

# Finland - Easter on the Arctic Circle

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 18 April 2017

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Bohemian Waxwing by Martin Rutz



Siberian Jay by Martin Rutz



Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl by Martin Rutz



Willow Tit by Martin Rutz

Report compiled by Alice Tribe  
Images courtesy of Martin Rutz & Alice Tribe



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Tour participants: Ari Latja & Alice Tribe (leaders) with fourteen Naturetrek clients

## Day 1

Friday 14th April

### London to Oulu

After a very early morning flight from Heathrow to Helsinki, we landed with a few hours to spend in the airport. It was here that most of the group met up, had lunch and used the facilities, with all of us being rather impressed by the choice of music in the lavatories: bird song! A few members of the group commented on the fact that there was no snow outside, which was the expected sight. It was soon time for us to board our next flight to Oulu, a journey of only one hour, but during the flight the snow levels quickly built up on the ground below us.

We landed around 5pm and met a few more of our group at baggage reclaim. Once everyone had collected their luggage, we exited into the Arrivals Hall where our local guide Ari was waiting to greet us. Ari and Alice then collected our vehicles and once everyone was on board, we headed to Oulu's Finlandia Airport Hotel, our base for the next two nights, which was literally 'just down the road' from Oulu Airport. Despite being close to an airport, the area was surprisingly quiet, with many forests and lakes in the area and little traffic on the roads.

We dropped our luggage in our rooms and quickly got into our outdoor clothing, as Ari told us about a Northern Hawk Owl that was just round the corner from the hotel. We headed out in our minibuses and drove to the site where, sure enough, a Northern Hawk Owl was sat in a tree by the road. It didn't seem worried about our presence at all, allowing everyone to get great views and photographs. A flock of Yellowhammers was also in the trees.

By this point it was time for dinner, so we headed back to our hotel, taking time to look at the Common Cranes, Greylag Geese and Whooper Swans in the fields as we drove by. Back at the hotel we all congregated in the dining area where we were served a delicious three-course meal consisting of soup, beef with reindeer sauce and chocolate cake. After dinner, we headed out again in pursuit of a Great Grey Owl that had been residing in the area, but unfortunately we were unable to find it. Several of the group saw a Great Grey Shrike, but after an hour or so of searching, we decided it was time to call it a day. After all, it had been a rather long day and bed was certainly calling!

## Day 2

Saturday 15th April

### Oulu

We woke to cloudy skies, but the scenery outside our windows was still glorious, with a thick layer of pristine-looking snow covering the ground. We tucked into the hotel's buffet breakfast, which was particularly good, with a wide range of food available. You could even cook your own pancakes – a fine way to set yourself up for the day ahead.

After breakfast we headed out to a nearby forest to search for woodpeckers. Snow started to fall quite heavily which made conditions quite difficult, but we still managed to pick up Snow Bunting by sound, and we heard and saw Common Crane. Two holes were spotted in two of the trees, which looked interesting so Ari scratched at the base of both trees. Nothing appeared out of the first hole, but a Stock Dove flew from the second!

Moving on to our next spot, we spent some time watching and photographing the Common Cranes and Whooper Swans in the roadside fields. The next site was also in a forest, and here we saw Eurasian Treecreeper, Bullfinch, and Common Crossbill.

We carried on again until we came to an area where Ari knew there were nest boxes present. He guided us to a particular one where we all gathered at a distance to see what was inside: it was a female Tengmalm's Owl sitting on eggs! We all got good views of her. Ari went up to the tree and scratched the base of it, at which point the owl looked out of the hole to investigate what was going on. Tengmalm's Owls have a wonderfully shocked-looking expression all the time. We soon left her in peace as it was time for lunch.

Ari took us to the Liminka Bay Visitor Centre, which is an excellent place situated near to wetlands and forests. The centre has been set up with birds and birdwatchers in mind, and there are towers and hides on site, with many exhibitions to see inside the centre. On site is also a very good restaurant, which is where we had our lunch; most people seemed to opt for the reindeer soup. The dining area had big windows, so we could sit and eat whilst looking out at the Whooper Swans, Greylag Geese and Common Cranes.

After lunch we went to an area that had gardens and bird feeders, which were being frequented mainly by Blue and Great Tits, Bullfinch, Siskin and Chaffinch. Lesser and Arctic Redpolls were also seen in the vicinity. We saw a nest box, and once again Ari scratched the base of the tree, at which point a Red Squirrel poked its head out! We went for a wander around, admiring the scenery as we went. There was a huge frozen lake in the area, which Ari said you could drive on... a fact we decided to take his word for!

A member of our group expressed an interest in visiting a nearby landfill site for gulls, which we did but, due to it being the weekend, it was shut. We hung around outside to see what was about. Baltic and Black-headed Gulls were seen, and a Raven flew overhead as well.

We headed back to our hotel for a quick freshen up and dinner, but not before stopping en route to watch a few Bean Geese and Roe Deer. Dinner consisted of soup, white fish risotto and apple cake. The food at our hotel was very good indeed, and the staff were incredibly friendly.

Feeling satisfied from dinner, Ari mentioned about a site nearby that was quite reliable for Pygmy Owl. We arrived at the site around 8pm. Light levels were still good as sunset wasn't until 9pm. As we started walking we thought we heard a distant Ural Owl, but this was never confirmed. Whatever it was only called once and no bird was seen! We stopped in the area for the owls and after waiting a little while, a Pygmy Owl called and flew into view! Everyone enjoyed wonderful views of this little bird as it flew around us, flying from tree to tree. After a fair while watching the Pygmy Owl, we called it a day and headed back to our hotel for bed.

## Day 3

Sunday 16th April

### Oulu to Kuusamo

This morning we woke to glorious blue cloudless skies, which made the snow glisten in the sunshine. We started the day with breakfast, so more pancakes were enjoyed. Everyone was packed and ready to drive to our next hotel in Kuusamo, a journey of around three hours. Naturally, we broke this journey up by birding en route, with our first spot being at a private house. In the garden were several bird feeders containing seeds and berries,

which in turn attracted in Siskin, Blue and Great Tits, Mealy Redpoll and the exceedingly beautiful Waxwing. Two Ravens flew overhead, making their distinctive 'cronking' call as they went. Yellowhammers were also seen in good numbers.

As we continued towards Kuusamo, we stopped at a bridge over a river to have a scan and Goosander, Whooper Swan and several Goldeneyes were spotted. We carried on and stopped again in a small wooded area where the snow levels were very high (the snowy banks came up to Alice's hips!). Here we saw several Two-barred Crossbills and Ari told us that seeing this species is quite tricky in this part of Finland.

We then stopped at a small petrol service station for lunch. We were pleasantly surprised by the food on offer; it was a buffet style arrangement and a variety of tasty dishes were available, as well as tea/coffee and cakes. When the weather is cold outside, having a substantial meal sure is welcome!

We continued on for a little longer until we finally reached the Original Sokos Hotel in Kuusamo, which was our base for the following two nights. Everyone checked in to their rooms and had some time to settle in before we headed out again at 5pm, to an area known for Siberian Jay. We did manage to see one Siberian Jay briefly at the top of a tree, but unfortunately the bird disappeared fairly quickly. We had good views of two Willow Tits, and Great Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker were also seen. We went back to our hotel for dinner after our early evening excursion and were treated to a dinner consisting of reindeer before heading off to bed.

## Day 4

Monday 17th April

### Kuusamo

We began the day earlier today at 5am, in an attempt to find lekking Black Grouse nearby. It was a fantastically sunny morning with clear blue skies and no wind, and pristine powdery white snow on the ground and trees. The trees were also frosty and they glistened in the sunshine as we drove along. It was cold though, with the vehicle thermometer telling us it was -10°C outside! The first birds of the day were two Siberian Jays, and they provided us with excellent views. They were very active and vocal as well, so fun to watch. We stopped for a while on a bridge over a river where steam fog was coming off the water into the cooler air above. It was incredibly atmospheric and beautiful. A Dipper was seen doing its characteristic bobbling behaviour on rocks sticking out of the river, and we could also hear it singing. Goldeneyes were swimming on the water and several Great Tits were flying amongst the trees.

By this time it was fairly late in the morning, so we started to return to our hotel to warm up and have breakfast. We got back in our minibuses and started to head back, when we saw a bird fly out of a tree, followed by another. They looked suspiciously like game birds and as we jumped out and got our binoculars on them, we could clearly see that they were Black Grouse! After hours of searching, it was fantastic to finally find a few of these birds. Everyone enjoyed good views of the two birds sat on trees, until eventually they flew off and we returned to the hotel.

Ari had a report of a Capercaillie that was in the area, so after breakfast we headed towards the site which was right in amongst a ski resort. We proceeded to walk into the forest, where the ground was covered in a thick layer of snow and the sun was shining through the trees. We reached an area and stopped whilst Ari went off

wearing his snow shoes in an attempt to drive the Capercaillie towards us. Sometime later Ari reappeared, looking rather tired, but without any luck of seeing the Capercaillie. Never mind – it was certainly worth a shot!

Next we returned to the spot where we had seen the Siberian Jay yesterday, to try our luck again. This time we were very lucky as several Siberian Jays were in the trees as we parked. Ari threw a few sausages from the breakfast buffet onto the ground. The Siberian Jays loved the sausages! They came very close to where we were, allowing fantastic views and photography opportunities. On the same tree where the Jays were mainly seen, a Three-toed Woodpecker suddenly landed! Superb – two target species seen at the same time. The Three-toed Woodpecker then flew to the top of a nearby old pine tree and started drumming. Another Three-toed Woodpecker was spotted too, and we realised that we had a male and a female, so a likely pair. We enjoyed watching the Siberian Jays and Three-toed Woodpeckers, as well as the Willow Tits and Great Spotted Woodpecker that were also around.

We went to an area in the forest to have our packed lunches, where there were also a few bird feeders nearby. Ari said that this was a good area for Siberian Tit and, sure enough, at least one individual turned up to take advantage of the feeders; another lifer for many of the group. Willow and Great Tits were also coming in for the free meal that was on offer. As we were enjoying the Siberian Tit, a stunning adult White-tailed Eagle flew overhead, stealing the show!

After lunch, we went to a river where we saw more Whooper Swans and Goldeneyes, but with a few additional surprises added in. One surprise was a nice flock of Snow Buntings, another was a Green-winged Teal (a bird usually seen in North America!) and the other was a lady who was swimming in the lake; the water must have been freezing! Ari also pointed out some Otter tracks in the snow by the water's edge. We then left this site to head north towards the Arctic Circle. Unfortunately the visitor centre was shut, but we still enjoyed having our photographs taken by the sign saying we were officially at the Arctic Circle. Afterwards, we drove back to our hotel where we freshened up and had dinner before turning in for the night.

## Day 5

Tuesday 18th April

### Kuusamo to London

The morning started bright and early again as we went to try and find both Willow and Hazel Grouse. Today the car was reading -18°C outside! We tried at two sites for both species, but neither were successful so we moved to another site nearby. It wasn't long before a male Willow Grouse turned up! He appeared for a little bit before flying away again. Satisfied with our sighting, we went back to the hotel for breakfast.

With everyone packed and ready, we left for Oulu. As we were driving, a Northern Hawk Owl was spotted, perched on top of a tree right by the road. Both vehicles managed to stop in time to allow everyone to get out and see the bird. The light was just perfect for both viewing and taking photographs. The owl eventually flew away and we continued on our journey.

Back in Oulu, we still had a couple of hours to spare before our flight so we went to look for geese in nearby fields. It proved to be a very successful idea, as we saw numerous Taiga Bean Geese, a White-fronted Goose, Pink-footed Geese, Skylarks, Common Cranes, Whooper Swans, Curlews, a hovering Common Kestrel and then three Rough-legged Buzzards, also hovering. It was a super end to our trip to Finland, but unfortunately our time

had come to an end and we had to say goodbye to this wintery wonderland before going to Oulu Airport for our flights back to the UK. Before departing, we thanked Ari for showing us around his beautiful country!

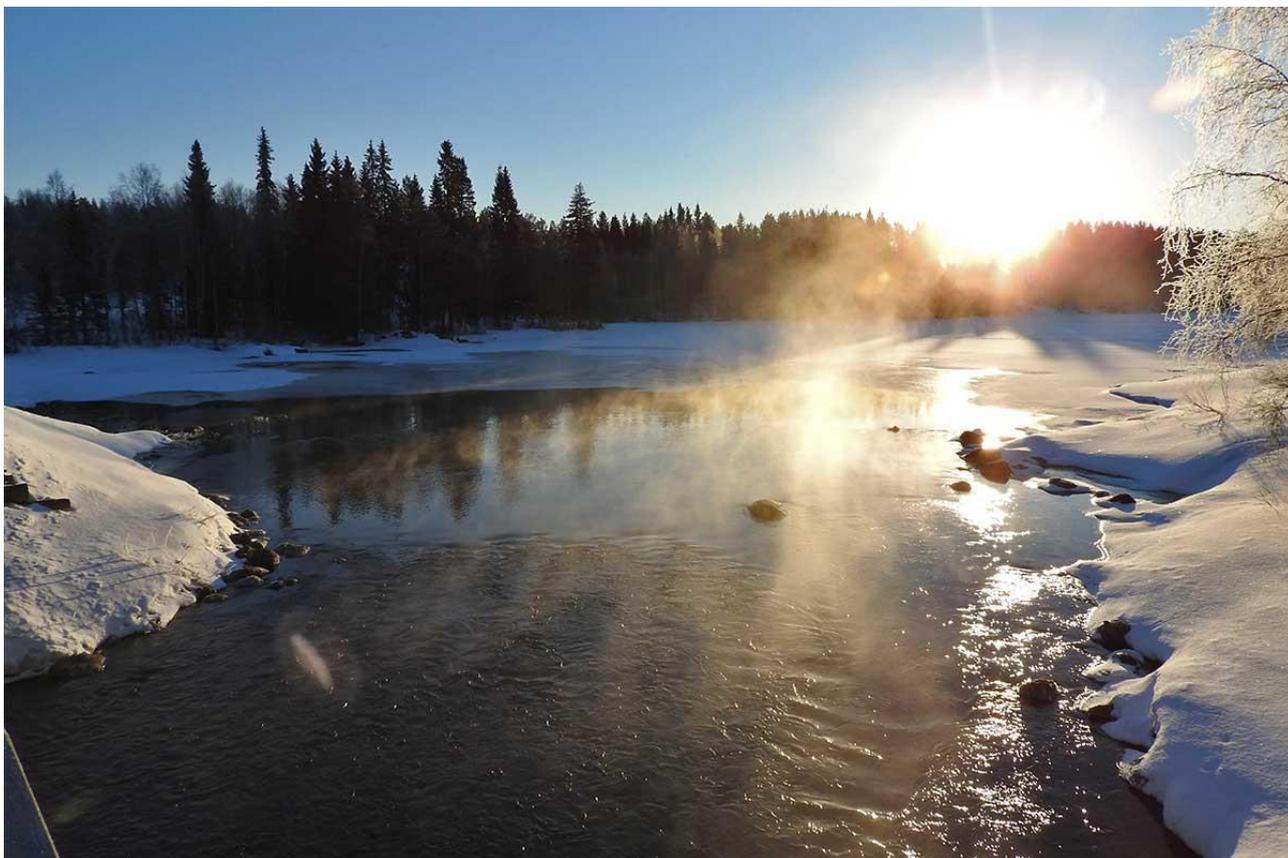
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Mist over stream by Alice Tribe

## Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	April				
			14	15	16	17	18
1	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	✓	✓			
2	Pink-footed Goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>					✓
3	Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>		✓			✓
4	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>					✓
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6	Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>				✓	
7	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			✓	✓	
8	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			✓		
9	Black Grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>				✓	
10	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>Lagopus lagopus</i>					✓
11	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓		✓	
12	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>					✓
13	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	✓			✓
14	Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>					✓
15	Mew Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>			✓		
16	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>			✓		
17	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>			✓		
18	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>		✓			
19	Northern Hawk-Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	✓				✓
20	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>		✓			
21	Boreal (Tengmalm's)Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>		✓			
22	Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>				✓	
23	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓	✓	
24	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>					✓
25	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓				
26	Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>			✓	✓	
27	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>			✓		
28	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓				
29	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓	✓		
30	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>			✓		
31	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>			✓	✓	
32	Grey-headed Chickadee	<i>Poecile cinctus</i>				✓	
33	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓		
34	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>					✓
36	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓			
37	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>				✓	
38	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓			
39	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓			
40	Lesser Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea cabaret</i>		✓			
	Mealy Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea flammea</i>			✓		
41	Arctic Redpoll	<i>Acanthis hornemanni</i>		✓			
42	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓			
43	Two-barred Crossbill	<i>Loxia leucoptera</i>			✓		
44	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓		
45	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓		✓		
46	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>		✓		✓	

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Mammals

1	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		✓			
2	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>		✓			



Northern Hawk Owl by Martin Rutz



Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker by Martin Rutz