

Skjervøy and the Surrounding Area

Northern Norway, January 8-11, 2024

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Photo by Steve Truluck

Together with my friend, Steven Schubert, I spent a few days in mid-January, 2024 in the northernmost part of Norway before we drove down to northern Sweden where he lives. The main reason for heading this far north at this time of the year was not to watch Aurora borealis as most people do but to go whale watching from Skjervøy. From October to mid-January large schools of Herring head into the fiords east of Skjervøy, especially Kvænangen Fiord. This not only attracts the local fishermen but also large numbers of Orcas and whales. When Orcas are around, there are no seals or other dolphins to be found so if those are your targets you should visit at other times of the year. Finding someone to take you out to find them might be difficult though.

The Herrings used to flock to the Lofoten archipelago years ago and many people still think this is the place to go. There are options from Andenes north of Lofoten but if you want the big numbers of cetaceans, you should go to Skjervøy. It is likely that this will also change in the future but there is not much land north of here left so I recommend you go as soon as possible before it is too late. Orcas are certain and so should Humpback Whales be. This year a few Sperm Whales have entered the fiords from their normal hunting grounds off the continental shelf. Nobody knows why but our guides assumed they feed on Greenland Halibut there. Fin Whales are possible and on some trips (and with a lot of luck), Minke Whales can be seen – they have only been seen once this season.

Several companies offer whale watching trips from Skjervøy and one even offers snorkeling trips with Orcas. Based on our research before and when in Skjervøy, the best company to use is Dervola Adventure: <https://dervolaadventure.no/>. Their guides, Steve and Knut, are both very competent guides – and nice too. The other companies sail out in small rib boats which can get very cold and they are only out for approx.

three hours whereas Dervola's trips last for four hours. That means you can take full advantage of the little light there is this time of the year – the sun did not rise till 7 days after our trip. Dervola uses small boats making the trip much more comfortable. Accommodation is possible in Skjervøy but there is not much to choose from. We spent a night in an Airbnb flat and then two nights in a tent inland in the Reisa valley.

We were rather unlucky with the weather. We arrived the day after a very sharp cold snap over northern Fenno-Scandia had turned into a winter heat wave; in some place the temperatures rose 40 degrees in 24 hours. That meant we had the 'pleasure' of temperatures just above freezing point giving us very wet snow and fairly strong winds from the northwest. That meant that on the first two days, all trips were cancelled making them 2 out of the 4 days with no trips all season. The forecast on the third day was great, however, but we also wanted to spend that day inland in far northern Finland. Fortunately, one of the Dervola guides told us that we could see Orcas and whales from the road heading east from Skjervøy towards Alta. Here is a stretch after you cross a low pass where the road follows the Kvænangen Fiord (; >3==87:>763575> ; so if the fish are in here between the mainland and the two islands called Skorpan-Nøklan and Nøklan, you can easily see them from land. A good tip is to download the app called MarineTraffic and look at what the local fishing vessels are doing in Kvænangen. When they start their pumps, Orcas and whales flock to where they are to get a free meal. But back to us; when we reached the pass, it was closed due to the weather and we had to turn around and head back towards Skjervøy without having seen any cetaceans. They are working on a tunnel there so such unluck should be avoidable in the future. I immediately called Dervola up and was told that they only had one seat left for the following day but if we could stay in Storslett where I called from and have a cup of coffee, he would try and see if he could find us another seat. Two hours later, I called back and was informed that it was not possible to guarantee anything but sometimes people did not turn up in the morning so we could come by and see if that was the case. Not something to bet on and we were not very happy about our string of poor luck. We did get some free books from the local library that they gave away so perhaps our luck was changing? Yes, yes it was because I got a call from Dervola as we were beginning to pack up and head for Sweden via a different route. We now had two seats the next morning!

On Thursday the 11th, the temperatures had dropped below zero again and we were in for a beautiful clear day so even though the sun did not rise we still had pretty good lights for our trip. Not for great photos but enough light to find marine life. If photos of whales in gorgeous golden light is what you want, a trip around December 1 is the right time for you. At that time, the fishing vessels will also be gone for the year as they have fulfilled their yearly quotas.

Our luck had indeed changed. Not far out from Skjervøy we saw our first two Orcas. Two adult males even. Much better was to come but the boat was buzzing with excitement already. From then on, we saw Orcas pretty much non-stop. Sometimes a single animal and sometimes bigger pods of up to 20 animals. We were told that the really big ones with up to 100 animals were further south in the fiord (close to the road to Alta) where the fishing boats were. You are not allowed to sail closer than half a nautical mile to a working fishing boat, so we did not get to see the big pods but we had other pods following the boat for long periods of time but best of all – and a first for our local guide – was a pod of Orcas playing and feeding with an adolescent Humpback Whale. Not hunting it, just hanging out and seemingly goofing around. That Humpback Whale would later give us a big show for 30-40 minutes with lots of spyhopping, pirouetting while spyhopping and general playful inquisitive interaction with our boat and Dervola's other boat. This was when the other companies had already returned to Skjervøy so we got the show all to ourselves. In total I found 6 Humpbacks and we also saw 3-4 Sperm Whales, two of them very close to the boat. Best of all was the family of three Fin Whales including a calf from last year. Fin Whales are shy and usually take off

in the opposite direction of boats but these were in a more amenable mood to us tourists on this day. There was a loud gasp from the people on our boat when they dived down and their massive bulk became apparent. Fantastic. This was my only lifer on the trip but the Orcas and the playful Humpback were all stunning experiences making this my best whale watching trip ever. Both guides from Dervola afterwards said that this was the best trip of the season.

Mammals seen on the whale watching trip and around Skjervøy:

European Red Squirrel – *Sciurus vulgaris*
Harbour Seal – *Phoca vitulina*
Orca – *Orcinus orca*
Sperm Whale – *Physeter macrocephalus*
Fin Whale – *Balaenoptera physalus*
Humpback Whale – *Megaptera novaehollandiae*

Birds:

Common Eider – *Somateria molissima*
Long-tailed Duck – *Clangula hyemalis*
Ptarmigan – *Lagopus muta*
Herring Gull – *Larus argentatus*
Great Black-backed Gull – *Larus marinus*
Glaucous Gull – *Larus hyperboreus*
Cormorant – *Phalacrocorax carbo*
Shag – *Gulosus aristotelis*
White-tailed Eagle – *Haliaeetus albicilla*
Magpie – *Pica pica*
Hooded Crow – *Corvus cornix*
Willow Tit – *Poecile montanus*
Great Tit – *Parus major*
House Sparrow – *Passer domesticus*

Our guides also said you could find Pine Grosbeak in the village and Northern Hawk-owl on a trail just north of the village but we did not search for them as I have seen both species in Denmark.