

Finland

Owls

20–23 May 2011

Participants:

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Siberian Tit

Leaders: Toni Eskelin and Peter Lansdown

Day 1: Ten Temminck's Stints were seen within walking distance of our hotel near Oulu before the final members of the group arrived just in time for an early dinner. Afterwards we set off for some birding, heading north to Alakyla and driving into the forest. From our two minibuses we were soon watching a fine male Hazel Grouse close to the track. Our first scheduled stop saw us leave the vehicles, walk on a short way and set up our telescopes on a hole high up in a tree. Our Finnature guide, Toni Eskelin, moved quietly to the base of the tree and scratched the bark, mimicking the noise made by that renowned climber and eater of eggs, the Pine Marten. Almost immediately a head filled the hole and we were being stared at by a much-appreciated adult Tengmalm's Owl. A male Black Grouse was seen in flight over the treetops as we strolled happily back to the minibuses. At Sangnijoki, in another more dense forest, we located a Eurasian Pygmy-owl. Such was its restless nature, coupled with the speed of its flight and the lush habitat that good views were obtained only on those occasions when the bird perched for a while near the track. Three distant flying Common Cranes were seen on the drive back to the hotel and a Caspian Tern was found by those who opted for a walk before retiring for the night.

Day 2: Like yesterday, it was largely a fine day and not cold when sheltered from the keen wind. Three Temminck's Stints, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a Common Crane were recorded around the hotel before we left, having breakfasted well. Our journey was interrupted by the sight of a Black Woodpecker, which flew away into some woods before we could all get out of the minibuses. We weren't to see it again, but the ensuing roadside vigil did produce two Eurasian Wrynecks and a male Black Grouse in flight over the

woods. At Siikajoki we took to the forest tracks. As we were passing through a large clearing a rarity appeared, a beautiful male Pallid Harrier gliding over the trees and it began to quarter the open area. On we drove, eventually stopping in another big clearing where we left the vehicles and walked across some very uneven terrain with well-spaced trees. Before long, by standing on various wobbly tussocks, we were able to gaze into a hole in a tree and see, deep inside, most of the head of a Northern Hawk-owl. After watching the bird for a long time, hoping for better views, we were astonished to find its mate sitting in a nearby tree. Now really excellent looks at this much sought-after species followed. We saw a male Black Grouse in flight near the minibuses then drove a short distance and parked on the edge of a mature forest, proceeding on foot to where a very impressive Great Grey Owl sat on its enormous nest. This time we did look for its mate and got great views of it in a tree not far away. After a well-earned lunch we headed for Liminka for more forest birding. Even prolonged study of a Ural Owl sitting in an old Northern Goshawk's nest enabled us to see only the very top of the bird's head and its under-tail. We walked on, locating a lively pair of Black Woodpeckers, before returning to the Ural Owl; on this occasion, from a different angle, we were able to see as far down as its eyes, so we had to be satisfied with that. Following dinner at the hotel, our final locality of the day was Oulu Harbour, where we felt the full force of the cold west wind. The Gulf of Bothnia was choppy, the tide was high leaving no mud exposed and it seemed that our chances of finding the only Terek Sandpiper known to be in Scandinavia at the time were slim. However, we found it remarkably quickly, away from the shoreline as it stood with a single Common Redshank for company, facing the buffeting wind. We all enjoyed good views before we returned to the hotel for the night.

Day 3: The wind had eased somewhat and it was another sunny day. After seeing a single Temminck's Stint and a stunning male Common Rosefinch in song, and hearing a second individual, as well as enjoying a hearty breakfast, we left the vicinity of the hotel near Oulu and set off north-east towards Kuusamo. Our first break during the journey was in a pull-off overlooking a bog, where we saw five Taiga Bean Geese, a Common Crane and a Short-eared Owl: our sixth owl species of the trip. At Iso-Syöte National Park we discovered a Eurasian Wrenneck and a male Parrot Crossbill and we then paused for lunch. Finland is full of scenic localities but birders do not visit sites for their beauty: so it was that our next stop was at Kuusamo rubbish tip, where we found two *heuglini* Lesser Black-backed Gulls. Once we reached the immediate Kuusamo area, we began to search the forests for the local specialities. It wasn't long before we were enjoying good views of an attractive and extremely welcome Siberian Tit near its nest-box and there was a female Parrot Crossbill nearby. More effort was required to find our only Siberian Jay but this showed very well although it refused to drop down to the ground to sample the generous helping of sacrificial peanuts. We spent a very pleasant last half-hour or so at Kuusamo Lake, where a good selection of birds included two Velvet Scoters, before retiring to our hotel in Kuusamo for dinner and bed. Two more Velvet Scoters were seen near the hotel by those who took a final stroll before turning in.

Day 4: We started the day with a wonderful pre-breakfast grouse-drive through the forests, which produced a splendid male Willow Grouse, two male and six female Eurasian Capercaillies, a total of fifty-five Black Grouse, mostly males at leks, and two male and a female Hazel Grouse. On one occasion we were surprised to discover that we were being watched by the piercing yellow eyes of a juvenile Tengmalm's Owl in its nest-hole and, at another site, we were delighted to find a female Pine Grosbeak which really posed for us at the top of a tree. After a late breakfast it was time to head for the airport at Oulu. We were not finished with birding, however, and it was seventh time lucky when we located a fine male Rustic Bunting at Sarkela. More good fortune was to follow when we re-visited Iso-Syöte National Park and tried, for the fifth time, to find a Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, which obliged by giving us a few flight views before alighting on a silver birch for a short while. It had been a superb day's birding and a lovely, calm, cloudless day with the temperature rising to 22°C. Thoroughly happy, we drove to Oulu airport, taking lunch on the way. We were very close to the airport, taking diesel on board before returning the minibuses, when a large raptor was spotted a long way away, but approaching obliquely. We watched it for a long time: it never got really close, but close enough to identify it as a White-tailed Eagle, which gave us a last-gasp bonus and completing an excellent tour.

Only selected species are mentioned in the above account, while a full list follows. The first figure in brackets represents the number of days recorded (out of four, the first being a very short birding day) while the second figure represents the highest daily count or estimate: Black-throated Diver (3, 3), Great Crested Grebe (2, 5), Red-necked Grebe (2, 4), Whooper Swan (3, 31), Taiga Bean Goose (1, 5), Greylag Goose (2, 20), Eurasian Wigeon (3, 6), Mallard (4, 20), Northern Pintail (2, 2), Northern Shoveler (3, 6), Common Teal (3, 4), Garganey (1, 2), Tufted Duck (4, 80), Common Scoter (1, 3), Velvet Scoter (1, 4), Common Goldeneye (4, 100), Smew (2, 6), Red-breasted Merganser (2, 10), Goosander (4, 10), Hen Harrier (2, 2), Pallid Harrier (1, 1), Western Marsh Harrier (3, 2), Eurasian Sparrowhawk (1, 2), Common Buzzard (2, 1), White-tailed Eagle (1, 1), Common Kestrel (3, 3), Merlin (1, 1), Willow Grouse (1, 1), Eurasian Capercaillie (1, 8), Black Grouse (3, 55), Hazel Grouse (2, 3), Common Pheasant (2, 1), Eurasian Coot (1, 3), Common Crane (3, 3), Eurasian Oystercatcher (2, 1), Greater Ringed Plover (2, 2), European Golden-plover (2, 1), Northern Lapwing (3, 15), Temminck's Stint (3, 10), Ruff (3, 5), Eurasian Curlew (4, 6), Whimbrel (3, 1), Common Redshank (3, 3), Common Greenshank (4, 2), Wood Sandpiper (3, 3), Common Sandpiper (4, 2), Green Sandpiper (2, 4), Terek Sandpiper (1, 1), Eurasian Woodcock (2, 3), Common Snipe (3, 6), Little Gull (4, 900), Black-headed Gull (4, 300), Common Gull (3, 8), Herring Gull *argentatus* (3, 300), Great Black-backed Gull (1, 1), Lesser Black-backed Gull *fuscus* (3, 21), Lesser Black-backed Gull *heuglini* (1, 2), Common Tern (4, 50), Arctic Tern (3, 12), Little Tern (2, 3), Caspian Tern (1, 1), Common Wood-pigeon (4, 10), Stock Dove (1, 4), Common Cuckoo (3, 1), Short-eared Owl (1, 1), Northern Hawk Owl (1, 2), Ural Owl (1, 1), Great Grey Owl (1, 2), Eurasian Pygmy-owl (1, 1), Tengmalm's Owl (2, 1), Common Swift (3, 40), Eurasian Wryneck (2, 2), Black Woodpecker (1, 3), Great Spotted Woodpecker (3, 2), Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (1, 1), Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (1, 1), Skylark (3, 1), Sand Martin (3, 50), Eurasian Swallow (4, 30), House Martin (3, 12), Tree Pipit (3, 5), Meadow Pipit (1, 2), White Wagtail (4, 6), Yellow Wagtail *thunbergi* (3, 2), White-throated Dipper *cinclus* (1, 1), Dunnock (2, 1), European Robin (2, 2), Common Redstart (4, 5), Whinchat (3, 3), Northern Wheatear (1, 4), Eurasian Blackbird (3, 1), Fieldfare (4, 20), Redwing (4, 3), Song Thrush (3, 5), Mistle Thrush (3, 3), Sedge Warbler (3, 3), Lesser Whitethroat (2, 2), Blackcap (1, 1), Garden Warbler (1, 2), Willow Warbler (4, 20), Wood Warbler (1, 1), Common Chiffchaff *abietinus* (2, 2), Goldcrest (1, 1), European Pied Flycatcher (3, 12), Spotted Flycatcher (2, 2), Siberian Tit (1, 1), Willow Tit *borealis* (2, 2), Eurasian Blue Tit (2, 4), Great Tit (4, 6), Common Starling (2, 2), Siberian Jay (1, 1), Eurasian Jay (1, 1), Eurasian Magpie (4, 12), Eurasian Jackdaw (3, 100), Common Raven (4, 6), Hooded Crow (4, 25), Rook (2, 3), House Sparrow (3, 6), Common Chaffinch (4, 30), Brambling (1, 4), Eurasian Siskin (4, 25), Greenfinch (4, 3), Northern Bullfinch *pyrrhula* (2, 2), Common Redpoll (3, 5), Common Rosefinch (1, 2), Pine Grosbeak (1, 1), Common Crossbill (3, 30), Parrot Crossbill (1, 2), Yellowhammer (4, 12), Rustic Bunting (1, 1) and Reed Bunting (4, 4).

The total number of bird species recorded was 130. The following mammals were seen: Brown Hare, Mountain Hare, Red Squirrel, Bank Vole, Musk-rat, Reindeer and Elk.