

Holiday Highlights
Finland & Norway
10 – 23 May 2013

Guides: Simon Eaves and Pirta Latja

Guests: Lynn & Steve Osborne, Val & Wayne Colson, Maureen & Ted Cawley and Neil Avis

Day 1: We all meet at Heathrow Airport at a respectable eight o'clock in the morning for our flight out to Finland. The first flight is on time and we touchdown in a sunny and warm Helsinki which is a very pleasant surprise after leaving a rather cold London. We have a while to wait for our connecting flight but it's a nice airport and we have time to catch up with guests we know and also get to know some new faces. The short flight north to Oulu which lays about half way up Finland and in the west close to the coast is only just over an hour. Taking off from Helsinki the views are great in the sunshine but the pilot warns us it's not so nice in Oulu. Landing in low cloud and drizzle we need our coats again!

We meet our local guide for the holiday at the airport, her name is Pirta and she has worked for Finnature for several years. She is instantly upbeat even in the cloudy drizzle and insists the weather is set to improve during the week. Bags are loaded and we make the very short drive to our first hotel ticking Curlew and Black-headed Gull as our first birds of the trip. It's getting quite late as we finish dinner so after a short briefing on what we will do tomorrow we head to bed excited for what the new day will bring despite the fact that it's still quite light outside!

Day 2: Some of the guests are up before breakfast and exploring the scrub, marsh and shoreline which is just behind the hotel here. Wayne and Neil talk of Pied Flycatcher and Redwings singing outside and lots of waders on the shore.

All set after breakfast we travel just a couple of minutes down the road to some grassy fields which have been good for hunting raptors recently. We get some nice views of a Marsh Harrier on the ground and several Curlews. The sound of Wood Sandpipers echoes in the distance and some Whooper Swans fly by. We drive on half a mile and spot our first Short-eared Owl so we jump out. The owl flies on and disappears but in this field we find a group of lekking Ruff! They look amazing through the telescopes with multi-coloured head and ruff combinations it's something we were all hoping to see and here it is on the first morning! There are Wood Sandpipers here too among the Ruff and a few Black-tailed Godwits in summer dress in the next field. Two Short-eared Owls appear and fly around, a flock of Yellow Wagtails swirls overhead and Pirta finds a Tree Sparrow while a Black Throated Diver flies above us. What a great stop!

We double back from here getting a brief view of a Hen Harrier and another Short-eared Owl as we go. From here Pirita leads us through a network of country roads to some woodland where she tells us a Tengmalm's Owl is known. We negotiate a wet ditch and creep into the forest and stand quietly in a clearing only a few metres from a nest box. It's set back in the trees about a metre or so off the ground so we have a clear view of the entrance hole. Pirita moves a little closer and the owl hears her approach because the next thing we see is the stunning face of a Tengmalm's Owl staring out at us! For the next few minutes we enjoy breath taking views of this incredible bird before it gets fed up of looking at us and drops back into the nest box.

Pirita knows some good, apparently random fields to stop at! As we pull up at a field edge there are some Grey-headed Yellow Wagtails on the edge of some little puddles so we jump out for a closer look. There are more Ruff and some Wood Sandpipers here as well. A Black Woodpecker calls and flies behind us right out in the open landing some way off on a power pole. Pirita plays a recording of a Black Woodpecker and it responds by flying back so we get a second flight view and some closer scope views as it lands in some birch trees. Two Male Black Grouse fly over and one of them perches in a distant tree. Meanwhile the woodpecker has flown even closer and we get some brief but close views of this huge woodpecker in a little stand of trees next to the road. Amazing!

A series of dirt roads and junctions with no signs (I'm glad Pirita is leading the way!) takes us deeper into a big area of pine forest. It's time for the wellingtons as the next forest track is quite wet after some recent rain. As we walk two Green Sandpipers are displaying over the canopy and the sound of Tree Pipits ring out in the still air. The track leads us to a bit of a clearing where a tall old tree stump hides our next species. We get a bit closer to set up the telescopes on a crack in the top of the dead tree and see the feathers of a Ural Owl sat tight on its nest. It's exciting and disappointing at the same time, we can see there is a Ural Owl there but only part of its back is visible. This is however a very hard bird to see and until any chicks fledge this is all you could expect to see sometimes. We feel privileged to have seen even this much of such a scarce owl.

A female Black Grouse is stood on the track as we get back to the van and we see a couple more as we drive on along the roadside. Pirita's van glimpses a Capercaillie in the trees briefly as we drive a little further. We carry on to a nature reserve visitor centre pausing to look at some more Ruff in a field along the way. In the centre we enjoy a nice lunch while watching Yellowhammers and Tree Sparrows at some feeders outside the window.

As we finish lunch the heavens open so we dash through the rain to a hide overlooking the coast and surrounding marshes. There are some very close Wood Sandpipers and flocks of other waders in the distance with Spotted Redshanks, Ringed Plovers, Greenshank and Dunlin all new for the list. As the rain

stops we move onto the roof of the hide which is a viewing platform. It's really nice to watch flocks of Ruff and Wood Sandpipers as they fly overhead from the fields out onto the shore.

We drive a short way along the coast to a little harbour and view a very calm sea. There are some distant Herring Gulls and a couple of Red-breasted Mergansers here. A Common Tern flies into the harbour and two Common Buzzards drift overhead. Pirita finds us a couple of Little Gulls on the sea before we move on again. A clearing of fields between some forest areas is our next stop. There are a couple of Common Cranes here striding through the grass and Pirita finds some Greater White-fronted Geese in the distance all the while the sound of Skylarks fills the air.

A little drive and we are at the coast again where a shallow shoreline is packed with waders and ducks. Among the countless Teal, Mallard, Wigeon and Tufted Duck Pirita finds a nice drake Garganey. Suddenly a White Tailed Eagle flaps into view its low and all the birds panic, we watch in awe as it starts to hunt closing in on some Teal. Its victim tries to dive to avoid the eagle but the water is very shallow and we watch as the eagle lands in the water then carries off a Teal for its dinner! Incredible!

On the way back to the hotel we take a quick look in an area where a Hawk Owl was recently seen by a birder we have just spoken to. We find some more Common Cranes and lots of Whooper Swans but no owls. The weather is starting to get increasingly cold and wet so we head for the warmth of the hotel and a nice evening meal.

Day 3: It's chilly but dry this morning and we drive about half an hour to an area of woodland where a pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers have been seen. It's a traditional site for this species so we find a nest hole but it seems like no one is at home. Pirita tries playing the call of a woodpecker but a Wryneck calls in response, it's not what we were hoping for but changing the track on her speaker to Wryneck works like a dream as a Wryneck flies in and lands in the tree above our heads! Walking back to the van we get some nice views of a flock of Waxwings and Wayne finds us a stunning male Pied Flycatcher.

We move on driving to another clearing in the forest with a few standing dead trees. A Lesser Whitethroat is singing and we get a nice view of a male Common Redstart. A Rough-legged Buzzard is also a nice addition to the list here circling on the now warming air as the sun breaks through a little. A couple of Willow Grouse that spook from the side of the road are a bit of a surprise in such dense woodland so not all of us spot them as they dash for cover. The track from here leads to another nesting area for Three-toed Woodpecker so we jump out of the vans and listen for a response to Pirita's speaker. A Chiffchaff starts to sing and a Brambling squeaks from the tree tops but not a drummer to be heard! Lunch is a safer bet so we drive on to find that instead!

After lunch Pirita leads us to a little pond where we find a pair of Whooper Swans and a stunning pair of Slavonian Grebes. The light is perfect with blue skies and sunshine, both species look amazing as they drift around the flat calm water.

Pirita has heard about a Red-rumped Swallow that has been seen just a few kilometres away so we head off on a bit of a twitch as this is a very scarce bird in Finland. The site where it was last seen is beautiful. We stand where a road crosses the end of a lake surrounded by pine forest. There are a couple of Spotted Flycatchers very close perching on the roadside barriers and several martins and swallows are hawking low over the water. We have been here a little while and we are just thinking that maybe the swallow has moved on when Simon spots it overhead. It spirals round and lands gracefully among the other hirundines on the power line just beside us, what a stunning little bird it is.

We drive from here a reasonable distance to the site of a Great Grey Owl. However they have not yet laid any eggs and may or may not be around the site. It's tall dense woodland and Pirita leads us to where we can see the nest. We spend a while here and search the surrounding area for the adults which are likely to be not too far away but alas no sign of this mighty owl. We don't hold our breath as we move on to another Three-toed Woodpecker site which is not too far away as our luck with this species has not been good today. Fieldfares, Red Squirrel and a Treecreeper are nice to see here but the little drummer remains quiet and unseen!

It's quite a long drive back to the hotel from here and the day is coming to an end but the light is fantastic with the sun low in the sky so we make a tiny detour to the fields close to the hotel to look for harriers again. We soon get our second wind as a Hen Harrier appears then three or more Short-eared Owls. A Marsh Harrier adds to the tally of raptors then Pirita finds a distant perched male Pallid Harrier. It's a reasonable view in the scopes but we wish for a better look at this stunning raptor. Our wishes are soon answered as a second male Pallid Harrier flies over the road and almost over our heads, it's brief but close and very nice! We really must get back for dinner but as we go to get back in the vans a Pallid Harrier is tussling with a Short-eared Owl and we just can't leave!

Day 4: We are up and out before breakfast this morning and after a short drive we come across eight male Black Grouse on an open field which are very nice to see. We watch as they all take flight and disappear over the trees. We also encounter a few female Capercaillies along the track sides here as well. We return to one of the Three-toed Woodpecker sites which we visited yesterday and the air is so calm we can hear Wryneck calling, Black Grouse bubbling, Greenshank and Wood Sandpipers singing, and some Cranes calling in the distance, it's very atmospheric. We get some nice views of Common Crossbill and Waxwings here but again the woodpeckers remain elusive.

Pirita takes us to another patch of forest where some Pygmy Owls are nesting. A Cuckoo is calling and Tree Pipits are singing all around. The nest hole here is hidden so Pirita plays a recording of the owl and we wait. All is quiet on the owl front so we decide to call it quits and return to the hotel for breakfast.

Refreshed from a nice breakfast we head back out into the forest where the weather has improved a little. Pirita takes us to some forest where we walk a short way through the trees to two Pygmy Owl nest boxes. We stand so we can see both boxes and Pirita plays the tape..... nothing happens! No owls at home. On the up side a Goldcrest is curious about the noise of the Pygmy Owl recording and it comes down to investigate giving us some stunning views of this tiny little forest bird.

We leave the forests for now heading towards the coast and an area which is used to dump snow cleared from the roads and paths in the winter. The muddy land that appears as the snow melts is a breeding area for Arctic Terns and a feeding area for waders at this time of year. We find Lapwing, Oystercatcher, Ringed Plover and Little Ringed Plover on this slightly industrial landscape which the birds seem to like despite its barren appearance. A little lagoon on the coast close to the snow dump is our next stop. There are some Red-breasted Mergansers on the sea and Arctic Terns flying along the coast. One or two Wheatears flit around the area and Pirita finds us a nice Whinchat.

We move on for a buffet style lunch in a restaurant before we drive a little way to another part of the coastline. We walk through some forest adjacent to the shore and find a Hobby perched in a clearing, it's a nice view in the scopes. The sun has broken through as we walk out of the woods down to the shore and the sea is very calm. A pair of Whooper Swans swim by through a significant amount of sea ice which is still yet to melt. There are Black Throated Divers on the sea, Pintail, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard and the first Gadwall of the trip. On the shore several waders are picking amongst the weed with Ruff and Ringed Plover quite close. On a distant part of the shore we see Little Terns and Temminck's Stints although they are tricky to see.

We are back at the hotel early today as we had an early start this morning but also so that we can offer an optional evening trip to try again for Pygmy Owl. After dinner a few guests stay at the hotel and enjoy a relaxing evening while the rest of us suit up and head off again into the evening sun. We return to one of the sites for Pygmy Owl where we looked earlier in the day, a wide dirt track with dense forest either side. Maureen spots a Red-backed Shrike as we turn onto the track off the main road it's perched beautifully lit by the evening sunlight.

We drive up the track and jump out of the van and wait in silence as Pirita plays the call of a Pygmy Owl. At first for a few minutes there's nothing then suddenly a little voice calls back at us, it's a Pygmy Owl! It's hard to tell how far away it is and we just have to wait and see if it comes into view. Then it stops and

nothing again for a couple of minutes. Pirta whistles this time to imitate an owl and it works amazingly as a tiny owl appears in the trees right beside the road with bright yellow eyes staring back at us! It sits quite still watching us for a long time lit perfectly by some sunshine filtering through the trees then flies across the road and calls out looking for the rival owl he has heard. It resettles close to us for some more stunning views before we have to leave, what an amazing end to the day and how rewarding after looking so hard for this stunning tiny owl.

Day 5: Today we travel to Kuusamo and it's quite a long drive but we will do some birding along the way. The scenery is not as flat as it was in the Oulu area and as we drive on the forests cover hills that stretch out into the distance. We make a stop about half way in a National Park area among these forested slopes. This is the habitat of Red-flanked Bluetail so we scan a likely area for singing males which often sing from the tallest trees. We can hear one singing in the distance but just can't find it. Eventually Simon picks it out silhouetted against the sky in the far distance but as soon as he gets it in the scope it flies off! It's not our only chance to see this species so we decide to move on.

Some snow on the footpath we hope to walk stops us from exploring the woods here but the warmth of the midday sun is making the forest birds quiet anyway so we drive on to find lunch. Lunch is in a little cafe with bird feeders outside the window and while we dine we watch a couple of Brambling including a male with its stunning black head of summer plumage. A male Pied Flycatcher is singing here as well. We carry on our journey after lunch and take a detour up a quiet dirt road, a hen Capercaillie flushes from beside the track and we spot a flock of about 40 Waxwings in a tree. We jump out at a couple of points to listen for Hazel Grouse and Pirta even tries blowing her Hazel Grouse whistle but the breeze through the trees means the sound doesn't carry very far so we continue on our way.

It's nice to see a couple more female Capercaillies and Black Grouse along the next stretch of the drive as we avoid some of the main roads taking the parallel side roads instead. Before long we reach the outskirts of Kuusamo so Pirta takes us to the rubbish dump! It does have a nice lake beside it though and there are quite a lot of gulls around. We add Baltic Gull to the list as they fly over and a Coot appears on the water which is another first for the trip.

The hotel is just a few minutes away and it's only mid-afternoon so we check in and find our rooms before heading out in the vans again to do some local birding. The weather is a little cooler here and the lake behind the hotel is still partly frozen so we wrap up well. We stop at several spots in the forest looking for Siberian Jay, Rustic Bunting and Hazel Hen but we have no luck with any of these birds. However, where the track runs close to a big lake we stop and find several Red-necked Grebes, flocks of Whooper Swans and loads of entertaining Muskrats busy in the partly frozen water, we are shivering in the air so we can't believe how cold it must be in the water for these little creatures.

We move on a little, keeping warm in the vans, and spot a Mountain Hare crouched in the verge. Pirita is concerned it may be injured but when she walks up to it, it runs off! The road passes through some houses on the outskirts of the town and there on someone's front lawn is a pair of Willow Grouse which is a nice surprise. They are very close and don't seem to mind us watching from the vans. The male's body is still all white from winter but the head and neck has turned brown just like a Red Grouse back in Scotland.

Our last stop overlooking a windswept lake which is still largely frozen is quite brief as the temperatures have started to drop even more. There are several ducks along the shore with mostly Teal and Wigeon and we find three Smew swimming on the deeper water. Tomorrow I think we will put on some more layers!

Day 6: We are up before breakfast again today, 5:00am to be exact. We are hoping to see a Capercaillie lek and maybe catch up with some of the species we have struggled to see so far as most birds are more vocal in the morning. However the weather is not really on our side as we wake. The cloud and drizzle are dampening our spirits but we do see a female Capper from the vans as we drive through the woods. We pull up in the forest lek area and a male Capercaillie is striding across the forest floor. We are quite close but with only one male around he continues to walk and wanders off into the forest, it's a short but nice view of this elusive forest grouse.

We try a little walk in the forest to listen for Siberian Tit and Siberian Jay but despite the early morning the woods are quiet. We carry on trying some traditional sites for Rustic Buntings which should just be arriving for the summer. However, it does not feel like summer this morning and as the drizzle turns to rain which then starts to pour down, we're not surprised that they aren't singing! We see several Mountain Hares and Reindeer along the way that don't seem to mind the cold and wet plus a couple more soggy female Capercaillies but the Rustic Buntings will have to wait as a hot breakfast is much more appealing at this point now the rain has started to pound on the windscreen.

What a difference a couple of hours can make as we leave after breakfast the skies brighten and the rain stops and by the time we reach our first site the sun is starting to break through. The Siberian Jays which have been elusive so far appear within seconds of us jumping out of the vans, they show well in the tree tops flying across the road. A pair of Willow Tits show briefly here as well. Will our luck extend to Rustic Bunting too? No not a peep when Pirita plays some tape at another site.

Moving on we retrace our steps from this morning and it's so much more pleasant in the sunshine. We start to look for Siberian Tits again but suddenly a Three-toed Woodpecker drums in the distance. We walk in the direction of the

drumming as it continues and there at the top of a dead tree bashing out its territorial signal is a stunning male Three-toed Woodpecker. It stays in the tree for us all to see really well in the telescopes, it's a new species for several of us and what a reward it is after trying so hard to see one earlier in the holiday.

We wander back through the woods over to the nest box which may have Siberian Tits nesting in it. We wait patiently and before long we are watching a pair of these little northern specialities. They hop around in the trees and visit the nest box where we are standing so we get some fantastic close views. It's another key species to see on this trip so we are all very happy to see one.

We drive a little way and have lunch beside a river which can be a good place to see Dipper and sure enough there is one under the bridge posing nicely for us as we arrive. The sun is shining and the air is much warmer so it's a very pleasant picnic. Not far from the river we pass a lake and find a pair of Smew and some Ruff. We search again for Rustic Buntings but still they refuse to appear.

We move on and take a road which runs through an area with many dead mature trees and cleared forest. This has been a nesting area for Hawk Owl in previous years so we cross our fingers and hope this morning's luck will continue. We see Black Grouse and Capercaillie by the roadside as we drive and several Reindeer but no sign of any owls. The road from here climbs a little and we get a view over some more habitat which looks good again for Hawk Owl. There are some Wood Sandpipiers singing here and we find one stood on top of a pine tree. We take a little walk to end the day, a narrow path winds up a fairly steep hill which is covered in old forest. Chaffinches and Willow Warblers are singing as we walk and when we reach a bit of a clearing we listen out for Hazel Grouse, they have a distinctive whistling call which Pirita replicates with a whistle but I guess there are none near enough to respond. Three Common Cranes fly over before we head back down the hill.

Day 7: It's a beautiful morning today, blue skies and sunshine with the forecast looking good for the rest of the trip as well. We head off with Rustic Buntings on our minds again but we have to make do with several female Capercaillies and Black Grouse which isn't too bad an alternative! More Reindeer are grazing along the verges as we drive on. The road passes a huge lake which is mirror calm and reflecting the blue sky beautifully. A pair of Black-throated Divers are on the far side but we can make out their distinctive curvy outline through the scopes even at distance. The dirt road comes to an abrupt end and this signals the start of our walk. A boardwalk crosses some wet woodland and at a little footbridge we pause to watch a Wood Sandpiper singing from a treetop nearby. The boardwalk continues and we get some nice views of a Tree Pipit, after hearing them almost everywhere is nice to find one perched in full view at last.

The trail enters some denser woodland, and as the path rises a couple of Willow Tits call as they work their way through the trees, we get some brief but close

views and we see that they are quite different from the ones back home. The path becomes a little steeper and a bit more awkward underfoot so we pause for a rest at a junction in the track. Simon and Pirita try to find some Crossbills that are calling in the treetops but the number of trees makes it pretty impossible.

The track becomes steeper now so we slow the pace down. We can hear a Red-flanked Bluetail singing, it's a simple but far carrying song and although they often sing from the very tops of the tallest trees this is going to be tricky to find. Just as the bluetail sounds like it has moved a little closer we hear a Hazel Grouse so Pirita calls back to it with her whistle. Some of us glimpse the Hazel Grouse as it scuttles through the grass below the trees but it's still very interested in Pirita's whistle and soon we watch as it glides through the clearing along the track, it's a very good flight view. What must be a second Hazel Grouse also flies through giving us all another great flight view of this elusive forest bird. We turn our attention back to the Red-flanked Bluetail which is still singing away but we can't pick it out from the track looking between the trees. Pirita walks off the trail into the woods to see if she can find somewhere to view it. She waves us in and we stumble out to join her. It's worth the effort though as through the telescopes we can see every feather on this gorgeous little bird.

We carry on up the trail but the path becomes tricky with snow and ice patches. Wayne, Neil and Lynn make it to the very top and enjoy an uninterrupted view in all directions of lakes and forest stretching out to the horizon in every direction even in the distance out to the Russian border. The rest of us make it most of the way and get a glimpse of the views through the trees, either way it's a stunning place. We all make it back to the vans and drive a couple of kilometres to a tiny wooden lodge cafe in the middle of nowhere! The smell of soup wafting in the air as we enter is lovely after a long walk and the taste is even better!

After lunch we search another area of forest that has had nesting Hawk Owls in previous years. This year though there have been very few sightings and no nests have been found yet so the chances of finding one seem slim. We get some nice views of Redstart and Tree Pipit again here but no sign of any owls unfortunately.

Pirita knows of another caper site which is a bit of a drive away but we have a good chance of seeing it so we all nod and agree this would be interesting and soon we reach the site where the male Capercaillie has been seen. We wait a while and suddenly a male Capercaillie appears from nowhere! It displays, tail fanned and chest puffed out making the curious wheezing and popping noises that only Capercaillies can. What a sight, camera shutters are clicking like mad! It gets braver and we get more scared as it gets a little too close for comfort. It backs off a bit which is good and after a couple more shots of it strutting its stuff in the middle of the track we leave. What an incredible encounter!

We are quite a way from the hotel so from here we head back but not completely ignoring another hen Capercaillie by the roadside. The brake lights on Pirita's van suddenly come on and then the reversing lights! They have spotted something in a field to the left..... it's an Elk! It looks over its shoulder at us then decides to dash off. We try to follow it but the tree cover gets thicker and it eventually disappears behind the vegetation. It may have been brief but they can be tricky to find so we are all really pleased to have seen one.

We can't head back to the hotel without trying one last time for Rustic Bunting which is fast becoming the bogey bird of the trip. At least we all now know what kind of habitat Rustic Buntings like! Needless to say Pirita plays some tape and nothing responds! Well there's always tomorrow!

Day 8: The day dawns fine and sunny again and before we start our long journey north across the Arctic Circle we have a score to settle. We all recognise the habitat of the Rustic Bunting as we pull over but this time it's really our last chance because we will be too far north to see one soon. Pirita has downloaded a new call to play back, one from a bird recorded in this area and the look of relief and excitement on her face is priceless when a Rustic Bunting appears in response to it. We all get some nice views of this stunning bunting before it returns to its elusive ways.

We continue north now clocking up the miles with amazing scenery of lakes and rivers among the miles and miles of forest. The reflections are stunning and the scene is enhanced with Whooper Swans and Goldeneye drifting on the flat calm waters. We cross the Arctic Circle in warm sunshine pulling over for a photo and a toast to this milestone on the trip. Beyond this point the scenery starts to change and as we stop for our picnic lunch we are surrounded by vast open flat land covered in shallow pools. We can hear Lapwings and find some Yellow Wagtails and Wheatears plus Curlew and Wood Sandpipers on the pools.

We still have some miles to cover so we press on after lunch towards Ivalø which will be our hotel stop for tonight. The clear road stretches out ahead and with just the odd Reindeer related crossing to slow us down we make good time and eventually take a side road to do a bit of birding. In some open pine woodland we stretch our legs a little, a Capercaillie flies across the track which some of us see and a Golden Eagle is almost as brief as it flaps low through the trees. We continue along this track a little way seeing some more Wood Sandpipers and Reindeer before there is too much snow on the road and we double back.

We are not too far from Ivalø now but again we take a side road that this time leads to a ski resort, there's no skiing now but still quite a lot of snow on the ground. A wooden tower gives us a view in all directions of the scenery stretching out into the distance and from here we pick out a couple of summer plumage Golden Plovers striding about on the open ground. A falcon appears directly over head as we are stood on the tower, it looks very white in the bright

light and at first we think we have a Gyr but as we watch it power off into the distance we realise it is just (!) a Peregrine. We drive down into the little town of Ivalø and find our hotel which looks out over a wide river which is running fast and high with melt water. After dinner a few of us take a stroll and see Short-eared Owl, Yellowhammers and a nice Arctic Hare.

Day 9: The run of good weather continues as we wake to blue skies again. We are driving on to Norway today with hopefully some good birding en route. The scenery is somewhat more rugged and wild, ice is still covering some of the lakes and snow is still on the ground in patches among the shaded forest. As we pass a lake surrounded by forested hills some birds catch our eye on the water - Black Throated Divers! Five of them swimming together with their wakes being the only ripples in the glassy water, they look amazing so we jump out to watch them for a while.

The Cafe we plan to stop for a cuppa is not yet open but no worries as we can still see the bird feeders around the back so we start looking for a couple of species we hope to connect with here, namely Arctic Redpoll and Pine Grosbeak. There are lots of Mealy Redpolls and Brambling visiting the feeders and a singing Pied Flycatcher which is nesting here but no sign of the two species we hoped for. The cafe opens so we grab a coffee then return to watching the feeders. A very pale redpoll visits the feeder briefly, it could be Arctic but it's quite brief and they can be tricky to identify. The Pine Grosbeak that flies in though needs no second look to identify as it dwarfs a Mealy Redpoll that it lands next to on the bird table. It may only be a female but it's still a stunner and a new bird for almost all of us. A second grosbeak flies in and we watch them both for a while in the trees and feeders for some time. Brilliant!

We drive on towards the border with Norway and the scenery becomes dominated with birch scrub on a flat, open, somewhat boggy ground. A bird perched on the power lines ahead has Simon and Pirta breaking hard, its silhouette is of a big flat head with a long pointed tail, it can only be one thing... HAWK OWL! We are shaking with excitement! We can't believe our luck as it stares back at us with its piercing yellow eyes. It's not bothered by us so we get out of the vans for some astonishing telescope views of this mythical northern owl. It's incredibly photogenic and eventually drops from the power lines and glides past us to perch in some birch trees on the opposite side of the road. What a bird!

We have lunch in a nice little bar next to the river crossing that is the Norwegian Border. Crossing the bridge really feels like entering a new country as the scenery changes quite dramatically again. Stunted birch woodland clings to the rough ground as we follow a wide river which has blocks of ice bobbing along in it and steep walls of snow and ice still clinging to the riverbanks. The river widens and the hills on each side climb higher adding to the drama of the scenery. We stop looking over this scenery and watch a Peregrine and several Rough-legged

Buzzards soaring on cliff updrafts. A dirt road across a vast flat sandy area in the valley floor takes us to the river edge where it becomes more of an estuary and surrounded on all sides by snow capped jagged mountains so here we do a bit of birding. There are lots of Common Eiders here plus Cormorants and a few Kittiwakes. We pick out Black Guillemots and three Velvet Scoters on the water as well as a very distant White Tailed Eagle.

From what is essentially sea level we head up and up into the mountains north towards Båtsfjord where we will be staying for a couple of nights. The road is clear but most of the land is covered in snow on the mountain plateau. We stop at the top where the temperature is a wee bit of a shock after such warmth in Finland, it's close to freezing up here! Golden Plovers fly between the patches of ground free of snow and Simon finds our first Lapland Buntings.

A bit further on we see Wheatears and Snow Buntings not far from frozen lakes with guys ice fishing! The scenery is stunning but we are all ready for the hotel because we set off this morning in warm sunshine so we all feel a little underdressed for this environment! The road drops back down to sea level to the little fishing port of Båtsfjord where we pause briefly to look at some Long-tailed Ducks and Red-throated Divers on a small freshwater pool just before the town.

A bit of warmth and a nice meal is very welcome at the end of the day however it's not the end as the hotel owner tells us that her daughter saw a Snowy Owl yesterday only a couple of miles away! We don all our layers to face the evening chill and head back inland up into the hills to scan the area the owl was last seen. It's quite misty with low cloud and a bit of a challenge to scan. We do find our first Ptarmigan though running across some scree. A singing Redwing is the only other bird we find, it sounds a lot more enthusiastic about the conditions than we do so with the light fading we head back to the hotel.

Day 10: It's cold and drizzly as we look out from the breakfast table but when we leave a little later it has brightened up and the wind is almost nothing which means although it's cold there is little wind chill.

Simon's van start the day with a Ptarmigan, all white against the snow only its eye and red wattle stand out. We catch Pirita and the rest of the group at the roadside where there are some clear patches free of snow. Here we get some nice views of Shorelark and Lapland Bunting plus we can hear a Temminck's Stint singing. Still exploring the snowy mountain road we stop again and Pirita finds us some Tundra Bean Geese grazing on the short vegetation. Simon spots a White Tailed Eagle but it glides behind a ridge and disappears. Mealy Redpolls, Wheatears and Redwings flit among the short birch scrub which grows in the sheltered gullies along streams in this hostile environment.

Dropping back down towards the coast we stop beside a wide bay. There are Black Guillemots here and some Oystercatchers on the shoreline. Simon hears a Ring Ouzel singing from the cliffs behind us and Pirita picks it out sat on a ridge near the top, it's a nice view in the telescopes. Pirita leads us along the coast from here a short drive overlooking a bay to a rocky headland which has been a nest site for Gyr Falcons in previous years. We sit here for a while and have lunch watching the vast numbers of Cormorants and Kittiwakes roosting on an offshore rocky island in the distance. A big falcon appears briefly by the headland but even with such a brief view we know it's a Gyr Falcon, it reappears again ever so briefly and most of us get a view even if it isn't great.

Moving on we get some great views of a Rough-legged Buzzard with nesting material flying very low over the next bay. A White-tailed Eagle is next, this one is high right above us as we drive on following the road that hugs the coastline. Two more White-tailed Eagles flush the gulls off a beach in the next bay as they cruise along the shore. Simon's van spots another eagle perched on the rocky shore then a second one half a mile further on again perched on the rocks and as we get close it flies in the direction of the lighthouse where we are planning to stop. The two White-tailed Eagles are passing the lighthouse as we pull up and jump out there's a pandemonium of gulls, sea duck and Shags all panicking at the sight of the eagles! Wow!

We find some shelter from the wind on the lea side of the lighthouse to enjoy the spectacle of literally countless birds. Never has Simon seen so many seabirds on and over the sea. The rolling waters are carpeted with Long-tailed Ducks, Common Eider, Shags, Cormorants, gulls and auks. The sky above the water is alive with more gulls, mostly Kittiwakes, it's simply awesome. Simon picks out a pair of King Eiders on the sea and gradually we all get a view of these handsome birds in the scope even if it's a young male not yet in fine feather.

Back at the van all the big gulls get up from their roost on the rocks and a Glaucous Gull flies up with them standing out well with its bright white wing tips. We double back from here following the coast road and Simon spots an Otter feeding on the shoreline. A couple of Hooded Crows are lurking nearby as the Otter has a fish. Then a Red Fox appears heading straight for the Otter and its catch. We watch in amazement as the Otter dives back into the sea with some of the fish while the fox snatches what's left on the shore!

We finish the day watching a Rough-legged Buzzard mobbing a White-tailed Eagle. Not a bad way to end the day is it?

Day 11: As the Crow flies it's not too far to Vardø, south east along the coast where our next hotel is, it's a town on an island at the outer edge of the famous Varangerfjord, however there are no straight roads and it will take us most of the day to drive the long way round but we hope for some good birds along the way.

Leaving Båtsfjord we climb again into the mountains stopping to view some displaying Golden Plovers and a pair of Arctic Skuas on a frozen lake. Then as the road descends Simon's van gets a nice view of a Willow Grouse. Catching up with Pirita we have all inadvertently stopped beside a singing Dipper, it displays and sings to a second bird before they both dart off downstream. We retrace our steps from a couple of days ago stopping at the wide river estuary again. Simon finds a Temminck's Stint among some roosting Dunlin and Pirita points out an Oystercatchers nest right on the track side. Some Shelduck and a couple of Bar-tailed Godwits are new additions to the list here as well.

We drive east eventually hitting the start of Varangerfjord stopping briefly as we spot some Red Knot. Then we drive on to a lunch spot overlooking this massive coastal inlet. We get to watch at least three different White-tailed Eagles as we munch our lunch here!

A headland with a pretty isolated church on it is our next stop. The bay and nearby island is busy with birds so we have a scan and take a walk here. Arctic Terns are fishing in the shallows and a big flock of Red Knots swirl in the distance. There are gulls and some Arctic Skuas a bit further out over the small island and we find a Turnstone on the beach.

A short drive along the coast is the town of Vadsø and we pull up here to search the sheltered bay for one of our main target birds of the holiday. The water is a stunning deep blue in the now sunny conditions and shining in the sun are a flock of brilliant white Steller's Eiders. There's a flock of about thirty birds and through the scopes we make out the beautiful subtlety of their plumage with orangey chests, black and white bodies and glossy green patches on the rear crown, they really are a stunning duck. Simon picks out a very distant drake King Eider here among a small group of Common Eiders, it's swimming close to some rocks and is tricky to see but most of us eventually pick out its colourful head pattern. A motor boat speeds straight towards the dozing Steller's Eiders and spooks them off the water however they fly round the bay and land by a little harbour wall closer to the shore. We don't hesitate to jump into the vans and speed round the bay to get closer look. They are so much closer now and look amazing as they dive and then pop up like corks all in unison. What amazing birds!

We continue our drive following the shore of the ever widening Varangerfjord with increasingly tundra like scenery along the shore. A couple of Whimbrel fly over the road ahead of the vans and we find a flock of Taiga Bean Geese on a roadside field. Simon is a little slow to set off from this stop and his van spots two Long-tailed Skuas fly elegantly over the road and off into the distance inland.

We make one last stop on route at a little village with a pretty harbour. Some Twite are feeding in the grass and we get a nice close view of a Purple Sandpiper. The town of Vardø is on a small island accessed by a long road tunnel which

is an interesting way to get to our next hotel. The hotel overlooks the harbour of this colourful place and in the distance we can see the seabird island that we will visit by boat tomorrow. We all look forward to this as Pirita describes the island over dinner.

Day 12: After breakfast we all meet at the harbour to catch a little ferry over to the seabird island of Hornøya. It's only a short crossing of ten minutes or so and as we get closer to the island the sheer number of birds becomes apparent. Auks scatter off the water in all directions as we glide towards the jetty and the cliffs are alive with the sound of Kittiwakes and the weather - well it must be the best day yet with blue skies and a warm breeze, we are so lucky.

The steps from the jetty run up to a small wooden shelter that gives a view up to small cliffs that rise from a steep slope in front of us. On the slope Puffins appear from burrows in the grass and Shags stand proud on the higher boulders. The cliffs themselves are lined with Common Guillemots with Razorbills and scarcer Brünnich's Guillemots among them in small groups. Kittiwakes are everywhere on the cliffs, in the air and sometimes swirling off the cliffs en masse, it's a real wildlife spectacle.

We follow the path slowly under the cliffs getting very close to some of the birds on the lower part of the rocks and they don't appear bothered at all. It's photographic heaven! The path climbs round the island and we all go at our own pace but those who make it a little further see a Pomarine Skua that Neil spots as it swoops over our heads. Lovely spoons!

We have had all morning but time flies and before we know it we are wandering back to the boat to catch it back to town. We have a little break and some lunch at the hotel to rest before heading out birding again.

We drive out through the tunnel back to the mainland and head North West. The road climbs away from the shore and a vast area of boggy tundra stretches out inland. Stopping here we see several Arctic Skuas, Curlew and a Whimbrel in flight. Simon finds a Spotted Redshank on one of the pools and then we notice that there are two Red-necked Phalaropes on the same pool, they aren't that close but they are the first of the trip.

We spot a few more Arctic Skuas along the next stretch of road of both light and dark phases but also one which is of the scarcer mid-phase colouration which bares quite a resemblance to a Long-tailed Skua with its dark belly and pale neck and face! The road drops back to the coast and we make a few stops searching for White-billed Divers but with no luck. The scenery is very dramatic with jagged towering rocks jutting out on both sides of the road and down to the shore with a steep cliff just inland. We find some Common Eiders and many Long-tailed Ducks but no divers.

Some Belgian birders (who we have met before as they are staying in the same hotel) are stood in the road as we drive on and they tell us that they have heard a Bluethroat singing. We don't need asking twice to jump out and we are soon listening, overlooking some low scrubby trees. Several Redpolls call and a couple of Waxwings fly over but no song from the Bluethroat. Pirita plays just a short snatch of song from her phone and up pops the Bluethroat in full view! It calls and sings for a while and we get some incredible views of this gorgeous northern gem.

The road twists along the coast between the rocks and around sweeping bays as we continue to look for divers but none appear. At the end of the road we walk a little to look out to sea, it's incredible to think that straight out is just water all the way to the North Pole! A single Gannet is a new bird to add to the list here.

We return on the same road keeping our eyes on the sea looking still for divers but all we see is the Belgian birders again! This could mean they have seen something so we stop to say bonjour! It's worth stopping as they tell us that there are some Fin Whales passing by! We all jump out and soon one surfaces just offshore. We drive a little bit ahead of the whales and see them again blow and surface as they cruise through the next bay and off into the distance. Talk about good timing! What a great way to end the day.

Day 13: Our run of fine weather continues and we wake for our last full day in sunshine and increasing temperatures. We are heading back to Ivalo along the shore of Varangerfjord and as we drive we watch Short-eared Owls, Rough-legged Buzzards and White-tailed Eagles!

At a small village we find a nice flock of Waxwings fly-catching from some power lines and on the beach two Glaucous Gulls. Onwards in Vardø we spot the little flock of Steller's Eiders again before heading just beyond the town to a grassy headland which Pirita tells us can be a good spot for Red Throated Pipits. It is in fact a good place for Red Throated Pipits as Simon finds one within minutes! It shows nicely on a fence line as it sings away.

We have a lot of miles to cover and so we press on calling in for lunch at the little bar on the border where we stopped on our way North before. After lunch Pirita leads us up a side road to an area that is used to round up the Reindeer. It's not in use just now but there are a couple of freshwater pools here and her local knowledge is priceless as we find several Red-necked Phalaropes spinning around in the water.

We move on with still some way to go but with blue skies reflecting in the many lakes and a return to the forests of Finland it's a beautiful drive. After a quick "tourist" shop stop for souvenirs we arrive back at the hotel in Ivalo for our last dinner. Hopefully there will be "Gloop" for pudding again! (You had to be there!).

After dinner we discuss our favourite parts of the holiday, it's great to remember as we have done so much over the last two weeks. There are many different answers for species of the trip with Hawk Owl and Bluethroat coming out on top. I think the surprise element of the owl and the stunning views of the Bluethroat really did make these two birds particularly special. The seabird island of Hornöya was place of the trip for Carolyn and several of us agreed it was an amazing location. Ted, Maureen and Lynn all choose lekking Ruff as their magic moment of the trip with several sightings they have been great to see in such unique plumage. Steve reminds us of the caper and being such an amazing camera opportunity, this had to be his magic moment. Piritä's magic moment was finding the elusive Rustic Bunting, relief as much as magic! There are many more, too many to mention but every day had its magic moment.

Day 14: Today we fly back home but we still have some time to go birding after breakfast. We drive a short distance to a birdwatching tower. Surrounded by trees but looking out over some open marshes and pools it's a nice place to spend our last hour. We see Ruff, Goldeneye, Goosander and Curlew out in the open and Maureen spots a Siberian Tit at eye level in the trees. A Merlin shoots over the tower and we get a typical tail end view as it powers across the marsh, it does land but quite distantly even for a scope view. The Siberian Tit must be nesting nearby and shows amazingly well as we leave the tower.

After an early lunch we make the very short drive to Ivalo airport where we say a very big thank you and goodbye to Piritä who has been a great guide and has humoured our British humour brilliantly! We take with us many vivid memories of some very special wildlife from a very special place.

Bird of the Trip: Hawk Owl and Bluethroat

Place of the Trip: Hornöya Island and Ilvaara hill top walk.

Magic Moments: Lekking Ruff. Capercaillie. Hunting White-tailed Eagle. Singing Red-flanked Bluetail and Tengmalm's Owl at the nest.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Crested Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Fulmar
Gannet
Cormorant
Shag
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Taiga Bean Goose
Tundra Bean Goose
White-fronted Goose
Greylag Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Pintail
Garganey
Shoveler
Tufted Duck
Common Eider
King Eider
Steller's Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Common Scoter
Velvet Scoter
Goldeneye
Smew
Red-breasted Merganser
Goosander
White-tailed Sea Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Pallid Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Common Buzzard
Rough-legged Buzzard
Golden Eagle
Osprey
Common Kestrel
Merlin
Hobby
Gyr Falcon
Peregrine Falcon
Hazel Grouse
Willow Grouse
Ptarmigan
Black Grouse
Capercaillie

Pheasant
Coot
Common Crane
Oystercatcher
Little Ringed Plover
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Lapwing
Knot
Temminck's Stint
Purple Sandpiper
Dunlin
Ruff
Common Snipe
Woodcock
Black-tailed Godwit
Bar-tailed Godwit
Whimbrel
Curlew
Spotted Redshank
Common Redshank
Greenshank
Green Sandpiper
Wood Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Turnstone
Red-necked Phalarope
Arctic Skua
Pomarine Skua
Long-tailed Skua
Little Gull
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Baltic Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Glaucous Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Kittiwake
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Little Tern
Guillemot
Brünnich's Guillemot
Razorbill
Black Guillemot
Puffin
Feral Rock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Cuckoo
Hawk Owl
Pygmy Owl
Ural Owl
Short-eared Owl
Tengmalm's Owl

Common Swift
Wryneck
Black Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Three-toed Woodpecker
Skylark
Shore Lark
Sand Martin
Swallow
Red-rumped Swallow
House Martin
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Red-throated Pipit
Rock Pipit (h)
Grey-headed Yellow Wagtail
White Wagtail
Waxwing
Dipper
Dunnock (h)
Robin
Bluethroat
Red-flanked Bluetail
Common Redstart
Whinchat
Northern Wheatear
Ring Ouzel
Fieldfare
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Lesser Whitethroat
Chiffchaff
Willow Warbler
Goldcrest
Spotted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Willow Tit
Siberian Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Common Treecreeper
Red-backed Shrike
Jay
Siberian Jay
Magpie
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow

Chaffinch
Brambling
Greenfinch
Siskin
Twite
Mealy Redpoll
Arctic Redpoll
Common Crossbill
Pine Grosbeak
Bullfinch (h)
Lapland Bunting
Snow Bunting

Yellowhammer
Rustic Bunting
Reed Bunting

MAMMALS

Red Fox
Otter
Fin Whale
Grey Seal
Elk
Reindeer (domestic)
Red Squirrel
Muskrat
Mountain Hare
Brown Hare