



After the resounding success of my Bulgaria trip in 2010 I chose Birdguides again in my quest to see as many of the European birds I'd dreamt about as a boy looking at the colour plates in my Dad's old 1954 Peterson edition of the Collins. After a bit of research into Birdguides itineraries and trip reports it looked like Finland was the one for me offering a fantastic selection of rare northern woodland species I had only seen in illustrations. Birdguides actually run the tour as a three-stage job with a pre-tour extension in Estonia and a post-tour extension to Lapland and the Varangerfjord in Norway. I couldn't quite run to the high arctic extension (Finland and Norway are hugely expensive places) and thought I either had most of the Estonian birds or could safely leave them for another time. I had been to Finland before with work so knew what a fantastic country it is. Only problem was, I'd gone in mid-March to Rovaniemi on the Arctic Circle and all I saw was a couple of Blue Tits at a railway station in Kemi.

I flew direct from Manchester to Helsinki the day before and joined the tour at the airport on Friday 1st June. There were seven of us in all in the Renault Trafic – a big blue mobile skip from which bits of trim would break off regularly and the seatbelt would jam in the door. Our leader was the intrepid Hannu Jännes and for one day his fellow birder Pekka.

On getting in the van Hannu gave us the bad news; 'there are no owls'. A miserable spring in Finland had meant that the Hawk Owls had run out of food and cleared off by 7th May and no nesting Great Grey Owls had been found. This was not good news but we had Hannu, translator of the Collins Bird Guide into Finnish; Kuusamo, bird race champion and one of the best connected birders in the country on our side. Constantly on his mobile getting tip offs about the whereabouts of birds he was not going to be defeated despite the adverse drizzly weather conditions and apparent lack of birds.

Our first stop was Haltia Forest near the airport for my first encounter with the Finnish Air Force. And my DEET was still in my suitcase. Doh! I was immediately identified as a super tasty prospect. It doesn't matter if it's cold and wet, the mosquitoes will be active

and the habitat is perfect for them in a country which is 70% forested and has 187,888 lakes. After that it was at the ready at all times. Don't go to Finland in summer without a good supply and a tube of insect bite cream. Amongst commoner species Wood Warblers were singing away everywhere and we enjoyed good views of one. We hoped to catch Red-breasted Flycatcher here too; a fairly uncommon Finnish bird which in the end we only heard. One to come back for. From there we drove on up to our excellent and beautifully situated guest house, Iloranta (meaning happy shores or something) just north of the extremely picturesque little town of Hauho in the province of Hämeenlinna.

A bit of birding on the nearby lake of Iso-Roine netted us a Common Crane, some close in and utterly splendid breeding plumaged Red-necked Grebes and our first rather distant views of Baltic Gull. These birds Hannu described as 'the most Finnish of birds' and a species under severe threat from Herring Gulls and from the closure of waste disposal sites which form regular feeding grounds.



Above: Viewing towers were the order of the day in Finland rather than our low-down hides. This one was near our guest house, Iloranta.

The first lifer was to come after dinner with Pygmy Owl at a nest box nearby. This is a typical Finnish nest box, trustingly placed very low down on the tree trunk. Once it was discovered that Pygmy owls would take to nest boxes and were pretty tough when it came to disturbance (the female will not abandon the nest) it was discovered that far from being in decline, they were actually quite numerous in Finland. Thought not as numerous as Finland's most common bird, the Willow Warbler, the sound of which accompanied us wherever we went.



Above: Pygmy Owl nest box.

The next day was my first full day's birding Finland. An early start (we were in the minibus for 5am most days) in a part of the world where the sun was technically setting at about 12.20am but twilight lasted just a couple of hours and then it was dawn again. It was raining and that was going to be the order of the day most days. Actually not a problem for getting our birds but a bit of an enemy for those of us wearing glasses and trying to digiscope in the rain! Hence my pictures aren't too great but then they were mostly taken with rain-soaked lenses in the gloom.

We started with a bang. Staking out a Black Woodpecker's nest and waiting for the young to show and eventually the adult birds to come in. We enjoyed some pretty good views and the male came in really close and landed on a telegraph pole near a house in the woods for one brief moment. I didn't manage to get the adults, digiscoping moving woodpeckers is nigh on impossible but here's a splendid juvenile sticking it's head out. The sexes are already defined before the birds fledge.



Above: juvenile Black Woodpecker at the nest hole.

A lifer before breakfast and the only bird I missed when I was in Bulgaria where we heard just one but failed to see it. After breakfast it was on to a site near Asikkalain, a cold and damp forest with our additional guide Pekka, who was to rally our hopeless bus around for the rest of the day. Here we stood around getting increasingly cold and wet hoping for Ural Owl. Eventually Pekka found one of the recently fledged but already adult-sized juveniles looking as bedraggled and cold as we were.

A search through the wood and eventually we twice caught the pale wings of the adult female flying tantalisingly between the trees but didn't clinch a good view. Still, Ural Owl in the bag and despite Hannu's warning that there were no owls we'd already had two species. Basically, without the knowledge gleaned from a network of birders and ringers by a good guide you don't really stand a chance of finding these species on your own. It would be entirely possible to blunder around Finnish forests for months and come away empty handed. In fact when I spoke to birders from other tour operators (of which there are many operating in Finland) in the hotels we stayed in and on the plane on the way back, not one of them was as successful as our Birdguides trip.



Above: Typical Finnish Spruce forest, mostly this was mixed with Silver Birch on the margins.



Above: Recently fledged Ural Owl in the rain

Next up was another site and a bit of a walk through some woods and across a very muddy farmer's field to wait for a Grey-headed Woodpecker to stick its head out of the nest hole.



Above: Male Grey-headed Woodpecker emerging from the nest

Eventually as the party headed off back I was lagging behind but was looking straight at the nest hole and got a great view of it flying out. Dawdling a bit and doing my own birding I lost our party which had turned off the trail somewhere for Hannu to tape in a Greenish Warbler. I had no choice but to head back to the van. Unfortunately it turned out to be the only Greenish Warbler on the trip and despite attempts in the Kuusamo area where they had been showing well just the previous week, they had all vanished by the time we rolled up. Never mind, it would have been a bonus lifer and wasn't top of my list anyway. What was however, was Tengmalm's Owl; the commonest owl in Finland and an evening trip netted us a splendid view at a nest hole in a roadside tree where I was able to line up my 'scope with a good view, set up properly and take practice shots.



Above: Tengmalm's Owl at the nest hole

The next morning wasn't too wet and Hannu took a few of us off early morning before breakfast to try and find a few specials around beautiful Hauho. For the Americans and Canadians on the trip this included Grasshopper Warbler but despite good territory one was not seen. I was more interested in the Blyth's Reed Warbler which showed really well in some bushes and sang fantastically doing amazing bits of mimicry and scales. Hannu told us that most of its repertoire consists of African species. Less tuneful and incredibly loud but hard to see was my first Thrush Nightingale in someone's garden. Apparently it's not a lot of fun if one decides to set up territory outside your house as they sing all night and don't have the liquid melody of the Nightingale. Imagine the bird equivalent of an American remake of a European arthouse film. Subtle they are not!

After breakfast it was a long drive north to Oulu on the Baltic coast. Here we did a bit of birding around the harbour area where Temminck's Stints nest. It's closed to avoid disturbance so we could only scan from just off the road. We hoped for a visit from a Terek Sandpiper which is another rare Finnish breeder at this site but they didn't show. Some Grey-headed Wagtails flitted about around a dump/snow pile area across the road but were a bit distant.

Over dinner Hannu was to hit us with a surprise. He'd been tipped off about a Great Grey Owl nest site but it was about 150km away and we'd have to leave at 2am to meet some other birders in a service station before travelling to the site. I thought this was a bit mental as we'd already travelled several hundred kilometres that day and subsequently been on the road most of it. Some went to bed early; I decided to wander into town and find a bar...

The following morning I was woken at 5am by Hannu. Plans had changed and he'd got directions so we could go on our own. So much for the lie-in! Off we went to somewhere beyond Oulainen down a road heading to the coast at Pyhäjoki. Down a forest track and off into the woods where we were looking for some camouflaged photographers hides.

Bingo! There we had two Great Grey Owl chicks at the nest and a third on the ground below,



Above: After a while the female came in and perched up in a nearby tree.



Above: Female Great Grey Owl

We had a great show of the owls for some time then left them to it and went to try and find the Red-breasted Flycatcher which was singing nearby but failed to show.

It was soon time to leave and making our way back to the van we got a great view of this huge and splendid owl flying across the path with a vole and through the trees back

towards the nest, but better still was to come. Driving down the forest track back to the road Hannu spotted something on a dead tree in an area of near clearfell. There, in all its glory, was the male. Clambering over the boggy terrain it stayed put and allowed us to take its photo. Just brilliant and the undoubted trip highlight.



Above: Male Great Grey Owl



Above: Male Great Grey Owl, or in Finnish 'Lapinpöllö'; a word which I attempted wholly unsuccessfully to pronounce!

The afternoon calmed down a little with a trip to Liminka Bay where I added a relatively common lifer in the shape of Common Rosefinch, with both a female and a splendid male which I had in the 'scope in perfect light and was just digiscoping when the battery ran out. Bah! I did get a half decent record shot of this Ortolan Bunting which showed really well though



Above: Male Ortolan Bunting Liminka Bay area

Quite a few other finches and warblers showed well for our transatlantic contingent in this area of farmland. Then it was off to Kuusamo for four nights stay.

The following morning saw us out in a forest park looking for a nest box containing Siberian Tit. After wandering around an almost silent open forest (apart from the odd singing Redstart) for ages, Mike told Hannu he'd spotted a nest box earlier just off the beginning of the track and we should check it out. He was right and we had great views of this amazing tit coming and going. They can survive in temperatures of -40°C by shutting down their metabolism but are unfortunately under threat. Their habitat of mature Spruce forest is being cut and the younger trees do not have the deeply grooved bark which allows insect-rich crevices on which the Siberian Tit can feed. So although this pair was happily using a nest box, the trees were not bountiful. There is nobody in Finland with the power of the RSPB to buy up tranches of threatened forest and the owners, who are politically aligned with the Finnish right, regard all conservationists and birders as Commies!



Above: Siberian Tit emerging from the nest box with a grub, another lifer and one of my top five target birds



Above: A much better photo courtesy Hannu Jännes

After breakfast it was off to Valtavaara where Siberian Jays were known to visit the feeding station at a roadside lay-by. They were not around for us but we went up a trail and after hearing a singing Red-flanked Bluetail we eventually tracked it down and had good views in the inevitable rain. They are on the westernmost edge of their range here

and numbers vary greatly from year to year. We were in luck though as it was a bit of a bumper year and we had at least ten over the next two days with some splendid views of full adult males looking stunningly blue as well as slightly duller first year birds.



Above: Red-flanked Bluetail at Valtavaara

Walking up the road we found another bird which varies in number, Little Bunting and had good but slightly distant views of a singing male. Not a lifer but boy was it a better bird than the one on Anglesey in the UK a few years back!

One of our party thought they saw a Hazel Grouse fly across the road. I turned round and just perceived a greyish looking grouse species but it was totally inconclusive. Taping from the side of the road for ages further on though we eventually called one in but it was only glimpsed between the trees before moving off. The high-pitched dentist's drill sound of Hazel Grouse was to taunt us for days until finally we got good views of one which had the courtesy to perch in a tree just in view.

Various more common species provided excitement for the party over the next few days including splendid male Velvet Scoters, breeding plumaged Black-throated Divers and Smew at various lakeside stops. Hannu pointed out how Goldeneye nest boxes are adapted for Smew with hole-reducing front plates.



Above: Nest box adaptors for Smew

A very early start was needed that night as we were out and in the van at 3am the following morning armed with a picnic breakfast for later. Our target bird was Capercaillie and after driving into Jungante Forest we used the van as a mobile hide and eventually located a male which gave us good views through the windscreen as it stalked around on the forest floor. Later on we were to find another superb male with two females in attendance right at the side of the road. Sorry folks, due to the circumstances I didn't manage a record shot of any of the game species we saw on the trip; Capercaillie, Black Grouse at the lek, Hazel Grouse and finally Willow Grouse in flight on the very last morning. After our very early breakfast we had been given permission to drive up to a private house of one of Hannu's birding friends who had come to the hotel for lunch the previous day to direct us onto a number of good sites. Here we waited for another of my star birds of the trip, Siberian Jay, a bird which is synonymous with Finnish birding and used as the logo for the Hannu Hautala museum in Kuusamo. Hautala is lauded as one of the finest Finnish wildlife photographers and there are some superb photos by him and others in the museum. Three noisy Siberian Jays came to the trees around us in the rain. The light was very poor and they didn't come to the bird table so this is the best mystery bird shot I got.



Above: You can tell this is a Siberian Jay honest!



Above: And this is what they look like in better light! Photo courtesy Hannu Jännes



Above: Cottage in the woods. Ten sleeping birders inside gathering for the forthcoming anniversary Kuusamo bird race.

Later in the day, one of the sites Hannu's friend had directed us too gave us great views of Three-toed Woodpecker; yet another lifer for me.



Above: Three-toed Woodpecker. It just refused to keep still!



Above: Capercaillie dropping. The pine needles they eat are poisonous so they have to find mature ones of exactly the right age so they can eat them.



Above: Little Bunting singing lustily, showing its chestnut crown stripe

The afternoon saw a visit to Kuusamo rubbish dump, looking for gulls.



Above: Looking at gulls



Above: Baltic Gulls with Herring Gull (far left) and a paler mantled gull in the foreground



Above: Second calendar year Heuglin's Gull



Thankfully the next day the persistent rain cleared to some quite decent weather with the odd shower allowing us to go for our slightly longer walk up to Iivaara.



Above: The awesome view from the top of Iivaara



Above: Hannu finding us the birds. He never did get to use his parabolic microphone!



Above: View from a bridge at the start of our walk where we failed to get Rustic Bunting



Above: Your reporter on top of the hill enjoying the view and totally missing out on a Pine Grosbeak which Hannu had found at exactly the moment this was taken. He called it and we all scrambled down the hill but it had flown and we failed to find it. The only really big miss of the trip.

The afternoon saw some more relaxed birding not looking for anything new but enjoying some see-what's-about birding which netted a Marsh Harrier which was rare for the area and superb views of Little Gulls which were numerous on the lakes around Kuusamo, plus finally getting some really good views of Grey-headed Wagtails.



Above: Little Gull



Above: Grey-headed Wagtail

On the final morning there was one more target bird for me which we had tried for every day around Kuusamo at appropriate sites with Silver Birch scrub and nearby water; Rustic Bunting. Hannu had warned us that once they were breeding they tended to keep

their heads down. Finally though, we got one singing and had brief views before it flew across the road and didn't reappear, but Hannu thought he heard another and went over the road in search of it. Eventually he found it singing from a high perch and we followed him across the boggy ground. We had a cracking view with the sun behind us but unfortunately my 'scope position bouncing about on the sphagnum was a bit obscured by foliage and I only managed this fuzzy view.



Above: Male Rustic Bunting

That was the end of the trip with Birdguides but before the section of the party going on to the Lapland extension headed north, Hannu was able to use the hotel internet to get me a map of the area just outside Helsinki city centre where a pair of Citrine Wagtails were breeding and where I could catch up with Caspian Tern which had eluded me earlier. Those on the Estonian pre-tour had already had it. So, after a flight back from Kuusamo to Helsinki I was able to work out how to get to Viiki by No.6 tram to the end of the line and on Saturday morning headed off for a final bit of birding before the afternoon flight home. I was not to be disappointed and bagged lifers of both Citrine Wagtail and Caspian

Tern and had more good views of Common Rosefinch and a decent view of a Thrush Nightingale blasting away.



Above: Citrine Wagtail



Above: Thrush Nightingale



Above: Caspian Terns

All in all a splendid nine days birding and heartily recommended. So, now I just need to go back for Hawk Owl, Pine Grosbeak and the birds of the far north...

Tim Wilcox, July 2012