Bird and Nature Trip to Estonia
February 19-25, 2023

Along Raudna jõgi (Soomaa)

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I visited Estonia in February 2023 with some friends - Ingrid Evaldsson, Mikael Qvarfordh and Markus Qvarfordh. Our primary target was to see overwintering Steller’s Eiders from Saaremaa, a mission that was accomplished on our first morning there. Despite the early season, we were also hoping to see some owls and woodpeckers both on Saaremaa (Vidumäe Nature Reserve) and on the mainland - mainly Soomaa National Park - but apart from a Middle Spotted Woodpecker (and lots of Great Spotted) we did not succeed on that front.

Our visit coincided with some quite heavy snowfall - this was perhaps bad for the birds but mostly a delight as the landscape views were absolutely magnificent. We were told that the week before had been exceptionally mild on the mainland with heavy rainfall and mud everywhere in Soomaa NP, this in stark contrast to our week when everything was covered in deep snow and temperatures went down to -15°C. It’s possible that the cold and these strong contrasts in weather interfered with bird life.

The aim of this report is to give some practical tips to travelers with similar aims to ours.

The report begins with various practical tips, followed by our itinerary and tips on various sites.

Note that we traveled without a DSLR camera, so all photos are taken with a mobile phone and there are basically no bird photos for that reason.

Travel

We traveled to and from Tallinn on the Tallink ferry from Stockholm, this worked very well.

Being EU citizens there were no complications with visas or similar, we didn’t even need to show our passports.

Car Rental, Petrol, and Ferry to Saaremaa

We rented a Toyota RAV4, an excellent choice especially to navigate the snow-covered forest roads, from www.easycarrent.ee. This was delivered to us in the parking lot immediately in front of Terminal D where we arrived, and was returned in the same manner. Everything worked very smoothly, we received the car with the tank half full and returned it in the same manner.

As in any country, in the urban areas there are lots of petrol stations, but in the countryside (the rural parts of Saaremaa where we spent most of our time and around Soomaa NP) they can be quite far apart. Filling up was a simple affair, just using your credit card by the pump.

The ferry to Saaremaa (Virtsu to Kuivastu and return) is very convenient. You can pay with a credit card upon arrival (a contactless device will be handed to you in your car). No booking is necessary in winter (although I’m told it’s wise to book in summer, when there is a lot of tourism), and the ferry runs every 35 minutes (https://www.praamid.ee/en/homepage).
Maps
For driving, we used Google Maps almost exclusively, which worked very well except when trying to find our way to Harilaid trail in NW Saaremaa, the app didn’t seem to have a clue about the condition of the forest roads in winter. Google maps was also our guide for finding suitable places to buy picnic food.

For hiking, we used the app RMK (the organization which manages Estonian state forests), https://www.rmk.ee/organisation/rmk-mobile-app, which was excellent. A must! For Soomaa we also visited the nature center at Tipu küla where we got a good map.

Climate
Saaremaa enjoys a mild winter climate, with normally limited snow cover. During our stay temperatures hovered around 0°C, with some snowfall as well. It still felt quite cold. Earlier during the winter they had had a huge snow storm, which had parts of Saaremaa go without electricity for a full week!

On the mainland temperatures are generally much lower, and this was the case also during our visit with around -10°C, and a thick - and beautiful! - snow cover. This was as expected, but as mentioned above they had experienced a warm spell just before our visit. Traveling at this time of year is truly a gamble.

Housing
During winter nature tourism by non-locals is very sparse. Thanks to us being four people staying for two nights, Loona Manor (https://loonamanor.ee/) was kind enough to open up for us, providing us with great breakfasts and dinners, as well as good rooms.
When visiting Soomaa National Park we stayed at Klaara-Manni (https://klaaramanni.ee/en/), which also proved to be an excellent choice. The owners grow their own vegetables and we loved the food.

In both places we could get our thermos bottles filled up with water, tea, or coffee in the mornings.

Both lodgings provided great birding just outside as well, with some nice sightings just outside the window - much recommended! And both landladies were lovely and very helpful with tips of various kinds.

In Tallinn we stayed at Citybox Hotel, chosen because it was a good price and within easy walking distance from the ferry.

Electricity
Estonia has standard continental European sockets.

Mobile Coverage and Wifi
Mobile coverage was very good. Only very rarely did we lose connection, and then only briefly.

Wifi was available in all places where we stayed, as well as in all restaurants where we checked. However, being EU citizens with free data roaming, we often didn’t bother to check, just using mobile data.
Food
There are food stores in most villages, but it can be some distance to drive when out deep in nature. Open restaurants were few and far between at this time of year, especially on Saaremaa, so we took most of our dinners at the places we stayed, buying picnics for our lunches.

Language
Estonians generally speak English so that made travel easy. To find your way around it’s good to know a few Estonian words, however:

jõgi - river
järv - lake
keskus - center
kirik - church
kohvik - cafe
laht - bay
looduskeskus - nature center
MKA = maastikukaitseala - landscape protection area
matkarada - hiking trail
mõis - manor
oja - stream
õpperada - study track
pank - steep rocky coast, cliffs
pood - store
raba - bog
rahuuspark - national park
rand - beach
saar - island
sadam - harbor
soo - marsh
vaatetorn - observation tower

Toilets
The national forests are well managed and there is often an outhouse, usually equipped with toilet paper.
Money
Estonia uses the euro. Credit cards were accepted everywhere we went, even for tiny amounts, with one exception; to pay for street parking in Pärnu we needed a euro coin.

ATM machines are available in most places but of course not in the countryside proper.

Preparations and literature
Main source of information was Birding Estonia by Uku Paal and Margus Ots, Second Edition from 2020. I strongly recommend purchasing this guide.

We also consulted various trip reports found on Cloudbirders, in particular

- **Mark Bonello:**

- **Daniel Gornall:**

Collins bird guide (Lars Svensson, Killian Mullaney, Dan Zetterström) accompanied us on our trip.

Itinerary (for coordinates to the main sites, see next section)

**Day 1:** Arrival in Tallinn by ferry at 10:30. Picked up rental car and drove to Marimetsa Nature Reserve, then continued towards Virtu Harbor for the ferry to Muhu Island. From there we drove to Saaremaa and onwards to Vidumäe Forest, where we parked at the Visitor Center.

Late dinner and night at Loona Manor.

**Day 2:** Early morning Loona Manor, then drove towards Ninase (peninsula), first stopping at the harbor (Saaremaa sadam), then continuing towards Tagaranna Harbor (just north) and Ninase pank on the western side of the peninsula.

After buying lunch at COOP in Mustjala, we drove the 129 to Möldri stream where we didn't see anything (although there were some Gray Herons and Mallards along the south coast of the Küdema bay) so we turned around. After several unsuccessful attempts to reach the beginning of the Harilaid trail we gave up and instead drove to Cape Undva. On our way back we took a side road to Suuriku cliffs. Walk in the forest behind Loona Manor.

Dinner and night at Loona Manor.

**Day 3:** Early morning Loona Manor, then drove towards Vidumäe Forest and onwards to Kuressaare bay by the medieval castle, then Roomassaare harbor to the east. On our way to the ferry from Kuivastu we stopped briefly on Muhu by St Catherine’s church (Muhu kirik). From Virtu
we drove on narrow beautiful roads (Rts 184, 179, 101) to Tuhu Bog (Soo), where we went for a short hike. Then Audru Park.

Dinner in Pärnu (VOA restaurant, really nice), night at Klaara-Manni.

**Day 4**: All day Soomaa. Driving on “Woodpecker road”. Hiking various trails in the park from dawn to dusk, see below.

There was no place to provision around the park so we drove to Tori for that, and had a late lunch at a picnic spot by Kuresoo bog and the Pärnu river. Then drove around for a long time hoping for some owls or other wildlife, but drew a blank.

Dinner and night at Klaara-Manni.

**Day 5**: Walked the trail behind Klaara-Manni after an early breakfast, then drove north to Kohila with the Keila river (we parked by the sports center). Onwards to Tammiku Forest Reserve (access is here) and finished the day off with the waterfall at Jägala before finding our hotel in Tallinn.

Night at Citybox hotel.

**Day 6**: In Tallinn, walking around in the scenic neighborhood of Kalamaja, then took the tram to Kadriorg park. Two of us departed for Sweden.

Night at Citybox hotel.

**Day 7**: In Tallinn, a walk from the center towards Pirita beach in the morning and then took the tram to the end station at Kopli, and walked the beach promenade.

Boarded the ferry to Stockholm in the late afternoon.

The main sites

**Marimetsa Nature Reserve**

Marimetsa (parking is here) was on our way from Tallinn to Saaremaa and also had a reported sighting (on ebird) of three Eurasian Pygmy Owls just a few days before our arrival, and so was a natural stop on our first day. It was snowing quite heavily although it let up while we hiked the first part of the trail. Unfortunately, perhaps because of the weather, we saw hardly a bird - only some Goldcrests and a pair of Bullfinches, but it’s a beautiful spot and I’d recommend taking the time to walk the entire 9 km trail (which we did not). Photo next page.
Virtsu-Kuivastu ferry (from the mainland to Muhu, from there you can drive to Saaremaa)

The weather was a bit rough going out on Feb 19, but we still saw some Common Mergansers and a few Long-tailed Ducks, apart from the gulls following in the wake of the ferry. On our way back the weather was better and we saw large flocks of Long-tailed Ducks which took flight because of a low-flying White-tailed Eagle.

In previous reports we had read about interesting sightings in the strait between Muhu and Saaremaa, but we saw only Mallards and a lone Mute Swan there.

Vidumäe forest

We visited Vidumäe forest twice in the hopes of owls, woodpeckers, and grouse. Apart from the ubiquitous Great Spotted Woodpecker (and a possible Black Woodpecker in the distance), we had no such luck. But we loved the place, it was beautiful in the snow and we saw both Roe Deer and a Moose there. There is also a small exhibition at the Visitor Center. The observation tower nearby was closed during our visit.

Along the Saaremaa coast - Ninase peninsula

The Ninase peninsula was the most rewarding for us. Saaremaa sadam - which had no human activity at all and is apparently only opened a dozen or so times a year for cruise ships - was the highlight, with a large flock of mainly Steller’s Eiders, Greater Scaup and Tufted ducks lying just by the pier as we parked. An amazing find! We later learned from our landlady at Loona manor that there is usually a flock here, while the larger more distant flocks that used to be observed from the coast have become more scarce. So definitely try this place first!
Further out we saw lots of other waterfowl, Common and Red-breasted Mergansers, large flocks of Long-tailed Ducks, the only Eider and the only Red-necked Grebe of the trip, etc.

A short distance further north we also visited the small Tagaranna Harbor from which we saw many of the same birds, and also a Red-throated Loon and a Razorbill.

From there on to Ninase pank (cliffs) which increased our waterfowl list with Velvet and Common Scoters, as well as an Arctic Loon, none of which were observed anywhere else. There is a short walk down to the sea from the parking lot.

**Along the Saaremaa coast - Undva**

Cape Undva (Undva pank) is a windswept and beautiful place. Two White-Tailed Eagles flew up on our approach, otherwise the main attraction from a birding perspective was a large flock of Mute Swans.

Driving back we took the turnoff (here) to Suuriku cliffs (Suuriku panga). There were a lot of abandoned buildings along the road which were quite scenic in the snow, perhaps of military origin.

Driving back we encountered a Great Grey Shrike just before the Undva bus stop.
Along the Saaremaa coast - Kuressaare and Roomassaare

Kuressaare bay by the medieval castle and Roomassaare harbor just to the east of Kuressaare (the only urban center on Saaremaa) were both rewarding for birding - we first checked with our landlady that the area would be ice-free.

We had our first Smew in Kuressaare bay. In both places we saw large flocks of Common Mergansers and a White-tailed Eagle. One of us saw a Merlin by the castle.

Tuhu bog

We visited Tuhu Bog (Soo), by driving the road going between Tuide Marsh and Tuhu Bog, where we parked by a modern inspirational observation tower at the start of the hike Tuhu matkarada. The bog was rather overgrown with pines, but was a beautiful sight in the snow. Much recommended - despite the absence of life at this time of year.

Audru park

Following previous trip reports we decided to try for Middle Spotted Woodpecker in Audru park and amazingly it was the first bird we heard, although - not being familiar with the species - it took a little while before we understood what the call was. We also had a large flock of Bullfinches there.

Soomaa National Park

From recommendations in other trip reports from this time of year we spent some time driving and stopping along the "Woodpecker road", especially at dawn and dusk. I had gotten the impression
that this was a local forest road, but it's actually Rt 128, the main thoroughfare through the park from west to east, starting at this point from Rt 151 connecting Riisa and Tipu. As a result I assume it's dependably drivable always, no matter the snow conditions, but it also means fastgoing traffic and limited opportunities for stopping. We also drove down a north-south road starting here. Unfortunately, no owl and no woodpeckers (beyond Great Spotted) on either.

In the early morning we hiked the Lemmjõe keeleemetsa öpperada by Raudna jõgi (river), see photo on page 1, it’s along the Woodpecker Road. Very scenic in the snow.

We also visited the observation tower overlooking Halliste jõgi, Tõramaa luha vaatetorn (photo below), before going to the visitor center, Soomaa rahvuspargi keskus. There we walked the Beaver trail.

![Image](image_url)

In the last good light we walked the Kuuraniidu öpperada trail twice (it’s some distance from the parking lot (along Woodpecker Road) but the actual trail is just a kilometer). Here one of us saw a grouse hen, likely a black grouse, in a tree but it got away too quickly for secure identification. We had been recommended this trail by our landlady at Klaara-Manni after she consulted with some local birders, as the best bet to see an owl.

**Jägala waterfall**

The frozen waterfall was an interesting site per se, but from a birding perspective the reward of going to see the Jägala waterfall was a Dipper a short walk downstream the waterfall, in this location:
Kopli Beach Promenade in Tallinn

Two of us spent two final days in Tallinn, mostly to experience the city (and Independence Day, celebrated on February 24) but also to do some final birding. Of particular interest was the beach promenade that we reached by taking the tram to the end station at Kopli, and then making our way down to the sea. We saw plenty of waterfowl here. The most interesting finds were four Smew and, in particular, a Little Gull that flew along the coastline, very close. This place was not mentioned in the Birding Estonia guide, so was a happy surprise 😊
Bird list

**Graylag Goose** (*Anser anser*) A pair flying by in Roomassaare harbor Feb 21.

**Barnacle Goose** (*Branta leucopsis*) 1 by Kurressaare castle Feb 21.

**Mute Swan** (*Cygnus olor*) Common in suitable habitat. Large numbers seen on our first day on Saaremaa (Feb 20), both from Saaremaa harbor and at Cape Undva, and on our last day (Feb 25) in Tallinn (beach promenade).

**Whooper Swan** (*Cygnus cygnus*) 5 seen from the car between Loona manor and Ninase Feb 20. Also heard from Loona manor earlier that morning, possibly the same flock flying by, and heard flying over Vidumäe forest Feb 21.

**Mallard** (*Anas platyrhynchos*) Observed most days.

**Tufted Duck** (*Aythya fuligula*) Large numbers seen from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20 and in Tallinn Feb 25.

**Greater Scaup** (*Aythya marila*) About 25 seen from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20 and about 50 just west of the ferry harbor in Tallinn Feb 25.

**Steller’s Eider** (*Polysticta stelleri*) 55 from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20.

**Common Eider** (*Somateria mollissima*) One male from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20.

**Velvet Scoter** (*Melanitta fusca*) 2 or 3 from Ninase Pank Feb 20.

**Common Scoter** (*Melanitta nigra*) At least 12 from Ninase Pank Feb 20.

**Long-tailed Duck** (*Clangula hyemalis*) A few observed from the Virtsu-Kuivastu Ferry Feb 19, and more than a hundred on our return Feb 21. Around 200 seen from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20, 20 from Ninase pank the same day, and 5 from Roomassaare harbor Feb 21.

**Common Goldeneye** (*Bucephala clangula*) About 30 from Saaremaa harbor, an additional 10 from Tagaranna harbor, at least 10 from Ninase Pank, 10 at Cape Undva, and 3 at Suuriku pank, all on Feb 20. About a dozen in Kuressaare bay Feb 21. Also observed along Pirita beach in Tallinn, 3 Feb 23 and 8 Feb 25. Later that day also observed around 30 along the beach promenade towards Kopli in Tallinn.

**Smew** (*Mergellus albellus*) 13 from Kuressaare Bay Feb 21 and 4 along the beach promenade towards Kopli in Tallinn Feb 25.

**Common Merganser** (*Mergus merganser*) About 25 from Saaremaa harbor, 10 from Ninase pank, and 3 from Suuriku pank, all on Feb 20; large numbers in Kuressaare Bay Feb 21, also observed around a dozen by Kuivastu harbor the same day, and in small numbers along the coast in Tallinn Feb 23 and 25.

**Red-breasted Merganser** (*Mergus serrator*) At least 25 seen from Saaremaa harbor and 3 from Ninase pank, all on Feb 20.
?Black Grouse (*Lyrurus tetrix*) One possible female along Kuuraniidu trail in Soomaa NP Feb 22 - sighting too brief to be sure it was a black grouse and not a capercaillie.

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) 1 in Keila river in Kohila Feb 23.

Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) 1 from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20.

Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) 1 from Roomassaaare harbor Feb 21 and 1 just west of the ferry harbor in Tallinn Feb 25.


Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) 16 from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20.

Razorbill (*Alca torda*) 1 flying, seen from Tagaranna harbor Feb 20.

Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) At least 2 from the Virtsu-Kuivastu ferry Feb 19, 1 from Roomassaaare harbor Feb 21, around 40 along Pirita beach in Tallinn Feb 25 in the morning. In the afternoon a flock of the same size seen in the harbor basin, possibly the same flock. Another 6 along the beach promenade from Kopli.

Little Gull (*Hydrocoloeus minutus*) 1 seen very close, flying along the beach promenade towards Kopli, Feb 25.

Common Gull (*Larus canus*) Observed all days when in the vicinity of the sea.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) Observed all days when in the vicinity of the sea.

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) 2 from Saaremaa harbor Feb 20, 3 in Kuressaare bay and 3 in Roomassaaare harbor Feb 21, and finally 2 along the beach promenade from Kopli in Tallinn Feb 25.

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) One from Tagaranna harbor Feb 20.

Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*) One flying, seen from Ninase Pank Feb 20.

Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) 1 seen from the ferry before arriving in Tallinn Feb 19 and more than 60 in Saaremaa harbor on Feb 20, later same day 1 at Cape Undva.

Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) 1 seen when driving past Keila river Feb 19, 1 seen from both Saaremaa harbor and Tagaranna harbor Feb 20, at least 2 in Küdema bay on the same day.


White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) On Feb 20 1 from the car driving on Ninase, and 2 at Cape Undva. On Feb 21, 1 in Kuressaare bay, 1 in Roomassaaare harbor, and 1 from the Kuivastu-Virtsu ferry.

Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) 1 from the car on Saaremaa, Feb 19, and four sightings Feb 21: one from the car on Saaremaa, two or likely three on Muhu.
**Middle Spotted Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopites medius*) 1 in Audru Park Feb 21.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker** (*Dendrocopos major*) Observed all three days on Saaremaa (including by Loona manor), also on the mainland Feb 21 and 22 in various forest habitats, including but not limited to Soomaa NP.

**Merlin** (*Falco columbarius*) 1 by the Kuressaare castle Feb 21.

**Great Gray Shrike** (*Lanius excubitor*) 1 close to the Undva bus stop on Saaremaa Feb 20.

**Eurasian Jay** (*Garrulus glandarius*) 1 heard in Vidumäe forest Feb 21.

**Eurasian Magpie** (*Pica pica*) This is not a city bird in Estonia, at least not in winter, but was regularly observed in the countryside, both on Saaremaa and on the mainland (mostly from the car).

**Eurasian Jackdaw** (*Corvus monedula*) Observed all days.

**Hooded Crow** (*Corvus cornix*) Common, observed all days.

**Common Raven** (*Corvus corax*) At least 5 from the car on Saaremaa Feb 19, 2 in Vidumäe forest Feb 21. On Feb 22, 2 along the Lemmjõe keelemetsa õpperada by Raudna jõgi (Soomaa), 2 by Klaara-Manni, at least 1 by Tõramaa luha vaatetorn (Soomaa), and 1 by the visitor center in Soomaa.

**Marsh Tit** (*Poecile palustris*) One certain observation in Audru park Feb 21. Probably also by Klaara-Manni

**Eurasian Blue Tit** (*Cyanistes caeruleus*) Observed almost every day.

**Great Tit** (*Parus major*) Observed every day except the first.

**Long-tailed Tit** (*Aegithalos caudatus*) One flock of at least 6 by Tõramaa luha vaatetorn (Soomaa) Feb 22.

**Goldcrest** (*Regulus regulus*) 5-6 in Marimetsa Nature Reserve Feb 19, 3 or more in Vidumäe forest Feb 21, at least 3 along Kuuraniidu trail in Soomaa NP Feb 22.

**Eurasian Nuthatch** (*Sitta europaea*) 1 along Kuuraniidu trail in Soomaa NP Feb 22, 1 along the trail behind Klaara-Manni Feb 23, and 2 in Kadriorg park in Tallinn Feb 24.

**Eurasian Treecreeper** (*Certhia familiaris*) 1 at Ninase pank Feb 20, 1 or 2 in Audru park Feb 21 and 2-3 in Kadriorg park in Tallinn Feb 24.

**White-throated Dipper** (*Cinclus cinclus*) 1 in Jägala jõgi downstream from Jägala falls Feb 23.

**Mistle Thrush** (*Turdus viscivorus*) Heard several times and briefly glimpsed along Kuuraniidu trail in Soomaa NP Feb 22.

**Eurasian Blackbird** (*Turdus merula*) Three on Muhu Feb 21, 1 in central Tallinn on Feb 23, 7 in Tallinn Feb 24 and 1 Feb 25.
Fieldfare *(Turdus pilaris)* 1 in Kohila by Keila jõgi Feb 23.

**House Sparrow** *(Passer domesticus)* Not observed on Saaremaa, but 4 on Muhu Feb 21 and all days on the mainland.

**Tree Sparrow** *(Passer montanus)* 1 on Muhu Feb 21 and 3 in Kopli, Tallinn, Feb 25.

**Common Chaffinch** *(Fringilla coelebs)* A flock of 20-30 by Loona manor Feb 20, and 1 on Muhu Feb 21.

**Eurasian Bullfinch** *(Pyrrhula pyrrhula)* Observed all days in suitable habitat, including several times by Loona manor. 2 in Marimetsa Nature Reserve Feb 19, apart from goldcrests the only birds there. Largest flock (around 30) in Audru park Feb 21. 10 in Kohila by Keila jõgi Feb 23. In Tallinn in Kadriorg park.

**European Greenfinch** *( Chloris chloris)* At least 3 by Loona manor Feb 20, at least 5 in Kohila by Keila jõgi Feb 23, at least 5 in Tallinn (Kalamaja and Kadriorg park) Feb 24.

**Twite** *( Linaria flavirostris)* 1 by Loona manor Feb 21.

**Common Redpoll** *(Acanthis flammea)* At least 5 by Klaara-Manni Feb 23.

**European Goldfinch** *(Carduelis carduelis)* Around 10 by Loona manor Feb 20.

**Eurasian Siskin** *(Spinus spinus)* At least 15 by Klaara-Manni Feb 23.

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**Mammal list**

**Roe Deer** *(Capreolus capreolus)* - 3 seen from the car on the mainland and one on Saaremaa Feb 19, 2 from the car when driving from Virtsu to Tuhu bog Feb 21, 3 in Soomaa NP Feb 22, 3+1 in Tammiku forest reserve Feb 23.

**Moose** *(Alces alces)*. 1 in Vidumâe Forest Feb 21.

**European Hare** *(Lepus europaeus)*. 1 from the car between Soomaa and Klaara-Manni Feb 22 and 1 near Jägala Falls Feb 23.

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