

Winter adventures in the Arctic.

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An Arctic odyssey, taking in the best of northern Finland and the Varanger peninsula in Norway. In temperatures that touched minus 26 C, the birding was simply superb, the winter landscapes spectacular and the trip nothing but a success.

Flying into Oulu, then driving overnight to the far north, this short whirlwind tour of the northern taiga forests and icy Barents Sea notched up 2350 km, a journey that started at feeders dripping in Pine Grosbeaks and Siberian Jays, then moved on to the stunning fjords that harboured flocks of Steller's and King Eiders, plus white-winged gulls, Brunnich's Guillemots and other specialities such as Gyr Falcon and Ptarmigan.

In addition to some amazing birds, the trip also was memorable for its mammals, no less than nine species recorded, included a fantastic Wolverine, three Otters, a Harp Seal and a few Red Squirrels.

With flights arriving in Oulu late on the 19th March and departing early morning on the 24th, the trip essentially gave four full days in the field, the two long drives (700 km Oulu to Inari and return) both being done at night, thereby maximising the time spent birding. With daylength over 12 hours and, fortunately, all days generally bright and sunny, this gave plenty of time to enjoy this unique corner of Europe at a season when it is rarely visited, but arguably at its most stunning.

From a practical angle, road conditions were excellent - though almost all the driving was on ice and pack snow, studded tyres meant that normal speeds could be maintained throughout and emergency stops for roadside birds didn't result in us skidding off into the ditch! Even if there had been heavy falls of snow, it is likely the roads would still have been passable - snow ploughs are in near constant operation and on the roads over the high passes (to Batfjord in particular and Vardo on occasion), a convoy system goes into operation, all cars following a snow plough every two hours or so. Accommodation was chosen close to the main birding areas - in Finland, the obvious choice was the Tuulen Tupa hotel, any place with Siberian Jays outside the restaurant and Red Squirrels in the roof must be deserving of 5 stars! On the Varanger Fjord, home was a self-catering apartment in Vestre Jakobselv, not only centrally located but also very economical and, better still, right on the waterfront and with Otters playing outside the kitchen window! It is probably worth adding that without a credit card, you would be stuffed in Norway - whilst most petrol stations are automatic in both countries, those in Norway took only a credit card!

And so to the trip...

19th March

Having found a very cheap flight from Riga to Oulu, my trip began at 3 p.m. with the 300 km drive north through Lithuania and Latvia. As a precursor for things to come, the weather had turned cool, flurries of snow and temperatures dipping below zero. No stops en route, but flocks of White-fronted Geese winged their way over the road and, all northbound, a single Rough-legged Buzzard was noted amongst the dozen or so Common Buzzards.

I arrived in Riga just after 6 p.m., the Air Baltic flight departed on time at 8.30 p.m., the trip was about to begin.

20th March, Lapland.

The flight had landed in Oulu at 11 p.m., within minutes, crunching across the snow in temperatures of minus 8 C, we were unlocking the rented car and beginning our long drive north. At 2.00 a.m., crossing the Arctic Circle, it was minus 23 C. By sunrise, we were 620 km north and the temperature had dipped to minus 26 C!

A few kilometres short of our destination, a little weary in the eye, I stopped to stretch my legs and take my first gasps of the frozen air. Stepping out into the snow, knee depth and none too friendly to wanderers in the forest, I heard a vaguely familiar song, a melodic flutey affair that I was sure belonged to one of my target birds. And indeed it did, a hundred metres through the trees, a small house had a bird feeder and, better still, that feeder had about twelve Pine Grosbeaks in attendance! Amazing, minutes after first stepping out into the vast taiga forests and I had found one of its special birds - a mix of stunning males and orange-yellow females. I was tempted to take a closer look, but it was only 6.30 a.m. and I

feared setting off the dogs, thus waking the owner of the house. Images of an irrate Finn coming out to chase me off, coupled with the numbing effects of the extreme cold, saw me instead retreat to the car.

Minutes later, pulling into Tuulin Tupa, a hotel 70 km north of Inari, my decision to leave the earlier Pine Grosbeaks was almost immediately forgotten. There were more here, dozens of them!!! The hotel, famous for its feeders, was like something purpose-built to be part of bird heaven! Though it was still before 7.00 a.m. and the hotel portrayed no sign of human life, what it did portray was an amazing concentration of birds! Feeders both sides of the hotel were bubbling with birds - chunky Pine Grosbeaks, probably in numbers exceeding 30, were squabbling over the grain and sunflower seeds scattered for them, a mesmerizing sight. And not just Pine Grosbeaks, but loads more birds too - a few Great Tits and loads of Greenfinches to provide the familiarity, oodles of mixed Mealy and Arctic Redpolls to provide constant entertainment.

Settling down to watch these birds, the mega-low temperatures were soon going to be a problem, already my thumb felt like it was going to fall off! But, wow, the birds were good! Never a moment without a Pine Grosbeak, never a moment without at least 20 or 30 redpolls, but soon my attention was being pulled by other attractions too - first a Siberian Tit dropped in, then just moments later a pair of simply brilliant Siberian Jays! By now wrapped in a sleeping bag and donning a Russian fur hat, the cold was kept at bay and, bar a thumb that was physically hurting, all was perfect ...two Red Squirrels had emerged from the hotel's roof and were now scampering around the beams, yet more Siberian Jays were arriving at the feeders and hopping just metres in front of me.

As the rising sun took the temperature up to minus 23, I wondered if the morning could get any better. Then it did!

Suddenly, from beyond a ridge in the snow, a head appeared! A large brown head with white blotches and rounded ears! I seem to remember my uttered words were something along the lines of 'Bloody hell, what the heck is that?'. In reality though I knew what it was, standing just three metres in front of me was a Wolverine, a totally mind-blowing animal and an exceptionally rare one at that! It is reckoned there are only about 150 in all Finland, yet here was one of them, an amazing bit of luck to begin the trip with! However, for those few moments that we were face to face, I am not sure who was the more surprised, the Wolverine or me! My senses kicked into focus, I swung the camera around, but he was having none of it, he dipped back below the ridge and was gone! For a good few moments, I remained there frozen, in both senses of the word, hoping he might reappear, but no, that was that, he was gone, my brief encounter over.

After that, I really was impressed with the place, and when eventually the hotel opened a couple of hours later, I booked a room for the night, a day spent here would not be a problem! With the hotel open, the next priority was to try to begin to defrost ...and what better place than their restaurant, fresh coffee and a window overlooking the feeders, bliss! Pressing nose to window, you could get just 30 cm from the Pine Grosbeaks, hordes of other birds too, all from the cozy interior, what a nice way to savour breakfast.

Suitably thawed and refreshed, I then returned outside for another stint at the feeders - quite magical, the number of birds was truly something remarkable. With lots of comings and goings, scattered between feeders at a couple of locations, actual numbers were very difficult to count, but I think it was no exaggeration to put the Pine Grosbeaks at about 25 that morning, the Siberian Jays at least six, Siberian Tits about eight and the mixed Arctic and Mealy Redpolls up in the the high dozens! After a little midday nap, the bright sparkling sun of the afternoon tempted us out into a safari of many kilometres to seek out yet more creatures of the frozen forests. What a brilliant idea! Drove about sixty kilometres and saw precisely one bird - a Magpie! Not much better on the mammal front either - three Reindeers trotting through the snow and two Red Foxes, one curled up asleep on the snow, enjoying the sun and the soaring temperatures that had now reached an almost tropical minus 16 C!

As the evening began to creep in and temperatures again began their plunge ever downwards, thoughts turned to the Aurora borealis, what a fitting end to the day that would be. So ever keen, and wrapped to the gunnels with extra fleeces and furs, off we stomped across a frozen lake, thinking we might just get lucky with a calling owl or some other goody of the night. Hmm, the clear skies of the day had given way to high clouds, the aurora was beginning to look a tad unlikely. Then it began to snow, brr that made it feel even colder! Called it quits and trudged back across the lake. End of day one, an amazing day by any standards, roll on the next morning!

21st March, northbound to Varanger.

Up at 6.30 a.m. and out into the chill, overnight snow having given way to another bright crisp morning. The temperature was minus 19, the sun was just appearing over the horizon and a half dozen Pine Grosbeaks were already entrenched upon the feeders, it was looking all set for another good day.

By 7.00 a.m., skipping the breakfast that would have been delicious bacon and steaming coffee, we were on the road, destination Norway. The journey up to the border, just 80 km, saw exactly two birds - another Magpie and a Hooded Crow, though even the latter was wimping it out on the edge of the border settlement! Into Norway and then eastward, a drive of an hour or so along the Tana River, totally frozen and devoid of life. Equally devoid of life was Tana Bru, the first town we rolled into, not a person to be seen and certainly not any welcoming coffee shops! Ah well, onward we went, now turning north to an impressive set of cliffs just 30 km up the road. These were the haunt of one of the Arctic's impressive beasties, Gyr Falcons! A traditional location for these birds, but perhaps better a little later in the season, I was to be pleasantly surprised. Initial scans of the rockfaces revealed nothing more than a pair of Ravens that seemed to be building a nest, but then, perhaps fifteen minutes after I had arrived, a powerful shape came cruising along the cliff top, one mega bird, an adult Gyr Falcon in all its glory! Straight overhead, then a twist and it vanished, I presume landing high on the ridge. Rather content with that, I decided that a voyage over the high fells to Batsfjord was in order, supposedly a scenic drive and a bird-rich harbour in the offering at the other end, perhaps a coffee shop too!

And wow, it was a scenic drive, drifting snow sparkling as it whipped across the road, expanses of snow disappearing off into hazy horizons, the whiteness punctuated only by the odd Reindeer here and there. On these barren tops though, there were birds I hoped to see, the specialists of such places, Ptarmigans. Stopping and scanning proved fruitless - looking for little white blobs in tens of square kilometres of white had to be worse than the proverbial needle in a haystack! There had to be a more logical approach - if I were a Ptarmigan, where would I be? Not out on the vast open snowfields, but perhaps near the occasional patch of exposed stunted heather. After a few kilometres, I found one such area ...and immediately I could see tracks in the snow, grouse footprints for sure! A careful scan revealed nothing, so I jumped out of the car, did a botched job of closing the door and heard a nice bang as it slammed. 28 Ptarmigan also heard it slam! Darn, they'd been just 30 metres away and I had not seen them ...and no they were all flying away!!! Fortunately they had the good grace to land further up the road and, as I took care not to slam the door a second time, the birds lingered just long enough for me to get a few nice photographs. Then they upped and decided it was time to give me the slip, up the hill they flew and disappeared over a ridge, safe in the knowledge I had no wish to clamber through drifts as high as my waist!

Later we arrived in Batsfjord, so too did an unexpected snowstorm! In near white-out conditions, we toured town in the hope of finding a coffee shop open. No chance, even the petrol station was closed! Now beginning to think that the morning breakfast would have been a good idea, we instead headed for the harbour - quite an ugly affair I have to say, not at all in keeping with the usual Norwegian standards, but still you can't moan too much when flocks of mixed King, Steller's and Common Eiders are paddling away in the foreground! Not massive numbers, but the first of the trip, so very welcome. Visibility was a bit naff, so after taking in an adult Iceland Gull and a first-winter Glaucous Gull, we said our farewells to this coffee-less hellhole (perhaps a tad harsh) and headed back over the high fells. The snow stopped immediately and the sun returned - it seemed to me that Batsfjord was cursed!

Then the miraculous occurred - aside a small fjord almost back at the Tana cliffs, we encountered a petrol station open, a petrol station that sold not only coffee, but rather nice cooked sausages too! Suitably stocked up, and trying not to choke on the coffee as I realised how much it cost, it was then time to savour the moment ...down on the fjord, assorted Red-breasted Mergansers fished the shallows, just along the road, five Waxwings shot across in front of the car, but best of all, a nice hot drink was finally flowing down my throat! Refreshed and eager, it was then time for the entrance into Varanger Fjord, surely one of Europe's most stunning birding localities. Nigh on 15 years since I last had the pleasure to walk these shores, I wondered how much I would remember, especially given this was my first winter visit and the landscapes certainly looked very different. Entering at Varangerbotn, these upper reaches were soon producing the first birds - flocks of about 450 Common Eiders, occasional Long-tailed Ducks, inter-tidal patches shimmering with Purple Sandpipers, dozens and dozens of them. A few kilometres up and the familiar outline of Nesseby church appeared, a most distinctive little structure, located on what is almost a little island in the fjord. In summertime this is famous for its Red-necked Phalaropes, but with a decided nip in the air, I decided not to dally and onward we went to Vestre Jakobselv, our base for the next two nights. Found our accommodation very quickly and was most impressed to find it right on the banks of the small harbour - to windows overlooked a small ice-free pool occupied by Long-tailed Ducks and the other gave a nice panorama to the north, perhaps we would be lucky enough to get a showing of the Aurora borealis without even leaving the sofa!

Now late afternoon, a nap would have been nice, but the town of Vadso lay just 15 minutes to the east and, to anyone who has travelled in this region, the name Vadso is synonymous with Arctic seaducks! The harbours of this town can be crammed with hundreds of King and Steller's Eiders, a temptation that was certainly enough to keep me alert! So, there I was, not many minutes later, parked on a quayside, gazing down as flotillas of Steller's Eiders bobbed past, a very nice spectacle in the setting sun. Next quay over, a repeat performance, just the actors changed - King Eiders, in full technical splendour, drifted a half dozen metres off. So ended my day's birding - sipping coffee, a sun dropping and bundles of good birds to watch.

Or so almost ended the day! Back at the accommodation, in the fading light, there was just time for one last treat - from the window, a brief glimpse of an Otter as it swam across the small pool! No Aurora borealis that night, clouds seemed to drift over just as it got dark!

22nd March, Varanger Fjord

The distance is only 95 kilometres, but the drive from Vestre Jakobselv to Vardo, hugging the shores of the Varanger Fjord all the way, must rank as one of the most impressive in all Europe - along the entire route, in sheltered inlets and bays, coves and harbours, hundreds of Arctic seabirds bobbed in rafts, often many dozens strong. This was to be my day to enjoy them. With the clocks an hour different to those in Finland, we made the 'mistake' of actually beginning our day's birding at 5.30 a.m., rather earlier than I would normally choose to emerge into the morning chill, even though it was only minus 16 C on this morning!

However, with the sun already threatening to appear over the horizon and five Black-throated Divers just offshore, the day was already off to a pleasing start. And it just got better and better - fifteen minutes up the road, back in the harbours of Vadsø, the numbers of birds was just incredible. All bathed in the warm glow of the rising sun, I counted no less than 267 Steller's Eiders, 25 King Eiders and 414 Common Eiders! Even though these totals were lower than in previous years, they were certainly enough to keep me happy! By the time I got to Ekkeroy, just 15 km further, I had added another 85 Steller's Eiders and 860 Common Eiders to the list!

One of the Varanger's little gems, Ekkeroy is a superb site - a narrow isthmus leading out to an island boasting massive seabird colonies. Within minutes, I was watching Black Guillemots on one side, a Common Seal on another and a White-tailed Eagle up in front! I had intended to walk round the island, a hike of some kilometres that would have given very good views of the seabirds (and I remember seeing an Arctic Fox there on my previous trip), but I had forgotten one thing ...the snow! I trudged all of one hundred metres before sinking into the first drift, this was going to be hard work, rather cold and probably relatively unproductive! I opted instead for a coffee in the car (two thermos flasks with us this day!). Ever eastward we went, countless stops more for flocks of mixed eiders, for occasional Red-breasted Mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks, and for an adult Glaucous Gull at Komagver. The day was becoming most productive, herds of Reindeer appeared on the snowfields to our left, Purple Sandpipers adorned rock ledges to the right, we were almost at our final destination, the island town of Vardo.

Then, just as it had the day before, it suddenly started to snow! Within minutes a raging blizzard had reduced visibility to not very much and, as the last few kilometres to Vadsø go over a high pass, it felt a little like driving an aeroplane, a featureless whiteness in all directions with no real perception of where land finished and sky began! And then it went dark!!! Vadsø lies on an island and the only access is via a 3 km long tunnel, a welcome respite from the snow. So to the harbour, famous for its many birds ...could barely see the water, let alone any birds! Did a few circuits of the town, then positioned ourselves in a little parking bay at the extreme north-east of the island. And there we sat, waiting, hoping the snow might let up.

And then the clouds parted, the snow let up and the island of Hornøya appeared, towering out of the sea and absolutely seething with birds ...clouds of Kittiwakes flanking the margins, thousands and thousands of Guillemots on the sea and streams of Shags motoring past. In amongst the throngs, I was to find my last main target of the trip - Brunnich's Guillemot. Even trudging through the drifting snow to get as close as possible, the island was still quite distant - certainly too far to pick out any Brunnich's Guillemots on the island itself. Fortunately many of the auks were a good deal closer and a half hour of patiently scanning those eventually paid dividends ... Common Guillemots everywhere, a few Black Guillemots too, plus a few dozen Puffins, all very nice, but the target bird was proving problematic! Some flew past that may have been Brunnich's, some on the water also seemed good candidates, but always the distance left a slight doubt, a return of light snow not helping very much! Temporarily distracted by an adult Glaucous Gull, then by a few King Eiders, I soon realised my legs were beginning to freeze, so retreated back to the car for a while. Suitably thawed, and perked up by another coffee, I returned to my headland and began the scan again ...and there they were, eight Brunnich's Guillemots mid-distance! Not the closest views in the world, but short of chartering a boat, that was about as good as I was going to get ...hmm, that was a good idea, charter a boat!

Back into Vardo I went, made a couple of phone calls and all was arranged - meet on the quay in 30 minutes and some guy would take me out. Arriving early at the quay, paced up and down, watched yet another Glaucous Gull, but moreover kept my eye on the horizon - the skies were turning most dark! And sure enough, just as the appointed time arrived, a vicious snowstorm kicked in and the guy opted to cancel! Shucks, no close views of Brunnich's Guillemots would be on the cards for today, so I turned, went back through the tunnel and emerged out the other side into a nice sunny day! With that, we slowly began our journey back to Vestre Jakobselv, a mixed flock of Common and Velvet Scoters being the only additional seabirds seen, plus two Arctic Redpolls near home.

Back in the warmth of our apartment, I began totalling up the day's birds. Impressive totals they were, 5 Black-throated Divers, 1089 Steller's Eiders, 2700 Common Eiders, 40 King Eiders, 21 Black Guillemots..... What?! Suddenly my counts were all disarray, I had not been looking out of the window! Now I was, three Otters were bounding across the ice, heading straight for our apartment!!! Right cute things, they went straight past the window and vanished under a boathouse next door, very nice indeed and a fitting end to another excellent day.

That night, the skies were clear and stars sparkled, the omens were good. The Aurora borealis just had to appear this night! After accidentally breaking the room's mirror in a failed attempt to position it so I could watch the northern skies from the bed, I then pinned myself to the window instead. An hour after dark, the sky began to move, it had begun...

23 March, Varanger to Lapland.

A last look at the flotillas of mixed Steller's and King Eiders at Vadso, many of them feeding on starfish, then it was the beginning of the long drive back south, at least 850 km to cover during the day. We didn't get far before the first stops were required! After a White-tailed Eagle near Ekkeroy, we had driven just a half handful of kilometres more and I spotted an iceberg, an iceberg with a large blob on it! Got the scope out and gave it a good scan ...my first Harp Seal! A minute later it slipped into the water and was gone, never resurfacing and never seen again! Further up, near the end of the bay, I found two more seals, very distant and right into the sun, perhaps Harps too.

Anyway, onward we went, stopping again when a Willow Grouse appeared in a roadside bush, then losing an hour or so in a failed attempt to find Hawk Owls. Crossing back into Finland, the next stop was a return to Tuulin Tupa, the feeders certainly well worth another hour or so of gawping. Very nice indeed, lunch accompanied by all the specials, Siberian Tits in and out, Siberian Jays swooping about, Pine Grosbeaks simply everywhere, Arctic Redpolls as abundant as ever.

However, for us, it was time to get moving, we had a flight to catch and that was still a long long way south! As darkness fell, we crossed the Arctic Circle, stopping this time for a few touristy photographs in Santa's world, tranquil and quiet, the place deserted. At 1.00 a.m., we pulled into Oulu airport, a few very cold hours later and our trip was over, our flight heading back to the Baltics.