



OCEANWIDE
EXPEDITIONS

Expedition Log North Spitsbergen

14th June – 21st June 2006

M/V Grigoriy Mikheev

ГРИГОРИЙ МИХЕЕВ



The *Grigoriy Mikheev* was built in 1990 in Finland and was designed as an ice strengthened oceanographic research vessel. Of steel construction, measuring 66m (210 ft) long, 12.8m (42 ft) wide, with a displacement of 2,000 tons, she is ideal for the Antarctic region. This former research vessel of the Hydrometeorological Institute in St. Petersburg is manned by an enthusiastic Russian crew so we know that we are in extremely capable hands. During the northern summer she cruises the water of the Arctic Ocean.

With

**Captain – Aleksandr Pruss
and his Russian Crew of 18**

including

1st Mate – Andrey Postnikov
Zodiac Driver – 2nd Mate Valeriy Kovalev
Zodiac Driver – 3rd Mate – Andrey Ivanov
Zodiac Driver – Radio Engineer – Roman Aleksakhin
Zodiac Driver – Able Seaman – Ruslan Kuzmenko
Zodiac Driver – Able Seaman – Igor Voyko
Cabin Stewardess – Alina Zurikhina
Cabin Stewardess – Marina Tattar
Dining Room Stewardess – Lyudmila Santimova
Dining Room Stewardess – Nataliya Dudinskaya

and

Expedition Leader – Rolf Stange (Germany)
Guide/Lecturer – Delphine Aurès (France)
Guide/Lecturer – Troels Jacobsen (Denmark)
Hotel Manager – Jan de Ceuster (Belgium)
Head Chef – Nathan Russ (New Zealand)
Sous Chef – Beverley Howlett (The Netherlands)
Ship's Physician – Dr. Inna Kammerer (Germany)

**And 29 of us from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, The Netherlands, South Africa,
Switzerland, Russia, Zambia, UK, and USA.**

14th June 2006 – Longyearbyen

Position at 16.00: 78°14' N / 15°39' W

Air temperature: 8°C, westerly breeze, light cloud.

Most of us arrived in Svalbard by plane in the afternoon. Boarding of the ship was not until 16.00, which gave everybody a couple of hours to explore the arctic metropolis of Longyearbyen. Many did a bit of shopping but also visited the small and newly re-build museum in this former mining town.

The ship was lying alongside the pier when we arrived and everybody acquainted themselves with their new home for the next seven days. We also met our fellow travellers and our Expedition Leader, Rolf Stange, for an introduction to the rest of the staff. The ship set sail at 18.00. Once under way we also underwent the compulsory and important lifeboat drill; warm clothes, bright orange life jackets and then up to the lifeboats. Our officers and guides explained the procedure. We decided right then that we would better never have to use those life-boats in earnest. Having successfully completed the drill we settled down for dinner. Many of us enjoyed the views in the early evening sunshine as we headed out of the massive Isfjord and north on the west side of mountainous Prins Karls Forland.

15th June 2006 – Kongsfjord – Blomstrandhalvøya, Ny Ålesund, and Liljehöökreen

Position at 07.00: 78°57' N / 11°56' W

Air temperature: 4°C, westerly breeze, scattered cloud.

The morning wake up call came late in the morning at 7.00. Our good ship Grigoriy Mikheev was heading into Kongsfjorden (Kings Bay) where we were to visit the northern most town in the world: Ny Ålesund at 78°.56 N. In the morning however, we made our first landing across the fjord at Blomstrandhalvøya, which is also known as Ny London (New London), where the English entrepreneur (and brilliant fundraiser) Ernest Mansfield once tried to mine marble. He managed to raise a great sum of money from wealthy investors in Britain by convincing them that he had found an entire island of marble of the highest quality. He build up the quarry from 1911-1920 but only sent one shipment of marble back to Britain. When it arrived it had all but crumpled due to minute cracks and change in temperature from the frozen arctic to the more temperate England. Mansfield was never again seen in England and hence was never made responsible for the failure. Despite his eccentricity he was very well liked by local hunters who could always rely on his help if they needed supplies or help in any way.

After an introduction to Mansfield and the historic site we divided the group in three: one hiking group led by Delphine, one group which did not climb all that much led by Troels, and a much more leisurely group led by Rolf. All groups had the pleasure of the fantastic view over Kongsfjord. The hikers saw a still white ptarmigan, and along with the two other groups got to enjoy the rare (in Svalbard) Long Tailed Skua flying above us at only a few meters distance. We also experienced our first encounter with inquisitive Svalbard Reindeer.

During the entire morning Ny Ålesund had been visited by a large cruise liner. Luckily for us, they had all gone when we arrived after lunch. Ny Ålesund is a small community consisting of scientists from all over the world who conduct a variety of research in the fields of atmospheric studies, glaciology, biology etc. A short walk took us into the centre of this historic village passing several Barnacle Geese. There was also an interesting little museum about the early days of Ny Ålesund, when coal mining determined everything here. Life must have been hard for the miners in these harsh conditions; work was usually carried out in a kneeling position deep inside the mountain. We headed for the lattice mast erected in the early part of the 20th century by the intrepid explorers Amundsen and Nobile, who tried to reach the North Pole by a dirigible airship in 1926 and 1928. The mast is only a few hundred meters from the settlement but our expedition staff insisted that everybody stayed close to the rifle in case of an unwanted Polar Bear encounter. Luckily there were no polar bears around this time but a few Svalbard Reindeer was pondering around grazing near the mast. Also, a lone Arctic Fox ran around the scientific equipment at the outskirts of town. After dinner we headed north and into the adjacent Kross Fjord/Liliehöök Fjord complex, where we explored the impressive 7 km wide glacier front of the Lilienhöökbreen (bre = glacier). The weather had completely changed from a rather windy Kongsfjord to absolutely calm conditions with a light snow fall. Our captain took the ship very close the glacier front giving us the best possible view. At less than 100 m distance the depth was some 110 m and the glacier front was estimated to be about 30 m high. Quite remarkable to think that the ice was somewhere around 140 m thick here! Several Bearded Seals were also spotted here on ice floes around the glacier front. After this great experience the ship headed towards the fjord entrance and to the north for another day of hopefully great adventures.

16th June 2006 – Woodfjord, Liefdefjord: Andøyane, Lernerøyane, Monacobreen

Position at 07.30: 79°46' N / 14°04' W
Air temperature: 4°C, calm, overcast.

At 7.30 Rolf once again made the wake-up call announcing that we had made good speed throughout the night and already had arrived in the mouth of the Woodfjord on the North West coast of Spitsbergen. It was to be an eventful morning as spouts from whales was spotted in the middle of breakfast. Everybody rushed outside or to the bridge to see these giants of the sea. Indeed, it turned out to be a quite remarkable sighting of 3-4 feeding Fin Whales



(possibly with a Sei Whale in between) all the way up here at almost 80°N in June!? None of the staff had ever experienced that before. The captain skilfully and carefully manoeuvred the ship towards the whales for us all to get a good look.

Breakfast was hardly over as Rolf announced the first Polar Bear of the trip on the very islands that we were planned to visit: Andøyane (Duck Islands). Everybody got into the zodiacs and we headed towards the island where the bear was lying sleeping close to the beach. As we approached we saw a small cub lying only a few meters from its mother sleeping. Carefully we approached and got a very good look at these great animals. Eventually the cub woke up and saw us (the mother had long kept a good, yet relaxed, eye on us) and crept closer to its mother. We stayed around for as long as Rolf felt appropriate so not to disturb the little family and indeed we left them exactly as we had met them. The mornings excursion was not yet over as the zodiacs turned away from the bear infested island towards another one in this little island group. Here we made a landing on the reddish rocks of the ancient “Old Red” sediment layers, which can be found numerous places around the world. The Duck Islands is named appropriately as we saw several Common Eiders around the island along with some already looted nests. The resident pair of Arctic Skuas had obviously been on the prowl for a while. Yet another couple of bird species was also seen on the island. The small Purple Sandpiper was spotted along side a Ringed Plover in one of the small ponds along with one of the favourite bird species of the Svalbard archipelago: The Grey Phalarope. Both the colourful female and the duller male was seen relatively close up. Normally males are the colourful (and selfish) ones in the animal kingdom, but when it comes to the phalaropes it is opposite. The female runs the show and has the brightest plumage.

A fantastic morning was over with both extraordinary sightings of whales and our first two Polar Bears.

After returning to the ship we headed deeper into the Liefdefjord where we once again took to the zodiacs cruising around a small group of islands called Lernerøyane (Lerner Islands). Here, we made a short landing with a bit of a walk up the hills to see the fantastic view over the end of the fjord and the great glaciers which terminate here.



During our excursion the ship relocated further into the fjord. While most were zodiac cruising the few that stayed behind got a nice look at a pod of about 20 Beluga Whales swimming in front of the ship. The rest of us however, also had a bit of adventure as we sailed between the islands to join the ship

again. This early in the season there is still a bit of fast ice at the head of the fjords as indeed was the case here. The zodiacs went icebreaking on a small scale between the islands as we pushed our

way through to the innermost part of Liefdefjord. Here the ship was parked in the fast ice waiting for us to be picked up again.

All back on board, the captain rammed the fast ice and went a few hundred meters further into the fast ice in front of the magnificent Monaco Glacier. What a spectacle when the ship cuts its way through the 50-60 cm thick ice cover! Fast ice normally also means seals and we were not to be disappointed. Several Bearded Seals lay next to their breathing holes all around. We also saw the Polar Bear with the cubs that we had already spotted from the island along with 2-3 other bears far away in the distance. Dinner was scheduled as a “surprise dinner” and consisted of a BBQ on the aft deck with complementary entertainment from two of our Russian friends. Belly dancing and Elvis impressions in the high arctic!

The ship left the ice again in the evening heading north. It was a spectacular evening with clear skies and great views as we headed into Woodfjord once again. Many enjoyed the snow covered mountains in the midnight sun on deck or from the bridge. We also saw another Fin Whale, which we had a close encounter with. What a fantastic day it had been!

17th June 2006 – Hinlopen Strait: Alkfjellet and Torellneset

Position at 07.00: 79°40' N / 18°21' W

Air temperature: 1°C, calm, sunny.



In the morning the ship was still steaming south through the Hinlopen Strait in order to reach the famous bird cliff Alkfjellet south of the Lomfjorden. Here, some 100.000 Brännichs Guillemots nest among the towering basalt pillars. The sun was shining and conditions were fabulous for the stunning scenery. It is indeed a fantastic place to zodiac cruise as the water is deep right up to the sheer cliff face and the birds in places nest only a few

meters above sea level. All available cameras were steaming hot in the great light on the cliff and on the myriad of birds in the water, on the rocks and in the air. Not only Brännichs Guillemots nest here. The Glaucous Gulls and Kittiwakes are also plentiful here, although obviously not in such great numbers. The Glaucous Gull is one of the largest predatory/scavenging birds in the arctic, and here they live the good life with plenty of prey around. Alkfjellet however, has more than wildlife to offer. The spectacular basalt columns upon which the birds nest is part of a great intrusion of basalt in the otherwise sandstone rock. This intrusion occurred millions of years ago and has now left the interface between the two rock types almost knife sharp as a text book example of the incredible forces of nature.

During lunch we steamed south east towards Torellneset on the south west corner of Nordaustlandet. The area is known to be quite desert like with very little vegetation. However, one big attraction is to be found here too: Walrus. About 20 mostly male Walrus hauled out on the beach, which we initially cruised carefully around for a “sea-side” look at these magnificent animals. Later we landed on the beach at a distance of some 500 m and made a land approach. Not only where there Walrus on the beach. Two were in the water and exceedingly curious about what on earth these strange things on land were all about. They approached to within 10-15 m of us standing on the beach. What a great experience! We then proceeded in orderly fashion along the beach in order to get a little closer to the hauled out animals that we had already seen from the zodiacs. We got to within 50 meters of them and enjoyed the massive animals occasionally quarrelling a bit swinging around there large tusks towards each other. The hierarchy is clear in such a wallow. The biggest males have the say and the privilege of the best spots. Sometimes however, it takes a little convincing for the others to realize. While admiring the Walrus, Belugas where suddenly spotted a bit off the point where we were standing. First a couple of animals passed relatively close to the shore and later they were followed by a pod of more than 50! It was indeed a very extraordinary spectacle to see the creamy white backs and well defined spouts within 150 meters distance. The staff was equally impressed and honestly stated that they had never experienced so many Belugas at this place. Remarkable! Unfortunately, Belugas in Svalbard are notoriously shy so no attempt was made to approach them by zodiac.

We spent around one hour in the presence of the Walrus and Belugas when around half the group returned to the ship. The other half went on a little hike up the desert like hills of Torellneset. It is a series of raised beaches, which is clearly visible as a number of terraces in the landscape. Indeed, they also saw the remaining bones of a whale high in the landscape; a clear indication that it once was the shoreline.

After dinner Troels lectured on Polar Bears in the dinning room. Interest was great and several other subjects were touched upon that evening.



18th June 2006 – Martensøya and the polar pack ice

Position at 07.00: 80°37' N / 21°25' W

Air temperature: 2°C, light breeze, partly cloudy.

In the morning we found ourselves the furthest north so far. Over night the ship had relocated to the Sjuoøyane (Seven Islands) north of Nordaustlandet, which is the second largest island in the Svalbard archipelago. Here we made a landing on Martensøya, which is the eastern most island of this very remote group of small islands. The landing was made somewhat difficult by the large quantities of snow and ice on the coastline, but a quick scouting trip by Rolf and Delphine during breakfast found a suitable place.



Here it is the high arctic climate that rules supreme. Only a very few months a year are the islands free of the pack ice and only the most resilient plants such as lichens and mosses can survive here. Desolate as it looked we still found many traces of animal life. Many tracks of Polar Bear, Arctic Fox, and Reindeer were spotted in the snow and on the beach along with a few Snow Buntings, a pair of Arctic Skuas along with a few Purple Sandpipers. When stepping on the island, one should think it was completely void of higher life forms, but the tracks proved us wrong. Not many of these animals (the mammals in particular) will spend much time here in the summer – indeed they will

most likely starve if they do. They probably came on the pack ice in search of food and stranded here when the ice retreated. Some of them are capable to escape while others will have to wait for the ice to return in order to leave.

The hikers climbed a small mountaintop on the centre of the island getting a fantastic view over these the northern most islands in Europe. Some individuals also got involved in activities slightly less peaceful than what the Svalbard Treaty of 1925 promotes, according to which Svalbard is supposed to be an area completely free of aggressive acts between humans – nevertheless, some of us ended up with a heavy load of snow in their necks!

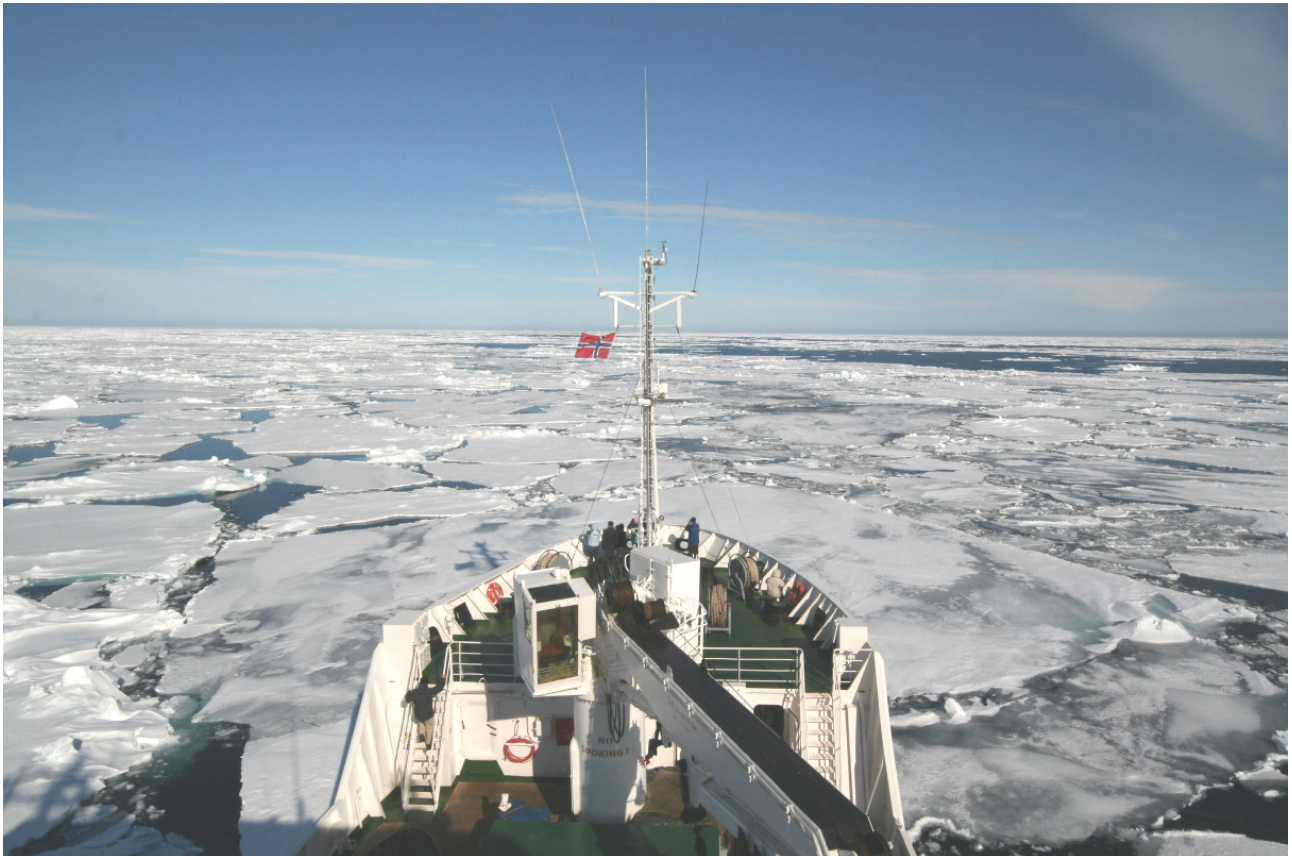
We returned to the ship in good time before lunch, which gave Rolf the opportunity to give a lecture on ice. Meanwhile the ship headed straight north in the search for the pack ice. In an average year the ice will surround the Seven Islands but the ice had already retreated unusually far to the north this year.

The afternoon proceeded northwards as far (almost) as was possible due to the drift ice. Only north of 81° the *Mikheev* ventured into the denser pack. The sun was still shining from an almost

cloudless sky leaving the impressive vast ice fields in a magical bright light. Numerous Polar Bear footprints were spotted on the ice – some quite old and a few ones indeed very fresh. Despite the best effort from our expedition staff no bears were actually spotted although conditions seemed perfect. Several seals, Bearded- along with Ringed Seals, were spotted in the water and on the ice floes here and there. Reaching 81°20'N Rolf decided that a zodiac cruise in the great weather and so very far north would be a good idea and most of us went in the zodiacs. Only minutes after the last zodiac had been loaded fog started to appear in the horizon. Troels and Delphine only just finished a radio conversation about it before it was on top of us. What an amazing speed with which it came! None of the less the zodiac cruise proceeded close to the ship in order to soak in the eerie atmosphere of ice and fog. On this cruise the rather rare Pomarine Skua was spotted.

It was early evening as we returned to the ship and a nice cup of slightly spiced up hot chocolate was served on deck by Jan. The captain took the ship further north and not until we had reached 81°26'N (923 km from the North Pole!) at dinnertime at 19.00 we once again turned southwest. The fog had in the meantime lifted somewhat and let the sun shine through for a spectacular last view of the pack ice.

After dinner Delphine lectured on pinnipeds (seals) of the Arctic.



19th June 2006 – Raudfjord: Hamiltonbukta, Amsterdamøya: Smeerenburg

Position at 07.30: 80°06' N / 13°24' W

Air temperature: 4°C, light breeze, overcast.

The weather was of the very typical high arctic type with mostly overcast, light precipitation and patches of blue sky. All at the same time of course. We had been quite far to the north the previous day and did not arrive in Raudfjord until around 10.00 o'clock in the morning. We anchored off the very picturesque Hamiltonbukta with great pointed mountains on the sides and the relatively small but very dramatic Hamiltonbreen at the end. We started a zodiac cruise on the northern side along the beautiful



cliffs looking for foxes and bears. Tracks from both species were everywhere to be seen in the snow on the hillside but none of the beasts themselves were to be seen. Foxes and bears are particularly attracted to this place because of the bird colonies on the mountainsides at the mouth of the fjord. We headed a bit further into the system and landed at small peninsula where we climbed the hill to get the fantastic view over the bay. At the landing site the remains of a reindeer that had been eaten here recently was found confirming the notion that foxes and bears have been around the bay very recently. The landing was just a little more than half an hour in duration and as we had boarded the zodiacs a Bearded Seal was spotted on an ice floe. They are very weary animals and quite difficult to approach. None of the less we succeeded in getting a good look at it before it disappeared in the water. We then continued the cruise along the glacier front enjoying the spectacular ice front with all its blue and white shades.

During a well-deserved lunch the *Mikheev* proceeded further to the southwest for our afternoon landing. Amsterdamøya is a very famous place in Svalbard history as it was the home of the largest whaling station of the arctic in the 17th century. Already from the ship the staff had observed a big brownish rock, which could in fact be a Walrus hauled out on the beach right close to the whaling



station. Indeed it was, and we approached this magnificent bull to some 30 meters. He seemed all together ignorant of our presence and just kept on sleeping and scratching himself respectively. Having spent some time watching and taking a lot of pictures, the focus turned on the historic part of the landing site. The 17th century Dutch blubber pots now surrounded by lots of drift wood originating

from Siberia allowed only a vague idea about what life might have been like here in the early days. The principal quarry of the whalers was the Greenland or Bowhead Whale, which was hunted to the verge of extinction and has not since recovered in numbers. It is in the family of the Right Whales, as they were the right one to pursue, being a slow-moving animal, which could be approached closely. Whalers worked from quite small sailing ships and made voyages of several years. The actual pursuit and capture of the whales was accomplished from rowing boats carrying about six men. Once the boat had managed to approach within a few meters of a gentle giant hand harpoons were thrown into its body, and when the whale was finally exhausted it was killed with hand lances. The Bowhead whales were towed back to camp, where the oil and the baleen were extracted. Now only the few remains of this once important economic society remains. We pondered around the site trying to imagine how the place must have been like almost 400 years ago as Rolf told the story of the whalers.

We were back on the ship in the early evening and before dinner the course was set to go further into the very scenic Smeerenburg Fjord with its massive glaciers. The captain went to great length to accommodate our hope to see another glacier front close up. Slowly and carefully he brought the ship to within 100 m of the magnificent Smeerenburgreen ice front while we toasted to a great trip on the bow.

20th June 2006 – Store Jonsfjord and Prins Karls Forland: Kingodden

Position at 07.30: 78°21' N / 12°18' W

Air temperature: 6°C, calm, cloudy



During the night the ship had sailed steadily south towards the inevitable final destination the following day. The trip was not over yet however, and in the morning we found ourselves in the mouth of Store Jonsfjord just north of the mighty Isfjord. The *Mikheev* ventured deep into the majestic fjord with its massive glaciers coming down the mountains on all sides. Smaller bits of ice that had been calved from them floated around the end of the fjord making up ideal resting places for bearded seals of which we saw at least five. We even got really close to one of them by great navigation by our captain and made a complete circle around the solid floe on which it was lying. It looked at us a

few times but would not leave its floe for anything it seemed – not even a big ship 25 meters away. Leaving the seal where we met it we suddenly discovered a small group of Reindeer on a hillside close to the coast. Yet again the captain and crew showed their worth by taking the ship nice and close to the coast to get a good look at the Reindeer. The ship then headed for the first landing site of the day on the northern side of St. Jon Fjord. Rolf had picked a spot where we could take a walk on the characteristic tundra of the high arctic. Here there was also a (very) small hut maintained by Sysselmanden (Governor of Svalbard) for the one or the other reason. We split up into two groups. Delphine and Troels went a little inland in order to get a closer look at a couple of Reindeers which we had spotted from the ship, whereas Rolf took a nice and easy stroll on the tundra near the landing beach. The walkers soon had to stop walking as they were approached by two exceedingly

curious young Reindeer. They didn't quite seem to know what to make of us and circled around us with inquisitive looks. Eventually they decided that we were not interesting enough and they headed down into the tiny valley and across to the other side where Rolf's group were standing enjoying the landscape. The two Reindeer also circled that group and hence gave us all a great experience. One can only wonder who was actually watching who...?

In the early afternoon while Jan was settling accounts in the bar, the ship steamed out of Store Jonsfjord and towards the southeastern end of Prins Karls Forland. Here we made our final landing at Kingodden, which added a bit to the adventure of the trip since none of the expedition staff had ever been here before. A pioneer last landing on the last day of our Arctic experience.

14th June 2006 – Longyearbyen

Position at 16.00: 78°14' N / 15°39' W

Everybody left the ship at 9 am and headed to town to do the last shopping before the afternoon flight. The last impressions of this great experience had yet to be really comprehended for most. It is always sad to leave after a good experience but the memories will live on.

Species list for North Spitsbergen aboard Grigoriy Mikheev 14-21 June 2006

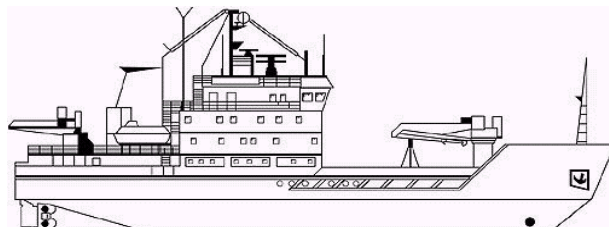
Common Name	Latin name
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>
Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>
Great black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>
Grey Phalarope	<i>Phalaropus fulicarius</i>
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>
Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>
Pomarine Skua	<i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>
Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>
Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>
Ivory Gull	<i>Pagophila eburnea</i>
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>
Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>
Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>
Puffin	<i>Puffinus puffinus</i>
Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>
Rock Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus mutus</i>

MAMMALS	
Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>
Bearded Seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>
Ringed Seal	<i>Phoca hispida</i>
Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>
Fin whale	<i>Balaenoptera physalus</i>
Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>
Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>
Spitsbergen Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus</i>



1. Blomstrandhalvøya
2. Ny Ålesund
3. Lilliehöökbreen
4. Andøyane
5. Lernerøyane
6. Monacobreen (BBQ)
7. Alkefjellet
8. Torellneset

9. Martensøya
10. Ice / Furthest North (81°26'N)
11. Hamiltonbukta
12. Smeerenburg
13. Smeerenburgfjord
14. Store Jonsfjord
15. Copper Camp
16. Prins Karls Forland



Total length of this trip
1014,3 nm / 1878,5 km / 1174 statute miles

Text by Troels and Rolf
Maps and photos by Troels and Rolf
Species list and e-mail list by Delphine

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