

babblers. Even though the chicks of birds be grown up enough, they remain conditioned to beg food, should parents be in sight!

Prominent features of the topography of the Shivaliks are the vertical mud cliffs, mostly bare and smooth. There is one in the middle of the sanctuary which last year had some 180 active nests of Small Bee-eaters *Merops orientalis*. I would like to know from ornithologists why there was not a single active nest this year? As we stared at the desolate cliff face, we were cheered to see several Crested Buntings *Melophus lathami*. They were attracted to the trickle of water oozing from the base of the cliff. And there was one female of the species whose mellow colours, the tidy crest and slender body gave her a delicate presence. I can bet my last Rupee that the male Grey Bushchat *Saxicola ferrea* we saw next was my fourth sighting on that same bush in the last two years!

On the skyline of the mud cliffs, we saw four Gorals *Naemorhedus goral* [the locals conveniently call them “*Van bakri*” (= Forest goats)]. We should have seen many more. But then we had also encountered two packs of 6-10 village dogs that have become predators. A wildlife guard, attempting to rescue a cornered young Sambar *Cervus unicolor* the previous evening, was chased away by the emboldened pack. I am told that such packs are also playing havoc with

birds’ nests on the ground and on bushes. What good is the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, if it can neither deter organised poaching of wildlife nor be implicit to permit pragmatic management of sanctuaries where predators are altering the prey-base drastically?

While we watched one Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia* and one Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*, there were more pittas calling from close quarters. A Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus* flew down and perched a few paces away. He carried no evidence of the “diagnostic” white rictal spot. Sometimes I begin to doubt its authenticity. In my experience (which is strictly of an undisciplined amateur) you come by this spot once on every 20 to 30 birds seen at random. There were two persistent bird calls, which with the aid of Kazmierczak’s book (maps and syllabised calls), we thought belonged to Hodgson’s Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps* (?) and the Indian Plaintive Cuckoo *Cacomantis passerinus*. Of the latter’s identity there was just no doubt.

The sanctuary’s wildlife guards use the most innovative methods to create water storage for birds and animals during these bone-dry days of May-June. At one spot, a hole had been excavated at the base of a clay mound. It was full to the brim. Here was the biggest spoor of Sambar I had ever seen. And in stark contrast, one tiny foot print of

a Porcupine *Hystrix* sp., along with the drag-mark of her quills. We were lucky to locate the pugmark of a Leopard *Panthera pardus* that a local had directed us towards.

Near the car park there were three Egyptian Vultures *Neophron percnopterus*, all in the chocolate-brown plumage of the juvenile. One Indian Roller *Coracias benghalensis* flew overhead with his monumental slow wing beats. We spotted a Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker *Dendrocopos mahrattensis* hammering away at the trunk of an ‘*Amaltas*’ in bloom. Amidst the thick foliage of a Jamun, a female Asian Koel *Eudynamys scolopacea* sat so concealed that for a long time she had us guessing. I was truly sorry that so many White-breasted Kingfishers *Halcyon smyrnensis* were all sitting out-of-job in this parched landscape. Next we were drawn to considerable bird activity as we neared another small puddle of water. There were at least twenty Yellow-throated Sparrows *Petronia xanthocollis*. This was my first sighting of this species here. At long last, we saw the Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata* looking all the more plump because of a cloud of White-eyes *Zosterops palpebrosus* in his close proximity.

And then, one pitta flew across, the two white moons on his wings in full display. Time to go back home, refreshed in body and soul.

Birding in Finland

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Amongst many other things, Finns are great at two pastimes: drinking coffee, and birdwatching. It is said that Finland has the highest density of birdwatchers in the world. I can well believe it, having spent two weeks travelling with my wife from the southern to the northern tip of the country this summer.

Our host, Mikko Pyhala, an ambassador, birding freak, avid traveller, and keen environmentalist all in one, drove us from Helsinki in the south to Utsjoki in the north, and then into the Norwegian countryside up to the Arctic Ocean. On the way we visited a host of protected areas, including Linnansaari, Siikalahti, Koli, Kevo, Oulanka, and Urho Kekkonen. Birding was of course special at these sites, but it was quite lively even outside, not least because

of the way in which café owners’ and shopkeepers’ eyes would light up when they heard of our interest in birds. In the protected areas, there were beautifully designed interpretation facilities to guide us, but at the road-side cafes and shops, the informal tips we got on nearby spots where rare birds could be seen, were no less helpful. It was truly an amazing experience to be in a country where literally everyone seemed to be in love with birds, or at least with birdwatchers!

We saw a total of 107 species in those two weeks, counting the brief stint in Norway (see list below). We covered forested habitats (rather uniform, dominated through the country by species of pine, birch, and spruce), lakes (Finland has 1,88,000 of them, mostly quite shallow),

marshes and bogs (a considerable part of Finland is low-lying, hence perennially wet), gently rolling hills with stunted tree growth and grassy stretches, and the coast along the Arctic Ocean. The last also included one spectacular bird colony, with tens of thousands of seabirds like gannets, various gull species, puffins, and the like.

At Kuusamo, we were in for a special treat. We met up with Hannu Hautala, the country’s best-known nature photographer. Big and burly, with a bushy beard and kindly eyes, Hannu reminded us of the naturalists of the past, completely engrossed in their passion. He and his wife Irma took us birding to a forest patch near their house, in search of the Hawk Owl...and sure enough after an hour of trying, it was spotted. One image that will remain forever etched in my mind:

Hannu standing just under the tree on which the owl was sitting, the two looking at each other with possibly equal levels of interest. Another, that my wife Sunita never tires of recounting, is when our host Mikko expressed a desire to try and find the Little Bunting, which he had never seen before. In no time at all, Hannu had fished out a CD player and two speakers, and played back the calls of the bunting, and magically, a pair of these birds appeared from nowhere and gave us a clear sighting for a good 20 minutes!

Other highlights included the sighting of a nesting Gyr Falcon, a bit into the Norwegian side; a group of Ptarmigan in the hilly Urho Kekkonen National Park; the wonderfully graceful Whooping Swan; nesting Osprey; the strikingly handsome Snow Bunting and a chick of the Black Woodpecker peeking out of a tree hole.

The extent to which Finnish birders can

indulge their passion was brought home to us at a spot on way to Lemmenjoki. We'd heard that a pair of American Black Duck *Anas rubripes* had been seen here. This species is a vagrant to this part of the world, so ripples of excitement had spread through the country's birders. When we reached the spot, we found half a dozen ornithologists standing on the side of some water purification trenches, all armed to their teeth with Swarovski scopes, binoculars, field guides, coffee flasks and snacks. We stayed an hour, but did not see the ducks. As we bade farewell to the birders, they told us they would wait the whole day in the hope that the birds would show up, since they had actually flown up from Helsinki just for this!

One final episode that amused and amazed us no end: somewhere near the Arctic Circle in the center of Finland, Mikko went off the highway and turned into some

side lanes. He had heard that some birders had seen the rare migrant Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis* here. He even had precise coordinates of where it may be. We waited there for a while, and sure enough, heard it calling from a distance. We could not sight it, but the call was adequate proof, and so Mikko sent off a message to someone. Within three minutes, he got a message back on his mobile; a Finnish birders' network was flashing the news of the 'hearing' to all birders in the country!

Indeed, for anyone going to Finland, the best thing to do is to get in touch with one of these networks. Check out the Finnish Chapter of BirdLife International (www.birdlife.fi/eng). Useful information on Finland's protected areas can be obtained from its nature conservation agency Metsähallitus (www.metsa.fi).

And don't miss the coffee!

Birds seen on visit to Finland and Norway: 15-29 July 2004

(Compiled by Mikko Pyhala and Ashish Kothari & arranged alphabetically)

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| Bittern (heard) <i>Botaurus stellaris</i> | Guillemot, Black <i>Cephus grylle</i> | Sandpiper, Common <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i> |
| Bluethroat <i>Luscinia svecica</i> | Guillemot, <i>Uria aalge</i> | Sandpiper, Green <i>Tringa ochropus</i> |
| Brambling <i>Fringilla montifringilla</i> | Gull, Black-headed <i>Larus ridibundus</i> | Sandpiper, Wood <i>Tringa glareola</i> |
| Bullfinch <i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i> | Gull, Common <i>Larus canus</i> | Scoter, Velvet <i>Melanitta fusca</i> |
| Bunting, Lapland (heard) <i>Calcarius lapponicus</i> | Gull, Great Black-backed <i>Larus marinus</i> | Shag <i>Phalacrocorax aristotelis</i> |
| Bunting, Little <i>Emberiza pusilla</i> | Gull, Herring <i>Larus argentatus</i> | Shrike, Great Grey <i>Lanius excubitor</i> |
| Bunting, Reed <i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i> | Gull, Little <i>Larus minutus</i> | Siskin <i>Carduelis spinus</i> |
| Bunting, Snow <i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i> | Harrier, Hen <i>Circus cyaneus</i> | Skua, Arctic <i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i> |
| Buzzard, Common <i>Buteo buteo</i> | Jay, Common <i>Garrulus glandarius</i> | Snipe, Common (heard) <i>Gallinago gallinago</i> |
| Buzzard, Rough-legged <i>Buteo lagopus</i> | Kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i> | Sparrow, House <i>Passer domesticus</i> |
| Chaffinch <i>Fingilla coelebs</i> | Kite, Black <i>Milvus migrans</i> | Stint, Temminck's <i>Calidris temminckii</i> |
| Chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i> | Kittiwake <i>Rissa tridactyla</i> | Swallow, Barn <i>Hirundo rustica</i> |
| Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i> | Lapwing, Northern <i>Vanellus vanellus</i> | Swan, Whooping <i>Cygnus cygnus</i> |
| Crane, Common <i>Grus grus</i> | Magpie <i>Pica pica</i> | Swift, Common <i>Apus apus</i> |
| Crow, Hooded <i>Corvus corone cornix</i> | Mallard <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> | Teal, Common <i>Anas crecca</i> |
| Cuckoo <i>Cuculus canorus</i> | Martin, Sand <i>Riparia riparia</i> | Tern, Arctic <i>Sterna paradisaea</i> |
| Dipper <i>Cinclus cinclus</i> | Merganser, Red-breasted <i>Mergus serrator</i> | Thrush, Mistle <i>Turdus viscivorus</i> |
| Diver, Red-throated <i>Gavia stellata</i> | Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i> | Thrush, Redwing <i>Turdus iliacus</i> |
| Duck, Long-tailed <i>Clangula hyemalis</i> | Owl, Hawk <i>Surnia ulula</i> | Thrush, Song <i>Turdus philomelos</i> |
| Duck, Tufted <i>Aythya fuligula</i> | Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus ostralegus</i> | Tit, Grey <i>Parus major</i> |
| Eagle, White-tailed <i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i> | Phalarope, Red-necked <i>Phalaropus lobatus</i> | Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i> |
| Eider <i>Somateria mollissima</i> | Pheasant <i>Phasianus colchicus</i> | Wagtail, White <i>Motacilla alba</i> |
| Falcon, Gyr <i>Falco rusticolus</i> | Pigeon, Rock <i>Columba livia</i> | Wagtail, Yellow <i>Motacilla flava</i> |
| Falcon, Peregrine <i>Falco peregrinus</i> | Pigeon, Wood (heard) <i>Columba palumbus</i> | Warbler, Arctic (heard) <i>Phylloscopus borealis</i> |
| Fieldfare <i>Turdus pilaris</i> | Pipit, Meadow <i>Anthus pratensis</i> | Warbler, Blyth's Reed <i>Acrocephalus dumetorum</i> |
| Flycatcher, Pied <i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i> | Pipit, Red-throated <i>Anthus cervinus</i> | Warbler, Sedge <i>Acrocephalus schoenobaenus</i> |
| Flycatcher, Spotted <i>Muscicapa striata</i> | Pipit, Tree (heard) <i>Anthus trivialis</i> | Warbler, Willow <i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i> |
| Gannet <i>Morus bassanus</i> | Plover, Golden <i>Pluvialis apricaria</i> | Waxwing, Common <i>Bombycilla garrulus</i> |
| Goldeneye <i>Bucephala clangula</i> | Plover, Ringed <i>Charadrius hiaticula</i> | Wheatear <i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i> |
| Goosander <i>Mergus merganser</i> | Ptarmigan <i>Lagopus mutus</i> | Woodcock <i>Scolopax rusticola</i> |
| Goose, Bean <i>Anser fabalis</i> | Puffin <i>Fratelcula arctica</i> | Woodpecker, Black <i>Dryocopus martius</i> |
| Grebe, Great Crested <i>Podiceps cristatus</i> | Raven <i>Corvus corax</i> | Woodpecker, Great Spotted <i>Dendrocopos major</i> |
| Greenfinch <i>Carduelis chloris</i> | Razorbill <i>Alca torda</i> | Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted <i>Dendrocopos minor</i> |
| Greenshank <i>Tringa nebularia</i> | Redpoll <i>Carduelis flammea</i> | Woodpecker, Three-toed <i>Picoides tridactylus</i> |
| Grosbeak, Pine <i>Pinicola enucleator</i> | Redstart <i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i> | Yellowhammer <i>Emberiza citrinella</i> |
| Grouse, Black (heard) <i>Tetrao tetrix</i> | Ruff <i>Philomachus pugnax</i> | |