

Hornborga & Owls, 2012

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Sweden is a very nice country, full of civilised people and very nice landscapes. It also has some very good birding possibilities, one of the many highlights being the spring gatherings of Common Cranes at Lake Hornborga. As the numbers climbed over recent years, so too had my interest in witnessing the spectacle, the 2010 bonanza of 18,000 birds just mouth-watering to the extreme. So, when fancying a little weekend away in spring 2012, my thoughts turned to putting this into action, the idea becoming all the more tempting by an unprecedented influx of Great Grey Owls into southern Sweden over the preceding month and the minor issue that I managed to find an air ticket from my base in Lithuania for less than the price of a medium-sized pizza!

And so it was, approaching departure date, early April 2012 – continuing to snow in Lithuania, cold across the whole of Scandinavia. This however played right into my favour, not only were a number of Great Grey Owls continuing to linger, but Cranes had bottlenecked at Hornborga, frozen lands to the north not tempting them onward. Amazing things were happening, just two days prior to departure, an incredible 27,200 were present, a 9000 increase on the previous highest count. My lips were truly whetted.

Daily Itinerary and Birding Log

5 April. Hornborga.

7.00 a.m., three White Storks circling over snow-decked meadows in Lithuania, a little bit later I was aboard a plane for the short hop across the Baltic. Nice car upgrade in Skavska, then a pleasant drive westward towards Hornborga, blue skies and sun all the way. A few minutes off the main E4, a pause at Roxen provided the first tasters of Swedish birding, hordes of Greylags and dabbling ducks gathering at a lakeside, a White-tailed Eagle flushing the lot on occasion. Twenty minutes scope work and the first target of the trip was under the belt – two Lesser White-fronted Geese grazing the meadows, smart adults trundling along.

One hour more and I was at Hornborga, over the brow of a hill I went and there it lay, a spectacle most fine - a feast for the eyes and ears, hundreds and hundreds of Cranes. I settled at a small creek and just enjoyed for a good half hour, yodelling birds strolling to within tens of metres, squadrons of birds constantly overhead, displaying on touchdown, courtship dance breaking out. Relocating a few hundred metres, I then reached the main viewpoint, truly a sight to behold - on undulating meadows that stretch south from the lake, a carpet of Cranes from near to far, many thousands of birds, plus hundreds of Whooper Swans and Greylags in their midst. A few moments to appreciate the enormity of it, then a stroll westward to a visitor centre atop a hill. Cranes all the way, the constant trumpeting yodels a most atmospheric backdrop. Somewhere in the middle of birds, five Pink-footed Geese were supposed to be lurking, but scoping through the mass of Cranes, Greylags, Whooper Swans and added extras such as Wigeon, Teal and Lapwing, I certainly could not locate them.

At dusk, the numbers would be swelled yet more by the return of Cranes from fields nearby, but before that I decided a short exploration of the lake's western shore would be nice. Down a maze of tracks, I reached Ytterberg to view across a shallow bay dotted with reeds and the skeletons of dead trees. Cormorants atop the trees, Smew and Goosanders loafing offshore, but a guttural growling revealed the real beauts of the bay – in resplendent breeding

plumage, three pairs of Red-necked Grebes showing off a treat.

High above, cloud was drifting in, the blue skies became obliterated and a distinct wind began to whip up. Half an hour later, back at the crane location, a slight drizzle now adding to the cocktail, the evening spectacle was indeed just that, the umpteen thousand Cranes in the meadows taking a short flight to a marsh just yonder to roost in massed ranks, skeins of additional birds pouring overhead to join the fray. Magic, and then it was dark. Darkness punctuated by a tracked grainspreader zigzagging across the now deserted meadows - Swedish conservationists scatter a ton of grain every evening to keep the next day's birds happy. In the car park, perched above the lake shore, I wound back the car seats for a night's kip, calls of Cranes a lullaby, carloads of assorted birders left and right to keep me company, end of day one.

6 April. Hornberga & Kotterun.

Torrential rain and wind buffeting the car, a rude awakening in the early hours! By dawn, rain had turned to sleet, step by step evolving into snow and a raging blizzard! Still, the morning show was a pretty amazing experience - a half hour after first light, masses of Cranes began to rise, yodelling and flying in, the meadows soon reclaimed. Flocks of 30, 40 and 50 erupted into lively dance, pairs prancing and leaping into the air, provoking a chain reaction of birds in all directions. Snow going going sideways, somewhere between 17,000 and 20,000 Cranes were now congregated in the fields in front, most magnificent. Also managed to locate the Pink-footed Geese, a small flock of five, plus had a White-tailed Eagle harrying dabbling ducks beyond.

No weather to linger, by 9.00 I decided it time to explore the eastern shore of the lake - a bit of a wash-out, snow turning back to sleet, a cold wind leaving things less than pleasant. Added more Red-necked Grebes, a few Smew and other odds and sods, but soon I decided to flee, driving north to colder lands, hopefully beyond the belt of snow. A long drive later, a bit dicey in places, I arrived in a forest clearing some way to the west of Stockholm - at this point, a pair of Great Grey Owls had appeared every evening for the previous month, a bird which would be just fantastic. Arriving at about 3 p.m., I had plenty of time to reconnoitre - first to attempt to find the correct clearing, then have a quick look round at the local bird life. With improving weather, one Black Woodpecker and a fly-over Golden Eagle, then a fortunate finding of a sign which said 'Lappuggla' amongst its other words. Now I don't claim any fluency in Swedish, but that word I knew - Great Grey Owl - and my rough understanding of the sign was 'Please respect the Great Grey Owl', a plea to twitchers not to disturb it. Super, I was in the right place. Evening eventually arrived, so too a couple of other would-be owl spotters, but as the appointed hour came and went, nothing stirred, the fence posts it should sit atop remained empty and the meadows devoid of any ghostly giant floating across. Bugger, darkness approached and the bird had not showed, the first time for over a month!!! A bit of a spanner in my plans, I decided not to wait for the following night, but instead ventured off into the night. Camp for the night was just north of Enköping, a bright starry night now, but plenty cold - the car thermometer reading a cool minus 6C. 7 April. Gastrikland & Vastmanland. A return to bright sunny conditions and to kick the day off, a rather pleasant Rough-legged Buzzard hovering over meadows just after I woke. Siberian Jay, typically a bird of more northerly latitudes, reaches its southern extreme in the forests a little to the north-west of Gavle, so with a whole day at my disposal, this is where I began. With a bubbling purr of Black Grouse at lek and churring Crested Tits, I began my search. Almost immediately found a chattering party of the jays, but they vanished before giving even the briefest of glimpses, so along a track I strolled. A buzz of bird activity at the top of a trackside spruce, Chaffinches and both Great and Crested Tits clearly peeved at something, certainly worth a few minutes of my time to check out. And there sat a Pygmy Owl squatting on a branch, much to the disconcertion of its neighbouring birds. What a stroke of luck, Pygmy Owl is not a bird I had on my radar for the weekend ...and then there was another, a male atop another spruce, hooting away to proclaim a territory. Splendid views as he happily pipped away in the morning sun. Another hour, still no visuals on the Siberian Jays, so took a wander in another direction, almost immediately seeing a massive black shape gliding through the open pines to settle some way off. 'Hmm, that just had to be a Capercaillie' I thought. And so it was,

an impressive male Capercaillie now at the edge of a forest clearing. And not alone, three male Capercaillies stood at that clearing, all then taking to the air to wing across to pines further yonder. Flocks of Chaffinches, a couple of Mistle Thrushes, but still no return of the Siberian Jays, but with midday approaching, I decided to depart, most content with my morning's haul. Next stop was McDonald's in Sandviken - not so much for the high class cuisine, but for the fact that all McDonald's in Sweden have wi fi, thereby allowing me to get latest bird information, maybe another Great Grey Owl would have been on show the previous evening. News was mixed, none of the 'regular' owls had proved quite so regular the evening before, but there had been a new Great Grey Owl found about 80 km to the south, not only seen the evening before, but also briefly in the morning. Hmm, thought I, should I chance my last stab at this species on this bird. Time to munch a burger and fries, a chance to mull over options. And jolly good I did, in the time it took to savour my McD's and coffee, another piece of news filtered in - not three kilometres from the new Great Great Owl site, a Northern Hawk Owl had been found! And better still, it was showing at this exact moment! A few last slurps of the coffee, a tad of speeding down the fine byways of Sweden and into the small parking lot of a small lake I arrived, not a birder to be seen and plenty of good-looking habitat to search. A very nice gentleman ambled up, 'Is there a rare bird somewhere around here?' he asked. Yes, I explained, giving a short account of where Northern Hawk Owls should be, etc. 'Ah, so that is what they are looking at, three gentlemen a hundred metres around the corner'. 'Er,' said I, 'now?' And so they were, a quick trampse along a railway line and into a boggy meadow and I found the three guys, cameras pointing up a very strange angle. Intergalactic Hawk Owls? And then I spotted the bird ...on a spindly pine not four metres in front of the enthused observers, one very smart Northern Hawk Owl! In I crept and joined the fan club, what a stonking bird - glaring at tussocks and meadow either way, then relocating to another stunted pine a couple of metres further to repeat the careful scanning for errant voles. Quite a number of Northern Hawk Owls I have seen, but never one quite so confiding, simply superb. Twenty minues later, off it went, never to be seen again as far as I am aware ...lucky I did that speeding! Now all rested on Great Grey Owl, could I pull off a hattrick of owls on this fine day. Three kilometres along, at the quaint hamlet of Ombenning, I surveyed the surrounding - mixed pine and ocasional deciduous stands, a large clearing of agricultural fields, an overgrown ditch running through the centre. Now that looked just the bee's knees, I reckoned it had to be the spot to see my last owl. No other birders present, I settled to wait the evening, both Black and Green Woodpeckers proving distractions to keep me entertained. At 6.00 p.m., one man arrived with small child, would-be owl spotters too. They confirmed I was in the right general area, two other birders arriving a little later pinpointing the best area to small meadows aside the road just around the corner. The sun began to dip towards the horizon, the guy with little boy took a short stroll, then a yelp - the boy had spotted the ghostly giant, there it was, sitting bold as brass, one mega Great Grey Owl on top a small bush! And what a stunner he was, 45 minutes of active hunting, dropping from tree tops and road poles to pounce of voles beneath. A breathtaking display indeed, full marks to that little boy! And with that, south I went into an approaching darkness, arrival at Skavska Airport for 10.30 p.m., the luxury of a hotel room my reward for a very successful final day to my mini-break. 8 April. Skavska Airport. In reality, I had time to nip up the road to see an Iceland Gull on a roadside lake, I probably could have even squeezed in a Black-throated Thrush that was found that morning a little to the south, but instead a lazy breakfast and coffee in the airport, Jackdaws and Magpies strutting the grass. At 11.00 a.m., I boarded my flight, back to the Baltics, weather still as disgusting there as when I had left a few days before!