

Finland – May 2013

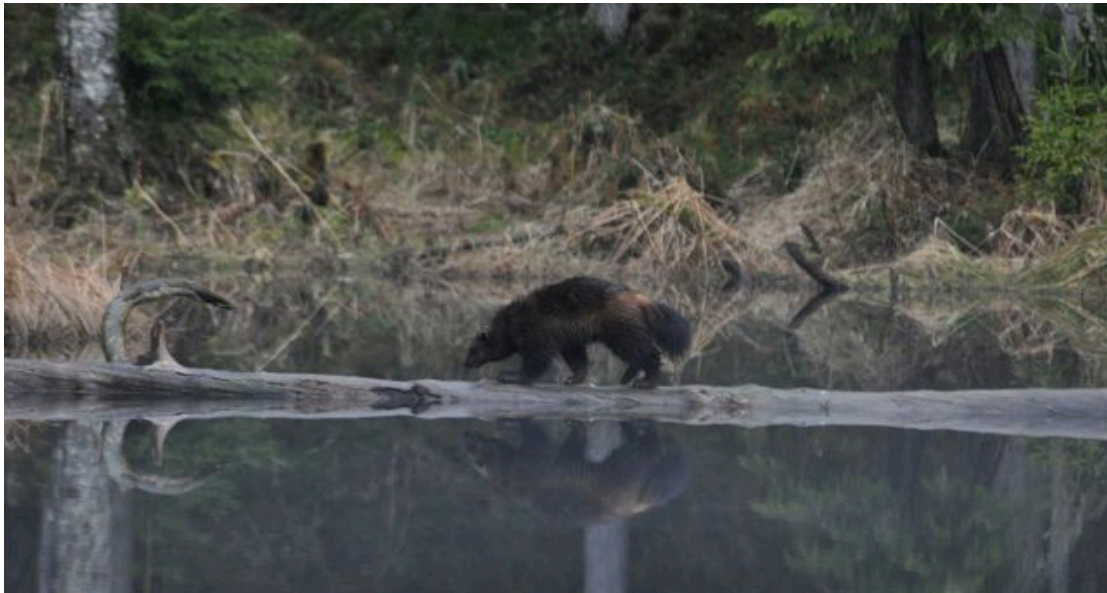
Report by Sjöf Öllers

A relatively short solo trip with the main goal to see wolf, bear and wolverine, but I also wanted to see some of the birdlife in northern Europe (grouses, owls, Taiga birds, etc.). The mammalwatching was successful with excellent sightings of all three target species. Birding was a mixed bag with quite a number of desired species not seen (well), but some highlights were red-flanked bluetail, double-barred crossbill, Ural owl, pigmy owl, and displaying male ruffs. A real delight was the quality of the grouse sightings: hazel grouse, capercaillie and black grouse were all seen spectacularly well and occasionally I even managed to get some decent photos.



Itinerary

May 09 Flights Amsterdam-Helsinki and Helsinki-Oulu
May 10 Liminka Bay area and Vihanti/Raahe area
May 11 Drive from Oulu to Erä Eero Lodge (near Lieksa) – Night in Hide
May 12 Drive from Erä Eero to Kuikka Base Camp – Night in Hide
May 13 Kuikka Base Camp – Night in Hide
May 14 Kuikka Base Camp – Night in Base Camp
May 15 Kuikka - Lentiira - Suomussalmi - Kuusamo
May 16 Kuusamo
May 17 Kuusamo
May 18 Kuusamo - Oulu - Liminka Bay area
May 19 Finnature Owl Excursion/Raahe/Liminka Bay; Evening flight to Helsinki
May 20 Flight Helsinki- Amsterdam



Wolverine

Sites Visited, Accommodation, Practicalities and General Musings

My wife and I had travelled in Finland in September 1993, mostly backpacking and traveling by train. We did some hiking in Karelia and near Rovaniemi, but most of the trip involved doing touristy things and we didn't see much wildlife then. Moreover, the forests are "dead" in September; the birds are not singing and most of the summer migrants have left. We have also done a lot of trekking in Sweden and Norway in the past, so I had already seen quite a lot of fjell and birch forest bird species including attractive species such as willow grouse and rock ptarmigan (both very easy to see if you do multiday treks), red-necked phalarope, golden plover, long-tailed duck, Lapland bunting, and rough-legged buzzard. On this trip I mainly focused on Taiga forest birds and owls, and getting close-up views of black grouse, hazel grouse, and capercaillie. On the trekking trips in Norway and Sweden we had seen few mammals. Highlights were Norway lemming and musk ox in the Dovrefjell area, Eurasian elk (moose) in Rago National Park and semi-wild reindeer on the Hardangervidda plateau.

Weather: On the day that I arrived in Oulu it was 25 degrees Celsius in my hometown and 3-4 degrees Celsius in Oulu. When I left Oulu and got back home, it was pretty much the other way around. The first two days in Finland the weather was unpleasant with a biting cold wind, constant rain/drizzle and temperatures near freezing. In Karelia/Kainuu the weather was more typical for this time of year with temperatures between 7 and 12 degrees Celsius, but still mostly cloudy and regular drizzle or rain. When I drove to Kuusamo, the weather suddenly changed and for days I had warm summer weather with cloudless skies and temperatures between 22 and 27 degrees Celsius. I didn't see a single mosquito until I got to Kuusamo, but the warm summer weather brought them back. Numbers were still manageable and most of them were still a bit slow and sluggish and could easily be chased away or sent to Walhalla in extreme cases. Bird activity was noticeably better on the medium-cold days in Karelia/Kainuu in the sense that there was activity throughout the day. The last days when it was really warm, bird activity was much more restricted to the evening and early morning (from about 4 to 9 am). Between noon and 5 pm it was often very quiet.

Liminka Bay and surroundings

This area is well described by Dave Gosney in his guide *Finding Birds in Southern Finland*. I assume that you have this guide in the descriptions/trip lists below. In the trip report I also refer to Towers 1-5 in the Liminglahti area, which corresponds with the site numbers that Gosney gives in his guide.

After picking up my Skoda Fabria from Budget in the early evening at the airport in Oulu I drove to the Liminglahti visitor centre to see if I could sleep there, but they are only open between 11.00 and 15.00. It was a national holiday but the birdwatching tower at the visitor centre was deserted (probably because of the awful weather). Not a single birder around. Pretty good birding from the tower with lots of ruffs, some spotted redshanks, a few godwits, both curlew species, little gulls, a variety of duck species, etc. I continued to the Värminkoski camping site along Route 8 (no signpost), but it is on the right side of the road (if coming from Liminka) less than 1 km after the turn-off for Route 86. I had E-mailed them in advance for a booking but never got a reply. There were only a few cars parked at the campground when I arrived, so I was hopeful to get a cabin. I walked to the main building and the owner told me that they were fully booked for the next two nights. I also asked her if there was anywhere to sleep nearby and she said that I should go back to Oulu city. Right. When I got back around 1 pm on the 19th, the gate was closed and nobody opened; the reception was closed. Tiring place. The campground is at a strategic place close to a lot of good birding areas, but I was very unimpressed with their service. Anyway, it was already quite late on my arrival day but I decided to continue on the Route 8 and initially you pass through kilometres of forest without a single house, but about 20 km from Liminka (in the direction Raahe) you reach Lahtiranta/Revonlahti. If you come from the north/Liminka, there is a green/blue petrol station on the left (impossible to miss, be careful, there is a speed camera). They have rooms for 58/70 Euro single/double, breakfast included. They serve pizzas and burgers, but you can also ask for a salad. They were very friendly and helpful and the room I got there was fine. The food was unexciting but I was glad I could get something to eat late in the evening as everything else seemed closed that day. From there it is a 25-minute drive to the Liminglahti visitor centre (not optimal, but okay). I stayed there on all days when I was in the Liminka area, because I could not find any other accommodation that had rooms available and I did not want to go all the way back to Oulu city (there are more campgrounds open around Liminka from June 1). On the 19th I also checked if I could stay at the Liminglahti visitor centre, but that night they were fully booked (tour groups staying). However, the lunch they served was excellent. It was interesting to

see the difference with ten days earlier. The visitor centre (and the towers) were now packed with pensioners, young families with kids, a couple of commercial birdwatching tour groups and lots of Finnish and foreign birders.

I did not visit the areas around Oulu city or Hailuoto Island, because I had seen Terek sandpiper before and there was nothing else there that I wanted to see in particular, but it is a good area to boost your wader and duck list. I also did not look for common rosefinch after seeing lots in Poland. I did look for ortolan bunting (would not have been a lifer, but this elegant and attractive bird is becoming rather scarce in Europe nowadays); I didn't find any, maybe because of the poor weather the first couple of days. None were heard singing.



Pigmy Owl



Wary Hazel Grouse Male

Finnature owl excursion in the Oulu region

When I contacted Finnature, they told me that the vole situation this year was not great, but definitely better than last year, so I was hoping that we would see at least three or four of the bigger owl species (some of the smaller ones I had already seen). Usually I don't like twitcher-oriented excursions where most of the birding is done from or next to the car, but given the high success rates in trip reports it seemed worth doing for getting close-up views of these difficult owl species.

At the start of the excursion it turned out that this year they had not managed to find nests/locations for great grey owl and hawk owl (the two species I wanted see in particular) nor for any of the woodpecker species, the latter not a big deal for me. We first went to an Ural owl nest. Bits and pieces of the female on the nest could be seen. A bit underwhelming. Here we also had wryneck and a goshawk on the nest. Next we went to a site for pygmy owl. Another Finnature group was already there; we had excellent views of the male. While we had coffee, we could enjoy this charismatic species for quite a while. We then visited two Tengmalm's owl nestboxes. In both cases the owl peeked out for a few minutes and then lost interest. We then visited two former great grey owl sites to see what we would find, but the birding was very poor, not even the normally pretty much guaranteed short-eared owl was seen. The success rate of these excursions normally is quite a bit higher so I was probably unlucky to go this year but it was a lot of driving and a lot of money for good views of only one owl species and decent views of two other owl species. The guide was a very

friendly young guy who was doing wolf research in Eastern Finland. It was great talking to him about his research on the longer drives between the sites. Next time I will probably ask for specific sites for great grey owl and hawk owl and see if they have a hide set up (they had hides at the Ural owl nest we visited), which is probably more fun and rewarding than these one-day car birding excursions. In general though I was very pleased with the service of Finnature: they respond quickly to E-mails (not a given in Finland in my experience) and were happy to help, suggest alternatives, book lodges/tours, etc.

Raahe/Vihanti

Many trip reports from commercial tour operators mention Raahe Lakes as a good site for Slavonian Grebe without specifying where the lakes are. I checked some lakes and ponds myself including the large Haapajärvi south of Raahe, but didn't find any grebes on them. Eventually I gave up and asked the Finnature guide for directions to the grebe site on the last day. I am not sure whether I should disclose the details here, but contact me (olpa [at] onsneteindhoven.nl) if you are keen to see the species (was a lifer for me). The site is very easy to reach if you know where it is, but probably impossible to find without directions.



Slavonian Grebe

In the trip lists below I also refer to Vihanti lakes: these are the lakes Saarelanjärvi and Rantasenjärvi west and northwest of Vihanti, and which can both be seen from Route 88 between Vihanti and Raahe. The former is on the western outskirts of Vihanti. There is a signpost along the highway; it is only about 500m down a dirt track until you reach a parking spot with a large lake on the left and a small lake with a birdwatching tower on the right. About 3 km further along the Route 88 in the direction of Raahe there are clear signposts for the Läntisranta nature reserve, which includes Rantasenjärvi. From the main road it is about one kilometre to the obvious parking area. From the parking it is 200 meters to the birdwatching tower. More interesting than the lake were the marked trails through the forest in the Läntisranta nature reserve. Make a photo of the trail map at the parking area before you leave because the trail markers sometimes disappear for a while (or at least I did not see them), but I would be surprised if you would really get lost. There are several

patches of excellent lichen-covered older forest, but also agricultural areas and younger “forestry forest”. I went to this area because apparently Slavonian grebe and smew sometimes breed/occur on the lakes, but I didn’t see both species here. However, the surrounding area held some nice birds (I had three grouse species, bullfinch, and common redpoll among others); it is worth a visit if you have some time on your hands or are tired of wetland birding at Liminka. The 1:150.000 Tiekartta map called Oulun Seuttu is well worth having if you want to explore the area (they sell it at the motel/petrol station in Lahtiranta). A productive road was the yellow road (on the map) that starts at Revonlahti and heads south to Relletti. I drove this road several times and always had something interesting (black grouse males, red-backed shrike, a mixed group of migrating waders that included some spectacular ruff males of all colour varieties), but I was probably just lucky here. Some areas looked excellent for ortolan but did not see them there. The quiet forest road between Relletti and Kopsa was nice too (black grouse females, bullfinch, woodcock and whinchat).

Erä Eero Lodge

Check Jon Hall’s report on mammalwatching.com for more information on this place or have a look at the website: <http://www.eraeero.com>. I only stayed one night in one of the hides together with two very friendly Finnish guys and we had six different wolverines that night. We stayed in the largest of the pro-hides: that hide is probably the best for photography, but the overall views from the main hide seemed better. That said, I am sure that you can get fantastic pictures from any of the hides. The differences seemed rather marginal. The first wolverine showed up around 19.15 in pouring rain and from then on there was regular wolverine action until about 22.30.



My first wolverine

The last wolverine sighting that evening suitably coincided with the time that it was getting too dark for photography. They are brilliant animals and fun to watch with their “built-in” restlessness and typical, almost comical gait. They are also surprisingly powerful: one animal knocked aside a large stone that must have weighed several kilograms with effortless ease.

Over those three hours in the evening we most likely saw: one juvenile (this animal was clearly much smaller than the other animals), an adult female, a subadult animal, one very dark and large adult – probably a male, and two subadult sisters together. Seeing the two sisters together was spectacular and they hang around for quite a long time.



One of the sisters on the lookout



The two sisters together

We all slept a bit during the twilight hours although I peeked out every hour or so to see whether the odd bear might show up (fresh bear tracks had been seen a couple of days before I arrived). A large moose had also been seen on the road a few days before I came.



The third wolverine sprinting towards our hide

In the morning not a single wolverine showed up. Birding was not as exciting as at the Kuikka hide, but several common wader, gull, and duck species were present almost all the time as well as white wagtail, greater spotted woodpecker, raven and hooded crow. Cranes were heard regularly but not seen. The only thing that was a bit unfortunate was the weather, it was very dark and cloudy (with one heavy shower) in the evening when the wolverines showed up, so the colours were a bit dull for photography and one had to shoot at least at

1600 or 3200 ISO. The next morning it was sunny with excellent light for photography, but no wolverines. Oh well.

Initially I had booked a different wolverine-watching hide through Finnature near Kajaani, because it would involve less driving and it was interesting to try something new. A few days before my departure Finnature told me that forestry workers had started cutting down trees in the area, which would probably make wolverine watching very difficult. So Finnature advised me to go to Erä Eero. The Kajaani place sounded interesting, but I can only say that Erä Eero comes highly recommended. The owner does not speak English, but was very friendly and gave us a lot of food and coffee to get through the night. A friend of the owner, who spoke excellent English, explained to me what to expect, etc., and everything seemed well organized. It looks like the ideal time to show up on your arrival day is between 14.00 and 15.00, because the owner arrived at the place at exactly the same time as I did (14.00). I read in some trip reports that people who arrived early found the gate locked and had to wait for quite a long time. Finally, the hilly area surrounding the lodge is very scenic with some great views and well worth exploring.

The Kajaani area is also a good place to look for flying squirrels but I decided to leave this for a future trip when the wolverine watching in Kajaani got cancelled. Several people told me that the Kuusamo area and the wolf/bear watching areas in eastern Kainuu aren't particular good for flying squirrels because their densities are not that high because their main food sources are relatively scarce. Nuuksio national park near Espoo in the south on the other hand seems to have a high density of flying squirrels with a decent chance of seeing one.



Wolf chasing off Ravens

Kuikka Base Camp

The excellent report by Uffe Gjøøl Sørensen and Hans Jørgen Bruun Pedersen on www.mammalwatching.com got me interested in this place. This lodge seems to be one of the few places in Finland where wolves are regularly seen and it is not impossible to see wolverine, wolf and bear in a single stay. They have several small hides in the forest that are good for wolverine and bear. Another set of hides overlooks a swampy area that is regularly visited by wolf and bear and occasionally wolverine. The other clients that stayed at the lodge when I was there (four Swedes and a Finnish/Norwegian duo) saw all three species during their stay by visiting both the forest and swamp hides. Since I only "needed" bear and wolf after seeing the wolverine in Erä Eero, I stayed in the "Paradise" hides that overlook the

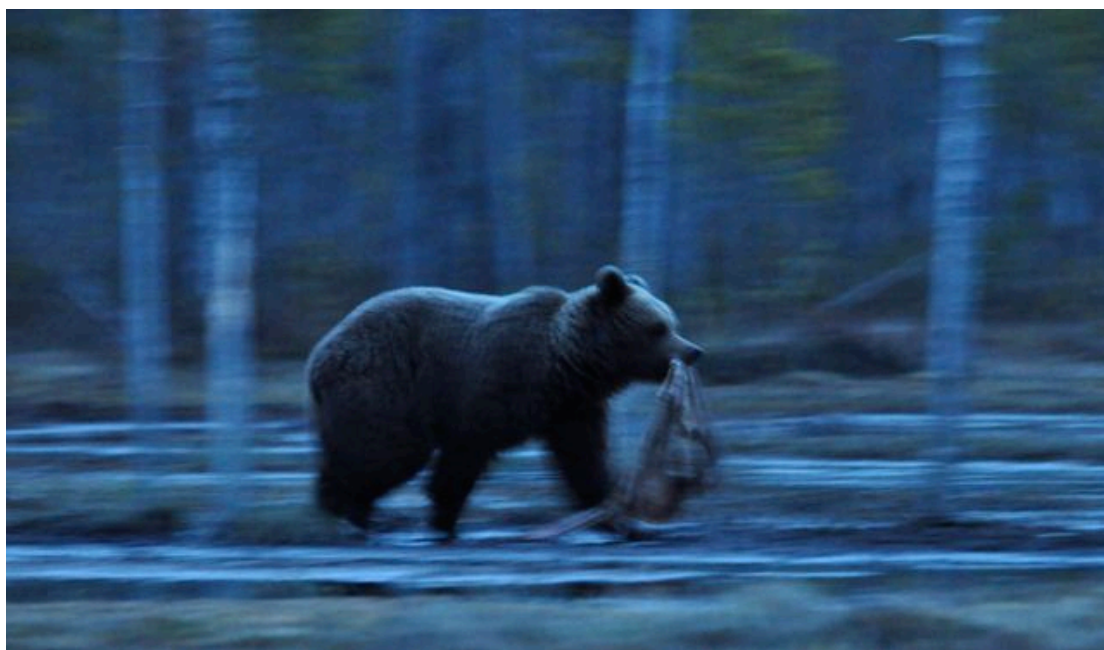
swamp area. In the days before I arrived, there had been four days at the swamp hides with zero sightings of the large carnivores, so luck is definitely needed too.

Kuikka Base Camp (www.arcticmedia.fi) is located about 50 km east of Kuhmo, only a few kilometres from the Russian border. The lodge is run by photographer Lassi Rautiainen and his family. Lassi was away when I visited but his son Sami and his wife did a great job keeping us happy. Everything is well organized, the food is great, and there is enough entertainment directly around the lodge (bird feeders in front of the main house), with some luck beavers on the lake next to the house, and good birding on foot from the lodge and short driving distances away. If you stay at the hides the routine is as follows: you arrive in the afternoon before 3 pm, you get yourself installed and maybe have a quick nap. At 4 pm there is a communal dinner and around 5 pm you drive to one of the hides. They try to give every group of clients a hide of their own. The next morning usually between 7 and 8 am you are picked up and driven back to the base camp to have breakfast. Between about 10.00 and 15.00 it is smart to get at least some sleep, and then the cycle starts again. During my stay I spent two nights in one of the Swamp hides. It is an idyllic place and the place has something charming in almost every kind of light. On the first night the Swedish clients stayed in the main hide and I stayed in a two-person pro hide. The main hide has the better overall views, but my hide was closer to one of the carcasses. The first night was cold (a couple of degrees Celsius below zero in the morning, having my sleeping bag was very welcome) with a nasty Siberian wind blowing right into the hide. Luckily all the hides have kerosene heaters, so it never gets really uncomfortable. I had made the mistake of sleeping far too little in the preceding days and around 3 am I was so tired (and no mammals up to that point) that I wanted to rest a bit. Of course I fell asleep and only woke up again at 5.30 am. It was sunny and for a couple of hours I kept an eye out for mammals again. Around 7 am still nothing, just gulls and ravens around the carcasses. How it happened I still don't know but around 7 in the morning I had obviously fallen asleep again because suddenly I heard people talking outside; I looked at my watch and aaaarggghhh, 7.50. Sami knocked on the door and said: "have you seen the wolf just now?" "The wolf !!!???" When I got out of the hide, it turned out that a wolf had shown up two times in the morning and of course just when I was asleep (once even shortly after 7). Initially I was more puzzled than angry, but throughout the day I got a little annoyed with myself. Anyway, after a short walk after breakfast to see a couple of bean geese breeding close by I tried to get some sleep. After resting several hours I felt surprisingly well and re-energized and after dinner I was eager to go back to the hides. Just in case, I exchanged phone numbers with the Norwegian/Finnish duo that would stay in the Swamp hides as well this night (there was a weak signal in the hides and it was no problem to send text messages). This time I first rearranged my hide in such a way that everything was exactly where I wanted it to be to avoid making noise when any mammal would show up. I had barely installed myself when an immature white-tailed eagle arrived on the scene. Ravens, gulls, magpies and hooded crows mobbed the eagle continuously. Entertaining stuff. Around 19.15 I bent forward a little on my seat to have a look in the far right corner and to my surprise a wolf was sneaking in close to my hide, crouching down regularly to check out whether the area was safe. It was the same alpha female that the Swedish clients had seen last night. She made her way to the carcass closest to my hide quite quickly and started ripping off large chunks from the carcass. She didn't stay that long the first time, but she was already back around 20.00. This time she managed to drag a large portion of the carcass across the swamp and started eating on it about 30-40 meters away from my hide, but in the far right corner. Unfortunately, I could not take pictures from that angle (without screwing off the camera of the ballhead and making noise), so I just watched the wolf going about his business.



Wolf dragging the carcass across the swamp

After the wolf's departure the birds took over the action and started cleaning up parts of the carcass that the wolf had left behind. Around 21.30 – almost exactly at the same place where I had first seen the wolf – a huge brown bear with a beige “neck collar” arrived on the scene. He had barely made his way to the carcass when a second, smaller bear showed up. The two were probably a mating couple and they were seen feeding on the carcasses on and off for almost 2.5 hours.



Brown Bear in the twilight hours

Around 23.00 a group of five cranes landed on the edge of the swamp. They were calling constantly and the noise they made at such a short distance from the hide was quite amazing. The cranes stayed in the area in front of my hide during the dusky hours between midnight and 02.00. It was quite surreal to see them walking cautiously through the swamp in the twilight; they almost looked like semi-translucent ghosts. One bear, which may have been the female of the couple seen earlier, showed up between my hide and the main hide when it was close to midnight and started eating the dog food that Sami had shaken out in the swamp. The bear was only 15 meters away and I could hear her slurping the water and chewing the dog food. Very early in the morning the wolf came back again and this time she stayed for a long time and ate from both carcasses. The bears didn't come back when it was daylight, but the birds (especially the eagle) provided entertainment throughout the morning. A highlight was the displaying and fighting of several ruff males. After the previous night I couldn't have asked for more; it was a huge relief to see both wolf and bear this well. From about 19.00 there had been almost non-stop action of some sort in front of the hides. Only between 1 and 2 in the morning it had been quiet.



Wolf mobbed by Hooded Crow

After last night it was very tempting to book a couple of nights extra in the hides, but I decided to save some experiences for a future trip because my wife would be probably enjoy this kind of wildlife viewing as well. Nevertheless, I didn't want to leave the area without checking out some of the surroundings and getting a good night's sleep before driving to Kuusamo.

Despite not sleeping at all last night I felt quite energetic so after breakfast I decided to go to the Elimyssalo nature reserve and hike the 13-km round trip trail to/around the lake. It is only about 15-20 km from Kuikka to the Elimyssalo reserve but it took me more than an hour to get there because I first took the wrong turn and ended up close the Russian border picking up several capercaillies and a mountain hare. Back on track I spent quite some time watching a black grouse lek. Some of the males were displaying and fighting on the road. Very cool. The road that skirts along the western edge of the reserve had excellent birding too. I scoped some waxwings, saw more capercaillies and black grouse, bean geese,

sparrowhawk, and bullfinch (and lots of common species). Red-flanked bluetail occurs in the area, but you need luck to hear/see them. The walk in Elimyssalo nature reserve was very nice. Most people only seem to go as far as Levävaara, but the best forest is around the Elimyssalo lake. Here I had two-barred crossbill, red crossbill, bullfinch, tree pipit, willow tit, reed bunting and pied flycatcher. The birds on the lake were a little disappointing, just the usual whooper swans, goldeneyes, common terns and black-headed gulls. Cranes were heard but not seen. The area around Levävaara had decent birding as well with golden plover, yellow wagtail, northern wheatear, more red crossbills and the four commoner thrush species plus one shy blackbird. Common everywhere were brambling, siskin, chaffinch, willow warbler and white wagtail. On the way back to Kuikka I saw two black woodpeckers, a three-toed woodpecker in flight, a great grey shrike, plus again the displaying black grouse. I also ran into a capercaillie male that was displaying on the road. Not bad for a midday excursion on a chilly and cloudy day with constant drizzle/rain almost all the time. After dinner I checked out a nest box for Ural owl (no owl present), but Sami had already told me that the nest was probably not occupied. Apart from more black grouse and capercaillies I did not see anything of note. I got back around 21.30 and was really tired by then and slept like a log that night. Next morning at breakfast I heard that activity at both the Caravan hide in the forest and Swamp hide had been very good, with three wolves showing up at the Swamp hide and good wolverine views at the Caravan hides.

Before the trip I also checked reports/websites on other lodges that are specialized in watching large carnivores. Martinselkonen (<http://www.martinselkonen.fi>) appears to be very good for bear sightings, but sightings of other large carnivores are extremely rare. Wild Brown Bear Lodge (<http://www.wbb.fi>) near Vartiuss also seems to be very reliable for good bear sightings but wolverine and wolf seem to be hit and miss. I tried to book here for two nights but after several quick and informative responses I never got a response that my booking was confirmed and questions about payment were never answered. Strange. However, I contacted them through one of their guides and not through the main website. Given the positive feedback in other trip reports, this was probably an accidental hiccup. The Boreal Wildlife Centre in Viiksimo (<http://www.viiksimo.fi>) seems to be the only other lodge where wolf and wolverine sightings are quite regular and the set-up appears to be similar to Kuikka. There is also a bear watching place near Kuusamo called Karhu-Kuusamo (<http://www.karhukuusamo.com>). Because this lodge is in the area with the domestic reindeer industry, seeing wolves and wolverines here is extremely unlikely since they are still relentlessly persecuted. A large wolf pack that established itself in the Kuusamo area was slaughtered down to the last animal by local hunters. Almost everybody that I talked to told me that permits to shoot wolves are given away easily, but more worrying is that illegal hunting in winter on snow scooters takes place throughout the country but especially in the northern half of the country. Quite a discouraging situation for a country that still has enough good habitat for viable numbers of large carnivores. The illegal poaching situation is unfortunately no better in Sweden or Norway. I really hope that large-carnivore tourism can help a bit to change attitudes and policies in the countryside in northern Europe.

Kuusamo

A bit of a mecca for birdwatchers since it is the best-known place to see red-flanked bluetail in Europe. My feelings about this area are a bit mixed. After visiting the much quieter and wilder Kainuu region, this area seemed comparatively tame, touristy and often surprisingly birdless. The area is excellent for grouse watching (but so was the Kuikka area), but otherwise I got bored by driving the relatively large distances between various sites and seeing (or hearing) very little at each site. I realize that it was a little too early in the season

for most of the summer migrants, but even the resident birds appeared to be present in very low numbers (save a few common species such as chaffinch, siskin and brambling). Several local birders that I met said that early/mid May is excellent for the grouses but less ideal overall in the sense that many summer migrants haven't arrived yet and some of the Taiga birds are busy building nests and don't come to feeders/villages as often. My experiences in the Kuusamo region seemed to confirm that. Birding in the Kuhmo area was challenging too but seemed livelier than in the Kuusamo area (possibly also because of the warm summer weather in Kuusamo). I did not want to use a local guide, which possibly cost me rather difficult species such as Siberian tit and Siberian jay. In addition, some bird species – thrushes for example – were extremely shy in the Kuusamo region, which became especially evident when I got back to Oulu/Liminka where the same species were much more relaxed. In general, the number of birds that were flushed and never to be seen again was unusually high in the Kuusamo area. Weird. The most productive sites mentioned in Gosney's guide were the birdwatching tower southwest of Haataja on the road to Lohiranta (in the Naatikkavaara area in Gosney's guide, good light in the morning), Iivaara and Valtavaara. A little disappointing but okay were the Vuotonki birdwatching tower (only common stuff, no scoters and grebes on two visits, best light in the morning) and Ala-Kitka birdwatching tower (few waterbirds on an early morning visit but a possible little bunting sighting, i.e., against the light and not singing). Very disappointing were the Porontimantie track east of Kontainen, Lake Toranki and surroundings, the Viipusjärvi area, and the top of Kontainen (an evening and early morning visit produced a total of zero and three birds, a robin and a pair of common redstarts).



Female Black Grouse

I also did several hikes often with similar or better results than visiting well-established birdwatching sites in the area. I really enjoyed the hiking this early in the season. I met very few people on the trails in Oulanka, which are popular and very busy in summer. In Oulanka National Park area I walked the Pieni Karhunkierros trail (from Juuma) and the 8-km day-hike trail from the Kiutaköngäs visitor centre. I also drove to the village Liikasenvaara on the Russian border, which passes through good forest but had very disappointing birding; this normally quiet road was surprisingly busy for Finnish standards, but I visited on a Friday

afternoon when people seemed to be rushing to their weekend cottages. In the Kuusamo area I stayed in Ruka in Motel Willis West (www.wwsaloon.com). Simple but practical rooms with a good shower and small kitchen. Good value in Finland at 45 Euro for a single room (low season price). They also serve breakfast on request. The motel is well located for a lot of birding sites in the area (Valtavaara and Kontainen are only a 7-minute drive away). Only Iivaara is really out of the way. Just like in the Liminka area, none of the campgrounds were open at this time of the year around Ruka. It is worth stopping at the tourist office in Kuusamo for maps and any recent information. They are well informed about the birds that birders are looking for and the person that helped me, later called the owner of Motel Willis West to let me know that red-flanked bluetail had been sighted at Valtavaara. Very nice.





Brown Bears – probably a mating couple

MAMMAL LIST

Muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus* – one seen from the “hidden” tower (site 2 in Gosney) at Lake Toranki, one at Nissinjärvi from the E5 (about 10 km north of Kuusamo)

European Beaver *Castor fiber* – one at Kuikka Base Camp on the lake

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* – one near Era Eero Lodge, about 3-4 in the Kuikka area and a couple in the Kuusamo area, a few seen en route crossing the road

Water Vole *Arvicola terrestris* – a bulky rodent with roundish head in Liminglahti near Tower 4 was probably this species judging from the habitat

European Hare *Lepus europaeus* – two near Pukkila on May 11, one near Lumijoki in the Liminka area

Mountain Hare *Lepus timidus* – two near Elimyssalo, about 15 in the Kuusamo area, a few along the highway between Oulu and Kuusamo, about 6-7 on the owl excursion on May 19 [West European Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* – only seen as a roadkill]



Mountain Hare

Wolf

Gray Wolf *Canis lupus* – alpha female at the Swamp hide in Kuikka
Brown Bear *Ursus arctos* – at least two and possibly three at the Swamp hide in Kuikka
Least Weasel *Mustela nivalis* – one crossed the road a few kilometres from Iisalmi
[European Polecat *Mustela putorius* – a few roadkills]
Wolverine *Gulo gulo* – six different animals were seen at Era Eero
Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus* – one in the Liminka Bay area
Domestic Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus* – common
[Forest Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus fennicus* – non-tickable sighting of the backs of two shy animals that were feeding on the forest edge and subsequently fled into forest near Lentiira]



Brown Bear Male

BIRD LIST

A very handy tool for checking bird distributions is the Finnish Bird Atlas:

<http://atlas3.lintuatlas.fi/results/specieslist>

Whooper Swan *Cygnus Cygnus* – common, seen on all days (5-50)

Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* – two breeding near Kuikka base Camp, five seen from the Swamp Hide in Kuikka, one near Elimyssalo, two at Hirvisuo

Greylag Goose *Anser anser* – regular sightings in the area Liminka/Raahe/Vihanti

Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* – once seen en route

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas Penelope* – three along the E19, three at Kuikka Base Camp, a few on Lake Toranki

Common Teal *Anas crecca* – fairly common, seen on most days

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* – seen on most days, but low numbers (3-8)

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* – one near Iisalmi

Garganey *Anas querquedula* – one drake from the bridge at Iivaara (a rare bird in the Kuusamo area with only a few pairs breeding each year)

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* – a few on the Vihanti lakes, about 10-15 seen in the Liminglahti area

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* – common in the Kuusamo area and Vihanti lakes,

[Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra* – not seen, I didn't really look for this species and thought I could easily tick this at Papinjärvi on my way to the airport on the last day. Well, I am sure it is normally a good place to watch birds, but the place was packed (on a Sunday) with people sunbathing and swimming in the lake (still had red-throated diver and marsh harrier)]

[Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca* – not seen, a bit of a bogey bird for the trip, typically it went like this when I arrived at some birdwatching tower: "oh, twenty were here all morning, but they left 30 minutes ago, why don't you try Vuotonki tower", drive to Vuotonki, same ritual, also not present at Lake Toranki and the scoter lake in Gosney's guide (page 35, it is right at the turn-off for Route 81 to Rovaniemi), have seen this species before but thought it would be an easy one]

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* – very common almost everywhere but in particular in the east

Smew *Mergus albellus* – a pair on the lake that I think is called Rääpilampi (the lake at the turn-off for Route 81 on the Route 5 between Ruka and Kuusamo), a male and two females on Nissinjärvi along the E5 north of Kuusamo, a male on the 8-km Day Hiking Trail that starts at the visitor centre in Oulanka

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* – a total of six near Tower 4 in Liminglahti, a pair en route between Kuikka and Kuusamo, excellent views of three birds at Ala-Kitka birdtower

Goosander *Mergus merganser* – three from Tower 1 in Liminglahti, a pair on a lake near Nurmes, a male on the Pieni Karhunkierros hiking trail

Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia* – a pair seen well on the road to Tower 2 in Liminglahti, a pair was flushed en route between Kuikka Base Camp and the hides, a total of three males on Pieni Karhunkierros (birds were seen and heard singing around noon), of which one was seen very well for at least 20 minutes, excellent views of a pair for at least 15 minutes at the start of the trail to the Valtavaara ridge and another pair seen quite well on the Valtavaara plateau, a pair was flushed on the Iivaara trail, and a pair was seen reasonably well at the Arctic Warbler site in Naatikkavaara (see Gosney)

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* – a male was flushed on the road to Tower 2 in Liminglahti, a female along the road between Kopsa and Relletti, a displaying male was seen between Relletti and Revonlahti (more males were heard, but I could not see them), spectacular views of 1-2 females and 6-8 displaying males on the road between Kuikka and Elimyssalo

(the males were seen in full display and sometimes fighting with each other). Kuusamo area: a total of six females was seen on Hiltunsentie (the access road to Iivaara), one female was flushed (and for a change seen very well in flight) at Iivaara, males were also heard but not seen at Nissinjärvi along the E5 north of Kuusamo. A female was flushed on the 8-km Day Hike trail from the Oulanka visitor centre. A male was seen perched in beautiful evening light on the unpaved road called Ryötingintie that leads to Suorajärvi and Vuotonki. On the same road I had 5 females. On the Finnature excursion we saw just one female.



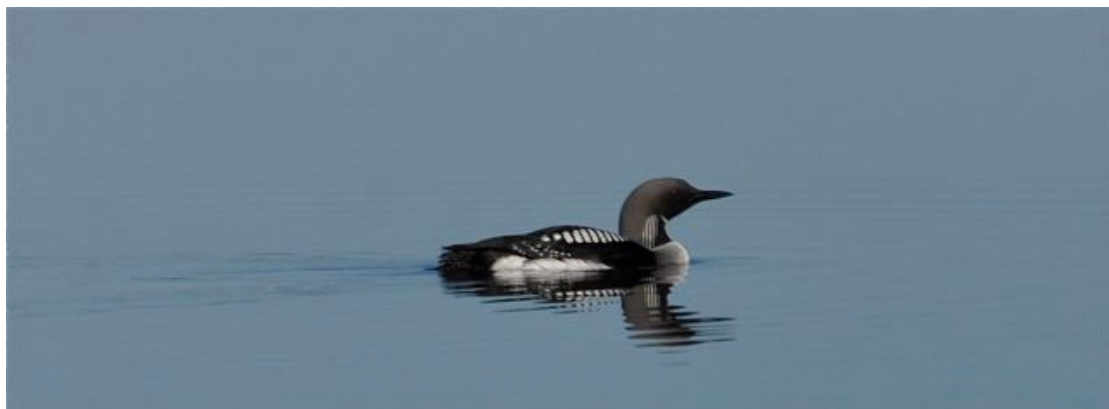
Black Grouse male

Capercaillie male

Western Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* – a female along the E19, another roadside female on the road between Iisalmi and Nurmes (Route 87), two females together along the Route 73 between Nurmes and Lieksa, 1-3 females and 1-2 males were usually seen en route from Kuikka Base Camp to the hides, outstanding views of females and displaying males on the road between Kuikka and Elimyssalo. Kuusamo area: a total of five females and one immature male was seen on Hiltunsentie (the access road Iivaara), two females and one male were flushed on the walking trail at Iivaara, superb views of a displaying male about two kilometers west of the Kontainen parking along the paved road, also several females on the same stretch on or along the road, one female at Naatikkavaara, and another female on Ryötingintie. Only a dead female (probably roadkill) was seen on the Finnature excursion.

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus* – a male at Vihanti lakes

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica* – all sightings in the Kuusamo area: one on lake Valkeainen along Hiltunsentie, a pair at Naatikkavaara, a pair on a lake near Suorajärvi, a pair on the lake directly west of Valtavaara



Black-throated Diver

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellate* – a pair at Papinjärvi near Oulu airport

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* – one near Nurmes

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* – at least eight from the birdwatching tower near Haataja (Naatikkavaara/Kuusamo area)

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus* – at least four at a small pond near Raahe

European Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* – one at the Porontimantie turn-off (this is the track a few hundred meters east of the Kontainen parking)

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* – one from the Swamp hide in Kuikka

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* – a distant bird from Tower 1 in Liminglahti on May 10, one immature from the Swamp hide in Kuikka (the immature bird was seen together with an adult bird from the hide one day later), a distant bird from the tower near Hataaja (Naatikkavaara/Kuusamo area)



Mobbed White-tailed Sea-Eagle

Western Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus* – about 3-4 in the Liminglahti area both on May 10 and 19, one male at Papinjärvi

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* – a male near Paavola on May 11, a male from Tower 1 and a male near Tower 5 in Liminglahti on May 19

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* – a female was seen on the nest during the Finnature excursion

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* – one west of Vihanti, one en route to Kuikka from Era Eero,

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* – one in the Kuikka area

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* – one seen about 40 km south of Kuusamo along the E5

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* – one west of Liminka, one in the Kuikka area, one en route between Kuikka and Kuusamo, two on the Finnature excursion

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* – one flying over the lake at Kuikka Base Camp

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* – one in flight on the Pieni Karhunkierros hiking trail

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* – one at Liminglahti

Common Crane *Grus grus* – one near Paavola, two along E8 near Rantsila, at least five from the Swamp hide at Kuikka, at least four from the tower at Haataja, about 10 in a field near Lumijoki on the Finnature excursion

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* – a migrating group of at least 25 birds was seen just south of Revonlahti on May 10, three in Elimyssalo, two in field in the Tower 5 area in Liminglahti

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* – fairly common to common, seen on most days

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* – at least 100 including a few males on May 9 and 10 at Liminglahti, eight spectacularly plumaged males in a field near Revonlahti, males and females (about 15) seen on both nights from the Swamp hide in Kuikka, some males would do ritualized fighting and I saw one pair mate, three males at Vihanti lakes on May 19.

Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* – one flushed but seen quite well in flight on the trail to Tower 2 at Liminglahti, two flushed from roadside pools along the E19

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* – at least four with display flights from the trail to Tower 2 at Liminglahti, two in the city centre of Iisalmi, several seen/heard en route

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* – one near Tupos on May 9, three feeding on the ground and seen for 45 min on the access road to Tower 2 in Liminglahti, one in flight along the E19, one crossed the road walking near Kopsa (east of Raahe), one flushed at the Liminglahti visitor centre parking at 2.245 am while waiting for the owl excursion to start



Woodcocks

Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa* – only a few (3-5) on several visits to Tower 1 in Liminglahti, about 5-6 in a field near Revonlahti, one in a field in the Tower 5 area in Liminglahti

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* – a group of about 10 was seen from Tower 1 in Liminglahti, which allowed a nice comparison with the curlews that were also around.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* – common in the Liminglahti area, regular en route.

Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* – several dozens in total on May 10 from Towers 1-3 and five from Tower 1 on May 19 in the Liminglahti area, about five from the Kuikka hide on May 12.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* – common, seen at Liminglahti, Era Eero, Kuikka, Elimyssalo, Kuusamo area and en route

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* – common, most were seen in the Kuusamo area (in particular, Naatikkavaara and Oulanka NP area), but also Kuikka and Elimyssalo
Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* – common seen at Liminglahti, Era Eero, Kuikka, Elimyssalo, Kuusamo area and en route
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* – common, seen at Liminglahti, Era Eero, Kuikka, Vihanti Lakes, Elimyssalo, Kuusamo area and en route



Little Gull



Dipper

Little Gull *Larus minutus* – fairly common; only a few at close range from the birdwatching towers in Liminglahti, several dozens at the Vihanti lakes, excellent close views of 4-5 from the tower at Hataaja, small numbers (3-7) in front of the birdwatching towers at Lake Toranki, a few at the Vuotonki tower
Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* – common
Mew Gull *Larus canus* – common
Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* – common
Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* – common



Lesser Black-backed Gull

Caspian Tern *Sterna caspia* – one from the main tower at Liminglahti visitor centre
 Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* – common, seen in low numbers on most days. Seen in all areas visited.
 Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea* – two on a lake near Kuusamo
 Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon) *Columba livia* – only in Helsinki
 Stock Dove *Columba oenas* – a group of three near Oulu
 Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* – probably common, but more shy/less visible than in Central Europe, about 1-5 daily
 European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* – only seen in Helsinki near the airport
 [Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* – heard only, but heard every day]
 Eurasian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum* – one male on the Finnature Owl excursion
 Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* – one female on a natural nest on the Finnature Owl excursion
 Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* – one near Paavola on May 11, one on a roadside on May at 2.30 am on the way to the Finnature Owl excursion
 Tengmalm's Owl *Aegolius funereus* – two in the nestbox on the Finnature Owl excursion
 Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* – one flushed from his nesting tree on the Finnature Owl excursion



Ural Owl at the nest

Short-eared Owl at "night"

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* – one west of Vesikaari (near Tupos), a bizarre sighting of two that flew over the main road at eye level near Pippola on the E19 (one strangely did not notice my car and almost flew straight into the front window), a pair along the road between Elimyssalo and Kuikka, two seen on the trail to the rapids in Oulanka, heard on the Finnature Owl excursion
 Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* – common, seen in all areas visited, between 1 and 15 daily
 Three-toed Woodpecker *Picoides tridactylus* – unsatisfactory flight views near Elimyssalo
 Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis* – heard singing and seen as a dot in the sky on the trail to Tower 2 in Liminglahti
 Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* – first seen at Vihanti lakes on May 10, seen on most days in varying numbers (5-50)
 House Martin *Delichon urbicum* – first seen near Kuikka, then seen on most days, but usually low numbers (<20 daily)

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* – quite common, seen at Elimyssalo, Kuikka, Iivaara, and Valtavaara among others

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis* – about 4-5 scattered sightings throughout the trip

Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava* – two from the Swamp hide in Kuikka, a group of at least 30-35 in Elimyssalo, one in Hirvisuo

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* – abundant throughout

Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus* – at least three between Kuikka and Elimyssalo, three rather distant birds scoped (after I heard them calling) on the unpaved road Ryötingintie that leads to Suorajärvi and Vuotonki in the Kussamo area

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus* – one at the rapids in Käylä (15 km west of the main Oulanka visitor centre)

Dunnock *Prunella Modularis* – one near Iisalmi on May 11

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* – fairly common (1-3 sightings on most days), seen at Era Eero, Kuikka, Valtavaara, Iivaara, Finnature excursion and Vihanti Lakes among other places

Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* – a total of three males (two adult males and one second-year male) were seen from the parking lot at Kontainen on the lower slopes of Valtavaara and Kontainen. One bird was seen in flight and then perched on the ridge at Valtavaara



Record shot of the bluetail



Honey Buzzard

Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* – common

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra* – a pair near the visitor centre in Liminglahti, a male near Kopsa (east of Raahe)

Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* – one in Elimyssalo, two en route between Kuikka and Kuusamo on May 15, three along Hiltunsentie (Iivaara road),

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* – fairly common: mostly a shy forest bird in the areas I visited, tamer on the west coast; seen on the Pieni Karhunkierros trail, Elimyssalo, Liminglahti and Vihanti Lakes area and on the Finnature excursion

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* – common

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* – fairly common to common
 Redwing *Turdus iliacus* – fairly common to common
 Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* – fairly common to common
 Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus* – one seen well at the Vihanti lakes area, another bird seen in the Tower 4 area in Liminglahti
 [Blyth's Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus dumetorum* – played the call a few times in habitat that I thought looked okay, bit got nothing]
 [Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca* – heard only]
 Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis* – one near the visitor centre in Liminglahti
 [Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides* – tried the call several times, but no response and no calling birds, probably too early]
 [Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* – tried the call several times, but no response and no calling birds, probably too early]
 [Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* – didn't see the bird or hear its characteristic call]
 Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita* – one southwest of Liminka on Finnature Owl excursion
 Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* – very common
 [Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* – heard only]
 Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* – one at the start of the Iivaara trail, one at Läntisranta on May 19, about 3-4 on the Finnature Owl Excursion
 European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* – several pairs nesting in boxes at Kuikka Base Camp, several in Elimyssalo, at least en route between Kuikka and Lentiira on May 15, one female on the Finnature Owl Excursion
 Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* – only one near Revonlahti
 Willow Tit *Parus montanus* – one at Kuikka Base Camp, one in Elimyssalo
 Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* – fairly common
 Great Tit *Parus major* – fairly common to common
 Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio* – one between Relletti and Revonlahti, one in the countryside east of Raahe
 Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor* – one between Kuikka and Elimyssalo
 Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* – one near Rantsila on May 11, one near Lentiira, one near
 Common Magpie *Pica pica* – common in urban and rural areas, fairly common in forest areas
 Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* – common in urban and rural areas, scarce or absent in forest areas
 Rook *Corvus frugilegus* – only seen 35 on the owl Finnature excursion along the roadside
 Hooded Crow *Corvus corone cornix* – common but in lower daily numbers (5-20) than I expected
 Common Raven *Corvus corax* – common at Era Eero, Kuikka area, regular sightings in the Kuusamo area, about 35 in total on the Finnature Owl excursion
 Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* – only once near Liminka and a few at Helsinki airport
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* – only one male seen near Lumijoki!
 Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* – abundant
 Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* – common, heard very often but often not that easy to see. About 10-15 birds seen including some beautiful males.
 Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* – a few in Elimyssalo
 Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* – common to abundant
 [Linnet *Carduelis cannabina* – a possible one near Raahe, flight views from the car]
 Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea* – really surprised that I saw only one bird on the whole trip, one immature/subadult bird seen at Läntisranta (took me a while to sort it out, but bird was seen at close range for a long time, pink/reddish rump seen when it flew off, clear white bar on the wing)

Two-barred Crossbill *Loxia leucoptera* – excellent views of a pair from the hiking trail in Elimyssalo, an unexpected bonus

Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* – three sightings of a total of about 7-8 birds (3 males) seen on the hiking trail in Elimyssalo, a male seen well at Valtavaara

[Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator* – heard only just when I got the bluetail in the scope]

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* – a pair on the road between Kopsa and Relletti on May 10, a female along the E19 on May 11, a pair on the feeders at Kuikka, a pair in Elimyssalo, a pair on the hiking trails at Läntisranta on May 19

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella* – common in the Oulu/Liminka/Raahe/Vihanti area, scarce to uncommon elsewhere

[Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* – a probably sighting of a female at the tower near Haataja]

[Little Bunting *Emberiza pusilla* – poor views against the light appeared to be this species at Ala-Kitka]

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* – fairly common in Liminka Bay and Kuusamo area, also seen in Kuikka, Elimyssalo, Vihanti lakes.



Hazel Grouse male in Oulanka national park



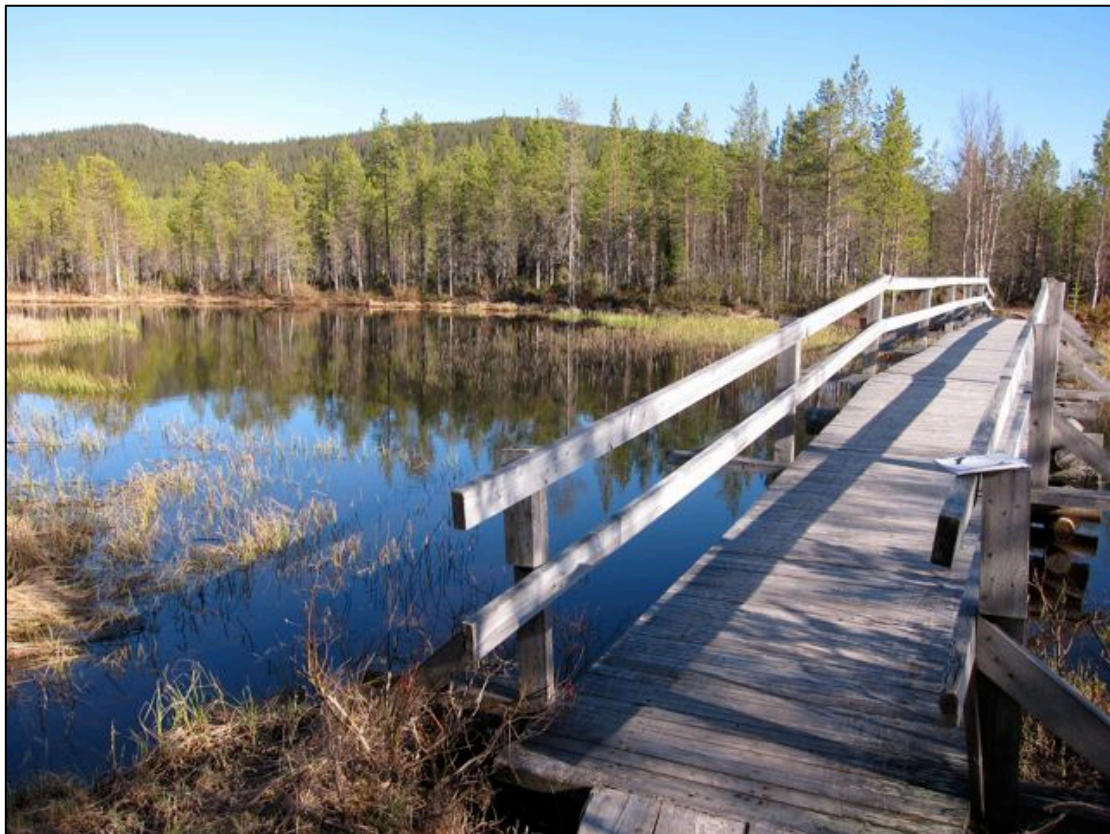
Cranes

HERPS

Grass snake *Natrix natrix* – one seen well on the road, the snake was still very sluggish (it only narrowly escaped becoming a roadkill)

Adder *Vipera berus* – two were seen on the road near Värminkoski. When I realized that I was driving in the wrong direction in the area, I turned around and only a few minutes after seeing the snakes I found out that both had been killed by passing cars. Real shame. A couple more were seen crossing the road near Raahe.

Viviparous lizard *Zootoca vivipara* – a few at a former Great Grey Owl breeding site on the Finnature excursion



Bridge at Iivaara with the hill in the background