



Estonia - Birds and Bears

Dates: 27th May – 3rd June 2019



Estonia is situated on the Eastern coast of the Baltic Sea and is bordered by Russia to the East and Latvia to the South. The country is generally sparsely populated and once away from the major cities like Tallinn the roads are almost empty. The landscape is very flat with extensive wild bogs and rich forests, home to an abundance of wildlife. This relatively unspoilt corner of Europe contains a superb network of national parks with many tower hides scattered throughout the country making wildlife viewing easier and a real joy.

The marshes and bogs are home to Great Snipe, Bittern, Bluethroat, Savi's Warbler, Great Reed Warbler, Red-necked Grebe, Black Tern and a few Citrine Wagtails whilst the forests support eight species of Woodpecker; as well as Hazel Grouse, Black Stork and several species of Owl. Woodcock are common and Nightjar regular whilst during the day Red-breasted Flycatcher, Thrush Nightingale, Barred Warbler, Icterine Warbler, Greenish Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Common Rosefinch all add their voices to the cacophony of bird sounds and sights making this a spectacular spring birding destination.

Not only does Estonia support an abundance of birdlife but also a very healthy population of large mammals such as Lynx, Beaver, Moose, Pine Marten, Raccoon Dog, Wild Boar and Brown Bear. During the trip we'll be making a special visit to a bear hide, close to the Russian border where we'll spend the night. The basic hide is well equipped with dry toilets and beds and gives us a very good chance of catching up with Brown Bears and a great way to round off a diverse, exciting trip to the Baltic region.

A late spring visit will also provide us with an opportunity to find an excellent variety of plants including Lady's Slipper Orchid and Military Orchid as well as a variety of butterflies such as Camberwell Beauty, Map and various Fritillaries. It's a brilliant time of year to visit with many birds in full song and one of the best times to see Brown Bear.



Day 1: We catch a scheduled flight to Tallinn where we should arrive in the early afternoon and head straight to the hotel near Matsalu National Park, where we'll spend the next three nights. In the early evening we'll spend some time around the hotel grounds and nearby tower hide where there's a good chance we'll start with some great species such as White-tailed Eagle, Osprey, Hobby, Crane, Great White Egret, Little Gull, Black Tern, River Warbler and Thrush Nightingale. White-backed Woodpecker and Wryneck also breed in the area and there's a good chance we'll pick these up during our stay.

Day 2: After breakfast we'll head north to the area around Poosaspea and the north facing peninsula at Spithami. Lying at the north-west corner of mainland Estonia this is the premier site for watching migrating birds and with a bit of luck we should see a good selection of both dabbling and diving ducks including Velvet Scoter, Common Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Black-throated Divers whilst raptors may be seen heading north towards Finland. After a spell on the headland we'll explore some of the nearby forests which have proved to be a very good area for Capercaillie as well as providing our first chances of catching up with Hazel Grouse, Black Grouse, Crane, Black Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Three-toed Woodpecker and White-backed Woodpecker. Nutcracker and Red-breasted Flycatcher are also possible and provide a great introduction to forest birding here. Later in the day we'll head for the Silma Nature Reserve which contains a number of towers which could provide a whole host of new birds including Little Gulls, Black Terns, Caspian Tern, Bittern, Savi's Warbler and Bearded Tits; whilst both Whiskered and White-winged Black Tern are seen regularly.

Day 3: Matsalu Bay is the most famous wetland site in Estonia and rightly so with thousands of waders, ducks, geese and Cranes passing through. Heaska tower on the north side of the bay offers the greatest range of species with many waders possible including Temminck's Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Ruff, Avocet and Spotted Redshank as well as masses of wildfowl and raptors such as White-tailed Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Hobby. The tower actually holds the record (128) for the number of species seen at one location in 24 hours. We shall also visit the headland at Puise, stopping at Põgari coastal meadow en route. The latter site is a great spot to pick up Barnacle Geese but also excellent for waders that should include Avocet and the locally breeding Baltic Dunlin. Puise peninsula which is a short distance further along the road should provide a few Scaup and Goldeneye

whilst the bushes are worth checking for migrant warblers and flycatchers as well as breeding Barred Warbler. As the day draws on we'll make our way towards Rannajoie tower where we have a chance of picking up Black Grouse as well as Montagu's Harrier, Crane and hopefully a few Elk to round off another wonderful day.

Day 4: We'll leave the west coast this morning and make our way to Soomaa National Park which lies roughly midway between Haapsalu and Tartu, making it a convenient area to spend a few hours exploring before continuing to our final destination in the south-east of the country. The national park is an extensive area of bog, woodland and wet meadows that experiences large floods on a regular basis in early spring. It's a very rich area and not on many peoples itinerary when visiting Estonia, which will make this area all the more exciting. We could expect Crane, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Greenish Warbler, Wryneck, White-backed Woodpecker, Three-toed Woodpecker, Golden Oriole and perhaps Nutcracker, Capercaillie or Hazel Grouse. We'll also stop on route as and when we spot birds which should include a good selection of raptors including Montagu's Harrier, Honey Buzzard and Lesser Spotted Eagle. In the evening we'll make an evening visit to Karavere Slid and the Great Snipe lek.



Day 5: Today we'll visit Ilmatsalu Fish Ponds which is an excellent site for a variety of birds and you can expect to pick up Whooper Swan, Red-necked Grebe, Slavonian Grebe, White-tailed Eagle, Osprey, Marsh Warbler, Penduline Tit, Thrush Nightingale and White-backed Woodpecker. From here we'll continue on to Alam Pedja Nature Reserve which is a vast wilderness and one of the wildest parts of Estonia. It contains a vast network of bogs and forests, with all the hoped-for owls, woodpeckers, grouse and raptors, including both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles. Woodpeckers include White-backed, Three-toed, Lesser Spotted, Black and Grey-headed Woodpeckers; plus goodies such as Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch, Corncrake and Thrush Nightingale. In the evening we'll visit Aardla where we'll hopefully with a bit of luck pick up Citrine Wagtail, Black Tern and maybe White-winged Black Tern.

Day 6: This morning we leave Tartu and head for the Alutaguse region which is the centre for Estonian bear culture and the area that we'll be spending the night in the bear hide. On route we'll stop in any good looking habitat or for any passing raptors before reaching our last site of the tour. The woodland and bogs in the Alutaguse region are also home to Lynx and Grey Wolf as well as Brown Bears; although the chances of seeing either of the aforementioned species are very slim. We do have a much better chance of picking up various woodland birds though including a chance of Capercaillie, Hazel Grouse, Black Grouse, Three-toed Woodpecker, White-backed Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Black

Woodpecker as well as Red-backed Shrike and Red-breasted Flycatcher. Ural and Pygmy Owl also occur in the area although to find either of these would be a real treat. We'll then collect our snacks and drinks to see us through the night in the bear hide.

Day 7: In the morning after we leave the hide we'll head to a local spa hotel to freshen up and enjoy breakfast before we slowly make our way back towards Tallinn stopping on route to check these eastern forests which hold an excellent variety of birds with past trips producing good numbers of Lesser Spotted Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Montagu's Harrier, Black Stork, breeding Green Sandpiper, Great Grey Shrike and wealth of warblers, flycatchers and woodpeckers. It's truly stunning and full of wildlife with a feeling that almost anything could turn up. We'll spend the final night in Tallinn where there should be a bit of time in the evening to explore the old city.

Day 8: In the morning we'll head to the airport for our return flights to the UK.

Dates: 27th May – 3rd June

Cost: £1,400 (includes night in bear hide).

The price also includes 7 night accommodation, all meals (if you have special dietary requirements please let us know when booking) and entry to the bear hide.

Group size: maximum of 8

Booking: Please email: steveduffield70@gmail.com

Where to meet: You will be met at Tallinn airport in Estonia. Please aim to be in Tallinn in the early afternoon.