

SWEDEN – Part 1 (VASTMANLAND)

13-16 MAY 2005

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Some of our party had twitched the Knutby Hawk Owl in February 2005 and thus discovered contacts in the Owl and Woodpecker-rich region of Vastmanland. This area is positioned no further than 50k from Vasteras airport and this, coupled with extremely attractively priced flights, was a temptation too great to resist. We had given Daniel Green, our excellent guide, a firm shortlist of targets and decided we could see all in 3 days (in fact we saw everything in 2 days!) Our planning culminated in a short trip from 13-16th May 2005. We travelled as a party of 7 to try to best share costs and we used the following websites to organise ground arrangements.

Useful Sites

Ryanair - <http://www.ryanair.com/site/EN/> (A bargain £47 return inc. taxes)

Car Hire - <http://hertz.co.uk/> (VW Caravelle 9-seater for £427)

Guide - Daniel Green at <http://www.svartadalen.nu/eng> (SKR2500 per party per day)

B&B - Elisabeth Quasthoff <http://www.kontakta-oss.nu/klockargarden/index2.asp> (SKR500 per person per day/full board)

Friday 13 May 2005. After driving through the night our 06.40 Ryanair flight from Luton to Vasteras (approximately 100 kilometres west of Stockholm) proved very efficient, even arriving 10 minutes early. We were met at Vasteras airport by our principal guide, Daniel Green, and, having completed the formalities at Hertz desk, were soon on the road to Flackebo in Svartadalen (The Black River area), our base for the next 2 nights.

Right next door to the airport is Bear Island (Bjorn Nature Reserve) and we stopped briefly to see/hear if Icterine Warblers had arrived, but drew a blank. A pleasant, longer stop in Angso National Park gave us our first real taste of Swedish birding (and food) with Common Cranes, Slavonian Grebes, Wood Sandpipers, waterfowl etc. We had booked our accommodation on a full board basis and Daniel produced a superb picnic lunch with reindeer and smoked salmon on the menu. Our next stop was at a known Black Woodpecker nest site and after a short wait the female popped out in response to Daniel's mimicry. Round the corner Hawfinches were found, and photographed, at a feeder. Two attempts for Ortolan Bunting failed but the second site at Hogsholm gave us 2 Wrynecks as a good alternative. The Wrynecks were singing against each other and presumably defending territory.

Time now to rendezvous with the Owl ringers and to meet Karl-Gunnar Kallebrink and his team. After a short drive down innumerable forest tracks we located our first nest box, but it was empty, the eggs probably taken by Pine Martin. The second box, however, had a female Ural Owl calling over our heads as 5 chicks were ringed. Stories of violent Ural Owl attacks abound and this was a nervous time as she was calling vociferously about 8 metres directly overhead. Karl sensibly wore gauntlets, ear defenders and a crash helmet - we felt a little underdressed! At a third nest box the female was in residence and shown in the hand at point blank range whilst yet another brood of chicks were processed. We left the ringing team to their work and proceeded to another site near Skultuna where we joined a handful of Swedish birders who were also awaiting our next quarry. Time passed. Another Wryneck also waited on a nearby fencepost sunning itself in the late evening sunshine and a Roe Deer passed by without concern. Woodcock were roding and some of the Swedish birders had given up and left when, at 21.00, not one but two majestic Great-grey Owls appeared from the nearby woodland, hunting and perching at 20 metres range. They were

completely unconcerned by our presence and, after about an hour, disappeared back into the woods leaving us with one of life's more memorable experiences.

It was now getting late as we left Daniel and travelled towards Flackebo in order to introduce ourselves to Elisabeth, our hostess at Klockargard Farmhouse B&B, but one more surprise lay in wait. In the gloom a European Lynx stood by the roadside, with obviously intent on the lambs in the field opposite. This was a rare sighting as we discovered that not all our Swedish guides had yet managed to see one. Fortunately Elisabeth was well used to birders and their erratic timing and she provided us with a splendid, very late meal of Swedish meatballs, mash, vegetables and beer with ice cream to follow. After a sleep-free previous night travelling to Luton we were not to get much more tonight as we had arranged an eggs and bacon breakfast for 05.30.

Saturday 14 May 2005. The day dawned bright and sunny with a little frost as we left our accommodation and made the short journey past Lake Flackjon, with no time for an investigation of either the Bittern or Thrush Nightingale that we could hear, to rendezvous with Daniel. Then we made a relatively short journey to the outskirts of Skinskatteberg to meet yet another Owl and Woodpecker expert, Michael Rhonnstad. Now Michael knows the forests and its trails like the back of his hand as it is part of his day job, so we had high expectations. Michael took us, via a lake that yielded a fly-by Honey Buzzard and a pair of Black-throated Divers, to a forest road where a Redwing was singing its simple 4-note song (shades of a Chaffinch-like intro) and here he stopped to play a tape recording. Almost immediately a Grey-headed Woodpecker responded with a typically lame yaffle and flew in to perch overhead on a dead tree.

Next, down more anonymous tracks in another area of the forest. A noisy pair of Black Woodpeckers chased through mature trees and Crossbills 'chopped' here and there. We walked along the track to a freshly burnt-over area and were not in the least surprised when two Three-toed Woodpeckers were lured into view, with the male particularly obliging as it drummed for more than 20 minutes on a nearby stump. Celebratory cake and coffee was passed round to the backdrop of a singing Whinchat as more Cranes flew noisily overhead.

There followed another short drive to a forest in the vicinity of Kolsva. Michael was conducting a ringing programme and here we were treated to a viewing of a female Tengmalm's Owl whilst her 4 smelly 16-day old chicks were ringed. This was a new bird for all our party and some had waited a long, long time for this moment, another magical memory!

We got the impression that Daniel was rationing out our treats and were content that our other targets would fall in due course, so we were comfortable with the suggestion that we do some general birding around Lake Flackjon. General birding in Svartadalen, however, included Goshawk, Osprey, summer plumaged Ruffs, some interesting Yellow Wagtail races, breeding Whooper Swans, Little Gulls and a pair of breeding White-tailed Eagles. (We later discovered that the Eagle's nest was visible from our accommodation).

In the late afternoon, and at the suggestion of Karl-Gunnar Kallebrink, we tried to help Daniel by attempting to locate the nest of a pair of Eagle Owls that had been heard recently and were thought to be breeding in a nearby sand quarry. We must have been close but it was all to no avail.

We travelled another short hop to Skillberg, climbed a wooded hillside and Daniel proudly showed us his feeding station. Not much around though this particular evening and after a while, as we waited quietly for something to happen, Daniel beckoned us to his scope with fingers on his lips. We were each mesmerised in turn to see a female Hazelhen sitting on a clutch of eggs – more Swedish magic.

Later that evening, and passing a large bull Moose en route, we drove to Bago. This site typified Sweden for us. Truly atmospheric as we watched a magnificent red sunset, with flights of Cranes bugling overhead, Woodcock roding and Whooper Swans echoing loudly down the valley. It would have been an exceptional experience without the Pygmy Owl that responded, as Daniel predicted, precisely at 21.00. More photographs were duly taken in low light as another unseen Pygmy Owl struck up nearby. Only 2 days gone and nearly cleaned up. We drove, passing another Moose that was walking down the road, to Elisabeth's for more excellent food and beer then grabbed a few hours sleep.

Sunday 15 May 2005. The sun still shone but there was a keener wind as we met, Niclas, our new guide for the day. After the hectic previous two days we were perhaps due a quieter session and the next few hours were the least productive of the trip. We started back at the feeding station where the Hazelhen still sat motionless. Taping here failed to attract a Nutcracker but a distant Black Woodpecker was heard. A succession of sites then produced not a lot. Lake Oje held a pair of Black-throated Divers and Raven. The football pitch at Vesterfarnebo provided Marsh Tit for the trip list and a nice summer plumaged Fieldfare but no Ortolan Bunting. The Great Snipes were not performing at Notmyran (but it *was* the middle of the day). Things perked up a bit at Vedarsbo where Ortolan Bunting and Icterine Warbler were heard and a snowball-headed Long-tailed Tit provided entertainment, supported by a Camberwell Beauty.

After lunch we moved to Vassla and noted the knowing grins on the faces of passing locals who, spotting birders, nodded as they knew what we were about to see. A little further on, and no more than three metres from the roadside, was a fine male Capercaillie, grunting and popping as it strutted its stuff.

We now travelled to again meet Karl-Gunnar Kallebrink and a couple of the birders from Friday and they took us to a sand quarry near Torstuna. No Eagle Owl here at its regular roost but we did catch up at last with a very colourful male Ortolan Bunting singing its distinctive three note song. At a second site, however, near Flosta we were shown a superb female Eagle Owl brooding two well-grown chicks, which just about rounded off a full set of available targets. (In summary we had missed Nutcracker, had Thrush Nightingale and Icterine Warbler as heard only and not had a spare evening to take advantage of displaying Great or Jack Snipe).

At a last stop in a flooded over area en route back to the airport we saw many Beaver damaged trees and the lodge but not the resident Beaver. Kingfisher and Grasshopper Warbler were added to a growing trip list leaving us with a total of 122, but it was the quality rather than numbers that left the lasting impression that Sweden was, indeed, a superb country to visit.

We departed Vasteras airport at 10.20 arriving at Luton, after time adjustment, only 1 hour later.

Monday 16 May 2005. An overnight stop at a Travelodge gave some of us the first decent sleep of the trip and we were up early enough to take in Great Reed Warbler (Willingham Gravel Pits), Stone Curlew (Weeting Heath) and Stilt Sandpiper (Burton Norton) on our way back north.

Postscript. The value of the local guides on this trip cannot be overstated. Quite simply, had we been working these forests on our own, without Daniel and his compatriots, we would have either seen very little or been extraordinarily lucky. A visit to Swartadalen (The Black River) area in Vastmanland is highly recommended!

SYSTEMATIC LIST

- 1 Black-throated Diver - A single and a pair on small lakes in summer plumage
- 2 Slavonian Grebe - 2 pairs in summer plumage at Angso N.R.
- 3 Great-crested Grebe
- 4 Great Cormorant
- 5 Bittern - Heard booming at Lake Flackjon
- 6 Grey Heron
- 7 Whooper Swan - Breeding at Lake Flacksjon. Atmospheric calls from other flooded valleys
- 8 Mute Swan
- 9 White-fronted Goose - A singleton in a Grey-lag flock at Lake Flacksjon
- 10 Grey-lag Goose
- 11 Canada Goose
- 12 Wigeon
- 13 Mallard
- 14 Gadwall
- 15 Shoveler
- 16 Teal
- 17 Tufted Duck
- 18 Marsh Harrier
- 19 Goshawk - One circling near Flackebo
- 20 Honey Buzzard - One close overhead
- 21 Common Buzzard
- 22 White-tailed Eagle - A pair at Lake Flacksjon nest site
- 23 Osprey - Scattered in suitable habitat
- 24 Kestrel
- 25 Hobby
- 26 Capercaillie - An aggressive close-range roadside display
- 27 Hazel Grouse - A female sitting tight on a nest near the feeding station
- 28 Pheasant - Only two
- 29 Moorhen
- 30 Coot
- 31 Crane - Common, the haunting bugling call one of the special memories of this region
- 32 Lapwing
- 33 Ruff - A lovely display between white-ruffed and dark-ruffed individuals
- 34 Curlew
- 35 Whimbrel - One at Lake Flacksjon
- 36 Redshank
- 37 Greenshank
- 38 Wood Sandpiper - Commonest wader with flocks of up to 58
- 39 Common Sandpiper
- 40 Woodcock - Roding during the evening Owl waits
- 41 Snipe - Flushed at Notmyran N.R. (but no Great Snipe)
- 42 Little Gull - 2 or 3 at Lake Flacksjon
- 43 Black-headed Gull
- 44 Common Gull
- 45 Herring Gull
- 46 Common Tern
- 47 Black Tern - 6-8 at Lake Flacksjon
- 48 Wood Pigeon
- 49 Stock Dove
- 50 Rock Dove
- 51 Cuckoo
- 52 Eagle Owl - A female at the nest with 2 large chicks

- 53 Ural Owl - 3 nest boxes visited.1) Eggs taken by Pine Martin;2) Female (overhead) + three 2-day old chicks; 3) Female (in hand) + 5 chicks
- 54 Great Grey Owl - A majestic display by 2 males from as close as 20 metres
- 55 Pygmy Owl - A vociferous individual with bags of character calling from top of pine with a 2nd calling nearby.
- 56 Tengmalm's Owl - 1 female and 4 chocolate-brown 16-day old chicks at a nest box ringing session
- 57 Common Swift
- 58 Kingfisher
- 59 Wryneck - 2 males calling at Angso N.R. and another sunning at the GGO site
- 60 Black Woodpecker - A female obligingly popped out of a nest hole at Angso N.R. plus 2 or 3 near Rydarrhyttan. Also heard at the feeding station.
- 61 Grey-headed Woodpecker - One flew in to a tape recording giving its typically exhausted call
- 62 Green Woodpecker
- 63 Great-spotted Woodpecker
- 64 Three-toed Woodpecker - A male drumming from 20m was joined by the female
- 65 Skylark
- 66 Sand Martin
- 67 Barn Swallow
- 68 House Martin
- 69 Tree Pipit
- 70 Meadow Pipit
- 71 White Wagtail
- 72 Yellow Wagtail - Blue-headed (*flava*), Grey-headed (*thunbergi*) and a possible Black-headed (*feldegg*)
- 73 Wren
- 74 Dunnock
- 75 Thrush Nightingale - Super song but unfortunately heard only
- 76 Redstart
- 77 Whinchat - Common, singing everywhere
- 78 Northern Wheatear
- 79 Blackbird
- 80 Fieldfare - Nice to see in full summer plumage
- 81 Redwing – ditto
- 82 Song Thrush
- 83 Mistle Thrush
- 84 Grasshopper Warbler - Heard only Lake Flacksjon and Beaver Dam
- 85 Sedge Warbler
- 86 Reed Warbler
- 87 Icterine Warbler - Distinctive song but difficult to see
- 88 Garden Warbler
- 89 Lesser Whitethroat
- 90 Common Whitethroat
- 91 Blackcap
- 92 Wood Warbler - Heard at feeding station
- 93 Willow Warbler
- 94 Goldcrest
- 95 Pied Flycatcher
- 96 Marsh Tit
- 97 Blue Tit
- 98 Great Tit
- 99 Coal Tit
- 100 Long-tailed Tit - A snowball-headed individual of the race *caudatus*
- 101 Nuthatch - Very distinctive race *europaea* with white underparts

102 Treecreeper
103 Starling
104 Jay
105 Magpie
106 Jackdaw
107 Raven
108 Rook
109 Hooded Crow
110 Tree Sparrow
111 House Sparrow
112 Chaffinch
113 Hawfinch - 2 or 3 around a bird table
114 Siskin
115 Common Redpoll
116 Greenfinch
117 Goldfinch
118 Linnet
119 Crossbill
120 Yellowhammer
121 Ortolan Bunting - Seen well as it sang its distinctive 3 note song
122 Reed Bunting

OTHER NOTABLE WILDLIFE

European Lynx - By roadside apparently hunting lambs in opposite field

Moose - 3 large roadside individuals (best avoided at speed in a car!)

Camberwell Beauty