



The Little Bunting is one of the avian highlights of the Kuusamo area.

The Kuusamo area at a glance

For visitor information and routes, see page 118.

The town of Kuusamo lies close to the Russian border in the southeast of the area covered by this guidebook, just south of the province of Lapland. The Kuusamo area is sometimes referred to as Finnish Siberia, because of its rugged terrain, its tall and lush forests and its wild rivers. There are various protected areas in the vicinity of the town, including three National Parks: Oulanka, Riisitunturi and Syöte.

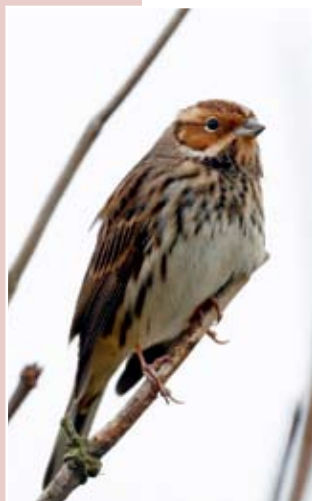
Oulanka forms one uninterrupted protected area with the Russian Paanajärvi National Park. The management of both parks work closely together – a bilateral agreement that is remarkable and praiseworthy given the challenging relations between Russia and the west.

The terrain in Oulanka is hilly, with steep slopes and canyons through which the two larger rivers, the Oulankajoki and the Kitkajoki force their way. Lakes and mires interrupt the forest cover and give the region a pleasant and diverse topography.

The soil of Oulanka is predominantly calcareous – a soil type that is rare in Finland and gives the park a special attractiveness. Oulanka is one of the very few places in Finnish Lapland where you can find rare orchids like

Lady's Slipper and Fairy Slipper (or Calypso Orchid), together with a large number of other rare wildflowers.

Riisitunturi lies just northwest of Kuusamo, near the village of Posio. It is with 77 km² only a small park. The park's unique feature are the sloping bogs, which run down from the two ranges of hills that dominate the park. The bogs support a special flora and have been subject of extensive and long running ecological studies of the university of Oulu. The higher ground in the park is just high enough to support some fell plants which are here at the southernmost edge of their range. Riisitunturi is also famous for its Tykky (tree crown snow load) phenomenon, which is said to be exceptionally beautiful here (see page 19 and 38). The hills in the park catch more ice crystals than other parts of Lapland, because they are the first real elevations the moist air from the west encounters. Consequently, the amount of snow accumulating on the branches here is extremely high.



Syöte is located 100 km southwest of Kuusamo. It consists of four separated areas, in which hills covered in old-growth Spruce forest alternate with flowery peatlands and hay meadows. The number of mires and meadows distinguishes Syöte from other protected areas nearby. In the park, there are many traces of the former slash-and-burn land use that is typical of Finland to the south of Lapland. This region was for a long time part of Finland's northern frontier, where the Finns lived a hard life trapping fur, logging forests and raising livestock (see page 63). Today, the meadows support important populations of rare plants (such as Marsh Saxifrage) and butterflies, while un-harvested areas of virgin forests still cover the hills.

Smaller snippets of primeval spruce forests are found all over the Kuusamo area. They have special protective status and are very interesting places to visit (e.g. Valtavaara (route 5) and Iivaara (page 132)). There are also several aapa mire reserves in the area.

The combination of large trees, hilly terrain and the eastern location on the Russian border, makes the Kuusamo area a hotspot for birds and thus for birdwatchers. Eastern delights like Little and Rustic Buntings and Red-flanked Bluetail mix here with Lapland attractions like Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit and various owl and grouse species. Oulanka is also a popular destination for hikers and a bit busier than the other two parks. Oulanka and Kuusamo make it the perfect starting point of an exploration of Finnish Lapland.



A lake in Oulanka National Park.