



FINLAND: OWLS SPECIAL TOUR

04 – 10 JUNE 2024



*While exploring the Finnish forests we will search for the breathtaking **Great Grey Owl**.
(Photo Jari Peltomäki)*

Our Owl tours to Finland have always been our most popular European tour, and for good reason. Exploring the beautiful taiga forests of Finland in search of these mystical birds is a highlight of any birding tour. However, this tour isn't just about the owls and we will enjoy a great variety of other species that Finland has to offer.

We will begin our tour in the city of Oulu in the northern part of southern Finland. Over the first three days of the tour we will explore the vast forests of the area. These forests are arguably the best in Europe for breeding owls and these will be the focus of the first part of our tour. With the aid of excellent and knowledgeable local guides, we hope to come across a remarkable eight species of owls. Whichever species we see will no doubt be an unforgettable experience, as is always the case with this charismatic family of birds. The forests here are also home to a range of other fascinating species, including **Black Grouse**, **Western Capercaillie**, **Black Woodpecker**, and **Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker**, amongst others.

While around Oulu we will explore Liminganlahti. This superb wetland area plays host to many wildfowl and shorebird (wader) species. Highlights of our time here will likely include **Spotted Redshank**, **Caspian Tern**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Garganey**, **Whooper Swan**, and **Common Crane**. This activity is an irresistible lure to multiple birds of prey including **White-tailed Eagle**, **Western Marsh Harrier**, and **Peregrine Falcon**. Rarer species that we have a chance of coming across here include shorebirds (waders) like **Broad-billed Sandpiper** and the delicate **Pallid Harrier**, one of Europe's rarest (and most attractive) breeding birds of prey. We will also be perfectly timed to witness the fascinating **Ruff** lek that occurs in the area every summer.



*The beautiful **Red-flanked Bluetail** is a relatively new breeding species in eastern Finland, having spread west from Russia. It is a big target on our tour.*

We will then head east across the breadth of Finland to the city of Kuusamo on the Russian border. Along the route we will explore the vast swathes of lakes that form Finland's interior. Here we will come across **Smew**, **Common Crane**, **Western Osprey**, **Common Scoter**, and **Eurasian Whimbrel**, among others. The variety of birds here is extensive, and as we continue to explore, we will come across small groups of **Common Goldeneye**, singing **Wood Sandpiper**, and stunning **Brambling**. This area of Finland is home to several eastern species of birds including **Red-flanked Bluetail**, **Rustic Bunting**, **Little Bunting**, and **Arctic Warbler**. Taiga forest specials occur here too, including **Grey-headed Chickadee** (Siberian Tit), **Siberian Jay**, **Two-barred Crossbill**, and **Pine Grosbeak**. There are simply too many species to list in this introduction to the area justice, so please see the detailed itinerary below for a more extensive list of the amazing species which occur here.

From Kuusamo we head north on a drive through the beautiful taiga forest to Ivalo where our tour ends. This tour of Finland is also part of our amazing **Finland and Norway: Taiga and Tundra Adventure Tour**. If you would like to combine Europe's best owl species with the amazing special species of the Arctic Circle then why not join that tour. Species of interest on that tour include **Gyrfalcon**, Thousands of seabirds including **Thick-billed Murre (Brünnich's Guillemot)**, **White-tailed Eagle**, **King Eider**, **Steller's Eider**, **Long-tailed Jaeger (Long-tailed Skua)**, **Snowy Owl**, **Black-throated Loon (Black-throated Diver)**, **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Eurasian Dotterel**, **Temminck's Stint**, and much more!

If you would like to further extend your stay in Europe why not join our **Svalbard Cruise: Polar Bears and Seabirds tour**. On this tour we will go in search of the legendary **Polar Bear** plus other amazing mammals like **Common Minke Whale**, **Blue Whale**, **Bowhead Whale**, **Fin Whale**, **Bearded Seal**, **Ringed Seal**, **Svalbard Reindeer**, **Walrus**, and **Arctic Fox**. Of course it is not just about the mammals and great birds can be seen on this tour too, including **Ivory Gull**, **King Eider**, **Rock Ptarmigan**, **Barnacle Goose**, **Snow Bunting**, and **Thick-billed Murre (Brünnich's Guillemot)**

Itinerary (7 days/6 nights)

Days 1 - 3. Arrival in Oulu, birding the Liminganlahti wetlands and the Oulu region

Welcome to the land of the midnight sun. You will be met at Oulu airport by your Birding Ecotours tour leader and expert Finnish local guide. Our first evening in Oulu will be spent getting settled into our hotel and enjoying a traditional Finnish meal. Here we will discuss the trip and use the time to facilitate anything the group may need.

We will spend the first three days of our tour in the area surrounding the city of Oulu. This city of around 200,000 inhabitants is the largest in northern Finland and will be our base for the next few days. Oulu happens to be surrounded by some of the best birding Finland has to offer and we will use the long hours of daylight to maximize the birding experiences here.

Firstly, we will explore the dense taiga forests in search of some of the amazing species that inhabit this vast wilderness. The Oulu region is one of the best in Europe for breeding owls and we will attempt to see no fewer than eight species here. With **Snowy Owl** being possible on the Norwegian leg of our tour, we could see almost all of Europe's owl species!

The smallest of these species is the **Eurasian Pygmy Owl**. Despite its small size this species is a voracious, mainly diurnal hunter, and often hangs around bird feeders and hunts in a fashion like that of small hawks. Another small owl species here is the **Boreal** (Tengmalm's) **Owl**. This species can be incredibly elusive, and our best bet will be to observe this species near nest sites.



*The tiny **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** is a fearsome predator, its small size not hindering it from being an effective hunter in the dense Finnish forests (photo Jari Peltomäki).*

The next species on the owl size-scale is **Northern Hawk-Owl**. This striking species is a real star of the taiga forest and it is often seen on roadside wires scanning the grasses for small mammals. It is one of the few owls to be solely diurnal and this will help us locate this species. Within the same habitat as the hawk-owl we should also come across both **Long-eared Owl** and **Short-eared Owl**. All three of these birds prefer slightly more open forested areas with nearby grassland to hunt.

Finally, we move onto the giant owls of the area. **Ural Owl**, **Great Grey Owl**, and **Eurasian Eagle-Owl** dwarf the other owl species here, but this does not necessarily make them any easier to see, though with our excellent local team we will stand a great chance! We will spend plenty of time searching the forests for these three stunning species as well as the other five owl species.



*The **Northern Hawk-Owl** is one of the few solely diurnal owls on Earth. They are efficient hunters and can often be found along roadsides (photo Jari Peltomäki).*

While the owl species are the real highlight of the forests, they are not the only amazing species to be found here. The taiga forests in June come alive as the daylight hours increase. By exploring the forest trails here, we should come across forest specials such as **Black Grouse**, **Western Capercaillie**, **Hazel Grouse**, **Black Woodpecker**, **Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker**, **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker**, **Rough-legged Buzzard**, and **Northern Goshawk**.

Passerines of the forest can be numerous in June and we will search for **Bohemian Waxwing**, **European Crested Tit**, **Great Grey Shrike**, **Common Rosefinch**, **Fieldfare**, **Tree Pipit**, **Brambling**, **Hawfinch**, **Red (Common) Crossbill**, **Eurasian Siskin**, and **Yellowhammer**.

Forest birding can be challenging but this makes the rewards even greater and the forests around Oulo offer some sensational species for us to enjoy.

The second area we will explore during the first three days of the tour is the wetlands of Liminganlahti situated to the south of Oulu. This wetland site 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**. Additionally, hundreds of young (non-breeding) **Whooper Swans** and **Common Cranes** spend their summer in the bay area.

Usual sightings here also include **White-tailed Eagle** and **Western Marsh Harrier**, while **Peregrine Falcon** is a daily visitor from the nearby bog. **Broad-billed Sandpiper** should have arrived here from May, as well as small numbers of **Eurasian Dotterel**, **Terek Sandpiper**, **Pallid Harrier**, and **Citrine Wagtail** are much sought-after rare breeding birds in the area.



Eurasian Dotterel is one of several stunning shorebirds possible on this tour (photo Jari Peltomäki).



*The male **Pallid Harrier** is a very special sight. Males are a ghostly grey with a black wingtip wedge. This species appears to be expanding its European breeding range in a westward direction with recent breeding confirmed in The Netherlands and France.*

Other shorebirds at the site might include **Temminck's Stint**, with its butterfly display flight, as well as **Common Ringed Plover** and **Little Ringed Plover**. Liminganlahti also has a spectacular **Ruff** lek. Differently colored males concentrate on winning the females' attention in a dazzling display of color and movement, something not to be missed.

During late evening excursions there might be a chance to find **Thrush Nightingale** and **Blyth's Reed Warbler** – and perhaps even **Corn Crake**, **River Warbler**, and **Marsh Warbler**. It is fair to say that all these species have incredible songs and will provide more tour highlights.

Overnight (three nights): Airport Hotel Vihiluoto, Kempele



*A displaying male **Ruff** is a fantastic and unusual thing to observe. The males vary widely in shape and size and they form communal leks where they display their bizarre and unique neck ruffles (hence the name Ruff!). Being able to watch the incredible scene of dancing, strutting, and bouncing Ruff unfold before our very eyes is sure to be a trip highlight.*

Days 4 - 6. Birding the Kuusamo region

After three action-packed days around Oulu we will spend Day 4 undertaking our journey towards the beautiful northern regions of Finland. En route we will travel through stunning landscapes blanketed with forests, bogs, lakes, and rivers, with our end destination being the city of Kuusamo on the border with Russia.

Along the way we will stop at convenient points to do some birding around the wet bogs and lakes. In these areas we should come across **Smew** (one of *the* best-looking ducks on the planet), **Common Crane**, **Western Osprey**, **Common Scoter**, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Green Sandpiper**, **Common Goldeneye**, **Little Gull**, and **Wood Sandpiper**, among others.

As we approach Kuusamo these lakes and bogs are broken up by sections of taiga forest. These are a real draw for species such as **Willow Tit, Common Cuckoo, Hooded Crow, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Brambling, Bohemian Waxwing**, and **Eurasian Siskin**.



*The striking **Bohemian Waxwing** breeds in the forests around Kuusamo. Their “sirrr” call sounds almost like a soft bell being rung and this often gives them away.*

Once in Kuusamo we will explore the superb habitats of the region around the city. The real draw of this region is the presence of several species which are very range-restricted in Europe. While searching for the commoner species mentioned above, we will keep our eyes peeled for **Red-flanked Bluetail, Rustic Bunting, Little Bunting, Arctic Warbler**, and **Grey-headed Chickadee** (Siberian Tit). These are all beautiful species and a huge bonus of birding in the area.

We should also be able to add to the above with some real forest specials such as **Siberian Jay, Two-barred Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak**, and **Black Woodpecker**. The grassland sections between the forests should hold **Rough-legged Buzzard, Great Grey Shrike**, and **Common Rosefinch**.

The habitats closer to Kuusamo will provide us with a different range of species to those found nearer Oulu such as **Red-necked Grebe, Spotted Redshank, Broad-billed Sandpiper**, and **Jack Snipe**. Exploring the surrounding forests will give us another chance of spotting **Northern Hawk-Owl** and **Boreal** (Tengmalm's) **Owl**, plus **Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse**, and **Willow Ptarmigan**.



*While not as grand as the male, a female **Western Capercaillie** is a beautiful cryptically plumaged bird and often far more confiding than the males.*

We will also spend time in the breathtaking old forest of the Oulanka National Park. Oulanka is the westernmost extreme of the taiga or boreal coniferous forest zone. In addition to the vast spruce forests, here we can enjoy lichenous upland pine forests, wild river valleys, and watery aapa mires, the flora and fauna of Oulanka's river valley is a distinctive mix of northern, eastern, and southern species.

One of the true stars of Oulanka is the **Red-flanked Bluetail**. We will walk up Valtavaara Hill where the birds should be singing and while not guaranteed, the views from the top are worth the climb. While exploring Oulanka we will attempt to see the often-elusive **Hazel Grouse** and **Siberian Jay**, and other forest highlights here include **Golden Eagle**, **White-throated Dipper**, **Red-necked Grebe**, **Little Gull**, **European Pied Flycatcher**, and **Common Redstart**.

We will also use the 24 hours of daylight to undertake a night-time forest safari for the four species of Phasianidae found here: **Hazel Grouse**, **Western Capercaillie**, **Black Grouse**, and **Willow Ptarmigan**. If luck is on our side, we may also have an unforgettable encounter with (European) **Brown Bear** or **Moose** (confusingly called Elk in Europe!).

Overnight (three nights): Sokos Hotel, Kuusamo

Day 7. Departure from Ivalo

Today will be a travel day as we make the drive north from Kuusamo to Ivalo for our departure. Time permitting, we will bird the local area around Ivalo before heading to Ivalo Airport for the flight to Helsinki and international connections from there.

Overnight: None

Please note that the itinerary 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. In addition, we sometimes must use a different international guide from the one advertised due to tour scheduling.

Duration:	7 days
Group Size:	4 - 9
Dates:	04 - 10 June 2024
Start:	Oulu Airport, Oulu, Finland
End:	Ivalo Airport, Ivalo, Finland
Prices:	€4,770 per person sharing – based on 4 - 9 participants (2024)

Single Supplements: €420 (2024)

In the event of fewer than eight participants signing up to the tour there will be the option of a surcharge to guarantee departure. The amount of the surcharge will depend on how many participants are signed up to the tour and will occur if all participants agree.

Price includes:

All accommodation (Day 1 until Day 7 as described above, or similar)
Meals (from evening welcome dinner on day 1 until breakfast on Day 7)
Drinking water – please bring a refillable water bottle
Expert tour leader
Local bird and wildlife guide fees
Birdwatching site entrance fees and travel permits
All ground transport and tolls/taxes while on tour, including airport pick-up and drop-off

Price excludes:

Flights to Oulu Airport, Oulu, Finland
Flights from Ivalo Airport, Ivalo, Finland
Expenditures due to flight cancellations/delays or other causes beyond our control (force majeure)
Visa fees if visa required
Departure tax
Items of a personal nature, e.g. gifts, laundry, internet access, phone calls etc.
Any pre- or post-tour accommodation, meals, or birding/sightseeing excursions
Soft/alcoholic drinks
Personal travel insurance
Gratuities (please see our [tipping guidelines blog](#))

Useful information

During this tour, your guide will be driving you in a comfortable vehicle. The tour does require some walking and hiking to see certain species of birds and there are opportunities for longer hikes if you wish. Some of these walks and hikes will be on rough, steep terrain so please make sure you are of a good level of fitness for this tour.

Due to the costs involved with visiting Scandinavia we run this tour with a slightly larger group than we would to other destinations so that we can spread the cost and keep costs down for everyone involved. This decision is also based on the habitats we will be birding in on the tour which allow for larger groups, without reducing the experience of the tour.

The weather in the area can also be highly variable with day temperatures often ranging from 25°C to -8°C in this period depending on the wind strength and direction. Nights are frequently cold and as the sun does not set many of our excursions will occur later into the evening and early morning.

The forested areas will have noticeable populations of biting insects if the weather is warm so please ensure you bring some form of repellent with you. Despite the northern latitudes the sun here can be strong in summer, so a hat and sun block are advised.