

Finnish Lapland and the Varanger fjord 8th – 19th June 2016

This was a trip to see the habitats and the breeding birds in the forests and bogs of Lapland and the tundra and coastline of the Varanger fjord in northern Norway. The three men in a Skoda Yeti were Kevin Cox (cook), Alan Martin (cameraman) and Renton Righelato (navigator). We went Finnair from Heathrow for Rovaniemi *via* Helsinki on 8th June, arriving early evening, and drove to our first location near Kuusamo.

We had booked a well-equipped, two roomed chalet with sauna at Atimo, near Ruka, where we stayed, the only guests on the lakeside site, for three nights (Euro 65/night). Goldeneye clanged over the lake and Cranes could be heard in the distance.

9th June: a dry, largely sunny day 6-10°C. After a disturbed night for two of us – our snoring cameraman was bright as a button – we headed for Konttainen Hill at the north end of the Valtavaara ridge. This is a fairly open canopy forest area with a thin scrub layer and dense ground mosses, bilerry etc.

Almost as soon as we had parked the car we found a couple of Siberian Jays and later a family party. A walk to the top of the hill produced Redstarts, Brambling and Willow Warblers (everywhere and not to be mentioned again) but little else.

On the way down, one of us disturbed a Two-barred Crossbill, drinking at a puddle and in the distance, a Black Woodpecker drummed, our only contact with this species.



At the bird tower at Vuotunki lake Little Gulls and Arctic Terns were nesting and Black-throated Diver, Mallard, Wigeon, Teal, Goldeneye, Smew – all species found on many of the lakes. Across the road from the bird tower, in scrubby pastures, Reed Bunting and Little Bunting were seen. We moved on to an old ringing station at Kovalainen, recommended by the Kuusamo tourist office. A small area of marsh that was difficult to find, but worth it. Breeding Greenshank, Wood Sandpipers, Ruff, Snipe and Common Sandpiper. In the scrub on the edge of the marsh, good views of a Little Bunting singing; Reed Bunting and Yellowhammer in the same area and Rosefinch singing close by. Along one of the tracks a Great Grey Shrike was seen perched on an isolated pine.

10th June: cold (3-6°C) and rain most of the day. A 2 am start to meet our Finnature guide, Antti Peuna, in search of some of the more difficult to find species. In dense forest, close to Kuusamo, both Willow Grouse and Hazel Grouse came to the car in response to recordings, the latter seen very well sitting on low branches. In the same area we visited a Tengmalm's Owl box at which the adult, blocking the entrance, stared at us until we left. A Siberian Tit at a nest box was the first of several we saw during the visit. A wet walk on the west side of the Valtavaara ridge produced little – a Pygmy Owl called in response to a recording, but did not approach. We



then went west of Kuusamo to an area of open forest, much of which had been recently cut. Here we saw a Hawk Owl with chicks begging nearby and a Great Grey Shrike. In the same area, we were taken to the nest of a Great Grey Owl with a spectacular adult and one or two chicks. Returning to the minibus from the owl's nest we stumbled across a pair of Rustic Buntings in an area of scrub and had excellent views of the male. On the way back, two Pine Grosbeaks were seen from the vehicle along the side of the track. One lake had a dozen or so non-breeding Velvet Scoter. Weatherwise a dreadful day, but the Finnature guide delivered several species that we would have been hard-pressed to have found for ourselves.



11th June: warmer 10-13°C, sunny and dry. We made our way north to Ivalo, via the Oulanka National Park just north of Ruka, unsuccessfully seeking an orchid that had died back the previous week. We stopped at the Petuka bog north of Sodankyla, but in mid afternoon saw little other than a few Teal and Red-necked Phalaropes and a very confiding Yellow Wagtail *M.f. thunbergi*. The Hotel Ivalo, the only place we could find rooms at short notice, was of no special merit. However, it enabled us to get an early start to go on to Inari and to the Karigasniemi area the next day.



12th June: again sunny, warm and dry. In the bright sunshine there was little to be seen on the bogs between the E75 and Karigasniemi, but the reindeer station 9km east of Karigasniemi made up for it. The pool held numbers of Ruff, Wood Sandpiper, Temminck's Stint. Alan, in quick succession, found the nests of Temminck's Stint and Lapland Bunting. A Long-tailed Skua appeared to be sitting on a nest, with its mate nearby apparently eating the flower buds of a bilberry-like plant. Rough-legged Buzzards were seen here and at three other places in this area. However, a walk up Mount Aligas produced nothing but a few Golden Plover, Wheatears and Rough-legged Buzzard.



Back to the E75 to stay the night at Neljan Tulan Tupa, a small simple hotel with a strong birder bias. The bird feeders held three or four Pine Grosbeaks, 10-20 Brambling, Redpolls and Willow Tits. We

met a Finnish bird-watcher who runs a thousand or so nest boxes across Finland. Nest boxes for a wide range of species can be seen along many of the roads – we were told that nest sites were a limiting factor for many hole-nesting species (perhaps because most of the forest is relatively young).



13th June: light rain, 6-9°C. The drive on to Ekkeroy, a peninsula on the northern side of the Varanger fjord, was uneventful. The best bird was a Dipper, nesting under a bridge over the River Utsjoki, just south of the town of Utsjoki. Outside Vadso we saw an immature Glaucous Gull, one of the surprisingly few white-winged gulls on the trip. At Ekkeroy we stayed in an old, white, wooden house, interestingly-restored, sited close to the cliffs with vast numbers of Kittwakes breeding – we did not count them, but around 20,000 is quoted. Kevin created an excellent risotto.

14th June: 16°C, wind fresh NW, cloudy. Walks on Ekkeroy produced Red-throated Pipits, which seem to occupy a very similar habitat to the somewhat more numerous Meadow Pipits, Red-necked Phalaropes on the pool in the centre of the island and inshore numerous Goosander and Eider. White-tailed Eagles have become quite common, with 4-6 seen along about 10 km of beaches to the north of Ekkeroy. The tundra north of Ekkeroy can be accessed by a number of tracks. Here we came across Long-tailed Skuas in a couple non-breeding parties of about 20. We were told that this was a poor year for rodents. However, Arctic Skuas were in pairs and appeared to be nesting. Golden Plover and Whimbrel were spaced out everywhere across the tundra. On the pools there were Long-tailed Duck and Teal and numerous Ruff around the edges. A Lapland Bunting came off a nest with five eggs in the 10 cm high scrub.



Juha Ahvenainen, a friend from Helsinki with whom I had first come to this area in 1999, and his wife Hariet, joined us for fish eggs and pasta in the evening.

15th June: 9-11°C, wind light to moderate W, fine. A walk through the scrub behind the beach north of Ekkeroy produced Bluethroat, Warblers and fly by Redpolls that did not allow speciation. We drove to Vardo and took the boat to Hornoy Island (Euro 40 pp), famous for its auk colony. Five auk species breed: Black, Common and Brunnich's Guillemot, Razorbill and Puffin.



North of Vardo, the scenery along the road to Hamningsberg is spectacular: dark crags and screes and deep fjords with marsh and scrub of Willow and Birch at their head. An interesting piece of modernist architecture about 5km from Vardo turned out to be a bird hide looked out over an area of pools and bog where we saw c 12 Long-tailed Duck, 3 Scaup, Bean Geese and numerous Ruff. About 7km before Hamningsberg, a fjord had a flock of around 1,000 Goosander. A few km further, at Sandfjord, we had our best views of Arctic Redpolls and Bluethroat in the willow scrub. On the road from Ekkeroy to Vardo we had at least 11 White-tailed Eagles, about 80% immatures.



16th June: 15-20°C, wind light E, fine. On another trip on to the tundra from Kampenes we saw again the nomadic party of Long-tailed Skuas and further inland, on a low, flat area, about 10 pairs of Turnstone breeding in a loose colony. In the same area Dunlin, Whimbrel, Ruff and Golden Plover were breeding and a Shore Lark was seen on a ridge. A trip to Nesseby, where Steller's Eider are reported to summer, was unsuccessful.



17th June: 12-15°C, wind light to moderate, partial cloud: We left Ekkeroy to start the journey south, stopping first at Lakongas, 25km along the 970 west from Utsjoki, following a text from Juha Ahvenainen that there was a Golden Eagle's nest (continuing west from Lakongas to the first parking place on the right, where there is a monument to a President of Finland; then walk 300m on to view). The nest, with at least one chick, was clearly visible across the River Tana, on the Norwegian side, and both adults were seen flying and perched close by. Returning to the E75 we saw a Hawk Owl beside the road and a Short-eared Owl hunting between Utsjoki and Inari. As we approached Saariselka, where we were to stay two nights, a front brought rain and stronger winds.

18th June: cooler 6-10°C, wind moderate NW, showers, sunny intervals. The moorland close to Saariselka is a good place to see Dotterel: although we saw none at Kaunispaa, nearby at Kilopaa, we found at least four birds, though we were unsuccessful with Ptarmigan. Following Dave Gosney's advice, we took the 9694 west towards Kuttura in search of old growth woodland. Although we failed to find woodpeckers, we saw Hawk Owls at two places and a pair of Siberian Tits.



19th June: On the drive back to Rovaniemi airport, the only bird of note seen from the car was a male Hen Harrier.

It was a great trip in wonderful habitats and spectacular scenery. Overall we recorded 141 species (two only heard), including four that I had not seen on my earlier trips to the area: Great Grey Owl, Hazel Grouse, Pine Grosbeak and Rustic Bunting.

Lessons: we were perhaps rather late in the season and we missed Steller's and King Eider and Three-toed Woodpecker. We also failed to find Broad-billed Sandpiper and Jack Snipe on the bogs (perhaps largely because we missed being at bogs at midnight). We were just too early for Arctic Warbler, the first of which was reported at Nesseby just as we were leaving!

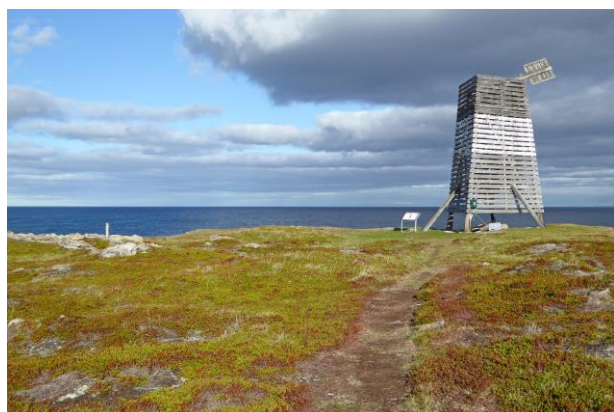
A trip to northern Norway in late May could be good to see all the Eider and White-billed Diver, along with migrating seabirds and waders.



Petuka bog



Above - tundra near Ekkeroy; below the beach at Ekkeroy and a view into the fjord





Temporary accommodation near Saariselka

Left: Red-necked Grebes were frequent on lakes. Rough-legged Buzzards plentiful in northern Lapland, Dotterel numerous at Saariselka. Reindeer – everywhere.



Bar-tailed Godwit at Nesseby

Finnish Lapland and the Varanger fjord 8th – 19th June 2016 - Species recorded

Whooper Swan	Redshank
Greylag Goose	Wood Sandpiper
Bean Goose	Red-necked Phalarope
Long-tailed Duck	Puffin
Common Eider	Black Guillemot
Velvet Scoter	Razorbill
Common Scoter	Brunnich's Guillemot
Goldeneye	Guillemot
Smew	Long-tailed Skua
Goosander	Arctic Skua
Red-breasted Merganser	Kittiwake
Shelduck	Black-headed Gull
Tufted Duck	Little Gull
Scaup	Common Gull
Wigeon	Lesser Black-backed Gull
Mallard	Herring Gull
Pintail	Glaucous Gull
Teal	Great Black-backed Gull
Hazel Grouse	Arctic Tern
Willow Grouse	Osprey
Red-necked Grebe	Golden Eagle
Rock Dove	Hen Harrier
Stock Dove	White-tiled Eagle
Woodpigeon	Rough-legged Buzzard
Swift	Hawk Owl
Cuckoo	Pygmy Owl (heard only)
Crane	Tengmalm's Owl
Red-throated Diver	Short-eared Owl
Black-throated Diver	Great Grey Owl
Great Northern Diver	Great Spotted Woodpecker
Gannet	Black Woodpecker (heard only)
Shag	Kestrel
Cormorant	Great Grey Shrike
Oystercatcher	Siberian Jay
Golden Plover	Jay
Dotterel	Magpie
Ringed Plover	Jackdaw
Lapwing	Raven
Whimbrel	Hooded Crow
Curlew	Duncock
Bar-tailed Godwit	House Sparrow
Turnstone	Tree Pipit
Ruff	Red-throated Pipit
Temminck's Stint	Meadow Pipit
Dunlin	Rock Pipit
Snipe	Yellow Wagtail (<i>thunbergi</i>)
Common Sandpiper	White Wagtail
Green Sandpiper	Chaffinch
Spotted Redshank	Brambling
Greenshank	Common Rosefinch (heard)

Bullfinch
Pine Grosbeak
Greenfinch
Common Redpoll
Arctic Redpoll
Two-barred Crossbill
Siskin
Lapland Bunting
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting
Rustic Bunting
Little Bunting
Willow Tit
Siberian Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Shore Lark
Sedge Warbler
House Martin
Swallow
Sand Martin

Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Wood Warbler
Garden Warbler
Goldcrest (heard singing)
Waxwing
Wren
Starling
Dipper
Spotted Flycatcher
Robin
Bluethroat
Pied Flycatcher
Redstart
Whinchat
Wheatear
Mistle Thrush
Song Thrush
Redwing
Fieldfare

And some surprising misses based on earlier June trips

Garganey
Gadwall
Pochard
Steller's Eider
Capercaillie
Ptarmigan
Black Grouse
Heron
Buzzard

Merlin
Great Crested Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Purple Sandpiper
Jack Snipe
Broad-billed Sandpiper
Snow Bunting
Twite



All photographs copyright Alan Martin