

Sweden in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

12 – 15 February 2015



Crested Tit



European Elk



European Otters



Pygmy Owl

Report compiled by Daniel Green
Images by Rob Daw



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Day 1

Thursday 12th February

We had only just pulled out of the airport, and driven a few miles towards Sigtuna, when a White-tailed Eagle appeared over a little lake by the road, so we pulled over to look at it. In the process we spotted a m Goldeneye flying by, and he proved to be just the forerunner for a flock of Mallard ... being chased by a Goshawk!! The chase was good entertainment, but the Goshawk ended up perched in a spruce tree (without any prey), a bit further away, but still in good view for the telescopes. It was an adult m in full splendour. That was a good start, and we were still in the suburbs of the town!

A bit further out into the countryside, we found another raptor, perched on a fence near the road. Its creamy-white breast and head and dark belly gave it away, as a Rough-legged Buzzard. As we were trying to get some pictures of it, a second bird appeared and, soon after, a Common Buzzard too. A stretch of open water by a bridge produced five Tufted Duck. Kingfisher might not be what you would expect to see in the cold north, but we couldn't help stopping by a bridge, where one had been reported. Meanwhile, we saw some Bullfinches and Tree Sparrows, among plentiful Blue and Great Tits on some garden feeders. And then, all of a sudden - as they often appear, the colourful little dagger came flying in, crossing the bridge and perching at the edge of the reed, just a little bit downstream. Charming!

Our first proper stop was to get some hot coffee and sandwiches (with a view), in a nature reserve on the island Ångsö. As we arrived at the shore, at least two White-tailed Eagles were sitting on the ice nearby, offering good scope views. Soon a warming fire was burning in the open-air fireplace: it makes a big difference on a cold, windy day like this one. We gathered around the fire, and got to know each other over the coffee. A Buzzard soared above, for a little while.

Since a stand of Larch trees with a lot of cones was almost en-route, we decided to stop to look for Crossbills for a little while, but without success. However, we did see both Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers. A juvenile Goshawk flew by and, shortly after, a large adult fem Goshawk approached, and flew right by us, in really nice evening sunlight. We headed towards the guesthouse, driving along small forest roads to look for some wildlife, and suddenly someone called 'stop!' A Moose (Eurasian Elk) was lying in the snow, by a willow, on the lake-side, looking very relaxed. Only after we opened a door to the van, it stood up, showing its true size. A large animal indeed! A beautiful sunset by the bridge over the Black River was our final stop for pictures, before checking in to the guesthouse, and dinner.

Day 2

Friday 13th February

Black Woodpecker had already been heard near the guest house by the early morning risers. We only drove a short distance, before we stopped for a short morning walk. A Pygmy Owl was calling and, after a while, it shot down towards us. It disappeared into the vegetation, but then it perched totally in the open, on a branch, and stayed there for as long as we remained on the site. Plenty of pictures were taken of this tiny owl, which often appears in daylight at this time of year.

The next stop was the Nutcracker feeding station, in a forest clearing. It did not take long till the first birds arrived, and the photographers among the group got plenty of shots of these rather tame birds, appearing within five metres of us. A Red Squirrel charmed us with its upright-standing ear-tufts, and seemed to be happy to share the hazelnuts with the Nutcrackers without any problem. Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Nuthatches (of the pale-bellied Scandinavian race), Crested Tits, Willow, Marsh and Coal Tits appeared frequently on and by the feeders. It was quite a lively little spot. Hot drinks and sweet buns kept our energy up meanwhile.

We drove south a short way, to another forest area, to walk in deep snow and search for Grouse and Woodpeckers. A Great Grey Shrike, perching on a tree-top, made a good stop. The track we started our walk on was very icy and slippery, and when we left the track the snow was so deep that we all had to wear our snow-gaiters. We saw some Eurasian Jays, and Bullfinches and Yellowhammers showed by a solitary cottage with a bird table; otherwise it was rather quiet. We therefore decided to go a bit further south, to have our lunch in an abandoned garden area with some bird feeders. On arrival, a m Hawfinch was showing well; they are often a bit shy and reluctant to come down close to humans. From the excellent views in the telescopes, we could see how it clearly justifies its name as the "King of finches". Several Bullfinches, Greenfinches, Chaffinches, Yellowhammers, Tits and allies frequented the feeding area, as we enjoyed our hot soup and tried to get some pictures.

Day 3

Saturday 14th February

Today we had an early start, before dawn, for a two-hour transfer northwards. Here the snow layer was even thicker, and the gaiters really came into their own. The walk was long, since the track has not been ploughed at all this winter. It felt a bit like an expedition, to get out into the wild like this, with a sledge filled with firewood and a tomahawk in the back-pack. At first it was really quiet but, suddenly, one, then two, then three Siberian Jays appeared just next to us, in the little clearing. Crested Tit, Willow Tit, Coal Tit, Nuthatch, and a couple of Great-Spotted Woodpeckers also joined in. Naturally, the birds are provided with food here in wintertime, and especially the Siberian Jays - who have a reputation of being curious - are very unshy. They came back over and over again, to feed on bits of fat and sausage we put out for them. Speaking of which: the party tried the Swedish tradition of sharpening a wooden stick to grill a tasty sausage on, over the fire we had just started. Served with mustard, ketchup and the Swedish Prawn salsa, it was a real treat! A Black Woodpecker was calling, and showing on some dead pine trees, in the open area next to us. For a long while, we could see it flying between the tree trunks in the forest as well: an impressive Woodpecker.

With the memory cards in our cameras filling up, and feeling happy with this first session, we started our return to the van and the drive back southwards. However, we had another destination on the journey that can be really interesting - The Färnebofjärdens National Park!

The area is somewhat impressive with its many fast-flowing streams, but we set straight off to the best Woodpecker area, and started to look around among plenty of dead trees near the river. A long drumming drew our attention: a White-backed Woodpecker was perched on a dry tree-top just next to us, drumming intensely. It offered good scope views, although it was a bit high up for photography. As it kept drumming, a Grey-headed Woodpecker appeared in another tree-top next to it, and we felt very fortunate to get such good Woodpecker activity, so late in the afternoon. These are the two most difficult-to-see species in the area. White-backed Woodpecker was almost extinct in Sweden (due to habitat loss) but is now slowly recovering. A Black Woodpecker was heard as well, and several Great Spotted Woodpeckers were flying about. Satisfied with this, we returned to the village of Gysinge, where a café overlooking the streams offered some rest, warmth, hot drinks and pastries. A flock of Goldeneyes were swimming around, and a Dipper or two (of the Scandinavian Black-bellied race) provided the entertainment. Some of the group saw a flock of 26 Waxwings, while the rest of us were having coffee.

As we crossed the small bridges on the way out of the National Park, a couple of people with cameras and big lenses pointing down towards the riverside, made us look in the right direction. And look at that! Two Otters - a mother and a baby - were playing around on the ice right next to the water, every now and then diving in with a good leap. Now, that's entertainment! The Otter is on a come-back in Sweden, but is still a quite difficult animal to see, especially like this. We stood and enjoyed the show, and photographed as much as we could, for a long time, until dusk started to fall. Then it was time to drive the last hour to Wilma's welcoming guesthouse in Salbohedsgården.

Day 4

Sunday 15th February

A Rough-legged Buzzard was gazing from its perch, just down the road from the Guesthouse, and was the first bird we saw as we left. Today we headed westwards, to Färna Eko-park. This is a new concept within forestry and nature conservation in Sweden. Here the state-owned forestry company Sveaskog is setting aside forest, and managing it with the aim of increasing biodiversity. This particular Eko-park is good for Woodpeckers. As we entered, a m Black Grouse was perched atop a Silver Birch, and allowed us to stop, and get out of the van, to get some pictures.

A lot of dead and dying spruce trees showed that here was a potential area for Three-toed Woodpeckers. Since they have a specialised diet of Spruce Bark Beetles, they will forage where trees are either already dead, or just infested with the bark beetles. One is a consequence of the other. We have met up with the local Woodpecker expert, Michael, who took us deeper into the forest, and then asked us to listen carefully for the gentle tapping of these slightly smaller Woodpeckers. It did not take him long to locate a m bird that was sitting half-way up a tree. We had some decent views, even if it was not close enough for photography. We could see that the bird was a m, from the yellow on the top of the head. This is the only European Woodpecker with yellow instead of red on the head. It saluted us with some drumming on a dry tree before flying off, to sit in a tree-top for a while. Red Crossbills were heard flying over, and the group started to walk back to the road. But the Three-toed m returned, so we called back the group, who got a second chance for some more views, this time with potential photography.

A bit further down the road, a Black Woodpecker suddenly crossed over a clearing. We got out and could see it repeatedly, as it flew to and fro several times. We tried to search for Hazel Grouse, but without success. A Wren

and some Crested Tits were all we could find, but suddenly a majestic, dark figure was standing in the middle of the road: a m Capercaillie! This was an excellent sighting, as they are rather unpredictable, and often hard to see in winter time. We seized the time and enjoyed a final picnic lunch (of Wilma's hot soup) in the sun, with chirping Crested Tits around us.

Sadly, the time had come to start our journey back. Once more we tried for the Crossbills in the Larch trees, but we had to settle for Fieldfares, Goldfinches and Redpolls. We enjoyed a last coffee break in the sunshine. However, we could not resist a short stop by some open water in the harbour area. A m Goosander and a pair of Goldeneye were seen, as a lot of Herring Gulls were starting to come in from the north. Among them we found several Great Black-backed Gulls and a surprising Glaucous Gull! This is an Arctic guest which had been seen occasionally in the area since before Christmas, but not lately, since the lakes have been covered with ice for almost two months. Anyway, it made a good finale before the drive towards the airport started. On the way back we saw Common Buzzards and a Great Grey Shrike along the road and, just before the airport, another two Rough-legged Buzzards perched on lamp-posts on the road-side.

We left, having enjoyed some of the best of Sweden in winter.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; m = m; f = fem, j = juvenile)

	Common name	Scientific name	February			
			15	16	17	18
1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓			✓
2	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓		30	2
3	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>			2	1
4	Western Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>				1 m
5	Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>				1 m
6	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1			
7	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	3			
8	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	1+2	✓	✓	
9	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	4			2
10	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1+1			✓
11	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>				✓
12	Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>				1 j
13	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓			✓
14	Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓		✓	✓
15	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>		1		
16	Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	1			
17	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
18	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>			1	
19	Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>				1 m
20	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>		1	1	1 m
21	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>	1			
22	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>			1 m	
23	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>		1		
24	Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>			3	
25	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓
26	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		4		
28	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
29	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>			26	
32	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓
33	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓
34	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓		✓
35	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓
36	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
37	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>				✓
39	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea europaea</i>		✓	✓	
40	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓		
41	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				1
42	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓		✓
43	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓		3
44	Black-bellied Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus cinclus</i>			2	
45	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓		✓
46	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓		
47	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			1 m	

	Common name	Scientific name	February			
			15	16	17	18
48	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓		✓	✓
49	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	✓	✓		
51	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>			✓	
52	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓		✓
53	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		✓	✓	✓
54	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓	✓		✓

Mammals

1	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			2	
2	Eurasian Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>	1			
3	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Fallow Deer	<i>Dama dama</i>				✓