

Arctic Odyssey

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Every year, I make a foreign trip to allow me to enjoy my passion, nature photography. With two small children, long-haul trips are a thing of the past, but Europe is within my reach!

The trips of the last few years were disappointing. I went to Finland in the summer of 1999 and came back with just two rolls of exposed film. My excursion to Scotland last year was hampered by wet weather, so not much joy there either.

So where to go this time?

Years ago I read a book by Hannu Hautala, a world famous Finnish nature photographer, called "A Year in Kuusamo". It remains one of the best nature photography books I have ever read! I had always dreamt of going to Finland in the winter but somehow I had never got around to doing it.

This year was going to be different. Jarri Peltomakki sent me an itinerary for a one-week trip. I couldn't resist - I would finally go to Finland in winter.

Finland is flanked by Norway and Russia and is not called The Land of the Thousand Lakes for no reason. Winters are harsh with temperatures often below 15 degrees Celsius during the day. There are not many birds around as the majority of them migrate south, but the resident birds and fantastic scenery make it worth the trip. I was first going to Oulu, roughly 150 miles south of the Arctic Circle, and after four days we would drive 150 miles inland to the east to the Russian border and a place called Kuusamo.

I flew from London to Helsinki, and then onto Oulu, where I was greeted by Jarri. The cold took me by surprise, even knowing what temperatures could be. But the skies were blue and I was praying it would stay like this for the rest of the week. I spent an enjoyable first evening at Jarri's house, planning the week ahead.

The next day Jarri arrived early at the hotel to pick me up. The goal for the day, moose, not an easy task, as they aren't very mobile in winter. We not only managed to spot a few but I got some good shots as well. Later we moved on to one of his feeders, where we took good pictures of redpoll, yellowhammer and various tit species. The weather was beautiful but it remained very cold!

The next day we tried for Pygmy owl. He wanted to lure the owl with a tape and, after a while, it worked. The owl was perched on top of a fir tree, but it was too far away to take any decent pictures. We moved on to the "forest feeder" in Liminka, one of the best places to photograph the small forest birds.

Jarri had created a beautiful feeding place on the edge of a forest. We'd erected cotton hides the day before so the birds would be accustomed to them. The light was brilliant. Once we had positioned ourselves in the hides, the birds appeared; willow tit, bullfinch, crested tit and many more made a regular appearance. The cold was like nothing I had never experienced before but what a magical place and great for pictures!

On Wednesday we moved to Kuusamo, a three-hour drive from Oulu. Kuusamo is a skiing resort 15 miles from the Russian border and one of the most beautiful places in Finland. We arrived late in the afternoon, unpacked and went straight off to meet Paavo Hamunen, a professional nature photographer whom I had met some years before. He was going to join us for the next few days on our photo tours in the Kuusamo area.

The next day saw us setting off for the Kiveskoski rapids, known for the large number of dippers during the winter, as the water doesn't freeze up. When we arrived we could see them gathered on both sides of the rapids. Photographing them not so easy at first. We had to work our way through knee-deep snow but eventually we managed to get really close to these handsome birds and took many pictures!



We spent most of the day outside and the cold was starting to get to me. Temperatures were between minus 15 and 20 degrees Celsius. Paavo got a good fire going so we could warm-up a bit. What a fantastic day!

The next day we went to Ruka to take pictures of snow-laden fir trees. The weather was again brilliant and it was an impressive sight, all those trees heavy with snow. We went on our way to Olanka National Park. We were going to spend some time at Paavo Hamunen's and Hannu Hautala's feeder, a very reliable place to take pictures of Siberian Tit and Siberian jay. The feeder was placed on the edge of a ridge, so we needed to be very careful not to slip.

The Siberian Tits are very fine birds and can be very tame. On several occasions they were sitting on my hat! The Siberian jays only appeared once but I managed to take some good pictures of them. Again it was very cold and we were glad when Jarri came to pick us up.

In the evening we visited Hannu Hautala, probably the most famous of all Finnish nature photographers. He has had a lot of work published and has produced many coffee table books. He showed us work for his forthcoming book and stunning it was. As was Paavo Hamunen's who also showed us some of his work.

The next day we went to visit an area where Great Grey Owls were spotted, but despite Jarri's sterling efforts, we couldn't find any. Jarri suggested another feeder in the area. I unpacked my gear and Jarri took his 4-wheel drive to scan the area for them. When he came back in five minutes, I thought he'd found them but instead he had spotted 3 hazel grouse along the road.



Hazel grouse are very elusive and secretive birds. Believe me, taking their pictures is very difficult but this time I got lucky! The birds were feeding in a birch tree and I was able to take great shots with splendid backlighting!

On the way back to the hotel I also managed to take pictures of Capercaillie. We also visited the local dump and photographed raven in the ubiquitous snow-laden trees. There were more than a 100 ravens and hooded crows.

My holiday was coming to an end and the next day Jarri took me to the airport. It was a great experience and the realisation of hopes for a great holiday. I had been able to see for myself the scenes from Hannu Hautala's book and the experience I had will always stay with me - good pictures and a helpful and companionable guide in the form of Jarri Peltomakki.

Logistics

FinnAir flies daily from London Heathrow to Helsinki. There are frequent daily flights to Oulu and Kuusamo. The cost of a return London-Helsinki-Oulu is £ 330 at the moment. Accommodation was in good hotels. Expect to pay £35 a night including breakfast. Meals will cost £ 15 and a beer, £3.

We were using a four-wheel drive Nissan and without a guide, in my case, Jarri, finding the birds would be virtually impossible. Jarri will run 2 to 3 one-week winter tours in 2002. Anyone who is interested can [contact me](#). These tours are limited to 3-4 photographers.

Equipment

During this trip I used the following equipment:

- Canon EOS 1 VHS
- Canon EOS 3
- Canon 4.0/500 IS
- Canon 4.0/100-400 IS
- Tokina 2.8/20-35
- Converters
- Gitzo 1325 Carbon fibre tripod
- Arca B1 QR
- Fuji Sensia II
- Fuji Provia 100F

- Fuji Velvia
- Lithium batteries

I used 30 rolls of film. Temperatures were very low but I encountered no problems with the cameras and I didn't have to replace the lithium batteries for the whole week. The only minor problem was the freezing up of the back of the EOS1VHS.

I was lucky; the weather was sunny for the whole week. This is exceptional. Expect a mixture of snow and sun at this time of the year. There are about 8 photography hours a day.

Clothing is very important. Layer system works well but it's very difficult to keep your hands and feet warm after a long time in the field!

With so much snow around you constantly need to adjust the exposure. I used centre weighted averaging metering on both cameras compensating from anything between plus 1 and 2. This depended on the light conditions. I always use aperture priority.

Editor's Note - Visit Rene's web site at www.naturepics.co.uk to view more of his work.

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