

## Sweden 2013 - A Game of Two Halves by Richard Lobley

On Friday 31 May 2013 I went to Sweden for a ten day visit with birding buddies Mike Bloomfield and Darren Ward. For me it was a re-run of a highly successful trip of ten years earlier. Initially I had no specific targets but had been advised of a strong possibility (aka bolted on) of both Gyr Falcon & Great Grey Owl.

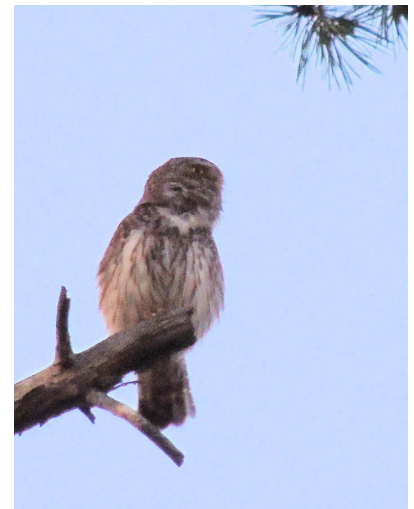
At the end of the first week I was therefore slightly crestfallen having missed out on both my key targets on first attempts. I / we had an extremely successful first week notwithstanding these dips. The trip back from the Funasdalen area was therefore probably my last chance of both & so I'd persuaded the duo to take a longer route back to have a second chance of the Great Grey Owl as well as the Gyr Falcon.

On the fateful Friday I was not too confident of either. I had been informed at a first visit en route to the North that Gyr Falcon's don't breed every year. The site itself was a known nesting cliff at Fulufjället National Park. The location was spectacular - a very high cliff on both sides of a waterfall that actually freezes over in winter & that the Swedes climb up with ice axes (between December and February) as a leisure pursuit. Clearly they must be in need of thrills on top of ski-ing etc. On our visits there was still a significant pile of snow at the bottom of the fall with a torrent of icy water going over the drop. The wind-chill walking up the boardwalk to the base of the fall was significant compared to the quite sunny and warm conditions from our higher vantage point when looking for the nest site. To put it into context we were probably 500 metres from the cliff face, so had we seen a falcon it would have been unmistakeably huge. The Raven & Kestrel seen gave a tantalizing glimpse of what we could be missing in terms of views.

Unfortunately, after a total of about eight hours over two trips it was not to be. Other consolation prizes were Black Bellied Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Tree Pipit, Redstart, Cuckoo, Goldeneye, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper and Willow Tit. The long trek back from here started at about 1pm but we had received a boost by telephone of a promise of a breeding owl site but we wouldn't be able to visit it that day as we needed full information from our Swedish friend Hans Johanssen. We then had a four hour drive back to the Great Grey Owl site (& a further two hours away at Skultuna) from our log cabin from the earlier part of the trip. For this bird I was quite hopeful as the first visit was effectively rained off with a torrential downpour immediately before we had arrived the previous Saturday night.

At that first site visit we had talked to some Belgian birders who had informed us that they had tape lured a Pygmy Owl quite close to the Great Grey Owl site. They also told us that on a professionally led tour of Northern Sweden, from which they were returning, they had only managed one sighting of a single Ural Owl.

Although the weather was much better on our second visit our luck was still out. However at the second of two clearings we were flitting between, we did get the Pygmy Owl. I hadn't expected it & so had to leg it back to the car for a scope. Luckily it hung around long enough for me to get stunning views. This was my second sighting and was much better than the first 10 years earlier. Both times it had betrayed itself with its distinctive call. So although I was slightly cheesed off with dipping on two great birds on probably my last trip ever to Sweden I was more hopeful for the following day. Luckily, I didn't sleep on the drive back to Storfors as Darren nearly fell asleep at the wheel (these young ones don't have staying power) and Mike was snoring for Britain on the back seat.



Pygmy Owl. Photo: Richard Lobley

Anyway, after a long lie in for us - in at 1am & out again at about 7am, we drove round to Hans' house for the directions & map for the Hawk Owl site which he had left in his post box. He was going to Stockholm for the weekend so couldn't come with us. It was about a 40 minute drive through Filipstad on the road we had travelled when going North the previous Monday. Within about 500 metres of the main road up a rough track was the nest site. Almost before I had stopped the car Darren was out (rat up a drainpipe sprang to mind) and he locked on to the adult Hawk Owl 500+ metres away up a pole just like depicted in Collins Bird Guide (Page 226). Luckily it did come closer & we got great scope views and Darren and Mike got some photos of it with prey in its claws. The site was a cleared forestry site and was undulating and difficult to walk over but we climbed up a small knoll to look over to where in the forest we had been told the nest hole was located. A young owlet was calling and I eventually located it very high up one of the fir trees. As the adult bird didn't go





Hawk Owl. Photo: Richard Lobley

too close we jointly concluded that it was trying to get the owlet to make its first flight.

On that high we eventually left & resumed our original plan which was to revisit some sites about an hours drive from the digs (but really about two hours driving time away as we had driven further in the opposite direction). So that Saturday afternoon we tried again for Red-breasted Flycatcher in the small nature reserve at Karlskoga (where Nobel comes from). Eventually after four trips to this site we got the bird calling. I even got a tantalisingly brief view of what was probably the bird. This reserve was a very steep sided river gorge with quite dense forest cover, so seeing it well was probably never a viable option. Our efforts did produce Northern Long-tailed Tit, Treecreeper and Northern Coal Tit here. We then returned to concentrate on the Storfors area. The plan was a decent meal that evening as we were getting fed up of pizza and kebabs. We had intended going to Kristinehamn but revised the plan as we were all beginning to suffer from a lack of sleep. The meal at Filipstad turned out quite well in that both Darren & myself thought we had our best meal - steak & chips, though Mike wasn't that impressed with his.

On the way back home for an early night, we stopped beside a railway crossing and ticked off two singing River Warblers, both seen very well, one about 200 metres away and the other pinned down to about 10 metres. Why don't decent birds behave like this in the UK? This site also had Corncrake & Blyth's Reed Warbler but bed was calling for two of us at least.

Sunday, our last day of birding was probably going to be an anti climax or so I thought. Not so, although after the final inconclusive visit to the Red Breasted Flycatcher site it could have been. Anyway, we successfully navigated our way to the Kvismarine area for what were very acceptable shots of singing Ortolan Bunting. I also got a brief but acceptable view of a Great Reed Warbler at Kvismarine and got my second Marsh Warbler of the trip. We also got further good shots of the first Marsh Warbler at its site a couple of kilometres away. Mike was also fortunate enough at Kvismarine to get three bitterns flying together. We had one the previous



Ural Owl adult and juvenile. Photo: Richard Lobley

weekend when Hans was with us. Hans is a top Swedish birder with a list of over 400 (the Swedish list is about 460) and that was his first Bittern sighting in ten years just to highlight how special Mike's sighting was.

We also managed, in the middle of a tremendous downpour, to get a bedraggled white tailed eagle in its tree perch about 250 metres out on the marsh. We were dry under an open sided screen hide.

With that we called it a day at about 4:30pm and started the long drive back to Storfors. We had to get the cases packed and had promised Hans and his wife Beata a meal out, given all their help and hospitality. However on the drive back - again in torrential rain - we got a further surprise phone call from Hans. His contacts had found a Ural Owl. Apparently the adult had attacked the niece of a local birder - a work colleague of Hans. We drove a little quicker back to Storfors; picked up Hans and tanked up the car for a second trip to Filipistad. Squashing five blokes into the car - three on the back seat of the car made it a bit cosy but worth it as Hans's colleague took us straight to the site without the need to bother with maps.

The site itself was yet another small local nature reserve only a couple of kilometres away from the Hawk Owl site. The reserve was a small wooded area a few hundred metres off of the main road and in the grounds of a former iron ore mine.

Sharp eyed Darren picked up the adult bird first - only 25 metres or so off the track. It got uncomfortable and flew further away. After scoping it for a while we walked only a couple of paces & discovered the Owllet. Possibly three metres up a small tree next to the path.

A great finish to the trip was followed by a celebratory meal with Hans and his wife. I should add that without fantastic information and guidance from Hans, who was with us the first weekend, we would never have done so well with the birding. We had fantastic views of all of our target birds and picked up some bonus ones - such as the Blyth's Reed Warbler at Oset and the Owls that would have been impossible without Hans' using his various contacts.

### **The State of Britain's Birds - The Decline Continues**

The State of the UK's Birds Report, from the RSPB, the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust and several UK government nature bodies, published in December 2013, shows that of the UK's 107 most widespread and common breeding birds, 16 species have declined by more than a third since 1995.

The birds that we associate with our area have been severely affected over the past two decades. Research nationally shows that the number of Willow Tits has plummeted by 82% and their range has halved. Whinchats, a bird of open countryside, have declined by 60%, and in range by 48% over the past 40 years. Our summer visiting Wood Warbler, have dropped in number by 69% since 1995, and their range has contracted by a third since the 1970s. There have been severe declines in the populations of Starlings and Grey Partridge, both by over 50% in the past two decades.

To put all this into context, it is useful to consult our archives and compare this information with what members were recording 20 years ago. In 1988, Yellow Wagtails were seen on passage in May at seven locations and there was a post-breeding flock of 42+ at Otley Wetlands on 7th August. In 1989, Willow Tits were recorded at 11 sites, including Shipley Glen, Dob Park, Swinsty Reservoir, Timble Ings, Hirst Wood (Shipley), Lindley Bridge and Esholt and up to six birds were regularly present in Cockersdale. Lesser Whitethroat was recorded at six sites in 1990 and breeding was confirmed at Knotford Nook and Toad Holes Beck.

In 1988 the Ring Ouzel was described as an uncommon breeder but it was recorded as being successful at Fly Flatts Reservoir and Ilkley, Burley and Barden Moors and possibly at Whetstone Gate, Draughton Heights, Kex Gill Moor and Nab End near Silsden! That year, nearly 30 records were received, which included at least 36 adults.

Trawling back through the records does not make for comfortable reading, but if you wish, you can find much of what has been written by consulting our website, where entries about almost all the species seen in our area have been archived.

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