



FINLAND: OWLS, TAIGA, AND FJORDS, OH MY!

7 OR 12 DAYS

3 - 14 JUNE 2020



Black Grouse (photo Jari Peltomäki) is one of our targets on this trip.

The 12-day version is detailed here, but the first seven days can be done as an independent tour, in which case you fly into and out of Oulu and you end the tour five days earlier.

Finland is a land of interesting contrasts, such as the four seasons, the midnight sun and the winter darkness, urban and rural, east and west. As you look out from the plane, the first impression you may have is that there are a lot of trees ... an endless carpet of forest, with many lakes and small towns in between. It's kind of a surprise when you land in Helsinki to find that the airport is so modern and efficient: not a polar bear in sight. It's truly amazing how uniquely exotic each season can be. Four times a year, nature changes its uniform completely – color, light, temperature, sounds, and smells. Everything changes in a way that happens nowhere else.

Itinerary (12 days/11 nights or 7 days/6 nights)

Days 1 – 3. Arrival in Oulu, birding the Liminganlahti, Oulu, region

Arrival in Oulu (often flying via London and Helsinki). Upon arrival in Oulu, you will be met by the Finnish birding photographic guide and transferred the short distance to your hotel. The Oulu area is best known for its breeding owls, which include **Eurasian Eagle-Owl, Ural Owl, Great Grey Owl, Boreal Owl, Short-eared Owl, and Eurasian Pygmy Owl**, and in most years also **Northern Hawk Owl and Long-eared Owl** (depending on the vole situation, the owl species might also be encountered further north in the Kuusamo or Ivalo regions). We will spend some of the time during these days in the forest and have an excellent chance of seeing these owls at close range. Other possible forest species are **Black Grouse, Western Capercaillie, and Black and Eurasian Three-toed Woodpeckers**.

Just south of Oulu we visit Liminganlahti – an important wetland reserve that is home to a multitude of wildfowl and shorebirds, including **Eurasian Curlew, Common Greenshank, Spotted Redshank, Ruff, Little Ringed Plover, Caspian Tern, Black-tailed Godwit, Northern Shoveler, Red-breasted Merganser, and Garganey**. Hundreds of young **Whooper Swans and Common Cranes** spend their summer in the bay area. Usual sightings here also include **White-tailed Eagle and Western Marsh Harrier**, and **Peregrine Falcon** is a daily visitor from the nearby bog. **Broad-billed Sandpiper** should be migrating in late May, as well as small numbers of **Eurasian Dotterel, Terek Sandpiper, Pallid Harrier, and Citrine Wagtail** are rare breeding birds in the area and of course are our targets too. Other waders this morning might include **Temminck's Stint** with its butterfly display as well as **Common Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers**. The spectacular **Ruff** lek takes place here in Liminganlahti. Differently-colored males are concentrated on winning the females' attention – sometimes it gets really exciting! Although lying on the threshold of Lapland, some 'night singers' are found in the Oulu area most years. During a late evening excursion there might be a chance to find **Thrush Nightingale and Blyth's Reed Warbler** – and perhaps even **Corn Crake, River and Marsh Warblers** are not necessarily excluded either.

Overnight: Airport Hotel Vihiluoto, Kempele

Days 4 – 6. Birding the Kuusamo region

We drive east through the beautiful northern landscape blanketed with forests, bogs, lakes, and rivers to Kuusamo, a small city near the Russian border. We stop en route for birds at some impressive wet bogs and large lakes, where we have good chances to see **Smew, Common**

Crane, Western Osprey, Common Scoter, and Whimbrel, among others. We can expect to encounter a veritable feast of eastern specialties in the expansive taiga forests. Species such as **Common Goldeneye, Wood Sandpiper, and Brambling** are common, but the real draw here is the undisputed list of eastern and northern species: **Red-flanked Bluetail, Rustic and Little Buntings, Arctic Warbler, Grey-headed Chickadee (Siberian Tit), Siberian Jay, Two-barred Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Black Woodpecker, Rough-legged Buzzard, and Bohemian Waxwing** all breed here. Other species we may find might include **Great Grey Shrike and Common Rosefinch**.

The lakes nearby provide good birding sites with **Smew, Red-necked Grebe**, and other waterfowl. Beautiful bogs are home to waders such as **Spotted Redshank, Broad-billed Sandpiper, and Jack Snipe**. In most years **Northern Hawk and Boreal (Tengmalm's) Owls** breed in the Kuusamo region, we have been lucky enough to find a pair of Boreal Owls at the nest in previous years. There is plenty of room for grouse in the vast forests surrounding Kuusamo. Here we will patiently look for **Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse, and Willow Ptarmigan**.

A moderate walk to a beautiful old forest area, Oulanka National Park, might give us sightings of the elusive **Hazel Grouse and Siberian Jay**. A natural preserve adjoining Paanajärvi National Park on the Russian side of the border, Oulanka is the westernmost extreme of the taiga or boreal coniferous forest zone. In addition to the spruce forests with beard lichens and thick moss, lichenous upland pine forests, wild river valleys, and watery aapa mires, Oulanka also preserves innumerable wildlife rarities. The flora and fauna of its river valley is a distinctive mix of northern, eastern, and southern species, and you can find, e.g., *Calypso* orchids here. Narrow-shouldered Siberian Spruce forests, home of **Brown Bear, Golden Eagle, and White-throated Dipper**, create a strong sense of the boreal riverine wilderness. The climb up Valtavaara Hill for **Red-flanked Bluetail** is steep, and the birds are never guaranteed to be singing, though the views are magnificent. While in the area we take advantage of the twenty-four hours of daylight for a night-time forest safari and “grouse drive”. Four species of Phasianidae all normally provide excellent views, and **Red-necked Grebe, Little Gull, European Pied Flycatcher, and Common Redstart** are also present.

Overnight: Sokos Hotel, Kuusamo

Day 7. Crossing the Arctic Circle to Lapland, transfer to Ivalo

We drive north to Ivalo. Time allowing, we might have a short evening excursion for some of the local specialties.

Overnight: Hotel Ivalo, Ivalo

Day 8. Birding the Tana River and its delta in Norway, transfer to Båtsfjord

We will leave Ivalo and take a long drive north to the Varanger Peninsula and the shores of the Barents Sea. On the way we will make birding stops in the pine forests and roadside bogs of the north. Birds possible to see include many of the taiga species, such as **Siberian Jay** and the quiet and elusive **Pine Grosbeak**, and wetland species, of which displaying **Jack Snipe** is of special interest. Also a visit to a roadside bog should produce our first **Lapland Longspur**. We drive until the forests give way to the vast, open arctic landscape, which is characterized by fells. The bogs and lakesides provide excellent birding sites with **Black-throated Loon (Diver), Common Scoter, and Bluethroat. Rough-legged Buzzard** can be seen soaring over the vast landscape,

while **European Golden Plover**, **Bar-tailed Godwit**, and **Spotted Redshank** all show themselves in glorious summer plumage.

We will drive along the river Tana and cross the border into Norway. After driving along the riverside we will visit the delta area, which is famous for its moulting **Common Merganser**, **Temminck's Stint**, and other breeding waders, and its colony of **Arctic Terns**. Here we also have fair chances to see some seals. Furthermore, there is a traditional breeding site of **Gyr Falcon** on the nearby rocks!

From the delta we will continue to the high-altitude tundra and to Båtsfjord, a small harbor town on the northern edge of the Varanger Peninsula. The tundra is the home of **Rock Ptarmigan** and **Gyr Falcon**. Also **Long-tailed Jaeger** and **Eurasian Dotterel** are often seen just by the roadside. And, with some luck, the magnificent **Snowy Owl** can sometimes be seen on the fells.

We are going to visit the other town on the northern side of Varanger, Berlevåg. The rocky coastline and tundra offer many excellent birding locations. The Kjølnes Lighthouse near the town is an excellent sea-watching site, offering good chances to see **White-billed Loon** (Diver), **Pomarine** and **Great Skuas**, **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls**, **Black-legged Kittiwake**, and **Northern Gannet** – just to name a few. But the conditions here can be harsh even at this time of year, so it might require plenty of clothes to go sea-watching on the arctic coast! Depending on the snow cover, we will venture onto the barren fells to search for **Eurasian Dotterel**, **Long-tailed Jaeger**, **Lapland Longspur**, and **Whimbrel**.

Overnight: Euro Polar Hotel, Båtsfjord

Days 9 – 10. Birding the Varangerfjord, boat trip to Hornøya

Today we drive to the Varangerfjord itself. En route, as well as during the next two days, we search for shorebirds such as **Whimbrel**, **Red-necked Phalarope**, **Temminck's** and perhaps **Little Stints**, **Ruff**, and **Bar-tailed Godwit**, as well as species such as **Red-throated** and **Black-throated Loons** (Divers), **Steller's** and **King Eiders**, **Velvet Scoter**, **Rough-legged Buzzard**, **Long-tailed Jaeger**, **Parasitic Jaeger** (Arctic Skua), **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls**, **Snowy** and **Short-eared Owls**, **Bluethroat**, **Arctic Redpoll**, **Horned (Shore) Lark**, and **Snow Bunting**.

We will make a half-day excursion by boat (weather permitting) to the large seabird colonies on the islet of Hornøya, home of thousands of northern birds. The Hornøya Nature Reserve is the easternmost of the protected bird colonies in Norway, home of about 25 000 pairs of **Black-legged Kittiwake** and 150 pairs of **European Shag**. Northern alcids breeds here: **Thick-billed Murre** (Brünnich's Guillemot), **Common Murre** (Guillemot), **Black Guillemot**, **Razorbill**, and several thousand pairs of **Atlantic Puffin**! There are wonderful opportunities here for photographing birds. There will be a nice walk all the way up to the top of the island, where there is a lighthouse. From here we will get excellent views over the Arctic Ocean – with a lot of fishing boats. The arctic waters are also home to seals, which we may see from the boat on the trip to or from the island.

We will also make an excursion to Hamningberg - the very end of Europe, connected by road from Vardø. The road to Hamningberg is something special. The expression "the end of world" comes to mind when you travel here. The landscape is wild and calm - with a lot of variation in-between. Sometimes it looks like you are on the moon, the next minute you mistake the beaches for ones at the Mediterranean!

We take several short excursions by foot to the tundra and to the bogs. The latter especially should be teeming with birdlife, in particular breeding **Red-throated Loon** (Diver) and arctic shorebirds. We will do some sea watching from Hamningberg, hoping to see **Northern Gannet**,

Northern (Blue) Fulmar, Long-tailed Jaeger, Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua), or even Beluga Whales!

Overnight: Hotel Vardø, Vardø

Day 11. Transfer back to Finland

Today we travel along the Varangerfjord and back to Ivalo, making birding stops en route, catching up with any species we may have missed.

Overnight: Hotel Ivalo, Ivalo

Day 12. Departure

Time permitting, we will bird locally before transferring to the Ivalo airport for the flight to Helsinki and the onward connection home.

Please note that the itinerary above cannot be guaranteed as it is only a rough guide and can be changed (usually slightly) due to factors such as availability of accommodation, updated information on the state of accommodation, roads, or birding sites, the discretion of the guides and other factors.

Duration: 12 (or 7) days

Limit: 4 – 8

Date: 3 – 14 June 2020

Start: Oulu

End: Ivalo

Price: €5620 for 12-day tour (starts in Oulu, ends in Ivalo, 3 – 14 June)

€2994 for 7-day tour (starts in Oulu, ends in Oulu, 3 – 9 June)

Single Supplement: €538 (12-day tour) or €383 (7-day tour)

For bookings by 30 May 2019 the prices are the following:

Price: €5352 for 12-day tour (starts in Oulu, ends in Ivalo, 3 – 14 June)

€2851 for 7-day tour (starts in Oulu, ends in Oulu, 3 – 9 June)

Single Supplement: €512 (12-day tour) or €365 (7-day tour)

Price includes:

Accommodation

All meals

Transportation by 4x4 VW minibus

Local birding guide driving throughout the tour

Boat trip to Hornoya Island (weather permitting) on the longer tour

Price excludes:

International flights

Personal insurance

Alcoholic beverages

Gratuities

Laundry

Personal expenses such as gifts