

Finland

Owls, Taiga & the South

2022

Friday 27 May - Saturday 4 June (9 days)

Small group tour with David Fairhurst & local guides



The magnificent Great Grey Owl is one of the species we hope to find on our May birding tour to Finland © Jari Peltomaki

Our birdwatching tour to Finland runs at the best time of year to see Scandinavia's sought-after owls and taiga specialities and has been extended to include an evening in a Brown Bear hide plus two extra days around Helsinki in search of late arriving southern breeders such as Blyth's Reed Warbler and Thrush Nightingale. Highlights from our last Finland tour included Broad-billed and Terek Sandpipers, Great Grey, Ural, Hawk, Tengmalm's and Eurasian Pygmy Owls, Siberian Jay, Waxwing, Siberian Tit, Greenish Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail, Parrot Crossbill and Little and Rustic Buntings! Join us for Limosa's 27th bird tour to Finland.

Highlights

- The best time and place for seeing Scandinavia's owls
- Great Grey, Ural, Hawk, Tengmalm's and Eurasian Pygmy Owls with all seen well on our last tour
- 3 nights near Oulu, exploring Finland's coastal taiga forests and its most important wetland
- Excellent time of year for seeing grouse, wildfowl, birds of prey, waders and woodpeckers
- An evening looking for Brown Bears
- 3 nights at Kuusamo, discovering the remote Russian border forests
- 5-star boreal passerines: Red-flanked Bluetail, Waxwing, Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit, Rustic Bunting
- PLUS 2 nights near Helsinki seeking key southern Scandinavian specialities
- Thrush Nightingale, Blyth's Reed, River and Greenish Warblers, Red-breasted Flycatcher
- Small group size with a maximum of 10 participants
- Expertly led by Limosa's David Fairhurst and English-speaking Finnish bird tour guides

What's Included?

- Limosa Tour Leader
- Expert English-speaking Finnature bird guides
- 8 nights accommodation in Finland, staying at comfortable tourist hotels
- All main meals and drinking water provided
- Minibus transport
- All excursions, local guides, entry fees & permits
- All tour-based tips (inc. local guides) and taxes
- Checklist of birds for the tour



Eurasian Pygmy Owl © Jari Peltomak

Outline Itinerary

Day 1

Fly to Oulu and transfer the short distance to our first hotel. Night Oulu

Days 2-3

We explore the coast and forests of Oulu region for owls and visit Liminka Bay, Finland's premier wetland reserve. Two further nights Oulu

Days 4-6

Birding the Russian border forests for taiga specialities. Kuusamo (3 nights)

Days 7-8

We head south and fly from Oulu to Helsinki in search of Finland's specialist southern breeders, species which only arrive here in late May. Helsinki (2 nights)

Day 9

Some final birding around the Finnish capital. Late afternoon flight to UK.

Tour Overview

Blessed with an astonishing array of boreal breeding birds, there is nowhere quite like Finland in the spring! It is a land where wilderness is vast and the birds thinly spread, so up-to-date local knowledge coupled with expert guidance are essential if one is to enjoy any chance of success finding the region's many special birds. On this three-centre tour, we have again been lucky enough to secure both!

We travel in late May, when both the weather and the birding in Northern Europe is at its best and the majority of Finland's summer visitors will have arrived and Scandinavia's owls will be busy feeding young.

The most sought-after specialities and a major tour highlight in spring are the "northern" owls. Our adventure begins at Oulu, a port on the north-eastern shore of the Gulf of Bothnia and the best place in Finland to see breeding owls. Pride of place goes to the majestic Great Grey Owl but Tengmalm's, Eurasian Pygmy and Ural Owls also breed in these sub-Arctic pinewoods and most years there are Hawk Owls to look for too!

With a network of local guides to assist us, we shall spend some time exploring Oulu's tranquil forests and meadows, where we have an excellent chance of seeing most (if not all) of these species and hopefully at close range!

Away from the forests, the coastal bays and rivers around Oulu hold dainty Little Gulls, displaying Temminck's Stints and, with luck, the exceedingly rare Terek Sandpiper.

We plan to visit Liminka Bay, Finland's most important wetland and a superb spot in spring, especially for waterfowl and shorebirds. Ruff will be lekking in the meadows and sporting their colourful collars and tufts. Numerous migratory birds stop off on their way to the Arctic and immature Common Cranes and Whooper Swans pass the summer here. Pallid Harrier and Citrine Wagtail are two rarities that



We look for Red-flanked Bluetail in the wild hills and forests that straddle Finland's border with Russia © Jari Peltomaki



A tiny Temminck's Stint hovers overhead © Jari Peltomaki

may also be present and if they return again this year, we will devote sometime to looking for them.

After three nights near Oulu, we head northeast towards the hills and forests that straddle the border with Russia. Around Kuusamo, we can expect to encounter a feast of specialities. The untouched Siberian taiga with its moss-laden spruce forests, lichen-clad upland pine forests and wild river valleys preserves a rich flora and fauna including some great rarities. Hazel and Willow Grouse, Capercaillie, Black and Three-toed Woodpeckers, Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit, Waxwing and both Little and Rustic Buntings breed. Over the years, we have also enjoyed an unrivalled track record for finding the exquisite but extremely localised Red-flanked Bluetail.

We have also added an evening visit to a Brown Bear hide and whilst nothing can ever be guaranteed, we hope to see one of these majestic animals.

An extra highlight of our Finland tour are two days in the south of the country where we will explore the forests, lakes and marshes around the capital, Helsinki. Our main focus here will be to find Finland's late arriving specialist southern breeders including Blyth's Reed, Greenish and River Warblers, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Thrush Nightingale and Common Rosefinch.

Finland's southern forests also hold many woodpeckers and, if conditions are right at the coast, we may see good numbers of divers, geese and other waterfowl streaming north towards their Arctic breeding grounds.

Guide **David Fairhurst** led this trip for us in May 2016 and 2018, and our 2022 tour will be his third visit to Finland. He will be assisted by one or more guides working for our friends at *Finnature*. Limosa has been operating bird tours to Finland since 1993 and our 2022 departure will be our 27th visit there.

Daily Itinerary

Day 1

FLY TO OULU

Our birdwatching tour to Finland begins with a morning flight to Helsinki and then onwards with an afternoon connection to Oulu where our local



Terek Sandpiper is a rare breeding bird in Finland, but we have a chance to look for it near Oulu © Jari Peltomaki

guide will be waiting to welcome us. We transfer the short distance to our hotel, which will be our base for a three-night stay.

Oulu is a port on the northeast shore of the Gulf of Bothnia, barely 150 miles south of the Arctic Circle. With almost round-the-clock daylight in late May (the sunrises at around 3.30am and sets again at 11.00pm), this evening we may have an opportunity to try for our first owl of the trip: the diminutive but fearless Eurasian Pygmy Owl.

With luck, the calls of Crested Tits and other small birds may lead us to find a male perched in a nearby tree. *Night Oulu*

Days 2 - 3

OULU WETLANDS & FORESTS

We spend these two days birding around Oulu, making a special effort to find some of Northern Europe's rarest breeding birds.

Nowadays, there are only few pairs of Terek Sandpiper left in Finland but Oulu is a reliable spot for them and with the help of our local guide and contacts, our chances of finding one here are considerably enhanced. Pallid Harrier and Citrine Wagtail are two even rarer possibilities that occasionally nest in the area and if they are about, we will also try for them.

More than anything, Oulu is a fantastic place to look for owls. In the extensive forests around the town, we will concentrate our efforts on finding the widespread but elusive Tengmalm's and Ural Owls. We also have a first opportunity to try for the 'monarch of the boreal forest', the magnificent Great Grey Owl. Short-eared Owls quarter the meadows and most years there are Hawk Owls to look out for.

Owl numbers can vary markedly from one year to the next and in these vast Finnish forests, it will soon become apparent why expert local knowledge is a prerequisite to enjoying any degree of success in finding Scandinavia's special birds.

Nearby, Liminganlahti is an internationally important wetland reserve that harbours thousands of waders and ducks. Whooper Swan, Garganey, Smew, Marsh Harrier and Little Gull are all regularly present in spring, along with a few pairs of Black-tailed Godwit, a scarce breeding bird this far north. After watching for Common Cranes, Greylag Geese and White-tailed Eagles, we will head out into the forests in search of Black and Three-toed Woodpeckers.

Two further nights Oulu

Days 4 - 6

KUUSAMO & THE RUSSIAN BORDER FORESTS

From Oulu, we head northeast to Kuusamo, where we spend the next three nights. Along the way, we will stop to scan some of the country's extensive forest bogs and mass of lakes - there are 187,000 of the latter in Finland! Lying close to the border with Russia and less than 40 miles south of the Arctic Circle, Kuusamo has a deserved reputation as the most exciting birding area in all Finland.

Goldeneye, Wood Sandpiper and Brambling are relatively common in the mixed hill woodlands and bogs around Valtavaara, where scarcer breeding species can include Red-necked Grebe, Great Grey Shrike and Parrot Crossbill but the real draw here is the quite unparalleled list of boreal 'exotics'. From Waxwing and Siberian Tit to Little and Rustic Buntings and the inquisitive Siberian Jay, there is more than enough here to keep our pulses racing all day! Rarest of all, the dazzling Red-flanked Bluetail occurs here at the

extreme western edge of its range. Although it may not be within our grasp every year, our forays into the hills in search of this shy Siberian jewel are invariably one of the most memorable and exciting aspects of the tour.

On one day at Kuusamo, we will make an early morning excursion to look for grouse, heading into the immense forests that extend around town in search of the magnificent Capercaillie as well as Black and Willow Grouse. A moderate walk in the beautiful old forests could also reward us with sightings of the elusive Hazel Grouse, along with singing Bramblings and Redwings, whilst nearby pools could hold summer plumage Black-throated Divers and Slavonian and Red-necked Grebes.

Golden Eagles breed and are well worth scanning for as they soar above the trees, and that wild northern nomad, the Hawk Owl, also breeds at Kuusamo most years. With the assistance of our local guide and a network of contacts, we have the best possible chances of finding this scarce, unpredictable and elusive bird.

Another potential highlight of our visit will be a visit to a Brown Bear hide and whilst these large and majestic mammals can never be guaranteed, we will hope for some luck and sightings. *Three nights Kuusamo*

Days 7 - 8

HELSINKI: FINLAND'S SOUTHERN FORESTS, LAKES & COAST

We return south to Oulu in the morning and catch the early afternoon flight to Helsinki, in the south of Finland, where we stay for two nights. We swap local guides and head directly out of town with our 'southern specialist' to enjoy the beautiful mixed forests, innumerable lakes and bird-rich coasts that surround the capital.

While the likes of Red-necked Grebe, Goshawk, Fieldfare and Crested Tit are widespread across much of Finland, around Helsinki we also have chances to see birds with a more southerly distribution such as Honey Buzzard, Great Reed and Marsh Warblers and Red-backed Shrike.

In late May, quiet coastal inlets hold nesting Turnstones, Common Eider, Velvet Scoter and Arctic Terns and visible migration can sometimes be impressive with large numbers of divers, geese and other waterfowl streaming north and east towards their Arctic breeding grounds.

Our main reason for travelling to the south is, however, to search for Finland's specialist southern breeders with Corncrake, Blyth's Reed, Marsh, Greenish and River Warblers, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Thrush Nightingale and the gorgeous Common Rosefinch all possible. A number of these are what the Finns call 'night singers', so some of our most exciting birding may well be done after dinner! *Two nights near Helsinki*

Day 9

VIIKKI WETLANDS, FLY TO UK

We have an opportunity to enjoy some final birding, perhaps with a visit to a boardwalk through the reedbeds and wooded islands at "Viikki" which is much easier to pronounce than its full name of Vanhankaupunginlahti!

In late May, we can expect to find a good selection of waterbirds and warblers here, including Great Reed Warbler, and have a further opportunity to hear the loud and far-carrying song of Thrush Nightingale.

We might also be lucky to see two recent colonists at the reserve: Bearded Tit and Citrine Wagtail.

Our birding over, we return to Helsinki for farewells to our local guide and board our flight back to the UK, where our spring birding tour to Finland concludes.



The nomadic Northern Hawk Owl is one of five sought-after owls to look for on our May tour to Finland © Jari Peltomaki

Trip Information

Group Size Max 10 participants and 2 leaders

Should the number of clients be between four (our minimum number) and six, we will be able to operate the tour with the local English-speaking Finnature guides. If more than six bookings are received, David Fairhurst will be travelling on our recommended flights.

What To Expect With almost round-the-clock daylight in late May and early June (sunrise is at 03.30am and sunset at 11.00pm in Oulu) and a host of owls and other taiga specialities to look for, to enjoy this tour to the full you should be prepared for early starts and late finishes.

Although most excursions are entirely optional, these do offer the best chances of seeing the key specialities, especially the owls and grouse, which are usually at their most active during the 'twilight' hours. The 'night singers' such as Blyth's Reed Warbler and Thrush Nightingale in southern Finland are also better at this time.

This is *usually* an exceptionally good tour for owls, but please be aware that owl numbers do fluctuate greatly year on year in response to the relative abundance of their prey (principally voles). In the event owl numbers are low in any given year, however, our expert guides invariably manage to find at least some of the species and participants will also find there is still much to enjoy on this superb tour!

A note about the itinerary:

Please note that the itinerary we detail here is intended only as a guide. No two years are ever quite alike on our tours to Finland and our guide David Fairhurst working in conjunction with our local guides may vary the itinerary to include places which offer the best birding at the time of our visit so we may visit places not mentioned in this Tour Information Pack or not visit some we have mentioned.

Birds 130-160 species

Meals All main meals are included in our tour price, commencing with dinner on arrival at Oulu on Day 1 and concluding with lunch near Helsinki on Day 9. Food is good throughout.

Accommodation 8 nights accommodation in Finland, staying at comfortable hotels - Oulu (3 nights), Kuusamo (3 nights) and near Helsinki (2 nights). All rooms are en suite.

Walking Short walks on mainly good tracks and forest trails. The walking effort is mostly easy, although there may be some hills to climb. Occasional forays over uneven ground or uphill away from tracks are optional but may be necessary to find some birds. Sturdy waterproof walking boots are advised and knee-length wellingtons are sometimes necessary for walking in the wetter forest and **we recommend you do take these.**

Weather Finland has a cold-warm climate. In May, the weather is generally cool to mild with daily temperatures at Oulu typically in the range of 3-12C (38-54F), averaging a little warmer in the south around Helsinki (4-15C/39-59F) and one or two degrees cooler at Kuusamo.

Flights Due to the pandemic, it is proving extremely difficult to predict future flight prices and schedules, especially when a trip is scheduled for beyond the period when flights can be booked. As a result, we have taken the decision to price our holidays as excluding all flights.

To keep the process as simple as possible for our clients, however, we are now working closely with a dedicated agent at Travel Counsellors who will be able to advise you which flights we are recommending and he will be able to book these for you.

We fly UK-Oulu (Day 1), returning Oulu-Helsinki (Day 7), and Helsinki-UK (Day 9).

For those not wanting to travel via London, there are options via some regional airports.

Ground Transport By minibus.

Insects Just about everyone travelling to Finland asks about insects but by visiting in late May-early June, we will be in advance of the main 'mosquito season' but their prevalence in any given year largely depends on whether spring comes early or late.

As a precaution, we recommend that you pack some effective repellent as 'moszies' can be a local nuisance in some forest areas, especially around dusk, when we may be out looking for owls and other species.

Photos Good photographic opportunities from time to time. Young owls can, for example, be very photogenic!

Tour Cost

2022 (9 days):

Land only cost: £3695

Single supplement: £395

Deposit: £500

Cost includes

- Limosa Tour Leader (when 6 or more clients)
- English-speaking Finnature bird guides
- 8 nights hotel accommodation in Finland
- All main meals and drinking water provided
- Minibus transport

- All excursions, local guides, entry fees, permits
- All tour-based tips (inc. local guides) & taxes
- Limosa checklist of birds

Cost excludes

Flights, insurance, drinks, airport/in-flight meals and snacks, & other items of a personal nature.

About Your Guides

David Fairhurst Ever since he can remember, David has been passionate about birds and wildlife. This has led on to a varied 25+ year career in conservation (working largely for the RSPB) and guiding bird- and wildlife tours. His work has taken him to all corners of the UK - from studying Wood Larks in Dorset to guiding wildlife tours in Shetland. He now works at the new RSPB reserve near Snape in Suffolk. David has also been involved in some fascinating projects around the world ranging from studying Griffon Vultures in Israel to restoring fragile ecosystems on the Seychelles.

He has travelled far and wide in pursuit of birds, including trips across Europe. He lives with his wife and two daughters near Minsmere on the Suffolk coast and is not only an exceptional birder but an accomplished all-round naturalist with great enthusiasm and humour as well as excellent leadership and bird finding skills. David led this same trip for us in May 2016 and May 2018 and our May 2022 tour will be his fifth visit to Finland.

Local guides An expert, English-speaking Finnature bird tour guide/s will also accompany our tour throughout our time in Finland.

How to enquire

Due to the considerable uncertainty created by the pandemic, Limosa Holidays are not currently accepting bookings for any trips, however, you are welcome to contact us either by email or phone to register your interest in any of our holidays.

Whilst some tour companies may be willing to take a deposit from you and say a trip is a “confirmed departure”, our approach is going to be to wait a little longer as we consider this both honest and realistic.

Once we are confident that the trip can run, we will be in touch to confirm your place and ask for a deposit.

We do encourage you to register your interest as we are expecting considerable demand, once the consensus is that it is safe to travel again.

Any Questions

Please do not hesitate to contact us by email or phone. Our office is generally open from 09:30-17:30 but you are welcome to contact us outside these times too. We are happy to take calls in the evening and at weekends but if no one is available the call will go to our answerphone.

Thank you for your interest in our tours. We do hope that you will be able to join us once the pandemic is over and we look forward to hearing from you.