

SWEDEN: ÖLAND PRE-TRIP
to Best of the Baltic Cruise
JUNE 30–JULY 5, 2019



Windmill and Iron Age grave field. Photo Rick Wright

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By Rick Wright

Take Cape May.

Take Cape May and stretch it to a length of 85 miles. Multiply the lighthouses by 5. Divide the crowds by 10. Add hundreds of centuries-old windmills and Iron Age burial grounds and forts. And, of course, don't forget the nearly 400 species of birds.



Ottenby Lund. Photo Rick Wright

The result is Öland, Sweden's island of sun and wind, the perfect place to get our eye and ear in with European birds against the background of a uniquely tranquil and historically rich landscape. Our small, congenial group of VENT friends took every opportunity to enjoy the birding, the scenery, the food, and the simple pleasure of having much of the island to ourselves.

We began at the little airport in Kalmar, a scant hour's flight from Stockholm. The morning's fickle weather—sun, chill, calm, warmth, rain, wind—

persuaded us to undertake some low-key birding in easy reach of the vehicle, and we selected the Southern Cemetery, an atmospheric patch of open woodland on the edge of the sound in the shadow of mighty Kalmar Castle. Colorful Common Redstarts and European Robins welcomed us, while Black-headed and Common gulls massed on the rocks beneath the fortress walls. The birding and the fresh air were as good for the soul as our lunch of traditional kroppkakor was refreshing for the body.

Arriving on Öland, at the eastern end of what was once Europe's longest bridge, we paid our first, brief visits to several of the sites we would return to later in the week, seizing the sunny moments for quick walks on the island's beaches and stony plains, hopping back into the vehicle when the wind grew to be too much or the skies too threatening. We found a pair of Wrynecks industriously feeding young, paced off one of the vast grave fields left by prehistoric seafarers, and picked our way through the flocks of sheep blithely grazing on the narrow road to Sweden's tallest lighthouse. Our own home for the week, the lovely and comfortable Gammalsbygården, was just up the road, and we appreciated the warm welcome as much as the beautiful dinner of salmon and new potatoes that emerged from the kitchen. Our second group, their arrival delayed by air traffic patterns half a world away, wouldn't taste the delights of our hotel's restaurant for another twenty-four hours—but the experience on our way to Gammalsbygården of dining out at a Swedish truck stop surely made up for the wait at least a little bit.

The next morning, the first with our group at full strength, brought fulfillment of half the promise of Öland's slogan: we saw precious little sun, but the winds were out in force as we birded our way north along the island's west coast to Mörbylånga, where a series of disused sugar beet slurry ponds has been turned into a fine little urban wildlife refuge. The wind made passerine birding challenging, but left unperturbed a sleeping pair of Horned Grebes, in the high plumage many of us get to see so rarely. The two families of Red-necked Grebes sharing the next pond were decidedly less pacific: whenever one strayed across some invisible watery line, the neighboring adults attacked, wings half spread and mouths wide open, shouting a challenge that can be compared only to the shrieks of a balky calf. Our lunch was in the pleasant café below the walls of Borgholm, the imposing shell of an almost sublimely huge castle.

The drizzle that had set in while we enjoyed our meal diminished as soon as we were back in the vehicle, and soon enough the sun reappeared, but the winds were more ferocious than ever when we returned to the coast of Kalmar Sound at Beijershamn. An invisible Garden Warbler met us in the parking lot. Out on the narrow beach, large numbers of Northern Lapwings and Barnacle Geese huddled on the rocky shore, and Common Redshank parents anxiously watched their chicks, and us, as we pushed on into the gale. Valiant as we were, we finally had to concede victory to the wind, and moved back south to relatively sheltered Gräsgårdhamn, where we watched breeding-plumaged Ruffs and Wood Sandpipers to our hearts' content, then took a break at our hotel before sitting down to another delicious dinner.

Blue skies and calm air met us on the next morning's return visit to the muddy edges of Gräsgårdhamn. Along with the now familiar Ruffs, Common Ringed Plovers, and Eurasian Oystercatchers, this time Spotted Redshanks, Eurasian Curlews, Common Greenshanks, and a host of waterfowl fed in the shallow water, some close in, others at a distance. It wasn't easy to tear ourselves away from the show, but the promise of equally good birding at Ottenby, on the southernmost tip of Öland, drew us on. The woods at the northern edge of the area were quiet—with the exception of two rambunctious bulls settling some kind of bovine argument—though it was here in these open woods that we saw our only Great Spotted Woodpeckers and (equally great, to my eye at least) Spotted Flycatchers.

The wind had returned by the time we headed for lunch, and no sooner had we taken our seats in the bird observatory's Bluebird Café than the weather turned stormy. But nothing seems to last forever on Öland, at least nothing meteorological, and our exploration of the ancient wall separating the former royal hunting preserve from the island's croplands was beneath clearing skies. A young volunteer led us to the nets and Helgoland traps of the Ottenby bird observatory; European Starlings, an Icterine Warbler, and a surprising Common Swift waited in hand for us there, and we were all impressed by the scientific rigor of the observatory's monitoring of the area's birds.

We celebrated the Fourth of July with a morning return to the mainland, where the ponds and reed beds of the Kalmar Dämme offered up all of the wetland birds we had come to know over the preceding days. Perhaps the most gratifying find of a fine morning was a Common Cuckoo: we had heard several already, but this bird deigned to actually let itself

be seen, flying close down the path as we watched. Never easy, cuckoos can be especially challenging this late in the summer, when their reproductive duties have been faithfully executed (though, not, of course, by themselves). After a good lunch in a huge windmill turned restaurant, we paid another visit to Ottenby, the lighthouse, and the bird observatory. The wind made even the sturdiest of blinds creak and moan, and when rain began to fall, we retreated to the comforts of our hotel and the delights of a final dinner together.

It was hard to leave Öland, its birds and its landscapes, but we knew what awaited us at the end of our quick flight to Stockholm: more birding and more exploration of the culture and nature of the Baltic Sea.

Yes, take Cape May. But leave me Öland, please.

ITINERARY:

June 30: Departures for Kalmar.



Kalmar International Airport. Photo Rick Wright

July 1: Arrivals in Kalmar. First group met at airport at 10:05 am. Continual heavy rain, sprinkles, brief periods of clear blue sky; very windy. Temperatures bouncing from the mid-50s to the high 60s and back. Kalmar South Cemetery, Kalmar Castle. Lunch at Kroppkakan. Halltorps Hage, Möckelmossen, Gräsgårdhamn, Ottenby. At hotel 4:50 pm. Dinner in hotel 6:30 pm. Second group met at airport at 8:15 pm. Dinner at Rasta. At hotel 10:20 pm. Still windy, partly

cloudy, 60 F.

July 2: Breakfast in hotel beginning 8:00 am. Departure 9:10 am. Very windy, cloudy, intermittent light rain. High 50s F. Bårby Iron Age fortress 9:30-10:00. Sugar beet ponds at Mörbylånga 10:10-11:20. Lunch at Borgholm Castle 12:25-1:40 pm. Halltorps Hage 2:00-2:15. Rain stopping, skies clearing, winds increasing. Beijershamn 2:50-4:10. At hotel 4:55 pm. Mostly clear skies. Checklist 6:15 pm. Dinner at hotel 6:35-8:20 pm.



Photo Rick Wright

July 3: Breakfast in hotel beginning 8:00 am. Gräsgårdhamn 9:05-10:15 am. Clear, bright, low 60s F, light wind. Ottenby Norre Lund 10:40-12:15. Very windy, mostly sunny, low 60s. Lunch at Bluebird 12:20-1:00 pm. Very windy, light rain. Ottenby 1:00-2:20. Windy, mostly sunny. Karl X Gustav wall 2:50-3:00. Light drizzle. Sebybadet 3:30-3:55. Mostly sunny, very windy. At hotel 4:00 pm. Checklist 6:15 pm. Dinner at hotel 6:40-8:15 pm.



Sea cows, of a sort, on Öland. Photo Rick Wright

July 4: optional pre-breakfast visit to Gräsgårdhamn 7:00-7:55 am. Breakfast in hotel beginning 8:00 am. Departure 9:00. Kalmar Dämme 10:00-11:45. Clear, windy, mid-60s F. Lunch at Kvarnkrogen Windmill 1:15-2:00. Cloudy, light sprinkles, very windy. Ottenby 2:15-4:30 pm. At hotel 4:45. Checklist 6:15 pm. Dinner at hotel 6:30-8:30 pm. Light rain, mid-60s F.

July 5: Departure for airport 7:00 am. Arrival Kalmar airport 8:05 am. Arrive Stockholm 10:55 am. Pre-tour ends with arrival in Stockholm and begin of Best of Baltic cruise 2019.

BIRDS:

Waterfowl

Graylag Goose, *Anser anser*: very common throughout, with many large juveniles.

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*: 250 at Ottenby July 1, with several large juveniles.

Several dozen at Beijershamn July 2, with a few small goslings. 200 or more at Ottenby July 3 and July 4.

Mute Swan, *Cygnus olor*: common throughout, with flocks of several dozen at Ottenby and Gräsgårdhamn; some cygnets still quite small and flightless.

Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*: common throughout. Ducklings at Ottenby July 1 and 4 and at Beijershamn July 2.

Northern Shoveler, *Spatula clypeata*: five or six at Beijershamn July 2. A dozen at Ottenby July 3, including one female with six ducklings; a few seen there July 4.

Gadwall, *Mareca strepera*: a score or more at Ottenby July 1, flocking with wigeon. Two at Beijershamn July 2. About 25 at Gräsgårdhamn July 3, visible only when flushed by an eagle. A few at Ottenby July 4.

Eurasian Wigeon, *Mareca penelope*: 35 at Ottenby July 1, flocking with Gadwall.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*: small numbers throughout.

Common Teal, *Anas crecca*: small numbers throughout, the high count about 25 at Beijershamn July 2.

Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*: two flybys at Ottenby July 3 and four there July 4.

Common Eider, *Somateria mollissima*: half a dozen off Ottenby July 1. At least 120 at Ottenby, and one or two at Gräsgårdhamn, July 3. A female at Ottenby July 4 had four small chicks.

Common Goldeneye, *Bucephala clangula*: a dozen at Ottenby July 3. More surprising were two at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*: one at Beijershamn July 2. Fifteen or so at Ottenby July 3 and July 4.

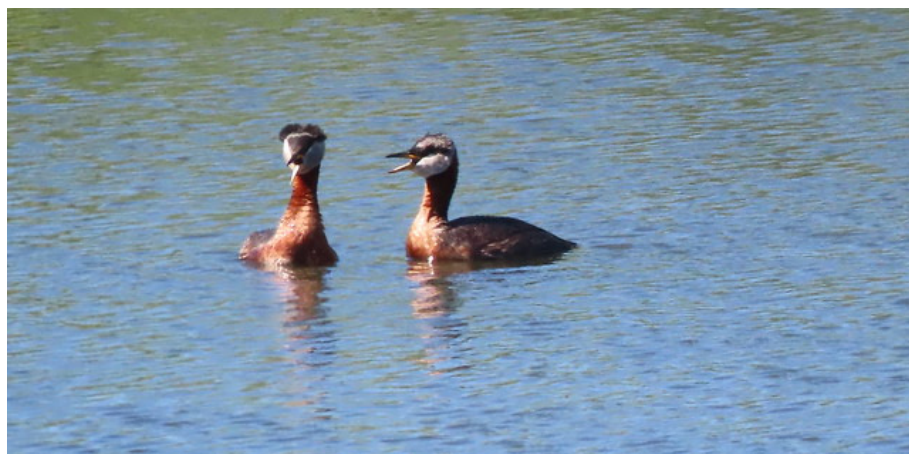
Pheasants

Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus*: a male at Mörbylånga July 2. One roadside male July 5.

Grebes

Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus*: one adult on Kalmar Castle moat July 1.

Red-necked Grebe, *Podiceps grisegena*: two pairs on a single pond at Mörbylånga July 2, one pair with at least one chick; encounters between the adults were vehement and noisy.



Red-necked Grebes--anything but sedate on their breeding ponds. Photo Rick Wright

Slavonian (Horned) Grebe, *Podiceps auritus*: an adult at Mörbylånga July 2.

Pigeons

Feral Pigeon, *Columba livia*: small numbers throughout.

Common Wood Pigeon, *Columba palumbus*: common throughout.

Stock Dove, *Columba oenas*: two flyovers at Ottenby Lund July 3.

Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*: one on Öland July 1.

Cuckoos

Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus*: heard at Möckelmossen July 1. One heard at Mörbylånga July 2. One heard July 3. One heard and seen at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Swifts

Common Swift, *Apus apus*: common and conspicuous throughout. One in hand at the Ottenby banding demonstration July 3. An impressive flock of some 85 birds at the Ottenby lighthouse July 4.

Rails

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*: four or five pairs at Mörbylånga July 2, most with several large chicks. An adult with a large chick at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Avocets

Pied Avocet, *Recurvirostra avosetta*: 25 or more at a distance at Gräsgårdhamn July 3.

Oystercatchers

Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus*: several dozen at Ottenby July 1. Twenty or more at Beijershamn July 2. Similar numbers at Gräsgårdhamn July 3, and common at other coastal sites that day. Common at Gräsgårdhamn July 4.

Plovers

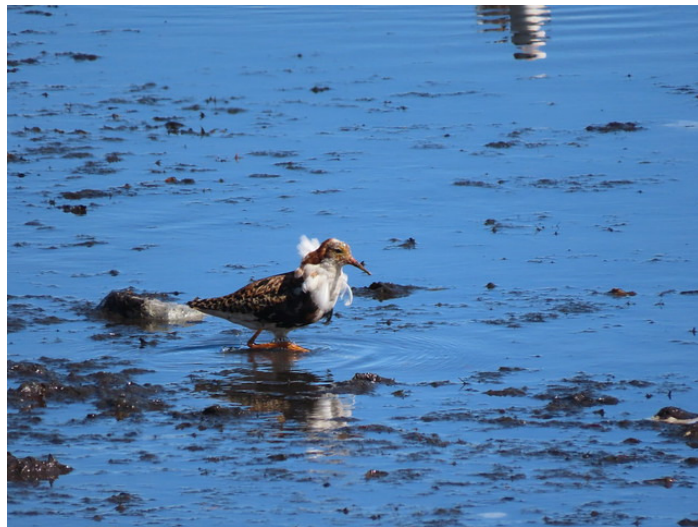
Northern Lapwing, *Vanellus vanellus*: moderate numbers throughout. Chicks at Ottenby July 1, at Beijershamn July 2, and at Ottenby July 3 and 4.

Common Ringed Plover, *Charadrius hiaticula*: a few at Ottenby July 1. Ten at Beijershamn July 2. Common at Ottenby July 3. A few at Ottenby July 4. Three roadside birds July 5.

Sandpipers

Eurasian Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus*: an adult on a newly mown field north of our hotel July 2. About ten at Gräsgårdhamn July 3. Three on a field near our hotel July 4.

Eurasian Curlew, *Numenius arquata*: one on fields July 2. Thirty over Gräsgårdhamn July 3.



Male Ruff. Photo Rick Wright

Ruff, *Calidris pugnax*: a dozen at Gräsgårdhamn July 1. Three fast flybys at Beijershamn July 2. Five or six at Gräsgårdhamn July 3, including one white-ruffed male at close range. Three males and a female-plumaged bird there at July 4; a few flybys at Ottenby that date.

Dunlin, *Calidris alpina*: many, but at great distance, at Gräsgårdhamn July 1. Three or four at Beijershamn July 2. Forty at Sebybadet July 3. Two flocks, totaling perhaps 30 birds, at Ottenby July 4.

Common Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*:

one at Gräsgårdhamn July 1. One over Mörbylånga July 2.

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*: one at Gräsgårdhamn July 3.

Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*: one in flight at Mörbylånga July 2. One at Ottenby July 3. Five on the first pond at Kalmar Dämme July 5.

Spotted Redshank, *Tringa erythropus*: half a dozen at great distance at Gräsgårdhamn July 3.

Common Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*: several at great distance at Gräsgårdhamn July 1. Eighteen at Beijershamn July 2. Ten or so at Gräsgårdhamn July 3.

Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*: a few at Gräsgårdhamn July 1. Ten there July 3 and four or five there July 4.

Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*: small numbers—but very noisy—throughout, with half a dozen or more at nearly every coastal site. Chicks at Beijershamn.

Gulls and Terns

Black-headed Gull, *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*: common throughout.

Little Gull, *Hydrocoloeus minutus*: one first-cycle bird at Gräsgårdhamn July 1.

Common Gull, *Larus canus*: common throughout.

European Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*: small numbers throughout.

Baltic (Lesser Black-backed) Gull, *Larus (fuscus) fuscus*: a near-adult at Gräsgårdhamn July 3.

Great Black-backed Gull, *Larus marinus*: three or four on the Öland bridge July 1. Two adults at Ottenby July 3.

Little Tern, *Sternula albifrons*: two at Ottenby July 1. Two at Gräsgårdhamn and two at Ottenby July 3.

Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*: one at Gräsgårdhamn July 1. Two or three at Beijershamn July 2.

Arctic Tern, *Sterna paradisaea*: two Gräsgårdhamn, and at least a dozen at Ottenby, July 1. Ten or more at Ottenby, and three at Gräsgårdhamn, July 3. One at Gräsgårdhamn and six or seven at Ottenby July 4.

Cormorants

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*: very common throughout.

Hérons

Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*: four or five July 1 and July 2. At least four at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Hawks

Western Marsh Harrier, *Circus aeruginosus*: two July 1, both female-plumaged. A female-plumaged bird at our hotel July 2. Probably the same female-plumage bird at our hotel, at Gräsgårdhamn, and at Sebybadet July 3. Spectacular views of an adult male at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Red Kite, *Milvus milvus*: one July 1. One over our hotel and another not far north of it the morning of July 2. One roadside bird July 4. One roadside bird and one over the airport in Kalmar July 5.

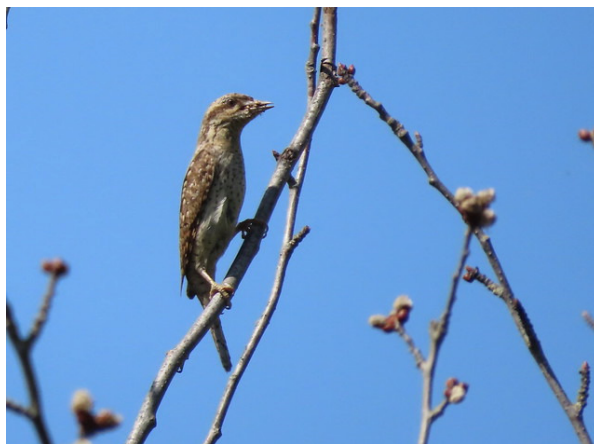
White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*: one July 1. One over Gräsgårdhamn July 3, throwing the geese and ducks into a noisy panic.

Common Buzzard, *Buteo buteo*: one dark bird July 1. Two roadside birds July 5.

Woodpeckers

Eurasian Wryneck, *Jynx torquilla*: a pair at Halltorps Hage July 1, carrying food into and fecal sacs out of what was obviously a nest site. One member of the same pair carrying food July 2.

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major*: excellent looks at an adult male at Ottenby Lund July 3.



Wryneck. Photo Rick Wright

Falcons

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus*: two July 1.

Shrikes

Red-backed Shrike, *Lanius collurio*: a male perched high over the Bårby fortress July 2.
Two males at Ottenby Lund July 3.

Crows and Jays

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*: small numbers throughout.

Western Jackdaw, *Corvus monedula*: common in Kalmar, somewhat less so on Öland. The largest concentration was a flock of more than 90 over our hotel the morning of July 4.

Rook, *Corvus frugilegus*: four on the lawn at Kroppakakon in Kalmar July 1. One at Mörbylånga July 2. Five in Kalmar July 4.

Hooded Crow, *Corvus cornix*: small numbers throughout.

Common Raven, *Corvus corax*: a roadside bird on Öland July 2. A total of five on Öland July 4, three on a roadkilled hare and two farther north. Two roadside birds July 5.

Larks

Eurasian Skylark, *Alauda arvensis*: common and conspicuous on Öland, still singing fervidly in rainless intervals.

Swallows

Sand Martin, *Riparia riparia*: half a dozen on Öland July 2, at Mörbylånga and at Beijershamn.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica*: common throughout, with a nest in the blind at Ottenby July 1.

Common House Martin, *Delichon urbica*: small numbers throughout.

Tits

Eurasian Blue Tit, *Cyanistes caeruleus*: a flitting family group at Mörbylånga July 2. Good looks at Ottenby Lund July 3.

Great Tit, *Parus major*: several at Mörbylånga July 2. Good looks at adults and young at Ottenby Lund July 3 and at Kalmar Dämme July 4..

Nuthatches

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea*: one in Ottenby Lund July 3.

Creepers

Eurasian Treecreeper, *Certhia familiaris*: a silent bird briefly seen in Ottenby Lund July 3 was clear white below, with a broad and conspicuous pale eyebrow. The length of neither the bill nor the hind claw was seen, and the bird was too far away to discern the precise wing pattern, but this is the only expected *Certhia* in the region.

Wrens

Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*: one singing at Mörbylånga July 2.

Leaf Warblers

Wood Warbler, *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*: one seen in Ottenby Lund July 3 proceeded to sing a couple of times.

Willow Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochilus*: two or three at Mörbylånga July 2. Two heard at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Chiffchaff, *Phylloscopus collybita*: two heard, and one seen well, at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Reed Warblers

[Icterine Warbler, *Hippolais icterina*: one in hand at Ottenby banding demonstration July 3.]

Eurasian Reed Warbler, *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*: several heard, and one seen a couple of times in flight as it apparently moved to and from at a nest, at Mörbylånga July 2. Several singing at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Sylvias

Eurasian Blackcap, *Sylvia atricapilla*: two singing at Mörbylånga July 2, one of them maddeningly close and invisible as it changed song perches several times. One heard at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Garden Warbler, *Sylvia borin*: a singing bird at Mörbylånga July 2 entirely evaded detection, a not uncommon behavior in this species.



Common Whitethroat. Photo Rick Wright

Common Whitethroat, *Sylvia communis*: one braved the winds and sprinkles to sing in the open at Mörbylånga July 2. One singing on the field edge at Gräsgårdhamn July 3. A good view of a silent bird at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Chats

European Robin, *Erithacus rubecula*: one adult in Kalmar South Cemetery July 1.

Spotted Flycatcher, *Muscicapa striata*: five or six in Ottenby Lund July 3.

Common Redstart, *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*: two or three adults in Kalmar South Cemetery July 1, one female bringing food to a nest hole. A pair with two or three young birds at Ottenby Lund July 3.



Male Common Redstart. Photo Rick Wright

Whinchat, *Saxicola rubetra*: one north of hotel July 2.

Northern Wheatear, *Oenanthe oenanthe*: common on Öland, with newly fledged juveniles seen at Bårby fortress July 2.

Thrushes

Song Thrush, *Turdus philomelos*: one in Ottenby Lund July 3.

Eurasian Blackbird, *Turdus merula*: fairly common throughout.



Adult Fieldfare. Photo Rick Wright

Fieldfare, *Turdus pilaris*: a pair with three newly fledged young at Ottenby July 1. Two or three adults at Ottenby July 3. One roadside bird July 5.

Starlings

European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*: very common throughout, with many juveniles in large flocks.

Wagtails

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*: common throughout.

Finches

Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*: one singing and giving, appropriately enough, its rain call in Kalmar South Cemetery July 1. Several heard, and one seen well at Mörbylånga, July 2. Three seen in

Ottenby Lund July 3 included a fledgling with a still downy crown. Heard at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

European Greenfinch, *Chloris chloris*: one heard at Beijershamn July 2. A pair drinking at Gräsgårdhamn July 3; one heard at Ottenby Lund that same date.

Linnet, *Acanthis cannabina*: several at hotel July 2, others in the countryside. Common throughout July 3 and 4.



Northern Wheatear. Photo Rick Wright

European Goldfinch, *Carduelis carduelis*:

two or three at Mörbylånga July 2. Excellent views at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Buntings

Yellowhammer, *Emberiza citrinella*: a few glimpsed July 1. Good, if brief, views of one at Beijershamn July 2. Good looks at a male at Karl X Gustav Wall July 3. Heard at Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Reed Bunting, *Emberiza schoeniclus*: a male seen in flight at

Mörbylånga July 2. Two or three briefly seen at a windy Kalmar Dämme July 4.

Sparrows

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*: common throughout in villages and at farmsteads.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus*: a few at hotel and in countryside July 2, 3, and 4.



A Brown Hare on Öland. Photo Rick Wright