

Finland

Owls

13–16 May 2016

Participants

Terence Adams
Stephen Bacon
Timothy Bourne
Patricia Boyce
Simon Cockayne
Richard Dakin
Detlef and Carol Davies
Nigel Oram
Graham and Christine Stacey
Phillip Strachan
John Williamson



Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl

Leaders Antti Vierimaa with assistance from: **Ray Grace** and **Helen Heyes**

Day 1 Skiers aside, there are not many groups of people in the world who would book a holiday when the weather forecast for the destination was worse than that for staying at home – I'm pleased to say that birders are among the select (and possibly bonkers) few. So it was that, after an anxious wait for Terry, whose taxi and National Express coach had both let him down, we set off from Heathrow in muggy 16°C conditions to arrive a few hours later in Oulu, where it was just 7°C. After meeting up with Antti and picking up the vans, we set off on the very short drive to the first of our two hotels on this trip. Its name – The Airport Hotel – makes it sound like a very basic Travel Lodge-type place with little more than a bed and a loo to offer, but in fact it is a very welcoming little hotel with incredibly friendly staff, great food and a fantastic wetland right on its back doorstep. Needless to say, the latter was our first port of call after checking in, dropping off the cases and donning a few extra layers! After picking up the resident Redwings, Fieldfares and Mistle Thrushes in the car park area, we wandered down to the lookout platform and were almost spoilt for choice as to where to look first – the place was teeming with water birds of all descriptions and we quickly ticked off Whooper Swan, Common Shelduck, Northern Pintail, Tufted Duck, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal, Common Goldeneye, some lovely Ruff in full breeding plumage, Common Redshank, Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, Common Greenshank, numerous Wood Sandpipers and an unbelievable number of

distant Little Gulls (Antti did a rough count and made it about 600 or so). Further scans produced Eurasian Wigeon, Great Crested Grebe, some lovely Garganeys, Little, Common and Arctic Terns, the first Hooded Crow of the trip, a couple each of Red-breasted Merganser and Common Merganser, Western Marsh-harrier, a couple of Common Cranes standing at the back, Common Ringed Plover, 11 Temminck's Stints, flyover Western Yellow and White Wagtails, heard-only Reed Bunting and Sedge Warbler, and a Marsh Sandpiper picked out by Antti, which we watched for some time. Delighted with the start we'd made (and with one write-in for the list already), we headed back towards the hotel for an early dinner, picking up our first European Pied Flycatcher en route. Once seated in the dining room, our lovely, smiley waitress announced the menu for the night and, after a long day in transit, we happily tucked into soup followed by steak with reindeer sauce and then chocolate cake, somewhat bemused by the Spanish-themed music selection playing in the background. It is traditional on these trips to try to crack the first of the owl species on the first night, and we were not about to let the side down. We clambered back into the vans and headed to the Sanginjoki Forest. On the drive, Antti told us to look out for grouse species on the roadside verges and, sure enough, we were soon peering at our first female Eurasian Capercaillie of the trip. Arriving at the forest, we took a short stroll past a family's little camp and were treated to the sight of a Black Woodpecker peering out of a nest box at us. After good looks and several photographs, we set off to try for the nominated first owl on this particular trip – Ural Owl. We made our way into a field bordered by a few trees and, to the accompaniment of loud, thumping (but this time definitely not Spanish) music, set up our scopes to look at what we were assured by Antti was a Ural Owl in a nest box. I think it's fair to say it wasn't quite the view we were hoping for, and we spent some considerable time trying to work out which bit of the bird we were looking at. However, in scanning around to try, unsuccessfully, to find a perched-up male, we were entertained by either several Eurasian Woodcocks or maybe just one demented one circling around the field, and had a good chuckle over the constant pounding beat from the nearby house – maybe the Ural Owl was trying to cover her ears! Finally, at about 11.30 p.m. and still in daylight, we headed back to the vans for the drive back to the hotel and a most welcome collapse into bed.

Day 2 They say there's no rest for the wicked, and by that yardstick I reckon that made Antti the only saintly one among us! After agreeing a 4a.m. meet-up at the vans this morning, we all stood around feeling somewhat chilly before it became apparent that Antti, for some reason as yet unknown, wasn't going to show. Without a room number or a phone number for him, and with no one on reception at that time in the morning, we were a bit stuck until Tim phoned the hotel number and got through to the overnight security firm. Thankfully, and to our great relief, they sent a guy out in a car to help us. Eventually, we tracked down the right 'Antti' from among the hotel guests and the security guy went and woke him up for us – thank goodness he'd just overslept and hadn't fallen ill. Apologising profusely, Antti appeared a few minutes later and we set off for what turned out to be a thoroughly enjoyable morning's birding. After our 'interesting' views of the contortionist Ural Owl in the nest box the previous night, first up this morning was a trip to the Siikajoki Forest to see if we could improve on that. Our luck was in! After walking through the trees for a little while, Antti picked out a bird sitting not too far ahead of us. He set up the scope, and almost everybody had a great view before the bird flew. As possibly the only person in the group who didn't see it the first time around, I will be forever grateful to Antti for relocating the bird a little farther on. This time we all had great views through bins and scopes and Tim did a bit of digiscoping using Patricia's phone to come up with a stunning image. So began the legend that was Patricia's phone list! Feeling suitably upbeat, we made a short drive to our next stop – a really productive, more open stand of mixed woodland with a little stream running through the middle of it. We had barely stepped out of the vans before we were treated to the sight of a female Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker drumming on a dead tree trunk a little way in front of us. As we sipped the coffee and nibbled the biscuits that Antti had brought with us in the van, we soon added a couple of Eurasian Wrynecks, a flyover Stock Dove, a lovely Bluethroat, a male Common Redstart darting out from a line of saplings along the stream, a male Eurasian Bullfinch, a couple of Eurasian Siskins, a Lesser Whitethroat, a Song Thrush, several Yellowhammers and a male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker. It's not often you get a haul like that before breakfast! Speaking of breakfast, we were running a bit behind schedule this morning and Antti had to phone ahead and ask the hotel to

extend the timings a bit for us. We made it back by the skin of our teeth for the wonderful and extensive buffet, but we did get rapped knuckles for trampling mud all through the dining room! With a little time to kill before meeting back at the vans and setting off again, some of us walked back down to the lookout tower at the back of the hotel, en route seeing some stunning views of Western Yellow Wagtails on the lawn under a big tree. By the time we got down there, we just about had time to tick off a few juicy extras in addition to what we'd seen yesterday, like about half a dozen Spotted Redshanks in breeding plumage, before we had to rush back to the car park. Our next targets for the day proved tough: Hazel Grouse and Eurasian Pygmy-owl. Either side of lunch in a supermarket, we tried two or three different sites for each species and drew a blank. Eventually, our luck improved and we all had brief, but amazing views of the beady yellow eyes of a female Eurasian Pygmy-owl staring at us from the next box. It was a relief to have the second owl under our belts, and our drive to the next site added a Short-eared Owl to our growing lists together with a Whinchat. Walking along the tracks at the next site, we listened again to Antti blowing his little whistle to try and attract a Hazel Grouse. At first there was no reply, but then, very briefly, one called back. So began our epic quest to track him down! Much more obliging was a lovely Crested Tit, which we watched for some time in between peering through the undergrowth and listening intently for whistling calls. At last there was a breakthrough of sorts when Richard had the bird fly directly over his head. Sadly, we were all looking in different directions at the time and many of the group missed it entirely. However, the bird soon settled into a routine of flying around in a big circle – from one hidden distant tree branch to another! After getting to grips with his favoured perches, we all eventually managed to get flight views of sorts as he darted from one to the next. It's nice to finally lay one bogey bird to rest – ish. Last on the agenda for today were two separate attempts to see Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl at the nest. At our first stop, in Paavola, we stood a little way back as Antti told us that this particular bird was quite shy. Slowly, Antti approached the nest box and stroked the tree trunk with a twig. There was no response and we could only assume that the bird was sitting tight in the chilly conditions. We scanned the area to see if we could locate the male sitting in a nearby tree, but again drew a blank, so we set off to our second site at Liminka. Again, we stood a little way back as Antti went and gently stroked the tree trunk. Sadly, again there was no response and we couldn't find a male in the trees here either. This was one that would have to wait for another day. With our birding luck seemingly having run out for the day, we set off back to the hotel for our lovely evening meal of soup, white fish and chocolate mousse before turning in for a much-needed early night.

Day 3 The forecast for today was for persistent rain all day, and you just know that if you'd been at home you would have rolled over and gone back to sleep. On transfer days on guided trips, however, you don't have that option and sometimes, in hindsight, you thank your lucky stars for that. This turned out to be arguably the best day's birding of the whole trip! With conditions wet underfoot, but not yet in the air, all of us except Patricia and Carol met up at the thoroughly civilised time of 6a.m. at the vans to try for the Terek Sandpiper that had been reported on the other side of Kempele Bay from the hotel. Jumping out at our destination, we met a local birder who had a brief chat to Antti. Sadly, the bird was not on the small pool by the side of the vans – which would have been the stuff of dreams – he was, instead, perched on the top of a distant lamp post! Through a scope you could see the stocky shape and upturned bill of the bird, but I think it's fair to say he probably wasn't going to make bird of the trip...unlike the second twitched bird of the day, which had to be a serious contender for that title. A short drive farther on, we walked through a copse to arrive at a small, reed-fringed lake. Almost as soon as we stopped walking we spotted a single Slavonian Grebe swimming across the water about half way between us and the far shore. Pleased just to see it, we were even more amazed as this stunning bird seemed to take great interest in us and started to swim in our direction. Slowly, it got closer and closer until it was preening so close to us that we could probably have reached out and picked it up. In stunned amazement and with broad grins across all our faces, we clicked away merrily with the cameras before heading back to the hotel for another delicious buffet breakfast. After loading up the vans with the luggage, we said a fond farewell to The Airport Hotel (we never did have time to try out the saunas!) and set off towards our next stop – Kuusamo. The first birding port of call en route was a return visit to Kiiminki and one of the Eurasian Pygmy-owl sites. After our brief views of the female yesterday, we were still hopeful of finding one sitting

out on a branch, and, after an initial lull, our luck changed as Antti heard some Chaffinches making alarm calls a little way from the nest box and followed the commotion to track down the male. This little star sat looking down at us for ages and we all had fantastic views through the scopes. In fact, he was so obliging that Tim was able to add another stunning image to Patricia's phone list – certainly better than anything we got with the cameras! As tends to be the way with birding, the next few stops were somewhat less productive. We tried several sites with promising habitat along the roadside for Rustic Bunting, and although my heart did skip a beat or two as a small bird perched up in the distance at one of the sites, it turned out to be a Tree Pipit. Temporarily giving up on Rustic Bunting, we set our sights on bigger things and, just before lunch, we stopped to photograph our first couple of Reindeer of the trip, grazing at the side of the road. Lunch today was a lovely hot buffet of soup and meat stew taken in a supermarket, and we tucked in with images of Slav Grebe and Pygmy-owl racing through our minds and with the promise of more to follow. First up after lunch was undoubtedly the funniest birding moment of the trip, and one that will stay in the memories of all of us for some time I suspect. After our two failures with Boreal Owl the previous afternoon, Antti had another nest site up his sleeve to the east of Kuusamo, and this time we cracked it. Again, we lined up some way back as Antti went and gently stroked the tree trunk; immediately the female popped her head out and looked straight at Antti with a truly comical look that said, 'Do you mind? I'm trying to do some serious brooding here.' Then she looked briefly at all of us and then she bobbed back inside. It was a brief encounter, but I don't think any of us will ever forget it, and we were still chuckling over it by the end of the trip. We were undoubtedly on a roll, and the next bird to be added to today's checklist was yet another humdinger. Antti first saw it from the road and we pulled over and headed into a little clearing right next to someone's house. Antti joined us clutching a large branch – protection! As we rounded the end of the hedge, we came face to face with... a glorious male Eurasian Capercaillie strutting his stuff. We stood mesmerized as he walked first one way and then the other, splaying his tail, singing his heart out (if you can call it a song) and occasionally bowing his head down and scuttling along with his feathers all ruffled. It was a truly memorable sight and for the longest time he didn't seem too bothered by our presence at all, but then he suddenly seemed to get fed up with us and scuttled at Antti. As the branch was put to good use, we all hurried back to the vans, but the bird followed us back! We then had fun and games on the radios telling each other when it was safe to move to avoid Mr Caper. Eventually, as we pulled away down the slope, he could still be seen looking in our direction and claiming his victory. Heaven only knows how the owners of that house manage to get in and out on a regular basis – bet they're safe from burglars though! Our next stop was a somewhat more tranquil affair as we pulled over beside a big lake to scope a lovely male Smew. In the spindly trees around the lake, we also had Willow Tit, Reed Bunting and various wagtails before Carol saw what she thought was a beaver swimming. Antti thought it was more likely to be a Musk Rat, but we never did see it again for confirmation. After making use of the somewhat whiffy composting-type toilet, we moved on. And so to our quest for another bird that ultimately eluded us. We made two separate stops today to look for Grey-headed Chickadee (Siberian Tit) – first at a place called Oivangin Kosteikko and then at a children's educational centre which was soon christened 'the prison camp.' At the first place the rain, which had not been as bad as predicted for most of the day, was coming down fairly steadily and I think it put paid to our chances of doing very well with passerines. It was incredibly quiet and the only things of note we picked up were some Wood Sandpipers on one of the pools. Moving on to the second place, we walked around the buildings, admiring the display of different types of nest box, but apart from some of the group seeing Eurasian Bullfinch and a Great Spotted Woodpecker, the nearest we came to any birds was the sign showing pictures of several local species with the Finnish names underneath. I was beginning to think that our luck had run out for the day, but I was wrong! At a very brief pull-in stop, we set up the scopes beside a lake to add four lovely, if slightly distant, Velvet Scoter to the growing list. Then, at a roadside stop in the Vuotonky area we tried for Red-flanked Bluetail. We didn't see one, but Antti heard a Bluethroat singing. Soon, we were watching this stunning little bird darting around the twiggy undergrowth just a few feet away from us. It was another memorable sight on a day of memorable sights, and we weren't done yet. With the light fading by now, we had one further site to stop at in the Vuotonky area before heading to our new hotel for dinner. We parked the vans and headed over the road to a field fringed by trees. The first few people to arrive were lucky enough to see two birds, initially on the ground, but the

rest of us were more than happy to settle for views of just one bird perched up high in a tree and sleepily closing its eyes. At the start of the trip, this bird was at the top of my wishlist (and maybe many other people's) and here I was, standing in a field staring up at a Northern Hawk Owl. In a year when the owls had been tricky to find, it was one of those moments when you felt like punching the air – and Detlef had more cause than most to do so, as it was his 5000th bird. On a real high after some truly wonderful birds today, we headed to our new hotel in Kuusamo for an evening meal of minced reindeer and mash (what Christine christened Rudolph pie) before turning in for our last night.

Day 4 Now you might think that on the last day, with a late-afternoon flight home and packing to sort out, we might just have had a lazy lie-in and a casual breakfast this morning – you would be wrong! With quite a few things still on the wishlist and time rapidly running out to find them, we met at the vans at 3a.m. Our first target was Great Grey Owl, the only one of the big five owls for this trip that had eluded us so far. Unfortunately, in a late spring with few voles about, no nest sites had been located for this bird before or during our visit, so we were pinning our hopes on finding a single perched-up bird somewhere. We spent some time driving around numerous fields that looked promising and where birds had been seen before, but with no luck. I guess there always has to be some reason to come back. In the course of our drive we did, however, track down a nice, singing Wood Warbler and spotted another female Eurasian Capercaillie on a roadside verge. Next up was a stop at Ruka-Konttainen – clearly a ski resort in the winter, but by the time of our visit the snow had all but gone, making the dozens of very white Arctic Hares very conspicuous. On the first and only uphill walk of the trip, we set off up a stepped trail that levelled out onto a narrow, two-plank boardwalk. Antti warned us that there were Eurasian Capercaillie in the area, but we didn't meet any, which is probably just as well as we were a bit out of puff to get out of the way in a hurry! Our quarry here was much smaller and more colourful, and no sooner had we stopped walking than we heard one singing. Scanning the tops of all the trees we soon tracked him down – a Red-flanked Bluetail! At first the colours were a bit difficult to pick out against the sky, but as he flew to a different perch, we briefly had much better views – and Patricia got another one on the epic phone list! We watched him for some time, and picked up several lovely Bramblings in the process, before it was time to move on again. Initially, the plan had been to head back to the hotel for breakfast at this point, but Antti felt that if we were to try again for Siberian Tit later, we really should try to fit in Siberian Jay now. How can you turn down a suggestion like that? So, after a short drive, we pulled over at the side of a road and Antti took out the lure – a packet of hotdog sausages! Having not yet had breakfast, there were some very envious glances from the group as he cut them up and scattered the pieces around various tree stumps and fallen logs and stepped back to wait. Sure enough, Tim soon picked out a single bird at the top of a tall tree on the other side of the road, and it wasn't long before it darted across to join us. To watch, it was an utter delight that couldn't fail to bring a smile to your face; to photograph, it was, like most corvids, a bit of a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't farce! The routine went something like: bird flies in and perches hidden in a tree, bird flies down and quickly grabs a piece of sausage, bird flies off again. Repeat. Eventually, I think we all got some images to match our views and we set off back to the hotel happy with yet another successful early-morning list, but more than ready for breakfast. Sadly, our targets after breakfast – Rustic Bunting and Siberian Tit – were not nearly so forthcoming. We tried several roadside stops for Rustic Bunting, with no joy, although we did spot a male Eurasian Capercaillie at the side of the road and a male Black Grouse in a field with two Whooper Swans from the vans. Luck was not on our side with Siberian Tit either. We first tried a wood with several nest boxes, all of which Antti checked with no joy except for a few twigs in one. We met up with a couple of German photographers here, and they were having no luck either. Apparently, a very cold spell in January had had a heavy impact on the species and everybody was struggling with it this year – at least it wasn't just us! In drier weather than we'd had yesterday, we returned to Oivangin Kosteikko to try one last time for this elusive little bird. This time we walked all the way down to the lookout tower as there were rumours that a Rustic Bunting had been heard singing in that area. We picked up another male Smew on one of the ponds, watched a male and female Common Redstart visiting a very new and very conspicuous nest box and then had two brief moments of excitement: first Antti picked out two small birds in a tree that looked promising but turned out to

be Willow Tits and then Tim had a flyover Rustic Bunting. We never did track it down though, and if there were any Siberian Tits in the area, they weren't playing ball this time. By now, time was getting on and we headed back to the hotel to pack up the vans and have lunch. However, we didn't really want our last birding of the trip to be a couple of dips, so after lunch Antti took us briefly to Lakkisalmi, a local wetland area where we were promised Red-necked Grebe and Black-throated Diver. Both were distant, but we got some lovely views through the scope, particularly of the divers. We tried for Willow Grouse here too, but without success. All good things must come to an end and we had arrived at that dreaded time on any holiday when you have to start heading for home. Clambering back into the vans we made the long drive back to Oulu Airport, where we said a very fond and appreciative farewell to Antti and headed inside to check in. It had been a short, but incredibly memorable trip. We had covered over 1170 kilometres in temperatures ranging from 4°C in the early mornings to an average of about 10°C during the day (and 16°C at the airport at both ends of the trip!); we had seen some stunning birds, including four of the big five target owls, in wonderful wooded scenery, and we'd survived being charged by a Capercaillie! Many thanks must go to Antti for his incredible knowledge and expert leadership throughout the trip, to Ray for driving the second van and somehow managing to stay awake when the rest of us were sound asleep and to all the participants for being a thoroughly lovely bunch of people to spend a holiday with.

Helen Heyes

Birdfinders will be repeating this popular and exciting tour in May 2017.