

ESTONIA, MAY 25TH – JUNE 3RD 2012
(PMC, SEC, RAD & APM)

Introduction

We were encouraged to visit Estonia after winning a free bearwatching excursion in an ‘Estonian Nature Tours’ competition, and also because every birder who’s been here seems to rave about it; indeed, it exceeded our expectations.

On the face of it, the country might seem very similar to Poland, with a comparable list of species but lacking some of Poland’s special birds such as aquatic warbler and collared flycatcher. But having been to both places, I believe Estonia is better – it’s just chock full of birds!



Great Grey Owl near Tudu

Surviving in Estonia

Estonia must be one of the most relaxing foreign excursions a UK birder could take: English is universally spoken (fluently!), everyone is helpful, it’s very safe and crime-free, the roads are almost empty and there is a general cleanness and efficiency about the place. In a change from my normal practice, I asked Estonian Nature Tours (www.naturetours.ee) to book hotels and car hire plus guided birding for two days. ENT have a good reputation and things worked out pretty well, but to be honest, guided birding is probably unnecessary in Estonia, it’s easy to bird yourself. Our 1½ days’ guided birding resulted in better views of Grey-headed and Black Woodpecker, some fantastic Lady’s Slipper Orchids, plus being taken to a superb wetland at Valguta that we’d never have known about otherwise.

Pests and Hazards

Don’t even think of going into an Estonian forest without spraying all your clothing in 100% DEET, and your exposed skin in 40% DEET. My off-the-shelf insect repellents didn’t deter the mozzies which bite through shirts, trousers and thin sweaters. We even came under mozzie attack in the bar of our hotel in the centre of Parnu, Estonia’s third biggest city! Midges were less of a problem. At ‘Hollywood Hill’ we forgot our repellent and encountered swarms of ‘blackflies’, non-biting insects that seemed intent on getting under our clothing until we eventually ran for it!

Two of our group were bitten by deer ticks. It is essential that you check yourself thoroughly at the end of each day and carry a tick-removing tool in your luggage.

Strategy

The other major problem in Estonia is the weather, which in May can range from one extreme to the other. It's not unusual for an entire day's birding to be lost to rain, perhaps one reason why all the birders we met were staying for a fortnight or longer. Continuous heavy rain can last for up to 48 hrs, a problem compounded by the almost total lack of birdwatching hides in the country. Having lodgings very close to a main birding site obviously helps when the weather's this changeable.

I thought it might be useful to list the (very few) sites in Estonia where you might birdwatch from shelter on a rainy day:

- the metal bird tower at Kabli – you should be able to seawatch through the plastic windows here;
 - the Hotel Promenaadi, which has sheltered balconies overlooking Haapsalu bay (there is also a covered pier behind the Spa Hotel Laine over the road, overlooking the Väike viik);
 - the Keemu and Kloostri bird towers on the south side of Matsalu bay are enclosed.
- ...and to my knowledge that's about it, please email me if I've missed any!

We visited in the last week of May for three reasons: firstly I'd hoped the weather would be better later in the spring (not always the case), secondly there were some late-arriving breeding species we wanted (notably Blyth's Reed Warbler) and thirdly there was a chance of some nice late-migrating waders such as Red-necked Phalarope and Broad-billed and Marsh Sandpipers (though these are always very hit-and-miss). May-June is also peak time for bearwatching.

Many birders told us we had to be out in the field at the crack of dawn to appreciate Estonian birdlife; I actually found the opposite to be the case. Firstly, in an under-populated country like Estonia, at 9am you may well be the first visitor of the day in the woods. Also, in spring many breeding birds are singing all day, for example we had our Blyth's Reed Warblers at 10am and 1pm, Marsh Warbler at noon, and pinpointed our first Red-breasted Flycatchers at 2pm – any earlier and the woods were too noisy to pick out their song!! Most woodpeckers were feeding young in the nest and therefore active all day long, so finding them was a case of walking a while and listening for soft drumming or calling young.

In the forests, the clearings were most productive (and much easier than trying to peer through woods in full leaf). Woodpeckers often choose to nest in the clearings, where it's easier to spot marauding pine martens.

Where to Stay / Where to Eat

The Estonian tourist season runs from mid-June to mid-August, so in late May you'll find plenty of empty rooms in hotels, and booking ahead is not essential. The popular holiday town of Parnu is a sleepy place at this time of year. Tartu by contrast is a bustling modern city; I couldn't fault our hotel, but getting in and out of Tartu city centre wasted a bit of time each day. The tourist board website: www.visitestonia.com/en/holiday-accommodation has loads of rural accommodation.

We stayed at three hotels: the Hansa in Tartu had fine rooms and an expansive, good value menu (recommend the Russian soup). The Villa Wesset in Parnu had more basic rooms but another cracking restaurant. The Baltic Hotel Promenaadi in Haapsalu had a more pricey restaurant with less impressive food (you might try the Laine across the road) but the location of the Promenaadi is unparalleled for birders: make sure you get a room number between 9 to 20 or 24 to 35 and you should have an uninterrupted view from your balcony down Haapsalu Bay. We had White-tailed Eagle at dinner and Caspian Tern for breakfast!

Outside of the towns there are food stores ('Pood') in every large village, but virtually nowhere to get a hot lunch (however, as already mentioned, loitering over a large breakfast is acceptable here!)

Information and Maps

Dave Gosney's 'Finding Birds in Estonia' is an essential. We made less use of Gerard Gorman's 'Birding in Eastern Europe', except for the section on Soomaa NP which is strangely omitted from Gosney. I also read several reports off the Travellingbirder website, particularly useful were J.Dawson's report from May 2007, J.Spencer's from June 2005 and H.van den Brink's from May 2009.

I was unimpressed with the red 'EOMAPS' on sale at most garages. We'd brought the Michelin 782 'Estonia' map, £6 (ISBN 782067 128439) and managed to muddle through with this and the Dave Gosney site maps. In retrospect though, we really should have invested €20 in the detailed 'Atlas Esti Teed' (ISBN 978-9949-416-71-4), which is handy to have in a country with so many newly-discovered bird sites.

There is a website for Estonian bird news: www.estbirding.ee/home.

We did meet other visiting birders to exchange information with, many thanks to them all especially Debi Shearwater, who had already been in-country for a month. The only park centre we visited was at Soomaa, in the hamlet of Tõramaa, which is a good source of info but unfortunately the ranger we met had limited English. Luckily Debi had earlier met the warden here, and passed all his news onto us. The only other warden we met was at Kabli, who had some interesting local info.

ITINERARY :

We planned to divide our week between the Parnu and Tartu areas. Because there was an interval before our bear-watching excursion at the end of the week, we decided to use this time to make a quick dash to west coast, taking in the famous migration sites of Haapsalu and Matsalu (even though migration here had declined to a trickle by late May).

Fri 25 th May	-	fly to Tallinn; drive to Parnu.
Sat 26 th May	-	Nigula 'magic corner', Pikla Pools, Kabli
Sun 27 th May	-	Soomaa NP
Mon 28 th May	-	Nigula 'magic corner'; drive to Tartu; Käravere Slid snipe lek
Tues 29 th May	-	Ilmatsalu fish ponds; Aardla wetlands

Weds 30 th May	-	Guided day with Rein: Järvselja woods , Valguta polder
Thurs 31 st May	-	Ilmatsalu fish ponds, 'Hollywood Hill', Valguta polder
Fri 1 st June	-	to Tallinn (two of our party flew home); Sutlepa Meri, Matsalu Bay
Sat 2 nd June	-	Dirhami woods, Paldiski headland; go to bear hide at Tudu
Sun 3 rd June	-	birding Tudu area with guide; back to Tallin & fly home

SITE GUIDE -

PARNU DISTRICT

Nigula

The only area of Nigula we visited was the 'Magic Corner' (Gosney, p.25.), arriving on 26th and 28th May and seeing different birds each time. On our first outing we were savaged by the mozzies, but by the time of the second visit the wind had picked up, so they were only a mild annoyance.

The area marked for 'grey-headed woodpecker' (Gosney site 7, p.25) is now a clearing, and here a **Black Woodpecker** appeared and began mobbing a **Ural Owl!** The presence of this particular owl was apparently widely known.

We later learned that a **Grey-headed Woodpecker** was nesting near the clearing, so on our second visit we sat and waited until the 'pecker showed. Walking the southernmost rectangle of the 'Magic Corner' between 10:00 and 14:00 produced brief views of 2 **Hazelhen**, a nice singing **Greenish Warbler** and lots of Red-breasted Flycatchers.



Ural Owl, 'Magic Corner', Nigula Bog

Pikla Pools

Several other birders and trips reports had made less than complimentary comments about this place, but we ranked it as one of our favourite sites of the trip!

On the entrance track a **Blyth's Reed Warbler** was singing in a ditch, our first of the trip. Golden Oriole and Wryneck sang from the trees while the flooded polder had bags of waders including displaying Ruff, and male Garganey chased females overhead. The reedbeds held booming Bittern and some very confiding Great Reed Warblers. It was a shame that several sections of paths were closed off at the beach leaving only the viewing platform accessible. Strangely, the one bird missing was the Savi's Warbler, famous for nesting by the tower every year.

Heading south, we tried to locate the way to the Häärdeemeeste bird tower opposite the church (Gosney p.23), but failed to find the turning. (We had also ran out of time to visit the Audru meadows west of Parnu.)

Kabli

Kabli is one of the most southerly birding sites in the country, and this is reflected in the local breeding species, which include Hoopoe, Tawny Pipit and Serin. A White-backed Woodpecker also visits in the mornings, according to the warden. We saw none of these but we did hear a snatch of Serin song.

The site is very easy to find by following the coast road south from Häädemeeste village, passing through Penu and Kuri villages until, just north of Kabli village itself, you see the large Heligoland trap on the right with the warden's hut next to it. The coastal woodland north of here forms an ever-narrowing strip which funnels autumn migrants down into this trap (but obviously not so good in spring!)

Unfortunately in the late afternoon, the dunes and woods were pretty dead in the heat, except for the Pool Frogs. However there was plenty of bird activity in the gardens over the road, which held Redstart, Red-breasted Flycatcher and common warblers.

Soomaa National Park

This huge park deserves longer than the day we had there. Starting early with a slow drive along the main west-east road at 6am to look for capercaillie and hazel grouse, we soon realised we should have started from the east because the sun was shining in our eyes the whole time! The road is marked by kilometre posts in descending order from the visitor centre at Tõramaa; by Kilometre post 10 was a promising looking clearing, and we stopped here around 7am. Sue, having wandered some way down the road, reported seeing a "black jay-sized bird with a white rump, making a strange 'knoorrrr, knorrr' call as it flew away!" Immediately I whipped out my iPod and speakers and managed to lure back the **Nutcracker** which then posed brilliantly on top of a tree.

Stopping further on at Kilometre post 8, we heard a **Grey-headed Woodpecker** calling, which was then answered by two others, though unfortunately none would show themselves. Then a **Greenish Warbler** appeared and parachuted into a lone tree, singing. A fantastic start to the day!

Deciding it was too far to head back to Parnu for breakfast, we made the mistake of looking for a friendly local café (there isn't one), but our wanderings took us to Selja village, where at a lake just south of the village we watched up to 8 **Red-necked Grebes** calling and courting, with another tried to swallow an oversized fish. Also Wryneck and Golden Oriole here.

Returning to Soomaa, we parked at the start of the 2km Tõramaa Bird Tower Trail and met several birders just returning. They had seen golden eagle and elk from the tower at the end, but nobody had any luck trying to spy the corncrakes calling in the grass below. The mozzies were out in force again, but the meadow was very pleasant, with some nice views of **Red-breasted Flycatchers** on the way through the woods.

We finished the day on the Beaver Trail, a short forest walk near the Tõramaa centre: not much new here, some nice examples of beaver dams.

TARTU DISTRICT

Karavere Slid

At the famous Great Snipe lek, the posts and information boards had now been removed, ostensibly because they contravened European wildlife protection legislation. However the directions in Gosney are still basically correct: just before the Emmajõgi river bridge, 14km

out of Tartu on Route 2, is a lone farmstead with a stork's nest; turn right into the farm, continue on this track for ½ km and park somewhere before the track forks and heads downhill (curiously there is a **P** sign at the bottom of the left fork, but no parking bay here). At this time of year the lek is supposed to start (quietly) at 18:00, and continue to last light at 10:30pm. The **Great Snipes'** bill clicking was audible from the track, and with a scope they could be seen leaping at the lek 200m to the northwest. They were not visible on the ground – arriving earlier in the season might have been better. It was certainly an atmospheric spot with **Corncrake** calling, a **Nightjar** in the distance and a **Spotted Crane** joining in briefly.

Ilmatsalu Fish Ponds

A very special site; Ilmatsalu village is signed off Routes 2 and 92 out of Tartu. By the parking bay there were **Marsh Warblers** around the scrubby ponds. This site had more people around than elsewhere – anglers, hikers and birdwatchers – but the birds seem to have got used to this and we got excellent views of **Thrush Nightingales**, **Penduline Tits** and our second **Blyth's Reed Warbler** singing in willow scrub by the reedbed. Our target species here was the **White-backed Woodpecker** which had eluded us so far, although it is relatively common in Estonia compared to the rest of Europe. In Gosney their favourite area is described as beyond the bird tower in the canalside woods (actually a strip of elderly willows immediately alongside the path), and here we found ♀♂ **White-backed Woodpeckers** on both our visits. Carrying on to the end of the canalside path Rob found an **Elk** feeding in the meadow. It should be possible to complete a circular walk around Ilmatsalu by crossing the canal bridge north-eastwards from the woodpecker area, but the path immediately after this was flooded, and wellies would have been essential to continue.



Watching Citrine Wagtails at Aardla wetlands

Aardla wetlands

On the afternoon of 29th we travelled around Aardla sites 1,2,3 and 4 in Gosney. There were superb views of four **Citrine Wagtails**, and the only **Grasshopper Warbler** and **Lesser-spotted Woodpecker** of the trip among other birds. The riverside road (site 1) has expansive views over the flood meadows, and deserves more time than we could spare to explore it.

Järvelja woods

Starting at 7am with our guide Rein, we spent a long time in the various woods near this village, 40km south-east of Tartu. It was dimly rainy and this was easily our most disappointing morning, despite the early start. The only thing of

interest was a group of **Wild Boar** on the road, a mammal tick for all of us. Nearby lies the

well-watched marsh of Rapina Polder; however, some visiting birders had said it was bone-dry and birdless this year, following the dry winter.

Valguta Polder, Lake Võrtsjärv

This proved to be a real 'honeypot' site. We'd originally planned to visit the Sangla Pools on Lake Võrtsjärv (Gosney p.26) but our guide Rein said these had very low water levels after the cold but dry winter, and he took us instead to Valguta Polder, a fairly new site which was created after drainage pumps broke down and fields re-flooded.

We arrived in the early afternoon just after a period of heavy, continuous rain lasting from 11pm to 11am. This had clearly halted migration completely and Valguta held dozens of Knot, Grey Plover and Godwits along with some rarities in the form of 10 **Red-necked Phalaropes**, an all-too-brief **Marsh Sandpiper** and best of all a breeding plumage **Broad-billed Sandpiper**, a rare sight these days given its sad population decline in Scandinavia.

Returning the following day we found the water level noticeably higher. Many waders had departed but there were now 3 Broad-billed Sandpipers and about 100 Little Gulls. A **Spotted Crane** called briefly from the polder. As we left a **White-tailed Eagle** flew up, and while pursuing it we encountered an Osprey.

To find Valguta Polder, travel 30km southwest from Tartu on Route 3 towards Rongu. At the Rongu junction, turn right onto Route 47 for 10km to Valguta; in Valguta village take a left turn, signed to Rannaküla. Follow this road for a few miles, ignoring a right turn to Vollipollu, then take a left at a small green sign to 'Keskkonnapunkt'. This track will take you to the lake: there is a good vantage point by the 'monument stone' as you reach the lake, but the best views of the shallows are obtained by driving beyond this, bearing left and then continuing as far as water levels will allow.

Hollywood Hill (Alam-Pedja)

Rein had informed us that the famous Alam-Pedja reserve was far, far worse for mosquitoes than Järvselja woods (where we'd just been eaten alive). With this in mind we decided to give it a miss and just visit nearby 'Hollywood Hill', easily located by its 'Hollywood' sign above a cafe, about 24km northwest of Tartu along Route 2. (The obvious path up from the cafe is a bit treacherous and it may be better to circle round the back of the hill).

This was a very productive viewpoint and something new seemed to be passing every five minutes. The highlights were a pair of **Lesser Spotted Eagles** which drifted for several miles northwest, and also a Black Stork seen by a Finnish/US group, just before we arrived unfortunately. The most famous local residents are a pair of Greater Spotted Eagles, which occasionally wander close enough to the hill to be properly identified. However, we were informed that one of these birds has now been trapped and DNA tested, revealing it to be a hybrid Lesser/Greater. The Estonian birders seem to take a relaxed attitude: if it looks exactly like a Greater Spotted, it's good enough!

THE WEST COAST

Matsalu Bay

We spent one very wet evening on the north side of this famous bay, starting out by heading about 5 miles south of Haapsalu on Route 31, and taking the turning to Puise and Kildeva as directed in Gosney, to site 6 (p.11) the Põgari-Sassi Bay. It was possible to bird from the car here, though not much to see except a very late Barnacle Goose. Returning to Route 31*, we continued another 10km south and then turned right towards Haeska village and the legendary Haeska Bird Tower. This has an excellent panorama over the marsh, though in the pouring rain we saw little apart from Goosander.

A birder informed us that he'd seen 6 Elk, on view simultaneously, from Kloostri tower on the south side of the bay.

**Note that in the Gosney guide, there is an error on page 11: the road shown leading to the Haeska bird tower from near Põgari-Sassi Bay is actually a road leading to the 'Kildeva Tower', which seemed virtually bird-free. To find the Haeska tower, continue on the Route 31 past the Puise/Kildeva turning for 10km then take a right turning towards Haeska village and continue right to the end of this road. The inset map in Gosney showing the tower and buildings is correct.*

Haapsalu area

As already mentioned, the optimum spot for viewing the Western part of the bay is probably the Baltic Hotel Promenaadi. Gulls, terns and other waterbirds were seen from here (while waiting for the rain to abate) and Black Redstart sang nearby. When the weather cleared, we crossed the road to view the Väike viik lake with its **Slavonian Grebes**, then walked north along the peninsula to look for grounded migrants. Beyond the unattractive industrial estate is a scrubby area at the end of the headland, and though not much migration was in evidence (just a few Wheatears & Red-backed Shrikes) we did get superb views of 3 **Barred Warblers**, singing and fighting over territory.

On the Eastern side end of the bay, older maps show 6 bird-towers (Linnutorn). Some of these towers have been declared unsafe and closed, but the following two seem good: the Kirimäe Vaateplatvorm is definitely worth a stop, just off Route 9 east of Haapsalu: shortly after turning off Route 9 onto Route 17 towards Linnamae, take the third track on the left which has a reserve map notice board. Drive to the parking bay at the end of this track and the tower is a short walk further on. From the car park we had 3 **Caspian Terns** fishing and Great White Egret.

Another good tower is reached by continuing along Route 17 in the direction of Linnamae, then turning left before the town onto a minor road signed to Silma. Drive down here for 2½ km (en route passing an obvious tower, which appears to be derelict) until you find a parking bay with a notice board on the right. Ignore it, and drive 200m to another parking bay on the right directly opposite the start of the trail. This trail leads through the woods for 1km to the Silma Loodustrada tower, superbly located overlooking the bay with an amphitheatre of pinewoods behind. Unfortunately the weather turned on us as we arrived, so we only saw Hobby, lots of Cranes and a distant **White-tailed Eagle** on a rock.

The famous slavonian grebe pond, just west of Vonnü village, south of Haapsalu, did not hold any grebes, but did provide a 'trip tick' in the form of a Moorhen!

Sutlepa Meri

A very pleasant spot with a good boardwalk through the reeds (Gosney p.5). The most northerly bird tower overlooks an excellent reedbed and lake with Black and **Caspian Tern** and 100 Little Gulls. This was the only site in Estonia where we saw **Savi's Warbler**; at least 4 birds were viewable from the tower but we also got excellent views from the boardwalk trail. Nearby **Barred Warblers** sang from the scrub, but these proved unbelievably difficult to see!

Dirhami/Spithami

We visited these woods on the off-chance of finding parrot crossbills. Parking near the dock, head back through the village about 300 yds and turn left to find a track that leads north through some gorgeous mossy pinewoods. There were a few singing Redstarts and Woodlarks, plus some Common Crossbill overhead. The sea was very quiet, so we decided to skip Spithami head and continue to Paldiski.

Paldiski headland

This well-known site for **Black Guillemot** is one of the first birding sites along the coast west from Tallinn, and proved well worth the stop. Approaching Paldiski town on route 8, continue straight ahead through the town on the road, which eventually ends at a parking area. The grassy meadows near the car park held several noisy, invisible **Corncrakes**, and from the cliffs Tysties and a summer-plumaged Long-tailed Duck (possibly the last one in Estonia?) were viewable on the sea below.

THE NORTHEAST: TUDU AREA

As we'd booked a night in the bear hide nearby, we spent the last couple of days birding in the forested area around Tudu, including a morning's guided birding (apologies but I did not note down directions for all these places!). Most of the time we spent driving the many forest tracks in the area, but note that some tracks are very rocky and do require 4x4 transport.

The area was rich in woodland birds and our guide found us **Grey-headed** and **Black Woodpeckers**, before stumbling across a **Three-toed Woodpecker** at its nest hole. We also spent some more time looking for capercaillie; no luck, but some nice views of Black Grouse as compensation.

At the bear hide, we found ourselves the only visitors, since the bears were known to have deserted the area during the previous week (they returned a couple of days after our visit). The forest was deathly silent as we waited; a Red Fox paced the boundary, then vanished. Then, at 10pm, to our amazement a **Great Grey Owl** appeared and began hunting right in front of the hide! This Estonian rarity was presumably listening for the rats attracted by the carcasses left out for bears. After nearly an hour, it pounced on something and flew off. Two **Raccoon Dogs** also came to feed in front of the hide, and then the owl reappeared in the early hours of the morning. Despite the lack of bears, a very good night's work!

Combined Trip List, 174 species:

- Slavonian Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*): 6 on the Väike viik, Haapsalu, viewable from behind the Spa Hotel Laine. (No birds present at the well-known site at Vonnü village).
- Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*): Present at most wetland sites.
- Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*):** 8 at a lake just south of Selja village (21km NE of Parnu); 3 at Valguta Polder; 1 at Aardla wetlands; 6 at Sutlepa Meri.
- Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*): Common at all wetlands; c70 at Valguta Polder, 30th.
- Bittern (*Botaurus stellaris*): Heard booming at Pikla Pools, Valguta Polder and Sutlepa Meri.
- Great White Egret (*Egretta alba*): 3 at Pikla Pools; 1 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds; 4 near the Kirimäe Vaateplatvorm, Haapsalu; max. count of 5 at Valguta Polder, where there is now an established breeding colony.
- Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*): Very common. Max count =20 near the Kirimäe Vaateplatvorm, Haapsalu.
- White Stork (*Ciconia ciconia*): Common, nesting everywhere.
- Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*): Common.
- Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*): Several breeding pairs: 1 pair at Selja; 2 pairs at Aardla.
- Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*): 2 at Pikla Pools; 14 at Põgari-Sassi Bay, Matsalu; 6 with goslings on the Väike viik, Haapsalu.
- Barnacle Goose (*Branta leucopsis*): 1 at Valguta Polder, 29th; 1 at Põgari-Sassi Bay, Matsalu, 1st June.
- Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*): 2 at Pikla Pools; 1 at Põgari-Sassi Bay, Matsalu.
- Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*): Very common.
- Gadwall (*Anas strepera*): 4 at Pikla Pools; 2 at Valguta Polder; Aardla wetlands.
- Pintail (*Anas acuta*): 2 from the Silma Loodustrada bird tower, Haapsalu.
- Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*): 2 at Pikla Pools; 1 west of Viljandi; 12 flying over Valguta Polder, on 31st.
- Wigeon (*Anas Penelope*): 3 at Valguta Polder on 30th and 4 there on 31st.
- Teal (*Anas crecca*): 2 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds; 2 at Valguta Polder on 30th and on 31st.
- Garganey (*Anas querquedula*): At least 2 pairs at Pikla Pools; 1 at Aardla wetlands; 2 at Valguta Polder; 1 at Sutlepa Meri; 1 at Haeska bird tower, Matsalu.
- Pochard (*Aythya ferina*): 4 at Aardla wetlands; 6 at Valguta Polder; flock in Haapsalu Bay.
- Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*): Present on most large water bodies, including 5 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds.
- Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*): 1 summer-plumage ♂ off Paldiski headland.
- Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*): 10 heading north, offshore from Kabli; 7 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds; 2 at Valguta Polder; flock in Haapsalu Bay.

- Goosander (*Mergus merganser*):** Only seen along the northwest coast: 2♀ near the Kirimäe Vaateplatvorm, Haapsalu; ♂♀ at Haeska bird tower, Matsalu; 3 passing offshore at Paldiski headland.
- Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*):** 7 overhead, early morning in Parnu city; 1 on the river at Joesuu near Soomaa; 2 off Paldiski headland.
- White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*):** 1 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds; 1 at Valguta Polder on 30th and 31st; 1 seen from 'Hollywood Hill'; 1 from the Silma Loodustrada bird tower, Haapsalu; 1 from the Baltic Hotel Promenaadi, 1st June.
- Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*):** 1 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds; 1 at Valguta Polder.
- Lesser Spotted Eagle (*Aquila pomarina*):** A pair was seen around noon on 31st from 'Hollywood Hill', one of which was displaying. Also two 'probables' were seen from the car between Tartu and Tallinn. Not as common as expected.
- (Greater) Spotted Eagle (*Aquila clanga*):** Remarkably, the first eagle species of the trip! An adult, seen from the roadside at Joeck, west of Ridakula, on the Viljandi – Tartu road, on 28th May. We had prolonged views of the bird as it slowly circled and ascended, picking up all the main features including the evenly-blackish plumage, broad wingtips, single pale underwing crescent, heavy bill, broad, fan-shaped tail and pale crescent on the uppertail coverts. Unfortunately we failed to get any photos. Considering the most up-to-date figures estimate the total Estonian population as only 6 'pure' pairs plus 10 'hybrid' pairs (one Greater with one Lesser Spotted), we'd been extraordinarily lucky.
- Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*):** 1 along the Tõramaa - Kildu road in Soomaa; 1 from the car, between Tartu and Tallinn.
- Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*):** Commonly encountered near any wetland.
- Montagu's Harrier (*Circus pygargus*):** 1 ♂ from the road between Selja and Tõramaa in Soomaa NP; 1 ringtail seen from 'Hollywood Hill'; 1 ♂ from the road near Tudu.
- Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*):** Common.
- Honey Buzzard (*Pernis apivorus*):** Singles seen most days; ♂ displaying at Nigula.
- Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*):** 1 en route between Tallinn and Parnu; 1 en route between Tartu and Tallinn.
- Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*):** Not a common species: 1 en route to Nigula; 1 at Paldiski headland; 1 en route Tallinn – Tudu.
- Hobby (*Falco subbuteo*):** 1 in Soomaa NP; 1 at Sutlepa Meri; 1 from the Silma Loodustrada bird tower, Haapsalu.
- Black Grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*):** 1 ♂ lekking at the roadside near Tudu; another seen flying nearby.

- Hazel Grouse (*Bonasa bonasia*):** 3 individuals on the south track at 'magic corner', Nigula, one of them flushed, the others seen walking across the track. Exactly where described in the Gosney guide!
- Corncrake (*Crex crex*):** *Heard at many sites, including: 3 calling at the Tõramaa bird tower, Soomaa; 3 calling at Karavere Slid; and at least 3 calling at Paldiski headland, near the car park. Reported to be much commoner at the beginning of the month*
- Spotted Crake (*Porzana porzana*):** 1 calling briefly at Karavere Slid, 10.30pm on 28th; 1 calling briefly at Valguta Polder, 3pm on 31st.
- Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*):** One pair with nest and young on the 'slavonian grebe' pond near Vonnü, were the only ones seen.
- Coot (*Fulica atra*):** Present on most freshwater sites.
- Crane (*Grus grus*):** Widespread; the largest flocks were 46 'dancing' in fields by Valguta village, and 50 at Sutlepa Meri.
- Oystercatcher (*Haematopus ostralegus*):** 2 at Kabli; 2 at Põgari-Sassi Bay, Matsalu; 1 from Haeska bird tower, Matsalu.
- Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*):** 1 dropped in briefly at Valguta Polder, on 31st.
- Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*):** 2 on the beach at Pikla Pools; 2 at Valguta Polder on 30th; 12 there on 31st.
- Grey Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*):** c50 at Valguta Polder, 30th; 6 there on 31st.
- Golden Plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*):** c10 at Valguta Polder, 30th; 2 there on 31st.
- Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*):** Common in most parts of the country.
- Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*):** c150 at Valguta Polder, 30th; 20 seen heading north at Põgari-Sassi Bay, Matsalu on 1st June.
- Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*):** 12 at Valguta Polder, 30th, and 10 there on 31st; 1 at Haeska bird tower, Matsalu.
- Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*):** 1 at Valguta Polder on 30th; and 3 there on 31st.
Only the second time the species has been recorded at this site (although it is a very new site).
- Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*):** 3 at Valguta Polder on 31st (not seen on 30th).
- Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*):** 9 at Valguta Polder, on 30th; 2 there on 31st.
- Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*):** Regularly encountered in swampy woodland, where highly vocal!
- Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*):** Only seen at Ilmatsalu: 2 there on 29th and 1 on 31st.
- Redshank (*Tringa totanus*):** 2 at Pikla Pools; 1 at Põgari-Sassi Bay, Matsalu.
- Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*):** 1 superb summer-plumaged bird was at Valguta Polder, on 30th.
- Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*):** 1 seen briefly at Valguta Polder on 30th before flying off.
- Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*):** 6 at Pikla Pools; 1 at Valguta Polder, 30th.
- Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*):** c30 at Valguta Polder, 30th.
- Curlew (*Numenius arquata*):** 1 heard at Pikla Pools; pair near Haardemeeste; 1 seen en route Tartu - Valguta; 1 seen en route Haapsalu - Matsalu.

Woodcock (*Scolopax rusticola*): 1 flushed at Nigula; 1 flushed at Järvselja.

Great Snipe (*Gallinago media*): At least 6 lekking at the famous Karavere Slid site, 10pm on 28th May.

Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*): Quite common, seen drumming at Pikla Pools, Ilmatsalu and Valguta Polder.

Red-necked Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*): 2 at Valguta Polder on 30th and 10 there on 31st.

Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*): Several displaying ♂ in flooded polder at Pikla Pools, 26th; 1 summer-plumaged ♂ at Valguta Polder, 30th; 1♀ Matsalu Bay.

Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*): Common. c100 at Valguta Polder, 30th.

Common Gull (*Larus canus*): Common; nesting at Pikla Pools.

Little Gull (*Chroicocephalus minutus*): 4 at Aardla wetlands; 2 in field near Valguta village; 12 at Valguta Polder on 30th; c100 at Valguta Polder on 31st; c100 at Sutlepa Meri on 1st June.

Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*): Common.

Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*): Regular at coastal sites.

Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*): 1 offshore at Kabli; 2 at Haeska bird tower, Matsalu.

Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*): Regular along the coast, also: 1 west of Viljandi; 3 at Aardla; 1 at Valguta Polder on 30th; c40 at Valguta Polder on 31st; 1 at Haeska bird tower, Matsalu.

Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*): Only 1 positively identified, sitting offshore at Pikla Pools.

Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*): 1 briefly at Sutlepa Meri; 3 fishing near the Kirimäe Vaateplatvorm, Haapsalu; 1 from Baltic Hotel Promenaadi, Haapsalu.

Black Tern (*Chlidonias niger*): 7 at Aardla wetlands; 1 at Valguta Polder on 31st; 8 at Sutlepa Meri.

Black Guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*): 8 on the sea off Paldiski headland.

Feral Pigeon (*Columba livia*): Common around towns.

Woodpigeon (*Columba palumbus*): Common.

Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia turtur*): 1 in field near Mõisanurme village, 15km west of Tartu.

Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*): Common and highly vocal at this time of year.

Great Grey Owl (*Strix nebulosa*): Surprise bird of the trip! – 1 adult hunting in front of the bear watching hides near Tudu on 2nd – 3rd June. This bird had presumably been driven in from Russia during the harsh winter of 2011/12.

Ural Owl (*Strix uralensis*): Adult at 'magic corner', Nigula, 26th and 28th, loitering until 9:30am. Late May is a good time to spot this species, when adults are still working hard to feed young.

Nightjar (*Caprimulgus europaeus*): 1 heard churring distantly, near Karavere Slid on 28th.

Swift (*Apus apus*): Common.

Black Woodpecker (*Dryocopus martius*): 1 seen at 'magic corner', Nigula; 1 heard drumming in the woods briefly, near Valguta Polder; 2 seen near Tudu in the Alataguse. A fairly common forest bird in Estonia, but very quiet at this time of year.

Grey-headed Woodpecker (*Picus canus*): 1 seen at 'magic corner', Nigula, close to the site indicated on p.25 of Gosney; 1 seen in flight near Tudu in the Alataguse. In addition, 3 were heard calling to each other near km post 8 in Soomaa, but these proved impossible to see!

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus major*): Fairly common in the woods, seen at Nigula, Soomaa, Järvelja, Ilmatsalu, Tudu.

White-backed Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus leucotos*): A pair at Ilmatsalu, seen very well on 29th and again on 31st. This was the only place we saw this species, despite a lot of hours in many different woods.

Three-toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*): After much fruitless searching at staked-out sites at Järvelja and Tudu, we chanced across a ♀ at a nest hole near Tudu.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus minor*): Female collecting food at Aardla wetlands.

Wryneck (*Jynx torquilla*): Only 1 seen, tape-lured near Selja. Quite frequently heard singing, including one opposite the Villa Wesset in Parnu, early morning.

Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*): Common.

Woodlark (*Lullula arborea*): Pair at the 'black grouse lek' near Pikksaare Ringtee, Nigula; at least 2 singing in the woods at Dirhami.

Sand Martin (*Riparia riparia*): Fairly common; an old colony was by the quarry at Aardla.

Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*): Common.

House Martin (*Delichon urbica*): Fairly common.

Meadow Pipit (*Anthus pratensis*): Fairly common.

Tree Pipit (*Anthus trivialis*): Several encountered at Nigula, Soomaa and Järvelja.

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*): Abundant.

Yellow Wagtail (flava race) (*Motacilla flava*): Very common.

Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*): At least 4 individuals at Aardla wetlands, near the bird tower. Reported to also be present in 2012 at Audru and near the 'Häardemeeste Rannaniit' bird tower..

Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*): Common.

Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*): Fairly common.

Robin (*Erithacus rubecula*): A relatively uncommon forest species, only 4 sightings during the week.

Thrush Nightingale (*Luscinia luscinia*): A common species, but usually difficult to see well. Our best views by far were obtained at Ilmatsalu fish ponds, where they seem more accustomed to human visitors.

Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*): Surprisingly uncommon, considering there's so much suitable habitat; 1 in gardens at Kabli; 2 singing at Dirhami woods.

Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus ochruros*): 1♂ by the Tõramaa visitor centre in Soomaa; 1♂ singing at Sutlepa Meri; 2♀♂ on the harbour buildings at Dirhami; 1♂ singing in Tudu village; pair at Haapsalu.

- Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*):** Single birds encountered at many sites; most appeared to be migrating, though they do also breed.
- Whinchat (*Saxicola rubetra*):** Widespread and seen most days. Max. count of 6 at Aardla.
- Song Thrush (*Turdus philomelos*):** Singing in most woodlands; adult feeding 3 young at 'magic corner', Nigula, 28th.
- Redwing (*Turdus iliacus*):** 1 singing at Ilmatsalu fish ponds was the only one encountered.
- Mistle Thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*):** Occasional in woodlands, Nigula, Soomaa; pair feeding at the bear hide, Tudu.
- Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*):** Common.
- Blackbird (*Turdus merula*):** Common.
- Garden Warbler (*Sylvia borin*):** Common.
- Barred Warbler (*Sylvia nisoria*):** 3 singing and showing well on Haapsalu headland, 9am on 2nd June. Also 4 singing at Sutlepa Meri, and 1 singing at Kirimäe Vaateplatvorm.
- Blackcap (*Sylvia atricapilla*):** 1 ♀ seen at Nigula, occasionally heard in various woodlands but definitely outnumbered by Garden and Icterine Warblers.
- Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia curruca*):** Fairly common in woodland.
- Whitethroat (*Sylvia communis*):** Very common.
- Sedge Warbler (*Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*):** At least 4 singing at Valguta polder; also at Pikla Pools, Aardla, and Ilmatsalu.
- Grasshopper Warbler (*Locustella naevia*):** 1 reeling near the bird tower at Aardla wetlands.
- River Warbler (*Locustella fluviatilis*):** Heard only: 1 at Nigula; 1 at Pikla Pools, 2 heard at Aardla wetlands; 1 at Järvselja.
- Savi's Warbler (*Locustella luscinioides*):** Only encountered at Sutlepa Meri, where at least 4 singing birds present.
- Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*):** Present at most reedbed sites; at least 5 singing birds at Sutlepa Meri.
- Marsh Warbler (*Acrocephalus palustris*):** Just one pair found, in willows close to the car park at Ilmatsalu fish ponds, on 26th. Unfortunately, two days later these willows were strimmed!
- Blyth's Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus dumetorum*):** 1 singing along the entrance track to Pikla Pools; 1 singing near the bird tower at Ilmatsalu. Good views were eventually obtained, confirming the species' longer, darker-tipped bill, more pronounced supercilium, and lack of buffy underpart tones compared with Reed Warbler.
- Great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*):** Common in all reedy habitat; we had particularly good views from the car, driving up to the first bird tower at Pikla Pools.
- Icterine Warbler (*Hippolais icterina*):** Common in woodlands.
- Willow warbler (*Phylloscopus trochilus*):** Abundant.

Wood Warbler (*Phylloscopus sibilatrix*): Common and vocal, though tricky to see well.

Chiffchaff (*Phylloscopus collybita*): Common, including one of the 'abietinus' race seen well.

Greenish Warbler (*Phylloscopus trochiloides*): 1 singing near km post 8, on the Tõramaa - Kildu road in Soomaa; 1 singing at 'magic corner' in Nigula.

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*): 1 seen in Nigula forest, heard in many different forests.

Spotted Flycatcher (*Muscicapa striata*): Common.

Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*): Common in most woodland, where they sang throughout the day. Top sites were Tõramaa bird tower trail at Soomaa NP (at least 3 singing here), at 'Magic Corner' Nigula, and at Järvelja.

Pied Flycatcher (*Ficedula hypoleuca*): Regularly encountered in most woodlands.

Great Tit (*Parus major*): Common.

Blue Tit (*Parus caruleus*): A widespread but relatively uncommon woodland species.

Willow Tit (*Parus montanus*): 2 pairs seen well around 'magic corner', Nigula; 1 pair at Ilmatsalu fish ponds.

Marsh Tit (*Parus palustris*): Pair at 'magic corner', Nigula.

Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*): 2 in Soomaa NP; 2 at 'magic corner', Nigula; 8 near the Silma Loodustrada bird tower, Haapsalu.

Bearded Reedling (*Panurus biarmicus*): Heard only, at Pikla Pools and at Ilmatsalu fish ponds.

Penduline Tit (*Remiz pendulinus*): At least 4 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds, very audible and visible near the bird tower; also at Aardla wetlands.

Nuthatch (*Sitta europaea*): 1 in Nigula forest; 1 from the Tõramaa trail, Soomaa NP; 1 at Ilmatsalu fish ponds.

Treecreeper (*Certhia familiaris*): 1 on the Beaver Trail, Soomaa; 1 at Järvelja;

Red-backed Shrike (*Lanius collurio*): 1 near km post 10, Soomaa NP; 1 on the Tõramaa trail, Soomaa NP; 2♀♂ at Ilmatsalu fish ponds; 1 at Järvelja; 2♀♂ at Haapsalu headland; 1♀ at Paldiski headland.

Magpie (*Pica pica*): Common.

Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*): Occasional.

Nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*): 1 near kilometre post 8 on the Tõramaa - Kildu road, at around 7am on 27th.

Jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*): Very common.

Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*): 1 near Mõisanurme village, en route Parnu to Tartu; flock of c50 encountered near Valguta Polder; 3 near Ilmatsalu.

Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*): Abundant.

Raven (*Corvus corax*): 2 at Pikla Pools; 7 together (roosting?) at Aardla wetlands; 1 near Valguta village; 2 seen from 'Hollywood Hill'; 1 feeding at the bear-watching site.

Starling (*Sternus vulgaris*): Very common.

Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*): Quite common but elusive, heard at most sites. 1 ♀ seen in flight at Ilmatsalu fishponds.

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*): Common.

Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*): Common.

Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*): Abundant
Linnet (*Carduelis cannabina*): Scattered sightings.
Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*): Common.
Greenfinch (*Carduelis chloris*): Quite common.
Siskin (*Carduelis spinus*): Small flock at Nigula; 1 at Ilmatsalu; 2 at Järvelja; 2♂♀ at Paldiski headland, several heard in the Tudu area.
Serin (*Serinus serinus*): 1 heard at Kabli.
Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*): Pair in clearing at Järvelja woods; pair at Dirhami woods; pair at Paldiski headland.
Hawfinch (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*): Present in most woods, generally brief views and flypasts, but good views of one from the river bridge at Joesuu near Soomaa. Max. counts were a flock of 3 at Nigula; a flock of 4 in Järvelja.
Common Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*): 1 heard at Nigula; 2 seen at Järvelja; 1 heard at Dirhami woods.
Common Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*): Very common and vocal.
Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*): Very common in any wet habitat.
Yellowhammer (*Emberiza citrinella*): Very common.

Mammals

Brown Hare: 1 at the 'black grouse lek' field near Pikksaare Ringtee, Nigula, was the only one seen.
Mountain Hare: 1 seen briefly near Tudu.
Raccoon Dog: 2 individuals at the bear-watching site near Tudu. The first seen at 22:30pm and joined by another at midnight.
Red Fox: 1 at the bear-watching site near Tudu, 20:30pm.
American Mink: 1 brazen individual was watched from the Tõramaa bird tower at Soomaa.
Wild Boar: Family party of 6 crossing a forest track near Järvelja.
Elk: 1 grazing in the marsh at the far end of the Ilmatsalu reserve, 11:00am.
Roe Deer: About a dozen seen during the week.

Reptiles & Amphibians

Common Lizard: 1 was found under a rock, on a brief stop en route Tartu – Tallinn.
Pool Frog: At least 3 seen in coastal pools at Kabli.
Marsh Frog: Common, heard or seen around most marshes.
Common Frog: Very common and widespread.

Insects

Camberwell Beauty: 1 along the Tõramaa Trail; 1 Nigula.
Scarce Fritillary: 2 seen sunning on the track near the Grey-headed Woodpecker clearing at 'magic corner', Nigula.

Chequered Skipper: At least 2 in a grassy ditch near the Grey-headed Woodpecker clearing at 'magic corner', Nigula.

Small Tortoiseshell

Map

Peacock

Orange Tip

Green-veined White

Holly Blue

Brimstone

White-faced Darter: At several sites including Sutlepa Meri and Kabli.

Four-spotted Chaser: An abundant species throughout the country, but especially at Sutlepa Meri where incredible swarms were brought down by the rain.

Downy Emerald: Several at Sutlepa Meri.

*in addition to the above, there was an abundant fritillary species flying in Nigula woods which refused to land for us, so was never identified (possibly Niobe's?)

Orchids

Lady's Slipper Orchid is quite common and flowering at this time of year; seen on the roadside verge of a forest track near Tudu, by the delapidated Flying Squirrel watchpoint.

Military Orchid is widespread and common around the coastal sites.

Other bird species, not seen:

Great White Pelican: We did consider diverting for this long-staying Estonian rarity, reported on 'estbirding', but no directions were forthcoming except that it was "near Karksi".

Capercaillie: Searched for this species along the gravel tracks around Tudu and Soomaa NP in the early morning, with no luck, Always a difficult bird at this time of year.

Black Stork: One had been seen soaring from 'Hollywood Hill, and two reported from Valguta Polder the previous week. A rare breeder in Estonia.

Golden Eagle: Not easy anywhere!

Lesser Black-backed Gull: Surprisingly, no sign of any 'Baltic' or Høeglin's Gulls at any sites we visited.

Pygmy and Tengmalm's Owls: Both species are best looked for in March and April; by early May they are almost impossible. Our guide assured us that visiting breeding sites in late May would be a complete waste of time!

Green Woodpecker: Declining in Estonia, and now almost completely confined to the islands.

Middle-spotted Woodpecker: We did not make a big effort for this species, but there are possible sites in the Tartu area, as follows:

1) Middle-spotted had been reported in the centre of Tartu city at 'Toomemägi', the hill by the old town, and at Raadi Cemetery northeast of the river, both earlier in the spring. They may well be resident in the city parks.

2) *Heading on Route 3 towards Rongu, pass under a bridge junction signed Route 160 to Rannu; turn off to the right and check the woods around here.*

3) *Continuing from here on the 160 towards Rannu, there is a left turning onto Route 161 towards Ervu, and the woods near this junction may hold Middle-spotted.*

Booted Warbler: *An extremely late migrant, only arriving at its sites in the south of the country in June.*

Crested Tit/Coal Tit: *Surprising not to encounter either of these species, considering the time spent in pinewood. May have suffered in the recent cold winters.*

Great Grey Shrike: *Often present on the blanket bogs (eg at Nigula, Soomaa), but we didn't visit this habitat..*

© Copyright PMCallagher, 2012

May only be copied for personal use.

Email pmcallagher@yahoo.co.uk