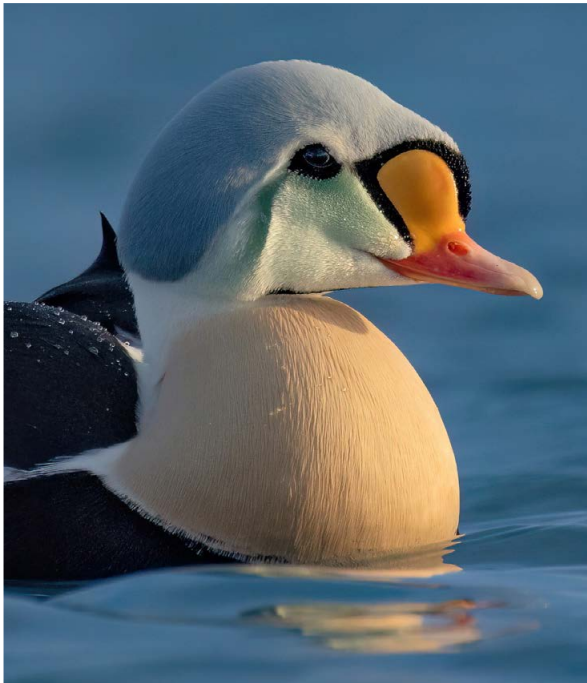


VARANGER

Trip-report 2024



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King Eider. Photo: Neil Hilton

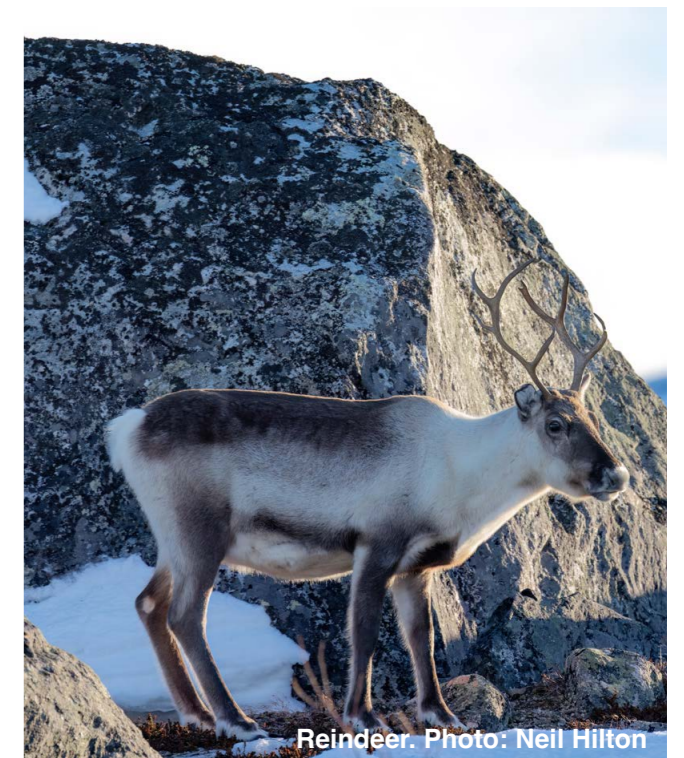


Steller's Eider. Photo: Neil Hilton

Tour operator: **Birdsafari Sweden / Karlmark resor** Text: **Daniel Green**
 Tour leader: **Daniel Green** Photo: **Daniel Green, Neil Hilton**
 Participants: **Samantha Nerrie (AUS), Neil Hilton, Julie Hilton (UK)**

Day 1, Thursday 22:nd February - Oslo - Kirkenes - Båtsfjord

We arrive to Gardemoen, Oslo airport well in time so we get a bit of waiting time at the gate, before boarding. It's mild and drizzly in Oslo but the ground is covered with snow. We arrive a sunny **Kirkenes** (after 2 hours flytime) with -4° C and a cold wind. We manage to get our rental and the luggage out quite swiftly and can start our journey northwards towards **Båtsfjord**, right on the Arctic coast. Facing Berings Sea the fjords along the way are partly covered with ice, they are usually open this time of the year, so apparently there's been



Reindeer. Photo: Neil Hilton

A really good seson for **Steller's Eider** in Båtsfjord, maybe the best so far with many (40+) birds around the floating hides both days. Also plenty of **King Eiders**, **Long-tailed Ducks** and **Common Eiders**, all offering excellent photo opportunities in different lights. Plenty of Gulls as well but noticeably fewer **Kittiwakes** this year and just one **Glaucous Gull** seen, they vary a lot between years. A small group of **Waxwings** were seen in the town. More **Ptarmigan** than previous years and **Hawk Owls** where present with 9 + 5 individuals on each transfer day across the peninsula. Species we've never seen up here in winter before was **Greater Scaup**, **Black Grouse**, **Northern Goshawk** and **Arctic Fox** (dark morph) - one of each. The dogsledding tour in the Pasvik Valley was a highlight as usual, with rewarding views and encounters of **Siberian Tits** and **Siberian Jays**.



The high plateau. Photo: Daniel Green



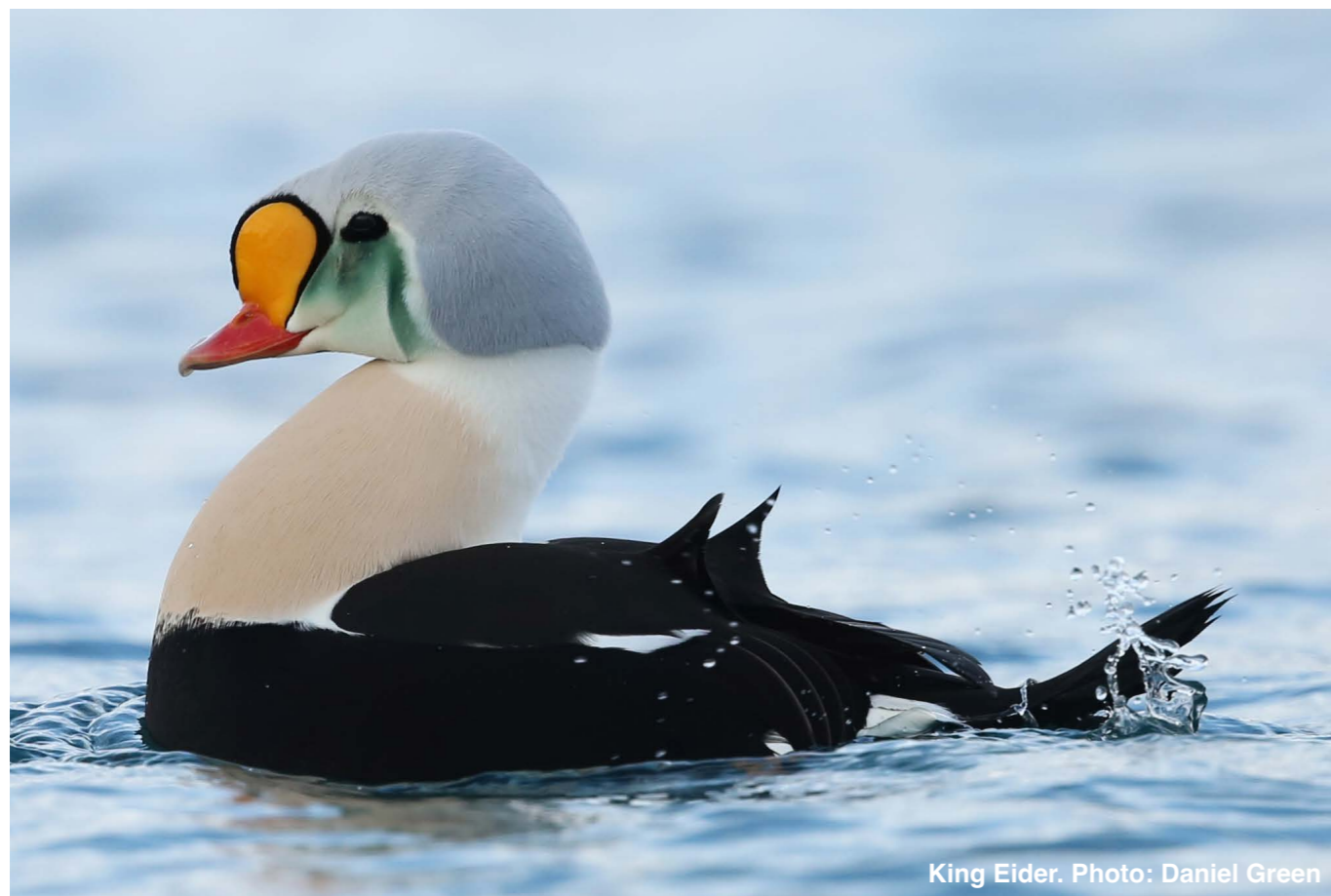
Båtsfjord. Photo: Daniel Green

a cold winter here. In one fjord there are a bunch of seals resting on the ice edge. A raft of 70 or so **Common Eiders** are the first ducks we see. We haven't driven an hour even when we spot the first **Hawk Owl** on a telegraph wire along the road. We step out and get some decent images before it takes off to search too far away in the birch forest. We get reminded that there's no chance to walk away to approach it since the snow depth is at least a meter or more here. We continue to spot Hawk Owls and by the time we reach **Varangerbotn** for a lunch stop we have seen no less than 6 **Hawk Owls**. We do not stop for everyone of them, but we certainly stop for two **Moose**, one of them lying down in the snow not far from the road. It gets up and walks across the road at very close range. A whole bunch of **Ptarmigan** (about a dozen) are suddenly crossing the road in front of us in a more open area. They get practically impossible to relocate once they've landed in the snow. Up in this habitat it's difficult to be sure whether they are Rock Ptarmigan or Willow Ptarmigan, could be either actually. They both become totally white in winter and only the black tail feathers make them stand out against the snow when they fly. As we get out of the car an adult **White-tailed Eagle** comes soaring (we are right by the coast here), maybe he flushed the Ptarmigan?

Bacon-wrapped hot dogs or waffles with brown cheese (local specialty) and coffee is on offer at the gas station in the small crossroad village **Varangerbotn** and then we're off again. **The Hawk Owl**-bonanza continues with another 2. They are spread out over a larger area this year. Last year we saw 9 on just 15 km of this part of the road, this year the 8 we've seen are during about 150 km of the road to Båtsfjord. Several groups of **reindeer** are appreciated photo-objects. We also stop to scan some garden feeders where we see birds, although just **Greenfinches, House Sparrows, Great Tits** and **Willow Tits** are seen. **Hooded**



European Elk. Photo: Neil Hilton



King Eider. Photo: Daniel Green

Crows and **Magpies** are also numerous up here. Luckily the road across the high-plateau is open so we don't have to drive with a snow plough in front of us (which can be the case if there is a blizzard alert). We do get some snow drift in the wind at the end of the drive though. As usual it feels really nice to arrive to Båtsfjord. We get a really good fish n chips-dinner at the Polar hotel to finish the day with.

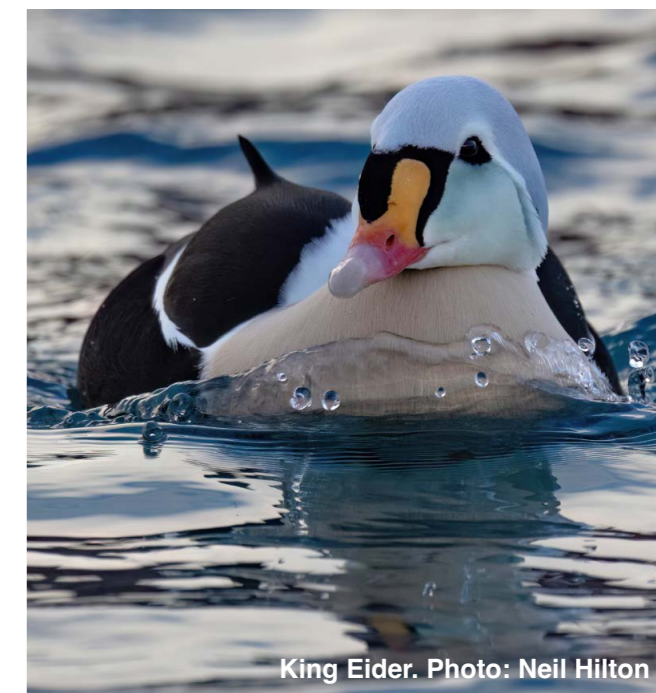
Day 2, Friday 23:rd February - Båtsfjord

Up early to grab a coffee in the hotel lobby and try on the arctic overalls before going out with our local guide John to the boat. The sky is relatively clear, temperature around zero, but a rather strong wind is blowing. Not causing any problems to get to the hides though. There are two floating hides in the harbor and our little group easily fits in one of them. We open all the hatches and post ourselves to wait for the dawn to come. It's a necessary routine to arrive to the hide before the break of dawn to not scare the birds away. This morning it takes a while til the birds start to arrive. First Gulls, then Crows, (just flying by) the first duck to appear is a single male **Steller's Eider**. Surprise! Soon followed by a pair. Could be seen as a sign in retrospect. The morning delivers plenty of **Steller's Eiders** around the hide during a majority of the time. About 40 birds or more, most of them males. They spend most of the time within photo distance also mixing with **Long-tailed Ducks, King Eiders** and **Common Eiders**. **The Steller's** show a lot of attitude, being charmingly active, poking each other, seemingly teasing and playing with each other and staying tightly together. Generally the birds move in very tight groups today, that's nice for photography and it's a bit typical during these windy days. The wind drops quite a bit during the morning though. **The King Eiders** are the most close swimming of the ducks (as usual) and one male appears several times on almost handshaking-distance - a really personal encounter. **Grey seals** pop up over the surface every now and then, impressively large animals even if we just see the head or the back and tail as they dive. A **Black Guillemot** in complete, jetblack summer plumage suddenly turns up close to the hide. A bit of a surprise since they normally mostly appear in the pale winter plumage up here this time of the year. Later we see several but none of them in the same perfect plumage.

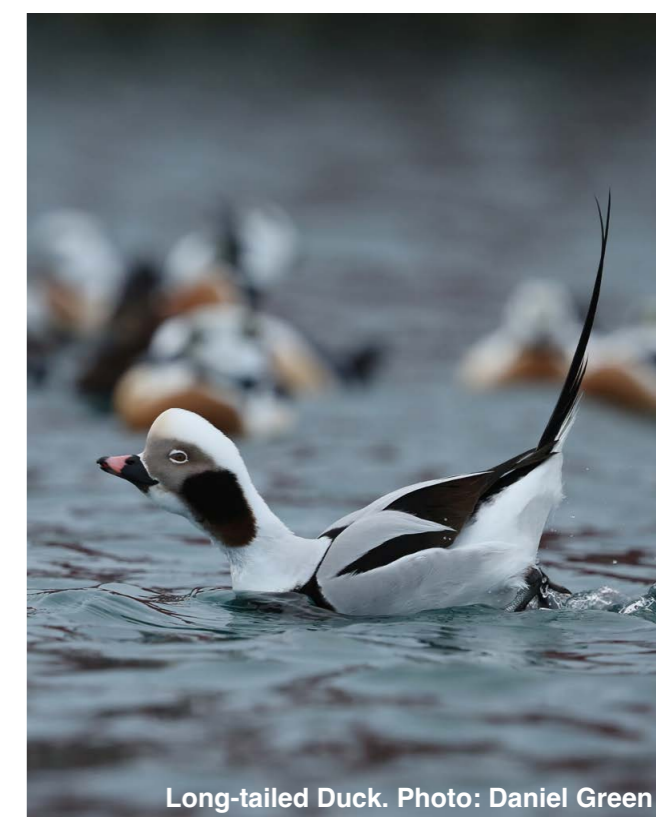
A young **Glaucous Gull** gets spotted as it appears soaring with other gulls (Herring mostly) quite near the hide. Just to disappear above and behind the hide. When John come and picks us up at



Hawk Owl. Photo: Daniel Green



King Eider. Photo: Neil Hilton



Long-tailed Duck. Photo: Daniel Green

about 10.30, we first spend some time with the **Purple Sandpipers** on the close shore. Sun is breaking through the clouds and if there's any bird that needs a bit of sunshine to stand out from the grey, rocky shores it's this one. They are also quite approachable with the boat and the light is from the right side. **Kittiwakes** haven't been very present yet today but as we get out with the boat at least we see some, could indicate a cold winter perhaps. The last years they seem to have increased every year. It takes a couple of Gull flocks to go through but then we relocate the juvenile **Glaucous Gull**. It's standing alone in the snow, posing. We get two chances on it, since it re-appears a 2.nd time further away. The bird is moulting a couple of wing feathers so it's easily identified to individual. We only find one new raft of 20+ **Steller's Eiders** far out on the other side of the fjord. But we are already more than happy with today's score of pictures on these gorgeous little arctic Ducks, so we couldn't ask for more. A **White-tailed Eagle** is up soaring in the wind.

Some turns with the boat against the wind make us get some real splashes of ice-cold, salt water over us. Lovely taste in the mouth but when it gets under your overall and into your underwear it's not as fun. Luckily it's time to return to land and there's even time for a really hot shower before

lunch. We get served bacon-wrapped chicken with a creamy mushroom sauce and fries. A lovely and well tasting meal. Who said Norwegians just have sandwiches for lunch??

Sun is shining even after this so we put dry clothes on and head out to explore the town. It pays off instantly, when we spot a **Waxwing** (Bohemian Waxwing) sitting on a wire along the main street. Soon 3 more appear together with the first, but then they just fly away never to be seen again. Quite exotic for Sam, the Australian lady on the tour. We walk slowly down the very icy main street, looking at some **Kittiwakes** sitting on nests on buildings, even the local supermarket - and some flocks of larger Gulls. Then we find a local bakery/café just as the sun descends and the wind picks up again. Some enjoy a Norwegian "semle" with a lot of whipped creme, local buns or just a plain coffee. Quite a moment, usually we don't do this kind of relaxed itinerary. :)

After that a brisk walk against the wind back to Polar hotel to get some afternoon rest (remember we got up at 4.15 this morning) time for developing pictures and getting together again at 6.30 for a drink before dinner. Our host and local guide John is joining us and telling stories of local history, his work here in Båtsfjord and future projects, including a summer lodge in nearby Syltefjord.



King Eiders. Photo: Neil Hilton



King Eider, female. Photo: Neil Hilton



Purple Sandpiper. Photo: Neil Hilton



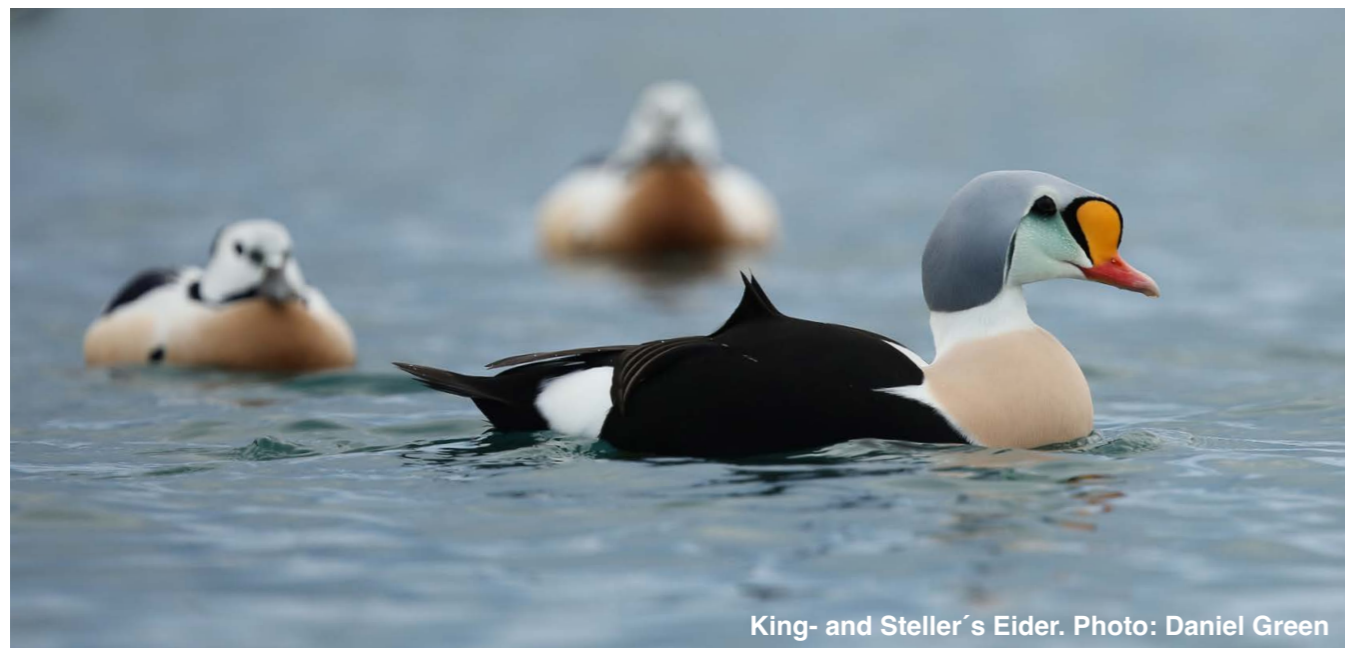
King Eider. Photo: Neil Hilton



View over the Varanger-peninsula. Photo: Daniel Green



Steller's Eider. Photo: Neil Hilton



King- and Steller's Eider. Photo: Daniel Green

Day 3, Saturday 24:th February - Båtsfjord

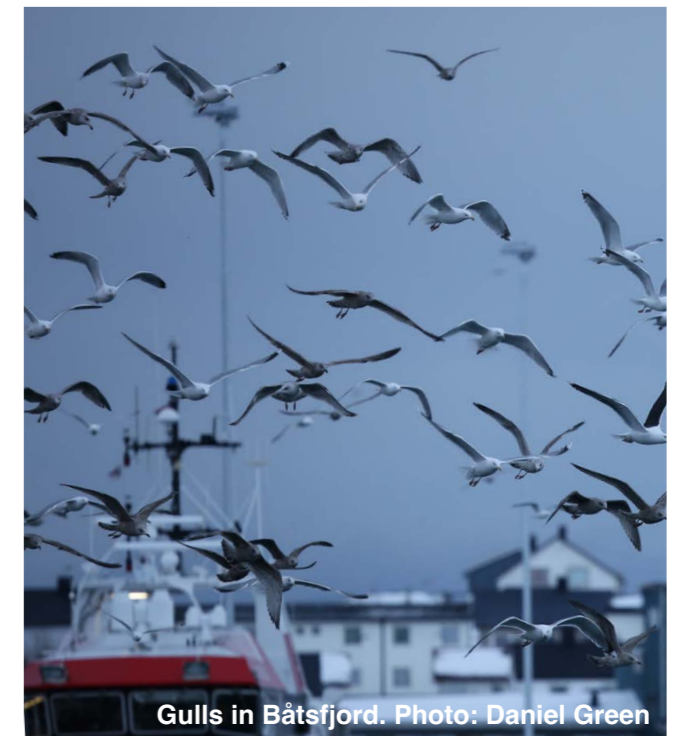
One more early morning to get out to the floating hide. It is of course quiet in the dark but dawn comes and birds arrive sooner today. It's a bit milder today as well with just about + a few degrees celsius. 06.10 - **King Eiders** coming in, first 2, then a dozen. 06.18 - 14 **Steller's Eiders** lands and steps up on the shore, short after the first bigger raft of King Eiders - 30-ish. 06.24 - a dense raft of **King-** and **Steller's Eider** approach, only 1 or 2 **Common Eiders**. Lovely to see! 06.30 - **Long-tailed Ducks** are starting to sing, they have a soft, melodic call, adding a lot of atmosphere. A larger, mixed-flock raft of "Eiderducks" are appearing, all 3 species represented. 06.58 the 1.st flock of **King Eiders** comes in super close. Today's surprise species-wise is the **Greater Scaup** (2.nd c-y male) that spends quite some time near the hide during the morning. A species we have never seen on any previous winter-tour up here.

After a rather quiet start of the morning we get a very intense session, with a lot of birds and opportunities all through til John arrives with the boat at 10.30. We could even have stayed longer, although the sun is starting to be a bit bright. We get plenty of different light and colours compared to yesterday, with very good bird presence. Probably more **Long-tailed Ducks** today (40+) and more active, doing a lot of courtship display. Same numbers of **Steller's Eider** (40-50) and probably as many **King Eiders** too (100+). **Common Eider** (300+).

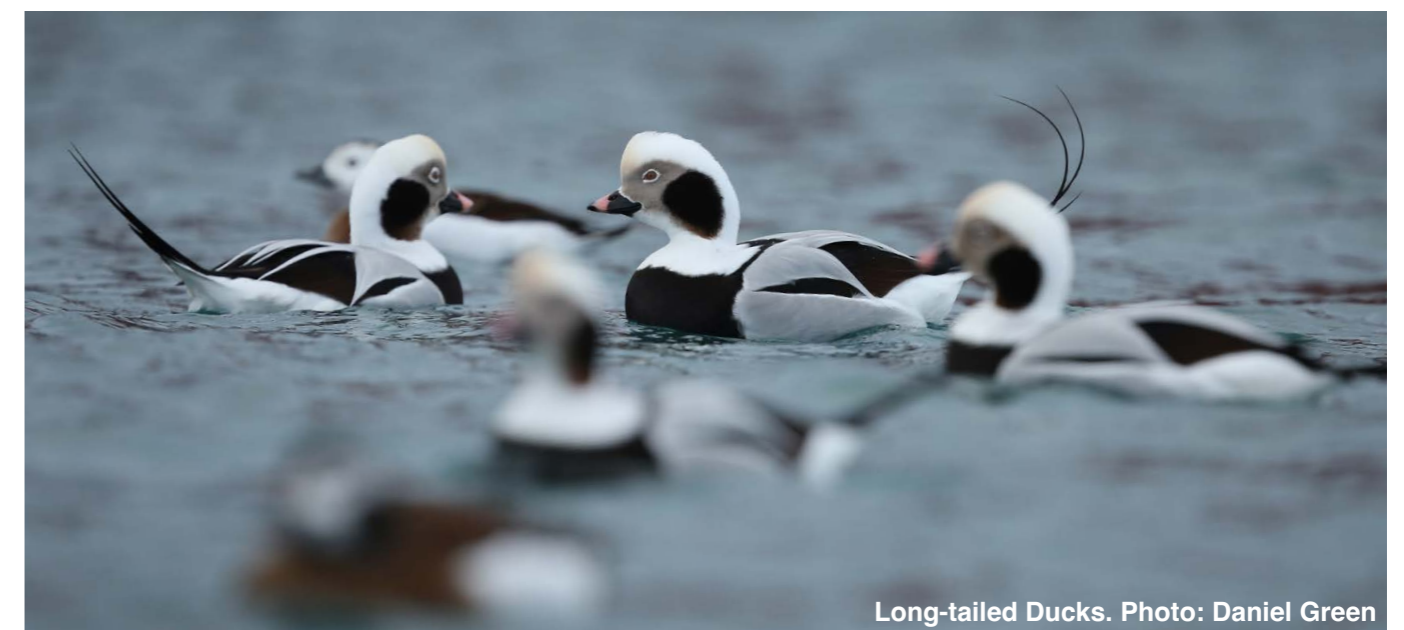
Plenty of gulls by the "fish factory" but no Glaucous Gull today. When we go around the fjord in the boat we spot a single juvenile **Common Gull**, not at all



Greater Scaup. Photo: Daniel Green



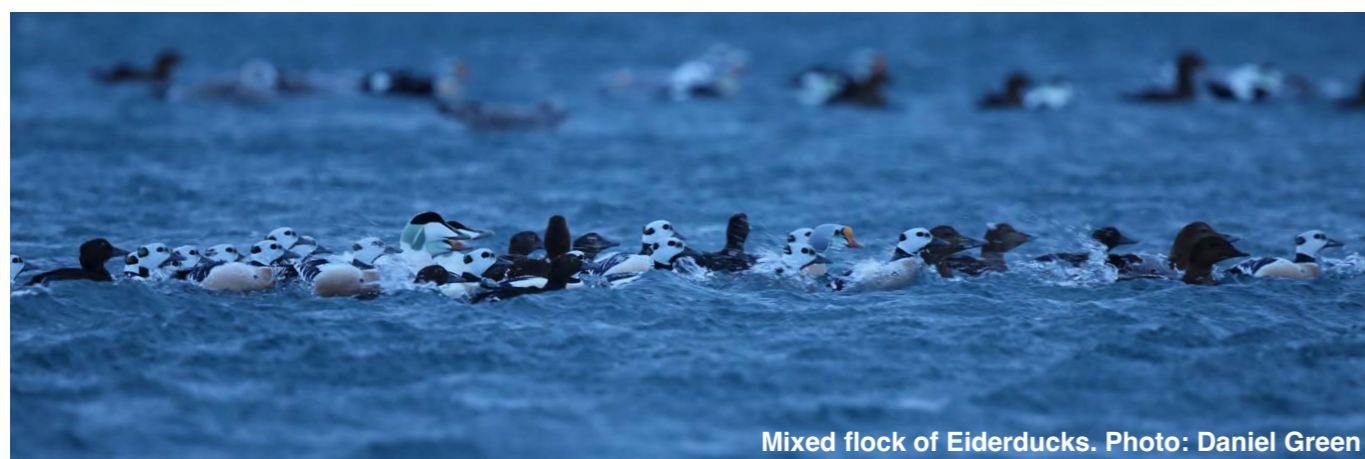
Gulls in Båtsfjord. Photo: Daniel Green



Long-tailed Ducks. Photo: Daniel Green



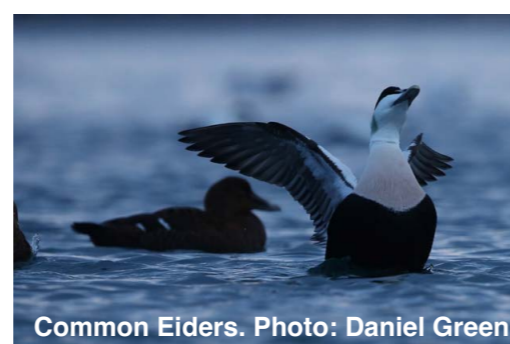
Steller's Eider. Photo: Daniel Green



Mixed flock of Eiderducks. Photo: Daniel Green



Steller's Eider, female. Photo: Daniel Green



Common Eiders. Photo: Daniel Green



Steller's Eiders. Photo: Daniel Green



Steller's Eiders. Photo: Daniel Green

common up here. A **Black Guillemot** in the whitest winter plumage looks good and some groups of **King Eiders** give us chances of flight shots in the sunshine. Not quite as cold and windy today although still some waves.

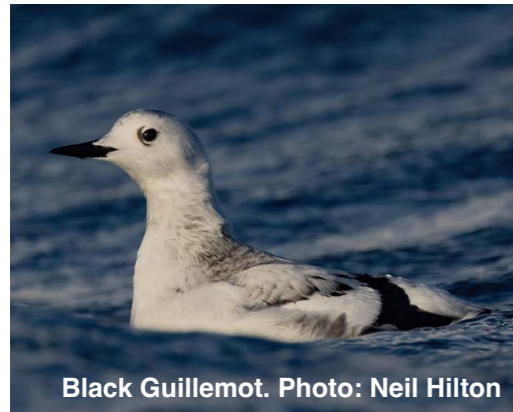
Very tasty Bouillabaisse for lunch with freshly baked breadsticks. We then undertake the challenge to head out and search for Ptarmigan by the old airfield outside town. Although the wind has picked up so much by now (17-20 m/s) it's even difficult to

open the doors of the car. We realise it's a mission impossible and try to retreat to yesterday's café, only to meet a closed-sign on the door. (The cafés close at 14.00 on Saturdays here in Norway!) So instead we buy ice-cream (!) at the supermarket and go back to the hotel and order coffee in the hotel restaurant. That works too and we enjoy a good chat about Raptor hides in Spain and Sweden, etc.

After dinner we decide to once again head out, this time to look for Northern Lights. The forecast is quite optimistic and the sky is clear, with only scattered clouds driving by. However the moon is full and very bright. We start by the old air-field but there's too much electric light in view here, so we drive further up in the hills. Eventually we find a place to pull aside (not plenty of them up here with all the snow drift). We linger a while here but more and more clouds are coming in so we give up and start to drive back to Båtsfjord. Just before town a mammal is jumping up on the road in front of the car, it's an **Arctic Fox**! It stands for a while on the snow wall by the road before it runs away and up the snowy hill, disappearing in the dark. A dark morph individual it was, quite unusual to see here in winter.



Glaucous Gull. Photo: Daniel Green



Black Guillemot. Photo: Neil Hilton



Grey Seal. Photo: Neil Hilton



Black Guillemot. Photo: Neil Hilton



Common Eiders. Photo: Daniel Green



Steller's Eiders. Photo: Daniel Green



Ptarmigan in winter plumage. Foto: Neil Hilton

Day 4, Sunday 25:th February - Båtsfjord - Birk Husky

The night's storm (30 m/s) has passed and we wake up to a clear morning with not much wind. It's our first lie-inn and we have breakfast at 8 o'clock and then say farewell to the local crew we have got to know. Light and visibility is good as we head up over the high plateau. The landscape is totally open and natural here with snow-clad, flat mountainsides to infinity. No windmills, pylons or anything, almost even no buildings, just a few huts or cabins - seemingly oversnowed - down in the valleys we pass. The landscape at it's best and some groups of Reindeer make us stop for pictures. Down in the birch forest we look carefully for **Hawk Owls** again. It pays off, first one a bit distant, then a 2.nd on a wire, but close and in very good light. In one of the first open waters we see a little group of 9 **Red-breasted Mergansers**. The males are throwing heads back, doing courtship display, nice birds. We stop for lunch in **Varangerbotn** just around noon. Just shortly after stop again for a new **Hawk Owl**, soon after one more. Not very easy to photograph though, sitting a bit into the forest. Well, we get some pictures.

The fjords along the way have less ice now than on the first day. 50 or so **Common Eiders** swim along the coastline at one point. The high-light for several of us is when a couple of **Ptarmigan** in pure white winter plumage sit in low birch trees along the road. We manage to turn around and come back while they are still perched and approachable. Pictures are taken from the car during a minute or so before they fly away. Lovely! Wether these birds where Rock or Willow Ptarmigan remains to be told by some expert. They look very similar in winter.

Close to Kirkenes a **Siberian Jay** fly by in front of the car. We stop and try to get more views but it doesn't reappear. Down in the **Pasvik valley** more **Ptarmigan** are flying up and perching by the roadside. Down here in the forested lowlands they would definitely be **Willow Ptarmigan**. Too low light for pictures now but nice anyway. One more **Hawk Owl** (sums up to 5 today) in silhouette against the evening sky is spotted not far from the Birk Husky lodge. After dinner we attempt to head out for northern lights, but the previously rather clear sky is filling up with clouds so no luck with that tonight.



Hawk Owl. Photo: Daniel Green

Day 5, Monday 26:th February - Pasvik

Overcast and about 0 degrees and some wind. Breakfast in decent hours and then we get fitted into a new set of Arctic overalls and head out to meet the guides and the dogs. First they are rather quiet but the more of them that get positioned in front of the sleds, they get more and more vocal and excited. We pair up 2x2 - one standing (driving) one sitting - and get 5 dogs in front of each sled. Must feel unfair to those who won't be a part of the excursion today. We head off in full speed, the track is a bit icy and fast but the snow is soft on the sides. Some tip over, even the guides sometimes. It takes about an hour to get to the log cabins by the forest edge where they have the bird feeding station. **Willow Tit** is the first bird we see, but then it doesn't take long til the first **Siberian Tit** shows up and soon we can also enjoy the presence of **Siberian Jays**. They are a family group of 5 birds, with 3 young. We place out some bits of a sandwich to them and eventually a piece of a waffle with brown cheese. They greatfully pick those up and fly back and forth to the forest with the bites. We also see that they feed on the ground a bit behind the cabins, where some fish-heads and tails have been left by a fireplace. Yummy! Although interesting not as picturesque perhaps.

The **Siberian Tits** are at least 4. A **Great Tit** and a (Mealy) **Redpoll** are the only other birds on the feeding station. We had of course hoped for some Pine Grosbeaks and Bullfinches too. We gather by the bonfire the guides have made and get to grill our own sausages and fish cakes (local style) on a stick for lunch. There's bacon (once again) to wrap around the sausage and flat bread to role around them. We then work the birds another couple of



Black Grouse. Photo: Neil Hilton



Siberian Jay Photo: Daniel Green



Birk husky lodge Photo: Daniel Green



Siberian Tit. Photo: Neil Hilton

rounds, some take a short walk or cuddle the dogs a bit. It's of course great fun to go dogsledding again when we head back.

Some of us get to see a female **Crossbills** - flying low across the track in front of our sled, but still not possible to identify by species. When back at the lodge we change to our own clothes and head out with the car for a little safari, including a stop in the nearby convenience-store. We hope for Northern lights tonight (last chance) but clouds are rolling in again, so that's that.

Day 6, Tuesday 27:th February - Pasvik - Kirkenes
 Today the sky is clear again, it's -5° C and the sun rise over Russia! Yes, didn't I say, the river by the lodge is the border to Russia so east of the river it's all the land of the east. Time for sunrise-pictures before breakfast. **Red Squirrels, Redpolls, House Sparrows** and Tits are very active around the lodge feeders. Today we get the double amount of Greg's lovely pastry (Greg is French and used to be a baker) When we leave we take the "Skröytnevägen", but turn back up left when we reach the main road, to try and find some garden with active bird feeders. The first ones we see are empty, but a really glossy blueblack male **Black**

Grouse perches in a tree top, looking really smart in perfect morning sunlight. It also has the courtesy to stay long enough for us to get pictures. Eventually we find a garden with feeders and birds. A whole dozen of **Bullfinches** - most of them lovely red males - some **Willow Tits** and even a **Siberian Jay** appears, feeding on the regular "fatballs". A large bird of prey is perched in a dry treetop by the road: It's a juvenile female **Northern Goshawk**! Another quite unusual sighting up here. We've never seen them on any trip up here before. A really big specimen as well.

That becomes our last bird sighting before we need to step on it to get to the airport. We have time to stop and take some pictures by the sign about the (Norwegian /Russian) border though. The check-in & security-process is rather quick and we get a bit of relaxing time before boarding our flight to Oslo.



Sunrise over Russia. Photo: Daniel Green



The huskies at Birk Husky. Photo: Daniel Green



Resan är ett samarbete mellan
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Glaucous Gull. Foto: Daniel Green

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