

TRIP REPORT – FINLAND 24th – 30th MAY 2009

DAY 1 – Saturday 23rd May

We flew from Stanstead on the 6 o'clock Ryanair evening flight to Tampere, arriving at 10.30 p.m. local time and after acquiring our Hertz hire car we set off on the long drive (overnight) to Oulu. We had toyed with flying to Helsinki from Heathrow and then getting an internal flight to Oulu, but this would have proved much more expensive. It was just getting dark (or more appropriately dusk) as we set off and I suppose we had a period of "darkness" for 2 hours or so on our long trek north. From a birding point of view there is nothing of great interest to report from this journey – **hooded crows, black-headed gulls, probably a red necked grebe, a group of small unidentified waders, and a pair of whooper swans** - until we were around an hour so from our destination. I spotted a couple of **Common Cranes** in a field and a little further on a pair of **Ravens** flew over. We also had an elk cross the road several hundred meters in front of us. The road from Tampere to Oulu is a good road but it is long, straight and generally boring. Wayne performed miracles in completing the 600km drive with only one stop for a very expensive sandwich and a cup of coffee.

DAY 2 – Sunday 24th May

As we drove overnight there was very little traffic and we completed the trip arriving just before 5 o'clock on Sunday morning. Although we had the name of our accommodation – the Värminkoski camping site in Liminka, and had a sat-nav, we could not find it anywhere in the small "town" of Liminka itself. We were tired, irritable and a little despondent as because of the time no one could be seen to seek help. We decided after a period of driving aimlessly to try and find the information centre in the Liminka Bay area and do a couple of hours birding. After half an hour of more aimless driving we stopped at a village store for petrol (very expensive and most facilities are pay at the pump) and I managed to get directions from the first "local" we saw. Driving towards the bay area we had **common redstart, willow warbler, common crane, greylag geese, northern bullfinch, and a woodcock** before we reached what we thought was the observation tower. Not so – it was a tower but not the one for the information centre. However, it did overlook part of the bay and from here we had **shelduck, goldeneye, gosander, merganser, goldeneye, ruff (in breeding plumage) redshank, arctic and common tern, marsh harrier, swifts, sand martins and swallows**. The small wood opposite had **chaffinch, willow warbler, garden warbler and great tit**. Our spirits were lifted a little but we still were somewhat clueless, and we decided to drive back to the main road and try and find the ABC service station that Finnature had given us as a place to meet the next morning. However, from this moment on our luck turned. We accidentally found the Information Centre (not open) but as Wayne decided on a "power nap" in the car, I walked to the tower. **Willow Warblers and Reed Buntings** were present along the walkway and I noticed two other birders at the top of the tower. These turned out to be the British couple (James and Jean) with who we were booked on the Finnature tours. The area of the bay that could be seen from this tower was greater than the previous and in addition to the birds we had seen from the previous tower, there were lots of **little gulls, greenshank, black-tailed godwit, a large ruff lek, a raven over a distant wood (James had had Honey Buzzard earlier over the same area), short-eared owl and distantly two white-tailed eagles**. The bonus was to come shortly after spotting one of the eagles, when a third bird flew right over the tower and out into the bay. After an hour or so of good birding, and by now several other birders had arrived, I walked back to the car park armed with directions from James to the campsite, the ABC station and more importantly somewhere that served food – the K Supermarket. On the journey to the campsite we had a **short-eared owl** quartering the fields, and after registering our arrival and being treated to quality views of a **male pied flycatcher** just outside our front door, plus singing **willow and garden warblers** in the nearby trees, we set off for something to eat. It was now late

morning and although the café in the K Supermarket had finished breakfast, the gentleman in charge allowed us to take an early lunch after discussing the merits of the 1980 Ipswich Town football team with him. The food here was excellent value with an "as much as you can eat" system for around 7 euros. After lunch it was back to the campsite for a much needed few hours sleep.

It was late afternoon when we set off for the free ferry to Hailuoto Island. We arrived just as the ferry was leaving but after a cup of coffee and some birding – **black-headed gulls, common and arctic terns, white wagtails, common sandpiper, whooper swan, goosander and merganser** around the terminal area, we caught the next boat. The crossing produced nothing new and after driving off the ferry we followed the one road. After a few kilometres we pulled off the road and followed a track down to the sea. This for us, turned out to be the best birding area on the island, producing our only **caspian tern of the trip, arctic and common tern at close quarters, little gulls, common sandpipers, redshank and spotted redshank, black-tailed godwit, gadwall, mallard, goldeneye, swallow, sand martin, and a marsh harrier**. We followed the road to the southern end of the island to the harbour area, but sadly adding no new birds to our list except the odd **tufted duck**, so we made our way back along the road to the ferry terminal where we added **yellow and grey-headed wagtail, house martins, and ringed plover** whilst waiting for the ferry to load. The crossing back was as uneventful as coming with the only new bird being a single **baltic gull**. Before heading back for the evening we turned off the main road to check out the lake just to the north of the ferry terminal road. Although there were no new species, there were hundreds of **little gulls** hawking over the water, with good numbers of "**comic**" **terns** among them. As it was now late evening we headed back to the campsite where we cooked our microwave lasagne for our evening meal before turning in for the night, after a long two days.

DAY 3 – Monday 25th May

We were up at 2 a.m. and set off in the grey light to the ABC service station to meet James and Jean and Perita, our Finnature guide. On the way there we passed a smallish owl sat on a lamp-post, which turned out to be a **tengmal's owl** as it was still there when we passed it on the start of our "tour" half an hour later. We headed east on the E75 and after several kilometres turned down a track into an area of forest. Not far down the track we stopped and walked about 100m across a field where an owl nest box was fixed onto the side of a tree. Perita scratched the tree and a female **tengmals owl** flew from the box and proceeded to observe us at close quarters from a nearby tree, giving despite the light excellent photograph opportunities. We walked back to the van and continued in a southerly direction further into the wood. After a couple of kilometres we stopped at a crossroads and Perita told us she was going to try and call out a male **pygmy owl**, which after a few minutes duly obliged and sat replying on the top of a nearby fir tree. As we were getting back into the van a **crested tit** was heard calling behind us.



As we drove further down the forest track we stopped a number of times in an effort to call out hazel grouse but without success. Again we continued further down the track and eventually stopped in a clearing. Perita told us there was a Ural Owl nest box in the area but the site was about a half hours walk into the forest. The track we followed was not an easy walk and the only bird of note we saw was a male **hen harrier** which drifted over one of the forest clearings. We eventually reached the big nest box and at a safe distance could observe the female **Ural Owl** sitting on the nest through the gaps in the wood. Perita told us to be cautious when she tapped the tree in an effort to entice the bird out, but although it reacted it did not leave the box and we made the long trek back up through the woods to the van a little disappointed. (As it turned out the ural owl nest box was in an area of forest opposite our campsite, about 1km away.)

We then drove out of the forest and onto the E8 where we headed south west and turning right towards Keskikyla. Not far down this road we again turned right off the road following another forest track. Not far down the track there was a large clearing over which **two short-eared owls** were hunting and on the opposite side a small group of **black grouse males** were lekking. We followed the track deeper into the forest passing an area in which Perita told us up to four male Capercaillies had been regularly seen close to the road – but sadly today there were none. As a consolation we did have two **woodcock** very close to the track. We pulled up in a nearby clearing and had good views of a party of sixteen **common crossbills** and in a nearby tree a small flock of **siskin**. Perita again called out our target bird and sure enough within a couple of minutes a splendid male **three-toed woodpecker** was giving us outstanding views on a dead tree about 10m away. Within five minutes the female had joined him and ten minutes later a male **great-spotted woodpecker** was sat with them on the same tree. Wayne was in his element at this unexpected photography moment. We had coffee and sandwiches while the woodpeckers continued to entertain us and while we were enjoying our breakfast we were treated to another male **hen harrier** which flew overhead, and a splendid male **brambling** sat in a nearby tree.



We then drove back up the track and parked up again. Just after setting off walking a **waxwing** flew into a nearby bush, and a single **common crane** was feeding in an open area of the forest. We walked about 800m or so back into the wood, when Perita pointed out the huge **great grey owl** nest about 100m or so into the wood. The nest was massive and sat in it was a huge female and three chicks. Although the female became alert to us she was not unduly bothered, even when Wayne and James climbed a nearby tree to get to the hide that had been erected for photographers. As myself and Jean observed the owl, a black shape flew just over the nest and disappeared into the wood – a **black woodpecker**, and in a tree about twenty metres or so below the owl nest a pair of **lesser spotted woodpeckers** were busily

feeding their young. We were also treated to a displaying **green sandpiper** flying overhead. After an hour or so (and some wonderful photographs) we left the owl in peace and returned to the van. The **crane** was still in the clearing but in the distance James picked out a number of black shapes feeding in the Aspen trees. It certainly was a strange sight to see sixteen **male black grouse** sat in trees. Perita drove down the track so we were nearer to the grouse, and showed us the nest box that a pair of hawk owls had investigated a few weeks earlier but sadly had decided not to hang about. Just as we were about to leave a **greenshank** alighted at the top of a nearby pine tree. We headed back for the E8 and just before meeting the tarmac road, a **common snipe** sat on the top of a pile of logs.



We were now heading back north towards Oulu and a few kilometres south of our campsite, Perita turned off the main road and again we followed a track into another wooded area. We stopped in a clearing and met another Finnature Party of French birders, and we slowly walked the 50m or so into the wood – this was a second site for **ural owl**. Unlike the first site, the male was content to sit in trees near the nest box site when not hunting and sure enough just as we approached the edge of the wood, this massive shape was seen flying back into the trees. He did a quick circuit and alighted near the top of a tree about 100m from us and just sat there watching us. What a sight – I did not realise they were so big!! The other party leader told us they had heard a **black woodpecker** a little way down the track and although we managed to get a reply when trying to call it out, we never got a sighting. It was now past 12 o'clock and we drove back to the ABC services and we said our thank you for an excellent morning's birding and goodbyes to Perita and James and Jean. We headed back to the K supermarket for another excellent value lunch and then back to the campsite for a few hours sleep.



It was around 5 p.m. when we set off for a second visit to the lake near the ferry terminal which we had visited yesterday. There were still masses of **little gulls, and good numbers of terns, tufted duck and goldeneye, and we had a male smew** as a new bird for the trip. We then tried to find the lake near Oulu airport but after a couple of hours of fruitless driving and much agitation, we gave up despite trying to find it approaching from every direction. James later told us the only birds of note were two distant **black-throated divers**. (I don't know how they found it, our sat-nav had us driving through the middle of it once!!!) We then drove to the other side of Oulu to the oil terminal but access is now not allowed and the road is blocked by gates. We parked and walked to the tower, but by now we were looking directly into the sun and could only recognise a single **baltic gull and two ringed plovers**. There was a very small wader on the shoreline but because of the sun could not get any recognisable jizz. It was now getting on for 9 p.m. and after what had to be the worst period for bird watching during the whole trip we tried to find the rubbish dump in Oulu, again on the other side of town, and like the rest of the afternoon area failed miserably. We did find a derelict area with a pool which had **greenshank, common snipe, goldeneye and a variety of common gulls, herring gulls and black-headed gulls**, but no rubbish dump, so we called it a day and returned to the campsite.

DAY 4 – Tuesday 26th May

Up at around 4 a.m. and we decided to try the area where the previous day Perita had told us capercaillie had been regularly seen. So we drove south again and turned off the Keskiyala road into the forest. This morning the area seemed to be devoid of birds and we ended up at the woodpecker area without seeing anything. Wayne tried to call out the three-toed woodpecker but after a few minutes we were interrupted when a **female goshawk** flew overhead and gave splendid views as it lazily circled above us for five minutes or so. Our luck was starting to turn and we heard a **wryneck** calling and I picked it out sitting in a bush behind us. At this moment Perita turned up with a single client who had missed out on the woodpecker the previous week and was making a second attempt. We spent several minutes talking, and then wished him luck and said goodbye. As the great grey owl site was nearby we spent 30 minutes or so observing from the edge of the wood in the hope the male would show up – again no luck, and to allow Wayne to take so more photographs of the female.

After breakfast and a short "nap" we set off for Kuusamo just before noon. We had decided to stop at the Hirvisuo Bog en route to break up the journey and on arriving we walked to the tower – a short walk which produced two **tree pipits** and a **great tit**. The view from the tower was, from a bird point of view somewhat disappointing – a distant **common crane and a whooper swan** sat on the nest. Returning we had a quick coffee and pressed on. The rest of the journey was a little uneventful until we were about 20k from our destination, when at a couple of the numerous lakes we had an **osprey** hunting for fish on one, a **drake and red head smew** on another, and a flyover **raven**.

I had received a phone call from Olli earlier and had arranged to meet him in the Sokos Hotel along with Jean and James to discuss local information. After our meeting and armed with a map and sites marked upon it, we decided to try the site for Willow Grouse which was not far from the hotel. We entered the housing area as indicated and turned right at the last road, parked up and tried to call out the bird. Within a few minutes the male **Willow Grouse** flew out of the wood like an exocet missile heading straight for the car, only turning aside at the last minute. It then proceeded to "strut his stuff" for the next 20 minutes or so only a few feet from us. For Wayne this was a photographer's dream with the bird ignoring him even when he got out of the car. If this was not the bird of the trip it was certainly the moment of the trip – brilliant!! After half an hour or so we left our new found friend and headed north to Ruka for our accommodation. Just a couple of kilometres up the road we had our second bit of luck within the hour. Driving past the small lake by the Kussamo Fishing Factory I noticed a larger bird on the water. We stopped to take a look and it turned out to be a **Black-throated Diver** in full summer plumage – our only one of the trip, giving really close views. Very satisfied we

headed for Ruka and checked into our accommodation and following a very nice (but expensive) meal at the hotel we retired for an early night.

DAY 5 – Wednesday 27th May

We were up at 2 a.m. checking the hawk owl site just north east of Kussamo that Olli had given us. We duly arrived at our destination to find James and Jean already there. We walked the couple of kilometres up the very boggy track and met them on the way down – nothing. They had been there for an hour without any joy. Myself and Wayne decided we would give it another hour but we also had no joy. Olli had told us that the vole population had crashed and Hawk Owls, he felt had moved on. This bird was last seen earlier in the week, on the Sunday. We did have the unusual sight of a male **Black Grouse** sitting on the top of a pine tree, and a couple of flyby **Cuckoos**, and of course **Willow Warblers** were singing everywhere. Slightly dejected despite being forewarned not to expect anything we set off back down the track and flushed a female **Black Grouse** on the way down. Just down the road from the track was a **Black Grouse** lekking site and as we passed it, six birds were present. We drove back towards Kussamo and stopped to investigate another clearing which looked promising for Hawk Owl. Again nothing but we did have another **cuckoo, six waxwings and a couple of tree pipits**. Just as we reached the car, James phoned and told us a male **capercaillie** was displaying at the site near the turn off to Multasniemi that Olli had indicated on the map. We set off, missed the turning the first time but as compensation, had a **White-tailed Eagle** fly over and by the time we got our directions right, there was no sign of the capper or James and Jean. We sat by the side of the road in the car and after about half an hour a male **capercaillie** flew across the road and into the opposite side of the wood. (apparently there are two birds which use this site). It started its display but sadly was heard only and not seen as it had disappeared out of sight over a ridge. We search in vain for a sighting without disturbing the bird, but gave up and decided to return to our hotel for breakfast and a few hours sleep. On the way back we had **short-eared owl** hunting over some fields (a good sighting as apparently in the Kuusamo area these are not common this year). After a few hours sleep we decided to head north for the car park area at Valtavarra. Just as Olli had predicted the weather set in and it began to rain heavily as we headed north. At the car park I threw some white bread onto the ground near the car and waited. For about half an hour our sum total of birds was a great-spotted woodpecker on the feeders. Our perseverance paid off though when a party of four **Siberian Jays** appeared out of the trees and began feeding. This was brilliant as they totally ignored us and views were down to a few feet. I even had them at my feet as I got out of the car to replenish the bread. They disappeared after a while and we spent the next 40 minutes or so chatting with a Dutch birder who was on a marathon tour of Scandinavia. After this time two birds reappeared and took the bread as before. By now it was raining heavily and it was cold.



We had planned to go to the Oulanka National Park but decided against this because of the inclement weather. Instead we explored roads and tracks to the north of Ruka. No new birds but, there were good numbers of **Little Gulls and Goldeneye** on various lakes, and the sighting of a beaver on one of the lakes brightened the afternoon. We were tempted to go back to Kuusamo and try the rubbish dump but as it was almost 5 o'clock (closing time), we decided before calling it a day to try the capper site one more time and James had informed us that in the morning, there had been a party of **Teiga Bean Geese** in fields just up the road near to Maattalanvaara. Sadly we had no success with either, so we decided to return for our evening meal and watch the Champions league final on TV. A bonus was that Wayne got some photographs of an Elk in a field and we had to follow a herd of Reindeer up a road for several kilometres.

DAY 6 – Thursday 28th May

Olli had phoned to tell us the rain would pass by 3 in the morning so we had arranged to start our guided day at 4 a.m. We met him and James and Jean outside the Sokos Hotel and set off for the Iivaara area south Kuusamo. On the way there we passed through two areas of woodland in which Olli had told us there were **capercaillie** leks. No joy with the first site but in the second a male was stood in the woods just off the side of the road. We stopped and got great views before it flew across the road and disappeared into the wood opposite. At Iivaara we parked and started the long trek up the "hill" to the red-flanked bluetail site. On the way up Olli pointed out a female **capercaillie** sat on a nest – you could just make out the bird at the right height and angle. We stopped at the first known area about two-thirds the way up but as it was very windy no bluetails were singing. However we heard **Hazel Grouse** calling not far off and tried to call them out. This ploy was somewhat successful as a male soon flew through the forest close by, before disappearing again. After about half an hour with no bluetail singing we pressed on to the top to the second sight. Within minutes a **red-flanked bluetail** was continuously calling and after a little searching tracked it down to give us good views. Olli was interested in this bird as he had never seen it before and due to its colouring was thought to be a second summer male, and he duly phoned this information in. Just as we were about to set off down a second bird started calling and this turned out to be a full adult male in full plumage, which gave us outstanding views. Very pleased we set off back down and while we were having coffee in the car park, a male **goshawk** flew overhead. We headed back to Kuusamo and on the journey back had two **baltic gulls** in a field **with black-headed gulls** in one field, and a single **golden plover** in full summer plumage with **curlew** in another field. We stopped at an area just south of Kuusamo where James had heard little bunting the day before, and we tried calling it out, but with no success. It was now very windy and we set off north and Olli stopped at a lake just outside of town (with the Grilli Bar) where a pair of breeding **velvet scoter** showed very close to the shore. We headed into a wooded area where Olli had a couple of **siberian tit** nest boxes and on one the female gave us close up views. We tried calling out Hazel Grouse at several areas – despite the earlier sighting, James wanted a better view, but we had no success, but we did have a flyby **woodcock**, and then we headed up to the car park at Valtavarra. We sat for about 45 minutes and spread bread around the feeder area but no jays showed, much to Jean and James disappointment. (They climbed the ridge the following day and had 9 birds plus 7 bluetails). However we were treated to outstanding views **of brambling, willow tit, and great spotted woodpecker** on the feeders plus **a red squirrell** coming into his summer coat. The weather was beginning to deteriorate so we headed back to Kuusamo, with a flyby **eurasian jay** (a rare bird in the Kuusamo area) on the way. Olli took us to lunch at a local bar – the best value meal of the whole trip – 7 euros for soup, as much salmon and/or pork you could eat, a dessert and coffee and then we went back to the Sokos Hotel to say our goodbyes. Following a long chat with James and Jean we decided to finish the day at the birdwatching tower by the NW shore of the lake. This was an excellent sight and we added **red-necked Grebe** (we had a pair displaying and mating), lots of **little gulls, common**

terns, white wagtail, goldeneye, wigeon and lots of sand martins. We also had a sighting of a muskrat. Now evening time and raining heavily we set off back to Ruka but stopped off at the Fishing factory lake where the **black-throated diver** was feeding. Wayne went through the wood at the back of the lake and through some gardens to get some good photographs of the bird.

DAY 7 – Friday 29th May

Wayne was determined to get a quality photograph of a male capercaillie, and had planned to go to the lek where we missed out two days earlier. He had set the alarm for 3 a.m. but to his dismay (and anger) his camera battery had not charged overnight. I had not planned to go but at 5 a.m. we both set off. On the journey to the site we had a pair of **hazel grouse** feeding by the roadside but they flew off when the car approached. On to the "caper" lek site but unfortunately nothing. Wayne was still cursing that it was too late and so after about an hour we headed further east to see if there was any luck with the previously seen bean geese and to check a black-bellied dipper site Olli had given us. On both counts nothing but we added a couple new birds in the form of a single **canada goose** with a flock of **whooper swans** in one field near Maattalanvaara and three **whimbrel** in another field close by. Wayne was still determined and we drove back to the caper lek site, but again nothing. We decided to drive further up the road towards Multasniemi and we were rewarded with excellent views of a pair of **hazel grouse** sitting in the forest just off the side of the road – James would have got his quality view! It was getting towards breakfast time now so we set off back towards Ruka for our final meal and a couple of hours sleep.

After lunch we did a tour around the ski resort of Ruka – the scenery was fantastic from the topmost peak, drove back to Kuusamo and checked the little bunting site again without any luck, and set off back for Oulu. We stopped at the bog again for coffee and were treated to close up views of a male redstart. At Ouku we checked into the campsite again and then spent a couple of hours driving down a variety of forest tracks just south of the campsite without adding any new birds.

DAY 8 – Saturday 30th May

Early Saturday morning we set off on the long drive back to Tampere, arriving early afternoon. I had spent many hours trying to get information and/or a local guide for a few hours prior to our trip but did not have much success. I had got a couple of "names" off various trip reports and we tried these, but spent a lot of time driving around. One area of note was a small pond in the area, where there was breeding **whooper swan, garden warbler, tree sparrow, tufted duck, pochard, coot and moorhen** and another decent area was a small lake where we added starling, sedge warbler, great-crested grebe to our trip list. Finally after much deliberation we headed north to where we found a wood with breeding **fieldfare and redwing, garden, wood and willow warbler, chiffchaff, great-spotted woodpecker**, and on the adjacent lake **widgeon, tufted duck, whooper swan, coot and common tern**. My advice to anyone trying to bird this area would be to get specific site information or get the help of a local birder, otherwise you could like us spend a lot of time driving around.

SUMMARY

Birdwatching in Finland is a surreal experience. The 24 hours of daylight and the unusual times when you are birdwatching make it a unique experience. It is very tiring and the days are very long – a lot of stamina is required! There is also a lot of travelling to be done, especially the way in which we planned the trip. The Finnature guides are excellent – they certainly know their stuff, but it is not cheap. 200 euros per person for a days guide is somewhat expensive. However without a guide we would not have found our target species, especially the owls, and the views we got were sensational, as the photographs prove.

To sum up – Finland was a unique experience and I can now say I have been there and done that. Now, where do we go next year? – Any suggestions welcome!

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