

Sweden in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 10 February 2008



Three-toed Woodpecker (male) by Daniel Green

Report and Images by Daniel Green



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Day 1

Thursday 7th February

Pygmy Owl and Tawny Owl rescue

Daniel Green, our local Swedish guide, met us at Västerås airport. We jumped into the nine-seater van and went through the outskirts of town heading northwards towards the countryside.

On the outskirts of the suburbs, a garden feeding station became our first stop. Here we enjoyed some sandwiches with tea and coffee while waiting for the colourful Hawfinches to descend from surrounding treetops. We soon get lucky; at least four Hawfinches come down to eat sunflower seeds from the feeder just some 8-10 metres away from us. Several pairs of Bullfinches, some Marsh Tits, Greenfinches and plenty of Yellowhammers appear alongside, while a Great-spotted Woodpecker takes to a lump of fat on a Silver Birch next to us.

We slowly continue our way northwards towards Svartådalen scanning the open farmland for raptors. Soon we spot a Rough-legged Buzzard perched in a tree by the river. Plenty of corvids seem to bother it a bit and the buzzard flies to another perch, exposing its characteristic black and white tail. We bring out the telescopes and zoom in carefully for 10 minutes, discussing how to separate it from Common Buzzard.

We soon alter our habitat and enter winding gravel roads surrounded by conifers. This is the habitat of all the taiga birds like Grouse, Owls and Woodpeckers. An open area in the middle of the pine forest looks attractive and we take a walk into the semi-open forest. A flock of several hundred Yellowhammers, two Siskin and a group of 10 or so Common Jays appear, the last feeding in the open on a field, just like a flock of thrushes. One of the clients reports a caterpillar on the snow, it is quite early for insect life but it is mild today and even a few mosquitoes are flying around. The caterpillar could be a moth called Ruby Tiger, larvae of which have been reported recently.

We start our search for today's primary target species Pygmy Owl. To make a long story short, we try three different sites without luck, but on the fourth site, Daniels' imitating whistling brings out a tiny little owl immediately. First it perches on a smaller spruce tree across a field, but soon it flies straight towards us and remains sitting in the nearby treetops for as long as we wished!

This is the first calling Pygmy Owl for this year in the area and the first to be seen on this particular site for more than two years. Interestingly several years before that, a very aggressive Pygmy male was very reliable at this site. Could it be the same bird or...?

A phone call from a local villager keeps us going.....an owl (another) is supposedly trapped in his chimney! Since it's just a few kms from the hotel we decide to make a rescue attempt. It's apparently a Tawny Owl and it's stuck in the pipe from an iron stove in one of the rooms in his small cottage. It first seems like a mission impossible, but after removing the newly installed stove, it becomes easy task to pull out the owl. It looks dazed and confused and a bit tatty. We decide to put it outdoors in an open cardboard box under a firewood shelter. After dinner we get reports that the owl flew away into the forest without problems.

Day 2

Friday 8th February

Woodpeckers and Eagles

Calm weather with bright blue skies and sunshine met us on the second day as we drive along Lake Fläcksjön towards today's destination for woodpecker-watching; Färna Ekopark.

We simply just can't help stopping by the beautiful scene at the bridge Färjebron. Cameras and smiles, some 15 Whooper Swans in the open water, and a calling Black Woodpecker.

As we go to drive further, we don't get more than 500 metres before a Pygmy Owl is seen perching on a telephone wire just next to the road in broad daylight.... Out again with telescopes and cameras and it remains in focus for quite a while, first taking to a taller tree top, then jumping upwards to chase some daring Yellowhammers away. At the same time the Black Woodpecker we had just heard came closer and perched in solitary aspen trees, well in sight and for quite some time.

A thirty minute drive later and we meet up with Michael Rhönstad, our special woodpecker guide at Färna Ekopark. The Ekoparks are a relatively new phenomena in Sweden, being forest landscapes set aside from commercial forestry by Sveaskog (Sveaskog is the biggest Swedish state-owned forest company) to increase biodiversity and induce or even actively create better habitats for insects and forest birds. Färna Ekopark is truly the Ekopark of woodpeckers. Here you can find seven species of woodpecker including Wryneck!

This morning is a glorious morning for woodpeckers. Within minutes Michael has tape-lured a male Three-toed Woodpecker into the open clearing where we stand. As the male is drumming away, a female answers and each two remain seated on a stump in front of us. The yellow top of the males' head is glowing in the smooth sunshine.

We drive a bit further and where beavers have gnawed plenty of trees down in the flooded forest by the road, we walk the snow-covered track up to where Grey-headed Woodpeckers breed. It's probably a bit too early in the season – they might not have established their territories yet – because they don't answer our calls. Another Black Woodpecker is all we hear and catch a brief glimpse of. Mike takes the group further into the flooded forest with many dead spruce trees, a super feeding habitat for Three-toed Woodpeckers, but they are not to be seen anymore....

Meanwhile Daniel has got a fire started down by the lake and as the group approaches, the scent of a Reindeer stir-fry with plenty of vegetables is tickling our noses. Mike calls out a Goshawk – an adult female who has just been spotted by Daniel as it crosses the lake right towards him – unfortunately too fast to be seen any more than briefly by the group though.

An after-lunch-stop is by a feeding station for eagles only some five kms away from the Ekopark. More than 40 Raven surround it and at least two different White-tailed Eagles immediately show as we approach carefully over a ridge not too distant. Eagles are wary of humans even from quite a distance. This time an adult bird is perched in an old pine tree and an immature bird is only a few metres away. We can tell that it's a juvenile bird from last year's brood. Soon it is up and flying straight towards us, just above the treetops. A mighty, mighty bird in close appearance.

The last thing we do on our way back towards Svartådalen and the Hotel Sättra Brunn is to refill the feeding station for Nutcrackers that we will attend first thing in the morning.

Day 3

Saturday 9th February

Shy Hazelgrouse and Nutcrackers

Action begins immediately as we step out of the van at the "Nutcracker Inn" – the Nutcracker feeding station west of Fläcksjön. A high-pitched whistling call is drawn to our attention by Daniel. It is a male Hazel Grouse that is calling. It is not far away but impossible to see in the dense forest across the road. We try to attract it by blowing a whistle imitating its sound perfectly, but though it moves closer, we can't get it in view. Maybe it gets spooked by a sudden and loud calling Nutcracker, moving from one tree top to another just above it, and again just out of sight behind other trees. The Nutcracker flies away and the Hazel Grouse shuts up, indicating a raptor presence.

We move up to the Inn and begin to await the birds arrival. Coal, Willow and Crested Tits are soon there along with Blue and Great Tits. Nuthatches and a Treecreeper also attend. One Great-spotted Woodpecker after another arrives at the scene and soon six of them are together on the same Aspen. A swinging branch of a Spruce next to us gives away the presence of a Red Squirrel (not so often seen here). A Sparrowhawk swoops down and all the birds disappear for a while, leaving a Blue Tit frozen in its position on a branch just a metre from some of us!

While the photographers decide to wait patiently for the birds to arrive again the majority of the group takes a walk down to the lakeside. A rewarding move that soon gives us encounters with a flock of at least 16 Long-tailed Tits of the Scandinavian white-headed race. As we get a view over Lake Fläcksjön a pair of adult White-tailed Eagles comes flying in a display-like flight, rolling up and down. We can even hear them call. They chase each other around in what seems to be a courtship display.

We move uphill to a better position as a Lesser-spotted Woodpecker appears. First we hear it call and then it was flying just above us, landing in a treetop a bit further away, but moves on before we can scope it. From our position we can actually see the nest of the eagles and as one of us looks in the telescope, one of the eagles lands in the nest, and starts to refine its construction.

As if that was not enough, suddenly a Nutcracker drops onto the treetop next to the eagle nest. There it sits for some minutes, so we all can enjoy it. Despite the distance it is a very characteristic bird.

Back at the Inn, it's time for lunch and we eat hot soup as finally another Nutcracker came down into the clearing, giving better views.

A Great Grey Shrike shows on the way towards our next destination, Jädraås, as well as some Siberian Jays. A warming, open fire and some hot tea in the dining room greets us at our nice little hotel Jädraås Herrgård. A nice conversation over dinner includes testing some local blue cheese and wine made from Cloudberrys.

Day 4

Sunday 10th February

Tame Siberian Jays and elusive Capercaillies

Up here – some 200 km north of Svartådalen – the snow layer is thick as we walk the unploughed track 2 km into the forest. We are totally surrounded by coniferous forest when plenty of bird calls break the silence. Loud Crested Tits are amongst the first birds to show, but we won't have to wait long until a Siberian Jay appears just by the track at the forest edge. It approaches us and perches in the open and is looking to see if we have brought any food for it. Soon three Siberian Jays are at the scene. Wonderful, curious and friendly little birds, they are overwhelmingly social. We put out food for them as the photographers blast away from different positions. These birds ought to be the best models you can imagine, they just keep coming back, so long as you've got plenty of food lined up for them.

Coal, Crested and Willow Tits, a Great-spotted Woodpecker and even some Nuthatches (a bird currently spreading north in the Swedish taiga) also take food, offering good photo opportunities. A brisk walk further along the track is exactly what we need to get warm, before we start a fire and grill some locally produced sausages for lunch.

Then it's time to move back south again towards the big River Nedre Dalälven. Three members in the front seat get lucky as a male Capercaillie suddenly flies over the road in front of us. What a bird! We stop for a while at Gysinge, where we enjoy several Dippers from the bridges over the streams. Goldeneyes closed the trip list on 42 species.

Gysinge is quite an interesting place when it comes to cultural heritage. The waterpower of the river brought the iron and steel manufacturing to the area in the 1600's and on the islands of Gysinge a whole village grew up around the industry. The architecture with its white painted, stone houses in a park-like setting looks almost more Spanish than Swedish. We visit the handicraft store, but also the nature visitors centre, which tells about the surrounding Färnebofjärdens National park with its unique river archipelago with lots of flooded forest and plenty of birds and wildlife. A quite appreciated finale to an intense and interesting long weekend!

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