

# Whales & Seabirds of Norway's Lofoten Islands

Naturetrek Tour Report

23rd – 28th June 2023

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Puffin



Elks



Arctic Tern



Common Gull chick

Tour report and images by Neil McMahon

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

## Day 1

Friday 23rd June

For the majority of us our journey began at Terminal Two, Heathrow Airport, but sadly our SAS flight to Oslo was delayed and we left at 9.40am rather than 7.05am. This meant we missed our connecting flight to Bodø, but managed to catch a later flight and arrived at Bodø at 5pm local time. Nat had been patiently waiting for us at Bodø, this short Naturetrek expedition with us being just a small portion of a significant Nordic adventure!

We managed to secure our hired mini-bus with the minimum of fuss and we drove across town to the ferry terminal. Here we had a short wait which permitted us to spot a few birds which included some noisy Common Gulls, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Black Guillemot and White Wagtail. Once on the ferry bound for Moskenes on the Lofoten Islands it left promptly at 6.45pm and we were back on schedule.

The weather was dull and cloudy with a little drizzle, but mostly dry with a light south-westerly breeze. This permitted those that were keen enough to spot some wildlife from up on deck as the ferry pushed west. Cormorants and Grey Herons occupied some of the initial islands we passed where there were also small groups of Common Eider and Oystercatchers. A couple of Arctic Skuas flew by chasing each other, and a little later an immature Long-tailed Skua flew over. Black-legged Kittiwake, Arctic Terns and Gannets were in small numbers but the diminutive looking Puffins were much more numerous. There were also Common Guillemots and Razorbills flying or diving on the approach of the vessel but on this occasion there were no sea mammals spotted.

We finally docked at Moskenes at 10pm, were swiftly off the ferry and a few minutes later arrived at our accommodation at Reine Rorbuer. It's always fun and games trying to find which of the chalets is which, but by 10.40pm we were all safely in our respective chalets and deciding how best to deal with the perpetual daylight at this time of year – perhaps not helped by the yelling of Common Gulls and the excited piping of the Oystercatchers!

## Day 2

Saturday 24th June

For those with energy after the travels of the day before, there was a 6.30am muster and dawdle around the settlement of Reine. It was an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with typical garden birds of this north-west archipelago which included Redwing, Fieldfare, White Wagtail, Great Tit (with their newly-fledged young in tow), Magpie, Hooded Crow, Starling, House Sparrow, Greenfinch, Redpoll and Twite. Herring Gulls lined up on rooftops, a few Red-breasted Mergansers fished in the harbour and Common Terns surveyed the shallows. Breakfast was from 8am and with a large platter of cold and hot food we also took the opportunity to create our own packed lunch from it too.

We departed in the mini-bus and drove slowly south to the village of 'A' and took a walk around this scenic area, spending time marvelling at the noisy and flamboyant Kittiwakes nesting on the buildings there. We saw more Redwings and Fieldfares but we also enjoyed close views of Willow Warbler and other passerines. At the breakwater there was an Atlantic Grey Seal skirting close to the rocks and more Black Guillemots, Oystercatchers and loafing Goosanders and Red-breasted Mergansers. Shag and Cormorants were in small numbers. Listening to a familiar if repetitive song brought us fine views of a male Pied Flycatcher as it inspected garden nest-boxes, even perching on the window sills of a house. Although it was still rather dull and cloudy, our walk was against a

backdrop of stunning peaks, windswept slopes and clumps of pine, birch, rowan and other trees on one side and a calm, picturesque sea with outlying rocks and distant island peaks on the other.

After a comfort stop we then progressed slowly north along the E10, stopping for scenery shots or areas of wildlife interest. During the course of this journey we encountered Curlew on territory, Common Snipe, Common Sandpiper and six species of gull and some Wheatears, and a few pairs of Whooper Swans patrolling small lakes.

A series of lakes north of Gravdal proved to be good for birds, particularly one managed as a reserve, called Storeidvatnet. We were hoping to find some Black-throated Divers on these lakes and our efforts were rewarded with five absolutely stunning summer-plumage adults. Red-throated Divers in their summer finery were also enjoyed and up to fifteen of the resplendent Slavonian Grebes also joined the parade. More common birds of the water included Shelduck, Wigeon and Tufted Duck and a pair of Goldeneye. A couple of Sand Martins put in a rather brief appearance and a Willow Ptarmigan was heard but not seen.

At one small lake we heard a loud noise and turned around to see a bird crash to the ground in a marsh. A search revealed a dead female Red-breasted Merganser, the bird spectacularly and fatally striking some overhead wires.

After amassing quite a list of interesting birds and enjoying the dramatic landscape we popped into the Viking Centre for some refreshments and then took a slow drive back south, stopping and scanning wherever seemed appropriate. By this time we had collected a long list of plant species too thanks to several of our party being particularly knowledgeable.

We were back in Reine for 6.40pm and sat down for a very welcome dinner at 7.30pm with a range of options which sadly included whale meat dishes. We gathered in one of the chalets and completed our Naturetrek checklist for the last two days and for those with the stamina, there was an option of an evening walk too. However, I think by this time the weariness had set in and the majority were looking forward to some sleep!

## Day 3

## Sunday 25th June

We started the day with another 6.30am walk, commencing at the chalets and making our way round the immediate area. We spent some time watching Rock Pipits and a variety of finches including Common Redpoll, Greenfinch and Twite – all feeding on or near the ground. The local Hooded Crows became agitated each time the Ravens flew over and Magpies were never far away. Fieldfare were busy collecting food for their young and both Oystercatchers and Common Gull had attendant chicks.

This morning's weather was spectacular – sunny with blue skies and no rain – perfect for seeing the high peaks and wonderful scenery of the Lofotens. Many people had taken the opportunity to climb the peaks overnight and it was possible for us to see them as tiny specks even without binoculars.

Sadly our itinerary called for us to move on from Reine, so after our 8am breakfast and self-created pack-up, we departed this picture-post-card scene at about 9.30am, again with a mini-bus full of cases. However, the weather and super light meant we had to take more scenery shots first!!

This was another day of travel, but with an opportunity for spotting some of the wildlife on offer too. Driving north, we made a couple of roadside stops for a couple of White-tailed Eagles (the first of our trip) and some Harbour Porpoises showing in a sheltered bay. We were impressed with the lake at Storeidvatnet the previous day, so we stopped there again and watched an excellent array of waterbirds from a hide which included the gaudy Slavonian Grebes and lithe Red-throated Divers. An unfamiliar, but persistent song emanating from the willows was tracked down and found to be a singing Arctic Warbler, very much a first for this trip and unexpected. The locally breeding Willow Warblers didn't appreciate its presence and kept shooing it away – only Nat managed some identifiable images of this bird. We popped into the Viking Centre for some celebratory refreshments only to discover that the electric sliding door on our minibus had ceased to function and annoyingly there wasn't a manual override system. However, a mixture of putting our heads together, a phone call to the hire company and ultimately brute strength, seemed to rectify the problem!

We drove further north and took a road-side stop overlooking a large lake for our lunch break. By now the cloud cover was increasing and it became quite dull by the evening, but it did stay dry. Red-throated Diver, Red-breasted Merganser, a flight of Goosander and Wheatear were all noted at our lunch stop before it was time to move on. Our schedule had been delayed by the issues with the minibus door, so with a long journey still to make before we reached Andøya we had to limit the number of stops we could make, however, we still saw wildlife on the way – albeit nothing new.

Finally at 5.30pm we arrived at our next accommodation at Marmelkroken where we were to stay for three nights. We were welcomed by Lizabeth, the owner, and after checking into our rooms we had time for an hour-long nature walk before our evening meal. With freshwater marshes and lagoons between the guesthouses and the sea, there is always something to look at here and we saw no less than three White-tailed Eagles, an elusive Common Seal, a buzzing flock of Sand Martins and three Black-tailed Godwits amongst more regular fare.

It had been a long day, but there was an optional 'night drive' (except that it wasn't dark) in search of mammals and birds. The roads have less traffic in the evenings, so we went for drive at 9.45pm and did not return until 11.15pm. And it was worth it – we were most fortunate to see a quality line-up in the shape of five stately Elk grazing in a lush meadow, quickly disappearing Mountain Hares, Woodcock, a super pair of Bluethroat and even a Waxwing perched on some wires.

Then it was time for some sleep!

## Day 4

## Monday 26th June

Again there was an optional 6.30am morning walk before breakfast and we walked from our accommodation along a track in the meadows opposite to a piece of woodland. The sun was shining and persisted all day with the temperature rising to 15°C, albeit with a cool north-easterly breeze. Our early morning meander resulted in a curious Elk watching us from a tree-lined track and rather brief encounters with Crossbill, Brambling and Siskin. A Blackbird and a Song Thrush were heard singing and a distant Cuckoo could be heard calling. Noisy Curlew, Redshanks and Common Snipe were not so subtle.

Following breakfast we departed Marmelkroken at about 9am and headed north up the coast road to Andenes. We had booked a whale safari, but the north-east breeze causes quite a swell in this part of the world and we were

unsure whether the boat would go. On arrival at Andenes we were informed that the excursion had been cancelled for that very reason, so we rebooked for the following day and re-organised our schedule.

A walk around the harbour and breakwater here provided close views of nesting Arctic Terns and Ringed Plover and two Barnacle Geese on the hinterland. Common Eiders, an assortment of gulls, Rock Pipit and a few waders were also on offer. Efforts at trying to obtain a hot beverage at a café are perhaps best forgotten!

With our revised schedule we headed slowly back south, checking a few roadside viewpoints and scanning out to sea ever watchful for sea mammals and seabirds, and consuming our pack-up as we went. We arrived at the small community of Bleik where we had re-booked a Puffin safari with a boat trip around the island of Bleiksøya (bringing it forward a day). So at around 3pm we boarded our boat and chugged out of the harbour. We were alert to the fact that the previous boat tour had encountered a pod of Orca, but sadly they had already moved on for us. Nevertheless, the Puffin Safari lived up to its name with a few thousand of these very special Atlantic auks either on the water close to us or flying at a variety of heights around their breeding colony on the island. Much smaller numbers of Common Guillemots and Razorbills were in their midst and an Arctic Skua remained with us for a little while. Every now and then there would be an explosion of Puffins from the island, generally associated with a flying White-tailed Eagle making efforts to catch one. Several eagles were spotted on the island, both immatures and stunning white-tailed adults cruising the airwaves or simply perched. We were told remnants of a dead whale beached during the winter had provided surplus food for them and plenty of other wildlife. All too soon our Puffin adventure was over and we returned to the harbour.

On returning to the bus, we continued south and took a track that extends inland and provided an opportunity for a little tundra birding. Birds out here are few and far between, which makes them extra special. Our highlights were singing Golden Plover and Whimbrel. Afterwards we trundled back to Marmelkroken and had a wander down to the seashore and observation blind to soak up the atmosphere, the sounds of breeding birds and of course to say hello to the seemingly resident pair of White-tailed Eagles. With our evening meal at 7pm there was time for a little relaxation before a 'night drive' at 9.45pm, heading out south to see what we could find. Less spectacular than the night before, we still wowed at views of Short-eared Owls and a brief view of a Woodcock.

## Day 5

## Tuesday 27th June

Another sunny day dawned with a cool north-easterly breeze and the day temperature topped a remarkably warm 20°C! Our 6.30am meander took us along the road in an effort to see the Bluethroats from two evenings ago, but we had no luck. We checked the lagoons and marshy areas before and after breakfast which yielded a very smart Wood Sandpiper. There was initially some concern as the alarm call it was emitting was so Redshank-like, but close views of it perched on a stick confirmed the identification. The supporting cast included White-tailed Eagles, the locally-breeding Grey Herons, Goosanders and Red-breasted Mergansers, Pintail, common waders and Sand Martins. Sedge Warblers sang from the bushes and a pair of Pied Flycatchers were clearly using a nest-box in a neighbour's garden. The warmth of the day brought forth some insects including migrant Red Admiral butterflies.

After our walk around Marmelkroken we jumped into the mini-bus and took an anti-clockwise drive around Andøya, including the road that lies parallel to the eastern shoreline. We stopped at any habitat which looked interesting including a shallow lagoon that provided two Black-tailed Godwits and distant Dunlin and a Little Stint as well as the more-usual Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Curlew and Oystercatchers.

We drove out to a small quay which permitted great views of the Norwegian sea between Andøya and the mainland where we had a good view of a Common Seal. There was more excitement when an Otter was seen swimming and fishing in the water, and it came into the harbour and then simply disappeared. Not everyone had managed good views, so it was with some considerable relief that it was spotted again fishing inside the harbour walls with everyone being able to appreciate this sinewy mustelid.

We continued north and stopped at a freshwater lake for our lunch. Lovely sunshine it might have been, but there was a nip in the air. A Bluethroat could be heard singing distantly but a couple of us tracked down the songster only to find a small number of them each proclaiming their territory. The original bird showed the best permitting some reasonable photographs. Some species of 'Erebia' butterfly were active, but just kept flying over the heather and mosses without permitting good views. Green-veined White butterfly and an unidentified Bumble-bee and odonatan were seen too.

A telephone call confirmed what we feared – the re-scheduled whale safari had been cancelled again and this time we had no time left to rebook it at a later date. This ensured we didn't see any large cetaceans on the tour, but it wasn't for lack of trying, with plenty of scanning out to sea taking place at every opportunity.

We continued our circumnavigation of the island with a brief sighting of a Stoat on the road and sightings of Whooper Swan, half a dozen White-tailed Eagles, four more magnificent (but more distant) Black-throated Divers, a couple of Red-throated Divers and both Common and Arctic Terns.

We returned to our very pleasant guest house and enjoyed our 7pm evening meal and then undertook our final 'night drive' of the tour! We travelled along a couple of hitherto unexplored roads, and we saw a Short-eared Owl, some Woodcock and the wonderful sight of a mother Elk at range with her leggy calf. Then it was back to our chalets for some sleep in preparation for an early start on our final morning.

## Day 6

## Wednesday 28th June

We departed from Marmelkroken at 6am for our three-hour journey to Evennes Airport. It was another day of sun with clouds over the hills and we took our time enjoying the fantastic Norwegian landscape with fjords, mountains and meadows. An animal at the side of the road caught our attention and proved to be a Mountain Hare leveret and we stopped and watched to ensure that this young animal hopped to safety off the road.

Further on we took a little break to stretch our legs and were delighted to find an Otter fishing in a small lake, but unfortunately it was quite shy and only showed to a few of us.

We arrived at Evennes Airport in good time and here our merry band went their separate ways – the majority to catch a flight home to the UK, but with Nat to catch a bus to continue her Scandinavian adventure and the tour guide to drive the mini-bus back to Bodø.

It was unfortunate that we didn't encounter any whales during the tour, but the good weather and plentiful wildlife sightings still made this an enjoyable Arctic adventure.

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## Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	June 2023					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>		4	4	2	2	
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		5			4	
Slavonian Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>		c15	c10			
Northern Fulmar	<i>Fulmaris glacialis</i>	✓					
Northern Gannet	<i>Morus bassanus</i>	✓			✓		
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Shag	<i>Gulosus aristotelis</i>		✓		✓		
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		7	✓	✓	✓	
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>				2		
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>					4	
Eurasian Teal	<i>Ansa crecca</i>			✓		✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓	✓			

Common name	Scientific name	June 2023					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>		H				
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			5	10	8	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>		✓				
Eurasian Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>				✓	H	
Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>				✓	✓	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>			✓	✓	✓	
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>				2	H	
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black-tailed Godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>			3		2	
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>					✓	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>					5	
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>					1	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		✓	✓		✓	
Arctic Skua	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	✓			✓	✓	
Long-tailed Skua	<i>Stercorarius longicaudus</i>	1					
Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Greater Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus graellsii</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	✓		✓	✓		
Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>	✓			✓		
Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Atlantic Puffin	<i>Fratercula arctica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			H	H		
Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>				2	2	
Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>				2/3	1	
Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>		2	✓	✓	✓	
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>				1	1	
Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		GO				
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓



Common name	Scientific name	June 2023					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Rock Pipit	<i>Anthus petrosus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			H	H		
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>				H	✓	
Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>		✓	1	1	1	
Sedge Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i>		✓	H	✓	✓	H
Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>			H			
Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	H	H	H	H
Arctic Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus borealis</i>			1			
Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			✓		3 pairs	
Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1♂	2♂♂	H	1 pair	1
Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>			1			
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>			H	H		H
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>			H	✓	✓	H
Greenfinch	<i>Chloris choris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H
Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>		✓	✓			
Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H
Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>				H		
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>				✓	✓	
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			✓	
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoenicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	H

## Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	June 2023					
		23	24	25	26	27	28
Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>			GO			1
Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>					1	1
Stoat	<i>Mustela erminea</i>					1	
Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			4+			
Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>			1		1	
Atlantic Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>		1				
Elk	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>			5	1	2	
vole sp.	<i>Arvicolinae sp</i>				1		

## Others

black slug	
dragonfly sp.	<i>Odonata sp</i>
Bumble bee sp.	<i>Bombus sp</i>
Green-veined White	<i>Pieris napi</i>
dark butterfly	<i>Erebia sp.</i>
Red Admiral	<i>Vanessa atalanta</i>
<b>Notable Plants</b>	
Rowan	<i>Sorbus aucuparia</i>
Silver Birch	<i>Betula pendula</i>
Willow sp.	<i>Salix sp</i>
Norway Spruce	<i>Picea abies</i>
Sycamore	<i>Acer pseudoplatanus</i>
Ash	<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>
Lime sp.	<i>Tilia sp</i>
Aspen	<i>Populus tremula</i>
Scots Pine	<i>Pinus sylvestris</i>
Whitebeam	<i>Sorbus aria</i>
Twin-berry Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera involucrata</i>
Walnut	<i>Juglans sp</i>
Cow Parsley	
Dock	
Red Campion	

Dandelion sp.	
Buttercup sp.	
Meadow Cranesbill	
Violet sp.	
Swedish Cornel	
Lady's Mantle	
Bog Bean	
Mare's Tail	
Cotton-grass	
Heath Spotted Orchid	
Sorrel sp.	
Common Butterwort	
Wild Rosemary	
Globeflower	
Wood Cranesbill	
Wateravons	
Seathrift	
Common Reed	
Marsh Marigold	
Marsh Orchid sp.	
Birdsfoot Trefoil	
Arctic Star	
Cowwheat	
Oysterplant	
Ox-eye Daisy	
Greater Stitchwort	
Bracken	