to submerge.





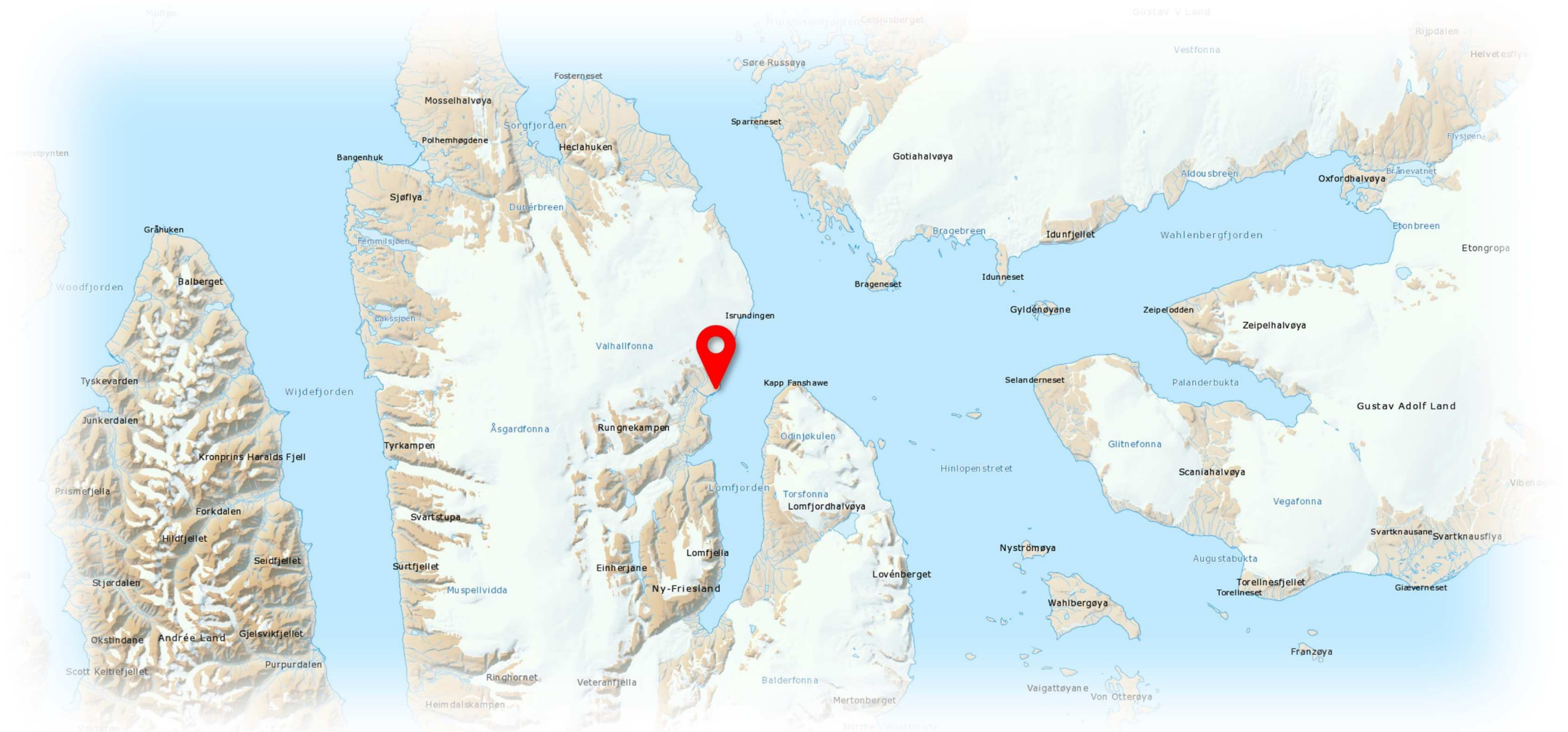
5. The polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*)





Lom Fjord

13 August 2022, we found ourselves in the Lom Fjord, near to the great Hinlopen Channel (between the principal islands of Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet) that crosses Svalbard from north to south and functions as a highway both for ships and cetaceans.





The waters won't be frozen for several months which is the season for seal hunting for the polar bears. While this moment arrives the polar bears divide their time between sleeping, eating any kind of carcasses (they are opportunistic animals) and going back to sleep. As food is scarce they have to preserve their energy and the best way to do this is to get comfortable anywhere and sleep as long as possible. It is vital for the polar bears to hunt seals, their principal source of nourishment, and this can only occur when the sea water is converted into a sea of ice. Here the bears can ambush the seals that are resting, both on the ice as well as the sea. The bears stalk the seals, by hiding in amongst the ice so as to get as close as possible without being seen and then pouncing onto the surprised seals.



In the zodiacs, at about 20 meters from the shore of the fjord, we sighted a polar bear family made up of a mother with her two small cubs and another mother and her almost adult cub. And to complete the group, on the other side, a large male was resting. This unusual gathering of bears in the same place, at this time of year, was brought about by the presence of a whale carcass that was providing nourishment until the arrival of the ice season and being able to hunt seals.



They are all hungry but the hierarchy must be respected. In this case the female with her two cubs occupies the prime position. The females with young cubs are very aggressive and protective so it is best not to get close. In second place is the male (they are usually much bigger than the females) that only feeds once the female and her two cubs have distanced themselves from the carcass to rest. The mother with the almost adult cub waits her turn until the male decides to rest.

At one point, when the female and her cubs were eating, a small conflict blew up that was originated by the almost adult cub who could not quash his hunger and hesitantly moved nearer to the carcass. This attempt to disorganize the feeding turns caused a warning persecution by the two cubs' mother and the almost adult escaped and returned to the protection of his mother. He would have to continue awaiting his turn.

The male polar bear can weigh up to 700 kg and measure 2.60 meters. The females are a smaller size, weighing around 350 kg. The females with cubs are very aggressive because the males will not hesitate to kill the cubs in order to mate with the female. The polar bear population in Svalbard is 3,5000 individuals, although it is possible that these numbers will be reduced by the rise in temperatures and thawing of the ice.











Without counting natural deaths, each year some polar bears die at the hands of humans. The most frequent causes are: because the bear is dangerously near to the town nucleus, and unable to be dissuaded; by hikers who irresponsibly camp on the coast where the polar bears prowl; and by the mala praxis of scientists that anesthetize a bear to study it and then are unable to wake it up. Due to this carelessness, the bears have killed people. Three days before arriving at Svalbard a bear killed a French hiker who was camping near the coast with other people. The guide didn't take sufficient precautions and the bear entered the tent, killing the woman. Then the bear had to be put down. A few months previously a bear entered a campsite made up of several tents, near to the airport, killing a boy of 14. The bear had to be slaughtered.











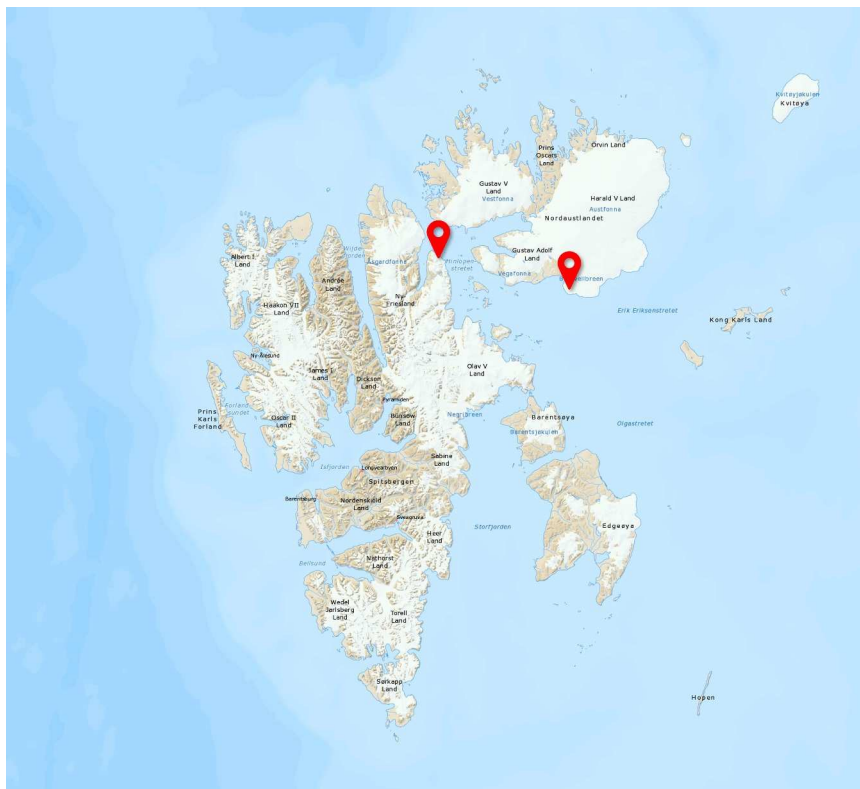


6. Along the channel



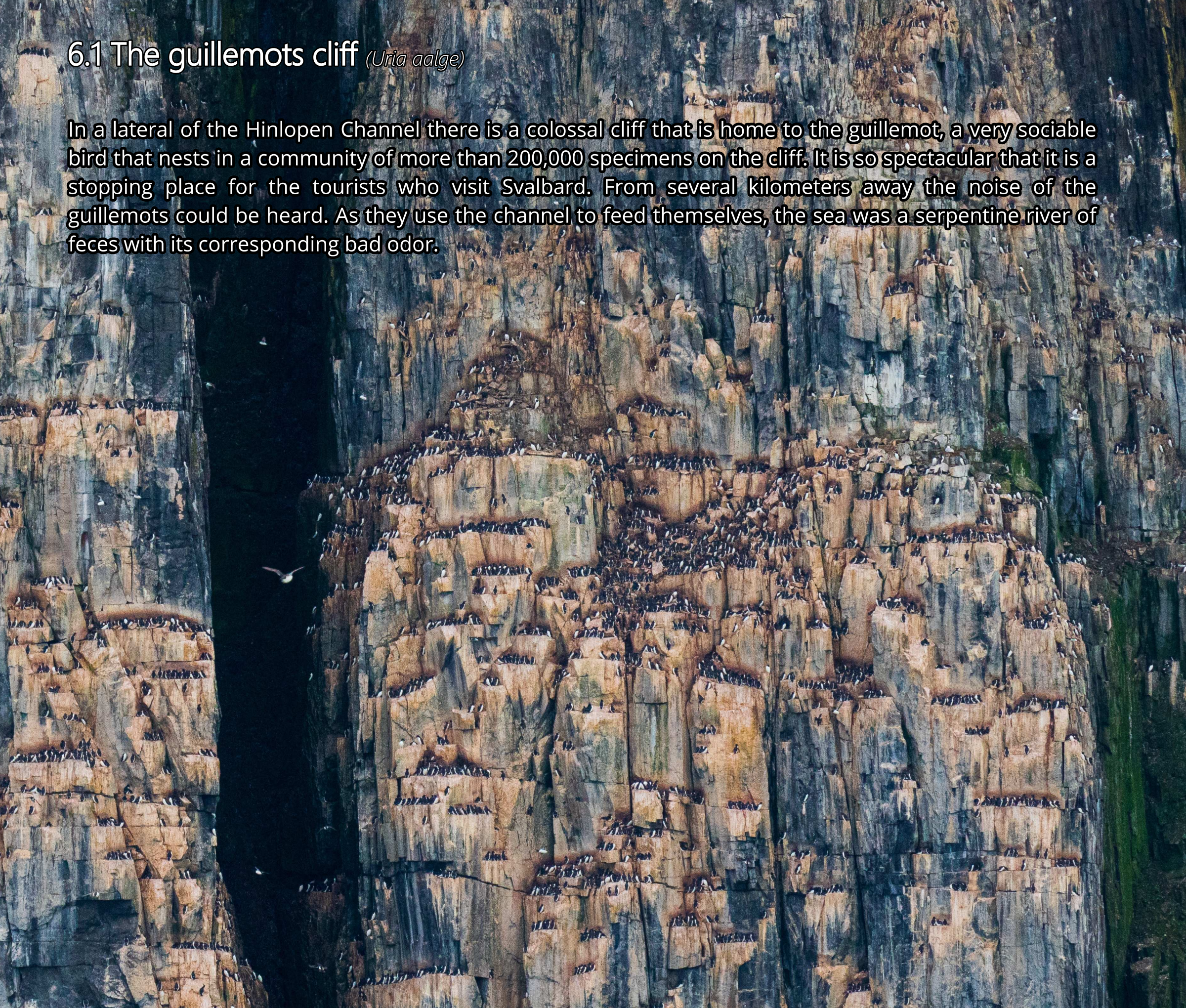
Hinlopen Channel & Austfonna

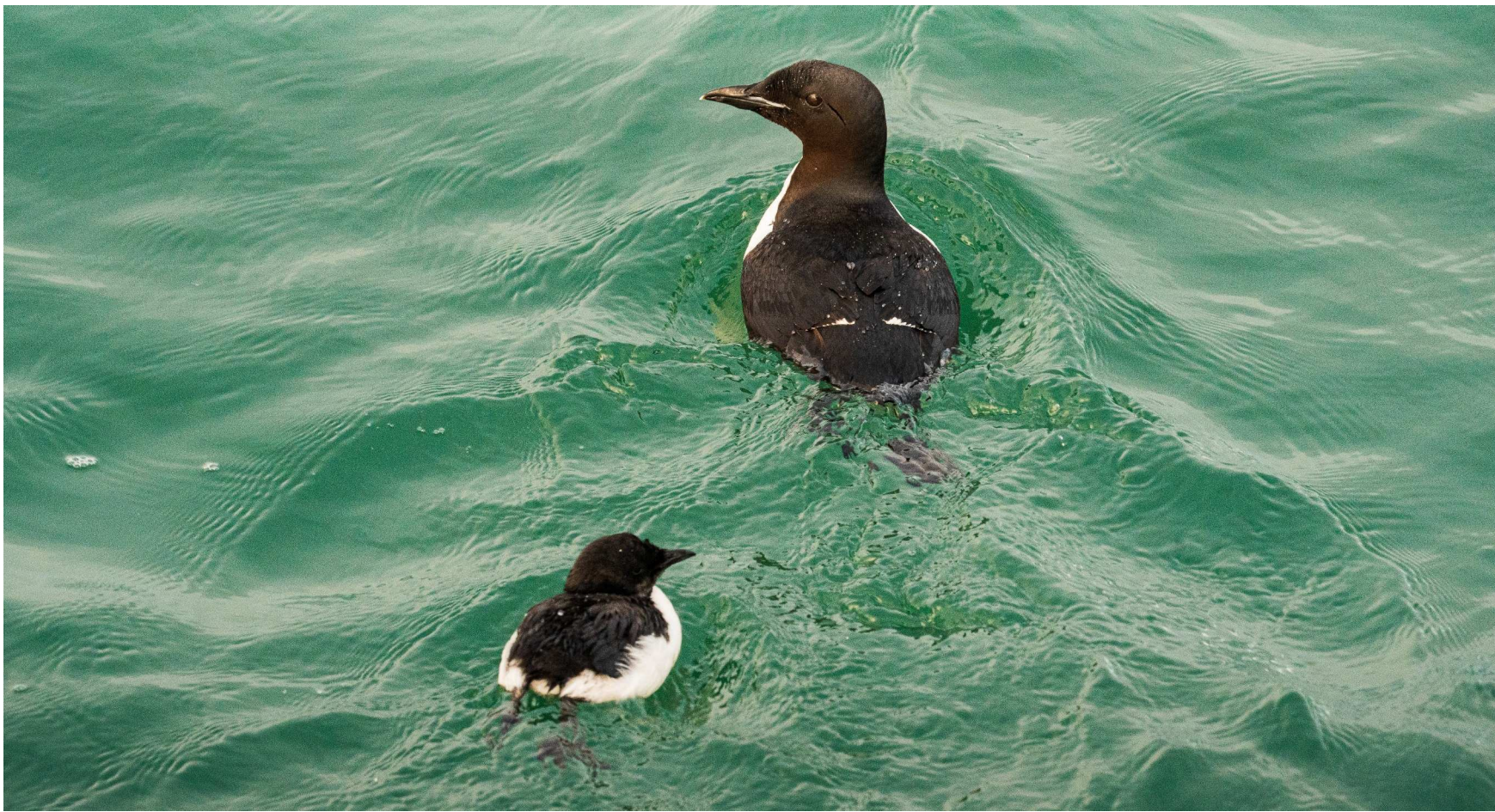
Crossing the Hinlopen Channel allows you to navigate Svalbard from north to south just like the ships and cetaceans. It is the principal artery of the archipelago and harbors much life and astounding vistas.



6.1 The guillemots cliff (*Uria aalge*)

In a lateral of the Hinlopen Channel there is a colossal cliff that is home to the guillemot, a very sociable bird that nests in a community of more than 200,000 specimens on the cliff. It is so spectacular that it is a stopping place for the tourists who visit Svalbard. From several kilometers away the noise of the guillemots could be heard. As they use the channel to feed themselves, the sea was a serpentine river of feces with its corresponding bad odor.





6.2 The polar bear in the channel (*Ursus maritimus*)



Navigating the Hinlopen Channel on the way to Austfonna, the great glacier wall, we were surprised to discover on an island in the middle of the channel a polar bear. It was resting on the edge of a green crag at a considerable height above the water.

6.3 Austfonna, the great ice cap



Austfonna is a block of ice of 7,800 Km² to the northeast of Svalbard, with a wall of up to 50 meters and decorated with numerous waterfalls produced by the thaw. It is a natural formation of huge magnitude that extends, uninterrupted, for more than 180 Km. It is one of the most enthralling attractions for lovers of extreme landscapes.



7. Storoya, the loney island



Storøya island

We headed to the small island of Storøya, at the extreme northeast of Svalbard, to continue searching for polar bears. The main attraction of this island is a frozen vault that covers the southern half. The northern half is a rough, flat tundra with no mountains.



7.1 Black-legged kittiwake cliff (*Rissa tridactyla*)

In our journey towards Storoya, in the Duve Fjord, we passed in front of a cliff where a large community of black-legged kittiwakes lived.



7.2 Walrus (*Odobenus rosmarus*)



Aboard our Zodiacs we approached a small crag where a large group of walrus was dozing. At about 500 meters from the walrus, on dry land, two polar bears rested, waiting for an opportunity to arise to try and kill a young calf. The polar bears, even though they are the greatest predator, cannot kill an adult walrus that weighs one and half tons. Because of this the polar bears are watching carefully in case a calf gets distracted and they can start the hunt.

It was a clear day, and the sun was at half-mast. We approached the walrus very slowly, in the direction of the sun so we were visible to them. But as soon as we were situated between them and the sun, we became undefined shadows and potentially dangerous, and this provoked a chaotic stampede of the walrus towards the sea. Once in the sea and like a gang of bullies the walrus stalked us at a safe distance to make sure that we left.

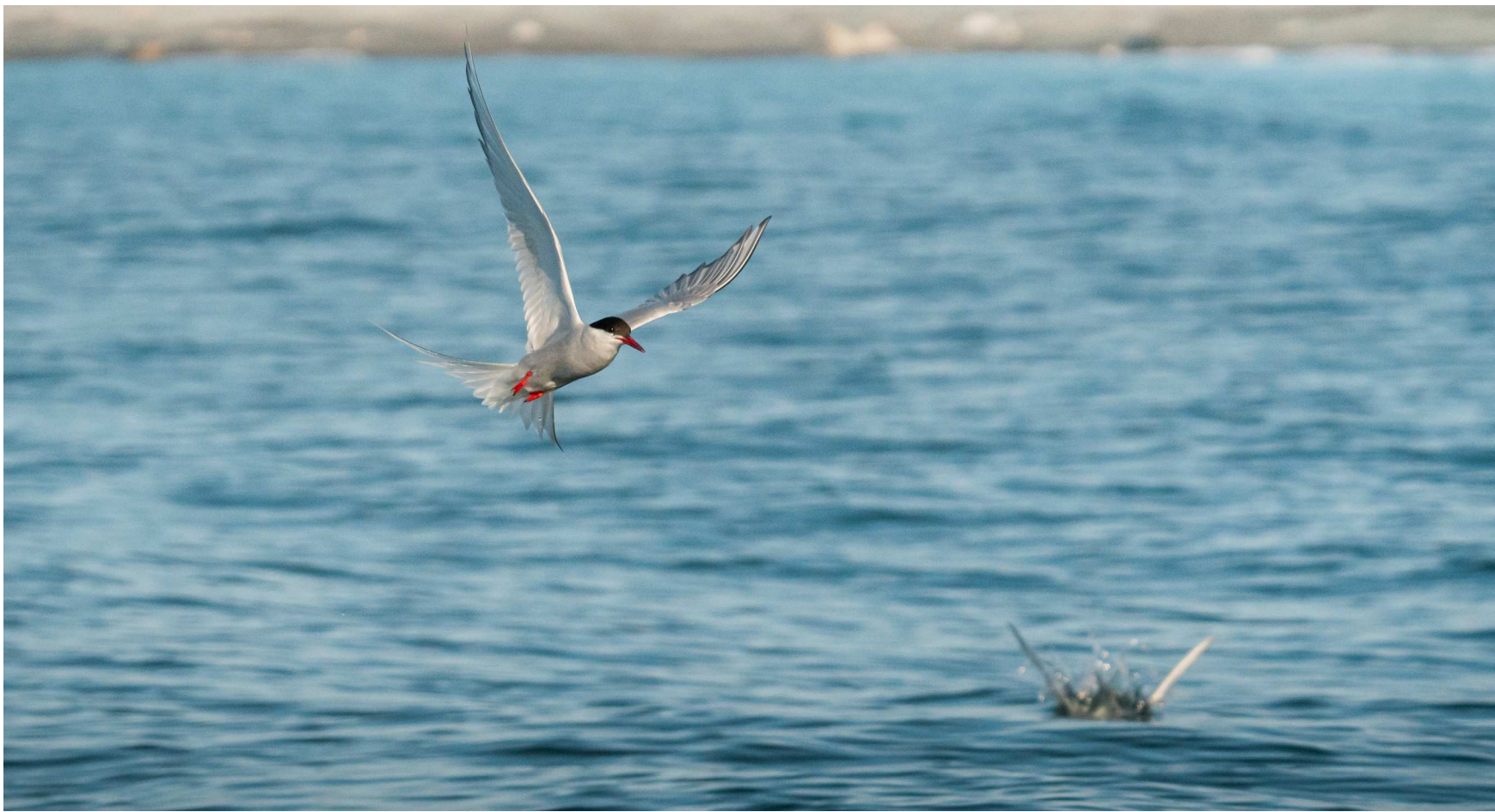


7.3 Arctic tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)

The Arctic tern is one of the most reckless birds, capable of attacking anything that comes near to its nest. This is regardless of if it is another bird, a person or a polar bear. When I was on the outskirts of Longyearbyen an Arctic tern indicated tenaciously that I was too near to the nest and until I finally moved far enough away it stopped diving down at my head, making menacing noises.

In Storoya Island the Arctic terns showed us their fishing method. This consists of maintaining their flight at about 3 meters above the sea and not moving from the same spot, centering their attention on the fish, and launching themselves downwards when they have it in sight.





8. A very alive glacier



Liefde Fjord

In the Liefde Fjord several huge glaciers are gathered together, very close to one another.



8.1 Glacier calving

As previously mentioned, the glaciers are constantly in motion, triggering spectacular landslides of their walls which provoke the resulting surges of waves. The noise that the landslide causes is similar to thunder. Whilst navigating in the Zodiacs, at about 200 meters from the glacier wall, several times this started to come down just in front of us.





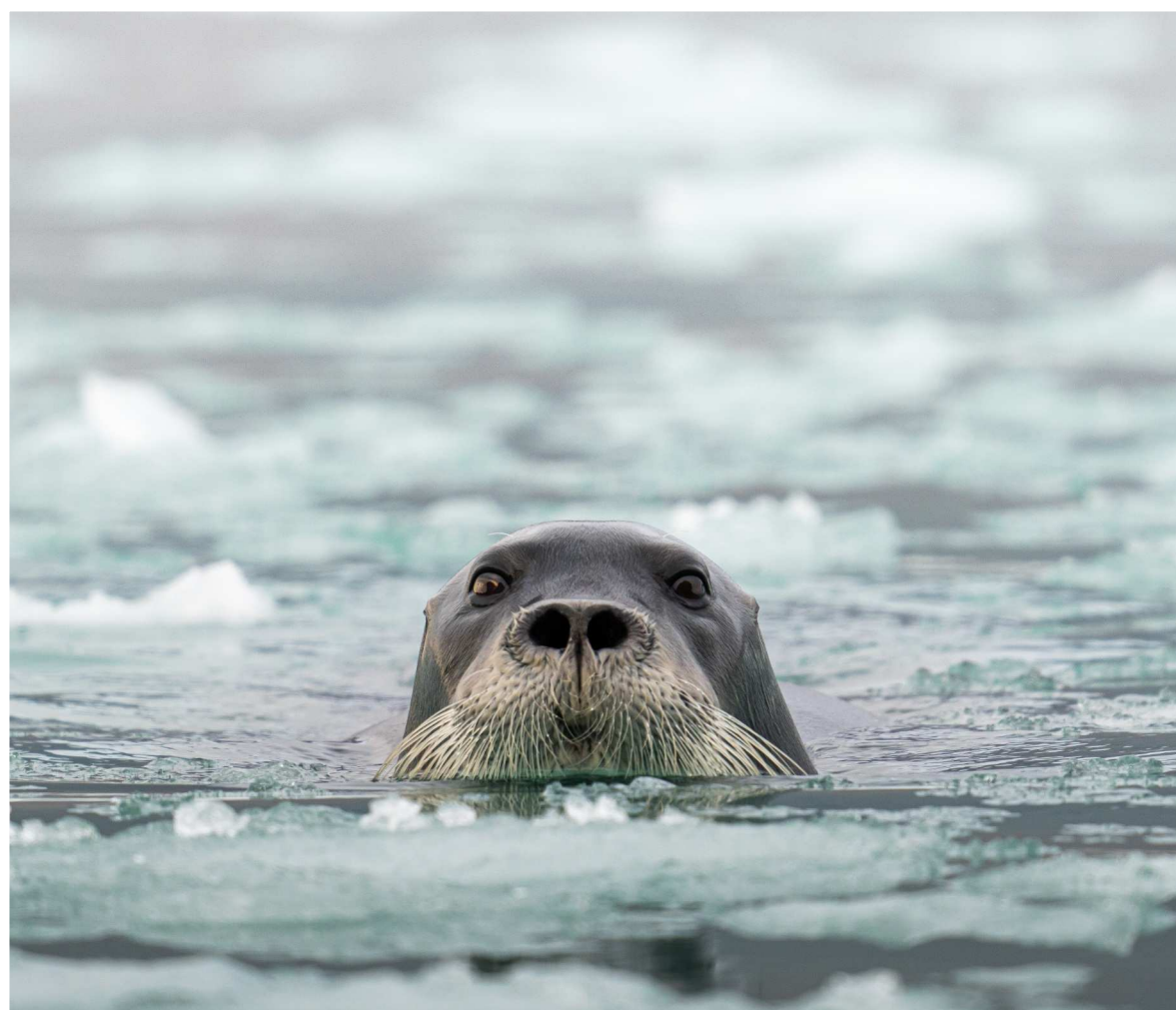




8.2 Bearded seal (*Erignathus barbatus*)



The bearded seal is the largest of the seals, reaching up to 300 kg and measuring 2.5 meters long. Although their predator is the polar bear, only adult polar bears are able to hunt this species. As well as their large size they have a characteristic large moustache that helps them to find mollusks. We could catch sight of several near to the glacier. All of them were very curious and a little daring. They moved closer, only two meters away from our craft and they were constantly submerging and appearing on both sides of the zodiacs, looking at us as if we were their entertainment of the day.

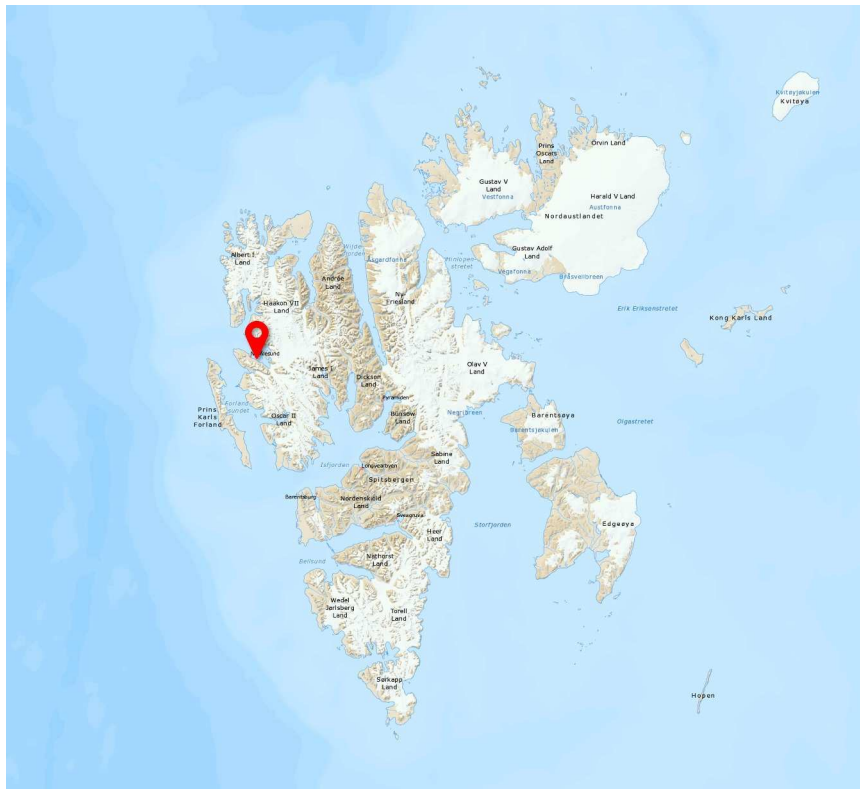


9. The hunt



Kongs Fjord

Today was the first day of rain since I arrived on Svalbard. A soft but constant rain. We arrived at Kongs Fjord, to the west of Svalbard. On one side is a small cliff, where the kittiwakes' nest and bring up their chicks. We got close enough with the Zodiacs to have a walk under the cliff, a place where Arctic foxes can be found. As soon as we arrived one the guides, armed, inspected the surrounding to make sure there were no polar bears near.



9.1 Glaucous gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)



This bird is one of the biggest seagull species. One of its characteristics is that they feed on other birds' chicks, like the kittiwake and we were there when a glaucous gull kidnapped a kittiwake chick while the parents pursued, unsuccessfully, the enormous abductor. The glaucous gull ended up settling on the sea to feed more comfortably on the chick.



9.2 Arctic fox (*Alopex lagopus*)

The Arctic fox is, together with the polar bear, one of the most iconic Arctic animals and specifically on Svalbard. It can measure up to 60 cm and weigh 5 kg, so it is not one of the largest fox species. It stands out because of the change in fur color depending on the season. The fur is white in winter and grey-brown in summer. A small percentage of these foxes maintain a dark color, almost black, all year round. These are called blue Arctic foxes. Like the polar bear, it doesn't have predators. It feeds off everything that it hunts and finds.

As soon as we arrived at the cliff where the kittiwakes' nest, we witnessed a glaucous gull attacking a kittiwake chick, but it was surprised by an Arctic fox that appeared from nowhere. The Arctic fox got the chick and ran away to its den to enjoy the feast. When we were leaving, another fox, with different colored fur, appeared high on the cliff.





Author



Hello, my name is Pablo Trilles Farrington. In this photographic book I wanted to visually and in a summarized format, capture this exciting voyage, mostly by ship, circumnavigating the Svalbard archipelago to photograph its exclusive fauna and incredible landscapes. I have had the opportunity to combine here two of my passions, photography and wild fauna. Each chapter shows, chronologically, those animals and places we found over 10 days.

In Svalbard there are more than 40 different species of birds and mammals, of which we were lucky enough to contemplate more than half, and almost all of them have been photographed and published in this book, with a special mention of the polar bear.

I hope you have enjoyed the content as much as I did preparing it.

If you feel like discovering more photographs and trips, I invite you to visit my web www.pablophotography.info and my Instagram account @pablofarrington.

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