

Finland - Easter on the Arctic Circle

Naturetrek Tour Report

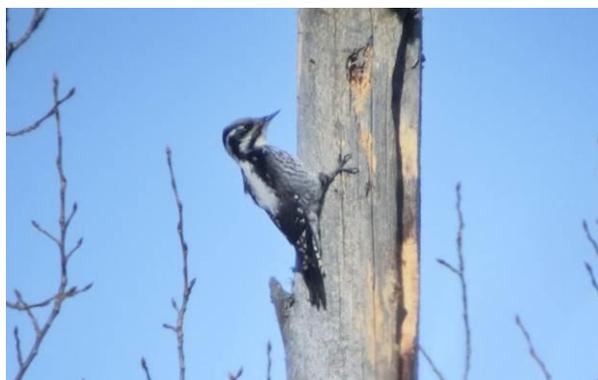
22 - 26 April 2011



Great Grey Owl



Tengmalm's Owl



Three-toed Woodpecker



Siberian Tit



Whooper Swans



Black Grouse lekking

Report courtesy of participant Eric Leese

Images courtesy of Catherine Pasterczyk and Eric Leese



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Day 1

Friday 22nd April

After a flight from Helsinki to Oulu the party was welcomed by Toni our guide. He quickly drove us to our hotel at Vihiluoto which was to be our base for the first two nights. It provided very good accommodation. Although it is near the airport, more importantly it is actually on the Gulf of Bothnia and the airport is nowhere in sight. A Pheasant roamed its grounds.

After a substantial meal Toni took us into the forest on an owl quest. He directed us to a roadside tree with a hole and did his imitation of a pine marten scratching at the trunk. On cue the Tengmalm's Owl ('Boreal Owl' in Finnish) appeared to investigate just what was happening. With its characteristic astonished look it peered out from the nest hole for a long time which afforded us plenty of time to set our cameras for a decent picture. Following this, Toni took us to an area where there was a pair of Pygmy Owls ('Sparrow Owls' in Finnish). They responded to the playing of their call and in the gathering darkness flew around us from tree to tree. We all felt that this trip was delivering what it promised. A great start to our adventure!

Day 2

Saturday 23rd April

After breakfast we set off to explore the area around Oulu. Along the way we stopped to see Common Cranes. Taiga Bean, Greylag and Pink-footed Geese were in the fields. Toni proceeded to show us his detailed knowledge of forest tracks and nesting sites. We visited one area where Hawk Owls had been reported, and a pair provided distant views.

We went to another site where he knew there were Three-toed Woodpeckers. At first a Great Spotted Woodpecker showed but then a Three-toed was seen feeding on another tree. Briefly the two birds were on the same tree. In the bright sunshine these were excellent views. A few moments later a Camberwell Beauty butterfly ('Mourning Cloak' in Finnish) was seen flitting through. The sun had coaxed out hibernating butterflies. A Comma was also seen.

At another site, somewhere in the forest (Toni had an internalised Sat Nav system!), Toni left us to check on a nesting site. He returned to tell us to proceed with caution as there was a Great Grey Owl ('Lapland Owl' in Finnish) already sitting on eggs. Again there were superb views through the trees - it was 'awesome' and what most of us had hoped to see. Could Toni fail? He seemed in complete control.

Later he stopped to check on another nest box and summoned us to view the box from a distance. All seemed very quiet but our intrepid guide scaled the tree and 'manoeuvred' the box. This seemed slightly unorthodox to those accustomed to British birding etiquette. However it prompted a Ural Owl to fly out and it allowed Toni to report that there were three eggs. He would inform his colleagues who would later ring the chicks.

After lunch we went to look at Liminganlahti Bay. At the visitor centre the warmth had enticed Small Tortoiseshell butterflies to bask in the sunlight. Out in the reeds there are birdwatching towers and duckboard trails. In this more exposed setting the cold winds were coming in off the still partly frozen sea. There were many Whooper Swans ('Singing Swans' in Finnish - the Whooper Swan is the national bird of Finland). There were waders and ducks - Redshank, Black-tailed Godwit, Goldeneye, Shoveler, Teal and Pintail. On our return our first male Reed Bunting was spotted.

Day 3

Sunday 24th April

After breakfast we drove the very short distance from the hotel to the Gulf. We surveyed the still largely frozen water here, hearing a Green Sandpiper and Curlews. We then set off northeast for Kuusamo. We were again diverting from the road along forest tracks to find target birds. And now the unflappable Toni began his quest for Hazel Grouse. Time and again he played the call. Once briefly a few of us sensed some disturbance just off the road where a male bird was glimpsed - but only a few managed to see this elusive creature. Toni wanted everyone to see the bird. Another stop produced a distant Raven, more distant Goshawk and a closer Crossbill. There were also three Black Grouse amongst the trees.

The main highlight was the tip outside Kuusamo itself. Here there were many Black-headed Gulls, some Herring Gulls but also many Baltic Gulls and one Heuglin's/Siberian Gull. On scanning the tree line, a Sparrowhawk and also a White-tailed Eagle were spotted.

We arrived at a very substantial hotel in Kuusamo. We were all eager to make the most of our time birding and shortly after settling in Toni took us to a place where we might see Siberian Tit. He felt this would be a more difficult bird as by April the tits had largely established breeding territories. The first foray into the forests produced a Capercaillie, Great Tits but no Siberian. With quiet confidence Toni led us to another location. He left the sound machine playing and a Siberian Tit obliged by perching above the recorder and sitting placidly in the late sunshine!

A fine Easter meal of reindeer, mashed potatoes and lingonberries was enjoyed that evening. We tried not to think about those reindeer we had admired so often in the forest...

Day 4

Monday 25th April

After a 6 am start Toni drove us 'off piste' again and we sighted a Black Grouse and then a female Capercaillie. He then brought us to a lek where there were over twenty Black Grouse males. The experience was multi-sensory. There was the bubbling sound that filled the air. There were the displaying white tail feathers which contrasted with the red eyebrows and the black body feathers and in the bright morning sun the metallic purplish gloss was evident also. There was a morning chill in the air. More grouse and capercaillie were seen and there were also more, but smaller leks.

The day was dominated by the quest for the Hazel Grouse and Toni drove us north to the Oulanka National Park. Here he called in Siberian Jays; one provided us with close views. A stop by a lake provided good views of a pair of Black-bellied Dippers.

After lunch in the ski resort of Ruka we headed east towards the Russian border. The aim was to see a Black Woodpecker. A few of us had seen one only briefly from the minibus the previous day. Earlier that morning one tree had contained a nest hole used in previous years but unfortunately it was empty now. At the next nest hole we were all expecting a Black Woodpecker to pop out. We were all surprised therefore when a cross-looking Tengmalm's Owl appeared briefly. We walked down the road and tried the distinctive Black Woodpecker call; and a male flew over us twice to see what was happening. There were excellent flight views! We noted the Willow Tits around us. As we headed back we stopped by a lake to watch the Whoopers and ducks. A little later Toni tried the call of the Hazel Grouse again and finally one flew from one side of the road and back again so everyone had a sighting. We were able to glimpse the black throat and speckled underparts.

Back in Kuusamo we looked at the lake behind the hotel. Much of the lake was still frozen but there were Shovelers and Whoopers. We were astonished by the number, size and nests of the Muskrats.

Day 5

Tuesday 26th April

We set off on our return to Oulu. Another visit to the tip was our first call. Here we could test our gull ID skills. This time there were more Siberian Gulls. Back in Oulu we had our first short shower of rain. After an early lunch Toni made maximum use of the time. The river held over twenty Caspian Terns. The site just down from our first hotel now had more water visible as the ice had retreated; there were Snipe, Gadwall, Wigeon, Ringed Plover and distant White-tailed Eagle. The fields outside the town held Common Cranes, Redshank, Kestrel and Skylark. Here there were views of Marsh Harrier. A Common Buzzard and a Rough-legged Buzzard soared over us to provide clear contrasts for identification. The forests held Waxwings, Crossbill, Redpoll and Crested Tit. The northern shore of the bay revealed a Woodcock and gave our best sighting of a Yellowhammer. We caught our afternoon plane back to Helsinki. Toni had alerted us that Eagle Owls were breeding in the centre of the city. One member of the party was able to use this knowledge on her stopover in Helsinki overnight.

It had been a stimulating and enjoyable adventure. We had seen Reindeer, Arctic Hare, Stoat, and Red Squirrel as well as butterflies and birds. We all were most appreciative of Toni's skill and calmness. We had enjoyed one other's company, stories and humour. We had also enjoyed excellent weather. Well done Naturetrek!

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Personal Highlights

Godfrey

- *The effect of low intensity agriculture for wildlife
- *The nests of the Muskrats

Richard

- *Our surprise at seeing an owl in a woodpecker nest
- *A Siberian Tit responding to the call of a Siberian Jay

Ann

- *The Tengmalm's Owl appearing out of what we thought was the hole of a Black Woodpecker
- *The Great Grey Owl

Ken

- *The Great Grey Owl
- *The sea ice

Simon

- *The markings on a Hazel Grouse
- *The echoing sound of the Black Grouse lek

Eric

- *The Camberwell Beauty
- *The Siberian Tit

Catherine

- *The Black Grouse lek
- *The quietness of the forests



Siberian Jay courtesy of Catherine Pasterczyk



Baltic Gulls by Eric Leese