

# Finland

21–24 May 2010

## Participants

Mark Andrews  
Ray and Linda Berry  
Lee Cooper  
Garry Fennemore  
John and Jennifer Moody  
John Murray  
John Murray  
Tony Oakley  
Alan Pearson  
John Pullen  
Eric Soden

**Leaders** Toni Eskelin and Martyn Kenefick



**Day 1:** If you decide to put together an intense “long week-end” foreign birding tour, it is absolutely essential that the supporting logistical infrastructure goes as planned. Finnair and, more especially Finnature did us proud – the tour went like a dream. Shortly after the ungodly hour of 05.00, the main group met up at London Heathrow for our initial flight to Helsinki; Tony O., travelled separately from Madrid. The 2.5-hour Finnair flight was punctual and smooth with both an excellent hot breakfast and friendly, efficient cabin crew. By noon local time we had landed in wall-to-wall sunshine and a temperature of +30°C. Immigration procedures and internal transfer were perfectly straightforward and we were soon boarding our second flight to Oulu (pronounced Aw-loo), a 515 kilometre journey roughly the length of the Gulf of Bosnia flying due north for nearly an hour. We arrived to a pleasant afternoon +19 °C with sunshine, scattered cloud and a gentle cooling breeze. Our bags came through promptly; Toni, our Finnature Guide, was there to meet us; acquisition of the rental minibuses was quick and easy and by 16.00 we were at our delightful Vihiluodontie Hotel (although it is signposted as “The Airport Hotel”, no doubt for us English), our base for the first two nights of the tour. A quick half hours birding in the grounds proved to be excellent value. The hotel is based on the shores of a large lake with perimeter reeds and sedges, willow and conifers. Amongst the Common Chaffinches, Blue and Great Tits and Willow Warblers were two “red” Common Rosefinches, several Pied Flycatchers (perhaps the most common of the “interesting passerines” in the country), both Redwings and Fieldfares and a fly-by Eurasian Hobby. Dinner consisted of salmon and potato soup followed by pork and vegetables – and then the tour really commenced. Over the course of the next five hours we birded a variety of sites within a radius of 50km east and south of Oulu. Birding the forest was great but without doubt pride of place goes to extended views of Tengmalm’s Owl peering out at us from its nesting cavity. He, or possibly she, was the second tenant of what was originally a Black Woodpeckers hole – the previous tenant being a Common Goldeneye! Not to be outdone, nearby we were shown a stunning male Black Woodpecker; a diminutive (no – truly minute) Eurasian Pygmy-owl at a monitored nest site. We found a quarrelsome pair of Crested Tits; two roding Eurasian Woodcock and the bizarre sight of a Green Sandpiper sat atop a pine tree. In some open

ground close to Limingen Bay, a pair of Little Ringed Plovers performed well and the first of many Arctic and Common Terns screeched over our heads. At the bay itself, a party of 41 Velvet Scoters flew over and the shoreline held a breeding plumaged Temminck's Stints. On the open water we found our only Greater Scaup of the weekend, several Whooper Swans, four Common Goldeneye and two Goosander together with Eurasian Wigeons, Mallards, Northern Shovelers, Common Tealss, Tufted Duck and Red-breasted Mergansers, all whilst delightful Little Gulls swooped over the water catching flying insects. Our final stop, at a particularly rat infested rubbish tip failed to produce acceptable views of the local Eurasian Eagle-owl (a couple of us glimpsed a huge brown shape fly between two mounds of earth) but nevertheless the evening had been a superb introduction to Finnish birding and with the sun looking to set shortly after 23.00 the tour had started well.

**Day 2:** By 05.00, the sun was streaming in through the windows, I personally doubt if it ever really set, heralding another day of clear, bright sunny weather and a temperature hovering around the +15–18°C mark. The dawn (or rather early morning) chorus included Sedge Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Pied Flycatcher and Fieldfare. Pre-breakfast birding was initially spent around the northeast corner of Limingen Bay where we found a “red-head” Smew together with good numbers of the common ducks seen the previous evening. With Common Cranes calling in the distance, we drove south seeking out suitable areas. Not only did we have excellent views of 8–10 different cranes, we saw up to 900 Whooper Swans and smaller numbers of Greylag Geese. However the star bird of the morning was a superb, and surprisingly showy, Thrush Nightingale, singing merrily from the edge of a small thicket. Following an excellent buffet breakfast, we headed southwest and spent much of the morning at Limingen Lahte Nature Reserve. This is a large reed and sedge fringed lake with nice muddy edges. From the boardwalk and elevated hide, ducks included three Garganeys and perhaps 30 Common Goldeneyes. Waders included Ruffs of many different persuasions – some blondes, a brunette and an exquisite auburn/red-head, whilst Black-tailed Godwits were ever on view with their display flights and calls. We all saw a male Western Marsh-harrier but a more distant White-tailed Eagle was seen by only a select few, whilst up to 30 Little Gulls sallied too and fro.

From Limingen we continued southwest for a further 50 kilometres or so and into the spruce, birch and pine forests close to Siikajoki. Our primary objective was to find Ural Owl, a species particularly scarce this year. Thanks entirely to Toni, we all enjoyed telescope views of an adult perched perhaps 100 metres distant. It is only right, at this point, to mention the downside of this morning's glorious sunshine – mosquitoes were out with a vengeance. Nevertheless, with broad smiles on our faces, we spent a further hour birding the forest edge, managing to entice in not only an Ortolan Bunting, which unfortunately flew straight at us, perched right in the top of a particularly dense pine and became lost to view, but also both Eurasian Wryneck and a particularly photogenic male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker. The next item on the agenda was lunch. Each day, our lunch was taken at one of a chain of large cafes adjacent to petrol stations – with an extensive hot and cold buffet to choose from.

Mid afternoon found us briefly back at our hotel to “don mosquito resistant clothing” before our final “owl quest” of the day. We took a 200km drive north and then east beyond the town of Kemi. Whilst the ticking clock meant we had to be extremely single minded in our birding, there was time out to watch a sub-adult White-tailed Eagle lazily soar over the highway. If you ask a selection of birders for their “most wanted Western Palearctic species” many would very understandably include Northern Hawk Owl in their response. They like open areas with plenty of dead conifers. In an obviously suitable area, we enjoyed the company of a male perched right out in the open no more than 50 metres away, regularly gently calling “rather Curlew like” to its mate who glared out at us from the safety of her nesting cavity. We were on the road and they appeared totally relaxed, if mindful to our presence and it is a half hour event which all of us will remember forever more. But it wasn't all over yet – we had one remaining quarry to seek out hidden a few kilometres further on and deeper into the forest. How Toni found this female Great Grey Owl sat on her nest I will never know. The viewing window between patches of foliage was so small and despite being a safe distance away, we were all able to enjoy this magnificent creature through telescopes – and what's more, there were no

mosquitoes! All that was left was the late evening drive back to Oulo and an even later dinner. In less than two days, we had found our five principal target owls, all thanks to superb local knowledge.

**Day 3:** Overnight, the weather changed. We awoke to overcast skies and early morning steady drizzle. Nevertheless birding the local environs produced the usual flycatchers and thrushes. However John M jnr and Mark stole the show by finding a Booted Warbler in some wet thickets nearby. No doubt there will be ensuing correspondence with the local Rarities Committee. Following another excellent breakfast, we checked out of our hotel with the principal aim of driving 250 kilometres northeast to Kuusamo which lies just below the Arctic Circle, birding en route. By mid-morning, skies had cleared somewhat, although with a fresh breeze, the temperature hovered around the +10–12°C mark. At Hireisuo we looked out over a large expanse of wetland bog with numerous small lakes, finding our only Taiga Bean Geese and a solitary European Golden-plover together with several Common Cranes and a pair of Eurasian Hobbies. Further on, more roadside viewing produced six magnificent summer-plumaged Black-throated Divers. Shortly before lunch, we diverted to some hillside pine forest close to Taivalkowski. Here our targets were Siberian Tit and Siberian Jay – and despite a real effort had neither sight nor sound of either. But all was not lost. An excellent European Honey-buzzard circled the trees in front of us before slowly drifting west; an agitated Eurasian Wryneck followed our passing, calling incessantly and almost constantly on view; a couple of Bohemian Waxwings briefly perched out in the open whilst Eurasian Siskins were continually calling and flying over.

After another excellent buffet lunch, we continued our drive northeast, birding some of the numerous roadside lakes and finding more Black-throated Divers, a pair of Velvet Scoters and three Smews – an adult male, a juvenile male and an adult female. Shortly before Kuusamo, we diverted to overlook a particularly clean rubbish tip heaving with gulls. Most were *argentatus* Herring and Black-headed but with around 30 *fuscus* Lesser Black-backed and a single sub-adult Siberian or Heuglin's Gull all perched in full view. Whether these are mere races or species in their own rights depends upon which authority you follow – but an excellent opportunity to hone gull identification skills nevertheless. Several attending Wood Sandpipers barely got a notice. In town, we checked into the large and very comfortable Sokos Hotel and then headed straight back out. On the way up into the conifer forest, we overlooked one particular lake, which, apart from the splendid male Smew in attendance, also produced our first male Black Grouse sat atop a distant tree. Again our quest was for the tit and jay double act. Siberian Jay was conspicuous by its absence (and silence) but we did have excellent views of a very agitated Siberian Tit – no doubt nesting nearby. By now, the skies had really closed in and rain was falling steadily – time for a very tasty dinner of reindeer with potatoes and lingonberries.

After dinner birding, for a hardy core group, was a pretty wet affair as the rain became continuous and quite heavy at times. A nearby lake produced pairs of Red-necked Grebes, Garganey and Smew. Our other target, Willow Grouse was a complete washout! We returned to the hotel in very gloomy light at 22.00 and with understandable reservations about the “early morning grouse drive” to follow.

**Day 4:** The agenda today was for an early morning drive along forested tracks hoping for grouse using the quiet of the early hours to get calcium from the gritted paths no more than 20 kilometres from the Russian border. However, rain would be a serious problem as female birds would never leave their nests/eggs open to the elements. On looking out of my hotel room at 03.00, it was proverbially chucking it down. Nevertheless, this was the final day of the tour and we had to make the most of it. Our buses left at 04.00, leaving just a couple of the group to have decent night's sleep. We stopped beside an open meadow, and could hear grouse “bubbling” somewhere in the distance. Indeed, there was a male Black Grouse sat atop a pine tree but that was not where the noise was coming from. A little further on, we found the source – an eight-male-strong Black Grouse lek. From there, with the rain turning to sporadic drizzle, it was into the forest proper, driving down dirt tracks. Bus No 1 had a fleeting glimpse of a grouse taking off in front of them that, by elimination, was a Hazel Grouse – nice but hardly sufficient. A while later, tyres screeched to a halt as a male Eurasian Capercaillie was found arrogantly, slowly strutting along a side-track. Whilst obviously aware of our

presence, it didn't take the slightest bit of notice. Our last grouse was a female Black beside the road. That then left two target birds in this habitat of dense, wet willow thickets. Despite sterling efforts, we drew a blank. Neither Rustic Bunting nor Hazel Grouse responded to our efforts. Time for a change of scenery.

Around 30 kilometres from Kuusamo is a well-known site for Red-flanked Bluetail. Indeed in the surrounding 10 square kilometres of hill forest, there are, in good years, 10–12 pairs. Our arrival coincided with the rain beginning in earnest, the wind picking up and the temperature dropping to around +7°C – hardly ideal conditions to view perched up small passerines. The best we could manage was another Bohemian Waxwing. Not to be put off, we set off into the forest determined to find a Siberian Jay which Toni had heard calling. Over the course of the next 20 minutes, almost all of us had reasonable views of one individual being constantly harassed and chased by a couple of Bramblings. Following a couple more “in vain” attempts to lure Rustic Bunting into view, we returned to thaw out over breakfast at the hotel.

We had, perhaps four more birding hours available to us before the long drive back to Oulu in time to check in for our flight, and Rustic Bunting was the main target. Eventually we heard one but try as we might, we could not entice it to come within viewing range. One bird did respond to a Rustic Bunting tape – a fine Willow Grouse flew right over our head landing out of view in dense thickets on the other side of the track. In the intermittent rain we slowly drove along a former railway line running through the forest for some 20 kms, parallel to the highway. Two Common Cranes flew over us but it was not until just before the end of the track that Mark called our attention to a distant grouse feeding on the edges – a male Hazel Grouse. In fairness, the heat haze (despite the drizzle) didn't help but we were all able to identify the bird clearly through telescopes. We tried to approach closer with the vehicles and a few of the group managed to get brief much better views as the bird hopped up onto a bank inside the forest and then just slunk away. This effectively finished the birding element of the tour. All that was left was lunch and the drive back to Oulu with five “target” owls seen well within an overall total of 125 species. Mammals had been few and far between, save for Reindeer and Hares. Alan found a Hedgehog and a couple of Muskrats were seen by the lakes, one of which was definitely stalking a Smew! Our return journey was as smooth and uneventful as the outward route and we arrived back at Heathrow at 20.30, some 20 minutes ahead of schedule.

Lasting impressions of Finland were of a well maintained countryside with good roads; cleanliness with a total absence of litter; friendly people who spoke perfect English; a virtual absence of traffic away from the large towns; the sight of people “ski-skating” along cycle tracks; waders sitting in the tops of trees and, for some, the downside of extremely expensive alcoholic drinks! We were fortunate in having several very sharp pairs of eyes amongst the tour group and were extremely grateful to Toni not only for his incredible local knowledge, but also for his friendly and professional guiding. A happy tour, that was a pleasure to participate in – it all went extremely well.

Martyn Kenefick

Birdfinders

[martynkenefick@hotmail.com](mailto:martynkenefick@hotmail.com)