

Estonia

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Participants

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White-backed Woodpecker

Day 1 The flight arrived on time at Tallinn and everybody got their luggage without problems. We drove directly to the much smaller town of Pärnu, which was to be our base for the next two nights. Pärnu is a nice seaside town with about 50,000 citizens and our hotel was about 300 meters from the seashore and just over the road from a park with old trees, a promising place for woodpeckers! On the way to the Pärnu we saw a few common birds – fields full of migrating Northern Lapwings, Common Starlings and Sky Larks and several Common Buzzards sitting on a telegraph posts. Also, the first White Storks had already arrived. We put our luggage in the hotel and had another half an hour drive to Soometsa forests. Just few days ago our guide had seen a Northern Hawk-owl but unfortunately it had moved back north so our efforts to find the bird weren't rewarded. The forest was really quiet, probably as a result of the very cold winter. The few hours birding here offered mostly common birds, including small groups of Mistle Thrushes and Crested Tits.

Day 2 We started at 06.30 driving from our hotel with the first destination being Soometsa forests, which is part of the Luitemaa Nature Reserve. The main target birds here are woodpeckers. It was really foggy at first – visibility was less than 100 metres, so we started our trip with a coffee and sandwich. After half-an-hour, the visibility was getting better so we started our walk along small forest tracks. First, a group of four Long-tailed Tits (white-headed race) were hanging close to us on a willow bush and soon afterwards we heard the first woodpecker drumming. It was Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, but, unfortunately, the bird wasn't seen in the continuing fog. Later the call of Black Woodpecker was heard and a pair of Common Cranes were trumpeting in the swampy forest. After two hours birding, we headed back to the bus. But just before that – a juvenile (3cy bird) White-tailed Eagle flew over our heads. We drove about 1 km and then made another stop to listen for forest birds. Just as we went out, a soft tick, made by White-backed Woodpecker was heard quite close to our bus. Soon a nice male landed near the roadside and we got brief views through the telescope before the bird moved off. Another group of Long-tailed Tits were also seen in the same spot. We made another stop in a coniferous forest where we heard some Goldcrests and saw male Great Spotted Woodpecker before continuing our birding close to the Latvian border around Häädemeeste village. First, we checked the territory of a Middle Spotted Woodpecker but didn't have any luck with that, only a Red Squirrel and Marsh Tit showed for us. Just before the lunch, we scanned the Häädemeeste coastal meadow which held flocks of Northern Lapwings, Taiga Bean and Greylag Geese and a pair of Common Cranes, whilst in the river delta, about 20 Whooper Swans, a few Goosanders, Eurasian Wigeons and Common Shelducks were encountered. We headed next to the local ladies community house, a really cosy place where two very friendly ladies

served an excellent traditional lunch to us. After a huge amount of stew and tasty cheesecake, a short rest at the hotel was very welcome. In the afternoon we drove back to Soometsa area with a hope to find a Eurasian Pygmy-owl or Ural Owl. Just before the forested areas, we spotted a very pale buzzard type bird near the road: a very nice Rough-legged Buzzard was sitting on a tree top. In the “hawk-owl” forest clearing a Great Grey Shrike gave us lovely view through the 'scope. We then waited at a Northern Pygmy-owl site but unfortunately no luck today, but we did see one Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. We returned to the hotel hoping for a better owl day tomorrow.

Day 3 Today was our longest driving day. We started from Pärnu and headed to Saaremaa Island and then drove to northwest Estonia. The purpose of the Saaremaa trip was Steller's Eider – an endangered sea duck that winters in compact flocks near Estonia's biggest island. On the way to the ferry we made one birding stop near Tuhu bog but the fog was dense and it wasn't possible to see anything at all. The ferry crossing took just 30 minutes and birded on deck in the icy conditions. As the ferry line was only place with reasonable open water, it holds flocks of different sea ducks including Smew, Long-tailed Duck, Common Goldeneye and Velvet Scoter.



After reaching Muhu Island which is connected by Saaremaa Island with a bridge, we had one-and-a-half hour drive to the main birding spot. Immediately as we step out from the bus, we spotted a female **Steller's Eider** sitting on the rock just 50 meters from the seashore. After brief scanning we also found the main flock feeding about 250 meters offshore. The flock of about 250 individuals dived synchronously, which is typical behaviour for this species. Around Cape Undva we also saw single Rough-legged Buzzard and Northern Goshawk, at least five White-tailed Eagles, an early Green Sandpiper and a few Wood Larks.

After another lovely lunch at Loona manor house, we still had time for several hours birdwatching around Viidumäe forests. This is a good breeding area for Spotted Nutcrackers, which are usually fairly easy to see here but, as the wind was increasing, it was quite hard to find any today and we saw mostly common birds like tits and goldcrests here. After reboarding the bus we drove back across the island, took the ferry back to the mainland and then had a one-and a half hour drive to Roosta, our accommodation base for the last three nights of the tour. On the ferry crossing we watched various species of sea duck circling the ferry in the last daylight and arrived at Roosta in darkness. After dinner, we had an early night as we had an early start the next day.

Day 4 After breakfast we drove to Nõva forests to begin the day's birding. Our first targets were Eurasian Three-toed and Black Woodpeckers. Black Woodpecker was quite soon heard in the distance but not Eurasian Three-toed this morning. We heard another Black Woodpecker calling as we walked in forest. We

were hoping to flush a Hazel Hen but a Spotted Nutcracker started calling nearby and soon the bird was sitting on a top of the Norway Spruce where it posed for several minutes. As we continued our Hazel Hen walk we had excellent views of two Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. We then headed for a short seawatching session at Cape Põõsaspea. The selection of sea ducks here was amazing: we had a lot of Long-tailed Ducks, a few Common Scoters and Red-breasted Mergansers and migrating Common Eiders. The most interesting find here were probably six Black Guillemots. After lunch at Roosta, we had a short rest before we started our afternoon birding session. Unfortunately it started to rain, not very promising for finding good stuff but we kept going. We decided to drive along small roads first with a hope of seeing some interesting mammals or birds. We found some very good birding around Variku. Firstly a black spot on a snow turned out to be a male Black Grouse lekking alone in the rain! In the same area we had small group of Bewick's Swans and a few Common Cranes and then a Merlin was spotted on the wires. The bird was much more interested in hunting Common Chaffinches and Sky Larks than us, so we got good views. Time was ticking on and we still needed owls so we drove to another Northern Pygmy-owl site. On the way, someone shouted Hazel Hen! We reversed and saw that a male was actually sleeping near the roadside! The bird quickly woke up, flew over a small clearing and disappeared into a tall spruce tree. We searched for a while but couldn't find it again. Still, we were happy to have even brief view of this very shy gamebird. It seemed that we have luck today and by the evening even the rain had stopped so with happy faces, we moved on to the Northern Pygmy-owl territory. Silence at first but after a few whistles all changed. Suddenly a small owl flew over the small clearing towards us like a bat. It landed just few meters from us and looked at us angrily with its bright yellow eyes. We watched this wonderful Northern Pygmy-owl through the scope for at least 10 minutes during which time a Spotted Nutcracker briefly showed and just before it got really dark we saw our third Rough-legged Buzzard for the trip. What a finish for the days birding! After that a local beer tasted better than ever before.



Day 5 This morning we drove to Variku fields again to see more Black Grouse. The snow was deep and we had about a 2km walk to the main lekking area. There were four lekking Black Grouse as we got there and the fields were absolutely full of migrating birds. Enormous flock of Snow Buntings holding at least 300 individuals and few European Golden-plovers were most interesting findings among dense flocks of Common Chaffinches, Sky Larks and Northern Lapwings whilst two Hen Harriers flew over. We continued birding around Üdruma village where Lesser Spotted Eagles are often seen. This time of the year is when they usually arrive here and despite of the snowy conditions, one individual was briefly seen. Suddenly a Grey-headed Woodpecker start calling nearby forest. After several whistles the bird flew over the river and landed on a treetop near us. The bird stayed there for several minutes before returning to its breeding territory. On the same route we had four **Elks** on one forest clearing staring at us suspiciously for several minutes. Before lunch, we continued birding at Matsalu National Park, which is the most well known birding area in Estonia.

We stopped for coastal birds near Puise and despite the snow on the ground there was a nice selection of waders including 16 Pied Avocets, a pair of Dunlins and several Common Ringed Plovers. On the way back to Roosta we spotted field full of **Common Chaffinches**. There were between three and four thousand birds with at least 100 **Bramblings** amongst them.



After a short rest in the bungalows we headed to our last evening birding session hoping to find Ural Owl. After hard winter with a thick snow layer it was harder than usual (many birds don't survive the winter). We made our first stop when sun was still quite high up in the sky. After few hundred meters walking one Ural Owl actually took off from a branch. Unfortunately it was hiding so well behind the trees that only leader and two participants were able to get brief views of this bird. We continued searching for the bird in other places but didn't have any luck. Only new tick on this evening was Bohemian Waxwing with a group of eight feeding on Juniper berries.

Day 6 We started with a morning drive from Roosta towards Tallinn. On the way we had one birding stop near Vihterpalu. It was an area of nice pine growth and we spotted two male **Black Grouse** feeding on Silver Birches. We then returned to Tallinn and had a one-hour guided walk through the old town before taking our last lunch together, our last local beers and making the very short drive to the airport. We ended our trip with 105 bird species, which was a good result considering the still-lying snow, a very late spring and some difficult weather conditions.



Full list of species seen

1. **Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor*
2. **Bewick's Swan** *Cygnus columbianus* – 18 at Variku fields on 4.4, small groups at Matsalu Bay on 5.4.
3. **Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus*
4. **Taiga Bean Goose** *Anser fabalis*
5. **White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons*
6. **Greylag Goose** *Anser anser*
7. **Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna*
8. **Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas penelope*
9. **Common Teal** *Anas crecca*
10. **Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*
11. **Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*
12. **Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata*
13. **Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*
14. **Common Eider** *Somateria mollissima*
15. **Steller's Eider** *Polysticta stelleri* – 250 ind. at Cape Undva on 3.4.
16. **Common Scoter** *Melanitta nigra*
17. **Velvet Scoter** *Melanitta fusca*
18. **Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula*
19. **Smew** *Mergus albellus* – about 20 ind. at Saaremaa island on 3.4.
20. **Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*
21. **Goosander** *Mergus merganser*
22. **Hazel Grouse** *Bonasa bonasia* – 1 at Nõva forests on 4.4.
23. **Black Grouse** *Tetrao tetrix* – 1 male near Variku on 4.4, 5 males near Variku on 5.4, 2 males at Vihterpalu on 6.4.
24. **Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*
25. **Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*
26. **White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia*
27. **White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* – 1 juvenile at Soometsa on 2.4., 5 ind. at Saaremaa island on 3.4., 1 juvenile at Nõva on 4.4.
28. **Western Marsh-harrier** *Circus aeruginosus*
29. **Hen Harrier** *Circus cyaneus*
30. **Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* – 1 at Saaremaa island on 3.4.
31. **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*
32. **Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo*
33. **Rough-legged Buzzard** *Buteo lagopus* – 1 at Soometsa on 2.4., 1 at Saaremaa Island on 3.4., 1 at Nõva on 4.4.
34. **Lesser Spotted Eagle** *Aquila pomarina* – 1 near Üdruma on 5.4.
35. **Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*
36. **Merlin** *Falco columbarius* – 1 at Variku on 4.4.
37. **Common Coot** *Fulica atra*
38. **Common Crane** *Grus grus*
39. **Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus*
40. **Pied Avocet** *Recurvirostra avosetta* – 16 at Matsalu NP on 5.4.
41. **Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula*
42. **Golden Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria*
43. **Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus*
44. **Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* – 2 ind of schinzii subspecies at Matsalu on 5.4.
45. **Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*
46. **Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata*

47. **Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus*
48. **Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*
49. **Common Gull** *Larus canus*
50. **Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus* – 2 adults at Saaremaa island on 3.4.
51. **Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus*
52. **Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus*
53. **Black Guillemot** *Cepphus grylle* – 6 at Cape Põõsaspea on 4.4.
54. **Rock Pigeon** *Columba livia*
55. **Stock Pigeon** *Columba oenas*
56. **Common Wood-pigeon** *Columba palumbus*
57. **Northern Pygmy-owl** *Glaucidium passerinum* – 1 at Nõva forests on 4.4.
58. **Ural Owl** *Strix uralensis* – 1 at Nõva forests on 5.4. - only seen by tour leader and two participants
59. **Grey-faced Woodpecker** *Picus canus* – 1 male at Üdruma on 5.4.
60. **Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius* – heard and seen on 2.4, 4.4 and 5.4.
61. **Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major*
62. **White-backed Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos leucotos* – 1 male at Soometsa on 2.4.
63. **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos minor* – 2 at Soometsa on 2.4., 2 at Nõva forests on 4.4. and 1 at Nõva forests on 5.4.
64. **Wood Lark** *Lullula arborea*
65. **Sky Lark** *Alauda arvensis*
66. **Meadow Pipit** *Anthus pratensis*
67. **White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba*
68. **Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes*
69. **Hedge Accentor** *Prunella modularis*
70. **European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula*
71. **Bohemian Waxwing** *Bombycilla garrulus*
72. **Eurasian Blackbird** *Turdus merula*
73. **Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris*
74. **Redwing** *Turdus iliacus*
75. **Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus*
76. **Goldcrest** *Regulus regulus*
77. **Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus*
78. **Marsh Tit** *Parus palustris*
79. **Willow Tit** *Parus montanus*
80. **Crested Tit** *Parus cristatus*
81. **Blue Tit** *Parus caeruleus*
82. **Great Tit** *Parus major*
83. **Eurasian Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea*
84. **Great Grey Shrike** *Lanius excubitor* – 1 at Soometsa on 2.4., 1 at Nõva on 4.4., 3 around Nõva on 5.4.
85. **Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius*
86. **Eurasian Magpie** *Pica pica*
87. **Spotted Nutcracker** *Nucifraga caryocatactes* – 2 at Nõva forests on 4.4.
88. **Eurasian Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula*
89. **Rook** *Corvus frugilegus*
90. **Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix*
91. **Common Raven** *Corvus corax*
92. **Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris*
93. **House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus*
94. **Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus*
95. **Common Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs*
96. **Brambling** *Fringilla montifringilla* – several around Matsalu at 5.4.

- 97. **European Greenfinch** *Carduelis chloris*
- 98. **European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis*
- 99. **Eurasian Siskin** *Carduelis spinus*
- 100. **Eurasian Linnet** *Carduelis cannabina*
- 101. **Common Redpoll** *Carduelis flammea*
- 102. **Common Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
- 103. **Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella*
- 104. **Reed Bunting** *Emberiza schoeniclus*
- 105. **Snow Bunting** *Plectophenax nivalis* – 300 at Variku on 5.4.

Full list of mammals seen on the trip:

- 1. **Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*
- 2. **Roe Deer** *Caproelus caproelus*
- 3. **Red Squirrel** *Sciurus vulgaris*
- 4. **Pine Martin** *Martes martes*
- 5. **Stoat** *Mustela erminea*
- 6. **Elk** *Alces alces* – four animals on 5.4.