

Finland, the hunt for owls.

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Some months earlier, as winter had gripped northern Europe, I had eyed my northern neighbour with envy - the entire southern half of Finland was being swamped with Hawk Owls, not mere dozens, but literally hundreds! I waited and hoped, maybe a few would turn up down in Lithuania, but it wasn't to be. So a plan began to take shape - perhaps a trip north might be in order! I sent messages up to friends in Finland, maybe some of the birds were lingering? As spring came and the memories of the owls began to fade, a call came from middle Finland - not only had a Hawk Owl settled down, but there was also a nestful of Ural Owls in the offering. Perhaps I might want to pop up? Not half did I want!

And so it was, a short weekend trip kicked into action...

Central Finland, 20th - 21st May 2006.

Day One

So, rounding off a rather busy week, I finished work at 9 p.m. on the Friday (19th) and hit the road - the destination was over 1000 km to the north. Through the night I drove, across appalling roads in Latvia and up to the port of Tallin in Estonia - arrived there at 5 a.m. and started the weekend off in good style with a Long-eared Owl flying across the road just before the city! Onto the ferry and across to Helsinki - a few Barnacle Geese around the rocky shores, Common Terns commonplace, then back into the car and on the road again. I continued my northward quest for another four hours and eventually pulled in at the appointed meeting spot at about midday, a tad on the tired side. Weather was none too kind, rather dull and occasional rain, but so began the weekend - with my friend busy for the afternoon, I joined a friend of his and drove just 10 km or so and began a walk in a valley of dense spruce, the thick forest and gloom of sky would make photographs not so easy, but the birds were quite excellent - flocks of Common Crossbills abounded, a few Cranes flew over, but I had been warned that the target of the walk could be difficult. It was not the case - got to a particular spot, waited for a few moments and there, tapping away of a trunk barely twenty metres, was a splendid male Three-toed Woodpecker, what an excellent start to the day. A little across we could see a nest hole - in there somewhere would be a female, but she was probably still on eggs, so she made no appearance, even when the male went over and tapped on the trunk directly above the hole!

With that, retraced our footsteps and headed off to one other spot where sometimes waders congregate - not a lot of waders there, bar a handful of Little Stints, Ringed Plovers and Green and Common Sandpipers, but directly behind the pools was quite a sight - on open sand banks, groups of Black Grouse were lekking - 17 in the first group and 12 in the next. Get to see Black Grouse quite often here in Lithuania, but a treat indeed to see them at lek in such an easy and open spot. Then it started to rain! Back in the car, we decided best was to return to the spruce forests - quickly located the Three-toed Woodpecker again, managed a few photographs, though the light made for not good snaps. Added a Great Spotted Woodpecker for good measure, then returned to town to meet my friend once again.

The evening went something like this - amazing followed by even more amazing! We started off at a little copse not far from town. A week before Ural Owl chicks had been ringed at a nest box here, so we were fairly confident we would find at least one of the adults nearby. We walked into the wood and, wow, there were the chicks, smack bang in front of us! Massive things if ever you saw - two of the chicks had fledged and were sitting in full view on low branches! What cracking birds, fairly ugly things though it has to be said! Not so for the adult, she was sitting just nearby, an absolute stunner of a bird. Uttering a deep hoo hoo, the presence of the adult female Ural Owl was before me, a truly mesmerizing experience! She glared down and we were under no illusions, this was her territory! Ural Owl are known for their aggression and a human intruder is fair game, so having inadvertently stumbled upon the chicks, we had to be a tad cautious of attack, on the wing she was indeed a mighty creature! Watching her, watching us, one the true wonders of the

northern forests, I felt very honoured. Leaving the wood, I could have gone home happy, but the next to come was even better!

As mentioned before, my friend had sent me a message of a single Hawk Owl he'd seen twice in an area of extensive open forest, so off we went. Arrived and had the favoured perches of the previous weeks pointed out - but no sign of any Hawk Owl! We separated and started to search - he went left, I right. Right took me to a spruce grove and suddenly there was an alarm call …‘oo er, that sounded good’ I thought and no sooner had I thought that and up popped a right stonking Hawk Owl, sat itself on the top of a conifer and effectively said ‘see how beautiful I am’. He sure was! I stumbled off to find my friend, then we returned for more views - a wonderful bird, not at all interested in us, sometimes passing a glance at us, but otherwise content to dominate the setting, power and beauty rolled into one. Then something extraordinary happened - the one bird turned into two birds, one carrying a mouse!!! Now this was seriously good, it had to mean a breeding pair, if so the first in the area for about 20 years! Soon the one bird flew off to a distant dead tree, then followed by the second, then by me! The mouse was handed over to presumably the female, then she began to rip into the mouse. Just at this moment I fancied a few photos, but the female had other ideas - she suddenly took off and flew back to a tree just near where we had started …and directly into a hole in the tree! A nest!!! Sure enough, we scoped the hole and there looking out was the Hawk Owl, but not the adult, but a well-grown chick! Holy moses, this was a spectacular finale to the first day! Watched the hole for a while - first one chick looked out, then mother and chick, then mother flew out and returned to her favoured perch, then two chicks squeezed into the hole to view the world around! The world around included two stunned birders!

Day Two

Day starts early up in these northern latitudes, so dawn saw us up and out by 3.00 a.m.! Having not slept the night before, have to say my eyes struggled for the first couple of hours and managed to miss the first birds of the day due to eyes being shut! Two Hazel Grouse scuttled across the road, then another, then a Black Woodpecker …each time just as I had closed my eyes for a second or two!!! By 4.00 a.m., we were on the hunt for Great Grey Owl - an area of big spruce had held a bird earlier, but nothing there this day. Wandered round for some time in a state of semi-slumber, then contemplated finding a nice patch of soft moss and having a snooze and wait for Hannu to find all the birds, but somehow mustered up a bit of energy …in about half an hour, kicked up a Black Grouse, saw a Black Woodpecker and encountered a couple of Crested Tits, all nice enough in themselves. Then retracked and found a 24 hour coffee shop …ah, that was not bad.

Next up, a cross-country slog - did I fancy bumping into a Willow Grouse, he had asked. Now I’m a sucker for such questions, so off we went - parked the car and trudged a half hour or so through a mosaic of wet forest and marsh to reach an extensive open vlei. Quite a stunning wild place, a bit like a raised bog. Plenty of good birds too. Out in the middle, a few grouse could be seen, then suddenly loads of grouse! A flock of about 23 male Black Grouse had got up off the bog and were sat in low trees, quite a spectacle. Looking through, suddenly realised there was a single very large grouse just to their left, hmm nice big rounded tail too! Quick peep through the scope and it was confirmed - a splendid male Capercaillie standing out in the open. A few Wood Sandpipers about too, flushed one bird by accident only to find it was sat on a nest - retreated quickly to let the bird settle again, then continued our quest - squelched across lots of good habitat. Found one very ex-Willow Grouse, essentially a pile of feathers below a plucking post, being half white clearly had some disadvantages when the likes of Goshawk appear! Onward we walked, paused to watch an Osprey on a nest, then got to see the second bird returning with a fish. Common birds rather thin on the ground - a few Whinchats, a couple of pairs of Yellow Wagtails, a Wheatear and lots of Tree Pipits. Still hadn’t seen the main purpose we had trekked out here and, just as I was thinking we would not see it, a shout from Hannu and there cruising past was a splendid Willow Grouse, rather more alive than the first and giving good views as it flew past and headed off into another bit of forest heath.

By now too, the sun had appeared, so it was decided to return to a couple of the spots from the day before - simply walk back to the car and off we would go. Simply walk back to the car, humph! We went the wrong way, got totally lost and started to amble about in the forest and bog without any real idea which way would be best and which would take us ever further from the car. An hour perhaps later, we stumbled upon a track, went left and eventually got to a lake and, good news, my friend recognised the spot, bad news, it was many kilometres back to the car if we stuck to the track! Toyed with the idea of hacking back through the dense forest-bogs, but agreed the longer track route would be the better option. And so it was, the rewards of getting lost soon presented them, first bumped into a Hazel Grouse (thus ‘getting back’ the birds missed earlier in the day, plus making it four grouse species for the location). Next had a few Common Crossbills calling and when two landed in a pine, thought it would be nice to have a look at them.

Hmm, can I see two white wing bars? Got the scope and sure enough, there was a cracking male White-winged Crossbill, then another one just below. Soon the flock moved across to another pine and perhaps as many as four birds could then be seen. Excellent, it is a good few years since I have seen this species and it is none too common in this part of Finland either! Getting lost was certainly turning into our fortune …and then we hit the jackpot. Almost at the end of the first track (two more to go), we passed through an open area and there sat on a dead tree was …another pair of Hawk Owls! Blimey, what a stroke of luck …clearly another breeding pair, after the excitement of the day before, certainly didn't expect this. Nothing like a Hawk Owl to help the legs the last few kilometres!

Concluded with a return to the locations of the day before - with the sun now out, perhaps a photo or two might be possible. Got back to the first Hawk Owl site and immediately saw the two adults. Wandered over to take a couple of photos, took a few shots, then went to put my scope on the ground - and almost plonked it straight on top of a Hawk Owl chick! One of them had fledged! Hawk Owls have the tendency to leave the nest hole some days before they can fly - they then scramble around on the ground and climb into trees for a few days. Seems a risky strategy to me, but this is what this one had done and now he was sitting pretty, quite far from the nest and just gawking at me as I carefully retracted my scope from almost on top of him! Needless to say, took a few photos, then decided it time to make a tactical retreat from the area. Stopped in at the Ural Owls too and got a couple a reasonable pictures, but all too soon it was time to start thinking about the journey south again.

I left mid-afternoon and zoomed off down the country, saw little en route, best being Kestrels, etc, but made good time and by early evening was back on the ferry returning to the Baltic States. Fell asleep on the boat and got woken to be told we had arrived in Tallinn some time before - went down to the now empty car deck and started up the car. Off I drove again into the night!