

Finland, bears and rares!

Contributed by Jos

Last Updated Monday, 12 January 2009

Fantastic, no other words! In a trip that fulfilled my lifetime ambition to photograph Brown Bears, I couldn't have asked for more on this short break.

If there are Gods up in those heavens, then they must surely have been smiling down upon me! In a whirlwind tour of Finland, clocking up 3730 km in just four days and five nights, it was a start-to-finish perfect trip, not only in the amazing views of Brown Bears, but also in terms of spectacular birds and amazing weather. At the same time, it should be noted this was a very demanding trip, three nights without any real sleep at all and the other two with just brief snoozes in the car ...my body returned home in a state of shock! Having already visited Finland earlier in the year, the goal of this June 2008 trip was to see Brown Bears, better still to photograph them. Naturally, should time allow, delights such as Red-flanked Bluetails, Rustic Buntings and Siberian Jays were also welcome. What I had not expected however, just days before I arrived, was the discovery of a Swinhoe's Snipe, an Asiatic species with only one previous record in the Western Palearctic!!! Not only was it in Finland, but it was just a couple of hundred kilometres off my planned route, what luck!

20 June With work finished and four days free, my trusty travel companion and I gazed towards the northern horizon. It was 7.30 p.m. and we got into the car, started the ignition and began our journey. Due to incompetence on my part, a slight error in Latvia saw me taking totally the wrong road, adding an incredible 280 km to the route! The long road to Estonia became even longer, we were to drive all night! 21 June Finally rolling into Tallinn at 5.00 a.m., with Arctic Terns overhead and our ferry waiting in the port, it was time for the trip to begin in earnest. The Baltic Sea being the Baltic Sea, nothing was seen on the crossing, bar flotillas of Common Eiders in Helsinki harbour, but all too soon we were cruising up the Finnish highways. Destination one, the small village of Vartsila, home to the Swinhoe's Snipe and neatly tucked up against the Russian border some 450 km to the north-east! On we drove, past lakes sporting Black-throated Divers and forests that tempted exploration ...but no time, this superstar of the snipe world had faithfully established a routine over the previous few days. As the evening sun illuminated its chosen residence, the bird would begin its aerial displays, variably described as a little rocket entertaining its massed fans. However, as I hurtled towards our rendezvous, there was one little issue a tad worrying - it was not just raining, but the clouds were positively glowering down, a very horrible shade of grey! Such conditions almost certainly meant the bird would not display, and if it didn't take to the air to display, the chances of seeing it were near zero. I silently prayed to any God that might listen, please stop the rain! Clearly I was in someone's good books! Just 30 km from the bird, the clouds parted, and blue skies began their march from horizon to horizon! And that is how it stayed for the next four days, unbroken sunshine, wonderful. We arrived at Vartsila just after 4.00 p.m., parked up and peered across at the old barn now famous as a favoured perch for the bird. No sign as yet, but hardly surprising, it was still early. A few Finns had already gathered, a couple were listening to its call on an ipod ...I did consider asking to have a quick listen myself, but I reckoned that once it started its 'distinctive' calls, I would surely recognise the new strange call. And then, just as I thought that, at 4.20 p.m. precisely, I heard a most peculiar call, almost a bubbling ...that had to be it I thought, scanning the sky frantically. And there it was, the Swinhoe's Snipe circling high, then plummeting groundward, only to climb again and repeat. Stunning, just twenty minutes after I had arrived and the show had begun! Stayed there for another five hours, thoroughly enjoyed this bird, the call and display totally unlike a Common Snipe, the fanned tail resulting in some of the weird sounds. Time after time, it rose from its meadows, displayed for some minutes, then dropped back down. The crowd of admirers swelled, Finns from many quarters, many happy faces there that evening. And should you bore of the wait between its showings, the field was also choc-a-bloc with Corncrakes, the grate-grate-grate echoing from all quarters, a couple even daring to put in brief appearances. Also several Curlews, one Whimbrel, a Marsh Harrier and, nesting in a lamp, a pair of Tree Sparrows. Finally, as the Swinhoe's Snipe completed yet another circuit over our heads, we decided to make a move - to

a nearby lake that was supposed to hold a few Great Snipes. Soon decided I wasn't going to see them, so had to content myself with two singing Blyth's Reed Warblers, plus several Common Rosefinches, Grey-headed Wagtails and such. All very nice. Bird these high altitudes and you get 24 hour daylight - even here, some 500 km south of the Arctic Circle, there was still sufficient light to just keep going forever ...so that's what we did, the last birds being Woodcocks patrolling their territories after midnight. With that, we then travelled a further 250 km or so north, all ready for the next day! 22 June The birding day started at 4.00 a.m., hoping to locate a Red-flanked Bluetail near Talvivaara. However, I couldn't even be sure I had found the correct location, a vastness of forest stretching in all directions as far as the eye could see! I quickly gave up on any hopes of a Bluetail and instead began to wind eastward back towards the Russian border. More Black-throated Divers en route, plus Red-backed and Great Grey Shrikes and a few butterflies - Pearl-bordered Fritillaries and Lapland Ringlets. Got to the Russian border at about midday, planning to relax until early evening when I would begin my quest to see the Brown Bears. A male Rustic Bunting singing by a lake was a good find, but otherwise the birds were much as expected - Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, several Common Crossbills, singing Redwings, etc. Plus one Red Squirrel. And then it 5.00 p.m., time for the magic to begin. In a wooden hide tucked into a forest clearing, the world outside was staggering in its beauty - bathed in evening sunshine, a small lake stretched to the left, marsh and cottongrass to our right. And beyond all, ancient pines rising on rocky outcrops. This would be our home for the next 14 hours, right through the night. In this paradise, there was one added detail, one that near ensured we would see Brown Bears - 80 kg of fish had been left for the taking! Two Ravens, three Baltic Gulls, the evening silence broken by their occasional calls. A Great Spotted Woodpecker landed in the pine adjacent, an hour ticked past without a hint of a bear. And the next hour too, pure tranquility, just a steady trickle of gulls arriving. And so it reached 7.30 p.m., 37 Herring and Baltic Gulls, Ravens and Hooded crows at a half dozen apiece. I glanced left ...and almost fell off my stool! A Brown Bear had arrived! The great hulk of a large male had slunk in and was now quietly feeding on fish at the far side of the lake. Amazing, I was finally watching my first ever bear. And then he did something most fortunate - after retreating back into the pines, I could see him slowly working right, towards us. As he vanished into the forest, I began to hope he might just appear right in front of us ...and that is exactly what he did, emerging some 60 metres away! A mighty beast, he approached with caution, smelling the air, looking directly at our hide, then decided all was okay and nonchalantly sauntered down to the lakeshore to take fish. Absolutely amazing, a splendid animal in perfect sunlight. Suddenly he spooks, turns and lopes back to the forest, disappearing over a rocky ridge, a cloud of gulls descending to snatch scraps. Over the next 40 minutes, more and more gulls arrived - eventually climbing to 10 Baltic, 46 Herring, 6 Black-headed and three Common Gulls. Green Sandpipers began to display, as did a Greenshank. Two Wood Sandpipers also arrived on the scene. And then things went totally crazy ...at 9.22 p.m., another bear arrived, a much younger animal and decidedly shy. After dashing in and grabbing a massive chunk of fish at the far left, the bear then wandered along the forest edge and, as with the first bear, stopped directly opposite us. And then there was another! Two bears in front of us, both looking like adolescents. They fed, on and off, for the next twenty minutes, but appeared somewhat nervous, frequently looking at something off to the right ...and then the reason for their worries emerged, yet another bear, this time a big old bear, probably a male. And this is how the night continued, with a peak of activity in the five hours from 10 p.m. till 3.00 a.m., there were no less than 37 appearances during the night, involving a minimum of seven to nine different Brown Bears, far exceeding even my most optimistic expectations. With the light superb, photography could continue round the clock, some very nice pictures being obtained at exactly midnight, as yet another big bear lay on the ground and lapped up fish oil. As morning approached, with a light mist hugging the pool and the sun now backlighting, the setting was most atmospheric, almost surreal. A Black Woodpecker was calling off yonder and, masters of this world, last bears strolled through. One arrived at 5.00 a.m., the last at 6.00 a.m., both staying for ten minutes, ghostly shapes in the rising mist. Understatement of the year, it had been a good evening! 23 June With the last Brown Bear at 6.12 a.m., we left the forests at 7.30 a.m. for the next pitstop on this whirlwind tour of Finland, a 260 km hop up to the Kuusamo area. Birding began at the massive lake just south of Kuusamo town itself, a very nice area and easily accessed via the peninsula at Tolpanniemi. Common and Arctic Terns in abundance, but even better a colony of about 40 Little Gulls, looking right dapper in their full plumage. Also a half dozen pairs of Red-necked Grebes, an assortment of dabbling ducks and, amongst them, a resplendent drake Smew. Thirty-five kilometres further north, I pulled into the lay-by at Valtavaara, undoubtedly Finland's most famous parking spot for the discerning birdwatcher. Towering above, cloaked in dense spruce taiga, the slopes here are the stuff of legends, home to a gem of a bird. For now though, I merely peered up, exploration would come later. First I set off for a look round the nearby Oulanka National Park. Great Grey Shrike was soon seen, then a Wood Sandpiper brooding four newly hatched chicks, cute little bundles that saw nothing better in life than to bury themselves under the mother bird, the result being one bird with many legs! Crossbills and Siskins were everywhere, including one that sadly went under the car. I did fancy seeing a Dipper or two, so also pulled in at Kiutakongas, a waterfall on the Oulankajoki River. All of fifteen minutes later, I was sat watching not one Dipper, but at a pair at the nest, tucked in under the waterfall itself. Plenty of Bramblings singing too. Some kilometres up, having slopped milk across the car, we made an unscheduled stop at a small stream to wash the mat ...what a lucky move, up above soared an adult Golden Eagle! I had also intended to visit Ahvenjarvi, a vast boggy mire, haunt of breeding Broad-billed Sandpipers and much more, but I had no idea where it was and, after stumbling across a small bay with breeding Whooper Swans and three more Smew, I opted for a return to Valtavaara for the evening. And so approached the end of the day, an excellent walk on the slopes notching up not just Common Redstarts and Pied Flycatchers, but also a stunning male Three-toed Woodpecker. Though the sun was still shining bright, I needed some sleep, so at the 'early' hour of 11 p.m., I put the seat back in the car, very soon I was asleep! 24 June I had to jump out of the car at 3.00 a.m., hear a distant Red-flanked Bluetail echoing down from the forested slopes, then set off in hot pursuit. The reality, 2.45 a.m., there I stood in the famous Valtavaara parking spot, a near silence prevailing, cut only by the repetitive tunes of Song Thrushes! So off I went, scrambling up the slopes to begin a 2 km hike to a locality where one bird had been seen the day before. By 3.30 a.m., I was there, standing in a damp

hollow on the ridge, lichen-draped spruce and birch hugging the slopes, wet mere underfoot. No Bluetail singing, perhaps the brief song season was over. Willow Tits were feeding young, a pair of Siberian Jays gurgled into song, then appeared in a nearby stunted spruce. All very nice, even more so a singing Rustic Bunting, but still no sign of anything remotely blue in the tail! A couple of hours passed, I wandered further afield, Pied Flycatchers and Redwings started into song, but the dawn chorus really was a rather dismal affair! Or at least it was until I heard the briefest snatch of a song that simply hinted that perhaps my target bird was here after all ...I trudged off up the slope, the song had come from the top of a ridge nearby. Was it going to be my bird? And then I saw it, indeed it was, a male Red-flanked Bluetail almost on the top of a scrawny effort of a tree. However, no sooner had I spotted it and it decided that it didn't want to be watched - the blighter flitted across a couple of branches, then zipped right and was gone. I neither heard nor saw it again! Very unsatisfactory, I had hoped for more ...I remember them in the Himalaya hopping about almost like town sparrows, clearly the Finnish ones have a bit of an attitude! Ah well, beggars can't be choosy. At 7.30 a.m., now slightly jaded due the effects of accumulated lack of sleep, I stumbled back to the car, had a bite to eat and immediately perked up again. Much of the rest of the day was spent journeying south, a few stops en route for errant Reindeers blocking the road, Curlews trying to commit suicide and one very nice Three-toed Woodpecker, but by 6.30 p.m., we were 870 km south and trying to find the ferry port. Darn the roads in Helsinki, we finally got to the ferry just 15 minutes before it sailed!!! Four hours on the boat to Tallinn, a seven hour drive back to Vilnius. Arrived home at 5.00 a.m., fifth night on the trot lost to sleep. Three hours later I was at work!