

Estonia trip 16 April – 23rd April 2011

Estonia is a small country on the Baltic sea with a population of around 11/2 million, capital Tallinn and is well forested, with the western end of the Taiga forest belt. Forests cover around 50% of the country with pines, spruce, birch, aspen, alders. My reason for visiting this country was to see a corner of Northern Europe, especially the owls, woodpeckers and stellas eiders, hence the interest in the early timing.

Last bird fair, I visited Estonian Nature Tours and was advised which company visited Estonia, and chose Bird Holidays as the one company going in early spring.

Day one Saturday 16th April

After a horribly early start (3 am) we arrived at Heathrow to take the flight to Tallinn via Helsinki and met our group. John Mcloughlin was the tour leader for Bird Holidays, and he turned out to be an outstanding birder. There were 11 people in the group; this number surprised me in these poor economic times. Some of the group had used Bird holidays before and we also had people from a local RSPB group.

Landing in Helsinki, we had to wait for our connecting flight; when called onto the plane, I was somewhat concerned to see propellers, the only other time I flew with propellers it was a somewhat buffeted flight, however my fears were ungrounded. We were met at Tallinn, around 2.30 pm by Mikko Virta a Finnish guide who spoke 5!! languages and was a fine birder, apparently his interest in birds was fostered by helping his father with a golden eagle ringing project as a boy. Our driver for the week was Aare and his driving throughout the trip was impeccable.

My first impression was of a grumpy looking Estonia, with grey skies, snow, evergreens and flat tired looking fields. We soon passed a stork on nest, deemed to by lucky by villagers as in central Europe. A goose flock was spotted in the fields, arriving at Parnu, after 2 hours driving and crossing the Parnu River. We noted ravens, hooded crows and rooks in town. Checking into the hotel around 5 pm, we enjoyed coffee with croissants and chocolate brownies.

Suitably refreshed, we visited Soometsa forest for our first trip. On our way, we spotted tundra bean goose in fields amongst the masses of white front. John explained how to tell Taiga from Tundra. There is so much suitable habitat here, the geese could go anywhere. Fields are not enclosed. A constant sound of burbling cranes.

Entering the forest, white headed long tail tits – the northern race – plus great grey shrike. Snipes displaying on tree stumps! Never seen that in UK. A nice white backed woodpecker in the trees. Due to the very cold winter, the woodpeckers in general were hard to find, maybe some had perished in the cold. This would also have an effect on owls, however more of this later.

Estonia has had many conquerors in its history, in particular the Germans and Russians

(the latter during the USSR time.) The Swedish time is known as the 'golden time' preferable to the Germans, who treated the indigenous population as peasants. Many Russians still live in Tallinn and all around the country the German influence was obvious. The Estonian people have small holdings to grow vegetables; root crops were served at every meal, especially beetroot with potatoes. On the mainland, the animals were kept inside, because of the cold, however as the week went on, we saw cows in field and horses, but I never saw any outdoor pigs. My vegetarianism was catered for adequately, however the best meals served were away from the hotels.

Day 2 Sunday 17th April

A misty start – oh dear – how to view the birds!!!

However the sun broke through during the morning and weather stayed bright and sunny all week, apart from a small front passing through Friday pm. Breakfast was self service. Cranes everywhere – Scandinavian and Russian cranes all apparently meet in Estonia during the spring and autumn, and then go on their separate ways. All Berwick swans meet here in spring, a constant chattering. Estonian people are not heavy into church going as in UK; there are various types of churches, more of this later.

Stop one in the Soometsa forests, we heard singing redwings, a song not known to me, they are our winter visitors. Mistle thrushes singing plus song thrushes, northern bullfinches and of course chaffinches everywhere, one of the top 3 summer birds the other 2 being

We found some tracks, racoon dog and roe deer and all through the forest the poo of the elk. Rather huge it was too. Lesser spot w pecker drumming, nuthatch, jays responding to woodpecker sounds. Two white storks flew over. Exciting discovery was fresh bear tracks from this morning, along side the canal. Also, evidence of beaver and 3 toed woodpecker due to the bark stripped off the tree. Goosander and green sandpipers enjoying the water and a lovely willow tit in the trees, seemed greyer to me than ours back home.

I was now taking pictures of each place we visited, so I could remember what the habitat looked like; I liked an old birch stump covered in bracket fungus. Some thrifty red ants in a tree stump, then in their own hump Estonia looks good today. A constant sound of distant cranes.

We took a walk around Parnu Park down to the beach, the sea is still icy. It was frozen, I have never seen a frozen sea before! The Parnu River brings fresher water to the Baltic than we have in our north sea; hence the sea is more liable to freeze. Hooded crows, starlings, siskin and greenfinches in the park. Herring and black headed gulls by the sea. A special ladies beach and a surfing beach, strangely as there is no tide, and the beach is flat and somewhat deserted. A few tree sparrows around a derelict sports centre and a nuthatch close to the hotel. Cups of tea.....

5 pm – the trip to the sea and enormously high tower hide! White fronted geese, grey heron, smew, goosander, goldeneye, merganser, curlew, little tern, white wagtails, and a strangely calling water rail. This place is Haademeeste. Snowflake flower found in the local ditch – very beautiful and rare in UK. Some local ladies had made us a lovely meal, a stew plus gorgeous raspberry cake, even nicely done for me. A sort of co-

operative formed after collapse of USSR, due to work disappearing. Crafts were on sale, hats, gloves, jewellery, bags with lace. Because of the 'dry toilet' only, we made a stop at the local service station before starting the night owling session. Ural owls can sit out on the forest rides; this is what we hoped for. However the first bird 'swish, swish' was a gorgeous black wood pecker in all his glory. At dusk, the ural owl was spotted, yes, sitting out in view; we had great fly passes to and heard the bird. A woodcock fly over.

Back to the hotel for a beer. Finish at 11.20 pm, happy to have seen that owl.

Day 3 Monday 18th

First transfer day.

Estonians work in forestry and some technical jobs such as mobile phone construction. The houses are mostly made of wood, with corrugated roofs, plus some have thatching, horizontal at the top, then vertical – this is apparently to prevent avalanches. Double glazing on the windows. Even scaffolding made of wood! This country is cold and dark in winter, can have 1 m depth of snow, much television watching to pass the time. On nice days, they ski and Nordic walking was evident. The bird guides here, like our Mikko, are mainly Finnish. Dry hot summers with schools closed in July August and no rain, June can be pretty variable.

A small wood stop in the hope of white back woodpecker, lesser heard drumming. Mixed geese flock in fields, skylarks, chaffinches singing, and some warmth in the sun today. First mute swan of the trip on local golf course. Audru village, with large gardens. Lots of stored wood about. Germans are now busy buying land for agricultural development; need to look after these forests.

At Tuhu bog, along with some French birders, we saw the golden eagle, these are always difficult. I learned that the length of the tail was diagnostic for these birds, and the way the wings are held in a shallow V. There are 25 pairs in Estonia, now none in Finland, it is now too agricultural. Mikko was involved in a ringing project with his father when young in S Finland. 2 white tailed eagles displaying, a great grey shrike. Estonia has a very short growing season.

A visit to the Manor house in Lihula, the home of Estonia Nature Tours, owned and managed by Marika. Most of these Manor houses found about Estonia were German built. This one had some ruins at the back and a local nesting white stork. We heard about the history of Estonia, occupied by Poles, Danes as well as Swedes, Germans and Russians. Estonia regained freedom from Russia by a peaceful protest in 1989, 150 miles of hand holding. The Russians sent in the tanks but the commander in chief who was Georgian, refused to fire. A statue of him resides in Tartu. In the second world war, Estonians fought with Germans against the Russians, however some hid in the forests, when discovered taken to soviet labour camps.

On the ferry over to island of Saaremaa from Virtsu, via Muhu. Lots of long tailed duck, 500,000 scaup, arctic terns, scoter with a few velvet scoters amongst them. They nest here in small numbers. Apparently the numbers of long tailed duck and stellas eiders have dropped off, no one knows why exactly. The ferry trip was half an hour. These

were ducks on migration. Scoters can nest here, most go up to the arctic tundra. Long tailed duck winter here, huge flocks.

Saaremaa is still wooded like the main land. We checked into the hotel, it seemed bigger and newer than the last. A more Scandinavian feel with a balcony by the coast. Sited at Salme. Because Mikko was not sure about the stellas eider numbers, he decided to take us to see them now, so we went to Undva bay, around Tagamsoisa, which is their winter stronghold. We found them eventually in a largish (around 300) flock; they all dive together, amongst the scoter. 2 Belgian birders accompanied us, and we were to meet them again on this trip. A cold wind doth blow! Oystercatchers, sandwich terns, common scoters, various gulls. Juniper bushes on the beach. A kestrel on top of a telegraph pole and sprawk on beach.

Day 4 Tuesday 19th April

A prebreakfast walk down to the beach, for shellduck, long tailed duck, sandwich tern and our first avocet of the trip. Fisherman in bay. Post breakfast trip to Sorve, meeting a Caspian tern noisily fishing a pond and observing a white tailed eagle basking on a rock, obviously post breakfast. Great views. An unmanned lighthouse next to a local place with a notice on the fence saying private in English!!! You could see Latvia off the coast. The place reminded me of Portland Bill in southern England. Which also has an observatory and a restaurant on the coast. Seaweed was being collected from the piles for use as a fertilizer. Now the Caspian tern had a mate and was arguing or displaying noisily. Who knows which! The next visit was to the Wall of war, Russian and German memorials. Beautiful blue flowers by the roadside, flower before leaf – liverleaf *hepatica nobilis* – we were to observe this again on this trip. This spot is for visible migration, cranes, chaffinches, wood pigeons, bramblings followed by sparrowhawks. Also seen, white tailed eagle, buzzard common and rough legged, kestrel. The two buzzards distinguished by the amount of white on the tail. Something new for me, there is a huge migration of chaffinches north from all over Europe. Apparently you can have a passage of 1 million per hour at peak time!!!

Lunch at another (Loona) Manor house, C17. Lingen berries were in the water offered with the lunch. There are 132 different manor houses on the island; this one provides accommodation (18 beds). They can also provide meals, heritage tours, wedding parties and events. Again local crafts on show, this time I bought a tea pot stand made of juniper. Baltic Germans own these houses; Estonians were the peasants, developing more slowly because of the cold. This lady of the manor showed us the visitor centre and fossils found (in the limestone rock) and had a superb husky dog who was called out to say goodbye. Apparently the sea increases (not tidal) when wind is from the west and goes down when from the east!

After lunch we looked in vain for nutcrackers, and most of the party, sadly not me, saw a beautiful black stork fly over, they nest in the forest, and there is a web cam which I will check out stationed on a nest. We asked for a forest walk, and walked the Viidumae nature trail, which still had snow lying in places. Original cliff edge on west of island. Signs of elk, raccoon dog, black woodie, fox and wild boar. One native pony came to see us. The notes on all these nature reserves were in both Estonian and English

fortunately. Another forest tower

The Finns come to the island by air or ferry and some own summer houses here, they also are like the Brits using Tallinn for stag parties, I was glad it was not just us! Estonians enjoy play football and Nordic football. All Estonians ski in winter. The Finns enjoy rallying, skiing and Nordic sport.

Stellas eider is Estonia's number one bird with the whooper swan being that of Finland as they breed there. One person will do the count. Lsr white front geese also come through here, around 30.

Flying squirrel is an Estonian speciality, found in NE Estonia and active at night. Very rare. Found in old pine/spruce forest. Hunted by pine martins. Very fast mover.

Day 5 Wednesday 20th April

I had a light breakfast today. It was our day to transfer back to the mainland. Some cloud cover today. We drove through the capital Kuressaare, German built, a spa town with a medieval castle. It has the islands airport with flights to Finland. Most island people work here, making wooden bolts. There is an orthodox church.

There is no German influence in Finland because of the Gulf of Finland, their influence stopped at the Baltic Sea.

Estonia's dairy industry is centred in the middle of the country; the land is more fertile here. W Estonia (where we are) has stony thin soil, of limestone base. Glass houses are used to grow veggies, cucumbers, tomatoes and peppers. Swallows and chiff chaffs have been known to over winter inside buildings/greenhouses. One village had an over wintering male stork, looked after by local ladies, donations were given to help feed him.

Ferry crossing, now would you believe a white tailed sea eagle drowned a long tail duck and took off with him for his lunch!! An amazing sight. He did however; struggle to fly with the saturated duck. More velvet scoter and long tailed ducks. Apparently, the number of juvenile bewick swans are dropping, somehow they are being predated, something for me to research, I will check WWT sites for information as they monitor bewick swans. I had noted myself they are fewer in number at Welney now than in the past.

Estonian school children have a 3 month summer holiday, none at Easter and 3 weeks at Christmas cos of the cold dark climate. It is inconceivable to me to live somewhere with a colder winter, I have enough trouble getting through the UK winter, the last 2 being particularly cold. And more darkness

A white wagtail landed on our bus and we could photo it through the sun roof, a nice memory to take away from this trip. We were all snapping away.

Now to Laelatu wooded meadows, which are protected for flora, mown for the 23 orchids it contained. Some gorgeous looking northern long tail tits by the roadside with their

white heads. A lot of the species here are 'different' to ours in the UK, song included. Folk can stay overnight in these forests and use them freely, unlike the UK. There are so many of these beautiful forest roads and so quiet. Cranes nest in the wet meadows – lakes surrounded by trees. Now some foals with their mums in a field. And a clever wood stack.

A small waxwing flock feeding on juniper berries on their way to Lapland.

Barnacle geese on the coast. The first visit to Matsalu bay, it looks icy and cold. Black grouse near the sea. Here the track goes through some snow. A pair of grey partridges crossed our path.

Our lunch today was at a farm house, Mõisaküla, where I had a splendid vegetarian lunch; our hostess was off dancing in local costume after lunch. I bought a pair of mittens here. The farmhouse was full of pelts and horns. There was an underground store for the potatoes. My lunch consisted of cheese, peas, carrots, potato, and beetroot with a mushroom sauce. Buns and coffee for afters.

Then to Keemu for yet another watching tower. Greenshanks, bewick swans, white tailed eagle, common terns and many scaup. Off to Matsalu manor, German built, owned by a Swede, for the heronry, extraordinary how these birds balance in the huge nests in the tree tops. A frozen lake, livestock contained in a walled field. 2 cranes drifting over.

During a fuel stop near Lihula, we noticed a local rookery. Back to the manor house for tea and chat to Marika. We found out that 180 lynx and 135 wolves were shot in the last year. They can be easily tracked using dogs in the snow. Bears are shot using baited hides. Of course this goes on in all countries; there is big money in shooting – trophies – which few countries can ignore.

Our last stop of the transfer day was at Kasari Old Bridge, now not used, a lovely cobbled bridge. Storks, meadow pipits, geese flying in plus fieldfare, redwings and starlings. Empty roads, flat, forests and water, however less water than Finland.

We arrived in Haapsalu in time for dinner – our room had a balcony outside looking over water, swans, black headed gulls, a post meal walk along the front was enjoyed finding Tchaikovsky's bench.

Day 6 Thursday 21st April

Outside the window first thing, pochard, great crested grebe nest building, cormorants. First trip was to Piirsalu wood to see hazel grouse and I had my first glimpse. A nice pied flycatcher obliging sitting on a branch. We were looking for black cocks on the Russian polders where the forest had been cleared for collective farms and we found them, at Variku meadows. These areas were now left to grow wild. Willow tits were seen making a nest in a hole. Fieldfares, skylarks, rough legged buzzard, yellow hammer and possible spotted eagle, John's famous speck in the sky. A chiff chaff was heard as the migrants were beginning to arrive. Everything seemed to be about a month or 6 weeks later than our area of UK. It seemed warmer today. Lots of circling cranes.

We took lunch at Roosta restaurant in the forest, near to the coast. This was a holiday camp with chalets and caravans. I bought some postcards here. We were to return for our evening meal.

Our next destination was Poosaspea by the sea. There were Swedish summer houses here, seeming to have no boundaries. Around 2 million birds pass between the point and island in autumn, a Russian migration counting point. There was a hut with heating and armchairs used by 3 Finnish counters for 3 months each year, August September and October. They would use a summer house to live in. Scoters, eiders, velvet scoters, grebes, swans, long tailed duck, goldeneye, red throated diver and a white wagtail on the beach. Cruise boats going to St Petersburg come round this point to stop at Helsinki; it is where the Baltic Sea meets the Gulf of Finland. We took a coffee stop and saw a ring tail hen harrier our only bird of the trip. A black grouse was resting on top of a sapling. Great excitement, a pine martin dashed across the road. Back to Roosta for dinner. This place had entertainment, a large screen TV plus bowling.

An evening woodland stop – a fierce pygmy owl came to see us, my first ever! I was impressed with this little man, a bird with attitude. He was defending his territory, never mind all these people!! This was my trip highlight.

We looked for elk from another tower; meanwhile one of our group spotted a glimpse of beaver in the pond. The day ended by finding 2 juvenile elk.

Day 7 Friday 22 April

This was my sister's birthday, so I had to remember to text her, difficult because we had an outdoor breakfast at the black grouse lek of yesterday. And they were strutting their stuff, even a fight, 2 males trying to impress one female. A hazel grouse flew on the edge of a wood on route. Willow tits again, wish they were so easy to find in the UK. Another chaffinch was calling then a spectacular kill by a merlin taking a chaffinch in the field. Tortoiseshell butterfly in flight. Lots of thrushes around. Taiga bean geese in the fields. Top three nesting Estonian birds are: willow warbler, redwing and chaffinch. Redwing breed easily around homesteads, just as blackbirds in UK. Fox dashing across the field. Cranes about. Always cranes about!! Fresh beaver signs of gnawed wood, signs of elk debarking trees.

I notice that this society is well mechanised, with transport to move wood, no horse and carts here. There is an ice road from Haapsalu in the winter up to 20 m long, the longest in Europe. A statue of a polar bear in the harbour. I wonder why. We walked to the castle in town, noticing that most of the houses were made of wood, with stone foundations. The castle was not open; however we could still look around. There was a play area in the middle.

A visit to Haapsalu station, with a 210m platform, the longest covered platform in Europe, said to be built for the Russian czar. Huge steam engines on display, that had travelled 2 ½ million k in their lives. The station was built in 1805 and was closed in 1995.

A visit to the north side of Matsalu bay, Puise, a Russian fishing village where they caught flounder and herring. We noted waders and bewick swans and there were said to be many cranes roosting in autumn. Two stops, one with a tower. Haeska, a major international staging post, with lesser white front geese, and waders passing through, monitored by a Finn and a Swede. Lapwing, avocet and the sound of dunlin. Wigeon, pintail, shoveler and some good ice hills in the sea. Third stop was at a private farm with a shop selling crafts and there was accommodation for up to 8 persons. A restaurant was being built.

Our last stop was a view over grassland, to look for elk and eagles. This hide had disabled access, rather steep ramps!!

Last evening meal with gifts and discussions about what the group had enjoyed the most. Some of us, including me, liked the pygmy owl. The trip in total was around 700 miles.

Last day Saturday 23 April

A guided tour of Tallinn. After an early start we arrived in Tallinn (400,000 people) and were met by a lovely Estonian lady, who was our guide. Tallinn is to be the European city of culture in 2011. A medieval city with lots of churches, Estonian orthodox, Russian orthodox (very grand) Lutheran church – the main religion. The city was quiet at 8 am, however full of Finns at 10 am who had arrived on the 2 cruise boats spotted in the harbour. Street cafes and trams, like any other European city. We went to the high point to look over the city and landmarks were pointed out to us. A walled city with stall selling nuts/sweets, some street musicians of dubious quality, some time for shopping and then off to the airport. We said our goodbyes and left Estonia, having thoroughly enjoyed our trip. Beautiful forests and space - that will be my memory.

Around 120 species were seen in all.

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