

# Finland and Arctic Norway

with Shetland Wildlife

26 May to 8 June 2012: TRIP REPORT



**Shetland Wildlife**

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**Tour Leaders:** Glenn Overington, Piritja Lajta & Petri Lampila

**Tour Participants:** Mark Clay, Andrew Merrick, Simon Millin, Emiko and Maasaki Nishikawa, Someko Onedo, Jo Rooney, Corrina Smart, John Vennard, joined by Philip Jordan and Jane Gray for Ivalo / Varanger

### **Saturday 26 May (Day 1) London to Oulu**

Glenn, Mark, Andrew, Simon, Jo and Corrina meet at Heathrow at 0515 hrs to begin our birding trip to Central and Northern Finland, Lapland and Varanger in Arctic Norway (other travellers will meet us in Finland or will join us along the way). Yes, it's early, but the sense of anticipation far outweighs any tiredness. In fact the sense of anticipation for one of our number was so strong that they originally arrived 24 hours earlier than the meeting time - although it's very difficult to be critical of such enthusiasm! Check-in and security are quickly out of the way and we are through to the communal departure areas where we can relax for a little while and get to know each other a little better. Strong coffee sharpens the senses and we're soon off to our departure gate for the first leg of our trip – our flight to Helsinki.

On arrival at Helsinki, we again relax (well isn't that what holidays are for?) and look out for John, another guest who is flying in from Manchester. John duly arrives and we immediately sense an air of 'mischief' behind his polite demeanour – as the trip progressed, it became clear that at that early stage, we didn't know the half of it!!

It was at Helsinki too that Andy showed his firm intentions for the trip, intensely scanning the airport runways and grassy areas for the first birds (White Wagtail, Linnet and a Skylark) whilst Corrina announced that there was a probable Blackbird in the ladies toilet – although it eventually became clear that this was piped birdsong. Still the signs were good – everyone was clearly raring to get started.

We take our one hour internal flight from Helsinki and arrive at Oulu airport just after 1700 hrs local time (Finland being 2 hours ahead of the UK). We claim our baggage and then we're through arrivals where we meet our local guide for the first week of the trip – Piritja Lahti. We collect the keys for our VW minibuses, load up the vehicles and after a short delay to allow Glenn to identify on which side the driver should sit we're on our way to the Vihiluoto hotel (Swift, Black-headed Gull) to check-in and meet up with our final guests for the first week of the trip – Emiko, Masaaki and Someko who arrived in Finland a couple of days ahead of us. We check-in and meet up with our friends from Japan and an early dinner is arranged for 1830 hrs as this will allow us to take an evening excursion for one of our key species. The food is well received and the company is delightful. However it's clear that everyone is keen to get birding. We therefore organise ourselves swiftly and regroup at the minibuses. Birding from the hotel beforehand produces Curlew, Magpie, Lapwing, Rook, Hooded Crow and Mistle Thrush.

It's been a good spring in Finland and there has been a healthy population of voles (a favoured food source for most Finnish Owl species) south of Oulu and some species are

already well into their breeding cycle with chicks fledging from the nest – this has been the case for our first target species – Tengmalm's Owl, therefore time is of the essence if we hope to see this special bird. We head south and after an hour or so arrive at a forested, broken forested area near Oulainen.

The light is beautiful and as we park the minibuses and alight we immediately begin to see birdlife. Two Short-eared Owls, a roding Woodcock, a male Bullfinch, Lesser black-backed and Common gulls. We head a short distance down a track to a further open area near an entrance into the forest and spend a few minutes here scanning the trees and shrubs for new species and have good views of our first Ortolan Buntings, Redwing and Shoveler before heading into the forest towards the Tengmalm's Owl nest site. We were warned by Pirijta that the chicks may now have fledged and unfortunately we find that this is indeed the case. We will therefore need to move quietly and carefully through the immediate forest area looking and listening for signs of the chicks or attendant adults.

The group slowly disperses and a few minutes later Pirijta whistles to us. A Tengmalm's chick has been located on a low branch near an open forest road. It is small, darkly coloured and keen to rest, however we all have wonderful views. The only sign of the adult birds unfortunately is a response to the chick's contact calls but we count our blessings as the following day may have been too late altogether.

We head back towards the vehicles but not before Andy impresses us with his botany knowledge, by identifying a False Morrel (a form of fungi) and we are distracted for a short while by some calling from a low mounted nest box and an occasionally visible beak. The bird is clearly not impressed with our presence and no firm identification is possible – although Wryneck is suggested as a possibility. Positive views however of Fieldfare and Chaffinch are gained.

We head back to the hotel, it is late but still light as at this time of year there are up to 22 hours of daylight even here in Central Finland. The return journey is marked by an unusual event, where a raptor in a lone dead tree was seen to be a 'Hawk Owl' by some however when we parked the vehicles and looked back – the raptor on the tree was clearly a Kestrel. A number of guests however stated that they had seen the original bird fly off and over a nearby tree-line in a manner that would definitely suggest Hawk Owl. A mystery then and one that would be discussed often over the next few of days as we were already aware that Hawk Owl could be a difficult species to see and as we understood the situation this year, there were no guaranteed sites for another sighting. Little did we know at this point, we needn't have worried...

## **Sunday 27 May (Day 2) Oulu**

Refreshed from some needed sleep and a hearty breakfast - and buoyed from our initial success of the previous evening - we head out for another day of birding. In truth, some guests have a head start, having explored the beautiful mosaic of habitats (gardens, marsh, reed bed and sea) within easy access of the hotel grounds. Therefore a conservative count of 12 Common Cranes, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, Yellowhammer,

Great Tit and Jackdaw have been secured before we leave. Our journey will again take us to destinations south of Oulu and our main targets will again be Owls.

We head initially for an area of forest North of Sikajoki, park and follow a track into an area of mixed forest, branching left into a natural grassy ride. Pirijta asks us to hold back here and await her sign to move forward. We are in the nesting area of a pair of Ural Owls and the chicks have again already fledged. Pirijta will look to locate the chicks and adult birds. However we must be cautious – Ural Owls may look ‘gentle’ but they have a well deserved reputation for being exceptionally aggressive within their territory during the breeding season.

After a short time Pirijta motions for us to move forward a little, slowly – she points and there on a branch overhanging the track about 100 metres ahead is a large chick sunning itself in the warmth of the morning. We set up our telescopes and cameras and enjoy the views, watching as Pirijta again moves forward slowly, watching keenly for any sign of other nearby chicks and the presence of the adult birds. Pirijta’s careful approach and exceptional field skills (even with a colour palette of clothing and hair which seemed to include bright hues of lime, orange, red and purple) allow her to eventually stand almost directly adjacent to the chick – which displayed no sign of alarm at all, but rather a genuine interest in this new arrival in the forest, and it watched Pirijta with obvious curiosity as she moved closer and then onward to the right and further into the forest in search of other members of the family.

We move closer to the chick and begin to enjoy the exceptional view. A second chick is located and then an adult a little further off. It keeps its distance, possibly a little nervous of the size of the group, however we all eventually obtain excellent telescope views of this beautiful bird before returning to spend a little longer with the chicks. We leave them, undisturbed.

We return to the minibuses, and as we walk we have the pleasure of the occasional Green Hairstreak butterfly for company. A quarry to the left of path hosts a nesting colony of Sand Martins and as we reach the sandy parking area we are treated to the sound and sight of one of the beautiful pale-grey toned Willow Tits of the Northern race.

Delighted with the start to the day we relocate, via a quick lunch stop, approximately an hour southwest of Sikajoki to another area of forest near Merijarvi. Here we hope to see another iconic bird – the Great Grey Owl. We again park and head into the forest, winding our way slowly and quietly through the trees until Pirijta motions for us to halt. Pirijta explains that we are now close to the site where the female owl and chicks reside. Unlike the Tengmalm’s and Ural Owls, the chicks have not yet fledged, however the female is very shy and therefore we must proceed very sensitively and not encroach too close to the nest itself.

We move forward with the appropriate level of care and position ourselves to gain a good view of the nest – we seem to collectively hold our breath. Suddenly, we are greeted by the awe inspiring sight of a huge female Great Grey Owl – the view draws gasps from the

group. The female, aware of our presence is sitting amongst and towards the front of a large structure of twigs and small branches supported by larger branches and the trunk of the nest tree. We soon see evidence of the small white chicks as they stretch and move around the nest or when the female repositions herself. We watch intently as the female spends her time both interacting with her young and keeping a vigilant eye open for danger. We can't fail to notice the stark contrast between the soft and caring expression and attention the owl displays for her offspring and the piercing stare that she reserves for us, her unwelcome audience. We hope for the arrival of the male owl, possibly with prey. We continue to watch, taking photographs and absorbing the experience, delighted and privileged to be able to share the lives of these owls for a short time. All too soon we are obliged to leave as a second group arrives – we leave reluctantly, but elated.

The hum of excitement continues as we head back northeast towards an area south of Sikajoki – we see Whooper Swans and Woodpigeon on the way. Eventually we turn into a dirt road in another area of mixed forest and park at the junction of a forest track. We wait as Pirijta mimics and then plays a very distinctive bird call – some of us recognise it as the call of a Pygmy Owl. Initially there is no response. We wait a little and try again, and then move slightly further down the dirt road, we try a further time – nothing. We continue a little way down the forest track where there are at least two Camberwell Beauty butterflies, and then suddenly, movement - and above us in the lower branches of a spruce - the bird we are looking for – a Pygmy Owl. Initially, for some it possibly feels like an anticlimax, having so recently seen the Great Grey Owl, a bird very much at the other end of the scale in terms of size. However, it soon becomes clear that this bird has its own impressive attributes. The sunlight really highlights the incredible fierceness and intensity of the bright yellow eyes and allows excellent views of the sharpest talons and beak, weapons that many of the smaller forest birds and mammals fear. The owl sits comfortably, preening, yawning, stretching, calling and often intently staring - seemingly relaxed and alert all at once. We eventually leave, again reluctantly, and head back to Oulu.

The excited conversation returns again over dinner as there have been many highlights today. Some enjoy a drink to celebrate, and then most head out once more – the short walk from the hotel down to the raised wooden platform overlooking the Gulf of Bothnia for some late birding. We are rewarded with Broad-billed Sandpiper, Greenshank, Redshank, Black tailed Godwit, Little Tern, Common Tern, Arctic Tern, Pintail, Ruff, Snipe, Teal, Tufted Duck, Shelduck, Little Ringed Plover, Red-Breasted Merganser, Gadwall and a flock of 12 Whooper Swans flying across the sunset. It was time to leave - a beautiful ending to an exhilarating day.

### **Monday 28 May (Day 3) Oulu**

A swift pre-departure scan produces Sedge Warbler among the usual hotel birds and then we head once more back towards Sikajoki. We initially head into the forest along a track taken yesterday (unsuccessfully keeping one eye open for the hubcap Glenn lost here yesterday - it was later recovered by Pirijta's group the following week!) and then diverting along a new track through open fields where a pair of Pallid Harriers nested in

2011. We stop, prompted by the sight of a Black Grouse in the area ahead. A closer look indicates that there about a dozen birds and some lekking occurs before they fly away to the forest edge. Before they depart we enjoy wonderful telescope views of these 'puffed up' birds glorious in their blue/black plumage, white splayed under tail and swollen red eyebrows. A Whinchat is present and we have good views of a Great Grey Shrike perched in the top of a distant tree swaying slightly in the breeze before we move on. The landscape becomes more enclosed but wider open in places with old forestry workings and clearance very obvious.

We reach our destination, park and look back across one of these open areas, broken by only the occasional trees. A pair of Waxwings and a beautiful male Crossbill provide good views, Siskin are common and very mobile and we see Spotted Flycatcher too before heading along a track and into an area of younger new growth forest leading to an older thicket of spruce.

The area is enclosed and quite dark but Pirijta directs our attention to a nest hole low down on the right hand side of a tree about 10m distant, just below a bracket fungus. The accessible space is a little tight but we organise ourselves, seeking the most advantageous spots for viewing and photography – eventually we are ready. Soon, again initiated by Pirijta, the drumming sounds and calls of a Three-toed Woodpecker are echoing around the thicket – we wait, looking and listening for a response. Eventually the eye and beak of our quarry appear slowly from the nesting hole. We focus, the bird is clearly curious but also very cautious. A Wryneck begins to sing in the background. The cautious behaviour continues for a while before the male woodpecker emerges fully and after a brief pause on the trunk of the tree proceeds to climb and circle reaching the higher branches before flying and landing on an adjacent favoured perch where it proceeds to drum loudly – the excellent choice of drumming post enabling the sound to reverberate loudly across the forest! We all have excellent views and it's another wonderful encounter.

We move back through the forest towards the vehicles. A flock of Brambling and a Green Sandpiper in flight entertain before we move on. Our next destination is only a short drive away and we soon arrive. It is another mosaic of very open, harvested forest with isolated single and small groups of trees, with thicker, denser growth back behind. We alight and spot a very vocal and obvious Cuckoo almost immediately. Whilst we are enjoying this view, a beautiful male Red-backed Shrike is spotted perched at the top of a small new-growth tree, and our attention is swiftly diverted. We follow a wide gravel track up from the minibuses, the direction the shrike has taken, towards an 'open' corner within the habitat with room to scan over a wider area. We stop here and begin to view our surroundings. This was the site of a Hawk Owl nest last year, but we hope to see Black Woodpecker today – the large nest hole is clearly visible, facing us from a small stand of Aspen. We see the Red-backed Shrike once more and obtain many good views over the period of our visit. A Wryneck too, patiently rests on a nearby spruce, and Tree Pipit is evident. Eventually we see the stunning Black Woodpecker. Initially coming in to land on the trunk of a tree away from the nest and calling, ensuring all is safe, then moving to the nest tree and to the nest hole itself. We spend some time here, watching the interaction of the pair of adult birds, coming and going bringing food to the nest and

hungry chicks and we are all impressed by the size in flight and in the way the birds use their stiff tail feathers to support their weight when they land and briefly 'rest' on the trunks of the trees. However, the highlight of our viewing was an interchange at the nest itself. The male was on the nest inside the nest hole and the female returned with food and for a change-over. As the female sat waiting at the hole of the nest, the male shot out past her and Someko managed to capture the action beautifully in her photograph – Andy and Glenn didn't! Before we leave, there is still time to investigate the song of a Common Rosefinch and locate him.

We depart the forest and drive back towards Oulu and onwards to Liminka and the Liminganlahti Visitor Centre for a welcome lunch and a well earned drink. It's a lovely centre with high floor to ceiling glass windows on two levels and excellent facilities. Some of the group are introduced to and purchase 'Finnsticks' and this is where the company who provide our local guides are based – Finnature. The owner of the company and our good friend Jari Peltomaki is here today and he introduces us to a wonderful exhibition of wildlife photography currently on show here in the centre. We spend some time admiring these and associated Finnish wildlife photography books before heading out on to the reserve itself.

The reserve is a vast expanse of wetland and marsh, but Glenn remarks that it looks very different to a year ago. The reed beds are flattened and water levels may have changed. The imposing bird watching tower has gone and been replaced by a lower platform above the main hide and the boardwalk shows signs of repair. Pirijta explains that a huge storm in the previous autumn devastated the reserve and the recovery is still in progress.

We head for the platform above the main hide – it is breezy but this gives us our first opportunity to view the landscape in all its splendour. A distant perched White-tailed Eagle is swiftly located and various other species are observed. We head down below to the enclosed hide for more comfortable viewing and spend a productive hour or so here identifying birds seen distantly from above and new arrivals and 'passers-by'. Eventually good views are obtained of Raven, the aforementioned White-tailed Eagle, Goldeneye, Great Crested Grebe, Smew, Oystercatcher, Little-ringed Plover Temminck's Stint, Caspian Tern, Marsh Harrier, Common Crane, Curlew, Redshank and three drake Garganey.

Terek Sandpiper is a very rare breeding bird in this area, but has been unreliable this year. As it is our final day in Oulu before moving on to our next base in Kuusamo, we elect to try two sites where they have been seen, albeit sporadically this year. We travel, via a series of ploughed fields where we see House Martin, Swallow, Yellow Wagtail, Lapwing and a male Marsh Harrier, to the first site, a carrot field (!), near Lumijoki. This is certainly not the most likely location for this species, but we are assured that the bird has been seen here recently and on more than one occasion. Unfortunately there is no sign today, we are also unlucky at the second site – a small wasteland near the coast, where this species has been seen regularly over the last few years although it appears that this year there has been much more working activity at the site and deep snow until very recently which may have altered the suitability.

## Tuesday 29 May (Day 4) Oulu to Kuusamo

A pre-departure early morning drive produces two fly-by Capercaillie (seen by Pirijta, Jo, Andy and Simon), Mealy Redpoll (Pirijta and Jo), Goldcrest, Herring Gull, Blue Tit and Blackbird. Following breakfast and check-out we load the minibuses, Reed Bunting, Robin, Greenfinch, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers are in the car park as we do so.

We then begin our long drive to Kuusamo, Northeast of Oulu and towards the Russian border. It's about a 3 hour drive straight through, however we intend to 'bird' along the way, and a beautiful male Hen Harrier glides across the road between plantations en-route. Pirijta leads us initially to an area slightly off-route at Sanginjoki – an area of deciduous forest. We carefully pick our way over and through fallen moss covered tree trunks and abundant new growth and foliage to a small clearing where a Red-Breasted Flycatcher's song is soon heard and Pirijta encourages it closer. The male bird stays with us for a few minutes, affording us some wonderful close views at times, and a Treecreeper keeps us entertained during the brief absences. We retrace our steps to the minibuses and continue our journey slowly towards Kuusamo.

We halt on a few other occasions and we also stop for our packed lunch at Syöte National Park where we hear Red-flanked Bluetail briefly, but although beautiful the forest appears empty here and we entertain ourselves with some group photos. We move on and eventually approach Kuusamo – where we head directly for the dump! We see Raven, Common Sandpiper, and Red Squirrel in a nearby conifer, but our focus here is gulls and we see the full Lesser Black-backed gull complex – *graellsii*, *intermedius*, *fuscus* (Baltic Gull) and *heuglini* (Heuglin's or Siberian Gull), the latter two being considered potentially as separate species. Common and Herring Gull are also seen. We spend some time here and a 'master class' ensues - ensuring that everyone eventually becomes (relatively) confident with the relevant gull identification features.

We head to our new hotel – the 'Sokos Hotel Kuusamo' – our base for the next 3 nights and check in our bags to lighten the load before heading out again to search for another of the northern specialities we have come to see. John returns to the minibuses elated as he believed he had received a personal message and sweets from one of the hotel room cleaning staff – a lady with an exotic name. In the interests of negating any possible resentment within the group, Glenn takes obvious delight in swiftly crushing this dream, ensuring John that we had all been treated with the same level of 'honour' and that in fact Glenn himself had received more sweets than John and in addition a telephone number!

We focus again on what we had come for – the wildlife. And Pirijta leads us once again to an area of open forest, a short drive away North of Kuusamo. We stop at Raapyslampi, beautiful roadside lake, on the way where we scan and view the area. The light is beautiful and we enjoy lovely views of a pair of Smew, a small group of Velvet Scoter, Pintail, Little Gull and Common Sandpiper. We proceed to our target site and park at the side of the road, moving a short distance into the forest where a small nest box can be clearly seen about five feet high on the trunk of a tree. We wait patiently as Pirijta

encourages the resident bird to show itself and eventually the small head and beak of a tit species protrudes from the nest hole – a Siberian Tit.

We stay for a while but see no more of the bird than this, it is clearly being cautious and eventually we decide to move to ensure that we do not disturb or alarm the nesting bird in any way. We relocate to another site for this species a short distance away. We position ourselves at an appropriate distance from the nest box and a little patience is rewarded with good views of, initially, a bird in the nest hole and then the returning partner who remains clearly visible in the branches of the tree for a period of minutes whilst we enjoy watching and photographing this sought-after species. It is then time to head back for our evening meal. Glenn advises that there are often Muskrat, wildfowl and terns on the lake behind the hotel and some of the group venture down briefly before and after the meal for some final viewing before the day ends.

### **Wednesday 30 May (Day 5) Kuusamo**

We enjoy a hearty buffet breakfast and confirm the itinerary for the day. The plan is to head to the Oulanka National Park – a vast wilderness adjacent to the Russian border, however we will take a detour on the way to our destination to visit an area near Juuma where a Hawk Owl has been seen recently.

We organise ourselves, load the minibuses and head off in a direction directly north of Kuusamo. Beyond Ruka, we stop briefly at a bridge traversing two lakes where we see Goosander, Goldeneye, Common Sandpiper and hirundines. We travel along minor but good roads through broken forest scanning carefully as we travel, searching the tops of tall dead pines for the tell-tale shape of a Hawk Owl. Suddenly we stop and Pirijta radios through to the second minibus that a raptor has been flushed from a tree set back to the left of the road. There is considerable excitement, however the bird has flown back and beyond a nearby tree line.

The group organises itself swiftly and heads up onto the hill and towards the direction where the bird was seen to fly. Glenn hangs back to secure the unlocked minibuses and shortly thereafter espies a distant silhouette, typical of Hawk Owl. Unfortunately the group is out of sight and by the time they return the bird has relocated and is not now visible (this is known as a ‘DLT’ – dodgy leader tick!) After a brief discussion and views of Pied Flycatcher we move onwards towards the direction Glenn’s bird was seen. However access is limited and there is no further sign. We retrace our steps and take a different route through the forest mosaic, stopping at another viewing point. There is soon a shout of ‘Raptor’ and as we look skywards a majestic Goshawk drifts slowly over us providing everyone with good views. We continue to move, flushing a female Capercaillie.

We continue north and east and are soon within the boundaries of the national park. The terrain is a tapestry of dense forest wilderness intersected occasionally by flat dirt roads to allow forestry work. The beautiful Oulangan river cuts through the landscape and we will see this when we reach the Visitor Centre. Birding can be difficult here at this time

of year as nesting birds can be secretive and live deep within the forest, Initially as we head through the forest the birds prove to be elusive, with only the odd 'commoner' bird to be seen. We soon reach the aforementioned Visitor Centre where we stop for a short break, drink and snack. The weather has begun to deteriorate just a little with the odd shower now interspersed between the bright sunny periods.

Everyone refreshed, we now take the path into the forest along the bank of the river. Passing old bunkers – evidence of where Finland's soldiers used to guard the border from the invading Russian soldiers. From a natural platform a Dipper amazes us with its fearless hurtling flight through the shallow ravine beneath our feet. We look closely for evidence of the rare and beautiful Calypso Orchid, an icon of the National Park, This year we are unlucky with heavy snow on the ground until very recently meaning that the orchids will be in bloom later than our visit. We search for Siberian Jays, and the other specialities of the area, but without success. We return to the centre, regroup and head to the minibuses. The birds and wildlife have eluded us thus far, but the beauty of the forest during our walk has provided compensation.

We briefly try our luck with attracting Hazel Hen at a spot that often proves successful, but with no response we move on again deeper into the forest and slightly east, closer to the Russian border. We eventually come to a lake - Juhtijarvi - surrounded by tree-lined hills and elect to stop for a while. We alight and set up scopes and scan the lake and surrounding habitats. The lake holds good numbers of Arctic Terns, flying in small flocks a few feet above the surface and periodically dipping down to skim food from or just below the surface. There are Goldeneye, stunning Velvet Scoter and squabbling Smew caught up in the emotion of the breeding season. There are Sand Martins and Swifts hawking insects and there are waders around the edges with Common and Wood Sandpiper most evident. Behind us on in the forest rising to a ridge a Great-spotted Woodpecker makes its presence known and shortly after a Golden Eagle drifts swiftly and briefly across the same area.

Eventually we look to move on and return to the minibuses. We realize then that John, who had gone for an apparently innocent walk has in fact made a break to cross the border into Russia. The race is on to catch John (and confiscate his passport, to prevent any future occurrence) before the Russian border guards have a chance to take an interest. There is a nervous few minutes before we finally intercept him about 1 kilometre from his intended goal and he is once again restrained in a chair with help of a seatbelt in the back row of Piritja's vehicle!!

We begin to retrace our route slowly back out of the National Park, continuing to be diligent in our study of the forest edges. Eventually we are rewarded with a female Capercaillie, which initially remains just inside the canopy before slowly and warily moving deeper into the undergrowth providing good views for all. Further on we come to a sudden halt. A Siberian Jay has flown across the road in front of Piritja's minibus. We park and attempt to attract the bird back to us. The response is almost instantaneous as not one, but eventually three Siberian Jays return to the area of the road and provide us with long and excellent views, calling and performing short flights backwards and

forwards across the road and down the forest edge. Our luck has certainly turned full circle and this is a wonderful experience! The group return 'buzzing' with excitement to the minibuses. Before we leave the boundaries of the park, a female Black Grouse is also seen picking up grit from the road edge.

We take the route toward 'home' heading west and then south along the main road towards Ruka and eventually Kuusamo. However we delay our journey with a planned stop at Valtavaara. Valtavaara is a famous name in Finnish and European birding, known as one of the most reliable areas for the rare Red-flanked Bluetail at this time of year. It is late in the day, but we are not the only interested birders who consider that it is worth a try. We move to a position where it is possible to view the tops of the highest trees on the hill and begin to look and listen intently. The brief and faint snatches of a singing Red-flanked Bluetail are eventually heard but the bird itself cannot be located. We are told by some fellow birders that there are other species that would be of interest to us a short distance back up the road, and we elect to try and locate the Little, Rustic Buntings and Three-toed Woodpeckers being mentioned. We move to the young plantation specified, however, although we hear evidence of the birds, we are unable to secure a view of either of the buntings – birds then for another day. One or two of the group have a brief sighting of the Three-toed Woodpecker drumming a short distance away on the other side of the road and this was the sum reward for our efforts. We intend to make one final stop this evening within the Kuusamo environs at a lake near the hotel, although by the time we arrive, the weather is closing in and persistent heavy rain drives us back to our accommodation without allowing us the opportunity to add further species to our trip list. The mood is optimistic however, and as we relax and reflect during our evening meal, anticipation already begins to mount for what tomorrow may bring – and tomorrow will start early. Very early!

#### **Thursday 31 May (Day 6) Kuusamo**

We meet at 04:30 at the minibuses. We have full attendance which emphasises the enthusiasm of this outstanding group of guests. It is our final full day in the Kuusamo area and we still have a number of key species we are keen to locate. Although a fly-by male Capercaillie had been seen by one or two from the group earlier in the trip whilst driving, nobody has really had a good view of this amazing bird. We have elected therefore to try a pre-breakfast 'grouse drive' to improve our chances.

Pirijta leads us from the hotel on a short drive to an area of spruce forest within which a lek has been evident this year and we slowly cruise the forest roads looking for this huge, but often elusive bird. We see two separate male Capercaillie within the forest during the drive. Unfortunately neither are keen to loiter for long but nearly all the group have a sighting of one at least one of the birds, albeit of varying length or quality. An additional bonus is another female Black Grouse and Arctic Hares are more obliging at this.

We are conscious too that today is likely to be our last likely opportunity to find Hazel Grouse and we therefore make a concerted attempt to locate this species before our return for breakfast. We partially retrace our route and take a road leading us to suitable dense

habitat just outside the Kuusamo environs where we believe our best chances lie. We once again slowly traverse this area from the road, carefully scrutinising the forest from the vehicles. It is getting later and our initial optimism is beginning to wane when Pirijta radios through to Glenn's minibus indicating that Andy has one! We manoeuvre the vehicles to allow all participants to view the area of undergrowth where the sighting was made and suddenly not one, but a pair (male and female) of Hazel Grouse become visible from behind a fallen branch. They appear and disappear periodically as they cautiously move around on the forest floor amongst the dense growth, whilst Pirijta uses her Hazel Grouse whistle to keep the birds interested. The male flies up to the branches of a roadside tree where it shows beautifully, if briefly. Success!! We return the short distance to the hotel and a welcome breakfast – a great start to the day.

We are eager to get started again and soon we are back at the vehicles ready to go. We will head for Iivaara shortly – a beautiful forested hill where we have seen both Red-flanked Bluetail and Rustic Bunting in previous years and where both of these species breed regularly. On the way we visit a local site for Little Bunting. Our target is almost immediately heard and we cross a small ditch and move into a relatively open expanse of birch and willow. The Little Bunting is soon located and we all enjoy the splendid views as it perches and sings around its small territory from the tops of the taller trees with the bright sunlight highlighting the subtly coloured but attractively contrasting head markings.

We begin the journey to our next destination travelling southeast of Kuusamo along wood and forest-lined roads interspersed with the occasional lake. At one point we view a Great Spotted Woodpecker fly across the road in front of us to an obviously familiar drumming post, in this case a telegraph pole where it alights. We continue on the 'Iivaara Road' and we get our best views of Little Gulls to date which are flying along near the lake edge in their lovely summer plumage – very much appreciated by our friends from Japan – Someko, Emiko and Maasaki who do not see this species in their native country. This statement came as a surprise to the rest of the group as nearly all of the other birds seen on the trip to date, and in truth later were apparently common in either Hokkaido, or our friends' back gardens in winter! Two Common Cranes flew directly over, but the undoubted highlights are the pair of Black-throated Divers.

We pass Itajunki and finally arrive at the forest parking area below Iivaara itself. The morning is now racing on and we organise ourselves swiftly once again and walk down the dirt path leading to an area of marsh where a boardwalk leads onto and over a wooden bridge. We halt on the bridge and scan for a while – Reed Bunting, White Wagtail and a passing Merlin are seen and there are the shadows of fish species evident in the water below and aquatic insects on the surface - but not the Rustic Bunting we are really hoping for. We continue over the bridge and back onto a narrow boardwalk leading us over the remaining area of marsh and onto the lower slopes of the hill where the ground becomes firmer and then a stony path leads us gradually upwards towards the distant summit. Common birds such as Blue, Great Tit and Brambling become visible and then suddenly a second-year male Red-Flanked Bluetail is seen and heard singing from various treetops in the vicinity of its territory. We all enjoy long and clear views of this sought-after

species and it is only the knowledge that a mature adult male has been holding territory near the summit of the hill that takes us onwards.

We continue up the steep rocky path towards the summit. A further 'Bluetail' song is heard and we follow and close in on the relevant area. Andy reaches the location first and sights the bird briefly before it departs. From his description it is clearly the adult male we are seeking. We remain for a while hoping for further views, however although we hear the song again frequently and often nearby, we are ultimately disappointed. Pirijta and the majority of the group elect to return a little way down the path to continue the search, whilst Glenn and Andy take a path leading upwards seeking the highest point and an area offering a clear view out over a wide area. The appropriate platform is found and the extensive views of forest and lake stretching west and north from the viewpoint are wonderful. Andy has moved further on, and is not present when Glenn re-finds the adult male Red-flanked Bluetail perched high on the top of a spruce and by the time he arrives it has moved on again! A singing adult male Brambling remains evident, as does a Willow Warbler.

Andy and Glenn return down the path and encounter the second-year male once again, before meeting up with Pirijta and the group on the lower slope to learn that a further second-year bird has been seen - so three Red-flanked Bluetails in total!

We move back towards the wooden bridge, some of us stopping to admire the extraordinary orange lichen covered boulders dotted around the landscape. We reach the bridge and are ushered swiftly to a point where we can view the stunning male Rustic Bunting that Simon has found in the meantime. It shows beautifully in the branches of a willow across a small expanse of water. Simon is congratulated by grateful members of the group and by the guides as we enjoy the moment before we head back to the minibuses. We collect our packed lunches purchased earlier in the day and relax for a short while.

We elect to return via the lake near Hiltunen which held the Black-throated Divers this morning and this works out well for us as we gain excellent and much closer views. We continue back to Kuusamo, and briefly visit the Hannu Hautala Centre for a hot drink. Hannu is renowned as one of Finland's first and foremost top wildlife photographers, he resides in Kuusamo and the centre is a tribute to him hosting an exhibition of some of his outstanding works. There are books of Hannu's and other Scandinavian wildlife photographers for sale too, and some of us indulge ourselves. We then visit the far shore of the lake adjacent to our hotel and spend an hour or so there enjoying views of Red-necked Grebe, Arctic Tern, Little Gulls, Yellow Wagtail, Wood Sandpiper and many 'endearing' and active Muskrats, oblivious to our close presence. We finally return to the hotel for our evening meal.

The meal is a sad occasion in some ways, as Pirijta will be leaving us tomorrow morning to return to Oulu to meet and guide a new group. We have become very attached to Pirijta over this short, concentrated time and we will undoubtedly miss her wonderful enthusiasm, sense of fun and outstanding skills. Pirijta's father, Ari is also at the hotel

this evening, guiding another group, and we quietly sing Pirijta's praises to him, so as not to embarrass him (or Pirijta) too much! Our guide for the forthcoming week in Varanger - Petri - has also arrived today and he joins us for dinner and a drink.

### **Friday 1 June (Day 7) Kuusamo to Ivalo**

We meet at breakfast and say a final farewell and huge thank you to Pirijta for her friendship and leadership over the previous days. We embarrass her with a card and collection and with threats to become friends with her on Facebook. We confirm that Petri hasn't checked out overnight (after the experience of getting to know the group the previous evening) and that he is still prepared to accompany us to Varanger – he is, it seems!!

Birding will be limited today as we have a long way to travel and the weather isn't as kind to us as it has been, with regular and persistent showers. However, we stop briefly at a site where a Great Grey Owl has been seen hunting – there are no obvious signs of its presence and we continue after a short while. We stop for lunch a short distance from Kemijarvi, and on approaching Kemijarvi stop in the lay-by just before the long bridge that dissects the huge lake immediately south of the town. This can be an excellent spot for waders when the water levels are right, although today unfortunately the water is too high. However, a pair of Red-throated Divers are present, and we are amazed when a Black-throated Diver suddenly flies across the road immediately in front of us - a wonderful sight and certainly unexpected.

We continue on and spend the next hour or so filtering through small groups of a stretched out Army convoy heading North as we are. We briefly wonder whether there has been an international incident of some description, the result of which Finland are now invading Norway, and we are relieved when the remaining vehicles ahead of us in the convoy turn into an Army base in Sodankyla!

Further North again, on the E75, opposite the right hand turn to Petkula we stop at a nature reserve, a beautiful mire - where we walk out onto a winding boardwalk to a birding watchtower. We stay there only briefly as the rain intensifies to a torrential downpour and is accompanied by thunder and lightening. We are driven back to the vehicles but we saw Spotted Redshank, Golden Plover, Common Crane, Greenshank, Lapwing, Swift and Wood Sandpiper. The weather abates and we try again – this time viewing the mire adjacent to the road from the turning to Petkula. We see a distant pair of Osprey and hear Broad-billed Sandpiper. Overall it's been a good stop and great to stretch our legs just a little and do some birding. Our final stop is at Kaunispaa, a ski centre just south of Ivalo, where we look unsuccessfully for Dotterel on the tops, before driving the final few kilometres to Hotel Ivalo for our one night stay.

Glenn and Petri ensure that the group are checked in successfully and arrange a time for regrouping in the restaurant for the evening meal, before heading off to Ivalo Airport to meet our incoming guests for the second week. Philip and Jane arrive safely and are swiftly transported to the hotel where the group are delighted to meet them. As with all

the hotels here it seems, there are opportunities to bird watch in the immediate environment and Ivalo is no different in that respect. Woodcock, Pied Flycatcher, Goldeneye and Arctic Hare (loping past the restaurant window) are all seen before we retire for the night.

### **Saturday 2 June (Day 8) Ivalo to Batsfjord**

We rise refreshed and full of anticipation. Breakfast and checkout completed we begin our journey north (is there any other direction to travel!). Petri leads us onwards for a while until we reach Toivaniemi, another beautiful mire full of birdlife. Of note there is Smew (a pair), Whimbrel, Wood Sandpiper, Fieldfare, a drumming Snipe and half a dozen Red-necked Phalaropes - a pair of which come close, feeding near the edge of the mire below us. The Phalaropes are confiding, absorbed with feeding and allow the photographers amongst us to capture some images.

We have arranged to have lunch at a lodge where our winter pho-tours are based near Kaamanen. We arrive there during the late morning and almost immediately locate our target bird - a stunning male **Pine Grosbeak!**. This elusive and very special species is usually exceptionally difficult to locate. However Kaamanen has become a regular site for them, especially during the winter months where the birds are attracted to a regular food source provided by our hosts.

Having positioned ourselves in various appropriate and suitable viewing positions, we watch the birds constantly coming and going from the feeding area. We are at times drawn back inside for a hot drink and for the wonderful soup lunch, but our eyes never really stray far from the wildlife. During our visit we obtain wonderful views of Brambling, Blue and Great Tit, Pied Flycatcher and Willow Warbler. Beautiful Red Squirrels also come and go but the real highlight alongside the Pine Grosbeaks is the arrival of a pair of Siberian Jays! It is wonderful to see these charismatic birds so close and have the opportunity to appreciate the subtle beauty of their plumage.

We thank our hosts, compliment them on their wonderful establishment and lunch, and vow to visit again on our return journey from Varanger to Ivalo, to allow us another chance to see the Jays. We point the minibuses North and move onwards once more. Our next planned stop is Utsjoki where we will cross from Finland into Norway, but as the day develops events will supersede this...

We have not yet reached Utsjoki when a call echoes through the radio 'Hawk Owl!!' We immediately turn the minibuses around and head back to a lay-by where we park the vehicles. As we do so the message that Andy has seen a Hawk Owl is repeated and the bird is viewed on the wires a short distance away. A Dutch couple emerge from a nearby forest track from the direction of the Owl and begin to talk to Petri. (it appears that they have broken down and Petri assists in calling a recovery service for them, whilst some of us consider that if you must break down today, then this really would be the best place to do so!). We swiftly set up our scopes and cameras to view this astonishing bird.

We enjoy the bird perched, preening and often 'contact' calling with a second bird situated only a short distance away within the forest. We have long and excellent views of this stunning pair. We become aware of another movement close by us as we are joined by an inquisitive white (winter) coated 'ermine' Stoat intrigued by the noise of our presence and excitement. The Stoat begins to play a game of hide and seek with us and our attention is split for a while before we eventually decide to move on again. Our focus on travelling is halted within a few minutes however as amazingly another Hawk Owl is seen on wires as we drive northwards. We stop of course and enjoy further views of this third individual.

Eventually we reach Utsjoki, catch our breath and discuss our incredible luck as we make use of the facilities, purchase a few items before we cross the border into Norway. We do gain an hour today though as Finland is two hours ahead of UK time, Norway being just an hour. A Sparrowhawk and Merlin are seen as we mingle by the minibuses waiting for the group to reassemble for the onward journey. We set off and almost immediately Petri turns right to follow the Tana River along the Southern side without crossing the border, Glenn is surprised by this and hails Petri on the radio. Petri's motives become clear almost immediately – if we follow the river on the Northern, and hence Norwegian side of the border, he cannot count any of the birds we see on his Finnish list!

We cross the border / river to the Northern side and head Northeast towards Tana Bru and the river delta. We see our first Rough-legged Buzzard and as we approach Tana Bru there is another Hawk Owl. This Owl behaves very differently from our previous individuals – it is high up on the slopes of the roadside hill and is actively hunting. It moves backwards and forwards across the slopes of the hill occasionally perching for a short time before moving on again. Its flight is rapid and almost falcon-like at times, and it sometimes breaks the skyline providing excellent, if slightly distant views. At one point we are convinced that it has successfully caught prey, but very swiftly it is off again so we remain unsure.

Having eventually departed we find that we are obliged to come to a halt again within minutes as unbelievably another Hawk Owl is present on a telegraph pole right next to the road!! Once again we park the minibuses at an appropriate distance and move cautiously back to the bird. This encounter proves to be the most exciting of all as it becomes clear that this pair have a nest! The nest is visible from the road and there are at least three young within it accompanied by the other parent. We remain for far too long of course - it is almost impossible to tear ourselves away as the parents hunt proficiently and bring voles to the nest with incredible regularity. Alighting on the wires or telegraph poles a short distance away and calling to ensure that the other parent is aware of their presence, the parent in the nest would then come to the 'hunters' perch and the vole would be passed and returned to the awaiting chicks. It is a wonderful experience!

Time is now pressing and if we hope to stop at the delta further on we need to make good progress for a while, and it is for that reason that when we see another distant Hawk Owl a short time later we register the sighting but amazingly continue without slowing.

Shortly after passing an area where Gyr Falcons have been present historically, but not in the most recent years we reach a turn-off and track leading down to Hoyholmen. The views are spectacular as we are surrounded by high fell (fjell) and wide expanses of low dunes and flats, broken only by the track and the Tana river wending its way seawards. We enjoy sightings of Arctic Skua, Arctic Tern, Little Stint, Sanderling, Oystercatcher, and Great Black-backed Gull, but the highlight is the an adult drake King Eider amongst the Common Eider flock on the river. It is a little distant but our telescopes allow reasonable views and the group are naturally delighted to see one of the Arctic's special birds.

Retracing our route back to the main road we continue on rapidly now towards our final destination today- our hotel at Batsfjord on the northern side of the Varanger peninsular. The landscape slowly changes and the birch and willow become more stunted and less numerous as we begin to climb and journey across the open high fjells. It is a wide open landscape now, a true arctic wilderness and an area we will explore closely tomorrow, but this evening we are obliged to continue to make good time – even so, we identify our first Willow Grouse and Long-tailed Skua before we drop down off the fjells and into Batsfjord.

We immediately head for the Polar Hotel, our base for the next two nights and familiarise ourselves with our new surroundings. The fjells beckon, but they will be tomorrow's adventure.

### **Sunday 3 June (Day 9) Batsfjord**

Today we plan to take the route from Batsfjord up over the fjells and on to Berlevag, this will involve heading southwest before turning back north and eventually sweeping around towards the northwest corner of the Varanger Peninsular. It is a bright day, the light is good and the fjells look wonderful. There is less snow here than Glenn and Petri have seen in some years at this time, but that is part of the beauty of this place - it is a different experience on every visit.

We drive and stop when events (birds) dictate and we find that we are stopping often! Progress is slow, but there is no rush today. We see Bluethroat (singing from the tops of willows and in song flight), two Rough-legged Buzzards, Long-tailed Duck, our first Snow and Lapland Buntings and Rock Ptarmigan. Mammals are evident too and we see Red Fox still in its glorious thick red winter coat and Lemming. We reach the junction where we head north again towards Berlevag. There is a beautiful lochan here and we halt once again. A White-tailed Eagle is circling high above us and there are Ruff (lekking), Ringed Plover, Turnstone, Redshank and more Long-tailed Duck. We see a pair of Scaup too and our first Red-throated Pipit singing and displaying. We travel onwards to Kongsfjorden where we enjoy coffee and waffles at a café and spend time conversing with our lovely hosts and admiring the diverse Norwegian culture on display and for sale within their store. There are birds here too on the Kongsfjord – White-tailed Eagle, Turnstone, and more (squabbling this time) Long-tailed Ducks.

We drive to the village of Viennes before taking a grassy track down to the nearby shore where we park and walk a final short distance to view a small bay overshadowed by high cliffs to our right. We hope to see Gyr Falcon here and spend a while looking for evidence of their presence. It doesn't look promising and although we locate the old Raven's nest where the falcons bred last year we determine that they are not present this spring. Black Guillemot, Shag and a further White-tailed Eagle are present in this area however and there are Common Seals just off-shore.

We are close to Berlevag now, however before the town we drop down to KJones lighthouse where we sea watch for a while. This is a good spot and the onshore winds push the birds close to us at times. We see Fulmar, Shag, Northern Gannet, Razorbill, Common Guillemot and many Kittiwakes. There is a second-year Glaucous Gull present in the gull colony on the rocks just offshore and a close fly-by Brunnich's Guillemot seen clearly enough for identification, but not seen by all.

Our final stop was planned to be the harbour at Berlevag, where we would search for White-winged Gulls, however on the return to the minibuses a local couple living adjacent to the lighthouse approached Petri and informed him that there was a Sperm Whale carcass on the beach below Berlevag Airport. Petri obtains clear directions and having just seen Glaucous Gull (a target at the harbour) we elect to visit the site. A short drive and a slightly longer walk and we find ourselves on a small beach with the deceased cetacean. As individuals we naturally respond very differently in the presence of this huge mammal in a state of demise; however all will no doubt have felt a sense of awe tinged with sadness at the spectacle. We are told by another onlooker that members of the local community had procured the enormous teeth as souvenirs and we see the evidence of this as most of the lower jaw has been removed and there are only empty sockets in the remaining pieces. Purple Sandpipers and Turnstones are present as we view.

We take the long journey back to Batsfjord and a welcome meal – we need to keep our strength up as we have arranged to undertake a 'night' drive tonight. We meet again at the minibuses at 23:30 and head up on to the fjells before turning towards Syltefjord. The road is rough in parts and progress is sometimes slow but we drive until we reach the harbour and small community at the head of the big sea loch. It feels very much like a ghost town and it should of course at this time of the night (about 2am) but we wonder if it would be like this in daytime too. Birds are evident though and during the course of the drive we are treated to many sightings. I will list these below here but no doubt the highlight for those that see it is Andy's 'seduction' of a Tundra Vole. Having been made aware of the location of the mammal by the occupants of the other leading minibus, Andy proceeds (very successfully) to stalk the vole with a view to getting some photographs. Andy is so successful in his approach that the Vole actually comes to him and climbs onto his arm where it appears to stay quite contently for a while!

Wildlife seen on the night drive (23:30 to 03:30) – Rock Ptarmigan, Willow Grouse, Hooded Crow, Ring Ouzel, Long-tailed Duck, Long-tailed Skua, Arctic Skua, Goldeneye (a flock of 26 on a loch), Fieldfare, Redwing, Willow Warbler, Snow Bunting,

Oystercatcher, Redshank, Meadow Pipit, Goosander, Common Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull. Tundra Vole, Arctic Hare (6), Red Fox (2)

### **Monday 4 June (Day 10) Batsfjord to Vardo**

We have another travel day today, as we relocate to Vardo at the eastern end of the peninsular. However we will have plenty of opportunities for birding on the way. Almost immediately we are delighted by an encounter with a beautiful Shorelark up on Batsfjord fjell and it allows us good views as it perches on rocks and the barrier adjacent to the road. Further on towards Tana there is another Hawk Owl perched on wires between the road and river and then a White-tailed Eagle flying parallel with our vehicles alongside the river as we begin to approach the turn-off towards.

At Hoyholness we hope for a further and closer sighting of the King Eider seen a few days earlier; however there is no sign today, although many Common Eiders are present. It is a lovely bright, if breezy day and an ideal spot for our packed lunch which we enjoy here as we bird – White-tailed Eagle, Raven, Little Stint, Arctic Tern, Ringed Plover, Oystercatcher, and Red Knot all come and go before we move on.

We will be passing the Hawk Owl nest site we ‘discovered’ on the way through again shortly and there is an almost unanimous request from the group for a further visit. As we approach, a Hawk Owl is sitting on the wires by the road, and we duly stop. We spend a further extended period with this enigmatic family as the parents come and go and the local vole population diminishes visibly before our eyes. Soon, too soon, it is time to move on again.

We head back towards the main junction where we turn east towards Varangerbotn and the long road which will lead us along the shore of the Varangerfjord and eventually to Vardo. We stop at Varangerbotn briefly for coffee and waffles before continuing to Nesseby. Nesseby and its church can be seen from the main road long before we turn down towards the small peninsular. It is beautiful, with its tidal shores, grassy peninsular and stunning wooden church. We explore here for a while, our interests split between the birds on the tidal sands immediately before us, the church and discovering what is beyond the church, over the grassy knolls. Our time here is well spent, it would have been well spent without the wildlife, but again we are rewarded. There are feeding Bar-tailed Godwits, Turnstone, Oystercatcher, White-tailed Eagle and Long-tailed Skua on the tidal flats (Corrina also sees a probable Curlew Sandpiper) – there is another stoat amongst the larger rocks along the shoreline – and confiding Red-necked Phalaropes and Little Stints on a small lochan below a grassy knoll back behind the church. A dead Little Auk is also discovered on the shingle on the shoreline back behind the church.

There are Taiga Bean Geese in a field as we head towards Ekkeroy and at Ekkeroy we see a raft of Common Scoter offshore and Purple Sandpipers on the beach. Finally we reach and pass through the tunnel which connects the once island of Vardo to the mainland and arrive at ‘Hotel Vardo’.

## **Tuesday 5 June (Day 11) Vardo**

The plan this morning is to take a boat trip to the Island of Hornoya nature reserve. However the strong winds dictate that we will reschedule for tomorrow. We will travel instead to the furthest point of mainland Europe – Hamningberg - once a thriving fishing community but now a ghost town for most of the year with only a few spending time in summer homes during the kinder months. It is not a long journey and we can take our time, exploring the inlets and rocky coastal sites carefully on the way.

We point out the Kittiwakes nesting on the sills of the colourful buildings just down the street from our hotel before returning back through the tunnel to the 'mainland'. A close Rough-legged Buzzard a few minutes into our journey is a welcome sight. The terrain changes as we drive becoming a landscape of shattered rocks and crumpled strata. The narrow road continues to wind between the harsh cliffs and the broken shore and we scan both sides, stopping regularly to allow us to search with appropriate focus. We are initially rewarded with Red-throated Diver and 10 King Eider on the sea, and further on around into the next inlet and beyond we see numerous dark morph Arctic Skuas harassing gulls and terns out at sea determined to force them to surrender their meal. Glaucous Gull and small numbers of Harbour Porpoise are also present. Suddenly a Minke Whale is spotted – seen well but briefly - a typical encounter for this species.

Petri has been looking intently into his telescope for a long while and now finally identifies a speck of dust on his objective lense as an adult White-billed Diver. I'm being unnecessarily harsh of course – the bird is very distant and not always visible, however it is definitely an adult White-billed Diver. It's quite elusive at that distance and easily 'disappears' behind a small wave – it is also feeding so is often below water and in a different location when it resurfaces. However with a little patience and persistence most of the group eventually get a view of some description. A second immature bird is also seen.

Soon after a large falcon flies over Glenn's minibus – it appears over the cliff to the left as we drive, swoops rapidly with a flick of its wings and flies like a bullet out to sea. It is all over in a second and although we stop the vehicle immediately the bird is out of sight before anyone can exit. Glenn states that it was almost certainly a Gyr Falcon however a confirmed identification could not be made on the brief view we have had.

Our next stop is at a river valley, where dense willow and scrub is a perfect habitat for a number of species. A Bluethroat displays and impresses with its song, whilst Willow Warblers flit amongst the vegetation. Mealy Redpolls are evident and there is a Dipper (heard) under the road bridge. A Merlin flies by and there are Common Gulls too. Maasaki has moved away from the main group to take photographs and returns a little later with an image he has just taken of an Arctic Redpoll. This bird has not been seen by any other member of the group and unfortunately we are unable to locate it again.

At the coastal end of this valley there are Temminck's Stint, Bar-tailed Godwit, Redshank, Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone. It is a short distance now to Hamningberg

and we drive through the village as we arrive and park at the eastern end overlooking the seawall and the Barents Sea. The group separates to explore, some eating their packed lunch, having agreed a time to meet a little later. Some seawatch for a while – Arctic Skuas and Terns are present of course, Northern Gannets pass too. We hope for a sign of a Pomarine Skua, often seen here on migration to their Russian breeding grounds – but none are seen today. Purple Sandpipers are seen in a smaller cove and there are Red-throated Pipits dotted around the village. One ‘Pipit’ location also has an unexpected family of Tree Sparrows in residence.

We leave Hamningberg and begin to trace our route back. The White-billed Divers are not visible but two Snow Buntings are seen before we eventually reach the hotel. Guests are beginning to arrive for tonight’s natural event – the transit of Venus across the Sun. It last took place only a few years ago, but the next transit is over a century away in the future. The event was first seen from this location centuries ago and Vardo remains one of the best places to see it. If the weather is kind the whole transit should be visible here between about midnight and 06:30 tomorrow morning, hence the high level of interest from the arriving ‘dignitaries’

### **Wednesday 6 June (Day 12) Vardo**

The weather has been cloudy overnight but has cleared at about 0500 hrs in time to allow viewing of the last hour or so of the transit. Glenn has risen to see the final few minutes, however at breakfast we become aware that some of the group have met an elated hotel guest who was waiting when the clouds cleared and managed to secure some photographs he was clearly delighted with.

We confirm the details for our boat trip this morning and take the short walk from the hotel down to the harbour and jetty for our departure at 0900 hrs. It is well that we pre-booked as there is a lot of interest today and a queue swiftly forms at the departure point. The water is calm and therefore the captain has elected to take the faster zodiac rather than the larger fishing boat, and while this is undoubtedly far quicker, only nine passengers can be taken at a time, far less than the boat – it is lucky therefore that we have priority.

We split into two groups for the crossing, Petri accompanies the first and Glenn waits to cross with the second – lifejackets are donned and we are soon all standing safely on Hornoya.

There is something very special about seabird islands. There is the aroma, and the cacophony of sound intertwined with the constant sea breeze and the drama of the lives of the birds themselves where predator can become prey in a moment and where every inch is precious. It is life on the edge, literally, and it pervades your every sense.

We are surrounded by sea cliffs and the ocean and the noise of birds comes at you from every angle. It takes a short while to adjust before we decide individually how we want to approach our time here. Some elect to stay near to the jetty and dedicate time to

immersing themselves in the various colonies of Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins, Shag, Kittiwakes – many of the photographers are among this group - whilst others prefer to take a perhaps more balanced approach and spend a little time with the colonies before heading onwards and upwards to the top of the island where other species and panoramas can be seen.

A key and sought-after species for us here is Brunnich's Guillemot and we locate a small group on the lower ledges, ensuring that all of our group have the opportunity to see them before we separate. There are thousands of birds here and we see Shag, Razorbill, Common (including 'Bridled'), Black and Brunnich's Guillemot, Puffin, Great and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Common Gull and Kittiwakes. Rock Pipits are evident, a Raven twice 'raids' the Kittiwake colony taking chicks. There is an extraordinary moment when Mark spots a big dog Otter appearing from below the cliff colonies - it takes a direct path swiftly down to the rocks and into the sea. We follow the Otter as he fishes, eats and cleans – resting at times on the small rocky islands adjacent to Hornoya. Members of our group who elected to walk around the island begin to return and we add Red-throated Pipit and Twite (Philip and Jane) to the list. A Gyr Falcon has been seen around the lighthouse but unfortunately not by our group.

Our time is over far too quickly and the Captain arrives to begin to take us back. We organise ourselves, embark and enjoy the journey back to Vardo. We have arranged to lunch at the hotel today and indeed the sea air has whetted our appetite, so the meal is welcome. We intended to have a 'flexible' afternoon and therefore had no fixed agenda, but the popular choice was to revisit the area where we had seen White-billed Diver yesterday to attempt to obtain better views. On the way we searching unsuccessfully for White-winged Gulls in the harbour adjacent to the tunnel but Lapland Bunting, Merlin and Rough-legged Buzzard are seen.. Displaying Bluethroat and Temminck's Stint are at the River Valley along with Willow Warbler and Mealy Redpolls again. The river valley is as far as we go towards Hamningberg on this occasion and we head back to Persfjord where we saw the white-billed Divers. Red-throated Diver is there again, but the White-billed remains very distant. We move to the Southern side of the bay as we head back in the direction of the hotel and are delighted to find three female Steller's Eider amongst a raft of 15 female King Eider a little way out to sea. Our good friend Antero Topp arrives with his small group at this point and benefits from our find.

#### **Thursday 7 June (Day 13) Vardo to Ivalo**

We begin the long journey back to Ivalo today, but decide to take a pre-breakfast walk up behind the Old Fort in the hope of finding Arctic Redpoll. The Redpoll is not found but it is a fruitful hour or so with Red-throated Pipit, displaying Temminck's Stint, Willow Warbler, Arctic Tern, Purple Sandpiper and a distant Pomarine Skua.

Following breakfast and check-out we are soon underway retracing our route along the shores of the Varanger fjord and it is not long before we find our first bird of interest – a Glaucous Gull amongst a gull flock at the side of the road. We stop at Kiberg and there is a female Steller's Eider in the harbour. Red-breasted Merganser, Goosander and female

King Eider are located at Ekkeroy and White-tailed Eagle, 30+ Bar-tailed Godwit, Arctic Skua, Ruff, Purple Sandpiper and Redshank at Nesseby. White-tailed Eagles are becoming a common sight and we see at least half a dozen more along the shoreline of the fjord as we travel west.

We reach Varangerbotn, where we again indulge in coffee and waffles before taking the Finnish side of the river to Utsjoki where we stop once again to stretch our legs, and replenish our fuel. We take a slight detour at this point heading up onto the fjells at Ailigaas to try once more for Dotterel. We scan the tops, ranging and scanning far and wide. We identify Golden plover and Meadow Pipits but the Dotterel if they are present, elude us. It suddenly becomes bitterly cold and begins to snow so we retire to the minibuses and continue towards our next destination – Kaamanen. There is a Hawk Owl on the wires again, and taking into account the location it is almost certainly one of those we saw on our Northward journey a few days ago.

We reach Kaamanen in the late afternoon. We see Pine Grosbeaks, Brambling, Willow Warbler and Great and Blue Tits. The birding continues when we reach the hotel at Ivalo with Woodcock, Pied Flycatcher and Goldeneye. We check-in and arrange a time for dinner. Some of us enjoy a drink together before the meal and during the meal John stuns the group with a wonderful gesture – he has arranged for chilled sparkling wine to be served. We are very humbled by John's generosity and accompanying words. We are delighted too to discover that Pirijta is here this evening and Pirijta joins us after dinner for a glass of wine. Antero is here too and a number of us socialize until late.

### **Friday 8 June (Day 14) Ivalo to Rovaniemi to London**

And so to home...

We are packed and ready for the last time and get underway. We try once more to locate Dotterel at Kaunispaa, having been told that they have been seen here whilst we were in Varanger but we will never know if they are as thick fog prevents us from viewing - we do see six Arctic Hares though.

Our time for birding is limited today as we need to be at Rovaniemi in time for an early afternoon flight. However we do stop briefly again at the beautiful mire near the Petkhula turn-off where we attempt to 'draw out' Broad-billed Sandpiper. It responds briefly, but only vocally and cannot be located despite Petri's best efforts. We will need to be content with the supporting cast of Lapwing, female Ruff, Whooper Swans and 6+ Spotted Redshanks.

There is the now almost obligatory Hawk Owl on wires en route, and we stop for the final time at a forest park outside of Rovaniemi where we cross an impressive wooden bridge over an impressive river with a Kayaking slalom course into an area of forest. Information boards show that this would be a wonderful place to spend some time at the right time of day and year, but we are limited to about 30 minutes today and we are soon

obliged to move on again, having seen only Siskin, Chaffinch, Great Tit and hearing Robin.

We reach the airport where we say our final goodbyes to Petri and our friends from Japan who will be staying to catch a later flight. We show our appreciation for Petri's efforts by presenting him with a formal thank you and a small financial token of our gratitude. We check-in and take our internal flight back to Helsinki, where we say a fond farewell to John, who is travelling back to Manchester from here. We relax for a while until it is time for us to board our final flight back to London where those of us that remain say our final goodbyes and head for home....

**Summary:**

It was a fabulous trip. The weather was generally kind to us, as was the wildlife. The landscapes were varied and beautiful, the company was wonderful. And last but not least, the historic Anglo-Japanese Bird Club was founded and already has a thriving membership of at least four.

PLEASE NOTE!

We will be repeating this trip in 2013

All the details are at

<http://www.shetlandwildlife.co.uk/holidays/overseas.htm>

## Wildlife Checklist

### Birds

Red-throated Diver  
Black-throated Diver  
White-billed Diver  
Red-necked Grebe  
Great Crested Grebe  
Northern Fulmar  
Northern Gannet  
Cormorant  
Shag  
Whooper Swan  
Taiga Bean Goose  
Greylag Goose  
Common Shelduck  
Eurasian Wigeon  
Common Teal  
Gadwall  
Mallard  
Northern Pintail  
Garganey  
Northern Shoveler  
Pochard  
Tufted Duck  
Greater Scaup  
Common Eider  
King Eider  
Steller's Eider  
Long-tailed Duck  
Common Scoter  
Velvet Scoter  
Common Goldeneye  
Smew  
Red-Breasted Merganser  
Goosander  
White-tailed Eagle  
Western Marsh Harrier  
Hen Harrier  
Common Buzzard  
Rough-legged Buzzard  
Golden Eagle  
Osprey  
Sparrowhawk  
Goshawk

Common Kestrel  
Gyr Falcon (Probable)  
Merlin  
Peregrine Falcon  
Willow Grouse  
Rock Ptarmigan  
Black Grouse  
Eurasian Capercaillie  
Hazel Grouse  
Eurasian Coot  
Common Crane  
Eurasian Oystercatcher  
European Golden Plover  
Common Ringed Plover  
Little Ringed Plover  
Northern Lapwing  
Purple Sandpiper  
Eurasian Woodcock  
Common Snipe  
Bar-tailed Godwit  
Whimbrel  
Eurasian Curlew  
Spotted Redshank  
Common Redshank  
Common Greenshank  
Green Sandpiper  
Wood Sandpiper  
Common Sandpiper  
Ruddy Turnstone  
Red Knot  
Sanderling  
Temminck's Stint  
Broad-billed Sandpiper  
Dunlin  
Ruff  
Red-necked Phalarope  
Pomarine Skua  
Arctic Skua  
Long-tailed Skua  
Common Gull  
Great Black-backed Gull  
Herring Gull  
Lesser Black-backed Gull  
Heuglin's Gull  
Black-headed Gull  
Little Gull

Black-legged Kittiwake  
Glaucous Gull  
Common Tern  
Arctic Tern  
Little Tern  
Puffin  
Common Guillemot  
Brunnich's Guillemot  
Razorbill  
Black Guillemot  
(Little Auk – deceased)  
Feral Pigeon  
Wood Pigeon  
Eurasian Collared Dove  
Common Cuckoo  
Ural Owl  
Great Grey Owl  
Northern Hawk Owl  
Eurasian Pygmy Owl  
Tengmalm's Owl  
Short-eared Owl  
Common Swift  
Eurasian Wryneck  
Great Spotted Woodpecker  
Three-toed Woodpecker  
Black Woodpecker  
Shore Lark  
Sand Martin  
Barn Swallow  
House Martin  
Tree Pipit  
Meadow Pipit  
Red-throated Pipit  
White Wagtail  
Yellow Wagtail  
Bohemian Waxwing  
White-throated Dipper  
European Robin  
Bluethroat  
Red-flanked Bluetail  
Common Redstart  
Whinchat  
Northern Wheatear  
Eurasian Blackbird  
Fieldfare  
Redwing

Song Thrush  
Mistle Thrush  
Sedge Warbler  
Blackcap  
Common Whitethroat  
Willow Warbler  
Common Chiffchaff  
Goldcrest  
Spotted Flycatcher  
Pied Flycatcher  
Willow Tit  
Siberian Tit  
Great Tit  
Blue Tit  
Red-backed Shrike  
Great Grey Shrike  
Siberian Jay  
Black-billed Magpie  
Eurasian Jackdaw  
Rook  
Hooded Crow  
Common Raven  
Common Starling  
House Sparrow  
Tree Sparrow  
Chaffinch  
Brambling  
European Greenfinch  
Eurasian Siskin  
Arctic Redpoll  
Common / Mealy Redpoll  
Eurasian Linnet  
Twite  
Common Rosefinch  
Pine Grosbeak  
Red Crossbill  
Eurasian Bullfinch  
Yellowhammer  
Ortolan Bunting  
Little Bunting  
Rustic Bunting  
Reed Bunting  
Lapland Bunting  
Snow Bunting

**Mammals**

Red Squirrel

Tundra Vole

Muskrat

Norway Lemming

Arctic Hare

Reindeer

Elk

Red Fox

Stoat (Short-tailed Weasel)

Eurasian Otter

Common Seal

Grey Seal

Harbour Porpoise

Minke Whale

(Sperm Whale – Deceased)

**Other Wildlife**

Green Hairstreak

Camberwell Beauty