

## Mammals and birds in the Norwegian fjells

*"It is by far the most expensive country I ever visited"*

Everybody I know who has been to Norway. They are right.

*"It's Scandinavia, don't expect to see wildlife around every corner"*

Crosbill Guides

*"There is no bad weather, there is only bad clothing"*

Norwegian saying... Yeah right!

*"In Varanger, rain only seems to fall horizontally, never vertically"*

Trip report

*"You think you're on the surface of the moon"*

My dad, describing the barren tundra landscape near the North Cape

*"If you see one, don't look it in the eyes and slowly walk backwards. Do not run!"*

Nyrud police officer talking about Brown bears.

Jan Kelchtermans said *"You'll see one"*

In the previous two weeks Iwan Lewylle, Jochen Kempeneers and I went to Scandinavia trying to see wildlife typical for the Fjell ecosystem. In Norway and Sweden, *fjell* (Norwegian) or *fjäll* (Swedish) usually refers to any mountain or upland high enough that forest will not naturally survive at the top.

We were very lucky to do this trip this year, since 2011 is now considered one of the better "rodent years" in the last decades. Lots of rodents, and many rodent predators guaranteed.

We looked for Musk ox, Mountain lemming, Arctic fox and Great snipe in Dovrefjell National Park together with Jan Kelchtermans, and subsequently went North to the Varanger Peninsula for Arctic species. We also visited the Pasvik valley, an area with some of the most pristine forest and bogs in Scandinavia.

### DOVRE

Musk oxen need a very dry, cold and barren type of habitat. They are the only species of large herbivore capable of surviving such frozen wasteland. These large goats were reintroduced in 1932 in the Dovrefjell nature reserve, one of the driest places in Norway.

Notorious for being moody and often aggressive, we looked for and approached them with great care. The Dovre landscape comprises hidden hillsides and cracks which often leads to stumbling upon a Musk ox. It takes some time for the animals to get to know you, only then can one come close enough to photograph these rough beauties.





Walking curtain

A very sought after and seldom seen carnivore in mainland Europe is the Arctic fox. After several hours of hiking a den was smelled/located underneath an abandoned shed. Sitting downwind between the rocks we could observe these small elusive foxes, hunting in the twilight of the arctic nights. We don't know whether this particular fox was reintroduced (big project going on) or one of the original foxes. It was not collared.



Arctic fox overlooking its territory.



Dovre also produced many Mountain lemmings, one Forest lemming (in Sweden) and two Siberian jays.



Mountain lemming photographed at night



Siberian jay



juvenile Tengmalm's owl

An ornithological masterpiece that all of us had been willing to see for a very long time is a Great snipe lek. Between 20-30 males were lekking at one time, for several hours. I took pictures until my camera decided that there was too little light coming in. Fantastic!



Great snipes lekking



After three days of Southern Norway we traveled North of the Arctic circle towards Varanger. This remote part of Scandinavia is the only area in Europe which has a permafrost, as part of a Tundra ecosystem. Six days of tracking in cold and often wet conditions delivered us sightings of Humpback whale, White-sided Dolphin, White-beaked dolphin, Grey and Harbour Seal, Tundra vole, Northern red-backed vole, Grey Red-backed vole, Snowshoe hare and also King eider (30), Stellers eider (20), all six European auks, Arctic redpoll, Gyr Falcons at nest and many more. Only on the last day we managed to find a Yellow-billed diver.





Iwan brought interesting taxonomical literature, describing how to split certain red-backed voles based on 16s ribosomal RNA sequencing.



The rock formations found here belong to the oldest on earth and make for a spectacular landscape.



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Red-necked phalarope foraging



© Karl Van Ginderdeuren





Hornoya



Streamer boy flying above the tundra



Long-tailed skua flying past



Nesseby church bathing in glorious light



Puffins





© Karl Van Ginderdeuren

Humpback whale going after schools of Capelin (lodde) together with dozens of fishing vessels



© Karl Van Ginderdeuren

Adult summer plumage Little auk: A very rare sight in mainland Europe. I never came across Little auk sightings in the reports I read



White-tailed eagle in sunlight



White-tailed eagle nest occupied by Gyr falcons!! (Thanks to Peter Claus & co for this)  
There was a path going underneath the nest so people were passing here several times a day. Photo taken with 500mm + converter



A triple rainbow panorama it seemed. Apparently a double rainbow with a “tertiary” reflection.







Cod drying



On the tundra we followed a fox towards its den. There I could photograph the intimate behaviour between mother and cubs







Finally, in our quest of seeing a Brown bear not near a dumpster or (expensive) feeding place, we visited the pristine Pasvik valley. The first day we went for birds and saw three Pine grosbeaks and several Siberian tits. Two more Forest lemmings were added to the mammal list.





Bear droppings showing the bears were mainly feeding on grass



Bear scratch marks on tree

To see a bear, we changed our diurnal rhythm and slept during the daytime. At night we scanned the bogs on the border between Russia and Norway. All of this in hope of seeing “Fat Teddy” as Iwan likes to call them. On the night of the 9<sup>th</sup> of June we had been scanning for several hours when I saw a bear crossing the road. We went to the area where it had walked and started tracking it’s prints up the slope. Immediately the wary bear was on to us (it must have heard us) and sneaked away. We could follow it for a few seconds before losing sight. Too short, but very cool nevertheless.



Siberian tit



Juvenile Hawk owl



It was supposed to be a summer holiday...

In total we saw 22 mammal species and some very cool birds.



## Species list

**Brown bear** *Ursus arctus* (1 in Pasvik valley)

**Arctic fox** *Vulpes lagopus* (1 near den in Dovre)

**Red fox** *Vulpes vulpes* (several in Varanger)

**Musk ox** *Ovibos moschatus* (10-20 seen in Dovre)

**Harbour porpoise** *Phocoena phocoena* (quite common in Varanger fjord)

**Humpback whale** *Megaptera novaeangliae* (1 seen during 20min at Hornoya)

**White-seaded dolphin** *Lagenorhynchus acutus* (at least one seen close to Batsfjord)

**White beaked dolphin** *Lagenorhynchus albirostris* (several swimming with humpback whale)

**Harbour seal** *Phoca vitulina* (several in Varanger)

**Grey seal** *Halichoerus grypus* (very common in Varanger)

**Mountain lemming** *Lemmus lemmus* (very common in Dovre)

**Wood lemming** *Myopus schisticolor* (1 close to Dovre in Sweden, 2 in the extreme southern point of Pasvik)

**Musk rat** *Ondatra zibethicus* (1 in Pasvik)

**Northern red-backed vole** *Myodes rutilus* (1 in Pasvik)

**Tundra Vole** *Microtus oeconomus* (very common)

**Grey Red-backed Vole** *Myodes rufocanus* (most seen in rocky areas along Varanger coastline)

**Hare** *Lepus europaeus* (seen in Dovre)

**Mountain hare** *Lepus timidus* (seen in Dovre and Pasvik)

**Elk** *Alces alces* (several seen in Dovre and Pasvik)

**Roe deer** *Capreolus capreolus* (Seen close to Oslo)

**Reindeer** *Rangifer tarandus* (many farmed Reindeer seen)

**American mink** *Neovison vison* (one in Varanger)

What did we miss:

Great Grey and Snowy owl: Hardly breeding in Finmark despite good numbers of prey.

We did not see otters (despite scanning a lot), nor did we have sightings of any bats during 16 days...