

Jared Goes to Finland

May – December / Toukokuu – Joulukuu

2005



May 02, 2005

Corvid Cousins

After a hectic few days of getting my life in order and packing up (as well as agonizing over the invasion of European vagrants that was happening around me at the most inconvenient time), I was finally ready to start my adventures ... The last bird I saw in North America, not surprisingly, was an **American Crow** on my way to the airport.

My first European bird, ironically but again not surprisingly, was **Carrion Crow**, with a pair carrying nesting material outside my terminal window in Frankfurt, Germany.

I was amazed at how quiet things were in Helsinki airport ... Lots of people, but eerily relaxed for an airport. I guess the "rumours" are true, and people in Finland really are laid back. Maybe I will fit in here afterall ...

Thinking that my first bird in Finland would be something mundane, like a starling, I was pleasantly surprised when a short walk outside Helsinki airport while waiting for my last flight produced a **Lesser Whitethroat** (Hernekerttu) flitting around in a hedge. That was followed by a **Hooded Crow** (Varis), a few **Greenfinches** (Viherpeippo), a **White Wagtail**, and a **Blackbird**. It was sunny and ~10 degrees ... Life in Finland is good thus far.

May 04, 2005

My first full day in Kuopio was a busy one ... Between setting up the new flat, organizing myself at the university, and getting a tour of the Neurosciences department, I didn't have much time for exploring outdoors.

What I did notice during my short time outside was the song ... Amazing how similar it seems to the chorus I'm used to on the other side of the ocean. The songs are strangely familiar, and I often find myself thinking I'm surrounded by familiar birds ... finches and wood warblers, especially. So similar, yet perceptively different. Like someone just released a "re-mixed" version of the North American songs.

I did manage to pick up a few species ... I woke up to a pair of **Magpies** (Harakka) outside my kitchen window, **Common Gulls** (Kalalokki) flying overhead, a **Eurasian Jay** (Närhi) on my way to a traditional Finnish smoke sauna, and a few **Common Goldeneye** (Telkkä) diving in still half-frozen lakes. Happy to report I still haven't crossed paths with a starling!!

May 06, 2005

In and Out

It's a gradual process, but I'm settling in.

I did manage to get out for a couple short walks on Wednesday. Most of the larger lakes here in Kuopio are still partially ice-covered, but some birds are gathering where there is open water. I was a little surprised to discover that the most common duck was **Mallard** (Sinisorsa), at least in the city (although it does make me feel a bit more at home!), followed closely by **Common Goldeneye** (Telkkä). It was nice, though, to see a number of **Great Crested Grebes** (Silkkiukki) hanging out close to shore.

The birds that seem to excite me most, momentarily at least, are the ones which we look out for back in Newfoundland as possible cross-Atlantic vagrants. It was rather difficult to suppress the sudden urge to scream out when I saw a **Redwing** (Punakylkirastas) and a **Fieldfare** (Räkättirastas) in the same tree!! And I was pretty thrilled by my first close looks at a pair of **White Wagtails** (Västäräkki) Wednesday evening, until I realized they are so common here that they often feed on the lawns with **House Sparrows** (Varpunen).

Yesterday was a public holiday in Finland, so my friend Anna and I decided to head out of town and to Koli National Park (~150km NE). The scenery on the drive alone blew me away - rich, tall forests of pine, spruce and birch surrounded by lakes and wetlands, and dotted throughout with beautiful, rolling farmlands. Koli itself rises high above the rest of the landscape, offering magnificent views over the lakes, islands and eskers that were carved out eons ago by glaciers. It was difficult to see most of the birds that were singing,

but my first **Goldcrest** (Hippäinen) was a treat - a comical little fellow flitting around restlessly, looking and sounding very much like the kinglets back home. **Great** (Talitiainen) and **Willow Tits** (Kuusitiainen) sang and chattered, and a **Blackbird** (Mustarastas) surprised me with a beautiful song I was far from expecting.

The clouds are gathering as I write this. I hope that my first weekend here is not rained out.

May 09, 2005

The Hardest Part Was Staying Awake ...

Well, no rain on my first weekend in Finland. But it was a busy one ...

We hosted a small party Friday night, and watched a World Hockey Championship game between Finland and the USA (They take their hockey very seriously here!!). It was a nice time – until I had to roll out of bed again at 3:30am to join a national birding competition.

It was already light outside when a local birder picked me up at 4:00. We drove to Varkaus (~75 km S), where I was part of a four-person team. The goal was to spot as many birds and species as possible from one location, so we set up near a small wharf on a large lake and started in on 8 hours of scanning the horizon for spring migrants. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a cold, overcast day and things were relatively slow -- for the Finns at least ... I managed to walk away having seen quite a few new species. The highlights were three **Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers** (Pikkutikka) which were calling and drumming in the nearby woods, as well as a number of **Black-throated Divers** (Arctic Loon / Kuikka). I also enjoyed quick looks at my first **Common Cranes** (Kurki) and **Whooper Swans** (Laulujoutsen – the Finnish national bird). **Little Gulls** (Pikkulokki) and nominate **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** (Selkälokki) were also a bit of a treat. A short trip after the competition ended (with a team total of 58 species) allowed me to see a female **Ural Owl** (Viirupöllö) peeking out from a nest box, and a female **Pied Flycatcher** (Kirjosieppo). Unfortunately, a tromp around a field known by local birders as a staging ground for

migrating Jack Snipe produced only a handful of **Common Snipe** (Taivaanvuohi) and some very vocal **Northern Lapwings** (Töyhtöhyppää).

After another late night checking out some local pubs and bars, I managed to sneak in a few more short hours of sleep before my next birding adventure. Another birder (and chair of the local birding club) was kind enough to take me to Raasio, where a large mining pit has become an active bird lake of sorts. Quite a number of shorebirds were poking around on the shoreline, and I was fortunate enough to bump into quite a few new species. While a single **Bar-tailed Godwit** (Punakuiri) was especially regal looking, my finding of two **Black-tailed Godwit** (Mustapyrstökuiri) stopping in on their way northwards was enough to get a few more birders out to see them. **Greenshanks** (Valkoviklo), **Common** (Punajalkaviklo) and **Spotted Redshanks** (Mustaviklo), **Wood Sandpipers** (Liro) and **Ruffs** (Suokukko) were abundant, while a few **Common** (Tylli) and **Little Ringed Plovers** (Pikkutylli) were also nice to see. My first **Smew** (Uivelo), **Reed Bunting** (Pajusirkku), and **Tree Pipits** (Metsäkirvinen) added to the enjoyment of a beautiful day out (sunny, calm, 15 degrees).



A view of the Kuopio centrum from the heights of Pujo Tower ...

May 11, 2005

Jokamiehenoikeus

Roughly translated, it means "Everyman's right". This is a uniquely Finnish concept which entitles everybody to the right to move around freely in order to enjoy or appreciate nature, regardless of land ownership. It speaks loudly about the importance of nature and stewardship in Finland's culture, and the broadly held value that the natural environment belongs to all. And, even as a visitor I already feel very comfortable birding here.

The birding community, while being MUCH larger than the one I am accustomed to in Newfoundland, is a very open and friendly one. Having been here just a week, I've already met a number of great people who have went out of their way to invite me on excursions, take me to interesting places known to the locals, and make me feel welcome. More often than not, when my phone rings it is a birder who I haven't even met yet, checking up to see if I'm available for an upcoming trip ...

Unfortunately, the restrictions of my work will interfere with my ability to bird during the next few key weeks, when migration brings in eastern vagrants, and singing is at its peak. In fact, I plan to chase an out-of-range Red-flanked Bluetail (Sinipyrstö) this weekend -- This is a "must-see" species while I am in Finland, and otherwise could be near impossible to get without a trip up north in the next three weeks.

May 13, 2005

My First Bongaus

"Bongaus" is the Finnish equivalent to "twitch", and that's exactly what I'll be doing this evening and tommorrow morning. My friend Hannu has kindly volunteered to accompany me to Keuruu to chase the Red-flanked Bluetail (Sinipyrtsö) which has been singing there. I only hope it has stuck around ...

Of course, the trip is also a chance for me to look for a few other species ... including Wood Lark (Kangaskiuru), Eurasian Nightjar (Kehräääjä), and Hazel Grouse (Pyy).

Tune in next week to see how my first "bongaus" turns out!!

May 16, 2005

Bongaus Bust

Well ... I may not have seen the Red-flanked Bluetail, but it sure was a great trip.

Following work on Friday, I drove to Suonenjoki (~50km SW) and met up with Hannu. A few hours of birding in the immediate area proved to be quite productive ... The most stunning bird being **Yellow Wagtail** (Keltavästäräkki) on a farm field with a number of **Golden Plovers** (Kapustarinta). In Rautalampi, we had amazing views of a **Ural Owl** (Viirupöllö), as the male stared us down and gave clear warning hoots, even snapping his beak to scare us away from the nearby nest box. I tried to take pics, but the light was dim and the owl was getting quite perturbed (Ural Owls are infamous for aggressive behaviour near the nest, and have been known to maim people on occasion!!), so we felt it best to retreat.

Also near Rautalampi, we saw a total of 5 **Short-eared Owls** (Suopöllö), getting very close to one for breath-taking looks. Across the field were 5 male **Black Grouse** (Teeri) displaying and fighting. Quite the show!! Other highlights were a calling **Great Bittern** (Kaulushaikara), a **Rook** (Mustavaris), and point-blank looks at a number of **Wood Sandpipers** (Liro). We were still birding in decent light at 11:00pm!!

We drove overnight to Keuruu, where the Bluetail had been reported. After a quick nap, we walked in to the site and made a steep climb to the heights enjoyed by this species. A few hours of trekking around proved fruitless. It was a large area, with very tall trees. If the bird wasn't singing, it wasn't going to be found. My first "bongaus" was a bust. I'll have to score Bluetail elsewhere ...

After dropping my friend Hannu back at home, I decided to do some birding on my own in the Suonenjoki area. Happy I did ... random stops produced very close looks at my first **Bluethroat** (Sinirinta), **Bullfinch** (Punatulkku), and **Hazel Grouse** (Pyy).

Sunday morning I set out on a return trip to nearby Raasio, where the cool winds kept everything pretty quiet -- far less shorebirds than I saw there a week earlier. But my first **Common Pochard** (Punasotka) was a bit of a consolation.

And then I watched the big hockey game. Ugh. I don't even want to talk about that.

May 18, 2005

Wood, Stock 'n' Rock

Nope ... I'm not talking about a hippie love-in and music-fest. I'm talking about the pigeons.

Like any city these days, there are lots of **Rock Pigeons** (Kesykyyhky) milling about in Kuopio. Not sure if it's good or bad, but they don't seem to have the kaleidoscope of colours and plumages of my native St. John's pigeons!! The somewhat similar **Stock Pigeon** (Uttukyyhky) has been elusive thus far ... or at least I haven't seen one that I'm comfortable calling yet. I guess it takes some experience. On the other hand, I have enjoyed several encounters with the much more handsome **Wood Pigeon** (Sepelkyyhky) - which I'm happy to report keep to the forests and farm fields rather than the city markets!!

Two things surprised me, though ... First, the utter lack of **European Starlings** (Kottarainen)!! I've only seen a handful in the two weeks I've been here ... not that I'm complaining, mind you. A local birder informed me that the Starling population in Finland crashed about a decade or so ago ... the reason is unknown, although there are a few theories which involve lighthouses and French farmers (*Need I say more?!!?*). Apparently the population across the border in Russia has remained much healthier.

Secondly, I was enjoying a coffee in the Tori (town centre and market area) the other day when I started noticing these very dark pigeons in the distance. It was only after one approached much closer that I realized it was, in fact, a **Jackdaw** (Naakka). For some reason, I didn't expect to find Jackdaws picking at scraps and hanging about in urban areas - but here they were. Urban corvids of northern Europe.

Despite my plans to start work in earnest this week, it turns out I might have this weekend off. I'm considering a trip to SE Finland to catch the famous arctic migration ...

May 20, 2005

A Few More ...

The weather the last two weeks has been very reminiscent of spring in Newfoundland ... unpredictable. One day its sunny and warm, the next chilly and wet. Yesterday alone, it was pouring in the morning, clear and beautiful at lunchtime, raining again at 3:00pm, sunny at 4:00, a thunderstorm at 6:00, and a bright, sunny evening by 7:30pm. Gotta love it ...

Even though I haven't been out doing much birding this week, I did manage to scrape up a few new species -- new birds are arriving daily. A quick drive just north of the city produced a **Sky Lark** (Kiuru) sitting in a meadow, and a walk on university campus found my first **Spotted Flycatcher** (Harmaasieppo). A call from my friend Hannu caused me to drive out to Suonenjoki, where I was fortunate to see a lone **Pink-footed Goose** (Lyhytnokkahanhi) which had wandered off course. The number of passerines seems to have picked up over the past few days, and the chorus of subtly unfamiliar songs (*though I am learning a few*) is increasing on my daily strolls.

My plans to travel to Virolahti in SE Finland have been put aside due to other commitments this weekend, so it looks like I will miss that part of arctic migration. I'll have to make due with local adventures, and maybe focus on migrating shorebirds and newly arriving songbirds.

May 23, 2005

Slow Weekend

Despite some beautiful weather, this turned out to be a pretty slow weekend for me. I spent Friday evening (and, well, much of early Saturday morning) celebrating my friend's PhD dissertation. That, of course, meant I was in no shape to be birding - let alone driving (or walking, for that matter) - for much of the next day.

But I did manage to haul myself to Raasio for a few hours in the mid-afternoon. After narrowly missing some Eurasian Dotterels reported in Siilinjarvi Friday afternoon, I was hoping for some shorebird migration. I was disappointed, and could count the total number of shorebirds on my fingers. Some patience paid off, though, when my first **Temminick's Stint** (Lapinsirri) flew in and fed on the shoreline in front of me for a while. There were also many **Sand Martins** (Bank Swallow / Törmäpääsky), and I enjoyed being able to sit and watch them zipping around and diving into their burrows.

I spent Sunday close to home, with an afternoon walk in the forests of Puijo. This is an absolutely beautiful, old-growth forest with low, green undergrowth - but it is very difficult to see the birds which hide waaaay up in the treetops. But I did manage to score the two species I was searching for -- a drumming **Three-toed Woodpecker** (Pohjantikka) and amazing looks at a very cute-looking **Treecreeper** (Puukiipijä).

May 27, 2005

Great News ...

I found the Kuopio dump!!! Seriously ... it really is great news. Now, when migration slows down and I'm tired of scouting out new songbirds and sandpipers, I can get down to some real business and watch the gulls feeding at the landfill.

The last few days has been more about getting my research project at the university up and running, and less about birding. But nonetheless, I've managed to sneak in a bit. Why, just walking across campus to visit my rats on Wednesday, I was startled by a high-pitched squeal as 8 newly arrived **Common Swifts** (Tervapääsky) zipped over my head. Really neat little birds ...

On Tuesday, at a BBQ and sauna outing with some colleagues in Maaninka, I was fortunate enough to catch a **Great Bittern** (Kaulushaikara) flying past. After hearing several, it was nice to put a face with the voice. A walk behind campus on Wednesday led me to a eye-level **Fieldfare** (Räkättirastas) nest, complete with four naked, gaping-mouthed chicks!! Gave me a new appreciation for what I have found to be an extremely common (almost bothersome) species.

A trip last evening to listen for night-singers proved somewhat disappointing, as it was quite windy and we really didn't hear much. But there are lots of evenings ahead!! I did manage to hear a couple **Common Cuckoos** (Käki) calling, and saw my first **Whinchats** (Pensastasku) near the dump. This afternoon, on a hot tip from a couple local birders, I drove out to Raasio and found the somewhat uncommon **Little Stint** (Pikkusirri) and two **Broad-billed Sandpipers** (Jänkässirriäinen), along with some more regular shorebird species.

Anyhow ... thought I would add a couple pictures now that my computer problem seems to be solved. I apologize for the poor pics ... I've been too busy looking instead photographing, and have had to deal with low light and wind when I have tried.



A Wood Sandpiper (Liro) staking out a roosting place for the evening.



A White Wagtail (Västäräkki), taken in my yard over morning coffee.



One of a large colony of Sand Martins (Törmäpääsky) at Raasio ... checking out the new burrow.

June 03, 2005

Long Days and Night Singers ...

The most wonderful thing about Finland is that one can work all day and *still* have lots of time to bird in the evening!! And that's just what I've been doing this last week.

I've become very busy with work (*finally*), but still taking every chance I get to bird -- and considering it now doesn't get dark at all, it hasn't been hard to find the time. Sleep ... now that's a whole other issue.

Adding to the miracle of continual daylight is the fact that many of the bird here in Finland are night-singers, and become most active after 9pm. Warblers, crakes and rails, nightingale thrushes, cuckoos ...

Because I haven't had time to keep this site updated over the last 7 days, I'll briefly sum them up here ---- Last Saturday I was fortunate enough to join a friend birding in the early morning hours. While it was a little windy and cool, I did manage to see my first **Winter Wren** (Peukaloinen) for Finland, a beautiful **Wood Warbler** (Sirittäjä), and the more drab but enthusiastic **Garden Warbler** (Lehtokerttu).

Tuesday evening was a real treat, as I was invited to help ring **Ural Owl** (Viirupöllö) chicks in Suonenjoki. While we arrived only to find that they had already fledged, a return trip later in the night allowed us to find two fledglings high up in the nearby trees ... we were able to "chase" them to a nearby meadow where their under-developed flying skills made them quite catchable. Luckily, we didn't attract the unwanted attention of the very protective parents, who can be quite dangerous in such a situation. *Check out the pics below (I apologize for the blurriness -- low light made sharp pics a little troublesome).*

As luck should have it, while I was visiting Suonenjoki that evening, a semi-rare eastern shorebird, **Marsh Sandpiper** (Lampiviklo) was spotted in nearby Rautalampi ... we tore off to the site, where I joined about 15 other birders for great looks at a very nice bird. Also that evening, I scored my first **Grasshopper Warbler** (Pensassirkkalintu) and **Sedge Warbler** (Ruokokerttunen) ... and heard the beautiful song of **Thrush Nightingale** (Satakieli). Even more fun to listen to was the varied, mimic-like song of **Blythe's Reed Warbler** (Viitakerttunen) -- another Finnish specialty.

Finally, I spent last night in Sillinjarvi and Maaninka, where I saw a number of shorebirds and ducks, 50+ **Common Cranes** (Kurki), my first **Eurasian Coots** (Nokikana), and heard a very excited **Spotted Crake** (Luhtahuitti). Shortly after midnight, I could distinctly hear 9 different species singing around one of the local bird lakes!! Night-singers ... It's fantastic.



This Ural Owl (Viirupöllö) fledgling was quite the little character ...



The funny-looking one is me.



Almost done ... Ringed and ready to go.

June 10, 2005

Weekend Getaway ...

Finally ... a weekend off to do some serious birding.

As is probably obvious from my lack of postings here lately, I've been rather tied to my work at the university. In the past week, I've only managed to get out a few evenings for a few hours of birding -- none of which has been too fruitful.

But this weekend should be different -- I finished up work early today, and will be leaving for Kuusamo in a few hours!! I'm pretty excited ... and am going with a hefty "wish-list" for the next two days. Key are the northern and eastern specialties which I should be able to score in Kuusamo -- Siberian Tit, Siberian Jay, Arctic Warbler, Little Bunting, Grey Wagtail --- AND, of course, Red-flanked Bluetail. And that's just the tip of the iceberg!!

So ... Tune in on Monday (June 13) for full trip report, and hopefully a few mediocre pics!!

June 13, 2005

Kuusamo Rocks!!

Wow!! It was a whirlwind tour, but definitely a highlight thus far in my Finland experience.

I really could have used another full day in the area, but I am happy to say I left Kuusamo with most of my target species squared away -- missing only Capercaillie and Rustic Bunting. (Unfortunately, I didn't see any raptors during the two days, and will have to wait for fall migration to see many of them.) With the aid of continual daylight and hardly any sleep, I managed to squeeze in 30 hours of birding in less than two days!! (*I was fortunate enough to have a local guide for about 1/3 of that time, who also provided me with directions to some of the hot species*)

My first stop early Saturday morning was Valtavaara and Konttainen -- the legendary breeding places of **Red-Flanked Bluetail** (Sinipyrstö). Using some general directions, I climbed the heavily wooded fell and eventually heard the sweet song I was hoping for ...

True to its reputation, the bird was quite shy and gave only brief but beautiful views for about 15 minutes ... BUT then it settled down and I had an amazing 30 minutes of perfect looks as it sang from high up in the treetops!! I could not have asked for a better start to my adventure.

Also on Valtavaara I was able to find **Greenish Warbler** (Idänuunilintu) - another eastern specialty that likes the old-growth forests of the Kuusamo region. On my way back down, I saw both **Red** (Pikkukäpylintu) and **Parrot Crossbill** (Isokäpylintu), along with **Redpoll** (Urpiainen) and **Siskins** (Vihervarpunen). While taking a short lunch break in the parking lot after my hike, a **Siberian Jay** (Kuukkeli) stopped in to check things out ... but quickly disappeared back into the woods. A **Great Spotted Woodpecker** (Käpytikka) was tending a territory in the same area.

I spent much of the rest of Saturday looking for **Grey Wagtail** (Virtavästäräkki), but despite checking the best river and a roadside stream where one had been spotted earlier, I came up empty. Fortunately, patience paid off and on my third attempt the next day I heard the "ringing" call. Eventually, the bird flew out of its hiding spot and began to display ... an amazing sight. But it was a VERY shy bird and traffic was quite heavy. I got nice but brief looks, and twice when I had it lined up for excellent photos, it was flushed by a passing car. Ah well ... fantastic nonetheless!!

At another stop, I was chastised by a **Siberian Tit** (Lapintiainen) as I was too close to its nest site. Earlier in the morning, I enjoyed the rare sight of a **Tengmalm's Owl** (aka "Boreal Owl", Helmpöllö) hunting for small rodents on a roadside meadow ... followed later by looks at its larger cousins - **Short-eared** (suopöllö) and **Great Grey Owl** (Lapinpöllö). **Woodcocks** (Lehtokurppa) and **Green Sandpipers** (Metsäviklo) were often seen doing their aerial displays. A lone female **Black Grouse** (Metso) was the only grouse species seen -- the warm weather and end of lekking season has made them quite elusive. A young **White-throated Dipper** (Koskikara) learning to fish on the rocks of a fast-flowing river was a real treat.

Several **Little Buntings** (Pikkusirkku) were singing in the lakeside willows of Tornkijarvi, not far from the town centre. Another was found just north of the town, where I tracked down the first **Arctic Warbler** (Lapinuunilintu) report of the season --- a new arrival that was, luckily for me, found just a few hours before I was due to leave!!



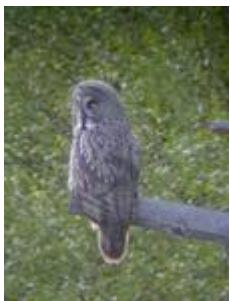
Red-flanked Bluetail (Sinipyrstö) ... What a looker!!



What can I say ... Wow!!



The view from Valtavaara ... not far from where I found the little guy above.



A distant pic of a true hunter of the north --- Great Gray Owl (Lapinpöllö).



This Little Bunting (Pikkusirkku) was quite active ... his song ringing out over the wind which had just picked up.



There were lot of reindeer in the Kuusamo region -- including this very photogenic calf tagging along behind the others.

June 17, 2005

Warblers to "Boot" ...

The season of song is quickly drawing to a close in most parts of Finland, meaning I only have a couple weeks to seek out some of the songbirds I haven't met yet. It's been a bit of a busy week, and I only managed to get out Monday night ... Hopefully I'll be more productive over the weekend.

After having one night to partially recover from my Kuusamo trip, I took up an offer to go "twitch" one of the rare eastern species which had been found ~100km south of Kuopio -- **Booted Warbler** (Pikkukultarinta). I met up with my friend Hannu just outside the city, and we headed off for an evening of birding. When we stopped to pick up another birder, we were greeted by the breaking news that a farmer (*maybe a little perturbed by the attention of birders near his fields*) had just cut down all the bushes the bird had been hanging out in!!

Sooo ... not sure if it was worth the effort, we decided instead to go and attempt to ring **Long-eared Owl** (Sarvipöllö) nestlings in nearby Varkaus ... only to be asked to leave by a local lady who was upset that we were exciting her dogs!! What an odd start to a night of birding.

Fortunately, it was not a total bust. I did hear my first **River Warbler** (Viitasirkkalintu), the more uncommon **Reed Warbler** (Rytikerttunen), and even helped catch and ring a **Marsh Warbler** (Luhtakerttunen) -- which, it turns out, is a fantastic singer. A little later

in the night I was able to get nice looks at a **Sedge Warbler** (Ruokokerttunen), which up to then had been impossible to see hiding deep in reed beds.

BUT --- As a last-ditch effort, we did go to our original destination. And, after an hour or so of walking fields in the early morning mist (*it was eerie but amazing*), we got to hear and eventually see the **Booted Warbler** not far from where it had been found. Crazy farmer ... can't stop us from getting our bird!!!

June 23, 2005

Juhannus

Starting tommorrow, Finland will pretty much shut down for the weekend. It's "Juhannus" -- the national holiday which celebrates Midsummer Eve or solstice. Towns and cities are almost vacated as everyone heads to their summer cottages for the weekend, and sales of beer and sausages ("makkara") skyrocket.

I will also be getting out of town this weekend --- heading NW to the Oulu region for some birding. This region, on the shores of Bothnian Bay and close to the Swedish border, hosts some of the best wetland areas in all of Finland and is home to some great bird species - including the rare Terek Sandpiper. I'll post a full trip report on Monday ...

In the meantime, I have managed to get out a little again this week. Monday morning, I joined a friend to look for **Golden Oriole** (Kuhankeittäjä). After an arduous trudge through some old birch woods with thick undergrowth, we finally heard one whistling -- but across the lake and out of sight. There were several **Tree Pipits** (Metsäkirvinen) singing, and I managed to find my first **Greater Whitethroat** (Pensaskerttu) singing on the edge of field. I spent Moday evening in Maaninka, where I missed my target species, but did have great looks at three **Marsh Harriers** (Ruskosuohaukka) and two **Short-eared Owls** (Suopöllö). Interesting to watch was a **Curlew** (Kuovi) leading around two fluffy young. Surprisingly, a flock of **Starlings** (Kottarainen) was only my second sighting since arriving in Finland 7 weeks ago!!

Tuesday evening I visited Haminalahti, where the highlights were one **Grasshopper Warbler** (Pensassirkkalintu) and my first **Long-tailed Tits** (Pyrstötiainen). Later, I joined my friend Hannu to ring several **Blyth's Reed Warblers** (Viitakerttunen) and get a close-up look at the subtle details which separate it from the very similar Marsh Warbler which I had helped band last week.



A Curlew (Kuovi) protests my presence from atop a light pole.



Some playful House Martins (Räystäspääsky) scuffling over lunch.



Birding in the eerie morning mist at Joinen last week.



This is a Marsh Warbler (Luhtakerttunen) that we ringed one night last week.

June 27, 2005

Coastal Birding ...

Well ... back from a weekend of coastal birding in the Oulu region. It was great - and perhaps the best part was simply seeing salt water again!! Didn't realize how much I missed it until I actually saw the open waters of Bothnian Bay - the waves rolling in over the rocks, and the distinct smell of ocean. (*Heck - when no one was looking, I fair danced a jig on the beach!!!*)

The salt water, combined with the weather which was (unlike my Finnish experience thus far) often cool and quite windy, made for a birding experience that was reminiscent of home. Bundled up for an early morning sea-watch and cursing as my scope trembled in the wind ...

I focused almost entirely on coastal birding for this trip ... most passerines and forest-type species I encountered were simply coincidental as I was walking the trails to waterside observation points. The Oulu region offers a variety of wetland habitats from coastal reed marshes to vast sandy beaches, and tidal pools to the open waters of Bothnian Bay. Unfortunately, it was rather quiet, maybe wth the wind keeping many of the waterfowl and waders taking shelter in the grass.

I started with a stop at a swampy pond in Piipola, about halfway along my drive to Oulu, where I encountered **Black Tern** (Mustatiira) at one of its few breeding sites in this part of Finland. I spent the rest of the day birding around Limingalahti -- a big bay with lots of coastal habitat and a number of birding towers and observation points. Here I found the only known breeding **Black-tailed Godwits** (Mustapyrstöküiri) in Finland, along with **Dunlin** (Suosirri), **Ruff** (Suokukko), and a number of waterfowl species. Both **Marsh** (Ruskosuohaukka) and **Hen Harriers** (Sinisuohaukka) were seen hunting over the marshes, and **Whooper Swans** (Laulujoutsen) and **Common Cranes** (Kurkki) were peeping out from the tall grass. **Sedge Warblers** (Ruokokerttunen) and **Reed Buntings** (Pajusirkku) were abundant everywhere. A pleasant surprise was an adult **White-tailed Eagle** (Merikotka) being harassed by crows - my first look at this species, which is successfully recovering in numbers in Finland after being threatened for many years.

A few hours at the cape of Tauvo also proved interesting -- seeing both **Caspian** (Räyskä) and **Little Tern** (Pikkutiira), as well as **Purple Sandpipers** (Merisirri). A quick trudge through the forest produced my first **Black Woodpecker** (Palokärki).

I spent an entire morning at Kemi, searching high and low in cold, damp and windy weather for the famed Terek Sandpiper (Rantakurvi). No success. Enough said. One of my key target species that I only hope I can see during its late-summer migration.

A short ferry trip brought me to the island of Hailuoto, where I spent a full day enjoying the great scenery and fantastic birding. With a variety of coastal habitats, this largest island in Bothnian Bay is a great place to poke around. Along with the more regular species, I saw breeding **Greylag Goose** (Merihanhi), **Common Shelduck** (Ristisorsa), and **Gadwall** (Harmaasorsa). Open mudflats and tidal pools produced scattered shorebirds, such as **Ringed Plover** (Tylli), **Redshank** (Punajalkaviklo), **Eurasian Oystercatcher** (Meriharakka), and **Ruddy Turnstone** (Karikukko). Interesting coastal passerines included **Rock Pipit** (Luotokirvinen), **Northern Wheatear** (Kivitasku) and **Yellow Wagtail** (Keltavästäräkki). At the fishing harbour, I found myself looking for **Great Black-backed Gull** (Merilokki) to no avail -- until a fishing boat came in with its daily haul, causing a flurry of gulls that (*not surprisingly*) included two. Despite sometimes seeing thousands daily back home, I was happy to see my first for this side of the Atlantic.

After a long weekend of coastal birding, I left feeling refreshed ... probably due to the salt water and fresh air!! I also left with a red, wind-burned face - but having seen lots of quality birds and some amazing scenery. Finland continues to amaze me ...



The Oulu region is home to a variety of coastal habitats.



A Ruddy Turnstone (Karikukko) poses for picture along the breakwater of Marjeniemi fishing harbour.



Common Gull (Kalalokki) chicks play on the beach.



A Eurasian Oystercatcher (Meriharakka) ponders lunch.



A male Northern Wheatear (Kivitasku) announces his territory from the nearby boardwalk.



A Meadow Pipit (Nittykirvinen) acting very territorial ... its partner was never far away.

July 01, 2005

Quick Recovery

My alarm clock went off at 7:00am this morning. Having second-thoughts about heading into the university a bit early, I drowsily hit the snooze button. Before I could settle back in for an extra few minutes of shut-eye, my phone started beeping -- a text message. It read: "RANTAKURVI, SIILIN. RAASIO". I didn't need a Finnish-English dictionary to decipher that one.

I jumped up, got dressed in yesterday's clothes, grabbed my gear, and headed for the highway. Half an hour later, I was walking the trail at Raasio, Siilinjärvi -- a great birding spot I know well. A few minutes after that, I was staring down the barrel of my scope at a **Terek Sandpiper** (Rantakurvi) on the mudflats across the lake. Not amazing looks by any means - but even in the harsh light the front-heavy, dumpy silhouette was more than obvious, and that odd upturned bill a dead giveaway.

After missing this species during my recent trip to the Oulu region (its only European breeding area), I had only hoped that one might show up close enough to chase. But for one to be found close to home, at a place I am familiar with, and on a morning that I could go for it immediately ... How sweet is that!?!?

Swimming nearby were also three **Red-necked Phalarope** (Vesipääsky) - not particularly uncommon, but still a new species for my Finland list.

Wonder what the weekend might bring???

July 06, 2005

Taking a Break ...

After spending the bulk of my spare time birding the last few weeks, I took a bit of a break from it all this weekend ... instead enjoying the weather relaxing in at the Tori (city centre and market area), sipping fine Finnish beer, and just taking it all in.

My one foray into the birding world was 1.5 hours spent at the Kuopio dump on Sunday, hoping to see and photograph **Heuglin's Gulls**. Unfortunately, I found only one (*a 1st summer bird*), and the bright sunlight from directly above made photography difficult. I also find that the gulls here are quite "flighty", and flush up and away at even the slightest approach, making it difficult to get anywhere near them.

Last evening, I spent a few hours in Maaninka. There many young swallows and martins hawking insects over the fields, and many **Common Teal** (Tavi) at one of the local ponds. I finally found my first **Ortolan Bunting** (Peltosirkku) sitting on a wire, and enjoyed great looks as a **Short-eared Owl** (Suopöllö) hunted nearby.

I take another break from it all starting tomorrow afternoon ... taking a short trip to Scotland to visit with a friend. Trading in my Finnish beer for fine single malt Scotch ...

July 14, 2005

Scottish Excursion

Back from a whirlwind trip to Scotland. It was a great visit with a close friend in a spectacular country ... Despite long travel times (low-cost flights = horrible connection times) and having to stopover in London just hours after the terrorist attacks, it was well worth the time.

Even though I did absolutely no "birding" during my trip, I did manage to pick up a few new birds in passing. From the ferry enroute to the Isle of Arran on the SW coast, I saw my first **Water Pipit** on the pier, a **European Shag** on the breakwater, and some more

familiar faces that also appear on my own side of the Atlantic (e.g. **Common Murre**, **Black Guillemot**, **Northern Gannet**, and **Manx Shearwater**). On the island itself I picked up a male **Capercaillie** on a country road, and a **Grey Heron** feeding in the tidal pools.

The rest of my time was spent in Glasgow, where I enjoyed amazing weather, great scenery and architecture, and some fine single malt whiskey. So much more to see, though ...



An "argenteus" Herring Gull against the scenic backdrop of the Isle of Arran.



It was great to be so close to the ocean again - even if just for a day. The bird sanctuary of Elsia Claire (distant left) lies just off the SW coast of Scotland.



Enjoying a drink with some Canadian friends we met, in one of the oldest watering holes of Glasgow.

July 24, 2005

The “Tara” Experience

Unlike most of my previous “Tara experiences”, this one did not involve a cute girl ...

For Finnish gull enthusiasts, “Tara” refers to the Tampere dump – a virtual mecca for larophiles. I made my pilgrimage on Saturday, spending ten full hours scouring through thousands of gulls with one of Finland’s resident experts.

It was great opportunity to study approximately 3000 **Herring Gulls** (Harmaalokki; of the northern *argentatus* race), with lots of all age classes present. More importantly, “Tara” is maybe the best place in the world to see the nominate *fusca* form of **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (“Baltic Gull”; Selkäloki), of which there were close to 1000 present. Additionally, a good number of other forms of this species were present for inspection - while most of these were probably *heuglini* ("Heuglin's Gull), there were a few which were more typical of the western race *graelisi*, and at least one which was a candidate for *intermedius*. (See why I love gulls ?!?!)

The definite highlight, however, was a juvenile **Caspian Gull** (Aroharmaalokki) - which is quite uncommon in Europe. Two **Great Black-backed Gulls** (Merilokki) were also uncommon but regular visitors to the area. Loads of **Black-headed** (Naurulokki) and **Common Gulls** (Kalalokki) rounded out the action.

As the day proceeded, the gulls were kept increasingly nervous by a pair of **Northern Goshawks** (Kanahaukka) prowling for lunch. Just before hitting the highway for home, we were surprised with a visit from a much more exciting hunter – my first **Black Kite** (Haarahaukka). It put on quite a show, soaring very close to us and causing havoc with the gulls and crows.

Earlier this past week, I spent a morning checking out some shorebird migration in nearby Siilinjarvi. Among the 11 species seen, I was especially pleased to find two **Curlew Sandpipers** (Kuovisirri). Flocks of **Dunlin** (Suosirri) were moving through in full force, and there were good numbers of **Temminick's Stints** (Lapinsirri) at two locations.



Some of the "wild and crazy" action at the Tampere dump ...



A horribly digiscoped picture of the juvenile Caspian Gull (Aroharmaalokki) ... all the regular excuses.

August 03, 2005

Shorebird Shuffle ...

A poke around a few of the shorebird hotspots in nearby Siilinjärvi last evening was sure indication that shorebird migration is well underway in Finland.

While there were no rarities, a number of the usual suspects were milling around the mudflats in good numbers. **Wood Sandpipers** (Liro) were especially abundant, but one location saw them outnumbered by **Ruffs** (Suokukko). Also making a strong presence were **Common Ringed Plovers** (Tylli) and **Temminick's Stints** (Lapinsirri). A few **Dunlin** (Suosirri), **Curlews** (Kuovi), **Common Sandpipers** (Rantasipi) and **Common Greenshanks** (Valkoviklo) rounded out the majority, while **Common** (Punajalkaviklo) and **Spotted Redshanks** (Mustaviklo) added some spice.

Especially interesting was the chance to see a few of these birds up close and personal while being ringed at Raasio. Amazing how small these critters really are ...

August 10, 2005

Weather Woes

Despite the fact that it has generally been quite pleasant lately, the weather seems to be getting the best of me whenever I decide to venture out birding ...

Late last week, I went for an evening stroll to a park near my flat - mostly to stretch my legs, but also in hopes of seeing a Grey Heron which had been seen there the day before. It was a bright and sunny when I stepped out my door. I guess I didn't see it coming, sneaking up on me from behind as I walked down the quiet sidestreets. In fact, I didn't notice it until I reached the farthest point of land in the park -- a dark, menacing cloud closing in fast. I accepted my fate, knowing I couldn't outrun it if I wanted to. I was in the kind of mood to get rained on anyways ... Bring it on.

The sky darkened, and the birds became eerily silent. It started as a low rustle in the leaves, and grew to dull roar as the trees began to tremble and the wind whipped dust around my face. I could even hear the rain rushing towards me across the lake!!

The sky had already started to brighten by the time I got home ... wet and heron-less, but surprisingly refreshed!!

After having to work on Sunday, I took advantage of the overcast weather in the late afternoon to watch the gulls at the local dump. By the time I had set up and began to scan through the 300+ gulls, the sky began to darken and the rain started. After another 20 minutes of heavy downpour, my "this is probably just a shower" theory was soundly defeated and I slogged my way home, with only one juvenile **Heuglin's Gull** (*L.f. heuglini*; Selkälokki) to show for my troubles. Despite watching the birds flush a number of times, the only raptors were a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** (Varpushaukka) and a **Northern Harrier** (Sinisuoahaukka).

Taking advantage of a more flexible schedule and bright skies, I scooted off this morning to "Musti" - a large man-made lake (a mining pit reservoir, actually) which can be excellent for shorebirds. Unfortunately, my luck was not much better as strong winds and harsh light made for less than ideal viewing conditions. While the variety and number of

shorebirds was less than I had hoped, I did manage to scout out my first **Sanderling** (Pulmusirri) for Finland. The vast majority of birds were once again **Ruffs** (Suokukko) and **Wood Sandpipers** (Liro), with a few **Common Greenshanks** (Valkoviklo) and **Dunlin** (Suosirri) thrown in for good measure. One **Curlew Sandpiper** (Kuovisirri) and a pair of **Northern Wheatears** (Kivitasku) proved to be the only other interesting species.



A Common Redshank (Punajalkaviklo) admires its own reflection ...



A Common Ringed Plover (Tylli) just hanging out ...

August 15, 2005

Picture Imperfect (*and why I hate digiscoping*)

A slight change of pace this weekend, as I headed NE to the Kuhmo region to watch **Brown Bears** (Karhu) on the Russian border. After arriving in Tarvius and meeting the group and tour guide, we made the short trek to the "hide" shortly after 5pm. It was a great evening - we had amazing looks at 6 different bears throughout the evening and night, although the local wolverine failed to make an appearance. (For tour info, check out www.wildbrownbears.fi)

Unfortunately, after arriving in the hide and setting up my camera gear, I realized that in my morning rush I had bought the wrong film!! Stuck only with the option of using my digital camera, I ended up being unable to capture any good pics -- despite the great evening light. Digiscoping was completely useless ... anyone familiar with the practice knows that it requires far too much light, and it is nearly impossible to photograph anything moving. Besides, the bears were actually too close for digiscoping -- I could hardly even fit a full headshot into a frame!! Despite my photographing woes, I enjoyed the bears fully, along with the company of a nice Finnish couple, two interesting Dutch guys, and a great tour leader (*who also happened to be rather cute*).

Just as exciting as the bears, we had a close encounter with an adult **White-tailed Eagle** (Merikotka), which at one point soared as close as 10m in front of the hide, affording spectacular views!! (Again -- impossible to get a photo).

After a relaxing morning at the lodge (breakfast, sauna, a swim, and great conversation), I took my time on the 300km drive home, enjoying the beautiful day and stopping to explore a number of places. It paid off ... I saw a **Great Grey Shrike** (Isolepinkäinen) on a farm road near Kuhmo, and some other interesting birds such as **Bohemian Waxwing** (Tilhi) and **Parrot Crossbill** (Isokäpypintu). Raptors on the trip included a **Black Kite** (Haarahaukka), two **Common Buzzards** (Hiirihaukka) soaring over the lake as I enjoyed my morning swim, and two **Honey Buzzards** (Mehiläishaukka) circling a hilltop when I stopped to stretch my legs in North Karelia.

A great way to spend the weekend ...



Digiscoping the bears resulted in poor "half-head shots", like this one ... blurry and hardly worth keeping.



Using just the digital camera, heavily cropped images like this were the best I could do. Pretty disappointing.



Digiscoping only works for cooperative critters that stay still, like this Hooded Crow (Varis).



... Or this Great Grey Shrike (Isolepinkäinen).

August 26, 2005

Birdless Holiday ...

It seems my postings have become more and more sparse ... For obvious reasons, I guess. I haven't been doing much birding.

The last few weeks have been split between working on my research at the university and enjoying a short holiday (albeit birdless). Late last week, I left to visit Stockholm for a few days. To make the trip even more interesting, I travelled by cruise ship across the Baltic Sea -- leaving from Turku and returning via Helsinki. It was a great trip, and I was both

inspired and humbled by the beauty and history of the Swedish capital. (*For more details and pictures of the trip, feel free to visit my website at <http://jaredclarke20m.com>*)

The only birds of any interest on the trip were noted from the ferry -- a few **Great Black-backed Gulls** (Merilokki) amongst the other more numerous larid species, two flocks of **Long-tailed Ducks** (Alli), and a **White-tailed Eagle** (Merikotka).

Earlier in the week, I did make an evening trip to Haminalahti - where I was entertained by a pair of **Eurasian Kestrels** (Tuulihaukka) at very close range. A **Northern Harrier** (Sinisuohaukka) also made a pass or two over the nearby meadows, and another large raptor escaped unidentified. Lots of **Greenfinches** (Viherpeippo) and **Barn Swallows** (Haarapääsky) were on the move, and one **Whinchat** (Pensastasku) posed briefly on a wire.

September 01, 2005

Raptor Migration

The end of summer and first few weeks of autumn is time for raptor migration in Finland - which becomes obvious when one looks at the birds being reported on local newsgroups.

This year has seen an unusually large invasion of Red-footed Falcons (Punajalkahaukka) to Finland, with 250-300 reported in the month of August -- most in the last week or so. On Saturday, I got a message about one being watched in Riistavesi (~30km NE of the city), but by the time I made it out there it had disappeared. While waiting around in hopes of it returning, I did get to see five **Common Buzzards** (Hiirihaukka), and a great family of **Whooper Swans** (Laulujoutsen) nearby.

I've been busy this week, and this morning was the first chance I had to check out the raptor migration for myself -- so I headed out to the agricultural area of Maaninka, where a good variety can be seen on a good day. Unfortunately, weatherwise, this was TOO good a day ... sunny and very light winds. Such days are not conducive to raptor-watching, and the best we could muster up were a handful of **Eurasian Kestrels** (Tuulihaukka) and

Sparrowhawks (Varpushaukka). In fact, at most good vantage-points the closest thing to raptor we could find was a dragonfly or two!! Just goes to show how important the weather can be to birding --- I'll have to keep my eyes on the forecast and head back for the next breezy, cloudy day.

Besides raptors, we did manage to see a few other interesting birds -- including three late **Curlews** (Kuovi), five **Golden Plovers** (Kapustarinta), and my first **Grey Heron** (Harmaahaikara) for Finland. Grey Herons are not common breeders in Finland, and are observed here mostly in late summer.

September 08, 2005

Afternoons and Coffee Spoons

Monday morning this week was overcast and breezy -- I figured it was high time to check in on that raptor migration again. And ... I was thwarted once again. Despite the much better conditions than last week, all I could find were a few small raptors -- a handful of **Kestrels** (Tuulihaukka), **Sparrowhawks** (Varpushaukka), and two **Eurasian Hobbies** (Nuolihaukka).

Today, I joined two friends for a full day of birding in nearby Rautalampi -- a great area of wetlands and farmfields, where some interesting birds have been reported lately. It was a windy but relatively nice day -- the temperature slipping over 20C at midday.

Unfortunately, it was also a slow day for birds.

If the Finns take their birding seriously, they take their coffee breaks even moreso. Back home in Newfoundland, a "break" means chugging some warm coffee and devouring a sub from the PCS corner store while driving between birding spots. But NOT here. No siree ...

Here, a coffee break is something sacred. The first mid-morning break involves finding a civilized place to sit down, drink coffee from a mug instead of directly from the thermos spout, and a healthy lunch of fruit and homemade sandwiches. A little later, closer to noon, a coffee break can be something much more complex. Today, it involved packing our things into a picnic shelter next to the birding tower (Yes -- coffee breaks are so important here that the birding society has even built a shelter just for that purpose). This time we pulled out all the stops ... started a fire, kicked back, enjoyed coffee, homemade juice, salad and more sandwiches. Most important was the *makkara* (Finnish sausage) -- roasting sausage over the fire is a staple of any Finnish summer outing. Boy am I going to miss *makkara* when I have to go home ...

As for birds, it was indeed a bit slow. The tail end of shorebird migration consisted of a handful of **Ruffs** (Suokukko), 2 **Dunlins** (Suosirri), a **Common Ringed Plover** (Tylli), and a **Greenshank** (Valkoviklo). The mediocre highlight was my first **Black-bellied Plover** (Tundrakurmitsa) for Finland. We did manage to note a few songbirds moving about -- notably **Crested** (Töyhtötiainen) and **Willow Tits** (Kuusitiainen) flocking together, increasing numbers of **Eurasian Jays** (Närhi), and a **Brambling** (Järripeippo).

A few raptors were on the move -- the most noteworthy of which were a **Rough-legged Hawk** (Piekana) migrating southward and a **Northern Goshawk** (Kanahaukka) seeming to enjoy the wind.

I also had my first experience with a "**Moose Fly**" (*Haematobosca alcis*) -- which has been expanding westward into Finland the last few years and is now a regular part of late-summer birding. They are ugly little buggers and, while they generally don't bite humans, they do like to get in your hair. Almost makes me want to shave my head and stop peeing in the woods ...



A typical *makkara* roast. Mmmmmmmmmmmmm ...



A Moose Fly ... Cute, eh?

September 12, 2005

One Sunday in September ...

This past weekend turned out to be a beautiful one for birding. Unfortunately, one of my other "hobbies" led to a late night out on Friday ... so Saturday was pretty much a bust. No regrets, of course!!

Sunday morning I joined some other birders at Siilamasuo -- an old abandoned garbage dump, which is now covered in grass and tall vegetation, producing great habitat for many birds. As has been usual for me lately, things were a little slow. The thick grass was alive, however, with common species -- such as **Chaffinch** (Peippo), **Willow Warblers** (Pajulintu), and **Dunnocks** (Rautainen). The first fall **Bohemian Waxwing** (Tilhi) for the region was a nice sight, as was a **Two-barred Crossbill** (Käpylintu) - the most uncommon of the three crossbill species in Finland. A **Black Woodpecker** (Palokärki) was a fine addition to the morning. A **Honey Buzzard** (Mehiläishaukka) perched in a distant tree was interesting, and it later soared above my car as I headed out.

Next, I headed off on my own to the current dump, hoping to spend an hour with the gulls. Oddly, there were NO gulls when I arrived -- maybe because the garbage had recently been spread and buried, with nearby farm fields now providing better menus?? Opting instead to check the grassy hill above the dump, I was pleased to flush up my first **Lapland Longspur** (Lapinsirkku) for Finland, and listen to its unique voice. Lots of **White** (Västäräkki) and a few **Yellow Wagtails** (Keltavästäräkki) ran around the path in front of me, and two **Willow Tits** (Kuusitainen) played on a nearby fence. Best of all, a migrating **Bluethroat** (Sinirinta) sat on an exposed perch, allowing nice looks at an uncommon and often elusive bird.

Later in the day, I joined two friends who were leading a group trip to the Maaninka farmlands. It was mostly a replay of my last few trips to the area, seeing many of the same birds as before. Of some interest was a very late **Curlew** (Kuovi) that appeared to be injured, and a straggling **Golden Plover** (Kapustarinta). The number of **Common Cranes** (Kurki) had decreased dramatically due to the widespread harvesting on the fields -- down from about 400 last week to less than 50. A few of the regular raptors were seen, including **Eurasian Kestrel** (Tuulihaukka), **Eurasian Hobby** (Nuolihaukka), and a

female **Northern Harrier** (Sinisuohaukka). A **Grey Heron** (Harmaahaikara) flying over the road on the drive back was one of the better birds of the day.



This Lapland Longspur (Lapinsirkku) was quite nervous, but eventually allowed me to snap a few pics.



Vesajöki, one of the farming areas of Maaninka which can provide great birding.

September 19, 2005

Another weekend ...

... another slow one.

Saturday was a fine day ... with the exception of a few isolated showers and one spell of "freezing rain", it was generally sunny with light winds. The unpredictability of the weather here is very reminiscent of back home!!

I spent a few hours walking the Jälä fields - a farming area just north of the city which attracts a variety of passerines this time of year. I spent most of my time trying to turn some of the many **Meadow Pipits** (Nittykirvinen) into something a bit more interesting,

but without any luck. One **Skylark** (Kiuru) and a handful of **Northern Wheatears** (Kivistäku) was as close as I got ...

The most exciting bird was a **Rustic Bunting** (Pohjansirkku), which made a brief appearance near a small patch of forest at the far end of the fields. It was a bit of a "coup" for me, as it was one of the few species I had missed in my trips up north earlier this summer!! Also of interest was my first **Jack Snipe** (Jänkäkurppa) which flushed up from a wet field, along with a few **Common Snipe** (Taivaanvuohi).

I tried to round out my Snipe list on Sunday, trudging through the wet fields of Haminalahti in search of Great Snipe. Alas, not a stir.

Sunday was a much cooler, windy day ... and my trip to Siilimäso was pretty much a bust. With the birds keeping to the thick vegetation, scaring up the **Chaffinch** (Peippo) was the best I could do. I decided to try some Newfoundland-style alder-bashing (well, "willow"-bashing in this case!), but my "pishing" only attracted a few **Willow Warblers** (Pajulintu), **European Robins** (Punarinta) and **Dunnocks** (Rautiainen).

I'll have to try and sneak off again some early morning later in the week ...

September 27, 2005

Ruska

A Canadian, a Czech and a Spaniard get into a car ...

No, it's not the start of a really corny joke. It's the beginning of my adventure this past weekend, taking a whirlwind tour of the Laplands.

My travelling companions were non-birders, so this was far from a birding trip. In fact, I drove straight through many habitats where I would normally have made a short detour to search for Capercaillie, and I had to restrain myself from asking them to "watch out for Hawk Owls" as we sped through cut-overs!! Nevertheless, it was a great trip with lots of amazing scenery.

"Ruska" is the Finnish word used to describe the magical colours of autumn, especially in Lapland ... when the leaves turn shades of red, gold and brown. While the trees north of the arctic circle had dropped many of their leaves in the last few days, it still made for an unforgettable experience.

Our journey began on Saturday morning, as we headed to Rovaniemi -- the gateway to Lapland, sitting on the very edge of the Arctic Circle ("Napapiiri"). We spent the afternoon visiting the official Napapiiri crossing - which, with scores of souvenir shops and restaurants, just oozes shamelessly of "tourist trap". (Not that it wasn't worth the visit -- some of the best Lappish handicrafts can be found in those shops, and the "real" Santa Claus even has an official village there!!).

On Sunday, we continued north to the small town of Inari -- the unofficial centre of life and culture for the "*Sami*" people, who have lived in Lapland for thousands of years. At a latitude of 68.54 N, it is a great example of true northern Europe (*and, in the Canadian scheme of things, is further north than Inuvik, Nunavut*). The Siida Museum was an informative and very attractive place to visit, and our hike to the Pielpajarvi Wilderness Church (9 km return) was a great taste of the local landscape.

While not doing any "real" birding, I did encounter a few of my favourite northern boreal species during the hike --- two **Parrot Crossbills** (Isokäpälintu) twittered from the treetops, a couple small flocks of **Siberian Tits** (Lapintiainen) flitted about, a **Willow Ptarmigan** (Riekko) skulked in the underbrush, and four **Siberian Jays** (Kuukkeli) dropped in to check us out. One **Golden Eagle** (Maakotka) on the drive up was my only new species for the trip, and unfortunately I dipped on a few of the other species I had hoped to encounter.

Monday was a dark, dreary and sometimes drizzly day --- making the scenery on the long drive home a little less spectacular. A few strategic stops, including one at the Urho Kekkonen National Park, only made me wish I had more time to explore the amazing wilderness areas of Lapland. With the exception of many roadside **Ravens** (Korppi), **Magpies** (Harakka), **Eurasian Jays** (Närhi) and one **Black Grouse** (Teeri), birds were pretty scarce. Although other wildlife was also scant, the girls did get to see their first **Reindeer** (Poro) and **Moose** (Hirvi) during the journey.

We had clocked 1750 km by the time I got home ... a long but worthwhile trip. Lots left to see up there -- next time, I guess!!



A Willow Ptarmigan (Riekko), trying its best to be invisible.



The colours of "Ruska" reflecting off the waters in Inari ...



Lots of interesting landscapes in the Laplands, such as the old forests which have grown up around the erratic boulders left by glaciers.

October 06, 2005

Gettin' scarce ...

Many birds, especially passerines, are getting scarcer each day here in the Kuopio area. While this is an interesting time for goose migration and eastern rarities, the "familiar" faces of local breeders are disappearing, and the forests seem eerily quiet. At least in my experience ...

While I haven't had time to squeeze in much birding the last few weeks, my odd walks in the forests around the city have proved pretty futile. Hoping to catch a glimpse of one of the Siberian *phylloscopus* warblers which frequent Finland in early October, I have had to settle for sparse sightings of anything. With the exception of **Fieldfares** (Räkättirastas) and **Redwings** (Punakylkirastas), that is ... those little monsters have flocked together and taken over!!

Still, a few notable birds have managed to brighten my short strolls ... a **Black Woodpecker** (Palokärki) doing its rounds, and a few small flocks of **Goldcrests** (Hippiäinen) twittering high up in the canopy. Always fun to see are the **Treecreepers** (Puukiipijä), which work away furiously amongst the trees - oblivious to anyone or anything.

Next week is a little less busy -- so here's hoping a few mornings of birding will produce something a little more exciting!!

October 12, 2005

Crap Luck ...

Yup. I said it. Crap luck.

As much as I love and enjoy birding here in Finland, I have been a bit frustrated with my "luck" since autumn has set in. I don't get out as much as I would like, and when I do I just can't seem to run into the birds. Maybe its a lack of birds, or just hitting the wrong places at the wrong time. Whatever it is, it's "crap".

My forays into the local forests looking for Siberian warblers that have been passing through Finland (and even showing up in western Europe in record numbers!!) have been for naught. Trudges through fields and meadows in search of unusual pipits and such have been useless. Visits to local wetlands and migration routes to look for geese have produced empty lakes and skies.

It's not all bad, mind you. The fresh air, fall colours and peaceful strolls have been amazing. And, despite my "down-in-the-mouth" attitude, there have been some fun birds, as well.

Taking advantage of a more flexible schedule the last few days, I've been chasing my tail a little more often. Friday morning I visited Musti and Raasio, two places where shorebirds gather earlier in the year, and geese sometimes frequent in fall. It was a ghost-town, with not a goose to be seen and no late waders. The only highlight was finally seeing a **Merlin** (Ampuhaukka) - a common raptor back home, but my first for this part of the world.

Before heading in to work on Sunday, I made my regular visit to Siilimasuo and the local dump. Except for a few **Chaffinch** (Peippo) and **Great Tits** (Talitainen), both places were a bust. There was some fleeting excitement when I flushed up a pipit, but it turned out to be just a **Meadow Pipit** (Niittykirvinen).

Monday morning included my first visit to Puutossalmi -- a location on Lake Kallavesi, just south of the city, that is known in the area for its arctic migration. But with southerly winds prevailing for days, not much has been happening. One **Great Black-backed Gull**

(Merilokki) and **Black-throated Diver** (Kuikka) were marginally notable, and a single flock of **Barnacle Geese** (Valkoposkihanhi) overhead was the only sign of migration.

Tuesday morning I visited the "bird lake" of Riistavesi. Again, no geese. Six species of duck were hanging out, including 6 migrating **Common Scoters** (Mustalintu), and four **Whooper Swans** (Laulujoutsen) honked their way across the sky.

This morning, a blanket of fog motivated me to abandon my plans to watch for migration and take a walk in the farm fields of Jälä instead. It was more birdy than I had predicted, although nothing too out of the ordinary. The highlight was a lone **Horned Lark** (Tunturikiuru) -- another common bird back home, but a Finnish first for me. One **Reed Bunting** (Pajusirkku), numerous **Meadow Pipits** (Niittykirvinen) and two **Skylarks** (Kiuru) flushed up from the grass, and a continual stream of **Fieldfares** (Räkättirastas) migrated overhead.

Fingers crossed ... something better HAS to cross my path soon. Right?!?!

October 17, 2005

Arctic Geese and the World's Laziest Sparrow

I shuddered Saturday morning after forcing myself out of bed and looking out my kitchen window. The winds had turned NW overnight, and dark rain clouds rolled in from the horizon. Cold and dreary ...

But rain or shine, I was joining in on the "fun". With the winds turning northerly for the first time in weeks, a good blast of arctic migration should have been on the way. So, a quick cup of coffee later, I bundled up, grabbed my gear and headed south of the city to Puutossalmi. Many birds follow the large Lake Kallavesi south, passing by the little point of land where the lake narrows ... making it a prime spot for viewing fall migration of waterfowl, divers and raptors.

By the time I arrived at 9:00am, about a dozen birders were already there. I'm not sure if it was the rainy weather, but things just didn't materialize that morning. After 4.5 hours of scanning the sky and water, most people were giving up hope of seeing too much ... In fact, the only goose was a single **Brant** (Sepelhanhi) that flew overhead, and other than a decent showing of **Black-throated Divers** (Kuikka) and a single **Snow Bunting** (Pulmunen), the morning was a bust.

Pinning my hopes on the promises from local birders that "tomorrow will be better", I joined some friends and headed out early Sunday morning. The winds were now coming straight from the north -- better for migration, but notably colder. At least it wasn't raining!! About 15 birders gathered at the point, staring face-first into the blistering wind ... *(Except for the lack of salt-water spray and a few jagged rocks to hide behind, it was a lot like a winter sea-watch back in Newfoundland!! Nice to feel at home!!)*

Things started a bit slowly -- a few **Long-tailed Ducks** (Alli) and **Black-throated Divers** (Kuikka) shot by. But soon the geese starting coming - and when they did, they just kept popping up. A flock here, another flock there -- some way out on the horizon, almost invisible to the naked eye, others flying directly over our heads. In fact, the keeners with pen and paper estimate we saw close to 7000 geese throughout the morning and early afternoon. Not bad by any standards ... While many of the geese were too far away for

definite ID's, most of them were **Bean Geese** (Metsähanhki) and **Barnacle Geese** (Valkoposkihanhi).

One of the more entertaining birds, though, was a **House Sparrow** (Varpunen). It arrived on the small ferry which carries cars back and forth across the small span of water (~250m) which separates the points of land in Puutossalmi, and hopped around our feet for an hour or so, picking up scraps and enjoying little handouts from the birders on coffee break. It's belly full, it decided to go home ... But despite the short flight back to the other side, it waited for the ferry to return, got back on and hitched a ride. Talk about lazy!!!

Well, it's vacation time for me --- today I start a weeklong trip to England to shake off the cobwebs and spend some time with a friend.

Kippis!!



A group of birders enjoying the arctic migration at Puutossalmi ...



The world's laziest House Sparrow (Varpunen) enjoying lunch ...

November 02, 2005

Birding Vicariously ...

I know, I know. I haven't posted in more than two weeks. That's because I have nothing to post. I haven't been out birding ... not even once.

I recently spent a week in England, visiting a friend and her family. It was a great time - one full day in London, and the rest in Nottingham. Did lots of fun and interesting things ... visited castles and beautiful churches, walked in Sherwood Forest and learned lots about the legends of Robin Hood, took in a great ghost walk in historic Nottingham, hung out in pubs and drank whiskey in fine company, and even hiked the seaside cliffs of Flamborough. But no birding.

Things have been busy at the university since I got back -- my project is winding down and there's lots to do. Throw in the fact that I have to prepare for a conference in Washington DC next week, and my days are full.

So ... I've been birding vicariously on the internet, and feeling the pain of many excellent species being seen back home in Newfoundland - especially after the "fallout" in Atlantic Canada which followed the tail-end of Hurricane Wilma last week.

Enough already ...

November 20, 2005

The "Art" of Birding ...

Excuses, excuses. Seems I'm having to come up with a lot of them lately.

And here's the most recent -- I haven't been birding lately because I've either been poked away in my office or jet-setting around the world. Not bad, eh??

Truth be told, I just got back from a trip to Washington DC for a conference. Despite my having made a mess of my travel plans, it was a very worthwhile venture. The conference itself was great, and I walked away having learned lots and picked up some new ideas. Even better, I had the chance to see and spend some time with my friends and colleagues from back home in Newfoundland.

In the bit of spare time I had, I did manage to take in some Washington sights -- including a number of beautiful memorials, the Smithsonian Museums, and the National Art Gallery. And while I didn't get birding (unless Starlings, Pigeons, House Sparrows and one Mockingbird count?!?!), I did get to see something just as spectacular ...

Fortunately, my visit to the National Art Gallery coincided with an exhibition of some of Audubon's original "***Birds of North America***" prints ... a selection from one of only two full collections known to exist!! It was nothing short of awe-inspiring to see these oversized paintings -- the detail and time that Audubon put into his work, the methods he used to combine art with field identification, and how his skill and quality improved over time. An absolute treat for me ...

I'm going to get out birding soon. Honestly. I mean it this time ...

November 27, 2005

Hiiripöllö

I did it. I "finally" got up from behind my desk and got out birding. Trouble is, someone forgot to inform the birds ...

Despite an extremely late night on Friday, I painfully rolled out of bed Saturday morning, fixed myself some coffee, and bundled up for a day of birding. After an unusually warm autumn, winter had finally started to show its face with snow falling gently outside.

The trip was a preliminary "scouting" expedition to find some birds in advance of next weekend's "rally" (A "big day" competition, for most of us North American birders).

Our first stop in Haminalahti produced the only highlight of the day -- a nice **Northern Hawk Owl** (Hiiripöllö) perched atop a tree, turning its head 'round in a dozen directions and scanning the surrounding fields patiently for breakfast. With the exception of **Great Tits** (Talitainen) and **Greenfinches** (Viherpeippo) attending a nearby feeder, the action was starting out pretty slowly.

And it stayed that way. The rest of our stops during the morning and early afternoon produced little of anything ... hardly any of the regular species, and certainly nothing of note. Even though it has been a warm fall and the lakes remain unfrozen, the only duck on the day was a **Mallard** (Sinisorsa) and no other water birds. Except for the wind rustling the trees, the forests were equally as quiet.

At least the fresh air and snow was refreshing ...

December 04, 2005

A Crane Story

I was recently told about a family of cranes that were still hanging around a nearby town in late November— weeks after the last of their kind should have left Finland, and facing an oncoming winter that I’m sure would spell their doom. It seems that one of the parent birds was injured and unable to fly, and the other two (parent and young) refused to abandon it.

It’s not the first such story I’ve heard, but this one has been playing on my mind for several days now. I have to wonder how concern and caring for a “loved one” can overcome the powerful drive to migrate south to safety. We all too often think of self-preservation as the most basic of all instincts, and the “kill or be killed” and “survival at all costs” as credos throughout the natural world – but maybe compassion is much more basic and instinctual than we realize.

In a world where we are inundated daily with news of war, greed and hatred, I like to think that these are not really the stuff of basic human nature. There might be hope for our species yet ... even if I have to look to a family of cranes to find it.

December 13, 2005

Time Flies ...

Wow – It really is hard to believe that 7.5 months have went by so quickly, and my Finnish adventure is drawing to close. For now, at least ...

While the main purpose of my trip was academic, I made the best of the opportunity to see this fantastic part of northern Europe and enjoy its spectacular nature and birdlife, as well as its interesting history and culture.

And I have to admit I've fallen in love with Finland -- its people, its traditions, and its language. And, for the most part, I've really felt at home here. Wherever and whenever I've traveled, I have met interesting and friendly people -- and am especially grateful to the many birders who have been generous with their time, energy and advice during my many adventures, from the local people here Kuopio, to those I've met in places like Kuusamo, Liminginlahti and Lapland.

And there will always be the little things, which I know I will miss when I leave ... the nightless nights of summer, ruisleipä (*dark rye bread*), evenings of sauna, the salty sweet taste of salmiakki, and roasting makkara (and, of course, the beautiful Finnish girls – but that goes without saying!!). Salmiakki I can bring with me, but the rest I know I will eventually come back for.

But my heart lies in nature and that, above all else, is what I have fallen in love with and what will draw me back. The amazing solitude of the Finnish forests, the gleaming lakes under a midnight sun, the beautiful voices of night-singers, the crisp air and brilliant snow of winter ...

I will miss it. But I'll be back.

December 19, 2005

Back on "The Rock"

Leaving my office Thursday afternoon, a **Great Tit** (Talitainen) called out from the path. It was to be my last bird in Finland (for now, at least) ...

Early Friday morning (*Dec 16*), I started my 26 hour journey home -- across Europe and the Atlantic Ocean, and back to Newfoundland. Having missed an exciting year in my province, and *many* rare species, during my Finnish adventure, I was looking forward to birding back on "the rock".

After a long and frustrating day of travel (several weather delays and the loss of my luggage), I arrived home at 4:30am Saturday -- to interesting news. A **Ross's Goose** had been found in a city lake just 2 km from my apartment -- a first provincial record and an extreme rarity for Atlantic Canada. After squeezing in a few winks of sleep, I nervously set out a few hours later. Fortunately, I found the goose still at the lake, hanging out with the local ducks and allowing amazingly close looks. I also picked up the last remaining **Laughing Gull** (*one of an influx that had been blown in by Hurricane Wilma a month or so ago*) and three female **Redheads** at another pond across town. Three "lifers" within hours of making landfall -- a good start to my return!!

Sunday was the first Christmas Bird Count of the season, and after another early rise, I met up with some friends, grabbed some Tim Horton's coffee (Surprisingly, I missed *that* in Finland) and headed down the shore towards Cape St. Mary's. While it was a rather mild day for mid-December, the winds were extremely strong, and the hike across the barrens and headlands to Point Lance was a struggle -- gale force winds nearly picking me off my feet and pushing me towards the cliff edge. A true day of coastal Newfoundland birding -- the cliffs rising high above the wild ocean, waves crashing violently against the rocks, blistering winds sweeping across the barrens, and the salt spray coating my binoculars. God, I missed it!!

It was a routine day of birding, with no major rarities. The highlights were a late **Orange-crowned Warbler**, a lone **Rough-legged Hawk** playing in the wind, a beautiful group of **Harlequin Ducks** hiding amongst the flock of **Common Eiders**, and handful of **Snow Buntings** and **Savannah Sparrows** sneaking around on the grassy beach.

And so ends my excursion to Finland. Not sure where my future adventures will take me, but I know I will find my way back there sooner than later. For now, I'm happy to be enjoying the nature of Newfoundland.

It's not Finland -- but it's home, and it's great to be back!!

LIST OF SPECIES
(May – December 2005)

1. Whooper Swan	48. Spotted Crake
2. Bean Goose	49. Corn Crake
3. Pink-footed Goose	50. Eurasian Coot
4. Greater White-fronted Goose	51. Common Crane
5. Greylag Goose	52. Eurasian Oystercatcher
6. Barnacle Goose	53. Little Ringed Plover
7. Brant	54. Common Ringed Plover
8. Common Shelduck	55. European Golden Plover
9. Eurasian Wigeon	56. Black-bellied Plover
10. Gadwall	57. Northern Lapwing
11. Common Teal	58. Red Knot
12. Mallard	59. Sanderling
13. Northern Pintail	60. Little Stint
14. Northern Shoveller	61. Temminick's Stint
15. Tufted Duck	62. Purple Sandpiper
16. Common Pochard	63. Dunlin
17. Long-tailed Duck	64. Curlew Sandpiper
18. Common (<i>WW</i>) Scoter	65. Broad-billed Sandpiper
19. Velvet Scoter	66. Ruff
20. Common Goldeneye	67. Jack Snipe
21. Smew	68. Common Snipe
22. Red-breasted Merganser	69. Eurasian Woodcock
23. Common Merganser / Goosander	70. Black-tailed Godwit
24. Hazel Grouse	71. Bar-tailed Godwit
25. Willow Ptarmigan	72. Whimbrel
26. Black Grouse	73. Eurasian Curlew
27. Red-throated Diver	74. Spotted Redshank
28. Black-throated (<i>Arctic</i>) Diver	75. Common Redshank
29. Great Crested Grebe	76. Marsh Sandpiper
30. Red-necked Grebe	77. Common Greenshank
31. Great Cormorant	78. Green Sandpiper
32. Great Bittern	79. Wood Sandpiper
33. Grey Heron	80. Terek Sandpiper
34. Black Kite	81. Common Sandpiper
35. White-tailed Eagle	82. Ruddy Turnstone
36. Golden Eagle	83. Red-necked Phalarope
37. Western Marsh Harrier	84. Arctic (<i>Parasitic</i>) Skua
38. Northern (<i>Hen</i>) Harrier	85. Little Gull
39. Eurasian Sparrowhawk	86. Common Gull
40. Northern Goshawk	87. Herring Gull
41. Common Buzzard	88. Great Black-backed Gull
42. Rough-legged Hawk	89. Lesser Black-backed Gull
43. Honey Buzzard	90. Caspian Gull
44. Osprey	91. Black-headed Gull
45. Eurasian Kestrel	92. Caspian Tern
46. Eurasian Hobby	93. Common Tern
47. Merlin	94. Arctic Tern

95.	Little Tern	145.	Common Whitethroat
96.	Black Tern	146.	Greenish Warbler
97.	Rock Pigeon	147.	Arctic Warbler
98.	Wood Pigeon	148.	Wood Warbler
99.	Common Cuckoo	149.	Chiffchaff
100.	Northern Hawk Owl	150.	Willow Warbler
101.	Ural Owl	151.	Goldcrest
102.	Great Grey Owl	152.	Spotted Flycatcher
103.	Short-eared Owl	153.	European Pied Flycatcher
104.	Tengmalm's (<i>Boreal</i>) Owl	154.	Long-tailed Tit
105.	Common Swift	155.	Great Tit
106.	Black Woodpecker	156.	Blue Tit
107.	Great Spotted Woodpecker	157.	Willow Tit
108.	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	158.	Siberian Tit
109.	Three-toed Woodpecker	159.	Coal Tit
110.	Eurasian Skylark	160.	Eurasian Treecreeper
111.	Horned Lark	161.	Golden Oriole
112.	Sand Martin (<i>Bank Swallow</i>)	162.	Great Grey (<i>Northern</i>) Shrike
113.	Barn Swallow	163.	Eurasian Jay
114.	Common House Martin	164.	Siberian Jay
115.	Tree Pipit	165.	Eurasian Magpie
116.	Meadow Pipit	166.	Eurasian Jackdaw
117.	Yellow Wagtail	167.	Rook
118.	Grey Wagtail	168.	Hooded Crow
119.	White Wagtail	169.	Common Raven
120.	Winter Wren	170.	European Starling
121.	Dunnock	171.	House Sparrow
122.	Bohemian Waxwing	172.	Eurasian Tree Sparrow
123.	White-throated Dipper	173.	Chaffinch
124.	European Robin	174.	Brambling
125.	Thrush Nightingale	175.	European Greenfinch
126.	Bluethroat	176.	Eurasian Siskin
127.	Red-flanked Bluetail	177.	Common Linnet
128.	Common Redstart	178.	Common Redpoll
129.	Eurasian Blackbird	179.	Common Crossbill
130.	Fieldfare	180.	Two-barred (<i>WW</i>) Crossbill
131.	Song Thrush	181.	Parrot Crossbill
132.	Redwing	182.	Common Rosefinch
133.	Mistle Thrush	183.	Eurasian Bullfinch
134.	Whinchat	184.	Yellowhammer
135.	Northern Wheatear	185.	Snow Bunting
136.	Grasshopper Warbler	186.	Lapland Longspur
137.	River Warbler	187.	Ortolan Bunting
138.	Sedge Warbler	188.	Little Bunting
139.	Reed Warbler	189.	Reed Bunting
140.	Marsh Warbler	190.	Rustic Bunting
141.	Blythe's Reed Warbler		
142.	Booted Warbler		
143.	Garden Warbler		
144.	Lesser Whitethroat		