

FINLAND

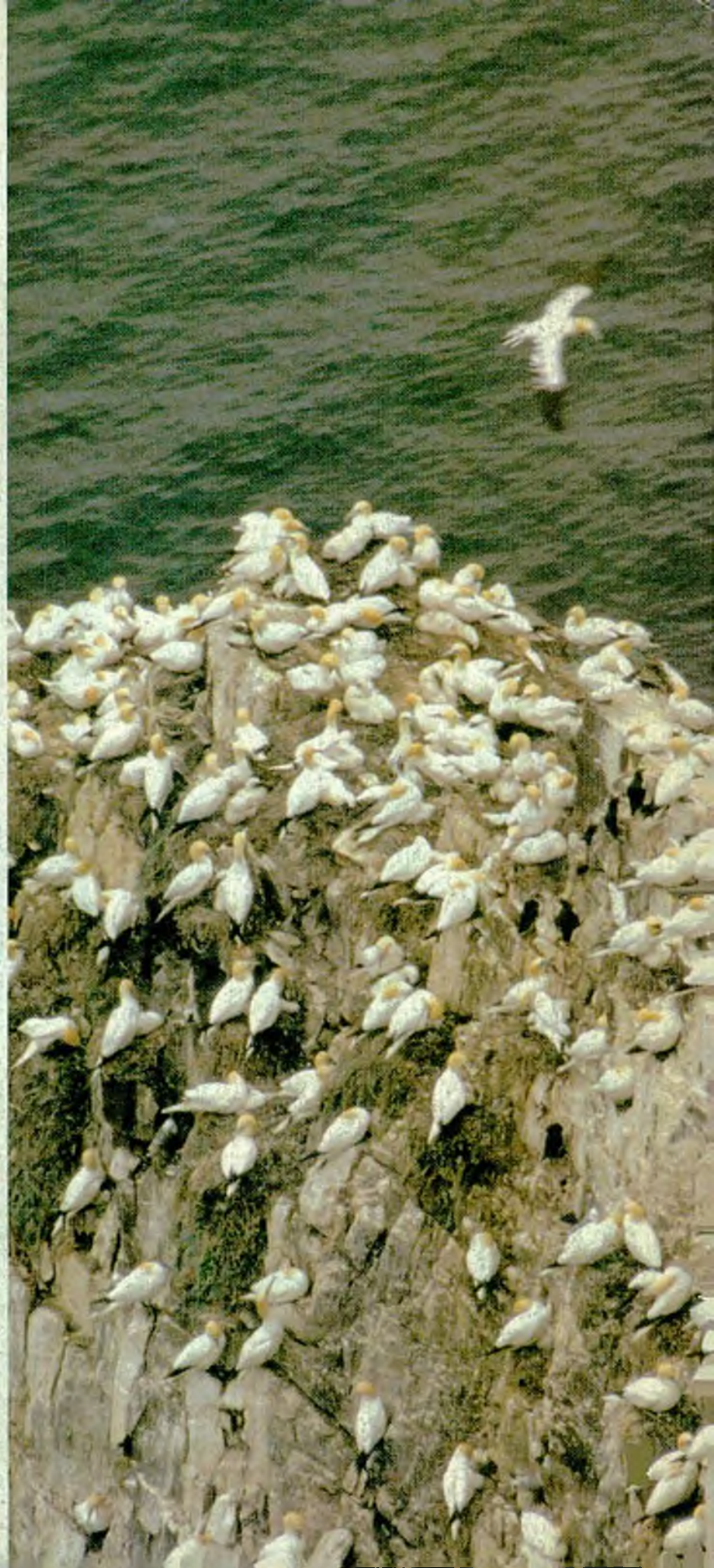
the beautiful north

ASHISH KOTHARI and SUNITA RAO spend long days exploring the national parks of Lapland

Clockwise from top: forests at Lake Kitka; a gannet colony in the Arctic Ocean; melting snows in northern Finland



Photographs by Ashli M. Kivipalu



Aquamarine lakes, meadows and bogs carpeted with wild flowers, lichen and moss-studded forest floors, wood-heated saunas followed by plunges into icy lake-water, world-class

natural history museums, extremely friendly people, almost as friendly reindeer, brown bears ambling through the forest, and sunshine at midnight...where in the world would one find such an incredible mix within 10 days? A country we knew virtually nothing about, till June this year—Finland.

We spent 10 days travelling up from Helsinki in the southernmost region of Finland, to the northernmost parts of Lapland and into Norway to touch the Arctic Ocean. It was a visit we are not going to forget in a hurry.

Approaching Finland by air, one wonders if its description as a land with thousands of lakes is wrong...it seemed more like one big lake with thousands of islands! Freshwater appears to be everywhere in Finland—most roads go along lakes, and there are huge areas of marsh that look deceptively like hard ground. We got a good dose of this on our very first outing, from our base in the town of Savonlinna, in central Finland. The Linnansaari National Park is spread over a portion of the massive Lake Saimaa. This reserve is specially notified to protect the Saimaa ringed seal, a freshwater species found only in Lake Saimaa, and now gravely threatened. A boat ride on the placid lake (on which you can apparently drive a car in winter) took us between many forested islands, peering at the shores for a sight of the seal. It eluded us, but we were lucky to see nesting osprey, one of the most dramatic birds of prey in the world.

As abundant as the lakes are the woods: dense stands of birch, pine, spruce, and other species that stretch from the southernmost tip to beyond the Arctic Circle in the north. Almost 70 percent of Finland is forested. But the woods often consist of only one or two dominant tree species, a somewhat boring reminder of long-standing logging practices that sustain a huge export industry, and continue to raise the hackles of environmentalists. Such monoculture, however, was more than made up for by the amazing ground level diversity. One of the greatest delights of travelling in this country is a walk through a forest or bog (marsh) ecosystem—marvelling at the range of lichen and mosses, wild flowers and berries. We got our first chance to walk through a bog on Linnansaari Island in the Linnansaari reserve, and then again when we were taken to the famous 'midnight singing' site of Siikalampi, on the Russian border near Punkaharju. Finland's famous summer light was dim as we walked silently on a wooden walkway through this marshy system, but enough to show us cotton-like flowers and lingonberries. And the deep resonating call of the Great Bittern, amidst a sweet chorus of several other birds that were making the best of the mid-summer light, left a lasting impression. The next day we went to the Lusto





Clockwise from left: brown bear; red squirrel, a common backyard sight; semi-domesticated reindeer; lycopodium moss; cotton grass

Forestry Museum at Punkaharju which offered a very impressive display of the development of forestry in Finland.

Moving further north with a quick stopover at the world's largest wooden church in Kerimäki, we caught a panoramic glimpse of the central lake area from a vantage point in the Koli National Park. A tram takes you up to a hotel that has breathtaking views of the scenery. Ancient glacial action (the entire country was under glaciers till as recently as 10,000 years ago) has resulted in some incredible landscapes throughout Finland, which more than makes up for the relative absence of large mammals (somewhat disconcerting to Indians used to seeing deer, antelopes and elephants in our wildlife reserves).

But a mammal is a mammal, so given the fact that our next date was with bears, we did not tarry long at Koli. At Lentiira near Kuhmo, after a short lecture on what to expect and do, we spent the night sitting quiet but alert in a cabin overlooking a clearing in the forest. The light was dim as midnight approached, and the long wait was made bearable by donning a pair of earphones through which we could hear every sound of the surrounding forest. At long last, we were rewarded by the sight of a mother bear with three cubs, followed by a big male who explored the forest floor for well over half an hour in front of us. Finland's bears are threatened, so this sighting was special.

Just before this, we had crossed the Arctic Circle, and had caught our first sight of reindeer (to our utter delight). In Lapland there are reportedly over 200,000 semi-domesticated reindeer. The Sami indigenous people often own herds that range in numbers from several dozen to several hundred. In summer they roam freely over the country, and are rounded up in winter. They look very friendly, can be approached quite close, but will rarely allow you to touch them.

As we kept climbing north, we came across more protected areas. The Oulanka National Park near Kuusamo contains dense forests that run along the Oulanka river, which cascades through spectacular gorges as it makes its way through the park. The park has a well-marked trekking trail, with camping spots and cabins every few kilometres. Every once in a while you come across the *Calypso bulbosa* orchid, the symbol of the area. On one of our birding trips in this region, we met up with Hannu Hautala, the country's best-known nature photographer. A big-built, amiable and shy man with a huge wild beard, Hannu reminded us of naturalists of the past—passionate, tough, and brilliant.

At Urho Kekkonen National Park near Tankavaara (also famous for its Gold Museum), we experienced the 'felt' or hill ecosystems of Lapland, where the by now familiar birch trees became stunted down to ground level. Ground flowers carpeted the hill slopes in spite of the intense cold. All told, we had visited about seven or eight protected areas, but with a total of 35 national parks, 19 strict nature reserves, 173 mire



On a trek to a bird colony in the Arctic Ocean

(marsh) reserves, 12 wilderness reserves, and many non-designated local reserves, there is plenty of variety to choose from wherever you are in Finland!

At Inari in northern Lapland, we spent a few hours at the Siida museum which showcases the culture and the wildlife of Lapland. It also has an extensive section on the Sami indigenous people. The Arktikum museum in Rovaniemi at the Arctic Circle is devoted to the geographical uniqueness of the entire circumpolar Arctic region.

As we travelled through Lapland, we were keen to get to know more about its original indigenous people, the Sami (or Lapps). Once proud herders of reindeer and fishers, who husbanded the harsh landscape for the last 10,000 years, the Sami have over the last two or three centuries been reduced to a tiny minority in Finland. Finns now acknowledge the severe exploitation and subjugation that settlers from the south subjected the Sami to. A Sami Parliament now works to unite these people and fight for their rights.

When you travel into Lapland, you will meet the Sami, some still herding reindeer, others absorbed in modern economic activities. We were lucky to come across a church congregation on midsummer's day, in Utsjoki (the only municipality with a majority of Sami people). We were humbled not only by the exquisite beauty of their dresses, but by their dignified demeanour, and their willingness to talk and patiently explain their customs to total strangers. We met Pekka Aikio, the President of the Sami Parliament, who told us of their struggles to regain titles to their lands. Other Sami mentioned the increasing over-exploitation of their natural resources, including over-grazing by large reindeer popula-

tions, and of their attempts to control this for the sake of the environment. At Utsjoki, Inari, and some other towns, you can also buy some of their handicrafts. Look out for the 'Sami Duodji' label, which indicates that it is a genuine article.

The grand finale of our trip was a short excursion into Norway. We headed to the Arctic Ocean, accompanied by researchers Seppo and Maija-Liisa Neuvonen. Seppo, who directs the Kevo Subarctic Research Institute at Kevo, kept us occupied with information on the arctic ecology and field biology tit bits as we trekked 20 kilometres to a bird colony at Syltefjorden. The sight as we crossed the final hill and looked down a sheer cliff dropping into the ocean, was spell-binding—tens of thousands of gannets, guillemots, kittiwakes and other gulls, nesting on sheer cliffs and island rocks, their bodies and droppings blanketing the site in one vast sheet of snow. Even if you don't get to the birds, a visit to the Arctic Ocean in summer is worth it.

It was also on this northernmost leg of our journey, that we witnessed what we will never forget—sunset and sunrise within five minutes of each other, from almost the same spot on the horizon. June 21st, the longest day of the year, saw us looking over Lake Kitka in northern Finland, marvelling at the blood-red sky on one side and the delicate hues of pink on the other. For the next few days we travelled through areas where the sun never set. If you are in Finland in summer, don't for anything miss this sight, and it's best seen the further north you get.

The only thing we missed on our entire trip was the legendary reticence of the Finns ("Finns are silent in several languages"). Everywhere we went people were curious, and our hosts friendly, and delighted to have us with them. Maybe they're different during the dark unending winters. We don't really believe that they (the Finns) are as gloomy as they're reputed to be, but we'd love to go back in winter to find out. ■



GETTING THERE

Finland's capital, Helsinki, is not directly connected by air to India, but is well-connected through many European cities. It can also be approached by train or ferry from neighbouring countries.

GETTING AROUND

Travelling within the country is a cinch. Most places are connected by **domestic airlines**. But if you have the time, going by train (not connected to most of Lapland, though), or hiring a car and **driving** on Finland's excellent roads are much more enjoyable and educational. Some parts of the country (especially the central part) can also be **traversed by lake**. And if you really have the time and the energy, the country is eminently **cyclable**, especially since there are not too many heights to struggle through. There are also hundreds of great

Lichen-coloured boulders

trekking routes, that range from a few hours to several days. Ask for trekking and cycling maps and guides at a tourist office.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

All the national parks and reserves mentioned in the article are in the eastern part of Finland.

► **Linnansaari NP** is best approached from Savonlinna town, via Oravi. Boats can be hired for a ride down the lake. For more information visit www.metsa.fi. There is varied accommodation available at Savonlinna to suit all kinds of budgets.

► **Sillakallio** can also be approached from Savonlinna, via Punkarinen and past Parkkala, towards the Russian border. Local birding guides will help you.

► **Koli NP** is just off Highway No 6, between Joensuu and Nurmee, and has a massive hotel right on top of a hill overlooking the entire park. See www.koli.fi

► **Oulanka NP** can be approached from Kuusamo, going past Huka and towards the Russian border. It's best seen in a camping mode, but there are also cabins for hire. For more information visit www.metsa.fi

► **Urho Kekkone NP**, the country's second largest park, is off highway No 4, near Tankavaara. There are two visitor centres with plenty of accommodation. And don't forget to peep into the God Museum (www.tankavaara.fi)

If possible, you should visit a representative sample of the country's protected areas (35 national parks, 19 strict nature reserves, 173 mire reserves, 12 wilderness reserves). These include **boreal or taiga forests**, glacial lakes, **bogs or mires**, **soascepes**, hills (föls), and the **tree-less tundra**. Metsähallitus, Finland's nature management agency, has brochures on all the protected areas (see also www.metsa.fi). The protected areas themselves have excellent interpretation facilities, well-marked pathways for trekking and helpful staff. For more information on Arctic area flora and fauna, see [**FAUNA**](http://www.wildlife.fi/arkkoko.</p>
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► **Birds**: For those specially interested in birds, do tap into the incredibly efficient and active birding networks of the country. Finland has probably the world's highest densities of birds. Check out

www.birdlife.org

► **Beers**: Visitors now have a good chance of seeing brown bears at six sites in northeastern Finland, where lodge-owners have set up special bear-watching facilities (see, for one of the best ones, www.wildbrownbear.fi).

► **Museums**: If you are going to spend some time in Lapland, visit Sida Museum at Inari (www.sida.fi), and the Arktikum museum at Rovaniemi (www.arktikum.fi). At Helsinki, visit the Finnish Museum of Natural History (www.mnh.fi/helsinki.fi), the Zoo (www.hel.zoo), and the spectacular Sea Life exhibition (www.sealife.fi).

WHAT ELSE TO SEE & DO

As spectacular as the midnight sun are the famed aurora borealis or northern lights. Best seen north of the Arctic Circle, this is a dancing show of green, white, red, blue, violet, and other colours that light up massive parts of sky. These are best seen in February-March and September-October.

After a good nature outing, make sure to try the sauno, Finland's national pastime. Has an hour in one, followed by a cold shower or an icy dip in a lake, is soothing and revives you adequately for another long day ahead.

RESOURCES

Get hold of a good guide to Finland (we used the Lonely Planet guide, and were quite satisfied with it). For general information go to the website of the Finnish Tourist Board www.visitfinland.com.

ASHISH KOTHARI & SUNITA RAO

TOP TIP
NATURAL FOOD

In summer, you can feast on **cloudberries**, **lingonberries**, **raspberries**, **strawberries**, **blackberries**, **you-nano-it-berries**, all according to the ground. And the Finns specialise in all kind of products made from these. Finland is known for its **natural foods**. These range from dishes made of **wild berries** and **mushrooms**, to **smoked meats and fish**, and **delicious breads**.







Bittu Sahgal edits *Sanctuary* magazine. A love of nature, born of frequent treks and camping trips to the wilderness, saw him start *Sanctuary* and *Cub* magazines in the early 1980s. He is also involved with campaigns to save the tiger, and protecting coastal India and its fishing communities.



Ranjit Lal is a keen birder, photographer and writer. His books, on birds and other subjects, include *The Crow Chronicles* (Penguin), *The Life and Times of Aitu Fattu* (Indiakink) and *Birds of Delhi* (Outlook). He lives in Delhi. This issue, he takes us to some of India's best birding destinations.

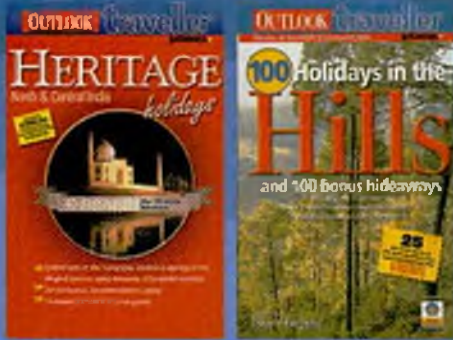


A founding member of the Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group, **Ashish Kothari** has been closely involved in wildlife conservation and community-based natural resource management. His work with people's movements working on environment and development has taken him all over India. He's travelled the world as member of Greenpeace International and the World Conservation Union.

COVERS OF THE MONTH



Sometimes covers are just harder to choose. This was one of them. You'll see why. The other options were Akashendu Das's charming pachyderms and this great picture shot in Bandhavgarh.



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Beauty, in Nicaragua, often contained the beast.

—Salman Rushdie