

Bird-watching in Estonia

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The Baltic had already been calling for some years, when I found out that for nature, and especially for bird-watching, Estonia would be the best destination. In the spring of 2009 my wife Rebekka and I decided to find out. Our trip took place from 19 May to 11 June, with the period 23 May – 9 June spent in Estonia. We certainly did not dedicate all our time to bird-watching but also did some sightseeing, spending time in Riga (the capital of Latvia) and Tallinn, both of them great historic cities, and on the Curonian Spit (Lithuania). But most of the time binoculars and telescope were close at hand and some serious bird-watching did take place.

Travelling to and from Estonia

As we're not very keen on flying and like to travel in our own car (a Hyundai Getz at the time), we decided to take a ferry. The Rostock-Helsinki-Tallinn line would seem the obvious choice, but it has a very inconvenient schedule, with departure and arrival in the middle of night. So we took the ferry from Kiel (northern Germany) to Klaipeda (Lithuania). It takes 22 hours. From Klaipeda to the southern border of Estonia it's a 4-5 hour drive.

This ferry turned out to have the most chaotic check-in we have ever experienced on any ferry. Which you wouldn't expect in Germany, but then it is not run by Germans but by Lithuanians. Anyway, once we were aboard everything was fine. The cabins were good and quiet; the food was nothing special but okay and inexpensive.

Itinerary and accommodation

Our itinerary in Estonia was planned consulting Estonian Nature Tours, an Estonian company that offers bird-watching and other nature tours for groups, but also individual tailor-made holidays. Marika Mann of Nature Tours (www.naturetours.ee) booked all the accommodations for us. It is no problem to find accommodation on your own and book it in advance, as nearly all guesthouses etc. have their own website with an English version, but this way it was easy and convenient and Marika assured us we would get good value, which proved to be true. All the accommodation was good and we got the best rooms at a bargain.

This is our itinerary, with the places we stayed at:

23.-27.05 Matsalu bay, Haapsalu and around: *Altmõisa Guesthouse* www.altmoisa.ee

27.-29.05 Tallinn: *Taanlinna Hotel* www.taanlinna.ee

29.05.-03.06 Tartu area (Alam Pedja, Kärevere, Aardla, Tavaeskoja): *Trofee Guesthouse* www.trofee.ee

03.-06.06 Pärnu area (Soomaa NP, Soometsa forest): *Kirke Holiday House* www.narnia.ee

06.-09.06 Saaremaa island: *Pilguse Resort* www.pilguse.ee

About Estonia

Except for the condition of many minor roads, Estonia is a perfect country for nature tourists. Firstly, there is a lot of nature. There are several large national parks and nature reserves (e.g. Matsalu Bay 48.610 ha, Soomaa 39.939 ha, Alam Pedja 31.000 ha), comprising bogs, marshes, floodplains, wet meadows, meandering rivers and many types of forest. There are a lot of other nature reserves with the same elements on a smaller scale. The farmland that determines most of the scenery is of a quality that has disappeared from Western Europe decades ago, with high densities of birds like Skylark, Whinchat, Wheatear and Corncrake. And last but not least, small but beautiful, there's the wooded meadows: little patches of earthly paradise with tapestries of wild flowers. Some wooded meadows are known to hold more than 70 plant species per square meter.

Secondly, most of this is perfectly accessible and everything is well organized. The national parks and some nature reserves have visitor centers with at least one English speaking staff member and brochures and leaflets in English. There are bird-watching towers and platforms, marked trails, information boards etc.

Thirdly, Estonia is a modern, 'western' country with all comfort and facilities. All our meals in restaurants and cafes were good, some excellent. 'In the country' it is not always easy to find a place to eat, but towns like Tartu, Pärnu, Haapsalu and Kuressaare offer a range of restaurants with a varied menu. Supermarkets even in smaller towns are open seven days a week, some until as late as 23.00.

Now about those roads: most minor roads are not surfaced and many have holes and loose gravel. So drive carefully and if there's a car ahead or oncoming (fortunately, very often there isn't) you're in its dust cloud, so close the car windows.

One more disadvantage, but one that doesn't really need to be one: mosquitoes. They're numerous in moist forests or forests adjacent to bogs, marshes etc. But bring or buy repellent (we prefer the orange variety of 'Off') and you'll be alright.

General birds remarks

At this time of the season some breeding birds are already hard to find, especially in the forests. For example, we missed Ural Owl and Hazel Grouse despite trying very hard and despite the help of a guide. Still, we found bird densities to be much higher than in Finland and Scandinavia, where you can sometimes walk for miles in forests without seeing or hearing any bird at all. Here there were always birds singing, even in the middle of a hot day, albeit mostly common species.

I already mentioned a few widespread species. To be added is the omnipresence of Thrush Nightingale and Scarlet Rosefinch. We have never before been greeted so often with 'pleased to meet you!'

There's some observations in other trip-reports that I'd like to comment on.

In some reports there is mention of Aquatic Warblers singing. However, Aquatic warbler is not, and has never been, breeding in Estonia.

Some travelers claim to have seen Great Spotted Eagle. According to our bird-guide Tarvo Walker, an experienced Estonian bird-watcher and guide, this species had become very rare in Estonia, only ten pairs or even less left. He himself has seen it only twice, and he's birding here day in day out. Moreover, there seems to be interbreeding with Lesser Spotted Eagle. So while it is not impossible, it is also very unlikely that any visiting foreign bird-watcher will hit upon this prize bird right away. I think anyone claiming a Great Spotted should check and double-check and make absolutely certain it really is one.

Birds per location

Now here's some observations at the various locations. I only mention the 'good' species. The 'best' are *in italics*.

Matsalu NP

Matsalu Bay is the heart of this national park. Around it lie immense marshes, reed beds and floodplains. Their vastness is very impressive. It can be experienced from various bird-watching towers and platforms. To convey it one would have to make panoramic pictures with a wide-angle camera. The area seems to be one of the best in Estonia for spring migration of waterfowl, waders etc. We hoped to catch the tail of this, but almost all migrants seemed to have moved on already. We saw small groups of Dunlin, Knot, Grey and Ringed plover, plus a few Barnacle and Brent geese, but nothing really special in the way of migrants. What we did see was a lot of Goldeneyes, almost exclusively males, a few White-tailed Eagles, quite a few Marsh Harriers above the reeds, several male Montagu's Harriers hunting over adjacent farmland, and 3 Hobbies (at three locations).

The Rannajoe platform (near the Haapsalu-Lihula road (31)) we visited on two evenings. We had read this was one of the places for *Elk*, and indeed we saw them on both evenings, one female and one young animal on the first, two females and a young on the second. The second evening we also saw 3 *Black Grouse* cocks displaying in front of (but not very close to) the platform.

The bay opposite Almoisa Guesthouse held quite a number of birds, none of them exclusive: >100 Barnacle Geese, 100 Grey Plover, 20 Ringed Plover, 30 Knot, some Dunlin, Redshank, Lapwing, Oystercatcher and Curlew, 6 Goosander, 6 Shoveler, 50 Goldeneye, some Little Gull, 1 male Montagu's and 1 male Marsh Harrier.

At breakfast on the morning of 25 May in the guesthouse garden we heard a *White-backed Woodpecker* drumming in the plot of woodland behind the house. The sound is very distinctive: very long, starting almost violently and becoming faster and 'thinner' towards the end. We did not see the bird.

In the vicinity

- The small lake in the village of Vönnu (a few kms SE of Haapsalu) held 4 *Slavonian Grebes*, seen at close range, one of them on its nest.
- Just east of Lihula, not far from the manor house where Estonian Nature Tours has its office, Marika Mann tipped us there's a good location for displaying *Black Grouse*. Indeed on the evening of 25 May about 19.00-20.00 we saw 11 cocks on arable fields and meadows. These fields also held incredible densities of Skylark and Lapwing, plus pairs of Golden Plover and Black-tailed Godwit.
- Nedrema wooded meadow, just off road 60 from Lihula to Pärnu, 25 kms SE of Lihula, not only is beautiful, but -Marika told us- also holds several species of woodpeckers and this spring there was a Ural Owl territory. We didn't see the owl, but caught a glimpse of a *Three-toed Woodpecker* in flight.

Haapsalu

The town itself seems to be another hotspot for (water)bird migration, something one can easily imagine while enjoying the view from the castle tower: everywhere land meeting water, inlets, sheltered bays, reed-beds, etc. While we were there however, there was nothing special to be seen, except a White-tailed Eagle in the distance.

Kärevere (just N of Tartu)

This is the one well-known spot for watching lekking Great Snipe. We heard that all other places are kept secret (and with good reason, as Great Snipe have abandoned leks e.g. in Poland due to too much attention). We followed the description in other trip reports and easily found the two poles indicating the minimum distance to the snipes. They're in a meadow like many other meadows in Estonia, which makes you think the country might be full of Great Snipe. If you follow the track a little further, after a S-turn there is a parking sign. On 29-5 around 21.00 we parked the car there. A pair of heavily alarming Great Spotted Woodpecker in the wood to the right drew our attention to a *Pine Marten* descending a tree.

After that we walked back 100 m and waited by the poles. Around 21.45 the strange calls of *Great Snipe* became audible, but it was almost 22.30 when they started to become visible, making strange little jumps and standing in strange postures. They were not right behind the poles but more to the right, not far from the s-turn. We would have seen and heard them just as well from the track. Hard to determine their number, perhaps some 10. It soon became a kind of shadow-show, but fascinating all the same.

Aardla (just S of Tartu)

The wet, partly flooded meadows and marshes of Aardla are the best-known spot for Citrine Wagtail. We had some trouble finding the area: following a sign to Aardla we ended up a dead-end street in Tartu's industrial quarter. Then after driving south through the village of Ülenurme we found the road to the left (no sign) that proved to be the right one. The area soon came into sight on the right hand side. It turned out to be the best birding site we visited, with an incredible number of both species and individual birds for such a small area. We parked the car by the first path to the right (before the bridge) and had hardly walked 20 m when we hit upon the target bird: a male *Citrine Wagtail* posing obligingly. Meanwhile the air was full of drumming Snipe, there was a Sedge Warbler singing every 10 m and all around us were alarming Black Terns. There were two Black Tern colonies, together perhaps a hundred pairs, plus several White-winged Black Terns. Furthermore we saw Little Gulls, Shoveler, Gadwall, Wigeon and a pair of *Red-necked Grebe* and heard a *Spotted Crake* calling in the middle of a cloudless and very warm day (30-5).

We drove the next path to the right (after the bridge, between houses) and parked the car at the first junction. Here we walked the path to the right, which leads into the wet area. Here I added my second 'lifer' (in less than one hour): an alarming *Marsh Sandpiper*, visible and audible at very close range. This bird is a rare but regular visitor to the Netherlands, but somehow I always missed it. Added to the list here were Garganey (a pair), Teal, Pochard, a Little Ringed Plover and finally a circling *Peregrine* to get most of the other birds into the air. The panicking terns were quite a sight. Their attempts at forming dense flight groups were very poor, nothing like the professional Starling formations in such situations. But the *Peregrine* didn't mean any harm.

Being satisfied we decided to skip the bird tower on the eastern side. Later we heard we could have seen more Citrine Wagtails there. Never mind.

Alam Pedja

This is a vast nature reserve, consisting of rivers and brooks, large mire complexes, floodplains and swamp forests almost untouched by human activity. Most of it is inaccessible, but there are two hiking trails, Kirna hiking trail in the north and Selli-Sillaotsa Nature trail in the south. We visited both trails twice.

Of the Selli-Sillaotsa trail we only hiked a small stretch the first time, just to get to the bird-watching tower to have a pick-nick with a view. The tower is perfect for this and the view is wonderful, but there were hardly any birds except a few Cranes and Ravens, fairly common birds in Estonia. From the road to the trail, very near the main road (near 'Hollywood Hill') we saw a White-tailed Eagle. On our second visit we hiked the trail in the evening. We heard the typical *Black Grouse* display song (it sounded like only one bird) and saw a Wood Sandpiper and that was about it. The forest where the trail starts and ends (dominated by pine, but also with spruce) looks very promising for Three-toed Woodpecker and Ural Owl, but no such luck. We only observed a Black Woodpecker.

The scenery on Kirna hiking trail could not have been more different. This is alluvial, more nutrient-rich soil. The trail follows the meandering Pedja river along its banks, meadows (flooded in early spring) and river forests. We walked the trail twice, first in daytime, just enjoying the scenery, the fields full of globeflower (*Trollius*) and hundreds and hundreds of small dragonflies that are called 'weidebeekjuffer' in Dutch (literally: meadowbrookladies; the males are metallic blue, the females green). Near the far end (the suspended bridge) on the north side we heard two woodpeckers drumming, one Great Spotted, the other different, but also different from the White-backed we heard before.

On our second visit (2-6), this time in early morning and with our bird-guide Tarvo Walker (more about him further on), we heard this drumming again and now Tarvo was able to tell us this was Three-toed. So we went off the path and stumbled into the wood, tripping over the undergrowth, waited inside the wood for some time for the meanwhile silent bird to resume its drumming, and when it finally did, had wonderful views of a *Three-toed Woodpecker*, sitting on a dead tree trunk and hammering on a branch stump. A happy moment for me, as I saw this species only once before, more than twenty years ago in Sweden (not counting the recent glimpse in Nedrema wooded meadow), and missed it on many other occasions. It took place in a very beautiful part of the forest, with tall poplars and equally tall spruce, a combination I had never seen before, and a lot of standing dead trees. Really good taste, this bird has.

The attempt to spot Hazel Grouse (another of my frustration species) failed and the Grey Woodpecker wouldn't show up at its nesting hole. But Corncrakes were rasping and Grasshopper Warblers chirping all along the way.

Birding with the guide

With Estonian Nature Tours we had booked a bird-guide for two days, to help find difficult species like Ural Owl, Hazel Grouse and Three-toed Woodpecker. Only with the last one we were successful. Earlier in the spring it's easier, but we were not very lucky either. But there was some compensation.

Tarvo, a young guy but already with a lot of experience in guiding, came to meet us at our guesthouse (Trofee) on 1 June at 10.00. After discussing our (or my) wishes and the options, he proposed to try *Greenish Warbler* first, because at this time of year, with the birds just arriving, they sing in the daytime. The place for this bird is Tavaeskoja, some 30 or 40 kms southeast of Tartu. It is completely different from the rest of Estonia: dry pine and spruce forest on pretty steep slopes of a small river. This seems to be the typical habitat of Greenish Warbler. One week before Tarvo had heard several singing; this time there was only one and it sang exactly twice. Too little to locate the bird and see it, but then there is more to hear than to see and as a twitch it counts. Moreover, hearing the song confirmed that I had already heard it two days before on Tartu's Dome Hill. (I wasn't sure then. It is a well-known spot for Greenish Warbler on migration, which is at this time of year.) To compensate for the unwillingness of the Greenish, a lot of *Red-breasted Flycatchers* were singing, 8 or so in a very small area.

After dinner in the guesthouse we started the quest for Ural Owl. But first there was another highlight. Earlier in the day I'd asked Tarvo about the habitat of *Blyth's Reed Warbler*. He told me it was lilac bushes near houses. Now these are everywhere in Estonia, and the bird is widespread but not common. So where to look? Tarvo added that it prefers lilac bushes near abandoned houses. And the song may be heard at all hours. So when, after starting out in the evening, I spotted a very good-looking lilac bush near a seemingly abandoned house, I stopped the car, we listened and there it was, barely audible from the road but very clear when we had crossed the field (startling a Grey Partridge) and stood near the bush. We saw only brief glimpses, but with this bird too there's more to hear than to see. The song is really beautiful, like Marsh Warbler but with more separate notes and pauses, less 'stream of sound'. Sometimes it resembles Icterine Warbler, but without that bird's harsh synthesizer bursts. My fourth lifer on this trip!

The rest of the evening, and the next evening, were spent looking for *Ural Owl*. We were late, because the young birds had already fledged and left the close vicinity of the nest. But there was a reasonable chance. The strategy consisted of locating places with a known territory this spring, drive the forest roads there very slowly, stopping at clearings to scan the remaining trees and the wood fringes. The owls hunt in open spaces and after all they have to feed their chicks. The second evening we came very close: Tarvo caught a glimpse of a Ural Owl, but unfortunately it was in a dense thicket of young trees and disappeared without a trace. Then in the last twilight we heard two young Ural Owls begging at the edge of a clearing, but it was too dark already to spot them and no parent showed up. So now Ural Owl is formally on my list, but it's far from satisfying.

Trofee guesthouse

We had just arrived at this guesthouse, on the river Pedja at the end of a gravel road between Puurmani and Jogeve, and had just entered our room looking out on the river, when I saw a *Lesser Spotted Eagle* from the window. We saw it (the same bird probably, or its mate) again a couple of times in the following days. The river had Goosander with a lot of chicks, Common Sandpiper and a pair of Kingfisher with a nesting hole in a bank of the river some 100 m from the guesthouse. Our guide Tarvo saw a Black Stork when he opened the curtains at 4.30 in the morning of 2-6. We were five minutes later and missed it. I hit back (not quite equalizing, I admit) with a passing Honey Buzzard.

Soomaa NP

On our way from Trofee to our next stage near Pärnu on 3-6 we took the (unsurfaced) road that leads through Soomaa national park from east to west. Despite the permanent drizzle, which became serious rain later, we immediately fell in love with this area: an immense complex of five extensive bogs, interspersed with rivers, floodplain meadows and all kinds of forests. Wolf, bear, lynx and even flying squirrel live here. We didn't see any of these, but did meet with a group of 7 *Wild Boar* on the road, 6 adults and 1 piglet in its striped suit. Walking the Riisa Bog Trail, one of six or so marked trails, we startled a *Black Grouse* hen. We decided to come back the next days -and we did, but unfortunately it rained incessantly for almost three days, making it impossible to do some trails. Still, we saw an impressive *Capercaillie* cock on the road in the southwest of the park. It was my first cock ever, after quite a few hens in Scandinavia and Finland.

Soometsa

The last evening of our Pärnu stage, when the rain had finally ceased, we decided to try Soometsa forest for Ural Owl and Hazel Grouse. Again no luck. We did see a squirrel and three Black Woodpeckers, one wonderfully sitting on a remaining tree in a clearing while uttering its plaintive call that echoed through the forest. Plus one more White-tailed Eagle harassed by a Raven. Strange area this: it is a nature reserve but at the same time it's a production forest with a lot of tree felling going on. But the remaining forest looks attractive enough.

Saaremaa

The island of Saaremaa we visited not for any special birds, but to enjoy the beauty of its nature, the coast with all its quiet shallow bays, the 'alvars' (coastal meadows with lots of juniper), the military orchids in the road verges everywhere, the beautiful medieval churches, the windmills, the meteorite craters(!) and the attractive town centre of Kuressaare. And, most of all, the one spot in Loode forest with hundreds and hundreds of flowering Lady's Slippers!

Still, I was able to add a few more bird species to my already long list, among them *Velvet Scoter* (male and female seen from the ferry from Virtsu to Muhu), *Arctic Skua* (on the northwest coast) and *Caspian Tern* (two birds flying by and calling at the coast of the southwestern peninsula). And to collect two more observations of White-tailed Eagle (making a total of at least 7 for this trip). Foraging above the surface of Suur Laht, west of Kuressaare, were an estimated 350(!) Little Gulls.

Conclusion

- Estonia is great for bird-watching. And it's a very nice country anyhow. We will surely come back sometime.
- We haven't seen all there is to see. So we will *have* to come back (earlier in the season).