

Sweden in Winter

Naturetrek Tour Report

8 - 11 February 2018

Report and images by Daniel Green



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Daniel Green (leader) with seven Naturetrek clients

Day 1

Thursday 8th February

It's a calm day, overcast with light cloud and a few degrees below zero that greets the seven enthusiastic travellers that get together at Arlandas Airport Terminal 2 today. We drive out over the Swedish countryside to avoid the traffic on the main road. The first birds to be seen are the common corvids (Hooded Crow, Magpie, Jackdaw, Raven) and one or two Fieldfares. A stretch of open water in a sound holds a few Mallard, two Coots and a family of Mute Swans with just one cygnet. Lakes are frozen at this time of the year and the wildfowl migrates south and to the coasts, so there are not usually even this number of waterbirds around. An unusually rufous Common Buzzard sits on a fence just by the road.

We decide on a coffee break with a lunch snack by a barn in open farmland. The sun is shining through the light clouds and a flock of hundreds of birds are up flying almost like a murmuration of Starlings. However, it's a mix of Jackdaws and Hooded Crows; they seem upset, but we can't spot a raptor even though a Peregrine has been seen here recently. The hot soup and sandwiches taste good. There's another flock of birds going up and down from what seems to be an unharvested crop-field. Most of them seem to be Yellowhammers but white wings, easily detectable from afar, give away the presence of Snow Buntings. At first glance it looks like there could be 50 or so birds, but in a while more and more birds come in and an impressive flock of several hundred Snow Buntings fly about over the field. Their white wings glittering in the sun makes it a beautiful spectacle. We estimate the flock to about 600 birds!

We drive smaller roads through farmlands hoping to see some more birds. Another Buzzard in a tree-top show pale head and breast on a dark belly - it's a Rough-legged Buzzard. When it flies up and away it shows the characteristic white tail with a black band. A garden with some bird feeders (operated by our host) is attracting some Marsh Tits, Blue and Great Tits, Nuthatches, a couple of nice Bullfinches and plenty of Yellowhammers. This is the hotspot for Hawfinch in the area but today they are absent. It's now afternoon and we think the forest habitats need some attention as well. We go to a place where Great Grey Owls sometimes can be seen, but despite an hour's wait and telescope scanning, no owls come out to hunt.

As a final mission for the day we go a bit further up the road to try to find a Pygmy Owl, but that doesn't work either. Well, we are happy to be close to our hotel as the day comes to an end and we can get some rest in comfortable rooms and gather for a nice dinner.

Day 2

Friday 9th February

We head west to the pine-forest-dominated area called Bergslagen. It's a clear, still, sunny and beautiful morning although also cold (about -10°C). We go to Färna Ekopark in an attempt for Pygmy Owl but have no success there. However, a small flock of larger, finch-like birds suddenly land in some spruce tree tops. They are Pine Grosbeaks! This is a difficult, northern bird that roams around the vast forests of northern Scandinavia in winter time and not always in large numbers. Although not all of us saw them very well before they flew off again, it's good that they are about, and we hope we might get more chances to see them. A flock of Redpolls or Siskin are flying past briefly but against the light. We meet with Mr Michael Rhönstad - another guide in our network - who kindly offers to help us through the deep snow - and walk us on a small trail, leading into a forest that could be good for Woodpeckers. It's a nice habitat with a mix of pine and spruce trees. We start with following a main

track where some people also go skiing, then we divert into the forest on a small trail following a little stream. A beautiful habitat! Soon, a tapping sound reveals the presence of a Woodpecker. It's very busy searching for food so it doesn't pay attention to us, allowing us some views at reasonably close range, although the trees are dense, and it is not easy with all the snow on the branches. Anyway, it's a Black Woodpecker and when it flies between trees a couple of times we can clearly appreciate that it's a massive bird and, in fact, the biggest Woodpecker in Europe. We had hoped for Three-toed Woodpecker too, but it proves difficult this year.

Michael needs to go on and after a short comfort stop in the small town Skinnskatteberg (with a Sparrowhawk flying overhead), we drive around the nearby lake to find a spot where we can have lunch in the sun or by some bird feeders Michael have told us about. It takes some time to find these feeders, and we had passed them once already before finally we get there and can enjoy some birds over the hot lunch-soup. There's in fact plenty of birds here; Coal Tits, the regular Blue and Great Tits, Nuthatches, Yellowhammers and the very similar Marsh and Willow Tits. So, we get good comparison views and when Daniel tells us the bib of the Willow Tit (in Scandinavia) is bigger and wider, whilst the bib of the Marsh Tit is like a small Hitler moustache, Liz comes up with the rhyme; Marsh - moustache! Easy to learn, impossible to forget. Here come a nice little flock of at least six Long-tailed Tits. These are of the Scandinavian subspecies and have all white heads: incredibly pure, innocent and cute looking birds. A female Bullfinch also appears for a while.

We drive back a bit along a nice little stream and then around the lake (Nedre Vättern) and a bit further south to an area where a Hawk-Owl has been seen lately. On the spot some Black Grouse females perch in a birch tree. When we get out they fly away, of course. We drive slowly and look really carefully in all tree tops, the habitat looks excellent with some open felling areas and some scattered dry, dead trees, typical Hawk-Owl habitat simply. Another Black Grouse fly up from a tree, this time a male. As we turn to follow it in binoculars another, much bigger bird comes flying as well. It's a male Capercaillie! After having disappeared behind some trees it luckily perches in a top of a pine tree and stays. We get plenty of time to zoom it in our telescopes, so everybody can see it really well.

A bit further down the road there are two big trees with big holes in them, probably old Black Woodpecker nests. We walk up to them and scratch the trunk. At the first one nothing happens, but from the second hole a Red Squirrel pops out and climbs further up the trunk, looking beautiful in its slightly greyer, silver-backed winter fur. We keep driving, scanning the surroundings for Hawk-Owl, but with no luck. As we return north on the forest track, another two Black Grouse females sit up in a birch again, and this time they allow us much better views.

We go back into the Ekopark Färna where we started the day. We try repeatedly to find the Pygmy Owl that's been seen here lately and maybe a second chance for the Pine Grosbeaks from the morning, but without success. A flock of 70 Redpolls entertain us for some time, and we walk down to a stretch of open water where Beavers have been active gnawing on the trees. We can see the marks and that alone give an impression of their capacity.

Day 3

Saturday 10th February

This day we start already at 6am. We get a cup of coffee and a muffin before the van departs northbound. We have a two-hour drive to do and there's a lot of mist today, so we need to drive carefully. Luckily, it clears up as we get further north into the higher grounds. We are almost there when a big bird is sitting in a young pine close

to the road. It's another male Capercaillie! We felt blessed yesterday to see one for so long, but this one is even closer - close enough to show the chestnut back and not just looking black as they do from a distance.

The snow is almost a metre deep here so it's a bit of a challenge to do the walk. The idea is to walk about 1.2 kilometres down a track to where Siberian Jays used to appear. Only a couple of people seem to have walked here before us, so it's a bit of a balancing act in the deep snow. It doesn't take long - in fact only half way - before three Siberian Jays fly across the track in front of us. They perch in the spruce trees by the track and one of them stays in a top, so we can enjoy it in the telescopes for a long time.

A little further on we reach the feeding site where people put up food for birds in a little clearing. We display some peanuts, sunflower seeds, and bits of sausage (that Jays like), then we have a tea/ coffee and sit down to await the birds. The first to come are the small ones, here the boreal tits like Crested, Coal, and Willow Tit are the most numerous, Nuthatches appear too. It doesn't take too long till the Siberian Jays appear. Silently they swoop in on reddish wings and tails spread, and with their soft, fluffy and almost furry plumage. Quickly they snap the food they prefer (the sausage) and fly up in the trees again, only soon to be back to get some more. Then they are absent for some time, before reappearing again. We are lucky today, because they have been mysteriously missing in periods this winter, and yet, here they are! They are lovely, charming and social birds, returning repeatedly throughout our stay.

Fluty calls are heard from above - Pine Grosbeaks! But they just fly over. It takes some telescope scanning before they are relocated in some spruce trees with cones a bit further away. Here we can see them well enough to distinguish yellow females from the deep "lingonberry-red" males. First, we can only count five or six, but at one moment 15-20 birds make a movement in the treetops. We approach them to get better views, but by then they have flown and cannot be relocated. It's great to have seen them properly at last, and much better than yesterday. We also make a fire and grill some hot dogs on sharp sticks over the flame - a typically Swedish way to prepare a wilderness lunch. The walk back is more uphill but we're getting more used to the snow-walking.

After a comfort stop at the local petrol station in the nearest village, we drive southwards through some nice forest habitat and then we stop at the river Dalälven. Gysinge is the name of the village where a cafe and a visitor centre for the Färnebofjärdens National Park is situated, just next to the river. We see four male Goldeneye as we approach and, when we step out, a Dipper is active just in front of us. We set up a telescope and start to overlook the stream. While asking what they can serve us in the cafe, the staff member tells us an Otter has been seen outside just recently. Two photographers fill in with more precise instructions, and soon we find the animal swimming and diving in the currents of the stream. It looks fun, but it gets even more entertaining when the Otter jumps up on the ice; here he lies down on his back and does a little "yoga", twitching a bit from side to side, biting on something (a fish?) and then jumping a bit on the ice before dropping back into the water. The whole scene gets captured on video by Daniel.

After the Otter show, we enjoy a hot chocolate and coffee before we make the last bit of the drive back to the hotel. As we pass the several bridges over the smaller streams, we count a total of five Dippers.

Day 4

Sunday 11th February

This is our last morning of the trip, and we have time to enjoy the breakfast buffet at the hotel, before going a short way up the road to the Nutcracker feeding station in the Black River Valley. A Red Squirrel jumps away from us just as we come up to the clearing. We put out hazelnuts, peanuts, margarine and sunflower seeds. A few small birds are about, but clearly less than usual, after a while we realise that it's totally quiet in the surrounding area. This usually indicates that there's a raptor or predator around that makes the other birds feel tense, so they don't dare to come to eat. We walk around a bit, and at least Nuthatches and tits are starting to come back, still chattering nervously, though. A Black Woodpecker is the bravest. We can hear the piercing call several times before it suddenly flies in and lands in the clearing, starting to descend to the food. We get views and some people get pictures, but it decides to go away again, clearly a bit shy. Great Spotted Woodpeckers are here too, and among the tits, Willow and Crested Tits are great to see again. To break the spell of raptor presence and shy birds, we decide to take a walk. The few more photographically focused decide to stay. Down the road there are some more of the common small birds, Daniel imitates a Pygmy Owl a couple of times and suddenly... a small bird shoots across the road and lands in the dense vegetation next to it. Tits and Woodpeckers are upset and soon the owl is spotted, perched low in a small tree really close to us. Wow! What a great little creature -so cute! It utters a low sound twice, but it doesn't really whistle back. This indicates that it is a female. We get some great pictures and after a while it flies straight at us, only to perch on a new tree and the other side of the road. Here it stays so long that we can get the others back from the feeding station to see it. We even keep enjoying it over a cup of soup and only when we are about to leave does it fly away from us. The stayers on the Hill got close encounters with the Black Woodpecker but the Nutcrackers never materialised - the first time ever this has happened on a winter tour. They are normally the most present of birds through the winter months, although also very cautious especially when Goshawks are involved.

We drive up towards the burnt forest. Another couple of Black Grouse females sit in a tree next to the track. We manoeuvre the van a bit, so most people can see them before they fly away. We drive to the Eagle feeding site. It seems quiet as we get out, but within a short time, two White-tailed Eagles fly by, both younger birds. We had hoped for a Golden Eagle too, but they are certainly less numerous than the Sea Eagles. On our way out a male Capercaillie sits in a tree top and, as we look at it, a second bird flies by. So now we have seen Capercaillie on three out of four days on a winter weekend - that's unusual!

The Hawfinch garden doesn't prove any more productive today, but down in the harbour of Västerås, a nice adult male Peregrine soars around for a while, offering some really good views before it's time to go to the airport. Along the way two Rough-legged and one Common Buzzard are seen, and we also have stunning views of an adult White-tailed Eagle flying very close in front of above the vehicle.

When we reach the airport, we say our farewells after a great short break in Sweden in winter.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February			
			8	9	10	11
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	2ad+1 juv			2ad+1 juv
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			✓	
4	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>				5
5	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	1 f	1	1	
6	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	1			1
7	Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	1			2
8	Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>		4f+1m		6f
9	Western Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>		1m	1m	2m
10	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	1	H		
11	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	2			
12	Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia 'feral'</i>	✓			✓
13	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>				1
14	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
15	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>		1		1
16	Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				1
17	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>				1ad m
18	Black-bellied Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus cinclus</i>			5	
19	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓		✓	✓
20	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		✓	✓
21	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		H		H
22	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓		✓	✓
23	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓
24	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓
25	European Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>			✓	✓
26	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
28	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		6		
29	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>			✓	✓
31	Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>			3	
32	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
35	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>				✓
37	Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>		5	15	
38	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	
39	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		70		
40	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
41	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	600			
42	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	100's	✓	✓	✓

Mammals

1	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				
3	European Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			1	

	Common name	Scientific name	February			
			8	9	10	11
4	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
5	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		1		1

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