

Finland

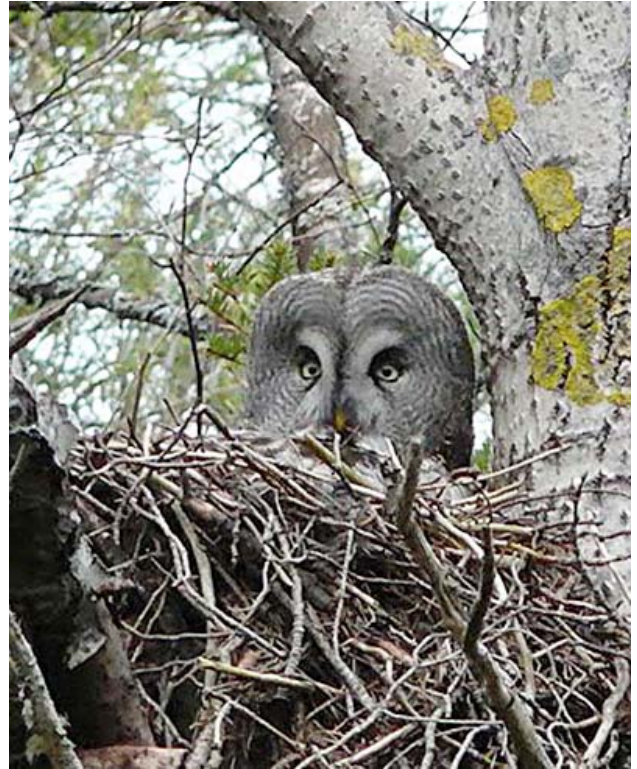
16–19 May 2008

Participants:

Bill Bailey
Dudley & Mary Baines
Catherine Ball
Alan Dearing
Ian Dearing
Bernard King
T J Marsden

Mike Morse
Judy Rosser
Gavin Salisbury
John Sirrett
Ryn Sullinge
Colin Wilson
Liza Zaferakis

Leaders: Antero Topp
and Peter Lansdown



Great Grey Owl

Day 1: The group assembled at Oulu airport, where we were met by our Finnature guide, Antero Topp. We quickly collected the two minibuses and checked into our nearby hotel, then set off for some late afternoon birding. The overcast, cold and windy conditions were temporarily forgotten as we were soon enjoying prolonged views of two superb Terek Sandpipers. The outing also produced Great Bittern (heard only), Smew, Western Marsh-harrier, Merlin, Arctic Tern and Grey-headed Wagtail. Other species we saw, and were to encounter on at least two more days, included Black-throated Diver, Whooper Swan, Common Crane, Hooded Crow, Ruff, Spotted Redshank, and Wood Sandpiper; many individuals of the last three were resplendent in full summer plumage.

Day 2: Although the weather did not improve during our first whole day, and, in addition, there were a few very light flurries of snow, we were more sheltered in the forests than we had been on the exposed coast. This was to be our 'owl day', but we were extremely disappointed to learn from the Finnature network and local contacts that neither Eurasian Eagle-owl nor Northern Hawk Owl had been located in central Finland this spring and that only one pair of Tengmalm's Owls was nesting in the area and so secretly that a licensed ringer checking nest-boxes had been the sole observer of either bird. Predictably, our short but optimistic vigil at the nest-box did not meet with success. However, we visited two Great Grey Owl nests and watched a sitting female at each. Elsewhere, a fierce Northern Pygmy-owl perched on a high branch and stared at us until we had all seen enough and retreated. Four Short-eared Owls completed the day's owl quota as two nesting Ural Owls failed to appear from their nest-boxes while we were present. The group's persistence in the forests was rewarded with White-tailed Eagle, Hen Harrier, Black Grouse, (including thirteen males at a lek), Eurasian Wryneck, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Willow and Crested Tits, Great Grey Shrike and Common Crossbill. Finally, after dinner at our comfortable hotel, those who ventured into the car park had sightings of a roding Eurasian Woodcock.

Day 3: Our second whole day began with four Short-eared Owls and further unsuccessful attempts for Ural and Tengmalm's Owls. Other species recorded in the Oulu area included Red-throated Diver, Common Scoter, Northern Goshawk, Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Little Gull, Eurasian Wryneck and Grey-headed Wagtail. Selected stops during our journey north-east to Kuusamo produced Red-necked Grebe, Smew, Golden Eagle, Lesser Black-backed Gull *fuscus*, Siberian Gull, Bohemian Waxwing and Mealy Redpoll. Although it was less windy in the Kuusamo area than it had been at Oulu, it was still cold and only the main roads were free of snow. We checked into our cosy hotel then ventured out once more. Along the roads and forest tracks we saw Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse, two much appreciated Hazel Grouse, Bohemian Waxwing, Common Crossbill and, briefly, Two-barred Crossbill, while a large open area allowed us to study Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese side-by-side and also to see White-fronted Goose and a flighty flock of Lapland Buntings.

Day 4: As we left the comfort of our hotel early on the final morning of the tour it was snowing heavily. In the pretty Christmas card setting of the Kuusamo countryside we saw Red-throated Diver, Northern Goshawk, Willow Ptarmigan, Black Grouse, Lesser Black-backed Gull *fuscus*, Bohemian Waxwing, Willow Tit, Great Grey Shrike, Mealy Redpoll and Lapland Bunting as well as both of our main target species. During a walk along a forest track, two Siberian Tits suddenly appeared and gave us wonderful, if neck-aching, views while, eventually, two Siberian Jays were located as they cavorted around next to the road. Before the half-way point of our journey back to Oulu, following directions gratefully received, we found in the forest a tree in which Ural Owls had a nest, and most members of the group were fortunate enough to get a view of the female. This was the last birding of the tour. We continued south-west to Oulu Airport to catch our flights home.

The group travelled some 1237km in Finland and recorded a total of 124 bird species. Mammals seen included Mountain Hare, Red Squirrel, Musk-rat and Reindeer. A combination of factors made the 2008 tour particularly difficult: a shortage of voles in February and March resulted in many wintering owls leaving the area rather than staying to breed and the unseasonal weather, which had started a week or so before the tour, not only blocked migration but also did not encourage species to begin nesting and, as a consequence, resident birds were harder to locate as they still roamed the forest seeking food. Thanks are due to Antero Topp and to Bill Bailey, Dudley Baines, Mary Baines, Catherine Ball, Alan Dearing, Ian Dearing, Bernard King, T.J Marsden, Mike Morse, Judy Rosser, Gavin Salisbury, John Sirrett, Ryn Sullinge, Colin Wilson and Lisa Zaferakis for their bird finding and their upbeat attitude despite the tricky conditions.