

Finland & Norway: Birding and Nature | June 3-15, 2024 | Trip Report by Gerard Gorman



With Gerard Gorman, local guides Jari and Riku, and Husam, Carol, Donna, Steven, Lise, Carol, Cyndy, Laurence, Suzanne, Webb, Eileen and Jeff



Mon., June 3 Arrivals | Oulu | Kempele Bay | Night in Oulu

Today everyone arrived in Oulu in Finland by plane and train, via the capital Helsinki. We all gathered at 7pm for welcome drinks and our first dinner together. After dinner, as it does not get dark this far north, some of us walked in the hotel grounds and also to a bird tower behind the hotel that overlooks Kempele Bay, which is an inlet of the Bay of Bothnia. On this, our first evening, we saw Whooper Swans (Finland's national bird), Common Shelducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Eurasian Curlews, a Common Sandpiper, Sedge Warblers singing and in flight display, White Wagtails and two common thrushes that we would get to know well during our trip, Redwings and Fieldfares. We would see most of these species again, many times in some cases, during the coming days. It was a splendid and relatively easy start, a good introduction to what was to come on our tour.



Tue., June 4

Kempele Bay | Liminka Bay | Night in Oulu

We went out pre-breakfast, walking the few hundred yards to the bird tower to scan Kempele Bay again seeing a rich range of species. Wildfowl included Graylag Goose, Eurasian Coot, Mute and Whooper Swans, Garganey, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Tufted Duck and Common Goldeneye. We picked up songbirds like Great and Eurasian Blue Tits, Reed Bunting, Willow Warbler, and the Sedge Warblers showed well again, singing and doing their flight displays over the reedbeds. A Common Rosefinch sang its “*pleased to meet you*” song. We also saw our only Eurasian Blackbirds (a member of the thrush family, not at all related to the “blackbirds” of the Americas) of the tour this morning. A European Pied Flycatcher was singing by the parking lot and Common Swifts, true to their name, were flying rapidly over the hotel. After a 7am breakfast, a particularly good buffet with plenty of local produce, we were away at 8am, off to explore the farmlands and forests of the Oulu area. Our first main target was the Ural Owl, not an east bird to find, but our local guide Jari knew a fairly reliable site for this magnificent species. After less than an hour we turned onto a forest road, stopped and walked a short way and scanned the trees. It was fairly quiet at first in this forest, but we were patient and then someone spotted something and there it was, perched and peering at us, the big, impressive Ural Owl we were seeking. Other birds hereabouts were Common Chaffinch, Brambling and Tree Pipit, doing its “parachuting” flight display. Elated, we moved on to another forest to look for woodpeckers. First up was a Grey-headed Woodpecker, which flew in and then gave us splendid views as it clung to a wooden electricity pole. A fantastic observation. Next was a male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker at its nest hole - this bird is similar in many ways to its close relative in the US and Canada, the American Three-toed Woodpecker, but based on DNA studies it is a distinct species. The forest was a bit boggy here so some of us turned back to the road, but those who carried on were rewarded with a pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Europe’s smallest member of the picid family.

It had been a phenomenally successful morning, with our main targets seen thanks to in-depth local knowledge. We had lunch in the Liminka Bay Visitor Centre and looked at its worldclass exhibition with informative information and stunning photos. This is an internationally renowned place for breeding and passage birds, one of Finland’s best birding sites with coastal meadows, reedbeds, and willow and birch woods. After lunch we watched the bay from a convenient high bird tower, seeing shorebirds like Black-tailed Godwit, our first Ruff, Spotted Redshanks, Common Greenshanks, Wood Sandpipers and Common Redshanks as well as Caspian Terns and Eurasian Marsh-harrier. On our way back to Oulu we stopped for a break at a gas station and, incredibly, a male pallid Harrier flew over the town! It had been a truly memorable day with superb places visited, many special birds seen, and the weather had been kind, too, the temperature reaching a maximum of 68 F (20 degrees C).



Wed., June 5

Kempele Bay | Oulu Area | Night in Oulu

We had a 6am breakfast and left at 7am. We would spend all day in the Oulu area and the weather would be fine, in fact a little warmer than expected, rising to 75 F (24 degrees C). After a thirty minute drive we reached a mixed, mostly Scots Pine, forest. Our main target here was Eurasian Pygmy Owl which it did not take long to find, and which posed nicely for us. As we left, a party of Red Crossbills came down and landed on the track. At another location right by a road we had flying and perched views of two, possibly three, Black Woodpeckers. A singing Dunnock, a Common Redstart and a soaring European Honey-buzzard were seen here, too. Onwards, we then visited a rural house with bird feeders getting easy observations of Eurasian Bullfinches, European Greenfinches and Common Rosefinches and some of us also got nice photos. An area of farmland hosted Northern Lapwings, Whinchat, Eurasian Kestrel, Eurasian Skylark, Yellowhammer and Ortolan Bunting, the latter a songbird that is sadly in decline in many parts of its range. We had lunch just after noon in a diner where the buffet was varied with dishes to suit all. At small pond in a suburban area, we had remarkably close views of a male Horned Grebe in full breeding plumage. At another suburban spot nearby, we came upon a Eurasian Red Squirrel and found some Eurasian Linnets and a Great Spotted Woodpecker at its nest hole in a garden. At an inlet of Kempele Bay we watched Great Crested Grebes and Tufted Ducks amongst others. It was a little warmer today, so we had a break back at our hotel. After dinner at 7pm we went out on an evening excursion to look for another iconic bird Terek Sandpiper. This shorebird is exceedingly rare in Europe being essentially a Siberian breeding species, but a few pairs breed in Finland every year, usually in the industrial zone of Oulu port. Indeed, the one we found perched on top of a truck! We then looked for another distinctly “eastern” bird, the Blyth’s Reed Warbler. We located a singing male, but it proved hard to see as it skulked in cover, although finally we got glimpses. As we waited for the warbler to reveal itself a Eurasian Woodcock flew over a few times. Finally, we visited a meadow and heard another infamous skulker, the Corncrake. It had been an eventful day and we returned to our hotel for the night in preparation for tomorrow when we would move on to our next base.

Thurs., June 6. Oulu | Ene | Pudasjärvi | Taivalkoski | Night in Kuusamo

We met for breakfast at 7am and moved on at 8 am, heading eastwards to our next base in Kuusamo. We were joined by Riku Lappalainen, our local guide for the rest of the tour. Riku would prove to be a knowledgeable and great asset. More inside information from the Finnish birding grapevine meant that it did not take long for us to find another special bird - a family of northern Hawk Owls, two adults and three well-grown fledged young. It was a marvelous observation that enthralled us all. We pushed on, pausing for a break in the town of Pudasjärvi where we saw two Arctic Loons on the large lake. Continuing northeastwards, on road 20, we often spotted ducks such as Common Goldeneye, more Arctic Loons and the almost ever present Whooper Swans on roadside lakes - there are innumerable lakes of all shapes and sizes in Finland, so we were selective in where and when we stopped. We did, however, pull over to watch Smew, a handsome tree-nesting duck that was high on the



request list of most. Everywhere we paused, we heard the song of Willow Warbler and almost always saw a White Wagtail, too. Upon arrival in Kuusamo we visited more wetlands around town, one with a birding tower from which we got outstanding views of both Little and Black-headed Gulls, some in flight and some on nests, and a smart-looking, Red-necked Grebe. This small city lies close to the Russian border and is a renowned winter sports resort but also a key birding area with vast forests, bogs and lakes. We checked into our comfortable hotel at 5pm and met for a buffet dinner at 7pm.

Fri., June 7. Oulanka National Park | Käylä | Konttainen | Night in Kuusamo

We had breakfast at 7.30am and then drove northwards to the Oulanka National Park. This scenic protected area of boreal forest, peatbogs and rivers, covers just over 100 square miles and borders the Paanajärvi National Park in neighboring Russia. The skies were overcast at first, and there were occasional rainy spells, but it cleared up later. We could not really complain about the weather we had had so far, especially considering where we were, just south of the Arctic Circle. We drove the well-maintained gravel forest roads through the park and at a remote lake saw our first Velvet Scoters as well as a pair of Smew, a smart drake and a “redhead” female, and the usual Tufted Ducks and Common Goldeneyes. Some Bohemian Waxwings perched briefly in the treetops here but did not linger. A few Bramblings were more obliging. Of course, as we had now come to expect, Willow Warblers were singing. We also heard a Hazel Grouse whistling in the forest but despite our best efforts could not see it. As we drove on, a couple of Green Sandpipers that flew up from a trackside ditch were another new species for the tour. On a trail to a waterfall we found Calypso Orchids, a plant that graces the emblem of the national park. We had lunch in the park’s visitor centre (some tried the Reindeer stew), looked at its well-done exhibition, which includes stunning photographs, and some bought souvenirs. In the mid-afternoon we left the park, but soon stopped by a rushing river near Käylä where we got good views of a White-throated Dipper and Gray Wagtail. Back towards Kuusamo, at a well-known birding site called Konttainen we hoped to see Siberian Jays, but these usually entrusting birds did not show. We did, however, see Eurasian Siskins and more Bramblings and up a trail in the forest heard and then glimpsed another special bird, Red-flanked Bluetail. Mammals seen today were Mountain Hare, Eurasian Red Squirrel and Reindeer (Caribou) even seen in the city itself. After dinner we compiled our checklist and although it was clear that we had not amassed a substantial number of species today, given the weather and the habitats we had explored, we had added some of real quality.



Sat., June 8. Säynäjä | Palokangas | Konttainen | Night in Kuusamo

We got up early and set off at 5am, pre-breakfast, to look for Black Grouse, which we hoped to see at their leks (display grounds) in meadows not far from Kuusamo. We soon found a few males, but they were rather distant and wary. A little way on, we found another group, of about ten, which gave us better views. We decided to watch them from our vehicles rather than get out and spook them. Next up was a search for another grouse species, the largest in the world no less, the Western Capercaillie. We drove into an open pine forest and kept our eyes open. A big, impressive, male was spotted walking through the trees on a ridge and so we got out to get better views. We edged gently forward and finally obtained stunning views of this exceptional bird. Later we agreed that this observation and thrilling experience was one of the absolute best of the whole trip. We were back in Kuusamo for breakfast at 8am. Later in the morning we went to meet a local birder who maintains nest boxes. He had kindly agreed to let us go with him while he checked some of them. First, he took us to a box with breeding Boreal Owls and we saw an adult very well. He then checked several more of his boxes for Gray-headed Chickadees. After a few negative results one had an active pair. Success! Everyone was delighted as although this little bird occurs in Alaska and northwest Canada, it is scarce and extremely hard to find there. This had proved much easier! We had lunch at noon and then went in search of yet another “Siberian” species, the Little Bunting, which we found on the edge of town. We decided to return to Konttainen to see if the Siberian Jays were about. Sure enough, they were, and they came close showing no fear of humans. We also added another new trip bird here, Willow Tit. In the evening, we went through our checklist, and everyone agreed that it had been yet another, wonderful day with many great birds in terrific landscapes.

Sun., June 9. Kuusamo | Lapland | Arctic Circle | Kemijärvi | Sodankylä | Saariselkä | Night in Ivalo

After a 7.30am breakfast we headed north to our next base at Ivalo. We took road 5 and soon crossed into the famed region of Lapland, ancestral home of the Sami people who call the area Sápmi. The road signs were now bi-lingual – in Finnish and Sami. We started to see more Reindeer, some walking on the main road. It is said that they do this to avoid the mosquitoes in the boggy forest. We stopped at the Arctic Circle at Suomi and posed for photos and, as tradition on this tour dictates, the group sipped a glass of cloudberry liquor (not the drivers, Riku and myself, I may add). We took a break in Kemijärvi, where there were Arctic Loons, Common Mergansers and, as ever, Common Gulls on the large lake. It was a long drive today, with us mostly heading directly north on road 4 from Kemijärvi, but we broke it up with roadside stops for birds. A flyby Common Cuckoo, seen by some of us, was unfortunately the only one we’d get. As it was Sunday most of the diners on our route were closed, so we had sandwiches and snacks for lunch in a café in the small town of Sodankylä. In the late afternoon we drove up



to the ski resort at Saarisselkä, just south of our destination at Ivalo. Our main bird target here was the Eurasian Dotterel, but despite much scanning of the tundra habitat, they did not show themselves this time. We did, however, get exceptionally good views of the first Common Ringed Plover of our tour and a displaying Meadow Pipit. Common House-Martins were nesting on a building. We checked into our comfortable hotel in Ivalo at 6pm and ate an hour later after another eventful day.

Mon., June 10. Ivalo | Neljän Tuulen Tupa | Skalluvaara | Nuorgam | into Norway | Tana bru | Tanafjorden | Varangerfjord | Night in Båtsfjord

We awoke to wet weather, but it soon stopped. After an early breakfast we checked out and began our drive north towards Norway. But first, we checked a spot just outside Ivalo where Arctic Warblers were known to reside. We soon found one, which showed well. North of Inari we stopped at the celebrated Neljän Tuulen Tupa (“Four Winds Inn”), for drinks, snacks, and to watch Bramblings, Eurasian Bullfinches, Common Redpolls and, perhaps best of all, Pine Grosbeaks on the bird feeders. We took a side road to a hilltop where there was a rather run-down “reindeer camp” and found another much-desired bird, Bluethroat – the subspecies in the Arctic is “red-spotted”. There were many Common Ravens here and a pond hosted Wood Sandpipers and Ruff in their varied breeding plumage. We had lunch in the small town of Nuorgam and then crossed into Norway - a new country, a new currency and a new language, though here, as in Finland almost everyone speaks good English. Our first birding stop was at Tanafjorden, where the Tana River enters the sea. Here we found our first Common Eiders, Red-throated Pipits and Temminck’s Stints that performed fantastic flight displays. A Gray Seal was seen in the fjord, too. Moving on, the drive over the upland tundra of the Varangerhalvøya National Park on road 891 was spectacular. Roadside lakes hosted some new trip birds, like Red-throated Loon, Greater Scaup and Long-tailed Duck, and we spotted our first Willow and Rock Ptarmigans, European Golden-Plovers and Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers on the tundra. We arrived at our destination, the small fishing port of Båtsfjord, which sits by the Barents Sea, in the late afternoon. Eurasian Oystercatchers, Black-legged Kittiwakes and Herring Gulls seemed to be everywhere. Dinner was in a nearby restaurant.

Tues., June 11. Båtsfjord | Syltefjorden | Varangerhalvøya National Park | Night in Båtsfjord

Today we explored the Arctic tundra habitats – it was remarked how the landscapes resembled those of Alaska. First, we stopped in town to see the Black-legged Kittiwakes nesting on buildings, often quite low down on window-ledges and to compare the Arctic and Common Terns. Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gulls were all in the harbor, too. We then took a quiet, scenic road to the remote fishing settlement of



Syltefjorden. We watched both ptarmigan species and European Golden-Plovers at the roadside and saw some Tundra Bean-Geese in flight. We watched a Harbor Porpoise in the small fishing port, too. We returned to our hotel for a light lunch and in the afternoon went into the Varangerhalvøya National Park, taking the only main road but occasionally taking sidetracks where the conditions permitted – there were still some patches of snow on the ground. But the weather was perfect, and we had to remind ourselves just how far north we were - Båtsfjord is at a latitude of 70°38'03" N. Everywhere we stopped we found good birds – more Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers, Rough-legged Hawk, Red-throated Loon, Long-tailed Duck, Common Merganser, Ruddy Turnstone, Wood Sandpiper and the ever-popular Temminck's Stints doing their fluttering courtship flights. A highlight for many was seeing gangs of Ruff, each with a different head color, displaying and fighting. New trip birds today included Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, Northern Wheatear and Hoary Redpoll. It had been another rewarding day in a fantastic location.

Wed., June 12. Båtsfjord | Varangerhalvøya National Park | Tana bru | Varangerfjord | Nesseby | Vadsø | Ekkerøya | Night in Vardø

Breakfast was at 7am and we were on the road at 8am. We were heading to Vardø where we would spend our next two nights in Norway. Although Båtsfjord and Vardø both lie on the same coast of the Barents Sea, there is no road between them, so we had to retrace our steps a little, taking road 891 over the peninsula again. But this is a scenic route and allowed us to enjoy many of its tundra birds again. We stopped in Tana bru for fuel, for the vehicles and for us, and then took the coastal road along the north shore of Varangerfjord. We looked at the old church at Nesseby. Birds here included Graylag Goose, Northern Pintail, Green-winged Teal, Tufted Duck, Ruddy Turnstone, Eurasian Oystercatcher and a range of gulls. A surprise sighting was a Stoat that scurried through the shoreline rocks. Today we had a boxed lunch, which proved challenging as a high wind arrived precisely when it was time to eat! No worries, we parked our vehicles by the coast at Vadsø to provide some shelter and got on with it. Many Common Eiders and a selection of shorebirds were on the water and rocks here. At Ekkerøya we watched the Black-legged Kittiwakes on the cliffs and picked up our first Razorbills, Black Guillemots, Atlantic Puffins and a Rock Pipit. The many bays of Varangerfjord held rafts of ducks including a new species for our trip, Common Scoter. We began to see more White-tailed Eagles, in flight and sitting on rocks, and also another Rough-legged Hawk. At one of the last roadside lakes that we passed before getting to our destination, we had splendid views of a Yellow-billed Loon in summer plumage. At about 5pm we arrived at our hotel in Vardø, another fishing port that sits on an island, via a road tunnel that passes under the sea. We had a fine dinner in the hotel restaurant which overlooks the harbor.



Thurs., June 13. Hornøya Island | Persfjorden | Night in Vardø

Today would include a major event in our tour. At 9am we boarded a boat for the short trip, around ten minutes, to Hornøya Island to see its seabird colonies. Unlike many such trips, when boats cruise around islands here visitors are able to disembark and walk on the island and see many of the birds up close. The birds are not perturbed at all. There were thousands of birds, on the sea, in flight, standing on cliff ledges and sitting on nests: Common Murres, Thick-billed Murres, Razorbills, Atlantic Puffins, various gulls, and European Shags. Some stayed to enjoy the masses of birds by the boat landing stage whilst others walked to the lighthouse around the island. Birds seen on that walk include Rock and Red-throated Pipits and Twite. Some pairs of Barnacle Geese were nesting, too. Overall, Hornøya Island was a phenomenal experience. We returned to our hotel for lunch at noon and later drove back to the mainland via the tunnel and then northwards to Persfjorden. It was a very scenic route with fascinating rock formations. On the sea there were Common Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, Common and Velvet Scoters and, arguably the ultimate prize, a party of King Eiders including adult drakes. The number of White-tailed Eagles we saw, dozens, was remarkable. We returned to Vardø and after dinner ran through our checklist and announced our plans for tomorrow.

Fri., June 14. Vardø | Varangerfjord | into Finland | Nuorgam | Neljän Tuulen Tupa | Night in Ivalo

We left Vardø at 8am and began our drive back to Finland. After going through the sea tunnel one last time, we followed the shore of Varangerfjord, stopping at the various birding “hotspots” and also when something “good” was spotted. For example, when a Short-eared Owl flew across the road and finally landed on a fence post we pulled over and got good views in our telescopes. It was the fifth owl species we had seen on our tour. The birding grapevine had informed us that a male Steller’s Eider was amongst other ducks at one spot, so we pulled in and scanned the sea. We soon found it: not only a handsome bird but a real rarity hereabouts at this time of year. Even at this late stage of our trip we were seeing new bird species. And, to “add a cherry to the top of the cake”, we also saw two Arctic Foxes during our journey! Once almost extirpated, this little canid is seemingly making a comeback in Norway. We crossed into Finland at Polmak (once again there were no border checks) and had lunch in Nuorgam as we had done when travelling northwards to Norway a few days earlier. Later we pulled in again at the “Four Winds Inn” and watched the birds on the feeders. We were delighted that the star birds, the Pine Grosbeaks, were there once again. We arrived in Ivalo just after 5pm and had dinner at 7pm.

Sat., June 15. Saarisselkä | Ivalo Airport

Our final day. Before breakfast we had an optional excursion, driving to the hilltop at Saarisselkä just south of Ivalo to look once more for Dotterel. Most of us went along and it was a wise decision as it proved to be an outstanding success. We had ridiculously close range views of a confiding male, which walked right up to us. It is actually not unusual for Arctic living birds to do that. Amazing. We all met for breakfast at 8.30 and at noon checked out and drove the short way to Ivalo Airport. Everything was straightforward and our flight to Helsinki left on time at 13.55. At dinner yesterday I'd asked everyone to list three things: favorite bird of the trip, favorite other animal and favorite event or place. Here are the "results". Husam (Bluethroat, Arctic Fox, the road tunnel to Vardö), Carol (Hawk Owl owlets, Arctic Fox, Arctic Circle Monument), Donna (Ruff, Reindeer, Ivalo Hotel), Steve (Dotterel, Arctic Fox, being "up-close-and -personal" with the birds on Hornøya Island), Lise (Dotterel, Arctic Fox, being shown the Boreal Owl and Grey-headed Chickadee by a local expert), Carol (Smew, Stoat, Forests and Rivers), Cyndy (Yellowhammer, Stoat, humor!), Laurence (Yellow-billed Loon, Arctic Fox, smoked salmon and pickled herring in Norway), Suzanne (Stellar's Eider, Reindeer, seeing the change from reindeer browsing on trees from "eaten" low down in Finland to "not eaten" in Norway), Webb (Dotterel, Arctic Fox, Hornøya Island), Eileen (Hawk Owl owlets, Arctic Fox, Hornøya Island), Jeff (Hawk Owl family, Arctic Fox, Hornøya Island). All marvelous choices. I'd like to thank everyone for contributing to this latest Naturalist Journeys tour to Finland and Norway.

Photos: Western Capercaillie (Gerard Gorman - GG), Northern Hawk Owl (Laurence Green - LG), Atlantic Puffin (LG), Razorbills (LG), Ruff (LG), Reed Bunting (LG), Gray-headed Woodpecker (Cyndy Johnson - CJ), Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (LG), Pallid Harrier (LG), Ortolan Bunting (LG), Sedge Warbler (LG), Terek Sandpiper (LG), Black-headed Gull (CJ), Northern Hawk Owl young (CJ), White-throated Dipper (LG), Bullfinch (LG), Gray-headed Chickadee (LG), Pine Grosbeak (LG), Temminck's Stint (LG), Willow Ptarmigan (CJ), Ruff (LG), Rock Ptarmigan (LG), Lapland Longspur (Carol Cook - CC), American Oystercatcher and chick (LG), Yellow-billed Loon (LG), Rough-legged Hawk (LG), White-tailed Eagle (LG), Arctic Tern (LG), Arctic Fox (LG), Short-eared Owl (LG), Eurasian Dotterel (LG), Whooper Swan (GG)