

Varanger and Northern Finland

6 April - 16 April 2018



The Crew on its way to Hornøya

From left to right: Lonnie Bregman, Wouter Monster, Diedert Koppenol & Danny Bregman



INTRODUCTION

From 6 April to 16 April 2018 a group of Dutch Birders visited Norway and northern Finland to try and observe the Scandinavian specialities. We flew from Amsterdam to Kirkenes where we picked up our rental car. We birded along the Norwegian coast and went south via Inari to visit Kuusamo. From there we went up back north to Pasvik and ended in Kirkenes again to catch our flight back to Amsterdam.

We decided to go in April because this would provide the best of both worlds. The rafts of Eider species usually dissolve around the 20th of April and April is the best month to see displaying grouses. Going to Norway first ensured us being there before the Eiders would be gone and it allowed us to see all species of grouse, so this way we would see all our target species.

In total we saw 62 species and only 'missed' White-billed Diver, which we did not really view as a target. Danny had the large amount of 22 lifers, followed by Monster with 16. Diedert had 13 lifers and Lonnie a total of 11.

Diedert Koppenol on behalf of the rest of the crew

HIGHLIGHTS

Steller's Eider, King Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Hazel Grouse, Wester Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Rock Ptarmigan, Willow Ptarmigan, Glaucous Gull, Thick-billed Murre, Ural Owl, Great Grey Owl, Northern Hawk-owl, Boreal Owl, Gyrfalcon, Siberian Jay, Grey-headed Chickadee, Pine Grosbeak, Arctic Redpoll.



ROUTE

We birded in several areas in the Varanger and Kuusamo area. We drove along the Varangerfjord to Vardø, from Vardø to Batsfjord and Kongsfjord, back down to Inari and from there to Kuusamo. From here we made one trip to Tornio to twitch the Great Grey Owl. After our stay in Finland we visited the Pasvik area and returned home afterwards.

In total we drove around 5100 kilometers, in a total of 10 days. Admittedly, this was quite a lot, but we never got really tired of driving. The car meant warmth and birds, so it was never hard to drive long hours.



A plot of our observations. A detailed map can be requested.





LOGISTICS

We flew from Amsterdam Schiphol to Oslo and from Oslo to Kirkenes. We bought retour tickets for €212,- per person. Our rental car, a VW Passat Alltrack, was hired at Sixt Kirkenes Airport and we paid a total of 770,- euros. We paid quite some money on gasoline and food, especially in Norway, where everything was way more expensive than in the Netherlands.

We did two things to save us money. First, we took several cans of food with us from the Netherlands, which we would heat on our gas cooker. Secondly, we also brought a tent, to save on costs for hotels, which are very expensive in this part of Norway. You are allowed to camp outside wherever you want in these countries, as long as you are 150 meters away from the nearest home. We didn't camp every night though, because the temperature dropped below -15 °C in Finland. We decided to rent a nice log cabin on a motel park. This cost us 15 euros per person per night, which wasn't expensive at all.

The total cost of our trip was around 500 euros per person, which was what we estimated before departure.



SOURCES

Several really good sources were used while planning this trip. Not only books or the internet, but several birders helped us a lot.

Especially Mika Bruun and Tormod Amundsen have our utmost gratitude for providing essential details about birds and locations. Willow Ptarmigan, Great Grey Owl and Boreal Owl would've surely been way harder without the great tips these two awesome guys gave us. We received multiple locations from them to go search our target species. More great help came from Peter Tibax, who visited the same sites as we did a week before with several friends. His observations and tips came in quite handy.

PUBLISHED LITERATURE

- *Collins Bird Guide, the most complete bird guide to the birds of Britain and Europe. Lars Svensson et al, updated version, 2013.*

Just the regular bird identification field guide.

- *Birding Varanger, the Biotope guide to the best bird sites in Arctic Norway.*

This book proved invaluable. We used it to plan almost all our sites in Finnmark. The descriptions of the sites are really good and the maps are detailed, so you can easily plot spots in Google Maps, which is what I did. All points found interesting were plotted in a map and can be requested by the author.

Both Gosney books were purchased, but are rendered unnecessary by the Birding Varanger book and are not useful in this time of year, anyway.

TRIP REPORTS

- 13 – 17 April 2012 – Gullfest 2012 – Vincent van der Spek

- 4 – 17 April 2015 – Finland & Arctic Norway – Joachim Bertrands

- 25 March – 2 April 2016 – Norway & Finland – Wim Heylen

- 2nd week of March – Wintervogelen in Finland – John van der Woude

There are few reports about this area that visit in the same time period as we did. Most useful was the one written by Joachim, really explicit, with tips and tricks and good sites to visit. We planned most of our trip based on this report. The report written by John was most useful to learn about the website tiira.fi.



WEBSITES

<https://finland.observation.org/>

<https://www.tiira.fi/index.php?toiminto>

<https://twitter.com/finnmarkbirding?lang=en>

We made extensive use of the website tiira.fi. It is a nightmare to work with, but with the guide of John I managed to create cached searches. This allowed us to search for sites of Great Grey Owl, Ural Owl, Boreal Owl, etc. The site is from the Finnish BirdLife and you can only get full value out of it if you would donate to them. I sent an email and got full access without response and without paying. How this happened, I have no clue, because after we returned home I did finally receive an answer where I was told I could get access after paying 30 euros. Anyway, even without the full access, you can get the spots plotted in Google Maps by eyeballing it, but it takes a bit more time. Furthermore, following Finnmark Bird News on Twitter and Birding Varanger on Facebook is a good idea for your time in Finnmark. Rarities will be reported here and you can report your observations to them. Any latest news can be found there.

All our sightings can be found on observado.org. For a full list of what we saw, check this link. If the link is broken, go to Observation.org => This Site => Users => Type 'Lonnie Bregman' and press enter => select Observations => adjust date from 2018-04-06 to 2018-04-16 and press enter. We all uploaded our sightings, so any name will do.

For any questions, related to this report or not, email me: diedertkoppenol@gmail.com.



ITINERARY

6th April Departure from Amsterdam. Early flight to Oslo where we took our flight to Kirkenes. Late night drive to Nesseby.

7th April Birding the entire road towards Vardø, even visited Hornøya. All Eider species were seen and we even saw Gyrfalcon in Vardø. We had a 'chanceke' on Hornøya with beautiful weather and great views of all species, including Thick-billed Murre. Moved down towards Tana and camped there.

8th April Birding in the northern Finnmark area; Båtsfjord and Kongsfjord. Several Northern Hawk-owls were seen in the Tana valley. Connected with Willow Ptarmigan near Båtsfjord and discovered a nice 'Viking Gull' at Berlevåg. Camped along the road towards Inari.

9th April Visited the feeder at Tuulen Tupa to tick Pine Grosbeak. Birded along the way to Kuusamo, where we found our only Siberian Tits. Staying in Ruka, at a motel.

10th April Birding in Kuusamo area, trying to locate all the grouse species. Connected with Black Grouse quite early, but it took the entire day to finally find a male Capercaillie.

11th April Another day birding the Kuusamo area. Dedicated to find Siberian Jay and Hazel Grouse. We connect with Siberian Jay during noon and see several more.

12th April A morning round in Kuusamo where we finally see a beautiful male Hazel Grouse and two more male Capercaillie. Twitch of Great Grey Owl in Tornio in the afternoon. Late night drive back to Kuusamo with Boreal Owl and Ural Owl.

13th April Birding the way back towards Nesseby with a stop at Kiilopää. We find a nice Rock Ptarmigan and continue northward. Camped outside Nesseby.

14th April Birding our way up towards Vardø to try for White-billed Diver. No luck, but large amounts of Steller's Eider and King Eider make up for this dip. Camped nearby Kirkenes.

15th April Visited Pasvik area, where we saw almost no birds. Several singing Pine Grosbeak were the highlight here and they were almost the only birds seen this day.

16th April Early flight back towards Amsterdam via Oslo.



Day 1 – 6th April

Amsterdam – Nesseby

Our plane left quite early from Schiphol Airport towards Oslo. Sadly, we had to wait for another five hours before our connecting flight to Kirkenes would depart. Exiting the plane in Kirkenes Airport while it was snowing immediately set the stage for a cool trip. The cold atmosphere and snow all around made for a nice setting. Luckily our rental car was waiting for us, heated and well, in the parking lot, so we could depart instantly. We decided to drive towards the start of the road towards Vardø, meanwhile checking for a place to camp. A short parking space next to the road between Nesseby and Varangerbotn would be our spot for the night. Two of us slept in the car and the other two put up a tent behind the car.



Day 2 – 7th April

Nesseby – Vardø – Tana

Due to heavy trucks and snowploughs driving close by, we were up quite early. Our first birds were scored, calling **Greenfinches** and **House Sparrows** along the road. A flock of **Snow Buntings** was present in the town itself. We drove up towards Nesseby Church where we checked the roosting gulls and had some views of **Long-tailed Ducks**. A lone **Reindeer** was walking next to the small church as well. It was a tagged animal, part of a herd probably. The status of the animals from the neighbouring National Park is rather vague, some research showed that a subspecies fennicus, Finnish forest reindeer, should occur in the Varangerhalvøya NP, but we didn't go that far inland to check. We only saw herded animals during our trip.



A single **Common Murre** flew past and a **Common Seal** was present in the fjord. There was nothing special between the present **Black-headed, Mew, Great Black-backed** and **Herring Gulls**, so we continued to make our way towards Vadsø.

We constantly checked the fjord next to the road and made several stops to scope. This resulted in some more **Long-tailed Ducks, Velvet Scoters** and our first **King Eider** of the trip. Albeit a female, it gave nice views while feeding within a raft of some 45 **Eiders**. Almost at Vestre Jakobselv we found a small group of eight **King Eiders**, females and males. The male plumage is something you don't see every day, so we were very happy with these good views. We also came across a large flock of **Snow Buntings**, around seventy birds, feeding in the fields next to the road.



After several stops we entered Vestre Jakobselv and drove inland, to check on the feeder at the camping. There was food in the feeder, but we didn't see any birds. We went further up the road and made a short walk in the forest there, but many ski tourists made us decide to hit the road again. We executed the same strategy as before, stopping to scope the fjord, while slowly making our way to Vadsø. We had a lot of **Ravens** flying, calling and feeding along the Varangerfjord, beautiful views of these cool corvids. We went towards the Vadsø harbour, where there is a Biotope shelter in the middle of the water. A female **Steller's Eider** was feeding along the path towards the shelter, so we had some close-up views of this lifer. We walked further into the harbour and discovered a large group of dabbling **Steller's Eiders**, including males.



We walked along a pier and could get superb views of these beautiful birds. Four **King Eiders** were also present, as were **Long-tailed Ducks**. After a while we continued to the small island in front of Vadsø, called (Store) Vadsøya, where a good vantage point for seawatching should be. We scanned the eastern side of the harbour from the bridge to Vadsøya, where another large group of **Steller's Eiders** were present. We parked in front of the Fjordhotel and made our way towards the vantage point. However, the track was fully covered with snow. A single line of hardened snow allowed us to walk into the area, with each step slightly off track resulting in sinking in the thick snow. After a while something moved in front of us and it turned out to be the first **Mountain Hare** of the trip.



We saw several here while we tried to make our way to the seawatching point. Everything was so unreachable however and we didn't really see a suitable spot, so we decided to turn back. Maybe this spot is better when the snow has disappeared.

Next stop: Ekkerøy. A large kittiwake colony can be found on the south side of Ekkerøy and sometimes hunting Gyrfalcons can be seen here. The road towards Ekkerøy allows for a stop to scan the inner bay. We met some Danish birders here who told us that there had been sightings of Orcas, so we were extra focused on cetaceans now as well. The seawatching did not result in any special sightings so we went on our way towards the cliff. The path was again fully covered with large amounts of snow where you would often have the snow up till your belly, a recurring theme this trip, but after a while we finally reached the coastline with the breeding **Black-legged Kittiwakes**.

A deafening environment, but it was really cool to see this huge amount of birds up close. Several kittiwakes were fighting for nesting places still, constantly tumbling down in the snow. Some individuals were even covered in blood from the pecking. There were also breeding **Shags** and a pair of **Razorbills**. Some **Black Guillemots** flew past in the fjord, sometimes taking a rest in the water.

We made our way back to the car and drove towards our next destination: Skalelv. Here we checked the frozen river bed, but we only found a **Northern Pintail**, not the Harlequin Duck we hoped for. More rafts of **Eiders**, **King Eiders** and **Steller's Eiders** were seen feeding in the fjord's cold waters. Some stops marked on our roadmap were off limits due to the amount of snow and are probably only accessible later in the season. Suddenly two **White-tailed Eagles** soared above our heads, slowly gliding out of view behind the large cliff at the roadside. We had some reports of Willow Ptarmigans being present on the Vardø Airport, so we tried to get some looks onto the field. We weren't able to reach a good place to scan, so we left it and crossed the road. The inner bay was full of gulls and we found our first **Glaucous Gulls** of the trip here. We had great views of several individuals resting in the bay.



Driving through the tunnel towards Vardø made it feel like we were going to enter another world. The tunnel is really steep and goes quite deep and the lighting is not optimal. We had a lot of spare time left, so we decided to do some birding in Vardø and see if we could still make it to Hornøya. It was a beautiful day, with clear weather and a calm sea, so we wanted to make the most out of it. Hornøya will be unreachable if the sea is too rough and going there with heavy rain can be unsafe but will also result in a terrible time because you will be there for two to three hours. First we wanted to visit the Norwegian birder/architect Tormod Amundsen who has his office, the Biotope, in Vardø. Sadly, he had already left for home, but a very nice present was a hunting **Gyr Falcon**. The falcon came in flying hard and tried to catch one of the Kittiwakes, who breed in nest boxes attached to the houses of Vardø. After some hunting it settled down on one of the telecom masts quite close to us. We had some cool views with the scope of this apex predator!



After a short wait we boarded our ferry to Hornøya. This small island holds a large breeding colony of several sea birds, including **Puffins**, **Common Murres** and **Razorbills** and a speciality, **Thick-billed Murre**. A small breeding population of around 500 birds, numbers fluctuating between years, can be found here. The entire island is holding approximately 100000 seabirds of up to eleven species. The smell is quite enormous as is the wall of sound you go into. All the chattering and the faeces of several thousands of birds make for an impressive attack on the senses. The views you get, however, are totally worth it. There is a constant stream of birds flying around at eyesight, there are **Puffins** rolling down fighting for a breeding spot, **Shags** sitting 3 meters away on their nests. Sometimes the birds would fly up in panic, letting go of all their processed food and making lots of alarm calls. Gyrfalcons and White-tailed Eagles have been seen hunting here often, which is probably why these birds are on edge.

We found several **Thick-billed Murres** on the cliffs by scoping and nice comparing views with **Common Murres**. After two and half hours of enjoying the large amounts of birds and seeing all species, we were picked up by the ferry again. A food stop was made at the only restaurant in Vardø before we made our way towards Tana. We would search for a spot to set up the tent there, which would save a lot of travelling time tomorrow.



Day 3 – 8th April

Tana – Båtsfjord – Berlevåg – Kaamanen

We camped somewhere between Varangerbotn and Tana along the road. We woke up very early because we wanted to check the entire northern side of Finnmark. We had received news of two **Northern Hawk-owls** being present just north of Tana. The detailed news proved to be right, as soon as we drove out of Tana, we discovered a **Hawk-owl** perched in a tree at the location described. After some beautiful views with the bird hunting in front of us, gliding between trees, it started to call. Shortly after, a second bird came flying in. The owls did not seem to be bothered by our presence as we could get up quite close. A group of **Common Redpolls** were feeding in the trees as well and a **Raven** was heard singing in the background. After this wonderful start, we decided to move on.



Constantly checking the many electric wires and treetops, we found a third individual further north. We often drove with open window to listen to the birds. Driving on ice made the car pretty silent. A woodpecker was calling in the distance, so we made our way towards the sound. It turned out to be a **Lesser Woodpecker** and even a second individual turned up. We slowly made our way towards Båtsfjord, large logging trucks and a crane driving in front of us, so we had to. We drove through stunning landscapes with crazy amounts of snow, at some places at least 5 meter thick packs. We scanned everything for **Willow Ptarmigans**, who frequent this area. Several stops were made, combined with playing tape, to scan the massive snow fields and small willow trees. A long time went by without seeing much beside the landscape. After a while we found an old track which Tormod had recommended to search. We found some prints of, presumably, **Willow Ptarmigan**, so we decided to play some more tape. No response or anything and after a long wait we wanted to move on again. Suddenly a call was made and some movement was spotted. Three white birds were sitting in the willow trees in the hillside foraging on the outer branches. **Willow Ptarmigan!** We got some very good views but after a short while they noticed us and started to move more. We had almost lost hope in this white landscape, but luck didn't leave us yet.



We made for Båtsfjord and checked the lakes, inner bays and harbour. A **Common Merganser** was resting in the frozen lake at the bottom of Båtsfjord. Some **Snow Buntings**, a **Great Tit** and some **House Sparrows** were visiting a local feeder near this lake. Further up north, in the harbour itself, we found a group of **King** and **Steller's Eiders**, with a sole **Long-tailed Duck** swimming along. After this, we went back and then took the road towards Kongsfjord. We found a parking area halfway and decided to take a break. Lonnie, Monster and Danny went for a short walk and found the first **White-throated Dipper** for our trip list foraging in a small stream close by. Recharged, we set off towards Kongsfjord. Unable to reach the harbour close enough to get good views into it, we quickly left and went up north again. No White-billed Divers had been seen yet, so we had asked for suitable places to scan the sea. A perfect place for this is the Kjølnes lighthouse. It is located on a small peninsula about 6 kilometers before you reach Berlevåg. The road towards Berlevåg is absolutely stunning! Magnificent views over the water, icy mountainsides on the west and clear skies made for a beautiful scenery. There were two **Snow Buntings** feeding on the parking lot of the lighthouse. Again, the path towards the actual lighthouse was buried underneath a lot of snow, so it took some effort to get to it. Once there, we set up the scopes and started scanning the sea. We flushed some **Purple Sandpipers** and noticed that there were several feeding on the weed below us. It wasn't as exciting at first, with two **Black Guillemots** present resting in the water, but after a while groups of gulls started flying past. At least 10 **Glaucous Gulls** passed, with most being 1st and 2nd winters. One adult was seen as well, we had great views of the different plumages which was really educational. Several hours later and no WBD's to show for it, Berlevåg was next. The harbour was a perfect spot to check gulls, with large groups present. Twenty **Glaucous Gulls** were present in the inner harbour, along with a very interesting individual. After checking some literature and characteristics it turned out to be a **Viking Gull**, a hybrid between Herring Gull and Glaucous Gull! Further up north in the village we found some abandoned houses, full with snow and broken roofs. We scanned the coastline here as well and saw more **Glaucous Gulls**, a total of ten birds.



The plan was to check the feeder at Kaamanen at first light tomorrow, so we headed back down towards Tana. Everything went smoothly, until a sudden traffic jam appeared. After some confusion we learned that a tow truck had ended up in a ditch next to the road, stuck in the snow. A large crane was summoned to lift it out. We did not think we would ever see a traffic jam here, with such a low population density. While waiting we suddenly heard some calls in the willows nearby. It sounded quite familiar, so we started checking our tapes. At first we thought it was a Boreal Owl, but the bird calling was a **Northern Hawk-owl**. Our traffic jam was located close to the location we found one this morning, so it could've been the same individual. We did not get any views on the bird, sadly.

Our long wait was finally over and we made our way for the Finnish border. Just before we reached it, a **Hawk-owl** was spotted perched on electric wires. Two **Red Foxes** were also seen while driving, but no Elks however. A group of Belgian birders had driven the same road a week before and had managed to see 5(!) Elks here, but we only saw tame **Reindeer**. We ate pizza's at the border restaurant and continued further towards Kaamanen. A 'suitable' parking place was found and we went to camp there with -16° Celsius. Welcome to Finland!



Day 4 – 9th April

Kaamanen – Inari – Kuusamo

Because of the harsh cold this morning, we woke up very early. We craved for a warm place to get a hot meal, so we drove off towards the famous feeders at Kaamanen, the place to see **Pine Grosbeak**, and its restaurant Tuulen Tupa. Upon arrival, we noticed some bird activity. The restaurant was closed, which was a big bummer, so we started to scout the area. Several **Arctic** and **Common Redpolls** were present in the parking lot and a **Lesser Woodpecker** flew by. A lot of feeders are placed on the terrain and birds are feeding everywhere. Behind the building was the main feeding station, with a lot of **Pine Grosbeaks** foraging on the feeders! They were not shy at all and we were able to get very good looks on the birds. Several **Red Squirrels** were enjoying the bird food as well, which was kinda cute. Further at the back of the station, several **Bohemian Waxwings** were present and feeding on scattered food.



After we had seen enough, our journey continued southwards. The goal was to reach Kuusamo today, so we had a lot of driving to do. Before we set out towards Finland and Norway, we had received intel about places to check for Siberian Tit. Mika Bruun had sent GPS-coordinates of a long road somewhere along our trip towards Kuusamo. At around noon this road was reached. We decided to give it a try, even though there was quite a large amount of snow stacked on it. After a while, the road became better though. After several miles and no bird whatsoever, we were starting to doubt if we would even see a Great Tit.. Mainly due to a low driving speed and wanting to check every little bush, it felt we were driving for ages. But after 12 kilometers, Monster suddenly spotted movement. Full brakes and several tense seconds later, we had full views of two **Siberian Tits!** We started some playback and they responded very fast and lingered for about half an hour. A **Great Tit** also joined the small flock after a while.

With another target in the bag, we made quick work of the road back. A snowstorm hit us as soon as we came back on the highway but it didn't cause too much delay. Another planned stop was the ski resort of Kiilopää to look for Rock Ptarmigan. Unclear instructions from the desk worker, we decided to split up and walk different tracks. After about half an hour, it started to snow quite hard, so we called our losses.

We reached Kuusamo without any further trouble and decided to go and sleep somewhere inside. Just before Kuusamo we found a motel where we could rent a hut with nice beds and a shower.



Day 5 – 10th April

Kuusamo area

The alarm went at 04:00 because we wanted to be deep into the right area before sunset to see our target species here, namely the grouses Kuusamo is famous for. After checking several places with good potential, we suddenly saw a grouse sitting in the tree tops in front of us. It turned out to be a female **Black Grouse**. After a short while we actually noticed there was another female present. They flew off and we continued the road. Only 20 minutes later a group of at least 8 **Black Grouses** was discovered in the tree tops across a large field. A **Hooded Crow** was also flying by. Several miles later and some stops to see and scan the area we reached a farmstead. There was quite a lot of bird activity here, so we decided to walk around the area and check its premises. A group of 5 **Roe Deer** suddenly walked by and left some cool prints in the large pack of snow. A flock of **Yellowhammers** was feeding on the ground near the road, several **Hooded Crows** flew by and a **Blackbird** was flushed from the bushes. Back at the car, we saw four **Bullfinches** perching in the nearby trees.



We didn't see much action for the next six hours. Constantly driving, slowly making our way through the entire Kuusamo area, which is littered with lakes. Then, with most of us sleeping or falling asleep in the car, Danny shouts he saw a Western Capercaillie. Full brakes again and full reverse, some tense moments follow and we can't relocate the bird as fast as we would like. Then he starts to move away from us, in towards the forest. We get nice views and everyone is wide awake. After a short period it flies off deeper into the forest. What a beast!



We decided to go for a nice walk and stretch our legs in a suitable looking area. We flushed a **Willow Ptarmigan** quite early down the path we were taking. We heard calls from **Black Grouse** in the background and a scan resulted in two perched far away in the tree tops. This concluded our day as we returned back to our warm hut.



Day 6 – 11th April

Kuusamo area

We had only a few target species left here. Siberian Jay and Hazel Grouse were still on our list and we wanted to make sure we left with very nice sightings. We had expected to encounter Siberian Jay already, so we started to get a bit worried. Some extra detective work on Observado and asking Mika didn't result in our hoped Siberian Jay. So today was another very early morning where we drove around all day in Kuusamo area, towards every bit of habitat that looked good.

At around half past 7, we were driving along a road with a field next to it. Everyone was constantly checking the trees we passed and every bird would get called out and a stop would follow to check what species it was. "What's this?!" It turned out to be the long lasted **Siberian Jay**! It flew off quite quickly, sadly, but we got decent views. However, after only several minutes, we discovered another one! This one gave splendid views and sat in the treetops for quite a while. Two **Black Grouse** were seen a while later too. And as if the cages had been opened, half an hour later we found two more **Siberian Jays**. Very happy to cross this species off the list, we birded further in Kuusamo area. We stopped at one of the several bridges, with some open water underneath it. The rest of the lake was frozen entirely, so a Black-bellied Dipper made good use of this open part. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** was also present. We ended the day at another lake with two **Whooper Swans**. A large flock of 50 **Snow Buntings** was in a nearby garden. The alarm would ring very early again tomorrow, so we went in for the night.



Day 7 – 12th April

Kuusamo – Tornio – Kuusamo

We still did not manage to see Hazel Grouse, even after checking the provided locations and good habitat. So, today was dedicated to finding this species. We went back towards the location where Joachim Bertrands et al had seen a beautiful male. Our hopes were quite low, as we had already checked this entire road and its sides. We decided to drive slowly by and stop at several spots and then open up the entire car and putting playback on speakers at max volume. After several stops and tries a big truck passed us by and we were ready to move further on. At the exact moment we wanted to settle ourselves in the car, Diedert heard a song which was the same as the used playback. Now completely focused again, there it was again. It was not playback, it was an actual **Hazel Grouse** singing! We continued our playback but were met with silence. But, after a wait which took ages, the song returned and much closer this time! After several back-and-forth's with our playback and the song of this male it came to the road. It flew across and disappeared again. This happened several times and only some of us managed to get views. Until it settled in a tree next to the car and we got insane views of this magnificent grouse. It sat still and was slowly crawling in the branches and sometimes even eating. Such a stunning bird!



Insanely happy with this observation, we continued down the road. There was much more activity today we noticed. A female **Black Grouse** was sitting on the road and flew up into the treetop when we rounded the corner with our car. Not long after, we stumbled upon a male **Western Capercaillie** walking in the middle of the road. Another male was walking in a ditch next to the road, slowly but surely making its way away from us, into the forest.



Another road, another corner and we encountered a large group of **Black Grouse** sitting in the trees along the lake. Males and females were mixed and they gave very good views. After such an epic morning, we decided it was time to try our luck for one of our most wanted species. This year was terrible for owls and there were only a few about. Most well-known stake-outs were coming up empty, but before we departed, we had seen that a Great Grey Owl was steadily appearing in a forest along the Finnish-Swedish border. We decided to take the trip and drove 400+ kilometres towards the Swedish border. When we arrived at the GPS-location we had derived from tiira.fi, we parked the car and started to scan the area. The road we were on crossed several big, snowy fields with large trees marking the borders between them. One step too far and you would fall deep into the snow. No sign of the GGO whatsoever, so we decided to drive down the road a bit further. Coming back to the place, we noticed a man sitting in his car and reading a book. As we didn't see another reason why someone would be here, we parked next to him and asked him if he had seen the owl. He had seen it before, but no luck yet today. He told some more info about the whereabouts of the bird and we decided to wait it out. A long wait followed and after talking to some more locals we decided to follow one of their tips for Eagle Owl and Three-toed Woodpecker. There was a sideroad next to the supposed waste dump and we birded our way down there.



Suddenly, one of the local birders came towards us on his bike and he waved heavily. He did not really speak English, but we just followed him and then he started to point. They had located it, we assumed. Following his instructions we scoped the treeline. **Great Grey Owl**, perched and scanning the area! We all quickly checked the bird but then decided to go back to our car and drive back around towards the main road, where the other birders were as well. From there, we had some amazing views in the scope. The distance was a bit too far for nice pictures, we managed some record shots, but with several short flights and very nice views, we were more than happy. We decided to celebrate this with a nice meal in the Swedish IKEA, but sadly they just closed, so we had to settle for the Swedish MC Donalds, called MAX or something. Our plan was to head home with several detours we prepared. On the internet, we had found some sightings or hearings of Boreal Owl, so we wanted to see if we could tick that one as well. A big, quiet road had several observations along it. Our tactic was similar to the Hazel Grouse one, stopping and playing tape at several nice open areas. It was already extremely dark, without any artificial light, but at 21:30 we heard something. A singing **Boreal Owl**! At the start of our trip, we had already written off this species, so a nice bonus to our list! A long drive was still ahead of us, so we didn't try to see it with our flashlights and made for Kuusamo. During this drive we had extreme luck and witnessed the **Northern Light**! It didn't last long, but the strange moving light had us awestruck!

At about 01:20, Diedert had to stop for a pee and stretch his legs from driving. While peeing, a Fox and a Dog were calling in the background, along the very dark, quiet road. Suddenly, an owl started calling. Waking up the other members in the car, everyone started listening and a recording was made. Back in the hut, we checked the recording and listened several tapes. It turned out to be an **Ural Owl**! How lucky! We went back the following day, but sadly no luck on any sightings. We arrived safe and sound back at the hut.



Day 8 – 13th April

Kuusamo – Varagerbotn

We decided to take a well deserved rest and slept till late in the morning. While cleaning the hut and preparing for our trip back north, a **Siberian Jay** quickly visited the trees behind our hut. Somewhere in the early afternoon, we drove off. We had only one real target left: Rock Ptarmigan. On our way towards Norway, we would visit the ski reserve Kiilopää again to try if our luck would last. This time, we found the right track, but after several miles, we still had not seen anything indicating the presence of the Ptarmigans, except for the many wooden signs in the snow with their picture. When reaching the top of the hill, which was a high hill covered with snow, the only viable tactic seemed to start scoping the area. The hill gave us an incredible view into the surrounding valley and unto the hillsides across it. However, it started to get darker and the snow started to cover the hillsides, which decreased visibility. After almost an hour, it is Lonnie who saves the day! He calls out that he has one in the scope, sitting on a rock! We quickly all checked the **Rock Ptarmigan** and after everyone had got decent views, enough to exclude Willow, we decided to go closer to get better views. It was still very far from our position, so we stopped several times to check if it was still present. As soon as we were ready to get it into view however, it was gone. No sign of it anywhere nearby and the darkness was closing in, so we decided to call it a day. With this last real target species in the bag, we had seen arguably everything we expected to see! We drove all the way back up towards Varagerbotn, where we found a different parking space to put up the tent. Strangely, we outraced the darkness, as it was still glimmering outside. We realised that the sun had already almost stopped setting here, up north, and that the light would stay the entire night.



Day 9 – 14th April

Varagerbotn – Vardø – Neiden

The only new species we could possibly still tick was White-billed Diver, so we decide to bird the entire road towards Vardø again and scan the sea at several places.

Our first mentionable observation is a **White-tailed Eagle** flying overhead at Nesseby Church. A group of 20 **Red-breasted Merganser** is also present in the nearby water. At Vestre Jakobselv we check the icy river from the bridge. A third calendar year **Glaucous Gull** is among the gulls as the only worthy bird. Not the hoped-for Harlequin Duck. We visit the camping for a second time and find a **Eurasian Tree Sparrow** and two **Common Redpolls** here. Other than that, it is as empty as before.

In Vadsø, we park at the same place as before and scan the inner harbour. 19 **Purple Sandpipers** in total were counted. A female **King Eider**, six **Steller's Eiders** and ten **Long-tailed Ducks** were lingering here. The court-like behaviour and mating calls of the **Long-tailed Ducks** is very cool to hear and see. A scan from the bridge towards Vadsøya resulted in We visited Vadsøya again and saw six **Mountain Hares** this time around. We walked more towards the north this time, to try and scan for WBD, but only noticed two female **King Eiders** floating on the sea. A **Great Cormorant** flew past and two **Greylag Geese** came flying over land inwards.



Next stop was Ekkeroy. Along the roadside in between Ekkeroy and Vadsø we discovered a group of 20 **Snow Buntings**. At Ekkorey we scanned all seaside's again. On the far westside, there was a small boathouse and a male and female **Steller's Eider** and six **Long-tailed Ducks** were swimming around its poles. On our way back towards the main road, a **White-tailed Eagle** came soaring by and landed in the shore on top of a rock.



We headed further north towards Skallelv, where we saw another/the White-tailed Eagle fly past. In the river mouth of Skallelv a large group of 25 **Common Gulls** were resting. After a quick stop here, we went to scan the sea at Kiberg. This turned out to be an amazing stop. At the start of the southern pier, a group of 40 **Snow Buntings** was feeding and flying about. We put up the scopes and started checking the sea for any passing birds. After a long dull moment, we noticed a group of grey creatures moving past. This turned out to be **Grey Seals** swimming in packs, probably hunting. This group or several groups pasted the same area we were checking over and over for the time we stood there. Some **Harbour Seals** were also partaking in these groups, but only about three individuals. We counted around 25 **Grey Seals**. The birds started to pick up pace as well and we discovered multiple rafts of **King Eiders** and **Long-tailed Ducks** too, with estimated totals for both species at around 300+. Among them were several **Steller's Eiders** too. In total we saw about 50 **Black Guillemots**, who were mostly passing by. A first winter **Glaucous Gull** was also present here. After spending some time here, we went on for our last stop in Vardø. We checked the harbours, which turned out to be quite empty with only seven **Steller's Eiders** present, and quickly made our way back down again to Varagerbotn, because the light was still good to see and we wanted to check the entire road still. We failed to see any other mentionable things and thus had dipped White-billed Diver. We will just have to discover one ourselves in the Netherlands!



However, our day did not end yet. We decided we would go and visit Pasvik, another nature reserve bordering Russia, so we made for somewhere around Neiden. As soon as we drove out of Varagerbotn, there was something really large standing in the roadside. Quickly slowing down and getting closer, it turned out to be an **Elk**! We soon realised, it was not alone; there were three other **Elk** present too! One was ear-tagged and had a collar, probably containing a satellite tracking device. We learned that it had probably been tagged for a scientific project. Sadly, we have not yet learned where and who tagged this animal. We had stunning views, as they were quite relaxed, eating their dinner. After some fifteen minutes, they slowly started walking back into the forest and we continued our road. Rinse, repeat: a place was found to put the tent down and we quickly went in for the night.



Day 10 – 15th April

Neiden – Pasvik area - Kirkenes

Since we had already seen all we wanted to see, we decided to go for some more birding in a less spectacular area. It turned out to be a very boring day, with almost no birds seen at all. We drove down the entire road towards the former border patrol houses and then drove back to Kirkenes. Our first stop was at the National Park's visitors centre. It being Sunday, everything was closed, so not only did we suffer from a lack of caffeine, there was also no activity at all. We continued quite quickly. Driving down several roads in Svanvik, looking for some bird activity, resulted in a garden where a feeder was keeping 30 **Common Redpolls** busy. We also found a male **Pine Grosbeak**, which was singing. Quite a cool, cute song! On we went, down further south. Several hours passed with nothing to see, so we were quite happy when we finally saw some activity in the trees next to the road again. We got out to check what birds were flying about and it turned out to be **Pine Grosbeaks**! Nine in total, one or two were singing too, which was quite cool. After that we made it towards the end of the road. A wooden gate and two buildings stood at the end, which was the old border patrol station. We turned and made our way back. No further sightings were made that day, until we arrived at our camping spot outside Kirkenes. In the lights of our car, while we were still chilling, a **Willow Ptarmigan** was spotted, sitting on the road, but it flew up after a short time. What a bizarre sighting and an unfitting end to our day.

We would only recommend visiting Pasvik in this time of year if you do not visit the Tuulen Tupa feeder or if you don't visit Finland at all, because Pine Grosbeak is the only species that makes it worth your while and they are quite abundant.



Day 11- 16th April

Kirkenes – Oslo – Amsterdam

Today we travelled back towards the Netherlands and this was the end to our trip. We had no delays back to Amsterdam and were happy to be able to sleep in a nice warm bed again.



Species list

Target Species

Steller's Eider

We started planning this trip because we really wanted to see this species. Well, we saw plenty! This stunning duck is fairly common around the entire Varangerfjord, all harbours hosted quite some amounts. We had our best views in the one of Vadsø, where there are several opportunities to walk quite far into the harbour on piers. They are also present at sea, in rafts, usually mixed with other ducks.

King Eider

Also very common along the Varangerfjord. The larger amounts can be found at sea, where they cluster in large groups called rafts. Several were also present in the many harbours along the coast, but less common than Common or Steller's here. The road between Varangerbotn and Vardø is a good place as with Steller's, but the other side of the peninsula, near Båtsfjord, is as good.



White-billed Diver

Sadly, we did not see any White-billed Divers. Tormud told us that some were already seen, but the larger bulk of the migrating birds still had to come. We were too early to easily score this bird and thus missed this one.

Hazel Grouse

A group of Belgium birders visited Kuusamo a week before us and had seen two Hazel Grouse just on the road, on their last day. It is possible to encounter them anywhere in suitable areas, but because there is so much snow in April still, most roads are inaccessible. We only saw one bird at the place Joachim Bertrands et al also had their only one (65.869, 29.708). This was one of the only places that seemed to have suitable habitat as well, as far as we could determine. Taping seems to work too, in general, but that would require 10000 stops at random places and this seemed way too boring for us. We would recommend this place, mostly when everything else fails.



Western Capercaillie

This species proved to be way harder than we had expected, especially looking at the sightings the Belgians did a week earlier. Luckily Danny had discovered the male in the ditch on our first day, because we went days without seeing one, even though there were many sightings. The road where we spotted our other two males seems to be a very nice road (65.893, 29.784). The gravel seems to be more accessible here, which the birds need for their digestion. They feed on this in the early morning, before the trucks and cars make it an unsafe place. So, the best way to find them is to drive slowly along these tracks in the early morning. An overall tip is just to make miles after miles and keep driving. Cover as much ground as possible and you will eventually run into them.

Black Grouse

This bird is fairly common in Kuusamo, we saw it every day in Kuusamo. Just scan the tree tops and listen for the typical song the males produce.

Rock Ptarmigan

This turned out to be a rocky one. We only connected with one individual at the well-known ski resort Kiilopää, where most people tend to connect with it. Be aware, Willow Ptarmigan is also present here, so you need to distinguish them. This can be quite tricky in winter plumage, but habitat is a strong supportive argument. We could not find any in the sites we had for Varanger, probably due to the large amounts of snow still present compared to other years. Usually they are present at certain spots in Varanger, like the airfield near Vardø.

Willow Ptarmigan

Another grouse species that turned out to be quite tricky. We tried many sites in Varanger, but only with the tips of Tormud were we able to connect with this species there. The road towards Batsfjord had several suitable sites and the hills where we encountered our group of three birds is definitely a good site (70.583, 29.660). We flushed an individual in Kuusamo and they are also seen in here on roads, in the very early morning or late evening, as our Belgian colleagues experienced. This species seems to be active even when it is already dark, as we noticed in Varanger. It can also be encountered at ski resort Kiilopää, but be aware of Rock Ptarmigan here.



Thick-billed Murre

Fairly easy if you'll be able to visit Hornøya. There are about 500 pairs present at Hornøya, where they breed among the many Common Guillemots. If you will not visit Hornøya, or bad weather prevents you from, they can be seen by scanning the sea nearby from Vardø Harbour.

Gyrfalcon

This species requires a bit of luck, as it is not a guaranteed species. Your best chance is visiting the many bird cliffs and scanning for any unrest which may be caused by Gyrfalcons who hunt on the breeding birds at these cliffs, like Kittiwakes. We had a very cool sighting in Vardø, where it chased after a bird and settled on the telepost mast for a while, which allowed us to scope in.



Northern Hawk-owl

The most common owl species of all in Norway. We saw many individuals in the Varanger area, most in the Tana valley, where they were present on the electric wires. Check recent sightings and keep scanning the electric wires as they like to use these as lookout posts.

Arctic Redpoll

Quite common, encountered at several feeders. We were not able to identify all redpolls we saw, so maybe even more common than expected. The Tuulan Tupa feeder is a good place to check for this species.

Siberian Tit

A tough one and we only saw two individuals at a site recommended by Mika Bruun. Maybe due to the large amounts of snow still present, as former years had higher scores. We never encountered it at feeders, so luck is involved in this bird. Just keep checking every flock of small songbirds.



Pine Grosbeak

Virtually guaranteed at the feeder of Tuulan Tupa. We saw several individuals there. Also quite common in the Pasvik area. Check feeders and scan for flyby birds.

Siberian Jay

Way harder than expected, but in the end, we had seen a total of five individuals. Open areas with solitary trees which can be used as lookout seem to be good habitat, but just cover a lot of ground and you will eventually stumble upon one.



Great Grey Owl

Sadly, we knew it was going to be hard to see owls this year, as the population cycle was at its lowest point this year. The heavy snowfall had made things even worse. Luckily we had noticed a twitchable Great Grey Owl near the border of Sweden, so after trying our luck to find one ourselves but failing, we decided to twitch this majestic bird. With the help of the local birding community, we got very awesome views!

You could always try a tour company, but these are way too expensive in our opinion. They seem to be pretty consistent in the areas they visit each year, but with no owls present at all due to the very bad circumstances, we had little hope of finding one ourselves. They are mainly active at dusk, but can also be found in broad daylight.

Ural Owl

This species is probably the hardest of all. We did not even put this one on our target list, because we could not find any reliable info on it. The very lucky 'heard-only' observation in the middle of the night was unforgettable.

Some people have chance sightings of an Ural Owl flying past during the day, but there have been no reliable stake-outs in recent years. Kuusamo reaches the northern edge of their distribution.

Boreal Owl

This one is on par with Ural Owl. Frankly, Kuusamo lies too far north and reaches the edge of the distribution. We had a very nice singing male closer towards Sweden. Usually, people go further south if they want to try for this species. Look for recent sightings and give these a visit during nights.

Orca

No Orcas for us, but these can be seen swimming in the Varangerfjord, along the road from Vadsø to Vardø. Some reports of pods were coming in while we were in the area, but we never managed to connect. Keep scanning the water for any fins.

Elk

Also not a guaranteed species and seem depended on local movements. The Tana valley seems to be a good area, as is the road towards Tuulan Tupa from Tana. Keep scanning the surroundings here, the Belgian group had seen five Elk along the road towards the feeder. Be careful of misidentifying one of the many captive-herd Reindeer that graze along the roads.

Arctic Fox

Pim Wolf et al had recorded an Arctic Fox in the Inari area: <https://observation.org/waarneming/view/136856799>. We only encountered Red Fox, but be mindful about this species.



Total Triplist

Birds

	Name (EN)	<i>subspecies</i>
1.	Greylag Goose	<i>anser</i>
2.	Whooper Swan	
3.	Mallard	<i>platyrhynchos</i>
4.	Northern Pintail	
5.	Steller's Eider	
6.	King Eider	
7.	Common Eider	<i>mollissima</i>
8.	Velvet Scoter	
9.	Long-tailed Duck	
10.	Common Goldeneye	<i>clangula</i>
11.	Common Merganser	<i>merganser</i>
12.	Red-breasted Merganser	
13.	Hazel Grouse	<i>bonasia</i>
14.	Western Capercaillie	<i>urogallus</i>
15.	Black Grouse	<i>tetrix</i>
16.	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>muta</i>
17.	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>lagopus</i>
18.	European Shag	<i>aristotelis</i>
19.	Great Cormorant	<i>carbo</i>
20.	White-tailed Eagle	<i>albicilla</i>
21.	Eurasian Oystercatcher	<i>ostralegus</i>
22.	Purple Sandpiper	
23.	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>tridactyla</i>
24.	Black-headed Gull	
25.	Mew Gull	<i>canus</i>
26.	Great Black-backed Gull	
27.	Glaucous Gull	<i>hyperboreus</i>
28.	European Herring Gull	<i>argentatus</i>
29.	Thick-billed Murre	<i>lomvia</i>
30.	Common Murre	<i>hyperborea</i>
31.	Razorbill	<i>torda</i>
32.	Black Guillemot	<i>arcticus</i>
33.	Atlantic Puffin	
34.	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>palumbus</i>
35.	Ural Owl	<i>liturata</i>
36.	Great Grey Owl	<i>lapponica</i>
37.	Northern Hawk-owl	<i>ulula</i>
38.	Boreal Owl	<i>funereus</i>
39.	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>minor</i>
40.	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>major</i>
41.	Gyr Falcon	
42.	Siberian Jay	<i>infaustus</i>
43.	Eurasian Jay	<i>glandarius</i>
44.	Eurasian Magpie	<i>fennorum</i>
45.	Hooded Crow	<i>cornix</i>
46.	Northern Raven	<i>corax</i>
47.	Willow Tit	<i>borealis</i>

48.	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>garrulus</i>
49.	Grey-headed Chickadee	<i>lappiconus</i>
50.	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>caeruleus</i>
51.	Great Tit	<i>major</i>
52.	Common Blackbird	<i>merula</i>
53.	White-throated Dipper	<i>cinclus</i>
54.	House Sparrow	<i>domesticus</i>
55.	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>montanus</i>
56.	Pine Grosbeak	<i>enucleator</i>
57.	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>pyrrhula</i>
58.	European Greenfinch	<i>chloris</i>
59.	Common Redpoll	<i>flammea</i>
60.	Arctic Redpoll	<i>exilipes</i>
61.	Snow Bunting	<i>vlasowae</i>
62.	Yellowhammer	<i>citronella</i>

Mammals

Name (EN)

1. Red Fox
2. Grey Seal
3. Harbour Seal
4. Elk
5. Mountain Hare
6. Eurasian Red Squirrel

Pictures of birds in this report have been made by Danny Bregman and Wouter Monster.
Printable version (without pictures) is available per request.

