

# Spitsbergen

## A Tour for the Alpine Garden Society

### A Greentours Itinerary

#### Day 1 To Oslo

We'll convene in Oslo during the evening at a hotel close to the Airport in preparation for our flight next morning up to Longyearbyen.

#### Day 2 To Longyearbyen

It is a measure of just how far north Spitsbergen (Svalbard) is that having spent more than an hour flying up Norway, it still takes more than another hour to reach these high Arctic islands. And what an arrival. Spitsbergen is famous for its incredible Arctic scenery and you'll get a fantastic introduction to this as the aircraft descends between the dark peaks that erupt from dazzling white snowfields and glaciers. The waters of Isfjorden appear as we land amongst the colourful buildings of Longyearbyen. Mounds of pink line the runway as we taxi to the airport terminal - our first encounter with pretty *Silene acaulis*.

Most of Spitsbergen's 2,800 permanent inhabitants reside in Longyearbyen and facilities and shopping are good there. Our very comfortable hotel has wonderful views over the town and fjord, and of the high-walled valley in which it stands. A glacier snout is visible just two kilometres up the valley! The diminutive Svalbard race of Reindeer graze contentedly between buildings and you'll likely soon catch sight of an Arctic Fox scurrying past the hotel. Immaculate Snow Buntings sing from the hotel gables and flocks of Little Auks hurtle back and forth along the ridgetops. At the furthest extent of the Gulf Stream's influence Spitsbergen has a surprising 165 species of flowering plant and virtually all can be found around Longyearbyen. Abundant Mountain Avens looks superb amidst the barren landscape. Another popular 'townie' is the beautiful endemic Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dahlianum* whose creamy-yellow flowers decorate lichen and sedge dotted turf throughout. Another beauty is the White Arctic Bell Heather *Cassiope tetragona* and this flowers prolifically by the hotel. Mounds of creamy *Saxifraga cespitosa* mixes with *Saxifraga cernua* and pretty *Pedicularis hirsuta*. In fact saxifrages are the most diverse genus here with fourteen species and we'll encounter yellow *hirculus* and *aizoides*, tall *hieracifolia*, and tiny *hyperborea*. The endemic *Saxifraga svalbardensis* flowers with Dwarf Golden Saxifrage and Pygmy and Tundra Buttercups. In sheltered spots Boreal Jacob's Ladder puts forth its exquisite blue blooms. Stunning King Eiders and pure white Ivory Gulls inhabit Isfjorden's coasts and out in the fjord there's Black-throated Diver and Long-tailed Duck.

## Days 3 & 6

### Longyearbyen - Larsbreen glacier, Airport Flats, and Hiorthamn

Arctic tundra reaches right up to the back door of the hotel. *Braya purpurascens*, bright yellow *Draba alpina*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia* in some fine colour forms from white to deep pink, *Saxifraga cespitosa*, golden-yellow *Ranunculus nivalis* burst from the damp mossy areas and delicate palest yellow *Papaver dahlianum* decorates shingle ridges. Further down the road we found *Draba daurica* and *Draba arcticum*, *Cochlearia* and *Saxifraga cernua* in bud. Arctic Tern and Arctic Skua hawk over the flowers as we enjoy *Cassiope tetragona*, pretty pink *Pedicularis hirsuta* and *Potentilla hyparctica*.

Accompanied by our local armed guide (an essential precaution anywhere outside of the town as Polar Bears can turn up anywhere) we'll head up the valley towards the Larsbreen glacier. *Draba pauciflora* and *Draba micropetala* grow together and nearing the glacier we'll find *Draba subcapitata* growing on exposed areas. We'll pass recently melted flushes of vivid green moss and gravelly areas spattered with lovely mats of *Saxifraga oppositifolia*.

Near the airport are sandy flats and shingle bars (a product of ice being crushed up against the shore) and here we find fine cushions of Moss Campion *Silene acaulis*, *Silene furcata*, *Potentilla pulchella*, *Ranunculus sulphurous* and *Minuartia rubella*. Eider are abundant and we may well see Red Phalarope feeding in the pools. There is a magnificent arctic panorama stretching across the Isfjorden bay with rows of snow-streaked peaks and immense glaciers. Around the pools are colonies of yellow *Saxifraga platysepala* a curious species with long bright red stolons. Also common are *Dryas octopetala* and *Draba alpina*.

We'll head across the bay to the old mining settlement of Hiorthamn. On the foreshore were Oysterplant *Mertensia maritima* and among the tundra *Saxifraga platysepala*, *Saxifraga cespitosa* and *Saxifraga oppositifolia*. A boardwalk takes us across soggy tundra and thence to drier slopes dotted with superb Woolly Lousewort *Pedicularis dasyantha* a lovely species with pale pink flowers. Reindeer graze on the plateau where we will find a small colony of *Saxifraga hirculus*.

We'll visit an innocuous-looking slope where there's a colony of gorgeous Boreal Jacob's Ladder *Polemonium borealis*, a refined blue-flowered plant with pinnate leaves. Alongside were many superb Mountain Avens *Dryas octopetala* in full flower, *Potentilla nivea* and fine reddish forms of *Saxifraga cespitosa*. Another specialty here is the Polar Dandelion *Taraxacum brachyceras* a species with appropriately white flowers.

## **Day 4**

### **Adventdalen**

The braided channels and marshes that descend Adventdalen are home to some fabulous plants. *Saxifraga platysepala* has pretty yellow flowers hardly noticed because of the brilliant red runners that loop out from the leaf rosettes. The gorgeous white woolly red-flowered *Pedicularis dasyantha* blooms with Lapland, Snow and Sulphur-coloured Buttercups as well as the sweetly-scented creamy Svalbard Buttercup. Beautiful Red (we call them Grey, but here they really are red) Phalaropes feed along streams and we'll encounter Arctic and possibly Long-tailed Skuas. Purple Braya flowers on dry flats with *Saxifraga oppositifolia* - the latter is quite possibly the commonest flowering plant on Spitsbergen and colours whole areas purple!

The road up towards Gruve has no less than eight species of saxifrage, with *Saxifraga cespitosa*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Saxifraga nivalis*, *Saxifraga cernua*, *Saxifraga platysepala*, *Saxifraga hirculus*, *Saxifraga heiracifolia* and tiny *Saxifraga foliolosa* all present. At the top of road is Spitsbergen's forest. It may be only one-inch tall, but this small colony of Dwarf Birch *Betula nana* is the closest thing there is to a forest on Spitsbergen.

## **Day 5**

### **Fuglefjella**

It is Little Auks that give this hill its name - tens of thousands of them fly back and forth to a breeding colony amid a huge boulder field. A dozen species of *Draba* occur on Spitsbergen and here we'll encounter many of them - white *daurica*, *subcapitata*, *nivalis* and *lactea* and yellow *alpina*, *micropetala*, *corymbosa* and *oxycarpa*. There's also the delightful little campion *Silene uralensis* with its pink-veined inflated calyx. Tiny *Cardamine bellidifolia* flowers among grey and green mosses and lichen-encrusted stones and there's also *Draba norvegica*, *Saxifraga cernua* in flower and the tiny *Ranunculus pygmaeus*.

## **Day 7**

### **Departure**

return to the UK or to Tromsø for the WAL Lapland tour or overnight Longyearbyen before joining the Spitsbergen Cruise

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