

NORTH NORWAY:

SPRING SEAWATCHING: 12-17th May, 2000

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General: This report summarises a “long weekend” seawatching trip to Slettnes in the extreme north of Norway.

Slettnes is a lighthouse on the north-eastern tip of the Nordkinn peninsula, between the North Cape of Norway to the west and the better known (from a birding perspective) Varanger peninsula to the south-east. At 71°N and 28°E, the Slettnes light is further north than Alaska and further east than Istanbul!

The reason for preferring Slettnes over Varanger for seawatching is that at least some of the birds passing Slettnes appear to head east into the Barents Sea, rather than following the coast south-east towards Varanger (where they might be seen from north or east facing sites on the Varanger peninsula, such as Kjølnes or Hamningberg). In theory, therefore, you do best from Slettnes.

We took a fairly relaxed approach, seawatching from Slettnes in one or two hour bursts and concentrating on birds that were close inshore. As a result, we enjoyed some spectacular birding, but the total counts of divers and skuas which we recorded are not directly comparable with the numbers reported by the doubtless hardier and more systematic Scandinavian seawatchers in previous years.

Acknowledgement: We first heard about Slettnes through Niklas Holmstrom’s masterly website “Birds at Slettnes Lighthouse” (<http://www.algonet.se/~nho/slettnes>). The quality of the website was a key factor in the decision to go ahead with the trip, so thank-you Niklas!

Itinerary: As follows:

<i>Friday 12th May, 2000:</i>	<i>Fly London- Oslo- Tromso (Overnight in Tromso)</i>
<i>Saturday 13th May, 2000:</i>	<i>Fly Tromso-Mehamn (via Vadso). Drive from Mehamn to Slettnes/Gamvik in hire car (20 mins.). Hire car from Avis, with snow tyres. (Overnight in Gamvik Guesthouse.)</i>
<i>Sunday 14th May to Tuesday 16th May, 2000</i>	<i>Three days in Slettnes/Gamvik/Mehamn area. Overnight in Gamvik Guesthouse</i>
<i>Wednesday 17th May, 2000</i>	<i>Drive back to Mehamn. Fly Mehamn-Tromso-Oslo-London (total travelling time for the return (Mehamn to London) was about 9 hours, including a two-hour connection at Tromso.</i>

It should be possible to juggle flights and do the outward journey from London to Mehamn in one day, not two. As it happened, we did rather well out of our stopover in Tromso, with a drake King Eider in the harbour and an memorable collection of birds in a bay just below Tromso airport; Short-eared Owl,

Redshank, Golden Plovers and Fieldfare along the snow-covered shore, with Red-throated Diver, Black-throated Diver and a summer adult White-billed Diver just offshore. Not bad for thirty minutes birding. We had a Temminck's Stint in the same bay on the way back.

Weather: Our main concern before travelling up was that bad weather might stop us from getting to Slettnes, or might stop us from birding when we got there.

When we arrived, there was more snow than we expected, with not far off 100% cover across the whole Slettnes/Gamvik/Mehamn area. There were very limited patches of bare rock and some small patches of grass around the houses. The snow was about half a metre deep, more where it had drifted. (Judging by the photographs on the Slettnes website, there would normally be less snow than this by mid-May.)

The road between Mehamn and Gamvik had been cleared by snowplough and so was easily passable (although, tantalisingly, the snowplough stopped about 1 kilometre short of the lighthouse at Slettnes and so we always had to walk the last leg). The road south from Mehamn was also clear, but with extensive drifts and snowfields on either side. Local information was that Ijffjord (the shortest route from south from Mehamn down to Varanger) is closed over the winter and does not usually open before 17th May. (For anyone desperate to get to Varanger, the long route to Varanger via Lakselv and Karasjok was open and we were told that it would be about an 8 hour drive.)

It is hard to say how far the snow cover affected our birding. It certainly didn't stop us from seawatching, but it did mean that the wetland area inland from Slettnes was birdless, except for spectacular views of cruising Arctic Skuas. Based on the information in the Slettnes website, some of the breeding birds would normally be back on this area by mid-May (consistent with our impression that there is usually less snow cover by mid-May). The spring thaw was underway and by the time we left, there was more rock and grass to be seen (but still up to 90% snow cover).

We experienced all weathers from bright sunshine and blue sky through to snow, hail and icy winds, but the bad weather never lasted for long. We were able to bird in one way or another throughout the period, except for a couple of hours one morning when it snowed fairly steadily and we stayed in bed. As promised in the Slettnes website, the buildings around the lighthouse provide good shelter and- despite the cold- seawatching here was an altogether more comfortable experience than huddling on a UK headland in driving rain. (The Gamvik Guesthouse is negotiating to be able to offer accommodation in the buildings by the lighthouse- this would be worth checking in subsequent years.)

Temperatures hovered a few degrees either side of freezing, depending on time of day and cloud cover- we guessed that the temperature never fell below minus 2°C and was usually just above freezing, although it felt much colder when there was a strong wind blowing from the north-west. The sun never set, but the temperature did appear to drop a few degrees during the night.

Birds: The highlights (in no particular order) were:

- passage of Long-tailed Skua and Pomarine Skua
- displaying Long-tailed Ducks in Oksfjorden
- Steller's Eiders in Gamvik harbour
- White-billed Divers

- Rough-legged Buzzards along the inland roads
- Gyr Falcon over Mehamn

A full trip list is attached.

Mammals: Red Fox and Stoat at Gamvik, Reindeer inland and seals (Atlantic Grey Seals?) offshore.

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Slettnes/Gamvik/Mehamn: 12th-17th May, 2000

Note: Species marked in **bold** seen at Mehamn/Gamvik/Slettnes. Species marked in ordinary type seen at Tromso only.

1. **Red-throated Diver (*Gavia stellata*)**
Present offshore throughout, mostly pairs in summer plumage. Also some easterly movement, maximum about 30 in two hours, including two flocks of 10 plus.

Several pairs on the fjords west and south of Mehamn.
2. **Black-throated Diver (*Gavia arctica*)**
Present offshore in small numbers, including a pair in Gamvik harbour occasionally flying and calling in a circuit between Slettnes and Gamvik. Also some easterly movement, but most smaller divers moving east were identified as diver spp or Red-throated.

Several pairs on the fjords west and south of Mehamn.
3. **Great Northern Diver (*Gavia immer*)**
One immature/winter plumaged bird off Slettnes on two occasions.
4. **White-billed Diver (*Gavia adamsii*)**
Present offshore throughout, mostly single adults in summer plumage. They tended to be feeding/resting a fair way out (500 metres plus) and so were hard to pick up in windy conditions. We located at least 15 offshore on the 14th May (the least windy day), including 9 in a loose group off Gamvik. A systematic count between Slettnes and Gamvik would certainly have picked up more.

Easterly movement was observed throughout, with at least 20 individuals during the period, all summer plumage adults except for three immature/winter plumage birds. Also 5 individuals west during the period. Again, a more systematic count would have picked up more.

On the 15th May, 1 individual flew in a large circle about 1km inland before swinging back over Gamvik church and dropping onto the sea off the harbour.
5. **Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*)**
Present offshore throughout, 1000s per day. One pure white bird was seen at very long range off Slettnes. It flew like a Fulmar and so is assumed not to have been an Ivory Gull.
6. **Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*)**
Present offshore throughout, between 10 and 100 per day.
7. **Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)**
Present offshore throughout, up to 100.
8. **Shag (*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*)**
Present offshore throughout, 10 -20.
9. **Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)**

1 past Slettnes.

10. **Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*)**

3 at Gamvik.

11. **Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*)**

3 at Tromso, 17th May

12. **Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)**

5-10 between Slettnes and Gamvik.

13. **Teal (*Anas crecca*)**

5 at Mehamn.

14. **Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*)**

5 at Tromso, 17th May.

15. **Eider (*Somateria mollissima*)**

Present offshore throughout, up to 300.

16. **King Eider (*Somateria spectabilis*)**

Up to 250 present offshore throughout, mostly in tight flocks of 30 plus individuals. Largest flock was of 137 off Slettnes on 17th May. Only small numbers moving east and these may have been local movements. Flocks mostly comprised females and immature males; less than 5% adult males.

There was also a flock of about 25 birds in Oksfjorden throughout.

1 adult male at Tromso, 13th May.

17. **Steller's Eider (*Polysticta stelleri*)**

Flock of 120 in Gamvik harbour throughout, including 2 adult males.

Also 2 individuals in Kifjorden.

18. **Common Scoter (*Melanitta nigra*)**

One party of 5 individuals east past Slettnes. Also in Hopsfjorden.

19. **Velvet Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*)**

5 at Tromso.

20. **Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*)**

Up to 150 present offshore throughout in small parties of up to 30 birds. Birds moving east may have been local movements only.

Smaller numbers in the fjords, including memorable displaying groups in Oksfjorden.

21. **Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*)**

1 at Gamvik.

22. **Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*)**
Offshore throughout in singles and pairs. About 20 between Slettnes and Gamvik.
23. **Goosander (*Mergus merganser*)**
1 in Gamvik harbour
24. **White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*)**
1 adult and 1 immature in the Gamvik area.

2 adults and 2 immatures in the Kjollefjorden area.
25. **Rough-legged Buzzard (*Buteo lagopus*)**
Seen on trips inland from Gamvik and Mehamn, total of about 6 individuals.
26. **Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)**
1 flew low over Mehamn town centre and round the back of the airport on 15th May. We owe a debt of gratitude to the traffic policeman who delayed us just long enough for us to be underneath the Gyr when it went over!
27. **Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*)**
2 inland south of Mehamn.
28. **Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*)**
About 5 pairs between Slettnes and Gamvik.
29. **Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*)**
2 at Gamvik from 15th May.
30. **Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*)**
Small numbers at Gamvik from 13th May.
31. **Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)**
Seen at Tromso
32. **Knot (*Calidris canutus*)**
5 east past Slettnes 16th May.
33. **Purple Sandpiper (*Calidris maritima*)**
Up to 70 in Gamvik harbour.
34. **Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*)**
A few in Gamvik harbour.
35. **Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)**
Small numbers at Gamvik from 15th May.
36. **Temminck's Stint (*Calidris temminckii*)**
1 at Tromso on 17th May.

37. **Redshank (*Tringa totanus*)**
1 at Gamvik.
38. **Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)**
1 at Tromso.
39. **Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*)**
1 at Gamvik.
40. **Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*)**
Displaying at Gamvik (between the houses) from 15th May.
41. **Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua*)**
2 individuals during the period.
42. **Pomarine Skua (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)**
Not seen until 14th May, when there was a major easterly movement. We recorded at least 50 individuals east in a two hour watch, including one party of 15. These totals do not include many more passing further out. Occasional birds moving east on subsequent dates.
- We saw no Pomarine Skuas during our last one hour watch on the morning of the 17th May, which (since 2000 is a leap year) equates to the 18th May in 1998 and 1999 (the “big day” for Pomarine Skua in those years, on the basis of the reports on to the Slettnes website). Maybe Poms were streaming through the day after we had gone, on the calendar 18th May ...
43. **Arctic Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)**
Present offshore throughout. 20 or 30 individuals in the general area, including up to 7 over the site of the nesting colony at Slettnes (covered by snow throughout). Some easterly movement, not easy to distinguish from local traffic.
44. **Long-tailed Skua (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)**
3 individuals west with Kittiwakes on 12th May. On 14th May, at least 25 individuals east in a two hour watch, including one party of 14 birds. Occasional birds moving east on subsequent dates.
45. **Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)**
1 in Gamvik harbour.
46. **Common Gull (*Larus canus*)**
Common.
47. **Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*)**
Common.
48. **Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*)**
Seen at Gamvik.
49. **Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*)**
Common.

50. **Kittiwake (*Rissa tridactyla*)**
Present offshore throughout in large numbers. Major movements west 14th/15th May and return movements on following days.
51. **Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*)**
About 5 between Slettnes and Gamvik, mostly second year birds. One adult.
52. **Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucoides*)**
2 individuals between Slettnes and Gamvik, one second year and one third year.
53. **Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)**
1 at Slettnes 2 16th May.
54. **Puffin (*Fratercula arctica*)**
Only seen (many 100s of birds) as part of a major westward movement of auks on the 13th/14th May.
55. **Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*)**
Offshore throughout, probably 50-150 between Slettnes and Gamvik.
56. **Guillemot (*Uria aalge*)**
Present offshore throughout, but only identified in small numbers.
57. **Brunnich's Guillemot (*Uria lomvia*)**
Present offshore throughout, but only a few positively identified. Excellent views of one close in to Gamvik harbour wall.
58. **Razorbill (*Alca torda*)**
Present offshore throughout, probably 50-150 feeding close in off Slettnes/Gamvik in small parties.

At least 95% of auks seen close inshore were Razorbills. There was a continuous movement of auks further out in small parties, the majority of which also appeared to be Razorbills.
59. **Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*)**
1 at Tromso
60. **Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*)**
1 at Mehamn.
61. **Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*)**
62. **Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*)**
1 at Mehamn on 15th May.
63. **Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*)**
Seen at Tromso.
64. **Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*)**

1 at Gamvik.

65. **Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)**

1 at Oksfjorden on 16th May.

66. **Willow Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*)**

1 at Oksfjorden on 16th May

67. **Magpie (*Pica pica*)**

68. **Hooded Crow (*Corvus corone cornix*)**

Common.

69. **Raven (*Corvus corax*)**

Common. Pair incubating at Gamvik.

70. **House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*)**

A few pairs at Gamvik. Significantly outnumbered by Snow Buntings, even around the buildings.

71. **Twite (*Carduelis flavirostris*)**

Seen at Gamvik.

72. **Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*)**

Common in small parties up to 40 throughout

73. **Lapland Bunting (*Calcarius lapponicus*)**

2 with Snow Buntings at Slettnes.