

Norway & Finland - An Arctic Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

9 - 19 May 2019

Report by Ari Latja



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Tour participants: Ari Latja (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 9th May

After being welcomed by our guide Ari, upon arrival at Oulu Airport, we made our way to the hotel. Here we took a short break to explore the surroundings of the hotel – a great introduction to the holiday of impressive birdwatching to come. The hotel grounds graced us with sightings of Wagtails, Fieldfares, Redwings and Greenfinches, and behind the hotel a Robin, Yellowhammer and a couple of Reed Buntings were singing. A short walk took us to a platform looking over the Kempele Bay just behind the hotel. On the bay there was a good collection of waterbirds: Greylag Geese, Tufted Ducks, Pochard, Goosanders, Teal, Shoveler, Mallard, Great Crested Grebes, Goldeneye and, best of all, a male and two female Smew. These were joined by some waders, including Wood Sandpipers, Common Sandpipers, Redshanks, Greenshanks and Curlews. Common Snipe were displaying above us whilst a male Marsh Harrier patrolled over the reedbeds, and a Kestrel flew overhead as Common Terns fished along canals dug behind the hotel.

A rejuvenating dinner set us up for our evening excursion, for which we drove to two respective forests. The first, being not so far from the hotel, had us soon standing under a tree with a sizeable nesting box, and a prompt from Ari caused an astonished nesting Tengmalm's Owl to emerge. In the second forest we endeavoured to entice a sighting of a Pygmy Owl, but alas, these little birds remained elusive, despite our recordings of a male call.

Day 2

Friday 10th May

Today's breakfast set us up for our journey to Vartti, located in the depths of the forest. Common Cranes entertained us en route with a pair feeding alongside the road, and later a further six were spotted flying above us. Cranes were followed by three stunning male Whinchats, and an area with tall aspen trees among young spruces delighted us with a Wryneck, six lovely Waxwings and a pair of Stock Doves. We also visited a box where there was a Ural Owl nesting, although we only managed to glimpse the tip of the female's tail. On the way back a female Capercaillie was seen in flight and a male Hen Harrier scouting for prey was visible when we passed a forest clearing.

We then drove to the famous Liminka Bay wetland, the biggest and most important wetland for birds in Finland and had lunch at the visitors centre. Distributed throughout the bay and fields were Whooper Swans, Bean and Pink-footed Geese, Shoveler, Pintail, Pochard, Goldeneye, Great Crested Grebes, hundreds of Ruff, the males in their summer plumage (some of them displaying), and other waders including Black-tailed Godwit, Common Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper, Greenshank, Spotted Redshank and Redshank.

Over the bay three big birds of prey were hunting; an Osprey, Marsh Harrier and a White-tailed Eagle, all joined by the biggest of terns, the Caspian Tern. We ended the day in an industrial harbour area by a lagoon, where the rare Terek Sandpiper sometimes comes to feed but no luck, just a lone Shelduck there.

Day 3

Saturday 11th May

In the morning we first visited Hietasaari Island by the city of Oulu. Some of the better sightings were Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander, Caspian Tern, Little Gull and a nice singing Wood Warbler.

After that we went to explore Sanginjoki forest area. Firstly, a stake-out at a pine tree rewarded us with good views of a Black Woodpecker as he emerged from his tree hole. We then drove to a nearby picnic site for some refreshments, where Ari played the drumming of a Three-toed Woodpecker and almost immediately, a male appeared in a tree just above us! Driving on we saw a female Capercaillie by the road. Happy with this, we left the area.

For the next target species, we had to drive south of Oulu, some 45 minutes. We parked along yet another dirt road in the forest. Just-around a hundred metres from the road we found a magnificent female Great Grey Owl sitting on a twig nest – a dream bird for us all! She didn't seem fazed as we continued to look on in admiration, and, after some time and a visit from a neighbouring Willow Tit we took our leave for lunch.

Driving north of Oulu a single, male Black Grouse displayed for us in a field alongside the road, and a Goshawk observed us from a tree. Our target this time was another box for Ural Owl, but, once again, she stubbornly refused to show herself. Disappointed, we had to return to the hotel.

Day 4

Sunday 12th May

Before embarking on our drive from Oulu to Kuusamo, we tried our luck at the Pygmy Owl box again. Although the male still failed to respond to the tape, we did take a quick look at the nesting female, steadfastly brooding her eggs. Taking a detour through the forests we managed to get a few good sightings including a Rough-legged Buzzard, a Black Woodpecker and a pair of Rustic Bunting, the latter taking their time to reveal themselves. Another thrilling sight was an Elk crossing the road in front of us.

We arrived in Kuusamo in the late afternoon.

Day 5

Monday 13th May

A pre-breakfast trip to a forest at the outskirts of Kuusamo resulted in a spectacular sighting, thanks to the efforts of Ari. An initially elusive male Capercaillie led us through the damp forest to a clearing, where he proceeded to enthral us with a magnificent display just some 20 metres away! Once we were sated by the view, we retreated to leave him in peace, and just around the corner we found a female Hazel Grouse feeding in a willow by the road. What a morning!

After breakfast and some rest, we went on to explore the forests of Kuusamo. Leaving the car by Valtavaara hill, we soon encountered three Siberian Jays which emerged from the forest, enticed even closer by the irresistible offer of sausages left over from breakfast. One even braved approaching Ari's hand for the tasty morsel. Next we visited Vuotunki lake with Whooper Swans, Taiga Bean Geese, Goldeneye, Tuted Duck, two male Smew and other ducks. Two Common Cranes flew over. Driving along the forest roads we saw a female Capercaillie and some Black Grouse. Visiting a small river with rapids gave us a Dipper and then it was time for lunch in Kuusamo town.

After lunch we visited some lakesides around Kuusamo. In Vihtasalmi we saw a party of 13 Black-throated Divers, a Red-necked Grebe, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and a couple of Little Gulls. In the forest by Oivanki wetland a pair of Siberian Tits were showing well. As we observed from a platform overlooking the wetland, a Short-eared Owl flew straight for us, soaring only a metre above us as we watched on.

Before returning to the hotel we visited Rääpyslampi lake, where we saw about half a dozen Goosander, a male Smew, 20 or so Little Gulls and another pair of Black-throated Divers, exhibiting their summer plumage in the afternoon light.

Day 6

Tuesday 14th May

In the morning we left Kuusamo behind and started the long journey to Ivalo. First stop was by the arctic circle. Further north we visited Sokanaapa bog where we saw five pairs of Common Crane, a couple of Black-throated Divers, common ducks like Wigeon, Mallard, Teal and Tufted Duck, Wood Sandpipers, some Ruff and a Grey-headed Yellow Wagtail. After having lunch in Sodankylä we visited another bog area, Ilmakkiaapa. On the small lake we found some 30 Tufted Ducks, a pair of Smew and three Black-throated Divers. Before we arrived at Ivalo, we drove up to Kaunispää hill where the only bird was a Golden Plover.

Day 7

Wednesday 15th May

Again, we had a long journey ahead of us from Ivalo to Vardö. First stop was in a forest in Toivoniemi where we had three Siberian Jays, two Siberian Tits and two Waxwings. Next stop was the famous Four Wind Cafe with birdfeeders. The star here was Pine Grosbeak, about 20 of them, mostly females but also two brightly pigmented males. There were also some 50 Bramblings in their colourful summer plumages and a few Redpolls, Greenfinches and Great Tits, Blue Tits and also a Siberian Tit. Driving on we came to higher ground with open bogs and mountain birches. At a traditional site there were 10 male Ruff displaying just at the edge of the road. Before entering Norway, we had lunch in a Finnish village Utsjoki.

Finally, we reached Varanger fjord and stopped in Nesseby. In the harbour there was a small flock of Common Eider and among them a pair of Steller's Eider! On the shore by the church there were some waders, Oystercatchers, Bar-tailed Godwits and a flock of Purple Sandpipers, and in amongst a flock of Bean and Pink-footed Geese, we also found one White-fronted Goose.

In the harbour of Vadsö there were more Common and Steller's Eider, and along the road to Vardö we saw at least five White-tailed Eagles of different ages, Rough-legged Buzzards, Arctic Skuas and three Short-eared Owls, two of which were a displaying pair.

Day 8

Thursday 16th May

First thing in the morning we took a boat to Hornöya – an island with a seabird colony just a short boat trip away from Vardö harbour. Usually the cliff is packed with different kind of auks and Kittiwakes but instead half-a-dozen White-tailed Eagles were flying over the cliff scouting for prey. All the birds from the cliff had escaped to the sea, only some Razorbills and Puffins had stayed behind. Despite this we managed to find some Brunnich's Guillemots among the thousands of Common and Black Guillemots, and on the lower parts of the

cliff, dozens of Shags nested among the boulders. Coming back from the island we saw a Coot in the harbour: a rare bird this far north.

In the afternoon we drove along the coast towards Vadsö. On the way there were White-tailed Eagles flying around or sitting on the rocks as were also some Rough-legged Buzzards and Arctic Skuas. The sea housed small flocks of Common Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers and Goosanders. In Komagvaer we turned to a dirt road and drove a few kilometres inland. On small lakes there were three pairs of Red-throated Divers. We managed also to see half-a-dozen Willow Grouse, a Long-tailed Skua, a male Lapland Bunting in its colourful summer plumage, some Golden Plovers and a few Ruff. On the way back we saw again three Short-Eared Owls hunting over the open land.

Day 9

Friday 17th May

We spent the whole day visiting 'the end of the world', Hamningberg village, some 40 kilometres north of Vardö. Strong winds made identification of the birds difficult; however, we still managed to find five Glaucous Gulls (two adults and three immature birds) in amongst Kittiwakes, Herring and Greater Black-backed Gulls along the Svartenes shore. A distant White-billed Diver was seen by only a few of us. Summer cottages scattered the rocky landscape, and one in particular had a birdfeeder that had attracted three Snow Buntings. Facing out to sea in the blustery village of Hamningberg, we appreciated the expansive views of small flocks of passing Common Guillemots, Puffins, Gannets and Fulmars.

Day 10

Saturday 18th May

In the morning it was time to pack up the van and start the drive to Finland. Again, along the road there were quite a few White-tailed Eagles and some Rough-legged Buzzards. We were making stops here and there trying to find King Eider but no luck, just the normal Common Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, Goldeneye, Goosander and Red-breasted Merganser on the sea. In Eckkeröy we saw Arctic Terns on the wing, as well as Black-throated and Red-throated Divers, passively floating on the sea.

When we reached Finland, we stopped in Utsjoki for lunch, and continuing on south towards Ivalo, we found a stunning male Bluethroat singing in the bushes by the road. Returning to the Four Wind Cafe we experienced much the same sightings as before, only there was just one Pine Grosbeak this time, and we added a male Pied Flycatcher to the list. We arrived in Ivalo in good time for dinner.

Day 11

Sunday 19th May

Our final day left us time only for last-minute packing and a final breakfast before we made our way back home – our turn to take to the air!

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