



FINLAND & ARCTIC NORWAY

4 APRIL – 17 APRIL 2015

Joachim Bertrands (author and photographer – Jonas Pottier – Bas(tiaan) De Ketelaere

INTRODUCTION

Between the 4th and the 17th of April 2015, three Belgian birders tried to score as many lifers as possible in Scandinavia. Famous for its few but tantalizing species, it had been on our bucket lists since we practically knew that birds exist. We flew from Brussels to Oulu, just south of the Arctic Circle, and birded our way up north. The first days we tried to twitch a few birds that had been in the area for months, which proved to be not the big success as expected. It was therefore the trip didn't started as good as we had in mind, but luckily it only got better as we came closer to the end. All the classic Scandinavia trips are made in May or June, but because we all still were students at the time, this was no option because of our exams during that period. After some thinking we decided to go in April...

So why should you break the tradition and visit the European Arctic in April? We'll here are some facts we experienced during our trip or already knew in advance and made us make the decision:

- April is the last month the big flocks of (King) Eiders, also called 'rafts', can be seen around Varanger. The moment they leave varies every year, but it's normally somewhere around the 20th of April. We were just in time to still get the full experience and literally being overwhelmed with the number of King Eiders.
- In April, the days are already long enough bird almost 16 hours a day, and temperatures are always just below zero. You'll be able to experience the wintering birds without the short days and the extreme cold.
- It is possible, with some effort, to find some owls on your own instead of paying the ridiculous high amount asked during a guided tour. The birds are still at their winter roosts, which are more or less public and easy to find if you search a bit on the internet or use the Finnish website 'Tirra.fi'. Another advantage, instead of seeing a breeding Great Grey Owl in June, is that the birds are still nice and fluffy instead of already having their worn – 'I-have-just-raised-three-crazy-ass-chicks-and-now-I-am-cranky'-plumage.
- If you're wildcamping, as we did, chances of having a rain-soaked tent are smaller as most precipitation falls in the form of snow. Birding is nice too when you have a bright sun shining almost every day.
- April is the best month to see displaying grouses. We saw Black Grouses every day and didn't have any difficulties regarding Capercaillie. The only disadvantage was that tracking through the forests was difficult because of the thick pack of snow that doesn't leave until the beginning of May. As Hazel Grouses prefer to stay in those inaccessible woods (instead of displaying on forest roads like the other two), we only connected with one individual which however showed itself really nice.
- There won't be any mosquito's or midges around 😊.

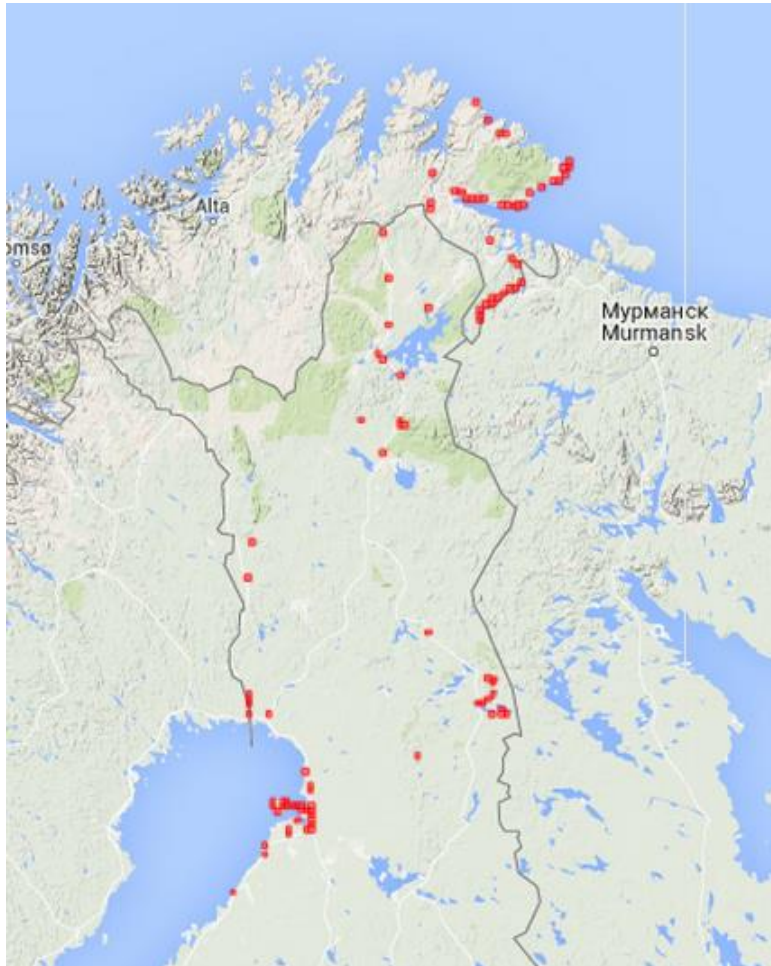
That said I have to admit that birding a bit later in spring can be very fruitful too. For example species as Arctic Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail and Rustic or Little Bunting were no option for us because of the fact they were still somewhere in South-East Asia at the time... Anyway, we had a very good trip and almost saw every main target species! A total of 118 species was seen, a very good number if you keep in mind the early time of the year...

Joachim Bertrands (on behalf of the rest of the crew: Jonas Pottier and Bas De Ketelaere)

ROUTE

Birding sites included the whole area of Oulu (Liminka bay, Hailuoto,...), Kiilopää, Inari (the famous feeder at Tuulen Tupa), the whole area of Varanger (Nesseby, Vadso, Vardo, Hornoya, Kiberg, along the river Tana to Batsfjord and Kongsfjord, the Pasvik valley and the area of Kuusamo.

We drove, or do I have to say I drove (because I was the only one with a driving license), over 5500 kilometers during our trip. This was a lot, but we never got sick of driving, because driving in Scandinavia means birding as well. A lot of birds were discovered from our car and there was still too much snow to make long walks.



LOGISTICS

We flew from Brussels to Oulu which took us about 330,- euro's each. The car, a Seat Leon, was hired only a week in advance at Scandia Rent for 450,- euro's in total. We paid a lot on gasoline and food, which is expensive in these countries. In fact, everything is expensive for us students, so we decided not to hire a hotel but bear the cold and sleep in a tent or our car for the whole trip. We also took some food with us on the plane (noodles and pasta's) to prepare on a bonfire. We still paid around 900,- euro's in total for gasoline and food combined, which resulted in a total of approximately 700,- euro's each. Still really cheap if you compare to other trips though.



SOURCES

While planning this trip, we got help from a lot of corners. But it has to be said most info reached us through one of our closest friends, Sander Bruylants. The year before, Sander lived in Oulu as part of an exchange program. He was able to see all the classic and also less classic species that can be encountered while birding in one of the coldest countries of Europe. During this year he provided us with recent stories and always amused us with his mouthwatering observations. It was with his help that we already knew a lot of tips and tricks about birding in Finland.

With the help of Sander, we also got to know Tirra.fi, the Finnish observations site. The website is only available in Finnish or Swedish, so a little inside info is required to access. If not a member, detailed maps are not accessible, but a more 'zoomed out'—version can be found. This is often enough to already know the locations though, so it's still a very useful tactic if you're planning a trip.

For the Norwegian part of our trip, Biotope.no was of great value. This combined architect – ecological office was founded by Tormod Amundsen and provides birders with the latest news on rarities in Varanger and its surroundings, good birding spots and accommodation. Their website can be consulted via 'Biotope.no' and they're also on Facebook and Twitter. Special thanks go out to Tormod who kindly invited us in his house to give us some recent info regarding species as White-billed Diver, facts about Hornoya etcetera...

PUBLISHED LITERATURE

- Collins Bird Guide, the most complete bird guide to the birds of Britain and Europe. Lars Svensson et al., 1999.
- Finding Birds in Lapland: Dave Gosney, 2010

TRIP REPORTS (all accessed by www.cloudbirders.com)

- 13 – 17 April 2012 – Gullfest 2012 – Vincent van der Spek
- 18 – 21 April 2003 – Varanger – Janne Aalto

WEBSITES

- www.observation.org
- www.cloudbirders.com
- www.biotope.no
- www.netfugl.dk
- All our sightings can be consulted at Observation.org using the following link:
http://observado.org/user/view/40846?q=&akt=0&g=0&from=2014-06-23&to=2015-06-23&prov=0&z=0&sp=0&gb=0&cdna=0&f=0&m=K&zeker=0&month=0&rows=20&only_hidden=0&zoektext=0&tag=0&q=&zoektext=0&from=2015-04-05&g=0&akt=0&to=2015-04-17&prov=0&z=0&m=K&zeker=0&rows=20&month=0&only_hidden=0
- If the link above is broken, go to Observation.org => This Site => Users => Type 'Joachim Bertrands' and press enter => select Observations => adjust date from 2015-04-04 to 2015-04-18 and press enter.

SLEEPING AND EATING

For broke Belgian students like us, Finland is simply horrifying. It's expensive and while still being the cheapest of the Scandinavian countries, we always made sure to think twice before we bought something. Norway is even worse, and we tried to camp outside as much as possible. The first night in Varanger, we slept in the Vadso Fjordhotel (Vadso), because of the intense rainstorms that afflict us the whole night. This was very expensive (about 80 euro's each), but the housekeeper had a lot of recent info regarding local birds and provided us with some detailed maps of the region.

Most nights we slept in our tent or in the car, which was cold but still doable. In Varanger we found a local shed which we used as a cover against the wind. Our tents were put up inside.

Regarding food, we bought a lot of noodles and pasta's from Belgium to cook on a bonfire which worked well and saved us a lot of money. It wasn't very bad to eat after a cold day in fact...



ITINERARY

4 April: Left Brussels at 7:00 PM and flew first to Helsinki, later to Oulu where we arrived at 1:00 AM. After picking up the car, we left for Hailuoto and camped at the place where the ferry would be at 7:00 AM the next morning.

5 April: We took the ferry to Hailuoto and found the Black-throated Accentor to be gone. Birded some more hours on the island but at 10:00 AM we took the ferry back to arrive in time at a place where a Snowy Owl had been seen the previous weeks, close to Keminmaa. We arrived there the same evening and slept in a barrack.

6 April: After a frustrating morning with the Snowy Owl only seen by Bas, we left for Kolari, where an Azure Tit had been feeding on a local feeder the last months. Third time, right time and saw the bird very well. After this we drove further in the direction of Kiilopää and where able to score Willow Ptarmigan, Siberian Jay and Siberian Tit before darkness. We camped outside somewhere besides the road.

7 April: After a short walk on the Kiilopää, Rock Ptarmigan was in the pocket and our next stop would be the famous Tuulen Tupa – feeder at Inari. We arrived there around noon and had a great time with all the Arctic Redpolls and Pine Grosbeaks. After this, it was a straight drive to the Varangerfjord. During the trip we had good observations of expected and less expected species. The weather changed around 8:00 PM though, and our only option was the Vadso Fjordhotel at Vadso. A good night of sleep was welcome however...

8 April: We explored the whole area of Varanger this day, and drove all the way to Vardo where we met Tormod from Biotope. He gave us directions because during the day we still hadn't found the massive flock of King Eiders which was wintering in the area. Thanks to his tips, we were able to locate the flock from a high mountain peak, just before dark. After this highlight of the trip, we drove all the way back to Vadso to find a shed a few kilometers before Vardo, which was ideal to put up our tents. This would be our basecamp for the next days.

9 April: Today was the day we visited Hornoya. The whole day was spent on the island and at night we drove back to our basecamp.

10 April: We visited Batsfjord, known for its very confiding King Eiders, and Kongsfjord. We also did a short stop at Berlevag to seawatch a bit. Later that day, we drove back to our basecamp.

11 April: After a last visit to some King and Steller's Eiders at the harbor of Vadso, we left for Pasvik. It was quite a drive and we had some stops on our way before we arrived there in the late afternoon. A quick visit at the Birk Husky feeder proved to be a good idea as the local lady informed us she had recently seen some females Capercaillie on the road. A good idea for the next morning, we thought, because this was still a lifer for me and Bas. We slept in our tents, sheltered by the pines.

12 April: After an early morning drive along the road to Kirkenes (which produced a male Capercaillie and other interesting observations), we decided to drive all the way down to Kuusamo, where we hoped to arrive just in time to profit from the twilight to potentially score our first Great Grey Owl. After a tiring drive of over 900 kilometers, we were just in time to find an enormously confiding Great Grey Owl. We slept in a shed in the area.

13 April: During the morning we drove a lot of forest tracks to find any grouses. We found a nice male Hazel Grouse and Parrot Crossbill. In the afternoon, the Great Grey Owl was still present at its site of the day before, and we had a good time photographing the bird. Weather was quite rainy so we stayed in our car for almost the whole day. At night we slept at the same shed as the day before.

14 April: An early morning drive along the forest tracks in the area produced two spectacularly displaying males Capercaillie which were a nice surprise. After this, we left for Oulu and reached it in the afternoon. We visited Liminka bay in the afternoon where a lot of early summer migrants had already arrived. This was good for our trip list and we decided to try and thicken our trip list for the last days we were in Finland. That night we slept in a cabin with fireplace, near Rahja (about 100 kilometers south of Oulu).

15 April: The whole day was spent in Liminka and its surroundings, in search of new species for the trip list. In the afternoon the harbor proved to be a very good birding spot... A last stop at a known nesting site for Great Grey and Ural Owl, near Vartti, didn't yield the owls but at least we found a very nice sleeping place in the form of an abandoned house in the middle of the woods.

16 April: We visited Hailuoto again. This was quite nice because of the migrating birds we encountered, but didn't yield any rarities though. At night we drove back to Vartti and slept at the same place as the day before.

17 April: We visited the harbor again, and in the afternoon ended our trip in Liminka. Around 7:00 PM we drove back to the airport and brought back the car. Our last night was spent at the airport where we had a nap before flying back to Belgium the next morning.





DAY 1 – APRIL 4th

BRUSSELS – OULU

We left Belgium around 07:00 PM and flew to Helsinki. After a transfer we were on our way to Oulu and arrived around 00:30 AM. We picked up our car and decided to drive in the direction of Hailuoto, so we would be there in time the following morning. It was around 02:00 that we had installed ourselves near the frozen shores of the Baltic Sea. Jonas and Bas planned to sleep in a tent, I chose for the car.

DAY 2 – APRIL 5th

OULU – HAILUOTO – KEMINMAA

Around 05:30 AM, the first light was visible and I decided to get out of the car and explore the area. The ferry would leave at 07:00 AM so there was still some time to enjoy the first birds. Jonas and Bas had had a short and also cold night, so it took a while before we were all out of our comfy sleeping bags.

A few **unidentified Redpolls** and a **Greylag Goose** where the first birds seen. **Yellowhammer, Great Tit, Whooper Swan, Herring Gull** (a few from the race '**omissus**', with the characteristic yellow legs), **Blue Tit** and **Great Cormorant** flew by or where seen in the bushes close to the ferry.

A quick check on the frozen sea yielded our first **Black Grouses** too. They were displaying at quite a distance in the early morning light.

At 07:00 we took the ferry and during the trip we began to encounter more birds as the sea on this route was ice-free: **Mute Swan, Whooper Swans, Goosander**,...

On Hailuoto, we immediately drove in the direction of Marjaniemi, the little town at the other side of the island, where a Black-throated Accentor had been seen the last three months. We found the feeder quite fast, and started checking the birds. After half an hour, the lady of the house came out and told us she hadn't seen the bird for the last three days. We were quite disappointed as this would be, for me personally, one of the highlights of the trip. There were still some other birds around in the form of **Mealy Redpoll, Black Grouse, Eurasian Magpie, Yellowhammer, Chaffinch, Willow Tit, Tree Sparrow, Dunnock** and **Eurasian Siskin**. We found at least **13 Ringed Seals** on the ice, accompanied by some **Great Black-backed Gulls**.

After our bad start, we decided to not waste time at Hailuoto anymore and to drive in the direction of Keminmaa, where a Snowy Owl had been seen the weeks before. On our way back to the ferry we were able to add our first **Mountain Hare**, a **Crossbill** and a big flock of **Snow Buntings** to the list. From here our journey would go north for the next week. We drove a few hours and in the afternoon we reached Keminmaa. At some fields in the middle of the woods, the Snowy Owl should be present. A quick call with our friend Sander told us that the bird was roosting at the frozen river, south of the fields, during the day. It only reached the fields by nightfall or in the early morning to go hunting. Since we also knew about a nearby place where there had been seen a Great Grey Owl very recently, we decided to try that one instead tonight, and sleep at the fields at Keminmaa, so we would be there in time the following morning to search for it.

The whole evening we looked for the Great Grey Owl, while driving along quiet country roads and scanning the forest edges, but in vain. Around 11:00 AM we reached the fields once again. Bas this time decided to use the car as comfy sleeping place (not!), me and Jonas found an empty shed where we put up our tent in.

DAY 3 – APRIL 6th

KEMINMAA – KOLARI – KIIOPÄÄ

Me and Jonas were decamping around 5:00 AM when Bas came to us from the car and told us he had seen the **Snowy Owl** flying in the distance, along the edge of the woods. We immediately rushed to the car to scan the fields, but there was no Snowy Owl to be found... The bird couldn't be relocated and our moods started to worsen. This in combination with the dip of the Black-Throated Accentor wasn't a good start of our trip. At least we had a **Rough-legged Buzzard** flying by and a lonely **Skylark** in the snow.

Weather was changing by now and it started snowing quite intense. We decided to drive north and try the Azure Tit at Kolari which was our last planned twitch of the trip. It took us a few hours to reach the place, but eventually we found the feeder and after a quick chat with the local people, we were convinced the bird was still there as it had been seen the day before. It was already present for months so we would make a good chance. After checking the **Mealy Redpolls**, we found **two Arctic Redpolls** between them. This was still a lifer for Jonas and Bas, so they made a little victory dance. But a few moments later, Bas discovered the **Azure Tit** which came in from the woods behind the feeder. The bird showed itself really nice but only stayed for a few moments before disappearing again. This was the normal behavior of this particular individual, so we decided to wait a little longer to have prolonged views. And so we did, after it arrived almost an hour later at the same place. This time it could be observed a bit longer and we were able to even take photographs. A beautiful bird and for me one of the highlights, no matter to the fact it wasn't a lifer (had seen it in Belarus the year before).



Because it was still 03:00 PM, we tried to reach our next destination by nightfall or even try to score some lifers if possible. The hill of Kiilopää was a place where we would try to see Willow and Rock Ptarmigan. Sander had also informed us there were recent observations of Siberian Jay and Siberian Tit.

On our way we came along very confiding **Black Grouses**, and when we took the small road to Kiilopää, our first **Siberian Jay** flew over the road. We got out our car to observe this lifer for everybody. With all the lichens hanging from the trees, it seemed a good place to me for Siberian Tit. I played the calls with my iPod and got immediate response! No less than **3 Siberian Tits** flew towards us and were very confiding for the following 15 minutes.

After this very successful stop we drove a bit further and parked at the car park of Kiilopää. There was a camping place with some bungalows and campers, parked in the snow. We had heard from Sander but also read on Observation.org that Willow Ptarmigan should be quite easy around here, at least when there were some small bushes for cover. We explored the area for a while and in the end found a good spot with a view on an open space between the trees. I decided to play the sound of **Willow Ptarmigan** from my iPod and got an immediate response! A male flew in and started displaying very close to us. We could observe the bird very nicely and after a while we went back to the car.

We had some difficulties finding a good camping spot that night, but in the end we found an open space where there wasn't that much snow, next to a paper dumpster. A nice fire warmed us before we spent our first night in the real taiga.

DAY 4 – APRIL 7th

KIILOPÄÄ – INARI – NESSEBY – VADSO

The following morning we woke up and went back to the hill of Killopää. This time we would climb it until there were no more trees in order to try to score Rock Ptarmigan, still a lifer for Bas. At the car park we were welcomed by some **Siberian Tits** and **Mealy Redpolls**. Some **Ravens** flew by and it didn't took long before a male **Rock Ptarmigan** replied to the tape. It showed really well and it was bizarre to see how close to each other the two species of Ptarmigan were living: the Willow in the valley, between the willows and the Rock only a few hundred meters further, on the bald mountain slopes.

It was only 8:00 AM yet, so we left for Inari, to the famous Tuulen Tupa feeder. It was still a three hours' drive but eyes came too short to see the beautiful scenery on the way. A lot of snow-covered forest often seemed dead at first but birds were always there if you looked closely. After two hours the first **Hawk Owl** of our trip was found by me. It was sitting at an electricity pole at (68.9492, 26.9522). It would be the first of a lot of Hawk Owls, a species much more easy to find on your own than we expected. Only for Bas it was a lifer since me and Jonas had seen birds in the Netherlands and Germany. It was nice to have two **Siberian Tits** in the same view when they were alarming around the owl.

We continued our way north and had observations of semi-domestic **Reindeer**, **Black Grouse** and **Raven** on the way. When we reached Tuulen Tupa (69.1825, 27.2126) by noon and pulled over, we immediately saw **Pine Grosbeaks** sitting in the pines. There was a feeder to the right and even some more behind the restaurant, and birds where numerous. In the following two hours we had observations of around 30 ridiculously tame **Pine Grosbeaks**, around 15 **Arctic Redpolls** which showed very nicely too (still a lifer for Jonas and Bas!), a lot of **Mealy Redpolls**, **Great Tit**, **Greenfinch**, **Raven** and a **Red Squirrel**. The latter seemed to have a different winter coat as they do in Belgium which was way more silver colored. In the restaurant we ate some fries with baked sausages, quite okay but still way too expensive for what it was. We felt a bit obliged to eat here because the lady of the restaurant feeds the birds every day and without her it would have been way more difficult to have these splendid views of the birds.

After this, we decided to drive north to reach Varanger by nightfall. It was a long drive through some spectacular scenery during which we could see the trees slowly making place for the tundra. The high pines gradually where replaced by dwarf birches and willows. Right before we entered Norway, a first winter **Golden Eagle** was observed while flying over the tundra plains. The border town located at Utsjoki yielded another **Siberian Jay**.

From there we took the road east and it took a while before we finally crossed the border and entered Norway. Some **Fieldfares** where new to the list and the closer we came to Varanger, the warmer it seemed to be. The first ice-free spots were seen and it started raining too, though not all too intensively.

At 4:00 PM we finally reached the westernmost tip of the Varangerfjord, close to Nesseby. The area north of the road should be good for Hawk Owls, but we saw none. But it didn't take long before Jonas found an unidentified Seal on the ice sheets in the distance. We stopped the car and because we didn't really knew what we were looking at through our scopes, we decided to walk closer, first through the snow, then on the ice. At last we had approached it to a few hundred meters and you could see it becoming quite nervous with our presence. I took a lot of photographs because I still didn't really knew what kind of seal we were looking at. I told Jonas and Bas the first thing that came into my mind when I saw it was Bearded Seal, but I didn't really knew any hard characteristics to confirm the identification... With the pictures made it shouldn't take long however to know the species.



We drove further and stopped at the church of Nesseby (70.1796, 28.6654) where a scan of the sea only yielded some **Long-tailed Ducks, Great Black-backed Gulls, Oystercatcher, Red-breasted Merganser, Mew Gull, a Black-headed Gull, Eiders** and some **Kittiwakes**.

A bit further, this time at (70.1437, 28.8811) we encountered **Red-breasted Mergansers, Mallard, Scandinavian Herring Gull, Eiders** and a **Golden Eagle** flying above the cliffs to the north side of the road.

In the harbor of Vadso we found one of the bird hides created by Biotope (70.0749, 29.7407). It was here we had our first 25 **Steller's** and 8 **King Eiders**. The King Eiders were in quite an 'ugly' plumage as it is often the case with tame wintering birds or summering birds in the Varanger area. We found females, first winter and second winter males but no adult males however. But we were happy to at least have the species seen. One year before I spent a lot of time scanning Eider rafts in Iceland when I discovered a male King Eider x Common Eider at nightfall. Because it was quite dark I was in the euphoria all night to have seen this lifer as I thought it to be a pure second winter bird, but the morning after I discovered the real deal when I immediately noted the strange features. Later that year I unsuccessfully twitched a female in the Netherlands while on a twitch with Wilson's phalarope as main purpose (which I luckily did see!). We knew by now there was some kind of curse on King Eiders and me, but finally the species was mine!

We drove further, hoping to find a suitable sleeping spot in the form of some kind of abandoned shed, but rain showers started to get stronger and stronger and in the end we decided to go to a campsite. The campsite was closed but they told us to go to the 'Vadso Fjord Hotel' aka the 'Birders Hotel' at Vadso (70.0677, 29.7486). While driving back, we crossed a bridge at (70.1851, 30.3283) and immediately saw another seal to our right.



This one looked exactly the same to us and was definitely another individual. Because Bearded Seal is a very rare visitor to Varanger, we were now a bit disappointed and thought that it would turn out to be a **Ringed** or **Harp Seal**.

Later that night we were at the hotel where we could make use of the local wifi. I sent the pictures to one of our friends and an experienced Svalbard-visitor (Pieter-Jan Dhondt). He replied that these seals were **Bearded Seals** for sure! This was just amazing, we had found not one but two of these very rare mammals on the same day! They would be the only ones seen during our trip and even Tormod of Biotope would post it on Twitter a few days later. Happy as we were, we fell asleep.

DAY 5 – APRIL 8th

VADSO – EKKEROY – VARDO

Around 10:30 AM we left the hotel after a nice breakfast. We had planned to drive all the way to Vardo with a lot of stops to scan the fjord for goodies as White-billed Divers and such. A quick scan of the harbor of Vardo itself produced our first **Glaucous Gull**, the same mixed flock of **King** and **Steller's Eiders** and two **Long-tailed Ducks**.

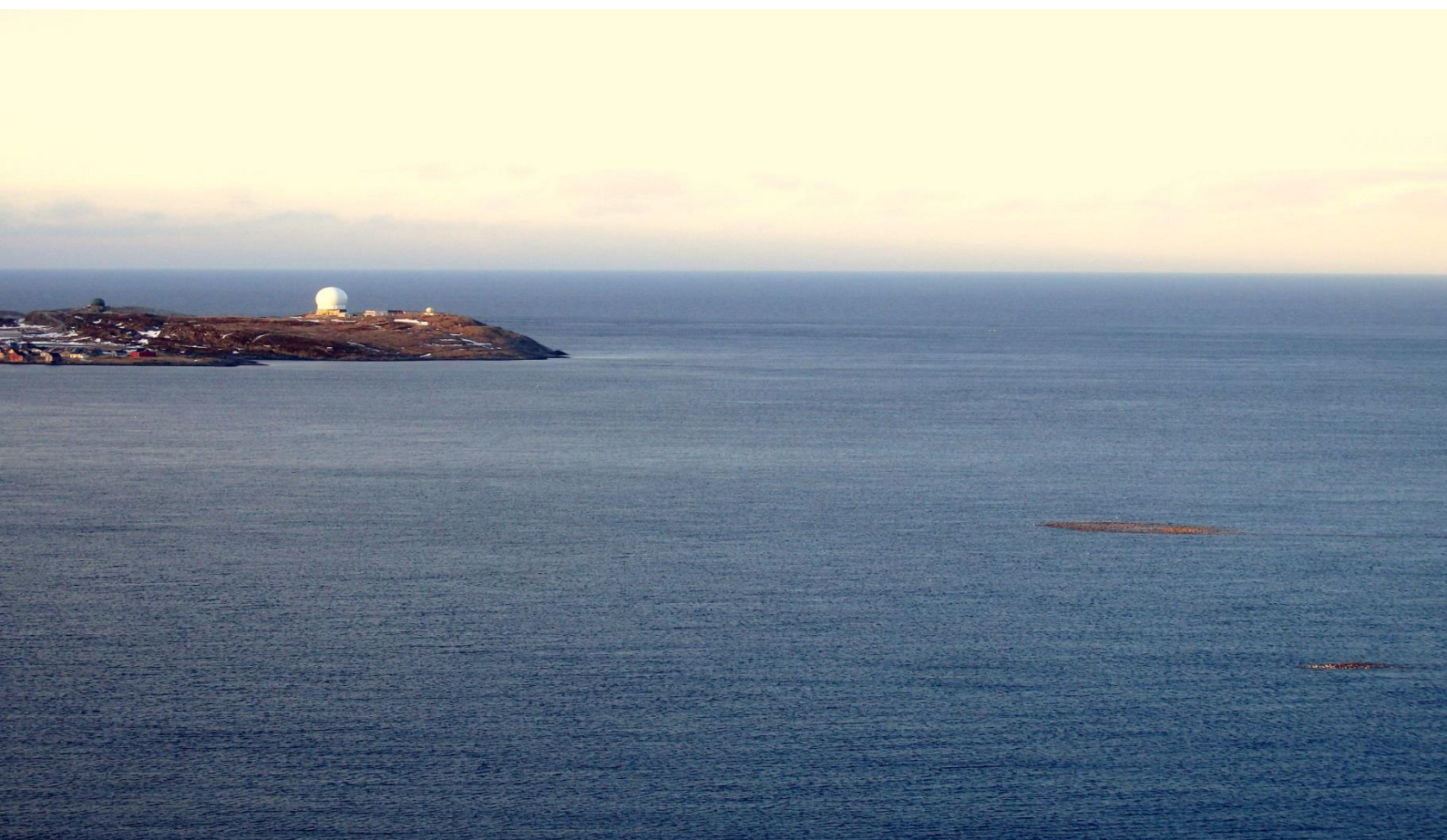
The first stop was Ekkeroy, known for, compared to Hornoya, its rather small seabird colony. The colony itself consisted mainly out of **Kittiwakes** and **Shags** but we also found **Black Guillemots**, **Rock Pipit**, **Ravens**, **Hooded Crows** and **Purple Sandpiper** to be common. In the bay north of the colony **Red-breasted Merganser**, **King Eider** and **Steller's Eider** where numerous but we couldn't find any

birds close to the shore. All the ducks were feeding quite far in the distance so no nice views of adult males King Eiders so far.

We stopped at several other sites, mostly spits which gave us the opportunity to scan the fjord well. Big flocks of **Steller's Eider** were common, **King Eiders** were still hard to find for the moment, at least the decent flocks. The big raft should be wintering between the island of Vardo and the mainland however, so we were eager to reach the town by the afternoon. In the harbor of Kiberg we found some very tame **Steller's Eiders** which were a nice opportunity to photograph from our car. At (70.2392, 30.5574) we had a **Red-throated Diver** but the surprise was a **Slavonian Grebe!** Tormod would later tell us this was a very good species for the region as their normal breeding grounds are still more than 500 km southward.

The first **White-tailed Eagles** flew by as we reached Vardo around 4:00 PM. A quick stop at the local supermarket later and we were looking for the big raft. We couldn't find this however, so we asked some people where the office of Biotope was located. A young girl on a bike brought us to the house of Tormod Amundsen where we met him and his wife. He took us to his basement which also functions as the office. It was really nice to have a chat with him and we talked about our sightings so far. He was quite impressed with our two Bearded Seals and we even made it to the Biotope twitter-feed, telling that young Belgian birders had found this rare species the day before. He told us the big raft of King Eiders was not always easy to see, and even with a scan from his house (yes he has King Eider on the garden-list!), we couldn't find them.

We said goodbye to Tormod and decided to drive back to the mainland. A weather station located at the tip of a mountain there should give us a nice birds eye view over the surrounding sea, hopefully giving us the chance of finding the raft. We drove all the way up there and had to walk the last 500 meters because the gravel road was covered in snow. When we found us a good spot, we immediately located a big brown spot in the distance. A quick look through the scope and we had found our raft! We tried to count them but it was simply too difficult. Estimated is though that around our time the group consisted out about 6000 individuals! A decent part of the world population in my opinion. Pure euphoria when we decided to drive back to Vadso and on the way back we found a very nice abandoned cabin where two tents could fit in. This would be our 'home' for the next couple of nights, the wooden house giving shelter against the strong winds.



DAY 6 – APRIL 9th

VADSO – HORNOYA – VADSO

Around 7:00 AM we woke up. We had planned to take the ferry to Hornoya today and on the way to Vardo check some more bays in the hope to find something new like White-billed Diver. The first stop at Ekkeroy didn't really yield anything new: **Red-breasted Merganser** and a flock of **Steller's Eiders** were the only noteworthy sightings here. Along the road, at (70.1746, 30.3195) three **Willow Ptarmigans** suddenly flew passed the car and were already showing signs of summer plumage. An adult **White-tailed Eagle** was the reason for their sudden flight, we found out.

At (70.2434, 30.537) we scanned the sea when I suddenly found a very big bird in my scope: a first winter **White-billed Diver**! A lifer for Jonas and Bas and not guaranteed in this time of the year as it was still a bit early for the White-billed Divers to arrive.

Around 10:00 AM we left for Hornoya, after a quick check of the harbor's Laridae yielded **Glaucous Gulls** in all kind of plumages.

First there was the sound, immediately followed by the smell of thousands of seabirds when we got of the boat. An experience like no other! Hornoya is a must for everyone visiting the Varanger region as you find a quite high diversity of seabirds in a spectacular scenery. It didn't took long to localize our first **Brünnich Guillemots**, a lifer for all. **Atlantic Puffin, Shag, Razorbill, Kittiwake** and **Common Guillemot** were the other breeding birds.

Scanning the sea also produced some **Northern Gannets** though they weren't numerous. The same for **Northern Fulmar, White-beaked Dolphins** and **Grey Seals** were easy to see from land. We were surprised to find two **Great Tits** at the island, but Jonas scored big time by finding a **European Wren** at the site. This should be only the 3th or 4th record for Varanger, so a very good find indeed!

Rock Pipit, Great Black-backed- and **Glaucous Gulls** were seen too. No Gyrfalcon however, and by 4:00 PM we decided it had been enough for the day and we took the boat back to the mainland.



We tried to find the big raft of **King Eiders** from Tormod's house again, in the hope they were now closer to the shore with the western winds during the day, but in vain. Only a small part of the group, a flock of 118 birds, was present. A lot of **Long-tailed Ducks** however, with a big flock of 500+ birds now swimming between the Eiders.

We drove back to our cabin and had a good night.

DAY 7 – APRIL 10th

VADSO – BATSFJORD – BERLEVAG – KONGSFJORD – TANA – VADSO

Today we would explore the northern part of the Varanger peninsula. Batsfjord is known for its very tame males King Eider in winter, suitable for photography, and since we still hadn't had breathtaking views of birds in that plumage, we planned to drive there and see what we could find.

It took a while to reach Batsfjord. After a spectacular drive over the fjells we finally found the harbor. A big flock of gulls consisted out of some **Glaucous Gulls** and **Kittiwakes** were common too. In the harbor we located a small flock of **Steller's Eiders** (21) and some **King Eiders** (8). The latter were diving at close range, next to a small pear. I had the idea of sneaking up to them while they were under water, hopefully resulting in nice views! After we observed the birds for a while, they (3 drakes) suddenly dove and we ran to them as quick as we can. We looked down from the pear and saw one of the drakes swimming under water only about two meters below us! A magnificent experience to see the birds behave as they do under the surface. When the drake came up it was surprised to see us as expected, but it just swam away, giving the opportunity to make some more pictures.



At Berlevag we found nothing special in particular, a **Ringed Seal** and the usual birds in the form of **Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser**, ... were common.

We continued our way north since we had been told that Kongsfjord should be a quite reliable place to see Gyrfalcon. We found a nice shelter against the wind in the form of a Biotope-cabin (70.7296, 29.3766) and scanned the sea. A lot of birds here: **Atlantic Puffins, Black Guillemot, Eider, King Eider Red-breasted Merganser, Northern Gannet**, ...

A look at the map told us we weren't going to make it at Slettness this trip, known for its spectacular seawatchdays as up to a few hundreds of White-billed Divers have been seen... We found another place however, within today's reach at (70.8732, 29.0848). Migration was clearly proceeding as we had big flocks of Alcidae heading east. A big group of King Eiders was present, but small flocks also seem to head east. An unidentified diver, most likely a White-billed, was found by Jonas but was discovered too late... A new bird for the triplist was added in the form of some **Twites** flying over. We drove back to our cabin during the twilight and were happy to find a **Hawk Owl** in the Tana valley (70.3067, 28.1942). The bird was singing in a treetop and not shy at all. This valley is known for its high numbers of Hawk Owls in winter and should be visited by any birder! Best strategy is to just drive slowly and check light poles or treetops.

At Nesseby (70.145, 28.981) we found another one, this time on a light pole! A nice way to end the day. We installed ourselves in our cabin again and spend our last night in Varanger.



DAY 8 – APRIL 11th

VADSO – VARDO – PASVIK

After we had packed our stuff we decided to try one last time for the big raft of King Eiders at Vardo. We couldn't find the same amount of birds as we did the first time, only a 1000 **King Eiders** and **Eiders** were seen, but **Long-tailed Ducks** seemed to have increased in number with a flock of about 3000 birds present at the site.

After this we had a long way ahead and left Varanger. The three **Willow Ptarmigans** and (the same?) **White-tailed Eagle** were present at (70.175, 30.3198).

At Vadso we stopped for a last view of the beautiful **Steller's Eiders** and after saying goodbye we definitely left Varanger.

After the blue water of the fjord was out of sight, we were driving between the birch tundra. Crystal clear skies made it a nice drive and we were surprised to find a (freshly-arrived?) **Rough-legged Buzzard** here. Suddenly, a flock of 'starlings' flew across the road and turned out to be our first **Bohemian Waxwings** of the trip. They were quite shy and were nervously eating berries between the birches. I suddenly got a woodpecker in sight: a **Three-toed Woodpecker**, still a lifer for Bas! After this productive stopover, we continued our way. After passing Kirkenes, it was a straight road to Pasvik along the Russian border. We saw a few birds flying above Russia in the form of Raven, Hooded Crow and Great Black-backed Gull. Already three species on the Russian list!

When we came close to the famous Birk Husky feeders, two **Pine Grosbeaks** flew above our car. The lady of the house told us that we could use the constructed cabins to look to the birds, but the diversity wasn't as big as the Tuulen Tupa feeders. She did however gave us some good news: she had recently seen three Capercaillies on the road in the early morning and she advised us to drive slowly in the twilight if we wanted to see them too. This was still a lifer for me and Bas so plans were made that night to rise early at 4:00 AM and drive down the road.

We found an open space next to the road, big enough to fit our car and place our tent. It was one of the coldest nights we experienced during our trip, with temperatures dropping to almost -10°C in the tent...



DAY 9 – APRIL 12th

PASVIK – KUUSAMO

It was a painful morning as we woke up around 4:00 AM. After we had packed our stuff, we began to drive down the long road to Kirkenes, in the hope of seeing Capercaillie. A quick glimpse of a **Siberian Jay** was the first bird of the day and **Black Grouses** were seen from time to time. At (69.2469, 29.1899) we found a – tame as usual – **Hawk Owl**, perched in a treetop. At (69.3384, 29.3742) we even found another bird! Despite the early rise we weren't tired at all because of these nice observations, but at (69.3456, 29.4943) we hit jackpot when an adult male **Capercaillie** suddenly appeared behind a corner. The bird sat there for a few seconds, then flew into the woods. Happy as we were, we drove further... What else would this bright morning had in mind for us?

A few **Willow Ptarmigans**, **Black Grouses** and **Mountain Hares** later, we reached more civilized areas, so we decided to turn back and drive down the road one more time in both directions. It was still a short observation we had had, so another Capercaillie would be welcomed with open arms.

The morning had already passed its most interesting point as we had much less sightings of different birds. But at the site of the Capercaillie (69.3456, 29.4943), I suddenly saw something big sitting in a tree. I stopped the car and looked through my bins... An enormous **Eagle Owl** looked right back at me. 'Eagle Owl!', I yelled, while the others looked at me with disbelief as they expected it would turn out to be the Capercaillie or something much less interesting. They quickly located the bird between all the branches and were just in time to see it disappear in the woods. This was strange and unexpected observation made us stop the car and we decided to make a walk in the woods in the hope to find back the Capercaillie. A **Siberian Tit** was calling and could be observed briefly by Jonas. **Ravens** and a few **Bohemian Waxwings** flew by. An exhausting walk through the snow later I was walking back to the car when I suddenly flushed the **Capercaillie**. It flew over the road and landed in the distance. I called the others but despite an intense search we couldn't relocate it...



It was already 9:00 AM and we still had to drive about 900 kilometers south, so we left the beautiful Pasvik valley and drove in the direction of Kirkenes. Our morning wasn't finished however, as we found not one but two **Hawk Owls** (the 6th and 7th for our trip!) at (69.6267, 29.9665). They were sitting on an electricity wire and because seeing two Hawk Owls perched on a wire is too mainstream, they decided to mate just in front of us! After that, a small bird landed on the wire, close to one of the owls... A **Pine Grosbeak**! We could make the rare picture of these two species within the same view.

After passing Kirkenes we drove south with the sound of Radio Murmansk in the background. The rest of the day was spent mainly on driving with a few stops along the road. **Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay, Black Grouse** and **Arctic Redpoll** were seen. We wanted to reach Kuusamo before sunset because a first try to find Great Grey Owl would be nice and the weather forecast for the next day wasn't as good as today. Because of this I had to slightly ignore the speed limits the last few hundred kilometers, and around 9:00 PM, only half an hour before sunset, we reached the beginning of a small road at Kuusamo, close to Valtavaara and known for its hunting **Great Grey Owls** in winter. It had been a long and boring day so the atmosphere was a bit depressed in our car. Everybody kept silent as I drove slowly down the road, passing beautiful spruce forests, clearances and small fields. After 45 minutes of no talking, I decided to break the silence and said to Jonas: 'I have the feeling it's gonna happen, but I don't know why...'. These words had just been said as Jonas only a few seconds later yelled: 'I SEE ONE, I SEE ONE!!!'. I stopped the car very clumsy, got out the car despite Jonas said I had to stay seated, got back in (without seeing the bird) and did all kinds of weird stress things because I wasn't able to see the bird because it was at Jonas' side of the car and I was in a bad angle. Jonas then said: 'Okay, we are now going to get out and look at the bird because it seems it's not going to fly.'



We stepped out and looked into the eyes of what must be one of the most majestic birds in the Western Palearctic and far beyond. A dream coming through after we dipped the species a year earlier in Belarus despite tree days of searching. I was happy as a child and we enjoyed the bird for the next 15 minutes until it was simply too dark to see anything.

In total ecstasy we drove down the road a bit further until we once again found a suitable cabin to put up our tent in. Jonas would sleep in the car as there was only room for one tent. Highly content we fell asleep.



DAY 10 – APRIL 13th

KUUSAMO

After waking up we drove to the center of Kuusamo to check Larches. Two-barred Crossbill is known to prefer these trees and because it was still a lifer to all of us, this would be the way to spend the first hours of the day. There was drizzling rain the whole morning so birding was mainly done from our car the first hours. A perched **Pine Grosbeak** in a Larch caused a stir when from a distance it wasn't clear at which bird we were looking as the head wasn't visible and the only thing we could see were two wingbars. At (65.9775, 29.2593) a **White-tailed Eagle** flew by and we decided it was time to try for Hazel Grouse at a known place (65.8702, 29.7011). When we arrived the first bird seen was a beautiful female **Capercaillie** however. She quickly flew up but we had enough time to see the differences with a female Black Grouse.



A few hundred meters further we stopped the car and found ourselves in the middle of a quite young spruce forest with a lot of undergrowth. This must be the best place and we played the song of **Hazel Grouse** from our iPod. We got an immediate response, though it took a while to see the bird. First it flew across the road but after a few more minutes the bird appeared at the side of the road, eager to find its rival. We got nice views and after everybody had seen it well, we stopped the tape and let the bird be. We drove a bit further again and suddenly found a crossbill in a spruce top. It turned out to be a **Parrot Crossbill**, a species we all had seen in Belgium before, but to see it in its breeding habitat was something different! A nice and unexpected sighting indeed.

It started to rain more intensely and we agreed to drive back in the direction of Kuusamo. The 8th and last **Hawk Owl** of the trip was found from our car at (65.867, 29.5167). It looked a bit grumpy because all its feathers were soaked and so were we by now. We couldn't think of any other 'afternoon activity' then drive back to the **Great Grey Owl** and spend the rest of the day here. We arrived and found the bird perched in a little birch in the middle of the clearance, next to the road. For the next three hours we looked at it, made pictures of it in all kinds of ways and had a lot of fun looking at this beautiful bird.

Plans were made to rise early again the next morning in order to do a last effort for Capercaillies. After this rainy but interesting day, we parked the car at the same site as yesterday and fell asleep.

DAY 11 – APRIL 14th

KUUSAMO – OULU

At 6:00 AM we were packed and drove down the road in eastern direction. At (66.1457, 29.5117) we stumbled upon a big gathering of **Black Grouses** as 9 birds were seen (but possibly more).



We found an unhardened road and drove on it. Suddenly, at (66.0501, 29.5317) we came from behind a corner and there they were... two displaying males **Capercaillie**! For a change they weren't flushed immediately but just stood still on the road. Then they started to display and we were just astonished about how intense this was. The weird sound was also heard as we were looking with great enthusiasm to these birds. We could even make some photographs. After a while they did fly up however, and since our target for the morning was seen, we agreed to start the drive to Oulu. But these weren't our last **Capercaillies** of the day as Bas found one (whilst driving 90 km/h!) from the car at (65.4858, 27.8389). The bird just sat on the ground, frozen like a statue, and didn't move until after a while it flew into the woods.

At 12:00 AM we reached Oulu and after a short visit to the library (to get up to date with the recent observations in the area), we left for Liminka bay. This bay is a hotspot for spring and autumn migration because of its interesting location in the Gulf of Botnia. It was time to thicken the trip list so any new species were welcome! At (64.8176, 25.3526) we found a big flock of geese which turned out to be **Taiga Bean Geese** with a few **Tundra Bean Geese** amongst it. A few **Cranes**, a **Kestrel** and and **Eurasian Curlew** were seen too at this location.

At Lumijoki we found a watch tower which was ideal to check the freshly arrived ducks which were swimming in the ice holes. **Northern Pintail**, **Eurasian Teal**, **European Wigeon**, **Shelduck**, **Goldeneye**, **Tufted Duck**, **Smew** and even a few **Pink-footed Geese** were all added to the trip list. **Meadow Pipits** and **Yellowhammers** flew by as we were scanning the sea in front of us.

Sander had updated us once again and told us about hundred kilometers to the south there had been a Lesser White-fronted Goose for the last few weeks, but the bird hadn't been seen for the last days. We got some coordinates and left. On the way, a **Northern Goshawk** was seen flying above the road and was yet another new species for the list.

At the given coordinates we found a few **Greylag Geese** but no Lesser White-fronted so we looked at the map and saw the sea was nearby and worth for checking. We arrived and found the sea to be, just like Liminka bay, loaded with birds. We found **White-tailed Eagle, Cranes, Red-breasted Merganser** and **Goosander, Goldeneye**, a lot of **Whooper Swans** and a few **Curlews**. The surprise however was a couple of **'Baltic' Gulls** (*Larus fuscus fuscus*).

We also found a cabin with a fireplace which seemed ideal for a sleeping place. The whole night we stayed there and could eat, chill and sleep with the sound of **Cranes** and **Whooper Swans** in the back. Just perfect.

DAY 12 – APRIL 15th

LIMINKA – OULU - VARTTI

In the morning we woke up and found the same birds of yesterday to be present, but no Lesser White-fronted Goose or whatsoever. We hadn't visited the front harbor of Oulu, so this was on the schedule for the morning. First we drove an hour and when we passed Liminka, a big flock of **Bohemian Waxwings** was found from the car at (64.8051, 25.4091). We drove towards them and found ourselves between some houses, looking at 98 Waxwings. Suddenly they flew up and landed across the railway in another area. We could easily get there and because I still didn't have any good photographs of them, we drove down there. When we arrived I suddenly saw something else sitting in a spruce tree and yelled **'Nutcracker!'**. This is a rare species in northern Finland and birds seen here belong to the Siberian subspecies *'macrorhynchos'*. When it flew up, another bird appeared from the spruces! The thin beak could be observed well as this is one of the few differences with our middle-European Nutcrackers.



After photographing we drove to the front harbor and along the road could add **Rook** to the list. The front harbor itself wasn't accessible, at least legally, but we could enter it by walking on the ice shelves which were still covering the sea around it. This turned out to be a very productive area where we found a lot of **Snow Buntings, Stock Dove, Partridge, Skylark, Common Ringed Plover** and the surprise of the day: two **Horned Larks!**

The latter was still a lifer for Bas so he was happy as hell. Back at the car a few Mountain Hares were showing signs of their summer coat.

From Sander we had heard about a small forest near Vartii at (64.8017, 24.9679) where Great Grey and Ural Owl had bred in the past. Enough to go and check it we thought, so around 06:00 PM we reached the area and explored the nearby forests. No owls to be found however, but we did find a very nice fireplace near an abandoned house. The house wasn't empty as old furniture was still inside, but it hadn't seen any people for a long time it seemed. Me and Jonas instantly knew what this meant: we had found ourselves a nice sleeping place for the night! We got in from the back window and found two large benches where we would sleep the next two days. Bas didn't like our idea of illegally entering an abandoned house at first, so the first night he slept in the car. But the night after he also enjoyed the joys of our house. A short walk before sunset still yielded 37 **Bohemian Waxwings** in the area and while we were sitting around our campfire a displaying **Woodcock** flew by.

DAY 13 – APRIL 16th

RAAHE – HAILUOTO – VARTTI

Last night Sander texted us with the message a very early Rustic Bunting had been seen at Raahe, about an hour drive from Oulu, at a feeder in someone's garden. The observer, Jouni Majuri, had reported it on Tiira.fi and Sander provided us with some coordinates. We were there in the early morning and walked through the area which was nothing more than a normal street with some houses. We quickly found a big feeding place and after the inhabitants got nervous with our bins pointed at their house, we knocked on the door and were let in. Their son, Jouni, had seen the bird the day before but despite our search we couldn't relocate it. After a while Jouni arrived himself and showed us some pictures of a cracking male Rustic Bunting, feeding between **Chaffinches** and other normal garden birds in the snow.

A bit disappointed we drove in the direction of Hailuoto which we were going to visit today in the hope to find some nice migrant birds. We had a **Marsh Harrier** along the road and after we arrived we straightly drove to Marjaniemi where we had dipped the Black-throated Accentor more than a week ago. A walk south of the town didn't yield any Rustic Buntings but we did flush a **Short-eared Owl** and found our one and only **Robin** of the trip in some bushes. We also drove to the southern part of the island where we checked the fields for any interesting birds. Two **Hen Harriers** were a nice surprise and **Cranes**, a few **Lapwings** and the ever present **Bohemian Waxwings** were seen too. After this we drove back to Vartti where we were able to score **Crested Tit** right before dark! After making a big fire we installed ourselves in the abandoned house and fell asleep.

DAY 14 – APRIL 17th

VARTTI – PYKOSJÄRVI – OULU – LIMINKA – OULU AIRPORT

Our last day in Finland. In a last effort to find Rustic Bunting we would cover as much areas as possible today.

We started at Pykkosjärvi, located right outside the city center of Oulu at (65.0499, 25.5112). The lake was still mostly frozen but a lot of gulls were present. Amongst the hundreds of **Black-headed Gulls** we found some **Greater Black-backed** and **Baltic Gulls**, but the surprise was an adult **Heuglins' Gull** sitting on the ice. Some **Goldeneyes** and **Coots** were seen as well, the latter still being a new species for the trip list!

After this we explored the front harbor again which this time didn't yield that much. A new species in the form of **Reed Bunting** was seen however and **Rock Pipit**, **Marsh Harrier**, **Linnet** and **Partridges** were seen.

The rest of the afternoon was spent at Liminka bay where we made a fire at the fireplace at (64.8753, 25.2025). It was here we saw a **Sparrowhawk** which flew by. The last new species for the triplist however was a **Greater White-fronted Goose** at (64.8138, 25.3653), found by Jonas. The bird was in a flock of about 200 **Taiga Bean Geese**.

Our trip to Finland had come to an end and we decided it was time to drive to the airport and to hand in the car.

At the car park we made our backpacks and spent the rest of the night at the airport. In the morning, around 5:00 AM, we took the plane back to Helsinki and from there to Brussels.



TARGET SPECIES (and surprises)

Hazel Grouse

Can be encountered practically everywhere in Finland but because the woods were still inaccessible because of the thick pack of snow, we only saw one bird at (65.869, 29.708) the 13th of April. This place seems to be a good bet since you can try to see them from the car.

Capercaillie

The best way to find these wild 'turkeys' is to drive slowly along quiet forest tracks in the early morning. We did have a short observation of a male the 12th of April in the Pasvik Valley at (69.346, 29.494). The day after (13th of April) we had a male at Kuusamo whilst checking for Two-barred Crossbills at (65.901, 29.687). A few hours later, near the Hazel Grouse site, we stumbled upon another bird, this time a female (65.870, 29.701). The last morning in Kuusamo (14th of April), we hit jackpot when we encountered two displaying males on the road at (66.028, 29.490). When we left Kuusamo for Oulu a few hours later, Bas found the last bird, another male, along the road at (65.486, 27.839).

Rock Ptarmigan

We had one bird in the beginning of our trip which we saw very well. Because we had no problems finding this species, we didn't look for other birds at the fjells of Varanger. Our bird was found at a – for the species – known site in northern Finland: Kiilopää. We looked for it in the morning of the 7th of April and immediately saw a displaying male at (68.349, 27.497).

Willow Ptarmigan

A common species which we saw very well the 6th and 7th at Kilopää (68.351, 27.471). While the Rock Ptarmigan was found on the bald flanks of the fjell, the Willow Ptarmigans were found only a few hundred meters further in a valley with some willow shrubs. It was very nice to see these two species so close to each other and yet so far away. Three birds were seen the 9th and 11th at Varanger along the road (70.175, 30.319). The 12th of April we had 4 birds along the road in the Pasvik Valley: one at (69.410, 29.770), one at (69.442, 29.880) and two birds at (69.200, 29.149).

Steller's Eider

A very common bird in the Varanger fjord, encountered almost everywhere between Vadso and Vardo. Often close to the shore and in small, sheltered harbors. Never in enormous flocks, the highest number we counted in one group was about 170.

King Eider

A bit more localized than Steller's Eider in our opinion. We saw a lot of small flocks, but rarely close to shore. In Vadso we had a small flock of all immature or female birds while bigger groups were seen between Vadso en Vardo. The enormous King Eider – 'vortex' as it is called by Biotope was seen from (70.332, 31.033) and consisted out of about 6000 birds. For close observations, Batsfjord seems to be the place since very tame individuals are seen here the whole winter. We had three adult males at a few meters in the harbor which was an incredible experience as well.

White-billed Diver

We were lucky to find a first-winter bird at (70.243, 30.537). A few weeks later there were a lot of sightings along the Varanger fjord, and we were a bit too early to experience good migration of this species. A lucky shot!



Brunnich's Guillemot

An uncommon breeding bird but very easy at the seabird colony of Hornoya. Found with ease and always between Common Guillemots on the 9th of April.



Great Grey Owl

Maybe THE highlight of the trip, seen both the 12th and 13th of April. Found by ourselves and therefore 0 – 1 for the very expensive tour companies that ask 220,- euro's p.p. to see this species (I will not call names). This ridiculous amount made us decide not to book a tour but take the risk and try to find the species ourselves, based upon recent observations on Tirra.fi.

We looked for it on multiple sites but the quiet road near Valtavaara proved to be the place. At (66.167, 29.465) we found the bird and since Sander saw it in the same area one year earlier, this place can be considered as a quite reliable wintering site for the species. Although we thought the birds to be mainly active at dusk, the day after we had it in a small birch tree in broad daylight.



Hawk Owl

During our trip we saw 8 birds in total, all found from the car. Good areas are the Tana river valley, close to Varanger and the Pasvik valley near the Russian border. All coordinates are listed below:

- 7th of April: one bird at (68.949, 26.952)
- 10th of April (Tana Valley):
 - One bird at (70.307, 28.194)
 - One bird at (70.145, 28.918)
- 12th of April (Pasvik Valley):
 - One bird at (69.247, 29.190)
 - One bird at (69.338, 29.374)
 - Two birds including mating at (69.627, 29.967)
- 13th of April: one bird at (65.867, 29.517)



Three-toed Woodpecker

We didn't really have any specific sites in mind for this species, but were planning to look them up if we had not seen the species by the second half of our trip. This was still a lifer for Bas so we really had to see the species. By accident we stumbled upon an individual the 11th of April, a female, at (69.816, 29.375) while we stopped the car for Bohemian Waxwings.

Siberian Jay

Not as common as expected. Seen the 6th along the road from Kaksilauttanen to Kilopää where they are known to be quite common and where we found three birds at (68.337, 27.389). Also one bird along the road near Utsjoki the 7th of April at (69.872, 27.001). The 12th we also had a bird in the Pasvik valley at (69.182, 29.202) and a few hours later along the road to Kuusamo at (69.292, 28.081) another bird crossed our path.

AZURE TIT

A twitched bird in Kolari was a lifer for Bas (me and Jonas had seen it a year before in Belarus) but we all were very happy as we had very good views of this lovely bird. The bird had been visiting a feeder at (67.395, 24.194) for months. We were quite lucky as the 7th, one day after our visit, the bird showed up for the last time and wasn't seen again.

Siberian Tit

More common than expected and encountered by accident at multiple sites. Never seen near a feeder though, probably because they were already preparing for the breeding season? Coordinates of all our observations are listed below:

- 6th of April: three birds at (68.337, 27.389)
- 6th of April: two birds at (68.349, 27.466)
- 7th of April: three birds at (68.346, 27.462)
- 7th of April: two birds at (68.949, 26.952)
- 12th of April: one bird at (69.344, 29.500)
- 12th of April: two birds at (69.292, 28.081)

Arctic Redpoll

Way more common than expected and encountered mainly at feeders. A lot of unidentified Redpolls seen in the Varanger area probably were this species too. Seen the 6th of April at the feeder at Kolari (67.395, 24.194). The 7th we found over 15 birds at the Tuulen Tupa feeder at Inari (69.183, 27.213). Other birds included one at one of the Birk Husky feeders the 11th at (69.407, 29.795) and another bird was seen one day later at (68.397, 26.577), along the road.

Pine Grosbeak

Very common at the Tuulen Tupa feeder where we saw over 30 – ridiculously tame – birds at (69.183, 27.213). We had other birds in the Pasvik Valley where we saw two birds the 11th fly by at (69.408, 29.795). The day after we had another flyby a bit further along the road to Kirkenes with one bird even landing next to a perched Hawk Owl on a telephone or electricity wire at (69.628, 29.966). The last bird was a female or immature in a larch tree in the center of Kuusamo at (65.962, 29.195).

Parrot Crossbill

A nice surprise was a male in a spruce top the 13th while we were looking for Hazel Grouse at (65.869, 29.744).



TOTAL TRIPLIST

1.	Hazel Grouse	<i>bonasia</i>
2.	Western Capercaillie	<i>urogallus</i>
3.	Black Grouse	<i>tetrix</i>
4.	Rock Ptarmigan	<i>muta</i>
5.	Willow Ptarmigan	<i>lagopus</i>
6.	Grey Partridge	
7.	Taiga Bean Goose	<i>fabalis</i>
8.	Tundra Bean Goose	<i>rossicus</i>
9.	Pink-footed Goose	
10.	Greylag Goose	<i>anser</i>
11.	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>albifrons</i>
12.	Mute Swan	
13.	Whooper Swan	
14.	Common Shelduck	
15.	Eurasian Wigeon	
16.	Mallard	
17.	Northern Pintail	
18.	Eurasian Teal	
19.	Tufted Duck	
20.	King Eider	
21.	Steller's Eider	
22.	Common Eider	
23.	Velvet Scoter	
24.	Common Scoter	
25.	Long-tailed Duck	
26.	Common Goldeneye	
27.	Smew	
28.	Goosander	
29.	Red-breasted Merganser	
30.	White-billed Diver	
31.	Red-throated Diver	
32.	Northern Fulmar	
33.	Horned Grebe	
34.	Northern Gannet	
35.	European Shag	<i>aristoteles</i>
36.	Great Cormorant	<i>carbo</i>
37.	White-tailed Eagle	
38.	Western Marsh Harrier	
39.	Hen Harrier	
40.	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	
41.	Northern Goshawk	
42.	Rough-legged Buzzard	
43.	Golden Eagle	
44.	Common Kestrel	
45.	Eurasian Coot	
46.	Common Crane	
47.	Eurasian Oystercatcher	
48.	Northern Lapwing	
49.	Common Ringed Plover	
50.	Eurasian Woodcock	
51.	Eurasian Curlew	
52.	Purple Sandpiper	
53.	Black-legged Kittiwake	
54.	Black-headed Gull	
55.	Mew Gull	

56.	Great Black-backed Gull	
57.	Glaucous Gull	
58.	European herring Gull	<i>omissus, argentatus</i>
59.	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>fuscus, heuglini</i>
60.	Brünnichs Guillemot/Murre	
61.	Common Guillemot/Murre	
62.	Razorbill	
63.	Black Guillemot	
64.	Atlantic Puffin	
65.	Stock Dove	
66.	Common Wood Pigeon	
67.	Eurasian Eagle Owl	
68.	Great Grey Owl	
69.	Northern Hawk Owl	
70.	Short-eared Owl	
71.	Great Spotted Woodpecker	
72.	Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>tridactylus</i>
73.	Siberian Jay	
74.	Eurasian Jay	
75.	Eurasian Magpie	
76.	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>macrorhynchos</i>
77.	Rook	
78.	Hooded Crow	
79.	Northern Raven	
80.	Western Jackdaw	
81.	Bohemian Waxwing	
82.	Willow Tit	<i>borealis</i>
83.	Coal Tit	
84.	Crested Tit	
85.	Great Tit	
86.	Eurasian Blue Tit	
87.	Azure Tit	<i>cyanus</i>
88.	Siberian Tit	
89.	Eurasian Skylark	
90.	Horned Lark	
91.	Goldcrest	
92.	Eurasian Wren	<i>islandicus/zetlandicus?</i>
93.	Eurasian Treecreeper	
94.	Common Starling	
95.	Common Blackbird	
96.	Fieldfare	
97.	European Robin	
98.	House Sparrow	
99.	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	
100.	Dunnock	
101.	White Wagtail	
102.	Meadow Pipit	
103.	Rock Pipit	
104.	Common Chaffinch	
105.	Brambling	
106.	European Greenfinch	
107.	Eurasian Siskin	
108.	Mealy Redpoll	
109.	Arctic Redpoll	<i>exilipes</i>
110.	Twite	
111.	Common Linnet	
112.	Pine Grosbeak	<i>enucleator</i>
113.	Parrot Crossbill	
114.	Common Crossbill	
115.	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>pyrrhula</i>

116.	Yellowhammer	
117.	Common Reed Bunting	
118.	Snow Bunting	

LIST OF MAMMALS

1.	Red Fox
2.	Bearded Seal
3.	Grey Seal
4.	Ringed Seal
5.	Harbour Porpoise
6.	White-beaked Dolphin
7.	Mountain Hare
8.	Eurasian Red Squirrel

