

Finland

Spring Birding at Oulu and Kuusamo

26-30 May 2019

David Karr & Mikko Pyhälä



The view from top of Valtavaara Hill, Kuusamo

Synopsis: A four-day birding excursion to northern (sub-Arctic) Finland. The private visit was designed to connect with two eight-hour organized tours offered by the Finnish company, *Finnature* at Oulu (27 May) and at Kuusamo (30 May). All target species were seen, with the notable exception of Little Bunting, *Emberiza pusilla* which had been reported around Kuusamo at the time of the visit. Highlights of birds seen included: lekking Capercaillie and Black Grouse, Willow Ptarmigan, Hazel Grouse, Great Grey, Boreal (Tengmalm's), Eurasian Pygmy, Ural and Northern Hawk owls, Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, Siberian Tit, Red-flanked Bluetail, Wryneck and Rustic Bunting. The long days of late spring (almost 24-hour sunlight) in the high latitude and the cooler than average temperatures (5-10°C) made for a brisk and invigorating birding experience.

Sunday, 26 May: I met my Finnish companion and birding comrade, Mikko Pyhälä at Helsinki's Vantaa Airport for our one-hour flight north to Oulu (Finnair). At Oulu, we collected our pre-booked rental car and drove the short distance to the birder-friendly *Airport Hotel* (highly recommended). We spent the rest of the afternoon and into the evening at the wetlands located directly behind the hotel (there is a convenient and strategically placed viewing platform set up for birders only 10 minutes' walk away).



Mikko checking out the local (bird) talent at the wetland observatory

Good birds seen here: breeding-plumaged Black-tailed Godwit and lekking Ruff; Common Snipe (overhead display flights); Whooper Swan, Greylag Goose, Garganey, Shelduck, Oystercatcher, Redshank, Greenshank, Ringed Plover; and singing Sedge Warbler and Reed Bunting.

We called it quits at 20:00 in order to prepare for our 03:00 start with *Finnature* the next morning.

Monday, 27 May: We met our *Finnature* guide, Pekka, at the arranged time of 03:00 in the hotel carpark. Our companions for the tour were Chris (UK) and Bernard (Belgium). The tour had been booked on-line several weeks ahead of our visit. The tour was primarily focused on seeing the northern European owls and we lost no time in driving to several different nesting owl sites known to the *Finnature* team around Oulu in search of our quarry. The location of the sites is a closely guarded secret of the tour company.

First up was a smart **Eurasian Pygmy Owl**, *Glaucidium p. passerinum* which obligingly answered a short burst of playback at around 03:45am:



The Pygmy Owl allowed prolonged views (15 minutes) from its perch atop a tall conifer.

We drove 30 minutes to another site, catching fleeting views of a **Black Grouse**, *Lyrurus t. tetrix* along the way. Here, attracted by playback, was also a highly responsive **Eurasian Wryneck**, *Jynx torquilla*.

But the main target was a nesting **Great Grey Owl**, *Strix nebulosa*, of which we heard several calls of the male and observed the female for some 15 minutes; she was seemingly unmoved by our presence and continued to brood on her nest:



The huge nest of the Great Grey Owl, a truly impressive structure

We then drove a good distance to a nesting area for **Ural Owl**, *Strix u. uralensis*. Here, while the nest was not seen, we quickly got onto a sentinel male, who may have been guarding the area. (And for myself, having experienced an attack by a Ural Owl in Hungary, was not keen to intrude further into its nesting territory):



Like the previous owls, the (male) bird seemed quite unfazed by our presence and allowed prolonged and relatively, (if not a little menacingly), close views.

Our final stop on the tour was a known nesting site of Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl, *Aegolius f. funereus*. Here, we were out of luck as the bird refused to show, despite the fact that we could discern the cheeping of chicks inside the nest box. The tour concluded at 11:00am and we were promptly delivered back to our hotel.



Our Oulu birding team, Chris, Pekka, Bernard and Mikko at the Boreal Owl site

Bidding farewell to Pekka, Chris and Bernard, Mikko and I decided to drive to the coast at Oulunsalo to where a small flock of Steller's Eider, *Polysticta stelleri*, had been reported by a local birder the afternoon before. Alas, we were out of luck, observing only a nesting colony of Black-headed Gulls, some Herring Gull and many of the more common oceanic species: Cormorant, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, and Arctic and Common Terns. On a whim, we took the (free) ferry over to **Hailuoto Island** to visit a wetland reserve with a wildlife viewing tower.



At a lake inside the reserve, we saw: Little Gull, Common Crane, *Grus grus*, Marsh Harrier and some Goldeneye, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, and Mallard.



Red-breasted Merganser in flight

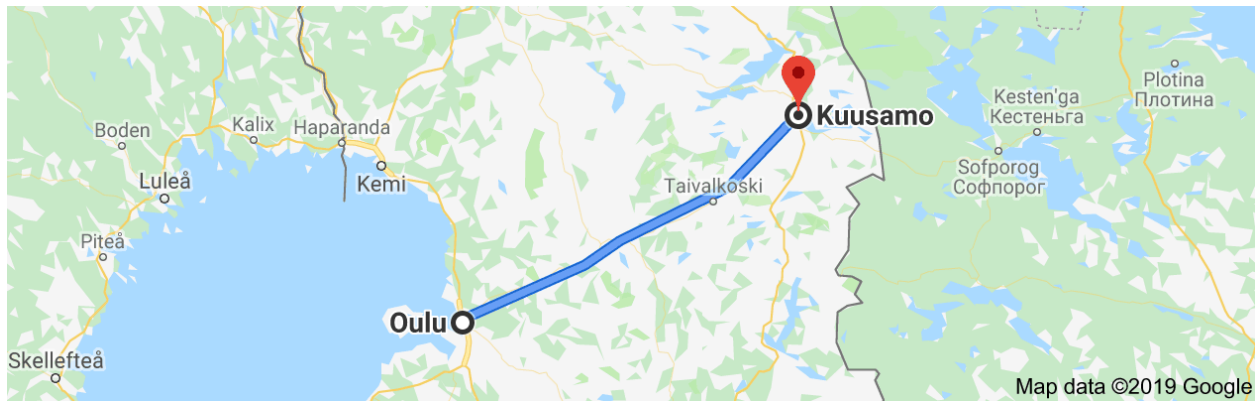
We then drove into Oulu Town for an early (and delicious) dinner at the local Greek restaurant, finishing just in time to make our date with a local manager of a bird hide managed by *Finnature* just outside of Oulu. The plan here was to observe Eurasian Eagle Owl, *Bubo bubo*, at a feeding site close by the hide. The manager brought in dead mice and chicken scraps to entice the beast and left us to our fate....



Our hide manager, setting out the bait for the local Eagle Owl – 19:00hrs

Unfortunately, despite a long and steadfast five-hour wait (battling fatigue), we gave up at midnight as the dawn broke again and the owl failed to show. It was fascinating however to observe the 'white night' and we saw several **Woodcock** in flight and a single male **Bullfinch** that came to a seed feeder close to the hide. (*Finnature* later kindly offered us another 'free' opportunity to re-visit the hide at a later date for the owl). We finally turned in at our hotel at around 1am...it had been a very long day.

Tuesday, 28 May: We departed Oulu at 07:00 for the 2.5 hour road trip northeast to Kuusamo (218kms on route 20).



En route, we stopped at **Syöte National Park** where several reports had been received of the presence of Red-flanked Bluetail. We walked several of the trails for 2 hours, but failed to connect with our target...



The park walks however, were splendid and we had remnant snow drifts apparent at many points. Here the only birds of any note were Willow Warbler, Fieldfare, Chaffinch, Crossbill and Song Thrush. Several signs advertising the presence of Capercaillie also failed to produce the promised bird...



We arrived at **Kuusamo** in the early afternoon and checked into our hotel, Kuusamon Tropic, located 4kms north of the town on the road to Ruka. We spent the rest of the day visiting the Valtavaara Mountain Park (approximately a 20-minute drive north). The bird action was slow, but we did connect with a few new species: Greater Spotted Woodpecker, Dunnock, Redwing, Song and Mistle Thrush, Brambling and Goldcrest. We were a little despondent not to even hear a peep from our much-wanted Bluetail.



A shy Dunnock gave brief views in the low strata of the forest

Wednesday, 29 May: Rainfall and high winds put a dampener on most of our day with generally poor birding conditions. However, the day began splendidly after we left our hotel at 03:00 to drive several of the unsealed roads to the southeast of Kuusamo that had been recommended by a friend of Mikko, the legendary nature photographer, Hannu Hautala. Indeed, within minutes of driving out of town, we came face-to-face with a female **Western Capercaillie**, *Tetrao urogallus*, standing in the middle of the

road (a lifer for me). As the misty morning wore on, we were to encounter two male Capercaillie at different points, including one in full testosterone-fuelled display:



Other birds were by the roadside, presumably ingesting gravel as an aid to digestion of their exclusive pine needle diet:



We were further rewarded with brilliant views of a flock of lekking **Black Grouse**, *Lyrurus tetrix*, (around a dozen) which put on a great display (despite the fog and misty conditions):



After lunch, we stopped by a lake opposite the Kuusamo fishing lure factory, which held a good number of hunting **Little Gull**, *Hydrocoloeus minutus*, a largely insectivorous species and a smart liveried bird if there was one:



We also took time to drive east of Kuusamo to visit farming lands and ploughed fields with the hope of seeing hunting Short-eared Owls. While this did not eventuate, we felt fortunate to connect with a lone Hawk Owl and **White-tailed Eagle**, *Haliaeetus albicilla*. Other new species were: Whinchat, a migratory flock of Wheatear, Eurasian Curlew and Lapwing. In a river, we had a smart-looking pair of **Red-necked Grebe**, *Podiceps grisegena*:



Later, we decided to return to the Kontainen Mountain parking place and Valtavaara Hill with the hope of finally connecting with the Bluetail. This time, we climbed to the top of the mountain, but the

prevailing wet weather conditions made birding very difficult. On our way down, we did however, meet a small family party of **Siberian Jay**, *Perisoreus infaustus*, which comprised an adult and several young:



We ended the day with delicious Finnish meal at Mestari Restaurant in the centre of Kuusamo (recommended). The menu included local cheeses, reindeer salami and a filet of 'white fish' and fresh local vegetables. I was pleased to note several Australian reds on the wine list which we enjoyed with the meal.



Typical birch forest around Kuusamo

Thursday, 30 May: We met our *Finnature* guide, Mikko and his trainee, Heikki, as scheduled at 03:00am at the Kuusamo Information Centre. We were delighted that the rain had petered out overnight and we were blessed with a golden dawn to start the day. It was also a great pleasure to re-connect with Chris (UK) and Bernard (Belgium) with whom we had birded on our Monday owling excursion.

Our guide, Mikko, had been briefed on our avian wish list beforehand and we spent the next eight hours visiting six different sites and systematically connecting with all but one of our target species. The enthusiasm and professionalism of the dynamic Mikko/Heikki duo was infectious and the birding very pleasant indeed...



First stop was in a *taiga* birch forest and we quickly connected with an obliging **Rustic Bunting**, *Emberiza rustica*; however we failed to see Little Bunting at this or at several other succeeding sites:



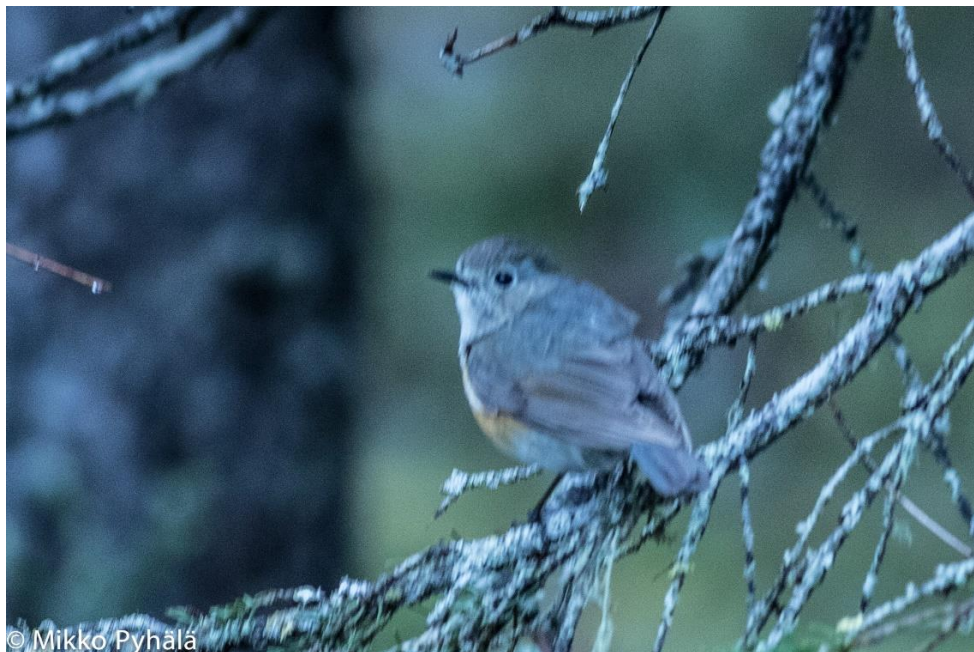
Next cab off the tank, was a very obliging **Willow Ptarmigan**, *Lagopus l. lagopus* which exploded onto the scene from a nearby copse in response to a short and judicious burst of playback:



Northern Hawk-Owl, *Surnia ulula* was easily found resting in a copse of birch:



With these fine birds under our belts, we headed back to Kontainen parking layover and Valtavaara Hill to try our luck once again for **Red-flanked Bluetail**, *Tarsiger cyanurus* – and this time, with expert assistance, we were in luck and found one non-breeding 2nd spring male at the top of the trail leading up the mountain:



In the carpark across the road from the park, Chris was delighted to find a pair of Siberian Jay and their youngster at a bird feeder – a life bird for him.



Next stop was to a series of bird feeders maintained by a local youth organization. In the grounds, we came face-to-face with a **Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl**, *Aegolius funereus*, which had taken up residence in a nest box intended for Goldeneye. The bird's whiskers were reddened by a recent bloody meal:



Our penultimate stop was at a site where three nest boxes had been erected by *Finnature* for **Siberian Tit**, *Poecile cincta laponicus* (the subspecies *lathamii* is known as **Grey-headed Chickadee** in North America). Here, a nesting pair were located flying in and out of their nesting box. I was especially pleased to see this bird as it had eluded me during an earlier excursion to northern Finland in June 2016.



Mikko checking out the nest box – some ten hatchlings were seen inside

With time running out for the tour, we were gratified when Eikki volunteered to take us to a new site where he had recently discovered a nesting Eurasian **Three-toed Woodpecker**, *Picoides tridactylus*, a bird that would become a lifer for the whole group (except Mikko P). This required a brisk 30-minute walk through fairly rough terrain; (*en route*, we would also glimpse a fleeing Capercaillie):



© Mikko Pyhälä



Boggy lake-side habitat where the Three-toed Woodpecker was found

And with that, our tour concluded at midday. Mikko and I then quickly departed Kuusamo to drive back to Oulu for our late afternoon return flight to Helsinki. A great trip with ten personal lifers for David Karr and two for Mikko: Bluetail and Ural Owl (the latter only heard before).



Our team, delighted to have ended the tour with great views of a female Three-toed Woodpecker: Heikki, Mikko (guide), Mikko Pyhälä, Bernard and Chris

David Karr, Bissau & Mikko Pyhälä, Helsinki

1 June 2019

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Guide Heikki, David and Guide Mikko

Systematic List of Birds Seen:

1. Whooper Swan, *Cygnus Cygnus*
2. Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*
3. Greylag Goose, *Anser anser*
4. Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*
5. Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*
6. Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*
7. Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*
8. Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca*
9. Garganey, *Anas querquedula*
10. Greater Scaup, *Aythya marila*
11. Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*
12. Gadwall, *Anas strepera*
13. Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima*
14. Common Scoter, *Melanitta nigra*
15. Velvet Scoter, *Melanitta fusca*

16. Long-tailed Duck, *Clangula hyemalis*
17. Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*
18. Goosander, *Mergus merganser*
19. Red-breasted Merganser, *Mergus serrator*
20. Willow Ptarmigan, *Lagopus lagopus*
21. Western Capercaillie, *Tetrao urogallus*
22. Black Grouse, *Lyrurus tetrix*
23. Hazel Grouse, *Tetrastes bonasia*
24. Common Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*
25. Black-throated Loon (Arctic Diver), *Gavia arctica*
26. Red-necked Grebe, *Podiceps grisgena*
27. Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*
28. White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*
29. Western Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*
30. Hen Harrier, *Circus cyaneus*
31. European Honey Buzzard, *Pernis apivorus* – a pair soaring in flight at Taivalkoski
32. Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*
33. Common Crane, *Grus grus*
34. Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*
35. Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticula*
36. Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*
37. Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*
38. Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
39. Redshank, *Tringa tetanus*
40. Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*
41. Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*
42. Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata*
43. Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus*
44. Woodcock, *Scolopax rusticola*

45. Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*
46. Ruff, *Philomachus pugnax*
47. Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
48. Common Gull, *Larus canus*
49. Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*
50. Lesser Black-backed Gull, *Larus fuscus*
51. Little Gull, *Hydrocoloeus minutus*
52. Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*
53. Arctic Tern, *Sterna paradisaea*
54. Wood Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*
55. Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus*
56. Great Grey Owl, *Strix nebulosa*
57. Ural Owl, *Strix uralensis*
58. Northern Hawk Owl, *Surnia ulula*
59. Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owl, *Aegolius funereus*
60. Eurasian Pygmy Owl, *Glaucidium passerinum*
61. Common Swift, *Apus apus*
62. Black Woodpecker, *Dryocopus martius*
63. Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendropicos major*
64. Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, *Picoides tridactylus*
65. Eurasian Wryneck, *Jynx torquilla*
66. Common Skylark, *Alauda arvensis*
67. Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*
68. House Martin, *Delichon urbicum*
69. Tree Pipit, *Anthus trivialis*
70. Meadow Pipit, *Anthus pratensis*
71. Pied Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*
72. Dunnock, *Prunella modularis*
73. Red-flanked Bluetail, *Tarsiger cyanurus*

74. Common Redstart, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
75. Northern Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe*
76. Whinchat, *Saxicola rubetra*
77. Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*
78. Redwing, *Turdus iliacus*
79. Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus*
80. Fieldfare, *Turdus pilaris*
81. Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*
82. Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin*
83. Sedge Warbler, *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*
84. Willow Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochilus*
85. Blyth's Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus dumetorum*
86. Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*
87. Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus*
88. Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata*
89. Pied Flycatcher, *Ficedula hypoleuca*
90. Great Tit, *Parus major*
91. Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*
92. Willow Tit, *Poecile montanus*
93. Siberian Tit, *Poecile cinctus*
94. Common Magpie, *Pica pica*
95. Siberian Jay, *Perisoreus infaustus*
96. Western Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*
97. Rook, *Corvus frugilegus*
98. Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*
99. Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*
100. Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*
101. Brambling, *Fringilla montifringilla*
102. Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*

- 132. Siskin, *Spinus spinus*
- 104. Eurasian Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
- 105. Common Crossbill, *Loxia curvirostra*
- 106. Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*
- 107. Rustic Bunting, *Emberiza rustica*
- 108. Yellowhammer, *Emberiza citrinella*