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# THE HARRIER



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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND ORNITHOLOGISTS' CLUB

NO. 24- Autumn 03

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## Barn Owls in Northern Ireland - 2001 and 2002

In 2001 the Barn Owl continued to be a scarce breeder in Northern Ireland. As usual there were few reports from Tyrone and Fermanagh. However, we believe 10-15 pairs still exist there. Co Armagh still produces reports from Middletown and Newtownhamilton, and we have no doubt there are 5-10 pairs in the northern part of the county. Co. Londonderry has seen a small increase in sightings and we

estimate between 10-15 pairs exist there. From the reports we get Counties Down and Antrim still have the stronghold populations with 10-15 pairs and around 10 pairs respectively.

Interesting sightings were: Belfast Lough Harbour Lagoons; a male bird calling for several hours on two successive nights near Hillsborough, and birds calling near Crumlin.

We were delighted to receive news in 2001 of a successful breeding result in one of our NIOC barrel nestboxes near Seaforde, Co. Down. Parents reared three young and all were in flight by May. This is a private site and for obvious reasons we wish it to remain so.

An estimate for this species in Northern Ireland in 2001 would be around 60 - 70 pairs, a slight increase in numbers from 2000.

A dreadful summer in 2002 saw almost continuous rain so it is not surprising therefore to find fewer reports of this rare breeder.

The only 2002 report from Fermanagh and Tyrone was of a bird seen briefly near Newtownbutler.

Armagh produced reports from Loughgall, Markethill and Newtownhamilton.

Co. Londonderry had reports of pairs breeding near Maghera, Magherafelt, Draperstown and Coleraine.

Co. Antrim had reports from Aghalee, Straid, Crumlin and Carrickfergus. A bird could be seen at the Fortwilliam roundabout

on the M2 on good evenings. This was perhaps the same bird that was seen on the Down side in 2001.

Co. Down continues to provide new reports from traditional sites such as Carrowdore, Groomsport, Greyabbey, Killinchy, Comber and, interestingly, a bird flying over Bog Meadows Reserve, Belfast just before Christmas. Birds were constantly seen near Hillsborough and Bailliesmills, and a pair could be seen hunting on good evenings on marshy ground near Annahilt.

The weather being what it was, it was no surprise then to hear that the pair in the NIOC nestbox near Seaforde, only raised one youngster.

The estimate for 2002 would be down from 2001 at around 50 pairs.

The NIOC continues to erect nestboxes and six were placed early this year.



*Gary, his daughter Heather, and one Barn Owl that's doing well!*

**Gary Wilkinson.**  
**NIOC.**



NIOC - Finland.

## *NIOC Finland Trip May 2002*

Well, what a trip! Fifteen of us set off from Dublin to Helsinki in May this year little realising what lay in store for us. The flights went very smoothly and, after changing in Helsinki and on to Oulu, we arrived virtually on time, to be met at the airport by Ulla and Jari Petromalki. We were then introduced to our guide for the week, Ari Latja. Ari is from Karelia in Finland and this was his first time covering the Oulu and Kussimo region. He turned out to be a tremendous guide through his knowledge of birdcalls and his willingness to join in the crack. He was also prepared to push to the limits to get many good birds for us as well.

We had two very comfortable minibuses. Ari drove one half of the party and the other half had an unnerving ride with myself as driver.

The Hotel at Oulu was five star and the staff and food were first class. After leaving off the gear we had time for our first birds. If you didn't have a guide in Finland you would be lost immediately in the endless expanse of conifers. Ari however had learnt

his routes and took us down an unmarked track for our first Waxwings, Brambling and an incredible Black Woodpecker. None of us had unpacked our cameras and how sorry we were. Ari went over to the woodpecker hole and played his tape (quite commonly used in Finland but frowned upon and sometimes illegal in the UK). In seconds the woodpecker appeared, called, then flew around a wide circle of trees before landing behind us on the bark of a birch. What a photo that would have been! Goldeneye and Goosander were on a loch nearby. Great Spotted Woodpecker and Tree Pipit put in an appearance as well, and, as we returned to our hotel, Fieldfares and Redwings were very obvious and abundant.

Our next proper day's birding was exciting from the start. I went out before breakfast and notched up a passing female Red-backed Shrike, while Ivor got a Smew. We then visited a bird watchtower and started ticking. My first Temminck's Stints were a party of nine feeding on the shore of the Gulf of Bothnia. Three geese to our left were Greylag, Whitefront and Bean. There were good mixes of duck with Pintail, Garganey and Shoveler being the best. Marsh Harriers and a Hen Harrier put on a display, followed by a distant Osprey that got closer and closer. There were drumming Snipe and loads of waders including Ruff, Spotted Redshank, Bar-tailed Godwit, Wood Sandpiper and Greenshank. Little Gulls noisily flew around: but their calls couldn't compare with the harsh calls of the Caspian Terns. Yellow Wagtails flew past and Ari heard a Bluethroat, but couldn't locate it. Back at the buses we saw Pied Flycatchers that were distinctly different from our own.

Ari told us they were being considered for separation.

We then headed to a landfill site where a Crested Lark conveniently appeared within minutes, thanks to Sandy's quick scoping.

On we went and our list notched up Ural Owl low on its nest, later peeking out for the cameras (if you were quick), and Great Grey Owl sitting upright near the bark of a conifer and allowing reasonable approach. A very brief view of a Pygmy Owl in a nest box no bigger than a Blue Tit's had us eager for more. Ari told us they use three nest boxes, storing food in two for their harsh winters. We then stopped near a farm to view fifty plus Common Crane as they flew in to feed - a truly awesome sight!

Not far away Ari heard something, and, as we pulled up along side the farmhouse an Ortolan Bunting could be heard singing from a tree. It then flew across in front of us to a field where another joined it.

Back through the conifers and birch we had fleeting glimpses of three Hazel Grouse, but at this stage none of us got any exceptional sights.

We saw our first Reindeer of the trip on the way back to the hotel and at the car park a Woodcock flew over in the simmer-dim.

Our next day in Oulu was our last there but didn't disappoint. Before breakfast, at the bird-tower, we had Marsh Harriers, Temminck's Stints and Wood Sandpipers. This was followed by a fly-past of Common Scoter, which Ari identified from a distance. We then headed off to Liminghati Reserve for more Marsh Harriers and hundreds of multi-coloured Ruff. The males were resplendent in their clown-like ruffs and delivered their dances accordingly. We then caught up with our elusive

Tengmalm's Owl, which indignantly put its head out of the nest box at the noise of Ari's stoat or weasel scraping. In the fields nearby was an array of Yellow Wagtails bobbing up and down along the furrows. We had a Common Redstart on the roof of our bus during our lunch stop. Our new wellies then got a turn at the swampy area which we had gone to in search of a rarity, Citrine Wagtail. After a long search amongst the hundreds of Yellow Wagtails Ari eventually flushed it up on to a bush. The views were not great, but we got the main identification features.

Marsh Harriers, Kestrels and Sparrowhawks were followed swiftly by a male Goshawk. A small flock of Yellowhammers was found back at the minibuses. We then finished at the bird-tower with an obliging Bluethroat.

Before moving up to the Russian border and Kussimo, we stopped briefly the next day at the oil refinery looking for recently arrived Terek Sandpipers. After initially letting us in, an over zealous official promptly evicted us but we still managed Jack Snipe, Ruff, Marsh Harriers and a Little Tern. Stopping en-route at an unknown lake, amid the myriads we took in Goosander, Long-tailed Duck, Waxwing and numerous Smew. A Hazel Grouse gave good views for some and an Elk was close for everyone. Looking for Capercaillie we got our first Rustic Buntings, and two Spotted Redshank in breeding plumage, a much different bird to our winter visitors. After dinner at our hotel in Kussimo with its attendant Little Gulls, we set out for Eagle Owl which sat perfectly camouflaged and motionless on her rockface ledge. Only her burning eyes let us know she was there. Calling Black Grouse couldn't be ticked and a

black Mink crossing our road on the way back didn't wait for good views.

For me, next day at the Arctic Circle and Russian border was probably one of those birding days that will forever leave me with a smile and a feeling that I must come back again to this birding heaven. It started plainly enough with a shy Crane and distant Buzzard. We then proceeded to work our way up near the Russian border with its endless conifers. The first hour produced nothing and we were getting despondent. Then Sam heard a Wryneck call and Ari lured it in on the tape. What a display of territorial behaviour! It flew right in beside us calling all the time and allowing stunning views of its bark-like plumage. It was a beautifully marked bird that is usually only seen along the east coast of Britain during migration. The Wryneck was quickly followed by a male Rustic Bunting so incensed by the thought of an intruder he thought he would join us in the minibus! Within seconds a White-tailed Eagle appeared in the distance, and I discovered a Great Grey Shrike perched on a low conifer. Next we saw a Golden Eagle on the horizon, and as it displayed it became apparent that the female was not far away. Sure enough she came into view below him, and as they came closer and eventually overhead, the bigger female was easy to separate. As we drove down the track a woodpecker flew to a far tree. I stopped the bus and scanned. Something red flashed in a tree near where the woodpecker landed. I radioed Ari and he returned. I had guessed Siberian Jay and as Ari played the tape sure enough the bird came nearer and nearer. The Siberian Jay is a glorious bird,

even for someone colour blind like me! I could still see the tangerine/orange in the tail and this bird performed for us flying around the minibuses, perching and calling.

On down the track a pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers spiralled up a tree in front of us. Wood Sandpipers called from tree perches and Hazel Grouse ghosted through the scrub. Willow Grouse were seen next and their dappled patterns startled you as they burst out of the woods. More Rustic Buntings were seen, then it was time for lunch. During lunch we scanned for the most northerly Ring Ouzels but in vain.



After lunch we decided to look for Capercaillie. I had expected a distant view, and when we arrived the Dutch group ahead of us were watching something. We disembarked to an amazing sight. A male Capercaillie, the size of a huge Turkey, was displaying aggressively to the assembled birders only feet away! It attacked those too near and took a fancy to Moyne's trousers. I had to go back up the track to take a photograph with my 500mm lens.

We then visited Oulanka reserve where rare plants combined with elusive birds. This is the place for the botanist, with plants such as Mountain Aven, Reticulated Willow, Yellow Oxytropis, Fragrant Orchid, Dwarf Milkwort, Teesdale Violet, Dark Red Helleborine, *Dianthus superbus*. Ostrich Ferns gave an eastern feel to the vegetation. Reindeer Moss carpets the woods here, and you would swear the ground was

covered in snow. We looked for Dipper here but were luckier: a Siberian Tit put on an excellent display only feet away. Redpolls and Siskins were abundant too, but the light in the wood made seeing the birds difficult.

Our final day in paradise was no let down either, and we started after breakfast at a nearby lake trying for Little Buntings. The weather was superb as usual and the morning light was just right for our views of the lake's birds. Red-necked Grebe was on its nest, resplendent in full breeding plumage and only yards away. A hide-and-seek Muskrat (an introduced mammal from North America) moved in and out between the floating vegetation. Little Gulls were nesting and quarrelling and giving their goose like calls; calls we don't hear at home. A bit further out were two Black-throated Divers, absolutely glorious in summer dress. There were also Whooper Swans on nests pairing like our Mutes. We saw Goldeneye, Common Sandpiper, Yellow Wagtail, Fieldfares and Redwings and our last Pied Flycatcher for the trip.

It was then on to the dump where we picked up Siberian Gull. Whilst not being a gull fan I have to agree it was unlike any gull that I have seen. It looked to be Common Gull size, maybe bigger, with a milk chocolate brown head. We then saw two Ravens. We were about to move on when we heard a Bluethroat. Ari played his tape again, and sure enough it skulked through the undergrowth and up on to a perch for all to see. It advanced closer to a grassy knoll, where the tape was playing until it was feet away. What an iridescent blue on its throat this bird has, I think this was an excellent first for many. Eastern race Willow Tits

put on a display only feet away for Ari's tape. They lack the warm soft sun colour our Willow Tits have being more grey in appearance, but wonderful just the same.

Just when we thought we couldn't get much more, Ari took us to a track that only a guide could find. In the middle of nowhere, through the conifers and birch scrub, we came out to a fishing lake and more brilliant birds.

First was a Common Crane, distant and wary, then a Common Buzzard, then more Yellow and White Wagtails. We ticked off Velvet Scoters, Goldeneye, Scaup, and then right above us a circling Rough-legged Buzzard. Next we made an arduous hill trek for Red-flanked Bluetail. Great scenery but no Bluetail. If we had stayed at the minibus with Moyne and Margaret we would have had nice male and female Bramblings. However, nothing ventured nothing gained, and we moved on up closer to the Russian border once again to where the border watch towers were clearly visible. Looking for Dotterel we got Golden Plovers in their fine bijuterie. Two Willow Grouse gave us a flypast as we approached Kussimo, and an Arctic Hare said goodbye.

The last day was mostly travel, and we reluctantly said goodbye to Ari at Oulu before our flight home. Without him and the assistance of Jari and Ulla's *Finnature*, there would have been a lot of wasted time finding birds and places. We all agreed we would want to come back soon, and I think everyone is still talking about it.

**Gary Wilkinson**  
NIOC

## ***Work of NI Bird Photographers No 30***

That annual event, the *Work of NI Bird Photographers* rolled into town for the 30th time on 5 March. As usual the audience was treated to an evening of fine bird pictures from the cream of our local bird photographers. Our judge this year was professional wildlife photographer Roger Tidman from Norfolk. Amongst the other awards he has gained, Roger was winner of the British Birds *Bird Photographer of the Year* title in 1996, 2001 and 2002.

The results of the show were:

### **? Beginners:**

? There being only one entrant in this category, no awards were made.

### **? Intermediate:**

#### **? Best Slide.**

*Osprey* by Kevin Johnston from *Moneymore*

#### **? Best Portfolio**

*Kevin Johnston from Moneymore*

### **? Advanced:**

#### **? Best Slide**

*Snow Geese* by Jim Megarry from *Comber*

#### **? Best Portfolio**

*Jim Megarry from Comber*

Commenting on the standard of the entry, Mr Tidman said of the Advanced category that 'The overall standard of photography was very high'. Congratulations to everyone whose slides were placed by the judge and, in addition, our sincere thanks go to each photographer who provided an entry.

**Dave Craig**