

Arctic fox

Latin: *Vulpes lagopus*
French: Renard Arctique

German: Polarfuchs
Norwegian: Fjellrev



Photo: Robert Mark Lehmann

The cunning bi-colored hunter

The Arctic fox, also known as the **white fox**, **polar fox**, or **snow fox**, is a small-sized fox native to and common throughout the Arctic. It is well adapted to living in cold environments.

Facts

The Arctic fox is an incredibly hardy animal that can survive temperatures as low as -58°F (-50°C). The defining feature of the Arctic fox is its deep, thick winter fur, which provides superior insulation and allows it to maintain a consistent body temperature. Its thick furry soles or pads allow the Arctic fox to walk on both snow and ice without losing too much body heat. Arctic foxes' thick winter fur is in stark contrast to its remarkably thin summer fur.

The Arctic fox can be seen on islands and on continents throughout the entire Arctic including Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Russia, Scandinavia and Iceland. It mostly inhabits tundra and pack ice, but is also present in boreal forests. Arctic foxes have even been spotted on sea ice close to the North Pole.

Arctic foxes give birth to their pups in burrows, and in a blizzard, they may tunnel into the snow to create shelters in

the treeless tundra landscape. The fox's thick tail (or "brush") aids its balance and is essential for keeping warm in winter. The Arctic fox's extremely insulating winter fur minimizes its exposure to the cold air. Also, its muzzle, ears and legs are short, which helps conserve heat. Arctic foxes change from a thick insulating winter fur to the much thinner summer fur with the seasonal molt. Arctic foxes come in two color morphs, white or blue. Most individuals belong to the white morph (approximately 97-99 percent of the circumpolar arctic fox population), that is uniformly white in the winter to be able to camouflage itself and blend in with the snow and ice. In the summer, it is greyish-brown on the back and thighs and yellowish-white on the belly and the flanks. The blue morph remains charcoal colored all year round, but becomes somewhat lighter in winter. The summer colors of the fox's coat make it possible for the animal to blend in with the colors of the Arctic tundra's rocks and vegetation.

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Photo: Quark Expeditions

Arctic fox normally gives birth to 2–10 pups, in dens. The pups weights 50–65 grams.



Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

Rabies is present in Arctic regions. Never touch or handle dead foxes.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

The Arctic fox's fur changes color with the seasons. In most individuals it is white in the winter to be able to camouflage itself and blend in with the snow and ice.

These colorings help foxes to effectively hunt many creatures such as: lemmings, voles, ringed seal pups, fish, waterfowl, geese and seabirds. It also eats carrion, berries, seaweed, vegetables, insects, and other small invertebrates. When food is scarce, Arctic foxes will follow polar bears to eat the scraps from its kills. Arctic foxes are often perceived as trusting and unafraid, but they are usually wary, particularly when they have pups (May–August).

The Arctic Fox is a well-known “host” of the mouse parasite – a tiny tapeworm that lives in the intestines of the fox or other canine species such as arctic dogs. Infested foxes excrete the parasites eggs into the Arctic vegetation or terrain, and people who then accidentally ingest them – for instance after touching this vegetation and putting their fingers in their mouth – are at risk. The eggs travel to the liver, hatch out, and can then cause cysts which are often fatal if not detected and removed.

Regulations

It is a violation of Svalbard's Environmental Protection Act's general principle of protection to disturb foxes. According to the act, “All species of flora and fauna, including their eggs, nests and lairs, are protected ...” and “all access and passage in Svalbard shall take place in a way that does not harm [...] or in any other way [...] result in unnecessary disturbance of animals.” (Section 25 and 73 of Act of 15 June 2001 No.79 Relating to the Protection of the Environment in Svalbard)

In other regions of the Arctic national and local regulations may include other or different provisions. Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is a great experience. To avoid disturbance when close to Arctic fox, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

Guidelines

- Arctic foxes may be inquisitive. Stay quiet and let the animals approach you and not vice versa.
- Foxes that live near settlements, cabins and camps grow accustomed to humans, and if they are fed, they gradually lose their natural fear. Never feed or attempt to touch Arctic foxes.
- Limit your time in proximity around foxes to avoid unnecessary habituation.
- Do not intentionally walk into areas with fox dens between June and mid-August. If you accidentally find yourself in a foxhole area, retreat quietly the way you came.
- Keep distance to known fox dens, if possible 500 – 1,000 meters depending on the terrain. Dens are often located near the shore, close to bird cliffs.
- Female foxes can give birth to large litters of pups. Sometimes more than 10. If fox pups approach you, leave them alone.
- Rabies has been detected in Arctic regions. Some animals, such as the arctic fox, arctic dogs and arctic wolves are potential carriers of rabies. Close contact to arctic foxes is potentially dangerous because of rabies. Fox bites can be dangerous to humans. Never touch live or dead wild animals. Inform local authorities if you observe dead animals or animals that might carry the rabies virus.

Signs of disturbance

To avoid unnecessary disturbance of foxes, observe the animal's behavior. If foxes show signs of disturbance, retreat quietly the way you came. If a fox is barking, yelping, or warning its pups, you might be too close. Other visual signs of disturbance can be the flattening of ears, a tail pointed upwards, or behavior suggesting the fox is attempting to flee. An Arctic fox will protect its den and its pups, and during the denning time foxes are most sensitive to disturbance.

Birds in the Arctic



Photo: Lisa Haglund

Experiencing – without disturbing – Arctic birdlife

Birdlife in the Arctic is diverse yet unique. The Arctic summer is short and hectic and the weather can be a challenge even during the summer months. The large numbers of birds during this period is a distinctive feature, since most bird species only spend the summer in the Arctic.

Species living in the Arctic have a high number of natural challenges, primarily related to various predators. Although there are not so many different species of birds in the Arctic, ten thousand individuals of a single species can occur in one

general area. Especially the sheer number of birds in well-preserved Arctic colonies and the overwhelming sight and sound does not fail to impress. In large bird colonies, there are often several different species living side by side.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Brünnich's guillemot. The ideal nesting site is located with no access for predators.



Photo: Georg Bangjord

Glaucous gulls have their name from the Latin word "glaucus" denoting a bluish-green or grey color.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Grey phalarope, male, one of several arctic waders.

Respect and awareness

It is important that people visiting the Arctic are observant of the bird life around them in order to avoid unnecessary negative impacts. Show respect and sensitivity – especially in the most vulnerable periods and places. The individual species in the Arctic often have small margins for success in the breeding and growth period. There are periods during the summer when the birds are more vulnerable and sensitive. This is especially the case during pair-forming and throughout the breeding season, but also during molting and the juvenile stages.

There is considerable variation in nesting periods between different species of birds in the Arctic. Some lay eggs in the last half of May while others are still incubating in August.

Most species however, have finished the most vulnerable part of the breeding cycle in late July. It is generally difficult to spot the well-camouflaged eggs and chicks of Arctic birds. Be aware of where you set foot in order to avoid stepping on eggs and nests – particularly those of waders and the Arctic tern. Arctic terns are common in many areas of the northern high latitudes and will attack intruders to protect their eggs and chicks. Terns often nest in large colonies in places where there are little or no foxes. Adjacent to such colonies other species often nest to take advantage of the aggressive protection by terns.

Regulations

Regulations relating to nature conservation, bird protection and bird sanctuaries apply all over the Arctic. It is essential to know the regulations relating to environmental protection, birds and bird sanctuaries, including entrance prohibition, other prohibitions and safety zones.

Entrance to bird sanctuaries is normally prohibited during breeding season and may also apply to safety zones both on land and at sea. Disturbance and harm of birds are prohibited

by law in large parts of the Arctic and usually apply to eggs, nests and lairs, as well as the birds themselves. Sounding ship sirens, firing shots or producing other loud noises within specific distances to sanctuaries or larger concentrations of birds may also be a violation of local regulations.

Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Guidelines

Watching wildlife in its natural and undisturbed environment is a great experience. To avoid disturbance of birds, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

Birds on the water

Birds often feed on the sea surface, dive from it, or simply rest and bathe.

- Be careful when approaching groups of birds on the water
- Do not drive into large flocks
- Reduce speed
- Avoid sudden change of direction
- Do not separate chicks from the parents

Birds on bird cliffs

Birds in colonies try to build their nests in places inaccessible to fox, bear and humans. Geese often nest by the rich vegetation below bird cliffs. Birds nesting low on the cliffs are easily disturbed, especially at the time when the chicks are about to jump. Disturbance may cause "early jumping," which is not desirable.

- Be cautious when in proximity to bird cliffs and do not climb into bird colonies
- When birds are nesting low on the cliffs make sure to show consideration and avoid approaching too close
- Do not use ship siren, fire shots or produce other loud noises when in proximity of bird colonies
- Human presence should be avoided in the proximity of bird cliffs under which geese or eider ducks breed and nest, as they are very sensitive to disturbance

Birds on land

Birds that nest in open plains get frightened at considerable distances. If parent birds are blocked from returning to their nests, increased predation of eggs and chicks by skuas, gulls and arctic foxes can occur. You can also accidentally step on chicks or nests. Some species such as geese and eider ducks are especially vulnerable during the breeding season. If they are scared off the nest, predators may prey on the eggs or chicks, or the eggs might get cold. In July-August, geese and eider ducks are molting their wing feathers and are unable to fly. They are often found in large, dense groups on land or on water and are sensitive to disturbance.

- Keep your distance from nesting birds and be especially careful to avoid unnecessary walking in areas where you can see that the birds are nesting and raising their chicks
- Avoid landing in areas with concentrations of breeding birds, often on small islands, rocky islets, spits, points of land or areas beneath bird cliffs where there are often nesting geese
- If one discovers a nesting goose or duck, it is often just one among more in the same area. If this happens, retreat silently the same way that you came from
- When walking in areas with birds, watch where you set foot to avoid stepping on eggs. It is recommended to walk in the intertidal zone since most shore nesting birds will build nests above the high tide line in the dry sand of the upper beach zone.



Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

An Arctic tern will attack you if you come too close to its nest or chicks.

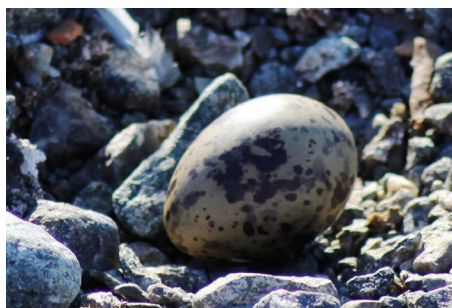


Photo: Ilja Leo Lang

Well-camouflaged eggs increase the risk of accidentally stepping on eggs.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Barnacle goose family. Adults with young are particularly sensitive to intrusion.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Guidelines

Attacking birds and birds pretending to be injured

While nesting, Arctic terns are very protective and will attack anyone who comes close. Typically, the terns will first fly shrieking in the air over the intruder, then they will “dive-bomb.” Terns can deliver serious blows to the head. If Arctic terns start dive-bombing you, you are too close to their nests. If this happens you should:

- Hold your hand (or a stick) steadily above your head and move away in the direction you came from
- Proceed carefully and watch out for eggs and chicks on the ground
- Do not wave anything above your head. It may injure the bird
- Do not stay in the area as this puts potential eggs or chicks on the ground at risk of getting cold, which may be fatal

Skuas are also very protective if you get too close to their nests or chicks.

- If skuas attack – walk away from the nest and/or chicks

Waders, terns and skuas can pretend to be injured: walking or running with the wings hanging down if their nests are close by.

- If a bird acts as if it is injured, you should retreat in the direction you approached from, or follow the bird, as it will lead you away from the nest



Photo: Christian Kempf

Ivory Gulls are primarily seen in the high Arctic. Adult (left) & young bird (right).



Photo: Georg Bangjord

Atlantic puffins have a wide distribution range with breeding grounds from the sub-Arctic to the high Arctic.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

An Arctic fox is trying to prey on this Pink footed geese's eggs – without success.

Cetaceans



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

Whale watching

Encounters with cetaceans are a common phenomenon in the Arctic and the number of species during the summer is around 15. The variety is great – ranging from the largest animal on the planet, the blue whale, to one of the smallest cetaceans of them all, the harbor porpoise – as well as perhaps the most peculiar of them all, the narwhal.



Photo: Ilja Leo Lang

The beluga whale or white whale is an Arctic and sub-Arctic cetacean. Photo from Svalbard with glaucous gulls on the ice behind the whales.



Photo: Quark Expeditions

Individuals can be identified by their tail flukes. In recent years citizen science photographs have contributed to more knowledge of migration.



Photo: Quark Expeditions

The humpback whale and other baleen whales congregate in the Arctic for summer feeding.

Regulations

The Arctic consists of several nations and states that may or may not have legislation or guidelines for approaching cetaceans. Ensure that you are aware of any legislation for whale watching in the area where you operate.

Guidelines

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is an unparalleled experience.

Marine mammals may be inquisitive and approach vessels and watercraft, and if they want to interact, they will stay with the vessel. It is best for the vessel to drift passively during such encounters.

To avoid disturbance when close to these majestic animals, please be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

- Do not chase or pursue whales. Animals may alter their behavior if they are disturbed. When in doubt, err on the side of caution, and give the animals time and space.
- Never herd (surround), separate or scatter a group of marine mammals, particularly mothers and young. Where appropriate, stay where they can see you.
- Stay with the animal up to a maximum of thirty minutes when within 300 meters distance. If signs of disturbance or change in behavior occur at any time during encounters, retreat slowly and quietly.
- When close to marine mammals keep your voice low, do not whistle or shout. Keep radio volume down.
- Communicate with other boats to minimize disturbance to animals.
- Never attempt to touch or feed animals.
- Playback of underwater sound of any kind should not occur. Use hydrophones with consideration and only for passive listening.

- If a whale approaches a vessel to bow-ride, maintain a relatively constant course and speed, or reduce speed gradually. Do not enter a group of dolphins to encourage them to bow-ride.
- Be aware of other boats and obstacles, e.g., shoreline to ensure the animal is never boxed in. Ensure that travel and exit routes for the animal are clear.
- Approach cetaceans from a direction parallel to them and (ideally) slightly to the rear (in the four or eight o'clock position), not from the front and preferably not directly from behind the animal.

Go slow when you see a blow! Use common sense and approach with caution and respect.

Signs of disturbance

Keep a watch for the following behaviors, which could indicate that an animal is agitated and no longer interested in maintaining contact with your vessel. Where these behaviors are noted, keep your distance, move slowly away and/or let the animal depart:

- Changes in travelling direction, regular changes in direction or speed, moving away from the area, apparent general agitation, hasty dives.
- Breaching, tail lobbing and flipper slapping may be an indication that the whales are socializing and may not be aware of boats. Keep your distance.

Approaching whales

When approaching marine mammals that are in the water (for all vessels – ships, Zodiacs, kayaks, etc.)

Zone 1: <3000 meters/9840 feet.

Searching zone: reduce speed and post a lookout.

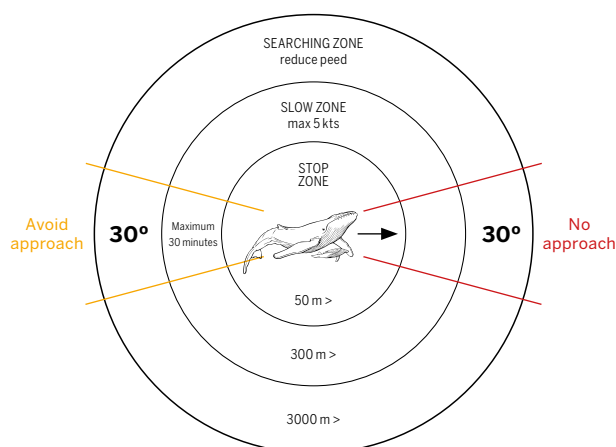
Zone 2: <300 meters/985 feet.

Slow zone: reduce speed to no more than five knots.

Zone 3: <50 meters/165 feet.

Stop zone: Put your engine in idle.

If you want to turn the engine off, first idle for a few minutes before shutting down. Try to avoid abrupt changes in noise that may startle or disturb the animal, including excessive engine use, gear changes, maneuvering or backing up toward the animal. Avoid the use of bow or stern lateral bow thrusters to maintain position as these can produce high-pitched noise and intensive cavitation.



Departure from scene of whale watching

Move off at a slow, no-wake speed to 100 meters/300 feet. Avoid moving in front of the animal. Never chase or pursue departing animals.

Polar Bear

Latin: Ursus maritimus
German: Eisbär

French: Ours polaire
Norwegian: Isbjørn



Photo: Ilja Leo Lang

The white king of the Arctic

Polar bears can be encountered in wide-ranging areas of the Arctic, particularly in Svalbard; East, North and Northwest Greenland; the Canadian Arctic; Russian Arctic; and the north coast of Alaska. Although most polar bears are born on land, they spend most of their lives on the sea ice. Here they hunt for their preferred food of seals from the edge of the sea ice, often living off fat reserves when no sea ice is present.

Facts

Because of their dependence on the sea ice, polar bears are classified as marine mammals. The polar bear is listed as a vulnerable species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature but is still hunted in North America and Greenland (in the regions under Russian and Norwegian jurisdiction all hunting is banned).

As a species, polar bears have evolved many characteristics that make them especially adapted for cold temperatures, hunting seals and for moving fast across snow, ice and open water. Polar bears have a well-developed sense of smell and are excellent swimmers that can swim long distances. They are at the top of the marine food chain and feed almost exclusively on seals with a very few regional exceptions.

A bear can survive up to eight months without eating. Pregnant female polar bears dig a snow den in early winter, give birth to cubs usually weighing 500-600 grams in late December, and emerge with cubs weighing 8-10 kg three-to-four months later. During this time, they live off their fat reserves. Males are larger than females, and can weigh 400-600 kg. Adult females typically weigh 150-250 kg depending on the season, geographic area and general condition.

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is an unparalleled experience. To avoid disturbance when encountering polar bears, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.



Photo: Rob Oo, Flickr

Polar bears are great swimmers and can dive several meters deep. Under water swimming for more than three minutes has been recorded.



Photo: Silversea Cruises

The fur of a polar bear tends to be yellowish in summer, whereas it is whiter in winter. The skin is black.



Photo: Jon Aars, Norwegian Polar Institute

Polar bears have their first cubs around the age of five. One or two cubs stay with their mother for two and a half years.

Guidelines when encountering polar bears

- Always be vigilant for bears when in "bear country".
- Always have a plan and be ready to act to avoid encounters by implementing safety measures beforehand.
- Do not pursue, follow or lure polar bears.
- Do not seek out polar bears in such a way as to disturb them or expose bears or humans to danger.
- Never feed or leave anything edible where it can be found by bears.
- Always keep your distance to ensure the polar bears are undisturbed.
- If a polar bear is in sight, observe the animal's behavior and be prepared to retreat or act on short notice.
- Never approach polar bears closer than 200 meters with an expedition cruise vessel.
- Small vessel and vessels with low outside decks must never allow a bear to approach the broadside.
- If observing polar bears from Zodiacs/small boats, these vessels must always be positioned so that the area can be left in a safe and controlled manner should the situation require it.
- Never follow or approach a swimming polar bear, from any angle. If you catch sight of a swimming polar bear, retreat immediately.
- If you are planning shore excursions, check out the terrain before landing the passengers.
- Do not make a landing if you cannot see clearly; for example, if you have low visibility due to fog.
- Do reconnaissance and look out for polar bears before any passenger comes ashore.
- Guides carrying firearms and other bear deterrents must lead the group.
- Establish a polar bear watch system and stay in places where you have good visibility of the surrounding area.
- If you find a dead polar bear, report it to local authorities in accordance with regulations and local requirements.

Beware and take care of the polar bear!

The polar bear is the world's largest predator and it is dangerous to humans. Above all you should avoid confrontations with bears. In areas with polar bears, encounters must be expected anywhere, anytime. Polar bears are best observed from a distance, when they are undisturbed.

Hurting or killing a polar bear is an offence if not done in self-defense. Irresponsible actions leading to such a situation can also be deemed an offence. As a rule of thumb, a polar bear's behavior should not be altered because of your presence.

Firearm handling and polar bears

All guides and polar bear guards should be experienced in the safe handling of firearms, have good shooting skills, and have knowledge about polar bear behavior. Unless the user is familiar with the firearm and has had sufficient training with a firearm, the sense of safety provided is deceptive.

Appropriate means of frightening and chasing off polar bears should be part of the equipment; for example, flare guns and flare pens equipped with thunder flashes or signal cartridges, sirens and similar. Such equipment should be carried so that it is readily accessible.

Regulations

It is a violation of Svalbard's Environmental Protection Act's general principle of protection to disturb polar bears. According to the Act "All species of flora and fauna, including their eggs, nests and lairs, are protected ..." and "all access and passage in Svalbard shall take place in a way that does not harm [...] or in any other way [...] result in unnecessary disturbance of animals." (Section 25 and 73 of Act of 15 June 2001 No.79 Relating to the Protection of the Environment in Svalbard)

In Section 30 of the Svalbard Environmental Protection Act it is stated that: "It is prohibited to lure, pursue or otherwise seek out polar bears in such a way as to disturb them or expose either bears or humans to danger." (Act of 15 June 2001 No.79 Relating to the Protection of the Environment in Svalbard)

Section 30 also lays down several general measures in respect to polar bears, among these are: "Any person travelling outside the settlements, with the exception of visitors and permanent residents who are taking part in organized tours, has a duty to familiarize themselves with safety measures in respect of polar bears. Necessary measures shall be taken to avoid the danger of polar bear attacks and to ward off an attack without injuring or killing the animal." (Act of 15 June 2001 No.79 Relating to the Protection of the Environment in Svalbard)

In other regions of the Arctic national and local regulations may include different provisions. Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Reindeer

Latin: Rangifer tarandus
German: Rentier

French: Renne
Norwegian: Reinsdyr



Photo: Peter Christensen, Visit Greenland

Antler clad herbivore of the Arctic

The reindeer, also known as caribou in North America, but generally referred to as reindeer in this guideline, is a species of deer with circumpolar distribution native to the Arctic, the Subarctic and some alpine areas. There are several sub-species of reindeer with variations in size, color and antler appearance.

Facts

Some reindeer populations are sedentary, while others are migratory. While overall widespread and numerous, some of the populations subspecies are rare and at least one has become extinct.

Reindeer are hardy, ruggedly built animals that are well adapted to life in the tundra. Their fur traps air, which not only helps provide them with excellent insulation, but also keeps them buoyant in water. The hooves' foot pads are softer in summer, when the ground is wet, providing the animals with extra traction. In the winter, the pads tighten, revealing the rim of their hooves, which is used to provide traction in the slippery snow and ice. Both sexes have antlers, and it can be difficult to distinguish male from female. Antlers are, however, typically larger on males.

Depending on the area, a variety of predators may prey on reindeer, including wolves. Polar bears sometimes, but very rarely prey on reindeer, and this is today considered of minor importance for live animals. As carrion, Arctic reindeer are fed on by e.g. polar bears, foxes and ravens. In many areas of the Arctic, blood-sucking insects, such as black flies and mosquitoes, are a plague to reindeer during the summer and can cause enough stress to inhibit feeding and calving behaviors. The Svalbard reindeer is almost exceptional in that it does not inhabit an environment where insect harassment is a problem.



Photo: Kelvin Murray

Reindeer calves are normally born in early June and suckle their mothers for three months.



Photo: Steve A. James, Quark Expeditions

The Svalbard reindeer is relatively short-legged and has a smaller shoulder height than other reindeer subspecies.



Photo: Brian Haynes, Quark Expeditions

Traditional festive legends mention Santa Claus's reindeer pulling a sleigh through the night sky to help Santa Claus deliver Christmas gifts to children.

Guidelines when encountering reindeer

Arctic reindeer are often tolerant of people. Reindeer's reaction to human presence varies depending on how we move, our speed, direction, noise, etc. Reindeer – especially young animals – are often inquisitive and curious when encountering humans – particularly when they have the wind behind them and cannot identify your smell.

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is a great experience. To avoid disturbance when close to reindeer, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

- Avoid disturbance of reindeer.
- Let the reindeer graze, rest and ruminate in peace.
- Do not follow a reindeer or a reindeer herd.
- Observe the behavior and if reindeer show signs of disturbance retreat quietly the way you came.
- Limit your time in proximity of reindeer. Disturbance means less time for foraging and extra energy expenditure.
- Mothers with calves are especially sensitive to disturbance; show extra caution.
- Never touch live or dead reindeer or other wild animals.
- Never pick up or remove body parts from a dead reindeer or other dead animals.
- If you find a reindeer that is suffering because it is sick, injured or has foreign objects attached to the antlers (e.g. reindeer with a fishing net, wire or other objects in its antlers), always report this to local authorities.

Regulations

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Seals

Latin: Phocidae
German: Hundsrobber

French: Phoque
Norwegian: Sel



Photo: Genevieve Roland

True seals of the north

There are six species of true seals in the Atlantic Arctic; harbor seal, ringed seal, harp seal, hooded seal, bearded seal and grey seal. Harbor seals and grey seals give birth on land in the early summer and late fall/early winter, respectively. The others give birth on land-fast or free-floating pack ice during late winter through early spring (late February-early May) depending on the species.

Facts

Hooded seals have the shortest lactation period of any mammal – around 4 days – whereas harp seals follow closely with a lactation period of only 12 days. Following the pup-rearing period and subsequent mating period, the adult seals undergo an annual molt. Many of the ice-breeding seals follow the seasonal retreat of the sea ice northward, although it is common to see both ringed seals and bearded seals hauled out on brash ice near glaciers fronts. Harp seals often can be found in large groups within the marginal ice zone or at its ice edges.

Harp seals are very numerous with populations numbering in the millions in the North Atlantic. Svalbard is home to the northernmost population of harbor seals in the world, which is estimated to about 2,000 individuals. Hunting of seals is important to many indigenous peoples in the Arctic.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

In the spring, particularly in nice weather, lots of seals can be seen basking on the ice in bays and fjords.



Photo: Aqqa Rosing Asvid, Quark Expeditions

Pups are left alone when mothers feed. They are not abandoned.



Photo: Christian Kempf

Seals sometimes come close to small boats. If you are in this situation, put your engine into neutral so the propeller does not harm the seal.

Guidelines when encountering seals

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is an unparalleled experience. To avoid disturbance when close to seals, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

Seals hauled out on land, rock or ice are sensitive to human presence. Noises, smells and sights may create a negative reaction. Use common sense and approach with caution and respect.

- Move away slowly if a seal shows signs of unease.
- Do not follow swimming seals.
- Harbor seals haul out on rocky shores and skerries. Do not make landings near such haul out sites. Keep a distance of at least 100 meters.
- If seals begin crawling with its flippers, rolls over on its stomach, lifts its head or looks into the water, these are clear signs that you have come too close and should move farther away.
- If you encounter seals with pups on the ice, keep a long distance.
- Pups are often left alone when mother seals are in the water feeding. They are not abandoned and must be left alone.
- If seals approach the boat, put your engine in neutral to avoid harming the seal.
- If there are several boats, do not encircle the seal(s).
- On beaches, avoid getting between seals and the sea.
- When viewing seals stay within the line of sight of the seal. Always let the seal see you.

Signs of disturbance

Signs of disturbance include: change in posture from lying to upright, frequent head turning, moving away from an approaching vessel, or a general increase in alertness or vigilance.

Regulations

The Arctic consists of several nations and states that may or may not have legislation or guidelines for approaching wildlife. Ensure that you are aware of any legislation regarding seals in the area where you operate.

Walrus

Latin: *Odobenus rosmarus*
German: Walross

French: Morse
Norwegian: Hvalross



Photo: Jason Roberts

The tooth-walkers of the Arctic

The sight, sound and not the least the smell of a large group of walrus, are quite impressive. As the number of walrus and walrus haul-outs are increasing in some areas of the Arctic, so is the chance to see them. Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is a great experience. To avoid any disturbance when around walrus, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.



Photo: Georg Bangjord

The tusks of large walrus bulls may grow to be 1 meter long and weigh 5 kg each.



Photo: Lisa Haglund

Walrus are very social animals and are usually found in groups.



Photo: Ilja Leo Lang

Walrus in water should always be treated with caution. Avoid approaching swimming walrus as they may attack if they feel threatened.

Guidelines

National and local regulations may include other provisions, which may be more stringent and require a further distance from walrus. Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Walrus are sensitive to boats and human presence, especially females with calves. Noises, smells and sights can elicit a fright response or other reactions. Watch for behavior that indicates that the animals may be disturbed when a group approaches. Their reaction can differ considerably depending upon factors such as sun and wind, if the walrus are on land or ice floes, the sex and age of animals in the group, how long they have been lying out of the water - and most of all - the behavior of the visitors.

Cows and calves

- Mothers with calves are much more sensitive to disturbance than the bulls. Keep at least 150 meters distance – more if necessary. Stampedes may cause mortality of calves.

Walrus on land

- Inform visitors about the approaching procedure before landing, and tell them to always follow the signals from the leading guide.
- Landings must be made at a minimum distance of 300 meters from the haul-out site. Make sure that the wind direction is from the walruses to the group of visitors.
- Divide into smaller groups (< 50). Do not walk up to the animals from different directions – the visitors should approach from only one side of a walrus group.
- Walk slowly towards the animals, make stops and watch reactions to your presence.
- Avoid making a half circle around the animals. The visiting group should stay together to reduce the impact of their presence.
- **Greenland:** Keep at least 400 meters from any walruses on land. This applies to distance at sea as well as distance on land.

- Never get between the animals and the sea - walk 'inland' of them.
- Avoid sudden appearances on the horizons which create silhouettes that are visible to the animals. Low approaches are always best, staying below the horizon.
- Keep commentary, conversation and engine noise to a minimum.
- Let their behavior decide how close you go. If they show any sign of disturbance, retreat quietly and slowly.
- Never go closer than 30 meters (150 m from cows with calves) irrespective of how undisturbed the walruses might seem.

Walrus on ice

- Walrus spend a lot of time on the ice and the same careful approach methods should apply as when they are encountered ashore. Be especially sensitive to females with calves.
- **Greenland:** Keep a minimum distance of 75 meter from walruses on ice.

Swimming walrus

- Do not go close to swimming walrus. Walrus are very powerful swimmers, and might attack the Zodiac using their tusks, if they feel threatened.
- Keep low speed in waters with walrus.
- Draw back if walrus approach.
- Never swim, kayak or dive in walrus waters – it is dangerous.
- Actively prevent yourself being surrounded by walrus in the sea. Make sure you are always outside the periphery of a group of walrus.
- **Greenland:** Keep a minimum distance of 75 meters from swimming walruses.

Facts

Descendants of sea-lion like animals, walrus are believed to have evolved millions of years ago and are the only living pinniped with external tusks.

They live circumpolar and are divided into two subspecies; the Pacific walrus and the Atlantic walrus. The Pacific populations count approx. 200,000 animals while the Atlantic population, which includes East Greenland, Svalbard and Franz Josef Land, has between 20,000 and 30,000 animals.

Males can weigh up to 1500 kg, while females can weigh up to 900 kg. Walrus cows give birth to calves which are approx. 1.3 meters long and weigh around 85 kg. The calves stay with their mother for 2-3 years.

This large brown sea mammal is recognized by its characteristic tusks, which on large males can grow to more than 1 meter in length with each weighing as much as 5 kg. Both walrus bulls and cows use their tusks to pull themselves out of

the water and because of this, they have been called "tooth walkers". The tusks also used for fighting, dominance and display.

Walrus prefer shallow shelf regions and can eat tube worms, soft corals, tunicates, sea cucumbers and various mollusks, including and often preferably, clams. Walrus find clams by sticking their sensitive vibrissae into the sediment on the sea bottom. They remove the sediment by waving their front flippers and then suck the clams into their mouth. Walrus may also feed on seals and sea birds.

Walrus are very social and haul out in large groups of animals, often very close to or even on top of each other. They are most often observed in groups, also in the water.

Polar bears and killer whales may take walrus, especially calves, but in doing so they need to be very careful as walrus are good at protecting themselves.