



## Baffin Birding - Observing birds at the Floe Edge

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**by Lev Frid** It's obvious that the wildlife highlights of the popular "[Baffin Island Floe Edge: Polar Bears and Narwhals](#)" tour is the namesake mammals, and, having done this tour twice - I can attest that this is certainly true. Seeing a massive Polar Bear feeding on a seal carcass only a few metres away or getting your first view of a pod of "sea unicorns" are memories that last a lifetime. However, there is another wildlife spectacle that we lay witness to when we travel here, to the end of the earth, which is happening constantly at this time of year and can be a great distraction while we wait for the bears or whales.



*Polar Bear at Floe edge © Lev Frid*

What I'm referring to is the spring migration of breeding birds to their breeding grounds here in the High Arctic. Our tours, which run anywhere between late May and mid-June, not only coincide with the best times to [see Narwhals and Polar Bears](#), and the ease of travel on the ice, but also with this great movement of birds. These are animals that have spent their winter in faraway places such as offshore West Africa, the tip of South America and elsewhere, and are returning to the seasonal bounty of the arctic to breed. The first birds you will notice upon arriving in Pond Inlet are likely the Common Ravens. These large, black birds are one of the only species that spends their lives here year-round, even through the eternal darkness of winter. In spring, however, they are joined by a variety of others. Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs are small, sparrow-like songbirds whose tinkling songs reverberate through Pond Inlet during the spring - day and night. These have spent their winters in agricultural areas in the United States and southern Canada - but some of the travelers you will encounter on the floe edge itself have gone much further. The most obvious birds on the floe edge are gulls. The most common of these is the large, white-winged Glaucous Gull - very common especially at seal carcasses. There, you may find another species, the Iceland Gull, which is slightly smaller and has darker wingtips. If you are really lucky, you may see the "mythical" Ivory Gull, an all-white small gull with a green bill whose rarity and normally close association to the inaccessible floating pack ice makes it a birdwatcher's dream. These gulls don't go very far from Baffin Island in the winter, but another common gull is a bit of a traveller. Black-legged Kittiwakes, which can be told apart from the others by its tiny black wedge on the wingtip and buggy black eyes (and black legs - if you can see them!) winter in the Labrador Sea and make their way up here to breed. The colony at Bylot Island is one of the more northerly in the world. Flocks of migrating kittiwakes are a common sight in May and June at the floe edge - but look carefully. One day, while we were waiting for some Narwhal to appear - we noticed a pink gull with a flock of white kittiwakes. This was none other than the Ross's Gull - a gull that breeds in very small numbers in Arctic Canada and is one of the most mysterious birds in North America, almost never seen except by researchers venturing to their breeding islands. It was likely on its way further north. It was an incredible moment and just goes to show that anything can happen at the floe edge!



*Ross's Gull © Lev Frid*

Another group of birds that demands attention at the floe edge are the jaegers. At a glance they may seem just like dark gulls - but closer inspection reveals beautiful, sleek predators with fancy tail streamers that make them look almost tropical. There are three species here - the light, tern-like Long-tailed Jaeger, named for its long tail plumes, the large, bulky Pomarine Jaeger, which has tail feathers the shape of spoons, and the Parasitic Jaeger, which is named for the behavior that all three species exhibit of stealing food from gulls and other seabirds. While they are pirates at sea, they feed mostly on lemmings, insects, and nestling birds where they breed.



*Long-tailed Jaeger © Lev Frid*

There is something remarkable about the jaegers besides their fancy tails, however. Long-tailed Jaegers, for example, winter in a small area off the coast of West Africa - a place you would otherwise never associate with the Canadian Arctic. The other two jaeger species can winter as far south as Antarctica, closely following the world's longest avian migration famously conducted by the Arctic Tern (whom you should also watch for), without receiving any of the credit! It's difficult not to notice the black-and-white, penguin-like birds at the floe edge - Thick-billed Murres, relatives of the more well known Atlantic Puffin. Another small alcid passes through here, but you'll need sharp eyes to notice it. It is the Dovekie, a seabird barely bigger than a House Sparrow. Ducks are also common at the floe edge, and are mostly represented by the eiders. Eiders are large, powerful birds that are usually seen flying past in medium-large sized flocks - sometimes inland over camp! Watch for the King Eiders, with the males having impressive, colourful adornments on their faces - for which they are named. The Common Eider, with its own unique take on facial ornaments, is larger. One of the more remarkable things about eiders is that unlike the other seabirds discussed above, many do not leave the High Arctic in the winter. They concentrate in areas called polynyas, where currents keep water open year round - however, this can be a gamble. Smaller polynyas that form may not last through the entire winter - indeed, when a cold snap occurs, hundreds of eiders can freeze. It is one of the risks they take in their attempts to be the first to arrive on their breeding grounds.



*King Eiders flying © Lev Frid*

Regardless of whether or not the birds you're looking at on the floe edge spent the winter nearby or far away, you will have a much more enjoyable trip if you take some time and learn a bit more about them. Not only does this make for a more meaningful journey, but it also helps you understand the struggles that people and wildlife face while living here, at the edge of the world. Besides - one of the key facets of mammal watching is patience, and it makes it that much easier if you can appreciate the ever-present birds while waiting for the big guys to show up. Who knows, perhaps your trip highlight will be something you've never expected!



*Northern Fulmar © Lev Frid*