



Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*. Owls hunting in the open in brilliant sunlight offer great opportunities for photography. This picture is made interesting by the strangely shaped shadow of the owl showing on the snow. Canon 1 D Mark II, 300 mm F2.8, ASA 100, 1/1000, F5, 45 point continuing focus, handheld, stabiliser in use. Liminka, Finland 8 March 2005.

Winter photography in Finland

JARI PELTOMÄKI, TEXT AND PHOTOS

Based on population distribution Finland is the most northerly country in the world. Thanks to the warmth of the Gulf stream it is possible to live quite normally this far north. Nevertheless Finland is part of Siberia in respect to nature and climate. In winter it is often possible to enjoy long, cold winters with stable high pressure prevailing,

because Finland is far enough away from the Atlantic. Feeding and helping birds in winter is common. In rural areas there are feeders in almost every backyard. Many nature photographers and companies offering nature photography have started feeders. Apart from seeds, nuts and fat for songbirds, many also offer large items, including whole pigs. In such cases the target is large wintering

raptors including Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* and White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, as well as Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*. The feeders providing pork in the archipelago started by the WWF White-tailed Sea Eagle group in the 1970s almost certainly saved the bird from extinction and today we can admire this wonderful raptor soaring increasingly often in new locations.



Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*. It is worth putting up suitable trees for the eagles to sit on at the correct distance from the hide. The pine in this picture is natural and a little too far from the hide. Canon 1 D Mark II N, 500 mm F4 + 2 X teleconverter, manual focus, ASA 320, 1/200, F8, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Utajärvi, Finland 25 January 2006.

The taiga forest is covered by snow for much of the winter and for the landscape photographer Kuusamo offers spectacular views. But the forest is rather quiet and only a few species are seen daily. But it is possible to increase this number considerably by visiting a few bird feeders. In winter, the birds minimise their movements and spend all the daylight hours feeding. Feeders offering varied food throughout the winter may be a necessity in the Finnish winter. Therefore, many feeders are also excellent locations for bird photography. A feeder placed in a well-lit corner of the forest makes it possible to photograph birds at least for a few hours daily, even in the darkest period.

Raptors from a hide

In practice the only way to photograph raptors in Finland is from a hide placed

next to a feeder. These formerly-persecuted lords of the skies, nowadays protected, are really shy and photographing them requires staying in the hide for up to 12 hours.

But if you think that staying in a hide in temperatures of -30C degrees is painful you are wrong. These hides, designed for winter use, are well insulated and have heating. Waiting for several hours, if not actually comfortable, is at least quite bearable. The author of this article sleeps soundly in the fresh air of the hide, while waiting for the targets to appear.

When photographing raptors, patience is a virtue, because it is easy to scare off a raptor, which has just landed, by moving the lens. But, for example, when there are a dozen White-tailed Sea Eagles present it seems as if the birds ignore moving lenses. The main rule is to begin carefully in order to enjoy a longer photographic session.

White-tailed Sea Eagles mostly breed in the archipelago of southwestern Finland, the west coast and Lapland in the vicinity of the big dams. Most White-tailed Sea Eagles are present in the archipelago and the west coast from November to March. Dozens of eagles can be present at the same time at the best locations. There are many unringed eagles (which make better photographs) from Russia wintering in Finland. Occasionally White-tailed Sea Eagles visit the northern eagle feeders even in mid winter and more regularly during migration.

Golden Eagles breed mainly in Central and Northern Finland. They visit feeders throughout Finland from October to April. Adult birds are sedentary, so photographing them requires a feeder quite close to the Golden Eagle territory. The Golden Eagles visiting the feeders in southern Finland are mainly wintering juvenile and subadult birds, which



Golden Eagle. In late winter there is plenty of light even to photograph birds in flight. It is necessary to be careful while taking flight photos from the hide and moving the lens, as raptors are shy. Canon I D Mark II, 500 mm F4, 45 one point continuing autofocus, ASA 320, 1/2000, F5.6, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Posio, Finland 15 March 2005.



Golden Eagle. A landing adult has just been stopped by the slow exposure time in the last light of the day at the fox feeder. The snowfall shows nicely in short streaks against the dark background. Canon I D Mark II N, 300 mm F2.8, 45 one point continuing autofocus, ASA 800, 1/125, F2.8, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Utajärvi, Finland 24 January 2006.

often return north as early as February, at the latest in March. In Northern and Central Finland the Golden Eagle photography period is longer and during migration good feeders can be visited by almost a dozen Golden Eagles at a time.

Goshawks also visit eagle feeders occasionally. But often it is necessary to start a Goshawk feeder in the territory in the middle or on the edge of the forest. For some reason Goshawks are more frequent at feeders in the south than further north. They visit feeders throughout the winter from October to March.

Songbirds at feeders

The winter forest does not offer wintering songbirds much to feed on. Many species winter successfully solely on feeder food. Some species, including Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris* and Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* populations have grown due to feeders.

Songbirds, especially tits, quickly get used to the photographer and it is not necessary to use a hide. On the other hand a hide is necessary for photographing woodpeckers and Jays *Garrulus glandarius*. Species visiting the feeders of interest to the photographer include Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*, Yellowhammer

► **Golden Eagle.** Flight photos showing the landscape can also be useful **Canon EOS 5D, 300 mm F2.8, manual focus, ASA 320, 1/2000, F5.6, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Utajärvi, Finland 27 December 2005.**

▼ **Raven *Corvus corax.*** Carrion feeders attract many corvids of different species and from a hide it is possible to photograph the shy Ravens. With the patience to start the photographing carefully, it is possible to see many Raven fights in a day. **Canon 1 D Mark II N, 500 mm F4, 45 one point continuing autofocus, ASA 400, 1/1300, F6.3, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Utajärvi, Finland 6 February 2006.**





White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*. The short days of November and snowless ground; this is the darkest time of the year. Two days in the hide at the eagle feeder produced much material on White-tailed Sea Eagles. The raccoon dog found by the road and now tied in front of the hide inspired the eagles to fierce fights. As the autofocus easily picks up the pale areas I decided to focus manually even in fast situations. Because it is slow to focus manually I lost some good shots, however. Canon I D Mark II, 300 mm F2.8, manual focus, ASA 400, ▲▲ 1/320, F4, ▲ 1/250, F4.5, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Vehmaa, Finland 14 November 2004.

Emberiza citrinella, Crested Tit *Parus cristatus*, Siberian Tit *P. cinctus*, Siberian Jay *Perisoreus infaustus*, Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*, Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*, White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* and Arctic Redpoll *Carduelis hornemanni*. But also many of our most common birds are good targets for photography in the snowy forest.

To Pygmy Owls *Glaucidium passerinum* the songbird feeders are food oases in the wintery landscape. Both small rodents and songbirds attracted to the feeders are suitable food for Pygmy Owls. Often the owls stay longer at the same feeder and collect food items in a nearby nest box or natural hole for an off day. If you manage to find a Pygmy Owl in winter, it will often be quite easily approachable.

Owls are photographed in the fields

The northern owls, Great Grey Owl *Strix nebulosa*, Hawk Owl *Surnia ulula* and

Snowy Owl *Nyctea scandiaca*, are easiest to photograph during the winter in Finland. They sometimes forage openly in daytime in the fields. Often they are quite tame and get used to a visiting photographer quite quickly. The yearly variations in distribution are great, as the owls follow the rodent populations. In some winters there could be half a dozen Great Grey Owls in the same field. Often the owls stay in the same field several weeks and can therefore be quite easily photographed. The Snowy Owls are often found in January and disappear in March. The Great Grey Owls often appear only in late January and disappear into the forests by April. The Hawk Owls can spend the whole winter, from October to April, in their chosen winter territory.

Berry birds in berry winters

Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus* and Pine Grosbeak *Pinicola enucleator* are specialist feeders. In some winters they are only seen briefly during migration, but in good

berry years, they gather in large flocks in urban areas. The photography period lasts from October to February. In poorer berry years the season can be restricted to October – November. The thrushes, especially Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*, Redwing *T. iliacus* and Blackbird *T. merula* can also be regarded as berry birds. Photographing them is easiest from either a car or hide. Vagrants to Finland, including Black-throated Thrush *Turdus atrogularis* or Dusky Thrush *T. naumanni* are sometimes photographed among the berries.

The winter light

A common belief is that because of its northern location Finland is pitch black in winter. However, up to at least the latitude of Oulu it is possible to photograph foraging owls in open areas even at the darkest time of the year in November to December. A songbird feeder placed in the open makes it possible to achieve a wonderful red tone to the photographs from the low sun of the winter's day.



Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*. The female, which has just landed at the feeder, is calling domineeringly as a juvenile Goshawk flies past. The picture was taken from a hide, where I spent all the hours of daylight. The Pheasant was placed and tied down at a suitable distance in the morning in the dark. This created an image of a difficult situation to photograph naturally, a Goshawk killing and eating a Pheasant. Canon 1 D Mark II, 300 mm F2.8 + 1,4 X teleconverter, manual focus, ASA 200, 1/250, F7.1, video-head attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Lohja, Finland 14 February 2005.



Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*. It is worth placing the bird feeder so that the visiting birds can be photographed from a warm car. A bean bag was used to stabilise the lens on the car window. The snowfall shows well against the dark background and shows as long streaks thanks to the long exposure time. Canon EOS 5D, 300 mm F2.8, manual focus, ASA 800, 1/60, F4 stabiliser in use. Liminka, Finland 2 January 2006.

After the shortest day of the year (21 December) the days quickly get longer and in February to March there is plenty

of light on sunny days. The light reflecting from the snowy ground makes it quite possible to photograph birds in flight.

But note that the white snow fools the light meter and it may well be necessary to correct the exposure.

Precipitation in winter is usually in the form of snow creating a wintry atmosphere. In a picture with snowfall, the background should be rather dark in order to make the snow flakes more visible. The snowfall shows as nice streaks in the picture especially with slow exposures (eg 1/60 second).



Great Grey Owl. A dark background and a long exposure time makes the snow show well. The autofocus targets the snowflakes, so it is necessary to focus manually. Canon 1 D Mark II, 300 mm F2.8, ASA 400, 1/125, F10, manual focus, tripod, stabiliser in use. Liminka, Finland 7 March 2005.

Moving around

The roads are often icy and snowy, so a four-wheel drive is recommended. Getting used to driving on icy surface takes time and it is recommended to hire a Finnish guide to do the driving. There is considerable snow in the forests and moving in the deep snow requires snowshoes or skis. Although learning to use these is easy, it is still hard work. Most of the companies offering nature photography have snow scooters, so the hides can be reached without much effort.

Final words

If you have feeders and hides, which you would be willing to rent to foreign clients, contact the author of this article

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▼▼ Siberian Tit *Parus cinctus*. A feeder in the forest can be placed so that it is possible to use the car as a hide. This Siberian Tit, eating snow, was photographed stabilising the camera on a bean bag on the car window. Canon EOS 10D, 300 mm F2.8 + 2 X teleconverter, one point and one shot focus, ASA 200, 1/500, F8, stabiliser in use. Kuusamo, Finland 1 April 2004.

▼ Crested Tit *Parus cristatus*. The January sun, shining low, the colourful pine trunks in the background, and the frosty perch of the bird together create a wintery atmosphere. Photographed without a hide sitting on a chair at the feeder. Canon 1 Ds, 300 mm F2.8, manual focus, ASA 400, 1/100, F7.1, tripod, stabiliser in use. Liminka, Finland 3 January 2004.

► Siberian Jay *Perisoreus infaustus*. Although Siberian Jays, being tame birds, are easy to photograph without a hide, this was taken from an eagle hide, in front of which food for songbirds had also been placed. Canon EOS 10D, 300 mm F2.8, manual focus, ASA 200, 1/350, F6.7, videohead attached to a board in the hide, stabiliser in use. Kuusamo, Finland 31 March 2004.

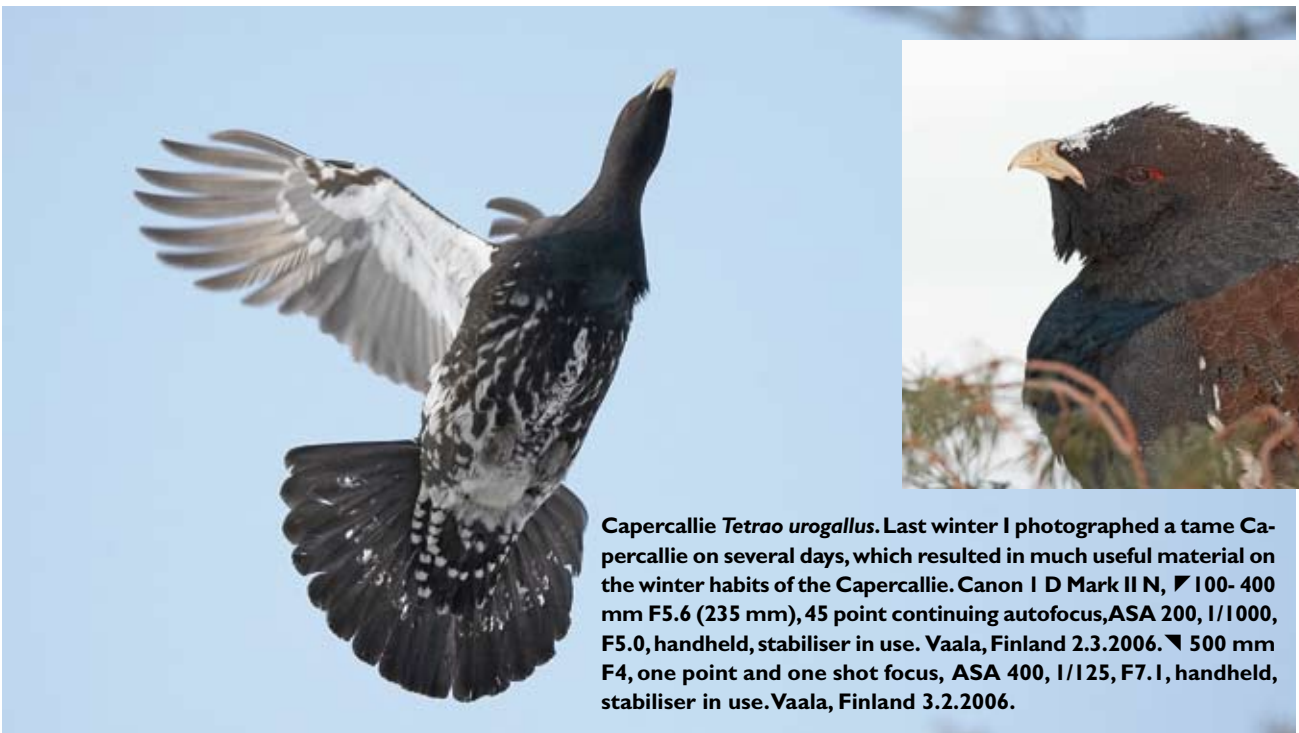




Great Grey Owl. Owls hunt in open fields some winters and can then be very photogenic. Especially if the owls are hungry, an artificial mouse can be used as bait to make them fly at the required distance. Canon I D Mark II, 300 mm F2.8, ASA 200, 1/1000, F8, 45 point continuing autofocus, handheld, stabiliser in use. Liminka, Finland 25.2.2005.



Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum*. Pygmy Owls turn up at bird feeders in winter and can be photogenic. It was possible to approach this owl, since it did not want to leave the prey it had dived into the deep snow after. Canon I D Mark II N, 300 mm F2.8, ASA 500, 1/2000, F4, one point and one shot focus, handheld, stabiliser in use. Vaala, Finland 1.3.2006.



Capercallie Tetrao urogallus. Last winter I photographed a tame Capercallie on several days, which resulted in much useful material on the winter habits of the Capercallie. Canon I D Mark II N, 100- 400 mm F5.6 (235 mm), 45 point continuing autofocus, ASA 200, 1/1000, F5.0, handheld, stabiliser in use. Vaala, Finland 2.3.2006. 500 mm F4, one point and one shot focus, ASA 400, 1/125, F7.1, handheld, stabiliser in use. Vaala, Finland 3.2.2006.