

## Sweden - Trip Report 29.5.2007 - 4.6.2007

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**Guides:** Daniel Green, Martin Rydberg Heden - (Sweden)



*Ptarmigan - Nipfjallet (B.J.Hill)*

### **Introduction:**

BH had visited the Black River Valley (Svartadalen) in Sweden in 2006 with a tour organized by *Birdwatch* magazine in conjunction with *Wildwings*, and had always intended to return to visit either this, or another region, in 2007. After several discussions with Daniel, the three of us agreed to test the viability of a two centre visit by undertaking a pilot trip. One section would cover Svartadalen and the other a plateau area in north-west Dalarna province. The latter is an extension southwards of the taiga and montane areas of southern Lapland, within driving distance of Svartadalen, and holds a number of species normally encountered much farther north. For various reasons, the only dates suitable for all of us were 29 May to 4 June, effectively six days birding.

**Tuesday 29 May**

**Svartadalen Area**

**Weather:**

**Bright on arrival, some cloud and sunny intervals but deteriorating towards evening, with a strong westerly wind developing and thick cloud cover. Light rain at times later.**

Delayed by an hour, we arrived at Vasteras airport late in the afternoon to be met by Daniel and a smart new roomy mini-bus. As we drove to the first stop, he outlined a draft itinerary which would need to be flexible for a number of reasons, but which had pre-booked overnight accommodation we would have to work round. A brief food stop at a small picnic site at Bjornon produced three pairs of Slavonian Grebe, first views of Goldeneye and an opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the strange local dialect of Pied Flycatcher, a common species in all woodland habitats throughout Sweden.

Driving towards Svartadalen, we were not encouraged by the news that a cyclical rodent population crash had made it a terrible year for owls, although Daniel was hopeful we would, at least, see Great Grey either later in the day or at the end of the trip. We paused at a small quarry enroute (a known site for Eagle Owl although none were in residence this year) and located at least two singing Ortolan Buntings, a species now much reduced in numbers and very local in Sweden. We heard our first Thrush Nightingale and saw two Marsh Harriers quartering the fields.

None of us were very optimistic as we set off for Great Grey Owl that evening, the windy and cool conditions were hardly favourable and it was no surprise the owl failed to show. Some time covering the area did produce four roding Woodcock and a breeding Green Sandpiper. Just before dark, four Common Cranes flew over the forest, calling loudly. We stayed overnight at Elizabeth Quasthoff's excellent B & B in Flackebo.

**Wednesday 30 May**

**Svartadalen Area - p.m. drive to Dalarna**

**Weather:**

**Rain for most of the day, occasionally heavy. Some brief dry periods, but always cloudy and cool. Light northerly wind at times.**

We breakfasted early, to the sound of Thrush Nightingale and Garden Warbler singing nearby and left to meet Daniel's friend Michael who is studying the local woodpeckers. He took us to a burnt clearing, where an isolated stump held a Three-toed Woodpecker nest. A brief piece of mimicry soon encouraged the sitting female to poke her head out. We waited at a safe distance, and although the male did not visit, we had good views of a

flying male Black Grouse, six Crossbills and a foraging Wryneck. Several Tree Pipits were singing, with possible brief snatches of Woodlark in the distance. Moving to another site, while trying to attract a hoped-for Grey-headed Woodpecker we got excellent views of a male Black Woodpecker, and saw both Green and Great Spotted. An Osprey gave good views, and a Capercaillie clattered away noisily ahead of us. Michael also monitors the local Tengmalm's Owls, putting up the nest boxes and ringing the nestlings. His news was not good. Of 150 boxes in the region, none showed any signs of successful breeding. He had one box yet to visit, and would do so with us. Not hopeful, we waited at a distance while he climbed the ladder to the box. Contrary to all our pessimistic expectations, and to our delight, we heard the angry sounds of 'bill-snapping' from within. Michael extracted the owl, giving us all an opportunity to see it at close quarters. She was sitting on five eggs, but Michael said there was no chance of success, as prey items in the nest consisted only of a couple of long-dead shrews. Normally there would be several half-eaten voles. In contrast, in the same area last year, the 20 boxes he monitored all produced good numbers of young. We had witnessed first hand just how closely the breeding of this owl is tied to the rodent population cycle. Later another ringer, Karl, took us to one of his Ural Owl nest boxes. Due almost entirely to the provision of nest boxes, Ural Owls have extended their range into this area of Sweden. This year they are faring little better than Tengmalm's. This particular female was persisting with the hopeless task of incubating five infertile eggs, and gave very obliging views as Karl examined the box. Although a few owlets have been raised this year, most breeding attempts have been aborted. It was now time to drive northwards, reflecting on the gloomy news that a slow moving depression, and its associated fronts, was now directly over us.

## **Thursday 31 May**

### **Fullufjallet National Park and surrounding area**

#### **Weather:**

**Steady persistent rain all day. Cool.**

Late yesterday afternoon we met our guide for the north, Martin. He had mixed news. Spring was very late on the plateau this year and, most unusually, snow was still lying in quantity in some areas. This would inevitably have an effect on the birds, and would certainly make walking more difficult. It was even possible some species had yet to arrive. We had a brief stop to check, unsuccessfully, for Rustic Buntings before overnighting at a youth hostel.

Hopeful of some improvement in the weather, it was depressing to wake to yet more cloud and rain. Nevertheless, we made our way to the park, and walked to the impressive waterfall at Njupeskar, the highest in Sweden. Breeding Ring Ouzels can be seen on the rock face, or at least could have been had the misty conditions relented! The waterfall itself was still spectacular, even in the damp conditions and poor visibility. Totally

unexpectedly in the almost treeless conditions, five migrant Spotted Flycatchers were taking advantage of a large hatch of flies from the nearby river. We saw Dipper and a breeding pair of Grey Wagtails. The latter species has been expanding northwards in Sweden but this was still a notable record. Species in the park, hardly surprisingly, were a total contrast to Svartadalen, with smart summer-plumaged Bramblings in abundance, and several Common Crossbills and Siskins in the pines. Excellent close views were obtained of the former. After an hour or so, we located two Siberian Jays, a new species for us all. Although looking rather bedraggled in the rain, they were very tame and did much to raise our spirits.

Despite the rain, we persisted as best we could, although leaving the bus at Njipfallet for mountain species was clearly a hopeless proposition. The rain, driven by a strong wind, was horizontal and heavy. All of us were relieved to seek shelter in a well-equipped hut and dry out while eating an excellent lunch around the wood burner. Later stops in the rain, nevertheless, produced many good species, including pairs of breeding Velvet Scoter and Greenshank. Rather surprisingly, we still managed over fifty species for the day, despite the conditions, and saw the first of many Reindeer.

We checked in at a bunkhouse in Tannas, with a very good restaurant alongside, for the first night of two, cheered by the news that Rough-legged Buzzard bred regularly on the nearby cliffs, and by a more upbeat weather forecast.

## **Friday 1 June**

### **Flatruet and vicinity**

**Cold but bright start, with near freezing temperatures at first. Warming by midday to around 20c, with bright sunny skies. Strong northerly wind gradually decreasing through the day. Cold again later.**

The road to Flatruet had only recently been opened for the summer, and the weather as we arrived on the plateau was more reminiscent of January in Scotland than 1 June as we arrived. Nevertheless, it was bright and sunny for a change. The scenery in parts, with much snow still lying, was breathtaking and many stops were purely to indulge photography. Brief examination of a small stand of dwarf juniper produced our first singing Bluethroat, a species we soon found to be common. Although flat, the walking was difficult in places with deep snow and boggy ground quite treacherous at times. The snow often gave way, plunging the heaviest amongst us into the freezing melt water beneath. We soon saw our first breeding Golden Plovers and Dunlin, then a small party of Whimbrel and, attracted by a mellow song, an immaculate male Lapland Bunting. So smart was this bird that SB was tempted to make it the bird of the trip. We watched several song flights, and copulation with a female. Crossing the road, we separated to cover as much area as possible, in line abreast. Two pair of Dotterel were soon located, and a pair of non-breeding Cranes, unusual here. A distant presumed Ptarmigan turned

out, on closer examination, to be a Willow Grouse but no less attractive. BH then walked past two Red-necked Phalaropes on a tiny pool. They took flight as he attracted the rest of the group and all saw them. Clearly just arrived, we later found 23 on a larger pool, with many more probably hidden by poolside vegetation. Arctic Terns were also settling down, and Daniel then saw an incoming Long-tailed Skua. This proved to be one of three, and we had excellent views as it jousting with a Common Gull, before settling to rest on a tussock. In poor lemming years this species may not stay to breed. We did see some lemming tracks where the melting snow had receded, so there may be hope this year. By late morning we had covered a large area for few birds, but these were all quality species, and were capped when DH, some way behind us shouted 'eagle'. Flying towards us, low overhead, we expected Golden but were instead treated to excellent views an adult White-tailed. We later discovered that this was a first record for the region.

Descending, we saw a drake Long-tailed Duck on a small pond, had prolonged views of a soaring Golden Eagle and a male Hen Harrier carrying prey.

While unloading the mini-bus at Tannas, Daniel and BH saw a circling Rough-legged Buzzard, but unfortunately it drifted away with the rest of the party inside the bunkhouse. We ate earlier than usual and left for a site close to the Norwegian border for Great Snipe, a little anxious as there was some doubt whether or not the lek site was still snowbound. The ascent was brief but arduous, with deep snow in places, and care had to be taken not to fall through it into flowing streams. It was not the place to break a leg. However, we all negotiated it safely and were relieved to find the lek boggy and snow-free, although surrounded by high snow banks. We were then treated, for several minutes around midnight, to the extraordinary performance of these birds. At least 15 birds were at the lek, and they seemed totally indifferent to our presence, displaying at close range, an undoubted highlight of the trip.

Returning to the bunkhouse, we saw a Short-eared Owl hunting in what was still reasonable light, although it was now well gone midnight.

We were now faced with a difficult choice. Martin and Daniel had news of a pair of Gyr Falcons breeding on a cliff face near the Great Snipe lek. We could return there the following day, or search for Siberian Tit. The tit would be a new bird for all of us, but Gyr was still a temptation. Time restrictions dictated it had to be one or the other. Like the woodpeckers, Siberian Tit becomes more difficult to locate later in the spring as feeding stations are deserted and breeding gets underway. We had, however, seen several Willow Tits in various places so thought there may be a chance of Siberian, so we opted in favour of this species.

## **Saturday 2 June**

### **Near Idre**

#### **Weather:**

**Fine bright and sunny, often very warm. Calm.**

With the wet weather of a few days ago now a distant memory, we stopped at an area of dwarf birch and conifer, surrounding a lake, Martin's best site for Siberian Tit. The terrain was, again, difficult in places and it took us all morning to cover it. There were few birds of any kind, apart from Willow Warblers, odd Willow Tits, Bramblings and Pied Flycatchers, but Redstarts were at least abundant, and we found one nest with 6 eggs in an open stump. Four pairs of Velvet Scoter, and a Black-throated Diver were seen on the lake. Sadly we found no Siberians. Despite spending most of the day searching, we had no success. We eventually returned to Nipfjallet, where driving rain had prevented us from leaving the transport a few days earlier. Conditions were now perfect as we walked up a low mountain. Here we had distant views of one pair of Ptarmigan (missed by BH) and extremely close views of another, not far from the path. Typically, apart from Meadow Pipits and Wheatears, birds were few. More walking should have produced Snow Bunting and Ring Ouzel, but we opted to descend and try another nearby forest feeding station, seeing only Willow Tit. Clearly this was not the right time of year for its Siberian cousin. Feeling we had given it a good crack, we called it a day and made our way to a hotel in Idre for our last night in the area.

## **Sunday 3 June**

### **Idre and enroute to Svartadalen**

#### **Weather:**

**Warm and sunny. Cloudless skies.**

Ever optimistic we paid a final early morning visit to the feeding station before departure. Again we saw no Siberians and, perhaps tellingly, not even a Willow Tit. We were rewarded with both Parrot and Common Crossbill, and good views of a Three-toed Woodpecker. Most of the party saw two (northern) Bullfinches. We then began the five hour journey south to Flackebo, knowing that Daniel and Martin, plugged into the Swedish grapevine, had planned a couple of stops enroute. The first of

these, at a pleasant wetland reserve, gave us breeding Whooper Swans, Common Cranes and an Osprey, but the hoped-for Red-necked Grebes remained hidden.

We then made a small detour to a working quarry, where an obliging Eagle Owl was roosting in shade on the rock face, giving excellent views.

Entering a small but busy town, we were rather surprised to be driven into an industrial estate, with factories and lorry parks, but the reason soon became clear. In the unkempt corner of one premises, we came upon a 'mini-twitch', with four or five Swedish birders armed with bins and scopes. The target was a singing Blyth's Reed Warbler, and one can only imagine the audience it might have attracted in the U.K. Mid-afternoon, and a hot one at that, is not an optimum time for seeing this species and it remained tantalizingly out of view, although singing persistently. A Marsh Warbler, just a few hundred metres away was much more obliging, showing well at close range. Two Common Rosefinches were also singing - not bad for a brief stop.

Here we said goodbye to Martin, arriving at Elizabeth's in Flackebo for an early evening meal, prior to giving owls another try.

Conditions were much better than our first attempt, just about ideal in fact, with calm settled weather. A couple of Swedish birders, and a photographer or two were at the site as we arrived, but the Great Grey had not yet showed. We walked for a while up a forest track bordering the meadow, coming across our first Red-backed Shrike, a cooperative male that posed stationary on a fence post for ages, and giving an excellent photo opportunity.

After a couple of hours, the owl still had not appeared, and we faced another difficult decision. Knowing it also hunted another meadow a couple of kilometres away, Daniel suggested visiting there while maintaining phone contact with a Swedish birder at the main site. Fortunately for all of us, SB for whom this was a new bird, vetoed this idea and received just reward when she saw the owl fly in within fifteen minutes. Had we left we would have missed it, because although it gave a good performance and all saw it well, it soon caught a rodent and flew off over the trees. Its appearance made Daniel happy too, maintaining his hundred percent record this year, in showing it to visiting birders.

Nearby, we had superb views of a Pygmy Owl, perched not atop a distant pine as is usual, but at close range, peering down at us from the branches of a birch a matter of feet away, and in good light too. It seemed as keen on investigating us as we were it.

Midnight saw us returning to Flackebo, and on the outskirts of the village, while watching a distant Elk, a Corncrake was heard calling. Leaving the car, it soon became apparent that three were calling from the same field, one quite close. Patience soon proved this bird inquisitive, it left the field, crossed a small ditch and 'craked' at us from close range by the roadside in full view. A brilliant end to a good day.

## **Monday 4 June**

### **Weather:**

### **Another warm sunny day**

An afternoon departure from Vasteras gave the opportunity to spend the morning on some last-minute birding around Flackebo. Rising early, we made another attempt for Grey-headed Woodpecker but although we heard a bird calling not far away it proved too elusive. Walking a rough track through a clearing, we flushed a Woodcock from underfoot and saw four newly-hatched chicks at very close range. The female took exception to our brief, but close examination, returning to fly at our heads, skua fashion. This discovery meant a more difficult return journey to avoid disturbing them again, but it was worth it. Several Tree Pipits were singing, probably the hosts of the local Cuckoos, and we found two male Red-backed Shrikes, one singing from a low stand of conifers. We heard a brief Wryneck call, and a little later Daniel saw one obligingly leave a nest hole in a tall dead trunk. It flew to another stump and spent some minutes there quietly preening. Like the 'true' woodpeckers, Wryneck becomes more difficult to see later in spring, so we felt fortunate. All except BH (to whom, like Goldcrests and Grasshopper Warblers this species is now inaudible!) saw a small party of Crested Tits moving energetically through some tall pines. Butterflies were abundant in the clearing, and many of these, such as Northern Wall Brown and Northern Chequered Skipper, were of interest.

Apart from the eagles, Common Buzzard, a single Rough-legged Buzzard, a couple of Ospreys and the odd Kestrel we had not done well for raptors. More time spent around Flackebo, where both Hobby and Honey Buzzard are common would undoubtedly have remedied this. We did spend the last hour available there. While the rest of the party watched a White-tailed Eagle being bombed by Hooded Crows, BH visited a small garden not far away where an Icterine Warbler had been heard. Although not singing, the bird showed well, but had disappeared into cover by the time he'd managed to attract the group.

Reluctantly we left Lake Flacksjon, with some forty or so Black Terns and twenty odd Arctic Terns quartering its waters, and made the trip to Vasteras for the flight home.

## Summary

This two-centre trip is certainly viable, although our experience shows that six days is probably the minimum time period possible. There is not much margin should a desired species fail to show. For example, time constraint made it impossible to re-visit the Rustic Bunting site. Had we done so this would have been at the expense of Blyth's Reed and Marsh Warbler - quite possibly Eagle Owl too. Difficult choices between species had to be made at times. Visiting the areas in Dalarna is a bit of a gamble too with regards timing, and we might have been a little fortunate here. With the late spring, some species had clearly just arrived. On the other hand, perhaps because of this, they were conspicuous. We regarded the snow-covered scenery, so unusual in early June, as a real bonus. Another day in this region, and in Flackebo would have been ideal.

There is clearly a need for some personal compromise with regard to species. Early/mid May is certainly better for woodpeckers (BH saw all available species in 2006), and is probably much better for Siberian Tit - maybe Siberian Jay too. There is a much greater chance of seeing these, and Nutcracker at forest feeding stations. On the other hand, you could not visit Dalarna any earlier than we did, indeed many of the roads do not open until the snow clears. This conflict between optimum times for the two areas probably leaves only a brief window for effectively combining them in one visit.

The terrain around Flackebo is very easy, posing no problems for the unfit. This is not, however, true of Dalarna where some of the walking is quite demanding, and would still be with no snow. Don't expect much sleep either, although with twenty-four hour daylight in the north this does not seem to matter much.

Overall it was an immensely enjoyable trip, with some great birds. We did not do well for raptors, nor for waders (there were several flooded areas in Svartadalen but none this year) yet still saw 146 species. Many thanks to Daniel and Martin, both excellent and obliging guides. Super cooks too.

BJH  
21.6.2007