

# Norway's Varanger Fjord

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 -18 March 2011



Pine Grosbeak



Siberian Jay



Ivalo, looking for woodpeckers



Nesseby Church

Report compiled by Peter Clement

Images by kind courtesy of Jennifer Horn



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## Day 1

Monday 14th March

London (Heathrow) – Helsinki – Ivalo

During the course of the morning the group met up either at Heathrow or Helsinki airports or at our final destination later that day - at Ivalo airport. At Ivalo we were also met by the news that our local guide, Toni, was unwell and that a replacement was on his way but wouldn't get here until later that night. In the meantime we were taken to the hotel by taxi where a buffet meal was waiting once we had checked into our rooms. After the buffet supper we took a short ride in the second hired vehicle up the road to a local cemetery on the edge of town in the hope of listening for any owls that might be calling but despite a short walk through the cemetery, where we admired some of the lantern-lit gravestones, there was little sign of any owls, possibly they were deterred by the rather strong cold wind pressing through the trees. After a while we beat a retreat back to the hotel and a warm night's sleep.

## Day 2

Tuesday 15th March

Ivalo – Utsjoki – VarangerFjord

The day dawned bright and sunny and over breakfast we met up with our new local guide, Ari, who had driven up from the south of Finland and arrived shortly after midnight. After breakfast we loaded up the two vehicles and took a short drive to the outskirts of Ivalo in the hope of seeing a Three-toed Woodpecker that had been seen in this area in recent days.

Once out in the forest we crunched along deep snow covered tracks in a fairly open pine forest but no woodpecker showed, we did however, see the only Willow Tits of the trip. By mid-morning it was time to head-off north along the main road north from Ivalo which passes through miles of pine forest and frozen rivers and lakes in the serenely snow-clad landscape with very little sign of any wildlife except for the occasional Hooded Crow. Things changed when we stopped about 80 km up the road at an isolated timbered roadside cafe where at one end there was a large pile of snow covered with sunflower seeds which were attracting a flock of Pine Grosbeaks together with a few Arctic Redpolls and several Siberian Tits. Not surprisingly we spent some time here admiring and photographing the comings and goings of the birds which were amazingly tame and seemingly unconcerned at our presence. We also just managed to squeeze in a cup of coffee in the cafe before we had to move on up the road.

Very little else was seen along the road in the rather unchanging landscape of pine trees and snow. We stopped for lunch in Utsjoki which is the last town in Finland, at a hotel that was otherwise closed for the winter but had opened up especially for us and a good lunch it was. The road running northeast from Utsjoki follows the border with Norway along a frozen river which divides the two countries but after a while the road passes seamlessly into Norway. Shortly afterwards we got our first distant view of the sea and shortly afterwards arrived at the frozen over inner part of Varangerfjord. We stopped by a little village with a picturesque wooden church right on the shore of the fjord and got our first look at some of the birds here. Amongst the rocks along the shore were some Steller's and Common Eiders, Purple Sandpipers and an immature Iceland Gull, a distant White-tailed Eagle was also spotted but unfortunately it was heading away and out of sight.

Moving on a little way we made a brief stop to look at the inlet at Vadsö where there was a close flock of Steller's Eiders near the bridge and some Purple Sandpipers but little else. The town of Vadsö marks the end of the trees and north of here it is an open landscape of gently rolling hills, open tundra and a rocky shoreline all of which was, apart from the road, covered in deep pure white snow. We made one or two stops along the road to look over the fjord and at one stop there were several Reindeer grazing and nearby a Fox was patrolling along the edge of rocks below the road. We reached Vardö just as it was getting dark and checked in to the hotel in good time for dinner.

## Day 3

Wednesday 16th March

### Hornöya Island and VarangerFjord

The dining room of the Vardö hotel looks out over the harbour and in the bright morning sun we could see several Steller's Eiders and some Purple Sandpipers along the edge of the inlet below the hotel. After breakfast we put on several more layers and walked along to the quay close to the hotel. From here we boarded a boat that took us out for a trip round Hornöya Island which lies just offshore. Once out of the harbour we ran into a brisk cold wind and a slight swell on the sea and further out, around the edge of the island, some superb views of Guillemots, Razorbills and Brunnich's Guillemots together with Puffins, masses of Kittiwakes, several Ravens on the cliffs and to top it all a fine White-tailed Eagle came almost overhead at one stage. Having done several circuits on the rather choppy swell we headed back to Vardo and were accompanied by several Glaucous Gulls one of which was still around the boat as we docked back in the harbour where there was also a single Brunnich's Guillemot loafing around the jetties.

After lunch we drove back through the tunnel which joins the island on which Vardö sits to the mainland. We took a side road down to another quay where some fishing boats were moored but by now the cold and biting wind had become full-force and it was difficult to try and see anything in the wind and driving snow but mainly from the vehicles we did manage to see a large raft of Steller's and some Common Eiders at close range together with several more Glaucous Gulls. Nearby a large and spread-out flock of almost all-white Willow Grouse were feeding by the roadside so brilliantly camouflaged in their all-white surroundings that we almost overlooked them but as soon as we stopped the vehicles they ran off into the moving blanket of snow being driven low across the ground and it was impossible to keep up with them. Further on we did actually manage to find a relatively sheltered bay where we found another large flock of Steller's Eiders together with a single Long-tailed Duck and a little further on a couple of flocks of Common Scoters. After the evening dinner we tried a drive out of town to look for the Northern Lights but although the wind had abated a little the moving blanket of driven snow over the road was even more surreal in the headlights, but it was all to no avail as the lights were not showing tonight.

## Day 4

Thursday 17th March

### Vardö – Vadsö – Utsjoki – Ivalo

Today was the start of the return journey back to Ivalo, but before leaving Vardo we took a drive around the town to the northern point which overlooks Hornöya Island. From here, and despite the wind, we could see the large flocks of auks and kittiwakes around the island and several Glaucous Gulls closer to us. In the bay were some Steller's Eiders and a couple of Goosanders, our first of the trip, but there was still no sign of any King Eiders. We left the island and set off back along the road through the snow-clad landscape. Stopping at several vantage points along the road where it runs close to the fjord we were still hoping to find some large rafts of eiders but the strong wind was creating a lot of white-horses out in the main channel and it was impossible to see anything at any distance. Stopping again at Vadsö we checked the inlet again and also the place further along the fjord by the picturesque church and apart from the by-now familiar Steller's and Common Eiders and some Common and a single Black-headed Gulls together with a briefly glimpsed White-tailed Eagle there was still no sign of any King Eiders. We reluctantly concluded that as there was no sign of them anywhere along the fjord they must have already set off back to their Siberian breeding grounds.

Back in Finland we stopped for lunch back at the same hotel in Utsjoki where a delicious salmon soup was on the menu. This consisted of large chunks of locally caught salmon in a rich creamy broth and is a local speciality dish. Whilst re-fuelling the vehicles at the filling station in Utsjoki a pair of Siberian Jays flitted across the main road and disappeared into a nearby garden. Further on down the road we stopped again at the roadside cafe and its amazing bird-table. In addition to the Pine Grosbeaks, Arctic Redpolls and Siberian Tits were two Siberian Jays which showed very well in the birch trees and pines around the cafe.

We arrived back in Ivalo in the early evening and checked back into the hotel. After dinner, although the wind was still blowing rather strongly we set off again in pursuit of owls and the Northern Lights, although the forecast for either was not promising. We tried one area on the edge of the forest just outside the town and through the wind we heard a rather distant Tengmalm's Owl calling, and, as we were about to set off in pursuit, on glancing upwards noticed that the Northern Lights were putting on a display! Over the next few minutes we stood and watched entranced by long green sprays of glowing light and long hanging curtains of light that came and went in the northern sky and all the while the wind whistled through the trees it was truly an Arctic spectacle not to be missed. Some of the group stayed out to watch and hopefully photograph more of the light display whilst the others went off in search of the owl but both groups had little luck as by then the owl had stopped calling and the light show was over.

## Day 5

Friday 18th March

### Ivalo – Helsinki – London (Heathrow)

After breakfast there was just time to take a look around the area outside Ivalo that we had checked on the first morning. Regrettably there was still no Three-toed Woodpecker showing but a nice male Pine Grosbeak sitting atop a tall pine was some consolation. In an area of some houses with large, spacious gardens we checked the bird tables in hope of finding the Nutcracker that had been seen here recently. At first all seemed quiet and only the local Great Tits were showing and we had nearly given up and were about to climb back into the vehicles when, there it was, in a tree right next to the bus!

The Nutcracker was sitting in the lower branches of a birch and was intently feeding on something that looked like a small mammal. Through the telescopes we could see it was something like a small rodent or squirrel and was so engrossed on its meal that it didn't appear to mind our close approach and some superb photos were taken by most of the group.

After the Nutcracker had finished its meal we just had time to check one more nearby location as a possible Dipper site. At first this also seemed rather a forlorn hope as the stream in which it was usually seen was mostly frozen over with only small areas of open water visible, but after a little while the Dipper hopped out in the open in mid-stream and showed well in between dips into what must have been the coldest of Arctic streams.

With the Nutcracker and Dipper as our concluding birds of the trip it was now time to head back for our last lunch of the trip and then on to the airport. We all agreed it had been a short but wonderful trip into the Arctic Circle.

At the airport we said our farewells to Ari who had been a really helpful and knowledgeable guide throughout. At Helsinki airport we said our farewells to each other as there would be little time at Heathrow where various members of the group would be heading off in different directions before boarding the flight back to London where we arrived shortly after 8pm.

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## Species Accounts

### Birds

Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>	Several distantly around the fishing boats off Vardo on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Fairly common or numerous Varangerfjord 15 <sup>th</sup> – 17 <sup>th</sup>
Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	Common around Vardo and on Hornoya Is on 16 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	A small flock of 10 on the sea near Vardo on 16 <sup>th</sup>
Steller's Eider	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	Fairly common in rafts between Vadsoe and Vardo 15 <sup>th</sup> to 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	At least 20 at Vardo on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	A single female on the sea near Vardo on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	Two flocks totalling 40 birds near Vardo on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	4 (two pairs) inshore at Vardo on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Single seen briefly near Vadsoe on 15 <sup>th</sup> , another overhead at Hornoya island on 16 <sup>th</sup> and another briefly near Vadsoe on 17 <sup>th</sup> . All appeared to be sub-adult birds.
Willow Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>	A flock of about 20 seen in swirling and drifting snow near Vardo on 16 <sup>th</sup>
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	Common in Varangerfjord with flocks of up to 100 at both Vadsoe and Vardo and in one or two bays in-between.
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	A single in winter plumage at Vadsoe on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	4 adults on the mudflats at Vadsoe on 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Common and numerous at Varangerfjord.
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoideus</i>	A single immature near Vadsoe on 15 <sup>th</sup> .

Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	Common and fairly numerous at Vardo, several around the boat at Hornoya Island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Common and numerous at Varangerfjord.
Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Very common and numerous at Varangerfjord.
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	Several hundred on the sea at Hornoya Island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>	At least 10 with Guillemots around Hornoya Island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	Fairly numerous at Hornoya island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	Two in flight between Vardo and Hornoya Island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Puffin	<i>Fratecula arctica</i>	About 50 on the sea around Hornoya Island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Small numbers in Ivalo and Vardo
Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>	Single heard calling in woods near Ivalo on the evening of 17 <sup>th</sup> .
(Black-bellied) Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>	One in a partly iced and frozen stream near Ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup> .
Siberian Tit	<i>Poecile cinctus</i>	Up to 4 at a feeder at a roadside cafe between Ivalo and Utsjoki on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> and at least 4 together in woods near Ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup> .
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	A pair in trees near Ivalo on the morning of 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Fairly common and numerous in woods and at feeders around Ivalo.
Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	At least one in gardens at ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup> .
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	Several at Ivalo on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> and 18 <sup>th</sup> .
Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>	Up to 4 at a feeder at a roadside cafe between Ivalo and Utsjoki on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> and at least one in flight at Utsjoki on the 15 <sup>th</sup> .

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Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	A single feeding on a dead mammal (possibly a squirrel) in gardens at Ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup>
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Common around Ivalo.
Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Fairly common in Varangerfjord and up to 20 on Hornoya Island on 16 <sup>th</sup> .
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Common in small numbers between Vadsoe and Vardo between 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> .
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Up to 4 in Utsjoki on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> .
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Up to 4 in gardens at Ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup> .
Common/Mealy Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	A single in woods near Ivalo on the morning of the 15 <sup>th</sup> .
Arctic Redpoll	<i>Carduelis hornemanni</i>	Up to 3 at a feeder at a roadside cafe between Ivalo and Utsjoki on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup>
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	Up to 20 at a feeder at a roadside cafe between Ivalo and Utsjoki on 15 <sup>th</sup> and 17 <sup>th</sup> and a single male in woods near Ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup> .
Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	One heard calling in flight over gardens near Ivalo on the morning of the 18 <sup>th</sup> .