

Birding trip to Estonia - „Migration hotspots“

3-10 October 2014

Tour operator: Estonian Nature Tours

Tour leader: Tarvo Valker



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. Photo: Wilf Powell

Day 1

We supposed to meet at Tallinn airport at afternoon. Unfortunately easyjet flight was delayed for 1,5 hours and plane landed in Tallinn about 5 p.m. After loading luggage on a comfortable minivan, we started our 2,5 hours long journey up to Mooste. We stayed overnight at the previous Vodka factory, running nowadays as a guesthouse. After first nice meal at the guesthouse, we took an early rest for the upcoming full birding day.

Day 2 Mooste-Mehikoorma-Järvelja

After breakfast we took about 20 minutes drive close to the Russian border. Mehikoorma, located at the western shore of the Lake Peipus is a major flyway for landbirds breeding in Western Russia. A bit foggy but very calm morning turned out to be a ideal to spot unusual migrants for inland. We had several hundreds of Velvet Scoters and Long-tailed Ducks passing overhead. Both species are numerous at the coast, but rarely seen inland in such numbers. We also had a flock of 20 Barn Swallows nearby the lighthouse – quite late autumn record for this species.

After 3,5 hours, migration was slightly dropping down and we had short walk in nearby bushes. It took less than 5 minutes, when we were rewarded with stunning views of the male Grey-headed Woodpecker, who landed on the telegraph pole at front of us. Near the parking lot we had a another

woodpecker, unfortunately disappearing too fast to ID properly. Most likely, it was Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

After nice lunch at Mooste Vodka factory, we headed out again. This time we planned to have a walk in ancient forests at Järvelja. Before reaching to this area, we spotted some eagles on the field. It turned out that there are 8 White-tailed Eagles. And just next to them was juvenile Golden Eagle, having the main reason in its claws. There was dead White-fronted Goose, that attracted all the eagles there. Golden Eagle had light green colour ring, pointing to the estonian origin.

Järvelja seemed to be rather quiet at first, but small walk along the hiking trail provided eventually several good sightings. We had another Grey-headed Woodpecker at the forest clearing and male Three-toed Woodpecker feeding on a fallen tree just few steps from the hiking trail. We also heard 2 Black Woodpeckers calling time to time and some of us very lucky to have a glimps of the bird, while they passed over the trail. We also heard a flock of Common Crossbill and we had first Crested Tit on a top of the spruce.

Daily totals:

Bean Goose – 350

White-fronted Goose – 500

Wigeon – 190

Pintail – 95

Greater Scaup – 115

Long-tailed Duck – 475

Velvet Scoter – 400

Red-breasted Merganser – 7

Black-throated Diver – 7

White-tailed Eagle – 14

Golden Eagle – 1

Little Gull – 11

Grey-headed Woodpecker – 3

Black Woodpecker – 2

Great Spotted Woodpecker - 6

Three-toed Woodpecker – 1

Barn Swallow – 20

Day 3 Mehikoorma-Tartu-Pärnu

We started our day again at Mehikoorma. On the route Tarvo spotted two Collared Doves perched on the telegraph pole. Suprisingly, this species is become very rare in Estonia, while it is one of the most common birds in UK.

One hour sitewatch was much less productive than yesterday, but we still had few nice birds here. The most spectacular sighting was certainly Rough-legged Buzzard passing straight overhead.

Before leaving the place, we took a little walk around Mehikoorma village. Soon, Stephen had a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in the reedbeds and we saw how the bird flew across the village. That was already 5th Woodpeckersspecies in just 1,5 days! Gardens were full of small birds, especially remarkable numbers of Goldcrests and Willow Tits.

So, we headed via Mooste to Tartu. Our first spot was Ilmatsalu fish ponds. Here we took small walk and spotted few new birds. On the fields nearby parking lot we spotted a flock of 23 Whooper Swans. Also several White-tailed Eagles were seen during the walk, some passing straight over us. Fish ponds were rather quiet at this time of the year, having very few waterbirds. But we added here Moorhen, Common Snipe and Reed Bunting to our trip list.

We had nice lunch in Tartu. Lunch was followed by nice walk around Tartu old town – including university, Dome church ruins and town square. Then we took drive to the southwestern corner of Estonia – to Pärnu. Its a summer resort, but nice place to stay at any time of the year. There are plenty of birding opportunities around Pärnu, especially in spring and autumn.

Daily totals:

Whooper Swan – 25
Common Snipe - 4
Stock Dove – 4
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – 1
Rough-legged Buzzard – 1
White-tailed Eagle – 5

Day 4 Kabli bird station-Pikla-Soometsa

We spent all morning at Kabli bird station. This bird ringing station has a Heligoland trap and there has been annual bird ringing for the last 45 years. Kabli is certainly the place to visit during autumn birding trip to Estonia.



A view to the Kabli bird station Heligoland trap. Photo: Wilf Powell

The morning at Kabli was a bit windy, but sunny. Loads of birds there caught with Heligoland during the morning. Over 200 Long-tailed Tits, many Coal and Willow Tits, 2 Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, few Treecreepers etc kept bird ringing station staff busy all the time.

Our next place was Häädemeeste village, less than 10 kilometers from the bird station. Walk in a small woodland gave several Nuthatches, but unfortunately not a bird we hoped for – a Middle Spotted Woodpecker.

After chilly walk around the park, we were offered nice stue and cheesecake, made by local woman community. It was another superb meal with a cosy little fireplace in the hall.

After gaining some energy we headed to Pikla fish ponds. We spotted few new birds here – few pairs of Goosanders. Probably the best of the afternoon were spotted near Soometsa then Tarvo picked up first Great Grey Shrike for this trip.

Daily totals:

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – 3
Marsh Harrier – 1
Long-tailed Tit – 200+
Goldcrest – 300+
Willow Tit – 50+

Great Grey Shrike - 1

Day 5 Kihnu island

We started our morning with early breakfast and 7.30 a.m. we were ready to leave Pärnu. We took straight drive to Munalaiu harbour, to reach small island – Kihnu. A place well known as good raptor migration spot.

The wind was increasing and there was some waves hitting the small ferry. But nobody got seasick and after one hour we reached to the island. First we went to the southern tip of the island, near the lighthouse. Just in few seconds we saw first Sparrowhawks flying overhead heading toward the stormy sea. Most of them turned back after due to strong front wind. It was remarkable to see how a flock of 350 Wood Pigeons gained the height at least up to 300 meters and kept going towards the south.



The smallest passerine in Europe – Goldcrest. Photo: Stephen Judd

Walk around the bushes produced basic passerines – loads of Goldcrests, few groups of Long-tailed Tits, some Blackbirds and Robins.

After lunch we had walk in the northeastern tip of the island. We had possible Goshawk there and glimps view of the Twite flushed up from the beach. The small group of pine trees were full of Goldcrests and Willow Tits.

We headed to the harbour but unfortunately bad news come. The wind was too strong for the departure and we had to stay overnight at Kihnu island. Some phone calls and we finally found the accomodation in tourism farm. So we didnt had to sleep under the tree :).

We spent last hour of the daylight at the southern tip again. That produced few new birds – 9 Grey Plovers and 5 Dunlins in one flock.

Daily totals:

Grey Plover – 9

Dunlin – 5

Sparrowhawk - 10

Twite -1

Day 6 Kihnu island-Haapsalu

We woke up at 6 a.m. with a hope to get on the early morning ferry. The wind was still strong and ferry trip was cancelled again. That meant we had to spend another half a day on the island. So we drove near the lighthouse to look some birds. At least sunrise was stunning, but it was also much more windy than yesterday.

Almost no birds on the migration, as the wind was against the main migration direction. But there was some local birds to look at – still few Grey Plovers at the beach, White-tailed Eagle soaring. Stephen had also Merlin during the photography walk.



Mute Swan. Photo: Stephen Judd

It started to rain and so we headed to the Kihnu museum. There was nice exhibition and we had coffee and some biscuits there. We also looked film about Kihnu wedding and that was really superb cultural event for everybody. The film is highly recommended if you happen to have bad moon. Laughing more than few times are guaranteed.

After another meal in the local farm, we finally got on the ferry. Waves wasn't so bad at all and everything was smooth. We stayed in the van and that gave us possibility to do birding without getting hit by the seawaves. We noticed big flock of ducks from the ferry. They turned out to be Greater Scaups as we got closer. There were at least 5,000 individuals – really remarkable numbers for this species in the autumn time.

Reaching to the mainland, we started drive towards the Haapsalu -a nice small seaside town. The wind was calming down and even sun come out. Unfortunately not many birds en route – but we had a bit closer look at the Great Grey Shrike. After settle in at the Promenaadi hotel, located by the sea, we had nice meal at the italian restaurant.

Day 7 Spithami-Leidisoo-Matsalu National Park

Full birding day. It was really calm today. Even too calm – so it was misty when we arrived to our seawatching point in Spithami. Spithami is one of the best places to observe arctic seaduck migration in the autumn time. Over 2 million waterfowls are counted here annually.

In a foggy conditions, it was pointless to ruin good birding time, so we took a small drive around forests nearby. Quite soon we had 2 Hazel Hen near the road – seen unfortunately only briefly, like its typical for this shy gamebird. Small walk along forest track offered us loads of calling Nutcrackers. Eventually two birds landed in the forest clearing. So everybody had proper look

finally on this stunning member of the crow family.

After that we made new attempt at Spithami as the weather was a bit less misty. And it was worth to go back. Soon we discovered adult Black-throated Diver swimming near the coast and about 20 Red-throated Divers passed the cape as well. Long-tailed Ducks were seen in small groups in flight and swimming. Also few Common Eiders were around and Common Scoter was another new bird for the list as well.

Afternoon were spent around Matsalu National Park. We visited Rannajõe area, Võnnu park and Haeska birding tower. All places offered few new birds for our list. First good sighting was made rather close to Haapsalu, then Ingrid spotted a flock of the 22 Cranes on the field. Most Cranes left this autumn rather early and that was nice to see at least that small group.

Another new bird was ticked near Rannajõe where we picked up hunting Hen Harrier. That was a stunning sighting as this species is declining everywhere in Europe nowadays. Also another Great Grey Shrike were seen on the same field.

Võnnu park had common small passerines with no White-backed Woodpecker. But on the road we had Northern Whetear – quite unusual to see one in Northern Europe in mid-October. So that was another late autumn record we had on this trip.

Last spot was Haeska birding tower.

Daily totals:

Hen Harrier – 1

Hazel Hen – 2

Common Crane -22

Nutcracker – 5

Day 8 Haapsalu-Tallinn

Short drive around Linnamäe area before heading to Tallinn. Morning birding produced another male Hen Harrier and Black Woodpecker were seen briefly on a forest clearing.

Birding trip to Estonia was ended with nice guided walk in Tallinn Old Town. Lunch was served in traditional estonian restaurant. Drive to the airport was smooth and we said goodbye to each other. Hopefully meeting you all soon in future trips.

Daily totals:

Hen Harrier – 1

Black Woodpecker – 1

Full list of birds:

1. Mute Swan – common
2. Bewick's Swan – small numbers on 6.10 at Kabli and 9.10 at Matsalu
3. Whooper Swan – 25 near Tartu on 5.10, small numbers at Matsalu on 9.10
4. Bean Goose – recorded on 4 days, a flock of 350 ind. seen in a field near Mooste on 4.10
5. Greater White-fronted Goose – recorded on 4 days, a flock of 500 ind. seen in a field near Mooste on 4.10
6. Barnacle Goose – recorded on 3 days
7. Wigeon – recorded on 4 days
8. Gadwall – recorded on 4 days
9. Teal – 6 at Mehikoorma on 4.10
10. Mallard – common
11. Pintail – 95 migrating at Mehikoorma on 4.10
12. Tufted Duck – recorded on 3 days
13. Greater Scaup – 115 migrating at Mehikoorma on 4.10, a flock of 5 000 seen from a Kihnu ferry on 8.10
14. Long-tailed Duck – 475 migrating at Mehikoorma on 4.10, flocks seen also at Spithami on 9.10
15. Common Scoter – several flocks passing cape at Spithami on 9.10

16. Velvet Scoter – 400 migrating at Mehikoorma on 4.10, few small groups passing also at Spithami on 9.10
17. Common Eider – 5 males at Spithami on 9.10
18. Goldeneye – common, recorded on 4 days
19. Smew – 5 ind. seen at Matsalu National Park on 9.10
20. Red-breasted Merganser – small numbers at Mehikoorma on 4.10 and Spithami on 9.10
21. Goosander -
22. Hazel Hen – 2 individuals at the roadside in Leidisoo forests on 9.10
23. Red-throated Diver – recorded only at Spithami on 9.10
24. Black-throated Diver – 3 passing at Mehikoorma on 4.10, 2 passing at Mehikoorma on 5.10, 1 adult swimming near the coast at Spithami on 9.10
25. Great Crested Grebe – small numbers, recorded on 3 days
26. Great Cormorant – small numbers, recorded on 3 days
27. Great White Egret – few individuals, recorded on 3 days
28. Grey Heron – common, recorded on 4 days
29. White-tailed Eagle – 14 ind. on 4.10, 5 ind. on 5.10, 2 on 9.10
30. Marsh Harrier – 2 at Kabli bird station on 6.10
31. Hen Harrier – 1 male at Rannajõe on 9.10, 1 male near Linnamäe on 10.10
32. Sparrowhawk – recorded on 3 days
33. Common Buzzard – recorded on 5 days
34. Rough-legged Buzzard – 1 passing overhead at Mehikoorma on 5.10
35. Golden Eagle – 1 (icy bird) eating White-fronted Goose on a field near Mooste on 4.10
36. Common Kestrel – recorded en route from Mooste to Pärnu on 5.10
37. Water Rail – only heard at Mehikoorma on 4.10
38. Common Moorhen – 1 at Ilmatsalu on 5.10
39. Coot – common at Haapsalu
40. Common Crane – a flock of 22 ind. on a field near Haapsalu on 9.10
41. Grey Plover – 9 at Kihnu island on 7.10
42. Northern Lapwing – common
43. Dunlin – 3 at Kihnu island on 7.10
44. Common Snipe – 4 at Pärnu on 5.10, 1 at Matsalu on 9.10
45. Little Gull – 11 at Mehikoorma on 4.10
46. Black-headed Gull – recorded on 4 days
47. Common Gull – thousands during the trip
48. Herring Gull – recorded on 5 days
49. Great Black-backed Gull – recorded on 2 days
50. Feral Pigeon
51. Stock Dove – 1 at Mehikoorma on 5.10
52. Wood Pigeon – seen almost daily, 560 migrating at Mehikoorma on 4.10
53. Collared Dove – 2 near Mehikoorma on 5.10, seen only by tour leader
54. Grey-headed Woodpecker – 1 at Mehikoorma and 2 at Järvelja on 4.10
55. Black-Woodpecker – 2 at Järvelja on 4.10, 1 at Leidisoo forests on 10.10
56. Great Spotted Woodpecker – 6 at Järvelja on 4.10, few recorded at Kabli on 6.10 and Leidisoo forests on 9.10
57. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – 1 at Mehikoorma on 5.10, 3 (including one from a hand) at Kabli bird station on 6.10
58. Three-toed Woodpecker – 1 male at Järvelja on 4.10
59. Skylark
60. Barn Swallow – 20 at Mehikoorma on 4.10
61. Meadow Pipit – about 100 migrating at Spithami on 9.10
62. White Wagtail – recorded on 4 days
63. Wren – seen only on Kihnu island

64. Robin – heard almost daily, one seen at Spithami on 9.10
65. Black Redstart – 1 at Pikla on 6.10
66. Common Redstart
67. Northern Wheatear – 1 near Ridala on 9.10, late autumn record
68. Blackbird – recorded on 5 days
69. Fieldfare – recorded on 5 days
70. Song Thrush – recorded on 2 days
71. Chiffchaff – recorded on 3 days
72. Goldcrest – recorded on 5 days, hundreds caught at Kabli bird station on 6.10
73. Long-tailed Tit – recorded on 3 days, 200+ at Kabli bird station on 6.10
74. Marsh Tit
75. Willow Tit
76. Crested Tit – few at Järvelja on 4.10
77. Coal Tit – small numbers at Järvelja on 4.10 and Kabli bird station on 6.10
78. Blue Tit
79. Great Tit
80. Nuthatch
81. Treecreeper
82. Great Grey Shrike – 5 individuals in total, recorded on 2 days
83. Eurasian Jay
84. Magpie
85. Spotted Nutcracker – 1-2 heard at Järvelja on 4.10, 5-6 seen at Leidissoo forests on 9.10
86. Jackdaw
87. Rook
88. Hooded Crow
89. Common Raven
90. Common Starling
91. House Sparrow
92. Tree Sparrow
93. Chaffinch
94. Greenfinch
95. Goldfinch
96. Siskin
97. Linnte
98. Common Crossbill – small flock at Järvelja on 4.10
99. Bullfinch
100. Hawfinch – recorded on 2 days, 1 well seen en route to Tallinn on 10.10
101. Yellowhammer – common
102. Reed Bunting