

Book reviews

Review of “*Marine Mammals of Svalbard*” by K. M. Kovacs, I. Gjertz & C. Lydersen (2004). Tromsø: Norwegian Polar Institute. Iv + 60 pp. ISBN 82-7666-208-0.

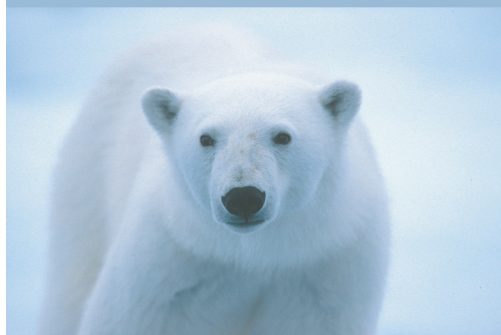
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This slim but elegant volume fills a clear need. As the frequency of expeditions and tourist travel to Spitsbergen and the other islands of Svalbard increases, more and more observations of marine mammals are being made, and there has been no single convenient guide to their identification. The book provides common (English, French, German and Norwegian) and scientific names, species description and information on distribution, abundance, general ecology, reproduction and life history, diet, exploitation and management, and current status for the polar bear, five species of seals, the walrus, and 12 species of whales and dolphins that can be seen in the waters of Svalbard. High-quality portraits (painted by Pieter Folkens) and photographs are included for each species. The at-sea photographs of cetaceans are especially helpful. The authors have done an outstanding job of summarizing the scattered technical literature on these animals in clear terms understandable by all. This is aided by a glossary of 80 terms. The accounts are packed with interesting details of life history, behavior and ecology usually not encountered in a field guide.

A few technical quibbles are in order. The conservation picture for some arctic marine mammals may not be quite as rosy as implied by the statement that “most harvesting is performed within sustainable limits”, especially for the white whale and narwhal. For example, recent studies estimate that present abundance of white whales in West Greenland is approximately 20% of that in 1954 and that continuation of recent catch levels will pose a 90% risk of extirpation in 20 years.

Marine Mammals of Svalbard



Kit M. Kovacs, Ian Gjertz & Christian Lydersen

Similarly, it is estimated that continued hunts of narwhals at present levels may result in extinction in West Greenland in the near future; present abundance is only 15% of that estimated to exist in 1986. While the situation in Norwegian waters may be stable, serious over-exploitation of Arctic marine mammals in the Atlantic is not strictly a thing of the past.

The bowhead was not the first great whale to be depleted by whaling, as stated. That dubious honour belongs to the North Atlantic right whale (*Eubalaena glacialis*), which was depleted before the 17th century by the early Basque land-based whalers, who also may have played a major role in extermination of the Atlantic population of the gray whale, another shore-frequenting species.

The “resident, transient and offshore” ecotypes described in the killer whale account were named and studied in the North Pacific; ecotypes in other regions such as the North Atlantic may have different characteristics of preferred prey or social structure. The North Pacific “resident” designation is actually a misnomer, the resident ecotype is not resident in one area year round, as the account suggests, but ranges widely in the winter; Puget Sound residents have been sighted off California.

The authors depart from the current most widely accepted taxonomic usage (Rice 1998),

in using *Phoca hispida* rather than *Pusa hispida* for the ringed seal and *Phoca groenlandica* rather than *Pagophilus groenlandicus* for the harp seal, but this can be a matter of personal preference; there is in fact no “official” world list of scientific names.

There is very little to criticize and much to laud in the production and editing of the book. I could find only one typographical error (Ridgway’s name is spelled wrong in the list of recommended readings). The binding is fine, and the photographic illustrations and other graphics are superb. A quick-identification sheet and forms for reporting sightings are provided in a pocket at the back. This guide should provide good and long service in the field and may result in collection and collation of sightings potentially useful to the scientific understanding of these fascinating animals. It is highly recommended for accurate information on the marine mammals one is likely to encounter in and around the far-northern arctic territories of Norway.

Review of *Marine mammals of Svalbard*, by K. M. Kovacs, I. Gjertz & C. Lydersen

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Every year, tourists converge on Svalbard hoping to catch sight of the big marine mammals. But most tourists are not zoologists. For a temporary visitor, it is no easy task to recognize marine mammals. Of course polar bears and walruses are easy to distinguish—and they also top the visitor’s wish list—but tourists also want to see seals and especially whales. These animals seldom “pose” the way polar bears and walruses sometimes do. They may give you no more than a brief glimpse and then leave you wondering: What was that? How big is a seal? What does it eat?

As of last summer, tourists and tour guides have a new way of finding answers to their questions about Svalbard’s fauna: Kovacs et al. *Marine Mammals of Svalbard*. But there are already several field guides and a substantial body of scientific literature. Does this book add anything new? This is an appealing book in terms of design,

size, text and content. It is just the right size to take along with you, and just the right thickness to invite reading. The book itself is too big to shove into your pocket, but just inside the back cover you will find an identification sheet with drawings of the animals. At least you can always carry the ID sheet with you. Passengers on cruise ships will not find the book’s size any problem. It can be kept close at hand in case you want to read up on animals that have been observed.

The authors are knowledgeable. The descriptions of the animals are clear and comprehensible. The language is precise and formulated with scientific caution. Known facts are described with care; if uncertainties remain, this is stated. The book is clearly organized and its structure easy to grasp. Information is presented consistently under the same headings for each individual species. This makes it easy to find one’s way around in the book. It contains more photographs and drawings than other, similar books. The photographs are not all of top quality, but here perhaps the publisher is more to blame than the authors. Even though the book is entitled *Marine Mammals of Svalbard*, it contains general information and glimpses of other parts of these animals’ ranges. Thus it can be of use even to people who are not visiting Svalbard specifically.

As the book states in several places, information concerning the range, population, etc. of the marine mammals is uncertain. The authors, whose research field is the mammals of Svalbard, give modest population estimates. Is this an expression of scientific conservatism? How uncertain are the estimates? More knowledge is needed, and in the preface, the authors hope readers visiting Svalbard will be inspired to report the animals they see by sending in the sighting sheet tucked into a sleeve at the end of the book. Though the aim is admirable, the authors bungle the job a bit by not giving clear reasons for the data collection. In addition, the sighting sheet is enormous, providing over 50 lines on which to report observations. What tourist has the stamina—or the luck—to make that many observations? One is reluctant to report a few scattered observations, which is all one usually gets on a short tourist outing. A postcard-sized reporting sheet, with the address pre-printed, and with a brief explanation of what the data will be used for, would inspire much more participation.

In addition, many tourists visit Svalbard more than once, though a few years may pass between visits. For them, it would be good if more than