

ARCTIC FINLAND 2018

An October visit to Lapland with Jan and Martin, staying in the holiday village of Äkäslompolo



Saturday 20th October

It took a whole day of travelling to reach our destination at Äkäslompolo. We left home at 5.15 and had an easy drive to Heathrow, dropping off our car with a meet-and-greet company called ValAir. The driver was very pleasant, probably eastern European and had never heard of Lapland. We soon found Martin, and our 10.25 flight to Helsinki took off just 10 minutes behind schedule. We flew on a jumbo-sized plane that was full. Helsinki airport was packed with people, many of them Chinese or Japanese, and we had to fight our way through the crowds to the other end of the terminal to catch our flight north to Rovaniemi, which was also full.

We soon picked up our red Golf from FinRent and set off for Äkäslompolo, a 125-mile drive on empty roads through forests. Driving was tricky as first, as it was very misty, no doubt because we were close to the river. During the nearly 3-hour drive we saw a single reindeer, ironically within feet of a road sign warning of reindeers. As we neared our destination the temperature dropped to freezing, and the road was treacherous and icy, but our studded tyres worked brilliantly. We reached Äkäslompolo shortly after 9pm, but it took another half hour to locate our house, Ainotar, mainly because we were looking for the wrong address. We were delighted to find it warm and roomy, and it was tricky deciding which room to choose. The

house is quite delightful and well-planned, with four en-suite bedrooms, a sauna, a very well equipped kitchen and a comfortable central sitting area, plus a wood burner. Though there are houses close by, the view from the living area is straight towards Yllas mountain.

Sunday 21st

I slept well, not getting up until 7.30. It was still very dark outside and raining. The rain soon stopped, but it was a grey morning. We drove round the village, eventually discovering the impressive supermarket that was almost empty when it opened at 10am. Yes, it was more expensive than Waitrose, but not by much, though it did only sell low-alcohol wines. (We soon discovered the well-stocked alcohol shop was next door.)

Finding our way back to our house proved a minor challenge, as we did get a little lost. After breakfast we set up our feeders, and we were delighted in the afternoon when they drew both blue and great tits. We also saw willow tits on impressive feeders nearby, along with a small party of bullfinches, and a very grey red squirrel.

There weren't many birds to see, but there were goldeneye (all ducks), a goosander and a pair of whooper swans on Äkäslompolo's large lake. We also found a colony of tree sparrows, saw a few house sparrows, a white wagtail and a trio of greenfinches. Magpies were the most conspicuous of birds, and there were also hooded crows and jays.

In the afternoon the sun came out, transforming the landscape, illuminating it with a beautiful low sun. It was still light in the afternoon when we came home. Martin lit the wood burner and it was soon so hot we needed to open the door - it was close to freezing outside. Species total for the day was 17, rather more than I was expecting.

Monday 22nd

A cold frosty morning: the preheater on the Golf worked brilliantly, thawing off the frost and warming the cabin. After breakfast we drove to the park information centre, where a friendly woman told us where to go and what to look for. Our first walk was close to the skiing centre and chair lifts at the foot of Mount Yllas. It was through pine forest, and for a long time we saw nothing but trees. Great tits and a jay relieved the monotony, but then Jan flushed a female capercaillie that ironically she didn't see. It flew over Martin and me. It was cold, though the sun was shining, with the temperature not much above freezing. After about 40 minutes we made our way back to the car.

We then dropped down to Yllasjarvi where we stopped for coffee, hot chocolate and cheese cake, but just before stopping we saw Siberian jays fly across the road. We stopped and set off in pursuit, and the jays cooperatively came



back to see us. They were constantly on the move, but I did get three pleasing pictures.

In the afternoon we set off on a boardwalk around the south of Yllasjarvi lake. There were a few goldeneye and a goosander on the lake, but just before we set off a juvenile golden eagle flew distantly over the trees, first spotted by Martin. The boardwalk was frosted, slippery and treacherous, so after a while Jan and I turned back. Martin continued, but didn't see anything of note other than willow tits.

We then continued on a loop that took us east, then north back to Äkäslompolo, a drive that took us through areas of cleared forest and extensive pastures. This was a reindeer area, and we saw many, but the best encounters were on a horseracing track where we got some reasonable photographs.

By now the light was fading, so we made our way home along the river valley. The fast-flowing river looked promising for dippers. Back home at 4.45 in time to discover that willow tits had discovered our feeders.

We stopped at the alcohol store, buying a couple of bottles of Chilean chardonnay for 17€. It was a well-stocked store, with prices about 20% higher than at home, but it is a long way to bring the booze. Pizza and salad for supper.

In the late evening we went out looking for the northern lights but without success. We will have to get advice as to where best to look. We did see a white mountain hare in the headlights, though, so it wasn't a failure.

Tuesday 23rd

It was a chilly -4degC when we got up, and the temperature hardly rose above freezing all day. We topped up the feeders and added more food, attracting our first willow tits and a male great spotted woodpecker, plus the grey red squirrel. After a cloudy start the sky cleared, so we had a wonderfully sunny day. In the morning we made our usual stop at the supermarket, where I went for a walk and added three species to the list: chaffinch, brambling and yellowhammer.

We then drove a short distance out of town to the waterfall at Kuerlinkka, where the river runs in a deep gorge that was apparently sacred to the Laps. Here Siberian jays came to greet us. The waterfall, and the deep ravine were spectacular, but there were no more birds to be seen, though we met a Finnish couple that had seen a dipper here the day before. It was very cold, and Jan was frozen (not enough clothes). Martin photographed ice in the river, while I shot some frosted birch. We went back to base for smoked reindeer soup.

The pre heater on the Golf is a brilliant device. Why isn't it an option on cars in the UK?

In the afternoon we ventured out again in the same direction, this time driving to Pakasavio, a deep lake in the forest. We drove for 12km along a dirt road, seeing a large herd of penned reindeer, then



stopped at the parking where we were greeted by the expected jays. We had brought sunflowers, so they were happy to perch on our hands to be fed. The lake was large and impressive, while the absolute silence was stunning, only broken by the sound of running water and then a cronking raven. A fire was burning in the grate, and Martin fed it and built it up - we should have brought food to toast.

Back to base, where we had salmon for supper. No sign of the northern lights.

Wednesday 24th

Minus 9deg when we got up, so a very cold night. We topped up and redesigned the feeding station and it was soon busy with tits and attracted the first pair of tree sparrows that fed for some time on Martin's feeder. The birches are all silvered with frost. My photography session wasn't very successful, though I did get a reasonable

shot of a tree sparrow.

We set off just before 11, pausing briefly at the feeders near the supermarket where we saw a yellowhammer, chaffinch, great tits and a *red red* squirrel that Martin got a good photograph of. We then drove north to Pallas-Yllästunturi Kansallispuisto National Park, stopping en route at Akasmyllie where we enjoyed the frozen landscape, and the beautiful stream that was partly frozen. The only birds were a great tit and the expected Siberian jay.

Our walk in the park at Sarkitunturi was up a well-graded and popular

path where we met parties of Finns, several with dogs. It took about an hour to reach the top, where we were rewarded with impressive extensive views in all directions. The hoar frost sparkled exquisitely, catching the light and producing tiny pricks of coloured light, like natural Swarovski crystals. It was quite magical. Birds were conspicuous by their absence. On the way up we saw two jays and a willow tit,

and there was a pair of whooper swans on a lake about two miles away, but on the descent we enjoyed great views of a pair of Siberian tits, our one new species of the day and a major triumph. They were very active, and we chased after them to get photographs with some success. It was the longest and most challenging walk since my knee operations, but was really pretty easy. It was very cold, about -5degC as we set off, but not so cold at the top. The sun shone brilliantly, unchallenged by clouds on the horizon.

We stopped at the information centre on the way home, but didn't gather any useful information. After

a break at home we did a quick shop in the supermarket and even bought some



birdseed (65% kibbled wheat, so not very good). It was -7degC when we came back home.

Our Golf is brilliantly set up for cold weather. The heater fan has six speeds, the heated front seats have three toasting settings, so it's wonderfully warm.

Dinner at home: gravlax and salad, followed by pasta cooked by Martin, washed down with Chilean chardonnay. Not bad.

Thursday 25th

A cloudy, dull morning. I didn't get up until 8am, venturing out into the -5deg cold to fill up the bird feeders. It wasn't until nearly 11 that we finally set off, checking the feeders in town first where there was nothing of note. We then drove north, on to the Kittila road, stopping first at the so-called volcano walk where there was a short boardwalk.

Everything was frozen into silence, and there was no sign of life at all. The silence was absolutely complete, the trees all silvered with frost. There wasn't a breath of wind. At the car park was a smart Lapp hut, complete with wood burner, so we decided to come back for lunch. Driving on up the road, we were delighted with a brief glimpse of a white willow grouse that flashed across the road. A couple of kilometres farther on we spotted two blackcock feeding on the top of a birch not far from the road. We stopped, photographed them, and then discovered more, including a greyhen that flew in to the top of a pine tree. The light was dull, but we did get some photographs.

Kittila was reputed to be an ugly town with nothing other than a church of note. It proved to be surprisingly busy and rather American-like in its sprawling layout. We stopped for a coffee and hot chocolate. The cafe we chose didn't do chocolate, but remarkably the coffee was free. When we came out I had a narrow escape from reversing into a post – why hadn't I spotted it? Fortunately no harm was done.



We returned home on the same quiet forest road, soon stopping for two golden eagles sitting in pine trees close to the road. Frustratingly they flew when we stopped, departing on heavy measured wing beats deep into the forest. There may have been some carrion here, as there were also hooded crows and a raven. We stopped again at

the hut where Martin soon got a good fire burning, so we toasted yesterday's pizza and sweet corn, which was fun. No more grouse seen.

We made a repeat visit to the water mill. Here there was not a bird to be seen except for a Siberian jay that took seed from the hand. Driving home, we stopped first for a furry and very red fox that sat by the side of the road and allowed me to take some poor pictures of it. A very pale bull reindeer was also photogenic.

Back home not long after 5. I cooked an omelet for supper. Overcast, so frustratingly no chance of seeing the northern lights.



Friday 26th

We woke to a light dusting of snow. The last doughnut, along with last night's pasta, was put out for the birds, attracting the usual customers. A fox circled around several times but never came in close enough to have its picture taken.

After breakfast we stopped at the supermarket, then checked out the nearby feeders, with the white beast (a golden retriever) present. Not many birds, but Martin spotted the brambling, presumably the same bird I had seen a couple of days before. We refueled the Golf, filling it for 60€: it has been notably economical. We then drove back to the gorge,

stopping first for a whooper swan on the river. As I walked back to the car a pair of whoopers flew right over. I'd heard them coming from a long way away, as they called continually. The gorge was now rather more frozen than on our first visit, but we failed on dipper, and didn't see any birds whatsoever. We drove on down the river valley, but in the light snow we didn't see anything of note.

Back home for reindeer soup, then an afternoon drive along the blackgrouse road towards Kittila. Birds were almost non-existent, but we stopped once for a lonely young whooper swan on a partly frozen river. At yesterday's black grouse site we found grouse once again, seeing at least six birds, and enjoying watching two cocks flying high and fast over the frosted spruces. A short walk produced grouse tracks in the snow, and

then a black woodpecker flew across the track, our first new bird of the day, and our last of the trip. Little of note seen during our drive back.

We enjoyed our last dinner at home, starting with gravlax and rocket salad, then pizza, crisp and much better cooked than the previous one.

Saturday 27th



Awake at 6.30, but we didn't leave until 8.45, having cleaned and tied up, stripped the beds and fed the birds. After dropping off our recycling we set off for Rovaniemi on empty snow-covered roads - it's uncanny how the winter tyres let you drive on frozen roads as if they were clear and dry. To begin with the scenery was spectacular, but when we joined the main road south there was less snow and frost. There were few birds of note other than corvids, but once a blackcock flew across the road. I kept to about 80kph as we had lots of time - the Golf was averaging nearly 70mpg. Traffic was almost non-existent. There was no fuel station at the airport, so after dropping Jan off, Martin and I drove back a mile or so to a Shell station at the Santa Claus village, where it swallowed another 32€ of unleaded. We eventually dropped the car off having covered about 1050km. It had proved to be an excellent vehicle.

The extensive airfield was surrounded by frozen forest, but not a bird moved, though a great tit inside the building proved to be our last Arctic bird. The flights home all worked well, and we landed at Heathrow on time at around 6pm. We dropped Martin off in Sundridge and were home at 9.45. We then discovered that my HotRox hand warmer had been removed from our check-in bag at Rovaneimi. Most irritating.

Birds recorded:

1. Whooper swan
2. Goldeneye
3. Goosander
4. Mallard
5. Golden eagle
6. Capercaillie
7. Black grouse
8. Willow grouse
9. Black woodpecker
10. Great spotted woodpecker*
11. White wagtail
12. Great tit*
13. Blue tit*
14. Willow tit*
15. Siberian tit
16. Greenfinch
17. Bullfinch
18. Chaffinch
19. Brambling
20. House sparrow
21. Tree sparrow*
22. Magpie*
23. Siberian jay
24. Jay*
25. Raven*

- 26. Hooded crow*
- 27. Yellowhammer

- seen from the house.

The mammal list was fox, red squirrel and reindeer.

