

Birder in a camper van – Part One

Introduction

I've split this summary up into countries and regions in case anyone gets bored of the rambling, especially in the Varanger section. It may seem long, but covers a six-month period, 26 countries and 16,000 miles driven so I hope it's relatively succinct.

This trip re-affirmed my appreciation of the people and nations of Western Europe, especially Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden where I met the most fantastic friendly people. And Rolf. ☺

I've not engaged any tour agencies or guides at any point, although I did consider the possibility in order to see owls in Finland. But to my mind, they charge way too much. One company quoted me €450 for 4-5 hours using my own vehicle. That would probably work out fine for a group of eight people, given the rewards, but not for me alone. If I had used guides, I certainly would have seen more, but I had to consider the budget carefully, and especially after €700 worth of gear (Lenovo tablet, my trusty Canon SX60 camera, plus €200 in cash), were all stolen from my bag at Breskens near the start of my trip.

The most common question I've encountered from everyone I've met is financial. More than half of the maximum £150 a week budget went on fuel, so the less driving the more eating-out is possible. Which wasn't much. For the most part I have cooked /prepared my food in the van to save money. I rationed myself to something along the lines of; cereal for breakfast, sandwiches for lunch, and a cooked meal in the evening. And that was almost every day, especially in the more expensive countries. But in less expensive countries options were much more limited or difficult to locate given the language barrier and lack of reliable information on my app of choice, Google maps.

In Norway, for example, the only locals I spoke to were the staff in supermarkets, such was my self-reliance. Most of my supplies had already been bought before entering the country so the only items I regularly bought, were; milk, bread and fruit, where available. It's a shame not to have had the chance to engage with Norwegians more as I found the people in the neighbouring countries friendly and helpful with tips and advice.

Photography and video

The photos aren't particularly good as I only carry a bridge camera with me and am limited by that. But some of the videos are actually okay. I try not upload any poor quality ones, but occasionally it's necessary.

They can all be viewed at my youtube channel, which includes videos from all my recent travels from the past few years. Youtube username: jamesdeehome

<http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHzYuFkYPxvOJ9YBbyxmDRg>

Route

My main goal for the Spring was to reach Varanger in Norway targeting some of the speciality Arctic birds, but stopping to take in some of the hotspots on the way North, including at least a week on Öland in Sweden. But lacking any itinerary or schedule I could explore at a leisurely pace, and the first two months turned out to be the slowest paced out of the first six. After Varanger, my plan was to head south to the Baltics and then the marshes of Eastern Poland, deciding on a direction after that. Either East to Bulgaria or into central Europe.

The trip

France, Belgium

On the 27th March 2019 I finally set out from Dungeness Bird Observatory, beginning the first leg of my six-month / fifteen-month* tour of Europe.

I didn't spend that much time in France or Belgium this time, (that comes later), but had a nice selection of species en-route including **Bluethroat**, Cattle Egret, White Stork, Spoonbill, Garganey, Spotted Redshanks and **Hen Harriers**.

Unfortunately, the grey geese had already abandoned Belgium by the end of March, but there were plenty of Barnacle Geese to see in the Netherlands, in very large numbers.

Netherlands

March 31st

I made it to Biesbosch National Park relatively early, first stop: the visitor centre. Within ten minutes the first **White-Tailed Eagle** (imm.) of the trip approached. I pointed it out to some visitors as it passed overhead, who didn't seem surprised at all. That was pleasing, as I thought they might have been difficult to see, given that their whereabouts was secret and I've not managed to see one in Scotland. The only other bird of note that day was a singing **Willow Tit** that allowed me very close views.

Early next morning a **Rough Legged Buzzard** came in to rest in a small wood near to the visitor centre, before continuing it's journey twenty minutes later.

Heading out of Biesbosch, one last stop gave me nice views of 14 **Water Pipits** as they landed briefly on a flooded area close to the road before moving off NE. Soon after, an adult **White Tailed Eagle** (they're not trying to hide their presence at all) passed by below tree-top level.

* Depending how the trip develops or when you read this

April 1st - 3rd

Ostvaarserveld

Over several visits to this area during this period, I noted **Bluethroat**, **Short-Toed Treecreeper**, Firecrest, at least **15,000 Barnacle Geese**, 85 Pintail, hundreds of Ruff in breeding plumage, the second **Rough-Legged Buzzard** of the trip and another **9 Water Pipits** making their way to breeding grounds, the second and last time I saw the latter species on this trip.

My last stop at **Ostvaarderplassen** was to visit the hide at the Northern reaches of the reserve to listen out for recently reported **Savi's Warblers**. I didn't hear any but prior to that, was happily surprised to see a male **Smew** fly by as I parked up at the dyke.

4th April

After scanning Google maps for appropriate areas to bird, I decided on **Werribbean National Park**. **15 Spoonbills** provided the highlight until I met local birder, Klaas Vedder, who proved really helpful with tips, and even gave me a lift to see a **Great Grey Shrike** that had wintered locally. Klaas suggested I visit the **Wetering Ost** viewpoint and area, adding **Black Necked Grebe**, and Garganey to the days tally that included a variety of other species.

5th April

The next morning gave me the opportunity to explore the immediate area in more detail, and it was the first big day of the journey so far, with 52 species seen including up to five booming **Bitterns**, about 6 singing **Savi's Warblers**, a **Purple Heron**, 4 **Bluethroat** and for entertainment value, 250 recently returned Sand Martins to the artificial nest sites. I look forward to returning to this area at some point in the future.

My penultimate stop in the Netherlands was to visit my friends Simone and Valterri in Groningen, where I had spent some weeks back in 2016. Just in front of her apartment **Short-Toed Treecreepers** can be witnessed chasing each other around the tree trunks in the Pioen Park and, more importantly, get themselves on the **van list**.

A few days later, my final stop off was to be Coenraadpolder where I encountered another spectacle of **15,000 Barnacle Geese**, 2 **Hen Harrier** and the first Ring Ouzel of the trip.

Germany – first visit – one night

I passed through Germany without doing much birding as I was keen to get to **Blåvand Fugelstation** in Western Denmark. **Barnacle Geese** and a **Bluethroat** featured but Denmark was calling me so I hurried through.

Some days, where I haven't managed to plan where I can park/camp/sleep after the day's birding, and I lack an appropriate option, I just keep driving until the next possibility appears.

Denmark

April 8th

I arrived at **Blåvand** quite late in the evening, but was greeted by a Prince amongst birders, the experienced ringer, Morten Jenrich Hansen.



April 8th – 14th

My arrival coincided with a spell of freezing weather and I ended up staying at the wonderful warm Observatory for 7 nights. Morten and Bent Jakobsen, who runs the Fugelstation, were both really accommodating and helpful with their advice.

During my week in the area I managed to see another 3 **Hen Harrier**, a **Great Grey Shrike**, 7 Ring Ouzel, 1 White-Tailed Eagle, 2 Black Redstart, 1000+ Common Scoters, 1 Spoonbill, and the first returning Barn Swallow of 2019.

During an outing to the local nature reserve of Skallingen I witnessed what must be Skylark heaven, with a conservative estimate of 200 individuals, although there are probably many more.



Great Grey Shrike

I highly recommend a visit to Blåvand, but I am told that Autumn is better. A crucial bit of information I received from Morten was of a site I'd never heard of before called **Skagen**, (pronounced Skane), located at the Northernmost tip of Denmark, a bottleneck for birds migrating North during Spring. I'm familiar with bottlenecks from my visits to Tarifa so that would become my next stop.



I had planned to cross to Sweden across the bridge from Copenhagen to Malmo and then visit Falsterbo, despite it being out of season, but now I'd change my route, and instead cross to Gothenburg on the late ferry, quickly passing through the city after midnight, untroubled by urban traffic.

But first, five days in Skagen! A revelation. My write-up doesn't and can't do it justice.

April 15th – 19th - Skagen

If you are going to visit Skagen I suggest taking a Dante (Shepherd) with you to spot and identify the birds, a few miles before they arrive. Very useful!

Skagen's Spring migration must surely be the most varied in Europe. Without moving from a spot on the sand dunes called **Grenen Hill**, it's possible to view passerines, raptors, wildfowl, waders and seabirds, and anything else that migrates. All you need, is to be there in the early morning, at the right clothing at the right time of year.



Grenen Hill, Skagen

On the first day I managed to see 57 species from the Hill, 64 on the second and 56 on the third, although I expect other more experienced with vismig managed more than that. 70-80 species can be seen on one morning in April.

Rolf Christensen is the guardian and master of the hill but he allows others to bird there. ☺ His foxy sidekick, **Samantha** patiently supports him in his daily efforts. Nothing gets past Rolf.



Samantha

Grenen Hill/ Skagen is the perfect for vismig. Some of the highlights from 5 days on the hill in no particular order were:-

Greater Spotted Eagle 1	Pallid Harrier 2	Penduline Tit 2
Black Kite 3	Taiga Bean Goose 2	Goshawk 2
Great Grey Shrike 1	Jack Snipe 2	Rough Legged Buzzard 7
Greater White-Fronted Goose 10		Lapland Bunting 1
Golden Eagle 1	Hawfinch 2	Hen Harrier 4
Ring Ouzel 125 (including a flock of 80!)		Osprey 11
Red Kite 3	Common Crane 5	

Occasionally, we witnessed the spectacle of large passages in a short period of time, for example; Sparrowhawk 45, Woodpigeon 2000, Song Thrush 300, Chaffinch 1000, Brambling 200, Goldcrest 300, Coal Tit 200

Sweden

April 19th - 20th

Conditions were calm, as I boarded the late evening ferry from Frederikshavn to Göteborg. The sun set slowly as we sailed allowing views of up to **1500 Common Scoter** and 30 Black Guillemot. I arrived in Sweden around 1 am and camped near some forested areas East of the city before heading to Storr Mosse National Park the following morning.

Storr Mosse is located about halfway between Göteborg and the island of **Öland**, but an overnight stop there turned out to be relatively disappointing; 40 Whooper Swan, 7 Common Crane and 1 Willow Warbler.

On the 22nd and 23rd April I visited **Beijershamn** for the first time, a great reserve with various habitats to explore. I briefly saw a Jack Snipe but the highlights were a **Wryneck** and Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, of which I had fine views. Other notable species included 2 Willow Tit, 2 Hawfinch, a White-Tailed Eagle and 150 Avocet. It wouldn't be my first visit here.



Much of my 17 day stay on the island were spent near the Southern end, but I also explored numerous other locations.

I met Swedish birder Gabriel Säll on my second day there. He gave me some good tips about the area and Swedish bird distribution / migration. We later embarked on an overnight trip to the northernmost tip to try and see White-Billed Divers, Penduline Tit,

Great Snipe and Little Bunting amongst other things. We heard the **Penduline Tit** and saw the **Little Bunting**.

I had planned to stay on the island about a week but ended up there for more than double that, and it could have been more. It was relatively slow going at times but amazing moments stood out. I had Red-Footed Falcon fly past me twice during my time there, located a few Collared Flycatchers, enjoyed **Woodlark** and **Montagu's Harriers** and 10 Wryneck in total which seemed to be everywhere. Beijershamn is the stand out site though with it's varied habitats with highlights being; **Red-Throated Pipit**, **Citrine Wagtail**, **Savi's Warbler**, 11 **Hawfinch** and up to 9 **Temminck's Stints**.

3 Red Footed Falcon were found together in disused grazing fields at one stage so obviously, I had to go to see that.

In total, I noted a total of 7650 Barnacle Geese fly over but didn't realise that there could be Red-Breasted Goose with them so didn't check. Big mistake. Others did manage to pick out one or two at other locations.

I was particularly excited to witness a small fall of Wood Warblers on the West coast one afternoon with at least 8 birds present in a small section of the wood. I couldn't count the area properly as it was a campsite, (and I wasn't a guest), so there may have been many more. Wood Warbler is *very common* apparently, but not where I'm from. At that time, Red-Footed Falcons seemed to more common!

Ottenby forest was home to thousands of Robins when I first arrived with 3 in every tree. Although I estimated seeing over 500, they were surely many more. I guess that's what inspired the Ottenby Bird Observatory logo.

The highlights of Öland in no particular order were:-

Red Throated Pipit 1	Citrine Wagtail 1	Little Bunting 1
Red Footed Falcon 6	Collared Flycatcher 5	Hoopoe 2
Wryneck 10	Caspian Tern 4	Penduline Tit 1-2 (heard)
Black Kite 1	Red Kite 3	Montagu's Harrier 3
Osprey 1	Rough-Legged Buzzard 1	White-Tailed Eagle 12
Temminck's Stint 9	Wood Sandpiper 30	Spotted Redshank 14
Purple Sandpiper 5	Little Tern 10	Black tern 2
Slavonian Grebe 2	Red-Necked Grebe 2	Garganey 6
Velvet Scoter 34	Long Tailed Duck 37+	Barnacle Goose 7650
White-Fronted Goose 2	Arctic Skua 1	Hobby 1
Great White Egret 6	Savi's Warbler 1	Marsh Tit 7

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker 2 Willow Tit 2

Common Crane 7 Woodlark 2

Common Redstart 14 Lesser Whitethroat 34

Yellow Wagtail *thunbergi* 3 Black Throated Diver 5

Robin 500+ (on one day in Ottenby forest)

Pied Flycatcher 29

Hawfinch 11

Cuckoo 9

Yellow wagtail *flava* 80

Tree Pipit 18

Wood Warbler 25



Collared Flycatcher



Little Bunting



Wood Warbler

When I finally departed Öland on May 7th I had already been in Sweden for 20 days. It's a great country, with very good people and some amazing birding opportunities in the coastal and mountain areas. Next time, I hope to see Fälsterbo and perhaps revisit Öland in Autumn.

As I crossed the bridge back to the mainland, there were still 2000 kilometres to travel to reach Arctic Norway - 22 hours to drive direct, but I wouldn't be heading there just yet. The weather reports suggested it was still a bit too wintery for van life, and anyway I was curious to visit some upland areas of Sweden (read: see **Tengmalm's Owl and Great Snipe**) and cross into Norway for a look-see. It would take me another 18 days to reach the Norwegian peninsula **Varanger**.

My route North took me along the East coast of Sweden as far as **Stornäsets** nature Reserve, Sundvall, then West for 3-days exploring the area around Ånjon Lake. After that, I would continue West and cross the Norwegian border veering North before Trondheim and on to Børgefell National Park. After a night in one of the remotest stops of the journey, hoping to hear Wolves and see a Bear (without luck), I once again turned East for a night in an actual house on the outskirts Swedish town of Lulea. After that my 34 day Swedish adventure would come to a close. I would follow the Baltic coast NE into Finland and the last long stretch up to Lapland.

But before that, a long staying adult male King Eider just East of Norrköping was too tempting to miss. It only took a few minutes to spot, standing out from the numerous less-colourful Common Eider.

At Hölick another Arctic duck had been regularly spotted off the coast. This one was a bit more difficult to locate but eventually, after 45 minutes struggling to find a vantage point in challenging light condition, I reached a small outcrop of rocks, easily found if you know the area, the perfect vantage point to scan the much more common Velvets Scoters for the American species: **Surf Scoter**. Small groups of migrant flycatchers, Whinchats and Blue-headed Yellow Wagtails suddenly descended on me from nowhere – exciting signs of the coming Spring.

Further North, I came across further signs of Spring at the small but fantastic coastal reserve of Stornäsets, 27 **Lesser White-Fronted Geese** being the highlight. 8 or 9 of them were colour ringed from the re-introduction projects, but the others must have been from later generations or even wild birds. Also here were a grand total of 250 Wood Sandpipers, along with a singing **Icterine Warbler**, 6 **Temminck's Stints**, a Wryneck and an extremely confiding (van tick) Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, which I shot several videos of:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpxbdhwRY6M>).



After Stornasetts I headed inland past Ostersund to higher altitudes. Despite all the coastal activity, winter was hanging on here and despite a sense of imminent arrival, most migrants hadn't yet braved the higher altitudes for my visit. Patches of snow could be seen more and more regularly after leaving Ostersund and around Anjons, locals were still using snowmobiles and skis to get up and down the hills, which was impossible in my footwear due to the incalculable depth of the snow – I tried, and fell, and got snow in my wellies – a few times. A week or 2 later and I probably could have hiked up the hills no problem.

Jacques Turner-Moss had given me few sites to try around Ånjons, and although the observatory was still closed for winter and I wasn't able to locate any Tengmalm's Owls, I did manage to see a **Beaver** very well and, **11 Capercaillie** in the forests. Many of these seemed to be female wandering about, but there was at least one immature male amongst them. They were relatively easy to see from the van, often moving toward cover very slowly on seeing the van creeping along. Willow and Black Grouse were also quite common, along with Woodcock as dusk.



[Capercaillie](#)

Much to my disappointment, the Great Snipe Lek seemed to be deserted by late April, although the scenery was stunning, enhanced by an endless golden dusk. I've seen a lot of wild landscapes around the world, but this one still had the power to impress. It was well worth the walk up the hill through the patchy slush and mush. A fantastic narrow boardwalk in places helps and the Grand Hotel at the top was a complete surprise to me. Although I went up on almost a windless day, I can imagine how useful it would be.



[The hotel Lekafornia](#)



Looking back along the route to the lek

(Sweden, Norway, Finland) transit to Varanger

Over the 18 day journey from Öland to Varanger I managed to encounter the following species of interest:-

Siberian Jay 5 - 3 different sightings at the roadside

King Eider 1 -a long staying adult male near Norrköping

Surf scoter 1 - a long staying adult male near Hölick on the East coast

Lesser White-Fronted Goose 27

Rock Ptarmigan 1	Waxwing 9	Capercaillie 19
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Yellow Wagtail <i>thunbergi</i> 21	Temminck's Stint 6	Willow grouse 8
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Caspian Tern 24 at one site	Wood Sandpiper 260	Rough Legged Buzzard 1
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Icterine Warbler 1	Jack Snipe 2	Bluethroat 3
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Black grouse 11	Black Woodpecker 1	Slavonian Grebe 14
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Dipper 1	Woodcock 5	White-Tailed Eagle 5
Osprey 1	Crane 11	Garganey 1
Spotted Redshank 5	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker 1	Little gull 150
Black Throated Diver 3	Merlin 2	Parrot Crossbill 7
Whooper Swan 26		



Varanger

I arrived at Varanger on the 25th May 2019, 59 days after crossing the English Channel. I didn't know if I was too early, or too late, or just right, but the first few hours went well as I managed to pick up a **Gyrfalcon** squabbling with a pair of Peregrine along the cliffs in the Tana Valley and then find a **Hawk Owl** nest with 2 adults and 2 chicks about an hour afterwards. The Gyr falcon had disappeared from view in less than a minute but the Hawk Owls just love hanging out for long periods at the roadside, which would suit any birder in a campervan.



Hawk Owl

Also in the Tana Valley: two Rough-Legged Buzzard and a Golden Eagle, the latter being much rarer than I realised at the time. I wrongly assumed that I'd be encountering more Gyr and Golden Eagles given how soon after arriving I'd seen them. Anyway, I was off to a good start, and managed to get both species on the van list too! That's crucial to the mission.



A drive up to **Kongfjordfellet**, the upland moors, provided further delights. My first sightings of Arctic and **Long-Tailed Skua** (2) as they flew beside the road, as well as other interesting species such as Willow Grouse (4), Red-Throated Diver, the first 2 **Shore Lark**, and a displaying adult male **Lapland Bunting**. A sole **Tundra Bean**

Goose dropped down onto some bog at the crossroads for a short rest, continuing it's journey East just a few minutes later. By this time it was late, but still light and it wouldn't be getting dark for the rest of my visit.



That was probably the best day of the trip to date. Gill Hollamby had lent me the fantastic Birding Varanger book, and over the following ten days I think I visited every single spot it covers and a few it doesn't. Even when many of the spots were dead ends, due to the time of year or weather, there was always the next site or other things to see between. For sure I was a tad early for a lot of the action, but on the other hand, was just in time to see one of the last **Stellar's Eiders** of the winter – a most important bird.

26th May

I headed towards the North Western part of the peninsula to get some long anticipated seawatching in at a location suggested by sea-watching aficionado Dave Walker. On the way there, I managed to see 2 Ring Ouzel and another, now commonplace, White-Tailed Eagle.

At Kjølnes lighthouse the wind had picked up, but the lighthouse functioned as the perfect windbreak that day. This has to be one of the best seawatching spots I have ever

visited. Auks were streaming through continuously, with divers, skuas and ducks sown in. I saw my very first **White-Billed Diver** here, although it was in winter plumage and bobbing up and down, diving, in somewhat difficult conditions. I lost sight of it amongst the waves, and doubted I had seen one at all when I spoke to the only other people there, a British couple who hadn't seen any. Remarkably, they didn't stay very long despite the wonders streaming East, and I was left alone to marvel at the spectacle for a further 2 hours.



The pull of exploring new areas stirred me into leaving the lighthouse and off I went to Berlevåg harbour and the Western reaches of the town in the hope of finding Arctic ducks, Red-Throated Pipits and Shore Lark.

White-winged Gulls are easy to spot along the coast and in the harbour. I counted 11 **Glaucous Gulls** and 1 **Iceland Gull**, but no winter ducks. They had probably already left for breeding grounds to the East, but it was to be expected this late in the season. Rock Pipits, Red-Necked Grebes, Black Guillemots and the occasional **Long Tailed Skua** passing by along the shore added to the experience.



Iceland Gull

Searching for Shore Lark, near the airport, I encountered the birders from the lighthouse who told me they'd seen a Red-Throated Pipit at the radio masts on the edge of town. By this time Long-Tailed Skuas, outnumbering Arctic Skua, were floating up and down and sitting at the roadside as well as passing by off shore, a quite wonderful sight which I had been looking forward to for months. This was another great day on Varanger, and about to get better.

I drove down to the masts, parked up and wandered around hoping to catch a sight of the pipit. The wind was picking up again, and not particularly nice conditions for passerines I thought, so gave up and headed back to the van. As I was about to open the door I noticed a movement to the rear of the van, as a small bird had landed on nearby rocks. It was a **Coues's Arctic Redpoll**. I could barely believe my luck, as this was another new species for me (and my van). It didn't stay long, but I managed to grab a photo. Earlier in the day, I had come up empty-handed at a site for these species so it was nice for it to come to me and turned out to be the only one I saw in Norway.



Coues's Arctic Redpoll

26th May – Northwest Varanger - sightings of interest

White-Billed Diver 2	Long Tailed Skua 35+	Iceland Gull 1
Coues's Redpoll 1	Glaucous Gull 11	Bluethroat 1
Purple Sand 83	Puffin 30	Black Guillemot 35
Long Tailed Duck 55+	White Tailed Eagle 4	Blue Fulmar
Peregrine 2	Arctic Tern	Arctic Skua 12

I returned to Kjølnes Lighthouse at around 1930 for a bit more seawatching and added another White-Billed Diver flying East to the day's tally, but the views were again pretty poor. I was desperate to see one properly. At some point I moved my van to avoid the worst of the buffeting from the wind and tried to sleep.

27th May – Kjølnes Lighthouse

The **Long-Tailed Skua** passage picked up during the morning and I saw over 100 go through including one group of ten. Amazing. Other highlights included another **White-Billed Diver**, 48 Puffins, 5 Arctic Skua and 5 Arctic Tern. The constant stream of Auks, Long-Tailed Duck and Red-Throated Divers continued unabated.

At about 1330 I finally departed this amazing spot, feeling guilty because I know a few people who would like to remain here 24 hours a day. It doesn't get dark at all and the birds are always moving to some extent. Surprisingly, I only met those 2 birders in the entire North West region, seemingly one of the best Spring seawatching spots in Europe. But perhaps the hardcore sea-watchers all go to Nordkapp. I'd be interested to find out.

The next stop would be to visit Viednes, along a particularly wild and of rocky coastline, and one of the excellent biotope hides, in the hope of getting better views of a Gyrfalcon. En route, I noticed another 2 Glaucous Gull, a White-Tailed Eagle and 250+ Goosander at the roadside. White Tailed Eagles are almost too widespread to count, easily outnumbering every other raptor.

Despite waiting in the hide for about an hour, I had no luck with the Gyrfalcon, or much else, although it would be a good place to take food and wait 2 or 3 hours. I often found myself unable to focus all my attention on searching for birds in Varanger.



On the walk back to the van I had good views of 2 **Twite** feeding on the ground, my only sighting of the entire trip.

Over the next hours I used the van as hide, driving as slowly as possible to the crossroads at **Kongjordsfjellet**, then Northeast to Batsfjord before doubling back Westwards the Tana Valley, checking every bird I could. I managed to pick up 2 **Shore Lark** along with 4 more **Lapland Bunting**, 5 **Snow Bunting** (on a snowy patch to make it more difficult!) and 2 **Temminck's Stints**. The latter were displaying and chasing off an Arctic Skua! Wood Sandpipers, Skuas, Ravens, Willow Grouse, Wheatear and Lesser Black Backed Gulls were also seen.

Just outside the town of Batsfjord itself, there were 4 more **Temminck's Stints**, 5 Purple Sandpipers and the very rare in Varanger: 2 **Gadwall**!

Closer to the Tana Valley produced 3 **Long-Tailed Skuas** and a further 4 **Shore Lark** plus the 2 adult **Hawk owl** with 2 chicks, that I had seen on the first day.

It had only been 2 days since I arrived but felt already like weeks, which may have something to do with the endless light and almost continuous birding. What a place!

28th May

I reached the well-known Nesseby peninsula at around 1300, hoping to spot a recently reported Stellar's Eider. The weather hadn't been kind to a van-based birder, with multiple showers and strong winds, but a quick walk to the tip of the promontory provided just reward with the first 2 **Red-Necked Phalaropes** of my visit. As they flew past eastwards and out of sight, I hoped they might stop to rest in one of the small bays on the peninsula but no such luck.

Also on the sea here; 6 Arctic, and 3 Long-Tailed Skuas, 15 Arctic Terns, and 2 Red-Throated Diver, whilst 35 summer plumaged Red Knot rested on the mud.



I spent the rest of the day searching through small rafts of ducks for a Stellar's Eider but only turned up one Rough-Legged Buzzard and a *thunbergi* Yellow Wagtail, so this turned out to be a relatively low-yield day compared to recent days.

29th May

Bingo! A tip off set me on my way to Komagvær and my first ever **Stellar's Eider**, a sharply turned out summer male, which had been associating with a mixed raft of 150+ Common Eider, 85 Common Scoter and Long-Tailed Ducks.



I had spent a few minutes lazily searching for it from my van window before Killian, the leader of a bird tour group, gave me directions to get onto it. Lack of sleep had started to get the better of me. Here, I was reminded how small the birding world is when one of the group turned out to be Neil, a regular Dungeness visitor.

This was the only tour group I encountered on Varanger, although there was also a photography group wandering around consistently flushing birds. A particularly poor example is seen below. Moments before the shot was taken, a hundred or so waders had been exactly where these people are pictured, but were disturbed from feeding and resting and forced to roost by the creeping encroachment of the photo obsessed.



Photographers standing on wader habitat

One individual took the “chase” to extremes. None of them improved their chances of getting good shots as the birds all backed off.



How NOT to be a nature photographer

For the remainder of the afternoon I lingered close to Skallelva where interesting finches are sometimes seen on bird feeders in the gardens of the hamlet, although not today. But I did count 24 species in the area, and the best of them came when a **Pomarine Skua** suddenly appeared from the sea and decided to do a quick circuit of the inlet, eyeing the assembled selection of birds as it completed a loop and headed back out to sea. That was the closest I have ever been to this species and completed the set of three skuas for the day.

30th May

A quick revisit to Komgvær on the way to Vardo confirmed that the male **Stellar's Eider** was still present and showing well. From the van, I noticed another Glaucous Gull, and a group of geese together in one of the rare goose friendly habitats: 2 Pink-Footed, and 2 Barnacle.



Shore Lark

At Svartnes, there was a Short Eared Owl (which was only the second of the trip), a **Shore Lark** and 3 **Temmink's Stints**, but the most exciting for me was a group of 8 **Long-Tailed Skuas** resting close to the road.



Long-Tailed Skua

I took some moments to appreciate this. Seawatching doesn't get much better.

A quick trip to Vardo Fort afforded me views of a summer plumage **Little Stint**, and another new species for the van list, a displaying **Red-Throated Pipit**. Incidentally, I only saw one Little Stint in Varanger compared to 11 Temminck's.



Red-Throated Pipit

After taking some time to watch the pipit continuously displaying I tried in vain to add Brunnich's Guillemot to the van list from the car park opposite Hornøya Island. The rafts of auks were just a little too far away, but I did enjoy the spectacle, (photos p33), plus 3 **Long-Tailed Skuas**, 2 Arctic Skuas and the bonus of a short staying immature **King Eider** amongst Common Eiders.



King Eider

I set out for Hamningberg that afternoon, with White Billed Divers being the top target. **2 Lapland Bunting** and **4 Long-Tailed Skua** provided joy along the way.

I hoped that the deteriorating weather wouldn't curtail the WBD mission, but with increasingly poor visibility, patchy rain and borderline gales I gave up after 3 hours. Amongst the many thousands of auks moving, I noted; 40 Arctic Skua, 5 **Long-Tailed Skua**, 18 Red Throated Diver, 3 Black Throated Diver and 1 **White-Billed Diver**, with only poor views yet again.

31st May - Hamningberg

The next morning I joined brothers Tito and Rafa Salvadores in scanning the waters to the NW of the headland. We were overjoyed to see that some summer plumaged White-Billed Diver had taken refuge in the bay West of Hamningberg headland, getting progressively better views as the morning went on. After an hour or so I went back to the van to prepare something to eat. As I put the kettle on I noticed some movement off shore and was surprised to see it was 2 of the divers, even closer than before at a range of 80 metres. It seemed that a male was courting a female and they seem distracted drifting close to shore. I called Rafa over and he got closer to have a look while I watched from the side door of my van until the female decided she'd had enough and it was time to leave. I regret not taking any photos, but was mesmerised by the moment, and was also keen to have breakfast. Luckily, Tito managed to take a few photos from the earlier encounter. In total we estimated 6 individuals in the bay, 4 of them in summer plumage, whilst 3 **Long-Tailed Skua** and 8 Purple Sandpipers provided support.



White-Billed Diver

Tito Savadores



Purple Sandpiper

On the way back to Vardo that afternoon, I spotted another winter plumage **White Billed Diver** in another of the other bays, in addition to 2 Whooper Swan, 1 singing **Lapland Bunting**, another **Long-Tailed Skua**, 2 Short-Eared Owls, 4 Red-Throated Divers, and 20 Arctic Skuas. The day was finished off nicely with another visit to the **Red-Throated Pipit** at Vardo Fort, (on my van list this time), and one the most Northerly Cuckoos in Europe. I'm not obsessed with the van list, honestly, it's just something to do!

June 1st

Summer had begun in England but in Varanger, winter is only just ending. I had just one last goal before I could consider heading South to warmer climes: **Brunnich's Guillemots**.



Tito and Rafa were on the same boat to the island, one of the first of the season, so nobody was sure where the Brunnich's might be located. Going by the number of Common Guillemots and Razorbills, it might be difficult to pick one out from the crowd. They look very similar to the Common Guillemot to the untrained eye, and to the trained eye as well. And also, to my eye.



We disembarked, trying not to slip on the guano, (quite a few people did), dodged the nesting Shags who pecked at the boot of anyone that came close, and began to scan the cliffs. I thought I'd focus on seeing the Brunnich's first, and then I could appreciate the smell of the bird colony a little more. It was far easier than expected. Around 75 **Brunnich's Guillemot** were spread out amongst the other auks in small groups.



Other species we saw on Hornøya which are not to be sniffed at, in order of appearance; 10,000 Common Guillemot, hundreds(?) of Razorbill, 300 Shag, 150 Puffin, 4 Rock Pipit, 2 White-Tailed Eagle.



A nest site with spades of...



I had stopped counting the White-Tailed Eagles not long in to the visit, but must have seen more than 50 on Varanger.

It's the sort of place I can imagine returning to and staying longer when not on a mad mission around Europe. By visiting in a camper van, I could have stayed for a month, as I had no accommodation costs, and no tour fees, but actually, I was keen to get South whilst before the singing stopped. I missed finding at least one warbler species to the South due to my late arrival but I also hung back a little in the hope of Arctic Warbler, which only arrive in June! You can't have it all.

I wouldn't visit anywhere as magnificent as Varanger again this trip. It's a shame to leave just when I know the weather will soon improve and more and more migrants will be arriving, but at that point I was keen to follow up on recent roadside Bear sightings in Pasvik National Park on the Russian border.

But before I could begin the journey back to Tana and on to Pasvik, I had unfinished business and stopped for a circuit of Svartnes, to seek out patches of water that might hold **Red-Necked Phalarope**. My luck was in and after twenty minutes found a pair of them looking amazing in their summer plumage. (Van tick – ahem – not that it's important).



After that I visited those fields that geese frequent on migration with entirely different birds this time; 2 **Tundra Bean Geese**, 2 **Greater White-Fronted Geese**.

were great to see but a long search for Great Grey Shrike only turned up a **Willow Tit**.

Also this afternoon, 1 **Shore Lark**, 80 Red Knot, and then another field that Geese often frequent near Tana which held; 1 **Taiga Bean**, 1 **Tundra Bean**, and 1 Pink-Footed Goose, along with 5 Crane. Then a search for Great Grey Shrike only turned up a Willow Tit.

This was my last day birding in Varanger but I had 2 more days in Norway before crossing to Finland.

I felt over-whelmed by Varanger and sad to leave; the birds, the seawatching, the scenery that I had partly rushed through in order to have a chance to see another Arctic speciality. The weather hadn't always been bad, but it hadn't been kind enough to prolong my ten-day stay. Some days were calm and sunny but at least half were overcast, with strong winds and driving rain. The Arctic is wild after all. I want to go back.

3rd-5th June North East Norway

A 2-night stop in the wilds of Pasvik, waking up very early and searching late at night didn't provide me with a bear sighting, although it allowed me to see the following; 2 **Siberian Jay**, a very confiding **Siberian Tit**, (which explored the lower branches of a tree I stood under down to 40cm), 3 **Smew** on the river bordering Russia; another **Tundra Bean Goose**, 2 **Pine Grosbeaks** flybys, 3 **Bluethroat**, 1 **Rough-Legged Buzzard**, 3 **White-Tailed Eagle**, 2 **Bohemian Waxwing**, 1 **Willow Tit**, 5 **Whooper Swan**, 3 **Capercaillie** (including the first adult male of the trip), and 1 male **Black Grouse**.



Next stop: Finland.

Finland