

Finland and Norway



King Eider (Rob Gordon)

25 May–6 June 2007

Participants:

Bob Bailey

Chris and Glynis Bond

Richard Castro

Rob and Ann Gordon

Lothar Kiel

Peter Kitchener

Margarete Liubavicius

Chris Rose

Leaders: Toni Eskelin and Bill Blake

Day 1: On arrival at Oulu airport, Toni Eskelin, our Finnature guide, met us. We loaded up our VW minibuses and headed to our accommodation for the next 3 nights, which was less than 15 minutes away. Time to freshen up after the journey then out to do some birding. In the hotel grounds singing Common Redstart, Redwing, Willow Warbler, Pied Flycatcher and Common Rosefinch all vied for our attention. We visited the little harbour close by where Red-necked Grebes, Whooper Swans, 11 species of duck that included our only Common Pochard of the trip, Little Ringed Plover, Little Gulls plus Common, Arctic and Little Terns were just some of the birds seen. We headed inland and visited an area of farmland where we added several more species including Eurasian Skylark, Meadow Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Whinchat and Yellowhammer, but not the hoped for Ortolan Bunting. We returned to our hotel for an excellent dinner and were joined by the final member of our group, Lothar, who had traveled separately from Berlin. An after dinner excursion into the forest east of Oulu took us to a nest box used by Ural Owl this year. A well-grown chick was found perched close by and gave excellent views but we could not find an adult; Eurasian Siskin and Mealy Redpoll were heard overhead. We were back at our hotel by 22.00 for some well-earned sleep.

Day 2: We awoke to the sound of rain falling so after breakfast a change of plans saw us driving east into the Sanginjoki forest and away from the rain. An emergency stop at the roadside for an overhead bird of prey had us watching two Eurasian Honey-buzzards gradually gaining height and soaring off over the forest; the stop also produced Common Cuckoo and Fieldfare. Our first scheduled stop of the morning had everyone smiling when a Northern Hawk-owl showed close to the road – a short walk down a forest track and we found the nest hole in a Birch tree. The two adults showed exceptionally well, as did at least one well-grown chick at the nest entrance. Also in the area we added Wood and Green Sandpipers, Lesser Whitethroat and

Eurasian Bullfinch. The smiles became even broader as our next stop took us to a Great Grey Owl nest. One bird was on a huge bundle of twigs, probably an old Northern Goshawk nest, her small yellow eyes blazing fiercely down on us as we vied for position to “scope” her through the trees. Close by, perched against the trunk of a tree, was the other adult. At first his small yellow eyes glared at us following every movement but it soon settled back to surveying the forest around us – what a stately bird! Red Crossbills were heard overhead. On the non-avian front, Camberwell Beauty and Green Hairstreaks were seen along the forest tracks, the former rather tatty having recently emerged from their winter hibernations; a huge Moose was seen in roadside forest on our way to lunch. Our lunch stop overlooked an inlet of the Baltic, here we added Common Scoter with a flock of 30 or so birds. After lunch we headed back towards Oulu; a brief stop at a coastal bay produced our first Baltic Gull plus Eurasian Oystercatcher. Next stop was a cemetery but the hoped-for Black Woodpecker failed to show, only Great Spotted Woodpecker being seen. Back out into the forest we went to a Northern Pygmy-owl nest box where we tried to tape lure the male in but he did not respond. We resorted to lifting the lid of the nest box where the female sat tight, clacking her beak as she glared up at us defiantly – what a brave mother. We also added Dunnock, Goldcrest and Crested and Willow Tits in the area. Heading back to our hotel we stopped briefly at Vihiluoto harbour where a pair of Long-tailed Ducks, two Temminck’s Stints and Common Sandpiper were seen before returning to our hotel for dinner. Fed and watered we were out again for some late evening birding. Firstly we went to a Tengmalm’s Owl nest box that was known to have fairly well grown young in it; despite our patient waiting neither the young nor the adults obliged us. We headed for Oulu rubbish tip where on close inspection we found a Eurasian Eagle-owl perched atop a street lamp. We left the tip to the sight and sound of Eurasian Woodcock roding overhead. Even at this late hour the light was very good allowing feather detail to be seen clearly, very different from the dark silhouettes seen at dusk back home.

Day 3: A pre-breakfast walk to Vihiluoto harbour was a chance to refamiliarise ourselves with the songs of Common Redstart, Redwing, Pied Flycatcher etc., we also added booming Eurasian Bittern, Sedge Warbler and Spotted Flycatcher plus a splendid drake Smew on the sea. After breakfast, we drove to the Liminka Bay area, in farmland near Liminka we stopped for a singing Oortolan Bunting and a pair of Eurasian Dotterel. The sound of distant bugling alerted us to a group of 40 or so Common Cranes starting to rise on the rapidly forming thermals. At Liminka bay a single Barnacle Goose, a group of nine very close Temminck’s Stints and a couple of Arctic Skuas were the highlights. We drove inland to an area of wooded heathland very reminiscent of the Norfolk Brecks. Here we had remarkable views of a male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker that Toni coaxed from its nest hole by scratching the nesting tree just below the hole. The bird popped its head out at first and then came out completely, but instead of flying off, it perched in full view just a few feet from us. This habitat produced a good selection of new birds that included Northern Goshawk, Eurasian Wryneck, Northern Wheatear, and Great Grey and Red-backed Shrikes. We stopped for lunch before returning to our hotel for a couple of hours with the chance to rest or bird around the hotel grounds. Late afternoon we were back out in the Oulu docks/lorry park area searching for Terek Sandpiper – we did see Ruddy Turnstone and Little Ringed Plover but no Terek Sandpiper. We returned to the cemetery we visited yesterday and this time we had great looks at a vociferous male Black Woodpecker as well as three well grown young in the nest entrance. Our next stop was a nearby marsh viewed from a tower hide; a pair of Garganey and a few Common Greenshanks were added to the list before we returned to our hotel for dinner and to call the bird log. Another late evening visit to the Tengmalm’s Owl nest box saw us again waiting quietly and patiently for the birds to appear. Around midnight a well-grown youngster appeared at the entrance hole and stayed there peering out into the evening gloom. At 00.55 an adult finally appeared carrying a vole and good views were had by all. We left the site happy and still had time to visit the Oulu suburbs to hear Corn Crake and Thrush Nightingale, returning to our hotel by 01.30.

Day 4: After a relaxing breakfast we loaded up the vans again and set off north-east for the drive to Kuusamo. We stopped at various sites en route to stretch our legs and check out the birds. Our first stop overlooked a bog where we found Taiga Bean Geese and Common Cranes on their breeding habitat and a couple of Eurasian Hobbies overhead. A little further on we stopped by a Reindeer ‘processing camp’ to

view an area of marsh from a tower hide – a pair of Slavonian Grebes, Ruff and a Western Grasshopper-warbler were added to the growing list. One of the many lakes in the forest held a pair of Black-throated Divers in full breeding dress, our third Eurasian Hobby of the day and some ‘heard only’ Bohemian Waxwings. A lake on the outskirts of Kuusamo held 14 Velvet Scoter, four Smews, four Whimbrels plus a White-tailed Eagle perched on the water’s edge on the far side. The eagle was being constantly pestered by a couple of brave (or foolish) Hooded Crows, even having its tail feathers pulled – eventually it flew off. We turned off the main road onto a forest track – a pure ‘white’ Mountain Hare was a surprise, presumably using the forest to shelter until it moults into its brown summer coat. Further into the forest we stopped at a nest box being used by a pair of Siberian Tits. Bill’s van got a puncture here, whilst Toni and I changed to the spare, the group had good views of the Siberian Tits – also in the area were Mistle Thrush and Red Crossbill. Our last stop was at Kuusamo’s rubbish tip – large numbers of gulls were attracted to the tip, mostly European Herring and Baltic Gulls. We overlooked a small pond where gulls came into bathe; amongst the pink-legged *argentatus* Herring Gulls were some birds with yellowish legs – these were var. *omissus*. In with the jet-black backed Baltic Gulls we had good views of a single Siberian Gull – a slightly larger, heavier bird with paler mantle (more like our *graellsii* Lesser Black-backs). Finally we checked into our hotel in Kuusamo, our accommodation for the next three nights. After dinner and calling the bird log most people had an early night as we had a very early start in the morning.

Day 5: An 04.00 start on a rather cool, grey morning saw us driving the forest roads around Kuusamo. Good numbers of Black Grouse showed well in grassy areas close to the forest – mostly males, some of which were displaying, plus a few greyhens. More Moose and several ‘brown’ Mountain Hares were also seen. We then had excellent views of a pair of Hazelhen, particularly the male, which responded well to Toni’s tape and even ‘whistled’ back in response – a difficult species to get to grips with and one that most of the group really wanted to see. We moved on to a lay-by at Valtavaara in Oulanka National Park, close to the Russian border. We had a stiff climb to the top of a hill to look for Red-flanked Bluetail. The area was quite busy with other birders and the weather was grey and overcast with a cold wind blowing in from Russia. We heard two male Red-flanked Bluetails in song but conditions conspired against us and we failed to see them; Winter Wren and Eurasian Jay were also heard. Next we went looking for Rustic Bunting – a male responded to tape, but showed itself rather too briefly and not to everyone’s satisfaction. We were back at our hotel by 08.15 for breakfast. After a leisurely breakfast we were out into Oulanka NP again, Toni took us to an area of forest where he had recently found a Eurasian Capercaillie nest. We approached with stealth but unfortunately for us the nest had been abandoned, perhaps having been disturbed by a predator. Spotted Redshanks, in their splendid ‘black velvet’ summer dress, were found on their breeding bogs before we returned to our hotel for lunch followed by a little siesta. An afternoon excursion into the forests produced more of the same but nothing new. Dinner and the bird log were followed by an evening excursion into the forests again – more Black Grouse included four different greyhens by the side of the track and another Moose was seen. The front van stopped for a male Eurasian Capercaillie just off the road but by the time the second van got there the bird had flown. Heading back to our hotel we at last found another Eurasian Capercaillie, a female this time, that gave prolonged close views to both vans before flying off.

Day 6: After breakfast we spent the day in Oulanka NP. We climbed another hill at Valtavaara, on the opposite side of the road to yesterday. It was sunny this morning but there was still a cold wind blowing similar to yesterday and although we heard a male Red-flanked Bluetail singing, it would not oblige us by showing itself. Bohemian Waxwings were seen however plus Willow Tit, Eurasian Siskin, Mealy Redpoll and Red Crossbill. Back down the hill we stopped at Pihlajalammentie – three Siberian Jays responded almost immediately to tape and gave close and prolonged views. We had a traditional Finnish lunch at Neidonkenka consisting of Reindeer stew on mashed potatoes with lingonberries and salted cucumber plus some excellent home-baked bread – and very good it was too! We were very close to the Russian border here so we drove as close as we could for a photo opportunity and to check out a Russian border post. The morning’s sunshine had been replaced by thick cloud and the temperature had dropped quite markedly. Whilst checking out a site for White-throated Dipper we stumbled into a singing Rustic Bunting that

eventually gave everyone excellent views by responding to tape. We did not see White-throated Dipper here but at our next stop we did, the bird being of the nominate Black-bellied race. Our final stop was at Lake Vuotonki where Velvet Scoter, Smew and Ruff were amongst some of the birds seen but the highlight was a breeding colony of some 700 Little Gulls. The bird log and some packing followed dinner at the hotel, as tomorrow is a traveling day.

Day 7: We loaded up the vans after breakfast to head even further north today. We called in at Valtavaara and climbed the hill again but the wind was stronger this morning and no sign of any Red-flanked Bluetails. Glynis did not climb the hill and saw a pair of Hazelhens by the road. Further north we crossed into Lapland and eventually crossed the Arctic Circle. As usual we made various stops on our journey north, the last of these being at a bog just south of our lunch stop. Here we tried to tape Broad-billed Sandpipers into showing themselves but the strong wind beat us. We did however see a distant White-tailed Eagle, an Osprey and a pale juvenile Peregrine. We lunched at Siltaharju, traditional menu again – reindeer meatballs with mashed potatoes and lingonberries. Outside the restaurant a pair of Ospreys at their nest provided a digiscoping opportunity for some. The forest nearby was quite open and we drove along some forest tracks, Toni's keen eye spotted another fine adult Northern Hawk-owl perched in a conifer. Closer inspection of the area revealed two recently fledged young on the ground nearby. Satiated with Northern Hawk-owls, we resumed our northward journey, we saw a lot more Reindeer today including many calves and males with antlers of various sizes. We arrived at our destination, Ivalo, in the early evening and booked into the hotel for the night. The hotel was situated close to a river and over dinner and the bird log, Wood and Common Sandpipers could be heard singing along with Redwings, Fieldfares and the ever present Willow Warblers.

Day 8: After an early breakfast we continued to head north through changing countryside as the trees started to thin out and large open boggy areas became more commonplace. At one such bog we had brief views of two Broad-billed Sandpipers flying away and our first Rough-legged Buzzard. Further on a couple of Short-eared Owls were seen and our first Bluethroat sang and displayed at Toni's tape giving great views. We stopped at a café on the main road north of Inari for coffee and to check the feeders out back. Red Squirrels and finches were present but our patience was rewarded when a young male Pine Grosbeak flew in to feed giving prolonged views – a real stroke of luck with this very elusive bird. We lunched at Pappila, just south of Utsjoki, on salmon soup and a spicy Reindeer stew, overlooking more bird feeders. A fine Arctic Redpoll and summer-plumaged Bramblings showed well plus Pied Flycatcher, Willow Tit and Yellowhammer. At Utsjoki, and without any border formalities, we crossed the Tana River into Norway – by doing so we gained an hour. Heading north-east we reached Varangerbotn and the start of the Varanger Peninsula proper. Here we added Greater Scaup and Bar-tailed Godwits, more White-tailed Eagles plus Pied Flycatcher and Willow Warbler in the somewhat stunted trees. Continuing east and eventually north we followed the coast of Varangerfjord – it became more and more rugged until eventually we reached its north-eastern tip on the Arctic shores of the Barents Sea at the small town of Vardo. Vardo, sitting on a small island and connected to the mainland by a road tunnel, was our base for the next three nights – our hotel overlooking the picturesque harbour. Here we are almost as far north as it is possible to go on the European mainland. Having checked into our rooms we were greeted by a sub-adult King Eider, a Red-necked Phalarope and a couple of Glaucous Gulls viewable from the hotel dining room. The bird log followed an excellent dinner before sleep beckoned.

Day 9: A pre-breakfast walk around the harbour gave us great views of the same King Eider plus Common Eiders, two adult Glaucous Gulls, a Red-necked Phalarope, a Brünnich's Guillemot and two Black Guillemots plus a Grey Seal. It was a cold, overcast morning with an icy wind but no rain so after breakfast we wrapped up well and explored the islands bays and rocky coastline. Three Steller's Eider were seen flying distantly with a large group of Common Eider then Toni picked up three summer-plumaged Grey (Red) Phalaropes bobbing up and down on the sea. Purple Sandpipers, an adult Long-tailed Skua, showy Red-throated Pipits, Twite and Snow Buntings were just some of the other birds seen. Finally we located a drake Steller's Eider close inshore, which gave very good views. Returning to our hotel for lunch we were greeted by another full summer-plumaged Grey Phalarope feeding in the harbour below our dining room – it was a

much photographed bird. It was a plumage tick for most people, me included, and so different from the dull grey phalaropes we are used to seeing in the autumn. After lunch we crossed to the mainland and drove north on the Hamningberg road exploring the many bays and inland cliffs – the sun came out and the wind dropped. Yet again Toni came up trumps with a Gyr Falcon on her nest. Two White-billed Divers (having just seen a Great Northern Diver for comparison), Northern Gannets, flocks of Long-tailed Ducks and Common Scoters, Rough-legged Buzzards and Peregrine were a fine supporting cast and made for an enjoyable afternoons birding. After dinner we crossed to the mainland again to enjoy the beautiful evening light and watch displaying Willow Grouse, Ruffs, Arctic Skuas and Short-eared Owls on the arctic tundra with calling Red-throated Divers providing the background soundtrack. Back at our hotel in the ‘land of the midnight sun’ the Grey Phalarope had been joined by two Red-necked Phalaropes.

Day 10: A pre-breakfast walk around the harbour on a beautiful sunny morning saw the ‘resident’ King Eider and Brünnich’s Guillemot plus three Glaucous Gulls but the phalaropes had moved on. Crossing to the mainland again, we turned south to explore the sandy bays and beaches. The little harbour at Kiberg held three more Glaucous Gulls and out in the bay were an adult and a young White-billed Diver plus a distant Great Northern Diver. Next, we stopped at Kramvik, a small bay famous amongst Finnish birders for turning up rarities – a flock of 21 very red Red Knot, Little Stints, displaying Ruff, White-tailed Eagle plus showy Red-throated Pipits and Lapland Buntings kept us busy. It started to cloud over as we returned to Vardo, leaving the vans at our hotel we strolled to the harbour steps to take a boat across to Hornoya Island. The couple of hours spent amongst the mixed auk and kittiwake colonies provided an excellent photo opportunity for those that wished and a chance to study the finer points of Brünnich’s Guillemot ID. After a hotel lunch we retraced our mornings route south on the mainland traveling beyond Kramvik to Langbunes. Here the highlights were two summer-plumaged White-billed Divers close inshore and a couple of White-tailed Eagles, directly overhead with talons locked, tumbling and twirling earthwards before breaking away and flying off in different directions. Further south we drove up on to the fjells above Komagvaer where the birds included a stunning adult Long-tailed Skua, Eurasian Dotterel, Shore Lark and Lapland Buntings. Another great days birding ended with the bird log after an excellent dinner.

Day 11: The King Eider, a single Glaucous Gull and Brünnich’s Guillemot were still in the harbour. After breakfast we loaded up the vans to start the return journey southward to Ivalo. Various stops along the Varanger included one at Ekkeroy where we saw a drake Steller’s Eider, two Red-necked Phalaropes and yet another White-tailed Eagle. We crossed back into Finland between Polmak and Nuorgam, this time we lost an hour. Just beyond Nuorgam some very showy Willow Grouse refused to leave the roadside verge. We drove to a mountaintop to search for Rock Ptarmigan but the warm weather and early snowmelt meant they had already departed for the higher tops. Lunch was at Pappila again, salmon soup overlooking the bird feeders. Another mountaintop above Utsjoki produced Rough-legged Buzzard, Long-tailed Skua, Short-eared Owl and an angry Merlin seeing off a marauding Common Raven but no Rock Ptarmigan. Carrying on southward, we stopped at a suitable looking bog to try for Broad-billed Sandpiper without luck but we did pick up a couple of Jack Snipes displaying high in the sky – their song likened to the sound of a galloping horse! Overnight at the same hotel in Ivalo.

Day 12: An early breakfast for an early start on the journey south to Oulu – first we diverted to a forest track on the eastern outskirts of Ivalo. Here we heard two Little Buntings and had excellent scope views of one bird singing from the top of a conifer and a birch. Our journey south was broken up by more mountaintop excursions, still searching for Rock Ptarmigan, but without success and a stop for a male Hen Harrier that some people in the front van saw. At a bog south of Siltaharju everybody finally had good views of a Broad-billed Sandpiper that responded to tape close to the road and sat up for all to see. We stopped for lunch at Santa’s Village on the Arctic Circle just north of Rovaniemi where it was surprisingly hot (25°C) and humid. Continuing south we approached the coast at Kemi where the air became cooler and fresher eventually arriving back in Oulu early evening; we tried again for Terek Sandpiper in the docks area without success. We checked into the Vihiluoto Hotel and freshened up for dinner followed by the bird log and a big thank

you to Toni whose birding skills, local knowledge and dedication in finding the birds for us made it a great trip. Toni had been alerted to Blyth's Reed-warblers in the Liminka area so at 22.00 we were out again. Our first stop produced no response to the tape so we moved on to another area where a Blyth's Reed-warbler responded immediately. Over the next twenty minutes or so the bird sang almost non-stop, sometimes half-hidden, sometimes out in the open and everybody managed reasonable views despite the unwanted attention of hordes of ravenous mosquitoes. Most of us donated some blood to these hungry hordes in the quest to see this bird; it was however the only time we had this problem on the whole trip.

Day 13: Our last day – at breakfast this morning we said farewell to Lothar and Toni took him to the airport for an early flight back to Berlin. It was a bright, sunny morning with a fresh breeze off the Gulf, we returned to the docks/container park area but Terek Sandpiper still eluded us. We did however, add two Eurasian Linnets, our last new birds for the tour list. We spent the morning in Liminka Bay NP finding Bean Geese, Common Cranes, Ruffs, White-tailed Eagle and an assortment of ducks and waders – best of all was a flock of 19 Spotted Redshanks overhead calling, already on their southward journey. Toni said they were probably all males returning south having done their 'bit'. After lunch we birded the fields between Liminka and Vihiluoto – breeding Black-tailed Godwits and a singing Ortolan Bunting being the star birds. All too soon it was time to head for the airport and our flight home. A Brambling singing on the airport fence and a distant Willow Warbler in song were the last sounds heard as we entered the airport buildings. I called a final bird log in the departure lounge whilst waiting for our flight to Helsinki – from Helsinki we flew on to London Gatwick where we said our goodbyes and the tour ended.

The group total was 199 species, which includes those species that were only heard; this beats the previous best total of 193 species for this Birdfinders tour. The weather on this tour was generally remarkably good - apart from the rain we avoided on our first full day we only had another 10 minutes of rain, whilst on Hornoya. An icy arctic wind blew on one day in the far north; otherwise most days were like a spring day at home. The light was very good, especially in the far north but even below the Arctic Circle the sun barely dipped below the horizon.

Bill Blake