

Birding trip report

Norway & Finland



March 25 – April 2, 2016

Wim Heylen

Andy Van de Water

Franky Van de Water

Jef Vanswevelt

Jan Vercammen

Itinerary

March 25	Evening flight with Finnair from Amsterdam to Helsinki.
March 26	Morning flight with Finnair from Helsinki to Ivalo. Rental car pickup at 9:00, drive north to Vestre Jakobselv.
March 27	Birding Varanger from Vestre Jakobselv to Vardø.
March 28	Birding around Vardø, drive to Pasvik.
March 29	Birding Pasvik in the morning, drive to Kiilopää in the afternoon.
March 30	Birding Kiilopää in the morning, drive to Kuusamo.
March 31	Roadside birding in Kuusamo area.
April 1	Roadside birding in Kuusamo area, drive to Oulu.
April 2	Early morning Finnair flight from Oulu to Helsinki, with immediate connection to Paris.

Logistics

Flights

We had booked flights from Brussels via Helsinki to Ivalo, and back from Oulu via Helsinki to Brussels (375.59 EUR per person incl. 30 EUR baggage allowance).

Unfortunately due to the terrorist attacks at Brussels airport 3 days before our departure, we had to rebook and fly via nearby airports (departure via Amsterdam, return via Paris). This did not impact our planning schedule much and we lost no birding time in the field. Finnair paid for our train tickets to get to the alternate airports, so all in all we certainly cannot complain considering the circumstances.

The outbound flight included an overnight stopover in Helsinki airport, where we got some sleep in the (free) [Kainuu lounge](#) near gate 30.

Car

We rented a Volkswagen Caravelle minivan with Budget, using [Sunny Cars](#) as the broker. We paid 853 EUR for the rental, plus an additional 252.94 EUR to be allowed to take the car from Finland into Norway (~75 EUR), and for a one-way fee (pick-up in Ivalo, drop-off in Oulu, ~175 EUR). The car was equipped with snow tyres, which is essential because there was still a lot of snow in most places. Having said that, the roads were generally clear and we had almost no problems with road conditions (read on for one notable exception).

Gear

To protect ourselves against the arctic climate, we had brought [thermal underwear](#), power stretch fleeces, windbreaker jackets, soft/hard shell jackets, skiing/hiking trousers (G1000), two pairs of gloves, and other winter clothing. This worked pretty well, perhaps so because the weather was

quite warm for the time of year (usually around or just above 0°C), although the wind chill factor (particularly in Varanger) could be quite strong.

One additional piece of clothing that I brought along was a pair of gaiters, which I found quite useful because it avoids snow getting into your boots when walking through deep snow and it keeps your trousers dry.

We didn't bring snow rockets, perhaps they could have come in handy on some occasions to go off track, but we felt they are not really required.

We went camping on two nights, but this wasn't a great success because our gear wasn't up for the challenge. Even though we had brought [liners](#) to provide additional insulation to our sleeping bags, this wasn't enough to stop the cold coming in from below. A proper second sleeping bag in combination with a heavy-duty sleeping mat would probably have made quite a difference. The other problem with camping is that the terrain is either heavily snow-covered, or is frozen solid, so either way it is a challenge to anchor the tents to the ground.

Information

We relied on the fantastic [book](#) "Birding Varanger - The Biotope guide to the best bird sites in Arctic Norway" as the site guide for Varanger and Pasvik. I would strongly recommend it if you are visiting the area.

We also used two of Dave Gosney's books:

- [Finding Birds in Lapland](#) (covers Varanger, Pasvik and north Finland)
- [Finding Birds in South Finland](#) (covers Kuusamo area)

Internet resources used include www.cloudbirders.com, tiira.fi, artsobservasjoner.no, finland.observado.org and norway.observado.org.

Useful Twitter accounts to follow for recent bird news are [@BiotopeOffice](#) and [@Finnmarkbirding](#).

Special thanks to Frederik Naedts, Mikko Halonen, and everyone else who responded to our pre-trip queries for providing recent information.

Daily account

Friday March 25th

Our flight from Brussels to Helsinki had been cancelled, so we went by train from Antwerp Central Station to Amsterdam, and flew to Helsinki from there. We spent the night at Helsinki airport in the (free) [Kainuu lounge](#) near gate 30.

Saturday March 26th

After an uneventful flight from Helsinki to Ivalo, we picked up our rental car and started heading north towards Varanger. Our first major stop was at [Neljän Tuulen Tupa](#), the famous roadside restaurant with bird feeders. We had lunch there and saw **Pine Grosbeak, Arctic Redpoll, Siberian Tit** and **Siberian Jay**.

After lunch we continued our journey and soon saw our first **Northern Hawk-Owl** and **Elk** along the road. In late afternoon we reached Varangerbotn (where we saw another **Elk**), and ended the birding day at Nesseby, picking up our first **Steller's Eiders, Black Guillemot, Long-tailed Ducks** and **White-tailed Eagles**.

We spent the night at [Vestre Jakobselv Camping](#) in a cabin (90 EUR).

Sunday March 27th

We started the day at Vadsø (**Steller's Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Snow Bunting, Mountain Hare**) and then visited the bird cliffs at Ekkerøy (many **Black-legged Kittiwakes, Black Guillemot**). In the outer bay, a large pod of **White-beaked Dolphins** was present, unfortunately they were a bit distant.

At Indre Kiberg, we spotted a large mixed raft of **Eiders** and **King Eiders** offshore, and started to see the first **Glaucous Gulls, Shags** and alcids.

The harbour of Svartnes provided the best **King Eider** views of the trip. After crossing to Vadsø island, we spent some time at the Hasselnes shelter, overlooking the Hornøya bird cliff, seeing lots of **Common Guillemots, Puffins, Razorbills**, etc.

Spent the night at [Skagen Bo & Havfiske](#) (1000 NOK for 2 rooms).

Monday March 28th

This morning we went looking for **Willow Grouse** at Svartnes. After tracking through huge snow-covered fields for an hour, we went back to the car and continued our search on the other side of the road, in the area west of Vardø airport, where we found 11 birds almost immediately.

We then spent some time at the Steilnes hide on Vardø island, scanning the sea for Killer Whales, as some had been seen a few days before, but no luck.

At midday we went to Vardø harbour to catch the 12:00 boat to Hornøya, but unfortunately the trip was cancelled because there was too much wind, and the skipper was worried that we would not be able to safely land on the island. This was a major disappointment because the trip to Hornøya was our best chance to see Brünnich's Guillemot.

So we resorted to plan B and returned to the Hasselnes shelter to try and see the guillemot from the shore. This was quite challenging because of the distance, but the weather and light conditions were very good, and after a while everybody managed to see 2 **Brünnich's Guillemots** swimming amongst the alcids (many 1000s). Other birds seen from there included **King** and **Steller's Eider**, **Common** and **Black Guillemot**, **Razorbill**, and many **Puffins**.

After this glorious moment we started our long drive towards Pasvik. Best birds en route included **White-tailed Eagle**, a fly-by **Gyrfalcon** and a **Northern Hawk-Owl**.

This night we camped in the snow near Nyrud, and saw a fantastic display of aurora borealis.

Tuesday March 29th

Roadside birding in Pasvik from early morning until midday produced **Willow Grouse** (6 observations), **Siberian Tit** (rather common in the southern part of the valley), **Pine Grosbeak** (singing), **Arctic Redpoll**, **Siberian Jay**, **Northern Goshawk**, **Whooper Swan** and no less than 5 **Northern Hawk-Owls**.

The rest of the day was spent driving back towards Finland, where we camped at a large roadside parking area (which had been mostly cleared of snow) along a minor road close to Kiilopää. Again another display of aurora borealis, albeit not as spectacular as the day before.

Wednesday March 30th

From the Kiilopää ski resort, we walked up the mountain for about 1.5km and found **Ptarmigan** quite easily.

The rest of the day was spent roadside birding while driving down to Kuusamo, with a few stops and walks along the way, trying for Eurasian Pygmy-Owl, Capercaillie and Great Grey Owl. No new birds were seen though.

In the evening, we tried for Great Grey Owl at a location where an owl had been seen a few weeks before, but unfortunately we managed to get the car stuck in a snow-filled ditch. After some frantic attempts to get the car out (with some much appreciated help from the local Fins), we had to call for assistance and were finally pulled out by a tow truck. Luckily the car was not damaged.

Spent the night at a very average motel in Ruka (100 EUR for 2 rooms).

Thursday March 31st

We spent the entire day birding the Kuusamo area, focusing specifically on Capercaillie, Great Grey Owl and Ural Owl.

Capercaillie was found very quickly, with a splendid male sitting on the road in early morning. Throughout the day we saw 2 more males and 1 female. None of the birds were displaying unfortunately, perhaps it was too early in the season.

Later that morning, as we were checking out a stakeout for Great Grey Owl, we were extremely fortunate to find a roosting **Ural Owl** sitting in a roadside tree. Unfortunately it flushed almost immediately, so views were brief and frustrating, and the snow conditions (~1 meter) didn't allow us to try and find it back.

Finding a Great Grey Owl turned out to be the biggest challenge. Using tiira.fi and other internet sources, we had mapped out quite a large number of locations across Kuusamo where the owl had been seen, recently and in previous years, and we meticulously checked all places carefully.

Finally, just as we were about to call it a day, there it was: a **Great Grey Owl** making a textbook appearance, sitting on top of a shed in the middle of a field. We all got decent views through our binoculars, but unfortunately, this owl too decided it wouldn't stay around for long, and flew off before we could put our spotting scopes on it.

The owl had been repeatedly seen in this area (northwest of Ruka) in the weeks leading up to our trip, so it was on one of our most promising stakeouts, but it wasn't easy at all. We had already visited the place in the morning and missed it. Also when we returned to the same place the next morning (this time knowing exactly where to look), we missed it again.

Other interesting birds seen during this day included **Black Grouse** (4 sightings, usually perched high up in roadside trees), **White-throated Dipper**, another **Northern Hawk-Owl**, **Pine Grosbeak**, several pairs of **Whooper Swan**, 2 **Elk** and an **American Mink** doing ice-fishing.

Spent the night in a ski cabin in Ruka – so much better than yesterday's motel, including fire place and sauna, for the same price (100 EUR).

Friday April 1st

In the morning we returned to the Great Grey Owl site, but we couldn't find it. We spent the rest of the morning touring Kuusamo and saw plenty more **Black Grouse**, and yesterday's **Northern Hawk-Owl** again. The only new bird for the trip was a calling **Bohemian Waxwing**.

We then started driving towards Oulu and went birding in the afternoon along the coast just southwest of Oulu, but this didn't produce much.

We spent the night in a roadside hotel/gas station/pizza restaurant near Liminka, all hotels near Oulu were full because of an event (170 EUR).

Saturday April 2nd

Early morning return flight from Oulu via Helsinki to Paris, where we took the high speed train to Brussels.

Bird list

The more interesting observations of our trip were all entered in observado.org using the [ObsMapp](#) app for Android. You can easily access them, including exact GPS location, via [this link](#).

Contact

In case of any questions, drop me a mail: heylen.wim@gmail.com