

# VARANGER NORWAY

# TRIP 2020 REPORT

21 - 27 FEB

BIRDSAFARI  
SWEDEN







Sledge dogs at Birk Husky

Photo: Simon Green

Travel organizer: **BirdsafariSweden / Karlmark resor**

Tour guide: **Simon Green**

Guides in Båtsfjord: **Ørjan Hansen, Even Hansen**

Participants: **Nicolas Rasson, Benedicte Rasson, Noelle Piron, Sören Linden, Kiff Hancock and Ove Jansson**

Text: **Simon Green**

Photo: **Simon Green**

Guides at Birk Husky: **Isabell Zürn**

This was the 2.nd late winter trip Birdsafarisweden arranged to the Varanger peninsula. A time of the year when Båtsfjord is most likely the best place in the world to get close to King Eiders, Steller's Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, Common Eiders and some other birds – and make no mistake – we get very close. This time of the year is not as dark as people might think, photolight extends from 9.00 am to 14. pm and even a little more in clear weather. During a day or two in Båtsfjord you are likely to experience practically all types of weather and light, which makes it a challenge but also a great experience for photographers. Just existing in this environment where the mountains meet with the Arctic Sea is an experience in it's own right. Adding to the whole thing is of course the chances of getting to see and photograph the Northern lights in the evenings. The other half of the tour extends into the taiga belt of the Pasvik Valley next to the Russian border. An area with good chances of Hawk Owl and Great Grey Owl – this year in fact ever so present – and a feeding station for the northern passerines like Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit, Pine Grosbeak and more. To this remote place we go dog-sledding! A wonderful, fun and adventurous way to experience the Arctic forest landscape and seeing birds in the process. The log cabins of Birk Husky lodge is the perfect place to stay, and just like in Båtsfjord the Norwegian hospitality makes us all feel very well received. The concepts and infrastructure of these places are just what we require as bird and landscape photographers.

### Schedule

Day 1 (21 feb): Flight to Kirkenes, transfer to Båtsfjord

Day 2 (22 feb): Photography by floating hide in Båtsfjord, aurora borealis photography at night

Day 3 (23 feb): Photography by floating hide in Båtsfjord, aurora borealis photography at night

Day 4 (24 feb): Optional early session in floating hide, transfer to Birk Husky in the Pasviks valley

Day 5 (25 feb): Dog sledge ride and and photography session at forest-bird feeding station

Day 6 (26 feb): Optional session at forest-bird feeding station

Day 7 (27 feb): Transfer to Kirkenes, flight home



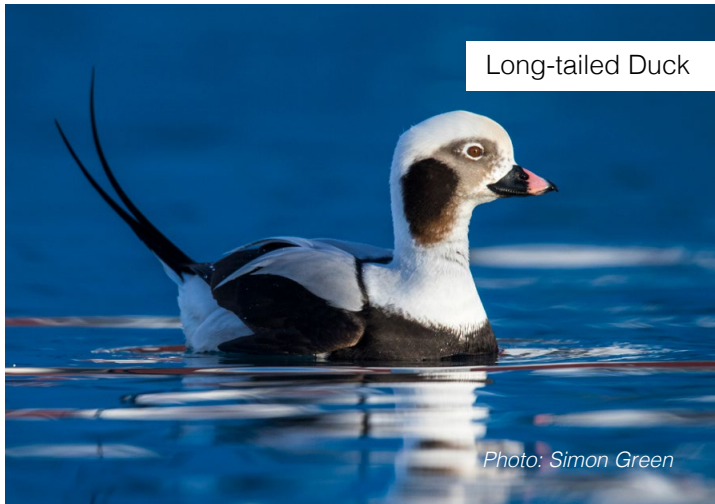
King Eider males

Photo: Simon Green



Iceland Gull

Photo: Simon Green



Long-tailed Duck

Photo: Simon Green

### Day 1 02/21

Our plane landed Friday morning in a windy Kirkenes. The snow-capped landscape was a welcome sight. On the airport parkinglot there was a minibus waiting for us. Already heated and ready to take us to the first destination of the trip, Båtsfjord. We loaded the car with our luggage and drove away. The surroundings along the road shone in shades of white and grey. Not too far along the way and we could see open water. Traveling along the fjords we observed a couple of **moose**, a few **reindeer** and a **raven** eating on a traffic-killed reindeer.

About an hour later we stopped for lunch at the local petrol station in Varangerbotn. Not far from where the oldest Sami remains in Scandinavia have been found, about 10,000 years old. Inside the station, we took the opportunity to gather information about the situation with the wind-exposed passage over the mountain just before Båtsfjord, in other words the road we soon would be traveling on.

Scandinavia had recently been hit by several storms, first out was the storm Ciara and then came Dennis. Norway's northern coast was still exposed to rough weather, which made every piece of information relevant. According to the staff at the petrol station, the road had been closed during the night and morning but was now open again. We thought ourselves lucky and munched away on our lunch of burgers, sausages and french fries.

Shortly before our departure the weather forecast had changed and we were informed that the road to Båtsfjord had been closed again. The only way to take us over the passage was by traveling behind a plow truck and the next departure was at five. After a short group discussion we decided to continue onwards regardless that we might arrive early for our departure. It resulted in one hour of waiting. Some of us then took the opportunity to take a walk.





Common Eider

Photo: Simon Green

A few minutes before five, the plow truck arrived that would transport us about 4 miles across the wind-exposed passage. Our minibus was the first car in the line and behind us followed 10 others. Large amounts of snow was plowed away as we moved slowly but surely towards our destination. Just before seven in the evening we arrived in Båtsfjord, a fishing community. The town harbour has about 10,000 fishing boats visiting annually. We had arranged a meeting with Båtsfjords local guide Orjan. The founder of a number of floating photo hides outside the fish factories in the harbour, which attracts plenty of birds. The same hides we would spend the coming mornings inside. Down by the water, Orjan greeted everyone and handed out overalls that would keep us warm during our days in Båtsfjård.

A short visit later and we went on to the Polar Hotel where we checked in and then had our first dinner together. Here, freshly caught fish were served from Barents Sea. After a satisfying dinner the group gathered in the hotel lobby and went outside for a simple Northern lights workshop by the harbour. We decided not to travel outside of town because of the strong wind. On site we went through the basic camera settings we would use for the coming evenings, trying to capture the Northern lights. It was just a warm-up as no Aurora was visible. Instead, we took the opportunity for an early evening and went back to the hotel.

## Day 2 02/22

The morning alarm rang at 04:30. A good while before the birds in the harbour had woken up. According to the forecast, today's weather would be dominated by strong winds and temperatures just below zero. We met by the entrance of the hotel. Dressed in our overalls and camera bags close by everyone looked ready to go. The staff at the Polar Hotel had prepared breakfast packages for each and everyone that were distributed to our party. After a two minute drive we met Orjan in the harbour. Laying by the docks was a small zodiac, the one that would take us over the water to the floating hide, a short 15 meter transport.

A few minutes later all the guests were inside the hide. The hide was equipped with chairs, rice bags to support the camera against, as well as tripod head plates and a lot of rugs to keep the cold away. There were plenty of windows for cameras and the group began to place themselves in preferred spots in the hide. Here we could choose between photographing sitting on a chair or lying down. We prepared our equipment and then had breakfast from the packages we brought with us from the hotel. Outside you could already hear the noise of the **eiders** coming in to feed. After breakfast we turned off all the lights and opened the windows.

Just outside our hide, flocks of **king eider** was gathering. Here and there, **common eider** swam past and in the background sat a variety of **gull** species. A large number of **lesser blacked back gulls**, **great black backed gulls** and **kittiwakes**



King Eider, female

Photo: Simon Green

were mixed with a few individuals of **Glaucous gull** and **Iceland gull**. The day offered varied photo light with great changes in the weather. Along the quay, there were a few **purple sandpipers**, the only wader in Båtsfjord this time of year. Even **Steller's eiders** and **Long-tailed ducks** showed up outside the hide but were few in number and kept at a distance. After a very productive photo session in the hide, Orjan knocked on the door to the hide.

The original idea was to travel out on to the fjord by boat for the purpose of taking flight pictures of the birds but the strong wind put a stop to our plans. Instead, we went back ashore and drove to the hotel where we enjoyed a hot soup for lunch.

After our meal everyone had the opportunity for some free time. I encouraged those who had the energy to meet later in the lounge to work with the catch of the day (today's images). After short rest some of us met in the hotel lobby whilst others were out to look for northern lights in the harbour. We all gathered up later to have dinner together. This time we were served deep-fried fish, freshly caught of course. With our bellies full, we went back to our rooms to change and prepare for tonight's hunt for Northern lights.

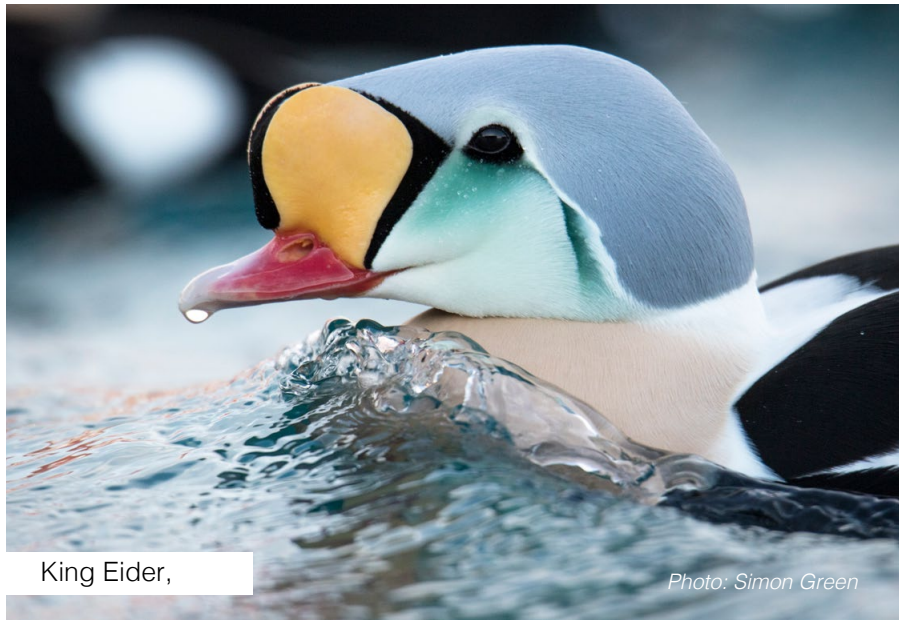
During the evening the wind had calmed down slightly and we decided to go up the valley above Båtsfjord. Tonight's lookout where the local community's former airport, there the former parking-



Photography session from the boat in the harbour in Båtsfjord

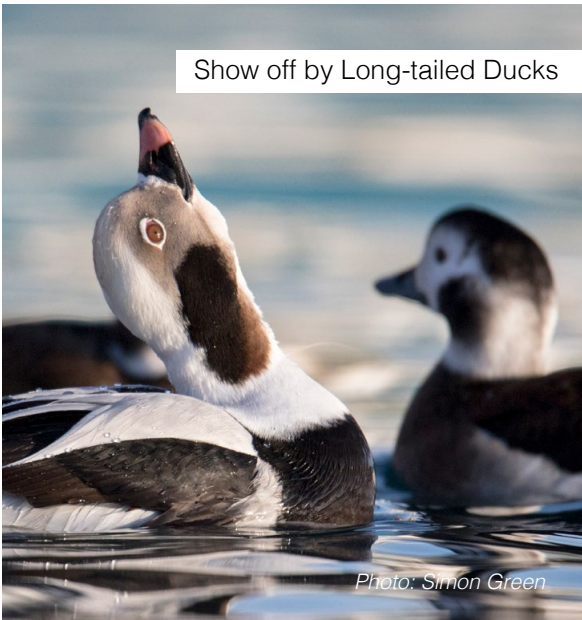
Photo: Simon Green





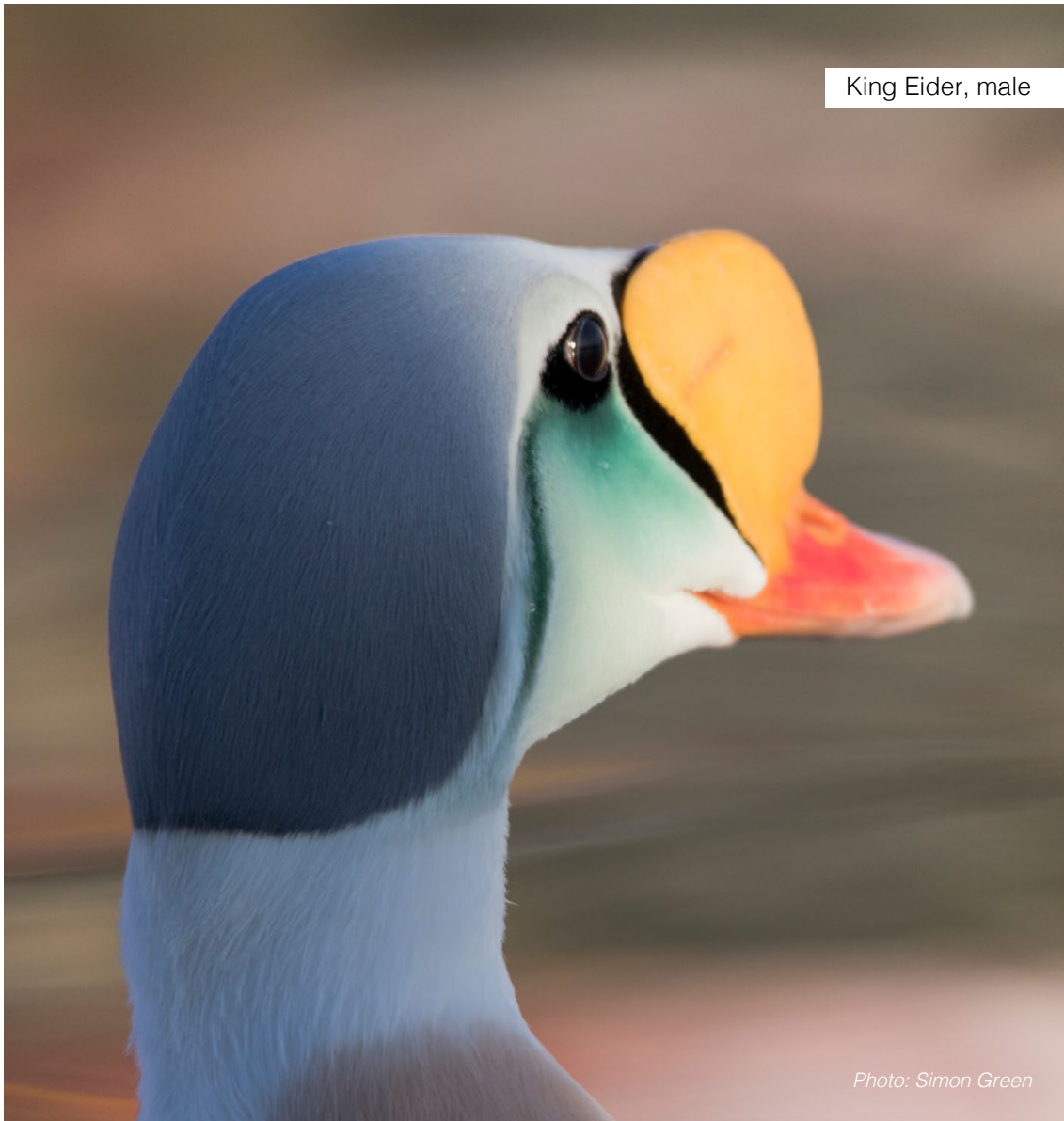
King Eider,

Photo: Simon Green



Show off by Long-tailed Ducks

Photo: Simon Green



King Eider, male

Photo: Simon Green

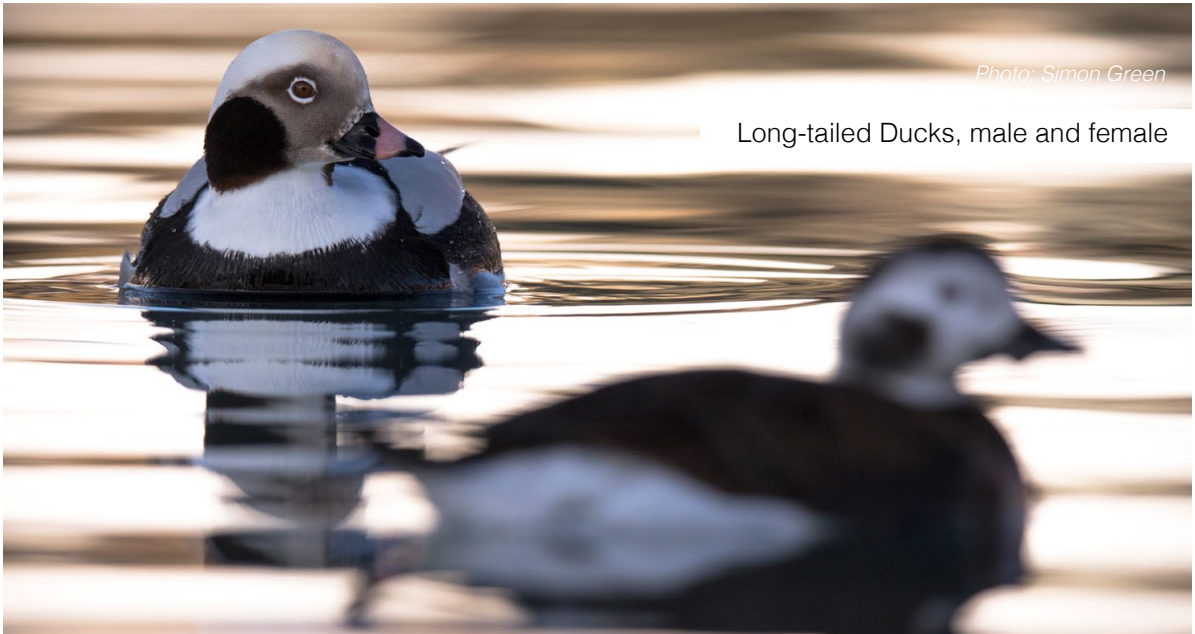


Photo: Simon Green

Long-tailed Ducks, male and female



Views in Båtsfjord

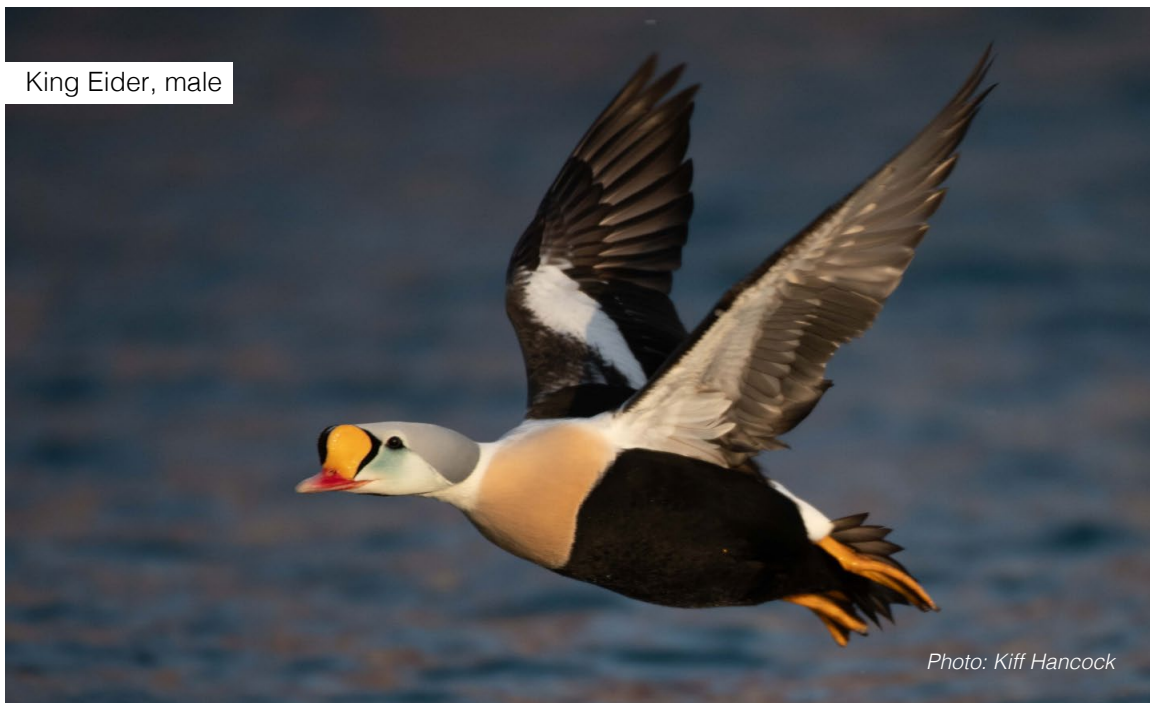
Photo: Simon Green



Steller's Eiders

Photo: Sören Lindén





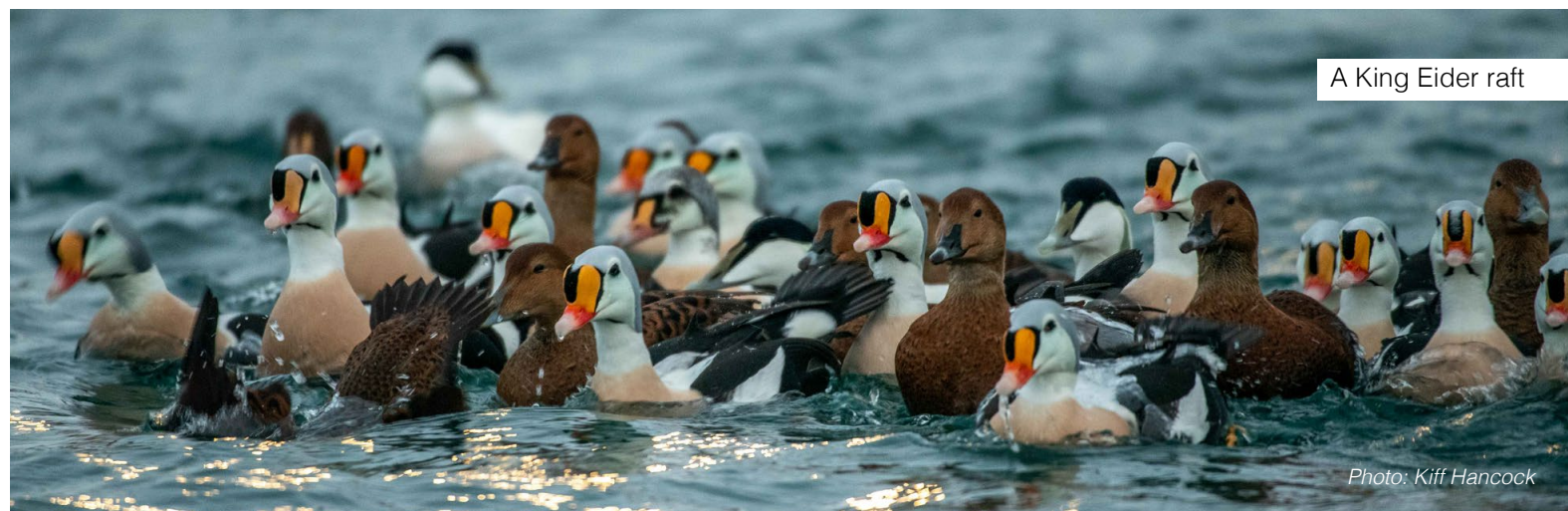
King Eider, male

Photo: Kiff Hancock



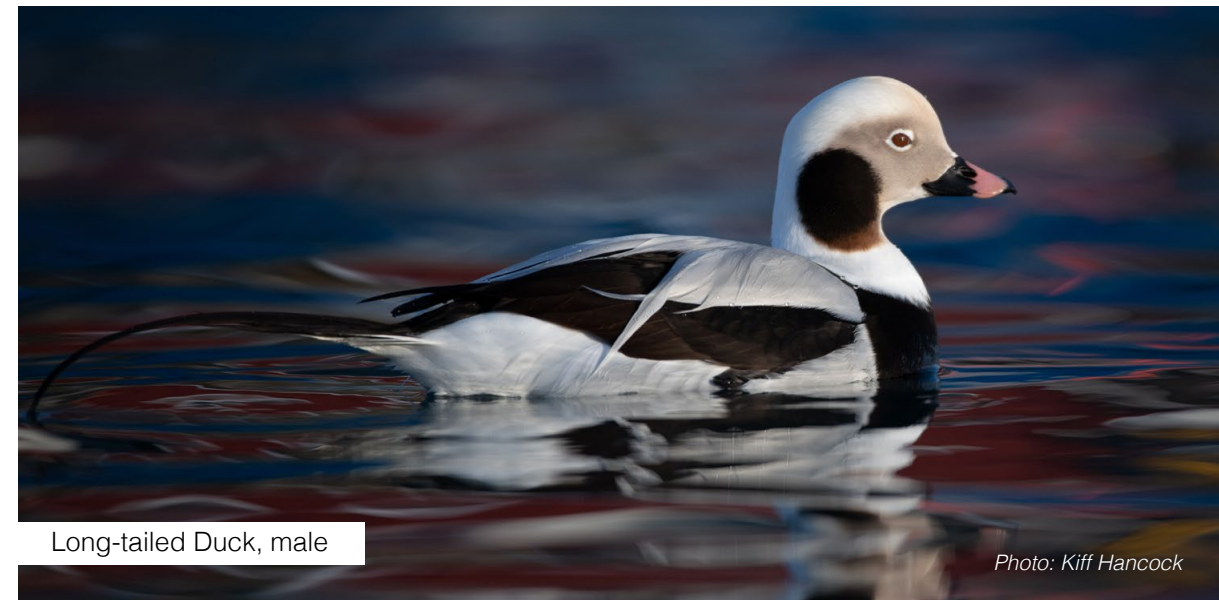
Long-tailed Ducks in flight

Photo: Kiff Hancock



A King Eider raft

Photo: Kiff Hancock



Long-tailed Duck, male

Photo: Kiff Hancock



Grey Seal

Photo: Kiff Hancock



Steller's Eiders

Photo: Kiff Hancock



lot was plowed and we had good visibility with the exception of a little light pollution. As we arrived and set up our camera equipment something was moving in the sky. We started experimenting with the cameras. About an hour later we went back to the hotel and jumped to bed around 10 pm.

### Day 3 02/23

As the light of day had not reached Båtsfjord yet, the group met in the hotel's foyer. We packed our breakfast and 20 minutes later we sat in the hide. On this day the wind had settled down, the water was still and the clouds were few. This offered different photo conditions compared to yesterday. Outside of the hide, we got a nice visit from the **Long-tailed ducks** who, unlike yesterday, were not the least bit shy. The beautiful little ducks were soon mixed with **King Eiders** in close proximity, which provided good opportunities for detailed portraits. The gulls were in larger numbers than yesterday and were closer to the hide. A **Glau-cous gull** came flying close by then landed on the water surface in front of the hide. The **Steller's eider** shone with their absence, but we had at least one female passing by. Around lunchtime we left the hide. As the wind had been calming down over night now had the

opportunity to go by RIB boat for some flight shots of the ducks in the fjord. It was sunny and just cold enough for us to perfectly comfortable in our overalls. We travelled the fjord and managed to capture pictures of **Common eiders**, **King eiders**, **Long-tailed ducks** and **Steller's eider**. However, the Steller's were few in number and the flocks kept a good distance from the boat. During our time out in the fjord, a lone **Black Guillemot** also turned up not far from our boat.

After a nice session on the water, we returned to the hotel just before two o'clock. We then enjoyed some catfish soup together. Most people then took the opportunity to get some sleep and alone time. In the late afternoon, the group gathered in the hotel lounge to socialize. Some took the opportunity to view and edit pictures taken in the hide. Just before seven the hotel restaurant opened and it was time for dinner, this time lamb was served. Some of the best lamb I ever had. Just before dessert, the guide Orjan came to visit to pick up the overalls we borrowed. Before he said goodbye he shared some information on where we might see Owls along the way to our next destination, Birk Husky (tomorrows destination). After dinner

we went out to try and find the Northern lights again. Because of the calm weather we had the opportunity to go all the way up to the mountains and leave the light pollution of Båtsfjord behind. Unfortunately, this evening was very cloudy and only occasionally did we have some Aurora peaking through the gaps of clear sky between the clouds. Despite this, the mood in the group was good and we decided to stay out a little longer.

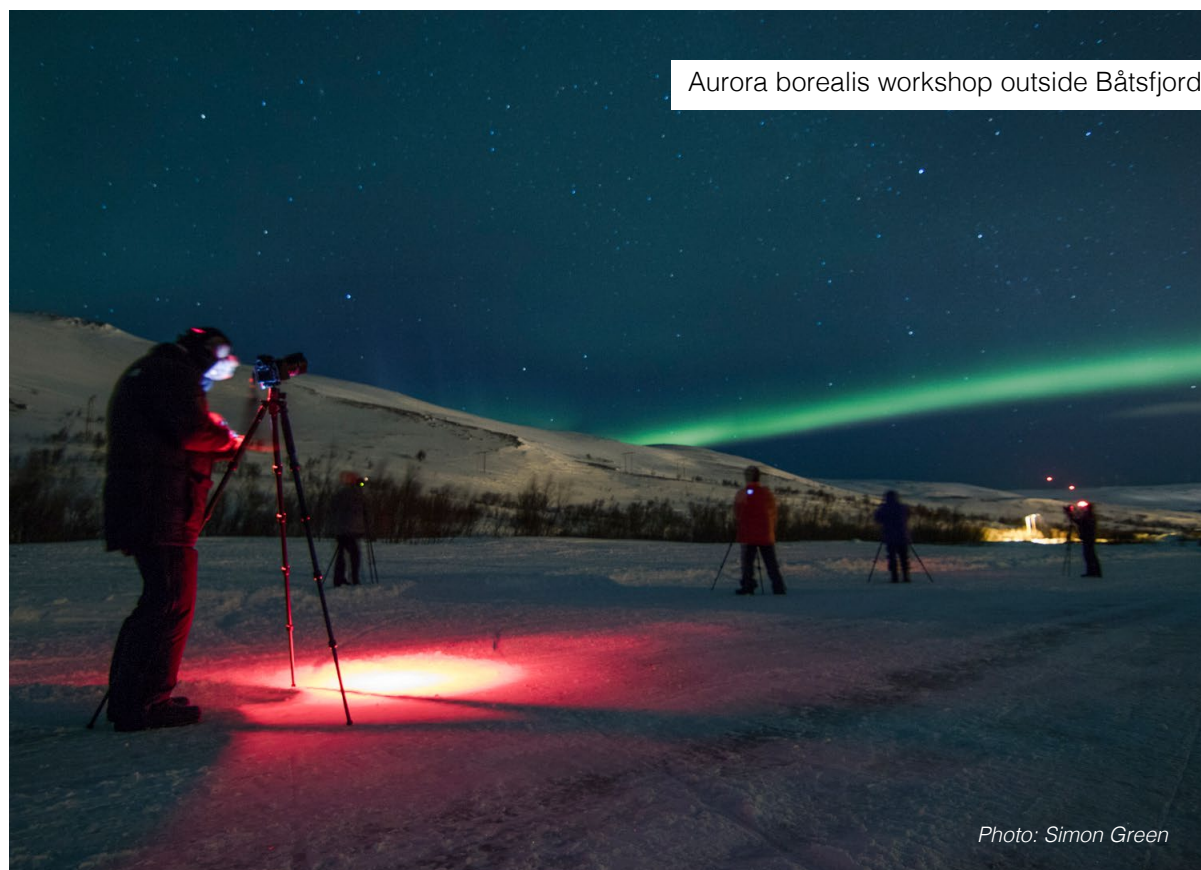
### Day 4 02/24

This was our last morning in Båtsfjord, we had the option to add a short session in the hide this morning but chose to sleep a little bit longer instead. We had breakfast at eight and at nine all our suitcases stood in the entrance and everyone had checked out. We left a snowy Båtsfjord behind, this time we did not need a plow truck to escort us. Along the way we saw a smaller group of **reindeer** in the far distance that offered us the opportunity for some landscape photography. A few kilometers further ahead a **lemming** came up on the snowy road. We managed a short stop to photograph it.

As we made our way down into one of Varanger's many valleys, we took the opportunity to pass Orjans family farm to look for Owls. A lot of **House sparrows** later and no Owls we drove on. Not

soon after we arrived to Varangerbotn for another lunch at the gas station. After a much needed meal, we moved on further into Norway's inland. Along the way we saw three resting **moose**, we decided to stop the bus for a picture and at the same time discovered a **White tailed eagle** sitting on a rock just behind the deer. When we were supposed to continue onwards we noticed that our car was stuck in the snow. Last night's snowfall had been plowed off the major roads but this one had not been prioritized. But after a few minutes of work we were able to continue. Despite this little mishap, I must say that the locals are very good at maintaining their roads in Varanger and we had already encountered a lot of plow trucks so far on our trip.

An hour later along the road we had some much needed "fika" in the bus. Some coffee and sweet buns we bought with us from the petrol station. Just before dusk, we arrived at Birk Husky, a hotel business that offers nature experiences with dog sledding near the Russian border. We met our host and guide Isabell who checked us in and showed us around the facilities. We took the opportunity to visit their little souvenir shop before returning to our accommodation for a few hours of rest and free time. Shortly after six o'clock, the group gathered inside Birk Husky's wooden lavvu. Entering the "tent" there was a large cast iron saucer in the middle where a fire was burning, surrounding the fire was eight solid tree stumps (as tables). We took a seat on the wooden benches covered in cozy reindeer pelts behind the stumps. Tonight's menu was salmon with boiled potatoes. After dinner, we chose to abandon the slightly smoky but warm tent to look for Northern lights and maybe hear some owls. Unfortunately, the weather put a stop to our plans as there was too much cloud to see Northern lights and too strong wind to hear owls. Instead some of us had a shorter session of determining the species of some gulls we had photographed in Båtsfjord.



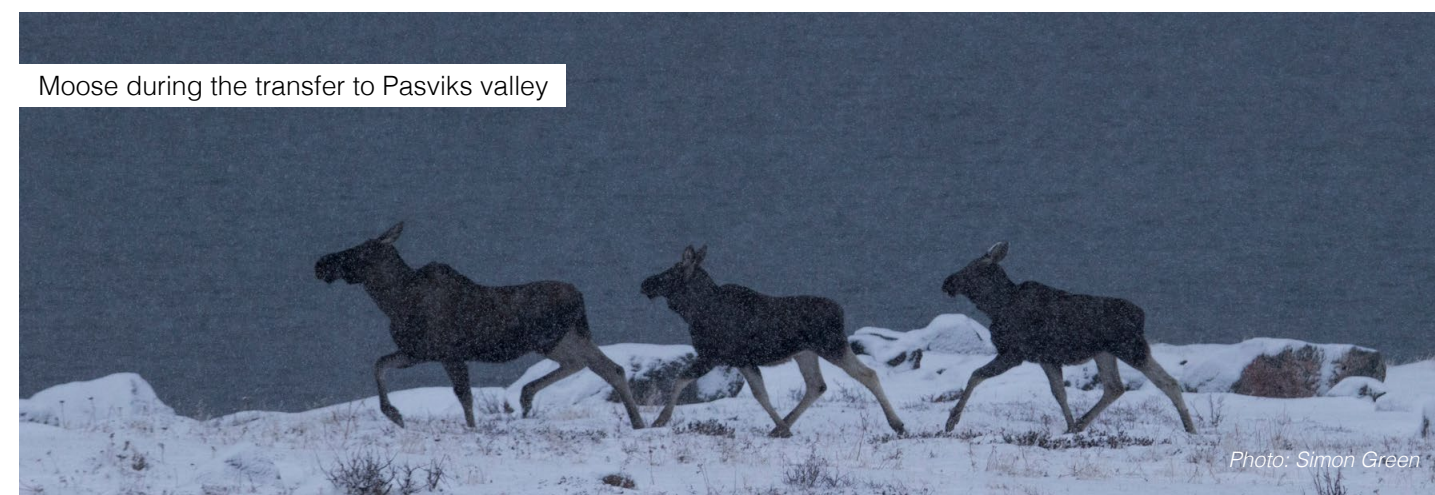
Aurora borealis workshop outside Båtsfjord

Photo: Simon Green



Lemming

Photo: Kiff Hancock



Moose during the transfer to Pasviks valley

Photo: Simon Green





Great Grey Owl

Photo: Simon Green

## Day 5 02/25

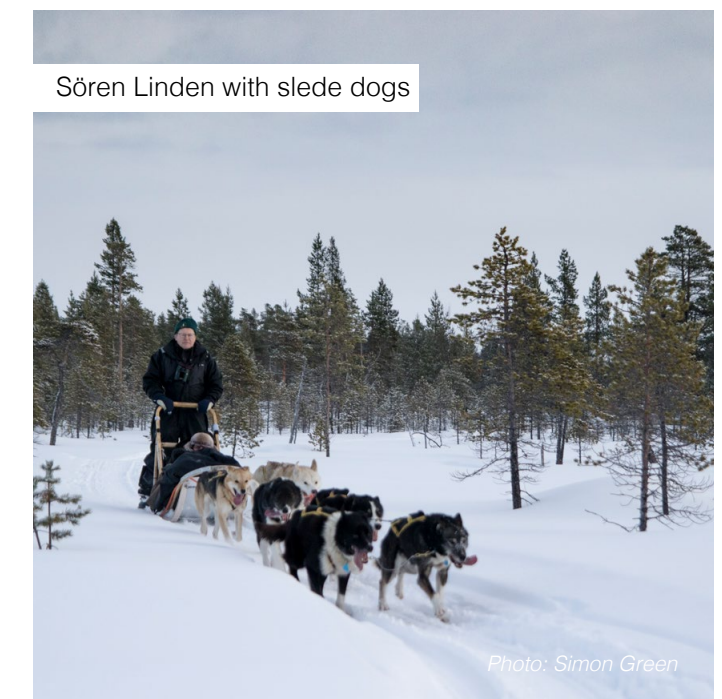
We began the day with breakfast downstairs of our accommodation. When everyone had eaten breakfast we got dressed for the outdoors and went to examine two locations where the latest sightings of owls had occurred. Both **Hawk Owl** and **Great grey Owl** had been seen only a few kilometers away from Birk Husky. After a few minutes the first owl was spotted in the top of a pine tree. A **Hawk Owl** had positioned itself in a grove on a farm, We went on to the property to see if the owner was at home and ask if we could be allowed to go in there and take some pictures. The owner was home, she smiled and said we were warmly welcome.

A bunch of image sequences later we decided to leave the owl that remained camly in the pine tree. Instead we focused on trying to find the **Great grey Owl** that have been seen in the area lately. After a minute of travel we saw a large owl sitting in a small spruce tree on the side of the road. "Great grey owl!" Unfortunately, we only had the opportunity to stay a little while as we had decided to meet up with the guides at Birk Husky at 10am.

Back at Birk, we gathered by the main facility to be equipped with warm overalls and boots. We then moved to the dog yard to meet man's best friend. We where warmly greeted by all the dogs and moved to the center of the yard where our vehicles for the day where parked, the dog sledges. A "crash course" later and it was time to dress the dogs in harness and leash them to the sledges. One by one they got lined up, everyone helped each other and we were ready to go long afterwards.

The dogs were eager and pulled us quickly away after we releaved the brakes. Our destination, a bird feeding station in the middle of the taiga.

A sledge ride later we arrived to the bird feeding station. It didn't take long for everyone to line up with their cameras and tripod in front of the bird feeders. **Siberian tits, Greenfinches, Willow tits, Bullfinches** and **Redpolls** came to feed at the station as our memory cards were filled with photographs. I had asked the local guides to bring some extra sausage for the **Siberian Jays**. A few pieces of sausage on the tree close to the feeding station was the right recipe. Not long after our first Jay came flying.



Sören Linden with slede dogs

Photo: Simon Green



Northern Hawk Owl

Photo: Simon Green





Kiff Hancock, Noelle Piron,  
Benedicte Rasson, Nicolas Rasson,  
Sören Linden och Ove Jansson

Photo: Simon Green



Siberian Tit

Photo: Sören Lindén



Siberian Jay

Photo: Simon Green

After an intense photo shoot and a nice lunch in front of a warming fire, the light of day slowly began to fade. We got ready and harnessed the dogs. Riding the sledges back we had a beautiful and warm sunset all the way to Birk Husky. Once at the facility, everyone had a big smile on their faces. We took an afternoon break and then met for dinner at seven. This was part of the group's last night in Varanger and therefore our last dinner together as a whole party.

A good meal of reindeer stew later we set out to see if the Northern lights had showed up. We decided to go out on the moor behind the dog yard, the same moor we had sled across earlier the same day. The dog yard was quiet and desolate, the strong cold that arrived during the evening had caused all sled dogs to take shelter in their bunks. Out on the marsh we were met by clear starry skies. As a letter on the post, the northern light arrived while the low temperature (-21 °C) caused the pine trees surrounding the marsh to crack. Producing something that sounds like when the batter in baseball gets a solid hit with the bat on the ball. What a great way to end an already great day.

#### Day 6 02/26

Today half of our group was going home. The other half had chosen to stay an extra day to spend more time at the bird feeding station we visited yesterday. Today was even colder than yesterday evening with temperatures around -25 degrees. We had one last breakfast together before half the group was driven to the airport. The minibus turbo decided to fuss along the road, which made our up hills along the way a bit slower. Anyways we arrived in good time before the flight. At Kirkenes Airport, the guests were dropped off and we made sure everyone was able to check in. The airport was then left in a new rental car that I had to replace because of the engine failure on the previous bus. I drove back to Birk Husky. Meanwhile the remaining guests had earlier the same morning been transported to the bird feeding station by snow mobile. As I went out to look for owls later in the afternoon one of the guests on the cell phone calls to tell me that they had returned to Birk. He continued "Simon, we couldn't possibly go to



Dog sledge on the way back to Birk Husky

Photo: Simon Green



Aurora Borealis at Birk Husky

Photo: Simon Green



Great Grey Owl



Photo: Kiff Hancock



Siberian Jay

Photo: Kiff Hancock

Siberian Tit



Photo: Kiff Hancock

Siberian Tit



Photo: Kiff Hancock

Siberian Jay







Bullfinch

Photo: Simon Green



Siberian Tit

Photo: Sören Lindén



Nicolas Rasson while photographing a Great Grey Owl

Photo: Simon Green



Northern Hawk Owl

Photo: Simon Green



Great Grey Owl

Photo: Simon Green

search for the owls?". "No problem" i said since I was already standing with a **hawk owl** in the viewfinder on the camera. 15 minutes later, we arrived to the spot and quite rightly the owl remained in the same tree as where I had left it. It was now late afternoon and the sun was setting. As we the guests slowly approached the bird it flew away. As it seemed it wanted to be left we focused on finding the **great grey owl** instead. A few hundred meters along the same route we found the species. At this point the photo light was really bad but we had a great experience and could spend about a fifteen minutes with the owl before it decided to leave and we drove back to Birk Husky for dinner.

We had Norwegian king crab soup served with freshly baked bread for dinner. At the dinner table the guests told that they have had good opportunities to photograph both **siberian jay** and **siberian tit** during the session at the feeding station. After dinner I decided to edit some pictures in the lounge in front of the fireplace while the guests went out to look for northern lights. They came back a while later, the northern light had shown but it was also cloudy. The remaining hour of the evening was spent packing the last for tomorrow's trip home.

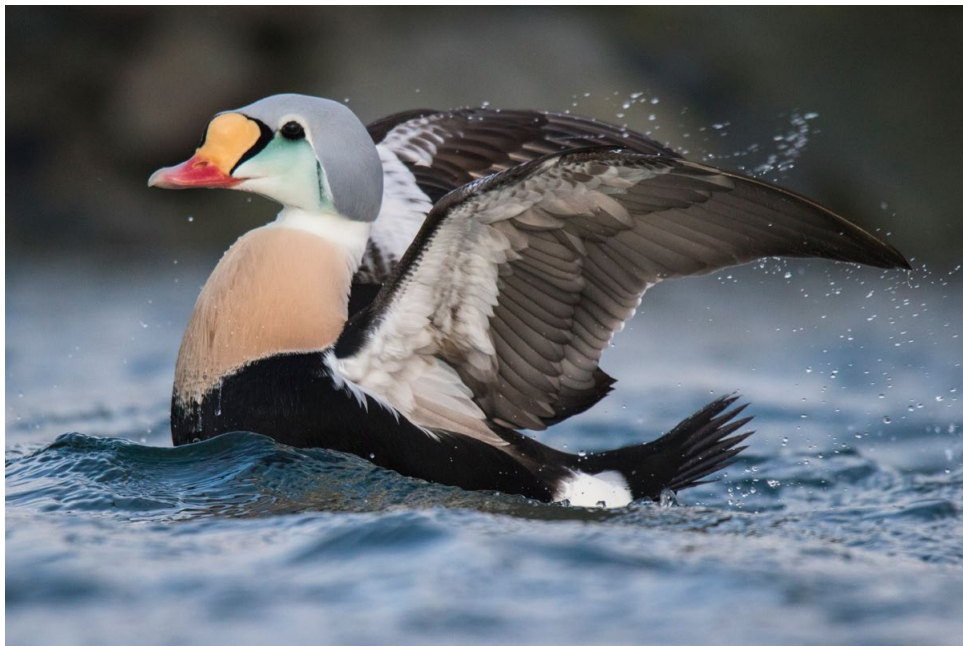
#### Day 7 02/27

We had breakfast together at sunrise, extra early this last day so that we would have time to swing past the owl location before heading to the airport. The weather was mild and we were left with "only" -14 degrees. After loading all the suitcases into the car we went away and got an hour together with a **great grey owl** hunting for rodents in the morning light.

In the end, the owl decided to leave and flew straight towards us then into the forest to not come back. It suited our time schedule well so we got back into the car and set sail for the airport. Along the way to Kirkenes we saw another **Great grey Owl** and three **Willow Grouse**. Check-in and security went on smoothly and after a little mingle in the airport lounge the plane was ready for departure. What a trip i thought to my self!



The trip is a collaboration between  
Birdsafarisweden and Karlmark Resor.



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