

Estonia

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Participants:-

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Photograph:- White-backed Woodpecker

Leaders:- Tarvo Valker

Day 1: The flight arrived on time and everybody got their luggage without problems. We drove directly to a much smaller town – Pärnu which was 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 mostly common birds – fields full of migrating **Northern Lapwings**, Common **Starlings** and **Skylarks** 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 unfortunate 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 here, 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, but also other forest birds. It was really foggy at first – visibility was less than 100 meters, so we started our trip with a coffee and sandwich first. After half-an-hour, the visibility was getting better so we started our walk along small forest tracks. First, a group of **4 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 the bird wasn't seen unfortunately in the continuing fog. Later the call of **Black Woodpecker** was heard and a pair of **Common Cranes** were trumpeting in a swampy forest. After 2 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 for listening forest birds. Just as we went out, a soft tick, made by **White-backed Woodpecker** were 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 here 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 Crane** whilst in the river delta, about 20 **Whooper Swans**, a few **Goosanders**, **Eurasian Wigeon** and **Common Shelduck** 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 **Northern Grey Shrike** gave us lovely view through the scope. We then walked and waited at Northern Pygmy-owl site but unfortunately no luck today with only one Lesser Spotted Woodpecker seen at this spot so we returned to the hotel hoping for a better owl day tomorrow.

Day 3: Today was our longest driving day for the whole trip. We started from Pärnu and headed to Saaremaa Island and then drove to northwest Estonia, our next base. The purpose of the Saaremaa trip was Steller`s Eider – an endangered seaduck in Europe which winter in compact flocks near Estonian`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 seaducks including **Smew**, **Long-tailed Ducks**, **Common Goldeneyes** and even **Velvet Scoters**.



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 which was feeding about 250-300 meters offshore. The flock with 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 5 **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 seaduck circling the ferry in the last daylight and arrived at Roosta in darkness. After dinner, we took an early night as we had an early start the next day.

Day 4: After breakfast, we started our birding at Nõva forests where our first targets were Eurasian Three-toed and Black Woodpeckers. **Black Woodpecker** was quite soon heard in a 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**. Before lunch, we headed for a short seawatching session at Cape Põõsaspea. The selection of seabirds here were 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 6 **Black Guillemots**. After lunch at Roosta, we had a short rest before we started our afternoon birding session. Unfortunately, it then 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 to see 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 Chaffinches and Skylarks than us, so we got quite good views. As time was ticking on and we still needed owls, 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! Unfortunately, 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 angrily looked at us 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 never before.



Day 5: This morning we drove to Variku fields again to see more Black Grouse. As it was still thick snow, we had to about a 2km walk to the main lekking area. There was only 4-5 lekking **Black Grouse** as we got there, but the fields there absolutely full off 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 **Chaffinches**, **Skylarks** and **Northern Lapwings** whilst 2 **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 4 **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 **Dunlin** and several **Ringed Plovers**. On the way back to Roosta we spotted field full of **Chaffinches**. There was around 3,000-4,000 birds with at least 100 **Bramblings** amongst them.



After a short rest in the bungalows we headed to our last evening birding session with a main hope to find Ural Owl. After hard winter with a thick snow layer it was harder than usual (many birds don't survive until spring). 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 the branch. Unfortunately it was hiding so well behind the trees that only leader and 2 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** a group of 8 of which were feeding on juniperus 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 nice pine growth and we spotted here 2 male **Black Grouse** feeding on Silver Birches. After that we headed to Tallinn and had a one-hour guided walk through the old town before taking our last lunch together, 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 as it was a very late spring with 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** *Sommateria 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 adult 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 2 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. **Skylark** *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. **European Blue Tit** *Parus caeruleus*
82. **Great Tit** *Parus major*
83. **Eurasian Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea*
84. **Northern 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. **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** *Plectrophenax 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* – seen only by few participants
5. **Stoat** *Mustela erminea* – seen only by few participants
6. **Elk** *Alces alces* – 4 animals on 5.4.