

# *The FOX SPARROW twitch in Finland*

*25<sup>th</sup> - 28<sup>th</sup> January 2013*



*Fox Sparrow – Bruant fauve – Passerella i. iliaca – Utö – Finland – 27-01-2013 – Kris de Rouck*

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**A trip experienced with** : Kris DE ROUCK – Lint (Belgium)

**25<sup>th</sup> January 2013** : Lufthansa flights from Brussels to München and from München to Helsinki (305,80 euros). Arrival at 18.55 at Helsinki airport where the T° was – 7°C and the snow was everywhere. Clear sky. We hired a Smart For Two with Sixt for 140 euros for three days including an insurance. Drove to Espoo where we slept for 89 € for a double room breakfast included at Hotel Kuninkaantie. A late meal here cost us 23 euros per person.

**26<sup>th</sup> January 2013** : We met Hannu Palojärvi at dawn at 08.00 for seeing a Black-throated Thrush that had unfortunately left its favored feeders and an extraordinarily tame Capercaillie that was still there in the city itself ! At 09.00 we said farewell to the Caper and to Hannu and promised to meet him on Corvo this autumn, then we hit the road again. We drove to Pärnäs to catch our ferry to the island of Utö that departed on time at 13.15. The drive to Pärnäs took a little more than three hours on icy roads for the last portion which was not on motorways. Driving with our extra-small hired Smart car was sometimes a little uncomfortable (for me) because the tyres had no studs. Arrived at Utö at 17.45. The whole ferry trip was fantastic with immaculate white landscapes all over the inshore areas of the Baltic Sea and its uncountable islands separated by frozen inlets. A few White-tailed Eagles enlivened the trip. The ferry had to break the ice during 02h30 to reach free water further out at sea : a really memorable experience ! At 18.00 we settled at the only hotel of Utö, the comfortable Havshotel.

**27<sup>th</sup> January 2013** : At 08.30 we met a Finnish birder (Kimmo) at the hotel who showed us the favorite spots used for feeding by our target bird, the Fox Sparrow. The weather today was not as good as yesterday with a cloudy, sometimes dark, sky and a strong, cold wind blowing from the south. Kris found the Fox Sparrow around 09.00 and from this time until 15.30 we could watch and photograph it frequently as it commuted between two gardens with feeders that it was sharing with Great and Blue Tits, a bunch of 20 Mealy Redpolls and a few Blackbirds. The feeding area of the birds was fortunately situated in the sheltered central part of tiny Utö, ensuring that we did not become totally frozen after a few hours ! The whole day was actually fantastic in such a remote and quiet place, with unforgettable views of the Fox Sparrow being obtained on numerous occasions amongst 23 species recorded on and around Utö. In the evening we had our second good meal at the hotel to celebrate our success and we paid our bill (80 euros per night for the room and about 30 euros for a meal) before going to bed.

**28<sup>th</sup> January 2013** : We woke up at 04.45 to catch our ferry at 05.30. This time the ferry trip was mostly used to recuperate from the early wake-up. The weather was deteriorating, the snow now falling constantly. We were back at Pärnäs at 10.00 and sure enough we were again contemplating the male Capercaillie on a thicker layer of snow in the same amazing (for a Capercaillie !) setting at Espoo around 14.00. At 14.30 we left him in peace and we drove back to Helsinki airport where we brought back our hired Smart at 14.55. We were back at Brussels at 20.15 with a lay-over at Stockholm, both flights being operated by SAS.

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## **BIRDLIST**

- 1. Great Cormorant - Grand Cormoran – *Phalacrocorax carbo* :**  
1 or 2 ex. at sea off Utö.
  
- 2. Mute Swan - Cygne tuberculé – *Cygnus olor* :**  
A few during the ferry crossing to Utö and a group of 40 ex. at sea near Utö.
  
- 3. Mallard - Canard colvert – *Anas platyrhynchos* :**  
A few in the Pärnäs area and a gathering of c.100 ex. on the frozen bay near Utö.
  
- 4. Tufted Duck - Fuligule morillon – *Aythya fuligula* :**  
A group of 12 ex. in the bay near Utö.
  
- 5. Goldeneye - Garrot à œil d’or – *Bucephala clangula* :**  
A gathering of at least **400** ex. in the bay near Utö.
  
- 6. Smew - Harle piette – *Mergellus albellus* :**  
At least 5 ex. (3 males and 2 females) in the bay near Utö.
  
- 7. Common Merganser - Harle bièvre – *Mergus merganser* :**  
At least 12 ex. at Pärnäs and at least 15 ex. in the bay near Utö.
  
- 8. Red-breasted Merganser - Harle huppé – *Mergus serrator* :**  
At least 5 ex. with the Goldeneyes in the bay near Utö.

### **9. Capercaillie - Grand Tétras – *Tetrao urogallus* :**

Having dipped the Black-throated Thrush that had not been reported for five days in Espoo, twitching a tame Capercaillie not far from there seemed to be a good idea on Saturday morning ! So there we went to “Alaportti”, in good company of Hannu. We were not prepared for what we were soon to discover : a male Capercaillie indeed, but in the middle of the city in a small children’s playground ! Tame it was indeed, seemingly totally unconcerned by our presence. We could barely believe what we were watching : such a huge and brightly colored bird that is normally a shy deep forest inhabitant here in a completely man-made environment ! The story has it that the bird had been there for a while and was apparently considered scary by children ! The police was called and they caught the bird (probably rather easily) and brought him back to a forest but two days later he was back there ... On our second visit on Monday, some people seemed to be rather annoyed that we were photographing the bird from such a close distance. They were thinking that we were disturbing him but the Caper again did not pay any attention to us. Simply amazing !! There will probably never be a better Capercaillie !









**Capercaillie – Grand Tétrás – Tetrao u. urogallus – Espoo (Alaportti) – Finland – 28-01-2013  
– Kris de Rouck (2) & Hugues Dufourny (1, 3-7)**

**10. White-tailed Eagle - Pygargue à queue blanche – *Haliaeetus albicilla* :**

5 ex. in total : 1 immature flying near the ferry departure at Pärnäs, 3 ex. (2 adults + 1 immature) during the ferry crossing to Utö and 1 superb adult seen very well flying near Utö. Obviously not rare around here !

**11. Great Black-backed Gull - Goéland marin – *Larus marinus*:**

A few individuals during the ferry crossing and 1 adult near Utö.



**Great Black-backed Gull – Goéland marin – *Larus marinus* – Ferry to Utö – Finland – 26-01-2013 – Hugues Dufourny**

**12. Herring Gull - Goéland argenté – *Larus argentatus* :**

A few individuals during the ferry crossing and near Utö.

**13. Common Gull - Goéland cendré – *Larus canus* :**

A few individuals during the ferry crossing to Utö and a gathering of c.100 ex. in the frozen bay near the island.

**14. Great Spotted Woodpecker - Pic épeiche – *Dendrocopos major* :**

1 ex. on Utö.

**15. Rock Pipit - Pipit maritime – *Anthus petrosus* :**

Heard several times and 1 ex. seen in flight on Utö.



**16. Bohemian Waxwing - Jaseur boréal – Bombycilla garrulus :**

A group of 4 ex. flew over Utö but we were surprised not to see a single bird during the 526 km. that we drove elsewhere in southern Finland !

**17. Eurasian Blackbird - Merle noir – Turdus merula :**

At least 5 ex. at the Black-throated Thrush site in Espoo and about the same number on Utö.

**18. European Robin - Rougegorge familier – Erithacus rubecula :**

1 ex. seen only by Kris on Utö. A birder told us that the species is rather rare here during the midwinter period.

**19. Great Tit - Mésange charbonnière – Parus major :**

Numerous at feeders on Utö.

**20. Blue Tit - Mésange bleue – Parus caeruleus :**

Numerous at feeders on Utö.

**21. Long-tailed Tit - Mésange à longue queue – Aegithalos caudatus :**

A group of 4 ex. flew before our car during the icy drive between the motorway and Pärnäs.

**22. Common Raven - Grand Corbeau – Corvus corax :**

Pairs and singletons were seen regularly during the driving periods and at least one pair was also seen patrolling Utö regularly.

**23. Hooded Crow - Corneille mantelée – Corvus cornix :**

Common between Espoo and Pärnäs on 26-01 but only a few seen on 28-01, seemingly much less obvious because of the snow !

**24. Jackdaw - Choucas des tours – Corvus monedula :**

A few individuals between Espoo and Pärnäs on 26-01.

**25. Magpie - Pie bavarde – Pica pica :**

Common between Espoo and Pärnäs on 26-01 but only a few seen on 28-01, seemingly much less obvious because of the snow !

**26. House Sparrow - Moineau domestique – Passer domesticus :**

About 10 extremely confiding birds at the Capercaillie site in Espoo.

**27. Tree Sparrow - Moineau friquet – *Passer montanus* :**

1 ex. at the Black-throated Thrush site in Espoo and 1 ex. on Utö.

**28. Eurasian Bullfinch - Bouvreuil pivoine – *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* :**

One male at the ferry departure at Pärnäs.

**29. European Greenfinch - Verdier d'Europe – *Carduelis chloris* :**

One pair at Pärnäs, a group of 6 ex. between Pärnäs and the motorway and 10 ex. at the Capercaillie site in Espoo.

**30. Mealy Redpoll - Sizerin flammé – *Carduelis flammea* :**

A group of at least 20 extremely confiding individuals were ranging all over Utö, commuting between all the feeding sites. These birds offered excellent opportunities to study the individual variations of this species which irregularly wanders to Western Europe, but seemingly not during this winter so this was a nice chance to see it this year.





*Mealy Redpoll – Sizerin flammé – Carduelis flammea – Utö – Finland – 27-01-2013 – Kris de Rouck (1 & 2)*

**31. Fox Sparrow - Bruant fauve – *Passerella iliaca* :**



A Fox Sparrow discovered in western Estonia at the beginning of December 2012 had prompted us to book a flight to Tallinn. As a first Estonian record and only a third for the Western Palearctic region, this was obviously a not-to-be-missed mega and most of the top WP-listers indeed went to see it in Estonia very quickly !! But two days after we had

booked our flight, the bird left its Estonian stop-over and, incredibly, was almost immediately rediscovered in south-western Finland on the remote tiny island of Utö, challenging any law of probability ! That situation left us in deep trouble : what should we do ? Forget it or try to book a new flight to Finland ?

After seeing almost daily, tantalizing news of its continued presence on Utö we could not stand it any longer and we decided to book a flight to Helsinki ! Until 09.00 on Sunday 27-01 we were not sure that this was the wise thing to do since there had been no report of the bird since Sunday 20-01, most interested birders having already seen it either here on in Estonia ! However, we had received a very mood-lifting sms from Markku Santamaa on Saturday morning to inform us that the bird had been seen by Seppo Haavisto. Seppo confirmed the big news when we met him as he was disembarking from the ferry at Pärnäs. So it seemed that luck was finally with us after almost two months of waiting ! And indeed suddenly there it was as Kris found it rather well hidden in a small bush at its favorite feeding site next to Utö only shop. Bingo ! All the time, energy and money was finally well spent to reach Utö for seeing this extremely unexpected vagrant !! As the day progressed, we saw the Fox Sparrow on numerous occasions until 15.30 when the light became too poor. It spent almost all of its time feeding in two gardens in the central part of Utö which was fortunately well sheltered from the cold southern wind. With its grey head and mostly brown plumage, this Fox Sparrow of the nominate so-called "Red" subspecies *iliaca* was rather reminiscent of a Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) or even, when seen with the naked eye, of a small Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*) ! Its tail, wings, uppertail-coverts and chevron-shaped markings on the breast and flanks are mostly of a beautiful bright chestnut (or fox) color. Its bill is rather peculiar with a very straight dark culmen but a mostly yellowish lower mandible which is angled upwards, giving the bill an almost upturned shape. Its legs are strong and pink. Its back is grey with dark brown longitudinal stripes. A pale supraloral spot gives the bird a rather open-faced expression. During feeding periods, it was mostly actively picking up seeds on the ground but after a while it would almost always fly into a tree and stay perched unobtrusively for rather long periods during which it could be hard to relocate. Altogether this Fox Sparrow was a truly beautiful bird and certainly worth the considerable effort put into seeing it. This was for both of us the most remote twitch ever, and certainly one of the most complicated to arrange ! We'll never forget it, nor the beautiful location this bird had selected to spend the winter on the wrong side of the Atlantic Ocean !

I also wish to thank here our birding Finnish friends who provided considerable help to us for all the arrangements of the trip, namely Markku Santamaa, Hannu Palojärvi and Seppo Haavisto. It would have been almost impossible without you, guys !! Thanks a lot !!



***Fox Sparrow – Bruant fauve – Passerella iliaca – Utö – Finland – 27-01-2013 – Kris de Rouck (1-3)***





**Utö Impressions – Hugues Dufourny**





Utö Impression – On the way to Utö – Hugues Dufourny

