

Finland and Norway

26th May to 7th June 2024 (13 days)

Trip Report



Yellow-billed Loon by Paul Varney

Trip report compiled and photos by Tour Leader Paul Varney

Tour Summary

Finland and Norway is a wonderful place to visit. The land of the midnight sun, we headed to more than 70° north to the very extreme top of Norway crossing into the Arctic Circle where the sun never sets and the birds many of us are familiar with in winter adorn bright spangly summer plumage and frolic and dance to attract a mate. The birds, while not vast in number of species were spectacular and the high arctic part of the tour produced some special species; Arctic (Black-throated), Red-throated and hugely impressive, Yellow-billed Loons, sparkling Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs and freshly arrived Red-throated Pipit and brightly adorned Bluethroats. Willow and Rock Ptarmigan were frequently encountered along with large numbers of huge White-tailed Eagles and the island of Hornoya with its vast seabird colony proved a memorable experience. The Arctic landscape also hosted numerous graceful, elegant Long-tailed Jaegers and we chanced upon a decent passage of Pomarine Jaegers on one day. It was a privilege to see shorebirds at close range in their

gaudy summer plumage – Little Stint, Purple Sandpiper, Bar-tailed Godwit, dainty, Red-necked Phalaropes and numerous Temminck's Stint but perhaps favourite of all were dancing and fighting Ruff with their elaborate neck adornments. We also spent 30 minutes watching a sparkling white Arctic Fox – a real treat and even obtained distant views of a pair of Humpback Whales. Moving further south into the forests of Finland we caught up with Hawk, Ural and Pygmy Owls and a plethora of Woodpeckers. Siberian Tit or Grey-headed Chickadee were found, and we had excellent close views of Hazel Grouse and a huge impressive male Capercaillie as he strutted in the forest, tail cocked uttering his strange burping calls. Singing Red-flanked Bluetail, beautiful Slavonian or Horned Grebe and some bubbling Black Grouse were also splendid additions to our impressive bird list. A great set of birds in some breathtaking scenery – this trip did not disappoint.

Top Birds as voted by the group

1. Western Capercaillie
2. Ural Owl
3. Yellow-billed Loon
4. Ruff
5. Eurasian Dotterel, Black-throated (Arctic) Loon

Varangerfjord; Vardo and Båtsfjord

Having all arrived in Ivalo, northern Finland we assembled for breakfast to begin our journey north to the extreme tip of Europe, Varangerfjord in Norway. Some stops along the way in the forests and bogs of northern Finland allowed us to see Hawk Owl on the nest and some other specialities of these northerly latitudes, Smew, Ruff, several Common Crane and a fine pair of Pine Grosbeaks.



Northern Hawk Owl in a nest hole



Long-tailed Duck

After lunch we were on the border of Norway and the trees had become shorter and the leaves had not yet opened making for a very different landscape. Driving along the edge of Varangerfjord, we saw the first of many White-tailed Eagles and Common Eider and our first Long-tailed Ducks. Several species of Geese were also noted; Taiga Bean, Greylag, Pink-footed, Barnacle and Greater White-fronted as well as many delightful Whooper Swans. As we moved further up the fjord to Nesseby we started to look for shorebirds and found some super looking Bar-tailed Godwits sporting their fine rufous summer plumage as well as Ruddy Turnstone, Dunlin and Little Stint. We arrived in Vardo, our base for the next few days, where we were greeted by the numerous Black-legged Kittiwakes nesting on window ledges on the buildings in town.

Over the next days, we explored the open tundra habitat and coastline of the outer fjord finding some late staying immature male King Eiders, Rock and Willow Ptarmigan, some wonderful Short-eared Owls, lots of



Temminck's Stint



Red-necked Phalarope

Common Merganser and also some Red-breasted Mergansers and numerous Arctic Skuas. Careful searching through the gull flocks uncovered an immature Glaucous Gull and we were all blown away by the stunning beauty of a full summer plumage Yellow-billed Loon that had taken up residence in a bay in town only a few hundred metres from the hotel. Eurasian Golden Plovers and Temminck's Stints were roadside birds up here and we also enjoyed some decent views of both Red-throated and Black-throated (Arctic) Loon. On one day we witnessed an incredible overland passage of Pomarine Jaegers with perhaps 50 or more birds seen during the day – most with full “spoons” the long twisted central tail feathers characteristic of this robust species. More delicate was the numerous and gorgeous, Red-necked Phalaropes that we encountered at various locations, often allowing for close views.

One of the sightings of the tour was a superb white Arctic Fox, new for all of us including our local guide. We watched the fox for some 30 minutes digging out, catching and devouring a couple of Root Voles at close range. An incredible sighting. We also saw a super looking Red Fox up here, but they are outcompeting the smaller and scarcer Arctic Foxes which are still a rare sighting.

One of the truly great things about visiting this part of Europe is a trip to Hornoya island which supports a huge seabird colony. Thwarted by the weather we eventually managed to get across on the short boat ride and soak in the smells, sounds and sights of this amazing place. Atlantic Puffin, Thick-billed and Common Murre, Razorbill, Shag and Kittiwakes are everywhere and walk between you to get to their nests. The comical appearance of the Atlantic Puffing hides a sinister side as we watched a pair fight for 20 minutes or more – presumably over a burrow. There seemed to be real bad blood between them. Returning to Vardo we viewed a pair of distant



Atlantic Puffin incoming



Common Murres



This Arctic Fox was incredible to watch by the roadside

Humpback Whales and a small flock of Bohemian Waxwings while consuming our lunch, a nice end to our stay in Vardo.

Moving to Båtsfjord we were all captured by the rugged beauty of the tundra landscape. There was more snow here and Long-tailed Jaeger were a common sight and we saw several consuming colourful Lemmings, sometimes engaging in a macabre tug-of-war with a hapless Lemming. We also connected with a few Rough-legged Buzzards and a pair of beautiful Dotterel although not everyone got to see them, unfortunately. Lapland Longspur and Snow Bunting were also present in decent numbers, but we only managed to see a couple of stunning Bluethroats and Red-throated Pipits but luckily obtained very nice views. After a fair bit of searching, we finally caught up with a Ring Ouzel too.



An elegant Long-tailed Jaeger



Eurasian Dotterel

Ivalo, Kuusamo and Oulu – the Finnish forests



Snow Bunting



Bluethroat

Our time in the very far north was over, and we headed south, back into Finland. On our way, we were rewarded with very nice views of Black-throated Loon, Northern Hawk Owl, Horned Lark and some beautiful, obliging Red-necked Phalaropes. Arriving near Ivalo, we had time to check for Hazel Grouse and got an immediate response with a male flying into where we were standing and perching up in a tree in full view. Usually very shy, Hazel Grouse are quite easily seen in this area. Male Hen Harrier, always a delight, the Grey-headed race of Yellow Wagtail, and a rare breeding bird in Europe, red-flanked Bluetail were all seen well and a drive around the quiet roads around Kuusamo produced numerous lekking Black Grouse and an absolute beast of a male Capercaillie strutting with tail fanned and throat inflated. None of us got chased by this impressive bird but we were all on high alert in case he decided to charge.



Ruff



Red-throated Pipit

Little Gulls are a local breeder and a small colony on a nearby lake provided an excellent opportunity to study these birds at close range. Their striking dark underwings a key identification feature. Red-necked and Slavonian (Horned) Grebes were nice to see, and we finally caught up with Siberian Tit, also known as Grey-headed Chickadee. Little Bunting is a scarce breeder in Finland and a nice singing male was nice to see near Kuusamo. This whole area is famed for woodpeckers and owls, and we weren't disappointed getting excellent views of Great and Lesser-spotted, Eurasian Three-toed, Grey-headed and Black Woodpeckers – the latter an excellent sighting of 2 adults feeding 2 young in the nest. Ortolan Bunting and Wood Warblers also put on a nice show too. A brief view of a Great Grey Owl, more Hawk Owls and excellent prolonged views of Pygmy and a frosty



Pygmy Owl



Ural Owl

Ural Owl were all highlights of our stay in these Finnish forests. On the shores of the Baltic Sea, Garganey, Spotted Redshank and Black-tailed Godwits were encountered, and good views of a dashing Hobby were enjoyed by everyone in the group.



Black Woodpecker



Hazel Grouse

Beautiful birds in wonderful scenery and 24-hour daylight make this an incredible trip. The birds are special up here and we were treated to some wonderful experiences watching, often at close range.



Slavonian (Horned) Grebe



Black-throated (Arctic) Loon



Male Western Capercaillie

Annotated List of species recorded

eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/238836>

Mammals

WOLVES, COYOTE, FOXES AND JACKALS - Canidae

Red Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*

1 near Vardo on 29th May and another near Oulu on 6th June

Arctic Fox – *Vulpes lagopus*

1 at Domen, near Vardo on 29th May was watched for about 30 minutes as it dug out, caught and devoured some Voles. Sporting its white winter pelage, this was an amazing sighting and a highlight of the trip for everyone

EARLESS SEALS - Phocidae

Grey Seal – *Halichoerus grypus*

Singles at Vardo on 28th May and near Hamningberg on 29th May

DEER - Cervidae

Moose – Alces alces

1 crossed the road near Ivalo on 27th May and 2 were seen on the approach to Båtsfjord on 31st May

Reindeer – Rangifer tarandus

Commonly seen in the far north Vardo, Båtsfjord and down into Finland as far south as Kuusamo. Once we moved beyond Kuusamo towards Oulu, the sightings of Reindeer stopped

RORQUALS - Balenopteridae

Humpback Whale – Megaptera novaeangliae

2 distantly from Vardo near Hornoya Island on 29th May. Seen fluking

PORPOISES - Phocoenidae

Harbour Porpoise – Phocoena phocoena

Several while we were eating lunch at Kongsfjord on 31st

RABBITS, HARES - Leporidae

European Hare – Lepus europeus

1 close to the hotel near Oulu on 7th June

Mountain Hare – Lepus timidus

Common in the far north near Vardo, Båtsfjord and also in Ivalo, Kuusamo area. Seen daily in these areas often in good numbers. Vary from white to grey blue in colour

SQUIRRELS - Sciuridae

Red Squirrel – Scirius vulgaris

Singles near Ivalo on 27th May and Kuusamo on 3rd June

HAMSTERS, NEW WORLD RATS AND MICE, VOLES - Cricetidae

Root Vole – Alexandromys oeconomicus

2 seen as they were eaten by the Arctic Fox near Domen, Vardo on 29th May. Identified from photographs

Lemming – Lemmus lemmus

We did not see one alive but we saw several in the Båtsfjord area being consumed by Long-tailed Jaegers. Identifiable by the yellow and black colours in the fur which were clearly visible in photos and even in real time. The Jaegers were better at finding them than we were

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Common Lizard – *Zootoca vivipara*

1 seen at Oulanka National Park, near Kuusamo on 3rd June

Common Frog – *Rana temporaria*

1 seen at Oulanka National Park, near Kuusamo on 3rd June



The group below the seabird cliffs on Hornoya island

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