



# NORWAY

*Whooper Swans by John van der Dol*

April 28<sup>th</sup> 2011 to May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011

A 3am assembly at the Sandwich Bay Bird Observatory on a mild spring morning, we were bleary-eyed but full of anticipation. The mini-bus taking us to Heathrow airport duly arrived a little late but made good time to London. We arrived with plenty of spare time and KLM were very efficient and helpful.

The flight to Amsterdam was short and I must say that this airport is one of the best I have been in. Although very busy it is designed as a hub airport which is much more efficient than the mess that is Heathrow. We arrived in Trondheim airport with our first glimpses of the country of Norway. The airport is about 30kms from the city itself which is at the head of the Trondheimsfjord – Norway's third longest fjord at 81 miles long. From the air it looks as if there are a few patches of low lying land around the tops of the fjords and the rest of the country is one gigantic upland nature reserve! The geology is predominately granite mountains with clay deposits in the fjord valleys. The small amount of flat land is put down to mainly grazing or vegetables such as carrots and potatoes. The whole area is one text-book-full of glacial features.

Varnes Airport – Skjelstadmark –  
Levanger (hotel)

We eventually found our guide, Terje (pronounced Terriay) and we settled into the mini-bus from which observation and photography were very good for some. After about 15 minutes into the journey we stopped by a roadside tree with a large hole.



*Black Woodpecker by Brian Summerfield*

After about ten minutes of standing across the road from the hole (about 20 feet away) we witnessed the female Black Woodpecker arrive and complete a leisurely and noisy nest change-over with the male who flew to the next tree to preen and feed. This was a far cry from chasing around French woodlands with the BW always 100 yards out of sight! It was very much an in-your-face experience and too close for a telescope. The birds gave us spectacular views and neither bird seemed at all bothered by our presence.

We began to notch up the commoner and regular species for the trip – Fieldfare, Redwing (frequently singing with varying regional dialects), Siskin, Common Redpoll and Common Crossbill which were present in bumper numbers this year. Also commonly found as we drove around were Goosander, Hooded Crow, Goldeneye, and Common Gull (25% of the worlds population breed in Norway). One of the commonest birds here is the Scandinavian race of the



*Neat and Tidy by Sue Morton*

Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita abietinus* and very much duller than ours, slightly paler and greyer.

The land and housing were extremely tidy and well cared-for and with no fences as the Norwegians are very keen on their rights of access. On the way to our hotel we didn't quite see all the 60,000 Spitsbergen Pink-footed Geese present in the area at this time of year but the counting went something like this – 1, 2, ooh plenty! On the way through the trees Sue

shouts “bird of prey”. This turned out to be a Peregrine on a fresh kill – a male Black Grouse which Terje was unable to resuscitate. The outer tail feathers were amazingly curved.

The hotel was comfortable though the lift didn't work. The evening meal had enough local dishes available to have a different one each night and the dark, nutty bread was delicious.

## April 29<sup>th</sup> Levanger – Skalstufiellet Road (Sweden) – Åre – Levanger

An early start for grouse with breakfast at 4 o'clock. Breakfast itself was an extreme version of a continental with a huge variety of cheeses, cold meats, fruits, cereals and hard- and soft-boiled eggs. Plenty of coffee, tea and juices set us up for the day.

The start of any day with “targets” includes some trepidation – there are so many things that can go wrong – but we needn't have worried. The weather was beautifully mild, calm and sunny and the birding was utterly stunning. Terje was increasingly happy as target after target fell with five-star views and outstanding camera opportunities.

It began with a short drive through spectacular scenery. There has been a great deal of snow-melt because of the fine weather the last few days and the rivers are full to overflowing. We wound our



way up to the chilly mountain plateau top but the air was noticeably clear, calm and crisp. After only a few minutes of searching the snow a spectacular male Willow Grouse was found beside the road walking over patches of snow, rock and moor. The bird was in the early stages of moult with a white body, legs, feet and wings contrasting with a fresh brown, ginger and freckled head and neck plus bright red wattles. It was simply breath-taking.



*Willow Grouse by Brian Summerfield*

We left the mountain-tops and worked our way through the upland forest as the day just got better. The only really clear upland areas were along and adjacent to the roads and it was here that the female Capercaillies came to feed and pick up the grit and minerals they needed for breeding and egg-laying. On this journey, Terje normally



*Female Capercaillie by Brian Summerfield*

sees between five and ten female Capercaillies, no males and a handful of Black Grouse. We notched up an outstanding 22 female Capers and three males at what might constitute a new lek. They were endlessly photographed and admired. During the day we also encountered three more Willow Grouse and seven Black Grouse which included three males.

We casually stopped beside the entrance to a large house with two telegraph poles either side of the track. Each pole had a large hole made previously by a Black Woodpecker. One of them now held our next species. Terje arranged us opposite

the hole and then walked to the pole. He scratched the trunk in what he told us was an imitation of a Pine Martin climbing the trunk. Instantly the occupant of the hole popped her head out to look for the Pine Martin – a beautiful Tengmalm's Owl who peered around and at us for ages while she was photographed and admired.

En-route to the next highlight we stopped under a cliff with a Rough-legged Buzzard's nest on it just above our heads. Although there were fresh branches on the nest indicating that the site was in use, we could not find the occupants.



*Tengmalm's Owl by John van der Dol*

The next stop was a lay-by on a low ridge with a mountain range in the distance over

which we found Golden Eagle and Rough-legged Buzzards drifting. We had to wait three or four minutes here before the star of the show turned up. This handsome boy was a Hawk Owl who circled us from tree-top to tree-top with a most indignant air as if to point out that we really shouldn't be there on his patch. After posing for the cameras for a while he rested across the road



*Male Hawk Owl by John van der Dol*

keeping one eye on us. Meanwhile a bird began calling which Terje called in – the first Wryneck of the spring for him and good views were had by all for about half an hour. After this interlude we were interrupted by two garrulous Siberian Jays who arrived to contest the ownership of the site with the Hawk Owl. Although not much of a contest, there were two of them and they proved annoying enough to move the Owl away from us; but then they were pretty superb birds in themselves.

A short drive over the mountains took us to a skiing village where Terje ordered us

lunch at a friendly café. This consisted of Moose on a salad and it was very tasty and nothing like chicken.

The rest of the day was spent cruising through predominantly spruce forest with numerous open patches and especially looking for Hazel Grouse. We did see numerous Common Redpolls (the Mealies of old) which are larger and greyer than the Lessers we get at home, several parties of Common Crossbills which included a very large female Parrot Crossbill, many sparkling spring-plumaged Bramblings and Siskins, two Dippers and short views of Marsh and Willow Tits.

Mammals were represented by three Moose next to someone's garden and many, many Lemmings. These smart Hamster-sized rodents are much bigger than I imagined and this year they were very numerous. It was because of this high prey density that the owls were nesting in good numbers. It would also be good news for the tundra breeding species such as waders because the predators would be able to feed on the Lemmings rather than the newly hatched chicks.

The evening vote for the "bird of the day" went to the Hawk Owl with one vote for Capercaillie.

April 30<sup>th</sup> Levanger – Tromsdalen –  
Vera – Torbustaden

After a later breakfast we searched 12 sites for Hazel Grouse without any luck. It goes something like this – we drive a few miles, we arrive at a place that has a pair of breeding Hazel Grouse, Terje whistles for about fifteen minutes while we watch Bramblings, Redwings and Siskins and then we move on to the next site. Hazel Grouse are apparently monogamous and once a pair is established in suitable habitat (always near a little stream with some mixed woodland) they become very secretive and hard to see. We should have been here last month or come here in September when the youngsters are about!

We were joined by Morton who lives locally and had been on several trips with John before. A short journey into the snow took us to a lake that was beginning to thaw. At the end of a small farm

track we parked the minibus and walked “only a few hundred metres” into the forest which was rather sparse. Because of the open nature of the site there were large areas of snow that we had to cross which didn’t look too bad. The snow, however, was thigh deep in some places and if you went through the crust of melted/re-frozen snow it could prove to be quite an effort. Although Jean was the only one to lose a boot in the process many ended up with wet feet. It was, however, a highly amusing activity.



*Gingerly crossing the snow by Sue Morton*

Eventually we arrived at the nest-box and immediately were checked out by the male. After posing handsomely for photos for about twenty minutes, he was joined by a very put-out female. She was not so interested in posing, more in getting us away from the nest. She did this by being very noisy and obvious but always



*Female Hawk Owl by John van der Dol*

keeping one step in front of us. This way she gradually led us away from the nest as we followed her attempting to get better views and photos. Clever girl! Once we had moved some thirty or forty metres she just disappeared quietly back to her box leaving the male to entertain us. Then we had to scrunch our way back.

After lunch we went to one that Terje and Morton had prepared earlier – a White-tailed Eagles nest. This was along the fjords edge and we were able to drive to a car-park, set up the telescopes and fill our boots with Sea Eagle. The pair were very obliging and the nest was huge – apparently it now weighs more than a ton. The area was also close to the sea and the tide was out allowing us to increase the bird list with common waders and sea-ducks.

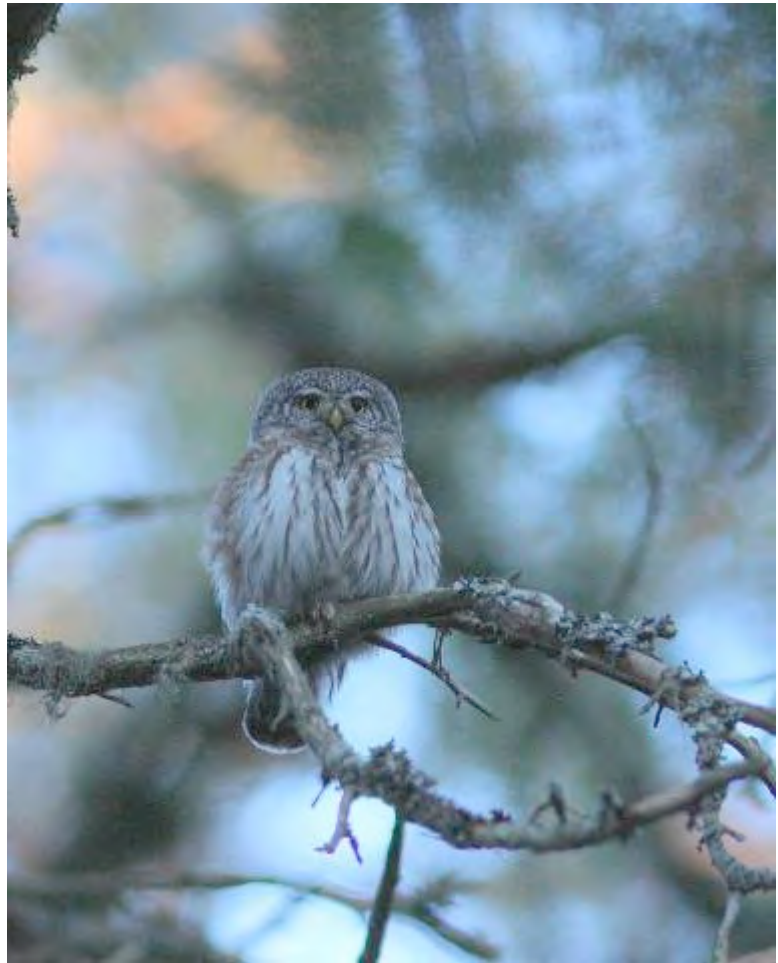
Distant views of several Harbour Porpoise were a bit of a surprise. Apparently there is a fairly healthy population of these mammals here.

We then moved back to the forest for the star attraction for what was to be a highlight for many of us despite its diminutive size. We drove almost to the site but the snow-melt defeated the minibus and we had to abandon it a few hundred metres from the nest-box. We quietly walked into the dark



deciduous forest to the Pygmy Owls' nest box and waited for about half an hour for the female to appear at the entrance hole. Eventually Terje played a short snatch of song and the male immediately appeared just above us. Some fifteen feet off the ground he sat and peered at us for ages. He did not seem at all bothered by our presence and the photographers were able to slowly get amazingly close to him which, given the darkness of the forest, was probably just as well. What a little stunner! We quietly left him to his thoughts sitting on his branch.

Then we tried to get the minibus out of the forest! In the end we gave up and Terje phoned for a tractor and a minibus for us. Thank goodness we were in a civilised country. After about twenty minutes the transport arrived and took us to our hotel where we were joined shortly afterwards by Terje who had had no trouble getting the minibus out with a friends tractor.



*Pygmy Owl by John van der Dol*

Bird of the day went like this – Hawk Owl 3, Pygmy Owl 4 and White-tailed Eagle 1.

May 1<sup>st</sup> Levanger – Tautra – Torbustaden



*Norwegian Lake by Sue Morton*

After breakfast we searched again for Hazel Grouse at a further eight sites. Needless to say they were one up on us although we did get a reply to the whistle at one site but no sniff of a sighting. Most of the day was spent on Tautra Island which was at one end of the fjord. However, on the way to the island we stopped at a few lakes that had numerous summer plumaged Slavonian Grebes. Despite there being so many (11

pairs on one pond) they actually proved not so easy to photograph, but they were spectacular to watch none-the-less.

On the island the tide was low to begin with and we picked up some waders and Grey Herons. Sea ducks were numerous with flocks of Eider, Common and Velvet Scoter with the odd Red- and Black-throated Diver (in spectacular summer plumage) and a single Red-necked Grebe. The island is joined to the mainland by a modern, but narrow, causeway in the middle of which was a sliding door. This was to stop predators like Foxes and Pine Martins from getting on the island and destroying the sea-bird colonies there. The single-track road had passing-places (called meeting places by the more romantic Norwegians) where we were able to watch from.

The island itself appeared to have a great many nesting birds around the edges while the interior was farmed. Amongst the sea-ducks were flocks of delightful Black Guillemots buzzing around being very busy. We did eventually, after much searching, find the White-billed Diver but could only manage fleeting views for most of us. Where it disappeared to in so much open water, I have no idea. We had a pleasant lunch beside a ruined monastery and were able to find some passerines. Here were resident Tree Sparrows, Yellowhammers and the first migrant Swallows and a Wheatear.

The afternoon was spent listening to Terje whistling for Hazel Grouse and looking at the Scandinavian version of the Willow Tit (*Poecile montanus borealis*). It is quite a striking bird being much greyer and paler all over than ours.

## May 2<sup>nd</sup> Levanger – Trondheim – Varnes Airport

Our last day and an early start. We knew that a King Eider had been spending some time amongst the hundreds of thousands of Common Eiders somewhere in the fjord and we very optimistically decided to go look for it.

Terje drove us around the fjord towards Trondheim and where the King Eider had last been seen some days ago. On arrival at the site there did not appear to be much to see at all. How appearances can be deceiving!

Moving slightly around a patch of well-leaved Silver Birch we began to pick up Slavonian Grebes, Black-throated Divers and the first of some 80 or so tremendous Long-tailed Ducks. We made our way through the Birches to the shore to get a better view and began to find a range of birds. We



were all terribly busy looking out to sea when Jim very quietly says “What’s this on the shore?” It was an Otter and what’s more it wasn’t just one but a mother and three very well grown cubs. Someone had caught a very large flat-fish of some kind and one of the cubs was munching its way through this with great gusto and concentration. So much so that the photographers were able to get really close to this family party without disturbing them at all. This was indeed a fabulous unexpected bonus. After feasting our eyes on this magnificent

*Otter by John van der Dol*

spectacle for nearly half an hour we left to catch our plane home at Varnes Airport just outside Trondheim. Trondheim is Norway's third largest city after Oslo and Bergen with a population of 150,000 (out of Norway's 4.5 million) which is just about the summer population of Thanet in a sunny year.

The trip back was the same in reverse to getting here, fairly easy with KLM and no hiccups. I think it was a good job it was only five days as had it been more I would have run out of superlatives in the report. The final "Bird of the Trip" was heavily in favour of Hawk Owl but there were so many that ran it close.

I would recommend a holiday to Norway although it is very expensive – two beers in the hotel cost the equivalent of £18! Apart from the scenery and the wildlife, the people are very friendly in this thoroughly modern and astonishingly tidy country. You will need a good guide like Terje who speaks good English and knows the locals. A good field knowledge is also essential in the guide for locating the birds in the sparsely populated forest.

Pete Findley

## NORWAY CHECK-LIST

| SPECIES                | 28-Apr | 29-Apr | 30-Apr | 01-May | 02-May | SPECIES                 | 28-Apr | 29-Apr | 30-Apr | 01-May | 02-May |
|------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Red-throated Diver     |        | 3      | 35     | 1      | 9      | Great Spotted W'dpecker |        | 2      | 2      | 1      |        |
| Black-throated Diver   |        |        |        | 7      | 3      | Barn Swallow            |        |        |        | 8      |        |
| White-billed Diver     |        |        |        | 1      |        | Meadow Pipit            | 1      | 5      | 20     | 10     | 5      |
| Red-necked Grebe       |        |        |        | 1      |        | Rock Pipit              |        |        |        | 2      |        |
| Slavonian Grebe        |        |        |        | 35     | 4      | Grey Wagtail            |        |        | 2      |        |        |
| Great Cormorant        | 3      |        | 2      | 10     | 3      | White Wagtail           | 3      | y      | 8      | 5      | 2      |
| Grey Heron             |        | 1      | 3      | 2      | 1      | Bohemian Waxwing        |        | Heard  |        |        | 2      |
| Whooper Swan           |        | 3      |        |        |        | White-throated Dipper   |        | 2      | 2      |        |        |
| Pink-footed Goose      | √      | 200    | 400    | 1700   | 100    | Winter Wren             |        |        |        | 1      |        |
| Greylag Goose          |        |        |        | 5      |        | Hedge Accentor          |        | 10     | 4      | 2      |        |
| Canada Goose           |        | 4      | 2      | 2      |        | European Robin          |        | 4      | 4      | 3      |        |
| Common Shelduck        |        |        | 1      | 6      | 1      | Common Redstart         |        |        | Male   |        |        |
| Eurasian Wigeon        |        | 20     | 2      | 4      | 2      | Northern Wheatear       |        |        |        | 1      |        |
| Gadwall                |        |        |        | 2      |        | Common Blackbird        | 6      | √      | √      | √      | √      |
| Eurasian Teal          | √      | 4      | 2      | 10     | 2      | Fieldfare               | √      | √      | √      | √      | √      |
| Mallard                | √      | 10     | √      | √      | √      | Song Thrush             | 1      | √      | √      | √      | √      |
| Tufted Duck            |        |        |        | 3      |        | Redwing                 | √      | √      | √      | √      | √      |
| Common Eider           |        |        |        | 100    | 200    | Mistle Thrush           |        | 2      | 2      |        | √      |
| Long-tailed Duck       |        |        |        |        | 50     | Common Chiffchaff       | √      | √      | 30     | 20     | √      |
| Black Scoter           |        |        |        | 50     | 100    | Willow Warbler          |        | 1      |        | 1      |        |
| Velvet Scoter          |        |        |        | 100    | 200    | Goldcrest               |        |        | 3      | 2      |        |
| Common Goldeneye       | √      | 4      | 6      | 10     | 4      | Marsh Tit               |        | 1      | 5      | 2      |        |
| Red-breasted Merganser |        |        |        | 6      | 2      | Willow Tit              |        | 1      |        | 2      |        |
| Goosander              | √      | 6      | 6      |        |        | Crested Tit             |        |        |        | 3      |        |
| White-tailed Eagle     |        |        | Adult  |        |        | Coal Tit                |        | 1      |        | 4      |        |
| Northern Goshawk       |        | Fem    |        |        |        | Blue Tit                |        | √      | 7      |        |        |
| Eurasian Sparrowhawk   |        | Fem    |        | 2      |        | Great Tit               |        | √      | √      | √      |        |
| Rough-legged Buzzard   |        | 1      |        | 1      |        | Wood Nuthatch           |        | 1      | 4      | 1      |        |
| Golden Eagle           |        | Imm    |        |        |        | Eurasian Jay            |        | 1      | 2      |        |        |



