



# EARTHCARE NEWS

*we do what we can, where we are*

July August 2007

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Wren and  
Wattle Bird

## Finland and the High Arctic

Paul Rees of Earthcare St Kilda will present information gained during his research into the effects of sub zero temperatures on flora and fauna.



The photos are stunning  
his adventures are fascinating  
and the research is good.

Thursday 26th July 7.30pm

Port Phillip Ecocentre

Corner Blessington and Herbert Sts St Kilda

The Scandinavian and High Arctic Expedition (25/05/07)

By Paul Rees

It was 4am in the morning as Paul and Marko walked briskly towards the town centre. On their left the sun had just began to rise and it was providing them with a fantastic display. The whole sky was bright red and looked as if it were on fire, as they looked around they realised that they were the only ones awake at this hour to enjoy it. A couple of hours later in Tornio, Paul and Marko strolled along a footpath straddling a lake. The morning dew still covered the grassy banks and sparkled in the early morning sunlight.

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**EARTHCARE**  
**PLANTING at POINT ORMOND**  
**SUNDAY JULY 29. 10am to 12 noon**

# HUMPBACK WHALES

Last month we were lucky enough to have a visit from several humpback whales in Port Phillip Bay. The research team from the Dolphin Research Institute (DRI) followed a total of four whales over two separate encounters. Another pod was observed in the southern section of the bay and actually diverted the Queenscliff - Sorrento ferry. DRI were able to get fluke and dorsal photos from the travelling leviathans that were sent to humpback whale researchers in NSW and QLD. It appears that the animals have not been recorded on the east coast migration before. This is a positive sign for what appears to be an increasing humpback whale population but does not justify the need of Japanese scientists to kill these magnificent creatures under the guise of research.



Photo: Sue Mason / The Dolphin Research Institute

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## RAKALI

Now the Rakali Teacher Resource Pack has been completed it's time give thought to the Rakali Symposium 20 October.

More information soon.

A fact Sheet has been written by Waterwatch North Central.can be found on the web site [www.rakali.com](http://www.rakali.com)  
Bob Tammick

### **The Scandinavian and High Arctic Expedition - (25/05/07) By Paul Rees**

It was 4am in the morning as Paul and Marko walked briskly towards the town centre. On their left the sun had just began to rise and it was providing them with a fantastic display. The whole sky was bright red and looked as if it were on fire, as they looked around they realised that they were the only ones awake at this hour to enjoy it. A couple of hours later in Tornio, Paul and Marko strolled along a footpath straddling a lake. The morning dew still covered the grassy banks and sparkled in the early morning sunlight. Upon reaching the end of the footpath they entered Sweden. They had crossed through no fences, no security checks and no men with guns stood guard. A lone seagull was the only witness to their crossing, it squawked and looked in their direction as they approached. It then flew off apparently satisfied that they had made the border crossing successfully. The boys remarked that this was perhaps one of the most unobtrusive border crossings in the world. It was just a footpath linking two friendly countries (Finland [Suomi] and Sweden [Sverige]) and two border towns (Tornio and Haparanda). Perhaps if more borders were constructed in such a way there would be better relations between neighbouring countries.

A couple of hours and buses later they arrived in Luleå and boarded a train destined for Narvik (A town in Northern Norway [Norge]). The landscape soon began to rush by as the train sped across the width of Swedish Lapland towards Norway. Marko and Paul remarked that Swedish Lapland looked very similar to Finnish Lapland, which was to be expected since the two are geographically linked. They did however note that the "hills" in Sweden were slightly larger than in Finland. As minutes turned into hours and the stunted birches continued to rush by, the relaxing motion of the train lulled them both to sleep. Some hours later they awoke from their strange travel dreams somewhat dazed. They had had the kind of dreams that often occur when one is sleeping in an

unfamiliar place surrounded by unknown people. One of these unknown persons was however soon to become known to them, as upon seeing they were awake and noting the strange expressions on their faces he started up a conversation. "Are you from America?" he asked, Paul replied that he was from Australia and Marko went into his usual lengthy explanation of being part of the Slovenian minority living in southern Austria. They made idle chatter for a little while as the hills, birches and snow continued to whiz by. The man it turned out was a Swedish Sami - the indigenous reindeer herders who have occupied northern Scandinavia for thousands of years. He told them he had been in hospital because he had a broken heart. Then as quickly as he had appeared he jumped up shook their hands and exited the train. As he left he told them to look to the east when they were 90km north of Narvik and they may see his reindeer, feeding on the hilltop lichens.

After their intriguing encounter with the unnamed Swedish Sami, they drifted in and out of sleep for the next couple of hours. Some time later Paul awoke with a jolt as the train turned a sharp corner. His eyes feasted upon the beautiful Ofot-fjord stretching out before him as far as he could see. He new instantly that they had crossed into Norway and that he would like this place. The train continued along the train tracks which were clinging for dear life to the sheer cliff face of the fjord. It was what can only be described as stunningly spectacular. Waterfalls cascaded off the steep cliff faces every few hundred meters, the water continuing its journey from snowy mountain peaks into the dark blue, crystal clear fjord below. All the drowsiness that had engulfed Paul previously was gone; he was wide awake and enthralled by the scenery. After the somewhat monotonous, but also very beautiful

### **PLANTING AT POINT ORMOND SUNDAY July 29 10am-12noon**

Finnish and Swedish landscapes the Norwegian fjords were a dramatic change.

The next morning they again awoke early and caught a bus north to Tromsø with their Norwegian friend Lars. Once in Tromsø they boarded an aeroplane destined for Longyearbean (Svalbard's main town). After landing Paul, Lars and Marko decided to stand back and wait even though they could see their bags circling through the throng of people anxiously waiting for their luggage. Most of these people were headed for flashy accommodation with clean white sheets, heated rooms, guided tours by snowmobile and armed guides.

Paul, Marko and Lars, were on the other hand headed for a more authentic and historically correct expedition incorporating a tent, sleeping bags, unguided tours on foot and a rifle to fend off the wild animals.

Svalbard is a declared territory of Norway approximately 600km North of Scandinavia and has been so since the signing of the Spitsbergen treaty in 1920. It is known as Svalbard by Norwegians and largely as Spitsbergen (Dutch for "Jagged Peaks") by the rest of the world. Although due to Norway's sovereignty over the area the use of the name Svalbard has greatly expanded in recent times. Prior to this treaty, many different nations such as the USA, Sweden and Russia also had claims over parts of Svalbard. The area was used in the past for mainly exploitative uses such as whaling, hunting and coal mining. However the hunting of animals is now almost completely banned and most of the coal mines have closed down. The new and rapidly expanding income for the area is tourism. But as with many places in the world, tourism could potentially be the saviour of Svalbard's environment or its bane. Arctic and Antarctic tourism especially needs to be closely managed as the polar environments are particularly susceptible to damage. However the Norwegians seem to be doing quite a good job with monitoring, controlling and mitigating the impact of tourism on Svalbard.

Longyearbyen the town closest to where the boys were staying is 78°N in latitude. This means that Longyearbyen is about 1200km from the North Pole which is only slightly more than the distance between Melbourne and Sydney. They actually launch expeditions to the North Pole from Svalbard, as it is one of the most northerly pieces of land in the world.

Paul and Marko soon realised that the trip was to become even more interesting when they saw the tent Lars had brought to camp in. The tent was described by Paul as "the kind of tent people use in Australia when they go to the beach for the day". Although this was a slight exaggeration, the tent was really the kind of tent that is only suitable for Australian summer time conditions. The floor was completely see-through and not waterproof and the tent almost collapsed every time the wind blew. Despite promises by Lars that he was bringing an appropriate tent, it was clear immediately that this tent was completely unsuited to Arctic conditions. A consensus was quickly reached that pitching the tent on the snow was out of the question as everything would get wet and they would freeze. Still they were determined to persevere, so after much thinking and chin rubbing they reached an almost adequate solution to the problem. They decided to pitch the tent on the balcony of the camp grounds service building and secure it with drift wood and rope. Surprisingly there was no one else camping there for the whole week, which the boys noted may have been because the campground was partially covered in snow and partially covered in streams and lakes of meltwater. Still this was part of the authentic Svalbard experience they thought.

After setting up the tent, the boys headed into Longyearbyen for supplies. On the way into town, they noted the polar bear warning sign - informing visitors that polar bears are found everywhere on Svalbard. So they headed straight to the hire shop to get a rifle for protection. Getting a rifle in Svalbard turned out to be just about as easy as buying lollies in a candy store. Two minutes after entering Paul was outside holding the rifle and bullets - the gun having been hired to "Paul Reese" (note the extra e) as they required no identification, no signature, nothing - just a misspelt name and some cash. A little worried at how easily he had just acquired a rifle, Paul looked around, eyeing off the passer byes and wondered what other psychos on Svalbard had also managed to acquire a gun.

Upon waking the next morning the sun had appeared from behind the cover of the clouds and the boys were provided with an absolutely stunning panorama. From the campsite, they could see two glaciers, tens of bays and hundreds of jagged snow covered peaks. They found it lovely having the warm sun shining on their skin after a restless night sleeping in a tent at -11C temperatures. They sat and ate their breakfast, each immersed in his own thoughts as they stared out towards the mountain covered horizon. The camp site provides wading pools and grassy knolls for many migratory birds, so the boys were able to watch geese grazing, ducks wading and gulls and fulmars flying overhead while they ate. While eating at the campsite the boys also saw arctic reindeer grazing and an arctic fox even wearily investigated their presence early one morning.

Svalbard is so far North that from April 20th to August 26th there is sunlight 24hrs a day, with the sun well above the horizon. If the boys woke at 3am and it was overcast - they found that judging by the light outside the time could just as easily have been 3pm. On the second night the sky was clear so the boys decided to stay up and experience the midnight sun. The midnight sun is when the sun is at the lowest point of its arc each day during the 4 month period when it does not set. All three boys remarked that the sun at midnight was still incredibly high in the sky, much higher in the sky than they would have expected.

By the second night Paul had figured out that he was going to have to wear two pairs of socks and two pairs of bottom and top thermals and a beanie whilst inside his down sleeping bag in order to keep warm whilst sleeping. The temperature while they were sleeping regularly dropped to -12C and the tent offered little insulation against such temperatures. The key in such situations Paul thought was to avoid getting cold in the first place; however this is often easier said than done. Every morning when the boys awoke their shoes were frozen and so very stiff that for the first 20min wearing them, they almost didn't bend. After a couple of days the water they had brought also froze and so had to be melted and made into tea if they wanted something to drink.

The boys went walking into the mountains and valleys

behind the campsite almost everyday, the longest being a 33km snowshoe hike down the Bjordalen (Bear valley) and up onto the Berget Plateau for beautiful vistas of the surrounding area. Even though Paul had really wanted to see a polar bear, at the end of the trip he was quite glad that they had in fact not encountered a bear. As an encounter with a polar bear whilst hiking on foot would most likely have been very dangerous; still the gun was their constant companion to protect them from the king of the arctic if he choose to appear.

Paul found the whole trip to Svalbard great, it was absolutely amazing, camping in amongst the wildlife and awaking to stunning vistas of snow capped peaks and sparkling bays every morning. A week after they had arrived, the boys packed up their campsite and said goodbye to the wonderful surrounds.

They returned to Norway, unfrostbitten, uneaten (by a polar bear) and largely with their sanity intact. This is actually quite an achievement considering the boys had experienced 168 consecutive hours of uninterrupted sunlight, which is one very long day. The next two days were spent in Drag, a small town on Tysfjord with Lars' family, who are Norwegian Sami. They travelled down Tysfjord in Lars' boat for a couple of hours, admiring the majestic beauty of the all encompassing fjord. They visited the local Sami centre and learnt more about the Sami culture. The landscape in northern Norway is absolutely amazing. It really has everything you could ever want in a landscape, soaring snow capped peaks, endless picturesque waterfalls and crystal clear lakes, rivers and fjords. Words and pictures really do no justice to the beautiful fjord landscapes.

One Ferry, Five Buses, a Train and Twenty-four hours after leaving, Paul and Marko arrived back in Oulu.

**PLANTING AT POINT ORMOND**  
**SUNDAY July 29**  
**10am-12noon**

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Wattle bird outside my window,  
watching my every move on the  
computer as I create this newsletter.



Beautiful male Superb Fairy-wren on  
the Elwood foreshore near the canal.  
Andrew McCutcheon