

SWEDEN - Part 2 (VASTMANLAND & GASTRIKLAND) 25-26 February 2006

The Team: Neil Osborne, Jimmy Pattinson, John Rayner, Fred Wake.

We had previously visited the Svartadalen (Black River) area of Vastmanland in May 2005. Those of us who had yet to see Hawk Owl and Siberian Jay returned for a winter visit in February 2006. The winter of 2005/2006 proved to be exceptionally good for Hawk Owls and many had been located in areas well into southern Sweden (there had been 10+ in Vastmanland alone). Cheap flights were still available from Luton to Vasteras (£49 each, RyanAir) so our party of four again arranged for Daniel Green to guide us (2750SKR each for 2 days guiding plus accommodation and all meals, even including beers).

Saturday 25 February 2006. After driving through the night we departed Luton airport at 06.50 and arrived at Vasteras, with a 1hour time adjustment, at 09.45. Daniel was waiting to greet us and, after a detour into town to upgrade our Volvo estate (now £18 each) we hit the road around 10.45.

Quite a lot of snow had fallen in southern Sweden and the air temperature was -2°C. The skies were a cloudless blue as we headed west along the E2, passing a red fox that was hunting voles in classical fashion by leaping high and pounding the snow. Daniel drove us the whole time and this was just as well as we were unused to driving on solid ice with studded tyres (minor roads are ploughed but not gritted so the regular thaw then freeze make for skating rink conditions). Corvids were well represented with passing Hooded Crows, Ravens, Magpies and silvery-headed Jackdaws.

After 20k we had moved onto minor roads and Daniel advised us to start looking. Almost immediately we located a superb Hawk Owl as it stared down at us from a vantage point on top of an electricity pylon. Obliging it then moved to a more photogenic perch on the top of a pine tree. Coffee and an excellent picnic lunch were also enjoyed as we watched the Owl and a flock of 12 Waxwings passed by as we were leaving.

Whilst heading north towards Flackebo a stop and search in suitable habitat produced another Hawk Owl (which ignored the dead vole on offer), a White-tailed Eagle and a flock of Mealy Redpolls that contained a good candidate for Arctic Redpoll. Lynx tracks were noted in the snow but that's as close as we got. Round the corner 6 Northern Bullfinches, Nuthatch, and Yellowhammers and were at garden feeders.

Sunshine continued unabated as we made our way to Flackebo, passing en route, a large female Goshawk, 2 more White-tailed Eagles, 2 female Black Grouse picking buds from the tops of birch trees and a Great Grey Shrike. Dusk was approaching (17.00) as once more we called in to meet Elisabeth at Klockargarden B&B for a wash and brush up. She put on a 'snack' of cheese, ham, hot bread, salad, cake, biscuits and coffee - merely an interlude before our evening meal proper. Two Moose were close by the road near the village as we left.

We made the longer journey north to Jdraas near Ockelbo in the county of Gastrikland, stopping only to buy hot dog sausages for next morning, a favourite of Sibe Jays apparently. We arrived at our accommodation Jdraas Herrgard B&B at 20.20 and dinner was at a fairly hurried 20.30 but another 3-course meal was duly despatched. Perhaps it's because birders never know how long it will be till the

next meal that they adopt an 'eat it whilst it's there' philosophy. The overnight temperature was a chilly -11°C but we slept like logs.

Sunday 26 February 2006. Breakfast at 07.00, half-cloud skies and a large Greenfinch, Tree Sparrow and Redpoll flock passed over a local chap who was feeding and hitching up his dog sled team. A Grey-headed Woodpecker called and flew from a nearby tree in the village.

It was only a short drive, then a 1K walk down a deep snow, forest track to Kittan feeding station. After baiting suitable perches with fat and hot dog sausage we settled down to an increasingly nervous wait as nothing happened for 30 minutes. Great-spotted Woodpecker and Crested Tit came down to feed and interesting silhouettes flew briefly overhead whilst Daniel lit a fire. Noise and wood smoke apparently attract the Jays as they like to investigate potential food sources. Then, the magic moment as 3 Siberian Jays swooped in to settle immediately on the fat and sausages. Cameras whirred and clicked as the Jays performed beautifully from as close as 2 metres. Eurasian Jays added to the growing Corvid list and the spare sausages were cooked on the fire by the hungrier of our party.

Grey clouds had built up during the morning and snow began to fall as we walked back to the car - a good time to make the return journey south.

En route we added Goldeneye and 4 Black-bellied Dippers on the Nedre Dalalvan River, then made an impromptu roadside stop to photograph a superb Pygmy Owl in a snow storm. This species hunts diurnally in the winter. A fly-by Rough-legged Buzzard demanded attention before we arrived, deep into Vastmanland, at Daniel's Skillberg feeding station, the site of our Hazelhen the previous May. Nutcrackers again eluded us, perhaps we were a little late in the day, but 6 Tit species plus Nuthatch and Treecreeper, both sporting the unfamiliar white underparts of Fennoscandia races, made good photographic subjects.

We finished off with a tour round local by-roads to see what we could find. This amounted to a second Pygmy Owl (Alvkullen), Great Grey Shrike and 3 Roe Deer (Staffansbo), Green Woodpecker, a very smart, perched Rough-legged Buzzard (Haraker), another Dipper (Svana) and a female Moose with large calf in fading light.

We again arrived at Elisabeth's at dusk for showers and a relaxed evening meal whilst we recapped the weekend's events over a couple of beers. Later, Daniel drove us the 45-minute journey back to Vasteras airport and we were in plenty of time for our 22.40 flight which departed on time and landed 5 minutes early. After a tedious wait for luggage we piled into the Travelodge at Toddington at 01.00.

Monday 27th February 2006. The pager did not show much action so a side trip to Norfolk was abandoned, a pair of displaying Goshawks at Welbeck raptor watch point was the only noteworthy record on the return journey north. It was interesting to reflect that all the Song Thrushes, Pied Wagtails and Chaffinches etc. that were so conspicuously abundant here in the UK could have originated from Sweden, where they are summer visitors.

All in all this was a very pleasant way to spend a weekend, the emphasis being on quality rather than quantity, with a total of 37 species. Again Daniel Green proved to be a most reliable and hospitable guide and we would have no hesitation in recommending him highly. He can be contacted at daniel@svartadalen.nu .

John Rayner 06/03/2006

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Mallard. Only 2 - rare inland in winter
2. Goldeneye. 10 from bridge over Nedre Dalalven River
3. White-tailed Eagle. 1 near Ramnas and 2 en route to Flackebo.
4. Rough-legged Buzzard. 2 very clean adults at Gullvalla and Haraker
5. Goshawk. A large female flew by en route to Flackebo
6. Sparrowhawk. 1 near Flackebo
7. Black Grouse. 2 females feeding in the tops of birch trees
8. Feral Pigeon.
9. Northern Hawk Owl. The joint highlight of the trip with stunning views of 2 individuals near Koping and near Lisso Angar.
10. Eurasian Pygmy Owl. 1 in a snow storm at Hillebro and a second at Alvkullen.
11. Black Woodpecker. Heard and then a fly-over at Skillberg feeding station.
12. Green Woodpecker. 1 flew in front of the car near Haraker
13. Grey-headed Woodpecker. One in Jdraas village
14. Great-spotted Woodpecker. At feeding stations at Kittan and Skillberg.
15. Black-bellied Dipper. 4 on Nedre Dalalven River at Nass and 1 at Svana
16. Waxwing. 12 near Hawk owl near Koping
17. Blackbird. 1 only at garden feeders nr Lisjo Angar (scarce at this time of year)
18. Great Tit. Common
19. Coal Tit. Common
20. Blue Tit. Common
21. Crested Tit. 6 or so from feeding stations at Kittan and Skillberg
22. Willow Tit. 4 at Skillberg feeding station plus odd 1s here and there. Much greyer mantled than UK birds.
23. Marsh Tit. 1 at Skillberg feeding station
24. Nuthatch. Pale bellied individuals at Lisso Angar and Skillberg
25. Treecreeper. Another race with pale underparts and also frostier upperparts.
26. Great Grey Shrike. 2 roadside individuals on our travels
27. Magpie. Common
28. Eurasian Jay. Wary at Kittan
29. Siberian Jay. 3 ringed birds at Kittan feeding station were anything but wary. Approached us to within 2 metres.
30. Jackdaw. Silvery-naped and common.
31. Hooded Crow. Common
32. Raven. At least 16 but always in pairs.
33. Tree Sparrow. Around Jdraas village in a mixed flock.
34. Common (Mealy) Redpoll. Approximately 20 feeding in Alders whilst hunting down our 2nd Hawk Owl. One individual showed many characteristics of Arctic Redpoll.
35. Greenfinch. Common and widespread
36. Northern Bullfinch. 6 at Lisjo Angar feeders and 2 at Skillberg feeding station. Call a harder, shorter 'piu' than UK birds.
37. Yellowhammer. 6 at Lisjo Angar feeders.

OTHER NOTABLE WILDLIFE

Red Fox. 4 individuals with one hunting voles under snow in classic fashion

Moose. A total of 4.

Roe Deer. 3 by the roadside near Staffansbo