

Whales & Seabirds of Norway's Lofoten Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

22 - 27 June 2018



Sperm Whale



White-tailed Eagle



Bluethroat



Oystercatcher

Report and images by Neil McMahon



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Neil McMahon (Leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

June's 'Whales and Seabirds of Norway's Lofoten Islands' group experienced periods of strong winds and rain during their journey within the Arctic Circle. Thankfully the periods of sunshine and dry weather ensured it was a balanced experience and it seems that we actually enjoyed better conditions than the Norwegians had seen in several weeks, albeit a far cry from the UK heatwave.

Following a flight connection at Oslo, the group met at Bodo on the north-west coast of Norway and then took a ferry over to the southern end of the Lofoten Islands and our first White-tailed Eagle was spotted atop a rocky island not far outside the harbour! Jagged pinnacles of rock covered with snow and engulfed by low cloud provided a mystical, almost theatrical setting as we approached surely some of the most dramatic scenery in the world. Sea birds had been visible during the crossing and more greeted us as we docked at Moskenes. A short ten minute drive found us at our lodgings for two nights in the picture-postcard village of Reine.

The following day saw us exploring the southern end of these stunning islands and finding some quality birds including Red-throated Divers in eye-catching summer plumage, a beautiful Bluethroat, resplendent Slavonian Grebes and a Golden Eagle. The following day we drove slowly up to the Vesteralen Islands, drinking in the scenery and watching birds as we did so, including four summer plumage Black-throated Divers and several White-tailed Eagles plus lots of roadside Fieldfares and Redwings which breed widely across the islands.

The fabulous Marmelkroken Guest House was our home for the next three nights and using this as our base we ventured out on a whale watching trip where we enjoyed sustained views of a magnificent Sperm Whale and enjoyed another boat trip which took us among thousands of rafting and flying Puffins and a gaggle of attendant White-tailed Eagles.

All too soon our adventure was over and we returned to much warmer temperatures, but we agreed that we had all visited one of the most dramatic and beautiful places in the world and sampled just a little of the wildlife that this northern archipelago has on offer.

Day 1

Friday 22nd June

We all met at Bodo Airport at approximately 2.45pm on a slightly delayed flight from Oslo. We then drove to the ferry terminal in our pre-booked mini bus arriving at about 3.15pm and we embarked almost immediately. At precisely 4pm our ferry commenced the four hour crossing to the Lofoten Islands!

Birds enroute were minimal but included a White-tailed Eagle just outside Bodo on an island, a few Puffins, Shags and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Sam saw a Harbour Porpoise. We ate on the ferry just after 6pm – a pretty mediocre meal but it was okay and we were hungry after a day of travelling!

We arrived at Moskenes on the Lofotens at about 7.45pm and disembarked quickly. The jagged, snowy peaks and low cloud made for amazing scenery and an awe-inspiring introduction to these exciting islands!

We drove for little more than ten minutes to Reine Rorbuer to check in for our overnight accommodation for the next two nights. An evening recce at Moskenes and down to the village of Å provided views of a White-tailed Eagle, Redwings and Fieldfares and a Glaucous Gull and we collectively managed to amass 25 species of birds by midnight on our first day!

Day 2

Saturday 23rd June

The optional early morning walk from 6.30am took place in rather dull and blustery conditions, but provided good views of Pied Flycatcher, Twite, and a stunning Mountain Hare, all close to our accommodation.

We tucked in to our buffet breakfast just after 8am and left just after 9.30am with packed lunches.

Our first venue for the day was the village of Å and we enjoyed a pleasant amble around part of the village and headland. A pair of Pied Flycatcher showed rather nicely followed by good views of Willow Warbler, White Wagtail, Redwing and Fieldfare (including just-fledged birds). The beautiful Black-legged Kittiwakes were nesting on the buildings and more distant Eiders and Black Guillemots were better appreciated with use of a telescope. We popped back to Reine Rorbuer for a comfort break and a coffee and left again heading north at 12.30pm.

We remained on the E10 road and unfortunately the weather deteriorated somewhat, with low cloud, high winds and rain. Nevertheless roadside stops produced views of Eider, Arctic Skua, Red-throated Diver and Twite, again the telescope providing enhanced viewing.

Our lunch stop was at a beach-side lay-by with a wooden kiosk selling hand-knitted garments, waffles and home-made jam! We fed the gulls – Common, Lesser Black-backed, Great Black-backed and Herring Gull with excess wraps from our packed lunch and these were some of the best views of these maritime birds all trip. A couple of Ravens couldn't resist the bonanza and came in close too!

Driving further north we encountered Shelduck, Whooper Swan, Red-breasted Merganser and Swallow.

We stopped at Lake Skjerpvatnet where the weather immediately improved for our short walk alongside the lake to an observation tower. At least one pair of resplendent Slavonian Grebes and several Reed Buntings were on show and Dunnock could be heard singing from the cover of small trees. Other avian highlights included Common Snipe, Tufted Duck, Teal, Curlew and Willow Warbler. An unexpected Golden Eagle flew over and was mobbed by a Rough-legged Buzzard, both birds disappearing as dots on the horizon over a distant crag! A charismatic male Red-spotted Bluethroat showed well on and beside the road next to the stream entering the lake. We reluctantly left this lovely spot just after 5pm, arriving back at Reine Rorbuer by 6.10pm (a little late for our evening meal).

We convened in the sitting-room in Cabin Seven later to compile our check lists and chat through the day's events and arrangements for the following day. Those with energy found the bar and enjoyed chatting to some of the local fishermen!

Day 3

Sunday 24th June

By the very early hours of the morning the Lofoten Islands had transformed! Bright sunshine, blue skies and a pleasant breeze was there for all those that struggled to sleep during the perpetual day-light. An early morning meander around the distinctive red-coloured clapboard houses of Reine provided views of Twite, tame Magpies, recently fledged juvenile Fieldfares, Oystercatchers, Eider with ducklings and plenty of adult gulls wearing their gleaming breeding plumages. An adult White-tailed Eagle was spotted sitting aloft on a large buttress of rock. Some people that we spotted on the very tops of the crags must have climbed up during the 'night'!

The registration plates of camper vans, motorcycles and other vehicles confirms this as a tourist trap – the nationalities of Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy and Sweden perhaps being the most represented. Most though were there to admire the stunning scenery, admittedly totally beautiful, but failed to take much notice of the wildlife ambitiously attempting to nurture their species' survival within the Arctic Circle.

Sadly, this was our day for departure from Reine and after breakfast we began the slow, staggered journey north to the Vesterålen Isles.

Stark beauty was all around and it was difficult to progress with another amazing view on offer around every bend! The long tunnels and excellent roads and bridges were testament to significant engineering works to link all the islands of this northern archipelago.

Birds visible included Whooper Swan, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander and at one roadside stop we found three magnificent Black-throated Divers in full summer plumage. We called in at Lake Skjerpvatnet in the hope of finding the male Bluethroat again and we were in luck and everyone managed to see the arrays of blues and reds associated with this often-furtive species.

A couple of Red-throated Divers were showing distantly on the same lake and we then drove a few kilometres further to the north for a coffee stop at the interesting Viking Centre.

Moving on we made a roadside stop at Lake Gardsvatnet where we saw Black-throated Diver, Whooper Swan with cygnets, a selection of gulls, Lapwing and Redshank. A distant eagle and lots of Ravens were associated with some kind of landfill nearby and a stop closer to this area produced two more White-tailed Eagles and a pair of Willow Tits.

Much of the remainder of the day was taken up driving north and there were fewer wildlife sightings as the sun disappeared and the grey clouds returned. We finally arrived at our second accommodation base on the island of Andøya at about 6.30pm. Elisabeth of the Marmelkroken Guest House greeted us warmly and after our room allocation it was time to sit down and enjoy a sumptuous meal in the restaurant there. The weather by this time had turned to drizzly rain.

Day 4

Monday 25th June

The Marmelkroken Guest House is positioned on the western shore and coastline of Andøya. There are freshwater pools, grassy meadows and a rocky coastline to scan from the comfort of a wooden, partly protected

veranda. An early morning scanning session quickly confirmed the presence of an adult White-tailed Eagle checking the tideline for any titbits. At one stage it flew down to a boulder and right alongside it was an Otter eating a fish. The eagle was clearly hoping the Otter would leave him some leftovers, but the aquatic mustelid was hungry and the eagle was left with nothing! Disgusted the eagle went off foraging further away and the Otter came closer to us onto the freshwater pools, flushing ducks in the process. Birds breeding in this vicinity and with young included some very vocal Curlew, a couple of adults venturing remarkably close to the veranda during our three-night stay there.

The weather forecast suggested that there would be a significant deterioration on the Tuesday and a couple of telephone calls caused our breakfast to be a short-lived affair as we quickly made ready for an amended schedule to our whale watching trip that had been booked originally for later in the day.

We drove north to Andenes, the launch place for our whale safari. En-route an adult White-tailed Eagle posed beautifully on a rock and no less than three different Short-eared Owls were seen. However, so insistent were the boat operators that we should make haste to Andenes that we didn't stop for the owls, something we regretted later as we saw no others during the trip. At Andenes we made ready for our short voyage and at 11am ventured out from the harbour in the hope of seeing a whale or two.

Various gulls were to be seen and we were escorted from the harbour by Fulmars with birds being present continuously. A few Puffins, Guillemots and Razorbills provided mostly distant views as did a Great Skua or two and a couple of energetic Arctic Skuas ventured a little closer. It wasn't long before we sidled up to a fellow whale-watching boat and after a short wait a Sperm Whale surfaced near to us.

The largest toothed whale in the world then maintained a presence on the water's surface, periodically blowing a spray of water. Taught grey skin enveloped a broad, muscular body as we appreciated a top-side view of this giant of the deep. A slight repositioning in the water was a prelude to diving as he slowly upended and dived vertically head-first, the fluke majestically flexed and then flattened as he plunged downward.

After a relatively short wait, what we thought to be the same animal resurfaced and did much the same thing again. Diving deep, a Sperm Whale can be hidden from view for a long while so our skipper decided to head back. We were on a smaller, but quicker boat than used on previous tours, the whole experience lasting only two hours, rather than enduring a four hour trip in swaying conditions! We counted ourselves lucky!

Back on land, we refreshed and some went to listen to a lecture conducted by one of the guides. There was even time for a little retail therapy at the shop there. Plenty of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls enjoyed unwanted sandwiches and another building adopted by nesting Black-legged Kittiwakes was alive with noise and detritus.

We took a little drive south of the village of Bleik, seeing a couple of White-tailed Eagles and a Merlin on the way. Retracing our steps to Bleik we then took our second boat trip of the day and chugged slowly towards the prominent island of Bleiksøya, locally known as Puffin Island. We found a few Cormorants and Shags initially and then we began to encounter auks – lots of them!! Large numbers of Puffins rafted on the water or swarmed around us as they contemplated landing on the island and smaller numbers of Razorbills and Guillemots provided good views. The reason for their trepidation at landing on the island was all too obvious with the

menacing presence of at least eight White-tailed Eagles on-land awaiting them. Local eagles have learnt to take advantage of this seasonal bonanza, often catching Puffins as they emerge from their nesting burrows. With gulls and skuas also there to compromise breeding Puffins, it's hard not to feel sorry for the diminutive, chunky clowns of the sea.

After ninety minutes we found ourselves back in the small harbour of Bleik and where earlier we had seen a smart Glaucous Gull in amongst more common fare.

After a busy action-packed day, it was time for a gentle drive back to Marmelkroken and an opportunity to relax ahead of an evening meal. By mid-evening the anticipated violent weather had arrived with powerful, blustery winds and this rattled and blew all night.

Day 5

Tuesday 26th June

Our last full day of the trip but unfortunately, as predicted, the weather conspired against us and we endured gale force winds and driving rain for much of the day but with, thankfully, a brighter evening.

The early morning scan from the veranda secured another Otter sighting, this time an animal being closely monitored by gulls and waders as it investigated the freshwater pools nearest the guest house. Future plans to erect a hide at the water's edge should provide enhanced viewing of Otters and birds of the aquatic margins. A couple of White-tailed Eagles were checking the seaweed-strewn boulders with one of them finding something to rip up and eat.

The powerful weather and dramatic west coast geology combined to demonstrate the awesome power of nature with huge waves crashing onto rocks, lots of foam and would-be observers being blown along forcefully each time we disembarked from the vehicle to take a photo!

Our planned couple of walks were not an option so much of the day was spent in the minibus, initially in the morning checking out coastal areas on the minor road leading to Andenes and in the afternoon completing a circular route taking in some of the southern end of the island.

Three Long-tailed Ducks riding the surf were our only ones all trip and we managed close views of Redshank, Golden Plover and Curlew as they sought shelter from the storm. Bedraggled Fieldfares and Redwings continued to glean food for their nestlings, often foraging by the roadside and utilizing garden lawns.

We scanned the small colony of Gannets on an island north of Bleik and espied a few Common Seals riding the big waves. For much of the day the White-tailed Eagles were conspicuous by their absence but with reduced rain by late afternoon they left their mountain haunts and were checking the tideline again for easy pickings. A few Swallows and a couple of flocks of Sand Martins were endeavouring to feed in impossible conditions – the smaller birds in this region are very much living on the edge of survival when it's this rough.

Our last evening together ensured we tidied up the check lists and enjoyed a very pleasant evening savouring the excellent cuisine and a White-tailed Eagle flying low over the restaurant!

Day 6

Wednesday 27th June

An early morning start saw us reluctantly leaving Marmelkroken at about 6am and we drove slowly eastwards to Evenes Airport. As the eagle flies this is no distance at all, but winding round the majestic fjords and passages ensures it takes a full three hours to arrive in good time. Still the wind blew, but with less ferocity as we meandered east. Wildlife encounters were minimal but a Willow Grouse that flew up at the side of the minibus was the only one seen during our short introduction to these islands of north-west Norway. And of course, White-tailed Eagles flew over us as we threaded our way around still more dramatic headlands and deep fjords.

At Evenes we said goodbye to our minibus and flew to Oslo and with most of us flying on to Heathrow later in the day, arriving home to very warm temperatures indeed!

In total we recorded some 79 species of bird and five species of mammal and covered just over a thousand kilometres by minibus. Despite sometimes challenging weather conditions, nothing could spoil the awe and beauty of this region. In true Scandinavian style we found the island infrastructure to be efficient and well managed, our accommodations and meals of a high standard and the warmth and friendliness of the Norwegians particularly welcoming.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans.

Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!



Newly fledged Fieldfare

Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	June					
			22	23	24	25	26	27
1	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>		1				
2	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				1	1	
3	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>				1		
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	1					
5	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			5	1	4	

Birds

1	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		2	6			
2	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>			4	1		
3	Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		2	2			
4	Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>				✓		
5	Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>				✓	✓	
6	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓	✓		
13	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				1		
14	Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
15	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
16	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
17	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
18	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>					3	
19	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
20	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Willow Grouse	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>						1
22	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	2	1	3	15	8	1
23	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		1				
24	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>		1				
25	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>				1		
26	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>			✓		1	
28	Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				2	✓	✓
29	Common Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>					✓	
30	Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
31	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>			✓		✓	✓
34	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1/2		
35	Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>		1	2	✓	✓	
36	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	1			1		
38	Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
39	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
40	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June						
			22	23	24	25	26	27	
41	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>			1	✓	✓		
42	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
43	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>				2	2		
45	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>				✓			
46	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>				✓			
47	Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
48	Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓			✓			
49	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>					2		
50	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>				3			
51	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>			8	2	✓		
52	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	
53	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
54	Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>				✓			
55	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
56	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		H					
57	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>						1	
58	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		2					
61	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>				1			
62	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenathe</i>		1	1				
63	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>		1	1	1			
64	Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>				✓	✓		
65	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
66	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓			
67	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		✓					
68	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			2				
69	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		
70	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
71	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
72	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	4	✓		✓		
73	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
74	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
75	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris choris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
76	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		
77	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		10	10	6	12	✓	
78	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				2			
79	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoenicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	