

FINLAND
22ND – 27TH MAY 2016



ORIOLE BIRDING
TOUR REPORT

TOUR LEADERS

Paul Roberts & Ari Latja

PARTICIPANTS

Andrew Dodd
Gary Harper
Chris Hodgson
Patrick Hogston
Larry Hurst
Dave & Jan Kingman
Alan Prosser
Allan Richards
Brian & Chris Shaw

22nd May 2016

Sunny and fairly warm.

Following a smooth transit from London Heathrow Terminal Three to Helsinki, and then to Oulu, we met our guide at the airport, picked up the additional vehicle and took the ten minute drive to the hotel, noting Hooded Crows and Black-billed Magpies en route. With an hour or so before dinner we explored the hotel grounds, which conveniently back onto the shore of Kempele Bay on the Baltic Sea's Gulf of Bothnia. Representative birds of the country were quickly located - Fieldfare [very common in Finland], Pied Flycatcher [often seen using nest boxes in gardens], Chaffinch and Willow Warbler. A Common Rosefinch sang, a Great Bittern 'boomed' [they occur no further north than this] from the adjacent reed bed and a Common Whitethroat was also observed. A tower hide by the edge of the marsh bordering the sea provided a handy vantage point over the bay. Waders were liberally distributed along the shoreline, including Northern Lapwing, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank, Green Sandpiper, Little Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Godwit and Ruff [displaying males]. Arctic Terns and Black-headed Gulls were plentiful, and we also noted our first Little Gulls, Common Gulls and Little Terns. A flock of seven Common Cranes bulged overhead, with Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting singing from the marsh. Wildfowl species logged were Whooper Swan [the Finnish national bird], Greylag Goose, Common Shelduck, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Eurasian Teal, Tufted Duck, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. Heading back to the hotel Sand Martin, Barn Swallow, Great Tit, Eurasian Jay, White Wagtail and Redwing were added to the growing list. Following a tasty dinner, we drove the relatively short distance east of Oulu to the forest at Uusi Yiklimingintie, towards Saviharja. Here we would search for the Pygmy Owls known to be present. Sadly, we were unable to locate any on this evening's excursion, but there would be chance to rectify this on another day...

23rd May 2016

Sunny and warm start, a little cloudier later.

Sightings in the vicinity of the hotel before we set off for the day included two Slavonian Grebes, European Robin, Common Redpoll and a Red Squirrel being set upon by a pair of Fieldfares. Our first port of call was to be an area of forestry to the south-west of Oulu, to the east of Silkajoki. Driving along some unmade up forest tracks we were soon encountering some typical species, such as Yellowhammer, Whinchat, Willow Warbler, Eurasian Siskin and Chaffinch. A male Eurasian Sparrowhawk perched up roadside and one or two Common Snipe were in display. A productive area of forest bordering ploughed fields and scrub gave us superb views of a male Three-toed Woodpecker, plus Eurasian Wryneck, Wood Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat and Tree Pipit. A distant White-tailed Eagle lazily circled in the warming sun. A short drive away was an Ural Owl site and we were soon admiring this magnificent predator from a safe distance. Great Spotted Woodpecker and Common Cuckoo called, two Mistle Thrushes flew past, a Pied Flycatcher nest was found and a Brown Hare sprinted off. Scanning from an open area a little further along the track we noted a Parrot Crossbill perched up, a high-flying Eurasian Hobby, three Common Cranes and several Sky Larks. Following this great start to the day we stopped briefly at a village shop for refreshments [noting House Sparrow and Greenfinch], before calling in at the coast at Varessäika, where a spit of land reaches out into the gulf. Our first Marsh Harrier appeared, a Great Bittern 'boomed' and Sedge Warblers sang.

Common wader species busied themselves and wildfowl included Mute Swan, Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Common Scoter, Common Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser. An Osprey was picked up very distantly to the west, eventually doing the decent thing and flying right over our heads. A tiny island lying very close inshore, by the small harbour, was heaving with nesting Black-headed Gulls, Little Gulls, Arctic Terns and Common Terns. Nine Barnacle Geese flew over and a Common Sandpiper was on the rocks, where two Northern Wheatears were also found. A dark-mantled Herring Gull - presumably *argentatus* race - was on the sea. Setting off roughly south-east from here through farmland, we slowed to observe a flock of roughly fifty Whooper Swans, but were soon diverted by a pair of Grey Partridges feeding close to the vehicle. An interesting feature of the birdlife of the Oulu area is the number of species - including Grey Partridge - that are at, or close to, their world northerly limit. We shortly after came across a similarly sized flock of Whoopers, also noting Wood Pigeons, Eurasian Jackdaws, Rooks, Hooded Crows and Common Starlings. Lunch was taken at the modern Liminka Bay [Limminganlahti] Visitor Centre. Here we received news of a Lesser Spotted Eagle - a Finnish rarity - which had been found to east of Oulu, just north of the Pikkuniva river. We chose to 'twitch' the eagle, which had unfortunately disappeared just minutes before we arrived [we've all been there], but luckily there were other options in the same area to take our minds off the 'dip'. A little further east in a rather isolated and scenic location near the lake Sankilampi we were able to catch up with another Ural Owl, this time a female incubating a nest in a seemingly precariously suspended box. Pied Flycatcher and Tree Pipit were also noted here, as well as a local with what may have been world's biggest pair of binoculars! To the west of here we took a forest track ['Kuparisenpalku'], where we were able to admire a female Black Woodpecker feeding young in the nest. With time moving on we began driving back towards Oulu, stopping south-east of the town, just south of the Oulujoki river. There was no sign of a reported Blyth's Reed Warbler, but we did enjoy Icterine Warbler, Garden Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Northern Wheatear, Marsh Harrier and a colony of Fieldfares, among others. We ended the day with a fabulous Terek Sandpiper at the unlikely-looking snow store location on the coast south of Oulu, at Nuottasaari, where we also noted a male Grey-headed Wagtail [of the race *thunbergi*], Eurasian Wigeon and a Water Vole motoring along a ditch.

24th May 2016

Sunny and warm morning, gradually clouding over and becoming cooler in the afternoon, with rain arriving late afternoon.

Straight after breakfast we headed for the Pygmy Owl site, where we had failed on our first evening. In total contrast we located a resting bird in a birch tree almost as soon as we entered the forest, seemingly completely unconcerned by our presence. We also noted two new butterfly species here - Camberwell Beauty and Green Hairstreak - before continuing on our travels. The plan was to visit a Great Grey Owl nest site some distance east of Oulu, south of Alavuotto. The journey took us through some very scenic villages and countryside [adding House Martin], before driving along forest tracks leaving civilization seemingly far behind. Our Finnature guide expertly led us through the forest - where no tracks exist - for about a kilometre. Here we were greeted by the awesome sight of a Great Grey Owl on her huge nest, showing beautifully in the clear morning light. Nearby we found a smart singing Greenish Warbler, plus Great Spotted Woodpecker, Tree Pipit, Goldcrest and Mistle Thrush. The understory of this ancient forest was thick and spongy, but not wet to walk on, and notable plants included *Daphne mezereum* and *Convallaria majalis*. Meanwhile, we had received news that the Lesser Spotted Eagle had returned to the same area it had been found at the previous day, which was convenient as we were due to pass through this location on our route back to Oulu. On the way we stopped briefly to look again at the Ural Owl in the nest box near Sankilampi [rude not to], also noting two Bullfinches and a Common Redpoll. This time our luck was in with the eagle and we were able to view this Finnish rarity from the roadside. It was noted initially stalking along the ground at the field boundary, before flying up to a higher perch at the forest edge, subsequently swooping down to dispatch an unsuspecting frog, before once more perching in trees. Our tasty and very welcome lunch was taken at a large service station, before we continued on to the tower hide at Puhkiavanperälle, on Liminki Bay. A Marsh Harrier hunted and two Red-backed Shrikes were found, subsequently proving to be the only ones of the trip. Two White-tailed Eagles were seen distantly and some of the regular wildfowl, such as Whooper Swans, were in the bay. A Baltic Gull was spotted far off, but better still were two fly past Caspian Terns. A Garganey was seen in flight and a Spotted Flycatcher dropped in to bushes by the hide. On the drive along the track back to the main road we pulled up next to another two tour buses, hoping to catch up with a Pallid Harrier, known to be frequenting the locale. We weren't to be disappointed as a stunning male soon flew in and perched along a line of reeds in a cereal field. After a few minutes the bird took flight, giving us fantastic views of this charismatic raptor.

With rain approaching we took a drive south-west of here through an area of mixed farmland and forest [between Lumijaki and Revonlahti] where the best sightings were a male Black Grouse pecking around - somewhat incongruously - in a ploughed field and an Ortolan Bunting singing lustily. With the rain becoming heavier we headed for the hotel after a fabulous day's birding.

25th May 2016

Cool and overcast, but dry apart from a few spots of rain.

Today we were to transfer to Kuusamo, stopping at various locations en route. Once well away from Oulu the countryside became noticeably undulating, with numerous expansive bogs. Stopping at Syöte National Park ski centre we located a Common Redstart and a Pied Flycatcher, although birds were few and far between in general. A fine male Brambling was at the visitor centre, with Tree Pipit and another Common Redstart at Vattakura. Following another tasty lunch at the local ABC services at Taivalkoski, we drove a short distance south to an area of mixed forest and clear fell. One of the party brilliantly spotted a Northern Hawk Owl fly in, a bird high on the 'hit list' for all of us. We watched this fabulous bird for around ten minutes as it was mobbed by Fieldfares, before it decided to move on. This area also yielded a distant Great Grey Shrike, Brambling and Common Raven. A little way from here, east of Taivalkoski is Latva-Juurikka. This small lake gave us lovely close views of immaculately plumaged Little Gulls - maybe seventy - plus a good selection of wildfowl, notably Common Goldeneye in numbers. Plenty of Sand Martins hawked for insects over the lake and a Grey-headed Wagtail was seen briefly. Taking the dirt road north-east from here - running in part along the remains of the German WWII Kenttärata railway, built to serve the Eastern Front - the best sightings were a Black Grouse and two close Great Grey Shrikes. Rejoining the main road to Kuusamo, we pulled in just before Kuolio at Kovajärvi, one of the larger lakes we had encountered today. We were soon admiring six dapper Black-throated Divers. Good numbers of gulls and terns were present, a Green Sandpiper flew over and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk was mobbed by hirundines. Our final stop before checking in at the hotel was a small lake by the town's rubbish tip. This had the densest concentration of wildfowl we had yet seen, most numerous Common Goldeneye. An Osprey displayed in the distance and a Common Kestrel flew over. Two Wood Sandpipers were also located here. The tip itself was difficult to view, but scavenging birds included Baltic Gull, Common Gull, *argentatus* Herring Gulls and a group of Common Ravens. An impromptu postprandial jaunt to the Toranki lake which the hotel backs onto brought us two Red-throated Divers, ten Common Scoters, one hundred plus Common Goldeneye [nearly all males], four Smew [one of which male], two Goosanders and a roding Eurasian Woodcock. Better still, perhaps, the next lake immediately to the north yielded at least three pairs of Red-necked Grebes, plus another three Red-throated Divers. We returned to the hotel at about 22.00, with an early start planned the next day...

26th May 2016

Sunny spells, fairly cool, with a moderate breeze.

We convened at 05.00 for a pre-breakfast excursion, mainly to look for the Red-flanked Bluetails at Valtavaara. On the way we stopped at a small lake just north of Kuusamo, where we noted six Velvet Scoters, four Smew and a Black-throated Diver. Shortly after continuing our journey a female Capercaillie was seen from one of the vehicles, before we pressed on to Valtavaara. Climbing the hill near the ski centre we encountered a rogue Capercaillie, and he clearly wasn't taking prisoners! A little further on through the atmospheric taiga forest, and after negotiating a couple of boardwalks, we found our first singing Red-flanked Bluetail, although not a full adult male. Further still we ascended a small hill up a steep incline to view the side of a hill, where we soon located a beautiful full adult male Bluetail. A Green Sandpiper was seen by the car park before we pressed on; with one more stop before breakfast anticipated. This was taken at a pine wood half way between Valtavaara and Kuusamo, where we had great views of a pair of Siberian Tits at a nest box. What attractive little birds these are. Following a hearty breakfast, we drove to the lake immediately to the east of Kuusamo and called in briefly to have another look the Red-necked Grebes. Also we all finally caught up with *fuscus* Lesser Black-backed Gull ['Baltic Gull'] here before heading south-east, via Kuusamo [noting two Feral Pigeons in town], along the road running north of Kuusamojärvi lake. We pulled in at a farm where a Stone Curlew - a very rare vagrant in Finland - had been found. A Common Rosefinch sang in the farmyard and House Martins were busy nesting. Scanning a grassy field, we quickly located the Stone Curlew - certainly not a bird we were expecting at this latitude! From here we headed east, taking the dirt road that runs south of the huge lake Muojärvi, where a superb vista offers views over to Russia.

Our quarry was Tengmalm's Owl and luckily our target was present in its roadside nest hole in a birch tree. It sat quietly for a while, flying off when seemingly spooked by a passing vehicle. The 'big five' owls had now been successfully notched up. After a stop for food in Kuusamo, we drove north-east to a known Northern Hawk Owl location, just north of the lake Suininki. Sure enough the owl was perched in a birch tree, allowing us some photo opportunities in the afternoon sun. A little further north-east still, a Taiga Bean Goose was found with Whooper Swans in a damp grassy field. Moving north we called in at the lake at Vuotinki, which proved to be productive for wildfowl, the best being a pair of Greater Scaup, twelve Velvet Scoters and thirteen Smew. A Common Kestrel flew over and seven Wood Sandpipers flew in. A raptor was picked up distantly low over the trees on the far shore of the lake and it soon became obvious that it was a kite species and although the plumage tones could not be made out at this reach, the large white mirror on the under wings suggested the bird might possibly be an out-of-range Red Kite. Ari put the news out that a kite species was heading in a south-westerly direction from the lake and another Finnature guide was able to photograph it about five kilometres from our initial sighting. The photographs subsequently showed it to be a *lineatus* Black [or Black-eared] Kite, the form from Central Asia, and a rarity for Finland. Some authorities consider that Black-eared Kite should have full species status, but whatever, it was certainly an interesting find for the group. The rest of the afternoon was to be spent at Valtavaara. Crossing a river [where a Goosander was seen amongst other wildfowl], we continued on for several km along a minor road south of the lake Poromtina. Here we were delighted to find a pair of Siberian Jays at the roadside - such characterful birds to watch. Nearby, along the Vikkulantie, we found our own Northern Hawk Owl perched on top of a pine, ending another great day in the field.

27th May 2016

Light winds and cloudless, but a cool start.

Still hoping to catch up with the two grouse species we had not yet seen we made an 03.00 start, intending to spend an hour or so searching from the vehicles, before then catching an extra few hours sleep before breakfast. Driving slowly along some forest tracks south of Kuusamo, north-west of the lake Kuusamojärvi, we searched diligently, but were unable to tempt any Hazel Grouse out from cover, although one was heard calling. However, compensation came in the form of a smart male Willow Grouse in a clearing. After a sleep and breakfast we drove north from the hotel for about twenty kilometres, then taking forest tracks and checking at regular intervals for Hazel Grouse, but sadly no joy was to be had with this elusive species. Arriving at a scenic small lake Matolampi we found a Taiga Bean Goose, which appeared nervous and quickly took flight, along with two Common Cranes, two Green Sandpipers, some Smew and the usual Whooper Swans, so common here in Finland. After a further short drive we encountered another picturesque lake Antinperä, similar in size to Matolampi and surrounded by an extensive bog. While walking down the boardwalk to the tower hide four Bohemian Waxwings flew over, while Brambling and Common Redstart sang. A White-tailed Eagle was seen distantly, with Marsh Harrier and Common Kestrel also around. Wood Sandpipers displayed, a Whooper Swan was on its huge nest and a Baltic Gull flew in and perched on top of a pine. With a plane to catch we drove back to the hotel to pick up our bags and take a quick buffet lunch, before taking the short drive to the Kuusamo Airport. Having driven 1215 km and seen 137 species during our stay in this fabulous country, we caught the flight back to London Heathrow, via Helsinki, concluding an enjoyable and successful tour.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1/Mute Swan
- 2/Whooper Swan
- 3/Taiga Bean Goose
- 4/Greylag Goose
- 5/Barnacle Goose
- 6/Common Shelduck
- 7/Gadwall
- 8/Eurasian Wigeon
- 9/Mallard
- 10/Northern Shoveler
- 11/Northern Pintail
- 12/Garganey
- 13/Common Teal
- 14/Tufted Duck
- 15/Greater Scaup

16/Velvet Scoter
17/Common Scoter
18/Common Goldeneye
19/Smew
20/Goosander
21/Red-breasted Merganser
22/Capercaillie
23/Black Grouse
24/Willow Grouse
25/Grey Partridge
26/Pheasant
27/Red-throated Diver
28/Black-throated Diver
29/Red-necked Grebe
30/Great Crested Grebe
31/Slavonian Grebe
32/Great Bittern [H]
33/Great Cormorant
34/Osprey
35/Black-eared Kite
36/White-tailed Eagle
37/Marsh Harrier
38/Pallid Harrier
39/Lesser Spotted Eagle
40/Eurasian Sparrowhawk
41/Common Kestrel
42/Eurasian Hobby
43/Common Coot
44/Common Crane
45/Stone Curlew
46/European Oystercatcher
47/Northern Lapwing
48/Little Ringed Plover
49/Eurasian Woodcock
50/Common Snipe
51/Black-tailed Godwit
52/Whimbrel
53/Eurasian Curlew
54/Common Redshank
55/Common Greenshank
56/Green Sandpiper
57/Wood Sandpiper
58/Terek Sandpiper
59/Common Sandpiper
60/Ruff
61/Black-headed Gull
62/Little Gull
63/Common Gull
64/Herring Gull
65/Baltic Gull
66/Caspian Tern
67/Little Tern
68/Common Tern
69/Arctic Tern
70/Rock (Feral) Dove
71/Wood Pigeon
72/Common Cuckoo
73/Ural Owl

74/Grey Grey Owl
75/Northern Hawk Owl
76/Eurasian Pygmy Owl
77/Tengmalm's Owl
78/Common Swift
79/Eurasian Wryneck
80/Great Spotted Woodpecker
81/Three-toed Woodpecker
82/Black Woodpecker
83/Sky Lark
84/Sand Martin
85/House Martin
86/Barn Swallow
87/Tree Pipit
88/White Wagtail
89/Grey-headed Wagtail
90/Bohemian Waxwing
91/European Robin
92/Red-flanked Bluetail
93/Common Redstart
94/Northern Wheatear
95/Whinchat
96/Blackbird
97/Fieldfare
98/Redwing
99/Mistle Thrush
100/Sedge Warbler
101/Icterine Warbler
102/Garden Warbler
103/Common Whitethroat
104/Lesser Whitethroat
105Willow Warbler
106/Common Chiffchaff
107/Wood Warbler
108/Greenish Warbler
109/Goldcrest
110Winter Wren [H]
111/Spotted Flycatcher
112/Pied Flycatcher
113Siberian Tit
114/Great Tit
115/Blue Tit
116/Red-backed Shrike
117/Great Grey Shrike
118/Siberian Jay
119/Eurasian Jay
120/Black-billed Magpie
121/Eurasian Jackdaw
122/Rook
123/Hooded Crow
124/Common Raven
125/Common Starling
126/House Sparrow
127/Chaffinch
128/Brambling
129/Greenfinch
130/Eurasian Siskin
131/Common Redpoll

132/Common Rosefinch
133/Parrot Crossbill
134/Bullfinch
135/Yellowhammer
136/Ortolan Bunting
137/Reed Bunting

MAMMALS

Reindeer
Arctic Hare
Brown Hare
Muskrat
Red Squirrel

BUTTERFLIES

Camberwell Beauty
Small White
Orange Tip
Green Hairstreak