

NORTHERN LIGHTS TOUR ON THE NOORDERLICHT NOVEMBER 2017



This is a report on the trip organised by John van der Dol of Sandwich Bird Tours on a week's charter of the sailing vessel Noorderlicht out of Tromso, Norway.

The 16 participants met at a Crawley hotel before an early flight the following day to Tromso, via Oslo. Our taxi driver stopped briefly after leaving the airport to show us a faint glimmer of the Aurora before continuing to the harbour of Tromso, passing through a long tunnel with an underground crossroad and arriving to board the Noorderlicht, our home for the next week.

We were welcomed aboard by the expedition leader Jan, who introduced the captain Floris, first mate Daan, second mate Jacob and cook Marielle.

We left our mooring at 0700 next morning and motored North. Sun rise was at 0815, but because we were most of the time in fjords we saw very little sun. A prolonged twilight at either end on the day of some two hours extended the daylight period of just four hours of the sun above the horizon to some eight hours of viewing time. The sun would eventually not rise from the 26th November, we were told. We had plenty of time for observation. Two distant White-tailed Eagles were seen over a far mountain, once briefly sparring with a Raven. Over the water, Herring Gulls were the most numerous, with fewer Great Black Backed and even fewer Kittiwakes. We moored for the night at 1330 at Ulsfjord, a sheltered inlet with 5 Long-tailed Ducks, 420 Common Eider, 2 Black Guillemots and a Cormorant. The nightly mooring was to enable passengers to go ashore to photograph the Northern Lights from a stable surface.

Our daily routine was breakfast at 0800, lunch 1230 and dinner at 1830, with tea and coffee and fruit available whenever we wished. The food was prepared in a tiny galley with great efficiency and was superb throughout our week. Everything freshly made, different each day and even artistically arranged on the plate! We all helped return dirty dishes from the two dining areas to the galley where it was dealt with smoothly by the crew. This was my third holiday on the ship

with Sandwich Bird Tours and the food was the best yet; I can see future passengers travelling just for the dining experience!

We went ashore and walked a mile along a road, passing well built wooden houses, most appeared to be occupied and not just summer homes. Two Fieldfares were eating rowan berries and at a bird table, two Great Tits, and what was possibly the bird highlight of the tour (for Kent birders) five Willow Tits! A Magpie was a surprising sight. It was cloudy, so an early night for all, following an excellent talk on the Aurora Borealis from Jan, with promise that tomorrow we might be lucky!

We were away at 0700 as usual, to motor through an area of islands. Almost every coast had well spaced houses. Not cold, a temperature of 6 degrees and a southerly breeze. It got progressively darker, and by the time we moored for the night at 1430 it was almost dark. 5 Little Auks were seen on the water quite close to us and a pier held 20 Cormorants. Oddly we did not see any Shags during the week. At 1030, on seeing some boats ahead with circling gulls we approached and were suddenly amongst whales. Several pods of Orcas (Killer Whales), travelling in tight groups with usually two males with enormous dorsal fins and females with younger animals. Difficult to count, I thought 13 was about the average number in a pod, and some 6 pods present. Two Fin Whales came past, greatly pleasing Jan, who said they were new for the area. Fins are huge, but merely show a long back slowly curving into the water before a small curved dorsal fin and no tail fluke as it disappears. There were several Humpback Whales, perhaps 15. These are big, bulky animals and much more active than the Fin Whales. A bushy blow was the first indication, soon followed by a characteristic curving back with small stumpy dorsal fin and often a tail fluke raised above the water as they dived. Jan told us that the whales were here to feed on Herring. Herring spend the summer spread across the Norwegian Sea and Atlantic Ocean, but come into the fjords for the winter. Last year the herring shoals were some 50 miles further South. The Orcas frighten the fish by flashing their white side patches, causing them to shoal; the whales then circle the shoal, picking individual fish on the outside. The Humpbacks take advantage of the Orca's work by swimming up to take huge mouthfuls of fish and Norwegian fishermen also circle the area with nets. Amazingly all this activity seems to take place with no animosity. Above the area were 300 Great Black Backed Gulls, 80 Herring Gulls, 4 Kittiwakes, 1 Glaucous Gull, 1 White-tailed Eagle and extraordinarily 1 Hooded Crow (we were two miles offshore) patrolling the area to pick up damaged fish. It was interesting to watch a Crow frantically beating its wings to attempt to pick something from the water without getting wet – fortunately it was quite calm. Enjoying this sight were several small tourist boats and a zodiac with snorkelers. All vessels were moving very slowly and the whales seemed unperturbed, moving in all directions. It was fun trying to guess where they would next appear! We moored for the night at Skjervoy and walked around the town in light rain, no Lights tonight. A talk by Jan on the Orca, the world population is thought to be only 50,000, so our watching of some 80 of them was a significant proportion.



Next day we spent off-shore from Skjervoy, watching whales. Occasionally drifting with engine silent and listening to the continual blowing of whales; every-one, including the crew, on deck to marvel at this rare privilege. There were more Humpbacks than yesterday – about 30, but fewer Orcas. The Orcas were much more lethargic than yesterday, spending time at the surface – perhaps digesting their good fishing. Saw one slapping the water with its tail, and another with its pectoral fin. Several were bobbing up vertically to look around 'spy hopping' – a challenge for the photographers! By contrast, the Humpbacks were boisterous, with several seen leaping

out of the water – 'breaching', but none very close. A good view of a close Fin Whale. Birds today included 3 Little Auks, 4 Glaucous, 300 Herring and 100 GBB Gulls, 12 Kittiwakes, 1 Sea Eagle and 6 Common Eider. Light rain all day and 10 -20 boats visible much of the time but this did not detract from the natural spectacle. There was a Norwegian research zodiac with a man in the bows with a rifle. We saw him hit an Orca, which appeared oblivious. The purpose was to obtain a DNA sample. Gary's birthday! Marielle produced a lovely cake which was shared with all.

Cloudy night – again.

Up at 0600 next day, clear and colder, with a slight frost on the deck. We watched a very slow sunrise, first touching the high peaks pink and at 1000 we actually saw the sun ourselves for half an hour – it gave no warmth! A morning spent with the whales. Today, one of the little tourist craft motored into a group of feeding Humpbacks and there was a loud shout of 'idiot' from one of the other boats, at which it immediately backed off. It was good to see the whales' welfare being observed. We motored back to our mooring of two nights ago, seeing a group of 8 Common Gulls and two Bonxies. Spectacular scenery of steep snow covered mountains with beautiful colours as the sun slowly set. Dinner today, wonderful as usual – goat's cheese wrapped in ham; cod with roasted root vegetables and salad; strawberry mousse. I mention this tonight because dinner for the next three evenings seemed to coincide with the appearance of the Northern Lights when we hurriedly donned our warm clothes and rushed outside – no way to treat such fare! The aurora 'oval' appeared, looking like a line of mist, but fading and intensifying. Most of the time it looked grey, but when photographed was green. Occasionally it looked greenish. It lasted until 2130 but was never spectacular. Jan told us the 'KP' index of solar activity on a scale of 0-9 was currently 2, so we could not expect a brilliant display. A few lunatics got up at midnight when it was visible again.

A little more cloud this morning with a W wind. A tight group of 130 Common Eider (80% males) were in the little fjord as we left and began our journey South. There was enough wind to sail; Daan and Jacob instructed their landlubber crew in hauling up the foresail and schooner sail and we sailed for a couple of hours, tight against the wind, so not very fast. Moored at Finnkronken for the night. This was on a large island, with a brightly lit glasshouse, heavily insulated growing some crop which might have been lettuce! A walk along the road, we saw an all-white Hare- very conspicuous in the brown landscape. Talks by Jan on Svalbard in the afternoon and on the history of the Noorderlicht, in the evening. A brief show of the Lights at midnight.

This morning we spent walking; along the road and up the hill behind Finnkronken. The ground was lightly frozen with heather and crowberry growing among the scattered birch. We saw an old peat cutting. Few birds, 1 Raven, 19 Fieldfare, 1 Blackbird, 1 Magpie, 1 White-tailed Eagle, 4 Herring, 2 GBB Gulls. We set off for Tromso at midday to arrive in time for us to take on water for the next group of travellers; it being Saturday and early closing. More birds were seen here – 35 Common Eider, 1 King Eider, 23 Curlew, 52 Cormorants, 1 Common, 4 GBB and 16 Herring Gulls and 20 Hooded Crows. Tonight was our last on board, and the crew, after asking us to spend the afternoon looking around Tromso, (strangely all shops closed at 1600hrs), gave us a splendid candlelit dinner. Starter of moulded potato and prawn with smoked salmon and

mayonnaise in cylinders of cucumber strips; lamb cutlets beautifully cooked, mash, pumpkin, sprouts and sauce; chocolate brownie, icecream and cream.

A cold night, down to -11C and the best Northern Lights display of the trip, immediately overhead and quite bright in spite of the many lights in the harbour.

We were away from the ship at 0900, leaving our bags on deck while the crew cleaned the cabins in preparation for the next group in the evening. Some new birds for the trip were Feral Pigeon 60, House Sparrow 1, Blue Tit 2, Fulmar 4 (blue phase birds flying around the harbour). Eventually a coffee shop was found this Sunday morning, while others visited the museum briefly before we were taken to the airport for an early afternoon flight to Oslo and Gatwick, arriving home late evening.

Our total bird list was only about 27 species; but these were not the priority and we were all happy with views of the Northern Lights and ecstatic with our good fortune to see so many whales.

John had organised a splendid trip, where only some of the travel arrangements could have been improved (see picture).



Alastair Henderson

December 2017