

Arctic Summer, Norway & Finland.

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After several trips to Norway and Finland in recent years, including an amazing winter visit to Varanger last year, I yearned to see the stunning Varangerfjord in all its summer glories - Long-tailed and Arctic Skuas on the tundra, Brunnich's Guillemots bobbing on the waters, waders galore. Had to be bonkers, but fancying a weekend away, I cashed in my air miles for a nice freebie north. A madcap non-birder decided to accompany me, little did he realise I had plans for no sleep, no stops for food and to do nothing but birding! Straddling four days and chewing up 2540 km sandwiched between two flights and capped off by an extra 600 km through the Baltics, so followed action-packed 24-hour birding adventures, all under the joys of round-the-clock sunshine, or cloud as the case sometimes was!

19 June. Northbound. Up through the Baltics, then a two-hour flight north on a Fokker prop plane, bouncing down into Oulu close on 4.00 p.m., Lapwings and Skylarks on the airfield, the birding had begun. However, a mere matter of 900 km still separated us from the destination that had lured me into Arctic territories. Ta very much to Avis, they offered a free upgrade and moments later, it was onto the highways to begin the drive north. Finland positively flew by, the first 550 km a blur of landscapes wizzing past at speeds that left little in our wake. Shot past a Woodlark on wires, hurtled over the Arctic Circle, arrived in the picturesque Inari at 9.00 p.m., the sun shining brightly, the start of an Arctic night. Changing down a gear, we now journeyed north at a more sedate pace, stopping at the numerous lakes, checking out birds in stunning taiga forests. Goldeneyes in abundance, a female Smew, two Common Scoters, breeding-plumage Black-throated Divers, the true elements of the northern avifauna now commonplace. Redwings and Bramblings sang from birches, a keen eye hoped to spot a Hawk Owl ...which naturally did not materialize. Approaching midnight, we reached Utsjoki and the Tana River. Ahead lay Norway. Rather than crossing the border, I took a slight detour and travelled along a most scenic road that ran eastward, hugging the riverbank and offering birding potential all the way. Willow Warblers singing, Black-throated Divers on the river. Perhaps 50 km or so further, we slipped into Norway, the border a subtle affair that could easily be missed. Another 30 km and the Varangerfjord opened up in front of us, we had arrived. It was 1.00 a.m., the sun was still shining and already we could see the first birds - White-tailed Eagles sat on rocks, Red-breasted Mergansers in rafts offshore. A few minutes more and we made our first stop - the legendary Nesseby Church. A small peninsula, famed for a phalarope pool that no longer seems to exist, the site still is a wonder. Oystercatchers on the church roof, Arctic Terns screeching overhead, gaggles of Common Eiders towing broods of little feather dumplings, waders aplenty on stony mudflats adjacent - Bar-tailed Godwits, Dunlins, Turnstones, all resplendent in their summer fineries. Now 2.00 a.m. and up walks a birder, 'Anything about?' he enquires! Only in the Arctic could such a thing happen! Next stop Vadsø, the winter playground for Steller's and King Eiders in their hundreds. Had a quick look round the two harbours - plenty of Common Eiders, but not a sign of their more illustrious cousins, so we ventured onward to the island beyond Vardo town. Took a walk - some of the best middle-of-the-night birding I have ever had! Red-throated Pipits feeding young in the nest, one crisp frosty Arctic Redpoll, dozens more Common Eiders, noisy gulls clearly narked by my intrusion, the first Arctic Skuas harrying the terns. For the highlight, however, the honours went to Red-necked Phalaropes ...dozens of them! A small pool held at least 20 pirouetting masterpieces on a pool, another 40 or so on the lapping waters of the bay adjacent. Time for sleep, it was now past 3.00 a.m., I had plans to be birding again by 5.00 a.m.! 20 June. Varangerfjord. And indeed 5.00 a.m. it was, up for a quick trot around Vadsø island. Jeepers, thought I, as reached the pool - a couple of Long-tailed Ducks bobbing about, three Tufted Ducks too, but my eyes were boggling - the pirouette masters were in the midst of an amazing Arctic hen-party! All females, an amazing 86 Red-necked Phalaropes were spinning and dabbling the surface waters just metres from my feet. The males no doubt left tending the nests, these ladies were having a wail of a time ...so was I! A few photographs later, I retreated and wandered back, still the Red-throated Pipits flitted about, several Mealy Redpolls hopped, sheltering beneath tussocks as a notable wind began to pick up. Then the Arctic turned Arctic! Gawd knows from where, but boy did the weather suddenly become disgusting! Temperatures fell to a spectacular four degrees, a gusting wind whipped across the tundra and the skies hung a deep dark grey, the tops of the fells vanishing into a gloom. Oo er, this was not looking good! And then it began to rain, a cold drizzle washing the landscapes and sending passerines into the depths of cover. Or at least almost all of them - one rather foolish Bluethroat decided to pop up and sing from the top of a bush! Or, at least, it did until a male Merlin put an end to that, hurtling in at low altitude to send the Bluethroat diving for the nearest thicket. Off vanished the falcon over an adjacent moor, an Arctic Skua in pursuit. In ever deteriorating weather, eastward we travelled. Stop after stop, all watched from the cosy confines of the car, the tally of birds kept rising - flocks of Red-breasted Mergansers and Goosanders, gaggles of Common Eiders trailing numerous creches through the kelp beds, a flock of Common Scoters some hundred strong. White-tailed Eagles huddled on outcrops, Arctic Skuas patrolled tundra and shore. Vadsø harbour had again failed to reveal lingering Steller's Eiders, but just a few kilometres further and there we found one - amongst Bar-tailed Godwits and Turnstones, between a couple of Common Eiders one female Steller's Eider on a small pool, very nice. Three Long-tailed Skuas came swooping in. Off Ekkerøy, our first Black Guillemots, then another 20 km and a truly spectacular bay - several thousand Common Eiders, almost all males, a few hundred Red-breasted Mergansers and Red-throated Divers dotted here and there. I was later to hear there were three King Eiders hidden amongst the masses! By now, however, the weather was really foul - the final few kilometres over the moors into Vardo seeing buffeting winds from the north, a chill driving rain and temperatures down to a mere 4 C. 'Eeks', thought I, understanding our chances of getting a boat out to the seabird colony on Hornøya were plummeting ever downward! And indeed, the boat would not go - I surely believe the boatman thought I was truly insane to even try to persuade him to take the boat to sea! Not even a suggestion that his Viking blood should brave him to the elements cut any ice, he had no wish to play dunk the cork with his treasured boat! Despondent for a few minutes, I had to accept my chances of seeing a Brunnich's Guillemot had just

taken a massive knock. However, there was still a chance - I looked around the local harbour, a sometimes haven to the holy grail of auks. Waves were crashing over the breakwater, but the only birds present were Black Guillemots and Kittiwakes wailing in the wind. Next stop the north-east tip of the island, a rocky headland overlooking the stormy straits that separated me from Hornoya. Parked the car at an angle to the wind, peered out to the turbulent waters beyond. Auks by the thousand packed under the cliffs of the island, with hundreds more in rafts strung across the waters. Common Guillemots predominated, filling the air and water, next came Puffins and third Razorbills. Battered by the wind, scoping the waters was never going to be easy - Puffins bobbing up all over the shop, Black Guillemots too, plus a good scattering of Shags. Arctic Skuas gave hell to passing terns, a possible Pomarine Skua shot through, views inconclusive. An hour on, and not a single Brunnich's Guillemot identified with certainty, I decided to move on, hoping for calmer conditions the following day. From Vardo, a summer road runs north, skirting true Arctic landscapes of scree, tundra and moraine. With the rain letting up a tad, perhaps a few birds would begin to show - through a landscape near lunar, the delights did indeed appear. Lapland Buntings grovelling as best they could, more Red-throated Pipits, breeding Golden Plovers and Temminck's Stints. On pools, Whooper Swans and Red-throated Divers. Nearing the old fishing hamlet of Hammingberg, three Arctic Redpolls appeared roadside, a small estuary held more Temminck's Stints and Bluethroats singing from thickets. I could only imagine how the place would be on a fine sunny day! A short attempt at a seawatch off the peninsula left me somewhat windswept, the results a mere Black-throated Diver as compensation. Late afternoon, we began to travel westward again, revisiting the bays between Vardo and Vadso. Two billion Kittiwakes and a superb selection of summer-plumage waders near Vardo, an exceptionally ugly second calendar year Glaucous Gull about 15 km further, then yet more impressive concentrations of Common Eider and Common Scoter a little further on, livened up yet further by three Velvet Scoters flying past. A total of about 15 White-tailed Eagles were noted, then the duck highlight of the coast so far - just before Vadso, an absolutely cracking drake Steller's Eider with two females alongside. Would have stopped for coffee at this stage, but everything was closed, so continued on our way. No chance of a midnight sun this evening, the rain was beginning to lash yet again, so decided to drive round to Tana Bru and the cliffs to the north. Had seen Gyr Falcons this way a year earlier, but no self-respecting Gyr would be out playing in such weather, so instead I drove yet further north. Drove out onto a grassy plain, Reindeer grazed to the side, an Oystercatchers piped, it was 11 p.m. and I called it a day. Wound the seat back in the car, had a kip. 21 June. Varangerfjord/Valtavaara. Another day that gobbled up an enormous number of kilometres ...at least 1100 km during the 22 hours active! And in amongst that, fabulous birding. It all started at the unearthly hour of 3.00 a.m., peeping out of the car window only to be disappointed by a continuing rain. Decided another hour of sleep would be in order. 4.00 a.m., it was out and about - a quick wander along a nearby track revealing several Oystercatchers on nests, the first Bean Goose of the trip and the expected White-tailed Eagles. Then it was up to the high fells, a drive up to the mountain roads that cross to Batsfjord. This was birding for the masochistic - a bugger of a cold wind blasting in from the north, taking the temperature below 2 C and slapping sleet straight into your face! Somehow though, it just felt perfect - all the true elements of the Arctic being slammed against you! Birds everywhere. Lapland Buntings in all their finery, Shore Larks, Red-throated Pipits. On territories, Arctic Skuas guarding what I presumed to be nests, three Long-tailed Skuas whipping over with the wind up their tail. All nice stuff. One small pool held a dozen Red-necked Phalarope, behind them a Red-throated Diver and two Long-tailed Ducks. However, enough of the desires to freeze to death, I had bigger wishes to get back to Vardo and the possibilities of Brunnich's Guillemots. So back we went, a couple of hundred kilometres, the highlights of the route a Rough-legged Buzzard and the sudden appearance of blue skies. Up went the temperature, a balmy 7 C now and even the wind hinted at moderation. Maybe, just maybe, the wimpish Viking would dare to take his boat to sea. Or maybe not, still clearly astounded that someone might want to voluntarily take to the waves, he suggested that the seas might be calmer by the next day. Fat lot of use to me, I would be a thousand kilometres south by then! So, it was time for the last ditch attempt on the Brunnich's Guillemots. Back to the north-east tip of Vardo to scan the waters. Much calmer now, I could even sit out with a telescope. Hmm, many auks were feeding just off the peninsula, a Brunnich's in amongst those would be a doddle to pick out, so I hoped. Puffin, Puffin, Puffin, damn Puffins everywhere. Many hundreds of Common Guillemots too. I began the slow search. Up popped a Grey Seal to fight with Herring Gulls over some chewed-up chunk of fish. On continued the scan. Twenty minutes later, there sat one stonking Brunnich's Guillemot in all its glory, what fabulous birds they are. Watched him for a good quarter of an hour, then got keen to find more. Scanned through the closest flocks time and time again, eventually found a total of five. Super. Over at the island, the massed ranks of thousands of auks must surely hold many dozens, but five was quite fine for me. Then a King Eider floated past! Or, to be more accurate, a queen - drifting on the tidal rip, she almost zoomed past, passing very close off the rocks. With the seawatch now considered a complete success, we began a very long drive. The time was about 3 p.m. and I had ideas of being on the Valtavaara ridge by midnight or near after. No sweat, it was only about 700 km. Unfortunately, the first 100 km of this led back along the Varangerfjord, so with stops for numerous birds, including an unexpected Ruddy Shelduck (!) at Varabgerbotn, we were already realising this was going to be one long evening. Deciding to take the slightly longer, but more scenic route, we swung east and headed for the Russian border, before turning south and re-entering Finland on a quiet backroad. It was then south, south, south, birding at 120 km/hour for a few hours. Regular screeches of the brakes to go pottering out after birds that had flitted over - sometimes for Bramblings, once for a Wryneck, better still for an excellent family party of Siberian Jays, the latter comprising three noisy youngsters begging for food from hard-working parents. Another stop near Ivalo added a pair of Siberian Tits, then somewhere further south again, a Waxwing appeared in a roadside pine. Never made Valtavaara by midnight, as the fabled hour approached, I had stopped by a most beautiful lake right on the Arctic Circle. The sun was just touching the horizon, a Rustic Bunting sang from a wet area and Red-necked Grebes floated on the serene waters. Less than an hour later, I did arrive at Valtavaara - how glorious, a feast of birdsong to greet us. I wandered a while listening to the various songsters. At 1.30 a.m., I decided it was time for a snooze. 22 June. Valtavaara & environs. 4.00 a.m. again, staggered out

to begin the last day's birding of this mini trip. Oo er, Siberian Jays hopping about the car park, that was a good start! Then it was off to hunt down the mythical songster that inhabits these ridges, Red-flanked Bluetail. One year earlier I had been here a week later and they'd stopped singing - loads of effort and one brief view. Back to the present, they'd just about quit their songs too. Off I trudged up the steep slopes, three Waxwings appeared in a tree, dozens of Crossbills flitted over. Plenty of birds in song - Robins, Dunnocks, Song Thrushes. But total silence from the Red-flanked Bluetails. Back at the car park, the Siberian Jays were going bonkers - tucking into the breakfast of some other birders on a picnic table! Nice orchids in the roadside verge. Tried the opposite ridge for the Bluetails, one brief snatch of song, but couldn't locate the bird, nor did it sing again. Ah well, a Black Woodpecker provided a little compensation. It was now mid-morning, I really should have been thinking about heading for Oulu, our flight was due to depart at 3.30 p.m. However, there was one last prize on offer - just a few kilometres to the east, right on the Russian border, we had information of a pair of singing Little Buntings. 'Find the border post, the bird is singing by the stop sign', so I had been told. And indeed that is exactly how it was, with Wood Sandpipers calling left and right, a few Finnish soldiers trundling past, we arrived and gazed around. And there, just as described, sang a super Little Bunting. Onward we zoomed, a quick stop in Kuusamo to scan the near birdless lake, then began to hurtle our way westward. With 30 minutes to spare, so I calculated, we made a last stop at a massive raised bog some 50 kilometres from Oulu. A Hobby hawked over pools, I stooped to photograph sundews, off wandered my friend. 'Eeks', thought I, almost half an hour later, 'we need to get going!' I looked round and where was my friend? Miles off in the distance gazing at two Cranes! A few frantic waves all to no avail, then I jumped up and down, still he did not notice. Buzzed his phone and finally got a response, there he came running back! We were now seriously late, there was a real chance of actually missing the check-in deadline. I thank the Finnish for not having too many traffic police, the last leg of our trip positively shooting by! With two minutes to spare, we swung into the airport, dumped the car in the car park and legged it to check-in. Trip over, 2540 km under the belt, 72 hours of excellent birding. Two hours later, we were in Latvia, another three and back home in Vilnius.