

Finland

April 2004

PARTICIPANTS

Mel and Heather Billington, Roger and Gill Broadbent, Richard, Gavin and Francis Peplow. Eustace Barnes.

ITINERARY

Arrival at Oulu airport. Evening excursion to watch Common Crane and Geese in fields nearby. Accommodation and dinner at Hotel Vihiluoto in Kempele.

15th April

Early morning departure to a nearby forest for Pygmy Owl and Black Woodpeckers. Later on in the day visited Liminka Bay and a nearby raptor watch point. Dinner and accommodation at Hotel Vihiluoto in Kempele.

16th April

Early morning departure for site near Tervola north of Kemi for Hawk Owl. Afternoon drive eastwards to Kuusamo stopping en route for Great-grey Owl. Night in Kuusamon Postii.

17th April

Birding in Kuusamo area along road to Pouso for Grouse. Later in the day we headed for Valvatarra National Park before visiting Oulanka National Park in search of Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit and Three-toed Woodpecker. Night in Kuusamon Postii.

18th April

After some birding in Kuusamo area looking at Grouse we departed to Oulu and a Forest site for Tengmalm's Owl. Accommodation and dinner at Hotel Vihiluoto in Kempele.

19th April

Early morning birding in Oulu area before catching the homeward flight.

DAILY DIARY

This trip to Finland was originally conceived to pick up all the Owls and Scandinavian specialities at a time in the year that would not interfere with the British birding scene but which would give us a good chance of seeing these species. April 15th to the 20th was deemed acceptable. On arrival at Oulu airport, we were met by our guide Harri. After mysteriously skirting the issue of owls and spending a whole afternoon watching 'Baltic' Gulls, Common Crane, Bean Geese and a Short-eared Owl in fields near Vihiluoto we had dinner with Harri. The bombshell was then exploded; the week before with Naturetrek no owls had been seen. Worse, it was a bad year for voles in the Oulu area and there were no owl nests located. Our spirits plummeted but we were one owl up with Short-eared Owl.

The following morning, not feeling so eager for the chase we headed off to some forests north-east of Oulu. The site where Naturetrek had failed so miserably to find Eurasian Pygmy Owl. At the first stop we heard a Hazelhen. At the second stop, nearby, we found a **Pygmy Owl** being mobbed by Chaffinches. A Black Woodpecker was then taped in to general approval. Later on in the day visited fields and marshes south of Liminka Bay. We had a good time seeing three **White-tailed Eagles** and up to 25 Rough-legged Buzzards but it was beginning to sink in that this was going to be slow trip. Migration had barely started, it was a bad vole year and it was poor for pine nuts. We had dinner with Harri, discussed what we might do and a plan was devised.

The following day we had an early morning departure for a site near Tervola north of Kemi for Hawk Owl. On arrival it was freezing cold and the site looked thoroughly bleak. However, Harri quickly, and quite unexpectedly, found a **Hawk Owl** perched up on a spruce. After some time we managed to get closer and discovered that in fact there were two birds. We watched these superb accipiter like owls hunt around the huge clearing. Then, somewhat elated, we headed off north to Santa Park for lunch. It was lucky we had found Hawk Owl here because otherwise Harri was headed 150km north to some 'very good' sites adding 450km to the days drive. In the afternoon we drove eastwards to Kuusamo, stopping in a small nature reserve where we found a pair of **Hazelhen** and a flock of Waxwing. The latter being the only ones of the trip. Harri had rather quietly said we might look for Great-grey Owl at a known wintering territory and we headed off but we were left with little hope of success. We were duly dumped at the best watch point while Harri and Heather went off to check other local sites. At one, almost on leaving, Heather spotted what she thought might be a hunting bird. It was and Harri tested the capabilities of the van to get us to the site. These Fins obviously get used to driving on snow and ice at high speeds under which conditions the UK would have been at a grinding standstill. Success, we all got superb views of **Great-grey Owl** hunting. We then retired for celebratory drinks at our hotel near Kuusamo after an fantastic day that will be long remembered by all.

The following day was planned to look for the forest specialities. Driving back roads near our hotel and towards Pouso we found several **Capercaillie**, **Hazelhen** and **Black Grouse** at a lek. As forest grouse are becoming so tricky to see well in the UK this went down well; especially the excellent views of Capercaillie. Later in the day we headed for Valvaterra National Park and filmed **Siberian Jays** at some feeders by the road. After this we visited Oulanka National Park on the Russian border and after some searching found a pair of **Hazelhen** and a **Three-toed Woodpecker**. On our return to the hotel we stopped and found a **Capercaillie** and a pair of **Siberian Tits** at another feeder. After dinner we were again appraised of the situation on the owl front. There were no Tengmalm's Owls nests found yet, although this was the best area for them. We returned to see the Great-grey Owl again and managed to get fantastic views of the bird perched up in a small spruce. After this, somewhat optimistically, we headed off to search for Tengmalm's Owl in the Kuusamo area. We gave up at mid-night as it was cloudy and a bit windy without success.

The following morning after some birding in Kuusamo area looking at **Capercaillie** and Black Grouse we departed to Oulu. On the way back we stopped at a rubbish dump to see the '**Baltic**' **Gull** and '**Siberian**' **Gull** for some taxonomic debate. These taxa are both considered part of the *fuscus* complex as Lesser Black-backed Gull by Clements. Sibley and Monroe by contrast place *heuglini* within *argentatus*. The Baltic Gull is nominate *fuscus* and is quite distinct from the west European form *graellisii*. The 'Siberian' form *heuglini* is rather less distinct as it is intermediate between *graellisii* and *michahellis* form of Yellow-legged Gull in appearance. Almost back at Oulu and Harri said we might want to spend a bit of time in a local forest which was good for birds. Crested Tits, Redwings and a Camberwell Beauty greeted us but Harri was clearly on a mission in search of a nest box which he found. A female **Tengmalm's Owl** then stuck its head out and gave us a surprised if worried look. Thereafter, we were happy looking through the Cranes and Geese as migration was more advanced.

Having taken a risk with the timing we had found all our targets. Later in the year more owl nests would be found and more migrants would have arrived but rarities may have been missed in the UK.

TRIP LIST

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) A flock of 25 birds seen flying north on the 16th near Liminka Bay.

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) A single bird seen near Tyrnava in fields. This is apparently an uncommon bird at this time of the year.

Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) Common. Large flocks seen near Oulu and smaller numbers seen on all bodies of water with ice free areas elsewhere.

White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*) 2-4 seen on fields near Tyrnava.

'Taiga' (Bean) Goose (*Anser f. fabialis*) Very common with flocks of hundreds seen in open areas near Tyrnava and around Liminka bay.

'Tundra' (Bean) Goose (*Anser f. rossicus*) A single bird seen near Tyrnava. This bird having the distinctive short neck, tiny spot on the bill and dark face. This form normally passes through in May.

Pink-footed Goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) Small numbers seen mixed up with 'Taiga' Bean geese.

Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) Small flocks seen in many areas around Oulu.

Brent Goose (*Branta bernicula*) A single bird seen in company of 'Taiga' Bean Geese on the 19th.

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) Small numbers throughout with pairs found on most bodies of water.

Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) 18-20 seen at Liminka bay on the 19th.

Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) Seen on rivers and lakes throughout.

Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) A single drake seen near Kuusamo on the 19th.

Goosander (*Mergus merganser*) A pair near Kuusamo and up to 25 at Liminka bay.

White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) 2 immature birds and 1 third year bird seen on the south side of Liminka bay near Karinkanta.

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) A single adult bird seen along a minor road north-west of Hirvas near Rovniemi.

Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeroginosus*) 2 males. 1 near Tyrnava and another seen from the Hotel at Vihiluotu.

Hen Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*) 3 males and 2 females seen in fields around Tyrnava and Liminka bay.

Rough-legged Buzzard (*Buteo lagopus*) Seen most days. Up to 25 seen on the 16th south of Liminka bay near Karinkanta.

Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) A few seen. 1 near Kemi.

Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) Common, with small numbers seen on all days.

Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) 1 adult male seen near Oulu on the main road to Kuusamo

Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) Small numbers seen, especially around Oulu.

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) A single bird seen south of Liminka bay and another 2 seen near Tyrnava

Willow Grouse (*Lagopus l. lagopus*) A single adult bird seen in Kuusamo. Two birds seen along back roads in the Soidinkumpu area. All birds only just starting to moult into summer plumage.

Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*) Up to 8 birds seen in the Kuusamo area, mainly along back roads near Poussu. A single male seen at a feeder north of Kuusamo near Nisinvaara.

Black Grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*) Fairly common around Kuusamo with many birds seen along back roads near Poussu.

HAZEL GROUSE (*Bonasa bonasia*) Several pairs seen. 1 pair seen in Oulanka NP and several seen along back roads near Poussu. A very beautiful species that is hard to see well elsewhere in Europe.

Pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) A few heard and one very dark female seen around Oulu.

Common Crane (*Grus grus*) Big numbers seen around Oulu, especially near Tyrnava.

Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) A few seen near Oulu.

Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) Fairly common throughout, especially near Oulu.

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) A few seen. Several on the 19th near Tyrnava.

Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) 1 seen on the 15th near Tyrnava. On our return we found it to be common

Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*) A single bird seen along minor roads north of Kiminki and Arkala.

Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) Small numbers seen around Oulu.

Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) Common throughout.

Common Gull (*Larus canus*) Small numbers at several sites.

Herring Gull (*Larus a. argentatus*) Commonly seen, with equal numbers of yellow-legged and pink-legged birds in all flocks. Although, noticeably paler than *L. cachinnans michahellis* these birds clearly illustrate the confusing divergence in these forms.

'Siberian' (Lesser Black-backed) Gull (*Larus fuscus/argentatus heuglini*) A single bird found at the Kuusamo rubbish dump. This form seemed paler above than *L. f. graellisii* of western Europe and is only slightly darker than *L. a. argentatus*. The primary tips have almost no white and the secondaries are only very narrowly edged white. It also appears rather long legged and is as heavily built as *L. a. argentatus*. As mentioned above this form is variously placed within *argentatus* or *fuscus*.

'Baltic' (Lesser Black-backed) Gull (*L. f. fuscus*) A pair seen near Oulu at a gull roost. Rather more numerous near Kuusamo on the rubbish dump. A very small form of this species, considerably smaller than *L. f. heuglini*. Jet black above with no contrast between back, wing coverts and flight feathers. Also yellow-legged rather than pink-legged as in *L. f. graellisii*. On the basis of difference or identifiability this is a good candidate for specific recognition

Greater Black-backed Gull (*L. marinus*) A few seen.

Stock Pigeon (*Columba oenas*) A pair seen south of Liminka bay.

Wood Pigeon (*Columba palumbus*) Common throughout.

GREAT-GREY OWL (*Strix nebulosa*) A lucky find. A single adult bird found at its hunting ground along the road to Posio from Kuusamo near Lohiranta. This bird was located on two separate days at this site and watched at length. As the vole numbers had crashed near Oulu and it was early in the season there were no nests to visit and finding a bird on winter hunting territory represented our best chance at seeing this species. One of the most exciting birds to see anywhere.

HAWK OWL (*Surnia ulula*) A pair found at a site north of Kemi near Tervola. These birds appearing to have taken up territory to breed on a winter feeding territory. Again this was a lucky find as no nesting birds had yet been found. We watched this pair perched up on tall spruce trees and flying around large fields hunting.

TENGMALM'S OWL (*Aegolius funereus*) A bird watched at a nest box at a site near Oulu near Joloskyla.

EURASIAN PYGMY OWL (*Glaucidium passerinus*) A single bird found in forest north-east of Oulu near Kiminki.

Short-eared Owl (*Asio flammeus*) A single bird seen twice near Tyrnava.

Black Woodpecker (*Drycopus martius*) Several seen or heard.

Great-spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus major*) Fairly common.

Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*) A single bird seen in Oulanka NP. Heard elsewhere near Kuusamo.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) Small numbers throughout.

Woodlark (*Lullulla arborea*) Two singing males near Karinkanta.

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) Small numbers throughout.

Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*) Small numbers near Oulu.

White-throated Dipper (*Cinclus cinclus*) A single bird of this black-bellied form near Kuusamo.

Bohemian Waxwing (*Bombicillus garrulus*) 6 seen near Rovaniemi

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*) A pair near hotel in Vihiluotu.

Northern Wheater (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) A few seen near Oulu.

Redwing (*Turdus liacus*) Commonly heard singing around Oulu.

Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) Small numbers seen near Kuusamo

Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*) Small flocks noted.
Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) Several heard and seen.
Great Tit (*Parus major*) Fairly common.
Blue Tit (*Parus caeruleus*) A few seen near Oulu.
Crested Tit (*Parus cristatus*) Fairly common.
SIBERIAN TIT (*Parus cinctus*) A pair seen at feeders north of Kuusamo just off the main highway
Willow Tit (*Parus montanus*) Fairly common throughout.
Eurasian Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*) A few heard near Oulu.
Northern Grey Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) Several seen at sites around Oulu and further north.
Common Magpie (*Pica pica*) Abundant.
Eurasian Jay (*Garulus glandarius*) A few seen throughout.
SIBERIAN JAY (*Perisoreus infaustus*) Up to 6 seen at feeders in the Valtavaara NP north of Ruka.
Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*) Fairly common around Oulu and small numbers seen near settlements in eastern Finland.
Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) Fairly common around Oulu. The most northerly population in Finland.
Hooded Crow (*Corvus corone cornix*) Common throughout.
Raven (*Corvus corax*) Pairs seen north of Kimii and in eastern Finland.
Common Starling (*Sturna vulgaris*) A pair and a group of 4 seen near Tynava south-west of Oulu.
House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) A few seen in Oulu and at Helsinki.
Chaffinch (*Fringila coelops*) Common throughout.
Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*) Singles and pairs seen near Tervola and Kuusamo.
Redpoll (*Carduelis flammea*) A few seen towards the end of our stay near Oulu.
Twite (*Carduelis flavirostris*) A flock of 5 seen near Oulu. A rarer migrant in Finland.
Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*) Seen on all days. More frequent near Oulu.
Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*) Small flocks seen at many sites throughout.
Bullfinch (*Phyrula phyrula*) Small numbers seen at many forest sites. The distinctive two note call
Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniculus*) Small numbers noted throughout.
Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) 25 seen near Liminka bay, 2 seen north of Kimii and another flock of 15 near Kuusamo at the municipal dump.
Lapland Bunting (*Calcarius lapponicus*) Several large flocks seen in fields south of Oulu near Tyrnava and Liminka bay especially on the 19th when a flock of approximately 150 was seen.
Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*) Fairly common throughout.

MAMMAL LIST

Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris*) 5 individuals seen near Kuusamo and 1 near Tervola. All animals were in grey winter coat with some showing redtails.
Brown Hare (*Lepus europaeus*) 1 seen near Liminka bay.
Arctic (Mountain) Hare (*Lepus timidus*) 12 animals seen in eastern Finland. All were in white winter coats.
Western Hedgehog (*Erinaceus europaeus*) 1 seen near Liminka bay.
Reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*) Commonly seen in eastern Finland. A semi-domesticate.

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