

Finland and Norway

25 May–6 June 2008



Siberian Jay

Participants:

Bob Adams
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Leaders: Ari Latja and Vaughan Ashby

Day 1: Weather fine, sunny, warm and calm. We arrived at the Vihiluoto Hotel at Kempele mid-evening after a pleasant and straightforward flight to Oulu via Helsinki. This proved an excellent base for the following three days, with breeding Eurasian Wrynecks in the garden, an abundance of Pied Flycatchers, and Common Redstart, Willow Warbler, Blackcap and Lesser Whitethroat in the hotel grounds. A male Western Marsh-harrier cruised past regularly, and a roding Eurasian Woodcock included the hotel in its circuit. The nearby reed-fringed bay held small numbers of common waders, scolding Sedge Warblers, Whooper Swans and both Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. After becoming acquainted with our Finnature guide, Ari Latja, at dinner, most of the group opted for an early night, despite the permanent daylight.

Day 2: Bright intervals and quite warm, wind W 3–4 on the coast. The day was spent touring a variety of sites in the Oulo area. The first spot visited was Varjakka, where a pair of Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers showed exceptionally well at close range. A small party of Eurasian Siskins and Common Redpolls added interest, as did both Pied and Spotted Flycatcher. The first Red Squirrel of many was noted. An area of open farmland, crossed by reedy ditches proved a splendid stop, with two Ruffs, several Whinchats and Northern Wheatears, two newly-arrived female Red-backed Shrikes and a party of 49 Whooper Swans. An area of open sandy heath nearby yielded at least one Woodlark (a surprise to many so far north, but on the edge of its range here), a Tree Pipit and excellent views of a male Ortolan Bunting. Three Short-eared Owls were seen from the buses. A roadside stop by open lakes produced at least 300 Little Gulls, all stunning adults,

Slavonian Grebe, Velvet Scoter, Temminck's Stint and Red-necked Phalarope. After lunch, we moved to forest near Siikajoki, pausing for 12 Eurasian Dotterels feeding in a ploughed field, to visit Great Grey and Ural Owls. The Great Grey peered with benign disinterest from an old Northern Goshawk's nest and was a real crowd pleaser. The same could not be said of the Ural Owl pair, which hid in deep cover and demanded considerable imagination to resolve. It was possible, with determination, to discern two dark blinking eyes deep within the branches but the fluffy owlets at least were plain enough, observing us from the top of an old water tank in an outhouse. Two foraging Crested Tits were seen at the Great Grey Owl site, and a calling Eurasian Pygmy-owl added interest, though it failed to show. We returned to the hotel mid-evening for a tasty evening meal, after a most satisfactory day.

Day 3: Morning cold and overcast with a strong northerly wind clearing by midday to brighter and a little warmer, wind N 3–4. Three Red-necked Phalaropes a Common Greenshank and two Black-tailed Godwits were the highlight of a pre-breakfast walk. The morning began with a tour of the Oulu waterfront area, targeting Terek Sandpiper, the local speciality. Other waders were in good supply and we had close views of Common Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers, Common Redshank and Temminck's Stint. A Terek Sandpiper was eventually located in a small reed-fringed inlet but flew further into cover after only half the group had seen it well. There was an impressive passage of hirundines, mostly Sand Martins, and good views of a first-summer Common Rosefinch in song. Two Eurasian Hobbies gave prolonged views, soaring over a nearby copse. A forest lake gave super views of Black-throated Divers and we witnessed interactions between the resident pair and an intruder, the latter eventually driven off. While watching these, a party of 13 flew over. Limingalahti bay, once a prime site for Yellow-breasted Bunting, a species whose range has since retreated eastwards, held a variety of waders, notably over 100 Ruff, parties of Common Cranes, an occasional Western Marsh-harrier and a pair of Garganeys. Some of the group were fortunate enough to see a Marsh Sandpiper before it was lost to sight in a creek. We ate early in the evening, to allow an excursion for Eurasian Pygmy-owl. We waited barely five minutes before one was called in, giving prolonged and close views, and welcome photo opportunities in good light. After posing for some time, it perked up suddenly at the sound of a scolding Great Tit and shot off in its general direction like a miniature sparrowhawk. The evening finished on the forest edge of a coastal marsh, where lekking Black Grouse were watched, accompanied by roding Eurasian Woodcock and a passing Little Tern.

Day 4: Bright and sunny start, overcast but dry later, wind calm early but N 2–3 later. After breakfast we began the journey north-eastwards towards Kuusamo, but before departure were treated to courtship display by both 'hotel' Eurasian Wrynecks, male and female calling vociferously and bowing to each other, high in a birch. A number of 'leg stretches' en-route gave views of the common forest birds, and some time was invested at one site for Siberian Jay. We had largely given up on these, and were returning to the transport, when one of these 'ghosts of the forest' did appear as if from nowhere, followed by three others. Bribed by chunks of bread, this small family party came very close but still contrived to appear wary. One bird looked skywards in such a fashion, alerting us to two Ospreys overhead. As is often the case, after this diligent searching, we were to see Siberian Jay on several future occasions. The first of many Reindeer crossed the road, and all the hares were now Mountain Hares, in various stages of winter/summer dress. The accommodation at Kuusamo was another high-standard Finnish hotel with fine local food on offer.

Day 5: Generally warm and sunny, with only brief overcast periods, little wind. Soon after breakfast we were in a boggy forest clearing with some open water, after passing three female Eurasian Capercaillies on the dusty access road. A singing Little Bunting performed very well, and there were excellent views of a pair of Smew, two Red-necked Phalaropes and Wood and Green Sandpipers. An adult White-tailed Eagle surveyed us from across the lake. Moving to the forest, we made a determined effort to track down Siberian Tit, and were eventually able to locate one using a nest box. This one had all the evidence of an encounter with a local ringer, but the jewellery it sported did little to spoil the occasion. A variety of other sites, held a number of highlights, notably White-throated Dipper (the black-bellied form) and more nesting Little Gulls. At one lake at least four pairs of Red-necked Grebes cruised the fringes while several Wood Sandpipers, Ruff and

Temminck's Stint and an odd Dunlin fed close to the shore. A brief visit to the best known site for Red-flanked Bluetail was unproductive. Spring was late (snow was still lying in many places) and only a couple of birds had been heard so far. Some of the group did, however, get fleeting views of a Hazel Grouse. Later, Ari made a determined attempt to find us a Rustic Bunting. Odd birds were heard singing, but were remarkably skulking until a splendid male did, eventually relent, and show itself well to all. Weasel and Common Frog (a bizarre orange-hued individual) were added to the non-bird list, as was Muskrat, now common on many lakes.

Day 6: Dull and overcast after a bright start, but some evening sunshine. Generally cool with a sharp N wind 3–4 at times. We began with a fruitful visit to a gull-watcher's regular joy, a corporation rubbish tip, this one serving Kuusamo. The highlights here were a third summer and an adult Siberian Gull, and around 10 Baltic Gulls among the large numbers of more common species. At Oulanka National Park, patience and determination eventually rewarded us with good views of Hazel Grouse perched in a bare tree and in flight. Also here, a female Eurasian Capercaille was incubating a clutch very close to a footpath. With the footpath now in regular use after being deserted in the winter, success looked remote, as she was flushed by each passing walker. The glorious scenery made Oulanka well worth a visit for this alone, with a spectacular torrent a major photographic attraction. Later in the day, Ari led us to a clearing overlooking a wide expanse of forest with the Russian border in view. Here, Paul did well to spot a distant Great Grey Shrike in the vast panorama, one of two seen on the trip. The group got reasonable views before it did a disappearing act all too typical of the species. The evening meal was followed by a visit to a nestbox occupied by Tengmalm's Owl. This was known to house well-grown young, but we had no idea how long we would need to wait for an adult. Fortunately it was only a matter of minutes. One of the endearing features of the northern owls is their indifference to humans and this adult proved no exception. It arrived clutching a still twitching rodent and perched briefly before delivering it to its offspring. Leaving the box, it flew to a nearby tree and examined the party almost disdainfully before embarking on another hunting foray, leaving happy memories in its wake. The late evening journey back to the hotel was punctuated with stops for a browsing Moose and views of Black Grouse in a clearing.

Day 7: A hot day, sunny throughout and calm. Crossing the Arctic Circle in temperatures of around 25°C came as a surprise to many, and most were regretting not packing shorts and sunhats. There was, however, a general feeling we would pay later for this luxury. En-route to Ivalo, we paused at a Northern Hawk Owl site in an open clearing. The young had fledged, but were in the area so we needed to be circumspect. In the event, both adults showed well, taking more interest in a fly-over Rough-legged Buzzard than us. We followed this happy event by enjoying an excellent lunch at a cafe owned by a local birder, who had helpfully trained a telescope on a nearby Osprey nest. Eurasian Bullfinches, Bramblings and Common Redpolls entertained us at feeders as we dined, as did two Red Squirrels. A nearby wetland site produced the unexpected bonus of three different Broad-billed Sandpipers, a species that normally performs best late evening. They displayed overhead, with their peculiar buzzing song and 'quick quick slow' flight but it proved impossible to locate them on the ground, even though one was followed down to a small tussock. A pair of Wood Sandpipers were, however, feeding very close to a tower hide, with three Red-necked Phalaropes more distant. Well satisfied with the day, we arrived at our hotel in Ivalo for a one night stay on the journey northward.

Day 8: Largely dull but dry, becoming colder with N3 wind. We stopped at various points between Ivalo and Inari, had excellent roadside views of an obliging Willow Grouse, and two drake Smew and saw the first Bluethroats of the trip. Lunching at the Four Winds Cafe (well that's the English translation!) with its excellent array of feeders it was hard to concentrate on the food. Birds on offer were Brambling, Common Redpoll and Siberian Tit, but these were topped by a pair of Pine Grosbeaks who watched us with tame indifference as we took shot after shot. The male, in particular, looked superb. A stop at an upland bog close to the Norwegian border brought us our first Long-tailed Skua, a pair of Golden Eagles, a few Common Cranes, foraging European Golden-plovers and a Short-eared Owl. As we crossed the Norwegian border, the

scenery changed dramatically and this was matched by a fall in temperature. We positioned ourselves at a safe distance from a well-known Gyr Falcon eyrie and were eventually rewarded with telescope views of an adult leaving and another arriving with prey. Nearby a Merlin displayed, and a Willow Grouse was located on an island in the river. A few hours later we arrived at the head of Varangerfjord and made a prolonged stop at Nesseby. Here it was hard to know where to look next. Highlights were 27 Steller's Eiders close in but none, unfortunately, in adult male plumage. Large rafts of Long-tailed Ducks were accompanied by Black and Red-throated Divers, Smew, Velvet and Common Scoters and small numbers of Red-necked Phalaropes. Seventeen Tundra Bean Geese fed on the shore, with a variety of waders. Both Atlantic Puffin and Black Guillemot flew past, as did several Arctic Terns. Mid-evening saw us entering the long tunnel that connects the road with Vardo, quite grateful for heated accommodation that awaited us.

Day 9: Dull and overcast at first with occasional light rain, brightening later with a strong N wind developing 5–6. We had the first rain of the trip, albeit light as we embarked the harbour boat for the trip to the island reserve of Hornoy. There was little wind, but the weather later in the day was to show us how fortunate we had been. Had the wind been as strong as in the afternoon the trip would certainly have been cancelled. We had already seen Brunnich's Guillemot in the harbour, and a tame adult Glaucous Gull but both these species were present on the island, the former breeding with hundreds of Common Guillemots, many of the 'bridled' form, Razorbills, Black Guillemots and Atlantic Puffins. Large numbers of Black-legged Kittiwakes crowded the breeding cliffs, and a passing Rough-legged Buzzard caused some panic amongst the rafts of auks on the water. An immature male King Eider drifted offshore with four females. Two passing Barn Swallows looked distinctly out of place as we watched a pair of Twite in low cover. We then had prolonged views of a Red-throated Pipit, resplendent in summer plumage, as it foraged amongst the grassy tussocks. In the afternoon we visited various sites along the coast, but the wind was now chillingly cold. Nevertheless we managed a Little Bunting, which quickly darted into cover, a 'family' of immature White-tailed Eagles and close views of a pair of Lapland Buntings. Purple Sandpipers and Arctic Skuas were now commonplace. Defeated by the bitter wind, but well satisfied by the day's birds, we returned to the hotel.

Day 10: Dull and overcast, occasional light sleet flurries, wind N 4–5. Although well-clad, the icy temperatures still demanded some resilience and it took some willpower at times to leave the comfort of the minibus. Fortunately the birds on show made it worthwhile. The day was spent at various points on the Barents Sea coast between Vardo and Hamningberg, an almost deserted fishing village to the north of Vardo. Several Lapland and Snow Buntings were seen, and a single Red-throated Pipit. A likely spot for Rock Ptarmigan failed to deliver, but we were rewarded with close views of a flying Long-tailed Skua. Near Hamningberg a Barnacle Goose was a real surprise, and a summer Little Stint was a good find in a mixed group of waders. An immature White-billed Diver, and several Red-throated Divers were seen offshore. We paid two visits to an area of low willow-scrub looking for Arctic Redpoll. On the first, we got frustratingly brief views of both these and Common, but did better on the return journey as at least two 'tiny snowballs' relented and perched long enough for examination. This same area also held Willow Warbler, Bluethroat, and a non-stop singing Redwing. Surprising, both this species and Fieldfare were seen in treeless areas and presumably breed on buildings. Further up the river valley, a pair of Long-tailed Skuas gave prolonged and excellent views on a snowfield, though Rock Ptarmigan once again failed to co-operate. Most Mountain Hares in the region had sensibly retained their winter coats.

Day 11: Dull and overcast at Vardo with a cold N 3–4 wind. Brighter and much warmer at Ivalo with little wind. Early morning saw us begin the long journey south. Few envied Vardo its weather but all would remember the birds. Just before the tunnel, a summer adult Siberian Gull fed on the grass. In a nearby harbour, not for the first time, Lynsey proved herself a skilled birdfinder. She had already located an Iceland Gull in Vardo harbour, and starred this time by finding one of the 'most wanted', a drake Steller's Eider in full plumage. We enjoyed no similar success with King Eider, but did see a party with immature drakes close in. En-route to Vadso, a roadside Common Starling was something of a surprise, less so than eight Tundra Bean Geese in flight. A Finnature colleague of Ari's had found a summer-plumaged White-billed Diver close in

near Vadso, and we gratefully snapped this up this most attractive bird. In Vadso harbour a Bearded Seal had been habitually hauling out on a local jetty, a rare event for this species and we had great views. As the proprietor of Birdfinders stalked the animal to obtain a closer shot, group cameras were readied in the uncharitable hope of recording a charging seal and undignified scramble. To some disappointment the beast preferred indolence to aggression and refused to co-operate. 130 Red Knot all in summer plumage were a splendid sight on a tidal reach close to the harbour, where Bar-tailed Godwits and Eurasian Curlews also foraged. The temperature rose in welcome fashion as we approached Usjoki, but it was still cool on a plateau as we made another attempt for Rock Ptarmigan. Evidence was uncovered, in a pile of feathers that probably recorded a Gyr Falcon strike but no living birds were found. Compensation came in the form of a tame pair of Eurasian Dotterels, several Northern Wheatears, an Arctic Redpoll (rare here), and further Bramblings and Bluethroats. A stoat killed on the road near Vadso could count itself very unlucky in view of the light traffic.

Day 12: Bright and sunny, anticyclonic calm, temperature around 21–22°C. Today was largely taken up with the long journey back to Oulu, punctuated by some good bird stops. In a woodland clearing we encountered Siberian Jay, and had particularly good views of a Siberian Tit, which even posed for photographs, as well as several Bramblings, and Common Redpolls. At a boggy forest stop, a male Northern Wheatear in the most unlikely surroundings gave a convincing imitation of a Great Grey Shrike, and a Spotted Redshank perched at the very top of a tall pine. Two female Eurasian Capercaillies gave excellent roadside views. A brief stop on the coast near Kemi produced Little Ringed Plover and Eurasian Hobby. Earlier, two Golden Eagles were seen during a brief 'leg-stretch'. Arriving back at the Vihiluota hotel in Oulu, it was a surprise to see how far the trees had advanced in our brief absence. All was now a sea of green with the birches well in leaf. Close to midnight the Eurasian Woodcock still patrolled and an adult Little Gull was hawking for insects above the car park.

Day 13: Bright warm and sunny, wind W 2–3, temperature 27°C in Helsinki later. After breakfast we said goodbye to Ari. He had been a first-class guide and great company. His English (as with most Finns) put us to shame. He could even curse well in a foreign tongue and was once heard to mutter 'bloody buntings' under his breath as a singing Rustic failed to play his game. Happily he was replaced for our last day by his daughter Berita, another accomplished Finnature guide. She had the final hours of the trip nicely mapped out, and we had a memorable finale. Our first call was to another Great Grey Owl, another female on a pile of sticks probably constructed by a Northern Goshawk. The male was quickly located in a nearby tree and well photographed, although frustratingly it rarely opened its eyes, studiously ignoring the food-begging calls of its mate, and us. Within a few metres there was an occupied Ural Owl box. An extensive search for the male proved fruitless, although he was no doubt watching us. We had to be content with viewing the female's tail feathers as she brooded. Savaged by mosquitoes, for the only time during the trip, we did not tarry long. A nearby clearing held Red-backed Shrike, Whinchat, Common Redstart, Yellowhammer and Ortolan Bunting. Lunch at the hotel was enlivened by a flyover party of 15 Common Crossbills before we left to try for a summering Pallid Harrier that had been seen infrequently. That we had no luck here did not surprise but we were well compensated by great views of two Terek Sandpipers in courtship display near Oulu, an excellent end to an equally excellent trip, and a relief for those who had missed the earlier bird. The connecting flight from Oulu to Helsinki arrived in Mediterranean temperatures. It was certainly a lot cooler at Heathrow a couple of hours later, when the group said their goodbyes.

Summary: It is hard to see how this trip could have delivered more than it did. The birds were brilliant, and all the participants pocketed new species. Perhaps the only disappointment was failure to see Red-flanked Bluetail, though Ari made it plain from the start he wasn't expecting sightings. Never an easy target, this was just a bad year with a late spring and consequent late arrival. Excellent views of other Scandinavian species provided more than adequate compensation and the owls, in particular, were outstanding. I had a personal species list of 162, but missed one or two the others saw, so the trip list will be higher. The Common Starling, at least, was mine! Both leaders were at great pains to find and show the birds, and were supremely successful at this. Highlights for many were the summer White-billed Diver, but many rated the Tengmalm's

Owl above the rest, and drake Steller's Eider and Pine Grosbeak stole a few votes. Hundreds of immaculately plumaged Little Gulls, pristine white against a blue lake is a personal favourite, as is a male Lapland Bunting, seen at close range, bracing itself against a chilling wind. It was good too, to see so many birds, migrants to the UK, some rare, some not so rare and others (e.g. Brambling) winter visitors, at home on their breeding grounds, in smart summer plumage. Tours like this are always about more than just the birds. We did quite well for mammals and the seal was a real bonus, although the late spring made butterflies particularly scarce. The landscape was, at times, quite simply stunning, with an immense sense of space. Oulanka National Park is famed for its scenery but the bleak tundra and taiga landscapes had a beauty of their own. We were fortunate with the weather and should probably not have been surprised by the extreme range of temperature. Sweltering sunshine at the Arctic Circle was followed within 48 hours by bitter northerly winds sweeping in from the Barents Sea driving the wind-chill temperature to well below zero, but we had little rain and this is quite typical of summer in these regions. Accommodation and food were both high standard. The Finns make the best mashed potato I've ever tasted and can be taught nothing about good soup. Alcohol is another matter. Booze in Finland is far from cheap and in Norway is yet more expensive. A can of lager celebrating a good day in Vardo cost over six pounds – almost as eye-watering as the cold. On the positive side, you are at least spared the self-inflicted misery of an early start clouded by a hangover. If you are reading this with a view to visiting northern Finland and Norway next year with Birdfinders my advice is don't hesitate. I guarantee you will not be disappointed.

Brian Hill

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