

[FINLAND & ARCTIC NORWAY JUNE 2008](#)
[by Simon Cox](#)

During half a century of travel, I have managed to see over 5,000 of the world's bird species but there were a few that breed in northern Europe that had so far eluded me and this had been a source of increasing irritation for a while! Having been on a number of most enjoyable holidays organized by Birdquest in recent years, Pat and I signed up for their 12 day trip to Finland and Arctic Norway in early June this year, to be led by the highly respected Finnish birder Hannu Jannes with whom we had travelled previously.

Four of us from the UK, including Ian Turner from Doddinghurst, arrived in Helsinki on the afternoon of 1st June and met up with Hannu and four trans-Atlantic birders who had already spent a few days in Estonia enjoying Lesser Spotted Eagles, Great Snipe, Broad-billed Sandpipers and more besides. One of the four, a Canadian, features in the top ten world listers according to the Surfbirds website with a world list of over 8,100!

Within minutes of clearing the airport, we were en route to Heinola where a local ringer, Pekka, was waiting on a forest trail to show us our first important bird. Pekka's *c.v.* includes having ringed over 1,000 Black Woodpeckers but on this occasion the target species was **Great Grey Owl** and after a short walk, we were enthralled by the sight of a superb adult with three chicks on a nearby nest platform—my number one target bird seen after less than three hours in the country! From there we drove to Hauho and checked in at a pleasant farmhouse but with daylight extending until after midnight there was still time to walk down to a nearby lake and gaze at three pristine Black-throated Divers and to see both Spotted and Pied Flycatcher, both of which proved to be relatively common.



A pre-breakfast excursion on Day 2 saw us watching an adult Ural Owl close to its nest box. Unfortunately one of its chicks had been evicted from the box and appeared in poor condition. We then tried some random stops in habitat deemed suitable for Three-toed Woodpecker and at the second attempt were successful when an adult flew over and landed in a dead tree in full view. After stocking up with calories, we then headed for a known **Pygmy Owl** territory and an adult was soon located near its nest box in which six chicks were huddled.



Not far from here, a **Tengmalm's Owl** was away hunting but we were able to see its five delightful chicks. Pekka worked for the forestry department and a colleague had recently found a Hazel Grouse nest with the female still incubating so his final contribution to our stay in this area was to show us this bird at a distance that didn't flush it from the nest. Four of my five main target species had been seen in less than 24 hours! This session also produced our only Crested Tits.



A long drive saw us finally arrive at Oulu but the birding was not finished! A late evening trip to a nearby rubbish dump succeeded in producing distant views of two Eagle Owls as well as introducing us to the song of the Redwing which took a while to register! The following morning started at Oulu harbour where a Terek Sandpiper fed on muddy margins, several Temminck's Stints performed their display flight and our first Common Rosefinch was seen and heard. After a short drive, we spent the remainder of the morning at Liminka Bay Reserve where the highlight was a superb male Pallid Harrier backed up by our first White-tailed Eagles, a Hobby, 150+ Common Cranes, Whooper Swans and Greylag Geese, a few Black-tailed Godwits and, after a struggle, our only Ortolan Bunting of the trip. A brief stop on the drive to Kuusamo produced the first of several Pine Grosbeaks and on arrival, a walk down to the large lake enabled us to watch a large flock of Goldeneyes with a few Common and Velvet Scoters, Little Gulls and mating **Arctic Terns**.



The Finns are keen on bird races and the 25th annual Kuusamo Bird Race was imminent with the result that prospective competitors were checking the area in preparation for the big event. However, it was quite incidental that we found ourselves staying at the same hotel as well known Bradwell birders Bob Pease, John Sutherby and Cindy Lawes together with Dave and Jacquie Bridges, now living in Norfolk! Our leader advised early starts to maximize seeing the game birds and for two consecutive mornings we were out at 3 am. We were rewarded with excellent views of Capercaillie, Black Grouse and three more Hazel Grouse but these were just a few of the treasures on offer here. Red-necked Grebes, Smew, Honey Buzzard, Goshawk, Wood Sandpipers, the first of around 100 smart Red-necked Phalaropes, Black Woodpecker at its nest hole, a pair of **Black-bellied Dippers**, singing male **Red-flanked Bluetails**, Siberian and Willow Tits, Siberian Jay (the last of my five target species), Ravens, flocks of Common and three Parrot Crossbills and several Little Buntings all afforded excellent views whilst a couple of Rustic Buntings, common in the area but now mainly silent and secretive, were glimpsed. A session of gull watching at another rubbish tip failed to produce Heuglin's Gull but we were able to study Baltic Gulls and also saw a confusing bird showing some features of an immature Iceland Gull but thought by Hannu to be a hybrid.



Our next destination was the small town of Luosto but a short detour en route into the Oulanka National Park enabled us to add Golden Eagle to the trip list albeit at some distance. The forest around Luosto was relatively quiet though Redstarts were much in evidence as were Siskins and several smart Bullfinches. We were soon heading north once more, stopping at a known breeding site for Broad-billed Sandpiper which unfortunately failed to appear. Our lunch stop was close to an Osprey nest after which we climbed a nearby fell and had amazing views of a **Ptarmigan** as well as some singing Bluethroats. A further short detour produced similarly close views of Dotterel. We then drove on to Ivalo where, after our evening meal, we headed out into extensive forest to a site provided by a local ringer where we had superb views of a pair of Hawk Owls and their three half grown youngsters. On the drive back to the hotel, two Waxwings showed briefly.



Another pre-breakfast excursion to a nearby bog gave us the chance to watch displaying Jack Snipes and soon after leaving Ivalo, we stopped at another boggy area where at least three graceful Long-tailed Skuas and both Hen Harrier and Short-eared Owl were on view. Only our leader saw the sole Rough-legged Buzzard of the trip as it flew across the road in front of the vehicle. Shortly before reaching the border, we had two sessions watching feeders which were attracting many Bramblings as well as smaller numbers of both Common and Arctic Redpolls and three more Pine Grosbeaks, also Greenfinches and a couple of **Siberian Tits**.



Soon after entering Norway, we paused at a site where Gyr Falcons were nesting and both adults circled round over our heads on several occasions. While at this location, we also recorded our first Willow Grouse and Arctic Skuas both of which were to be seen again. By mid-afternoon, we had reached the famous [Varangerfjord](#) and several roadside stops gave us a taste of what was on offer here with large flocks of Long-tailed Ducks, Common Eiders, Goosanders and Red-breasted Mergansers, 20 Tundra Bean Geese and a single Pink-foot, hundreds of Kittiwakes and regular White-tailed Eagles. One of our final stops before reaching Vardo provided an opportunity to study a flock of c70 immature Steller's Eiders, a group of superb displaying Ruffs and a fairly distant adult White-billed Diver. As we sat down for our evening meal, we noticed a Brunnich's Guillemot swimming in the [harbour](#) and an Iceland Gull was also mingling with the resident Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls.



From the harbour, we could see the famous Bird Island of Hornoy and next morning a short boat trip us took us to the landing stage and for the next couple of hours we were watching the numerous Puffins, Razorbills and Guillemots with smaller numbers of Black and Brunnich's Guillemots and Shags that were breeding on the island. In one of the bays, a King

Eider and more Steller's Eiders were identified—neither species obvious in immature/female plumage. Further highlights that day were another White-billed Diver, this time a first summer bird, our only adult drake **Steller's Eider**, an immature Glaucous Gull, a large flock of Purple Sandpipers, a pair of Ring Ouzels and several smart Lapland Buntings. That evening I received a tap on the shoulder to find Rod Martins from Norfolk, whom I have known for over 30 years, asking for information on local sites!



Our final full day in Norway took us to the dramatic landscape around the now deserted fishing village of Hamningberg that overlooks the Barents Sea. Red-throated Divers were in evidence in the bays and our third White-billed Diver allowed prolonged views whilst Gannet and Snow Bunting were additions to the trip list as was Bonxie though I missed that one! A flock of 11 King Eiders were all in female or immature plumage. Back at Vardo we saw several Red-throated Pipits and a flighty Shore Lark and an early sortie on the final morning there added Twite.

A detour on the drive back to Ivalo failed to locate the Lesser White-fronted Goose that had been present for several days but a mixed flock of Temminck's and our only Little Stints provided interest. An evening flight took us back to Helsinki. An afternoon flight back to Heathrow on 12th June allowed us a final birding session and what a session it was. With several red Rosefinches flying around, we finally pinned down a singing River Warbler which was 'scoped' for several minutes and while this was on show a Blyth's Reed Warbler popped out of cover at quite close range. Just as Hannu recommended a different site to try and see Thrush Nightingale, one flew up to a telegraph wire and sang for 2-3 minutes in full view! Tree Sparrow was another addition. Our last port of call failed to produce the Collared Flycatcher known to be present but we were well satisfied with views of Caspian Tern, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and Hawfinch with both Wryneck and Icterine Warbler heard. We simply ran out of time.

I have omitted to mention a variety of additional species of less significance to British birders though should include Willow Warbler, common throughout even in the relatively hostile habitat in Arctic Norway, the chattering Fieldfares and the dainty Grey-headed Wagtails. Finally, I should recall the vast expanses of forest interspersed with numerous lakes, the beautiful pure, clean air, lack of traffic, good food and friendly people. I would

thoroughly recommend both countries for a summer birding holiday but local knowledge is essential to find many of the target species and if you venture north to the Arctic, do take your thermals!