

## Travel report to Lapland in February-March 2023

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Seeing the northern light has always been a dream for me and my family. During a one week-holiday in February-March 2023, we attempted to do just that. My three boys were as excited as my wife and I were. As an avid birder, it had a side goal to attempt to see four potential lifers: Willow Grouse, Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, Tengmalm's Owl and Siberian Jay. I therefore squeezed in a morning's birding in Kiruna in northern Sweden to see how lucky I could be.

In Europe, we want to travel to foreign destinations as much as possible by train. Not only saves this emission of carbon dioxide but it is also quite relaxing as you can read or play games with the family and see the landscape pass you by. We decided to pay for first class-tickets to have a bit more luxury which was especially welcome in the sleeper trains. All was expertly arranged by [treinreiswinkel.nl](http://treinreiswinkel.nl).

The map shows the Scandinavia leg of our trip.



The **itinerary in more detail** was as follows:

24 February

The trip conveniently started at the central station of Utrecht, the Netherlands, where we live. We left at 15:07 towards Stockholm, Sweden, with changes in Amersfoort (Netherlands), Osnabrück (Germany) and Hamburg (Germany). From Hamburg, a sleeper train towards Stockholm (Sweden) departed at ca 20:30. We arrived at Stockholm at 09:55. We walked to our boat hotel.

25 - 26 February

We stayed at boat hotel MS Mälardrottningen near the central station of Stockholm. We visited the city, and especially enjoyed the old town (Gamla Stan).

27 February

We took city bus 53 to the Viking Line docks where we boarded the ferry towards Turku (Finland). It left at 07:45. Although we traveled by day, we had a personal hut booked which was quite useful. Nice birding while sailing out of Sweden (four White-tailed Eagles) and also near the Aland Islands (Finland), including a flock of Long-tailed Ducks. Arrived at 19:50 in the dark in Turku where we saw a hint of the northern light. Note that there is a time difference of an hour between Sweden and Finland. From Turku, we took the train to Tampere where we changed to a sleeper train towards Kemi (Finland), situated on the northern shore of the Bothnian Bay. We arrived at Kemi at ca 07:50 on 28 February.

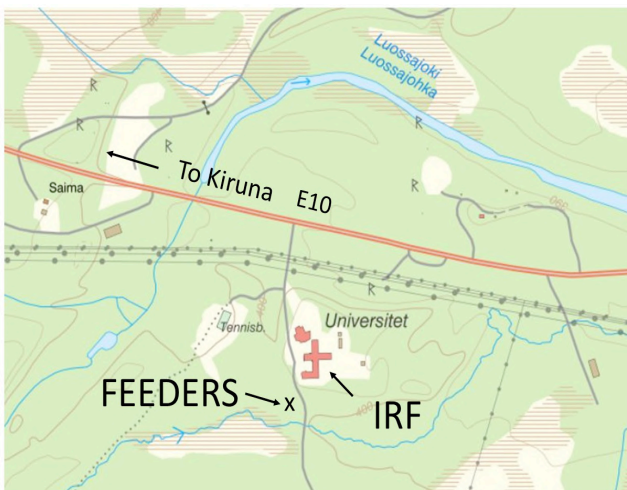
28 February

Kemi is known for its annual snow castle so we paid this site a visit. Unfortunately, it had been decided not to built it this winter but the boys still had fun sleighing down the hills there. During the late morning we decided to catch the local bus to Lulea (Sweden) as our train towards our next destination would start there. At the border, we had to switch buses. In the afternoon, we arrived at Lulea and had time for some dinner in the restaurant near the train station. Our train left at ca 16:30 (clocks again adjusted) and after a short break due to a police action (which later proved a misunderstanding) we arrived somewhat later than planned at Kiruna train station. From there, free shuttle buses run to the new city center. We were booked in the Kiruna-Scandic Hotel which was perfect. Tried to see the northern light but it was not to be. Unfortunately, my wife got quite sick, presumably because of food poisoning. Fortunately, she felt somewhat better in the morning.

1 March

As a birder, I was looking forward to this morning at Kiruna, as this was my chance to see a few birds, including, hopefully, one or two lifers. After searching the internet, I found the email-address of Lotta Nygård who lives in Kiruna. She was unfortunately unable to make it but she brought me into contact with Eva-Britt Lindberg who, together with her husband Roland, wanted to take me out for a few hours. Lotta furthermore provided the email-address of Patrick Åström, a birder living in Abisko.

In the Netherlands, I had already learned about a bird feeder near the IRF (Institutet För Rymdfysik) east of Kiruna where some boreal species could be seen. There are actually two there of which one in the forest is the best (marked with x on map below, kindly provided by resident birder Benny Modig).



The feeding station was extremely productive with my most-wanted lifer Siberian Jay already present at our arrival. We furthermore saw many Bullfinches and Great and Willow Tits, and we were also rewarded after a while with two Pine Grosbeaks and two Siberian Tits. The latter species even came very briefly to my hand where I held some peanuts. Four Red Squirrels also checked me out while the Siberian Jays boldly came to scavenge some meat parts that Eva-Britt had brought. Needless to say I was very happy with all these sightings! Later on, we could visit the IRF where some artefacts were displayed that had been brought in and out of space. We watched the first feeder from the cantina but this one was less spectacular although we saw the only Eurasian Tree Sparrow of my trip.

After this, we visited a second feeding site along the road from Kiruna to Kurravaara. From the south, just after crossing the powerline, take the track to the left and park at the barrier. After a little walk along the main track (parallelling the Kurravaara-road) one can find a feeding station at your left, hidden in the forest. After having visited the feeder at IRP, Great Spotted Woodpecker was the only new trip bird there but several other interesting species are possible like Grey-headed Woodpecker.

After this quick round of birding, I arrived back at the hotel so that we could pack for the next part of the trip to Abisko Turiststation. Due to the weather, a bus would unfortunately replace the train, and it would leave somewhat later than the train. We however misjudged that the shuttle bus to the train station had fixed departure times and did not run directly prior to the bus leaving. Long story short, we suddenly had to find our way to the train station via several city buses. Fortunately, we managed and, after an hour driving through a snowy landscape, we arrived at our destination of Abisko Turiststation in the late afternoon. We were shown our nice cabin for the night, after which we learned that the restaurant was fully booked. We fortunately managed to buy some basic food in the very small shop to prepare a very basic meal. After dinner, we had nice views of the lake and the far-away mountains from the main windows of our cabin. But no matter how long we looked, we did not see the northern light...

A few minutes before midnight, I was emailing Patrick Åström for advice on birding spots or special birds in Abisko for the next day, when he emailed back that there was a spectacular show of northern light going on. I still did not see anything from the windows so I rushed outside, and there it was indeed... (both photographs below by the Dutch Van der Hoop-family who had booked the same tour as us). It thus did not happen in front of us but instead right above us...



After waking up the rest of the family, we enjoyed the spectacle for a long time in the cold wind and snow. Very happy, we finally went to sleep.

## 2 March

After having breakfast in the restaurant, we had a whole morning left of walking in the national park. We opted to walk the orange trail that is also known as the Njakajaure Nature Trail. It was beautiful but almost completely birdless. I had hoped for Willow Grouse but that was not to be.

After that, I walked the blue trail past the Sami houses exhibition while the family enjoyed some tea and other drinks in the restaurant. Again, no birds! We left at 16:00 to Narvik (Norway) by train to arrive there at about 17:45. We walked to the Breidablikk Guesthouse (<https://www.visitnarvik.com/breidablikk-guesthouse>) to stay the night. Diner at the local Burger King as all restaurants already closed. A Red Fox in the street observed from the room was interesting.

### 3 March

Nice breakfast with a fly-by White-tailed Eagle. After a morning in the Amfi mall, we boarded the train back to Sweden at ca 15:00. Nice ride through the mountains back to Abisko, Kiruna, Lulea and all the way to Stockholm. In the dark, a last effort to see the northern light but without success.

### 4 March

We had arrived in Stockholm at ca 10:45 (somewhat later than scheduled) but were still in time to catch the train to Copenhagen (Denmark). There we checked in at Hotel the Square, after which we got a tour through the city by an old friend of my wife. Copenhagen appeared to be a very nice city and both the old harbour and Christiania are very interesting sites to visit.

### 5 March

An early start (07:30) towards Hamburg, where we changed trains towards Osnabruck and then towards Utrecht. At home in time to visit the local Pixies-show in TivoliVredenburg. Excellent ending of an excellent trip.

### List of bird species

The table below details all bird observations (and a few of mammals) during the trip as far as it concerns those in Sweden, Finland and Norway. Most interesting observations have been detailed in the detailed itinerary above. Where I divide observations on a date (with an /), it means that the day was spent at multiple sites. For instance, on 27 February, the observations before / are for the Sweden-part while the observations after / refer to the Aland Islands.

### Thank you

A big thank you to the local birders at Kiruna and Abisko for all their help and making my birding a success: Lotta Nygård, Roland and Eva-Britt Lindberg, Benny Modig and Patrick Åström. Also thanks to the Van der Hoop-family who sent us their beautiful photographs of the northern light at Abisko, resulting in lasting memories of this special occasion for us.

	25-feb	26-feb	27-feb	28-feb	01-mrt	02-mrt	03-mrt	04-mrt	05-mrt	tot
Mute Swan	1	5	c/c						10	1
Greylag Goose									3	2
Tufted Duck	2m	2m	c/c					20/-	c	3
Common Eider			-/m							4
Long-tailed Duck			-/30							5
Common Goldeneye			c/c							6
Goosander	m	6	c/c							7
Mallard	m		c/c	2/-				c/-	c	8
Red-throated Loon			-/1							9
Little Grebe	1	1								10
Great Cormorant	20	5	c/c							11
Grey Heron								-/10		12
White-tailed Eagle			4/-				1/-			13
Eurasian Sparrowhawk							1/-			14
Common Buzzard									2	15
Golden Eagle	ad									16
Eurasian Coot	1	1	-/c							17
Black-headed Gull			-/c					-/c	c	18
Common Gull		1	c/-							19
European Herring Gull	10	10	c/c				c/-	c/c	c	20
Great Black-backed Gull			3/1							21
Great Spotted Woodpecker					-/1					22
White-throated Dipper				1/-						23
Willow Tit					2/2	2				24
Siberian Tit					2/-					25
Blue Tit		2		2/-	2/-					26
Great Tit					6/c	2				27
Eurasian Jay					-/2					28
<b>Siberian Jay</b>					2/-					29
Common Magpie	5	1		c	c	2	c/-	c/c	c	30
Western Jackdaw	c			2/4	4		2/-	c/c	c	31
Hooded Crow	10		c/c	c	c		c/2	c/c	c	32
Common Raven	4		1/-	2/-	2/-	2	-/2			33
House Sparrow			3/-	h/-		3		-/c	c	34
Eurasian Tree Sparrow					1/-					35
European Greenfinch			h/-		4/2		2/-			36
Pine Grosbeak					2/-					37
Eurasian Bullfinch					10/10					38
Red Squirrel					4/-					
Moose					-/1					
Red Fox						1 (Narvik)	-/1			