



Estonia - Birds and Bears

Dates: 12th – 19th May 2018



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

Large concentrations of migratory waterfowl pass through during April and May with many species still in abundance late into spring. A trip at this time of year provides us with a very good chance of picking up a diverse variety of wildfowl including Barnacle and Brent Geese as well as Common Scoter, Velvet Scoter and Long-tailed Ducks. Other species such as White-fronted Geese, Goldeneye, Scaup, Wigeon, Pintail and Garganey are all, also likely to be encountered. It's also a great time for good numbers of passage waders, resplendent in their summer plumage including Ruff, Wood and Green Sandpipers, Temminck's Stints, Spotted Redshanks and maybe something a little more unusual such as a Broad-billed Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper or Red-necked Phalarope. Raptors feature well with White-tailed Eagles being a daily sight along the coast whilst Montagu's, Marsh and Hen Harriers; Hobby, Honey Buzzard and Lesser-spotted Eagle are almost guaranteed. Add to this the expansive stretches of forest found throughout the country supporting a rich array of birds, animals and flowering plants. These woodlands support eight species of Woodpecker, Hazel Grouse, Black Stork and several species of Owl. Woodcock are common and Nightjar

regular whilst during the day Red-breasted Flycatcher, Thrush Nightingale, Barred Warbler, Icterine Warbler, Greenish Warbler, Red-backed Shrike and Common Rosefinch all add their voices to the cacophony of bird sounds and sights making this a spectacular spring birding destination.

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



Day 1: We catch a scheduled flight to Tallinn where we should arrive in the early afternoon and head straight to the hotel in Haapsalu, where we'll spend the next three nights. In the early evening we'll spend some time around the east end of Haapsalu Bay where there's a good chance we'll start with some great species such as White-tailed Eagle, Osprey, Hobby, Crane, Great White Egret, Little Gull, Black Tern, Bearded Tit, River Warbler and Thrush Nightingale.

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

Day 3: Matsalu Bay is the most famous wetland site in Estonia and rightly so with thousands of waders, ducks, geese and Cranes passing through. Heaska tower on the north side of the bay offers the greatest range of species with many waders possible including Temminck's

Stint, Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Ruff, Avocet and Spotted Redshank as well as masses of wildfowl and raptors such as White-tailed Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Hobby. The tower actually holds the record (128) for the number of species seen at one location in 24 hours. We shall also visit the headland at Puise, stopping at Põgari coastal meadow en route. The latter site is a great spot to pick up good numbers of Barnacle Geese but also excellent for waders that should include Avocet and the locally breeding Baltic Dunlin. Puise peninsula which is a short distance further along the road should provide large flocks of Scaup and Goldeneye whilst the bushes are worth checking for migrant warblers and flycatchers. As the day draws on we'll make our way towards Rannajoie tower where we have a chance of picking up Black Grouse as well as Montagu's Harrier, Crane and hopefully a few Elk to round off another wonderful day.

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

Day 5: Today we'll visit Ilmatsalu Fish Ponds which is an excellent site for a variety of birds and you can expect to pick up Whooper Swan, Red-necked Grebe, Slavonian Grebe, White-tailed Eagle, Osprey, Marsh Warbler, Penduline Tit, Thrush Nightingale and White-backed Woodpecker. From here we'll continue on to Alam Pedja Nature Reserve which is a vast wilderness and one of the wildest parts of Estonia. It contains a vast network of bogs and forests, with all the hoped-for owls, woodpeckers, grouse and raptors, including both Greater and Lesser Spotted Eagles. We shall take a hiking trail from Kirna which covers about 4 miles and provides us with the opportunity to pick up White-backed Woodpecker, Three-toed Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker and Grey-headed Woodpeckers as well as Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch, Corncrake, Thrush Nightingale and Lesser Spotted Eagle. In the evening we'll visit Aardla where we'll hopefully with a bit of luck pick up Citrine Wagtail, Black Tern and maybe White-winged Black Tern.

Day 6: This morning we leave Tartu and head for the Altaguse region which is the centre for Estonian bear culture and the area that we'll be spending the night in the bear hide. On route we'll stop in any good looking habitat or for any passing raptors before reaching our last site of the tour. The woodland and bogs in the Altaguse region are also home to Lynx and Grey Wolf as well as Brown Bears; although the chances of seeing either of the afore-mentioned species are very slim. We do have a much better chance of picking up various woodland birds though including a chance of Capercaillie, Hazel Grouse, Black Grouse, Three-toed Woodpecker, White-backed Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and Black Woodpecker as well as Red-backed Shrike and Red-breasted Flycatcher. Ural and Pygmy Owl also occur in the area although to find either of these would be a real treat. We'll then collect our snacks and drinks to see us through the night in the bear hide.

Day 7: In the morning after we leave the hide we'll head to a local spa hotel to freshen up and enjoy breakfast. We'll also be spending our last night here which will allow us the rest of the day to explore this little known region. A couple of days spent in this area in spring 2015 and 2016 produced some excellent birding with good numbers of Lesser Spotted Eagle, Honey Buzzard, Montagu's Harrier, Black Stork, breeding Green Sandpiper, Great Grey Shrike and wealth of warblers, flycatchers and woodpeckers. It's truly stunning and full of wildlife with a feeling that almost anything could turn up.

Day 8: In the morning after breakfast we'll make our way back towards Tallinn for a mid-afternoon flight back to Manchester. There should also be time to stop on route to admire any birds and scenery before finally leaving this wonderful country.

Dates: 12th – 19th May 2018

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

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

Group size: maximum of 8

Booking: Please email: steveduffield70@gmail.com

Where to meet: If you choose to fly from Manchester our guide will meet you at the airport for the outward flight on the first day. Otherwise if you fly from London or elsewhere you will be met at Tallinn airport in Estonia. Please aim to be in Tallinn in the early afternoon.