

Fjords, Arctic Birds & Northern Lights. A Norwegian Coastal Voyage

Naturetrek Tour Report

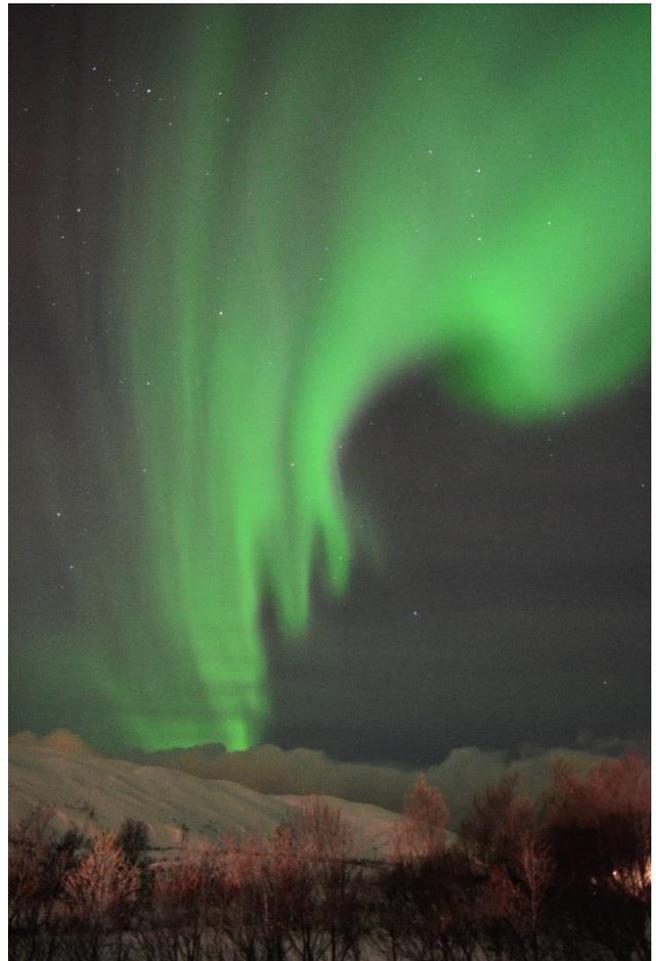
23 – 28 February 2017



Elk by G Canney



King Eider by G Canney



Northern Lights by D Phillips

Report compiled by Rob Mileto & David Phillips
Images courtesy of Graham Canney & David Phillips



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Rob Mileto & David Phillips (leaders) together with nine Naturetrek clients

Introduction

In Norwegian folklore, the lights were the spirits of old maids dancing in the sky and waving. In Scotland, which had an influx of Viking settlers, the lights are sometimes called "the merry dancers". Many Inuit tribes considered the aurora to be the spirits of dead humans playing a ball game using a walrus skull as the ball. We now know that the gentle fading in and out of these ribbons of ethereal light are, unromantically, the result of collisions between gaseous particles in the Earth's atmosphere with charged particles released from the Sun's atmosphere. Variations in colour are due to the type of gas particles, and how much energy the collision transfers. The most common auroral colour, a pale yellowish-green, is produced by oxygen molecules located about 60 miles above the Earth. Rare, all-red auroras are produced by high-altitude oxygen, at heights of up to 200 miles. Collisions with nitrogen produce the blue or purplish-red in auroras.

Day 1

Thursday 23rd February

London Heathrow to Tromso (via Oslo)

We met up at the Heathrow departure gate, rather early and rather bleary-eyed. Leaving promptly, a strong tail wind brought us in early to Oslo. After immigration formalities and collecting our luggage, some had a quick drink and/or bite to eat, and we were soon off over snowy peaks enroute for Tromso, where we arrived in the early afternoon.

Although we had all had an early start, everyone seemed keen to make the most of their holiday time so, after a quick supermarket shop for lunch, we set off on the coastal road towards Kvaloyvagen. However, it was snowing; tricky weather to be spotting anything but the ubiquitous Hooded Crows. We could though, drink in the snowy landscape. After about half an hour we stopped on the narrowest stretch of the Kvalsundet strait to view, through the snow, a handful of Long-tailed Ducks and what were probably all Common Eider – the distance and the weather made it tricky to tell.

We then headed towards our hotel in Tromso. Arriving at dusk, we had plenty of time settle in, snatch 40 winks, eat and then head out again to hunt for the 'lights'. The moral of the evening's story is never believe a weather forecast, which was for an overcast sky and moderate auroral activity, yet we found the only gap in the cloud for miles around on the road to Skulsfjord, and there was plenty of activity to put on a good show. For around an hour we watched the ever-changing ribbons and patches of ghostly green, white and rarely purplish-red dance slowly across from one horizon to the other on the opposite side. The snowy white hills and dark silhouetted trees provided a fitting foreground, and for a period the lights were overhead, giving the impression of the aurora cascading down upon us; a phenomenon known as a corona.

Day 2

Friday 24th February

Kvaloya

After a good night's sleep and a fine breakfast, we headed back to the island of Kvaloya and retraced our steps towards Kvaloyvagen in the hope of better views of birds. We were not disappointed, even though there were

frequent heavy snow showers. At a fish processing plant there was a tight raft of mainly Common Eider, but with a scattering of (Great) Cormorant, (European) Shag, Long-tailed Duck, and Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. Nearby was a little gaggle of Red-breasted Merganser. Returning to the narrowest stretch of the Kvalsundet, through the snow this time, we could see more ducks but it was very tricky to identify them. After a good deal of trying, most were convinced they were King Eider, but in all honesty, we had pretty poor views so would have to be patient.

Next, we head off on the road to Sommeroy. At first the scenery appeared monochrome in the grey light of an overcast sky, but later it glistened and sparkled in the mellow sunlight; a unique quality of light, experienced most commonly north of the Arctic Circle. We made several stops to take photographs and simply enjoy the pristine landscape.

We drove at a leisurely pace along the fjords and through immensely picturesque fishing villages, stopping regularly to see and take photographs of all manner of things including Red-breasted Mergansers and some (semi-wild) Reindeer that we spotted on several occasions, either resting in the snow or ploughing through it.

Around lunchtime we entered Sommeroy village and spotted Common Eider and Common Gull in the harbour. A short walk around the village added a brief but lovely view of a small flock of Snow Bunting. It was then time to warm ourselves a little and the local shop provided hot coffee and a place to sit and enjoy a late lunch and some fruit and chocolate.

Warmed and fed, we took a little detour back down to the harbour to see a pair of distant Purple Sandpiper, and then a little drive to a nearby beach gave us better and closer views of these dumpy little waders. We took the coast road back to Tromso and rounding a corner, a large dark bird flying towards and then past us, was our first White-tailed Eagle; albeit a juvenile. Not long after that a second juvenile was spotted, perching on a rock on the beach. However, top spot of the afternoon was first described, having driven past it, as a large creature that “wasn’t a donkey”! Sure enough, it wasn’t a donkey, or a pony – it was an Elk! It stood staring at us for a little while before trotting off into the woods where, whilst still visible, it was a little more challenging to see. Eventually, it wandered off upslope and gave us all some excellent final views.

We spent the evening ‘at leisure’, dining and touring the city, before meeting again later to hear David give an illuminating PowerPoint presentation about the aurora and how its mysteries had slowly been revealed. At midnight we boarded Hurtigruten’s ‘Kong Harold’ for our three day, 1,000-kilometre cruise down the intricate and grand Norwegian coast to Trondheim.

Day 3

Saturday 25th February

Tromso to Stamsund – the Vesterålen and Lofoten Archipelagos

Dawn brought us our first views of the dramatic north Norwegian coast from the water. This cruise has been hailed as one of the most beautiful in the world and it was easy to see why - a wild landscape of snow-topped granite peaks falling, sometimes as sheer cliffs, into pure blue waters, and colourful houses in remote fishing villages nestled along a narrow coastal ribbon.

An excellent buffet breakfast was followed by many fabulous views; some taking them from the bracing viewpoint near the prow, some from the cosy armchairs on the viewing deck. During the morning, some were lucky enough to see a pod of diminutive Harbour Porpoise. Later, as we passed through the narrow passage beyond Risøyhamn. The relatively shallow waters provide good feeding opportunities for various birds and we saw rafts of Common and Velvet Scoters, Long-tailed Duck, Common Eider and, tantalisingly at first, a raft of distant but distinct King Eider. Then we saw a much closer group, with at least three males in their resplendent breeding attire – that was much more like it!

For those wanting a bit of maritime history, in Stokmarknes there was just enough time to visit the Hurtigruten Museum. This cruise line was set up in 1893 to sail coastal Norway, so has over 100 years worth of exhibits. It is a fascinating museum with lots of maritime photographs and memorabilia from this Norwegian coastal express, including one of the early ships on display. For those that strolled along the harbour or looked out from the stern of the ship, Black Guillemot was a welcome addition to our trip bird list, and there was also a White-tailed Eagle perched on the shore under one of the many minimalist Norwegian bridges we saw.

In the late afternoon we entered the 12-mile strait of Raftsundet, billed as the most scenic part of the voyage. It was easy to see why. Here we passed close to rugged snowy peaks on both sides, which dropped precipitously into the dark waters. As its grand finale, we steered past the mouth of the stunning Trollfjord, only some 300 feet (90 metres) wide at its entrance, but rising on its northern side to over 1,000 feet (300 metres).

After dark the ship docked for an hour in Svolvær, the main town of the Lofoten islands. Soon after leaving, the aurora was sighted. Initially we saw a broad ‘quiescent arc’ stretching across the northern horizon which later developed into beautifully defined rays and rapidly moving curtains of light. From the bow of the ship the sky was very dark and clear, yielding wonderful views of the aurora, the constellation of Orion, the Pleiades and the Andromeda Galaxy. Despite the movement of the ship, we managed to get some decent images of the aurora.

Day 4

Sunday 26th February

Ornes to Folda – the Norwegian coast.

Around 9.15am we crossed the Arctic Circle - a golden globe marked the 66°.33” north latitude of the Circle. We could also have a good look at ‘Horseman’ Mountain, which looked very little like a horseman. We were invited to receive a free commemorative teaspoon – as long as you partook of its contents – cod liver oil!

Strolling around the ship, there were always new and exciting vistas to be seen and a scattering of the ‘usual’ birds on and near the water. At one point, some of us saw a Black-legged Kittiwake which was new for the list. Soon afterwards an adult White-tailed Eagle dropped out the sky, yellow taloned legs first, and landed on a nearby island. Around lunchtime we passed the ‘Seven Sisters’; a row of Helgoland mountains towering to over 1,000 metres and the subject of a great and rolling folklore saga that concludes with seven dancing sisters being turned to stone. In reality, they are seven parallel valleys carved into U shapes by small glaciers, and the peaks between them are the ‘sleeping sisters’. In the harbour of Brønnøysund, a few were lucky enough to spot an Otter on the quay, which slowly slinked off into the water when disturbed.

Later we passed another mountain with a story – Torghatten, the hat-shaped mountain with a hole. Sadly, the visibility was too poor to see it, but according to legend, the hole was made by the naughty troll Hestmannen

while he was chasing the beautiful girl Lekamoya. As the troll realized he would not get the girl, he released an arrow to kill her instead, but the troll-king of Somna was having none of it and so threw his hat into the arrow's path to save her. The hat turned into the mountain with the arrow hole in the middle. This hole is 160 metres long, 35 metres wide and 20 metres high. It was actually formed during the ice age. Ice and water eroded the looser rocks, while the harder ones in the mountain top resisted erosion.

Day 5

Monday 27th February

Trondheim

Arriving early in the picturesque city of Trondheim, we had time for a last leisurely breakfast on board before making a short transfer to our modern and stylish waterfront hotel. Having planned possibilities together the previous evening, we had all decided to spend the day on our own pleasures. Most took a walk through the centre to the Nidaros Cathedral, built over the burial site of Saint Olav, the King of Norway in the 10th century, who became the patron saint of the nation. It is the traditional location for the consecration of the King of Norway. It was built from 1070 to 1300 and is the northernmost medieval cathedral in the world. In its grounds we spotted Greenfinch, Blue and Great Tits and our only Nuthatch and Fieldfare for the trip. On the nearby waterway were Goldeneye and a sole Goosander.

Around lunchtime, some of us took the tram up to the nearby forest of Bymarka. The trip gave us fine views over the city and as we stepped out, a bird that had just landed in a nearby tree turned out to be a Hawfinch, which was a bit of an unexpected treat. We strolled around the snow-laden conifers and chanced upon a bird party that held Bullfinch, Siskin and Coal, Blue and Great Tits. As we neared the end of our walk we spied another lovely Hawfinch in the sun, and a pair of Bullfinch, cerise fronts bright in an otherwise near colourless landscape. We all met up back at the hotel at 6pm to share stories, and agreed it was a city worthy of a visit.

Day 6

Tuesday 28th February

Trondheim to London

Everyone enjoyed a fantastic breakfast (voted 'best breakfast in Norway' 10 years in a row) before setting off for the airport. After changing planes at Oslo, we arrived at Heathrow and said our farewells to each other. It was then time to make our ways home with fond memories of the stunning wild places and the fantastic natural spectacles we had seen.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Naturetrek Facebook

We are delighted to launch the Naturetrek Facebook page so that participants of Naturetrek tours can remain in touch after the holiday and share photos, comments and future travel plans. Setting up a personal profile at www.facebook.com is quick, free and easy. The [Naturetrek Facebook page](#) is now live; do please pay us a visit!

Species List

Birds (x = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February					
			23	24	25	26	27	28
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	10	42	x	X	x	
2	King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>		30	19			
3	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>		100s	70	50	10	x
4	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>			12			
5	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			20			
6	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	4	16	32			
7	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					3	
8	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					1	
9	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		50	12	14		
10	Yellow-billed Diver (Loon)	<i>Gavia adamsii</i>			2			
11	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			8	20		
12	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>		10	x	x		
13	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	8	14	x	x		
14	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	2	4		
15	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		11				
16	Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>				1		
17	Common (Mew) Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		21	10	X		
18	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	3	12	x	x		
19	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	7	49	x	x	x	x
20	Great Skua	<i>Stercorarius skua</i>				1?		
21	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>			12	2		
22	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>		1	2		x	x
23	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	2	6		x	x	
24	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	12	40	x	x	x	
25	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>					4	
26	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>					8	
27	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		6			3	
28	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					1	
29	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>					1	
30	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>					13	
31	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>					2	
32	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					2	
33	Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>					5	
34	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>					2	
35	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		1				
36	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		6				

Mammals

1	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>		34				
2	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>		1				
3	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>				1		
4	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>			8			

Other Species

1	Common Sea Urchin	<i>Echinus esculentus</i>			x			
2	Starfish	<i>Asterias sp.</i>			x			
3	Brittle Star	<i>Ophiothrix fragilis</i>			x			