

Finland 24th – 29th May 2015



Travelled to Helsinki, Finland from Heathrow [2hrs 30mins] with 10 participants in an Oriole birding group for a six day birding trip. Transferred from Helsinki to Oulu [1hr] by domestic flight in the north for a three day stay.

24th May 2015

Arrived at the Hotel Vihiluoto five minutes from Oulu Airport at around 1700hrs. The hotel was located in an ideal setting with lots of birds in the grounds and in the nearby marsh located on the Kempeleenlahti Bay. A quick look around the hotel grounds revealed large numbers of breeding Fieldfare as well as pairs of Pied Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff and even a roding Woodcock. Common birds seen here and throughout the trip included Hooded Crow, Chaffinch, Black-headed Gull, Swallow, Pied Wagtail, Magpie and Jackdaw.

Within an hour we were on the road to our first stop some 20kms south of Oulu, one of the benefits of 24hr daylight this far north. Our target bird showed extremely well in the form of an **Ural Owl ((*)**), with both adults in trees around a nestbox passing vole prey to each other and a nearly full grown chick peering out of the nestbox inquisitively. We watched the adults going about their business for the next hour until we all had our fill of this iconic species without getting to close and the birds were completely unphased by our presence. Other birds around the site included Pied Flycatcher, Redstart and another roding Woodcock.

Our next site still south of Oulu took us to another nestbox, this time of **Pygmy Owl ((*)**). After about 15mins the female was seen flying into the nestbox and occasionally sticking its head out of the hole and then the male flew in and perched on a tree about 10yds away giving good views, as it was getting a bit nery by our presence we decided to leave them be.

We returned to the hotel knackered but in bright sunshine I couldn't go to bed without walking around the nearby marsh to have a look what was about. This turned out to be a good idea as I recorded Marsh Harrier, 10 Wood Sandpiper, 2 Goosander, Gadwall, Dunlin, Pheasant, Bittern booming, Spotted Crake calling, Common Tern, Shoveler and Shelduck. Finally went to bed at 0100hrs after a long day but still in daylight. The sun never went down but just bounced off the sea once a day.

25th May 2015

No chance of a lie-on on the first day of a holiday and was up and out at 0500hrs for a pre-breakfast walk down the marsh. Birds were singing and the sunshine was even brighter than the day before. New birds at the marsh and bay included Greenshank, Little Plover, Sedge Warbler, Reed Bunting, Raven, Whooper Swan, Red-breasted Merganser, Garganey, Great Crested Grebe, Goldeneye, Common Sandpiper, Arctic Tern, Common Tern and White Wagtail. Around the hotel grounds Redwing, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Magpie, Blackbird and Collared Dove were new for the trip.

Today we travelled eastwards to a maximum of 40kms. On our journey from the minibus we spotted 22 Cranes, 20 Whooper Swan, a hunting Merlin and lots of Rook. Our first stop was at a territory of a pair of **Great Grey Owl (**)** along a forestry track of spruce and birch in yet another anonymous location as they all look the same to us. The adults were feeding three well grown chicks at a prominent nest site giving crippling views. There were lots of other birds around this area including Crossbill, Crested Tit, Willow Warbler, Chaffinch, Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Tree Pipit and Yellowhammer. A few kilometres along the track we saw our first Willow Tit and Cuckoo. A little further on we saw Greenshank, Yellowhammer, Redstart and a female Capercaillie next to the track. After about 10mins we stopped at another clearing and picked up 3 Whinchat, Wheatear, 5 Crane, 2 Wryneck, Red-backed Shrike and Stock Dove all showing extremely well. Again on the same track and another clearing we had Moose, Camberwell Beauty [our only butterfly species of the trip, a pair of Hen Harrier, Snipe in display flight, an immature Golden Eagle [probably 3rd year bird], Curlew, Common Gull and our first Skylark.

By now we were all very hungry and we stopped for lunch at a famous local nature reserve – Limminganlahti. With a very modern centre and half a dozen tower hides overlooking the bays marsh. After an extremely satisfying lunch we walked to a nearby tower and on the way I recorded two hoverflies in *Eristalis intricarius* and *Eristalis pertinax* as well as Muskrat and Stoat. The view from the tower over the bay was all encompassing and a large number of species were present in the 18C sunshine. A pleasant couple of hours was spent watching 2 Marsh Harrier, White-tailed Eagle, 2 Greylag Goose, 100+ Whooper Swan, 50 Common Tern, 10 Arctic Tern, 1 Gull-billed Tern [A Finnish rarity and mini-twitch], 10 Pintail, 5 Garganey, 10 Gadwall, 5 Wigeon, 10 Goldeneye, 50 Tufted Duck, 15 Mallard [not common here], 4 Great Crested Grebe, Whinchat, 8 Ruff, 4 Swift, 15 Black-tailed Godwit, 6 Redshank, 2 Grey

Plover, Greenshank, 2 Yellow Wagtail (*subspecies – thunbergi*), 50 Crane, White Wagtail, 2 Red-breasted Merganser, Sedge Warbler, Willow Warbler, Chiffchaff, Sand Martin, Swallow, Lapwing, Jackdaw, Pied Flycatcher and Yellowhammer.

On to our next site which was a stake out for 3-toed Woodpecker, which was seen at the nest hole sticking its head out investigating any noise that we made, but wasn't seen in flight.

Next site was back in Oulu itself which was a municipal park with children and dogs walking very close to the nest of a pair of Slavonian Grebe, which were not bothered by human presence or noise. Final stop of the day was at the Oulu harbour which was a site for Terek Sandpiper, which unfortunately didn't show for us. Other birds kept us occupied though and included a communal Lek of Ruff, Common Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Little Plover, Arctic Tern, 30+ Little Gull, Redshank and Arctic Hare.

Back at the hotel for 2000hrs evening meal and after plenty of time to walk around the marsh and get a good night's sleep. New birds for the marsh were 5 Temminck's Stint, 2 Pintail, Coot, Common Sandpiper, and Ringed Plover, pair of Slavonian Grebe, Dunlin, and pair of Red-breasted Merganser, Whimbrel, Little Gull and Greenshank. Regulars included Shoveler, Bittern booming, 3 Spotted Crake calling, Common Tern, Arctic Tern, Great Crested Grebe, Curlew, Wood Sandpiper and Gadwall. Retired to bed at 2230hrs ready for another bird packed day tomorrow.

26th May 2015

This was our last full day in Oulu area and an early start saw us driving in a northerly direction to another forestry clear-fell area about 20mins away. The sunshine had by now disappeared and gave way to cloud and a light drizzle, but that didn't hamper our birdwatching agenda for the day. We arrived at the site to immediately see a male **Hawk Owl (**)** perched in a high tree giving great views. Over the next two hours we watched both male and female feeding at least 6 well grown chicks dispersed widely amongst the trees. Also at the site Cuckoo, Redwing, Tree Pipit, Willow Warbler and displaying Wood Sandpiper were noted.

With the drizzle becoming more constant our local guide decided it would be better to drive round the area looking to see what was on the tracks rather than walking the area and getting wet. Our list included female Capercaillie, female Black Grouse, Crossbill, Pied Flycatcher, Redstart, Wheatear, Lesser Whitethroat, Song Thrush, Crested Tit and Siskin. We then returned to the hotel for lunch.

In the afternoon the weather cleared up and the sun broke through once again. So we drove south to an area of forestry we had visited on the first day. Birds of prey were in the air and included 2 Golden Eagle [adults], White-tailed Eagle, Sparrowhawk and best of all a brilliantly coloured male Pallid Harrier that gave mesmerising close views. Other birds seen were 2 Crane, Siskin, Cuckoo, Skylark and a distantly heard Wood Warbler.

A visit to the lake called "Papinjarvi" adjacent to the airport produced 2 Common Scoter, 10 Whooper Swan, 2 summer plumage Black Throated Diver, 20 Goldeneye, 30 Tufted Duck, 10 Black-headed Gull, 20 Little Gull and 2 Common Tern.

Last look around the marsh at the hotel produced new birds in Blackcap, Garden Warbler and Little Tern as well as Pintail, 5 Greenshank a pair of Marsh Harrier, 2 Whooper Swan, 2 Crane and 4 Swift.

27th May 2015

The day started with the expected heavy rain that was forecast, but this was our travel day to Kuusamo some 200kms to the north-east, so the rain would not really bother us that much. We stopped about half way at Syote Nature Reserve, which was a huge area of bog and forest and from various areas in the reserve we saw Taiga Bean Goose, Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Tree Pipit, Yellow Wagtail (*subspecies – thunbergi*), Brambling and Common [mealy] Redpoll. We also had a fine lunch at the reserve centre before carrying on to Kuusamo. We arrived at Hotel Sokos in Kuusamo at around 1500hrs just as the rain was clearing. By the time we had evening meal the skies had cleared and the sun was shining, as it did for the rest of the trip.

So out we went again to a nearby area of forestry where we saw **Tengmalm's Owl (**)** peering out of a nestbox when the local guide scratched the tree. Then a visit to a viewpoint over looking Kuusamo Lake which produced 2 pairs of Black Throated Diver, a pair of Red-necked Grebe, 40 Whooper Swan, Greenshank, 20 Goldeneye, 100+ Little Gull, 10 Common Tern, 4 Wood Sandpiper, Greenshank, 10 Crane, 2 Temminck's Stint. Another viewpoint produced 9 Goosander, 10 Goldeneye, 3 Black Throated Diver, 2 Temminck's Stint and 2 Wood Sandpiper. Then back to the hotel for an early night for the long day ahead of us tomorrow.

28th May 2015

Can't say I was up at the crack of dawn as there is no dawn at this time of the year. Instead we were out at 0400hrs to make the most of the day. First stop was at a site in the forest at the edge of Kuusamojarvi Lake where we successfully saw Little Bunting along with Reed Bunting. A little way back along the track leading here we had satisfying views of a pair of **Siberian Jay (**)** but couldn't coax them into the open to photograph.

Next stop was a nearby inland lake where we had 6 Ruff, 6 Temminck's Stint, Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, 2 Black Throated Diver and Red-necked Grebe.

Stop 3 produced a pair of **Siberian Tit (**)** at a nestbox site that showed well at times. With another tick in the bag it was time to return to the hotel for breakfast.

We then travelled to a nearby hilly area called Livaara Nature Reserve, but on route at a few small lakes and forestry tracks we picked up 2 Black Throated Diver, Wood Sandpiper, Red-necked Grebe, 3 Waxwing, 2 Siberian Tit, Cuckoo, Lesser Whitethroat, 2 Crested Tit, 6 Redstart and 4 Tree Pipit. At the hill itself after a brief climb we had a close Pygmy Owl sitting out in the open but not Red-flanked Bluetail that had been seen an hour earlier by another group. The only other birds of note on the hill were 3 Dunnock and Chiffchaff. The small lake below the hill held a pair of Black Throated Diver, 2 Goldeneye and White Wagtail. Continuing by bus along the main track south we found Green Sandpiper at several small ponds, Osprey briefly perched, Redstart, 2 hobby and Sparrowhawk.

Stopped for lunch at a forestry lodge called Livaaran Erakartano which had excellent food including Reindeer meat. It also had the added bonus of bird feeders outside which brought in 20 Siskin, Willow Tit, 2 Brambling, 2 Bullfinch, 3 Greenfinch and Red Squirrel, with the Osprey still flying around the nearby lake. Further along the track a series of lakes held 2 pairs of Black-throated Diver, 5

Whooper Swan, 2 Goosander, 4 Goldeneye as well as Mistle Thrush, Cuckoo, Hobby, Common Buzzard and Tree Pipit. But our great surprise was 7kms further on where we found a pair of Hawk Owl in courtship display.

We then followed another forestry track passing many small lakes and clearings racking up species as we went along Including 5 House Martin, Mallard, 2 pair of Goosander, 10 Little Gull, Hobby, White Wagtail, 3 pair of Black Throated Diver, 2 Woodpigeon, Kestrel, 2 Green Sandpiper, Herring Gull, Fieldfare, 4 Yellowhammer, 5 Common Tern, Mistle Thrush and finally Great Spotted Woodpecker. Time was now getting on so we returned to the hotel for evening meal and an early night ready for our last day in Finland.

29th May 2015

This was our last day in Finland and had to be at the airport at 1230hrs. So we set off from the hotel at 0500hrs and headed north and stopped briefly at a lake 10kms outside Kuusamo called – Raapyslampi. Here we had 3 pairs of Velvet Scoter, 2 pairs of Smew, 30 Goldeneye, 3 Wigeon, 50 Tufted Duck, 20 Little Gull, 10 Common Tern, 20 Black-headed Gull and 5 Herring Gull.

From here we travelled to Saarua, Ruka to visit the famous Valtavaara hill opposite the ski runs. We again failed to see the Bluetail, but did have a nice surprise in a very showy male **Hazel Grouse (**)**, while the female kept her distance. Further up the hill we stumbled across a very close displaying Capercaillie showing down to a matter of feet at times, thankfully it did not charge the group and some good photos were had by all. Robin and Wren were new for the trip and Arctic Hare was common around the ski slopes. The pond near the parking area held a female Smew and 2 Goldeneye.

Returning to the hotel for a 0930hrs breakfast we briefly had a last look at Kuusamojarvi Lake which produced 2 White-tailed Eagle, Red-necked Grebe, 20 Whooper Swan, 2 Black Throated Diver, 30 Little Gull and 10 Common Tern.

On the way to the airport we stopped at a small lake near the town dump and saw 2 Baltic Gull (*Larus fuscus – subspecies of Lesser Black Backed Gull which maybe a future split*), 2 Waxwing, 6 Goldeneye, Cuckoo, Common Tern, Kestrel and Common Gull. Our last birds of the trip were a pair of Swallow at Kuusamo airport.

We departed Kuusamo about 1430hrs to Helsinki for the connecting flight to Heathrow London, and with a slight delay arrived back in the UK at 1930hrs.

Finland was a beautiful country with a myriad of lakes and forestry, the hotels and their services were of top class as was the food everywhere we stopped. The pace of life was extremely relaxed as were the people and crime was unheard of in these northern towns. The Trip list topped 145 species with 8 species new for me. Oriole Birding and the local ground agents Finnature made sure our stay was as pleasant as possible and would recommend this tour to anyone interested in visiting Finland to see the birds.

Martyn Hnatiuk