

Norway's Varanger Fjord

Naturetrek Tour Report

16th – 20th March 2022



Steller's Eiders



Pine Grosbeak



Siberian Tit



Siberian Jay

Tour report and images by Tim Melling



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Tour participants: Tim Melling and Matti Komulainen (leaders) with 10 Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Wednesday 16th March

We took the 10:20 flight from Heathrow to Helsinki but technical difficulties meant we were two hours late in setting off. We would have missed our connecting flight to Ivalo, but Finnair held the flight for us. We arrived in Ivalo just a little late where we met Matti, our local Finnature guide, who guided us to our hotel and a welcome meal.

Day 2

Thursday 17th March

We were up for breakfast at 7am, but before that we saw several interesting birds around the hotel, including Pine Grosbeaks. At 8am we set off north to Varanger, but after an hour we stopped at a roadside café where there was an amazing bird feeding station. All of the time, there were about 20 Pine Grosbeaks on view, perching in the snow and on photogenic twigs, in perfect sunshine. Also, both Arctic and Common Redpolls were giving great views. Several Siberian Jays were also seen plus just a couple of Siberian Tits. Most unexpected was a calling male Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and the Red Squirrels were a curious grey colour. Heading north, we stopped to view two roadside Moose that gave great views. Further on, at our lunch stop on the Norwegian border, we saw yet more Siberian Jays, Pine Grosbeaks and Arctic Redpolls. We crossed the bridge into Norway with no border checks whatsoever. Once in Norway, we saw our first small herd of Reindeer then continued on to Varanger. We stopped to look at a few bays and a fish quay but saw nothing of note. But at Vadso, where we were staying, we saw our first Steller's Eiders (three males, two females). We also saw quite a few Red-breasted Mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks, plus plenty of Common Eider. After dropping our bags off at the hotel, we went out again in fading light and saw more Reindeer, a Grey Seal plus many Purple Sandpipers.

Day 3

Friday 18th March

Well, the day did not start well when Matti told us he had spoken to a birder who said he had scoured the entire fjord and hadn't seen any King Eiders, and the only Steller's Eiders he had seen were in Vadso harbour, where we had already seen them. A quick look at the harbour before breakfast produced about 20 Steller's Eiders and there were hundreds of Fieldfares feeding on the rowan trees about Vadso. Then after breakfast we headed out towards Vardo for our boat trip to Hornoya. En route we stopped to look at some feeders and saw a single Tree Sparrow among the many House Sparrows. We also spotted a group of four Willow Ptarmigan by the road, looking fantastic in their white winter plumage. We stopped at a small fishing harbour just before Vardo and saw three more Steller's Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks and a juvenile Glaucous Gull. We arrived at Vardo only to be told our boat trip had been cancelled, so after enjoying Black Guillemots and Long-tailed Ducks in Vardo harbour, we set out to reach a viewpoint overlooking the island of Hornoya. We could see the place was teeming with seabirds and eventually most people had managed distant scope views of Puffin, Razorbill, Guillemot and Brunnich's Guillemot. Then we spotted a raft of King Eiders; about 20 birds, mostly females but with two fantastic males among them. We then drove through the tunnel off Vardo Island and visited a fish quay nearby that was brimming with birds. Best of all were more than a hundred Steller's Eiders really close and photogenic, plus a female King Eider flew in incredibly close. Long-tailed Ducks also showed well and close, as did an adult Glaucous Gull among the hundreds of Herring Gulls and Kittiwakes. We then returned to the fishing village we

had visited on the way there. No Steller's Eiders this time, but we did have great views of two adult White-tailed Eagles soaring over us. On the way back we saw a larger group of white Willow Ptarmigan by the roadside. After a quick comfort break at the hotel, we set off again around Vadso and managed to find two more flocks of Steller's Eiders. After an excellent dinner we noticed the sky had cleared so we drove away from the town's lights and enjoyed the Aurora borealis. We also managed to see a white Mountain Hare in the headlights, and probably the same individual on the way back. All agreed that seeing the Aurora was a great way to end a fantastic day.

Day 4

Saturday 19th March

It was snowing when we set off back, but we still made a few stops along Varanger Fjord. The most notable bird was a White-tailed Eagle along with the usual Ravens and Hooded Crows. We stopped to photograph some ice waterfalls down the cliff faces by the river that separates Norway and Finland. On a frozen river by our lunch stop we saw two Dippers, plus a single Siberian Jay at our lunch stop. The weather greatly improved for the drive south in glorious sunshine. We stopped en route to see a really close Golden Eagle right over our vans. But we saw little else of note until we stopped at the bird feeder café. There were lots of Pine Grosbeaks and Redpolls plus a few Siberian Jays, but the Siberian Tit failed to make an appearance. We arrived at our hotel in Ivalo at about 6pm. An app told us that the Aurora might show after 2am, so we decided we would not bother getting up then as the sky might have clouded over by then.

Day 5

Sunday 20th March

We set off to look at the local woodlands at 6am, before any traffic was about. It wasn't long before we saw a female Capercaillie then a little later we saw two males, an adult and a young male. Black Grouse were also feeding in the trees, and we must have seen about 20, including both males and females. Other new birds this morning were five Bullfinches and two Great Spotted Woodpeckers. Little else was seen apart from the usual corvids plus a few Pine Grosbeaks and Redpolls. After breakfast we headed out again and saw yet another male Capercaillie, and some great views of Siberian Tits in the forest (not at feeders). We enjoyed beautiful landscapes but, alas, it was time to head to the airport for our trip back. All flights ran to time, and we arrived back in Heathrow early evening.

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Species lists

	Birds		March			
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	20	20		
2	Steller's Eider	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	5	150		
3	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		20		
4	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	100	100		
5	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	20	50		
6	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	30	10	4	
7	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		10		
8	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>		16		
9	Western Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>				4
10	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>				20
11	Rock Dove (Introduced)	<i>Columba livia</i>	2	4		
12	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	50	100	40	
13	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	5			
14	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	20	30	20	
15	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		2		
16	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	100+	100+	100+	
17	Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	100+	100+	20	
18	Brunnich's Guillemot	<i>Uria lomvia</i>		✓		
19	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		✓		
20	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		✓		
21	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	1	20		
22	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓		
23	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmarus glacialis</i>		1		
24	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	10	20	2	
25	European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		10		
26	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				
27	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	1	
28	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>	1			
29	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>				2
30	Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>	12		4	
31	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	40	10	20	20
32	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	100	40	50	15
33	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	30	20	30	2
34	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	15			
35	Siberian Tit	<i>Poecile cinctus</i>	2			
36	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	1			
37	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	5			
38	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	15		4	20
39	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>			2	
40	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	10	300	100	10
41	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	30	50	30	

Birds			March			
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20
42	Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		1		
43	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	40		40	3
44	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				5
45	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	10	10	8	8
46	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		6	2	
47	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>	30		30	20
48	Arctic Redpoll	<i>Acanthis hornemanni</i>	20		20	
Mammals						
	Common name	Scientific name	17	18	19	20
1	Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>	2			
2	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	30	30	10	
3	Grey Seal	<i>Hypochoerus grypus</i>	1	2		
4	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	1			
5	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>		2		



Northern Lights