



Sunrise Birding LLC
FINLAND
TRIP REPORT
May 28 – June 3, 2017



Photos: Great Gray Owl, Siberian Jay, Hazel Grouse, Whooper Swan, Capercaillie by Gina Nichol



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LEADERS:

Pirita Latja

Gina Nichol

Steve Bird

Wild and pristine, Finland is home to some of Europe's most sought after birds. In the easternmost region of Europe, Finland sits at the western edge of the vast Siberian boreal forest and offers a variety of northern forest birds rarely found in other parts of Europe. Sunrise Birding's inaugural trip to northern Finland was a smashing success. Despite the unusually cold and snowy weather, we had great views of Great Gray, Ural, Eurasian Pygmy Owl, Capercaillie, Hazel and all of the Grouse possible, Black Woodpecker, and so much more.



Group highlights and top sightings:

- **The two Capercaillie experiences!**
 - Chasing the bus
 - Chasing Pirita!
- **Ural Owl**
- **Great Gray Owl**
- **Eurasian Pygmy Owl**
- **Dotterel**
- **Hazel Grouse**
- **ALL the grouse!**
- **Smew**
- **Black Woodpecker**
- **Fieldfare, so many!**
- **Dipper**
- **Red-necked Phalaropes**
- **Siberian Jay**
- **300+ Little Gulls in one place**
- **Bean Geese, both subspecies**
- **Getting great views of tricky birds!**
- **The day at Iivaara with Siberian Tits & Jays**
- **Experiencing the boreal forest, birch forests, landscapes & habitats**
- **Seeing bird behavior, etc.**
- **Traveling with a great group of people**
- **Eating traditional food**
- **Pirita! Our superhero, action figure guide!**

Day 1

Our tour began in the city of Oulu in northern Finland, located on the shores of the Bay of Bothnia in the Oulunjoki River delta. Oulu is the largest city in Northern Finland and the capital of northern Scandinavia. A thriving city, Oulu is the gateway to the nature of the region. Everyone arrived by late afternoon and we enjoyed our first dinner of the tour with a special celebration of Chris's birthday.

Day 2

After breakfast we spent the day birding around Oulo. Our first stop was the city snow dump where we searched for Terek Sandpiper to no avail. No worries though as we moved across the street and there was one around a small pool which seemed a better habitat than a snow dump anyway. Also here were Little Ringed Plover, **Slavonian Grebes**, and Whooper Swans at a local pond.



We drove farm roads around Tupos and found an Ortolan Bunting that offered great views as it perched on a power line. Across the road in the back of a field, a Short-eared Owl flew over hunting and a Skylark was doing a display flight. Also seen here were a male Hen Harrier, and several Whinchats. A short walk to a pond near Liminka village found us 30+ very busy Red-necked Phalaropes which were a joy to watch as they moved and fed.

Then we visited a globally important waterfowl habitat called Liminganlahti, Finland's most important wetland located on the Bay of Liminka. From the observation tower, we will scanned the shoreline and found many displaying Ruff and a few Wood Sandpipers, Common Crane, Black-tailed Godwit and two White-tailed Eagles.

We enjoyed a great salmon soup lunch at the visitor center while watching Greenfinches at the feeder and enjoyed the excellent exhibits there. In the afternoon we birded a few patches of forest around Siikajoki in the hopes of finding woodpeckers. They didn't cooperate but we had great views of Siskin, Yellowhammer, Bluethroat, Goldcrest and a fly over Tree Pipit. Pirita rescued a Willow Warbler from a green hut on the beach (first super hero stunt!) and we added Great Black-backed Gull and Cormorant to our list.





We end the day at Papinjärvi, a lake near the airport that had 300+ hundreds of Little Gulls in breeding plumage. The spectacle of this number of birds flying low over the lake was memorable and we also found Common Scoter and Black-throated/Arctic Loon here. There were many Barn Swallows in with the Gulls and a Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew over. We enjoyed a sunny end of the day with some brightly colored Yellow Wagtails (thumbergi) around the airport runways.

We returned to the hotel and enjoyed a great meal and review of our bird list for the day.

Day 3

The Oulu Region is best known for its breeding owls and today was our day to look for Great Gray Owl is one of the most sought after of this family. We started out after breakfast just outside our hotel where we checked the shores of the Bay of Bothnia and found a handsome male Smew just offshore. There were several Sedge Warblers singing and a flock of Yellow Wagtails was roosting on some sand piles offering great views.

From here we traveled to the town of Oulainen where we walked a short path and were soon enjoying great views of a **Great Gray Owl** on a nest. The bird was quite sedentary but being able to watch it against the backdrop of the stunning lush forest was a thrill for everyone.



We left the owl as we found it and on the way out watched a Eurasian Jay moving low in some trees. Our next stop was near Raahe where a flock of 21 Barnacle Geese were flying low of the water (unusual here). We scanned the offshore waters which had Tufted Duck, Common Merganser, Eurasian Wigeon and Mute Swan. In a nearby tree, a Lesser Whitethroat was singing its head off as a Lesser Black-backed Gull flew over.



After lunch in town, we moved to Tauvo where we had great views of a **Ural Owl** near a nest box. The bird sat in a tree while we looked and took many photos and videos. After about ten minutes the bird flew off so we moved on to another forested area that offered great views of Great Spotted Woodpecker and Chiffchaff. Outside the forest on the road, we looked up to see a Goshawk thermaling high into the clouds. From here we went searching for some reported Dotterels and soon came up with two Gray

Partridge moving in a stubble field near the road. Our last stop of the day was along the road near Tyrnävä where 12 Dotterel were feeding in a freshly plowed farm field. Views were distant and a little heat hazed but we repositioned for better views and enjoyed these birds for a half hour or so before we headed back to the hotel to celebrate another great day!

Day 4

Our pre-breakfast walk this morning featured nice views of Reed Bunting, a pair of Smew and the Great Crested Grebe on its nest. A pair of Marsh Harriers was seen and as we walked the street back we had a pair of Eurasian Bullfinch with a nice colorful male. After breakfast we loaded the bus and departed the hotel for our journey to Kuusamo.

Our first stop was at a place called Hietasaari near Oulo where we had nice views of Lesser Spotted Woodpecker and a quick moving Woodcock. We traveled to Kiiminki where we found a Green Sandpiper by the road and saw our first Bohemian Waxwings. We watched a **Black Woodpecker** nest from the road and saw the male peak its head out several times. In another area we looked around an active Eurasian Pygmy Owl nest site but could only put the bird on our list as heard at this point because the female on the nest never appeared.



After lunch we continued along the road to Kuusamo through the beautiful northern landscape of forests, bog lands, lakes and rivers and eventually stopping for some close Bohemian Waxwings. We scanned an open cut of forest and Jane found a nice looking Great Spotted Woodpecker for us. The next stop in Jokijärvi offered Common Scoters, Red-throated and Black-throated (Arctic) Loons, a few Temminck's Stints, Common Sandpipers and Red-necked Phalaropes. Further on, we stopped at a short grass field that held some great looking Eurasian Golden Plovers and Ruff and a Mountain Hare across the road. Still further on we had great views of a flying **Short-eared Owl** that came toward us allowing good photos. Crossing a bridge over a river we had a Hen Harrier and finally we

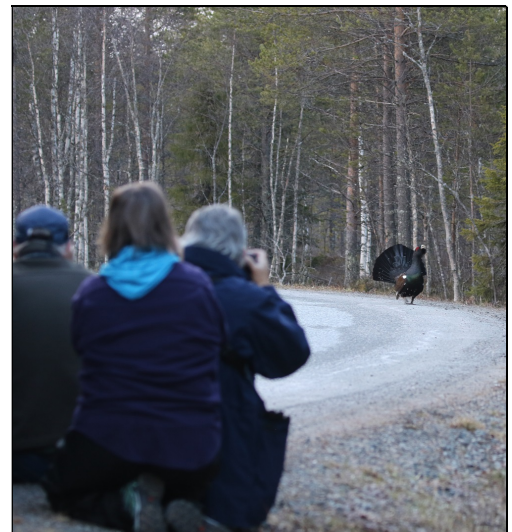
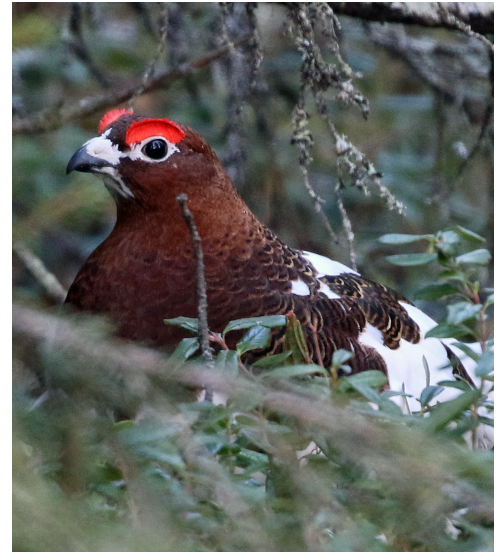


arrived in the small city of Kuusamo near the Russian border where we spent the next three nights.

Kuusamo lies on an elevated plateau where 90% of the land area is forested with pine and spruce as well as some deciduous trees. Fells and forests stretch as far as the eye can see with lakes, rivers and rapids adding a sparkling component to the spectacular countryside which was still fending off the cold of winter. We settled in and had a nice dinner celebrating our sightings for the day and preparing for the days to come.

Day 5

We were out early this morning to look for Grouse around Kuusamo. Not far from the hotel, we stopped for a handsome male **Willow Grouse** and as we positioned to see him in the dense undergrowth a male Capercaillie appeared on the road in front of the van. For the next half hour or so, this bird displayed right in front of us in the middle of the road giving an unforgettable show! He strutted and called and sauntered back and forth until finally going off into the forest. We pulled away in the van and our driver noticed the bird in the side mirror chasing us down the road. He turned on the rear camera and we could see this crazed Capercaillie right behind the van with us in its sights! What a display! It was all we could have hoped for!





We continued along some local roads searching for more grouse. We found a Mistle Thrush at Ruka, several Mountain Hares and some Golden Plovers along the road but no more grouse. But after all, how much better could it get! We returned to the hotel for breakfast and to check our numerous photos and videos of this charismatic bird and its extraordinary performance.

After breakfast, we visited two bird watching towers around Kuusamo. The usual ducks and gulls were around and we added Scarlet Rosefinch and Velvet Scoter at Kuusamo Lake and Red-necked Grebe at Vihtasalmi Lake.



We continued south of Kuusamo to a lovely ski track cafe in the woods by Lake Ahvenjärvi at the foot of Iivaara Hill (<http://www.iivaara.fi/>). Here we found several feeders hopping with birds. Mostly there were Eurasian Siskins, Bramblings and groups of Eurasian Bullfinch. We watched for a while and then had to tear ourselves away to enjoy the delicious home-cooked lunch of Reindeer stew in the café. After lunch we continued birding around the buildings and saw Common Crossbill, **Siberian Tit**, and **Siberian Jay** very well. Traveling nearby we had female Black

Grouse (one on a nest) and female Capercaillie along the road. On the way back, we stopped for an active **Black Woodpecker** nest and had great views of the male attending to whatever was inside. It was another fabulous day celebrated with a great meal at the hotel.



Day 6

Once again it had snowed overnight and snow and wind continued this morning. But we bundled up and persevered to continue our exploration of western-most extreme of the boreal Siberian forest. After breakfast we traveled north of Kuusamo to Konttainen to look for Pygmy Owl. We walked through the snow and admired the wintery landscape. We found Common Redstart and Siberian Jay and a lone **Whooper Swan** on the mostly frozen lake. The Pygmy Owl was a no show so we continued on enjoying the warmth of the van. At Kayla, we had great views of Eurasian Dipper, a fleeting glimpse of Gray Wagtail, several Waxwings, and Velvet and Common Scoter on the lake.



We went to Vuotunkijärvi, affectionately named the cold lake as the wind whipped off the half frozen water. Here we had Smew, a fly by Hen Harrier, Red-necked Phalaropes and Dunlin. We drove some small roads near the Russian border and at one point a **Hazel Grouse** flew fast across the road. We stopped and stayed in the bus while Pirita blew the whistle causing the grouse to fly back toward us giving great views and moving to several spots around the van allowing photos. This normally shy bird performed very



well for us! We continued to Riekkilä where we had fantastic views of Dotterel, Eurasian Plover, Reindeer and Black Grouse. We returned to the hotel and celebrated yet another stellar day!

Day 7

This morning before breakfast (4 AM!) we traveled back North of Kuusamo to Konttinen and that nice tract of forest. Much of the snow on the ground was gone but it was snowing lightly so as not to disrupt the winter ambiance. A Greenish Warbler was singing from the tall evergreens but never came in. We heard the call of a distant **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** and tracked it through the forest. It flew in and perched over our heads for 20 minutes or so allowing excellent views! It was well worth the early start and we had received our just reward! We went back to the hotel for breakfast and said goodbye to Craig and Jane who were heading back to Helsinki to explore the city for a few days. The rest of us continued on for the Lapland and Varanger tour.

