

Estonia in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	<u>Fly Tallinn</u>
Day 2	<u>Poosaspea and Silma Reserve</u>
Day 3	<u>Matsalu and Leidisoo</u>
Day 4	<u>Matsalu to Saaremaa Island</u>
Day 5/6	<u>Saaremaa Island & Parnu</u>
Day 7	<u>Kabil & Luitemaa Reserve</u>
Day 8	<u>Tallinn; fly London</u>

Departs

September

Focus

Primarily birds plus other wildlife

Grading

Grade A. Day walks only

Dates & Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code EST01)

Highlights

- Large flocks of Common Cranes
- Impressive autumn bird migration, including rafts of wildfowl.
- Snapshots of rural life in remote villages
- Estonian hospitality
- Expert local naturalist



From top to bottom: Barnacle Geese, Lesser Spotted Eagle and Common Cran (images courtesy of Shutterstock)



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Introduction

Estonia is the smallest of the three former Soviet Republics which were known collectively as the 'Baltic States'. Always the most prosperous of the trio, the country has enjoyed moderate financial growth since gaining independence in 1991, and accession to the European Community in 2004 was a natural progression for a nation anxious to once again become part of Western Europe. The topography of Estonia consists predominantly of low-lying marshes, rivers and forests through which are scattered over 1,500 lakes whilst its western border is set by a deeply indented Baltic coastline, along which are countless islands of varying sizes.

Geese at sunset, Matsalu



As many Naturetrek clients have already discovered, Estonia is an ideal spring destination for both birdwatchers and botanists offering a fascinating range of species amid unspoilt and picturesque scenery. Perhaps less well known are the many attractions of an autumn visit and this September holiday offers participants the opportunity to enjoy yet another facet of this remarkable country. At the end of the short Arctic summer, tens of thousands of birds begin their long southward migrations and Estonia is ideally positioned to offer a staging post for these migrants to pause and feed before continuing their extraordinary journey. The long, indented coastline provides a myriad of sheltered bays and marshes to attract waterbirds whilst passerines can find many leafy thickets to frequent on the long peninsulas that extend like fingers into the Baltic, or on the thousand or more islands that dot the coast. Whilst migration is always an unpredictable phenomenon, dictated by variations in weather conditions, the peak movements through Estonia are usually towards the end of September and our tour is timed to not only witness this veritable flood of birds but also to savour the vibrant colours of the autumn vegetation and of course the legendary Estonian hospitality which is such a feature of this friendly country.

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Arrive Tallinn

We fly from London on a scheduled flight and on arrival at Tallinn transfer to accommodation near the airport for the first night.

Day 2

Poosaspea

The following morning, we transfer to the Baltic coast. We begin our birding at the most north-westerly point of the country, the Poosaspea. This narrow, north stretching spit is situated at a migratory crossroads where masses of waterbirds heading south from Bothnia and Finland may be observed. Numbers vary according to weather conditions and season but at the peak of migration tens of thousands of Long-tailed Ducks, Common Scoter and geese can occur here along with lesser numbers of other sea-ducks and occasional rarities such as Steller's Eiders. Poosaspea is also famous for the volume of diver passage, involving thousands of Red-throated and Black-throated Divers and on rare occasions, White-billed Diver.



After lunch we will move to Silma Nature Reserve and adjacent Haapsalu Town. This is a region of shallow sheltered bays, coastal lagoons, marshes and reed-beds providing an ideal place for the migrants to rest and feed. From the coastal promenade of Haapsalu, rafts of Goldeneye, Scaup and other wildfowl can be seen bobbing on the water and walks are often interrupted by the sudden appearance of a White-tailed Eagle scattering the ducks or with a line of Cranes passing overhead.

Day 3

Matsalu Bay and Leidisoo Forests

The northern shore of Matsalu Bay is our early morning destination today and here an observation tower enables us to scan the surrounding areas. We will also drive to the Puise peninsula and explore a variety of unique coastal habitats before retiring for a memorable lunch at a local farm. Following the meal, we continue our birding in areas of woodland bordering large open fields which are often frequented by flocks of geese and Cranes. There will also be an optional evening excursion which offers the chance of a roadside encounter with the rare Raccoon Dog or maybe an owl or two.

Day 4

Matsalu Reserve

Today we reach Matsalu National Park. This is the best known reserve in Estonia, comprising a large open floodplain, coastal meadows, riparian and coastal woodlands, river delta, reed-beds and marshes. Seven



Whooper Swans

observation towers afford views over the reserve habitats and the shallow expanses of adjacent Matsalu Bay. Whooper and Bewick Swans congregate here to take advantage of the food and protection, which they share with flocks of Barnacle, Bean, Greylag and White-fronted Geese. With luck one or two Lesser White-fronts may also be picked out among their larger brethren. Autumn birding at Matsalu also promises masses of wildfowl and waders with appearances by various raptors such as White-tailed Eagles,

harriers and Merlin to disturb the tranquility, but the star attraction of this wonderful reserve is the large numbers of Common Cranes which visit daily. As many as twenty thousand Cranes have been counted at Matsalu and the traffic of trumpeting birds to and from the coast is one of the unforgettable moments of our tour. Later in the day we drive to Virtsu and catch a ferry to Saaremaa Island for a stay of two nights.

Day 5

Saaremaa Island

Saaremaa Island is the largest of the thousands of islands studding the Baltic coast of Estonia. The Sørve Peninsula and Saare Spit is the site of a bird ringing station and is well known in Estonia as one of the very best migration sites. Sea watching from this 50 kilometre long peninsula of land can produce numbers of skuas and sea-duck whilst the raptor passage may include accipiters, eagles, Buzzards, harriers and falcons. Huge flocks of migrating finches follow the coastline south and other passerines stopping off to rest here can include one or two unexpected vagrants from Asia such as Yellow-browed Warbler. This is the Estonian equivalent of Spurn Point or Blakeney and like these British locations, autumn can bring many surprises!

We will also look at the south-east of the island, an area of woodlands, peat-bogs and Alvars (layers of thin topsoil on a limestone base which are almost unique to this Baltic coast). Residents here include Golden Eagle and Black Grouse but we can expect a good selection of migrants including geese and Cranes in the coastal meadows.



Sørve Peninsula

Day 6

Saaremaa Island & Parnu

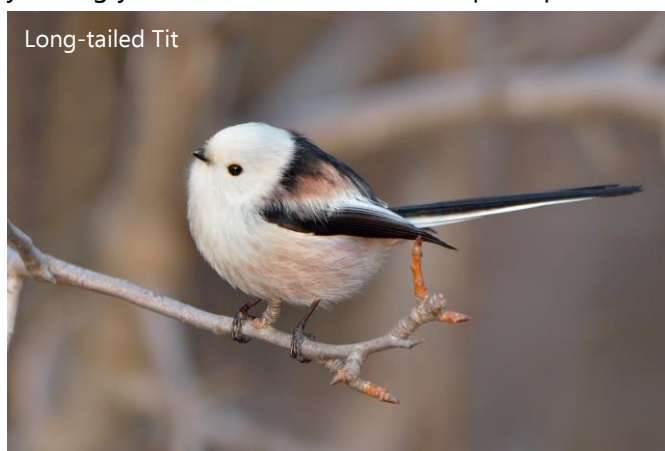
After some final birding on Saaremaa Island we return to the mainland and drive to Parnu in the south west of Estonia. En route we should see more evidence of migration in roadside fields and will be looking out for more flocks of wildfowl and Cranes. The mixed forests around Parnu are more rewarding in spring but we will take a look at the most likely tracts of woodland in the hope of coming upon some of the residents which include Black, Grey-headed, White-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers.

Day 7

Kabli & Luitemaa Reserve

First thing we visit Kabli bird station near the Latvian border, the oldest ringing station in Estonia. Depending on conditions we could see a fine variety of birds here and the area is noted for being a regular site for such northern owls as Tengmalm's and Pygmy during years of abundance. We will perhaps need to be very lucky to see any owls but the migrants pausing in the vegetation here might contain more surprises and the local inhabitants include Crested, Willow and Long-tailed Tits, the latter the distinctive white-headed race.

After lunch we visit a lookout tower in Luitemaa Reserve, overlooking Tolkuse Bog, a magnificent ancient mosaic of peat bogs and pools which we can also investigate by means of a pathway accessing the marsh. This is a wonderfully evocative and ethereal place to conclude our tour although it will not quite be the end as we plan a final evening outing after dinner to listen to the night sounds of the autumn taiga and wetlands.



Long-tailed Tit

Day 8

Fly London

We return to Tallinn to catch our return flight to London but, depending on airline schedules, there may be time for some final birding at the end of a wonderful week of autumn spectacle in Estonia.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock

Tour grading

This tour is graded 'A'. This is a traditional birdwatching tour with no particularly difficult terrain, however a moderate amount of walking at a relaxed pace should be expected, with some rougher ground, and several miles may be covered on foot in a day. We also anticipate quite long days in the field, to make the most of daylight hours, and there may be options for evening excursions as well.

Focus

The primary focus of this holiday will be on Estonia's outstanding birdlife. Whilst your tour leader's expertise will be primarily in birds, they will be more than happy to share their knowledge of the region's mammals and general information.

Weather

It can be windy and cold on the Baltic coast in September, but there will also be the possibility of brighter, warmer days, just as in Britain at this season. Warm and waterproof clothing will be required although we hope for days of better weather.

Accommodation and meals

All meals and accommodation are included in the holiday cost except snacks and meals in transit at the airports. Normally this is from breakfast on Day 2 to lunch on Day 8, depending on flight times.

We will use a range of comfortable hotels, guesthouses and lodges for this tour, chosen for their proximity to the areas we wish to visit. Some rooms may be simple in nature and it's rare to find tea and coffee making facilities in the rooms, particularly in the more rural areas, however all rooms have private facilities.

Extra expenditure

Items of a personal nature such as drinks, tips, souvenirs, etc. are not included in the holiday cost and we would suggest allowing approx. £15 - £20 per person per day to cover these.

Extensions

There are no set extensions for this tour, however it is possible to extend your tour with some additional time in Estonia if you wish. We can assist with booking additional nights in Tallinn and are happy to discuss options for extending your tour with you.

Flights

We typically use direct flights from London Gatwick with Air Baltic for this tour, however these flights are not daily, so an indirect flight or alternative airport may be used. If you would like to travel from a regional airport please contact the Naturetrek office for information on available options.

Your Safety & Security

Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/estonia prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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