

Norway's Varanger Fjord – Early Spring in the Arctic

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Ivalo

Day 2/3 Varanger Fjord

Day 4 Ivalo

Day 5 Fly London

Departs

March

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code NOR04) or brochure

Grading

A. Easy birdwatching walks

Focus

Birds

Highlights

- Take a rare glimpse of the Arctic in early spring
- Enjoy large flocks of Steller's Eider, King Eiders and Gyr Falcon
- Look for Siberian Tits and Siberian Jays in the taiga forests
- Seabirds, including Brünnich's Guillemots on an offshore island
- 'Northern Lights' – a possibility
- Be guided by our expert local ornithologist



Aurora Borealis courtesy of Jennifer Horn



King Eider courtesy of Jari Peltomaki



Brünnich's Guillemot courtesy of Jari Peltomaki



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Introduction

The Varanger Peninsular lies at the most northerly tip of mainland Europe, far to the north of the Arctic Circle. This is a sparsely populated land of mountains, deep fjords bordered by the icy expanse of the Arctic Ocean. For much of the winter the interior of this region is a Christmas card scene of thick snow, the haunt of Willow Grouse and Snowy Owl, but thanks to the warming influence of the Gulf Stream, the deeply indented coastline is free from ice providing sheltered havens for large rafts of sea duck. Most of Europe's population of Steller's Eider crowd into Varanger Fjord, sharing the open water with large numbers of the beautiful King Eider, plus Common Eider and Long-tailed Duck, to create a unique assemblage of birds that is likely to be one of the highlights of this unusual tour. In recent years the presence of the King Eiders has been less predictable due to milder winters resulting in alternative areas of open water being available elsewhere but Varanger is the traditional haunt of these splendid ducks and in a 'normal' winter rafts of up to 500 birds can be seen in the Fjord.

With over ten hours of daylight a day we will have plenty of time to explore this spectacular area and as darkness finally falls we will turn our attention to the heavens in the hope of catching sight of the beautiful Aurora Borealis or 'Northern Lights', a natural light spectacular at its best during the dark winter and early spring nights!

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Ivalo

Early this morning we will leave London and fly to Helsinki before transferring to our flight to Ivalo, a town in Finnish Lapland roughly 150 miles to the north of the Arctic Circle. On arrival this evening we will be met by our local guide and ornithologist we will transfer the short distance to the Hotel Ivalo, our base for the first and last night of the tour.

The forests around Ivalo are also very occasionally frequented by the magnificent Great Grey Owl. In the weeks before our arrival our guides will be talking to foresters and other local contacts to find out if this most majestic of owls is hunting in the area. They are rare birds here at the northern extreme of their range, but if it has been a good vole and owl year we just may just be fortunate have the privilege of watching a Great Grey Owl gliding silently over the frozen meadows or perched on the edge of a snow covered tree. Hawk Owls can also be a roadside sight in both Finland and Norway during a good vole year.

Day 2

Vardö Varanger Fjord

After an early breakfast, we will begin our journey head north to the Varanger Peninsular perched on the most northerly tip of Europe. After a while we will leave Finland and cross into Norway. As

we continue further north along the Arctic Highway the trees gradually thin out and give way to open tundra. En route, and before we leave the trees altogether, we will stop for some birdwatching and lunch. At this time of year garden bird feeders can be very productive and are a good place to look for Siberian and Willow Tits and Arctic Redpoll, Siberian Jay and Pine Grosbeak. The countryside around Ivalo is favoured by several members of the grouse family and with luck we might see the impressively large Capercaillie, Black, Willow and Hazel Grouse, although the last named can be frustratingly hard to view in their forest habitat and the first two species require good fortune to find in the snowy winter landscape.

Before reaching Varanger Fjord itself, we may visit Hoyholmen to look for the beautiful Gyr Falcon. This is a former breeding site and as such is a good area to look for this most powerful of falcons although the whole of the peninsular constitutes hunting grounds for these birds and we might even see one striking fear into the bird population around Vardo. Such accomplished predators can roam over vast areas of countryside but if we are lucky enough to coincide with an appearance during the tour it will be an unforgettable encounter. It will probably be mid to late afternoon before we get our first look at the starkly beautiful landscape of Varanger Fjord with its snowy tundra set aside the deep blue of the Arctic Ocean. We should have time for a couple of hours birdwatching and our first sight of the huge rafts of sea ducks before continuing on to the small fishing village of Vardö, our base for the next two nights.

Day 3

Vardö Varanger Fjord

Vardö is located on the eastern most tip of the Varanger Peninsular and is a perfect base from which to explore the Fjord and surrounding area. Here, most years, hundreds of Steller's Eider and King Eider crowd the waters just offshore, all resplendent in their breeding plumage and energetically performing their courtship displays. The evocative cooing of the Common and King Eiders fills the air with sound, mingling with the cries of hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks which are in also the race to pair up and mate before they leave for their breeding grounds. We will also be on the lookout for White-billed Divers, a battleship of a bird, which occasionally plough through waters of the Fjord at this time of year. Other birdlife to look for include the majestic White-tailed Eagle, of which ten or more may be seen around the Fjord, Willow Grouse, numerous Glaucous Gulls and smaller numbers of Iceland Gulls. On the snowy fells we are bound to see plenty of the semi-domesticated Reindeer which wander the forests and tundra but with luck we may also see a snowy white Arctic Fox or Arctic Hare.

Once we have absorbed the sights and sounds of the inshore waters, and weather permitting, we will board a small boat to visit Hornøya Island, an important seabird breeding colony. With luck we will see five species of auk including the most sought after for British birdwatchers, the Brünnich's Guillemot which is numerous here. Along with these, however, we should also see Common and Black Guillemots, Puffin and Razorbill along with an outside chance of that mighty atom of the auk world, the Little Auk, which is rare but occasionally seen in the Varanger area.

Vardö and Varanger Fjord are a photographer's paradise. The flocks of sea duck, in common with many Arctic species, are fearless and approachable as are many of the land birds. Bring a tripod

and you can even turn your camera skyward after dark to capture the flicking lights of the Aurora Borealis as it illuminates the night sky; a true arctic finale to our stay in this magical place.

Day 4

Ivalo

After breakfast we must sadly say farewell to Vardö and Varanger Fjord and begin long the journey back to Ivalo. Before leaving the area altogether, however, we will have some time for birding before eventually we re-enter the Taiga zone and the open tundra gradually gives way to trees once more. Birdwatching stops en route will give us another opportunity to look for those birds we missed at the start of the holiday before we return to Ivalo for our final night in the Arctic.

Day 5

London

We will have the whole morning to further explore the forests and gardens around Ivalo. Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay, Pine Grosbeak, Waxwing and Arctic Redpoll are all possible this morning and we will also be on the lookout for Black Grouse and their even more elusive cousin, Hazel Grouse. At mid-day we must sadly return to the airport for our flight to Helsinki from where we connect with our return flight to London arriving in the early evening (flight timings to be confirmed nearer the tour).

Tour grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of day walks only. We will travel to each site by minibus, then take leisurely walks to explore the area, generally over easy terrain, although some paths can be rough in places. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and is of an 'average' level of fitness.

Weather

March is early spring in the arctic so you should expect the weather to be cold. Day-time temperatures may only reach -5 to 0°C and at night it may drop to -20°C. This however will not be the 'damp cold' you are used to in the UK, with no wind and sunshine it can often feel almost warm but wind chill is a significant factor on occasions! Rain is very unlikely at this time of year but the odd heavy snow shower should be expected. Obviously, plenty of warm clothes are essential for this tour and you will be sent a full checklist of recommended clothing on booking, as part of the pre-departure pack.

Transport

We will use 6-8-seater minibuses throughout, driven by our local guides.

Accommodation

We will be using two hotels on this tour. For our two nights in Ivalo we use the comfortable Hotel Ivalo whilst for the two nights in Vardö we will be staying in the Hotel Vardö (from where,

incidentally, you can watch Steller's Eider from the hotel dining room window!). All rooms have private facilities.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website.

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