

# Northern Lights and Wildlife in Swedish Lapland

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 - 20 January 2019



Northern Lights



Reindeer



Crested Tit



Local Transport

Report & images kindly compiled by Ann Miles



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Tour participants: Marcus Eldh (tour leader) with eight Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Wednesday 16th January

The tour started with an early morning flight for most of the group from Heathrow to Arlanda airport, Stockholm, where we met the remaining three members who had been staying for a few days in the city. The flight from Stockholm to Luleå was on time and our tour leader Marcus Eldh met us on arrival at Luleå airport *Kallax*. We were immediately struck by the very cold conditions and our first task was to defrost the passenger doors so we could climb into our minibus! Marcus supplied us with some sandwiches and drinks to eat along the way. The drive to Jokkmokk would take around two and a half hours, so after an hour and a half, we stopped for a 'comfort' and photography break at the Storforsen nature reserve, a partly frozen river rapid. It was -27c and deep snow on the ground. It was our first experience of the wonderful arctic evening light with snow and frost on all the trees, a pink and blue sky and rising moon.

We then traveled on to Jokkmokk for another hour and most of the group visited the Outdoor Centre to get kitted out with the winter clothing that we were renting during the tour. We had an introduction to the tour, exchange of names, interests and aspirations of the participants and then a welcome dinner at Hotel Åkerlund. After dinner we drove to Vajkijaure, a frozen lake, close to Jokkmokk. As we drove there, we could see the Aurora starting in the sky ahead of us. We headed onto the ice where Marcus lit a fire while we watched a fantastic Northern Lights display in the sky! While we were watching the Aurora, there was a constant stream of cars and trailers going past, which we later found out were the Sami Reindeer Herders going to neighbouring Sami Corral areas to collect their marked reindeer. We spent the night at the Hotel Åkerlund.

## Day 2

Thursday 17th January

After breakfast at the hotel, we set off in the minibus to search for wildlife along the road to Karats. The landscape was frozen and beautiful. We made an early stop to enjoy the sunrise and the wonderful warm light on the snow. We had several sightings of Moose (Elk) through the trees but they were difficult to photograph as they feed on young shoots and then rest among the trees. Reindeer feed in the open digging into the snow to feed on the moss.

Our lunch was taken in a small shelter by a frozen lake. It had a fireplace where Marcus quickly lit a fire and we toasted sandwiches and made hot drinks. The temperature was -33c. As the light turned to shades of pink and blue in the afternoon, we had further views of Moose - this time a mother and son out in the open but very distant. We stopped to take a few photographs from a bridge by a small tributary. A dipper was glimpsed as it shot up the river.

Our last stop of the day was at a bridge over the River Lule just north of Jokkmokk. The temperature had fallen to below -35c and any spray or vapour from the river was frozen onto the trees and bridge. In the evening, we drove just outside Jokkmokk to Fatjas.

When we arrived, there was no sign of the Aurora but the sky was clear and the landscape lit by a nearly full moon. As we waited and watched, the Northern Light display started although never quite as good as the first night. Night at Hotel Åkerlund.

## Day 3

Friday 18th January

The visit to Jokkmokkguiderna was one of the highlights of our trip. Matti and Stina live in a small red cabin by a lake with some 60 huskies, which they breed and generally keep for their entire life. Sometimes they buy dogs for breeding from other kennels to keep the Siberian Husky blood lines healthy. The huskies need to be able to love the life, be friendly, be able to run at a good speed and manage the challenges that life in the wilderness demands. We soon realised that to run in front of the sled is what the dogs love most. We sat astride the sledges - four people to each one. The dogs are so keen to be off that it was very difficult for the mushers to keep the sledge from moving and their excitement is infectious. Once they took the anchor off, it was full ahead through the trees and out onto the Lake. Those first few moments speeding through the snow were truly exhilarating! The dogs get hot and thirsty so we stopped at regular intervals for the dogs to roll in the snow and Matti to check we weren't getting frostbite on our noses. The air temperature was below -30c so, with the wind chill factor when moving, it was around -43c and we found our hair, eye brows etc were all iced up when we stopped. Half way round our circuit of the lake, we got off the sledges for a 'second breakfast' in a Lavuu shelter. Bacon and dried reindeer meat in toasted rolls with hot drinks was very welcome indeed and we soon thawed out by the fire. By the time this was finished, the sun was just beginning to rise above the distant hill and we sped back on the sleds to the kennels where we helped get the dogs out of their harnesses and into their enclosure.

We next met up with Mats Karström at lake Talvatis in Jokkmokk. Mats is a keen birder and biologist who is devoting his spare time to protecting Sweden's forests. He does this by studying and recording the species present in an area and their rarity and then, by publicising this, he demonstrates to the forest companies the value of the forest in its present state not least as a tourist attraction. He has managed to save more than one hundred different forests in this way, some small, some huge. On this day, Marcus asked Mats to show us his best bird feeding station which is close to the lake in Jokkmokk. We managed to see Willow Tit, Great Tit, Red Squirrel, Siberian Tit, Great spotted Woodpecker and Crested Tit, some of which ate nuts from our hands and from Marcus's head. The Siberian Jay failed to show up.

Some of us then found time to fit in a visit to Jokkmokk's Sami museum with excellent exhibits of Sami life and culture. Almost next door to our hotel, we also found the Sami handicrafts shop and gallery.

In the late afternoon, we visited Anna. Anna is a Sámi woman who still lives the indigenous lifestyle, based on reindeer herding. She took us to visit and feed some of her reindeer that she keeps in the forest behind her house outside Jokkmokk. They have thousands of reindeer grazing in the mountains, but the reindeer that she keeps behind her house are animals that have been found too weak to survive in the wild. They feed them and then let them return into the wild herd. She then took us into a traditional lavvu (Sámi tent) where we sat down around the open fire. She served us some Sámi dishes and she also sang a joik, a traditional Sámi way musically to tell a story which we found spellbinding. This evening was cloudy so we didn't venture out to try and see Northern Lights. Night at Hotel Åkerlund.

## Day 4

Saturday 19th January

We had some free time in the morning to look round Jokkmokk with its 19th century church which is in Gothic Revival architectural style and is built of wood. We left the hotel and Jokkmokk behind to drive one and a half hours north and arrived at a tented camp at Nabreluokta by Lule river. This camp is the work of Lennart Pittja.

Lennart is Sámi and part of reindeer community. There were five tents and a wood cabin where Lennart lives and serves meals for his guests. Apart from an earth closet, the facilities are an incinerator toilet called Cinderella that caused much amusement as she 'grumbled' loudly when not happy and had to be coaxed back into action by Lennart.

Once we had eaten lunch and moved our luggage into our Lavvu, we ventured out onto the frozen Lule River as the sun was disappearing. There were wonderful ice crystal patterns where the water has flowed onto the ice surface and quickly froze. A near full moon rose behind the trees lighting the landscape and the camp. Some of us also took up the opportunity to try snow shoeing and cross country skiing.

Lennart cooked us a wonderful supper of Arctic Char - locally caught and smoked by him. The cabin is very cosy and we felt honoured to be there and to learn all about the Sami traditions and their way of life. Lennart is from the Unna Tjerusj Sami community, one of 51 Sami communities in Sweden, who have been herding reindeer since prehistoric times. The life cycle of the reindeer has characterised their lives for generations; when Lennart grew up the family moved twice a year to follow the reindeer between their summer and winter pastures. Lennart has his own reindeer but his brother takes care of them while he runs his Nature Experience business.

Later after our supper, we were treated to a modest display of Northern Lights and then to bed. The night in the Lavvu was peaceful and surprisingly warm with a log fire and a diesel stove to ensure we were warm in sleeping bags and duvets. Night Glamping

## Day 5

Sunday 20th January

In the morning, we left the camp and drove to Jokkmokk to drop off our rented winter clothing. We stopping to look for a wolverine that we saw ahead of us disappearing into the forest and to photograph two reindeer who were surprisingly confiding, feeding by the road. We had a brief photo stop at the signs for the Arctic Circle and then continued to Kaptensgården restaurant for a lunch in the Unesco World Heritage Gammelstad, an old churchtown dating back 400 years, near Luleå. As we arrived at Luleå airport, a full moon arose above the trees. Having said our goodbyes and thank yous to Marcus, who had been an excellent caring and enthusiastic guide, we started on our journey and arrived back in Heathrow on time after a fabulous trip.

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## Species Lists

### Birds

Willow Ptarmigan, *Lagopus lagopus*

European Crested Tit, *Lophophanes cristatus*

Great Tit, *Parus major*

Common Raven, *Corvus corax*

Black-bellied Dipper, *Cinclus cinclus cinclus*

Willow Tit, *Poecile montanus*

Siberian Tit, *Poecile cinctus*

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopus major*

### Mammals

Reindeer, *Rangifer tarandus*

Red Squirrel, *Lepus timidus*

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes*

European Elk, *Alces alces*

Wolverine, *Gulo gulo*

