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Travelogue style.



Norway Wildlife Travel Article

The blurb about the holiday cottage left a few details out. It didn't mention the noisy neighbours. It didn't mention the sirens to be heard intermittently day and night. It didn't mention that, every morning, lines of children would sally past our cottage with anxious mothers in tow. And it made no mention of the local crime wave.

But that's Arctic Norway. It's a melting pot of birds, and our visit in July coincided with the tail end of the breeding season, an anxious time of high activity and high stakes, when all life is set at top volume. The neighbours in Ekkerøy were the 40,000 pairs of Kittiwakes on the cliffs half a mile away, and their young were close to the flying stage. The adults were commuting back and forth, trying to dodge the Arctic Skuas that tried to ambush them as they came in with a meal. We quickly came to recognise when the Arctic Skua had been successful at stealing food. It would fly in towards its own nest, uttering a call that sounds like a cross between the Kittiwake's caterwaul and an ambulance siren. The noise went on throughout the 24 hours of daylight.

As for the mothers and children, these were Eiders. Here, up on Norway's celebrated Varangerfjord, the rocky coast had taken on the feel of one big nursery. There were broods of their fluffy chicks everywhere, crowding the shallows in a perpetual school-run-like melee, each duckling like a floating bumblebee, dark brown with two pale stripes on the head. As you drove along the coast you could almost mark your progress by Eider families and crèches. Our accommodation was 23 family units to the nearest town.

My wife Carolyn and I had taken up an offer from Din Tur to take a look around Varangerfjord, one of Norway's finest and most celebrated birding areas. Din Tur have come up with the brilliant idea of providing people with a self-catering holiday complete with accommodation, GPS and extensive file telling you where the birds are. So, if you wish to see breeding Little Buntings, for example, you look up the bird in the file, enter the site number in the GPS and it takes you to the spot. Then, hopefully, you do your bit and find the bird.

We were determined to do our bit, but I have to admit that we had so many distractions around Ekkerøy, our base, that it took us a while to go further afield and look for localised species. The cottage nestled on the island's narrow spit connecting it to the mainland, giving us sea views both sides, and the garden list was pretty formidable on its own. You could hardly miss the summering White-billed Diver – it floated just offshore and we half expected it to knock on our door and ask for fish at any moment. Red-throated and Black-throated Divers were visible too, along with such other delights as breeding Long-tailed Ducks and Arctic Terns, the latter ensuring that the Kittiwakes weren't the only loudmouths.

Nesseby Church, 60km to the west, lured us out, though. It was a place that I can remember reading about as a child. It has long been famous as a stake-out for breeding Red-necked Phalaropes and, to my delight we found several of these colourful waders spiralling on the same small pool that must now have provided sightings for generations of birdwatchers. What the bird books don't say is what a magical place this is, the

church set apart right next to the fjord, amidst the grandeur of the waters and surrounding hills. Phalaropes or no Phalaropes, we fell in love with it.

Another place that everybody visits here is the island pair of Hornøya and Reinøya, just off the town of Vardø. Forget the scenery – this is the place to find those northern specialities, Brünnich's Guillemots, along with a slew of other auks. Normally you take a boat out for a few hours and land on Hornøya, but the day we visited the whole area was fogbound, so we were reduced to standing at the eastern end of town and straining our eyes over the sea. Eventually, with much effort, we managed to get some good views of Brünnich's Guillemots, but it wasn't a glamorous way to do it.

Still, the fog gave us time to look around Vardø. It is somewhat peculiar. It is the administrative centre of the Varanger region, yet inconveniently, actually lies on a small offshore island. It is connected by a 2km long and very smart tunnel, which gives you the impression that you are about to drive somewhere major, but when you do arrive Vardø seems no larger than many a seaside village in Cornwall. It is also dominated by a very tall Lutheran Church, with a pinnacle-like tower, so that it looks oddly elongated vertically, like a church in a trick mirror. With its cathedral-like proportions it shares its town's delusions of grandeur. The regular congregation barely exceeds double figures.

An hour to the north of Vardø is Hamningberg, a very small old-time fishing village that is so far-away, so savagely isolated, that the Nazis overlooked it in their policy of smashing Arctic Norway to smithereens. The road to here, open only in summer, serves up a landscape of wind-scarred cliffs, rocky shores, and bizarre ridges of sharp rock. Every nudge north seems like an adventure, a stepping on the toes of the slumbering Arctic. And indeed for the bird tourist, Hamningberg holds the tempting promise of Arctic rarities. Gulls and ducks that breed further north or east often spend a lazy summer here, wiling away their adolescence.

The easiest of these rarities to find are Glaucous and Iceland Gulls, of which we unearthed several. The harbour on the other side of the village from the self-styled "Café at the end of Europe" (which also sells waffles) was occupied by a splendid selection of gulls, of various plumages and ages. Carolyn was unimpressed with the gulls, but the atmosphere here is theatrical. The Arctic Ocean stretches away into the distance, and your eyes wander to the far horizon, where the next stop is the permanent ice around the North Pole.

Before we visited Hamningberg I had run into a birdwatcher who told me, as we each checked through a moulting flock of 1000 Eiders (one is never at one's best in these situations), that he had seen an adult King and Steller's Eider side-by-side close to Hamningberg (cue intense irritation). I therefore decided to check every sea duck along the coast to replicate his sighting. It took hours, but eventually I managed to locate a single immature male King Eider among a large flock of Common Eiders and Goosanders quite some way out to sea, in the fog. I was pretty chuffed at finding it.



→ Our plight with the King Eider did show that July can be tricky for some of the area's rarities. In winter and spring there are many hundreds of both King and Steller's Eiders in the Varanger area, but most are gone by June, and you are left with scraps. I took another five days to track down a Steller's, at a town called Båtsfjord.

But July also has a major advantage that I had not realised until one utterly magical moment in the middle of our trip. Driving the short distance between Vadsø and Ekkerøy one afternoon, Carolyn suddenly asked me to stop. A group of Reindeer had crossed the road and she wanted to try to photograph them.

Fair enough. This had become something of a ritual; the large mammals were everywhere, but it was hard to get the perfect front-on shot. I remained in the car and my eyes wandered to the waters of the fjord lapping a couple of hundred metres away. I began to monitor the approach of some dark clouds from over on the Russian side, carrying rain. In front of them, a few shafts of sunlight lit up the sea.

Suddenly something gleaming white appeared just offshore, the size of an overturned boat, only to disappear immediately again beneath the surface. In that instant my knees went weak, my heart leapt and I yelled at Carolyn. The Reindeer scattered. I knew straightaway that this could only be one thing – a Beluga, the majestic, incomparable white whale of the High Arctic.

Actually, it wasn't just one Beluga, it was a pod of twenty or more. For the next hour they remained close to shore, often several surfacing at a time. We had them to ourselves, and they were near enough for us to hear them splashing and breathing. We had these delectable creatures for company, in front of a suitably formidable brooding storm-scape, on Varanger's hallowed shore. It was heaven.

Those were the sort of noisy neighbours we liked.

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