

# Bird report for the Varanger Peninsula, Norway, 7-13 March 2013

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## Introduction

We had three main reasons for going to the Varanger Peninsula in the far north-east of Norway in March 2013. We wished to see the:

- King Eider
- Steller's Eider
- Northern lights (or aurora borealis)

The two ducks and several other species will winter at Varanger which is always ice-free because of the warm water moves of the Gulf Stream. The ice-free conditions attract ducks from Siberia and other north-eastern areas to spend the winter there. For our journey we chose a period of the very early phase of the new moon (7%). The moon was only visible at daytime which meant that the nights were as dark as possible. As it was close to the equinox, the days were not too short (sunrise at 5:50, sunset at 16:35). Other bird groups were also given high priority, i.e. gulls, eagles and tits.

Had we made our journey in April it would not have been possible to see King Eider although there would be less snow in April and it would be easier to get around.

Gitte and Allan were responsible for the overall travel plans as they had visited Varanger in June 2010 and gained valuable experience. They booked accommodation at Mr. Øyvind Artzen in Vadsø in September 2012 and bought flight tickets to Kirkenes. For their homeward journey they chose the coastal service Hurtigruten from Kirkenes to Tromsø and then a flight to Copenhagen. Aoi and Henrik preferred going by flight for their outward as well as homeward journey. Car rental was also booked well in advance.



*We are standing in front of the beautiful church in Nesseby. It is among the few churches which survived World War II. Left to right: Henrik, Allan, Gitte and Aoi.*

## Diary notes

Localities marked with an asterisk (\*) denote that these places have been described into further details in the next chapter which deals with localities visited several times. For localities which were only visited once, all details have been included in the diary section.

### 7 March

The journey started as we departed from Copenhagen just before midnight.

### 8 March

In the morning our flight transport continued from Oslo to Kirkenes with arrival at noon time after a two hour transit. The rented car, an Opel Meriva, was waiting for us in the airport of Kirkenes. We asked for snow chains when we had booked it. However, according to the car rental agency Sixt (booked via ArgusCarHire.com) the car would have studded tyres. But we realised that in fact the car only had ordinary winter tyres, which the agency later told us would be absolutely suitable for our trip. It soon became evident that this was not true! The size of the car proved acceptable for four adults plus luggage.



*Purple Sandpiper at the church in Nesseby. The birds were abundant and were not at all shy!*

Our first day was comprised of a 170 km car trip around the beautiful and ice-free Varangerfjord. It snowed a lot during the first 50 km, but then the weather turned to lovely sunshine. The area west of Kirkenes towards Varangerbotn is quite remote – sparsely inhabited with just a few small villages.

We bought food in a Coop supermarket in Varangerbotn where the Sami people have their parliament. This town is called Vuonnabahta in the Sami language. In the shop we heard Sami customers talking to each other in Sami which sounded interesting – like something between Icelandic and Finnish, but it was absolutely incomprehensible!

Just before sunset we made a brief visit at the charming church in Nesseby\*. That gave us a fine opportunity to watch Purple Sandpiper at the water's edge. These sandpipers were not at all shy.



*Purple Sandpiper photographed just before sunset.*

We continued to Vadsø\* and settled down at Øyvind's house at Fossesvingen 25 in the northern outskirts of the town (Arntzen Arctic Adventures, [www.varanger.info](http://www.varanger.info)). We had brought a little food and, not the least, 6 litres of red wine (two cartons) from Denmark. Compared to the first stretch from Kirkenes to Varangerbotn, the second half of our first day's trip was quite different as most of this route was inhabited. Moreover, Vadsø is also relatively large; it has more than 5000 inhabitants and another 1000 live in its surroundings.

## 9 March

It had snowed at night, but the morning was sunny. We went to Vestre Jakobselv\*, a little under 20 km west of Vadsø. Here, Øyvind has set up a bird reserve around his cabin. We were fortunate to see the three "main attractions" of his reserve: Siberian Tit, Common Redpoll and Arctic Redpoll. We also spent some time in the open birch forest surrounded by fields.

In the late afternoon we returned to the port in Vadsø\* where we mainly focused on Steller's Eider and King Eider – an obvious and splendid choice!

At night we made the first of several attempts to see the northern lights. We went east of Vadsø. However, it proved hard to find an area without artificial light from houses and other human

activities. Furthermore, there are no roads going inland from the coast. Initially the sky was nearly cloudless, but soon the sky was largely overcast. Nevertheless, we managed to see a faint “band” of northern lights across the sky (Øyvind called it a “sausage”). Other attempts to experience northern lights on the trip were also unsuccessful because the sky was seldom clear and cloudless at night.



*Siberian Tit from Vestre Jakobselv. This photo and another one can be seen in large size at [www.naturephotos.dk](http://www.naturephotos.dk)*

Approximately 10-15 km east of Vadsø we saw a fox caught in the headlights of our car. We believed it was the Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* as it was reddish and appeared comparatively long-legged. In this northern range it hybridises with the Arctic Fox (*V. lagopus*), however, we found that this individual was probably a pure *V. vulpes*.

### 10 March

We spent the morning in the port in Vadsø\* where we were “hunting” King Eider. Subsequently we went in eastern direction to Vardø at the easternmost tip of Varanger. During the entire day we really experienced a heavy snowstorm! Still, we got some good observations.

In the morning we saw a fox (Red Fox) at more or less the same place as we saw the fox the previous night. Maybe it was the same individual?

At Kramvik a beautiful Royal Eagle crossed the road in front of us. We had really expected to see several White-tailed Eagles, but we did not see any. According to Øyvind this species mainly lives

in the inland mountains during the winter where a few dead reindeers may be found. Nevertheless, Øyvind told us that some White-Tailed Eagles should remain permanently at certain spots along the south-coast of Varanger.

At noontime we arrived at Vardø – the goal of the day! We went through the 2890 m long and 88 m deep tunnel to the island of Vardø. We hoped that the snowstorm would cease, but it was not to be! We merely parked the car in a part of the port with fishing industry. From the car we could watch numerous Herring Gulls, Kittiwakes, Glaucous Gulls, Great Black-Backed Gulls, Common Eiders, Steller's Eiders and Mallards. We also saw a Grey Seal eating a fish on the surface near the fish factory while the gulls tried to steal it.



*Arctic Redpoll from Vestre Jakobselv. This photo and another four from that locality can be seen in large size at [www.naturephotos.dk](http://www.naturephotos.dk)*

### 11 March

It snowed in the morning. We started with a trip to Nesseby\* where we first visited the small port, and later the beach at the church. The most interesting birds in the port were Red-Breasted Mergansers, Kittiwakes and Glaucous Gulls. At the beach we did not see Purple Sandpiper because it was low tide which means that the part of the beach where the sandpipers use to forage is frozen.

On our way back to Vadsø we got an interesting non-avian observation as we saw four dolphins swimming in pairs. They were White-Beaked Porpoises: now and then we saw the characteristic

high dorsal fin and some of the back above the surface. We noticed the elongated light markings on either side of the body.

At noontime we were home again and visited the port in Vadsø\* for the third time. The weather was sunny, which we had not experienced previously at this locality.

In the late afternoon we made a second visit to Vestre Jakobselv\* where we walked to the bird reserve and spent some time on a trail along a frozen stream and the open birch forest.

## 12 March

Our last full day in Varanger became rather dramatic although our ornithological observations were not that unusual. As the finale of our journey we had chosen Båtsfjord in the north. The weather forecast said sunshine in Vadsø and Båtsfjord in the afternoon. We left Vadsø at 7 a.m. and started driving in bright sunshine. However, as we headed towards the mountains (reaching approximately 300 m altitude) heavy snow set in. But that was not the worst. When it is snowing in the mountains the traffic is arranged in a line with fixed departure times, lead by a large snow plough.

We arrived at the starting point at 9 a.m., however, the line had just left at 8:45 and the next one would depart at 11:30! That was indeed a negative experience, but after some consideration we decided to wait 2½ hours in order to continue to Båtsfjord (rather than just turning around). Eventually we took off and we were in the very front of the line, just after the snow plough. It left a huge cloud of snow behind, so we kept a distance of a couple of hundred metres. The bad thing was that it was hard to see the track which had been cleared on the road in front of us due to a heavy snowstorm combined with dense fog. Fortunately there were dark plastic poles marking the edge of the road in both sides, but the road not been cleared to the edge which meant that our car sometimes touched the piled snow. But we were lucky that we did not get stuck in them. Nevertheless, it was to get even worse on the Båtsfjord trip... We managed to cross the mountain pass and the descent towards Båtsfjord at the Barents Sea went well although certain parts were steep, and (as usual) extremely icy and slippery.

It snowed during our entire stay in Båtsfjord. Due to the major loss of time in the mountains we had only one hour to watch birds in the port. In spite of our superficial efforts our observations confirmed that this locality was an important winter site for King Eider: Allan counted in total 10 males, all of which might well have been different individuals; Gitte recorded with certainty 6 males at a time. We saw also several females. However, at a distance some of them proved hard to distinguish from Common Eider though they are smaller. Additionally we observed Steller's Eider, Common Eider, Herring Gull, Great Black-Backed Gull, Glaucous Gull, Kittiwake and Purple Sandpiper. We also saw one Grey Seal in the port.

From the port we noticed two smaller boats with bird photographers and bird watchers returning from a trip. There is a company which arranges such trips enabling you to get close to e.g. King Eider close to the water surface. Henrik considered joining such a trip **if** there had been a vacant seat (which there was not) and **if** we had arrived at Båtsfjord without delay and **if** the weather had been sunny!

We went a bit around in the port of Båtsfjord in order to find good sites for watching birds. The last site was situated down a steep street in a residential area. As usual the surface was extremely slippery. Hence our car was not capable of driving up again, but it just slid into the snow! We tried

to push it up the hill, but that was really madness because our boots could not even get a firm grip on the ground. Henrik fell and hit the ground in such an unfortunate way that his right shoulder was dislocated. The shoulder was relocated, but he was quite handicapped for the rest of the trip.



*Two pairs of Steller's Eiders from the port in Vadsø.*

We managed to have a quick lunch in the car before we went a few km to the start of the southward line at 2:30 p.m. The fact that our car did not have studded tyres meant that it could not get over the first steep climb – it simply slid in an uncontrollable way into the snow! The service car which completed the line pulled us out. Moreover, Gitte proved tough and brave as she several times pushed our car over some smaller hills. As we had eventually passed some of these climbs, we did not dare stopping to collect her as we feared that we could not get started again. Luckily a Norwegian driver collected her and took her up the hills before she could get back in our car. That experience left her freezing, exhausted and coughing!

The rest of the day trip went well without accidents. The conclusion is that a winter trip over the mountain to Båtsfjord (and back again) will require that the car is equipped with studded tyres. If your boots may skid around on icy pavements, we recommend that you attach spiny ice grips underneath them.

### 13 March

Our journey to Varanger had nearly come to an end. Eventually the weather was sunny with a blue sky, so we enjoyed the car trip of the last day. As our time schedule was rather tight, we could only



make a short stay at the church in Nesseby\*. We enjoyed and photographed the flock of Purple Sandpiper (it was high tide) and made a group photo.

As we reached Kirkenes we parted. Gitte and Allan took the coastal service Hurtigruten to Tromsø and Aoi and Henrik went to the airport and took the flight via Oslo to Copenhagen.

## Localities with several visits

We visited a number of localities two or three times (marked with an asterisk \* in the above diary notes). We have found it appropriate to describe them separately.

### Vadsø, house with garden

We take the liberty to use the term bird locality for our home in the residential neighbourhood in the northern outskirts of Vadsø because we watched and photographed small birds from the window when we were at home. That was at Arntzen Arctic Adventures, [www.varanger.info](http://www.varanger.info).

Øyvind and his wife were feeding birds in the garden. To us Common Redpoll and Arctic Redpoll were the most interesting species. They may be hard to distinguish. However, several individuals with dark and conspicuous striation and very dark breasts could be positively identified as Common Redpoll. Other individuals with completely pale breasts and weak striation were clearly Arctic Redpoll.

There were also a number of smaller birds which are well-known from Denmark.

#### *Species list for the garden in Vadsø:*

Great Tit, *Parus major*

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*

Common Redpoll, *Carduelis flammea*

Arctic Redpoll, *Carduelis hornemanni*

European Greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris*

### Vadsø, port

We made three visits in the port of our “home town”. For the purpose of bird watching we divided the port into four sections where we carried out our work:

The fishing port with fishing vessels near the main road.

The part closest to the town with petrol station, offices and shops.

The bridge to the island of Vadsøya.

The industrial port on the island of Vadsøya, most of which was however closed for the public.

We were primarily looking for Steller’s Eider and King Eider which are extremely beautiful. But we cannot tell in which section of the port they were most common as they moved around a lot.

We were happy when we managed to spot King Eider. Once we saw three males together.

Finding Steller’s Eider also gave us much pleasure. At each visit we saw several males and females which were not particularly shy.



*Male King Eider from the port in Vadsø.*

On 10 March, we observed and photographed from a quite long distance one female Common Eider swallowing a whole sea urchin – an important prey item of eiders! Earlier the female had manipulated its prey by turning and tossing it in the beak so that the numerous spines had been bitten and rubbed off.

On one occasion we watched one Grey Seal swallowing a large cod on the surface. As a rough estimate the fish might have weighed 3-4 kgs. The seal made several attempts to swallow it until it was successful. We followed the “show” for more than 3 minutes. We can refer to [www.naturephotos.dk](http://www.naturephotos.dk) where photos of that experience have been uploaded.

*Species list for the port of Vadsø:*

- Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*
- Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima*
- King Eider, *Somateria spectabilis*
- Steller’s Eider, *Polysticta stelleri*
- Long-tailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis*
- Great Northern Diver, *Gavia immer*
- European Shag, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*
- Purple Sandpiper, *Calidris maritima*
- Common Black-headed Gull, *Larus ridibundus*
- Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*

Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*  
Black Guillemot, *Cepphus grylle*  
Common Magpie, *Pica pica*  
Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*  
Common Raven, *Corvus corax*  
House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*

### Vestre Jakobselv, bird reserve

Vestre Jakobselv is situated a bit less than 20 km west of Vadsø. The bird reserve is formed by an arctic birch forest of 32,000 m<sup>2</sup> which is privately owned. Access requires permit from the owner, i.e. Arntzen Arctic Adventures [www.varanger.info](http://www.varanger.info) of Øyvind Arntzen at whom we stayed in Vadsø. A feeding station near a cabin has been set up in the bird reserve and it is especially used by a number of interesting small birds. He is also feeding fish to a weasel to prevent it from eating too many birds. There is an information board with birds of the area and Øyvind gladly tells about the birds. You will have to pay to get access to the reserve and you can get favourable conditions if you stay in his apartment in Vadsø or in the cabin inside the reserve.

The adjacent nature is also worth visiting. In addition to the low birch forest there are also open areas and a stream.

Our great wish came true as we watched Siberian Tit at close distance. At least a pair came to forage several times in the morning of 9 March. The two birds were always together. Allan also heard a Willow Tit with its characteristic hoarse call: "taah taah taah"

In the late afternoon on 11 March Henrik was fortunate to see and photograph one pair of Willow Tits. Like the Siberian Tits the two Willow Tits also appeared closely connected. Reference is made to [www.naturephotos.dk](http://www.naturephotos.dk) where a couple of the Willow Tit photos have been presented.

Common Redpoll and Arctic Redpoll were abundant at this locality. See the notes made under "Vadsø, house with garden".

In the birch forest we heard a woodpecker, probably Lesser Spotted Woodpecker which is regularly reported from the bird reserve.

### *Species list for Vestre Jakobselv:*

Great Tit, *Parus major*  
Willow Tit, *Poecile montanus*  
Siberian Tit, *Poecile cinctus*  
Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*  
Common Raven, *Corvus corax*  
Common Redpoll, *Carduelis flammea*  
Arctic Redpoll, *Carduelis hornemanni*  
European Greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris*  
Eurasian Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

### Nesseby, church and port

Nesseby is a tiny community which is quite charming. The conspicuous white parish church (1858) is worth visiting. It is situated close to the beach which has an easily accessible population of Purple Sandpiper. The sandpipers are not shy and you can get close to them. We noticed that we could only see them at Nesseby at high tide where they were busy catching invertebrates at the water's edge. We could not see any at low tide at this locality. We spoke to Øyvind about this phenomenon. He confirmed the interpretation which came to our minds: At low tide the mud will freeze and the sandpipers will basically not have access to any invertebrates. At high tide water constantly flushes over the mud which thus forms the basis for eating various invertebrates.

The small port is situated less than 1 km east of the church. Here we watched e.g. Glaucous Gull, Kittiwake and Red-breasted Merganser. In total we visited Nesseby three times; on the first and on the last day of our stay in Varanger it was particularly nice due to the sunny weather.



*Female Common Eider swallowing a whole sea urchin after it had been bitten and rubbed off the spines.*

#### *Species list for Nesseby:*

Red-breasted Merganser, *Mergus serrator*  
Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*  
European Shag, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*  
Purple Sandpiper, *Calidris maritima*  
Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*

Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*  
Black-legged Kittiwake, *Rissa tridactyla*  
Common Magpie, *Pica pica*  
Common Raven, *Corvus corax*

## Total species list for the journey: 28 species

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*  
Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima*  
King Eider, *Somateria spectabilis*  
Steller's Eider, *Polysticta stelleri*  
Long-tailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis*  
Red-breasted Merganser, *Mergus serrator*  
Great Northern Diver, *Gavia immer*  
Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*  
European Shag, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*  
Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*  
Purple Sandpiper, *Calidris maritima*  
Common Black-headed Gull, *Larus ridibundus*  
Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*  
Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*  
Black-legged Kittiwake, *Rissa tridactyla*  
Glaucous Gull, *Larus hyperboreus*  
Black Guillemot, *Cepphus grylle*  
Great Tit, *Parus major*  
Willow Tit, *Poecile montanus*  
Siberian Tit, *Poecile cinctus*  
Common Magpie, *Pica pica*  
Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*  
Common Raven, *Corvus corax*  
House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*  
Common Redpoll, *Carduelis flammea*  
Arctic Redpoll, *Carduelis hornemanni*  
European Greenfinch, *Carduelis chloris*  
Eurasian Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*

## Practical hints

### Travelling

The Varanger Peninsula is situated 250 km north of the polar circle east-southeast of the North Cape and approximately 1500 km north of Denmark. It is easy to travel by air, i.e. via Oslo to Kirkenes as we did. But going by car through Norway can also be a nice experience for those who have sufficient time.

It is a great advantage to have access to a car, especially because the public buses run at quite long intervals. But on the other hand, more or less all bird localities of Varanger are situated close to the main road along the coast which is served by the public buses. So if you enough time and you want to save some money, this means of travelling may be relevant. However, during the winter it may be very cold waiting for a bus if you have already spent a day in the cold watching birds.



*Glaucous Gull, from 2nd winter, photographed during snowy weather in the port in Båtsfjord.*

For our brief journey of less than one week duration it was obvious that we chose renting a car from the airport of Kirkenes.

There are only a few main roads along the coasts or other roads connecting the big towns. It is really rare that you see small roads going inland. For those who would like to go walking in the nature there are a few trails. However, in winter the trails are either inaccessible due to the huge amount of snow or the trails have been prepared especially for cross-country skiing. You should not walk on these trails as you may easily damage them for the skiers. Hence it is not really possible to walk in nature areas outside the main roads and the coasts in the winter time. One exception is Vestre Jakobselv where you may walk in a good nature area.

### Accommodation

We do not really know anything about the various possibilities for accommodation at Varanger. We will merely say a few words about the solution we chose. We stayed at Arntzen Arctic Adventures belonging to Øyvind Zahl Arntzen in the town of Vadsø. We lived in an apartment of 65 m<sup>2</sup> in the

basement of a private house in the northern part of Vadsø where Øyvind and his family lived in the rest of the house. There were two bedrooms, each equipped with two double beds and one single bed (set up as bunk beds) and there was a kitchen, a bathroom and spacious living rooms. When he was at home we could get various kind of good advice from him. In total we paid 1000 NOK per night, i.e. 250 NOK per person. It would have been possible for six persons to live in the apartment if you accept to live somewhat tightly in the bedrooms which would have reduced the cost per person further!



*A section of the port in Vadsø where we observed several interesting birds such as Steller's Eider and King Eider.*

As mentioned under “Localities with several visits” Øyvind’s guests will enjoy a rebate if you go to his private bird reserve at Vestre Jakobselv. We can also refer to his website [www.varanger.info](http://www.varanger.info) for further information.

### Hints about car driving

In the winter most roads in northern Norway are ice-covered or covered by a “polished” layer of snow which makes them extremely slippery. For that reason we strongly recommend that you only use a car with **studded tyres**. This will be the only responsible solution and on certain steep roads in mountains and towns a car only equipped with ordinary winter tyres will not be able to make it!

In Norway **priority to the right** is a very essential part of the legislation on road traffic, probably because it is often impossible to see marks painted on the roads. Even when driving on a quite large

road and you are met by a car coming from a small road on the right-hand side, we will have to give way. That may easily result in an unpleasant surprise and accident for foreigners. But as far as we could judge, the exception would be when you are driving on a main road on the countryside as priority to the right apparently does not apply there!

### Hints about weather

You may acquire spines which are especially made for attaching underneath you boots. It is highly advisable to use such equipment when you walk on frozen roads with much traffic. Chemical heat pads for shoes and gloves may also be necessary or at least very pleasant when you spend much times waiting for birds. On our journey the temperatures normally ranged between -10 and -5 degrees C which was comparatively warm due to clouded and snowy weather conditions. But we also experienced -18 degrees C in clear weather. However, the wind factor is important: On a windy day -5 degrees C feels very cold.

Køge, November 2013