

Whales & Seabirds of Norway's Lofoten Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 29 June 2012



Reine



Sperm Whale



Seabirds & White-tailed Eagle



Lofoten Bridges

Report and images compiled by Malcolm Stott



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Day 1

Sunday 24th June

Andøya, via Oslo and Evenes

Weather details: sunny, temp 15°C

After an early morning departure from Heathrow we landed on time at the airport in Oslo. After a quick transfer from International arrivals to Domestic departures we boarded our flight to Evenes. Beyond the Arctic Circle the weather improved dramatically, from grey cloud to bright blue skies that permitted some stunning views of a frozen interior dominated by snow covered mountains.

Once on the ground at Evenes it didn't take long to organise our transport before we were soon heading north on relatively empty roads. Having stopped at a service station to buy sandwiches we had lunch by the very impressive Tjldsunbrua. On crossing the bridge we left mainland Norway and travelled to Andøya, the northern most island in the archipelago, through some very scenic coastal and mountain scenery. We made several stops en route, the most spectacular being the graceful (steep) Risøyhamn Brua before eventually arriving at Marmelkroken, our accommodation for the first 3-nights. The guesthouse was set in idyllic countryside with spectacular coastal views and distant mountains to the rear and a beautiful wooded valley in front.

We had supper on the terrace listening to the evocative sounds of waders and enjoying the warmth of the evening sun, it was delightful. After dinner Malcolm gave a short briefing out-lining the itinerary and what we might expect to see over the next few days before we enjoyed an evening walk; some even staying up to see the midnight sun, while others gladly retired to recover from a full day of travelling.

Day 2

Monday 25th June

Pelagic, Whale-watching

Weather details; cloudy, temp 8°C

We arrived at Andenes by 8:45am, in plenty of time to check-in for the whale-watching cruise. Once on board M/S Reine we had the obligatory safety drill before leaving the sheltered waters of the harbour and heading out into open-seas to a deep canyon on the edge of the Continental Shelf.

The normally placid Arctic Ocean had a swell this morning, but the end result was well worth a little discomfort. We had some incredible views of a 40 ton Sperm Whale right in front of the ship's bow. We watched and enjoyed with great excitement as it exhaled in huge white plumes of spray. We followed the whale for 20 minutes before it eventually arched its back, presented a tail fluke and slipped into the great depths of a mystery world that few people, if any, ever experience. Everyone was euphoric by now and eager for similar encounters with the largest predator on Earth! Although we did have another 3 Sperm Whale sightings, their behaviour appeared uneasy for whatever reason, perhaps the pod of Orca from the previous day had made them more cautious? Given some 200 – 300 male Sperm Whales gather on these rich feeding-grounds in summer and despite the extra special efforts by the ship's crew to find other more obliging individuals and after 5-hours we returned to Andenes without any further contacts. After the chilling wind at sea, the warmth of the Whale Museum was particularly welcome while Malcolm disappeared to buy provisions for picnic lunches.

We returned south along the, perhaps scenically less attractive east coast, where we stopped by the hexagon-shaped church at Dverberg to look for otters. Although previous tours had seen them here, we were not so lucky today. Time was pressing on so we took a short-cut and crossed the island to arrive at Marmelkroken just in time for supper. The spicy fish-soup was delicious and warmed the inner soul! After the customary daily-log, some managed an evening walk, while others retired to preview the day's images.

Day 3

Tuesday 26th June

Bleik

Weather details; misty early morning with warm, sunny periods pm, temp 12°C

We retraced yesterday's route north along the very scenic western seaboard, but this morning the pace was more leisurely. We hadn't gone far when Malcolm spotted 2 adult White-tailed Eagles sitting on rocks close to the road. We felt very privileged to have some excellent views of these majestic eagles and watched them for a while before continuing on our journey. After several more stops to photograph aspects of this amazing coast scenery we had a brief walk onto a moorland edge where we saw and heard the plaintive cries of a Golden Plover and found a Teal with 7 very small chicks. Back on board the bus we ascended the road that took us through densely wooded hillsides when Richard spotted something large in the undergrowth! We turned the bus around and slowing drove back down the hill to find an Elk with her calf. We enjoyed some good views of both before they vanished back into tree-cover.

We arrived at the very attractive bay at Bleik, with its apron of white sands washed by azure coloured seas, and went straight to the tiny harbour to check-out sailing time for the 'Puffin Cruise'. With a choice of sailing times we opted for an early lunch on the harbour to wait and see just how many people would take the earlier sailing. The 1:00pm sailing looked to be busy, so we decided on the 3:00pm sailing. Meanwhile we drove a little further north and stopped to view, perhaps the most northerly Gannetry. By this time the sun was shining and we could see several hundred of these beautiful birds, with their dagger-shaped bills and sulphur heads, sitting on their large bulky nests along with neighbouring Cormorants.

Before returning to the harbour at Bleik we stopped by a cemetery on the outskirts to admire the wildflower meadows that surrounded it. Cowslips, Globe Flower and Wood Cranebills, indicators of species-rich flower meadows, were growing in profusion, yet we couldn't find a single orchid spike in flower.

The old traditional land-management practice of transhumance (closing small fields close to the farm in summer for hay production, while grazing animals at higher pasture on the hills) was still very evident, albeit some of the hay-meadows had long been abandoned and now turning to scrub. This riotous colour of wildflower meadows and roadside verges will be a lasting memory of our stay here.

Once on board MV Laura we were soon enjoying a pleasant afternoon cruise to Bleiksøya, the large lump of rock that rises cone-like from the sea just off the coast. The sea was grey and steel-like, the sun was defused by light clouds, the conditions couldn't have been more ideal. Halfway out to the island we noticed a small fishing boat returning to the harbour with its catch. It was clouded by hundreds of gulls and also had 3 White-tailed Eagle in attendance. We sailed over to get a closer look and had the most amazing views as the eagles flew overhead, twisted and dropped to the sea to pick-up discarded fish, marvellous!

The local geomorphology makes this area unique and ideal for breeding seabirds; the sea is shallow at this point due to post-glacial land-uplift and the close proximity of the Gulf Stream washes shoals of small fish onto the shelf making ideal feeding grounds for Puffin, Guillemots and Razorbills.

Bleiksøya is unusual for a Puffin colony, albeit 120,000 pairs nest here, none are seen standing by their burrows as you might expect. The presence of so many hungry White-tailed Eagles would make them easy targets if they did, so instead they opt to stay on the sea before swirling in their myriads in a confused mass before making a dash to feed their growing young. All too soon it was time to return to the harbour, the experience was pure magic and the memories of this experience will linger for a long time to come.

Our return to Bø was equally memorable for the moody coastal scenery, where wisps of cloud spilled over mountains like veils and the backlighting made for some very atmospheric images that begged to be captured.

Our last dinner at Marmelkroken was as delicious as ever and followed by the daily-log. There was even time for a last walk to soak-up this idyllic atmosphere before returning to pack and prepare for the journey south.

Day 4

Wednesday 27th June

Lofoten

Weather details; early morning light rain, followed by bright sun & temp 11°C

At 8:00am this morning we bade farewell to Lizabeth and staff at Marmelkroken, who had made us feel most welcome, and began our long journey south. Shortly after crossing the Risøyhamn Brua some keen observers amongst us thought they had seen an Otter, but the view was all too brief to be absolutely sure. It was a heart-rending sight a little further down the road when we did come upon a dog Otter that had unfortunately just become the victim of a fatal road accident!

After a brief stop at the service station near Sortland it was time to sit back and relax and simply enjoy the day as we journeyed through some of the most spectacular and breathtaking scenery imaginable; the tarmac ahead snaked a path along picturesque fjords, tunnelled its way through high dramatic mountains and arced across long-sweeping graceful bridges that linked the islands together. By late morning we had arrived in the charming fishing hamlet of Kabelvåg where we enjoyed coffee overlooking the harbour before taking a diversion to visit Henningsvær, often described as 'Venice of the North Lofotens'.

Before entering the town we stopped on the outskirts for a picnic lunch and watched climbers 'spider-like' attempts to conquer the sheer granite faces. The picturesque little port was very busy as we joined the tourists to enjoy a stroll through its attractive narrow streets, with plentiful galleries and soak-up the ambiance it generated.

By late afternoon and several stops later, we had arrived at the Lofotr Viking Museum at Borg. The replica 'longhouse' that had been constructed on an original site was the main attraction. It was both an informative and enjoyable experience. Before we left Malcolm drove to within a short walking distance of the replica 'Viking' ship which was moored close-by before visiting a small nearby nature reserve to look for Slavonian Grebes. Conditions were not ideal and if any grebes were present they would have been seeking shelter in the sedge-beds from the very choppy waters.

Just when you are about to become blasé and think the scenery cannot possibly get any better, it somehow manages to excel and you have run out of superlatives! The last part of our journey across Lofoten did exactly this, when the scenery could have been from a mythical 'Fairy-tale' and you could expect to see a Troll sitting by the road! Neither would you have expected to see sheep grazing on a turf roof!

We finally arrived at our destination by early evening and the landscape at Reine was awesome. The small colourful harbour and the rusty-red houses on stilts that hugged its shoreline were over-shadowed by some very imposing, craggy heights. This would be a very special and magical place for our last two nights. We had enough time for a quick photo opportunity before dragging ourselves away to continue down the hill to check-in at the Rorbuer. Dinner was a traditional Norwegian feast and after the daily-log we enjoyed a stroll under the warmth of the late evening sun before retiring.

Day 5

Thursday 28th June

Lofoten

Weather details; bright sun with a little cloud, temp 12°C

The day began with a leisurely stroll around the village. Taking time out to enjoy the moment and absorb the atmosphere of this remarkable place is very important and the raison d'être of 'being here'! Malcolm collected us from the Eve Halli Gallery at 11:00 am and we drove the short distance to Å. We stopped before the hamlet to photograph it from across the bay, where a very elusive Mink was observed disappearing into the boulders never to be seen again, least not by us! On arrival at the car park we had a brief walk to the cliff tops, the view across the Moskenesstraumen Striait, where the mighty maelstrom is created between the islands, was awesome! The hundreds of orchids that normally had a splash of colour to the headland were plenty, although the late season meant their spikes were not yet in full bloom.

We enjoyed our time strolling through the narrow streets hemmed by traditional fisherman's houses (rorbuer), visiting the harbour and for a lucky few even a pod of 6 Orca in the bay! By the time we returned to the car park Malcolm had a picnic lunch ready and waiting. After lunch Marian and Brenda decided on a coastal walk back to Reine while Malcolm drove back to Rambour to visit the beautiful white, sandy beach and to enjoy some very impressive scenery. On the way back we visited the sculpture valley to look at the 'Round Stones' work by a Japanese artist; mmmm!

We enjoyed a delicious supper in the traditional restaurant at Reine Rorbuer before it was time for one last evening stroll before packing for our departure the following morning.

Day 6

Friday 29th June

Lofoten – UK

Weather details; sun shine all the way, temp 15°C

Luggage packed and loaded on the bus before breakfast and our final departure from Reine. The ferry terminal was quite busy and we didn't have long to wait before the ship's arrival. Once on board the ferry we settled down for the 4-hr crossing. The sea was very calm as we watched the 'wall of granite' slowly disappear beyond the horizon, like some ancient sea-serpent. During the crossing we kept a vigil on deck looking for any whale sightings and we were rewarded with views of at least 2 Humpbacks and, perhaps a brief view of a Minke before arriving back at the mainland. Our transfer to the airport at Bodø didn't take too long and once inside the terminal building we checked-in for our UK flight via Oslo. I thank you for your excellent company on what I hope was an enjoyable experience.

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White-tailed Eagles

Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			24	25	26	27	28	29
1	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassana</i>		✓	350			
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	280			
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>			✓	1	4	
5	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>				4		
6	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	4	6	4	2		
7	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>					4	
8	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	2	1	1		
9	Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca crecca</i>			1			
10	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		3	2	4		
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>				4		
12	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	10			✓	12
13	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		57				
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	1	6	20	2	3	
15	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	2	3	10	2		
16	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	10	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
17	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	1					
18	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>			2			
19	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	H					
20	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	6	10	✓	✓	2	
21	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	12	6	✓	✓		
22	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			1	2		
23	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>						
25	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	2	3			2	1
26	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		4	10			
28	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		3	12	1	✓	
29	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		2		1	2	24
31	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			✓			
32	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			✓			
33	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>			10		3	
34	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓	✓			
35	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columbia livia</i>				✓		
36	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	H	H	H	H	H	
37	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica rustica</i>	1			1		
38	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	20					
39	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	2	3	4	2	✓	2
41	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	1	1	3		2	1
42	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	2	2	2	6	10	2
43	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>					3	
44	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenathe</i>			1			
45	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		2		1		
46	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	1					
47	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	1	2		1		

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			24	25	26	27	28	29
48	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2		3		6	1
51	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	12			2	2	
52	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓		
53	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>				2	2	3
54	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				1		

Mammals

1	Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>		2				
2	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	1					
3	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				1	1	
4	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		2				
5	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>						2
6	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>						?
7	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>					6	

Vascular plants

RN Species with very restricted distribution in Britain, largely montane

N Species that occur very largely in northern Britain or in mountains.

Clubmosses, horsetails and ferns

- N Fir Clubmoss *Huperzia selago*
 Water Horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile*
 Marsh Horsetail *E. palustre*
 Field Horsetail *E. arvense*
 Beech Fern *Phegopteris connectilis*

Conifers

- N Juniper *Juniperus communis* ssp *alpina*

Buttercups

- Globe Flower *Trollius europaeus*
 Meadow Buttercup *Ranunculus acris*
 Creeping buttercup *R. Repens*
 Monkshood *Aconitum napellus*

- only seen at Reine

Birches

- Downy Birch *Betula pubescens*
 N Dwarf Birch *B. nana*

Chickweeds,ampions etc

- RN Arctic Sandwort *Arenaria norvegica*
 Sea Sandwort *Honckenya peploides*
 RN Mountain Sandwort *Minuartia rubella*
 Creeping Pearlwort *Sagina procumbens*
 RN Sea Campion *Silene uniflora*
 Red Campion *S. vulgaris*
 Moss Campion *S. acaulis*

Bistorts, docks etc

- N Alpine Bistort *Persicaria vivipara*
 Sheep Sorrel *Rumex acetosella*
 N Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna*

Thrifts

- Thrift *Armeria maritime*

Violets

- Heath Dog Violet *Viola canina*

- Wild Pansy *V. tricolour*
- Willowherb**
Rosebay Willowherb *Epilobium angustifolium*
- Dogwood family**
Dwarf Cornel *Cornus suecica* - widespread
- Willows and poplars**
N Dwarf Willow *Salix herbacea*
RN Blue-leaved Willow *S. caesia*
RN Woolley Willow *S. lanata*
N Tea-leaved Willow *S. phyllucifolia*
- Cresses**
Arctic Scurvy Grass *Cochlearia groenlandica*
N Northern Rockcress *Cardaminopsis petraea*
N Polar Cress *Cardamine nymanii*
Shepherd's Purse *Capsella bursa-pastoris*
N Sea Rocket *Cakile arctica*
- Sundew**
Common Sundew *Drosera rotundifolia*
Oblonged-leaved Sundew *Drosera intermedia*
- Heathers**
N Bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*
Heather *Calluna vulgaris*
N Bog Bilberry *Vaccinium uliginosum*
Bilberry *V. Myrtillus*
Cranberry *V. oxycoccos*
N Crowberry *Empetrum heraphroditum/nigrum*
RN Cloudberry *Rubus chamaemorus*
- Primerose family**
Cowslip *Primula veris*
Chickweed Wintergreen *Trientalis europaea*
- Stonecrops**
N Roseroot *Sedum rosea*
English Stonecrop *S. anglicum*
- Saxifrage**
N Starry Saxifrage *Saxifraga stellaris* - only seen at Nøss(?)
- Parnassus**
Grass of Parnassus *Parnassus palustris* - only seen at Risøyhamn
- Rose family**
Meadowsweet *Filipendula ulmaria*
N Alpine Cinquefoil *Potentilla crantzii*
Marsh Cinquefoil *Potentilla palustris*
Water Avens *Geum rivale*
Alpine Lady's-mantle *Alchemilla alpine*
Lady's-mantle *A. filicaulis*
Mountain Ash *Sorbus aucuparia*
- Clovers and vetches**
Kidney Vetch *Athyllis vulneraria*
Red Clover *Trifolium pratense*
White clover *T. repens* - introduced leys
- Geranium**
Wood Cranesbill *Geranium sylvaticum* - widespread
Herb Robert *G. Robertianum* - common on Lofotens
- Milkwort family**
Common Milkwort *Polygala vulgaris*
- Carrot family**
Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris* - introduced (potential conservation threat?)
Pignut *Conopodium majus*

	Sweet Cicely <i>Myrrhis odorata</i>	- frequent around farms; introduced
	Garden Angelica <i>Angelica archangelica</i>	- abundant
Bogbean family		
	Bogbean <i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	- widespread in pools
Borage family		
	Borage <i>Borago officinalis</i>	- only seen at Reine
	Field Forget-me-not <i>Myosotis arvensis</i>	
Deadnettle and mint family		
	Wild Thyme <i>Thymus polytrichus</i> (praecox)	- widespread & abundant
	White Dead-nettle <i>Laminum album</i>	
Mare's-tail		
	Mare's-tail <i>Hippuris vulgaris</i>	- widespread
Plantains		
	Sea Plantain <i>Plantago maritima</i>	- widespread
Figwort family		
	Northern Yellow Rattle <i>Rhinanthus groelandicus</i>	- common, especially in damp flushes
Butterworts		
	Common Butterwort <i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	- widespread in flushes
Bedstraws		
N	Northern Bedstraw <i>Galium boreale</i>	- widespread
	Lady's Bedstraw <i>G. verum</i>	- widespread
Valerians		
	Common Valerian <i>Valeriana officinalis</i>	- widespread
Teasel family		
	Devilbit Scabious <i>Succisa pratensis</i>	- only found at Å
Bellflowers		
	Harebell <i>Campanula rotundifolia</i>	- widespread
Daisy family		
	Autumn Hawkbit <i>Leontodon autumnalis</i>	- common (not to be mistaken for Cat's ear <i>Hypochoeris radicata</i>)
N	Dandelion <i>Taraxacum spectabile</i> group	- several species
	Hawkweed <i>Hieracium</i> spp.	- widespread
	Scentless Mayweed <i>Tripleurospermum inodorum</i>	- widespread
	Ox-eye Daisy <i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	
	Ragwort <i>Senecio jacobaea</i>	
N	Melancholy Thistle <i>Cirsium dissectum</i>	- widespread
	Smooth Sow-thistle <i>Sonchus oleraceus</i>	
Orchids		
	Northern Marsh Orchid <i>Dactyloriza traustei</i>	- common and widespread
	Heath Spotted Orchid <i>D. maculata</i>	- widespread
Rush family		
N	Three-leaved Rush <i>Juncus trifidus</i>	- widespread on heaths
	Heath Woodrush <i>Luzula multiflora</i>	- widespread
Sedge family		
	Common Cottongrass <i>Eriophorum angustifolium</i>	- widespread
	Carnation Sedge <i>Carex panacea</i>	- uncommon
	Bottle Sedge <i>C. rostrata</i>	- common
Grasses		
	Arctic Fesuce <i>Festuca richardsonii</i>	- widespread & abundant
Lily family		
N	Scottish Asphodel <i>Tofieldia pusilla</i>	- widespread & frequent
	Bog Asphodel <i>Narthecium ossifragum</i>	

Summary

Species recorded (not necessarily inclusive)	99
Rare in Britain with a northern distribution	6
Northern or montane distribution in Britain	21

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Red Campion