



Sunrise Birding LLC  
**FINLAND**  
**TRIP REPORT**

May 28 – June 3, 2018  
Photos by Steve Bird & Gina Nichol



Photos: Black Woodpecker, Willow Grouse, Siberian Jay, Northern Hawk Owl with chick.



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Leaders: Piritä Latja, Steve Bird & Gina Nichol

Finland sits at the western edge of the vast Siberian boreal forest and holds a variety of northern forest birds rarely found in other parts of Europe. Wild and pristine, a birding trip to Finland offers the chance to see some of Europe's most sought after birds.

After last year's cold and snowy weather, we weren't sure what to expect. And this year, the weather was quite opposite. An early spring meant warm temperatures and many species already in the midst of their breeding activities. Again, our Sunrise Birding's 2018 trip to northern Finland was a brilliant success. We had amazing encounters with Great Gray, Ural, Eurasian Pygmy Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, Capercaillie, Black Woodpecker, and more.

### Day 1

Our tour began in the city of Oulu in west central Finland, located on the shores of the Bay of Bothnia in the Oulunjoki River delta. The largest city in Northern Finland, Oulu is the capital of northern Scandinavia and the gateway to the nature of the region. Everyone arrived by late afternoon and met in the evening with our local guide Piritä and enjoyed our first dinner of the tour. We all commented on the bright, sunny, warm weather, somewhat unusual for this time of year and a far cry from the icy grip of our trip last year. Word was that this had shaped up to be a good owl year and we hoped that our group would have the good fortune to see these and the other special birds of Finland.





Though some people had traveled for many hours, all of us gathered the energy to go out after dinner and look for our first owl, **Eurasian Pygmy Owl**. We drove a half hour outside of Oulu under clear blue skies and ended up along a spruce lined road and the spot where we expected the owl to be (based on some good local information). We scanned the trees and, all at once, Gina said, "Here it is!" Soon we were looking at the bird half way up a nearby tree. It allowed good views, all the while looking very annoyed as Pygmy Owls often do. We positioned our scopes and cameras for photos and took our time observing and photographing the bird. It soon settled down and closed its eyes as if not to be bothered by the paparazzi. Once in a while it would open one eye just to keep track of us.

Our first excursion was a success and we had seen our first owl within two hours of starting the tour! We headed back to the hotel to retire for the night to be ready for our first full day in Finland.

## Day 2

The Oulu Region is best known for its breeding owls and today we made the most of our stay here with a total of 12 owl seen (4 species)! By the end of the day, we had tallied 4 Short-eared Owls, 5 Hawk Owls, 2 Great Gray Owls and 1 Boreal Owl. What a day!

After breakfast, we headed out to our first stop recording Common Cranes, Jackdaws, Curlew, Greylag Geese, Northern Lapwing and a flying Eurasian Kestrel along the way. We stopped on a road between some farm fields and found Short-eared Owl, a Black-tailed Godwit (likely breeding in the grassy field), Eurasian Golden Plover and a Yellowhammer. A Marsh Harrier flew over and there were displaying Skylarks and Meadow Pipits.

Our next stop was to see a Boreal Owl at a nest box. The little cutie peered out the hole and didn't seem at all phased by the paparazzi allowing nice photos.

Later in the morning, we visited a globally important waterfowl habitat called Liminganlahti, Finland's most important wetland located on the Bay of Liminka. From the



observation tower, we will scanned the shoreline and found displaying Ruff, Common Crane, Black-tailed Godwit and several Whooper Swans, Spotted Redshank and an adult Little Gull that flew past showing its black underwing. We walked back to the Nature Center getting good views of Pied Flycatcher, Willow Warbler and Yellowhammer on the way. We had a nice lunch at the nature center and look at the excellent exhibition and then continued our owl quest.

After lunch we stopped to see a **Northern Hawk Owl** nest with three chicks right along the road. Two of the chicks were already out of the nest and the busy adults were bringing in voles and feeding them as we watched. The show was frenetic and thrilling for us, as the busy parents tended to all of the chicks at once.



After the Hawk Owl show, we moved on to the coast where we had Mute Swan and Cormorant and then walked back to a super birdy yard that offered Common Redstart, Whinchat, and Spotted Flycatcher. There was a thrush bonanza in the yard featuring Redwing, Fieldfare, and Blackbird, as well as a Eurasian Robin. A Woodcock moved in the background and a Waxwing flew over.



The next stop was near the coast where we had Pintail, Red-breasted Merganser, Garganey and Tufted Duck. We headed back to the hotel for an early dinner and a review of our list for the day. After dinner, we visited a **Great Gray Owl** nest with an attendant female. It wasn't long before Tuomo, our driver, found a gorgeous male Great Gray carrying a vole to the nest. We watched this magnificent creature for several minutes and then left it to continue its evening activities. It was an owlmazing day!

### Day 3

After breakfast, we visited a small pond near Oulu town to look for **Slavonian Grebe**. There were several adult Mallards and countless Mallard ducklings moving among the rushes keeping out of the way of the nearby Hooded Crows and Black-headed Gulls. The Slavonian Grebe appeared and worked its way toward us and then circled back to the far end of the pond. All the while there were Common Swifts flying over calling.



Our next stop was near the snow dump at the coast where we had Common Redshanks, Common Sandpipers, Common Teal, a male Common Rosefinch near the front of the bus, Ringed Plover, Little Ringed Plover and Wood Sandpiper. We scanned and found a Terek Sandpiper and got decent views from the van. It was being chased by Redshanks and finally settled in the back of the pond. Terek Sandpiper is rare in Finland with only 5 pairs known in the country. We stayed in bus to avoid disturbing it (though the Redshanks were doing a good job at that!).

Later in the morning we visited a couple of forest areas that produced Wood Warbler, Willow Warbler and plenty of mosquitos. We heard Cuckoo calling but it was distant.



Lunch was taken at a local golf course where there was a stake out for a **Black Woodpecker** nest which could be seen right from the verandah of the clubhouse. Some people watched with vigilance while others risked going inside to get lunch which was eaten with views of the nest hole. Eventually, John spotted the male flying in and it perched on a nearby tree for a minute or so

before heading to the nest and feeding the chicks. It was inside the nest hole for a few minutes while we waited intently for another sighting. Then the male appeared at the hole, looked our way and flew out towards us and over the clubhouse. Superb!



After lunch we headed to another spot south of Oulu to look for **Ural Owl** that was known to nest in a box in a large woodland. We walked a tract and as soon as we spotted the bird it quickly flew off. Pirita told us to stay put while she searched for it and in a few minutes she whistled for us to go back down the track where she had the Ural Owl already in the scope. It was a little distant but it seemed that this bird, a female, was not going to tolerate any closer approach. We set up the scopes and spent a half hour watching and photographing the bird. It knew we were there but we stayed at a respectable distance and the bird stayed too.

After the Ural Owl show, we moved on to another site with some agricultural fields surrounded by forest. Here we had good views of Ortolan Bunting, a few displaying Skylarks and a Whinchat.



Our final stop of the day got us a male **Pallid Harrier** feeding on something on the ground in the middle of a grassy field. Another great day!



#### Day 4

This morning we checked the grounds down in front of the hotel where we had good views of Sedge Warbler, a singing Tree pipit, and a nice male Reed Bunting. At the end of the path, we could see a distant Red-throated Loon and a closer Common Shelduck.

We moved to another area overlooking the bay where we had very nice looks at Smew and several Great Crested Grebes in good light. There were Whooper Swans out in the open water as well as Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Teal.



Our next stop was a lake by the airport where we had a female Common Scoter and an Arctic Loon but it was otherwise quiet bird-wise. At a local birdwatching tower looking over the bay, there was lots of distant birds but mostly the same things we'd already seen. So we made our way toward Kuusamo through the beautiful northern landscape of forests, bog lands, lakes and rivers stopping at several lakes along the way. At one lake, there were several **Little Gulls** feeding over the water. Steve tried playing the call and a few flew very close overhead offering great views.

A little further on, we saw our first Reindeer of the trip. These large creatures were radio collared as all the Reindeer in Finland are owned even though they are free roaming. We arrived in the small city of Kuusamo near the Russian border where we spent the next two days exploring the area. Kuusamo which lies on an elevated plateau and is 90% of the land area is forested with pine and spruce as well as some deciduous trees. Fells and forests stretch as far as the eye can see with lakes, rivers and rapids adding a sparkling component to the spectacular countryside. We settled in to our hotel and had a nice dinner celebrating our sightings for the day and preparing for the days to come.

#### Day 5

This morning we were up early and out by 4 AM to look for grouse. It was already daylight and first stop was for a lone Black Grouse displaying in an open field. In another field we had 11 Black Grouse, a couple of Whooper Swans, a Whimbrel or two and a European Golden Plover. We remained in the van so as not to disturb the lekking grouse but a rogue Reindeer decided it was a good idea to run through the field and

flush all of the grouse. We waited for them to return but they didn't so we continued along the road and found them perched on the road but still flighty from the Reindeer.

We returned for breakfast and by now it was raining so we took a little break before heading out again. Not far from the hotel, we found ourselves in a bog looking at a displaying **Capercaillie** which allowed great views and photos. On our way out, a Willow grouse flew out of some woods but was not seen well. We moved to another area hoping to spot the grouse but instead found a Whimbrel on top of the tree.



Next we stopped at a nice looking lake where there were Red-necked Grebes, Eurasian Wigeon, and several Little Gulls flying over the water creating great reflections in the still water of the lake. From an observation tower, we had nice views of a Redwing on top of the tree. We also had Arctic Loon, a Red-necked Grebe on a nest and another pair making a nest, some Common Terns on a nest and good views of a male Reed Bunting.

We continued south of Kuusamo to a lovely ski track cafe in the woods by Lake Ahvenjärvi at the foot of Iivaara Hill (<http://www.iivaara.fi/>). Here we found several feeders with colorful Eurasian Bullfinch, a few Greenfinch and some Siskins. We watched for a while and then had to tear ourselves away to enjoy the delicious home-cooked lunch of Reindeer stew in the café.





We moved on to another spot which offered good views of **Brambling** and Rustic Bunting from a wooden bridge and then those with enough energy left climbed up the hill to see Red-flanked Bluetail.

Back at the hotel, a band was warming up next to the restaurant so we did our checklist in the Reindeer hide room downstairs. We enjoyed another great meal starting with delicious salmon soup and got to bed early in preparation for another grouse run in the morning.

## Day 6

Another early morning had us out looking at Rustic Bunting which we found along a road not far from the hotel. At another spot, a **Willow Grouse** flew at us and over our heads. The bird perched in a tree in the open for all to see and photograph, all this by 5 am!



We drove some roads outside of Kuusamo and found a female Black Grouse. A local lake yielded Common Crane, Tufted Duck, Goldeneye, and a male Smew. At the next spot, we had gorgeous views of a distant lake (so many lakes!) and then two Siberian Jay came in and showed well for us as they foraged and warmed themselves in the morning sun.

After breakfast, we explored more of the area. The first stop was an open field where Pirita spotted some heads in the grasses which turned out to be Taiga Bean Geese. Scanning the area, we found Mistle Thrush and a few Northern Lapwings. In a forest area along the road we had Little Bunting, Raven, the ubiquitous Willow Warbler and a Mealy Redpoll. We went all the way to the Russian border zone which was quite except for a Raven nearby.

On the way back we stopped at a lake that held Smew, Velvet Scoters, a few distant Common Cranes, Common Goldeneye, Tufted Duck, Common Terns and Shoveler.

Orange tip butterflies caught our attention as they fed on the few flowers that were available.

Our picnic lunch was taken at the “Dipper” site at Kayla. There the **Eurasian Dipper** was actively feeding a nest of chicks which was right under the walking bridge. With patience, the bird was well seen by everyone as it navigated around the fishermen and walkers enjoying the beautiful day. After lunch, we went onto a nearby national park and walked a trail where we saw several Calypso orchids, a few close Goldcrests, Gray Wagtail, and a gorgeous waterfall.



Our last stop of the day was at a lake surrounded by a forest with several nest boxes. One of the boxes had an active Grey-headed Chickadee nest while another had a Common Goldeneye. A White Wagtail was nesting under the viewing platform and a Pied Flycatcher was spotted near another box.

### Day 7

This morning before breakfast, we looked for the elusive Hazel Grouse but Velvet Scoter was more cooperative. We went back to the hotel for breakfast and said goodbye to Ed and Susan who were heading out to explore other parts of Norway. The rest of us continued north for the Lapland and Varanger tour.



Photos: Arctic Loon, Orange-tip, Calypso Orchid