

Finland & Norway | Trip Report

Jun. 4 – 16, 2022 | by Gerard Gorman



With Naturalist Journeys guide, Gerard Gorman, local guide Matti Komulainen, and participants: Alan, Dee, Ellen, Gayle, Joan, John, Maija, Philip, and Susan.



This first Naturalist Journey's trip to Finland and Norway was a great success! A fabulous tour that took in two captivating and friendly countries and many wonderful places and habitats within them. From the taiga forest, peatbogs and lakes of Finland to the tundra, mountains and Arctic coast of the Barents Sea in Norway. The fantastic birdlife, both residents and summer visitors, and other wildlife, kept us captivated throughout our stay. There were countless bird highlights: how about 5 species of geese, 5 auks, 6 owls and 11 finches? We saw dozens of White-tailed Eagles and Whooper Swans, Tufted Ducks, Fieldfares and White Wagtails were recorded every day of our trip. Specialties seen included Hazel Grouse, Siberian Jay, Bohemian Waxwing, Pine Grosbeak, displaying Great Crested Grebes and Ruff lekking in breeding plumage. Mammal highlights included great views of Reindeer, Roe Deer, Red Fox and Red Squirrel. Our accommodations were all located in perfect locations for our itinerary. Even in remote areas the rooms were modern and comfortable, and always with private bathrooms. We ate very well, too, sampling many local dishes, with local products, breads and berries on the menu. The weather was also generally kind. Indeed, it only rained significantly on the day we departed - perfect timing! I would like to thank everyone involved for making the trip so memorable and successful! Gerard.



Sat., Jun. 4

Vihiluoto | Kempele Bay | Oulu

We met for an hour of birding around the hotel which backed on to Kempele Bay, and inlet of the Gulf of Bothnia. It was a good start. We saw Eurasian Blue Tit, Great Tit, Redwing, Fieldfare, Willow Warbler, Hooded Crow, Reed Bunting, a pair of Marsh Harriers, Great Crested Grebe, two Red-breasted Mergansers, Common Cranes in flight, a displaying Common Snipe and six Eurasian Curlews, one doing its calling and flight display over our heads. Common Swifts and Barn Swallows hunted low over the water for insects. We then dropped off Ellen, Phil, John and Joan in Oulu where they visited a few of the city's sites and museum. John bought bags of various local 'salty' liquorice which he kindly passed around during the tour. In the afternoon we did a few runs to the airport, just 15 minutes away, to meet Maija, Alan and Dee, and Gayle from the train station. At 7pm we met in the hotel lobby bar for welcome drinks, some sampling cloudberry liqueur, a Finnish specialty. We took dinner at 8pm, and it was a fine buffet. Gayle came in on a late flight and joined us at around 10pm, the restaurant kindly stayed open so that she could have a meal. Before everyone retired for the night (of course, at this latitude it would never be totally dark) we announced our plans for the next day, when our tour proper and the birding and wildlife watching would begin.

Sun., Jun. 5

Kempele Bay | Liminka | Lumijoki-Revonlahti

It was rather windy before breakfast but nevertheless some of us went out at 7am to the bay behind the hotel. The sky was clear, however, and we soon found some birds: Black-headed and Common Gulls, Common Shelduck, Eurasian Curlew, Garganey, Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and a pair of Marsh Harriers displaying over the reedbed. A few Whooper Swans (Finland's national bird) flew by, too. Despite the wind, a Common Rosefinch sang its 'pleased-to-meet-you' song, a Sedge Warbler belted out its scratchy phrases from a thin bush in the reedbed, and a nice male Reed Bunting perched up, too. There were Barn and Bank Swallows and several Common Swifts zooming overhead. We returned for an 8am breakfast which was a generous hot and cold buffet. There was something to suit everyone's taste and diets. We set off at 9am in our two comfortable vans (everyone had a window seat) to explore the region. As we went along, birds in the fields included Northern Lapwings, Eurasian Jackdaws, Rooks and Eurasian Curlews. We also saw a few Gray Partridges, the latter an uncommon bird hereabouts. We left the main road and drove on a forest track (we would drive several in the coming days and noted that they were remarkably well-maintained). We got out in a clearing and heard, and glimpsed, a Garden Warbler. Some saw a Hazel Grouse fly rapidly by and then disappear into the forest. Our



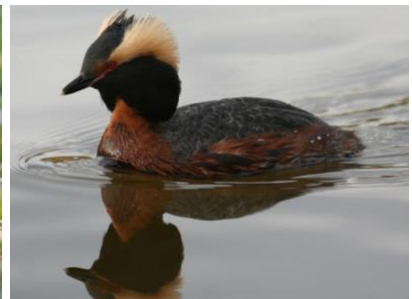
main reason to visit this spot was to check some nest-boxes for Boreal Owls (throughout the tour we would have local information like this) but the young had fledged. At one site there was a dead owlet on the forest floor. It was unclear what had happened, perhaps it was the 'runt' of the brood that had perished, which is not unusual for owls. Moving on into open country we watched Black-tailed Godwits doing their noisy, calling, flight display, and came upon another pair of Gray Partridge. Eurasian Skylarks, a Yellowhammer and a Common Rosefinch were singing here, too. Spring was in full swing. Nearby, we subsequently had better luck with another owl species. Four young Northern Hawk Owls were out of their nest, on the ground in the grassy yard of a farmstead. The owner was painting his barn and welcomed us onto his property to watch the owls which he was obviously proud of. The owlets were not yet able to fly and hopped around not concerned by us at all. As we took photographs a Willow Warbler sang from the farmhouse TV antenna above us. It was all just wonderful.

Lunch was a buffet in the Liminka Visitor Centre by Liminka Bay. The facilities here were good – restrooms, souvenir shop, conservation exhibition - and everyone took advantage of them. It started to get windy again, but we pushed on and entered another forest. It was a pleasant drive, on sandy tracks, with many big ant-hills amongst the pines. Matti had more information about owls, and we were soon looking at an enormous nest in a tree (probably originally built by a hawk) and a sitting Great Gray Owl. From time to time, a white downy chick was visible under the adult's wing. This Great Gray Owl was also totally unperturbed by us but nevertheless we maintained a discreet distance. It was another fantastic experience. A little way on, in a more open area of trees, we searched for Ural Owl. This took a bit more time but finally we spied four young birds, in different isolated trees, and then a parent watching it all from the forest edge. This was another tremendous owl experience. What next? Well, it was time to head back for dinner which proved to be another fine and healthy affair. Afterwards we ran through our checklist of the day's sightings and discussed our plans for the next day. What a day it had been.

Mon., Jun. 6

Teppola-Laitasaari-Valkeisjärvi / Vartti Forest

A bit chilly, but nevertheless most of us went out to scan the bay before breakfast. It was always worth it and today Red-breasted Mergansers, Eurasian Coot, displaying Great Crested Grebes and Smew were added to the birds we'd seen on the water yesterday. After breakfast, we briefly checked the bay again. The Smew had gone but we had good views of Common Pintails and Garganeys. A Ring-necked Pheasant was spotted, too. We then drove on. As previously, roadside birds included Northern Lapwings, Black-tailed Godwits, Eurasian Curlews, Rooks and Eurasian Jackdaws. Common House-Martins were collecting mud to build their nests with from puddles. Very soon, however, we stopped when two Short-eared Owls were spotted hunting, in mid-morning, in broad-daylight, over a field. One bird flew into a tree, so we got out of the vehicles to get even better views.



Someone remarked that it was only day three of our trip and were doing ridiculously well for owls. Could it continue? Next up was a pond on the edge of a small town. Here a male breeding-plumaged Horned Grebe showed splendidly. As we watched him a party of schoolchildren and their teacher walked by, but the grebe did not mind at all - no doubt he was used to seeing them.

Further on, after a coffee-break, we stopped at a cottage where there were birdfeeders. Here we saw Eurasian Bullfinches, including stunning, vivid red males, bright Yellowhammers, a Eurasian Jay and two Great Spotted Woodpeckers. A pair of Pied Flycatchers were using a nest-box beyond the feeders. Then it was back to the owls. Our next site for Boreal Owl was successful. We cautiously approached a nest-box and were instantly rewarded as the adult owl was already there, looking out from the entrance hole. Magnificent. We took lunch in a self-service roadside diner: we would do this several times on the trip as they were convenient places, habitually used by the locals, and the choice and standard of food was remarkably high. In the afternoon we drove through another tranquil conifer-broadleaved forest, this time to check a Eurasian Pygmy-Owl nest-box. As we left the vans for a short walk through the trees, we saw a European Robin was singing at the top of a tree. The tiny owl was 'at home' and after all of us had briefly looked at it we quietly left. We stopped at a peaceful lake, one of dozens we would scan during our tour (Finland apparently has almost 188,000) and saw an Arctic Loon and a flock of Bank Swallows flying low over the water. We went back to the hotel for an earlier dinner, at 6pm, as we planned to go out in the evening to look for lekking Black Grouse. At 7.30pm we were on our way again, taking a winding route on forest roads to an area of lightly wooded peatbogs. The grouse were not present but just as we began to turn back, a Black Woodpecker flew across the track in front of us. It landed in trees out of view but soon returned after I had made a few calls. This wonderful woodpecker (easily Europe's biggest at up to 22 inches long and with a wingspan of up to 28 inches) performed well. It was a great bird to end the day on.



Tues., Jun. 7

Vihiluoto | Lake Jolos | Turpeinen | Rääpyslampi | Kuusamo

At 8am we loaded the vans and headed eastwards then northwards into Lapland towards the town of Kuusamo in the region of Northern Ostrobothnia. In Sámi, the Finno-Ugric language of the Indigenous Sámi people, Lapland is known as Sápmi. We made, several stops along the way for birding, scheduled and unscheduled, rest stops and lunch in another excellent roadside gas-station-diner (we were really getting to like these). But first, close to Oulu we again pulled over as the Short-eared Owls we'd seen yesterday were flying and hunting once more. Super views were had by all again. We drove on, eastwards, and we noted that there were hardly any cars on the road, though occasionally were 'stuck' behind a truck. Finland did seem to be a sparsely populated country (officially just 5,554,960 in 2022). At another lakeside stop, we climbed into an observation platform. We watched, amongst others, Common Goldeneyes, Little Gulls, a Common Crane, and a Black Tern, a Finnish rarity that two local birders even arrived to tick-off). Eurasian Blue Tits and Pied Flycatchers were using nest-boxes by the platform (Finland does have a lot of nest-boxes!).

At the next, small, lake our first Red-throated Loon was spotted. At a stop for gas and coffee, our first Eurasian Wigeon was on the adjacent river. Next up was a place that everyone really appreciated. Our local guide Matti had a family lakeside 'weekend house' near the village of Turpeinen south of Kuusamo. He kindly suggested that we stop there to eat our boxed lunch. It was a great decision. As we ate, we watched Eurasian Siskins, European Greenfinches, Bramblings and Great Spotted Woodpeckers coming to seed and suet on feeders. Besides the birds, the tranquillity of the place, and seeing how Finns like our local guide and friend, like to be close-to-nature, was touching. Moving on, we stopped to watch a group of Yellow Wagtail. The taxonomy of the birds is complex, with various subspecies described. These interbreed so identification can be tricky though the ones we saw were the 'grey-headed' Fenno-Scandic *thunbergi* subspecies. Soon after that, we experienced another extraordinary sighting: a pair of Hazel Grouse walked out onto the gravel road ahead of us, the male pausing in clear view for several minutes. Until then we had had only flight views of this forest-dwelling and often hard to see grouse. As we headed north, we began to see more Reindeer, some walking indifferently along and across the main road. In North America *Rangifer tarandus* is called Caribou, and the two are the same species although they differ in some respects. In North America, these deer are truly wild and have never been domesticated. The Reindeer in Europe are smaller than their American counterparts and are not truly wild having been domesticated around two thousand years ago. At around 6pm we arrived at our next base in Ruka, near Kuusamo. Although at a relative low elevation of 1,173 feet, Ruka is a ski-resort - although being off-season there were no skiers about at this time. Later that evening we were treated to a smorgasbord dinner. After doing our checklist of sightings we discussed our plans for the next day and retired.



Wed., Jun. 8

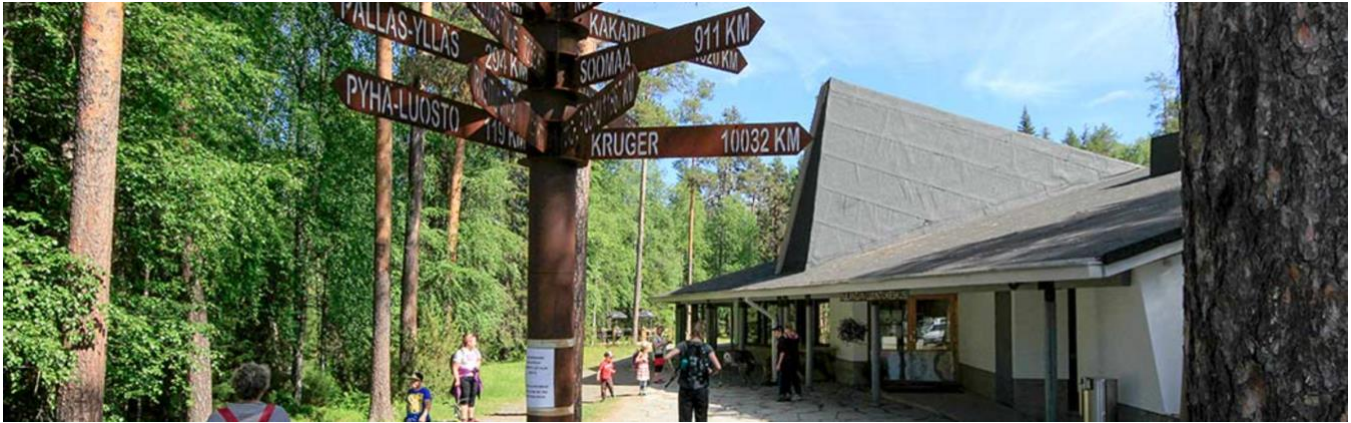
Ruka | Oivanki | Lake Kuntivaara | Suolavaara

We spent all day in the Kuusamo region which is typified by vast boreal forests of mostly pine, spruce and birch, dotted with lakes of all shapes and sizes and wild rushing rivers. It is a wonderfully scenic place and today we visited numerous birding spots, in forests and by lakes and rivers. We focused on some of the species that are not present where we had been in the preceding days further to the south. First up was a roadside stop at the foot of a mountain trail, a known place to see Siberian Jays. Sure enough, we were soon watching and getting photographs of a party of these smart and confident birds. As we did so, several Reindeer stopped to look at us! We also found our first Goldcrest here. Another target, Red-flanked Bluetail, proved more difficult to see, but we did hear one singing from up in the forest. We were also now beginning to encounter more Bramblings and Eurasian Siskins. Lunch was another good buffet, with lots of choice, in a small-town diner. Our next destination was far down a gravel road that went past Lake Kuntivaara and eastwards towards the Russian border. We did not stop until we came to a barrier beyond which was a restricted 'no-man's land'. We posed there for photographs and then set about looking for our next avian target, Little Bunting, a true Fennoscandian specialty. After a while we all got looks at a male that perched up in a birch tree. A Green Sandpiper was seen briefly here, too. After dinner some of us went out to search for grouse, we did not find any but did see some Whimbrels and a Moose. Other mammals seen today were Red Fox and many Reindeer.

Thurs., Jun. 9

Ruka | Oulanka National Park

At 8am we drove northwards to the wild and wonderful Oulanka National Park. After avoiding a few Reindeer on the roads, we reached the park. Tree Pipits, doing their 'parachute' display flight were one of the first birds we saw. There were Siberian Jays again, which proved to be popular, a Mistle Thrush, Brambling, Eurasian Bullfinch, Eurasian Siskin, European Greenfinch, and some Red Crossbills flew over. We had not, somewhat surprisingly, seen many diurnal birds-of-prey so far, but this area produced Golden Eagle and Eurasian Kestrel. Driving on the gravel roads (we were constantly amazed how well these were maintained) we reached some secluded areas where the forested, mainly of Scots Pine, and lake-dotted landscapes were glorious. We paused to watch a stunning male Common Redstart, and another Tree Pipit, then skirted the Russian border. In fact, this Finnish



protected area continues into Russia where it becomes the Paanajärvi NP - this is an inspiring example of international cooperation.

Some of the secluded lakes we scanned were quiet, although others had Whooper Swans, Tufted Ducks, Common Goldeneyes and Velvet Scoters. Later, by an old-growth forest, two Red-breasted Flycatchers were something of a surprise. The singing bird had no red on its breast which most likely indicated that it was a second-year male. After a productive morning we had lunch in the Oulanka Visitor Centre. For those who were curious, there was reindeer soup, but also salad and berry options, and wholesome, healthy breads, as we had learned was usual in Finland. This centre was excellent, with top-class facilities - a nature-themed exhibition, a reference library, a kid's area, and a gift and gear shop. Hence, we spent some time there. In the afternoon we walked on a trail to the rapids of the Oulanka River. It was a scenic route, with forest on one side and the fast-flowing, boulder-strewn, river on the other. It was undulating, but not difficult. Our main bird targets here were Gray Wagtail and White-throated Dipper, two species which typical on clean, fast-flowing, rock-dotted, waterways in Europe. At first there was no sign of either. The Calypso Orchid is the emblem of the national park, and we did indeed find some here. We reached a particularly picturesque spot, an area of flat rocks accessed by a wooden bridge. It was a perfect place to take photographs, and we took some. When all looked lost on the bird front, a Gray Wagtail suddenly appeared. But it flew down river and disappeared, for a while. After much searching, we saw it return, landing on the riverbank by a White-throated Dipper! So, we saw our two target birds together at once. It was a lesson of sorts, never give up! It had been another fruitful day, birding-wise and also in terms of the other wildlife, places, landscapes, habitats and people we had encountered. After dinner back in our very comfortable hotel in Ruka, we ran through our day's sightings and announced our plans for the next day, as we were now accustomed to do.

Fri., Jun. 10 Ruka | Arctic Circle at Suomu | Kemijärvi | Kaunispää

Today we moved on even further north through Lapland mainly taking roads E63 and E75. Once again, we noted that there were few vehicles on the road. This made stopping to look at roadside wildlife easy and safe. We stopped at the Arctic Circle (latitude approximately 66°30' N) at Suomu and as is the tradition, we took photographs and sipped some cloudberry liqueur. After a rest stop in Kemijärvi, we passed through an area of open, almost treeless, peatbogs. We pulled off onto a side road and ate a boxed lunch. Birds here included Common Crane and three Willow Tits which came into bushes nearby as we finished lunch. Surprisingly, these were the only ones we'd see. We drove on, soon coming to a halt again to watch an Osprey which flew high over the road with a fish in its talons. The landscape was now getting more 'Arctic' and we went up a mountain road to a high open moorland on Mount Kaunispää. The key bird we were looking for here was Eurasian Dotterel. We soon found one, squatting on its nest on the ground. It was hard to spot at first, but we were able to approach quite closely as these birds are renowned for their tolerance, being almost 'tame' - a trait that is not unusual in some 'Arctic' bird species. We arrived in Ivalo, the main fishing and winter sports centre in the region, at about



5pm. Ivalo is called Avvriil in the local Sámi language - as we had seen on the bi-lingual road signs. In this area the culture of the Sámi people, who inhabit the northern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Kola Peninsula in Russia, is still maintained. Our wonderfully comfortable hotel was situated right on the bank of the Ivalojoiki River, which is alleged to be rich in gold deposits, but most people visit it to fish for salmon and trout. After a 7pm dinner some of us went out on another evening excursion, seeing a Common Buzzard perched in a tree, eight Taiga Bean Geese grazing in a field and a pair of Grey-headed Chickadees. As we headed back to Ivalo we were forced to stop again, to watch a pair of Bohemian Waxwings that flitted between and landed at the top of roadside trees. It was yet another fitting end to an enjoyable day as this species was one that several of our group had on their birding bucket list.

Sat., Jun. 11

Ivalo | Nejjan Tuulen Tupa (Four Winds Café) | Utsjoki to Norway | River Tana | Hoyholmen | Tanamunningen

After a one-night stay in Ivalo we drove north towards Norway. Besides being a great area in its own right, this overnight stop meant we could 'break' what would otherwise be a very long drive. After breakfast we continued, on towards the most north-eastern part of mainland Europe, the Varanger peninsula. But before we left Finland we had stops to make. The Nejjan Tuulen Tupa café and inn (the name translates into English as the 'Four Winds Café') is spot that most birders who pass this way know well as it is a reliable place to see Pine Grosbeaks. These large finches come to the feeders that the proprietors maintain. We soon saw them, males and females, close-up, along with Bramblings, European Greenfinches, Common and Hoary Redpolls and Grey-headed Chickadees. All these birds were taking advantage of the ample seed providing. From time-to-time a Red Squirrel visited, too, along with, amusingly, a pair of Mallard that waddled on the ground below. Later, at a quiet remote pull-in, of which there were many on our route, we looked for Ruff, which sometimes had a lek at the roadside there. But we only found one individual – no worries, we'd catch up with this species later. In addition, a pair of Common Ringed Plovers were nesting here on a patch of gravel. A little way up the road we watched a Bluethroat singing from a wire and then atop a bush. This colourful member of the chat family has six subspecies, the one we watched was *svecica* which has a red spot in its blue chest (in other parts of Europe they have a white spot or no spot at all).

Next up was an Arctic Loon on yet another lake (we were no longer counting how many bodies of water we'd passed). After lunch in a delightful, traditional inn in the Finnish border settlement of Utsjoki (Ochejohka in Sámi), we entered Norway via the Sámi Bridge over the Teno River. We slowed down, had our passports to hand, but the frontier crossing was unmanned. We followed the River Tana (as it is called in Norway) eastwards



then northwards. The Tana is an impressive river, one of the largest in Norway, and very important for Atlantic Salmon. The scenery and habitats began to change, a mosaic of birch forest and bog started to prevail over the pine dominated forests we had explored further south. We saw more Bohemian Waxwings and our first White-tailed Eagles and Rough-legged Hawks. At one point near the river many Ravens and Herring Gulls were in the air – a trash dump was nearby. We reached the Tana fjord and the Tanamunningen Nature Reserve. With a stunning backdrop of snow-covered mountains this shallow, brackish, sub-Arctic estuary and salt marsh, was a new habitat for our trip and yet another great site to stop at. Here we saw Black Guillemots, Common Eiders, Common Mergansers, Eurasian Oystercatchers, and a pair of Parasitic Jaegers. The term ‘Parasitic,’ because it is a kleptoparasite, an ‘avian pirate’ that chases and harasses other birds to force them to disgorge their recently caught food. These birds are not ‘brood-parasites’ that lay their eggs in the nests of other birds as cuckoos and cowbirds do. We also had glimpses of a seal, swimming far out, probably a Habor Seal, but we could not be sure. We then started to go uphill, leaving the tree line as we headed across the Varanger peninsula on the winding road 891.

The snow-dotted tundra landscape was vast and impressive. Parasitic Jaegers started to be more numerous, and we saw our first Long-tailed Jaegers. A small lake had a few Greater Scaup, Long-tailed Ducks and Velvet Scoters and Ruff in their varied breeding plumages lekking on its shore. We also briefly saw a Willow Ptarmigan. Finally, we descended into the quaint fishing port of Båtsfjord which lies on the Barents Sea around 282 miles north of the Arctic Circle. This would be our base for two nights. When running through our post-dinner checklist this evening, we realised that we had heard Common Chiffchaffs singing ‘chip-chap-chip-chap-chip-chap...’ many times, on most days, but today we had finally seen one! A true European ‘LGJ’, a ‘Little Green Job’.

Sun., Jun. 12 Båtsfjord | Varangerhalvøya National Park | Gednje | Kongsfjord

After a 7am breakfast, we first checked the harbor right outside our cozy hotel, seeing Kittiwakes, Common, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Arctic Terns and noisy Eurasian Oystercatchers. Unlike other auk species, Black Guillemots came into the sheltered waters, swimming close to the moored fishing boats. We spent most of the rest of the day inland, exploring the upland tundra of the Varanger Peninsula. At first, this treeless habitat looks desolate, but that is misleading, it is quite rich in birdlife. It is protected as the Varangerhalvøya National Park and eerily beautiful. There was on and off rain, but not too heavy, indeed this was the first day of our tour where we had not experienced fine, dry weather. Remembering where we were, up in the Arctic, we could not reasonably complain. Near Gednje we found several Ruff leks, with white, black, ginger and rufous colored

males displaying and battling in order to impress the rather drabber plumaged females. These birds had been eagerly anticipated and they did not disappoint. A single Tundra Bean-Goose was also here and turned out to be the only one we'd see. Dunlin with black bellies, Temminck's Stints doing their 'bat-like' flight display, Whooper Swans, Greater Scaups, Long-tailed Ducks and Red-necked Phalaropes were also seen well. A Rock Ptarmigan was spotted, though it was a little far off. We were able to compare two jaeger species today, Long-tailed and Parasitic. Long-tailed Jaegers are wonderfully elegant with a buoyant tern-like flight and, as their names suggests, a slender tail spike. Parasitic Jaeger has a shorter tail, and they are polymorphic, having two color phases, pale and dark. These are not subspecies but forms that freely interbreed, and hence intermediate individuals can occur. The individuals we saw were the light form.

We ended up at Kongsfjord, a remote fishing settlement to the north-west of Båtsfjord, where we ate our boxed lunch in the shelter of guesthouse (the staff kindly allowed us inside to escape the rain). The seabirds we had now become familiar with were on the sea, often close to the shore, as well as a group of mostly male Common Mergansers. Driving back the way we had come, there was no other route, we stopped to watch more Ruff, which were always popular. There were also Golden Plovers in fine summer dress, a Common Raven being attacked by two Long-tailed Jaegers, a White-tailed Eagle and a Red-throated Loon on its nest right by the roadside. It had been a very good day for shorebirds with thirteen species seen, including some new ones for our trip list like Dunlin, Ruddy Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper. Throughout the day we encountered groups of Reindeer, which are domesticated and herded here although they appear to be 'wild' as they roam free grazing on the tundra and often flee when approached. The main course at dinner was the locally caught cod. We compiled our daily checklist and retired for the night after yet another fascinating and productive day.

Mon., Jun. 13 Båtsfjord | Gednje | River Tana | Nesseby | Vadsø

We had an earlier breakfast than usual today, at 6.30am, as we wanted to be away before 8am. It was overcast and there was a chill in the air, but not freezing. To get to our next destination, Vardø, we needed to retrace our route for some way over the uplands at the heart of the peninsula. This meant we saw, once again, the two jaeger species, displaying Temminck's Stints and the same and other Ruff leks. Everyone was happy with that, this was not a 'seen it, done it' trip, we liked to watch the behaviour of wildlife. After following the River Tana for a while, we joined road E75 as it went east, skirting the northern shore of Varangerfjord. The most easterly fjord in Norway, Varanger is not a deep gorge-like fjord enclosed by steep mountains, as many are in western Norway. It is a wide body of water that ends when it joins the Barents Sea where it meets Russia to its south-east. Almost as soon as we hit the coast, we started see White-tailed Eagles, first one, then four together and by the end of the day dozens.

We stopped at Nesseby where there is an old wooden church on a peninsula. It dates from 1719 but was rebuilt in 1858. It was one of the very few buildings that the German army left standing as they retreated at the end of World War II. The sea and shore here held Common Pintail, Eurasian Wigeon, Common Redshank and, after not



seeing any for some days, Common Shelducks. Herring, Common and Great Black-backed Gulls, all watched us from the tops of utility poles as we ate our boxed lunches by the vehicles which provided shelter from the wind. We pulled into a small fishing hamlet to take photographs of the fish drying-racks laden with cod. A gas/rest stop at Vadsø was also good for ducks, gulls and shorebirds including a handsome Bar-tailed Godwit in reddish breeding plumage. At another stop, to scan the sea, we counted over one hundred Common Scoters. At other roadside stops on route as we neared our destination, we saw a fine male Wood Sandpipers, more colourful Ruff, Willow Ptarmigan, Lapland Longspur, Short-eared Owl and an Arctic Loon. Our destination today was the town of Vardø, on Vardøya island, which is reached by an undersea road tunnel of about 1.8 miles. As we approached our hotel, we were greeted by many Kittiwakes nesting on the window ledges of adjacent buildings. As we checked in, we heard through the birding 'grapevine' that a Ross's Gull, a major rarity hereabouts, was in the harbor behind the hotel and some of us went out that evening and found it. As we ate dinner, we watched Arctic Terns which were nesting on areas of gravel right outside.

Tues., Jun. 14 Vardø harbor | Hornøya Island | Hamningberg

Today we took the 9am boat from the dock behind our hotel to Hornøya Island, a journey of a few minutes. Our time on this uninhabited 99 acre island was to prove to be one of the ultimate highlights of our trip. Quite simply, the seabird colonies on Hornøya are magnificent, the place is a bird paradise. Unlike many such boat trips around the world, which circle around islands with passengers not allowed to disembark, here everyone is able to land. As we stepped onto the landing area European Shags were literally nesting under our feet, unconcerned by our presence. On rocks a few yards away hundreds of Common Murres were resting. These birds, as well as Thick-billed Murres (not as common as their close relatives with around 500 pairs estimated), Razorbills (also 500 pairs estimated) and Black-legged Kittiwakes, breed in 'seabird cities' on ledges on the cliffs above and constantly fly to and from their nesting sites to the surrounding sea. Atlantic Puffins were nesting lower down, in burrows on grassy areas through which we walked on a well-marked trail that went round the back of the island. Here and there huge Great Black-backed Gulls sat on nests, too. Many of the Common Murres on Hornøya Island were the 'bridled' form, having a white eye-ring and line behind the eye. This is not a subspecies but rather an example of plumage dimorphism. Most of us walked to the lighthouse on the highest ridge at the back of the island, others took their time to sit and take in the overall avian spectacle. The island is Norway's most easterly point (around the same latitude as Barrow in Alaska) and if one were to sail directly north from here across the Barents Sea, you'd reach the Arctic Ocean. We really were in a remarkable place.



A couple of Rock Pipits, another new species for our trip, flew and around and sang. There were gangs of Common Eiders, the drakes carefully following the ducks, as they do and Barnacle Geese were nesting on a rocky, grassy slope, across a narrow bay. Amongst them was a single Brent Goose, of the 'pale-bellied' *hrota* subspecies, which some regard as a full-species. We also found an old whale vertebrate washed up on the shore. After three outstanding hours on this bird-rich island, we returned to the hotel for a one o'clock lunch. In the afternoon we went northwards from Vardø following a scenic route which passed through rocky terrain, quite unlike any other landscape we'd seen so far on our trip. In places the road had been cut through the huge rocks that ran down into the sea, these mini man-made gorges were narrow and impressive. We saw a Golden Eagle, four Rough-legged Hawks and estimated fifty-five White-tailed Eagles - Varanger did seem to be a major area for these huge raptors. There were several Parasitic Jaegers and at stops to scan the shore we observed both loons, Common Redshanks, Temminck's Stints and Eurasian Oystercatchers. The sea had rafts of Long-tailed Ducks and Common Scoters, both close in and far off. We ended at the somewhat dilapidated fishing settlement of Hamningberg, a quiet place, just a few houses and an almost empty little harbor. It seemed to have seen better days. We did, however, add a new species to our bird list here, Northern Gannet, several of which flew offshore over the rather choppy Barents Sea. Fieldfares were in the gardens of the houses, as in Finland earlier, this thrush was a common 'yardbird'. There was also another singing Rock Pipit.

Wed., Jun. 15 Vardø Island | Varangerfjord | Polmak | into Finland | Utsjoki | Kaamanen

We checked out of the hotel at 7.30am. Before leaving the island, we explored some of its grassy and sandy coastal habitats for a while seeing, amongst other birds, Sedge Warblers, Red-throated Pipit and a superb Bluethroat. We got much better views of this beautiful little chat than we had earlier on the tour in Finland. Moving on, we took the E75 again and then road 895 which followed the River Tana on its southern side. We crossed into Finland at Polmak where, once again, there were no border checks, nor visible officials. Norway is not, unlike Finland, in the European Union but it does not seem to matter at all. These neighbors seem to get on just fine. We returned to the same roadside inn at Utsjoki where we had had lunch when going north. It was ideal. Later, we also stopped once more at the 'Four Winds Cabin' inn. The various finches, including Pine Grosbeaks, were on the bird feeders again. One of the birds that some of our group had seen well earlier on in



our trip, but which others had missed, was Smew. We'd had sightings of several 'redhead' females but few of the handsome black-and-white drakes. Therefore, we decided to check-out several likely-looking lakes in search of them and went off the main road to check some secluded ponds just before reaching Ivalo. There were often Tufted Ducks and Velvet Scoters but finally, we spotted five male Smews swimming together! They were not close, and then flew around, but clear enough through our telescopes. It was a great way to end another great day. After dinner in Ivalo on our final evening, everyone chose one bird species that was their ultimate favourite (not an easy task to do with so many) and also their most memorable non-bird highlight: John choose the Parasitic Jaegers and the local people we met, Joan's favorites were the Hawk Owls and the rocky coastal landscapes near Hamningberg, Alan choose the Atlantic Puffins and Matti's place, Dee most liked the Ruff and also Matti's place, Gayle choose the Great Crested Grebes and Matti's place, too, Susan choose the European Shags and the 'Black Woodpecker forest', Ellen choose all the owls and the fields near Oulu where the Short-eared Owls hunted, Philip most liked the Hawk Owls and Matti's place, and Maija's favorites were the Pygmy Owl and the boat trip to Hornøya.

Thurs., Jun. 16 Departures | Ivalo Airport

After having travelled by road for approximately 1665 miles, our trip around northern Finland and the Finnmark region of Norway was nearly over. It had been spectacular and rewarding. We had seen many great birds and other wildlife, visited fantastic habitats and often been in awe at the land- and seascapes. We had met some kind and talented local people, too. One last breakfast together and then it was time to head to Ivalo airport, just a few miles from our hotel, to take the 12.35am flight to Helsinki. From there we would all go our separate ways. Everything at the airport went smoothly. Last but not least, I'd like to thank everyone involved for making this tour so successful and enjoyable. Gerard.

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