

# Finland and Norway

25 May–6 June 2009

**Participants:**

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**Leaders:** Toni Eskelin and Martin Cade

**Day 1:** After an uneventful journey from the UK, via Helsinki, there was enough time during the evening for a little exploration in the vicinity of the Airport Hotel, Oulu – where breeding species included Eurasian Woodcock, Redwing, Pied Flycatcher and Common Rosefinch.

**Day 2:** A full day exploring the Oulu area. The focus through the morning was the Siilkajoki area south of Oulu where a pair of Great Grey Owls at their nest stole the show. A visit to an Ural Owl nest box provided us with views of the male lurking amongst the foliage of a nearby tree but the female remained out of view in her out-sized box. The back-up list in this area included Eurasian Wryneck and Ortolan Bunting. After lunch, the forests east of Oulu came up trumps with Tengmalm's Owl and Eurasian Pygmy-owl at their respective nest-boxes, two Hazel Grouse and a variety of other woodland birds that included Crested Tit, Willow Tit, Bohemian Waxwing and Parrot Crossbill, whilst the day's tally was further racked up with a good selection of wildfowl and waders at Liminka Bay and a Eurasian Eagle-owl late in the evening in the less than salubrious surroundings of Oulu rubbish-tip. Inhabitants of this nearby forest clearing included the likes of Eurasian Wryneck, Red-backed Shrike and Ortolan Bunting.

**Day 3:** On a day of what turned out to be mixed weather we woke to find it damp although still pleasantly mild. Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker had been an irritating bogey yesterday so was the morning's priority. The first stop in the forests south of Oulo saw our quarry elevated still further up the wants list but a clearing in the forest did provide us with plenty of distractions: a wonderful Great Grey Owl ghosted across and



**Pine Grosbeak**

perched in full view, two Black Woodpeckers performed a timely fly-past and Great Grey and Red-backed Shrikes were added to the tally, whilst the adjacent birch plantation held some splendid singing Wood Warblers. Our wait for the woodpecker wasn't to be too long as Toni's tape drew an instant response at our next stop and we were afforded great views of a female consorting with a Great Spotted Woodpecker. The rest of the day was spent visiting a succession of spots on the shore of the Gulf of Bothnia. Terek Sandpiper was our principal target but along the way we scored with, amongst others, two White-tailed Eagles and a Caspian Tern. After initially proving troublesome, a Terek Sandpiper eventually showed remarkably well – calling and display-fighting for several minutes right in front of us – at the species' last breeding site in the area close to Oulu docks.

**Day 4:** On what was to be a travelling morning we weren't too inconvenienced by finding that a stiff breeze had sprung up overnight. Unfortunately both cloud cover and wind strength increased the further east we travelled towards Kuusamo – although that wasn't enough to prevent us adding a pair of Taiga Bean Geese to the list at a strategic stop en route – and by early afternoon we reached our destination accompanied by sporadic showers. The afternoon's exploration of points east of the town was enlivened by the sight of trees uprooted literally in front of our eyes by the now gale force wind, although we did score with a pair of Siberian Tits visiting a feeding station in the shelter of the forest before the onset of heavier rain curtailed birding for the day.

**Day 5:** An early start in much better weather saw us head east from Kuusamo for a grouse-drive: a splendid lek of Black Grouse was followed by a female Capercaillie and, before long, two Willow Grouse. Rustic Bunting quickly became the new Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker by frustrating us at every opportunity but there was fine compensation when a Red-flanked Bluetail showed atop a distant pine in the hills not far from the Russian border in Oulanka NP. Visits to a number of wetlands, many hosting breeding colonies of Little Gulls and displaying Red-necked Grebes, punctuated our further quest (...unsuccessful!) for Rustic and Little Bunting that continued through the morning before we adjourned for a late lunch at a rustic restaurant deep in the forest where two Siberian Jays visited another strategically-placed feeding station. As the day wore on the weather took a turn for the worse again and birding became more difficult, with the first of what were to be many Red-necked Phalaropes proving to be the pick of the evening birding.

**Day 6:** Having already seen most of the specialities of the Kuusamo area, we had ample time to indulge in a prolonged quest for better views of Red-flanked Bluetail. This necessitated a steep hike through the forest but although at least three males were in fine voice at close range it proved to be remarkably difficult to get anything other than fleeting views of them. In increasingly pleasant warm and sunny conditions the rest of the day was spent roaming Oulanka NP: the raptor tally included White-tailed Eagle, Rough-legged Buzzard, European Honey-buzzard, Northern Goshawk and Black Kite (the latter a minor rarity for Finland), whilst we also added White-throated Dipper (of the black-bellied form) and Velvet Scoter to the trip list before the final port of call at Kuusamo rubbish tip provided us with a Siberian Gull and plenty of *fuscus* Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

**Day 7:** A last pre-breakfast attempt for Rustic Bunting close to the hotel finally came up trumps when a fine male showed within second: if only they'd been this easy yesterday! Today's long drive north from Kuusamo to Ivalo was made even longer by the necessity to take a detour westward to pick up another member of the group who was joining us for the Norwegian leg of the tour. This duly done, we did manage to break the 500km drive with stops for amongst others, Broad-billed Sandpipers in full display flight over a roadside bog and a pair of delightful Eurasian Dotterels atop the windswept hills shortly before reaching our destination.

**Day 8:** Having drawn a blank at a few potential spots for Little Bunting in the last few days, we started the day in some boggy woodland outside Ivalo where at least three males were holding territory and showing intermittently. With the Norwegian coast our eventual destination today was to prove a day of contrasts, both in landscape and climate. The first leg of the journey saw the forests we had grown accustomed to in the last

week gradually thin out as birches began to replace the conifers. Our last two stops in Finland both provided encounters with a much-wanted species: Pine Grosbeaks were still visiting feeders at a roadside cafe and at Pappila where we stopped for lunch; both sites also attracted a constant processions of Bramblings and redpolls, the latter including the first few Arctics amongst a wealth of Mealys. By the time we crossed the border into Norway residual snow patches had become conspicuous on the surrounding hills and when we stopped for the first time a little later beside the Tana River it was immediately apparent that the temperature had fallen markedly. A Gyr Falcon eventually showed high over the riverside cliffs, whilst the river delta came up trumps with memorably prolonged and close views of a Long-tailed Skua. Before long, we reached the shore of the fabled Varangerfjord where White-tailed Eagles verged on the commonplace, sea-ducks were numerous offshore and a flock of Tundra Bean Geese provided additional interest. The final leg of the journey through increasingly barren tundra on the coast road to Vardo was undertaken in sporadic sleet showers which continued once we reached our destination and restricted birding to the formality of ticking off the Brännich's Guillemots that were bobbing around in Vardo harbour right outside our hotel windows!

**Day 9:** A pre-breakfast seawatch from the headland outside Vardo revealed the wealth of birds feeding offshore and nearby a singing male Bluethroat put on a fine display. The day was otherwise largely taken up with covering the coast between Vardo and Hamningberg. White-billed Diver was the principal target and, although they required perseverance, three were found through the course of the day. Arguably even more impressive were the huge rafts of sea-ducks encountered en route, whilst further entertainment was provided by the wealth of other typical tundra inhabitants that included Red-necked Phalaropes, Arctic Skuas (that were common enough to qualify as vermin), more Bluethroats and several dapper summer-plumaged Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs.

**Day 10:** An exciting morning saw us take the short boat trip to Hornoya island where the seabird colony was truly impressive: not only were the birds abundant but the spectacle was made all the better by the fantastic close views – both settled and in flight – that landing on the island permitted. Brännich's and Black Guillemots were plentiful amongst the masses of Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Atlantic Puffins and Black-legged Kittiwakes on the cliffs, whilst Steller's and King Eiders were found amongst a flock of Common Eiders in a sheltered bay on the east side of the island. The afternoon was spent working slowly along the coast from Vardo to Vadso: scrutiny of the wealth of sea-ducks revealed a few more Steller's Eiders, whilst the shoreline and adjacent tundra held Tundra Bean Geese, White-tailed Eagles, Red-throated Pipits, Lapland Longspurs and a good variety of waders and gulls amongst other typical inhabitants of this barren landscape.

**Day 11:** After a successful few days in Norway it was time to head south again as we reached the latter stages of the tour. A few unsuccessful stops for Shore Lark did turn up a couple of Willow Grouse, whilst our lunch venue just over the Finnish border at Pappila again came up with Pine Grosbeaks amongst the mass of redpolls and Bramblings. A comprehensive flog across the moorland high up on the nearby fjells produced a pair of Eurasian Dotterel but no sign of any Rock Ptarmigan and on the journey back to Ivalo it wasn't altogether surprising that we failed to fluke across a Northern Hawk Owl at any of the stops made in likely looking habitat.

**Day 12:** Another long day traveling all the way back to Oulu saw us make yet more stops in the forlorn hope that a Northern Hawk Owl might pop up out of nowhere but it was not to be. Towards the end of the day there was enough time to have a scout around Oulu: a nice selection of wetland birds were logged, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was heard drumming, the rubbish tip Eurasian Eagle-owls didn't perform and we ended the evening in slightly surreal circumstances wandering around the plusher suburbs of Oulu listening to the song of a distant Thrush Nightingale that proved impossible to get close to.

**Day 13:** With the return flight to London via Helsinki not due to leave until mid-afternoon there was plenty of time to have a look at some of the wetlands south of Oulu. Birdwise there were few surprises but it was enjoyable to be able to have a more in-depth look at these sites than had possible earlier in the trip.

The group total was 197 species, which is just short of the Birdfinders record of 199 for this tour. The weather this year was sometimes disappointingly dreary and cool and, although we endured a few sleet and snow showers in Norway, we were fortunate in avoiding any rain that really inconvenienced the birding, whilst biting insects – that can be nuisance at this time of year – were all but non-existent. All in all the tour was very successful: thanks to Toni's perseverance and local knowledge we were treated to memorable encounters with virtually all of the regional specialities; only Northern Hawk Owl eluded us after a widespread crash in vole numbers had seen this species abandon its breeding sites earlier in the spring.

**Martin Cade**