

Norway 2013, Musk Ox & Snowfields.

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A mini expedition to seek out Musk Ox on the frozen snowfields of Dovrefjell mountains, an epic little trip combining stunning landscapes, extreme weather and an iconic species in the European mammal fauna.

Introduction High on the remote tops of the Dovrefjell mountains, there exists one of the great relics of the last Ice Age - the iconic Musk Ox, a species at home in Arctic blizzards and winter landscapes. While relatively easy to see in the temperate summer months at this locality, I wanted to do it the hard way - to seek out the species in its true element, huddled to a backdrop of snow and ice. And so the idea was born - in temperatures that almost certainly would be minus 15 or minus 20 and in snow that could be metres deep, an attempt to find the animal in winter. The task would be made even harder by the fact that Musk Ox, unlike most animals, actually ascent during winter, climbing to seek ridges exposed to the wind and thus blown free of snow. Whether this trip was actually feasible, I had no idea, but hearing of the plan, UK mammal-watcher John Dixon, a fellow nutcase I have to assume, jumped at the chance - flights were booked, we would try ...

Daily Log 8 March - Bergen to Dombas. Proud holder of a ticket costing little more than a family-sized pizza, onto Wizz Air I went for a two-hour flight to Bergen. John was already waiting for me, and had already notched up White-tailed Eagle and House Sparrow, so without further ado, we popped into a hire car, got stuck in a massive Bergen traffic jam, then hit the road north. Via largely birdless fjords, through umpteen kilometres of tunnels and over high mountains, on we zoomed from afternoon till night, over 500 km and eight hours. As we neared journey's end, the temperature hit an impressive minus 23 C. All was ready for next morning.

9 March - Dovrefjell. Day of the ascent, high cloud and flakes of snow at dawn, temperatures having actually risen overnight to minus 12 C. Greenfinches singing in spruce trees outside our rooms. By 8.00 a.m., we'd driven 25 km to the north, clouds had dispersed and temperatures had dipped back to minus 19 C. A glorious sun was beaming down, glistening snow sparkling in the sunshine, the blue sky a treat. Having already checked a couple of localities where distant Musk Ox can sometimes be seen from the road, we seeing only Common Ravens and Willow Tits, we arrived at Kolla Mountain, an igloo-shaped peak complete with entrance. The thermometer still displayed a chilly minus 19, snowfields stretched to horizons all around and somewhere up on Kolla Mountain lurked Musk Ox, a couple seen in the area on previous days. Time for the hike to begin, we stepped off the road ... phwoomp, we immediately plunged up to our waists in snow! Oh boy, this was going to be quite a slog! I clambered up and over, trying to stay on the firmer crust of snow as much as possible, John just kept crashing through. Fifty metres more and John was floundering, the going not to his delight. As he waved defeat and turned back, I pushed on alone and an hour up, I reached a broad ridge, a spot where the wind had clipped the snow back to manageable depths and the views were stupendous. Ptarmigan tracks zigzagged the area, Red Fox too, but as I scanned the endless kilometres of snow in all directions, not the slightest sign of a Musk Ox. Ahead lay a couple of low ridges, separated by wide gullies of deep snow, and beyond that the 'entrance' of the 'igloo'. If Musk Ox were anywhere, they had to be in the lee of one of these ridges, so on I pushed, the weather conditions a perfect mix of unbroken sunshine and absolutely no wind. On these slopes, every second rock looks like a Musk Ox hunkered down, so many a long moment was spent pondering distant shapes, but all to no avail. Climbing to the second ridge however, a dark blob certainly looked of interest - partly obscured by other rocks and stunted willow growth, it was enough to warrant a detour. From the top of the ridge, I quietly clambered left, passing over a number of boulders. Then bingo, tracks in the snow, fresh Musk Ox tracks! Fifty metres more, as I crept over a final brow, I had my quarry in sight - two doe-eyed Musk Ox, shaggy coats and all, one standing facing left, the second lying down. Magic! Finding a suitable roack, I sat myself down and just enjoyed the moment: it was exactly the experience I had sought - an Arctic landscape, a million and more ice crystals twinkling in the sun, perfect solitude and there to savour it, just me and the Musk Ox, perfect. Musk Ox are a little unpredictable, sudden charges not unknown and these beasties can do 60 km/hour, considerably faster than me! That said, moving quietly in full view so as to not spook them, I managed to approach to about 60 metres, the animals showing no hint of concern. And there I sat for a half hour, the two animals shuffling in the snow, occasionally wandering a few paces. Somewhere, way down in the valley, John was presumably still near the car. With no hope of seeing them from there, I decided to return and, if need be, push him up the mountain! Almost back at the car, I found him again trying to climb. He seemed to have developed a nasty cough and a rather shattered look. On hearing the news though, he need no push - dumping his camera lens and unnecessary weight, and encouraged by the promise of easier conditions on the ridge, we trudged (slowly) up to the first ridge. But good news, saving an arduous hike across the gullies ahead, the Musk Ox had moved slightly and, though distant, were now visible from our position. John was chuffed indeed, even more so when one stood up and plodded along the ridge. John probably wisely opted not to tackle the gullies to get a closer approach, so believing him capable to manage the descent, I opted to return via another route, looping out across further snow fields in an attempt to find Ptarmigan. A right bummer of route down it turned out to be, unstable snow and deep drifts ...and no Ptarmigan! Back at the car, no John. Three cups of coffee later, still no John. A quick snooze, a turning around of the car and a stroll along the road and then, finally, a figure in the snow ... he was back. Feeling he was about to vomit and almost unable to walk, the route down had taken its toll on him. But hey, mission accomplished, both of us had seen Musk Ox! Predictably the rest of the day was rather more sedate - after a return to base for a good cuppa to revive my flagging companion, we then set off for a tour of the village and forest surrounds to seek out feeders - oodles of Willow Tits at the couple found, plus Tree Sparrows, Bullfinches, Yellowhammers and the like. A cracking sunset over the snowy slopes, then back to base. Next day would bring another new species for John...

10 March - Dombas to the Coast. 'Jeepers, a bit chilly out there this morning.' Minus 23 C at dawn, another day of superb sunshine about to begin. Another trot up to the altitudes of the Musk Ox? Na, reckon that would have killed John. Instead, we turned the car westward to a segment of the Reinheimen mountains some 150 km distant. Another stunning landscape, and one possessing more big mammals,

most notably Elk and Reindeer, one of the largest genuinely wild populations of the latter inhabiting the area. As temperatures fell below minus 25 C, we stopped for a scan - birds few and far between, we'd already seen a few Willow Tits and Common Redpolls, but here not a single bird stirred, a world of perfect silence ...silent that is until John muttered 'Reindeer in the valley'. And so there were, three wary individuals peering directly at us. We relocated a little closer, but they were having none of it, up they got and trotted off across the snow. Onward, then just as the temperature hit minus 28 C, we entered a couple of mega-tunnels. After about 8 km underground, we emerged at a lower altitude on the more temperate western side of the mountains - a positively tropical minus 12 C and, on larger rivers, patches of open water. And with the water, the first birds returning to the highlands - Dippers bobbing about on the ice, pods of Whoopers Swans in vocal melody, occasional Red-breasted Mergansers and Goldeneye. As we descended yet further, a White-tailed Eagle joined the talley of birds seen, a fine adult flying parallel to the car for a while. By early afternoon, after a little mix up at the local petrol station, we arrived at the small town of Floro, a point at the mouth of the fjords near the open sea. I had been expecting a bonanza of auks, sea duck, perhaps a smattering of divers or even white-winged gulls. Hmm, absolutely not - whilst the fjords are sure picturesque, they are deadly boring from a birding perspective! With considerably effort, we notched up a mere dozen Red-breasted Mergansers, a grand total of four Oystercatchers, an additional White-tailed Eagle and barely anything else. Zigzagged south, reaching Bergen by dusk. Navigated the city and headed out onto Oygarden, a string of islands that we hoped would provide a few treats next morning. temperatures fell to minus 10 C over night, a bit cool for sleeping in the car! 11 March - Oygarden. Woke an hour pre-dawn, not sure if it was the cold or someone snoring! Anyhow, a drive along the dark byways proved totally unproductive, but with dawn a change in luck with a fine Otter swimming in a bay. Birdwise however, Oygarden proved about as devoid of life as the fjords further north - Red-breasted Mergansers here and there, three Common Eiders in one cove, a White-tailed Eagle over some houses and nowt much else to write home about. After a few hours basking in the sunshine, we gave up on the birding and headed for the airport, our mini trip over, memories of most resplendant Musk Ox to take us home with smiles. FOOTNOTE: a mere six kilometres from where we had been, a Walrus was found on Oygarden on the morning of the 11th, the impressive beast lying out on rocks as we drove about seeing not very much!!!