

# Birding trip report – Northern Norway (Finnmark), 19-26 February 2022

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*The majestic drake King Eider, surely one of the most beautiful ducks in the world, which offers stupendous views in winter in the fishing harbours of Northern Norway*

## Background

Having met a Danish wildlife photographer in 2020 in Finland, who had told me about the spectacle of seaducks in winter in Northern Norway, including King and Steller's Eider and the concept of floating hides for photography, some time off in mid February 2022 was a perfect opportunity to see this for myself as well as experience a winter in the far North with the possibility of the Aurora Borealis

Full eBird trip report here: <https://eBird.org/tripreport/80663>

## Highlights

- King and Steller's Eiders in Båtsfjord Harbour as well as adult winter Long-tailed Ducks, all in stunning pristine plumage
- Flocks of Steller's Eider in Kiberg Harbour
- Some good gulling at multiple sites with opportunities to appreciate dark mantled Scandinavian Herring Gulls, and Glaucous Gulls of a variety of ages
- An excellent day at a feeding station in Svanvik with close views of Siberian Tit and Jay, and Pine Grosbeak

## Trip summary

A very modest total of only 32 species seen, mainly hampered by weather conditions and limited daylight. However my main birding targets were achieved except White-billed Diver which I was told is more reliable in the months of March and April, Gyrfalcon (the morning I had budgeted to look for this at Ekkerøy was a write off due to blizzard like conditions) and Northern Hawk Owl (which I suspect is a question of luck at the roadside) or knowing a roost spot). Brunnich's Guillemot is also likely around Hornoya but although I saw several flying auks they were all distant so I was not confident in IDing these. Full species list at the end of the report and additional photos.

## Logistics

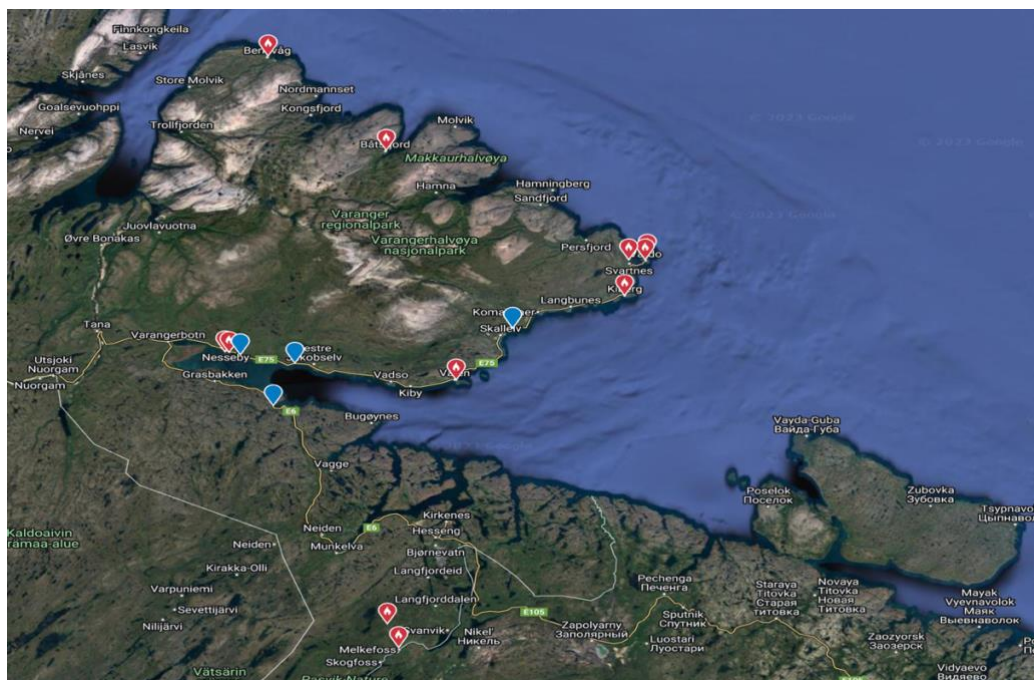
The Troms og Finnmark county is in the extreme northeast of Norway, curving around Finland and sharing a border to the east with Murmansk Oblast of Russia. The cold fish rich waters of the Barents Sea attract the sea ducks prior to their migration to breeding grounds in Russia and Svalbard. The main town and point of entry is Kirkenes (though there are also internal flights to Vardø and Vadsø further along the coast). This was a self arranged trip via Internet research and looking at eBird checklists of the area. The best time of year to visit for photographing winter ducks is January-March though in January days are even shorter and in March the birds are starting to move off- thus the month of February is an optimal time. The excellent website <http://eBird.varanger.net/> has a wealth of information regarding sites and enabled me to plan the driving and destinations. I also received some direct advice via email from Tormod Amundsen of Biotope ([tormod@biotope.no](mailto:tormod@biotope.no)). The photography hide in Båtsfjord harbour was arranged via email by the very helpful Rainer Hanssen at Båtsfjord Hotell ([booking@baatsfjord.com](mailto:booking@baatsfjord.com)) who also secured accommodation here for the days I spent there. The remainder of the accommodation was arranged via Booking.com except for Birk Husky in Svanvik, which I arranged directly (<https://eBird.birkhusky.no/en/>).

I flew from London Stansted to Oslo with Ryanair and then took a flight the following morning with SAS Airlines to Kirkenes where I hired a car with SIXT. Cars are equipped with snow tires as standard but I learnt the hard way later on in the trip that a 4x4 or at least high clearance vehicle is a prerequisite as my Volkswagen Polo, even with snow tires, got marooned in a snowstorm on my penultimate day and was probably the closest to a near death experience I have had. Roads in general are good and regularly cleared by snow ploughs, but weather can change suddenly and unpredictably so if it is snowing heavily driving must be avoided. Clothing is key- pack plenty of good quality thermals, liner and outer gloves and a warm hat (I found the quilted trapper style hat to be a good bet for adequate ear cover). Stout waterproof walking boots or wellingtons are also a prerequisite. Temperatures maxed at around -3 to -4 degrees C and at their lowest were around -23 degrees C (though I suspect with wind chill was colder). There are several inches of snow on the ground at this time of year, in areas off road several metres deep at times. The sun tended to rise around 0730 and started to set by 1430 meaning you are limited to around 5-6 hours of decent light for birding.

Food was adequate albeit with understandably limited choices (though bizarrely the two main restaurants in Vardø are both Thai) and as a vegan it was slightly more challenging though there is a good understanding of this in Scandinavia. I also packed snacks from home as between towns, there are very few places to pick up food. I was able to manage fine with my UK credit card but as is well known, Norway is extremely expensive and perhaps accentuated here due to its remoteness and presumed difficulty getting some goods up here. English is widely spoken so communication was not a problem.

Places visited- Nesseby, Ekkerøy, Kiberg, Svartnes, Vadsø, Vardø, Båtsfjord, Berlevåg, Pasvik, Oslo. Little walking was needed with most birding done via stops in the car.

Below is a map of the route I took in the region (excluding Oslo which was just a day in the city):





*Typical road conditions during fair weather*

### Day by day itinerary

19<sup>th</sup> Feb- Travel day, with Ryanair flight to Oslo Gardermoen from London Stansted (the cheapest option even with carry on luggage) arriving in the late evening, and an overnight stay in Oslo

20<sup>th</sup> Feb- Took the 0850AM flight from Oslo with SAS Airlines which arrived into Kirkenes at 1100AM local time. Pretty amazing descent with the snow blanketed landscape. Picked up my rental car (a VW Polo) which very soon looked woefully inadequate as there was heavy snow falling. The initial plan was to drive to Vardø, around 3 hours away at the tip of the Varanger peninsula with stops en route at Nesseby and Ekkerøy but this plan very quickly disintegrated as I was driving at half the speed I had predicted. The landscape is bleak and inhospitable and bitterly cold for the most part and there was unsurprisingly little by way of bird activity en route, with 3 flyover **Raven** the first birds of the trip. A brief roadside stop to scan a fjord yielded a couple of **Black Guillemot**.

Reached Nesseby at 1430pm where the light was already fading and took the small side road up to the church where there is a small parking area. At -10 degrees (likely colder with wind chill) trying to scan with a scope was a challenge as taking gloves off to manipulate the focus wheel or take any photos would mean your hands freezing. Precious little here beyond a small flock of **Long-tailed Duck**. From here went straight to Vardø, which was an uncomplicated drive arriving shortly after 1700pm and self checking into a comfortable room I had arranged via Booking.com (Wilhelmsen Romutleie). Dinner was at a local Thai



restaurant (one of very limited dining options) and a night drive post dinner to look for the Northern Lights was unsuccessful.



*Nesseby Church at sunset*

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103150318>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103180961>

21 Feb – Initial stop was the top of Vardø where a headland jutting into the ocean looks out into the open sea towards Hornøya. I was delighted to see a mixed flock of **Common Eider** with around 70 **King Eider** out to sea, and a further 20-30 in a separate flock. There were several flying auks around Hornøya but very distant in the scope and could not confidently ID any as Brunnich's Guillemot though am sure a more experienced observer would be able to identify this. Walking back through the harbour I was surprised not to see any white-wingers amongst the **Herring** and **Great Black Backed Gulls**, though seeing nesting **Kittiwakes** and close **Purple Sandpipers** in their smart winter plumage was nice all the same.



*Kittiwakes are a ubiquitous sight In the harbour and on the buildings of Vardø*

Leaving Vardø, my first stop late morning was the small village of Svartnes just outside Vardø, which I had read is good for gulls. This was the case with no fewer than 8 **Glaucous Gulls** including a couple of adults (a plumage I have never seen before), plus several Purple Sandpipers and Long-tailed Ducks.



*Purple Sandpiper at Svartnes*

From Svartnes it was on to Kiberg, which is a well known village for **Steller's Eider** visiting the harbour. This intel was accurate and I quickly picked up a good sized flock of them associating with Common Eider. A scan of Kiberg beach also yielded a few more Glaucous Gulls. I was also somewhat thrown by the Herring Gulls here in Northern Norway as their mantle is so much darker, even more so than argentatus spp that I have seen in the UK.





*1<sup>st</sup> cycle Glaucous Gull in Kiberg harbour*



*Flock of Steller's Eider in Kiberg harbour*

Beyond Kiberg it was a couple of hours drive to Vadsø via Ekkerøy where a brief stop yielded more Steller's Eider and Glaucous Gulls, and then onwards in darkness via Varangerbotn on the road snaking upwards to Båtsfjord. An eerily beautiful landscape with snow submerging small huts in the roadside fields and bathed in a bluish twilight, and with the car recording temperatures of sub -20 degrees outside. I checked into the Båtsfjord Hotell, a very comfortable and warm room with great hot showers, and met Rainer Hanssen of the photo hides experience, who talked through the logistics and gave me a survival suit (!) under which he encouraged me to wear as many clothes as I possibly could in anticipation of a very cold morning lying down stationary in a floating hide!



*Winter landscape in dusk light between Varangerbotn and Båtsfjord*

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103329499>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103329517>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103329930>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103332701>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103494250>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103345402>

22 Feb – A 0430AM start and with packed lunch in tow and donned in survival suit, took a small RIB from the pier around 5 minutes to the floating hides- ingenious wooden constructions with floating supports and polystyrene cutouts which can be removed to allow water's level viewing. I was joined in the hide by a Norwegian and a Swedish birder. For the next 4 hours with falling snow and brightening light, I enjoyed a nothing short of magical experience with King, Steller's and Common Eiders (predominantly King Eider with smaller numbers of the latter 2 species) and Long-tailed Ducks showing to within touching distance and allowing for some excellent photography and a welcome distraction from the cold! At around 1100AM we vacated the hide and then took a RIB ride around the harbour and into slightly more open sea with loose flocks of King and Steller's Eider and some large Grey Seals. Back on dry land and getting changed in the hotel and thawing out, I set out for a short walk around the harbour as it was a gloriously sunny day; nothing too notable birds wise but nice to see some close King Eiders, Purple Sandpipers and Kittiwakes at close range. I returned for a filling dinner of vegan burger and chips and then another unsuccessful drive in the darkness for around 45 minutes in pursuit of the Northern Lights, despite the Aurora app stating there was a very high chance of this.





*Common Eider portrait, Båtsfjord harbour*



*King Eider drake, Båtsfjord harbour*



*Steller's Eider drake, Båtsfjord harbour*



*A curious Steller's Eider drake, Båtsfjord harbour*



*Long-tailed duck drake, Båtsfjord harbour*



*King Eider drake attempting to tackle a Sea Urchin, Båtsfjord harbour*

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103494425>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103494582>

23 Feb- After a quick breakfast in the hotel I decided to try the Båtsfjord harbour again to see any interesting gulls around, and drove around to the fish factory which seemed a good



spot to concentrate large gulls. This was relatively unproductive though there was one adult Glaucous Gull amongst the Herring Gulls, and also an extremely close view of a drake King Eider. With little else found I drove to the other side of the harbour that looks out onto the bay and only could add one of Black and **Common Guillemot**.



*Adult Glaucous Gull with Northern Herring Gulls, Båtsfjord*

Although I had originally planned to drive back to Vadsø, which was the base for the next night, I made a last minute change as the weather was looking good, to drive even further north to the fishing village of Berlevåg which supposedly had excellent roadside scenery and the prospect of good gulling. The scenery certainly did not disappoint on the 1 hour 10-minute drive with frozen lakes, and blanketing snow reflecting the brilliant winter sunshine, and views of the Barents Sea on one side and snow cloaked mountains on the other, plus the picturesque colourful village of Kongsfjord. At Berlevåg, the fish factory again looked like the best spot to look at gulls, mainly Kittiwakes and Herring Gulls, but also a ridiculously obliging 1<sup>st</sup> cycle Glaucous Gull sat on a metal post. Further patience was then rewarded with a beautiful adult **Iceland Gull**, another plumage lifer having only seen 1<sup>st</sup> winters in the UK before. This gave extremely close fly by views and I was surprised that it was the only sighting I was to have on the entire trip. Scanning the harbour itself yielded one drake Steller's Eider plus King and Common Eider and the ubiquitous Long-tailed Duck. Further birding was limited due to huge banks of snow stopping access to other areas of sea to scan, so left in the early afternoon and drove towards Vadsø. I had a glimpse of a Ptarmigan sp as a pair flew across the road, which would have to go unidentified but the drive was otherwise uneventful and reached Vadsø FjordHotell after darkness where I appeared to be the only guest. Dining options as a vegan were severely limited so I went for the trusted local Indian restaurant Indigo, with a surprisingly tasty and authentic dhal and rice, at a rather more unappetising price of £35 for just the two dishes (they do say Norway is expensive!) I departed after dinner to Nesseby driving for around 45 minutes to try for Northern Lights but after sitting at the church there for around 30 minutes with no luck, I returned to Vadsø for the night.



*1<sup>st</sup> cycle Glaucous Gull, Berlevåg*



*Adult Iceland Gull, Berlevåg*



*Scandinavian Herring Gull showing primary pattern, Berlevåg*



*Vistas from the road to Berlevåg*

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103553871>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103557142>

24 Feb- A day that lives long in the memory for all the wrong reasons. After a good buffet style breakfast at the hotel, and an unsuccessful scout of Vadsø harbour, I decided to drive back towards Vardø, with stops at Ekkerøy and Kiberg. The road was reasonably clear up to Ekkerøy but snow clearly falling faster and as a result visibility at Ekkerøy was next to nothing. At this point it would have made sense to turn back, but foolishly I pressed on



towards Kiberg. As the snow got heavier and heavier visibility quickly deteriorated and the road was fast becoming impassable- at a certain point I was relying on the sat nav to identify where there were bends in the road. I was around 7 miles from Kiberg and now well away from Vadsø, so it seemed there was no choice but to continue on, until suddenly a huge drift of snow blew onto the windscreen and the car juddered to a halt. I was now completely immobilised in the middle of the road with snow piling up on either side. Panic started to set in now so I called the rental car company whose only advice was to wait for a snow plough who could dig me out. A car with 3 Swiss tourists coming in the other direction stopped to help, but clearly no one had the adequate tools and they too very quickly became stuck in the road. Thankfully a van soon arrived with two men equipped with snow shovels who were able to manually dig the car out, and I turned around and decided to tailgate them back towards Vadsø. The snow soon started to lighten but I was able to reflect on what could easily have become a very nasty turn of events.



*The dangers of getting caught by sudden blizzards- never underestimate the weather and if in doubt do not set out if it is snowing heavily*

At Nesseby the sky was now completely clear and I also had the first (and only!) raptor of the trip, a total of 3 **White-tailed Eagles** over the main road at different points. At Nesseby church the sea was again quiet with only a raft of Red-breasted Merganser and huge numbers of Purple Sandpiper on the rocks.

From Nesseby it was a further 2 hours drive southwards and slightly inland via Kirkenes, on the road to Nyrud, passing Svanvik and then turning off the forested road to the Birk Husky Guesthouse, my base for the last night in Norway ( info here, <https://eBird.birkhusky.no/en/>). I had read that this place had an option to go to a feeding station as I was targeting Pine Grosbeak. It was expensive considering this was just a single excursion but as I was short on time I felt it was the best investment to try and maximise the chances of seeing one rather than spending several hours searching large tracts of forest where bird density is low. I spent a relaxing evening in a very well appointed room in a wooden house, and reflected on the surreal experience of looking across a river a mere

200m away from the cottage, which separated us from Russia (sufficiently close that our hosts told us that occasionally the Russian mobile network is picked up, incurring large data costs!)

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103615562>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103615673>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103615704>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103615914>

25 Feb- After a good breakfast and meeting a British couple also spending a few nights here birding, the husband picked up some movement in the trees while we were eating which turned out to be 2 **Pine Grosbeaks** and we got decent bins views albeit in poor light. This hastened our exit and a further three were seen further on but they did not stay long or offer particularly good views. I had booked a snowmobile to take me at 0830AM to the feeding station and after being given some warm overalls and boots, took the fun and bumpy ride out into the middle of nowhere to a cabin where the feeding station is, around 30 minutes from the main accommodation. At the feeders were excellent close views of **Willow Tits, Common Redpolls, Siberian Tits** and a stunning brief male **Northern Bullfinch**, and 2 **Siberian Jays** visited for around 5 minutes at around 1015AM. By this time there were no signs of any Pine Grosbeak and I was beginning to worry that the 4 hours I had budgeted was not enough, and so rang the guesthouse to request an extra hour. This proved an incredible stroke of luck as just after 1300, 3 Pine Grosbeaks arrived, all of which looked like first winter male types. They did not stay long but offered much better views. Thoroughly satisfied I returned to the camp, and post lunch checked out for the drive back to Kirkenes airport, amidst slightly treacherous blizzard like conditions though thankfully nowhere near as severe as the previous day. On arrival it turned out the plane was delayed by 45 minutes, and this meant an arrival time back to Oslo at midnight and then a further half an hour train journey to the centre for my final night of the trip



*Siberian Tit, Pasvik*



*Siberian Jay, Pasvik*



*Pine Grosbeak, Pasvik*

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103678543>

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103678401>



26 Feb- Not really a day of birding, and was spent walking around Oslo, though did pick up **Common Goldeneye** on the fjord which was a new species for the trip. Flight back home was in the evening which gave me time to look around the city which was perfectly pleasant and walkable. Thus concluded an excellent short trip which made up for lack of species diversity with quality of sightings and amazing winter landscapes.

eBird checklists:

<https://eBird.org/checklist/S103731769>

### Full bird list

Common name	Scientific name	Comments
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Various locations
Steller's Eider	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	Good views at Kiberg and Båtsfjord
King Eider	<i>Somateria spectabilis</i>	Best views at Båtsfjord but also good numbers on sea at Vardø
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>	Various locations, best views at Båtsfjord
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Most areas with sea
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Oslo Fjord
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Nesseby
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	
Purple Sandpiper	<i>Calidris maritima</i>	Most rocky areas
Common Guillemot	<i>Uria aalge</i>	Vardø, Båtsfjord
Black Guillemot	<i>Cepphus grylle</i>	Various locations
Black-legged Kittiwake	<i>Rissa tridactyla</i>	Most locations
European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Most locations
Iceland Gull	<i>Larus glaucoides</i>	Berlevåg
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	Kiberg, Svartnes, Berlevåg, Ekkerøy
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Various locations
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	
European Shag	<i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i>	
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Flyovers on road between Vadsø and Nesseby
Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>	Pasvik
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Pasvik
Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	Pasvik
Siberian Tit	<i>Poecile cinctus</i>	Pasvik
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Pasvik
Eurasian Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Oslo
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>	Pasvik
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	Pasvik

Common Redpoll	Acanthis flammea	Pasvik
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Total- 32 species

Mammals

Common name	Scientific name	Comments
Reindeer	Rangifer tarandus	Nesseby, en route to Vardø

Other trip photos



*Reindeer were common in many places though I suspect a number of these were livestock and not wild*



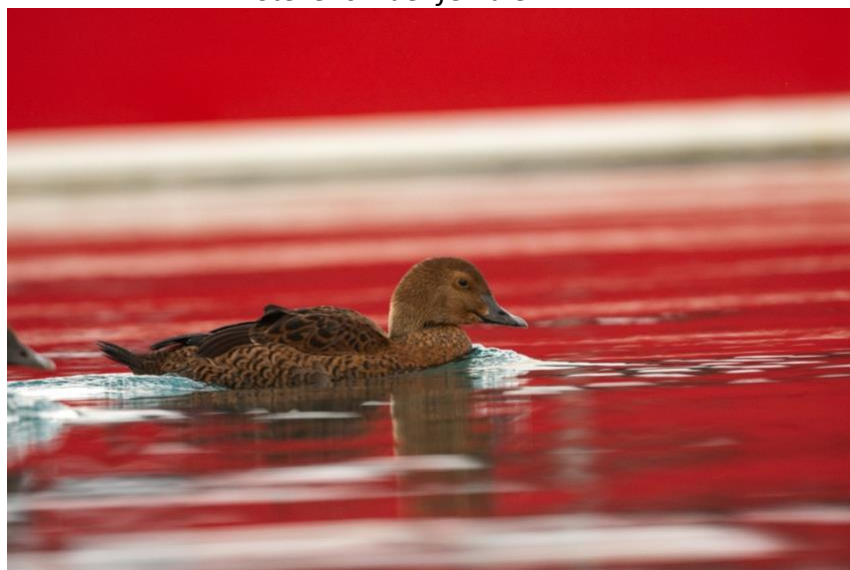
*Purple Sandpipers were the only wader seen on the trip and the only wader that spends the winter up in the far North- amazingly hardy birds and permitted very close observation*



*Superb views of the female ducks at Båtsfjord- Common Eider*



*Steller's Eider female*



*King Eider female*





*Superb male Northern Bullfinch at Pasvik*



*Lovely views of Common Redpolls at the feeding station*



*I had very close views of Willow Tit with Siberian Tit, a species that is scarce and local in the UK but at home in the cold birch and pine taiga of the far north*