

Swedish Experience - Mike Bloomfield

I first became interested in birding about 14 years ago, due entirely to Hans Johansson, a work colleague, and now a 400+ Swedish birder, who volunteered to take me out into the Swedish countryside to show me some local sites, in a region called Värmland, just to the North of Lake Vänern, Sweden's largest inland lake. One Sunday, with borrowed bins, one scope between us, sandwiches, very strong black coffee and an early start, we set off into the forest and later, a more open deciduous area with wetland. After a very long day in the field and 75+ different bird species, I was exhausted but hooked on the sounds of nature and bird watching.

Over the following years of business related visits and infrequent birding opportunities at different times of year, my own Swedish list grew to 196, without visiting any coastal areas whatsoever. Visits in the spring allowed me to see birds in their spectacular breeding plumage, some of which I had previously only seen in their more sober state during our winter months. Winter visits were just as exiting with Hawk owl, Eagles, Pine Grosbeak and Nutcracker visiting a garden feeder to name drop just a few.

However, there were at least two challenges that remained before my retirement in September 2007 (a) to reach a list of 200 and (b) to include great grey owl and rustic bunting. The latter had been previously targeted without success, despite hours of searching. It would seem this bird would not be as common at it once was at the Southern limit of its' breeding range, possibly retracting further northwards because of climate change. Sadly, I failed on both challenges so I just had to arrange at least one more visit.

On the 30th May this year (2008) I set off on a circuitous route by plane from Manchester to Stockholm and then by train to Kristinehamn where Hans was waiting with the news that he had lined up sites for the Rustic Bunting and one of the most southerly Swedish nesting sites of the Great Grey Owl.

We had the best part of eight days to twitch what we could and, unknown to me until my arrival, Hans had some other exiting news. He had received confidential information on a nesting pair of Gyr Falcons in a nature reserve and a long staying Steller's Eider on the Baltic coast, north of Stockholm. These additional species would be lifers too but time spent at sites and travel logistics between sites was going to be critical.

The weather was set fair for the entire trip, with wall to wall sunshine and warm temperatures throughout so it was shorts and tee shirts.

An early start allowed us to reach Orsa by mid morning, where there were two possible sites for Rustic Bunting. After a good couple of hours unsuccessfully searching the two sites, it was becoming evident that the task was going to be more difficult than expected and would prove to be much more of a challenge, especially for Hans, who had confidently predicted success. Time was already becoming an issue so we had no alternative but to hit the road northwest towards Särna otherwise we would fall behind schedule before lunch on the first day. This was not the best start we could have hope for but there were other nice bird sightings en-route to keep at least my spirits high including Capercaillie, Velvet Scoter, Red and Black Throated Diver.

It was late that afternoon, when we set off on foot along a track leading us up into a deep gorge with an impressive waterfall cascading heavily over a rocky escapement bringing occasional rumbles of melt ice crashing downwards. A few minutes scoping of the opposite rock face brought joy to both of us when we located the Gyr Falcon nest with the female in attendance and the male only a few metres away. Movement just below us revealed a pair of nesting Ring Ouzel and a male Brambling singing from the high point of a nearby pine. Wow!

Just a few more miles to reach our first base at Funäsdalen where we stayed for a couple of nights and where I had been once before. I knew exactly what to expect the following morning when we set off north to a high treeless and snow clad area where Bluethroat, Lapland Bunting, Ptarmigan, Long-tailed Skua, Arctic Tern and Red-necked Phalarope all reside. We were not the only birders hoping to see these specialities here. It looked like a small guided group of 10 in a mini coach but they seemed unwilling to venture out onto the snowbound, waterlogged tundra to get close views. Permafrost was still keeping the ground firm so, apart from the odd snowdrift and pools of melt water, the going was fairly easy, once again in wellies. No Phalarope this time but Short-eared Owl, Little Gull and Arctic Tern were adequate compensation.

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The following morning was earmarked for an identified site for Siberian Tit but we found the car access track was closed which meant a 7- 8 km walk along a little used winding track through mature forest, across occasional streams and open boggy areas. Evidently we didn't reach the prime spot, falling short by maybe another km. However, the trek was not entirely in vain as we enjoyed magnificent close-up views of Siberian Jays. One being quite inquisitive of our presence in their territory of old pines heavy with lichen. We eventually arrived at the originally intended parking area but it was still a long walk back to the car! Unless you just happen to stumble across a fisherman with small van and a dog and have the cheek to beg a ride! The old guy got in the passenger seat whilst Hans shared the back with the dog. It was a shame there were no windows for him to see the magnificent frame of a male moose on the way back! Still, he's seen many before.

A long journey east to Sundsval on the Baltic Sea next, where we instantly located the beautifully plumaged male Steller's Eider. Over lunch and a review of our planned itinerary the disappointment of the rustic bunting was still playing on our minds such that we decided to head back directly to Orsa for another try. Birds had definitely been seen mainly in the evening and early morning at these areas, which were both along a particular forest stream where flooding over many years had produced significant boggy, tree free, areas which were infested with mosquito's and many other low life forms - insect repellent, heavy clothing, hats and wellies essential. Did I predict shorts and tee shirts! However, the target bird was still nowhere to be seen.

We moved on again, aiming for an evening appointment at a site near Västerås so, with plenty of time in hand, decided upon a detour to a small pool where a male Ferruginous Duck had taken up residence. Not that we saw it, despite spending at least a couple of hours there and knowing it had been seen the previous day. Alas, another dip but a pair of Slavonian Grebes in breeding plumage made up for our disappointment along with some nice dragonflies, damselflies and butterflies. Not a good day for birds so far.

My excitement grew as we moved on and nearer to the Great Grey Owl site. A couple of birders were already there when we arrived so we were at the right location and it was just a matter of waiting until the owl appeared. Suddenly, there it was, hunting over a rough pasture partially bathed in the dazzling light of the setting sun quartering into dark shadows cast by the surrounding forest. Photography was difficult due to the light conditions and distance but outstanding flight views and the successful taking of a vole more than satisfied my obsession to see this owl, ever since a picture appeared in one of the Company calendars, a picture which I subsequently had framed and still hangs at my home.

It was back to our starting point for some more relaxed local birding. A relatively short journey to known hot spots in the area of Örebro added Icterine Warbler and Red-necked phalarope, amongst others, to our growing trip list.

My Swedish list was now over 200 but the Rustic Bunting was still on our minds. Hans made telephone contact with another birder and he struck lucky with a new site where they had been recently seen. We had planned to visit the western coast of Sweden to add significant numbers to my list but these would be birds common in the UK. Hans had confidently promised we would see the bunting during the week, so the coast was not really an option. Another long drive to the north of Värmland and along a remote forest track where we parked, donned our smellies and wellies yet again. It was late in the morning, the sun was beating down from a totally clear sky, not the ideal time, or conditions. Down we went about 200 metres through virgin forest and into, yes, another huge bog. The going was not easy and the phrase 'needle in a haystack' came to my mind. We paused after about 15 minutes of bog walking keeping fairly close to the forest edge with no sight or sound of our target. Hans had made a recording of the song for recognition purposes and although the volume was low, even on maximum, he aimed it towards the pines and played it a couple of times on the off chance it could be heard. It was still and absolutely silent where we were and after a few minutes we heard a response high on top of a mature pine. There it was, a male Rustic Bunting, which lingered just long enough to get a brief scope view and one picture. Then it was off never to be seen again!

Hans was elated and relieved, as was I. Broad smiles, high 5's and mission accomplished. We stayed overnight in comfort at Finnskoga Vårdshus where we celebrated with large beers and local cuisine before sleeping and heading homewards the following morning.

A last evening stint produced singing River Warbler, two singing Marsh Warblers (what a delight), Corncrakes calling, Nightjar and, last but not least, Woodlark. A final trip total of 150 species,

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some of which you see pictured. What a week! Thanks to my good friends Hans and Beata Johansson.