

Finland - Easter on the Arctic Circle

Naturetrek Tour Report

5 - 9 April 2007

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Day 1

Thursday 5 April

The arrival at Oulu airport was at 5.30pm. After accommodation and an early dinner we had an evening excursion. The main target was Pygmy Owl, not far from Oulu town itself.

We stopped by a forested road. Instead walking in to the forest we decided to give a try already on the road. After a few seconds of taping, a Pygmy Owl flew in already! Soon he started to call as well, perching on an Aspen tree by the road and giving excellent views. While admiring this little predator, another male started to call somewhere further.

As we had a quick success, we decided to try to see Eagle Owl, too. For this species, an exciting excursion to Oulu dump was required. We were still on the road preparing ourselves to walk by the dump, when someone spotted an Eagle Owl perched on a chimney on a large building! Unfortunately a closer look proved this “Eagle Owl” was not “tickable” as it was made of plastic. Purpose of this plastic owl remained unclear.

The “real” Eagle Owl refused showing for us, despite rather long wait by the fence of the dump. But still, we were satisfied to our first excursion in Finland.

Day 2

Friday 6 April

As the first thing after breakfast we drove to Oulu downtown. There was a feeding site for Waxwings with plenty of berries been set on someone’s garden. A flock of Waxwings was on top of a treetop above the garden, but as soon as we arrived they flew away and didn’t come back.

Then we drove to Sanginjoki forest area, situated in the Eastern part of Oulu. While driving along, someone spotted a Goshawk perched on an edge of a field. It was difficult to see in between the trees, but finally everybody managed to see the bird, I think, before it flew away. A flock of Snow Buntings was flying above the field, too.

Soon after this we stopped on a parking place by a small river. No, we weren’t looking for Dipper. Instead, there were a few large pine trees by the road, with a couple of old Black Woodpecker holes. One of these holes was occupied by Tengmalm’s Owl. We were comfortably standing on a road again, when Toni scratched the tree and the owl popped to check what’s going on. She remained by the hole for a few minutes and when she was sure it was only a group of curious birders looking at her, she went back down on her eggs and the show was over.

We continued deeper in to the forest and drove along a small forest road. Unfortunately after the early morning, wind has risen dramatically and birding in forest was anything but easy. Thus we managed only to hear a few Common Crossbills and Siskins.

From forest we made a bit longer drive to large fields to the South of Oulu. If birding was not easy in the forest, it was definitely not on the fields either! Drifting snow with VERY strong blow forced us either to stay in the van or hide behind them when trying to see something. A flock of Common Cranes, a few Whooper Swans and some Bean and Canada Geese were the only birds we saw before we decided to go for lunch.

After lunch we continued further south along the coastline. Soon there was a large flock of geese on the field. We estimated about 750 Taiga Bean Geese, 30 Pink-footed Geese and 20 Greylags. Also a large flock of Snow Buntings was on the same field.

From the fields we went back to forest. This time there was a feeder, and our main target was a Crested Tit. But only a few Willow Tits were seen...

Then we made again a bit longer drive to another forest region. There we had a Ural Owl in a box. As a ringer, Toni had to check how many eggs the owl had. Toni scratched the tree and the Ural Owl flew out of the box. Unfortunately she perched out of view. Toni climbed up to the tree and had a look in the box: two eggs. The small number indicates bad food situation in the area. Then we left the site and allowed the owl to come back to continue her incubating.

Then we drove a few hundred meters and tried to Hazel Hen by a whistle. Soon a male whistled back, and also showed up quickly, but everyone didn't get good view of it. A Goshawk, which flew over and called, didn't help this project at all...

On our way back there was a flock of Black Grouse lekking on a field. We counted altogether 11 males and 7 females. Again, a flock of Snow Bunting was flying around, too. In the evening we estimated we saw over 1500 Snow Buntings during the day!

After a nice dinner we decided to give another try for Eagle Owl by the dump. This time we were more successful, as almost instantly we arrived an Eagle Owl was found. Also a Short-eared Owl was flying over, and also shortly mobbed the eagle Owl! Suddenly we realized we were up at five species on the owl list!

Day 3

Saturday 7 April

After loading the vans for journey to Kuusamo, we started our morning again at the Waxwing feeding site. This time 7 birds gave more prolonged views and everybody were happy.

Then we continued to a forest feeder close to the town. Some Coal, Great and Willow Tits were visiting the site, but still no Crested. A Nuthatch was a nice surprise. Also some Blackbirds and Great Spotted Woodpeckers were showing up.

Then we moved on to Oulu river mouth. This site provided Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Goosanders, Goldeneyes and two Shelducks. From the river mouth we continued to a lakeside close to the Oulu dump. The lake was packed by gulls, mainly Herring and Black-headed. But several Great Black-backed were found, too. After some scanning two Scandinavian race Lesser Black-backed were found. This so called Baltic Gull has jet black back and it is very small and long-winged. Finally we managed to find one Siberian Gull, too. This, race *heuglini*, has paler back, and is larger and heavier than Scandinavian *fuscus*. I don't know if the group was any wiser, or just more confused regarding gulls when we left the site, but, however, we had two more special gulls on our lists!

Then we had a long drive towards Kuusamo. We turned on a side road, and stopped to try a Hazel Hen. Instead Hazel Hen, there was a Black Woodpecker drumming in distance. A few seconds of tapping, and the bird flew over nicely.

We had our lunch at Pudasjärvi, c. a hundred kms towards Kuusamo. After that we made a detour through Syöte national park, which is established to protect hills with old growth forests. We stopped for a few times and played Pygmy Owl tape. Many Common Crossbills, Mealy Redpolls and Siskins came in to mob the "Pygmy Owl". But these were more or less the only birds we managed to see on the rest of our way to Kuusamo.

Before going to our hotel in Kuusamo, we visited on a forest feeder North of the town. Not a long wait was required when the first Siberian Tit turned up, followed by another one. They fed for a while and disappeared back to the woods. A nice ending for the day!

Day 4

Sunday 8 April

This morning we had an early pre-breakfast excursion. Almost still in the town itself, just besides people's gardens, there is a good site for Willow Grouse. And it worked again. Just besides road there were two birds, male and female, feeding. Male has just started to moult to summer plumage, with a few rufous feathers on its neck; female was still pure white.

After these nice birds we drove around Kuusamo in search of grouse on roads. Unfortunately it had been snowing on previous day and the roads were covered by snow, so there was no sand for grouse to pick, and thus no grouse on roads...

Instead, there were some 30 Black Grouse lekking on a field, but rather distantly. One more Willow Grouse and a few Snow Buntings were seen before going back to the hotel for well-earned breakfast.

Then we departed towards Northern Kuusamo. The first target was a feeder at the famous Valtavaara car park. In summer the site is famous thanks to Red-flanked Bluetail, but this time it attracts Siberian Jays. But not today. Only a few tits were seen. We continued along the road and stopped for a few times. One Hazel Hen was whistling near by the road, but frustratingly it remained out of sight.

Further north there is a river free of ice. Four or five Dippers were found feeding and flying around the fast streaming river. These Dippers, so called Black-bellied Dippers are different from British "Brown-bellied" ones. Then we entered Oulanka National Park. We stopped several times to try Hazel Hen and Three-toed Woodpecker, but without success.

Then it was time for lunch. We went to a local restaurant called Neidonkenkä (Calypso Orchid in Finnish, the symbol of Oulanka NP). A beautiful buffet was served for us, with reindeer stew and mashed potatoes, a very typical Finnish meal.

With full stomachs we continued birding in Oulanka np. The road we drove along was very quiet. But near by the turning point there is a feeding site for Golden Eagles. We managed to see one quickly flying over the hill. Ravens were more numerous.

On our way back the second van suddenly stayed behind. A phone call to the leading van, a basic Finnish hand-brake turn, some rally-driving back, and there it was: a Hawk Owl perched on a treetop!!! WOW!!! And even that wasn't enough. While admiring this awesome bird, three Siberian Jays came to mob it! It is no wonder that we decided to drive back to café Neidonkenkä to celebrate these highlights of the trip. Someone even had Whisky or Brandy, too!

Two vans full of smiling faces we went to have a look to Russian border. There was a fence keeping us a couple of kilometres away of the border, but we estimated, that with telescopes we might have had some Russian ticks. A group photo by the fence and we were ready to return to the hotel.

Day 5

Monday 9 April

Again, our morning started with a pre-breakfast excursion. This time we headed to the South. After a few stop with playing the Three-toed Woodpecker tape, one finally responded by flying in to a nearby conifer. In the end there were two birds, male and female. Also a pair of Parrot Crossbills turned up, and people had difficulties to decide which ones to look at! What a problem...

After breakfast we loaded our vans again and departed back towards Oulu. First we visited at Kuusamo dump. It didn't offer us anything new, so we continued towards Oulu.

We decided to make a detour along small forested roads. Only some reindeer were seen during the first tens of kilometres. But then we noticed fresh Capercaillie tracks on snow. The group stayed on the road and the leaders walked in to the woods to search the bird. Suddenly a flock of grouse took off and flew over the road. At least one female Caper was accompanied in the flock of female Black Grouse, there might have been even more. Also two Elks were seen while the leaders were walking around.

A few kilometres later a Hazel Hen finally gave up and showed nicely for all of us. After all this we were ready to return to the main road and head to Oulu.

Since we had lunch on the way and the flight was in the early afternoon, we didn't have much time for birding anymore. We had one stop just before the airport, which provided the last new species to the list: Great Grey Shrike.

Then it was time to say farewell to this arctic country and check-in for the homeward flight.

Summa summarum: despite the "general birding" was a bit difficult in times, and we had rather long quiet hours, partly due to the cold spell and sometimes hard wind, this trip was one of the most successful Naturetrek Easter trips ever with 6 species of owls, all grouse, woodpeckers and some other specialities seen!