

North Atlantic Odyssey

m/v Hondius, 3 – 14 June 2019

This is the trip report of the **ORCA** Cruise Conservationists, Andy Gilbert & Andrew Crowder, aboard the maiden voyage of **Oceanwide's** ice strengthened ship, **m/v Hondius**. The expedition began for us in Aberdeen, UK and finished in Longyearbyen, Spitzbergen taking a course through the east Greenlandic pack ice. All photographs in this report were taken during the expedition by ourselves, unless indicated otherwise.



ORCA Cruise Conservationists, Andrew Crowder (left) and Andy Gilbert

Wednesday 5 June – Aberdeen

Having set sail two nights previously from its home port of Vlissingen in the Netherlands, **Hondius** made port in Aberdeen. Whilst guests enjoyed a choice of on-shore excursions, we joined the ship at midday and spent the afternoon meeting and being briefed by the Expedition Leader and his team. Crossing the North Sea, **harbour porpoise** had already been sighted and, as they approached Aberdeen harbour, guests were treated to an acrobatic show from the resident **bottlenose dolphins**. As we sailed out at 17:00, we were able to officially record them as the first cetaceans of our survey albeit they were less than flamboyant. A **grey seal** was also recorded. After a safety briefing for the 'wet' landing by RIB on Fair Isle tomorrow we collected our mandatory rubber boots and had our first dinner

with the guests. After dinner a group of **white beaked dolphins** passed down the port side of the ship. Little did we know that these were to be the last small dolphin species we were to see on the expedition.



M/V Hondius

Thursday 6 June – Fair Isle

We woke to a morning the Scots call “Dreich” – grey, overcast, light drizzle. Andy was out on deck when a group of birders from the Netherlands reported a **Franklin’s gull** flying past – a real rarity from North America. We dropped anchor off Fair Isle and began our first RIB expedition, landing on the shoreline of a relatively protected beach. On the track up from the bay it was sad to note the remains of the world-famous Bird Observatory, which burnt to the ground earlier this year. With the low cloud and persistent light drizzle this was never going to be a day for spotting cetaceans but the exuberant **puffin, gannet, fulmar** and **arctic tern** colonies provided adequate compensation. We were also able to find nesting light and dark phase **arctic skuas**.



Atlantic puffin on Fair Isle

As we approached the centre of the island one of the local birders had amazingly spotted the **Franklin's gull** amongst a mixed flock of other resting gulls! For most of the birders on the cruise (including ourselves) this was a totally unexpected 'lifer'. We later found out that the bird flew away one hour later and has not been reported again since. How lucky can you get sometimes?



A Franklin's gull (with dark head) amongst a group of other gulls

Well, not always – as we sailed west of Shetland we had hoped to sight **orca**, following all the recent reports from around the islands, but it was not to be.

Friday 7 June – Norwegian Sea

Our first full sea day began at 05:30 in reasonable conditions and early on we had a typical brief sighting of a **minke whale**. Andy called "**orca**" when he spotted the unmistakable fin of a large male off to starboard, which was subsequently photographed by one of the guests. The captain slowed and turned the ship around, however the impressive fin of that apparently lone individual was all we could record. But as we turned back a group of **eight long-finned pilot whales** surged across the bow, showing really well in the choppy waters. Again, the captain turned around to search for them and they reappeared for another close run across the front of the ship, much to the delight of guests who had missed the first pass.





Long-finned pilot whales bursting through the surface of the sea

There were several birds hitching a ride on the decks including **ringed plover**, **dunlin** and a surprising **house martin**. A **northern wheatear** passed the ship pressing northwards towards Greenland, presumably of the sub species **leucorhoa**. That evening Andy gave a presentation on the wildlife we were hoping to encounter on our Arctic expedition, the aims and ambitions of ORCA and our role as Cruise Conservationists. It was very well received by a large audience of 110 guests, who were all clearly committed nature enthusiasts and really looking forward to their Arctic adventure after Andy's excellent appetiser.

Saturday 8 June – Norwegian Sea within the Arctic Circle

We woke before 06:00, having crossed the Arctic Circle a few hours earlier, only to find dense fog which made surveying impossible. After breakfast we went up to the bridge which is open to guests. The fog was only lifting slowly and, with the heavy swell, we decided to start our survey from the bridge. The first thing we noted was that the **house martin** was still with us. One of the expedition team spotted a whale off the port side and we were able to get a sighting but, in the difficult conditions, we could only record a probable **minke whale**. With guests also having bridge access it meant we were able to have plenty of positive interaction with them and, with conditions outside not improving, we ended up staying there all day. A large whale briefly surfaced in front of the ship which we recorded as a probable **fin whale**.

Sunday 9 June – Jan Mayen Island

We again woke early to be greeted by the incredible sight of the snow-covered volcanic cone of Beerenberg on Jan Mayen Island. It is the world's northernmost active volcano and peaks out at nearly 2,300m. We were so lucky that it was a beautiful sunny day because very few visitors get to see it as it is almost always covered in clouds and sea mist.



Beerenberg, the world's most northerly active volcano, on Jan Mayen Island

Indeed, two hours later the mists descended and we never saw the volcano again that whole day. A blow ahead of the ship turned out to reveal our first view of a **humpback whale**.



A humpback whale showing its distinctive dorsal fin

A little later a much larger blow and body was sighted by Mick, one of the guests, which Andy thought looked good for a **blue whale** and Mick's photographs later confirmed the identification.



A blue whale, with distinctive 10m blow and huge size (M. Peerdeman)

Few people ever visit Jan Mayen Island and even fewer are lucky enough to land because of the dangerous Atlantic swells. However, our luck was in. The beach was strewn with huge driftwood logs carried on ocean currents from Siberia. But the most impressive artefacts were the numerous whale bones, including the skull and jaw bones of a large whale, possibly a bowhead. It's impossible to know how long they have been there, possibly even left over from when the island was used as a whaling station. The remains provided a perfect prompt for much interesting discussion with guests about topics such as whale anatomy and hunting.



Huge whale jaw bone – Jan Mayen Island

The island's massive cliffs were also home to huge colonies of **little auk**, **Brünnich's guillemot**, **puffin** and **fulmar**. Back on board **Hondius** we headed north again past two of Jan Mayen's glaciers that came down to the sea and noted the new land that had been formed when the volcano last erupted in 1980. As it faded into the mist we said farewell to this incredible island knowing how privileged we had been to visit it. Later that evening a **long-tailed skua** was seen and **four northern bottlenose whales** (again photographed by Mick) surfaced in front of the ship, passing down the port side and were then watched for some time from the stern. An exciting end to a unique day.



Northern bottlenose whales (M. Peerdeman)

Monday 10 June – Greenland Sea

We were on the bridge at 03:30 today as we were due to pass over a sea mount, the peak of which rose to only a few hundred metres below the surface. Sure enough we found whales – 3 separate groups of **four northern bottlenose whales** and two very large, distant blows with one animal seen fluking. At that distance it was impossible to identify positively but one blow in particular was huge and persistent and was associated with a fluke sighting – to be able to see any part of an animal at that distance strongly suggests we'd tantalisingly passed another blue whale?. Later we had our first arctic seal sighting with a group of **40 harp seals** seen swimming, some characteristically on their backs.



Harp seals swimming in the cold arctic waters

Then, at 10.30, we found ourselves on the edge of the East Greenland pack ice! In order to make quicker progress north we ran parallel to it, keeping to open water. In the evening a call came from the bridge from where they had spotted seals hauled out on the ice up ahead. This turned out to be a widely dispersed but huge group of **harp seals**, perhaps several thousand in total. Our Expedition Leader stated that in all his years of experience he had never seen such a large gathering!

Tuesday 11 June – Greenlandic Ice Pack

We woke to a deep thumping noise resonating through the hull. The Captain had turned **Hondius** into the pack ice for its very first encounter!. **m/v Hondius** is the first registered Polar Class 6 ice strengthened vessel in the world, meeting the IMO Polar Code, allowing her to explore the polar regions with as little impact as possible. Our Russian Captain had over 20 years of experience sailing in the pack ice and he manoeuvred the ship around ice floes whenever possible, slowing down to nudge them out of the way when it was not.



We started in bright sunshine but with intermittent banks of fog. We had stayed out of the ice overnight to reach an area where bowhead whales had been recorded in previous years but the reduced visibility was going to make finding them very unlikely. However, we did see many more **harp seals** and Andy photographed a female **hooded seal**. It was hard to drag ourselves away from the decks but you do have to keep up your energy levels with food – we both agreed that dining whilst looking out onto Arctic pack ice was probably one of the most surreal gastronomic experience of our lives!

Back out on deck everyone was getting excited as we were now seeing polar bear tracks in the snow. Andrew noticed one particular track that split up into two. His photographs showed it was a cub following directly in the footsteps of its mother and then breaking away to make its own path through the snow. Everyone was tantalised by these tracks as it showed that we were truly inside their realm but looking out over the vastness of the terrain and its many ice sculpture forms, no one was in any doubt that finding the animals that had made these imprints was going to require skilful observation and no small amount of luck.

We did, however, spot the ornithological icon of the high arctic, the stunningly beautiful **ivory gull**; for all the birders on board this was the target species of the trip. The bird was a pristine adult and, as it circled the front of the ship, flew in close for some fantastic photographic opportunities.



A beautiful adult ivory gull, seen flying close to the ship

A great first day in the pack ice but you could feel the frustration building on board because we hadn't yet seen either the Ice Bear or bowhead whale.

Wednesday 12 June – Greenlandic Ice Pack

We woke up to a superb sunny, arctic day and as soon as we made it out on deck we were greeted by **three ivory gulls** with their tern like calls. Sailing in the ice pack in these conditions is such a unique experience it's hard to find a reference to compare it to. The environment is silent with the ice pack negating any swell at all; the uncountable shades of blue against white are startling and that is all you can see from horizon to horizon. This emphasised the sounds of the natural world particularly from the many birds. This is not an ice desert – little auks, kittiwakes, guillemots & gulls are everywhere. Most surprising were the large numbers of black guillemots – a bird we normally associate with coastal waters. With all the elements in place it appeared that most of the ship's contingent were out on deck anticipating something special. Then suddenly Mick, who was using a telescope, shouted "Bear!!" It was clearly very distant and people were struggling to pick it up, even as the Captain nosed the ship in the direction of the original sighting. Occasional contacts were called from across the decks but the bear remained frustratingly difficult to pin down. Then, amazingly, there it was in full view - walking across the bow about 5-600m away – the legendary **Ice Bear**, totem of the Arctic. We stood off as it moved around apparently unconcerned, occasionally staring at us, trying to work out what we were. It is amazingly possible that this animal has not seen a ship in its entire life, let alone in its ice kingdom. It continued to walk around sniffing the air and at one point raised itself on its front legs onto a mound of snow to gain more height to better test the air. The pose was simply majestic, even when it went into a huge yawn! It continued to pace around, jumping from floe to floe and swimming readily when the gaps were too large. It also dropped into the snow rubbing itself on its underside before flipping onto its back to do the same; this is a mechanism for removing water from its outer coat to remain dry. Our contact lasted about one hour and we started to pull away as it swam off in the opposite direction. The expedition crew log and report all sightings of **polar bear** and rate them on a Standardised Fatness Index as a marker of health. Our bear was an adult male with an index score of 4, which meant he was in peak condition.





A magnificent polar bear

But it didn't stop there. Most people were recovering inside when reports of a **narwhal** sighting started circulating. Everyone dashed outside and it became apparent the sighting was genuine but despite the best efforts of all it could not be picked up again. It later transpired that an ORCA volunteer, Dave, who was on board as a guest, had been one of the few people to see it and had photographic evidence to prove it was indeed a female **narwhal!**



A female narwhal (D. Newall)

A seal was then spotted lying out on the ice up ahead and the Captain steered the ship slowly towards it. Aware of our presence the seal seemed totally unconcerned and allowed an incredibly close approach. With the ship's engines silent

the sound of several hundred camera shutters must have been a completely foreign sound to this animal, which was an immature male **hooded seal**.



An immature male hooded seal resting on the ice

Leaving the seal behind and moving into a patch of relatively open water, a call came down from the bridge of a whale sighting up ahead. We edged forward slowly but for a long time nothing was found. Then a few of us spotted a large body barely breaking the surface, which sank almost immediately. This surely had to be our most sought-after cetacean of the arctic?.... but we desperately needed confirmation. Patience paid off as the animal surfaced again after about 10 minutes and stayed up for several minutes. We were able to record it as the first ever **bowhead whale** on an ORCA survey. This species is often described as having the profile of an elephant swimming and it really is true! It moved slowly across the surface, blowing gently and sinking down twice more. We were occasionally able to glimpse the diagnostic lower jaw of the species but it was the massive girth of the body that really made an impression – like no other species we had seen before. The Bowhead then arched itself for what was obviously going to be a deeper dive and, for one brief moment, we thought it might fluke but after showing a small amount of tail stock it sank out of sight.



The distinctive profile of a swimming bowhead whale

Our adventure into the Greenland pack ice was now drawing to a close as the Captain turned **Hondius** east towards Svalbard but the impact of last few hours would last everyone a life time.

Thursday 12 June – Svalbard

Hoping to survey as we came onto the continental shelf we were up again at 05:00, only to find out that the ship had sped up during the night and passed over that interface some three hours previously. It was grey and overcast as we had for our first view of Spitzbergen, the largest island in the Svalbard archipelago. We didn't record any cetaceans as we passed to the west, heading towards Prins Karls Fortland (*Prince Karl's Island*). We did, however, sight **reindeer** on shore; the **Svalbard reindeer** is this smallest subspecies in the world with particularly short legs and stocky body. After breakfast it was time for our first RIB safari of the day. We had been briefed the night before about potential polar bear contacts ashore and how they would be managed. This included being marshalled at all times by members of the expedition team equipped with rifles. We were taken ashore in small groups to visit a known haul out of **walrus** and there they were, at the end of a sand spit called Poole-pynten. Apart from a few in the water, they were all sprawled across one another in an almost solid pinnapedic mass, so we could only estimate their number at 40-50 individuals. They were all males - which meant they were impressively huge with large tusks – and they come down from the Russian arctic outside the breeding season, leaving the females behind. Visiting this colony is strictly policed by numbers, distance and time but everybody enjoyed a special encounter.



A haul out of male walrus

We returned to the ship and sailed into Isfjorden (*East Fjord*) on Spitzbergen for another RIB excursion to a glacier in the bay of Yoldiabukta. As we sailed in Andrew spotted the remnants of a whale blow dead ahead, which was followed soon after by the characteristic full blow of a **humpback whale**. The animal's body then appeared and went into a fluke dive. By the time it repeated this sequence again alongside the ship most of the passengers had made it out onto deck and the tail disappeared to a loud cheer! Whilst this was happening a guest told Andrew that he thought he had seen a fin ahead of the ship. Almost immediately a **minke whale** surfaced across the bow and then another, travelling in the opposite direction. Each whale then surfaced two more times and both were clearly feeding. The excitement had not subsided when **three walrus** were spotted in the water, jostling with one another. They eventually came right alongside and camera shutters were being hammered again. As we were still on effort we could record **walrus** in our survey, whilst both ourselves and the packed decks of guests were treated to a stunning display of marine nature.

The final RIB excursion then began with groups being taken around the bay and to the face of the glacier. **Walrus** surfaced close to several boats and also one very inquisitive **harbour (common) seal**. Each group then went ashore to walk closer to the glacier; a deep rumble proclaimed the fall of a large mass of the ice face into the water with a spectacular splash that sent the large flock of **eider** scurrying for safety. The flock was a mix of **common eider** and their more flamboyantly attired cousin, the **king eider**. Amazingly, we were also able to pick out a male **Steller's eider** – a species normally found in the eastern arctic. It was completely unexpected as it is a mega rarity in Europe in full breeding plumage. For almost all the birders it was another 'lifer' and neatly bookended the trip remembering the **Franklin's gull** on the first day.



A mixed group of common & king eider with male Steller's eider (centre)

We all went back to **Hondius** very happy and joined the Captain, all the crew and expedition team for a toast before our final dinner together. During dinner we sailed into the port of Longyearbyen and docked alongside.

Friday 13 June – Longyearbyen

Guests started to disembark in groups from just after midnight (although in full daylight, as the sun never sets here at this time of year) to take flights back to Oslo and then onwards towards home. **Hondius** was to stay in Svalbard, using it as a base for expedition cruises around the archipelago for the rest of the summer.

*We extend our sincere gratitude to **Oceanwide** for providing us with the opportunity to showcase the incredible wildlife of the arctic to guests and enabling us to collect vital scientific data for the conservation of cetaceans. We would particularly like to thank **Captain Alexey Nazarov** and crew, **Jan Belgers** and his expedition team and **Michael Frauendorfer** with all the hotel staff aboard **m/v Hondius**, for making us feel so welcome and facilitating our role as **ORCA Cruise Conservationists**. To all the **Oceanwide** guests, it was a real privilege to share this experience with you and hope that our presence helped you to make the most of the wonderful wildlife and, with that as our inspiration, we all renew our efforts in supporting the cause of conservation.*

***ORCA** is one of the UK's leading whale and dolphin conservation charities, dedicated to the long-term protection of whales, dolphins and porpoises (collectively known as cetaceans), and their habitats. For more information about us, please visit our website www.orcaweb.org.uk*

Bird Species Recorded (on & off board)

Northern Fulmar	Northern Wheatear	Dunlin
Northern Gannet	House Sparrow	Purple Sandpiper
Great Cormorant	Starling	Long Tailed Skua
Herring Gull	Ringed Plover	Little Auk

Kittiwake	Barn Swallow	Brünnich's Guillemot
Great Skua	Shag	Glaucous Gull
Goosander	Arctic Skua	Great Northern Diver
Common Guillemot	Black Guillemot	Red Throated Diver
Razorbill	Hooded Crow	Ivory Gull
Atlantic Puffin	Common Gull	Steller's Eider
Greater Black-Backed Gull	Arctic Tern	Barnacle Goose
Franklins's Gull	Twite	Pink-Footed Goose
Common Eider	Skylark	Long Tailed Duck
Manx Shearwater	Rock Pipit	Rock Ptarmigan
Meadow Pipit	Snipe	Snow Bunting
Rock Dove	House Martin	Gyr Falcon