

# Sweden in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 13 February 2011

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Report compiled by Daniel Green



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## Day 1

Thursday 10th February

After arrival at Arlanda airport, we make our way through the snowy Swedish countryside. A Great Grey Shrike is soon spotted perched in a small bush along the road and we get decent views from a distance, but as we approach it flies off, passing by in its wagtail-like undulating flight, showing its white wing patches well. A Rough-legged Buzzard causes the next stop - a very dark bodied and pale-headed juvenile bird perched not far from the road in a low spruce tree. A contrasting underwing and tail-pattern in black, buff and white show well as it flies eventually. A little patch of open water in an otherwise very frozen landscape provides a couple of Whooper Swans and some Mallards. Another dark raptor is scrutinized but is just a Common Buzzard. A really big raptor crosses the road in front of us and proves to be an immature White-tailed Eagle. During our so far (40 min) rather productive drive the snow started to fall.

Our first proper stop offers coffee and sandwiches as we find shelter and comfortable benches under some big spruce trees in the outskirts of a garden. In front of us is a feeding station that is teeming with birds: 10 Hawfinches are sitting in the surrounding treetops on our arrival. Soon a host of Yellowhammers and Greenfinches are descending onto the bird table or the ground beneath it. Bullfinches are adding bright pink to the scene and no less than 21 of them are counted. Add to that a couple of Great-spotted Woodpeckers, 5 or so (Mealy) Redpolls, Marsh Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch and some strikingly white-bellied Nuthatches of the (nominate) Scandinavian race. Even a few of the shy Hawfinches descend to the bird table.

As we move further north we take a short walk along the Black River where the stream is running fast, a good site for Dippers and Otters - but none of them show up. We have to settle for interesting ice formations, frosty trees and what seem to be tracks from Otters in the snow. Since the weather is getting more blizzard-like every minute it feels good to be welcomed to the warm fire in the hotel lounge for a cup of tea before dinner.

## Day 2

Friday 11th February

We wake up and we get out in still stormy conditions, even some snow falling still. Many roads have not been ploughed yet so today we struggle a bit with reaching the sites on the itinerary. But for starters we have no problem getting to the Nutcracker feeding station – a little clearing in some old growth pine forest.

Here we put out hazelnuts, peanuts, margarine and sunflower seeds and soon a variety of forest tits are attending; Marsh, Willow, Coal and Crested Tits are all over the place, naturally together with Nuthatches, Great and Blue Tits. No less than six Great-spotted Woodpeckers are showing simultaneously and at very close range. Goldcrest and Treecreeper appear in the clearing, and then suddenly – a Nutcracker is sitting on a perch only 5-6 metres away! (It was seemingly most attracted to the margarine but later consuming hazelnuts and peanuts as well). During the morning at least 3, possibly 4 individuals are taking turns on the food just in front of us in the little clearing, and were surprisingly tame, offering excellent views and pleasing the cameras.

The cold requires a walk to get our limbs back in motion. Some impressive holes and cavities' in a spruce tree along the path are the marks of Black Woodpeckers feeding on Horse Ants living inside tree trunks. Down the road to the lakeside we try to attract Hazel Grouse with a whistle imitating its call. It doesn't work today but all of a sudden a strikingly black and silvery, adult male Goshawk, flies out of the forest edge just beside us - a stunning bird at this close range. A Long-tailed Tit is heard and seen briefly by some of the group.

Back at the feeding station, the Grey-headed Woodpecker has been present for a little while. Since this is the most sheltered place from the still hard blowing wind, we stay here for lunch, a reindeer meat stir-fry prepared in a big pan over an open-air fire. Meanwhile the sky turns more and more blue, and soon the sun is shining again.

When we get back down to the lake the scene is somewhat livelier than an hour ago. Not only corvids by numbers, but also Eagles are present. A couple of young White-tailed Eagles are playing around in the air at very close range, showing their impressive wingspan as they fight or play over some fish carcass hanging from their talons. We can also determine that there's an adult White-tail, but not only that; 2 juvenile Golden Eagles are also present. One of them eventually perches in a tree so we can get the telescopes out and examine it more carefully, comparing features with the White-tails. We get the impression that there are 5 or 6 eagles present. Back home the camera gives further evidence, with no less than nine White-tailed Eagles caught in one single shot! The turbulence with all the birds flying around just made it difficult to count.

Snowdrift eliminates the plan to go grouse-searching this afternoon since some of the tracks we planned to go are totally snowed in. We have to improvise and look around at some other spots, but we do get some lovely sunshine and afternoon tea in the snow and sun. As the evening falls it quick gets cold but also brilliant. A Black Grouse male is posing in a Silver birch and a Grey-headed Woodpecker suddenly flying by become the last birds of the day. We try for Pygmy Owl at sunset but where one bird was yesterday, nothing turns up today, maybe the wind still blowing a bit is putting it off.

## Day 3

## Saturday 12th February

Today the snowed over roads from yesterday are ploughed. The sun rises on a clear blue sky as we drive through the beautiful countryside of Svartådalen, then through vast pine forests to reach our destination of the day – Färna ekopark. A Great Grey Shrike perched in a treetop just by the roadside is the first good bird of the day, and for once is un-shy enough to offer very good views in the frosty sunrise. In the ekopark we start with an area with storm felled trees. Here we have to walk in deep snow and as we hear tapping sounds and trying to approach some of us get stuck in snow so we have to retreat and try another angle. That however proves a successful idea, because soon we are standing below at least three Three-toed Woodpeckers foraging together in the trees. They are a bit high up in the treetops but after some work we manage to get good scope-views and even some pictures.

Another – 4th bird – is heard on the other side of the felled area and after a while it perches on a solitary tree stump drumming away intensively...ann obviously longer drumming than that of Great-spotted Woodpecker. A Black Woodpecker is heard several times and also seen flying by on a couple of occasions. In the forest Treecreeper, Crested Tits, Goldcrests and others are feeding too. A couple of Black Grouse are posing in a birch tree a bit further off. As we move on to a more open hilly part of the forest with a good stand of old, tall Aspen trees, a strikingly big animal track stands out in the snow. It doesn't take long to identify it as a good set of Lynx prints, fresh for the day, with some very clear and impressive footprints in the new snow. A hot soup lunch is enjoyed in the lovely, warm sun, by a lakeside. Even if the nearby feeding station don't offer much more than the forest tits today, its always nice to see plenty of Crested and Willow Tits.

The evening is tempting with another Pygmy Owl site at hand. It is really cold today ( $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) but is more pleasant than yesterday, as the wind has dropped totally. We really try our best but a couple of nice Bullfinches and likewise local birdwatchers are the only encounters we make. We had our coffee break at a local bakery in the small town Norberg. Cakes and hot chocolate with whipped cream is enjoyed in an interesting, historical environment, before the drive up north to Jädra ås where Siberian Jays awaits.

## Day 4

## Sunday 13th February

Early morning,  $-9^{\circ}\text{C}$ , overcast. The road we have to walk some 1,000 meters is covered with almost half a meter of new snow. The clearing in this pine forest that serves as a feeding site for Siberian Jays, doesn't look like much as we arrive. In fact we all wonder where the birds are? It takes a while before the first tits show up, Crested, Coal and Willow Tits. Then the first Siberian Jay glides in on silent wings. First two, then three birds approach carefully, but soon were eating away on the fat we've put up for them, exposing their rich rufous tail and wing feathers.

Just to give it a last try – against all odds – since the morning isn't young anymore, our guide imitates Pygmy Owl a couple of times. To our surprise it doesn't take long until there is a real Pygmy Owl calling back from inside the forest! We have to make a move in the deep snow to get it in view, but it soon flies to a more convenient position by the roadside, offering excellent views for quite a while. After having the attention of all the tits and woodpeckers in the neighbourhood, the tiny Owl gets tired of the mob and disappears back into the forest. Grey-headed Woodpeckers have also been alerted by the commotion round the Pygmy Owl, and now a male and a female is approaching us. The male being the bravest, jumping from tree to tree to get to the suet in a basket, it appears only some 10 metres away, showing its bright, red forehead and offering excellent views. A Black Woodpecker also turns up and shows some interest. It also gets a bit agitated as our guide imitates its call...an impressive and beautiful bird showing really well at last. Suddenly a sound like from flying Mallards is heard and a flock of 20 Black Grouse fly past tree-top high above our heads. The way back through the snow feels much lighter with all these good birds fresh in our memory. We all agree it was well worth the effort of the snow-walk.

A half way stop towards the airport at Gysinge – a small village surrounded by streams – is enjoyable. The café has not only got good cakes but a nice river view with Dippers and Goldeneye, and later a male Goosander. We then make our way to the airport and back to the UK.

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## Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded; H = heard only)

|    | Common name              | Scientific name                | February |           |    |        |
|----|--------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|----|--------|
|    |                          |                                | 10       | 11        | 12 | 13     |
| 1  | Whooper Swan             | <i>Cygnus cygnus</i>           | ✓        |           |    |        |
| 2  | Mallard                  | <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>      | ✓        |           |    |        |
| 3  | Goldeneye                | <i>Bucephala clangula</i>      |          |           |    | ✓      |
| 4  | Goosander                | <i>Mergus merganser</i>        |          |           |    | 1 male |
| 5  | White-tailed Eagle       | <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>    | 1        | 9         |    |        |
| 6  | Northern Goshawk         | <i>Accipiter gentilis</i>      |          | 1 ad male |    |        |
| 7  | Common Buzzard           | <i>Buteo buteo</i>             | 1        |           |    |        |
| 8  | Rough-legged Buzzard     | <i>Buteo lagopus</i>           | 1        |           |    |        |
| 9  | Golden Eagle             | <i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>       |          | 2         |    |        |
| 10 | Black Grouse             | <i>Tetrao tetrix</i>           |          | 1 male    | 4  | 20     |
| 11 | Feral Pigeon             | <i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>   |          |           |    | ✓      |
| 12 | Eurasian Pygmy Owl       | <i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>   |          |           |    | 1      |
| 13 | Great Spotted Woodpecker | <i>Dendrocopos major</i>       | 2        | 6         | ✓  | 2      |
| 14 | Three-toed Woodpecker    | <i>Picoides tridactylus</i>    |          |           | 4  |        |
| 15 | Black Woodpecker         | <i>Dryocopus martius</i>       |          |           | 2  | 1      |
| 16 | Green Woodpecker         | <i>Picus viridis</i>           |          | 1         |    |        |
| 17 | Grey-headed Woodpecker   | <i>Picus canus</i>             |          | 1         |    | 2      |
| 18 | Black-bellied Dipper     | <i>Cinclus cinclus cinclus</i> |          |           |    | 2      |
| 19 | Fieldfare                | <i>Turdus pilaris</i>          | 2        |           |    |        |
| 20 | Blackbird                | <i>Turdus merula</i>           | 2        |           |    |        |
| 21 | Marsh Tit                | <i>Poecile palustris</i>       | 2        | 2         |    |        |
| 22 | Willow Tit               | <i>Poecile montanus</i>        |          | 5         |    | ✓      |
| 23 | Coal Tit                 | <i>Periparus ater</i>          |          | 4         |    | ✓      |
| 24 | Crested Tit              | <i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>   |          | 4         | ✓  | 4      |
| 25 | Great Tit                | <i>Parus major</i>             | ✓        | ✓         | ✓  | ✓      |
| 26 | Blue Tit                 | <i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>     | ✓        | ✓         | ✓  | ✓      |
| 27 | Long-tailed Tit          | <i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>     |          | H         |    |        |
| 28 | Eurasian Nuthatch        | <i>Sitta europaea</i>          | ✓        | ✓         | ✓  | ✓      |
| 29 | Eurasian Treecreeper     | <i>Certhia familiaris</i>      |          | 1         | 1  | ✓      |
| 30 | Great Grey Shrike        | <i>Lanius excubitor</i>        | 1        |           |    |        |
| 31 | Eurasian Jay             | <i>Garrulus glandarius</i>     | ✓        |           | ✓  | ✓      |
| 32 | Siberian Jay             | <i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>    |          |           |    | 3      |

|    | Common name    | Scientific name                      | February |    |    |    |
|----|----------------|--------------------------------------|----------|----|----|----|
|    |                |                                      | 10       | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| 33 | Magpie         | <i>Pica pica</i>                     | ✓        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| 34 | Nutcracker     | <i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>       |          | 4  |    |    |
| 35 | Jackdaw        | <i>Corvus monedula</i>               | ✓        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| 36 | Hooded Crow    | <i>Corvus cornix</i>                 | ✓        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| 37 | Common Raven   | <i>Corvus corax</i>                  | ✓        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| 38 | Tree Sparrow   | <i>Passer montanus</i>               |          | ✓  |    | ✓  |
| 39 | Chaffinch      | <i>Fringilla coelebs</i>             | 1        |    |    |    |
| 40 | Greenfinch     | <i>Carduelis chloris</i>             | 40       | ✓  |    | ✓  |
| 41 | Common Redpoll | <i>Carduelis flammea</i>             | 5        |    |    |    |
| 42 | Goldfinch      | <i>Carduelis carduelis</i>           |          | 2  |    |    |
| 43 | Bullfinch      | <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>             | 25       | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| 44 | Hawfinch       | <i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i> | 10       |    |    |    |
| 45 | Yellowhammer   | <i>Emberiza citrinella</i>           | 50       | ✓  |    |    |
| 46 | Goldcrest      | <i>Regulus regulus</i>               |          | ✓  |    |    |