

Norway - Orcas, Humpbacks & Northern Lights - A Winter Arctic Cruise

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 19 January 2019



Northern Lights by Tobias Brehm



Orca by Chris Anderson



s/v Rembrandt van Rijn by Colin Hawkins



White-tailed Eagle by Colin Hawkins

Report compiled by David Phillips
Images courtesy of Colin Hawkins, Chris Anderson & Tobias Brehm



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Tour participants:	David Phillips (Naturetrek Leader) Tobias Brehm (Oceanwide Expedition Leader) and Evert Mul (Whale Specialist) with 31 Naturetrek clients
Boat's crew	Mario Czok - Captain Sjoerd van Hoek –First Mate DJ – Hotel Manager Stefan – Chef

Summary

The region visited by this tour lies north of the Arctic Circle and in early January the sun does not rise above the horizon. That said, twilight lasts for around four hours and the reflected light off the snow-covered mountains makes for a brighter scene than you might expect, particularly if the skies are clear and the moon is bright.

The s/v Rembrandt van Rijn is a three-masted schooner built in 1924 as a herring lugger. The vessel was a fine boat from which to enjoy the starkly dramatic scenery of the northern fjords.

Day 1

Friday 11th January

Twenty members of the group boarded an early flight which departed London Heathrow at 7am.

Descending into Oslo we were greeted with a landscape carpeted with snow. Once we had collected our bags we made the short walk across to the very comfortable Radisson Blu airport hotel and checked in. There were no fixed activities for afternoon and some group members took the train into the city whilst others took a bus to the small town of Jessheim about 5km south of the airport. A second group arrived from Manchester in the afternoon.

The bird species reported from these urban areas included Fieldfare, Great Tits and Blue Tits. Around the airport Jackdaws, Magpies and Hooded Crows were ubiquitous.

Day 2

Saturday 12th January

A relaxed morning at the hotel, enjoying the sumptuous breakfast buffet, was welcome after the long first day. At 12:00 the group met in reception to walk across to the airport and board the afternoon flight across the Arctic Circle to Tromsø. As we flew north the sun set below the horizon; we wouldn't see it again for another week.

Arriving in Tromsø at 4:30pm the group boarded a coach which took us to the quay where our vessel, the Rembrandt van Rijn, was moored.

After we were settled on board David and Evert led a short walk through the city centre passing a statue of Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen and the old cathedral. Whilst walking back along the harbourside we saw one of the large Hurtigruten ships docked. Reconvening at the ship for dinner, the crew and expedition staff introduced themselves and we were taken through the emergency procedure with life jackets.

At 11:30pm we moved off from our moorings and started sailing east, passing under the bridge that links Tromsø to the mainland. We were to sail overnight north east towards the area where whales are abundant.

Day 3

Sunday 13th January

As first light we were sailing near the island of Skyervøy and in the area where both Orcas and Humpback Whales had been sighted in recent weeks. Many of the group members were up on deck surveying the water when a Humpback caught us by surprise by surfacing close to the boat and giving a loud blow. From that point the excitement grew, the whale sightings picked up and we were all starting to look and listen for whales.

For about half an hour six Humpback Whales spent time resting at the surface (known as logging) as we circled the huge animals at a respectful distance.

Several pods of Orcas were in the area and during the course of the morning we saw between 25 and 35 of these amazing animals.

Once it became too dark to whale watch, Tobias gave an illustrated talk about photography and David gave a talk about the northern Lights.

Late afternoon we pulled up alongside a pier at the village of Sørkjosen, at the southern end of Reisafjorden. The whole group disembarked for a short walk around the bay to enjoy the crunchy snow (for safety, the ship had provided ice grips for our shoes). It was a very small village with one shop, a bar and restaurant and a few houses. With the snowy backdrop the lights from the buildings made a pretty scene.

After dinner David went to check on the skies and hurried back to report that the skies were clear and there was some northern lights activity beginning towards the north-east. Everyone quickly layered up with warm clothes and were led out to a dark area that had a good clear view to the north with little light pollution. Initially a classic auroral arc appeared extending from the north-eastern to the north-western horizon. In the following minutes vertical rays developed and brightened along the arc, forming curtains of moving light. As we watched, multiple arcs then appeared higher in the sky. The group was entertained by this natural light show well into the evening. Some group members were able to take some good photos. The aurora was still displaying when we returned to the ship to warm up.

Day 4

Monday 14th January

The skies were grey as we sailed north into Reisafjorden where we soon found a couple of Humpback Whales. They were spotted by their characteristic blows. As we approached we could see their backs arching above the surface of the water as they took breaths before finally lifting their tail flukes vertically out of the water to make a deep dive.

After lunch Tobias decided to launch the zodiacs to give everyone a view of the fjord from the water, each zodiac taking eight people plus a driver. It was also a chance to view the ship from a distance, in the light.

Later that afternoon, as there was a tail wind, the crew decided to raise the sails. Some group members were keen to help raise the sails and were given the opportunity to pull the ropes as they were hoisted. The engine was cut and for several hours we sailed by the power of the wind alone into a narrow fjord called Jøkelfjord. In Norwegian the word jøkel means glacier, and there is indeed a glacier at the head of this fjord. We dropped anchor here for the night.

Evert gave an interesting talk in the afternoon about the two species of whales we had come to see; the Humpback and the Orca.

Day 5

Tuesday 15th January

During breakfast the boat moved to the end of the fjord where, as it became light, we could see the snout of the glacier creeping over the top of the mountain. We could see the blueness of the glacier ice against the white of the surrounding snow.

As we moved out from the narrow Jøkelfjord into the main Kvænangen a couple of Humpback Whales were spotted close to the eastern side of the inlet near the shore. They seemed to be quite static and the decision was made to launch the zodiacs. Approaching slowly to minimize disturbance we were able to gain a closer view the whales from just a few tens of metres away and level with them. With engines cut we could hear the deep blows each time they surfaced and sound of the water lapping over their huge bodies.

The Rembrandt's sister ship, s/v Noorderlicht joined us and from the zodiacs we had great views of both historic ships side by side.

Moving further out to the west side of the inlet we could see fishing trawlers actively bringing in their nets. For a few minutes of great excitement, a pod of Orcas, including one large male and several females with their calves, moved in close around the fishing vessels. We saw one individual spy-hopping and also some tail-slapping behaviour.

The light level was quite low by this time (mid-afternoon) and even the keenest photographers were resigned to viewing rather than pushing the limits of what they could capture on their cameras.

Our guide Evert had been tracking the movements of Orcas in Norway as part of his PhD research and in the afternoon he gave a talk about the techniques he uses and the results of his research.

Over dinner the ship moved into more open water to the north and around the island of Silda before making course for Øksfjord. On the approach to the dockside we could see a faint line of aurora so we stayed away from the harbour in order to view without the lights of the town. The display came and went over a period from 11pm till 12:30am and while it was fairly weak, a number of brighter features came through nicely and the group was able to detect the green colour generated by the excitation of oxygen in the high atmosphere.

Day 6

Wednesday 16th January

We were once again greeted with impressive scenery as it became light. Overnight the ship had moved to the southern end of Øksfjord - a narrow inlet flanked by high mountains.

Many of the group were standing out on deck scanning the water for cetaceans when David caught sight of a Harbour Porpoise. Although this species is the most common cetacean in the North Atlantic, they usually only break the surface with their dorsal fin once or twice before disappearing from view.

Soon though a pod of fast moving White-beaked Dolphins were spotted. They approached the boat and repeatedly came in close, sometimes swimming underneath. The water was so clear that we could make them out below the surface. The dolphins remained with us on and off for the following half hour or so, and it was decided to launch the zodiacs again. From these, groups of clients had superb views of the dolphins at very close range.

By the time the second group were in the zodiacs the White-beaked Dolphins had disappeared, but Evert eventually spotted some movement over on the far side of the fjord. Approaching slowly we could see that these were actually a different species - a pod of White-sided Dolphins. The Harbour Porpoise also made an appearance again.

Tobias, the expedition leader, is a geologist by training and he gave a talk about the geology of Norway which helped explain some of the land forms that we had been seeing.

In the evening we moored along the pier on the island of Skorpa. The wooden pier was first assessed by the crew from a Zodiac as our vessel was larger than the smaller vessels that usually visit this small island.

Once secured, the group enjoyed walking ashore through snow and visiting the abandoned village with its small church and memorial to those who died in the Second World War. The more adventurous members of the group walked through a small birch forest to a frozen lake. A Hawk Owl was heard but we didn't manage to see it.

In the snow we found tracks of Ptarmigan, Otter and a many tracks of a type of small rodent which may have been Birch Mouse.

Day 7

Thursday 17th January

During the course of the week we had seen White-tailed Eagles every day but today these huge raptors were seen at every turn. More than once an eagle would swoop down and take fish from the water surface close to the boat. It was great to see these magnificent raptors at close range.

Sailing close to Skjervoy we saw several large pods of Humpback Whales surfacing regularly.

Our captain, Mario, gave the afternoon talk all about sailing vessels and how he had been captivated by sailing when he went on a school trip in his native Germany. Mario was a most entertaining man and the delivery of his anecdotes was the cause of much laughter.

In the evening we moored at the small town of Hansnes where clients and crew took an evening walk around the snowy streets of warmly lit houses.

Day 8

Friday 18th January

Our last day at sea took us back towards Tromsø. We passed close to the group of islands off the tip of Reinøya where Common Seals were seen in the shallow water. One adopted the banana posture with tail and head out of water. Early in the day the birdlife picked up with good numbers of Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Eiders on the sea. A number of Little Auks flew past and a single Great Northern Diver was seen at close range.

On rocks at the edge of one of the islands the captain spotted four White-tailed Eagles and some Ravens around the carcass of a Reindeer, so he brought the boat in close to give us a better view.

Upon reaching Tromsø we docked close to the bridge where there were hundreds of Common Eider and a few dozen Long-tailed Ducks. We scanned through the Eiders hoping to find a King Eider but unfortunately none were seen.

The boat had to be re-fuelled so we had the opportunity to spend some time in the city.

Whilst out Evert had spotted otter tracks on a pier just a hundred metres from where our boat was docked. David went out after dinner to check out the location and saw two otters at close range. The clarity of the water made it possible to see them swimming under the surface. Unfortunately, despite rushing back to alert the rest of the group, by the time they returned to the spot where the otters were seen, they had departed.

Day 9

Saturday 19th January

A very early breakfast was necessary to be ready for a 6am coach transfer to the airport for the flight to Oslo. The long stopover in Oslo soon passed as the airport had recently been refurbished with shops and plenty of cafes and restaurants.

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Species Lists

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

	Common name	Scientific name	January								
			11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	
1	Great Northern Diver	<i>Gavia immer</i>									1
2	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓	1	1	6	5+		>100
3	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		✓							
4	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>									1
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>									6
6	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>									>100
7	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>				4		1			
8	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>									>50
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>									20
10	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>						T			
11	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			10	5	10	2	>20		10
12	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>							20+		
13	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
14	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
15	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>					1				2
16	Little Auk	<i>Alle alle</i>									5
17	Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>					7	1	✓		
18	Razorbill	<i>Alca torda</i>						3			10
19	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>					1	2			
20	Northern Hawk-Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>						H			
21	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	4								
22	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	4								
23	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓								
23	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	6								
24	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
25	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				1	1	4	✓		✓
26	Eurasian Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	10+								

Mammals

1	Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>									2
2	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>			9	2	8		15		
3	Orca (Killer Whale)	<i>Orcinus orca</i>			25-35		12				
4	White-beaked Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus albirostris</i>						8			
5	Atlantic White-sided Dolphin	<i>Lagenorhynchus acutus</i>						7			
6	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>						2			
7	Common Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>									6



Zodiac and Humpbacks by Chris Anderson

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Trip Map



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Humpback Whale by Colin Hawkins



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