

## Photo Itinerary - Svalbard

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*Editor's Note* - Thumbnails are links to larger images, presented in slide show format.

Not many people are familiar with the Svalbard archipelago, and this might be one of the reasons why it is such a splendid place for nature photographers. The archipelago lies at 78° N and only 900km away from the North Pole. Although being that far north in the arctic region, due to the circulation of warm wet air from Western Europe and the Northern Atlantic its winter temperatures are not much different from those encountered in the French Alps. This explains the relatively wet, mild climate and the narrow range of temperatures in encountered in Svalbard.

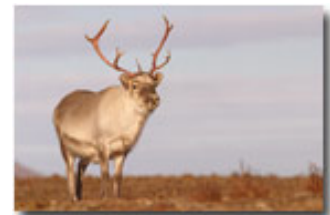
Although the archipelago does provide great conditions for nature photography throughout the whole year, spring and summer are most certainly the best periods to visit the islands. During this time the archipelago turns into a bird paradise with approximately 30 species of birds breeding throughout the summer, including Red-throated Diver, King Eider, Long-tailed duck and the only native bird, the Svalbard Ptarmigan. As all these birds are not used to human encounters, most of them will only give you a glance and continue their daily routine allowing you to make the best of the photo opportunity. The mid-summer light provides plenty of sweet warm light for 24 hours a day, but it's at its best during midnight hours.

But Svalbard is certainly not only a bird photographer's heaven, its majestic scenery makes it very interesting for the landscape photographer as well. Alp-like summits rise from the ocean up to about 1700 meters along the southwest and northwest coasts of Spitzbergen, which is the biggest island of the archipelago. These mountains are mostly covered by an ice-cap which is several hundred meters thick. Between all those mountains and glaciers, fields of bare rock (arctic desert) and arctic tundra can be found. Especially at the end of summer, when the arctic tundra turns orange and the light is at its best, the wide landscape offers excellent potential for the landscape photographer.

Due to the fact that Svalbard's animal population is island-based, there are only two species of land mammals found in the archipelago. The Svalbard Reindeer is the only herbivore found at Svalbard. With a population between 10,000 and 12,000 animals, these reindeer can be seen practically anywhere in the archipelago. The Arctic Fox is a regular visitor on the islands, particularly along the coastline near the big seabird colonies. Although they are still extensively hunted (especially around the capitol, Longyearbyen) the population still exceeds 2000 animals.

Most of the mammals are found near the coastlines and include a large variety of water mammals, including several species of whales and seals. If you want to photograph walrus, you have to go north as far as 80°N where Svalbard's largest walrus colony is found on the island of Moffen. Although human access has been banned from the island since 1983, walrus can be found throughout the whole area. Most certainly one of the most impressive mammals found in the arctic is the polar bear. The polar bear covers a large range of territory as it is forced to move around in search of food. Although polar bear might be very interesting and high on the "wish-list" of many nature photographers it is not recommended to photograph them at Svalbard. The polar bear is the largest carnivore in the world and can reach a weight up to 700kg. It is not recommended to spend time in the field with these impressive mammals, as they'll most likely be very hungry in spring and summer. Svalbard polar bear have absolutely no experience with humans and will see us as a way to survive. Svalbard is definitely worth a visit but one should keep certain things in mind:

- Due to the danger of meeting polar bears it is forbidden to go out in the field on your own
- When going out in the field one is advised to carry a rifle, which may only be used in case of self-defense when being threatened by a polar bear. A rifle can be rented in Longyearbyen but keep in mind that a rifle-training is also needed, which might be expensive



- When one sees a polar bear in the distance it is forbidden to go any further in that direction. If polar bear are high on your “want to photograph” list you would be better off visiting Churchill, Canada

Aside from these drawbacks, visiting this beautiful archipelago can be a wonderful experience. Boat trips can be booked in Longyearbyen and there are even some photography tours available with professional guides who will protect you against any polar bear threat with their high-powered rifles. Although Longyearbyen might not look like a place where you want to stay for a long period of time, the area around it does provide one of the better opportunities for wildlife photography.

### What to bring?

When you want to visit Svalbard in spring or summer, you will encounter 24 hours of good light on a clear day. Therefore it is recommended to bring enough film or digital media to store all your photographs. Film can be purchased in Longyearbyen but might be very expensive.

Longyearbyen has only one road, making nature photography almost impossible to do from the car. Most photography will include extensive walking and one should be well prepared for that. A good photography backpack, which can also take enough food and drink, is highly recommended.

When you plan to make a boat trip, a lens in the range of 70-200mm will be useful as most birds will fly by close to the boat. It is possible to obtain frame-filling photographs of many bird species with a 70-200mm, but for most of the work a 300mm or longer lens is needed to make sure you won't disturb the animals. For wildlife I used a 300/2.8 with a 1.4 converter to keep myself at a comfortable distance from my subjects.

Due to Svalbard's location, fog and clouds are the biggest obstacles for photography. For that reason I used fill-flash quite often in combination with a Better Beamer flash extender to brighten up my subjects. A sturdy tripod or beanbag is recommended as well.

Although Svalbard's weather is relatively mild, it still remains close to the North Pole and the average temperature in spring and summer varies between  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $+5^{\circ}\text{C}$ . As with most islands, you could experience strong and steady wind, which will yield a wind-chill temperature between  $-11^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Although you could also experience days with temperatures as high as  $+21^{\circ}\text{C}$ , one should still be prepared for low temperatures by bringing enough clothes.

### How to get there?

During spring and summer season, planes fly from the mainland of Norway twice a day (depending on the fog). Information about those flights can be gathered from Scandinavian Airlines, which is the only company flying at Longyearbyen.

Besides the drawbacks mentioned, Svalbard is an exceptionally beautiful place where you really can “be one” with the surroundings, a unique yet satisfying place for both wildlife and landscape photographers.

*Editor's Note* - Visit Jasper's website at [www.doest-photography.com](http://www.doest-photography.com) and his [online portfolio](#) to view more of his work.

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