

IN THE PICTURE SPITSBERGEN

Six scientists who live in Spitsbergen: "It touches you, it is so impressive"

Spitsbergen, that sounds to the North Pole, and therefore uninhabitable. In reality, scientists from all over the world live and work in Longyearbyen and Ny-Ålesund. Photographer Marte Visser went there to portray a number of them.

Tekst by Afke van der Toolen

January 24, 2020, 3:00 PM; translated by Google Tra



Maarten Loonen Image Marte Visser

Maarten Loonen

Arctic fox here, glacier there, and always the possibility of an approaching polar bear: an inhospitable wasteland where human footprints are still rare. And there you are eating your sandwiches. "That touches you, you know. That is so impressive, you can't tell. "

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Of course there is the warming. In the thirty years that he has been here in the summer, Maarten Loonen (59) has seen it happen. If you ask him specifically about that, he will get tears in his eyes. But if you hear him talk about Spitsbergen itself, the enthusiasm will burst. Even a lump of glacier that collapses into the sea, is pretty much the symbol of the climate crisis: "Mighty beautiful to see."

He is mainly from the barnacle geese, this biologist from the only Arctic Center in the Netherlands (University of Groningen). They are currently among the winners: the warmer it is in Spitsbergen, the more they have to eat during the breeding season. But the arctic fox population is also growing. Thanks to the chicks, especially those from the late leg, with the shortest legs.

In addition, man also demands his attention, because he is chairman of all institutes represented in Ny-Ålesund. What used to be an abandoned mining village is now a research center with scientists from all over the world. Not only for climate study, but also for geopolitical stratego. Foreign affairs finance enough for Loon's own annual stay.

Everyone therefore knows who he is when he walks through Ny-Ålesund on his traditional Dutch clogs. And yet it is not this human world for which he returns year after year. He is concerned with what lies beyond, what he calls his playground. "As a boy I wanted to be a cowboy, now I am walking through the wilderness with a gun over my shoulder." Indeed, as happy as a child.



Maarten Loonen. Image Marte Visser

Lena Håkansson

If you climbed the Norwegian rock walls at the age of 12, you are made for raw nature and exciting challenges. Geologist Lena Håkansson, from climbing girl to Spitsbergen resident. For four years she has lived permanently in Longyearbyen, the northernmost town on the planet.

The climate of then, now and later, that's what it's all about for her. She goes on ice to take deep drill samples, scrambles to glaciers to study how they shrink. "I look into the distant past to see the future," she summarizes.

In the summer she takes students on fieldwork. When polar bears arrive, she has to evacuate such a whole group. As calm as possible, because it depends on her whether panic breaks out. She always keeps an eye on the best escape route.

So far, Spitsbergen life seems to be right for the climbing girl of the time. That is true, she agrees wholeheartedly. "But at the same time I'm getting more and more frustrated." "I think we should only stay if we really need more knowledge to open everyone's eyes."

In addition, her freedom of movement is quite small. Someone always has to go if she wants to go, because nobody is allowed in the wilderness alone. "And what not to do to arm yourself against the polar bears and the cold!"

So no matter how this rugged region suits her, she won't stay forever. By the way: "Being able to get on the train again with a good book, that also attracts me again."



Lena Håkansson and Alexander Hovland. Image Marte Visser



Lena Håkansson: "Being able to get on the train with a good book is something that appeals to me again." Image Marte Visser

Simon L'orange

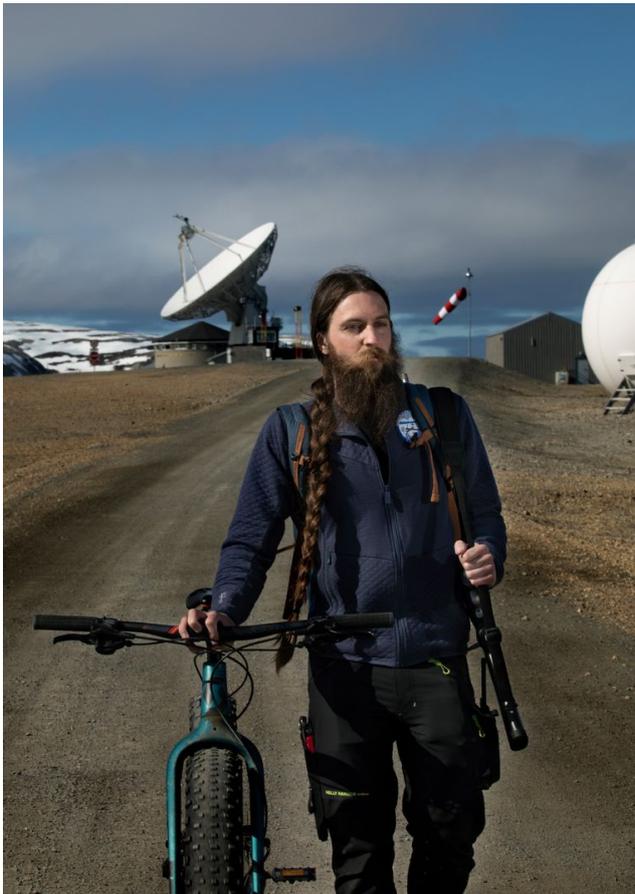
Life is good in the Arctic - in the jacuzzi with a beer. Because that is the favorite leisure activity of Simon L'orange (26), perhaps the most casual resident of Ny-Ålesund. He had just graduated and was looking for his first job, when a vacancy appeared on Spitsbergen. "Do that then," he decided.

He may also be the most relaxed resident. Doesn't he miss the sun during the polar night? No, at most he is a bit futile than normal. Doesn't he find life hard there? No, the people are exaggerating too fast, it is not that cold. And there are no meters of snow either, it is too windy for that.

L'orange, despite its name being a true Norwegian, is not polar biology or ice cap geology. He's from the machines. Large machines. As a technician at the Kartverket geodetic observatory (the Norwegian surveying authority), he ensures the well-being of three out-of-the-box satellite dishes. These are part of a global network that, among other things, measures the rotation of the earth, which is important for the proper functioning of satellite navigation. And the two newest antennas are also suitable for accurately mapping what the climate crisis is doing to the surface of the earth.

Fortunately, all machinery usually works well. So the work is also pretty relaxed. Maybe a little too much, he even says. "Who knows, that will break me up in my future career."

On the other hand, he is a member of the Jacuzzi committee. And go to work by bike, if possible. And last winter he was Santa Claus. But hunting, like at home in Norway, is something he does not do here. "No fun, because you can pick up the geese so to speak. Everything here saves its energy." Just like him, yes.



Simon L'orange: "Everything here saves energy." Image Marte Visser

Marije Jousma

Landing in the morning, shooting lessons in the afternoon. Otherwise she would not even have access to that country where the polar bears are always hungry. "And imagine, sometimes ten hours of walking for just half an hour of field work. And then spend the night somewhere deep in the wilderness in a hut, with only mountains and ice around you - wow. "

The two months that biology student Marije Jousma (24) has lived in Spitsbergen, she feels like a small person in the Wild West. Her view alone, a fjord complete with a whole series of glaciers, a freshwater lake, roaming reindeer, arctic foxes on a skewer, and - somewhat dissonant though - the building of the local pub.

That freshwater lake is central to her research. She tapped measured liter jars of water full of microscopic plankton, and then went looking for goose poo. Indeed, at 2,864 kilometers north of the University of Groningen this student followed the geese to collect their freshest droppings. She put varying amounts of them in her water pots, and set the whole at two different temperatures. The goal: to see how the ecosystem of such a polar lake changes under the influence of global warming and the associated Spitsbergen goose boom. Because more geese = more poo = more nutrients in the water. How does plankton benefit from this?

Jousma is now home again, but her analysis is still in full swing. And, does she want to go back to the pool again? "I love it." Has she become addicted like others do? No, not that. "Life there is pretty difficult. That you have to do everything on foot, for example. And besides, the rest of the world is also there. "



Marije Jousma. Image Marte Visser

Åshild Pedersen

Living on Spitsbergen is actually very common. At least: "You must be able to stand the cold. And love nature a lot. And robust enough for the physical conditions here. "

Said Åshild Pedersen (50), reindeer biologist who dragged her entire family to Longyearbyen, and is surprised when people are surprised about it. Because for daughters Sigrid (14) and Synne (11) it is ideal there. They can go out on skis and dog sleds, and closer to home there is football, horse riding and lessons in circus acrobatics. And together with three hundred other children, they attend the most northerly school in the world - where they learn how to skin a reindeer in addition to the regular curriculum.

The polar night is currently prevailing on Spitsbergen. But Pedersen does not think that is a problem, as long as she goes outside every day. "Really, it is a very conventional existence," she insists, and she laughs: "I have adapted successfully."

The latter is a nod to her research theme: the adaptation of reindeer to climate change. In Pedersen's words, the Spitsbergen reindeer is no more than "a clumsy sheep." And it doesn't keep up with the rapid changes. The herds on the coast are in a squeeze, because moving across the ice from pasture to pasture is no longer possible. Those in the interior have it easier, until the snow rains, as happens nowadays. The wetness freezes irrevocably, and then grazing is no longer there.

Apart from the warming, the reindeer have no real natural enemies, which means Pedersen can come very close to her research object. "Great, right?" That is why she would like to stay forever - albeit that her husband, who was a skipper here for a while, got other work in Norway. In that one respect, the adjustment was not entirely successful.



Åshild Pedersen. Image Marte Visser

Geir Wing Gabrielsen

That Geir Wing Gabrielsen actually uses his middle name is not a snobbery. For him, the accidental reference to the English "wing" is a gift, as if he were put in the cradle of the birds. And that's true, because the Norwegian fishing village where he grew up suffocated. That is where the love began that had already brought him to Spitsbergen for 33 summers.

He is 64 years old, but wants to continue for at least five years. "I have so much to do!" He exclaims. In addition, his annual stay in Ny-Ålesund is quite comfortable. "Your food is served in the canteen, your bed is cleaned by housekeepers, and there is a good dinner every Saturday night." The hardships of Spitsbergen discoverer Willem Barentsz are long gone.

As the chief toxicologist at the Norwegian Polar Institute, Gabrielsen keeps track of how much industrial junk is entering the birds of the High North - in short: an enormous amount - and what that physiologically does to them. Which means he has to investigate how much plastic ends up in their stomachs and how many toxins in their blood.

To do this, he boarded a boat, set out for such a typical nesting island, sailed around it first to see if there were no polar bears, and landed for scientific craftsmanship. For example, catching eider geese to take blood samples. Or carve storm bird carcasses to count swallowed plastic particles.

"In that respect, my life as a bird scientist is not that romantic, no."

At the same time, he is still full of wonder about what beautiful animals birds are. Take those tens of thousands of breeding short-tailed coots, buried under a thick layer of snow after an insane storm night. All created, he thought. Until, a few melting hours later, he saw the first black cups protruding to death above the white. "Very funny yes. But also very impressive. "



Geir Wing Gabrielsen: "My life as a bird scientist is not very romantic." Image Marte Visser