# Estonia Trip Report

27<sup>th</sup> March - 3<sup>rd</sup> April

Winter & Early Spring Migration Mark Bonello



### Introduction

The objective of this trip was to carry out a yearly spotting of the Steller's Eiders that winter at Saaremaa island. This was strictly a birding trip and no dedicated effort was made to see mammals. We spent a 7 day guided tour by Uku Paal and the attendees were Raymond Galea, Nicholas Galea, Stefano Miceli, Benjamin Grech, Stefan Azzopardi, Alex Casha and myself. The visit was timed to manage some of the early spring migration as well as to see the wintering birds. Our main targets included Black Grouse, Bohemian Waxwing, Ural Owl, Pygmy Owl, Cappercaille and Hazel Grouse. Unfortunately the latter two were flushed and not seen properly while for the rest we had particularly good views. It was an exceptionally good winter to observe hawk owls but our timing was late and no records of this species would be taken back home, as they had already left. Overall the weather was unseasonably quite cold for early spring with temperatures dropping to  $-9\,^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the morning resulting in reduced bird activity particularly in forests.

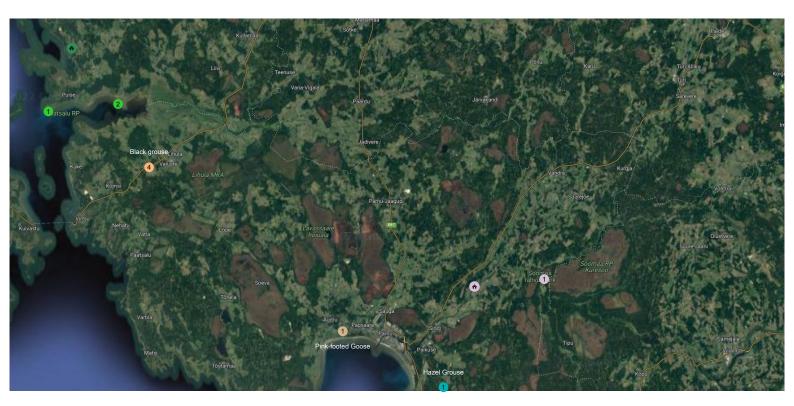
#### **Itenary**

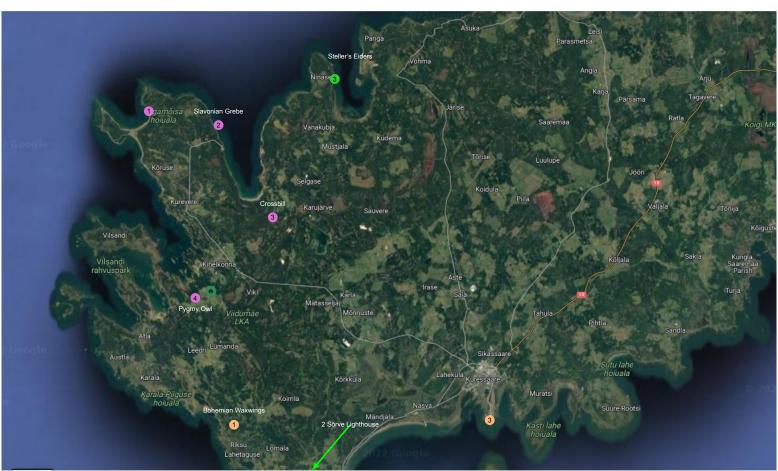
We flew to Tallinn Estonia with RyanAir leaving Malta at 06:15. The early morning flight meant we got to do some birding on our first day.

- **Day 1:** Arrived at Tallinn and met Uku Paal our guide at the airport, Grabbed lunch from Meistri Lyon Cafe and Boulangerie, Birding at Haapsalu and drove to Altmoõisa Guesthouse to stay for the following night.
- **Day 2:** Birding at Puise in Matsalu, took the ferry to Saaremaa Island and visited Saaremaa harbour and Vislsandi Rahvurspargi Kulatuskeks before we drove to our next guesthouse Loona Guesthouse where we would stay for the following 2 nights.
- **Day 3:** Our last full day in Saaremaa island was spent exploring even more coastal areas along the western part of the island. Following our dinner at the guesthouse we headed to a wooded area were we got our pygmy owl.
  - Day 4: Before we headed to mainland Estonia we visited Sorve Lighthouse and Roomassaare sadam.
  - **Day 5:** We visited various wooded areas in Sooma National park.
- **Day 6:** For our last day we resumed exploring Sooma National Park to test our luck with the capercaille and hazel grouse.

#### **Travelling**





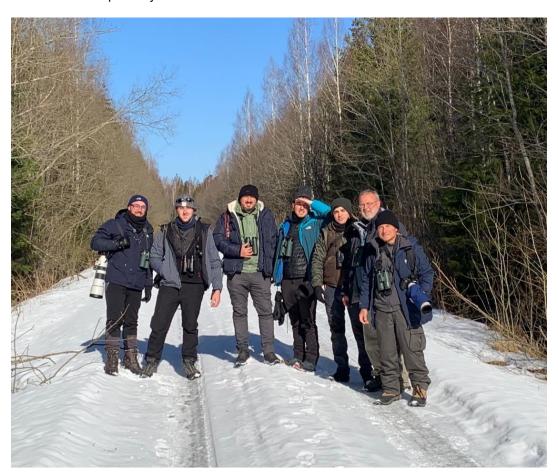


Notable birding spots top: Estonia and bottom: Saaremaa

#### Gear

Temperatures dropped to  $-9\,^{\circ}\text{C}$  and when factoring in the wind chill it gets quite cold so make sure you are equipped with thick jackets, insulating gloves and proper headwear. Thermal base layers and water proof jackets are required, as although infrequent, we experienced occasional precipitation that lasted a few minutes. Apart from the binoculars which are obviously a staple a spotting scope is essential. This provides better views during our sea watching excursions and is also useful when scanning large flocks of geese that will help you spot the rarer pink-footed or red breasted goose. In our group we shared 4 spotting scopes between us and served us well.

Photographic opportunities were scarce especially during sea watching as birds tend to be too far away for suitable photographic subjects. Having said that, probably your best bet is to carry with you a  $400\,\mathrm{mm}$  to  $600\,\mathrm{mm}$  telephoto lens. During forest birding it is easier to find subjects for photography, in my opinion I found woodpeckers easy to photograph. We managed decent shots during our ferry crossing between the mainland and Saaremaa so keep the camera on you as you will encounter long tailed ducks, tufteds, common scoters and possibly common eiders.



During one of our walks in Sooma National Park

## Day 1

#### 27th March - Padise Area

We arrived in Tallinn by Ryanair and found our guide Uku Paal waiting for us at the airport. En route to our planned lunch at Tallinn we saw flocks of geese mainly **Greater White-fronted Geese** migrating in large flocks. Our next stop after lunch was an owl session in Padise area. On our way, a pair of **Grey Partridges** was seen crossing the road until we arrived at a clearing where we had a raptor fest mainly **Common Buzzard**, **White-tailed Eagle** and **Rough-legged Buzzard** all seen hunting. The **Eurasian Tree Creeper** soon made an appearance immediately upon reaching Padise area. It was not long until we had excellent views of two **Ural Owls** seen in the image below which was one of the highlights of the trip for many. On our way to the guest house, our first male **Hen Harrier** and **Curlew** of the trip were spotted and not long after, the red fox got our mammal list up and running. Good numbers of **Yellowhammers** that were seemingly ever present throughout the trip were heard and observed flying. We stayed at Altmõisa guest house for our first night.



Ural Owl observed on the first day of the trip 27th March 2022.

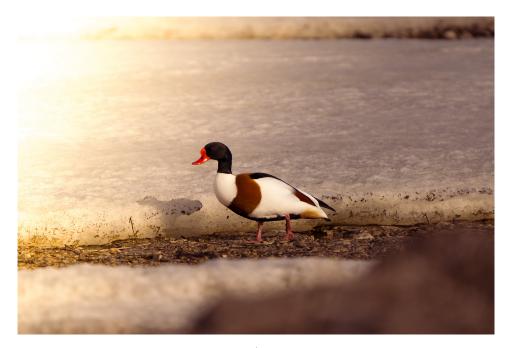




Tree creeper top & White tailed eagle bottom

#### 28th March - Matsalu & Saaremaa Island

Breakfast was planned at 7:00 and soon after we headed for sea watching at Puise in Matsalu National Park adding 2 female elks on the way to start off the day and a hare was seen running into a bush upon arrival. It is recommended to use a spotting scope during these sea watching sessions as some of the birds like **Smews** tend to be observed further away from the shore. Other notable birds observed were **Goosander**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Oystercatchers**, **Shelducks**, **Great Scaups**, **Teals** and **Ringed Plovers** while **Long-tailed Ducks** and **Common Goldeneyes** were present in large numbers. The **Common Scoters**, **Velvet Scoters** and **Northern Pintails** were seen migrating and a flock of about 12 **Snow Buntings** came feeding along shoreline. In nearby fields the **Wood Larks** showed well while **Siskins** and **Skylarks** could be heard occupying the meadows.



Shelduck; 28th March 2022

Our sea watching session resumed at a different area after lunch where a single male **Smew** showed prominently amongst a large flock of **Coots**. **Mute Swans**, **Bewick's Swans**, **Whooper Swans** and **Tufted Ducks** were present in this area. A couple of **Tree Sparrows** were seen in a tree behind us while a **White-tailed Eagle** was observed flying high. It did not take long to get our first of several **Grey Herons** of the trip as it was seen flying just over the sea and our sole encounter with **Canada Geese** made for a good mix of birds before we left for Saaremaa island.

Undoubtedly the highlight of the day has yet to come as we crossed to Saaremaa island to spot the highly anticipated **Steller's Eiders**. En route, **Grey-headed Woodpecker** and **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** were added to the list. During the ferry crossing various species of ducks we had seen earlier were noted with **Long-tailed Ducks** present in good numbers. Upon arrival at Saaremaa, we headed to Saaremaa sadam were we observed the **Steller's Eiders** from the harbour. This allowed us to enjoy magnificent views of them. On the other side of the harbour Uku spotted a **Red-necked Grebe** although it was a little too far to admire closely but still a welcome sighting. We spent the rest of the day photographing and admiring the eiders mostly, before heading off to Loona guesthouse where we stayed for 2 nights.



A male Smew showing prominently among a flock of coots

After we had dinner from the guesthouse we took a short walk close to the hotel in an attempt to see **Woodcocks**. Our efforts paid off as 4 **Woodcocks** were observed and circa 20 red deer running after each other crossed the street in front of us.

#### 29th March - Saaremaa Island

We headed off to Undva Point to resume sea watching where we enjoyed good views of ducks largely Common Scoter migrating. This allowed us to add more species to our records most notably, Redthroated Diver, Black-throated Diver and Black Guillemots to spice up our trip with the only species from the auk family encountered here. Our next stop was another sea watching location, this time on a sandy beach in Saaremaa where we added the Great Crested Grebe and Horned Grebe to our trip list. Both were too far away to be fully appreciated without a spotting scope. We resumed the day with forest birding were we had our first pair of Bullfinches which were showing beautifully from a tree. A Hawfinch made an appearance and while travelling to the next location a Fieldfare was observed relatively close to our van. Our forest birding later rewarded us with a Crossbill shown in Figure 7 and our third woodpecker, the Great Spotted Woodpecker. Both of them were clearly visible. Since bird activity in forests was low, we returned to the Steller's Eider location. This time they were much closer to the shoreline showing off splendidly in spite of the isolated snowfall which hindered the sighting for a couple of minutes. After we had dinner at our guesthouse we resumed birding at Viidumaäe forests primarily targeting Pygmy Owl to which we were successful. The small bird offered us good views perching on top of conifer trees and content with this effort we called it a day.





Female Bullfinch Male Bullfinch





Top: Crossbill and bottom: The Steller's Eiders observed from Saaremaa Sadam

#### 30th March - Saaremaa Island & Pärnu

The day could not start any better as a flock of **Bohemian Waxwings** (Figure 10) was observed from our van on our way to Sõrve. We parked the vehicle and got out to fully enjoy the waxwings eating berries from a nearby tree. Our final sea watching location was Sõrve peninsula where we added our only **Black-tailed Godwits** and **Merlin** of the trip. An unexpected surprise in the form of a **Rock Pipit** was seen perching on a rock living up to its name close to the shore that shortly flew off while a couple of **Redshanks** were waiting for us here. The **Smews** and **Common Scoters** close to the shore stole the limelight while a good number of **White-tailed Eagles** were a treat to see. Once again the spotting scope proved to be an essential accessory to fully enjoy the migrating birds and a young seal that was also observed from here.

Various species of ducks were once again present floating on the sea surface during our ferry crossing back to the mainland. We resumed birding in mainland Estonia en route to our next guesthouse. The drive to Tuhu Bog proved fruitful as a **Black Grouse** was observed grazing from the van. We quickly got off the van to get a better look with the spotting scope and binoculars. One of them flew just in front of us drawing our attention to 2 others which were nearby. Later we also added a **Middle Spotted Woodpecker** and a **Eurasian Nuthatch** to our trip list during a brief visit to a park in Audru. Later, we headed to Klaaramanni guesthouse that we made our home for the next two days. After dinner we tried to locate a Tawny Owl which was calling from the forest behind our guest house. Unfortunately the bird could not be located and headed to bed hoping for better luck the following day.



A flock of Bohemian Waxwings enjoying berries off a nearby tree observed on 30th March 2022.





Top: Long tailed ducks and bottom: Middle spotted woodpecker

#### 31th March - Soomaa NP

On this day, we had an early start and headed off to Soomaa National Park in search of a Tawny Owl which sadly we did not manage to see. Our next stop was the forest at Soomaa where we were greeted with a **Crested Tit** chirping atop of a tree. In the distance a familiar drumming caught our attention and saw a **Black Woodpecker** that unfortunately headed off to a wooded area and did not make itself seen again. Deeper in the forest the place was alive with birds and we continued our woodpecker streak where **White-backed Woodpecker**, **Three-toed Woodpecker** (Figure 12) and **Great Spotted Woodpecker** were all seen with relative ease. Walking slowly down the road through the forest rewarded us with sightings of **Great Tits** later joined by **Coal Tits**, **Willow Tits** and **Marsh Tits**. High up in the sky a winged figure loomed over the area that our keen birders of the group identified as **Golden Eagle**. Unfortunately it kept gaining height until it disappeared. Meanwhile we added a **Nuthatch** to the day list and it was good to see **Blue Tits** flying over our heads. Sightings of **Common Cranes** were present throughout and **Common Goldeneye** could be observed wherever we encountered bodies of water. Later we headed to a reed bed location in search of bearded tits. Unfortunately these were nowhere to be seen but instead we added a **Moorhen** and heard a **Water Rail**.



A Three-Toed Woodpecker giving life to dead timber in Soomaa NP observed on 31th March 2022.

After lunch we headed near Paikre OÜ where we had some time to scan mixed flocks of geese, **Northern Lapwings** and gulls. A sudden commotion arose as a **Goshawk** that was sitting in a tree flew over the feeding birds which caused the birds responded by flying haphazardly. On our way to a part of the forest

where a Boreal Owl was allegedly seen we saw a couple of **Stock Doves** that put up a brief appearance which we admired through the van windows. The hopes of finding a Boreal Owl were short lived as a pair of **Ural Owls** appeared in their territory meaning that there was little chance the Boreal was still there. On our way back to the guest house we saw around 4 wild boars feeding (possibly baited) and unintentionally dazzled a **Woodcock** with our van lights that was crossing street.





Top: Crested tit and bottom: Marsh tit

#### 1st April - Soomaa NP

We headed back to the scenery of Soomaa NP with the main targets being the **Capercaillie** and **Hazel Grouse**. The day kicked off really well with a **Nutcracker** making itself heard from the forest. It did not take long before it offered cracking views singing from atop of a tree just in front of us that can be seen in Figure 14.



Nutcracker offering cracking views singing atop of a tree, observed on 1st April 2022

The forest was alive with woodpecker drumming and tits chipring but the **Hazel Grouse** still eluded us until we flushed one and flew deep into the forest. Unfortunately that proved to be the only sighting of it. We were met with the same fate with the **Capercaillie** but decided to remain at the same place hoping it would return but the bird had none of it and remained unseen. However the day was not over yet and we had time to take a good look at the geese present in Audru Polder. The fields were flooded with mixed flocks of **Greater White-Fronted Geese**, **Tundra Bean Geese** and the occasional **Barnacle Geese** which were seen in the thousands. We stopped occasionally to scan the big flocks en route to look for a different species of Geese. It was a pleasant surprise when we spotted a **Pink-footed Goose** blending amidst the flock of bean and greater white-fronted geese.

# Complete Trip List

Common Name	Latin	Description
Gray Partridge	Perdix perdix	Seen in Padise and Audru always in pairs
Hazel Grouse	Tetrastes bonasia	Flushed and headed deep into the forest
Western Capercaillie	Tetrao urogallus	Flushed and headed deep into the forest
Black Grouse	Lyrurus tetrix	Seen twice, first time grazing in Tuhu Bog
Mute Swan	Cygnus olor	Present
Whooper Swan	Cygnus cygnus	Present
Bewick's Swan	Cygnus columbianus	Present
Barnacle Goose Canada Goose	Branta leucopsis Branta canadensis	Present
		Flock seen once at Haapsalu, Lääne-Virumaa.
Greylag Goose	Anser anser	Present
Tundra Bean Goose	Anser serrirostris	Seen in flocks of thousands
Pink-footed Goose	Anser brachyrhynchus	One amoung a flock of white-fronted and bean geese
Greater White-fronted Goose		Seen in flocks of thousands
Long-tailed Duck	Clangula hyemalis	Present in good numbers
Common Eider	Somateria mollissima	Seen migrating on 2 days
Steller's Eider	Polysticta stelleri	Circa 60 wintering at Saaremaa
Velvet Scoter	Melanitta fusca	Seen migrating
Common Scoter	Melanitta nigra	Commonly seen migrating and close to shore in Sõrve
Common Goldeneye	Bucephala clangula	Frequently seen where habitat is suitable
Smew	Mergellus albellus	Noted at Puise and Sõrve
Goosander	Mergus merganser	Common observation during sea watching
Red-breasted Merganser	Mergus serrator	Seen occasionally during sea watching
Common Shelduck	Tadorna tadorna	Present occasionally
Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	Seen from Puise
Tufted Duck	Aythya fuligula	Frequently observed
Greater Scaup	Aythya marila	Seen at Puise
Garganey	Spatula querquedula	3 birds seen at Audru Polder
Gadwall	Mareca strepera	Noted at Puise and Sõrve
Eurasian Wigeon	Mareca penelope	Common during sea watching sessions
Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	Present
Northern Pintail	Anas acuta	Noted at Puise, Sorve and at Audru Polder
Common Teal	Anas crecca	Noted at Puise
Red-necked Grebe	Podiceps grisegena	Noted at Saaremaa harbour
Great Crested Grebe	Podiceps cristatus	Noted at Saaremaa
Horned Grebe	Podiceps auritus	Noted at Saaremaa
Stock Dove	Columba oenas	Occasionally present near Padise and Soomaa NP
Common Woodpigeon	Columba palumbus	Present
Eurasian Collared-dove	Streptopelia decaocto	2 birds observed in Saaremaa
Western Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus	Noted at a reed bed in Audru area
Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	Noted at a reed bed in Audru area
Common Coot	Fulica atra	Common in harbours
Common Crane	Grus grus	Present
Red-throated Loon	Gavia stellata	2 birds seen migrating off Undva Point
Arctic Loon	Gavia arctica	1 bird noted migrating off Undva Point
White Stork	Ciconia ciconia	Seen flying and building nest close to Klaaramanni
Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea	Frequent sightings
Great White Egret	Ardea cirierea Ardea alba	Noted at Puise and Soomaa NP
Great Cormorant	Phalacrocorax carbo	Present
	Haematopus ostralegus	
Eurasian Oystercatcher	•	Noted at Puise, Sõrve and Tallinn harbour
Eurasian Golden Plover	Pluvialis apricaria	Circa 80 noted at Padise area
Common Ringed Plover	Charadrius hiaticula	Noted occaionally during sea watching
Northern Lapwing	Vanellus vanellus	Present

Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arguata	Noted from Sõrve	
Black-tailed Godwit	Limosa limosa	Seen from Sõrve	
Eurasian Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola	Noted on Saaremaa and Soomaa NP	
Common Snipe	Gallinago gallinago	8 birds noted at Puise	
Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus	A lone bird seen in Audru Polder	
Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	Noted at Sõrve	
Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ridibundus	Present	
Mew Gull	Larus canus	Present	
European Herring Gull	Larus argentatus	Present	
Great Black-backed Gull	Larus marinus	Occasionally during sea watching sessions	
Black Guillemot	Cepphus grylle	2 birds seen migrating from Undva Point	
Eurasian Pygmy-owl	Glaucidium passerinum	2 seen not far from our guest house at Saaremaa	
Tawny Owl	Strix aluco	Heard only	
Ural Owl	Strix uralensis	Noted at Padise area and Soomaa NP	
Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	Seen flying in Soomaa	
Western Marsh harrier	Circus aeruginosus	Female seen from Altmõisa guest house	
Hen Harrier	Circus cyaneus	Noted occasionally from van	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	Noted at Matsalu NP and Soomaa NP	
White-tailed Sea-eagle	Haliaeetus albicilla	Present	
Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis	Seen twice at Paikre OÜ & Audru Polder	
Rough-legged Buzzard	Buteo lagopus	Noted at Audru Polder	
Eurasian Buzzard	Buteo buteo	Present	
Grey-faced Woodpecker	Picus canus	Seen at Haapsalu	
Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius	Only sighting in Soomaa NP	
Three-toed Woodpecker	Picoides tridactylus	Couple of sightings in Soomaa NP	
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius	Only bird noted at Audru Park	
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor	Seen at Haapsalu	
White-backed Woodpecker	Dendrocopos leucotos	Noted in Soomaa NP	
Great spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major	Present where habitat is suitbale	
Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus	Noted at Padise area and Audru	
Merlin	Falco columbarius	Noted at Sõrve	
Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor	Occasional sightings in Soomaa NP	
Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	Frequently in Soomaa NP	
Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	Present	
Northern Nutcracker	Nucifraga caryocatactes	1 Bird observed in Pärnu forest	
Eurasian Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	Present	
Rook	Corvus frugilegus	Present	
Common Raven	Corvus corax	Present	
Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix	Present	
Coal Tit	Periparus ater	Observed once at Soomaa NP	
Crested Tit	Lophophanes cristatus	Noted at Sooma NP	
Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris	Noted at Sooma NP	
Willow Tit	Poecile montanus	Noted at Sooma NP	
Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus	Present	
Great Tit	Parus major	Present	
Woodlark	Lullula arborea	Occasionally seen in meadows	
Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis	Present	
Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus	Seen at Haapsalu	
Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris	Noted at Padise and Soomaa NP	
Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea	Noted at Soomaa NP and Audru park	
Northern Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	Noted at Soomaa NP	
Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	Present	
Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus	Common in Soomaa forest	
Song thrush	Turdus philomelos	Noted at Padise area and Saaremaa	
Eurasian Blackbird	Turdus merula	Present	
Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris	1 bird noted at Undva Point	
European Robin	Erithacus rubecula	Noted at Soomaa NP	
Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros	While driving through Audru	
Goldcrest	Regulus regulus	Present	
Bohemian Waxwing	Bombycilla garrulus	Flock of 22 in Kotlandi, Saaremaa	
Dunnock	Prunella modularis	Heard migrating in Soomaa NP	

House Sparrow	Passer domesticus	Present in residential areas		
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	Passer montanus	Noted in fields at Puise and Tallinn		
Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis	Occasionally heard and seen in meadows		
Rock Pipit	Anthus petrosus	Single bird noted at Sõrve		
Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	Present		
Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla	Noted at Jaamaküla and with a chaffinch flock		
Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes	Noted at Undva Point		
Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula	Usually in pairs present during forest birding		
European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris	Occasionally noted at Soomaa NP and Tallinn		
Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina	Present		
Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra	2 birds observed in Saaremaa		
European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	Noted in Soomaa NP		
Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus	Present		
Snow Bunting	Plectrophenax nivalis	Noted in small flocks at Puise and Undva		
Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella	Present		
Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus	Common where habitat is suitable		
Total: 129				

#### Mammal List:

Common Name	Latin	Description
Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Seen in Padise area
Elk	Alces alces	2 females observed close to Altmöisa guest house
Wild hare	Lepus europaeus	Observed running near Puise
Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	Seen feeding in Saaremaa
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus	Good numbers in Saaremaa
Grey Seal	Halichoerus grypus	Noted at Sõrve
Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	Feeding at Soomaa NP possibly baited by hunters
Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris	Noted at Soomaa NP
Arctic Hare	Lepus arcticus	Noted at Soomaa NP