BEST OF FINLAND & ARTIC NORWAY

Capercaillie to Owls

&

FINLAND

Brown Bears & Wolverines Pre-Trip

May 17 – June 2, 2027
May 12 – 19, 2027

Finland and Arctic Norway offer one of northern Europe's most varied, untouched and exciting wildlife-watching destinations a perfect combination for birders of many European specialties. Exporing spectacular rugged Arctic landscapes from vast boreal taiga forests, endless lakes, majestic tundra, intricate coastlines boasting remote fjords to the stunning Norwegian Sea cliffs of the famous Hornoya islands simply brimming with countless thousands of breeding seabirds. During the Arctic's short summer, the sun never really sets for months, fueling this spectacular land of plenty; the all too brief explosion of Arctic life makes our visit to Lapland so special. Be prepared for a fascinating adventure in a truly phenomenal wildlife-watching destination!

Pristine boreal forest holds many exciting Arctic and Siberian specialties. © Andrew Whittaker

Our trip is perfectly timed to enjoy the best of early spring as we follow this natural burst of life, offering many sought-after Arctic and eastern European breeding specialties along with an excellent opportunity to experience exciting spring migration as countless water, sea birds, shorebirds and songbirds are arriving to enjoy breeding in the Land of the Midnight Sun. This tour has been meticulously designed, along with expert local birders, enabling us to highlight the best Scandinavian avian treasures, including many of Europe's most charismatic owls (up to eight species at known nesting *sites), multiple woodpeckers and no less than* five incredible grouse species too, topped by magnificent plumaged male Ruff displaying on leks!

A magnificent male Western Capercaillie displaying. © Andrew Whittaker

Imagine filling your lungs with the tonic that is fresh, clean Arctic air, like a high-class bottle of bubbly, walking through delightful boreal forests, experiencing the vibrant tundra full of displaying shorebirds, or light sparkling and dancing on the surfaces of myriad lakes—all while enjoying the changing landscapes. If you love owls, woodpeckers and grouse as well as immense seabird colonies, and Arctic shorebirds, then this certainly is the tour for you. Better still, we will enjoy observing these mega owls in the day light!

This exciting tour also offers many of Eastern Europe's most sought after Sibes (Siberian) and Arctic species. The taiga forests and tundra here are blessed with an astonishing array of boreal songbirds and shorebirds, all in glorious breeding plumage with their melodious songs ringing throughout secluded forests, while we can marvel at the rarely seen shorebird flight displays plus unforgettable lekking male Ruff adorning all types of color combinations imaginable! This trip truly is a hidden gem for naturalists and birders alike.

We begin our tour in Finland—a sparsely populated country brimming with natural beauty from lakes, rich wetlands, pine bogs to vast forests of pine, birch and spruce. In fact, seventy percent of Finland is still forested and a further 10% covered with lakes! Successive ice ages and the cold climate have led to the formation of a wide range of peatland and wetland habitats. Meltwater rivers inside the ice deposited long ridges of sand and gravel which now stand above the surrounding landscape and are known as eskers. Finland is reputed to be the "Land of a Thousand Lakes," with nearly 200,000 lakes which are mostly small and shallow—excellent for the country's abundant waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls and raptors.

Oulu, high up on the Gulf of Bothnia, is a birder's paradise. Here we'll concentrate our efforts birding both the rich forests and internationally important wetlands of Liminganlahti. The region is best known, however, for its breeding northern owls, so we'll begin our owl quest here but also continue further north in Kuusamo and Ivalo. Eurasian Eagle Owl, Ural, Great Gray, Eurasian Pygmy, Northern Hawk, Short-eared and Boreal owls are all expected. Our local guides specialize in showing these to visiting birders and will have several active nests located.

Magnificent wetlands offer us a great selection of breeding shorebirds too including hopefully the rare Terek Sandpiper seen on our 2023 trip, colorful Black-tailed Godwit, Northern Lapwing, both Broad-billed, Wood and Green sandpipers. Plus, splendid Ruff in their incredible varied breeding colors,

performing their intricate and comical displays at leks. These immense scrubby marshlands and reed beds offer a good chance to find summering Harriers, Hen and Pallid, Common Cranes, Eurasian Bittern, Whooper Swan, various geese, Horned Grebe, Little Gull, delightful Smew, colorful Western Yellow Wagtail, Whinchat, Eurasian Bullfinch, Yellowhammer and possibly even a rarity or two. Previous tours have seen Pied Wheatear and found a vagrant Pectoral Sandpiper.

A cute Boreal Owl inspects us. ©Andrew Whittaker

Continuing eastwards towards Kuusamo and closer to Russia, we find a land of lakes, bogs and extensive forested hills providing habitats for Taiga Bean Goose, Great Crested and Red-necked grebe, Arctic Loon, Jack and Common snipe, European Golden-Plover and Spotted Redshank. Taiga forests offer good chances of finding more cool woodpeckers such as Black and Eurasian Three-toed, Lesser Spotted and Gray-headed, White-throated Dipper, Fieldfare, Redwing, Eurasian Siskin, Brambling, Parrot Crossbill, and Pine Grosbeak. It's also a magnificent area for grouse, including much sought-after Western Capercaillie, Black and Hazel grouse. However, the area is best known for being the only European nesting sites for a number of eastern specialties or Sibes such as Siberian Jay, Gray-headed Chickadee (Siberian Tit), magical Red-flanked Bluetail, as well as Little and Rustic Buntings.

Next, we will venture further north by crossing the Arctic Circle and the home of both Wild Forest Reindeer as well as herds of feral Reindeer arriving in Ivalo our best sight for Eurasian Dotterel and Golden Eagle. Next day we continue northbound stopping off at the famous bird café where cold can offer excellent feeder watching with Pine-Grosbeak, Brambling, Eurasian Bullfinch and Siskin, Redpoll and Gray-headed Chickadee to very cute Red Squirrel. Eventually crossing the border into Norway. Entering the true high arctic of Lapland with spectacular remote stark landscapes of the Varanger Peninsula on the Barents Sea. Spectacular scenery abounds with rugged hills, stunted taiga forests, rivers full of melt water, magnificent tundra to fjord coastlines offer a further range of exciting birds in

this marvelous wilderness setting. Seabirds, shorebirds and wildfowl will be especially rewarding with a mix of circumpolar species—Gyrfalcon (rare), White-tailed Eagle (common), Tundra and Taiga Bean-Goose, Long-tailed Duck, Velvet Scoter, Steller's and King eiders (with luck), Rock and Willow ptarmigan, Parasitic and Long-tailed jaegers, and Yellow-billed and Red-throated loon amongst "Old World" species such as iconic Red-necked Phalarope, Purple Sandpiper, Dunlin, Bar-tailed Godwit, European Golden-Plover, Temminck's Stint, Red-throated and Rock Pipit, the stunning Bluethroat, Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, and pink-rumped male Twite. Too truly awesome seabird colonies along the Norwegian coast. Our boat trip to Hornoya Island is always a trip highlight (by far the best European seabird colony I have ever visited) holding countless thousands of five Atlantic alcids: Common and Thick-billed murre, Black Guillemot, Razorbill and the cute Atlantic Puffin; plus, emerald eyed European Shag offering truly exceptional photographic opportunities even with your mobile!

A stunning Ural Owl ©Andrew Whittaker

We wind up this fabulous adventure far south around Espoo and Helsinki (the greenest capital in the world), where spring is at its peak offering an amazing variety of different sought-after birds and birding opportunities to many diverse habitats. Here we will pick up the later arriving migrants and hopefully some rare vagrants too while exploring birdy estuaries, diverse agricultural areas, lush deciduous broadleaf dominated forests and older boreal forests. Targets should include the likes of Tawny Owl; Gray-headed Woodpecker; Barnacle Goose; Broad-billed Sandpiper; European Honey-Buzzard; Western Marsh Harrier; Caspian Tern; Red-backed Shrike; Thrush Nightingale; warblers galore; Great and Common Reed;, Marsh ; Icterine; Wood; River and Grasshopper warbler, Greater and Lesser Whitethroat; Red-breasted Flycatcher; colorful Citrine Wagtail; Common Rosefinch; and Hawfinch.

Apart from a splendid list of very unusual Arctic birds and eastern specialties, the tour offers a stunning and truly varied scenic panorama plus safe and comfortable travel into some of the most remote wilderness areas northern Europe has to offer. The Finns (after the Brits!) are some of the keenest birders in Europe and there is a wealth of local knowledge from our Finnish co-leaders to assure that we have the best possible opportunities for finding the most sought-after birds. The Birding Hotline will likely direct us to a number of rarer species also; in 2022 we had a lovely male Pied Wheatear! The road systems, transport, hotels and meals are all a high standard. Several of the national parks have excellent trails, visitor centers, blinds and observation towers to make our birding here an even more pleasurable experience.

Striking Eurasian Dotterel breed on the tundra. © Andrew Whittaker

May 17-18, Days 1-2: Travel to Oulu, Finland

Participants not continuing from the Brown Bears & Wolverines Pre-Trip should plan to arrive in Oulu (airport code OUL) no later than May 18. Most international flights from the United States will depart in the afternoon and arrive in Helsinki (airport code HEL) the following morning, with onward connections on Finnair from Helsinki to Oulu. You will be met on arrival by a representative of our ground agent for transfer to our nearby hotel, where you will meet your tour leader and fellow participants. Upon request the VENT office will be happy to assist with extra hotel nights and transfers for early arrivals.

Oulu is situated on the Gulf of Bothnia, at the mouth of the river Oulujoki, which was an ancient trading site. The city proper was founded on April 8, 1605, by King Charles IX of Sweden, opposite the fort built on the island of Linnansaari. Today it is a modern bustling city of 250, 000. Time allowing, we will make an excursion for some of the local specialties this afternoon. Species such as Eurasian Blue and Great tits plus striking Fieldfare and Redwings are common "garden" birds. We will be close to excellent coastal birding sites where we may find the first Whooper Swans, Great-crested Grebe, Eurasian Wigeon, Garganey, Tufted Duck, Eurasian Teal and many waders as well as an exciting assortment of many other waterbirds.

Situated on the beautiful Kempeleenlahti Bay, our hotel offers delightful birding opportunities in the bay's nature reserve, with its pleasant trails through rich meadows, reedbeds and shallow bay being an important breeding and migration staging point. A delightful nature trail starts directly from the hotel leading through marshes to a birding tower overlooking the sea, and reedbeds good for ducks, terns and an assortment of marsh birds, we have heard odd calls of a booming male Great Bittern or screaming Water Rail or observed hunting Western Marsh-Harrier, Reed Bunting, Sedge Warbler.

NIGHT (May 17): Overnight aboard aircraft

NIGHT (May 18): Lapland Hotel Oulu, Kempele, Finland

Brambling is a fairly common bird of Scandinavian forests. © Finnature

May 19-20, Days 3-4: Birding the Taiga Forest and Famous Liminka Bay Wetland Reserve

Although Oulu is one of the larger cities in north-central Finland, there are places within half an hour's drive with all the atmosphere of untouched wilderness. This area of the Gulf of Bothnia offers some of the finest birding opportunities in Finland and Liminka Bay is one of the country's most important wetlands.

We will spend two full days birding the forests and coastal areas around Oulu. The region is best known for its northern owls. Our local guides specialize in showing these to visiting birders and often have active nests located here and at other locations where we stay later in the tour. While breeding numbers fluctuate from year to year, the breeding species include Eurasian Eagle, Great Gray, Ural, Boreal, Pygmy and Short-eared owl and most years also the nomadic Northern Hawk and maybe even Long-eared owl too.

Northern Hawk Owl © Finnature

Depending on the vole numbers, some owl species might also be encountered further north in the Kuusamo and Ivalo regions, including Northern Hawk Owl up in Norway. In the forests surrounding Oulu, we will also look for Common Buzzard; Eurasian Woodcock; Eurasian Three-toed, Lesser and Greater-spotted, Gray-headed and sought-after massive Black woodpecker. Black or even Hazel Grouse are also possible. Songbirds should include Fieldfare, Crested Tit (rare), Eurasian Bullfinch,

Yellowhammer, Wood Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Ortolan Bunting and Great Gray Shrike (rare) among several other interesting species that breed in the area.

Just south of Oulu, we will visit Liminganlahti – a large internationally important wetland reserve that is home to a multitude of shorebirds, water birds, gulls and raptors. Whooper Swans and Common Cranes spend their summers here, and breeding species include colorful Black-tailed Godwit, Eurasian Curlew, Greenshank, Common Sandpiper, Common Shelduck to summer visiting Garganey. Among the numerous migrants that rest here, we should see hundreds of Ruff that nest in the area and we will certainly relish the males which should be in their bizarre and extravagant breeding dress of white, orange, black and speckled ruffs. Other shorebirds such as Northern Lapwing, Spotted Redshank and Little-ringed Plover and the less common Broad-billed Sandpipers also often stop here. The coastal meadows around Oulu are good for colorful Western Yellow Wagtails, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting, and raptors. White-tailed Eagles and Eurasian Marsh-Harriers patrol the shores and colorful meadows endlessly. We will keep a constant look-out for the rarer and more graceful Hen or rare Pallid harrier, both seen regularly during migration and the former in the last decade has become a more and more regular breeder up here. The rarest and most desired of all shorebirds is of course the distinctive Terek Sandpiper, with only a few breeding pairs left in Finland. Oulu is their last breeding area and we will certainly concentrate on looking for them if they have been recorded during our time here (seen on our 2023 tour).

NIGHTS: Lapland Hotel Oulu, Kempele, Finland

Male Ruff lekking will definitely be a trip highlight. © Finnature

May 21, Day 5: Morning Oulu Birding; Afternoon Driving Northeast to Kuusamo and Ruka

After another superb morning of birding around Oulu, we'll journey along an incredibly picturesque road northeast to the small Russian border town of Kuusamo, a land of many lakes lying between low, forested hills—a contrast to the flat, open western coast. There will be plenty of opportunity for birding along our route as we pass through dense forests of birch, aspen, pine and spruce interspersed with bogs and countless lakes holding Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Red-necked and Horned grebe, the delicate Little Gull and snazzy male Smew. Kuusamo is a small town whose population explodes in winter as it's a major winter sports center, especially for skiing. A wilderness for man and woman, the far north is home to countless birds and animals which here even seem to lose their fear of humans. We'll check into our hotel some 30 minutes north of Kuusamo in Ruka for three nights and enjoy a well-earned Finnish dinner and good rest.

NIGHT: Holiday Club Kuusamon Tropiikki, Kuusamon, Finland

May 22-23, Days 6-7: Birding Areas Around Kuusamo and the Oulanka National Park

Kuusamo is an exciting birding destination with a mouth-watering number of eastern and arctic species breeding here. It is also well known for its incredible natural beauty. For one of our two full days here, we'll visit the unspoiled wilderness of taiga forest in Oulanka National Park, which embraces river valleys with endless tracts of forest, bogs, riverine meadows and gorges. It also adjoins a huge, protected area on the Russian side of the border. The vast forests and meadows are excellent Hen Harrier and grouse habitat, and an early morning drive will be taken to search for Willow Ptarmigan and Black Grouse, the enormous and highly sought-after Western Capercaillie, plus the elusive snazzy Hazel Grouse.

This is the western-most extreme of this boreal Siberian Forest type and holds many rare plants and birds. During our stay, we should find breeding Red-necked Grebe in all their glory, Arctic Loon, wildfowl including striking Smew and Velvet Scoter, shorebirds such as European Golden-Plover,

Lekking male Black Grouse have to be seen to be believed. © Finnature

Common Greenshank, the minute Jack Snipe (rare), Green and Wood sandpiper and Spotted Redshank. Many of these are quite commonplace here.

We will continue our quest for the northern woodpeckers, as well as Arctic owls, and begin with other forest specialties. Interesting songbirds include Eurasian Cuckoo, the slick looking Bohemian Waxwing, Fieldfare (a colonial breeder), and Willow and Crested tits. Streams hold the delightful White-throated Dipper, while colorful Red and Parrot crossbills play in the variety of pine and spruce trees. This is the only European nesting area for several eastern specialties such as Siberian Jay, Gray-headed Chickadee (Siberian Tit), stunning Red-flanked Bluetail, and Little and Rustic buntings, all of which will all be given high priority. Golden Eagle and Northern Goshawk breed here and are well worth scanning the skies they soar. In most years, Northern Hawk Owl and Boreal Owl also have bred in the Kuusamo area. With virtually no night-time darkness at this near-Arctic latitude (as far north as Fairbanks or Nome, Alaska), there is the potential to be active 24 hours a day in search of the excellent range of birds here!

NIGHTS: Holiday Club Kuusamon Tropiikki, Kuusamon, Finland

May 24, Day 8: Morning Birding Kuusamo; Afternoon Crossing the Arctic Circle to Ivalo

After another morning of great birding in the Kuusamo region, we will continue heading north into Lapland, crossing the Arctic Circle. En route we will observe the remarkable change from coniferous forest giving way to Mountain Birch and peat bogs before stopping off for photos at the Arctic Circle. Birding highlights will hopefully include our first Taiga Bean Goose. Willow and Birch forests and moors should hold Bohemian Waxwing, Brambling, Eurasian Siskin and Eurasian Bullfinch, Bluethroat,

Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Common Redstart and lovely Willow Ptarmigan in between their summer and winter plumage which is striking!

A magnificent singing male Bluethroat © Finnature

Our next destination (a distance of 375 kilometers) is the quaint and remote village of Ivalo in the land of the midnight sun! This lovely area is a vast, sparsely populated region of field ridges, spruce and pine forests, open tundra heath and bogs with streams—the heart of Lapland. Tourists visit every year for winter sports (downhill and cross-country skiing, snowboarding, husky and reindeer sled riding) and for summer activities (trekking and hiking in the Saariselkä fjells, canoeing in Lapland's rivers, mountain biking, panning for gold and fishing, etc.). We plan to arrive in time for a brief excursion to a nearby hill for Eurasian Dotterel which choose to stay on the barren hilltops with dinner at our quaint hotel.

NIGHT: Hotel Ivalo, Ivalo, Finland

May 25, Day 9: Drive from Ivalo with Stops in Kaamanen at the Bird Café Before Continuing onto the Barents Sea Coast and Båtsfjord, Norway

Stunning male Pine Grosbeak © Andrew Whittaker

After breakfast we continue our tour towards the northernmost part of mainland Europe. As we explore the Lappish forests and bogs along the way, we will concentrate this morning on searching for several target species with a delightful stop in Kaamanen at the bird café offering wonderful active bird feeders (dependent on cold weather) and offering super photographic opportunities as well as great hot chocolate! Species should include cute Red Squirrels, European Greenfinch, Redpoll, Gray-headed Chickadee (Siberian Tit), Siberian Jay, and superb Brambling in summer plumage as well hopefully amazing Pine Grosbeaks.

Siberian Jay is one of the classic species of the vast taiga forest. © Finnature

We may even encounter moose wading through the remote bogs, while forests are also home to rare Forest Reindeer (seen on our last four tours) and the cute long-legged Mountain Hare. Other mammals could include Pine Marten (rare), with both Stoat or Least Weasel being seen on our last two tours, Northern Bat and several species of vole and shrew.

After a great homemade lunch at a cozy pub before the Finnish Norwegian border, we will cross into Norway following the famous salmon river of Teno to the fjords. We plan to stop at the Teno delta for shorebirds and the first Common Eiders of the tour. Soon we start climbing uphill and leave the tree line behind. The highlands and arctic tundra in the Varanger Peninsula are simply bursting with life. Breeding wadersand wildfowl offer some absolutely wonderful birding and the species list is truly appreciable; Rough-legged Hawk, Merlin, Willow Ptarmigan magnificent Bluethroat, occupy the river valleys while Eurasian Golden Plover, Lapland Longspur, Horned Lark and Long-tailed and Parasitic jaeger can be found on the hillsides. Most adapted are the Rock Ptarmigan, Snow Bunting Roadside lakes provide excellent birding with Red-throated and Arctic loon, Greater Scaup and Long-tailed Duck, while Temminck's Stints show off their butterfly display flight along the roads. We'll always keep an eye open for a rare Gyrfalcon sighting seen on our last two tours.

After birding the highlands, we will descend to the lovely small fishing town of Båtsfjord and our northern-most outpost. The fishing village is located along the 13 km (8 mile) Båtsfjord inlet off the Barents Sea along the northern coast of the famous Varanger Peninsula. Historically, there were three whaling stations in Båtsfjord, but thankfully they are no longer in operation. Enjoying a wonderful, home-cooked, freshly caught sea fish here such as Cod is always exceptionally delicious.

The River Teno (Tana in Norwegian) is one of the most important salmon rivers in Europe (bordering Finland and Norway), and has deposited enormous amounts of sand, reminding one of the great Siberian rivers. Northern Norway is a mixture of divine inspiration and spectacular sea cliffs simply alive with countless thousands of breeding seabirds. Here the North Atlantic drift carries the warm rich Gulf Stream this far north, resulting in an exceptionally high biological productivity. A combination of Arctic landscapes, boreal forests and intricate coastline make this one of Europe's most varied wildlife-watching destinations—boasting rugged archipelago, majestic mountains, glaciers, caves and exciting bird-filled sea cliffs and offshore islands. We will drive along the riverside and visit a delta area in Norway, which is famous in summer for its flocks of thousands of molting Common Mergansers

(Goosanders), Common Shelduck, and breeding waders. We will also have a good chance to see Gray Seals or Harbour Porpoise.

NIGHT: Båtsfjord Hotel, Båtsfjord, Norway

Breeding plumaged Arctic Loon © Finnature

May 26, Day 10: Båtsfjord Birding on the way to Vardö

Today we retrace our steps before crossing over the peninsular to the est through the vast, open arctic landscape of fjords and secluded bays and fishing villages with their large wooden Cod drying racks. The countryside is characterized by fells, which are not actually mountains, but gently rising cones of earth providing spectacular vistas. The bogs and lakesides offer an ideal open field of vision for excellent birding among the dwarf birch and pygmy willows, with great likelihood of seeing hunting Short-eared Owls, Hen Harrier, White-tailed Eagle and our first Tundra Bean Goose. Mudflats and delightful bays hold Greater Cormorants, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Eurasian Curlew, Whimbrel, Red Knot, Redshank, Common Ringed Plover and handsome Bar-tailed Godwit, plus a mixture of waterfowl and gulls.

We have previously observed Red Fox and Lemmings. A reintroduction of the endangered Arctic Fox is ongoing here, but we would be very lucky to come across this tiny, delicate northern fox. After driving through an impressive deep tunnel for three kilometers, we'll exit out into the pleasant

island town of Vardo, our home for the next three nights. The Black-legged Kittiwake certainly love the town as thousands nest on the buildings. Time allowing, we can visit the nearby Memorial Site commemorating the execution in 1621 of 91 people for witchcraft, which is in an easy 5–10-minute walking distance from our hotel.

NIGHT: Hotel Vardö, Vardö, Norway

Spring and love are in the air - breeding plumage Bar-tailed Godwit. ©Andrew Whittaker

May 27-28, Day 11-12: Varanger Fjord and its Famous Hornøya Island & Barents Sea

This region of Norway offers more spectacular scenery of rugged, rocky coast; magical and colorful wild tundra; and fjord coastlines typical of the high Arctic. Vardö is, in fact, an island off the very northeastern-most tip of Norway. An important year-round fishing town, it is connected to the mainland by tunnel, allowing us easy access to this remote and exciting region. Our primary objective in this region will be the observation of seabirds, shorebirds in their distinctive breeding plumage, and various wildfowl—some species endemic to this area, others with a broader circumpolar distribution, yet all regarded as highly desirable sightings.

The rock star of northern seabird colonies is the Atlantic Puffin.

© Andrew Whittaker

We have two full days to explore this exciting northern outpost. One morning, weather permitting, we will make a half-day excursion by boat (15-minute boat ride) to visit one of Europe's most impressive seabird colonies on Hornøya Island. This nature reserve is the jewel in Varanger's natural crown—a wild island inhabited by an impressive 80,000 seabirds! Cliff ledges are crowded with thousands of breeding Common and Thick-billed murres, Black Guillemots, Razorbills, Eurasian Shag and some 7,500 pairs of Black-legged Kittiwakes, while grassy slopes hold enchanting Atlantic Puffins. Overhead the skies are often patrolled by immense White-tailed Eagles that hunt here on the stunning sheer cliffs. This is by far the best European seabird viewing I have ever experienced and magical for photography even with your phone as the birds are incredibly tame!

With some luck we will encounter the true master of the air, the powerful majestic Gyrfalcon, patrolling the island in hopes of an easy snack and causing panic among the breeding seabirds. The air is filled with the cacophony of countless thousands of birds and a constant stream of birds flying in and returning to sea. Simply there is no better spot in Europe for photographing seabirds at close range. A nice walk all the way up to the top of the island to the lighthouse will reward us with wonderful views over the Barents Sea and Rock Pipit.

Huge White-tailed Eagles are fairly regular around the magnificent seabird cliffs. © Finnature

In the rich seas and fjords here, we will especially search for the incomparable King and Steller's (both rare) and Common eider; Yellow-billed Loon; and Velvet and Common scoter. Song birds might include Ring Ouzel, colorful Red-throated Pipits, Snow Bunting, Shore Lark, Lapland Longspur, and uncommon Twite. Numerous White-tailed Eagles will be a delight to observe as they patrol the coastline for easy prey.

Red-necked Phalarope female © Andrew Whittaker

We will also enjoy a day excursion to Hamningberg, which is often referred to as the very end of Europe. Scenically this drive through this remote Arctic area is truly awe-inspiring, spectacular geological features abound with countless raised beaches and incredible sea views and remote sandy beaches. Here its magnificent and colorful tundra is simply bursting with life and holds some very impressive birds, especially a huge population of shorebirds (all in wonderful breeding plumage): Eurasian Oystercatcher, Wood Sandpiper, Dunlin, Common Ringed plover, Purple Sandpiper, Temmink's Stint and Eurasian Whimbrel. My favorite, without doubt however, is the gorgeous, Red-necked Phalarope, the females are truly radiant in color even more so than the slightly duller males.

An incomparable male King and Steller's eider © Finnature

The road follows the unique rocky coastline and there are excellent vantage points for sea watching from the end of the road which can be great with the correct winds. Here we will search for White-billed and Common loon, Northern Gannet, Northern Fulmar, and again pay special attention to

hopefully find either King or Steller's eider (both rare). Also, sea watching at times can be very productive, giving us chances of both Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers and Great Skua. The arctic coast is always a great place to look for whales and dolphins, and we have a good chance of detecting Gray or Common seals. The Barents Sea also holds several types of cetaceans like Orcas, Humpback, Fin or Northern Minke whales, and Harbor Porpoises. Past tours have seen Humpback, Northern Minke. Even the cool-looking ghost-white Belugas are rarely seen here.

NIGHTS: Hotel Vardö, Vardö, Norway

May 29, Day 13: To Ivalo, Finland

After breakfast and some more birding, we start our journey south, crossing back into Finland and on to Ivalo. We will have time for some birding en route and will at least stop by a couple of secluded bays and again at Nesseby Church, which are excellent for shorebirds. While driving, we'll keep our eyes open for a late Glaucous Gull or any shorebirds we still need such as Spotted Redshank, Sanderling, Curlew Sandpiper or Little Stint plus the two rare eiders amongst the flocks of Common Eiders. We will have a picnic lunch and afterwards return to Finland. Time permitting, close to our hotel we will bird a barren hillside which is home to the amazingly colorful Eurasian Dotterel and the recently split Eurasian Whimbrel.

NIGHT: Hotel Ivalo, Ivalo, Finland

May 30, Day 14: Drive from Ivalo to Rovaniemi for our Flight to Helsinki

This morning we'll drive to Rovaniemi Airport (RVN) for our departure on Finnair Flight to Helsinki (flight time subject to change). Upon arrival, we will meet our excellent local birding guide, pick up our vans. Spring will be in full swing with its vibrant greens and colorful meadows of flowers and we will drive half an hour or so to our very nice, secluded forested hotel in nearby Espoo. If we have time, we will explore the delightful lake and forest trails of the forest reserve right outside our doorsteps.

NIGHT: Hotel Nuuksio, Espoo, Finland

May 31-June 1, Days 15 & 16: Espoo, Helsinki and Surroundings

Helsinki, Espoo and surroundings offer a different variety of sought-after birds and superb birding opportunities in diverse habitats. The magical transformation of spring will have been fully completed with the trees in full leaf. We will enjoy exploring birdy estuaries, diverse agricultural areas, lush deciduous broadleaf dominated forests and some older boreal forests while searching for their special inhabitants. Exact birding locations we will visit depend largely on arrival of our target species, mostly late migrants and resident species only found in the southern tier of Finland. All springs are different, and we will be focusing our birding efforts at the best sites to locate all our target species, or to chase up an exciting, rare vagrant we hear about on the local hotline.

Numerous wetlands and reedbeds offer a good selection of localized breeding species like Great Reed Warbler, skulking Savis's or River Warbler and wonderous Citrine Wagtail. Warblers abound and many birds will be in full song making it very special. Common Reed and Sedge Warbler to Reed Bunting haunt the reed beds with below skulk Water Rail and Eurasian Moorhen. Waterfowl are usually found in good numbers and often along with cute broods these should include Common Pochard, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Common Goldeneye, plus Eurasian Coot with their rather unusual looking chicks. Observing migrant waders in mudflats from well-placed blinds will certainly be a highlight. We have good chances of encountering the distinct Broad-billed Sandpiper among more common species like Little Ringed Plover; Wood, Common and Green sandpiper; Redshank; Greenshank; and Common Snipe. Other common species include Gray Heron, Caspian Tern, Barnacle Goose and lovely breeding plumaged Great Crested and Horned (Slavonian) grebe.

Nesting Horned Grebe © Andrew Whittaker

In agricultural areas and bushy edge habitats we will search for sought-after master songsters like Blyth's Reed and Marsh warblers; however, the prize must go to Thrush Nightingale with its astonishingly loud and beautiful song. Hopefully, late arriving River or Common Grasshopper warblers (both skulkers) will be present. Edge and riverside inhabitants should include Greater and Lesser whitethroats, Whinchats and flashy Common Rosefinches, Yellowhammers, and lovely Citrine and Western Yellow Wagtail, Red-backed Shrikes and with luck even the odd Eurasian Wryneck a truly bizarre brown/gray woodpecker or Eurasian Hobby overhead catching dragon flies.

Red-backed Shrike © Andrew Whittaker

Here the wondrous musical song of Skylarks fills the air. Other species we might encounter include Common Kestrel, Gray Partridge (rare), Northern Lapwing, Eurasian Curlew, European Goldfinch, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Sought after Corncrake could be present and usually very hard to see, but we will do our best. Some years the area is even graced by nesting Montague's Harrier.

The very lush deciduous forests of southern Finland are extremely rich in birdlife and yield many wanted and hard to see species. Our target list is fairly long, but includes Tawny Owl, and many woodpeckers at the top. These include the highly localized gray-headed and white-backed and Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker, if not seen before. Other forest gems include shy Hawfinch; European Pied and Spotted flycatcher; Wood warbler; Chiffchaff; Blackcap; Garden Warbler; Eurasian Wren; Goldcrest; Great, Blue and Coal tit and; Eurasian Bullfinch. We will also visit some old growth boreal spruce and pine forests, where we will try to locate Red-breasted Flycatcher, Greenish Warbler, and Eurasian Treecreeper. With luck the striking Eurasian Golden Oriole is possible.

NIGHTS: Hotel Nuuksio, Espoo, Finland

June 2, Day 17: Departure for Home.

Depending on departure flight times, we may offer a couple of hours of early morning birding before coming back to the hotel with time to clean up and finish packing. We'll provide a group transfer to the international airport, timed to accommodate any flights leaving Helsinki after 12:00 noon.

Gray-headed Woodpecker © Finnature

FINLAND: BROWN BEARS & WOLVERINES PRE-TRIP

May 12–19, 2027

This exciting pre-trip offers an exceptional opportunity to experience the Arctic's foremost wildlife of the vast Siberian taiga forests in Eastern Finland. This sparsely populated area (only 184,000 people) is simply brimming with natural Arctic beauty from lakes, rich wetlands, and forests of pine, birch and spruce. Planned primarily to enjoy the antics of two fascinating carnivores in this rarely visited and untouched wilderness, it's a dream come true to observe one of the most mythical carnivores in the world, namely the extraordinary Wolverine (multiple observations on all our previous trips)! Wolverines look something like a mixture of a very powerful dog, a skunk and a bear, with short legs, long hair and elongated snouts. They also have a distinctive mask of dark fur around their eyes and forehead, and a stripe of blond or ivory fur that runs from each shoulder to the base of the animal's tail. This trip is planned to visit during its peak season of activity, and without doubt will offer us plenty of great photographic opportunities, too.

If that's not enough in itself, we will also encounter the most powerful apex predator of Eastern Finland, namely the European Brown Bear (like the North American Grizzly). We will enjoy these amazing experiences all from within the comfort and safety of a spacious log cabin or a large well-constructed blind that both provide us with comfortable resting amenities in bunk beds and toilets. A night in a blind—seeing wild Wolverines or immense bears at close range—is certain to be an unforgettable experience! On our last two tours we were privileged to observe a pair of majestic Gray Wolf for over 45 minutes! We even stand a chance of European Polecat (seen on one tour) or the infamous European Lynx (if we are very lucky), both of which occasionally come into the feeding stations. Avian scavengers could include enormous White-tailed Eagle, Black Kite, Northern Goshawk or Common Buzzard, Common Raven and a great variety of gulls including the attractive long winged race of Lesser-black Backed (Baltic) Gull (a future possible split) gracing the stage.

Playful Wolverines outside the comfortable Wolverine blind © Finnature

Indeed, being surrounded by glorious fabled Arctic settings will also offer us a sprinkling of magical boreal birds as well for us to enjoy. Our visit to the delightful Koli National Park will certainly also be a birding highlight. These forests are home to stately Western Capercaillie, Hazel and Black grouse, Eurasian Woodcock, Black, Gray-headed and Eurasian Three-toed woodpecker, Bohemian Waxwing and both red and Parrot Crossbill.

Large carnivores are generally faring well in Finland, where vast areas of pristine taiga forest hold abundant prey. This mammal and bird watching tour is centered on visiting two different areas observing mammals first from a comfortable, spacious log cabin and for our bears, a well-constructed

spacious blind, and will provide an unforgettable experience. Nights here are almost without darkness and are the peak activity time for these animals. By staying overnight in the blinds, we will maximize our chances of seeing and photographing several of these awesome predators!

The Wolverine is normally a solitary and rare animal that is always on the move. It resembles a small bear with a long tail. They are primarily scavengers and can devour their food quickly in big chunks—their scientific name, Gulo, means glutton. Meanwhile, the Brown Bear is the largest apex predator in Europe, feeding on anything it can find or catch, ranging from berries, carcasses to fish and other mammals. Adult males can weigh a massive 300 kilos or 660 pounds. Despite their big size, Brown Bears are agile and males can travel hundreds of kilometers in a short period of time; females and cubs inhabit smaller territories.

European Brown Bear from bear blind © Finnature

Other boreal inhabitants we shall be on the lookout for are European Roe Deer, Pine Martin, Moose, and especially wild Forest Reindeer (seen on most of our tours)! Importantly, the sun sets around 10:00 p.m. with sunrise at 4:00 a.m., but it does not really get dark at this time of year—therefore it's excellent for wildlife viewing and photography as well. We will offer relaxation time back at our lodges to catch up on sleep during the day. Birding around the Boreal Wildlife Centre lodge is good too. Many

of the commoner species are: Whooper Swan, Great-spotted Woodpecker, European Pied Flycatcher (nesting in their boxes), Western House Martin, Redwing, White Wagtail, Common Redstart, Bohemian Waxwing, Red and Parrot crossbills, Brambling, Eurasian Bullfinch, Eurasian Siskin, Redpoll, Rustic Bunting and endearing Red Squirrels. This will be an action-packed pre-trip to one of the friendliest and most delightful countries—that is Finland.

May 12-13, Days 1-2: Travel to Joensuu, Finland; Transfer to Koli Hotel with Afternoon Birding Koli National Park

Most international flights from the United States will depart in the afternoon and arrive in Helsinki the following morning, where you can catch your onward connection to Joensuu (May 13). Connect with Finnair flight 341 is currently scheduled to depart at 7:15 a.m. from Helsinki (airport code HEL) to Joensuu (airport code JOE).

On arrival at Joensuu in northern Karelia, we will meet our local expert birding guide for an enjoyable one-hour drive through the spruce forests and lovely heritage meadows, looking out for any interesting wildlife and beautiful natural scenery, on our way to Koli, about 60 kilometers north of Joensuu. Koli became a symbol of romantic nationalism at the end of the 19th century, and its stunning landscape has inspired numerous Finnish artists.

Upon request the VENT office will be happy to assist with extra hotel nights and transfers for early arrivals.

Koli National Park is truly a delightful destination for birding with a versatile mixture of hills, forests and special slash-and-burn meadows full of flowers, while Pielinen Lake is bordered by lovely spruce forests and smooth, rounded cliffs, forming an impressive landscape. Arriving at Ukko-Koli, we will visit the Koli

Nature Center Ukko where birding these iconic landscapes will be a joy and offer us a great sample of the local avifauna. During our walks here several target species include the elusive Hazel Grouse, Eurasian Three-toed, Gray-headed and Black woodpecker, stunning Common Redstart, Eurasian Bullfinch and Red Crossbills. Freshly arrived migrants from Africa should be in full song and we will be enchanted by the famous Common Cuckoo or cascading songs of Wood Warblers and delightfully

sweet voice of Willow Warblers. Raptors could include Northern Goshawk, or Eurasian Kestrel. Other songbirds should include Fieldfare, Song Thrush and Redwing, White Wagtail, Eurasian Wren, Goldcrest, Common Chaffinch and colorful Eurasian Siskin. We'll return to our hotel for dinner and for those interested, the hotel offers a relaxing spa.

NIGHT (May 12): Overnight aboard aircraft

NIGHT: (May 13) Koli: Break Sokos Hotel on Top, Koli

The Impressive Black Woodpecker © Finnature

May 14, Day 3: Morning Birding Koli National Park; Drive to Lieksa Hotel and Afternoon/Night in the Wolverine Blind

Following a full breakfast, we will depart and begin birding along the way visiting the exquisite Lake Pielinen—home to Arctic and Red-throated loon, Red-necked Grebe, Whooper Swan, Common Crane, Eurasian Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Tufted Duck and Common Goldeneye; while exploring its shores for the likes of Northern Lapwing; Eurasian Curlew; Wood, Green and Common sandpiper; and Common Snipe. Vibrant meadows are home to playful and cute looking Mountain Hares, Northern Wheatear, Whinchat, Tree and Meadow pipit, Eurasian Skylark, European Greenfinch, Yellowhammer, Reed Bunting and Eurasian Tree Sparrow.

The Wood Warbler is a true delight. © Andrew Whittaker

Mid-morning, we will drive into Lieksa and check-in to our hotel and enjoy a delightful lunch. Midafternoon, we will take the short drive to the remote area of Kontiovaara and enter our exciting Wolverine viewing hide for the night. The comfortable and ample log cabin has two sides which are connected. Each side has eight chairs and altogether there are twelve bunk beds with sleeping bags and pillows for resting, as well as dry toilets. After settling in, we can relax and enjoy the spectacular boreal settings and excellent opportunities for observing Wolverine as we're smack in the center of the animal's natural environment. Here, Wolverines visit the site virtually daily since it's baited. The number of individuals varies, but usually there are several Wolverines' territories around. In addition, Brown Bears and recently in the last two trips majestic Wolves have visited! We will overnight in the hide, constantly on the lookout for any wildlife. Just a remind for anyone resting; you can be assured that if and when any animals or exciting birds appear, you will be promptly informed. We won't go hungry either—there will be plenty of snacks, treats, and hot drinks to enjoy. We also will be treated to a show of gulls coming in for the bait; these should include attractive long-winged Lesser-black-backed (Baltic split), Common, and Eurasian Herring—an odd yellow-legged Feno Scandinavian type!

NIGHT: Hotel Puustelli, Lieksa / Wolverine blind

The poorly known Wolverine © Finnature

May 15, Day 4: Rest in the Morning; Early Afternoon Visit to the Wolverine Blind

This morning at 8am, we return to the hotel for a good cooked breakfast and allow time for a well-earned rest. However, for those who just can't get enough Arctic species, the grounds and a walk along the nearby river will provide a great selection of local commoner species such as Fieldfare, Eurasian Bullfinch, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Sandpiper, Great-spotted Woodpecker, Great and Eurasian Blue tits and Reed Bunting. After lunch, we'll return by mid-afternoon and spend another night in the cozy Wolverine Cabin to maximize our chances of spotting and enjoying more this incredible mythical creature—as well as any other exciting wildlife. The blind baits can also attract Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Magpie, Common Gull, Hooded Crow and Great Tits and we have previously observed Northern Goshawk, Eurasian Sparrowhawk and Common Buzzard and a variety of song birds too.

NIGHT: Hotel Puustelli, Lieksa / Wolverine blind

A charming European Red Squirrel © Andrew Whittaker

May 16, Day 5: Lieksa to Viiksimo and Drive to Boreal Wildlife Centre and Enter Brown Bear Blind

After returning to the hotel this morning for breakfast, we will continue our mammal quest, driving north through the taiga, keeping our eyes open for Moose or Wild Forest Reindeer and possibly our first roadside Western Capercaillies or Black Grouse en route. The Boreal Wildlife Centre is situated between the Gulf of Bothnia and the White Sea, close to the Russian border in Viiksimo, Kainuu a very remote region. We will have rooms at Boreal Wildlife Centre, which used to be a border patrol station. This lodge is very nice and comfortable—each block has two bedrooms with a shared toilet and shower facilities— and serves as our base for the next two nights. Here we really are in the middle of Finnish wilderness! The viewing hides themselves are situated close-by in the Finnish-Russian border zone. After an early scrumptious afternoon meal, we will depart for the bear cabin to begin our encounters with massive wild Brown Bears. The viewing cabin is located on a shallow slope and the feeding point itself is in a boggy depression. The cabin windows give excellent views and are situated at a perfect height. There are also openings for camera lenses below the height of the viewing windows. The cabin is excellent for general views of bears and for obtaining photos and videos of the animals with their natural habitat in the background.

We will spend the night in the blind, which has bunk beds with sleeping bags for those who wish to rest during the night, and there are dry toilets. Earplugs recommended for light sleepers. Again, goodies/snacks and hot drinks for the night are provided. At the hides, the baits usually attract Common Raven, Hooded Crow, Black-headed, Common Gull, Eurasian Herring Gull, Baltic (Lesser Black-backed) Gulls and often our first White-tailed Eagles and Black Kites. We overlook pools with some ducks or geese and shorebirds such as Ruff, Wood Sandpiper or Spotted Redshank. In addition, even Wolverine visit this site occasionally and we have even heard Wolves, which rarely visit too.

NIGHT: Boreal Wildlife Centre, Kuhmo / Bear blind

May 17, Day 6: Boreal Wildlife Centre and Bear Blind

Early morning we are often wakened by the sounds of lekking Black Grouse males in the meadow. We return this morning at 8 am to the wildlife center for cooked hot breakfast and enjoy time off for a

proper rest—or if you can't get enough, some local general forest birding. In the surrounding forests we could encounter Western Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Hazel Grouse, and some more common forest birds such as European Pied Flycatcher (nesting in boxes), Great Spotted Woodpecker, Western House Martin, Tree Pipit, Common Redstart, Redwing, Fieldfare, White Wagtail, Eurasian Bullfinch, Brambling, Eurasian Siskin, Common Redpoll, and red and Parrot crossbills. This area also has a population of Wild Forest Reindeer. Sometimes colorful Bohemian Waxwings are even found in the garden's trees!

European Brown Bear taking a close look outside the blind © Finnature

In the early afternoon we will depart for the Bear cabin for our final night in this magnificent Finnish wilderness, enjoying another night with the exciting bears and other wildlife at the blind.

NIGHT: Boreal Wildlife Centre, Kuhmo / Bear blind

May 18-19, Days 7-8: Driving to Oulu for Overnight or Departure for Home

We will return from the bear blind this morning to the comfortable wildlife centre for a full breakfast, after which, we'll pack up and drive to Oulu for the start of the main tour. We plan to arrive midafternoon with time for you to explore right behind the hotel the rich bay and marshes on the nature trail. Meeting the rest of the group that are only on the main tour at dinner this evening at the hotel restaurant. For anyone not continuing on the main tour, we suggest a late afternoon departure

on Finnair to Helsinki, spending the night in a Helsinki airport-area hotel and departing for home on a morning flight on May 19. Upon request, VENT will be happy to assist with any additional lodging arrangements.

NIGHT: Lapland Hotel Oulu, Oulu (or afternoon flight to Helsinki if not continuing to the main tour.

ESSENTIAL TOUR INFORMATION

TOUR SIZE: The main tour and pre-trip will be limited to 9 participants.

TOUR LEADER: The main tour will be led by **Andy Whittaker**. The pre-trip will be led by local leader **Pirita Latja.**

Andrew "Andy" Whittaker, a senior member of the VENT team, is a world-class ornithologist and naturalist whose passion for birds began at age 7 in the United Kingdom. Now based in Brazil, Andy has spent more than 30 years exploring the planet's most diverse habitats and leading VENT tours since 1993 across South and Central America, Antarctica, Africa, Europe, and Asia. In 2024 alone, he showed participants over 2,000 bird species—an extraordinary achievement reflecting his deep expertise and contagious enthusiasm.

Andy is widely regarded as an authority on Amazonian birds, with numerous scientific publications to his name. His work with the Smithsonian Institution in Manaus and later as an associate researcher at the Goeldi Museum in Belém has contributed to the discovery of several new species, including the Cryptic Forest-Falcon, and the rediscovery of the White-tailed Tityra once thought extinct. His renowned ear for bird vocalizations and over 800 hours of sound recordings now housed in the British Library Sound Archive highlight his lifelong dedication to the field.

Andy's passion for wildlife extends beyond birds to orchids, mammals, and ecology. Residing near Porto Alegre with his partner, Jaqueline, he continues to guide, research, and coauthor a forthcoming field guide to the birds of Brazil.

Pirita Latja has spent nearly 15 years guiding birdwatching and photography tours, bringing together a lifelong passion for birds and a deep understanding of the natural world. She holds a Ph.D. in Ecology, and her research took her to the heart of Africa, adding valuable scientific perspective to her work in the field. Her connection to birds began in childhood under the guidance of her father, Ari Latja, a longtime Finnature guide. Since then, birds and nature have remained at the center of her life. Known for her thoughtful approach and engaging style, Pirita helps travelers gain a deeper appreciation of wildlife, ecosystems, and the landscapes they explore.

TOUR COSTS & PAYMENT INFORMATION

TOUR FEE: The fee for the main tour is **$ $13,125** per person in double occupancy from Oulu (tour ends in Helsinki). or **$14,250** for a person requiring single accommodation. This includes all meals from lunch on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 17. The fee for the pre-trip is **$6,175** per person in double occupancy from Joensuu (tour ends in Oulu) or **$6,540** for a person requiring single accommodations**.** This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 7. Both tours include accommodation as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation during the tour, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. The cost of the internal commercial Finnair flight from Ivalo to Helsinki is included in the tour fee. The tour fee does not include airfare from your home to Oulu for the main tour (to Joensuu for the pre-trip) and return from Helsinki on the main tour (return from Oulu if only on the pre-trip); (see AIR INFORMATION below), airport alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: You may register for this tour through the VENT website or by calling our office (512-328-5221). The initial deposit for this tour is **$1,000** per person. At 180 days VENT will collect a second deposit that brings the total deposit amount to 40% of the tour price. We accept MasterCard and Visa for both deposits.

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour

fee is due 120 days (January 17, 2027 for the main tour and January 12, 2027 for the pre-trip) prior to the tour departure date.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: If you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay in Ghana, please contact the VENT office at least two months before your departure date. We can easily make hotel arrangements, often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TIPPING: An important part of the value of a VENT tour is knowing that tips for local service providers at our destinations—restaurant staff, hotel staff, drivers, local guides, and various other support staff—are included in your tour fee. If you would like to offer any of your local guides an additional tip, $5 to $10 a day is a common amount.

Tips for your VENT tour leader(s) are **not** included, but it is customary to tip one or both if you feel that you have received exceptional service. To assist in your planning, we recommend tipping your VENT tour leader(s) $15 to $20 per day, or the equivalent of approximately 2–4% of the tour fee.

If you plan to give tips by cash, they should be given directly to your tour leader at the end of the tour and **not** sent to the VENT office. Some of our tour leaders use mobile payment applications such as Venmo, PayPal, and Wise. If you would like to use this method, please ask your tour leaders directly whether they can accept tips through such an application.

We emphasize that tipping is optional and that these amounts are only recommendations. The amount you decide to tip is based entirely on your experience and at your discretion.

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS

CANCELLATION BY PARTICIPANT on the main tour:

- **More than 120 days prior to the tour start date:** A refund of all monies paid will be issued, less 50% of the deposit (including initial and second deposit)
- **120 days or fewer prior to the tour start date:** No refund will be provided.
- **Optional add-ons:** Some tours offer optional add-ons that are designated as non-refundable. Any such add-ons are clearly identified as non-refundable at the time of booking. By selecting and purchasing an optional add-on, the participant acknowledges and accepts its non-refundable status. Fees paid for non-refundable add-ons are not refundable under any circumstances, regardless of when the tour is cancelled.

This cancellation policy applies to all participants and all tours (Pre-Tours and Extensions are considered self-contained tours separate from the main tour). Because unexpected events can occur, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance.

For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.

CANCELLATION BY PARTICIPANT on Pre-tour:

- **More than 120 days prior to the tour start date:** A refund of all monies paid will be issued, less 50% of the deposit (including initial and second deposit)
- **120 days or fewer prior to the tour start date:** No refund will be provided.
- **Optional add-ons:** Some tours offer optional add-ons that are designated as non-refundable. Any such add-ons are clearly identified as non-refundable at the time of booking. By selecting and purchasing an optional add-on, the participant acknowledges and accepts its non-refundable status. Fees paid for non-refundable add-ons are not refundable under any circumstances, regardless of when the tour is cancelled.

This cancellation policy applies to all participants and all tours (Pre-Tours and Extensions are considered self-contained tours separate from the main tour). Because unexpected events can occur, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance.

CANCELLATION BY VENT:

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant.

If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A "***Force Majeure***" event means any act beyond VENT's control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of $50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

MEDICAL EVACUATION INSURANCE/PROTECTION REQUIREMENT: This tour visits remote locations where immediate access to primary medical care may not be available. **For this reason, travel insurance/travel protection which covers you for emergency evacuation is required for participation**

on this tour. This coverage is included in the **Ripcord Rescue Travel Insurance™** program. Alternatively, comparable service can be obtained through **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist** plan. If you choose not to purchase insurance/travel protection through Ripcord or Medjet, you are required to obtain it through another provider. Please refer to the TRAVEL INSURANCE/TRAVEL PROTECTION section for additional information.

SUGGESTED OPTIONS: To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with **Redpoint Travel Protection** as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its comprehensive **Ripcord** plan, which includes a medical evacuation benefit**.** With this in mind, it is important to note that medical evacuation is not offered by Redpoint as a stand-alone policy or benefit. For travelers not interested in comprehensive travel insurance, VENT recommends **Medjet** and its **MedjetAssist®** plan. Medjet is not an insurance company, and Medjet Assist is not an insurance product; rather, Medjet is a membership-based air-medical transport company specializing in moving hospitalized travelers from an admitting hospital to a medical facility of choice. Medjet does not provide medical evacuation service from the point of injury or illness; yet, the MedjetAssist plan offers robust enough travel protection to satisfy the medical evacuation insurance requirement in place for many VENT tours.

About Redpoint Travel's Ripcord Plan

Ripcord is a completely integrated travel insurance program with single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims. Critical benefits include comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice; medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a "Cancel for Any Reason" benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.*

For a price quote or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: **Ripcord Travel Insurance;** or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help > Preparation and Insurance > Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, second deposit, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The "pay as you go" approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to "pay as you go," you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip costs in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage.

Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a Coronavirus FAQ page on its website that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics.

About Medjet's MedjetAssist Plan

MedjetAssist is a membership program that functions like AAA for motorists. The company's primary service is air medical transport. Critical benefits of MedjetAssist include a staff on call and ready to provide assistance 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; all-expenses-paid air medical transport in the United States and internationally to medical facility of choice, regardless of medical necessity; repatriation of remains; and no exclusions for pre-existing conditions.

For travelers under 75, MedjetAssist may be purchased as Short-Term Memberships of 8, 15, 21, and 30 days, or Regular Annual Memberships from 1 to 5 years. For travelers 75–84, Medjet offers a Diamond Membership that is the same program but with a few additional conditions.

For a price quote or to purchase MedjetAssist, please visit: Medjet.com/VentBird or call 1-800-527-7478. Pricing is based on type and term of membership.

GETTING THERE & REQUIRED TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

AIR TRAVEL: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: $50 domestic; $75 international.* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. **Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.**

*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

Please note that the cost for internal commercial Finnair flight from Rovaniemi Airport to Helsinki (see May 29, Day 14) is included in the tour fee.

BAGGAGE: Please limit baggage to one piece of luggage and one carry-on. The airlines now strictly enforce baggage regulations. Excess baggage charges, which can be substantial, are the personal responsibility of each participant. Please consult your pre-departure materials and/or airline to find out specific weight restrictions.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack a change of clothes, toiletries, medications, important travel documents, optics, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Due to ever-changing circumstances in the government's attempts to improve airport security, we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for information pertaining to permissible carry-on items: http://www.tsa.gov/travelers/airtravel/prohibited/permitted-prohibited-items.shtm.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS

PASSPORTS: A passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure is recommended for entering Finland and Norway. Visas are not required for entry by United States citizens for Finland or Norway. Non-United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions.

CLOTHING: Please bring lightweight, layered clothing to allow for all eventualities of temperature, wind, and precipitation. Gore-Tex, fleeces, thermal underwear and windproof/waterproof outer clothing are advised. Remember that dark-browns, dark-blues and dark-greens are less likely to startle birds and mammals and are the preferred colors for all birding. **PLEASE kindly, no bright colors or loud, crackling plastics.** Dress is casual throughout. Keep in mind that most hotels on this tour do not provide laundry service.

You should bring water-resistant hiking boots or hiking shoes with rugged soles—tennis shoes are NOT sufficient for this trip. The sun will shine, so a sunhat with a good rim or cap, sunglasses and sunscreen will be essential. Most hotels have saunas and some have swimming facilities, so bring swimwear if interested. A sturdy dark-colored collapsible umbrella may also come in handy. Few European hotels provide face cloths; bring your own if you wish. For the pre-trip, winter sleeping bags are provided in the hides. You may wish to bring a sleeping sack to line the sleeping bag provided in the blinds.

EQUIPMENT: You should pack a pair of binoculars that are in good condition, along with a belt pack or day pack (for carrying books, sunscreen, extra cameras, lenses etc.). As a precaution, it is a good idea to pack your binoculars, a change of clothing, toiletry items, and medications and travel documents in your airline carry-on bag. Your leaders will have two spotting scopes, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so as this is certainly a tour where a scope will be used a great deal. **We encourage you to do so, especially if you wish to Digi scope.**

Binoculars: We strongly recommend good binoculars of at least 8x32, 8x42, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend that you do NOT bring mini-binoculars of any kind. Some people like “minis” because they are small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and very poor light gathering power. Trying to find a bird in your binoculars using minis is like trying to read a book through a keyhole. You will be very frustrated, and even if you do manage to get the bird in your binoculars before it flies, you will have a poor view. You will find that 8x32 or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough.

Spotting Scopes: Your tour leaders will have scopes available for group use throughout the trip, but if you have one and wish to bring it, please feel free to do so.

DESTINATION INFORMATION & LOCAL CONDITIONS

CLIMATE: Early springtime in this region can be temperate to very cold but past tours have found it variable. Some days when even shorts could be used, others full winter clothing! So please be prepared, especially since we will cover such a wide range of latitude, including north of the Arctic Circle (If you've birded the full extent of Alaska from Juneau to Barrow, expect similarly varied conditions.). Hopefully much of the time will be clear and sunny with temperatures in the mid-60s to mid-70s. However, be prepared for clouds, wind, some rain and temperatures down to the low 40s (or lower with wind chill) in the far north with even the possibility of snow.

CURRENCY: Each country has its own currency. Finland uses the Euro, while Norway's currency is the Norwegian Krone. Each has different values compared to the US dollar. Credit cards are widely accepted and ATMs are available to obtain local currency.

DIFFICULTY: For the main tour, one or two longer walks (1-2 miles) up slight inclines may be needed in order to see specific birds. Some days will start early (5:00-6:00 a.m.) and other days we will stay out late (11:00 p.m. -12:00 midnight), but long midday breaks will be provided on these days.

On the pre-trip there are short and easy walks involved in getting in to the blinds. We will spend many hours in these blinds—but it is possible to stretch your legs and even sleep in the blinds, so it is fairly comfortable to stay overnight. Basic dry toilets are available, but there is no running water in the blinds. Wool socks are suggested as the nights may be cold, and the floors may be a bit drafty.

MISC:

- **Electricity** – 220 volts; European style 2-pin plugs are standard throughout
- **Time** – Finland and Norway are 1 hour different from each other. We will be between 6-7 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time.
- **Language** – Each country has its own language: Finnish and Norwegian. English is widely spoken in both countries.
- **Laundry** – Most hotels on this tour do not provide laundry service.

INTERNET: All the hotels have internet connection available. Internet connection might be slow or missing in wolverine / bear blinds.

HEALTH & SAFETY

HEALTH: There are no required immunizations for this tour. There is a generally high standard of hygiene in Scandinavia and we should be generally safe from stomach upsets, but bring a preferred remedy plus general first aid items, just in case. Water is safe to drink.

VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

COVID-19: We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying "Up to Date" with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance for avoiding COVID-19.

INSECT REPELLENTS: There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- **DEET** (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations

including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.

- **Picaridin:** A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- **Herbal insect repellents:** Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

Insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- **Permanone®** (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- **Insect Shield® apparel**: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta Georgia. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line at 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636), or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

SUGGESTED READING & TRIP PREPARATION

A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend **www.amazon.com** which has a wide selection; **www.buteobooks.com** and **www.nhbs.com** which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and **www.abebooks.com** for out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

FIELD GUIDES:

Birds:

Svenson, Mullarney, Zetterstrom & Grant. *Collins Bird Guide: The Most Complete Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe.* Second edition, 2009. This field guide has received excellent reviews for its identification detail and illustrations. The most updated & highly recommended! It is also available as an App for mobile phones. App edition produced in partnership by: Nature Guides, William Collins, Bonnier Fakta and Gyldendal.

***Mammals*:**

MacDonald, David and Priscilla Barrett. *Mammals of Europe.* Princeton Field Guides. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Barret, Pricilla & David Macdonald. *Mammals of Britain and Europe.* Collins Field Guide, 1993.

Shirihai, Hadoram & Brett Jarrett. *Whales, Dolphins and Seals: A Field Guide to the Marine Mammals of the World.* Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2019.

***Butterflies*:**

Tolman, Tom. *Butterflies of Europe.* Princeton Field Guides. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.

***Botany*:**

Fitters & Marjorie Blamey. *The Illustrated Flora of Britain and Northern Europe.* Collins Hand Guide, 1985.

***General Reading*:**

Chester, Sharon. *The Arctic Guide - Wildlife of the Far North.* Princeton Field Guides. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Excellent all-around book for naturalists.

Bird Voices:

Sample, Geoff. *Collins Field Guide: Bird Songs and Calls of Britain and Northern Europe.* 1996.

Kettle, Ron and Richard Ranft. *British Bird Sounds on CD: The Definitive Audio Guide to Birds in Britain.* British Library, 2006.

TERMS, CONDITIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, "***VENT***") act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e. railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on July 22, 2026, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant's Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

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06/08/23 - AW

07/22/27 - PN/SB