

# Limosa

## FINLAND: OWLS AND TAIGA TRIP REPORT



*The group enjoyed fantastic views of all the likely owl species on our 2025 tour to Finland including this magnificent nesting Great Grey Owl © Tracey Barber*

# FINLAND: OWLS AND TAIGA

24-30 May 2025

**Leaders: Derek Barber and Kari Engelberth**

## Introduction

This was Limosa's 27<sup>th</sup> visit to the wonderful country of Finland and, once again, it was a highly successful one. The tour kicked off with three nights in the Oulu area and, with our expert local guide, Kari Engelbarth, we had soon seen Eurasian Eagle-Owl. Next up was Tengmalm's (Boreal) Owl, with a couple of very well-developed young peering out of a natural nest hole. Right next door was a Black Woodpecker's nest, and it was incredible to see an adult bird come in to feed its young just metres away.

We knew that Hawk Owl was going to be very difficult this year as no nesting sites had been located locally, nor had there been any recent sightings. It was, therefore, a relief when news came through that a local birder had located an adult just 10 minutes from where we were taking a coffee break. Amazingly, the owl was still perched in a dead tree when we arrived and we had great scope views before it regurgitated a pellet and flew off. The Hawk Owl 'twitch' was followed by fabulous views of a Great Grey Owl on the nest and point-blank views of Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker.

During our time in Oulu we were also taken to a Ural Owl nest, where the female was sitting on eggs, and a European Pygmy Owl nest where the male bird was on guard outside the nest hole giving cracking views. Nearby, a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was also nesting and we enjoyed great looks at the female bird.

The wetlands and lake areas also provided us with some entertainment, with the highlights including Slavonian Grebe in full breeding plumage, a couple of Broad-billed Sandpipers, Temminck's Stints, a displaying Terek Sandpiper (a rare breeding bird in Finland) and a pair of Ortolan Buntings in nearby farmland.

Moving on, we headed east through the taiga to the town of Kuusamo, close to the Russian border. Here, we had a chance to see some of the 'Siberian' specialities of the region, amongst some absolutely stunning scenery. The area did not disappoint and we soon connected with Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit, Willow (Grouse) Ptarmigan and Hazel Grouse.

We had an evening booked in a bear hide, where we were treated to views of a two-year-old female Brown Bear and, on our drives, also encountered many Reindeer and a few Eurasian Elk (Moose). We managed to see a couple of female Capercaille on one early morning drive, along with some lekking Black Grouse.

The Kuusamo area also holds good populations of Hen Harrier, Red-necked Grebe and Little Gull and we managed to see all three species during our time here. Little Gull is particularly common and it was wonderful to see this beautiful gull species in large numbers on its breeding grounds.

On our last day, we found a pair of Rustic Buntings and then, back up in the hills, connected with Red-flanked Bluetail to conclude what was a highly rewarding and most enjoyable trip.

## Trip Diary

### Day 1: Saturday 24 May London – Helsinki - Oulu

The group arrived as scheduled at Oulu Airport via Helsinki and we were met by our local Finnish guide Kari Engelberth. After loading the van, we headed to a large lake on the outskirts of town as a taster of things to come. It was lovely to see a large group of Little Gulls feeding on the lake. This was to be a species that we would encounter on most days of the tour but one that is hard to tire of. Also present were a few Wood Sandpipers (another commonly encountered species in Finland at this time of year), a couple of Common Sandpipers and a number of Common Scoters. Finally, we found a pair of Black-throated Divers, which were some way off but always a treat to see in their full breeding finery.

It was late afternoon by now and all of us were feeling a little jaded after our travels, so Kari took us to our hotel which was just a short distance away. Kari had already checked us in so we collected our keys, had supper and retired to our very comfortable rooms.

### Day 2: Sunday 25 May Oulu Area

Most of us attended the pre-breakfast birding from the hotel, despite the drizzle. The hotel was ideally located to access an area fringing the Gulf of Bothnia, including a rather handy and well-constructed viewing platform. There were many common species to be seen in and around the grounds but noteworthy were our first Common Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers of the trip. A Lesser Whitethroat was singing but remained unseen, although we managed to connect with the bird a couple of days later.

Common Snipe were everywhere and it was so lovely to hear them displaying all around us. On the water, we soon located Whooper Swans, a group of four Velvet Scoters and another Black-throated Diver. A singing Common Rosefinch initially proved elusive but we all managed to connect with this species on multiple occasions throughout the trip.

After breakfast, we headed off in the van in search of some of our main targets in the area, namely owls. First up was a site for Eurasian Eagle-Owl, which initially played hard to find but it was soon spotted sat on a branch in the woods by the side of the road. Kari manoeuvred



the vehicle backwards and forwards under our instruction so that everyone got a good look. We then had flight views as the owl moved perches.

*Tengmalm's (Boreal) Owl chicks © Tracey Barber*

Satisfied with ticking off our first owl species, we headed to our next site, stopping enroute to check out a pair of Common Cranes close to the road. On arrival, we soon had a couple of well-grown Tengmalm's (Boreal) Owl chicks staring out from a natural nesting hole and giving exceptional views. Almost next door, in fact just two trees away, a pair of Black Woodpeckers were nesting. A young bird was hanging out of the nest hole persistently calling, when an adult bird flew in to feed it. We had grandstand views, which was quite amazing and one of the highlights of the trip.

*Black Woodpecker © Tracey Barber*

We enjoyed coffee and biscuits by the van, which Kari had prepared for us, as Pied Flycatchers zipped around. Whilst taking our break, Kari received a text message that a local had found an adult Hawk Owl nearby, in fact just 10 minutes away. We already knew that Hawk Owls were in short supply this year, with no nesting pairs or recent sightings, so the importance of this news did not pass us by. We soon had the van loaded and were off on a twitch!

Arriving at the site, we were scanning the nearby countryside when Kari spotted the bird some way off in a dead tree. We quickly got out of the vehicle and set the scopes up. The Hawk Owl obligingly stayed in view for about 20 minutes, then regurgitated a pellet



and flew off, not to be seen again by us or, alas, any other group that day, or apparently the following day.

Next, we followed some tracks deep into the forest before parking up and being taken to a Great Grey Owl nest. The female was sitting and gave incredible views. One of those iconic species, that most birders have high on their wish list, was in the bag. Back on the main track, Kari had one more surprise for us when he called in a male Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, which performed exceptionally well and gave cracking views.

It was now time for lunch at the Liminka Bay Visitor Centre, where Whinchat and Common Redstart entertained us whilst we were eating. After lunch, we headed back to the hotel for a rest, before returning to Liminka Bay for some late afternoon birding. Here, we had great looks at a male Garganey, Caspian Tern, Black Tern, White-tailed Eagle and the 'thunbergi' subspecies of Yellow Wagtail. On the drive back to the hotel, we even managed to see a Short-eared Owl bringing our owl list for the day to an impressive five species. A celebratory drink was obviously well in order !!

### **Day 3: Monday 26 May Oulu Area**

After breakfast, we headed southeast of Oulu to the Muhos area in search of more owls. First up was a wet forest, where we were taken to the nesting site of a pair of Eurasian Pygmy Owls. At first there was nothing to be seen but then, suddenly, the male bird shot in and perched on a branch just outside the nest hole, giving incredible views.

*Eurasian Pygmy Owl © Tracey Barber*

This was unquestionably another highlight for the trip, as this species can be tricky, so to see one so well was a real bonus.



Nearby, a pair of Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were nesting and again we got lucky when we found the female bird feeding nearby. It was time to leave the wet forest and head off to our next site.

A short drive away, it was now time for us to look for Ural Owl. Parking up, we followed Kari into some open woodland, adding a singing Bohemian Waxwing on the way and, there she was; a female Ural Owl sitting on eggs in a nest box. She half-opened her eyes to have a look at us but soon settled down to continue incubating her eggs.



*Ural Owl © Tracey Barber*

Again, we spent some quality time watching our last species of owl for the trip before heading back to the van and on for our next coffee break. Whilst we drank our hot drinks, we watched a feeding station which had been set up outside adding Eurasian Bullfinch, Eurasian Siskin and singles of European Greenfinch and European Robin to the list.

It was time to move on and our next stop was a small lake which contained two pairs of Slavonian Grebes, looking splendid in their full breeding plumage and a lovely way to end the morning session.

Lunch was taken at a nearby restaurant, where we enjoyed the Finnish delicacy of salmon soup (which was delicious!), before heading back out and searching a large expanse of

farmland, where we were successful in locating a pair of Ortolan Buntings in a ditch close to the road. Both birds showed pretty well with the male singing constantly.

Having enjoyed the buntings, we headed towards the coast at Varessaikka where we drove to the headland to see what we could find. The sea itself was a little quiet, but there was a large number of Great Cormorants on a nearby island and we also managed to pick out a couple of Great Black-backed Gulls.

The surrounding marsh and mudflats, however, were far more rewarding. There were quite a few Ruff present in breeding plumage, plus a good number of Ringed Plovers and a couple of Oystercatchers. Best of all were at least five Temminck's Stints, again in breeding plumage, and two Broad-billed Sandpipers which, although a bit distant, looked good in the scopes. Northern Wheatear was also added along with a pair of Arctic Terns which were taking a rest on a shingle bank. Although it never seems to get dark in Finland at this time of year, it was time to head back to the hotel for supper, highly satisfied with our day.

#### **Day 4: Tuesday 27 May Oulu – Kuusamo**

Today was mostly a driving day, as we headed east from Oulu to the town of Kuusamo, near the Russian border. First of all, we had one last species to locate near Oulu. Kari took us to an industrial area full of warehouses, which looked an unlikely place to locate one of the rarest breeding waders in Europe. Not long after we had parked up, we soon had our quarry as a Terek Sandpiper was perched on a lamp post above one of the warehouses. It was calling like mad and then performed a flight display across the yard and landed on another favoured lamp post. Brilliant !!

After this slightly bizarre performance, we headed off on our journey to Kuusamo, through the taiga and enjoying the amazing scenery as it passed us by. We dipped on Red-throated Diver in one of the many national parks enroute but did manage decent looks at some Brambling during a roadside coffee break. Kari also took us to the village of Taivalkoski to show us a historical building constructed out of wood in 1883 and now set up as part museum, part shop. A fantastic building and well worth the visit.

It was now early afternoon and we were closing in on the outskirts of Kuusamo so, instead of going straight to the hotel, we stopped for some birding. Kari had a stakeout for Willow Ptarmigan, down a walking track in the forest. However, a dog walker had got there before us and was walking their small dogs in exactly the area where the Ptarmigan would normally show.

Unbelievably, a pair then flew in from the side of the track with the male landing in front of the dogs (which, thankfully, were on leads) and started to aggressively display at them, obviously trying to see them off. The dog walker backed off, turned around and started to walk back to us. We had really good views through the scopes of the male, before both birds

scuttled off back into the dense foliage not to be seen again. We were cursing the dog walker when we arrived but, without them, we might not have seen the birds !!

Nearing our hotel, we stopped at a large lake with a viewing platform and enjoyed views of over 200 Little Gulls at a breeding colony, a wonderful sight and sound. We also managed to locate the first Red-necked Grebe of the trip, a lovely bird in full breeding plumage.

Arriving at our hotel, we had lunch and then a rest before going out again. By this time, it was early evening and we slowly drove the forest tracks east of Kuusamo, checking for bird or mammal activity as we progressed. Almost immediately, a pair of Hazel Grouse flew on to the road in front of us, with the male bird staying long enough for everyone to get a decent look before it flew off.

We continued on, adding a few Reindeer and a couple of Mountain Hares until we stopped at an open area, which was being traditionally farmed, where we enjoyed fabulous views of a male Hen Harrier which performed beautifully. A male Black Grouse then flew in and landed on a telegraph pole and a pair of Whimbrel were calling and located in the scopes.

Driving on we got within one mile of the Russian border but, despite our efforts, could not locate any Capercaillies. On the return drive, an Osprey flew over the vehicle and, as the sun just about disappeared below the horizon, we arrived back at the hotel and straight to bed.

#### **Day 5: Wednesday 28 May Kuusamo Area**

We had a fairly relaxed start this morning after the late finish of the previous evening and headed out after breakfast to look for the first of our 'Siberian' specialities of the region but not before Kari returned to the hotel restaurant to pick up a supply of breakfast sausages.....

In a nearby forest, where lots of nest boxes have been erected, we were soon looking at a Siberian Tit, which was busily collecting food to take back to its nest. The bird stayed with us for about 15 minutes and then disappeared into the forest.

Highly satisfied with our views, we moved on to higher ground and a roadside car park stop. The reason for needing a supply of breakfast sausages then became apparent, as Kari spread several around a feeding station just inside the woods. At first, it was just the local Red Squirrel population that showed any interest, but it was not long before our first Siberian Jay flew in, took a sausage, and then disappeared back into the woods to eat it. The sausages proved quite popular with at least three Siberian Jays coming in to feed. Also present were a couple of Willow Tits and a gaggle of Bullfinches, which had better taste and showed no interest in the breakfast we had provided!

We knew it was going to be a long day as we had a hide booked for the evening in the hope of seeing Brown Bear, so we took the opportunity to have an afternoon rest after lunch, before heading back out again. Once back on the road, our first stop was at a river crossing

where a pair of White-throated Dipper had been nesting. Thankfully, the nest was still active and we saw one of the adult birds come in to feed the chicks.

Our route to the bear hide took us through some beautiful pristine forest and, during the drive, we stopped for a couple of Elk, both of which melted away in to the deep forest having seen us.

Arriving in good time, we were briefed by the owner on what to expect and then taken to the very comfortable hides which were more like cabins in the wood, with a toilet and a sleeping area. The hide looked over a large boggy clearing in the forest which is baited with fish of various sizes.

We enjoyed our packed dinner in the comfort of the hide whilst watching the displaying Wood Sandpipers outside. Attracted by the fish were a selection of gulls which included Lesser Black-backed Gull and the 'omissus' variant of Herring Gull with yellowish legs.

Also present were three magnificent White-tailed Eagles (two second year birds and an adult) which were a real distraction. We were on our best behaviour in the hide and were rewarded at around 8:30pm, when a two-year-old female Brown Bear started to make her way towards us. At first, it was only possible to see parts of the animal through the trees but, eventually, she came right out into the open to search for food.



*Brown Bear © Tracey Barber*

She stayed with us for about 10 minutes before 'exiting stage left'. We thought she had been spooked by something, perhaps another bear, but nothing else showed up and by 10pm our time was up and we headed back to the van.

We drove slowly back to the hotel retracing our route stopping to look at a lek of Black Grouse, which contained seven cock birds. Back at the hotel, we went straight to bed.

## Day 6: Thursday 29 May Kuusamo Area

We had some unfinished business so there was a very early 'optional' start for some of the group who headed out with Kari before breakfast in search of Capercaillie. Thankfully, we were successful finding three females by roadside tracks. We also had good views of another Black Grouse lek containing five cock birds and also saw a couple more Siberian Jays.

We took a well-deserved rest after breakfast and decided to go out late morning, which paid dividends. We really wanted to connect with Rustic Bunting, a bird which had eluded us thus far.

We tried a number of trails but failed to find our target bunting, although we did see a further six Red-necked Grebes, all in breeding plumage on a nearby lake. We were running out of time but tried one last promising looking track. A short burst of playback and there they were, a lovely pair of Rustic Buntings in full breeding plumage. What a relief !! We revelled in the views, before heading off for lunch in town at a very nice Chinese restaurant.



*Rustic Bunting © Tracey Barber*

It was now time to attempt to find the last of the key species of the trip but this was not an easy one. Our quest took us back to the 'breakfast sausage stakeout' in the hills above Kuusamo where we walked up a track into the woods above the car parking area.

Nothing much was singing apart from a Spotted Flycatcher and a couple of Brambling, but we persevered. Heading a little bit further up, we suddenly heard the song of a male Red-flanked Bluetail which was our target bird. It was close, but could we nail it down, no. It stopped singing, so we spread out, with another group of Swedish birders helping out. Eventually, the bird did show, singing on the top of nearby trees and, with a bit of scrabbling around, we all connected with it. What a great finale to the trip and a cracking bird to finish on !!

We celebrated with Kari back in the car parking area with a glass of Cloudberry Liqueur (which was delicious) before heading back to the hotel for our final dinner together.



*Red-flanked Bluetail © Tracey Barber*

### **Day 7: Friday 30 May Kuusamo – Oulu – UK**

We had a leisurely breakfast on our last day in Finland before loading up the van and heading back to Oulu for our early afternoon flights home via Helsinki and then on to London. We added Common Buzzard to our bird list but otherwise the drive was pretty uneventful, other than the fantastic scenery.

There had been some disruption to our flights due to industrial action at Helsinki Airport but everything went to plan and we all arrived safely back at Heathrow late evening the same day.

We had enjoyed a brilliant and very successful trip with special thanks to Kari and his birding contacts. The weather had been incredibly kind to us with most days being fine and mostly sunny.

I do hope you enjoyed Finland. Thank you for participating and it was an absolute pleasure travelling with you all. Fingers crossed, we will get to travel again at some point in the future.

*Derek Barber*