

Whales & Seabirds of Norway's Lofoten Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 27 June 2014



White-tailed Eagle



Orca



Reine



Sperm Whale

Images and tour report compiled by Malcolm Stott



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Leader: Malcolm Stott Naturalist

Participants: Paul Mansfield
Sue Mansfield
Sally Truman
Mike Petty
Eve Dawson
Sarah Reeves
Ali Easton

Summary

Nature is powerful in Norway, perhaps nowhere more so than in the Lofoten Islands, 123 miles north of the Arctic Circle. This 184-mile-long archipelago of small fishing communities set against a dramatic wall of towering snow-patch peaks and granite formations that date back several billion years. Nowhere does the midnight sun shine to greater effect than these islands anchored in the Arctic Circle, with their Caribbean-blue seas, purple mountains and green meadows, colourful fishing boats and rust-red clapboard houses on stilts. And, nowhere else can you overdose on air! The beauty of these islands is indescribable and a visit here is one that few visitors will ever forget!

Day 1

Sunday 22nd June

Heathrow – Andøya via Oslo (49km). Weather details: Overcast, wind N4m/s, temp 60C

The plane eventually descended at Andenes, where Malcolm was waiting to meet us. With luggage stowed on board we headed on a 45-minute journey through some amazing coastal scenery to our base at Marmelkroken. We deposited our luggage in the cosy rooms and headed straight for the dining room. Following supper there was time (and daylight) for a spot of bird-watching from the veranda before retiring; by which time we had already become blasé to the presence White-tailed Eagles!

Day 2

Monday 23rd June

Andenes – Bø via National Coastal Route (120 km), Weather details: Overcast, brighter period mid-afternoon, wind NW 8m/s, temp 90C

After an early breakfast we travelled north, back to Andenes for the whale-watching or so we thought. Due to strong winds and quite a heavy swell the sailing was cancelled and so we decided to book for the following day. We enjoyed an informative guided-tour of the whale-museum, and later we returned south along the National Coastal route towards Bleik, with a brief stop to view the small island Gannetry. In Bleik we headed straight for the coffee shop before visiting its picturesque harbour, which looked more Caribbean than Arctic with its white beaches washed by turquoise-blue waters! At the harbour we made enquires about a sailing to Bleiksoya. Although they were sailing this afternoon, we decided to delay our trip in the hope of better weather. Having seen a fleeting glimpse of Bluethroat we made a couple of stops but didn't have any luck at finding a bird.

We did much better watching a White-tailed Eagle at her nest and watched as her mate brought home garnishing for the nest rather than any food! It was very spectacular and a privilege to see these magnificent birds in such a wonderful landscape. Next we visited a local nature reserve at Sørmele where we had a wonderful time botanising on the flower-rich calcareous grasslands and finding four species of orchid before returning to Marmelkroken. After supper we had the daily species log followed by an evening stroll.

Day 3

Tuesday 24th June

Paleagic & Blieksøya (119km). Weather details: am cold & dull with sunshine early pm, wind N 7m/s, temp 80c

After breakfast and some birding this morning, and some calls to the whale-watching centre, we decided not to waste time hanging around, so decided on returning to Sørmele. We had an enjoyable hour botanising and the flowers, especially Frog Orchids, were in profusion. For some there was the 'magic rabbit out of a hat trick', albeit a Mountain Hare on this occasion! Next we visited another local reserve and had a midday stop for coffee. The weather looked to be improving slightly, so Malcolm decided to contact the whale-watching centre once more and the news on this occasion was more positive – hurrah! With a potential sailing on offer we needed to be at the whale-centre by 13:30, and we were still at the southern end of Andøya at this point! A mad dash north and we arrived just in time to hear the good news that some whales had entered the fjord and we would be sailing at 3:00pm. While Malcolm organised all the essentials and even managed to reorganise timings for the 'Puffin Safari', we had an alfresco lunch by the whale-centre.

Eager to sail we were first in line when it came to boarding the ship. We had no sooner left the harbour when the captain placed sonar-earphone on his head and we were heading straight for the echo location of a Sperm Whale. Although we didn't have long to wait before we encountered two Sperm Whales blowing in the distance, we kept on course because the captain knew we had another whale beneath the ship. With deep dives lasting up to 90 minutes we had a bit of a wait, but when the whale surfaced it was well-worth it! The Sperm Whale appeared from the deep and allowed the ship to approach very close indeed, so close that when it exhaled a plume of water vapour you could actually smell its fishy breath! Laying on the surface this gentle giant emptied its lungs in spurts of exhaust vapour before arching its body and slipping back into the depths, raising its tail fluke as it disappeared.

Soon we were tracking a second whale and its pattern of behaviour was similar to that of the first; allowing some great views. This was incredible, almost unbelievable, never had we dreamed of getting this close to the 'Titans of the Deep'! Having so many male Sperm Whales together in one small area is very rare, they mainly lead a solitary life away from their warm water breeding grounds, yet we had a total of four in the same area. And we were lucky enough to enjoy their company for a couple of hours before it was time to return to Andenes. Overwhelmed by our experience we began to return to the harbour when we encountered, not one, but two pods of Orca containing about 30 animals in all. Some females had very small young. And what was even more incredible, we arrived just in time to see them carousel feeding and what's more, we were at the centre of a feeding frenzy; it was difficult to know exactly where to look next! We couldn't have wished for a better experience, it was marvellously exciting and exhilarating at the same time - Wow!

Back at the whale-watching centre we had time to enjoy a pizza before the next sea adventure at Bleiksøya. Once on board the small ship it didn't take long to reach the conical shaped island, home to 200,000 puffins! Puffins in

plenty and with lesser numbers of Razorbill and Guillemot present and covering the sea like a vast black carpet! The sea and sky were a mass of swirling bodies and with dead herring on offer it didn't take long to attract the attention of the magnificent White-tailed Eagles! Wow, this was exactly the stuff of dreams and an extraordinary experience! All too soon our experience was over and we were heading back to Marmelkroken.

I have been interested in nature for over 50 years and nothing in nature ever surprises me, but today's experience exceeded every expectation and was one of the best days ever!

Day 4

Wednesday 25th June

Andøya – Reine, Lofoten Islands (364km). Weather details: Cold & dull, wind NW11m/s, temp 6oC

We had departed Marmelkroken before 09:00am this morning to start the long drive south. Just before we reached Sortland a Willow Ptarmigan, dressed in his splendid summer plumage flew across the road landing close to its edge only to disappear immediately before all could see it! Although the journey south took all day we managed to break it up in to shorter stretches with several convenient stops. The first was at Kabelvåg where we had an enjoyable coffee and cake. Next we briefly turned off the E10 to visit the traditional fishing village Henningsvaer (Venice of the North) and enjoyed the artisan atmosphere and many charming galleries of the former water-front warehouses. Lunch was by a silvery-white beach and caribbean-blue sea with panoramic views of majestic mountains and black-jagged peaks before continuing on our southerly migration.

As we travelled further south through subtle changes in the landscape became more and more obvious as we journeyed; the green wooded hills and black-jagged peaks of the northern most islands were being gradually replaced by bare slabs of giant granite rocks, our introduction to the Lofotens proper. We made a brief visit to Eggum, but the wind was strong and cold, so we decided to move on and look for Slavonian Grebes. First we found a Red-throated Diver with a single chick on route before arriving at a local Nature Reserve, known to Malcolm, where we did eventually find Slavonian Grebes and added Wigeon to our list. By now the light was beginning to take on a magical quality, albeit the sun's appearance was brief.

Continuing on our journey we were able to relax and appreciate the ever-changing landscape unfold as the road snaked a path through tunnels and over sweeping bridges linking the various tiny islands of this amazing archipelago. And just when we thought the scenery couldn't get any better we arrived at Reine, it surpassed all that had gone before! The cliff-edge road-works were pretty impressive too and the entertainment of a low flying White-tailed Eagle was appreciated. On arrival at Reine the community was awash in warm golden sunlight, so we stopped above the tiny fishing village to capture the moment. The scenery below composed of rust-red clapperboard houses on stilts and empty fish-drying racks huddled round the tiny harbour in the shadow of mighty granite mountains was indeed amazing; a mixture of metaphors spectacular, dramatic and beautiful, even romantic seemed inadequately to how we felt. After a full-day of travelling we had some time to unpack and freshen-up before enjoying a delicious supper of seafood soup, baked cod and cheesecake, all very yummy! After dinner some took the opportunity of a walk to enjoy the evening sunlight while others retired to the cosy Rorbus.

Day 5

Thursday 26th June

Reine – Å (86km). Weather details: Very sunny, wind NW 4m/s, temp 11oC

We live in a world of paperwork filled days, increasing workloads and diminishing time frames, so stopping to be thankful for the sweeter moments in between is important in our daily lives. Today was one of those rare opportunities to do exactly that; take a leisurely stroll and take pleasure in the variety of small plants often overshadowed by such a grand landscape, and to appreciate and enjoy our last full day on these magical islands.

From the car park at Å we walked a short distance to the headland where the coastal scenery was awesome. At this point, especially in March on a full moon when the tides are at the greatest difference, the world's strongest maelstrom is found. The phenomenon produces 400 million cubic metres of water to rush through the 150m wide and 3km long sound at speeds of up to 20 knots, causing mighty whirlpools. However, today the sea was calm and blue, so it was very difficult to even imagine such a maelstrom.

We spent a wonderful hour or so on the headland botanising and found Heath Spotted Orchid in profusion and even a couple of Small White Orchids. Soaking-up the glorious sunshine and magnificent scenery we next visited the picturesque fishing village before travelling back through the cliff-edge road works to find a peaceful picnic location. After lunch we continued onto Ramberg and photographed the gracefully sweeping double bridge. We enjoyed a walk on the white, sandy beach washed by azure-coloured Arctic waters and simply soaked up this incredible landscape. We stopped in the village for coffee and cake before returning to Reine.

After supper, with the sun still shining, it proved difficult to resist one last walk around this uniquely individual fishing village before reluctantly retiring to pack in readiness for departure the following morning. Nowhere does the midnight sun shine to greater effect than these islands anchored in the Arctic Circle, consequently most of us were tempted out for one last moment of sheer enjoyment before bed.

Day 6

Friday 27th June

Lofoten Islands – Oslo – Heathrow (15km). Weather details: Sunny, Wind NW 3 m/s, Temp 12oC

Sadly, it was time for us say farewell to Sue and Paul this morning before we left Reine Rorbuer for the short drive to Moskenes and the 10:30am ferry to Bodø. Once on board we settled down on the half-deck for the 3-hr crossing, the sea was calm and the sunshine enjoyable as we watched the 'wall of granite' slowly disappear beyond the horizon, like some ancient sea-serpent. We had time for one last coffee by the marina in Bodø before the short drive to the airport. Once inside the terminal building we checked-in for our UK flight and didn't have long to wait. At Oslo we bade farewell to Malcolm, who had one more night before his connecting flight home, the rest was trouble-free. We were soon on the penultimate leg of our journey home with memories cards full and an experience to last a life-time!

Thank you for making my work so pleasurable and I look forward to meeting you at some point in the near future on another Naturetrek tour!

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2014 Naturetrek Group relaxing

Species List

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

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>				1+yng		
2	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>				3+yng		
3	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassanus</i>		120	120+			
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	60	100	150	✓		
5	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	2	1	3	2	6	
6	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	1	3	1	3	1	
7	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus Cygnus</i>	4	2	4	2		
8	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		8	24		10	
9	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2	2				
10	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>				8		
11	Mallard	<i>Anser platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓		
12	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		2	6	4		
13	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
14	Goosander	<i>Mergus mergus</i>	6		2		4	
15	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	4	3	2	4		
16	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>				1		
17	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	8	10	22	3	2	2
18	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		1				
19	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>			1			
20	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	4	6	✓	✓	✓	2
21	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	4	2	2			
22	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		2	2	2		
23	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>		1				
24	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	2	3		2		
25	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2	6	4	1		
26	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	3	8	2	2		
27	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hyperboreus</i>	1			1		
28	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	1	1	2			
29	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>		6	6			
31	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		2	✓	✓		
33	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	1		✓	✓		
34	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		30	30	24		
35	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>			24		1	
36	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>			20			
37	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>			50			
38	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grille</i>			1		5	
39	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>			100k+			
40	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>				30		24
41	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	H	H	H			
42	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica rustica</i>		2		2		
43	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
45	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>		5				
46	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
47	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>	1			H		

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			22	23	24	25	26	27
48	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		1		2	2	
49	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		H	1	H		
50	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		H	H			
51	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>					1	
52	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		1		1	2	
53	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
54	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	1	2		1	2	
56	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		1	6	10	6	✓
57	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		6		✓	✓	✓
58	Greenfinch	<i>Cardulis choris</i>		3		3		
59	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>				1		
60	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>					1	
61	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>		4		3		
62	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		1		1		

Mammals

1	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>				1		
2	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	1		1			
3	Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>				1		
4	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>			4			
5	Orca	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			30			
6	Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus vitulina</i>		1	3			

Butterflies

1	Green-veined White	<i>Artogeia napi</i>		1			1	
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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 *E. fluviatile*
 Marsh Horsetail *E. palustre*
 Field Horsetail *E. arvense*
 Beech Fern *Phegopteris connectilis*

Conifers

- N
 Juniper *Juniperus communis* ssp *alpina*

Buttercups

- N
 Globe Flower *Trollius europaeus*
 Marsh Marigold *Caltha palustris*
 Meadow Buttercup *Ranunculus acris*
 Creeping buttercup *R. Repens*
 Monkshood *Aconitum napellus* only seen at Reine

BirchesDowny Birch *Betula pubescens*N Dwarf Birch *B. nana***Chickweeds, campions etc**RN Arctic Sandwort *Arenaria norvegica*
Sea Sandwort *Honckenya peploides*
Common Chickweed *Stellaria media*RN Sea Campion *Silene uniflora*
Red Campion *S. vulgaris***Bistorts, docks
etc**N Alpine Bistort *Persicaria vivipara*
Sheep Sorrel *Rumex acetosella*N Mountain Sorrel *Oxyria digyna***Thrifts**Thrift *Armeria maritime***Violets**Wild Pansy *Viola tricolour***Willowherb**Rosebay Willowherb *Epilobium angustifolium*
Alpine Willowherb *E. anagallidifolium***Dogwood family**Dwarf Cornel *Cornus suecica* - widespread**Willows and poplars**N Dwarf Willow *Salix herbacea*RN Woolley Willow *S. lanata*N Tea-leaved Willow *S. phylicifolia***Cresses**Arctic Scurvy Grass *Cochlearia groenlandica*N Northern Rockcress *Cardaminopsis petraea*N Hoary Whitowgrass *Draba incana*Shepherd's Purse *Capsella bursa-pastoris*N Sea Rocket *Cakile arctica***Heathers**N Bearberry *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*Heather *Calluns vulgaris*Bilberry *V. myrtillus*N Crowberry *Empetrum heraphroditum/nigrum*RN Cloudberry *Rubus chamaemorus***Primrose family**Chickweed Wintergreen *Trientalis europaea***Stonecrops**N Roseroot *Sedum rosea*

Rose family

	Meadowsweet <i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	
N	Alpine Cinquefoil <i>Potentilla crantzii</i>	
	Water Avens <i>Geum rivale</i>	
	Alpine Lady's-mantle <i>Alchemilla alpine</i>	
	Lady's-mantle <i>A. filicaulis</i>	
	Mountain Ash <i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>	
	Stone Bramble <i>Rubus saxatilis</i>	

Clovers and vetches

	Kidney Vetch <i>Athyllis vulneraria</i>	
	Red Clover <i>Trifolium pratense</i>	
	White clover <i>T. repens</i>	- introduced leys

Geranium

	Wood Cranesbill <i>Geranium sylvaticum</i>	- widespread
	Herb Robert <i>G. Robertianum</i>	- common on Lofotens

Carrot family

	Cow Parsley <i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	- introduced
	Sweet Cicely <i>Myrrhis odorata</i>	- frequent around farms; introduced
	Garden Angelica <i>Angelica archangelica</i>	- abundant

Wintergreen family

	Common Wintergreen <i>Pyrola minor</i>	
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Bogbean family

	Bogbean <i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	- widespread in pools
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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
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Plantains

	Sea Plantain <i>Plantago maritime</i>	- widespread
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Figwort family

	Northern Yellow Rattle <i>Rhinanthus groelandicus</i>	- common, especially in damp flushes
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Butterworts

	Common Butterwort <i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	
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Bedstraws

N	Northern Bedstraw <i>Galium boreale</i>	
	Lady's Bedstraw <i>G. verum</i>	

Valerians

	Common Valerian <i>Valeriana officinalis</i>	- widespread
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Teasel family

Devilbit Scabious *Succisa pratensis* - only found at Å

Bellflowers

Harebell *Campanula rotundifolia* - widespread

Daisy family

Autumn Hawkbit *Leontodon autumnalis* - common (not to be mistaken for Cat's ear *Hypochoeris radicata*)

N

Dandelion *Taraxacum spectabile* group - several species

Hawkweed *Hieracium* spp. - widespread

Scentless Mayweed *Tripleurospermum inodorum* - widespread

Ox-eye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*

N

Melancholy Thistle *Cirsium dissectum* - widespread

Orchids

Heath Spotted Orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata* - widespread

Frog Orchid *Coeloglossum viride* only at Sørmele

Common Twayblade *Listera ovata* only recorded at Sørmele

Small White Orchid

Rush family**N**

Three-leaved Rush *Juncus trifidus* - widespread on heaths

Heath Woodrush *L. multiflora* - widespread

Sedge family

Common Cottongrass *Eriophorum angustifolium* - widespread

Carnation Sedge *Carex panacea* - uncommon

Bottle Sedge *C. rostrata* - common

Grasses

Arctic Fescue *Festuca richardsonii* - widespread & abundant

Lily family**N**

Scottish Asphodel *Tofieldia pusilla* - widespread & frequent

Summary

Species recorded	86
Rare in Britain with a northern distribution	6
Northern or montane distribution in Britain	20

References

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