



BIRDING IN NORWAY

biotope  Innovasjon Norge

A 5 page summary of the 74 page 'Birding in Norway' Innovasjon Norge report

Birders & birding culture

Birding is much more than a hobby. To many it is a lifestyle. The culture of birding is a worldwide culture, complete with its own "language", ideals, morals, websites, businesses and so much more.

A niche of millions - Birding is big

- Birdlife International estimates that 7 million people travel internationally every year to watch birds
- There are 18 million birders / birdwatchers in USA
- There are 7.8 million birders / birdwatchers in UK (3.7 million said they went birdwatching occasionally and 1.9 million go birdwatching regularly)
- In Europe UK has the most birders. UK bird / nature conservation organisations *The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds* and *The Wildlife Trusts* are hugely popular with respectively 1,1 million and 800 000 members. Together they also run the worlds biggest birdwatching fair The Rutland Birdfair, visited by 25 000 birders / birdwathcers every year (It is also the meeting point for the global birding industry).

Categories of birders

- Birdwatchers: Birding is more of a hobby (have binoculars, sometimes telescopes)
- Birders: Birding is a lifestyle (have binoculars, telescope, very often camera with telephoto lens)
- Twitchers: Birders with an express interest in chasing rare birds (and keeping lists of their finds)
- Bird / wildlife photographers: A focus on the creative / esthetic side of birding
- Active nature enthusiasts: With an interest in outdoor activities, birdwatching included. Often families.

Birding Survey - highlights & key points

(based on a 3 day poll in the birding community / keen birders)

- Most birding holidays last 2 weeks. Independent travelling is by far the most popular (80%).
- On every trip birding is the main focus. Everything else is secondary.
- Hotels and lodges rule, but everything goes (Airbnb, camping, etc).
- Credible information is key: Advice from other birders is by far the most important when deciding on where to travel (blogposts and trip reports by other birders are very important).
- Destination websites are often considered less valuable, as birding information on these is very often found to be less trustworthy or relevant.
- Destination bird guide books are hugely popular and important (guide to best bird sites - 75% will always buy a guide book for the destination they visit. Make sure one is available.)
- 64% will sometimes hire a bird guide (person). A guide is relevant, but not critical.
- There is enough birders in the world to have birding happening at every price range. However birders are often willing to spend considerable amount of money of their passion and hobby.
- Birders most commonly travel internationally once or twice a year. However some travel much more.
- On accommodation: Birders are very focused on the birding experience but 60% still prefer to pay more for comfort and / or good food.
- Birding happens at every age, from teenager to retired. Birding is a lifestyle. Once you have chosen birding it will stay with you for life.
- In Europe most birders are male (approx 75%). In North America it is closer to 50/50 male / female.
- Pay for photo hides are sometimes used by birders, but are very popular among bird photographers.
- Public bird hides / wind shelters are very popular and widely used.
- Birding is biggest in UK and USA. Birding in Asia is on the rise. In particular in China (where people come into birding via photography).
- Birding destinations are popular based on 1) being easily accessible and safe 2) being exotic and / or adventurous 3) providing a very high diversity of bird species.

- Norway (essentially meaning Varanger) is recognised as one of the top ten birding destinations in the world.
- In a European context Spain is the most popular birding destination (close to the biggest market, UK - and it has a very rich birdlife).
- Norway (essentially meaning Varanger) is recognised as one of the top 5 birding destinations in Europe.
- Varanger is by far the most famous birding destination in Norway. In the birding world sense it is Norway's flagship destination.
- Northern Norway holds the most interest for an international audience. Lofoten / Tromsø has undeveloped potential. Key birding destinations in southern Norwegian context has potential to go bigger (but most likely in a Scandinavian context).

By birders, for birders

The global birding business scene is made up of people who have made their passion their job. This in turn can make it difficult for a non-birder or a non-birding business to relate to the birding scene. This is a good thing. It is a means of securing quality throughout the scene. Business consequence: Make sure you have a birder (or more) on your team. Credibility is key (providing correct bird info, bird identification, etc, is vital).

Birding online

The birding world is highly decentralised, making it tricky to 'get into'. There is not a clear hierarchical structure, but rather a flat structure or culture with millions of contributors. There is a birding tour company for every taste or age, there are magazines to cater for every variety of the interest, and on top of that a very high percentage of birders are producers of content themselves, with thousands of blogs found online. The most popular social media are Facebook and Twitter.

Birding in Norway

Birding can be done anywhere. But this does not mean everywhere is desirable for birders. Varanger in Arctic Norway is a flagship destination for Norway internationally. More destinations have potential, but better products and more clever marketing is needed to reach out to an international audience.

Top Norway destinations / products

Internationally the **Varanger** region is by far the most famous region for birders and nature enthusiasts. It is by far the most famous destination in Norway. In particular Varanger gained international notoriety by the 1979 book "Arctic Summer" by UK birder Richard Vaughn. Since 2009 Varanger has propelled into birding world fame based on an innovative approach to destination development and marketing. This is not based on traditional formal means through tour companies and destination companies, but rather through informal international networks and clever use of social media, fueled by interesting content. This new form of destination marketing has been led by Biotope, made possible in particular with the support from Innovation Norway.

Svalbard is highly regarded as a wildlife destination, but less as a birding destination. Mammals are the key attraction on Svalbard, especially Polar Bear, but also Walrus, various species of whale, Arctic Fox and Svalbard Reindeer. Birding in Svalbard clearly has a potential for more development.

Lofoten / Tromsø / Senja regions is in a birding context not very well known, however there is much potential to develop the region as a birding destination. The region is already famous for its impressive landscape of mountains and fjords. The Northern Lights are also considered to “live” in the region. This status has helped the region establish itself as a premium nature destination. Further developing it as a birding destination needs more products, better facilities and presentations of the birding opportunities. The biggest potential is within the birdwatcher / active nature enthusiast and the bird photographer market.

Vega and Helgelandskysten also has a lot of potential to develop nature based tourism. In the world of birding there are always interest in special species like owls. The region has a relatively healthy population of Eagle Owl (hubro) which would be huge attraction if this became approachable in a sustainable manner.

Trondheimsfjorden / Trøndelag forests is relatively famous for bird and wildlife photographers. The region holds good numbers of northern bird species like woodpeckers, owls, grouse, Golden Eagles, etc. Best selling point is easily available bird species belonging to the northern taiga forest.

Dovre and the mountainous regions south of Trondheim is quite well established as a great destination to visit for those interested in wildlife and birds. The Musk Ox is the big draw, but the region also hold enough other interesting bird species and stunning landscape to be considered top destination to visit. Great potential, but much work is needed to refine and present it to an international birding audience. The biggest potential is within the bird / wildlife photography market.

Smøla, on the westcoast of Møre and Romsdal is an example of how one great product / company can make a big difference. Almost all the bird photography activity on Smøla is based around the company Smøla Naturopplevelser. Some places in Norway have a destination potential, meaning it has a wide range of attractions to hold the interest of a birder for at least a week or two. Other places need great products to become interesting for an international audience. Smøla has great nature, but not the variety to hold people for extended periods of time. Here a great product makes all the difference.

Jæren, Lista, Utsira and forested regions in East Norway are all places that are popular among norwegian birders and that has potential for further development and internationalisation. However better facilities, better products and presentations are needed.

Best selling points for Norway

- Rich birdlife with an arctic flavor
- Wild and intact nature
- Extremely varied both seasonally and regionally
- In addition to the birds it has an extant megafauna (Moose, whales, Reindeer, Bear, etc)
- Norway is hassle free, everyone speaks english and travel is easy and predictable
- Other attractive natural phenomena, like Northern Lights
- In an arctic context Norway is the cheapest birding destination (!)

Norways competition

- In the grand scheme of things Norway's competition is all the top global birding destinations. Birders will travel widely for great birding experiences. Maintaining a constant presence is the key. That is being represented at Birdfair in UK, having great content from Norway reach an international audience, and maintaining a highly engaging presence on various social media.
- In a Scandinavian context Finland can be considered competition, in terms of where birders fly to first for arctic birding experiences. Previously all birders came to Varanger via Finland. Today most birders arrive Varanger via Kirkenes. However the combination of birding in Northern Finland and Varanger still provides Norway with a good number of birders.
- Other top arctic birding destinations could be considered Norway's competition. However many of the most popular birding destinations are in warmer countries. Spain in Europe is very popular. Costa Rica in South America is hugely popular. Creating a worldwide shift in focus, and giving the arctic more attention will benefit all the northern destinations. In particular Northern Norway has a lot to gain from this, as it is easily available and cheap in an Arctic context.
- Norway's flagship birding destination, Varanger, is not only the world's easiest available arctic birding destination. It is also the world's cheapest arctic birding destination. The only competition here is Alaska, Arctic Canada and Siberia. Of these Alaska is the only well known arctic birding destination. Arctic Canada is not well known. Siberia is both expensive, unpredictable and not easily available. In this context Norway is the cheapest destination. Both hotels, rental cars and flights are considerably more expensive in Alaska.

Sustainability

- Engage in nature conservation:

Sustainability for wildlife-based tourism is about more than reduced carbon emissions and recycling plastic and paper. In the very widest sense engaging in nature conservation means to take action to make people's presence a benefit for birds and wildlife. This approach is undertaken to excellence by conservation organisations such as the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds). You can support bird observatories (they are a key part of science and bird conservation) or support a nature reserve. The ways to engage are endless, but make sure you do. What is good for ecology is good for the nature based economy.

- Code of conduct:

The nature of the hobby is to intrude into the lives of animals, but do so with as little impact as possible. Intentionally or recklessly disturbing birds comes at the expense of both the birds themselves and your fellow nature enthusiasts. Make sure you behave in a sustainable / responsible manner. It is a nature destinations / company's responsibility to develop a 'code of conduct' that matches the destination or attraction.

The following 5 (of 11) interviews with key people in the international birding community is an integral part of the 'Birding in Norway' report. They will provide more insight into the birding world:

Dominic Mithcell / Birdwatch magazine <https://youtu.be/t2ieaVCDRW0>

Jonathan Meyrav / Israel Ornithological Center <https://youtu.be/qRxAb1c-zuE>

Mike Watson / Birdquest <https://youtu.be/fzp3uA0zZoE>

Tim Appelton / Rutland Birdfair https://youtu.be/SI9q1_Jx0hM

Read the full 'Birding In Norway' report for more details and insights