

Finland

Owls

11–14 May 2018

Participants

Stephen and Bryony Abbott
Alex and Andy Cruickshanks
Phillip and Sally Ellis
Michael and Rosemary Frost
Anthony (Dougal) and Dylan Gysi
Bert Logtmeijer



Western Capercaillie

Leaders Tero Linjama and Bill Blake

Day 1 Most of the group met at London Heathrow for an early Finnair flight to Helsinki arriving on time in warm sunshine with cloudless skies. Our transit time was a bit tight but we arrived at the appropriate gate in plenty of time for our short onward flight to Oulu, northern Finland's most populous city. Arriving at Oulu (pronounced 'owlu') we were greeted by cloudless blue skies and a balmy temperature in the mid 20's centigrade. Once through security we collected our luggage from the carousel and met up with our Finnature guide, Tero. With our VW minibuses loaded we headed to our accommodation for the next three nights, the Airport Hotel, Vihiluoto, just a short drive from the airport and met up with the rest of our group; Phillip and Sally who arrived yesterday from Manchester and Bert arriving earlier from Amsterdam. Room allocation was swift and hassle free thanks to Tero, after which we took time to unpack and freshen up before meeting up to do some birding.

Oulu is located over 500 miles north of Helsinki on the Gulf of Bothnia, a northern arm of the Baltic Sea; our hotel is ideally situated on the shores of Kempele Bay, itself an arm of the Gulf of Bothnia, and overlooks an area of reed beds, marsh and foreshore viewable from platforms close to the hotel and even from some hotel room balconies. As we gathered outside in the car park **Common Redstart, Eurasian Blackbird, Fieldfare, Redwing, Mistle Thrush, Lesser Whitethroat, Willow Warbler, Great and Blue Tits, Common Chaffinch, European Greenfinch, Eurasian Siskin and Eurasian Linnet** were all seen as was a fine male **Pied Flycatcher** that sang loudly from various perches, whilst **Common Redpolls** danced their undulating song flight overhead. We drove along the hotel road to the little harbour of Vihiluoto to scan across the marsh and the bay hoping to find a Terek Sandpiper; we failed in our search for the Terek but there was still a good selection of birds on show. A flotilla of at least 35 summer-plumaged **Long-tailed Ducks** were a fine sight in the bay along with many **Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese, a Common Shelduck, Mallard, two Northern Shovelers, Common Teal, three Common Goldeneyes, a pair of Red-breasted Mergansers, at least four Common Mergansers (Goosanders) and our only Great Cormorant, plus Black-headed Gull and two Herring Gulls and Common and Arctic Terns.** The marsh and foreshore held at least one booming **Great Bittern, a pair of Western Marsh-harriers, Common Pheasant, numerous Common Cranes, a Greater Ringed Plover, Northern Lapwings, Eurasian Curlews, Common Redshanks, a Common Greenshank, Common Sandpipers and four Green Sandpipers plus Bank Swallows (Sand Martins), White Wagtails**

and **Reed Buntings**. We drove the short distance back to our hotel to freshen up before meeting for a delicious buffet dinner in the hotel dining room. Afterwards, with the sun still shining we assembled outside again for a late evening drive.

Common Wood-pigeons, **Eurasian Magpies** and **Hooded Crows** proved to be common roadside birds on our drive south-east as did **Eurasian Jackdaws**; the latter of the form “*soemmerringii*” known as ‘Nordic Jackdaw’, which show a distinct pale silvery half collar. We drove to the Lumijoki area adding **Rook**, in one of its northern Finnish outposts, to the growing trip list. Stopping in an area of open fields we met local birders who have been studying and monitoring goose numbers that use the area as a refuelling stop on their northward migrations. Of greatest importance here was the flock of the globally-threatened **Lesser White-fronted Geese** that gathers here before moving on to their breeding grounds further north; these birds are on their way to breeding grounds in Norway and are not part of the Swedish re-introduction scheme. A count of 89 of these rare geese was made earlier in the afternoon although it was hard to say how many we actually saw as many were either resting or feeding with their heads down. Also present was a flock of over 120 **Taiga Bean-geese** and these were later joined by 100+ **Greater White-fronted Geese**, four **Pink-footed Geese** and ten **Barnacle Geese**; small numbers of Greylag Geese were also present in the area making it six species of geese for the evening. At least two **Short-eared Owls** put on a show for us as did displaying Eurasian Curlew and **Black-tailed Godwit** and Stephen picked out three **Ruffs**. Other birds in the area included a **Common Kestrel**, **Stock Dove**, **Barn Swallow**, **Eurasian Skylark**, two **Whinchats** and three **Northern Wheatears**, a **Common Raven**, **Yellowhammers** and more Common Cranes.

Next at a monitored nest box we had views of a female **Boreal Owl**, her wide-eyed round face filling the nest hole peering down at us; Boreal Owl was known as Tengmalm’s Owl and was named after Peter Gustaf Tengmalm, an 18th century Swedish physician and naturalist. **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Bohemian Waxwing** were further additions to the trip list here. Moving on Tero advised us we were entering the territory of another target bird; driving slowly along a forest track checking likely looking perches Phillip spotted a large owl perched atop a conifer close to the track. A magnificent **Great Grey Owl** with white ‘eye-brows’, black chin and piercing yellow eyes glared down at us giving great views. A call to Van One on the radio saw them reversing in time to see the owl before it melted back into the forest. A **Common Snipe**, a singing **Common Chiffchaff** and two **Bramblings** were also additions to the trip list. On the way to our next site we had brief views of a ghostly male **Hen Harrier** and a little further on we saw six **Mountain Hares** in a field, all sporting various shades of brown, white and blue as they moult from winter to summer attire. Our final visit of the evening was to a sensitive site where the property owner was uneasy about having groups of birdwatchers at his property; a hole in a tree stump had been chosen by a pair of **Northern Hawk Owls** to nest in. The ‘stump’ was beside a road however so we could stand on the road to view the nest without disturbing the property or its owner; in fact we were so well behaved that the landowner came out to chat with Tero and said if all groups behaved so well then he was happy for other groups to visit. After a short wait a male owl flew in with prey and stayed for a while before flying off, the female also flew off shortly afterwards. A brief **Wood Warbler** and a **Spotted Flycatcher** were also new here. Returning to our hotel some of us walked to the first viewing platform to listen for the sound of ‘horses galloping across the sky’, namely the display of a Jack Snipe. We did hear displaying Common Snipe and saw a roding **Eurasian Woodcock**, but no Jack Snipe. An excellent evenings birding with four species of owl, three of which were target birds plus six species of goose; we retired to our rooms, weary but happy.

Day 2 A Pied Flycatcher in full song and a cloudless, azure blue sky greeted us as we assembled outside for an early start; we had a 90-minute drive to another owl site and took a packed breakfast with us. Driving deep in to the forest we found a female **Western Capercaillie** posing by the side of the track, showing its unbarred, orangey upper breast. We also saw several female **Black Grouse**, a couple of **Wood Sandpipers** and a **Eurasian Jay**. The track eventually came to a dead end with a turning circle; we followed Tero a short distance into the forest to a nest box some seven or eight feet off the ground. Tero assured us that it contained a female **Ural Owl** on eggs and that the only way we could view the bird was to look through an angled mirror that he held over the entrance hole so we could see the bird that glared menacingly up at us. We were also in the territory of a Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker and Tero located the nest hole about five feet off the ground; the hole was fresh and still being excavated but we could not find the woodpeckers and there was no response to play back. We ate our packed breakfast here and added **Eurasian Hobby**, **Common Cuckoo**, **Goldcrest**, **Tree Pipit**,

Northern Bullfinch and two calling **Parrot Crossbills** to the trip list plus more Bohemian Waxwings and several Green Hairstreak butterflies plus some Reindeer. Moving on, we drove into another forest at Haapaselkä where Tero took us to another nest box. Standing quietly around the nesting tree Tero whistled a single note; a male **Eurasian Pygmy-owl** responded immediately and flew in to check us out. It landed close to the nest box then flew a short distance before landing in the open where it peered down at us giving great views to everyone. Heading back towards Oulu, only Tero and Bert saw a flyover Northern Goshawk from the front of Van 1; we stopped near the port at Poikkimaantie but drew another blank for Terek Sandpiper, it flew off 5 minutes before we arrived; we did add **Eurasian Oystercatcher** and **Common House-martin** and some of us had brief views of a pipit that could only have been a Rock Pipit. On the outskirts of Oulu we visited Lintulampi (translates as 'bird pond') where we had good views of a stunning pair of **Slavonian Grebes** in full summer plumage plus singing Common Redstart and Pied Flycatcher. Our lunch stop for today was at the Sankivaaran Golf Course, at Mikonmäentie on the outskirts of Oulu overlooking a tributary of the Oulu River and a **Black Woodpecker** nest hole. The temperature was now in the high twenties and it was nice to sit in the shade of the club restaurant waiting for the male woodpecker to fly in as we ate our buffet lunch; Common Sandpipers fed along the river. After an hour the male had not put in appearance so Tero used playback; the female came to the nest-hole entrance immediately, peering out and looking for her mate. We left the golf club with the temperature soaring but despite the heat there were still patches of compacted snow in dark hollows on the side of the road. We stopped in an area of forest suitable for Crested Tits but the midday heat meant there was little activity and we saw none. Back at our hotel we relaxed for an hour or so before heading out again; Tero had received news that a Lesser Spotted Eagle had been sighted over farmland at Tyrnävä, which was on our evening route. As we arrived Mike saw a distant raptor and Stephen got on to the bird quickly; it was not the desired eagle but a **Rough-legged Buzzard**, a good bird nevertheless, albeit rather distant. We watched it hunting and hovering over the distant treeline. Heading into the trees again we drove narrow forest tracks to view a superb Great Grey Owl on her nest. Close to the track, about eight feet off the ground; we had excellent views of the bird as she peered over the edge of her huge stick nest, her piercing yellow eyes watching our every movement. Time was spent enjoying the bird and cameras clicked away; Holly Blue and more Green Hairstreak butterflies were also seen.

Our final site of the day was at the rather unlikely looking ABC Gas Station/Service Station at Liminka overlooking an area of rough grassland and farmland. Soon a sub-adult **Pallid Harrier** appeared quartering the grassland. It eventually landed and gave good telescope views on the ground; it had chosen to land close to a Common Crane on its nest much to the annoyance of the bird. The best was still to come however, as when the bird took flight to continue its hunting, suddenly an adult male appeared and an aerial tussle ensued before the young contender was vanquished. It was not finished there though as an adult female appeared from nowhere and the adult male started 'sky dancing.' Parties of Ruffs flew back and forth and the lovely rhythmic trill of displaying Eurasian Curlews echoed across the fields. **House Sparrow** was a trip tick for everyone here. What a cracking end to the day! A delicious 3-course dinner followed, sirloin steak with garlic butter for the carnivores amongst us. After dinner we had the rest of the evening free; with an early start in the morning some chose an early night whilst others spent time in the bay at the viewing platforms. On the way down a **Song Thrush** fed on the lawn behind the hotel. Two **Great Crested Grebes**, a single **Canada Goose**, six **Eurasian Wigeon**, a single drake **Gadwall**, a pair of **Northern Pintail** and a pair of **Garganeys** were new birds in the bay, whilst the marsh held Common Redshank, Common Greenshank and good numbers of Ruff, many of the males looking splendid in their summer finery of white, black or rufous ruffs; those with rufous ruffs seemed to dominate over the other colours. A tight group of seven delicate **Temminck's Stints**, all moulting into summer plumage, flew in close with a small party of Ruffs.

Day 3 Our first stop was at Liminganlahti Visitor Centre where a Thrush Nightingale was heard singing yesterday evening; if it was still present it chose not to sing this morning and not to respond to playback. We made our way to the Siikajoki area to continue our search for Hazel Grouse and Three-toed Woodpecker. Neither species co-operated by responding to playback, thus we drew another blank. We did see a Black Woodpecker and a Common Cuckoo in flight and the ringing contact calls of Bohemian Waxwings betrayed their presence in the trees above us; best of all was a flyover **European Honey-buzzard**. We moved on to the Varti area and a known Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker territory; after eating our packed breakfast we walked along a track with woodland on one side and open fields on the other. A **Hazel Grouse** was flushed from the woodland edge but was only seen in flight by some of the group; playback failed to make it reappear. We saw

another Black Woodpecker, more Common Cuckoos and a Great Spotted Woodpecker and, in the open fields, we found a pair of **Ortolan Buntings**. Back at the parked vehicles we heard a singing **Eurasian Wryneck**, which unfortunately refused to show itself but we did find a couple of **Dunnocks**, a lovely pair of **Red-backed Shrikes** and six **Red Crossbills** flew over calling. Despite much searching and the investigation of various likely looking tree holes Three-toed Woodpecker remained elusive. Green Hairstreak and Holly Blue butterflies were again seen; at first we were unsure about the blues being Holly Blues as we could find no Holly or Ivy which are the food plants of the Holly Blue in Britain. As it happens Holly Blue is the national butterfly of Finland and uses quite different food plants in parts of continental Europe. Tero pointed to a tree at the side of the track that had a large area of bark missing some seven or eight feet above the ground, which had been caused by a Moose eating the bark! We moved on to an area of damper forest nearby as Tero had been given the site as a Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker territory; we walked deep in to the forest searching for a marker that had been left by the finder of the nest hole. Despite much searching, the use of playback and a few false alarms we failed to find a nest hole in use. During our hike in the forest we saw Common Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers, a Spotted Flycatcher and several Wood Warblers, the accelerated trill of which echoed through the trees. We also found a Common European Viper (Adder) sunning itself and several Viviparous Lizards; the latter lives farther north than any other species of non-marine reptile.

En route to our next stop a Rough-legged Buzzard flew over us in Van 2 giving excellent views before disappearing over the trees. Stopping on the coast at Karinranta we spent an enjoyable hour or so 'sea-watching' and checking the muddy foreshore. Amongst the commoner ducks and waders, Arctic and Common Terns highlights here included a fine summer plumaged **Black-throated Loon (Diver)**, three stunning drake **Smew** among a group of seven birds, a flying **White-tailed Eagle**, a **Spotted Redshank** in its summer 'black velvet' plumage, seven exquisite summer-plumaged **Little Gulls**, a couple of **Common Gulls**, two distant '**Baltic Gulls**' and a party of 'thunbergi' Western Yellow Wagtails known as **Grey-headed Wagtails**, the males looking especially handsome with blue-grey cap, dark ear-coverts, bright yellow underparts and olive-green underparts. Many Ruffs were also present and several leks were taking place around the marshy foreshore plus Common Greenshanks and over 30 Wood Sandpipers. Somewhat bizarre, considering the high temperatures and blue skies, was the number of icebergs out in the bay, most of which were 'smallish' but there was one huge berg on the horizon. We returned to the Liminganlahti Visitor Centre for a hearty buffet lunch of Fish Soup and Thai Curry; today was Mothers Day in Finland and this accounted for the business of the centre. After lunch we walked out to the observation platform overlooking the reserve to scan the bay and marsh; White-tailed Eagles were particularly conspicuous and we counted at least seven birds. Many Ruffs were feeding or cavorting in leks and we estimated that there could be as many as 1000 birds present on the marsh. Black-tailed Godwits and Northern Lapwings were also displaying, Whooper Swans were 'bugling' and cranes were 'trumpeting' and the whole scene was one of nature at its best. Returning to our hotel mid-afternoon some took the opportunity to rest whilst others visited the viewing platform; Alex and Andy checked out the bay and were rewarded with a couple of **Caspian Terns** patrolling the waters. They found the other members of the group, some in their rooms, to let them know and all had good views of these huge terns.

After dinner we assembled outside for our last evening drive calling in at Poikkimaantie again to search for the elusive sandpiper; there was no sign on arrival so Tero went off to check another pool but returned with thumbs down. We were about to leave when a Terek Sandpiper flew in landing on a small patch of mud giving great views of the long upcurved bill and rather short orange-yellow legs. It then flew off calling showing a fairly broad whitish trailing edge to the wing and grey rump and tail before disappearing beyond the sea wall. En route to our next destination Van 1 saw a Badger running across a field and we added **Common Starling** to the trip list; we drove on to Kara to search for the elusive grouse again. As we stood quietly on a forest track Tero played the grouse song; a bird whistled a reply almost immediately. Moving closer Tero played the song again and the grouse responded again; surely the bird would come to the forest edge and show itself. Sadly the grouse did not show so Tero went into the damp forest in an effort to gently push the bird towards us but the bird refused to co-operate; eventually a Hazel Grouse flew across the track ahead of us but it was brief flight views only and not seen by all of the group. Tero persevered but the bird was not heard or glimpsed again. A Eurasian Hobby flew over and we could hear the distant 'bubbling' of a Black Grouse lek somewhere close-by. We left the area in somewhat low spirits and headed to the Liminganlahti Visitor Centre carpark where we had started this morning but, if the Thrush Nightingale was still present it was not singing. In the late evening dim we walked out towards the viewing platform listening, hoping to hear the 'whiplash' calls of a Spotted Crake or

the 'clippety-clop' of a displaying Jack Snipe; neither obliged but we did hear the whistling song of a Spotted Redshank. In the gathering gloom we made our way to Ketunmaa to a barn in the middle of a field. A couple of roding Eurasian Woodcocks provided some initial excitement before Andy saw a large bird land at the top of a line of pine trees. The large bird quickly became a huge bird in a scope. It was an impressive **Eurasian Eagle-owl** surveying its domain. Unfortunately the attention of an annoying Hooded Crow became too much for it and the bird flew out of sight. With spirits buoyed by our seventh species of owl we returned to our hotel after a long day.

Day 4 Our day began with an Eurasian Elk (Moose) being spotted by Van 1, close to our hotel, as it trotted across a field close to a busy road. First we re-visited Kara on 'Operation Hazel Grouse' but despite the sterling efforts of Tero we failed once again; we did see a Short-eared Owl en route and a Eurasian Hobby at Kari where the distant 'bubbling' of lekking Black Grouse was again heard. Next we revisited the Varti area where Tero orchestrated a big effort to get everyone views of Hazel Grouse, which eventually involved us all going into the damp forest in an effort to surround a grouse but only Tero and Bert had good views of the bird. Consolation prizes came in the form of a fine male Northern Bullfinch and two **Willow Tits** of the paler, greyer, northern form (*borealis*) plus more of those woodland species already seen. Other new birds seen were a singing **Sedge Warbler** and a couple of **European Robins** before we returned to the hotel for a buffet breakfast seeing a **Western Roe Deer** on the way. A Eurasian Wryneck was singing outside the restaurant as we ate our breakfast but remained unseen. After packing and vacating our rooms we left our luggage in hotel reception for us to pick up later.

We spent the rest of the morning in the Siikajoki area in a final effort to find Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker; we found a likely looking nest hole but there was no sign of the woodpecker and no response to playback. In our search we flushed a Wood Sandpiper from its nest, found a singing Wood Warbler and another Northern Bullfinch and added a **Eurasian Treecreeper** to the list. Whilst staking out a likely looking nest hole we used playback to call in a handsome **Crested Tit** that performed very well and was the last new bird for the trip list. This was our last birding stop and it was now time to head back to Oulu stopping at a supermarket for a lunch of sandwiches and cold drinks on the way. We dropped Bert at the airport for an earlier flight to us; back at our hotel we picked up our luggage, said goodbye to Phillip and Sally (flying tomorrow) and returned to the airport. We thanked Tero for all his effort to find us the birds; after checking in we did a final log call in the airport lounge whilst waiting for our flight to Helsinki and our onward flight to Heathrow arriving slightly ahead of our scheduled time.

The group total for the tour was a creditable 130 species seen with a further two species being heard only (Great Bittern and Eurasian Wryneck).

So it was a good tour for our target birds with our five target owls being seen plus a bonus Eurasian Eagle-owl. Despite all our efforts and early starts good views of Hazel Grouse eluded us and Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker refused to co-operate. The daily soundtrack to the tour consisted mostly of bugling Whooper Swans and Common Cranes, the melancholy whistle of Eurasian Curlews and the songs of Willow Warbler, Common Redstart and Pied Flycatcher and the dry whirring of Common Redpolls as they danced their undulating song flight. My thanks to Tero for his excellent skills as a bird guide, his safe driving and his sense of humour; as always it is the group that deserve special thanks for their good humour, birding skills, keen eyesight and above all their patience.

Bill Blake on behalf of **Birdfinders**