

# Whales & Seabirds of Norway's Lofoten Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 - 26 June 2015



Otter



Andøya



Eik



White-tailed Eagle

Report compiled by Malcolm Stott  
Images courtesy of Phil Piper



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Tour Participants: Malcolm Stott (leader) with four Naturetrek clients

## 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 is 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, green meadows, colourful fishing boats and rust-red clapboard houses on stilts. And nowhere else can you overdose on air that's so like champagne! The beauty of these islands is indescribable and a visit here is one that few visitors will ever forget!

## Day 1

Sunday 21st June

### Heathrow – Andøya via Oslo

Weather details: Sunny, wind E 1m/s, temp. 11°C. The plane eventually descended on a beautiful sunny Arctic evening at Andenes where Malcolm was waiting to greet the group. With luggage loaded into the car, we headed off on a 45-minute journey through some amazing coastal scenery to our base at Marmelkroken. With little time before supper we deposited our luggage in the cosy rooms and headed straight for the dining room. Following a traditional Norwegian supper there was time, and plenty of daylight, for a spot of birdwatching from the veranda. In no time at all we were treated to our first White-tailed Eagle of the tour. Although the UK was marking summer solstice, in Norway that occurs on the 23rd June. Nevertheless, at midnight the sun was still shining; the evening light so exquisite and typical of the Arctic. Evocative sounds of waders and drumming Snipe drifted on the evening breeze and lulled us to sleep this evening.

The story behind the legend of the 'Marmel'. Most people who live along the coast, especially the elderly, know of this mythical creature. It's about a fish of unusual, not to say a rather strange appearance, sometimes taking on the shape of a swaddled infant. It would talk and even answer questions; however, if caught and not returned to the sea it could also bring bad luck. The Marmel's greatest sorrow lay in his nakedness, so the fishermen sought to remedy this by providing it clothes before casting it back to the sea. In return the Marmel would point them to new fishing grounds, rich in shoals of fish. In general the Marmel was not considered to be a source of harm, but rather of comfort for people in dire need of good weather and plentiful supply of fish. The legend inspired the Marmelkroken to provide a warm welcome to all their guests visiting this island of outstanding natural beauty and diverse in wildlife.

## Day 2

Monday 22nd June

### Andenes (Paleagic) & Blieksøya

Weather details: Cloud and sunshine, wind NW 3m/s, temp. 11°C. After an early breakfast we travelled north; back to Andenes for our whale-watching cruise. We arrived in time to check-in and go straight to the ship. The weather conditions this morning were perfect for a day at sea: some cloud, good light and no wind. We sailed about 14 kilometres out to the deep Blieksøya canyon, on the edge of the 'Continental Shelf', where we had our first encounter with a Sperm Whale. Unfortunately by the time we had reached the whale's location it took a deep dive and we had to wait another 45 minutes before it resurfaced, but it was worth the wait. The whale laid

almost motionless close to the ship and stayed on the surface for some time before arching its back, fluking its tail and disappeared back into the dark depths of the ocean on another deep dive. A second whale had been found, but again we had to wait for what seemed like ages, before the 'Titan of the Deep' reappeared, much closer to the ship this time. We were totally awe-struck as we watched in complete silence with the whale laying on the water surface, as before, noisily exhaling clouds of vapour before entering the depths in another deep dive.

The sky took the appearance of a huge sheet of grey steel, as did the sea, and both merged imperceptively as one on the distant horizon. Just as we were about to return to Andenes the third Sperm Whale was seen, but sadly it was too far away and by the time it would have taken to reach its location it would most certainly have started its dive and we didn't have enough time to wait for it to resurface.

Once back at the harbour we enjoyed the brief walk back to the whale centre while Malcolm disappeared to buy provisions for lunch. Reunited, next we visited Bleik. The picturesque harbour looked more Caribbean than Arctic with its white sandy beaches washed by turquoise-blue waters. A private sailing on the 'Puffin Cruise' was arranged for later so we had plenty of time for a relaxed alfresco lunch by the harbour.

Later we boarded 'Laura' and were soon settled on board the ship and enjoying the spectacular scenery as we sailed towards the island of Bleiksoya. As we approached the huge conical-shaped rock, the sea all around us appeared to be carpeted in auks, mostly Puffins with Guillemots and Razorbills in much lesser numbers. And the sky swarmed with thousands more – wow, this was exciting! Sadly for us the crew didn't have any fish to tempt the eagles down low (apparently the fishermen were on holiday), however we did managed some excellent views of at least seven individuals as they circled overhead. All too soon our time at this magical island was over as the ship's engine roared into action, and with a plume of exhaust smoke we headed back to the tiny harbour.

Back at Marmelkroken we enjoyed another delicious supper followed by the daily log. With the sun still high in the sky we were just happy to retire contented, for today was truly an exciting day of wildlife watching and we had been so lucky to have had good weather in which to enjoy the experience.

## Day 3

Tuesday 23rd June

### National Coastal Route between Bø and Blik

Weather details: Dull am with sunshine late pm, wind N 5m/s, temp. 15°C. After breakfast we headed off to enjoy the peace and tranquillity of a local nature reserve at Sørmele where we enjoyed a botanising walk on the flower-rich calcareous grasslands. We also saw a pair of Great-northern Divers close to the shore.

Next we had a leisurely drive along the renowned 'National Coastal Route' to Blik, birding and botanising along the way. Within a kilometre of the hotel we found six White-tailed Eagles; then we began to get a little blasé to the presence of these magnificent birds. Once at Blik we soon found an idyllic location for lunch, sheltered amongst the rocks and flower-rich pasture, and we even had a Peregrine fly overhead. After an extended lunch we drove slowly back to the harbour which proved to be very fruitful since we found an Otter enjoying its lunch on a boulder very close to the beach. It was a marvellous sight and we all felt privileged to share the moment, especially since it was the first-ever otter sighting for some of us.

We made a slow return journey to Marmelkrocken, birding along the way and the sun even put in an appearance illuminating the 'fairy-tale' landscape in sublime light. We arrived back at the hotel in time for tea and given the long journey on the following day, we decided to opt for a leisurely stroll birding and botanising before supper. The bird log followed another superb traditional meal before it was time to retire and pack in readiness for tomorrow's journey, skipping all the summer solstice celebrations!

## Day 4

Wednesday 24th June

### Andøya – Reine, Lofoten Islands

Weather details: Cloudy with drizzle, wind N 4m/s, temp. 12°C. It was with great reluctance we had to depart Marmelkrocken this morning. We didn't travel far before our first stop by the impressive Risøhanmm Bridge where we enjoyed a short walk to photograph the spectacular structure, and we didn't ignore the botanical interest, finding Grass of Parnassus to add to our increasing list of plants. The bridge at Sortland provided another excuse to stretch our legs before finally leaving Vesterålen and continuing our drive south to Reine.

Unfortunately the weather proved not to be conducive for many photographic stops, so a coffee break and leg stretch by the time we reached Kabelvåg was more than welcomed. On leaving the town we briefly turned off the E10 to visit the traditional fishing village of Henningsvaer (Venice of the North) and enjoy the artisan atmosphere and many charming galleries of the former water-front warehouses. The inclement weather that accompanied us on most of the drive meant we needed to find a sheltered spot for lunch, which we did at the impressive Gimsøystraumen bru where Pauline, on one of her many brief botanical forays, managed to find a good specimen of Coral-root Orchid.

As we travelled further south we began to notice subtle changes in the landscape as the green wooded hills and black-jagged peaks of the northernmost islands were gradually being replaced by grey slabs of giant granite rocks: our introduction to the Lofoten Islands proper.

We made a brief stop at Borg, but decided not to visit the replica 'Viking Longhouse'. Having already seen Black-throated Diver earlier, Malcolm was confident we might find a Red-throated Diver and his intuition paid dividends; this meant we had collected all three diver species possible, and now we were keen to add Slavonian Grebes to the bird list. Arriving at a small local nature reserve we were not to be disappointed when we saw a pair of Slavonian Grebes with two young, and we managed a fleeting glance of a Ruff being harassed by three Redshanks.

Continuing on our journey, we tried 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. We eventually reached the new cliff-edge road before finally arriving at Reine Rorbuer. We paused briefly at a car park overlooking the fishing village to take in the beautiful scenery below: rust-red clapperboard houses on stilts and empty fish-drying racks huddled round the tiny harbour in the shadow of mighty granite mountains, albeit shrouded in moody clouds.

After nine hours of travelling all we wanted to do was stretch our legs and find the restaurant, so once we had found our quirky Rorbu, we found our way to supper. After an excellent meal and feeling a little tired from the travelling, we retired early.

## Day 5

Thursday 25th June

Reine – Å (86km)

Weather details: Cloud and drizzle, wind N 7m/s, temp. 10°C. Opportunities to unwind and relax in a world of modern communications is a rare luxury these days and this morning Å provided one of those sweeter moments in our daily lives to do exactly that. We had a leisurely stroll and took pleasure in the variety of small plants often overshadowed by such a grandeur landscape, and to appreciate and enjoy our last full day on these magical islands.

We spent a wonderful hour or so on the headland botanising where we found Heath Spotted Orchid and Bog Rosemary growing in profusion. From here, especially in March on a full moon when the tides are at their greatest difference, the world's strongest maelstrom is found. The phenomenon produces 400 million cubic metres of water to rush through the 150 metres wide and three kilometre long sound at speeds of up to 20 knots, causing mighty whirlpools. However, today the sea was relatively calm and Caribbean-blue, so it was very difficult to even imagine such a maelstrom.

Next we visited the picturesque fishing village and enjoyed a stroll amongst its red, clapper-board buildings before travelling back to Reine and beyond. We had intended travelling to Ramberg this afternoon, but the weather (low cloud and drizzle) forced us to change our plans. Instead we visited Sund and found shelter by the Blacksmith Museum for lunch, after which we returned to Reine where we spent the rest of the afternoon sitting in our rorbu drinking coffee and generally chatting while we waited for the weather to improve, but it never did! Sadly, the persistent low clouds continued to deny us the full impact of the truly spectacular scenery that surrounds Reine.

After an early supper we all retired to pack in preparation for a very early start the next day, while keeping an optimistic eye on the weather.

## Day 6

Friday 26th June

Lofoten Islands – Oslo – Heathrow

Weather details: Cloudy, wind NW 3 m/s, temp. 10°C. We left Reine Rorbuer at just turned 5am for the short drive to Moskenes and the ferry to Bodø. Once on board the ship we quickly settled down in the lounge and slept through most of the three hour crossing.

At Bodø the ferry had docked by 9.05am, leaving plenty of time before the flight to Oslo and onward to the UK. We spent some time this morning exploring the areas south and north of Bodø before driving to the airport where we said our goodbyes. Marion and Phil then caught the flight to Oslo whilst Pauline and John stayed to begin the second part of their holiday. Malcolm also stayed before a six hour drive to return the car back to Narvik the following day.

## Species Lists

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

	Common Name	Scientific Name	June					
			21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Great-northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>			2			
2	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>				3+3yng		
3	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellate</i>		2		2+2yng		
4	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>				2+2yng		
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Sula bassanus</i>	2	✓				
6	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>					2	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	10	3	6		
9	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	2	7	5	5		
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>				2		
11	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	2					
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas Penelope</i>		1		2		
13	Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca crecca</i>			5	2		
14	Mallard	<i>Anser platyrhynchos</i>			4			
15	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	12	6	6	4		
16	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		2		6	4	
17	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>			1			
18	Goosander	<i>Mergus mergus</i>	3					
19	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			1			
20	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	1	12	10	3		
21	Peregrine	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			1			
22	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	1					
23	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	10	6	✓	✓	✓	2
24	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	2	1	2	1		
25	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>		1	1			
26	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>			1			
27	Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>			1			
28	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	3	3				
29	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2	6	✓	✓		1
30	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa tetanus</i>	4	2		✓		
31	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		3	5			
32	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		10				
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		✓		✓		
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>		1	10		✓	
36	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>		✓		✓		
37	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		1		2	1	
38	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>		12				
39	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>		50	1			
40	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grille</i>		7			6	
41	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>		✓				
42	Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>			1			
43	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓			✓		✓
44	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			H	H		
45	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						2
46	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>			2			
47	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common Name	Scientific Name	June					
			21	22	23	24	25	26
48	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
49	Redwing	<i>Turdus illacus</i>			1			
50	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		1		1		
52	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>			1			
53	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>	1	1	12	1		
54	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>				1	2	
55	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
57	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				1	20	✓
58	Brambling	<i>Fringella montifringilla</i>			1			
59	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>			6	2		
60	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>						1
61	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>			1			

### Mammals

1	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			1			
2	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>		3				
3	Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>				3		

### List of Vascular plants (Compiled by Pauline Grimshaw & Malcolm Stott)

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*

N  
 Alpine Meadow Rue *Thalictrum alpinum*

#### Saxifrages

N  
 Tufted Saxifrage *Saxifraga cespitosa*

#### Birches

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

#### Chickweeds,ampions etc

RN  
 Arctic Sandwort *Arenaria norvegica*  
 Sea Sandwort *Honckenya peploides*  
 Common Chickweed *Stellaria media*

N  
 Moss Campion *Silene acaulis*

	Red Campion <i>S. dioica</i>	
<b>Bistorts, docks etc</b>		
N	Alpine Bistort <i>Persicaria vivipara</i>	
	Sheep Sorrel <i>Rumex acetosella</i>	
N	Mountain Sorrel <i>Oxyria digyna</i>	
<b>Thrifts</b>		
	Thrift <i>Armeria maritime</i>	
<b>Violets</b>		
	Heath Dog Violet <i>Viola cania</i>	
RN	Yellow Wood Violet <i>V. biflora</i>	
	Wild Pansy <i>V. tricolour</i>	
<b>Willowherb</b>		
	Rosebay Willowherb <i>Epilobium angustifolium</i>	
N	Alpine Willowherb <i>E. anagallidifolium</i>	
<b>Dogwood family</b>		
	Dwarf Cornel <i>Cornus suecica</i>	widespread
<b>Willows and poplars</b>		
N	Dwarf Willow <i>Salix herbacea</i>	
RN	Woolley Willow <i>S. lanata</i>	
N	Tea-leaved Willow <i>S. Phylliucifolia</i>	
N	Net-leaved Willow <i>S. reticulata</i>	
<b>Cresses</b>		
	Arctic Scurvy Grass <i>Cochlearia groenlandica</i>	
N	Northern Rockcress <i>Cardaminopsis petraea</i>	
N	Hoary Whitowgrass <i>Draba incana</i>	
<b>Heather family</b>		
N	Bearberry <i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i>	
	Heather <i>Calluns vulgaris</i>	
	Bilberry <i>V. myrtillus</i>	
N	Crowberry <i>Empetrum heraphroditum/nigrum</i>	
N	Bog Rosemary <i>Andromeda polifolia</i>	
RN	Cloudberry <i>Rubus chamaemorus</i>	
RN	Creeping Azalea <i>Loiseleuria procumbens</i>	
<b>Primrose family</b>		
	Chickweed Wintergreen <i>Trientalis europaea</i>	
N	Northern Grass of Parnassus <i>Parnassia palustris</i>	
	Cowslip <i>Primula veris</i>	
<b>Stonecrops</b>		
N	Roseroot <i>Sedum rosea</i>	
	Biting Stonecrop <i>Sedum acre</i>	
<b>Rose family</b>		
	Meadowsweet <i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	
	Cinquefoil <i>Potentilla sp.</i>	
	Water Avens <i>Geum rivale</i>	
N	Mountain Avens <i>Dryas octopetala</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 saxatillis</i>	
<b>Clovers and vetches</b>		
	Bird's Foot Trefoil <i>Lotus corniculatus</i>	
	Kidney Vetch <i>Athyllis vulneraria</i>	
	Red Clover <i>Trifolium pratense</i>	
	White clover <i>T. repens</i>	introduced leys
RN	Bush Vetch <i>Vicia serpium</i>	
<b>Geranium</b>		
	Wood Cranesbill <i>Geranium sylvaticum</i>	widespread
	Herb Robert <i>G. Robertianum</i>	common on Lofotens
<b>Carrot family</b>		
	Cow Parsley <i>Anthriscus sylvestris</i>	introduced
	Sweet Cicely <i>Myrrhis odorata</i>	frequent around farms; introduced
	Garden Angelica <i>Angelica archangelica</i>	abundant
<b>Wintergreen family</b>		
	Common Wintergreen <i>Pyrola minor</i>	
<b>Bogbean family</b>		
	Bogbean <i>Menyanthes trifoliata</i>	widespread in pools
<b>Phlox family</b>		
RN	Jacob's Ladder <i>Polemonium caeruleum</i>	
<b>Borage family</b>		
	Field Forget-me-not <i>Myosotis arvensis</i>	
<b>Speedwell family</b>		
N	Rock Speedwell <i>Veronica fruticans</i>	
	Thyme-leaved Speedwell <i>V. serpyllifolia</i>	
<b>Deadnettle and mint family</b>		
	Wild Thyme <i>Thymus polytrichus</i>	- widespread & abundant
	White Dead-nettle <i>Laminum album</i>	
<b>Broomrape family</b>		
	Common Cow-wheat <i>Melampyrum pratense</i>	
	Eyebright <i>Euphrasia sp</i>	
<b>Mare's-tail</b>		
	Mare's-tail <i>Hippuris vulgaris</i>	widespread
<b>Plantains</b>		
	Sea Plantain <i>Plantago maritime</i>	widespread
<b>Butterworts</b>		
	Common Butterwort <i>Pinguicula vulgaris</i>	widespread in flushes
<b>Bedstraws</b>		
N	Northern Bedstraw <i>Galium boreale</i>	- widespread
	Lady's Bedstraw <i>G. verum</i>	widespread
<b>Valerians</b>		
	Common Valerian <i>Valeriana officinalis</i>	widespread
<b>Scabious family</b>		
	Devilbit Scabious <i>Succisa pratensis</i>	only found at Å

## Daisy family

RN	One-flowered Feabane <i>Erigeron uniflorus</i>	- only found at Sørmele
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
	Sea Mayweed <i>Tripleurospermum maritimum</i>	- widespread
	Ox-eye Daisy <i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>	widespread
	Tansy <i>Tanacetum vulgare</i>	
N	Melancholy Thistle <i>Cirsium dissectum</i>	widespread
RN	Mountain Everlasting <i>Antennaria dioica</i>	

## Orchids

Heath Spotted Orchid <i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Widespread
Frog Orchid <i>Coeloglossum viride</i>	only at Sørmele
Common Twayblade <i>Listera ovata</i>	only recorded at Sørmele
Corral-root Orchid <i>Corallorhiza trifida</i>	only recorded at Gimsøystraumen

## Rush family

N	Three-leaved Rush <i>Juncus trifidus</i>	widespread on heaths
	Heath Woodrush <i>L. 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
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## Lily family

N	Scottish Asphodel <i>Tofieldia pusilla</i>	widespread, but not common
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