



Seabirds of Spitsbergen

Although only one species of bird (the ptarmigan) is able to withstand the harsh Svalbard winters, this Arctic archipelago is a hub for many species of visiting breeding birds, especially sea birds. As you explore the ancient fjords and sail along the untamed coastal waters, you are likely to encounter a range of beautiful and fascinating species which visit Spitsbergen during the summer months. Whether watching the comic mishaps of little auks bouncing off the waves, admiring the carefree glide of the fulmar or watching the startling ivory gull to see whether it will lead you to a polar bear, the seabirds are an enigmatic aspect of any Arctic experience.

Ivory gull (*Pagophila eburnea*)

This striking and surprisingly agile gull is distinctive in its brilliant white plumage. Immature ivory gulls also have white plumage but have a scattering of brownish-black spots on the body and the tips of the wing feathers. Like many other gulls, this Arctic species is an opportunistic feeder, consuming a wide range of foods that it encounters but it is commonly associated with scavenging from kills and these gulls will often follow polar bears and even human hunters to feed on the scraps from their kills. In parts of its range, ivory gull numbers have fallen rapidly. For example, surveys of breeding colonies in Canada in 2002 and 2003 revealed that populations had declined by 80 percent since the early 1980s.



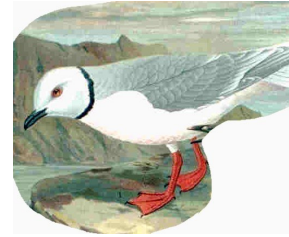
Sabine's gull (*Xema sabini*)

The rare Sabine's gull is a small species of gull, which breeds in the Arctic and has a circumpolar distribution. The species is easy to identify from its striking wing pattern; with adults having a pale grey back and wing coverts, black primary flight feathers and white secondaries. The white tail is forked. The male's hood darkens during breeding season. Their bills are black with a distinct yellow tip. Breeding in colonies on coasts and tundra, a female lays two or three spotted olive-brown eggs in a ground nest lined with grass. It takes a wide variety of animal food and will eat any suitable small prey, often stealing eggs from nesting colonies of Arctic terns. The Sabine's gull is very pelagic outside the breeding season.



Ross's gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*)

This attractive and delicate gull is recognised by its pointed tail and bright red legs, along with its distinctive pink flush to the breast, and a neat black neck ring (both of which are lost during the winter). There is still much that is unknown about this elusive species, with its wintering grounds being poorly known, for example. It arrives on its breeding grounds in late-May where it breeds from early-June in colonies of 2-10 pairs, foraging solitarily or in small, loose flocks. During the breeding season, Ross's gulls feeds mainly on insects, whereas outside of the breeding season and during migration, small fish and surface-dwelling marine invertebrates form the main part of the diet.



Glaucous gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)

The glaucous gull (so called for its colouration) is a large and powerful species, with very pale plumage, with no black in the tail or wings. Whilst adults are pale grey above, with a prominent yellow bill, immature glaucous gulls are very pale grey with a pink and black bill. Breeding from mid-May to mid-June (depending on ice conditions), this species nests either in solitary pairs or small colonies and favours sea cliffs and secluded inshore islands, often close to colonies of other gulls or geese. The glaucous gull is a generalist feeder and eats fish, molluscs, echinoderms, crustaceans, rodents, adult and young birds, eggs, insects, berries and carrion.



Arctic skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)

Like all Arctic skuas, the genus name *Stercorarius* comes from the Latin; *stercus*- (dung) and *-arius* (belonging to), deriving from its habit of scavenging food. Like other species, the Arctic skua practices 'kleptoparasitism' – chasing and harassing other species for their food. This 'aerial pirate' is distinguished by its yellowish-white head and neck, with a black cap. The back is brown with white underparts and the wings have dark primary feathers and a distinctive white "flash". Living for up to 25 years, Arctic skuas feed on other birds, mammals and insects during the summer and by 'bird piracy' in the winter. It has a wide range, migrating between Arctic breeding grounds and overwintering in the Southern Ocean.



Pomarine skua (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)

The word pomarine comes from the Greek: *pomato*- (lid) and *-rhinos* (nose), referring to the lid-like plates on the bill. Although there are various colour morphs of the pomarine skua, the species can be typically recognised by its brown back, mainly white underparts and dark primary wing feathers with a white "flash", which appears as a distinctive double flash. The head and neck are yellowish-white with a black cap. The collar is often diagnostic, as it is typically 'wooly' in appearance and is distinctive in its colouration, usually being a yellowish band. There is much debate on the history of the pomarine skua and it is commonly thought that the species is a recent (15th century) hybrid between great skuas and Arctic skuas.



Long-tailed skua (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

This is the smallest of the skuas; readily recognised by the long tail (which may account for up to 50% of the body length), which is reflected in its name *longus*- (long) and *-caudus* (tail). The long-tailed skua typically feeds on fish and small rodents in the summer breeding months, where it also practices kleptoparasitism but mainly fishes for itself in the winter, during its migration to the Pacific and south-eastern Atlantic. With a grey back, no wing flashes and a very long tail, this species is unmistakable and can often be seen hovering over their nesting areas. Like other skuas, the long-tailed skua is fairly aggressive in nature and will target the head if foxes or people approach the nest.



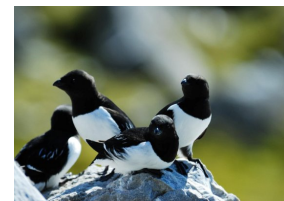
Great skua (*Stercorarius skua*)

Taking its name from the Faroëse word '*skuvur*' skua, the great skua is a large and barrel-chested bird, with streaked greyish-brown colouration, a darker cap and a short, blunt tail. Although it practices the piracy seen in other skuas, the great skua is noted for its ability to attack and kill larger prey and kills birds including the great black-backed gulls and gannets. Its method of piracy is less agile than other skuas and it uses its force and size to bully its victims. The great skua is commonly referred to as the 'bonxie', an old Norse word ('bunki') which means large and dumpy. Its call is a loud and characteristic '*hah-hah-hah-hah*' and the great skua is infamous for its dive-bombing of unwary people venturing too close to nests.



Little auk (*Alle alle*)

With its scientific name deriving from the Swedish word for 'seabird' (*alle*) the little auk is a relatively small seabird, with black upper and white lower colouration, with dark underwings. After breeding in the Arctic, little auks migrate to overwinter in the North Atlantic. With a 'frantic' type of flight, with fast, seemingly-disjointed wing beats close to the water, little auks are often caught in strong winds and are blown off-course, ending up in large 'rafts' lost at sea. Favouring coastal cliffs for nesting, little auks breed in huge colonies throughout their Arctic range and spend the rest of their time out at sea, where they feed on a range of planktonic crustaceans.



Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)

The fulmar, which is related to petrels and shearwaters, gets its name from the Old Norse *fulmar*, meaning 'foul gull', for its anti-predator behaviour of 'vomiting' stomach oil when threatened. Although this oil is an energy-rich food for chicks, when sprayed onto an avian predator, it mats the feathers, which leads to the death of the bird. This mostly-pelagic bird nests on rocky cliffs and females are able to store sperm for several weeks, awaiting favourable weather conditions before laying eggs. Feeding on a range of crustaceans, fish, squid, plankton and even jellyfish prey, the fulmar is able to dive several feet below the surface to catch food. Fulmars fly with stiff wing beats, often close to the water.



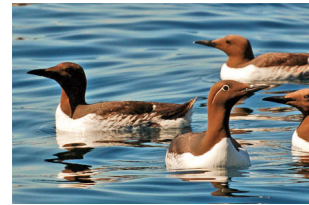
Brünnich's guillemot (*Uria lomvia*)

With a name deriving from the Greek for waterbird (*ouriaa*) and the Swedish for 'diver' or 'auk' (*lomvia*), this striking black and white seabird with dark legs and feet is typically found either on its own or in pairs, along rocky coastlines. Although silent at sea, it produces a raucous cackling call whilst at its breeding colonies. The Brünnich's guillemot differs from the similar common guillemot in that it has a thicker, shorter bill, with a pale 'gape stripe'. The Brünnich's guillemot is one of the deepest underwater divers of all birds and regularly dives to depths of 100 m or more, with some dives exceeding 200 m deep. It can remain submerged for more than three minutes, whilst hunting its main prey; small fish.



Common guillemot (*Uria aalge*)

From the Greek '*ouriaa*' (waterbird) and the Danish '*aalge*' (auk), the common guillemot is a large member of the auk family, inhabiting coastal Arctic cliffs during the breeding season and spending the rest of its life out to sea. During the nesting season, many thousands of common guillemots nest together on cliffs, making it of little surprise that this species has one of the smallest nesting territories of any bird, extending only a beaks' length around the nest (about 5 cm). To combat the problems of nesting on bare rock on steep cliff faces, the eggs of the common guillemot are shaped so that they roll in circles, rather than off the cliff. Although chicks cannot fly for 1-2 months, they can dive almost immediately.



the eggs of the common guillemot are shaped so that they roll in circles, rather than off the cliff. Although chicks cannot fly

Black guillemot (*Cepphus grille*)

From the Greek for a particular waterbird (*kepphus*) and the Swedish word for guillemot (*grissla*), the black guillemot is relatively easy to identify in that it is predominantly black, with bright red feet and large striking patches of white on the edges of the wings. Found in ones or twos, the black guillemot nests around rocky coastal cliffs, remaining at sea for the rest of the year. Strangely, black guillemots show a right- or left- 'handed' tendency in that each bird prefers to store the fish they catch facing a certain way; either facing left or right, hanging out of their beaks. Preferring the Arctic conditions, they only move into the northern Atlantic and Pacific to be able to be near ice-free waters.



Photographs kindly provided by: Patrick Coin, Quentin Goodman, Michael Haferkamp, T Müller, Alastair Rae, Jerzy Straelecki, Will Sweet