

# Norway & Finland - An Arctic Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 - 22 May 2011

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Great Grey Owl nest



Pygmy Owl - Sanginjoki



Tengmalm's Owl in an Aspen tree



Pine Grosbeak

Report and images courtesy of Prof Cedric Prys-Roberts

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Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour Leader	Ari Latja (Local Guide)
Tour participants	Barry Hall Patricia Hall Anthony Messinger Jeffery Curtis Bruce McLaren Christine Shawyer Cedric Prys-Roberts

## Day 1

Thursday 12th May

### London – Oulu

After such an early and warm spring in Britain, it was a pleasant surprise to find similar conditions in Helsinki, and on our onward flight to Oulu. We were met by Ari and quickly transferred to our comfortable hotel overlooking the Baltic. After dinner, and a gulp at the price of beer (€ 6.50), we headed down the creek toward the platform overlooking the sea. We passed a Reed Bunting in full song and found on the foreshore, mostly at telescopic distance: Teal, Red-breasted Merganser, Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Shoveler, Greenshank, Little and Herring Gulls, some Common Terns, and a Curlew flew overhead. A flock of Ruff, with males in breeding plumage flew past on their way north.

## Day 2

Friday 13th May

Even before breakfast some of us had found a singing male Redstart at the front of the hotel, together with a fine male Great Tit and a Yellowhammer.

After breakfast we set off for the forest areas near Raahe, to the SW of Oulu, and in bright warm sunlight we found Tree Pipit, a Wryneck, a distant flying Sparrowhawk, and a singing Whinchat on the top of a small spruce. Nearby we had some stunning views of a male Hawk Owl. Ari thought it was carrying prey to the nest in a nearby tree stump, but by careful stalking Cedric was able to get good video evidence that it wasn't carrying food. Ari could not entice the female to show. Walking along the tracks we had numerous views of Green Hairstreak butterflies. We then had excellent views of a singing Wryneck.

In a different area of forest Ari found a female Great Grey Owl on her nest giving good close views as she blinked at us; and soon he had found the male hunched up against the trunk of a Spruce tree, watching us warily. In the same forest area Ari guided us to a nest-box in which we could just see the tip of the tail of the female Ural Owl. On the outskirts of Raahe we scanned two lakes on either side of the highway and had good views of a pair of displaying Great Crested Grebes, Teal, Pochard, and Shoveler. We also had good views of Black-headed Gulls allowing us to distinguish the shape of the black head, and the length of the red beak, by comparison with the Little Gulls. A group of nine Cranes were flying in a formation reminiscent of the Red Arrows, albeit at a more leisurely pace.

At the nearby port of Raahe we found Whooper Swans, Wigeon, and had good close-up views of male and female Red-breasted Mergansers inside the breakwater, followed by a male Goosander.

After lunch on the outskirts of Raahe we went on to explore another forest area where we had brief views of Woodlark, Whinchat, Siskins and a brilliant Yellowhammer, but then had a very good view of a female Three-toed Woodpecker drumming and exploring a dead spruce stump.

We went on to Lumijoki (joki means river) on the Liminka Peninsula, and spent some time looking through telescopes. Despite the brilliant sunshine there was a cold northerly wind. There was some discussion of a funny-looking female Smew, with a partial brown stripe around the eye, rather than a full crown. A large flock of Ruff wheeled in the air, almost certainly spooked by a Peregrine. Finally we had good telescopic views of a Lesser White Fronted Goose. The old ferry boat (between Lumijoki and Hailuoto Island) had been preserved and displayed at the dockside. The day was somewhat marred by one of our group needing medical attention on returning to the hotel, and Ari drove our unfortunate friend to the Oulu University Hospital where he was kept in for diagnostic tests.

## Day 3

Saturday 14th May

We made an early pre-breakfast visit to the Sanginjoki area to look for Pygmy Owl. Ari found the woodland feeders where two male Bullfinches were feeding, but despite repeated playback there was no response from an owl, although the sound stirred up the Siskins, Pied flycatchers and Bullfinches. At a different location, the playback again failed to attract an owl but brought in Crested Tits and a group of three Crossbills that entertained us from the tree tops. An attempt to call Black Woodpecker also failed.

After breakfast we drove through Oulu city, and crossed the bridge to the island of Hietasaari (Middle Island). At a small lagoon looking out towards Hailuoto Island we found Ringed Plover and what was probably the first Terek Sandpiper of the season; and a fine view of a Curlew in a display flight. Having parked the van we walked through a birch forest not yet in leaf to an observation tower, but there was nothing exceptional to see. So we followed the distant sound of a drumming Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, and were rewarded with good views of the bird attempting to fell a wooden electricity pylon. As we walked back towards Oulu we had good views of a Tree-creeper.

After photographic views of Oulu city across the water, we were driven south, around Oulu, to the Virkkula Reserve on the Liminka coast. We walked out along the boardwalk to an observation hide with a superb view over marshland and lake. Almost immediately we had good close-up views of a Marsh Harrier that wheeled in front of us, and over the lagoon flocks of ruffs gathered and wheeled like shoals of fish. Initially the stimulus was a marauding peregrine, but soon we had sight of two magnificent White-tailed Eagles circling and then eventually settling on a couple of rocks in the water, where they were harassed by a Hooded Crow. On our way back to the reserve centre for lunch we had good views of Mealy Redpolls in the stunted trees by the boardwalk.

After a fine lunch we drove to another area near Virkkula, and as we drove down a track a Short-eared Owl flew out in front of us, settling in a hedge where we had a very good, albeit brief, view. In an adjacent field a Curlew fed no more than 30 m away from us, and close by we saw two male Ruff in full breeding plumage with a female.

From another viewing platform we saw two White-tailed Eagles landing on a rock in the lagoon, and then taking flight together with a flock of Ruff. We also had good telescopic views of Greylag Geese before moving to an inland forest area where we found another female Ural owl sitting on an old Goshawk nest in a Spruce tree - again only her tail was visible. Nearby two Black Woodpeckers responded to playback by flying repeatedly across the track but not settling on any tree within sight. Back at the hotel Cedric got a superb video of a Reed Bunting in full song in the late afternoon sun.

## Day 4

Sunday 15th May

Before breakfast, at the hotel, we had a singing Yellowhammer, a singing Redstart, a couple of Fieldfares and a solitary Waxwing hopping around the road, probably with an injured wing.

After breakfast we loaded the van for our first journey north but, en route we made a detour to Sanginjoki to search again for Pygmy Owl. This time Ari was successful in attracting a fine male who perched in full view for us in three different trees. It was accompanied by, and harassed by, a variety of small birds. In a forest area near Kiiminki, Ari identified an Aspen with a suspicious hole half-way up the trunk. Performing his usual trick of scratching the base of the tree with a twig, he persuaded a beautiful Tengmalm's Owl to look out at us. Nearby, as an encore, he found a dark phase Adder in the grass.

We continued on our way north-east, and after lunch made another detour, this time to the Syöte National Park. Ari drove us to the top of the Iso-Syöte ski-resort, from where we had impressive views across the forests, to the sound of a drumming woodpecker. Within the park we walked a forest trail to Vattukuru, and having climbed to the top of the hill, an obliging Crossbill made an appearance. We rested at a shelter area, hoping to see Hazel Hen, but to no avail. On the snow-covered boardwalk climbing back out of the valley we found a bat, hypothermic or injured, clinging to the boardwalk. On our way north we had brief views from within the van of male and female Capercaillie

On the outskirts of Kuusamo we visited a small lake adjacent to the town landfill and rubbish dump. We had telescopic views of Teal and Shoveler in addition to the numerous Common and Little Gulls, and a 'cronking' Raven. We drove on around the south side of Kuusamo to a lake where Ruffs were lekking in the battered reeds. As the observation platform was occupied by another group we had to make do with a lake-side view.

## Day 5

Monday 16th May

The weather was still fine when we set off for a hill a few kilometres from Kuusamo – we arrived at Konttainen and set off climbing up the trail. Ari, with his hands cupped around his ears, identified our quarry and established the playback. We left the trail, climbing up vertical grass and moss to find a singing first year male Red-flanked Bluetail, the first to have arrived this year. Everyone had a good view of it, but when it flew off Cedric climbed higher and acquired an even better video of the singing bird.

Afterwards we all climbed to the summit of the hill to be rewarded with magnificent panoramic views from Ruka ski-hill across the horizon to the north. We returned to Kuusamo to meet the bus carrying our companion who had been released from Oulu Hospital and was about to rejoin the group.

After lunch we drove to a variety of forest habitats, with Hazel Hen as our primary target, though we never found one. We were rewarded in one stretch of road with superb views of two Siberian Jays that responded to feeding and, in their incomparable style, came very close to us. Later, one was seen preening in a nearby tree. From a bridge that spanned the river between two lakes we scanned for birds, and saw Whooper Swans and Goldeneye. We had transient views of Arctic Hare, Black Grouse, Capercaillie and a Green Sandpiper. The weather, which had been glorious until now, was becoming ominously worse.

## Day 6

Tuesday 17th May

We set out on the long journey north in a fine drizzle, that relented as we made a detour to Konttainen, not to see the Bluetail, but to search for Hazel Hen and Rustic Bunting. We found the latter, a brief but clear telescopic view. We crossed the Polar Circle line, and proceeded to Kemijärvi. Most of the group walked towards a jetty on the river. Cedric walked the other way and recorded a bedraggled but joyful Yellowhammer singing half its song (“... and no cheese”), as if it had forgotten the first half.

We stopped for lunch at a small ravintola (restaurant) run by a charming young couple who served us a delicious reindeer-meat soup (lapinukonkeitto), and home-made blueberry tart - an uplifting episode in an otherwise drizzly day. With the rain turning to sleet, and snow we made a detour to a ski-resort to search for dotterel, Ptarmigan and Willow Grouse, but found nothing but low cloud!

## Day 7

Wednesday 18th May

Fresh snow (3 cm) had fallen overnight, giving the river by the hotel at Ivalo a very wintry appearance. We drove north, and made a detour on a snow-covered side-road, and then walked into a forest area beautiful for the fresh snow and silence. Ari listened for, and called, a Siberian Tit which gave us good close views as it climbed a Spruce tree. We continued down to a very photogenic small lake. A lone Wood Sandpiper walked along the far bank, and a Brambling stopped briefly to inspect us. Further along the road another Wood Sandpiper looked rather forlorn as it stood in icy water, surrounded by snow, and a sharp wind ruffled its feathers. One wonders whether such a bird thinks to itself “why did I leave Ethiopia”?

We rejoined the E 75 and continued north, stopping for coffee at a small roadside café near Kaamanen with bird feeders behind. These attracted a lovely Red Squirrel, numerous Tits and Bramblings, and a pair (male and female) of Pine Grosbeaks. At a bleak and windswept lay-by we found Reed and Lapland Buntings scratching around the edge of a small icy pond. Shortly before we came to Utsjoki a Rough-legged Buzzard flew across the road in front of us and we watched it wheel around a small lake to a tree on the far bank, and then fly to another tree behind us. We had lunch at the hotel overlooking the river, watching a pair of Goldeneye float down river past us, then fly back up river to repeat the process.

We crossed the suspension bridge over the Tenojoki (Tana) River into Norway in search of Lemmings that had been seen by Ari's friends. We did not find any, but we spotted a male Bluethroat flitting around the roadside vegetation. We crossed back into Finland to follow the road on the south side of the ice-choked Tenojoki, stopping briefly to watch a flock of Taiga Bean Geese on the Norwegian side. Crossing back into Norway we crossed the hills and descended to Varangerford, spotting an Elk at the roadside.

We pressed on to Nesseby and turned off to the small church on a peninsula overlooking the bay. Those with telescopes revelled in distant sightings of Long-tailed Ducks, Black Guillemots and Black-throated Divers. The cold wind did not encourage us to stay there, so we drove on to Vadsø and were rewarded with close views, in the harbour, of a large flock of Common Eider, and a smaller but easily visible flock of Steller's Eider. Further on we stopped briefly at Ekkerøy, but the best part of the day was a White-tailed Eagle at the side of the road, that gave us a superb view of its features as it flew away with slow strong wingbeats. Finally we arrived at Vardø, entering the town underground by tunnel.

## Day 8

Thursday 19th May

On a bitterly cold morning, our first viewing site was adjacent to the town cemetery. A Lapland Bunting was singing on a nearby mound and a Golden Plover patrolled uneasily. The telescopists had more distant quarries in view: a Pomarine Skua, Arctic Skuas, Cormorants, Shags, Goldeneyes and a variety of Gulls. We drove on, through the tunnel that connects Vardø to the mainland and turned north on the road towards Hamninberg. Our first stop gave us close views of Purple Sandpipers on the foreshore, and nearby a group of six Dunlins in full breeding plumage. Amongst them Cedric was able to identify, post hoc, a Broad-billed Sandpiper based on a video image. The road to Hamninberg was obstructed by a "road closed" sign, but Ari felt that we could safely drive as far as the road was not covered in ice or snow. We stopped at numerous sites as we crossed the snow-covered tundra. At one site we discovered a Glaucous Gull and an Iceland Gull feeding in a mixed flock of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and little further we had good close views of Snow Bunting and Lapland Bunting feeding together, and a pair of Arctic Skuas.

We were able to reach Persfjord and the bridge across the river there without difficulty. There were numerous reindeer feeding on seaweed down at the beach and to sea we had excellent views of a raft of Common Scoter rising and falling on the incoming swell, and Ari spotted a White-billed Diver. We continued on to the first headland beyond Persfjord, finding Oystercatcher and Long-tailed Ducks to sea; and Northern Wheatear and Shore Lark in the short grass by the roadside.

We returned to our hotel in Vardø for lunch in the hope of going to Hornøya Island in the afternoon, but the landing stage at the island had been damaged and needed repair. The lunch of King Crab legs, smoked and fresh salmon, together with Bacalau (Dried Cod in a sauce with onion and tomato); followed by a special cake baked for the Norwegian Independence Day (May 17th), more than made up for the news about the island.

After lunch we set off again on the Hamninberg road (still officially closed), stopping only for a Turnstone that gave a good display on a nearby seaweed-covered rock before flying away. We reached Persfjord quickly and, after stopping to video the Shore Lark, we drove on and found the steep hill down to Sandfjord perfectly passable between walls of snow about 3 metres high on one side. Here we found Red-breasted Merganser on the river, and a fine view of a Redwing singing in the stunted bushes. We reached Hamninberg without difficulty and spent some time there, scanning for birds in the harbour, or walking around the village and making use of the most north-easterly public convenience in Europe! Golden Plovers scuttled between the houses. We drove further north to a beautifully calm bay where we found Black-throated Diver, Oystercatcher, Ruff and a pair of Whooper Swans flying north. Those with telescopes found what they believed to be a Minke Whale surfacing about 800 metres offshore.

## Day 9

Friday 20th May

We drove back towards Vadsø, and turned down to the harbour at Kiberg. A lone Cormorant sat on a buoy outside the harbour, but numerous Cormorants flew in small groups to the north. We turned inland from Indre Kiberg and found Red Breasted Mergansers on a small lake, numerous Snow Buntings and a fine light phase Arctic Skua. Returning to Vardø we found a flock of Common Eider in the northern part of the harbour, and a lone Oystercatcher. As we looked out towards Hornøya we could see numerous Guillemots and Razorbills in the intervening sound.

At last we got the call to board a small fishing boat for the crossing to Hornøya, and 15 minutes later we were clambering onto the jetty and the steep metal gangplank on to the island. The sight of so many birds sitting or nesting on the cliffs above us was impressive and we sat in the shelter to eat a very tasty packed lunch. We had clear views of Puffin, Guillemot, Brunnich's Guillemot, Razorbill, Kittiwake, and Shag. There were some Guillemots that showed a clear white ring around the eye and were labelled as Bridled Guillemot. The group then walked across the base of the cliffs, climbing sturdy ladders to access a grassy ramp on the other side of the island rising to the lighthouse. Unlike previous years no Twite were seen.

Returning to Vardø by Zodiac was slightly more exciting than the outward journey, and we then set off to the south counting no less than six White-tailed Eagles on our way to a point beyond Kiberg where we drove inland on a rough track for about 3 km. Scanning the marshland areas to the north yielded good telescopic views of Willow Grouse, and Whimbrel, and a pair of Red-throated Divers on a small ice-bound lake. By careful stalking, Cedric got a good video close-up of an Arctic Skua feeding on what looked to be a small bird with white feathers. We then came across a lek site for a number of male Ruff, but because a French group were observing them from portable hides we had to maintain a reasonable distance. Nevertheless it was a remarkable sight! Finally we had splendid view of two Lapland Buntings foraging at the base of some bushes, to be followed by a pair of Arctic Redpoll, the male looking very spruce (pun).

## Day 10

Saturday 21st May

Having left Vardø for our long journey south we stopped a number of times for White-tailed Eagles and especially for a mixed group of Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese together with a White-fronted Goose. We had a longer stop at Ekkerøy where we found Ringed Plover on the beach patrolling up and down. Ari spotted a Lemming that raced along the top of a wall, and then we found a group of Arctic Terns basking in the sunshine, and a flock of male and female Common Eider preening on the rocks. Ari spotted a diver further out in the harbour that he thought may have been a vagrant Pacific Diver. At Vadsø we crossed the bridge to a small island where we walked to a pond in a small reserve. Initially we found only a solitary Redshank, but in the far corner of the pond were three Red-necked Phalarope that were very tolerant of our presence.

We drove on to the Finnish border and lunched again at the hotel overlooking the Utsjoki. The Goldeneye were still there, but we also had a male Redstart. After lunch Ari drove us uphill on a rough track and stopped in a small glade. Soon he had called a male Bluethroat that entertained us at close quarters for many minutes. One of the major sightings of the tour! We drove on up an even more rough track to an antenna near the top of the hill. We were searching for dotterel but found none, but we had a brief glimpse of a Long-tailed Skua.

Still another 164 km to Ivalo... We stopped once or twice to listen and search, and then right out of the blue, on the verge of the main road – a large group of male Ruff in an exciting lek. There were Ruffs with black, white, brown and cinnamon ruffs, and the solitary Reeve walked around encouraging about 8 Ruffs. A wonderful video opportunity and a great end to a day of great sightings!

## Day 11

Sunday 22nd May

We set off on our last morning to a sturdy hide at Mielikköjäkä overlooking a lake and wetlands. Ari heard and called a Siberian Tit and it gave us a close view just below the parapet of the hide. A male Pied Flycatcher flitted in the scrub at the lakeside, and we could see Snipe and Wood Sandpiper, and a couple of male Ruffs.

We drove back through an agricultural area and were rewarded with a good view of a Short-eared Owl in a display flight, calling as he circled above and unseen female. Our last site was on the bank of the Ivalojoiki. A pair of Whimbrels foraged on the opposite bank, and a pair of Goldeneyes floated along.

We bade farewell to Ari at Ivalo airport; he faced a long drive back to Oulu to meet another group that evening. Ari's encyclopaedic knowledge of birdsong, his unerring eye, and his boundless energy despite long drives, had made for us an unforgettable tour with some stunning sightings.

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