

Finland and Norway

25 May–6 June 2005

Participants:

**Tony Baker
John Coupe
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Leaders: Carl Powell and Toni Uusimaki

Day 1: The group assembled at the flight check-in desk in good time and there were no problems during transit. The change at Copenhagen went smoothly and we arrived at Oulu on time. There we met our Finnature guide Toni and embarked onto the two very upmarket VW Minibuses. After booking in to the hotel we were quickly into birding mode with successful visits to both Tengmalm's and Eurasian Pygmy-owl sites. At the hotel itself there were ample opportunities for birding as we were to discover over the next three days. The trees within the grounds held Willow Warblers and Pied Flycatchers as well as Common Rosefinch and the adjacent waters were well-populated with wildfowl including Whooper Swans and Common Goldeneye.

Day 2: Enthusiasm within the group was high and remained so throughout. Pre-breakfast birding was the norm, not difficult with continuous daylight of course! Today's excursion to nearby farmland gave us close views of Black-tailed Godwit, Ortolan Bunting and Common Rosefinch. There are lots of potential life ticks on offer in Finland particularly for the first time visitor. What could be better than Great Grey Owl as a starter? Well, Great Grey at the nest complete with chick did it for us! Digital cameras have become so popular now and it is easy to understand why. Instant results that can be reviewed, discarded or saved and, of course, instantly compared with those of your fellow snappers! Cameras would be constantly busy on this



**Eurasian Pygmy-owl
(Carl Powell)**

trip. The Ural Owl was a little more reluctant to pose keeping the sun behind it and staying high in foliage. However, that does not mean that we did not see it very well. The Black Woodpecker proved to be a little less cooperative and was heard but not seen. Not so the Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker which came to us and performed with disregard for our presence. The nature reserve at Liminka was interesting with good numbers of wildfowl on display. These included Garganey, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser and Northern Pintail. Our first attempt at locating Northern Hawk Owl later that day was in vain but the long drive had compensations. A stop on the way back to Oulu gave us surprising views of a male Pallid Harrier. Way off course you might say but apparently an increasingly more common sight hereabouts. By now we were all aware of, and very grateful for, the huge stock of local knowledge that our Finnature guide Toni carried in his head or had access to via his mobile phone! With Western Marsh-harrier and Hen Harrier also seen, this had been a three harrier day!

Day 3: We began with a return to Oulu airport. Not to fly anywhere but to see two Terek Sandpipers picking their way through the grassy runway edges and even to display for us. Not alone, they had Arctic Terns, Temminck's Stint and Little Ringed Plovers for precious company. Next stop a nearby lake with a close-to-shore Red-throated Diver. Also on the water were Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup, a super opportunity for comparing these confusable species. Our only Caspian Tern then entertained us with a close up fly by, no confusion there! After our picnic lunch we visited a large reed bed but unfortunately the wind began to blow quite hard which kept smaller birds low. Views of 70 Common Crane from the exposed open top tower provided welcome compensation, but only for a while. Inland, a visit to a forest (Finland seems to be nearly all forest!) allowed the group to see Northern Goshawk at the nest. As almost every birder knows, the local rubbish disposal or landfill site can be relied upon to attract gulls from near and far. At Oulu we could go one better and an after hours inspection secured a massive Eurasian Eagle-owl as our reward for venturing among the bin bags!

Day 4: Before breakfast and the long drive north to Kuusamo we added Grey Partridge to our list. Nice to see this bird, which is becoming increasingly rare in the UK. As usual on long trips, frequent stops are taken to stretch legs and to bird. During one such stop to see Black Woodpecker we were surprised to see a pair of Smew fly low over forest clearing. Here we did see Black Woodpecker well as well as Common Crossbills. Another town, another tip, great! If nothing else, gulls always provide a talking point if not heated discussion. Just how different is the mantle on the Lesser Black-backed Gulls from that of the Siberian Gull? The Hotel at Ruka was very good and was located at the bottom of several ski lifts. However, the snow had all but gone from this area by now. Overall the weather on the trip remained good but today a rainy spell dampened our prospects somewhat but we had all come well prepared and we were not discouraged.

Day 5: A lay-by half way up a hill was our first port of call this morning and what a stop. Patience paid off and we had our views of the promised Red-flanked Bluetail and a pair of Siberian Jays whilst a passing Osprey was a welcome diversion during the wait. The grounds of the visitor centre at the national park were home to Crested and Siberian Tit along with Eurasian Siskins, Brambling and Parrot Crossbills. Always on watch as we drove the numerous roads and tracks, Hazel Hen and then Eurasian Capercaille were eventually spotted. Another long but rewarding day adding several species to our lengthening list. Bohemian Waxwing, Spotted Flycatcher and Willow Tit providing welcome infill between the rarer and more exotic delights.

Day 6: A second day of touring whilst based at Ruka. Another must see added to the list with lovely views of Little Bunting. During one stop with fields and open spaces around us we also saw European Golden Plover, Yellow Wagtail (*M.f. thunbergi*), and hunting Short-eared Owl in the air and on the ground. Also, along one track, a lone male Black Grouse practicing his full repertoire of display dances! Today the weather was not as warm and dry as we would have liked, but spirits remained high. At one lake we had 300 Little Gulls, Wood Sandpiper, Red-necked Grebe and Red-necked Phalarope. Every trip has special highlights with different ones for each member. One of mine came today when, at last, we found Rustic Bunting. Whatever your feelings are about using sound lures to bring birds into view it must be said they usually work. Our male

Rustic Bunting came almost immediately to the sound of a second bird in the vicinity and reacted with such energy that I thought he would burst! No need to prolong the recorded sound any longer, its job was done. Memorable moments indeed. Finally, a late call alerted Toni to a possible Northern Hawk Owl. We needed no more encouragement and drove the extra 20km followed by a lengthy walk to the site. The disappointment of seeing the bird fly as we arrived was quickly reversed to joy as it landed a few feet away in the top of a young conifer. The light was poor (it was nearly midnight!) but the bird was magnificent.

Day 7: Another long day driving further north to Ivalo. Various stops along the way afforded opportunities to see a variety of birds from displaying Broad-billed Sandpiper in upland bog to Eurasian Dotterel on the high windy tops and Merlin. As we progressed during the day it was possible to notice the change in the landscape from forest to tundra. At one stop we had a small, informal celebration as we crossed the Arctic Circle, cameras working overtime to record the occasion.

Day 8: Yesterday was a long drive, today was longer! First though, we explored a very wet bog for Broad-billed Sandpiper and with a great deal of success. A single bird on the ground proving difficult at first but at last we had good views. A displaying Jack Snipe provided an entertaining support cast. And so to lunch just south of Utsjoki on the border and a chance to compare Arctic and Mealy Redpolls over salmon soup. Next stop was real snow-covered tundra almost as far north as you can go in Norway. Check your map and you will find that we were at the same latitude as the top of Alaska and that is way up toward the top of the world! Fabulous birds too; Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas in abundance, small parties of Snow Bunting and a Willow Ptarmigan white as the snow it stood in all greeted us. Yet another magic moment for the memory bank as a large falcon swooped low over the bus and passed to our left. Time to practice the emergency stop and de-bussing procedure as we marveled at Gyr Falcon being harassed by two Long-tailed Skuas, wow! Down from the tops and along the coast road east to Vardo. White-tailed Sea-eagles were almost common and a group of summer plumaged Red Knot numbered over 600. Tiredness kept at bay by a combination of enthusiasm and wonderment, could that be adrenaline?

Day 9: From the hotel windows it was possible to see Arctic Terns fishing in the harbour and Purple Sandpipers foraging in the exposed seaweed, does it get better? Of course! The day was spent driving back along the Varangerfjorden stopping where we didn't on the way up. Groups of White-tailed Sea-eagles, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas and a host of sea duck including Long-tailed Duck and Velvet Scoter seemed to be everywhere. Lapland Bunting showed well at one stop and Shore Lark at another. A small flock of King Eiders was exciting amongst the hundreds of Common Eider. Other highlights included Bluethroat, Rock Pipit and singing Red-throated Pipit. Yet another superb picnic lunch preceded a visit to the reserve at Ekkerboy where 20,000 pairs of Black-legged Kittiwakes noisily wheeled around us. We had expected that we might have seen more birds of prey than we had but today we added Rough-legged Buzzard to that rather short list.

Day 10: Today was to be probably our best weather-wise and it couldn't have been timed better. We boarded a small fishing boat for the short trip out to Hornroya Island, not dissimilar to a trip to Skomer. As we approached the island, there was a distinct smell but that soon was lost to us. Thousands of Common Guillemots, many of them 'bridled', Black Guillemots, Atlantic Puffins and Razorbills were all around us and amongst them yet another prize in the form of Brünnich's Guillemots. Cameras out and ready with yet more full memory cards! Walking around the island we came across a small rock pool guarded by a pair of Greater Black-backed Gulls. In this pool were the remains of dozens of birds of an indeterminate number of species. Legs, wings, feathers and bones, a gruesome reminder that those gulls are truly killers and predators. Back on shore for the afternoon session and a trip along the coast northwards searching for White-billed Diver. Sadly, we were never to catch up with this bird, our only real failure. Chin up however, because aren't Steller's Eiders beautiful! We arrived eventually in a small hamlet named Hamningberg, which proclaimed itself to be at the "end of Europe", yet another photo opportunity!

Day 11: A last attempt to find White-billed Diver was fruitless although, we had no trouble with both the Red and Black-throated varieties. Often taken for granted was the Willow Warbler. They were commonplace to say the least but even at the very northern extreme of Europe they could be heard singing, such a change from their warmer winter habitat. Returning along the Varangerfjorden we stopped as necessary to watch a group of Red-necked Phalaropes and countless duck and waders before turning south back into Finland and back to Utsjoki for lunch. Here, from the tight confines of a kitchen window, we were privileged to see a pair of Pine Grosbeaks at a feeding station. On back to the Hotel in Ivalo where, in common with the remainder of Finland, the teenagers who had that day graduated from their local schools gathered to celebrate. Young ladies in their finery and young men sporting the traditional headgear reminiscent of a Victorian sailing cap.

Day 12: Another long drive back to our starting point at Oulu. But even after a long day we could not resist the temptation to search for Blyth's Reed Warbler. It was difficult and by now it was almost midnight and the sky was very overcast so that the 24-hour daylight faded to a degree of dimness we hadn't seen before. A bird did call and that bird was undoubtedly a Blyth's, the bird that showed well however, was undoubtedly a Sedge Warbler. Some were lucky enough to see both others not so. It was left to individuals to claim the bird or not. One last bird to catch up with and off we went in search of Thrush Nightingale. This bird was definitely heard but not seen.

Day 13: Some local last minute birding was all we managed today as we prepared to leave. We said our farewells to Toni and thanked him for his excellent work in finding us nearly every one of the target species for the trip. The flights back to Heathrow were uneventful; sleep being the order of the day for most. The tour had gone very well with everyone mixing well and socializing together and seeing some terrific birds.

Carl Powell