

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

21 – 26 February 2018



Sommarøy by David Phillips



Northern Lights over Tromsø Harbour by Stephen Jones



Hurtigruten Ship at Sandnessjøen by Stephen Jones



Trondheim cathedral by Stephen Jones

Report by David Phillips  
Images courtesy of Stephen Whitlock-Jones & David Phillips



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Tour participants: David Phillips (leader) plus eight Naturetrek participants

## Introduction

This tour combines beautiful mountain and coastal scenery, Arctic bird and mammal watching with the chance of seeing Northern Lights.

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 charged particles released from the sun's atmosphere (mostly during coronal mass ejections) and gaseous particles in the Earth's atmosphere. Variations in colour are due to the type of gas particles that are collided with and how much energy the collision transfers. The most common auroral colour, a pale yellowish-green, is produced by oxygen molecules located about 10 kilometres 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

## Wednesday 21st February

### London Heathrow to Tromsø (via Oslo)

We met up at the departure gate, rather early and rather bleary-eyed. A prompt departure took us into Oslo on time. New rules at the recently updated airport meant that we no longer had to pick up our luggage and re-check it in, which gave time for a quick bite to eat before picking up the connection to Tromsø. We arrived in Tromsø in the early afternoon, where it was cold and clear.

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. The clear skies gave us beautiful views across the narrowest stretch of the Kvalsundet strait and we stopped at a few places to look for birds on the water. Dense flocks of Common Eider were seen diving en masse to feed on shellfish and reappearing all together, just as suddenly. There was also a handful of Long-tailed Ducks and Black Guillemots. Along the road we saw the ubiquitous Hooded Crows.

We then headed towards our hotel on Tromsø's harbourside. Arriving at dusk, we had plenty of time settle in and have dinner before an 8pm departure to hunt for Northern Lights.

The sky was cloudy as we drove north from the city and up to a high point on the road over to Skulsfjord where we spent a few minutes waiting to see if it would clear. With no luck, we continued on to the village of Skulsfjord, but the sky was still cloudy and the light pollution in the village too great, so we decided to return to the high point and wait. Our patience was rewarded at around 10pm, when the clouds cleared partially to reveal a faint ribbon of aurora in the north-west and a more diffuse band stretching across to the north-eastern horizon. We watched for around half an hour, as patches of ghostly green moved slowly across the sky.

## Day 2

Thursday 22nd February

### Kvaløya

After a good night's sleep and breakfast, we were collected by our driver Arvid and headed back across a high bridge to the island of Kvaløya (Whale Island in Norwegian). Taking the road west towards Sommerøy we enjoyed the superb scenery in the pure, clear and sunny Arctic light. Making a stop at a historic wooden boat sheds at Stakken, we spotted a Fieldfare on the shore, Long-tailed Ducks out to sea and Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls in the air.

Continuing in our bus, we took the road across the mountainous centre of the Kvaløya island. Passing the inlet of Kaldfjorden we stopped at a pull-off and spotted four Harbour (Common) Seals close in to the shore, and whilst watching them, a Glaucous Gull flew past. We drove at a leisurely pace along the fjords and through immensely picturesque fishing villages, stopping by frozen lakes with views of snowy peaks. In places we saw Red-breasted Mergansers and Purple Sandpipers along the shore.

Around lunchtime, we entered the village of Sommerøy and stopped at a local shop to buy our lunch and warm ourselves with the hot coffee they provided. Following a short walk and a drive along the neighbouring island of Hillesøya, we headed back to Tromsø, stopping regularly to take in the majestic scenery in perfect weather.

Back in Tromsø, the evening was 'at leisure' and clients dined in various restaurants, returning to the hotel's lounge to meet up. The auroral forecast was looking favourable with fast-flowing solar wind from a coronal hole due to interact with the earth's magnetosphere and upper atmosphere. Despite significant light pollution around the harbour, the aurora was energetic and dynamic, and gave a magical display. During the strongest part of the display, at around 10.30pm, curtains of lights swayed and pulsated across the zenith.

At midnight, we walked the 100 metres along the harbour to board Hurtigruten's ship the 'Kong Harald' for our three-night, 1000-kilometre cruise down the intricate and grand Norwegian coast to Trondheim.

## Day 3

Friday 23rd February

### Tromsø to Stamsund – the Vesterålen and Lofoten archipelagos

Dawn brought us our first views of the dramatic North Norwegian coast from the water. It was clear this morning, turning cloudy later. 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 in from the bracing viewpoint near the prow, some from the cosy armchairs in the viewing deck. During the morning, close views of Common Eider and Velvet Scoters were enjoyed as we approached the harbour of Risøyhamn. A single male King Eider was seen by the tour leader but since he was the only one to see it, it didn't make the list. In the harbour of Risøyhamn a couple were lucky enough to see an Otter. Later, as we passed under the bridge and through the narrow passage beyond the harbour, the relatively shallow waters provide good feeding opportunities for various birds and so we were seeing good numbers of Velvet Scoter (plus a few Common Scoter), Long-tailed Duck, Common Eider and several White-billed Divers.

For those wanting a bit of maritime history, in Stokmarknes there was just enough time to see 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 photos and memorabilia from this Norwegian coastal express... including one of the early ships on display!

In the late afternoon several White-tailed Eagles were seen as we approached the 12-mile-long strait of Raftsundet, billed as the most scenic part of the voyage. Here the ship passes close to rugged snowy peaks on both sides, which drop precipitously into the dark waters. As we were about to exit the sound, most of the group were out on deck and were surprised when an air-sea rescue helicopter flew in to the ship and winched some poor soul aboard.

After dark, the ship docked for a couple of hours in Svolvær, the main town of the Lofoten Islands.

## Day 4

**Saturday 24th February**

Ornes to Folda – the Norwegian coast.

Throughout the day snow showers and mist made for poor visibility and limited opportunities to watch birds from deck – at least, not in any comfort! At around 9.30am we crossed the Arctic Circle. Although the exact latitude of the Arctic Circle varies with time, a golden globe on an island marks the 66° 33' N latitude which is approximately correct. Passengers were invited to receive a free commemorative teaspoon – as long as you partook of its contents – cod liver oil!

None of the scenic highlights such as the Seven Sisters and Torghatten were visible through the fog. Our group kept themselves warm inside the ship and some watched the rugby match between England and Scotland that was shown on a big screen.

## Day 5

**Sunday 25th 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. Most took a walk through the centre in snow. It was interesting to witness how efficiently the roads were cleared of snow on a quiet Sunday morning. A vehicle sucked up the snow and shot it into a succession of lorries and was followed by snow ploughs and road sweepers. In the city centre the grand Nidaros Cathedral was built over the burial site of Saint Olav, the king of Norway in the 11th 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 Tit, and a Great Spotted Woodpecker. On the nearby waterway were Mallards and Goldeneye, which we had better views of from the old wharf buildings along the River Nidelva.

Around lunchtime the skies had cleared, and the city looked beautiful with a fresh coating of snow as some of us took the tram up to the nearby forest of Bymarka. The tram was full of families and young people with skis and toboggans looking forward to a day out in the snowy hills. Once we reached the end of the line, we walked

through the fresh snow around the snow-laden conifers around a frozen lake. In the tops of the trees we caught views of Bullfinches, Common Redpoll and a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

Back at the tram stop we once again shared the journey back into the city with winter-sports enthusiasts. The Winter Olympics had finished days before and it is little wonder that the Norwegians won more medals than any other nation. Meeting back at the hotel we chatted about our day in the lovely city of Trondheim.

## Day 6

Monday 26th March

### Trondheim to London

Before breakfast David took a walk across town in sub-zero temperature. One sign in town gave the temperature as  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Across the street from the hotel, within a corvid roost of mostly Hooded Crows, there were some Rooks. The Kristiansten Fortress is set on a hill and surrounded by a wooded park and here Red Crossbill, Snow Bunting, and Common Redpoll and Yellowhammer were seen amongst the trees.

At the hotel everyone enjoyed a fantastic breakfast (voted 'best breakfast in Norway', 10 years in a row) before setting off for the airport. En route we saw a group of Whooper Swans on a mostly frozen lake.

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 the fond memories of the stunning wild places and fantastic natural spectacles we had seen.

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	February						
			21	22	23	24	25	26	
1	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>							3
2	White-billed Diver (Yellow-b. Loon)	<i>Gavia adamsii</i>			4				
3	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	5	20+	✓	10			
4	European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	2		✓				
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓		20			
6	Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	100+	100+	✓				
7	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>			20+				
8	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>			3				
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	10+	10+	100+				
10	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>						5	
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		10+	25+				
12	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			4				
13	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			1				
14	Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>		6					
15	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	✓	✓	✓				
16	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓			
17	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>		1					
18	Black Guillemot	<i>Cephus grylle</i>	5		20+				
19	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓					✓	
20	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>						2	
21	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		20+					
22	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>						✓	
23	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>						✓	
24	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	10	20+	✓			✓	
25	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>							4
26	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	10	20+	20+			✓	
27	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		5				✓	✓
28	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>						10	✓
29	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>						2	10
30	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>						5	
31	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>							2
32	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>							1
33	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>							1

## Mammals

1	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			1				
2	Harbour (Common) seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>		4					