

Estonia – A Steller's Eider Special

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Tallinn & overnight

Day 2 Poosaspea

Day 3 Saaremaa Island

Day 4/5 Parnu Region

Day 6 Drive Tallinn and fly



Departs

March / April

Dates and Prices

See website www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code EST02)

Grading

A/B. Easy to moderate day walks

Focus

Birds



Highlights

- Europe's largest gathering of Steller's Eiders
- Great opportunities to find woodpeckers & owls
- Large assemblies of waterbirds
- Picturesque landscapes of lakes & forests
- The historic city of Tallinn
- Traditional Estonian hospitality



From top to bottom: Steller's Eider, White-backed Woodpecker and Crested Tit



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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. The credentials of Estonia as a major European birdwatching destination have been firmly established by the successes of our May tours. Participants have returned from these holidays full of enthusiasm, not just for the superlative birdwatching but also for the hospitality of our Estonian hosts who take great pride in sharing with visitors both the natural history and the gastronomic delights of their country! While May is an excellent time to visit, nesting activity for some species beginning as early as March, so there are also very good reasons for travelling to Estonia earlier in the protracted spring season. As the days lengthen and the icy grip of winter is melted by the increasing warmth of the sun in late March and early April, rafts of Steller's Eider begin to congregate in their favourite bays. As many as a thousand birds can be seen in one of the largest concentrations of this rare duck in European waters, although most will have migrated north by the end of the month. Another significant attraction in March and April is the relative ease with which the resident woodpeckers can be found in forests that have yet to attain their summer canopy of leaves, plus the chances of observing lekking Black Grouse or finding a Hazel Grouse.



Steller's Eider (Jari Peltomaki)

Itinerary

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

Depart London

We depart London on a direct flight to Tallinn. Upon arrival, we will be met by our local guide and driven to a nearby hotel where we will spend the night.

Day 2

Leidissoo and Poosaspea

An early start will be necessary to arrive at Leidissoo Bog in time to witness the morning lek of Black Grouse which maintain a thriving population in this mix of heathland and forest. The bubbling cries of the displaying males provide an evocative background to our observations and with luck we should see plenty of these very attractive grouse engrossed in sorting their hierarchy and trying to

impress the watching Grey-hens. We will have packed breakfasts with us to better facilitate the early departure from our hotel and may choose to either enjoy the picnic to the accompaniment of the Black Grouse calls or take the meal with us into the nearby pine forest where rather more discordant



Black Grouse Grey-hen

and bizarre noises emanate from Turkey-sized male Capercaillies issuing their own spring challenges to would be rivals. It is difficult to penetrate the deep forest to observe the displaying birds but we will marvel at the cacophony of noises from a discreet distance. Far more demure are the chicken-sized Hazel Hens (Hazel Grouse) which inhabit the same tract of forest but, like their bigger cousin, they will also

be proclaiming territories and forming partnerships for the new nesting season. Another noisy resident to look out for here is the pine loving Nutcracker.

The Poosaspea is a narrow spit of land which extends into the Baltic Sea like a finger pointing towards neighbouring Finland. Renowned as an Estonian Spurn or Blakeney Point, it is a natural magnet for migrants seeking to rest or feed before commencing the next leg of their journey. The first week of April is a little early for any significant passerine movements but as we drive along the promontory we will be scanning offshore among the bobbing rafts of sea duck which occur along the Poosaspea coast. Along with the flocks of Long-tailed Duck, Scaup, Common and Velvet Scoter we should also find both Red-throated and Black-throated Divers; the banana-beaked White-billed Diver is, even in these northern waters, a much more elusive bird, the presence of which cannot be guaranteed, but we will be looking out for any individuals that are present. Depending on the prevailing conditions we may spend several hours travelling along the peninsula before travelling to Roosta.

After a hearty Estonian lunch, which may be eaten at a local farm to savour a little of the rural lifestyle, we devote the remainder of the afternoon to experiencing the dramatic numbers of wildfowl and waterbirds inhabiting the marshes and rough meadows along the Baltic coast. Great flocks of Wigeon, Teal, Pintail and other wildfowl graze the damp fields together with ever vigilant Bean, White-fronted, Greylag, and



Red-throated Diver

Barnacle Geese whilst both Whooper and Bewick's Swans doze in family groups like so many snowy islets among the sea of grey bodies. From time to time a passing Hen Harrier or one of the local White-tailed Eagles will cause panic among the throng of feeding birds and for a while the sky will

be full of movement as long lines and chevrons of flying wildfowl circle around before gradually settling again, the crescendo of anxious calls subsiding to conversational exchanges between the feeding flocks. There will be a lot of birds to check through and one or two surprises may be in store before we make our way back to Roosta for the evening.

Day 3

Matsalu and Saaremaa Island

This morning, after breakfast, we will drive to the western part of the country and catch an early ferry from Virtsu to visit Saaremaa Island, the largest of the many islands and islets along the Baltic coast of Estonia. On the way will stop at Matsalu, the longest established RAMSAR site in Estonia, and we may come upon flocks of stately Common Cranes, freshly returned from their winter quarters, and perhaps be lucky enough to spot a Bittern flying over the marshes or standing motionless in a reedy creek beside the road.

Depending upon the local conditions, we may observe many sea-duck as we cross the Suur Vain Strait but in a severe winter this narrow stretch of water often freezes over, and icy conditions can persist into April. Once ashore we make our way to north-west of Saaremaa Island to a sheltered bay near Cape Undva where one of the biggest concentrations of Steller's Eider in Europe occur. Numbers vary from a few hundred to almost 1,000, and the males can be as

Common Crane



animated as they are beautiful when the imperatives of the imminent breeding season driving them to a frenzy of displaying. Sometimes when feeding the dense flocks of eiders behave as if synchronized, the sea appearing empty for a few moments then suddenly transformed into a bubbling cauldron as scores of bodies surface at the same instant. At other times a mood of lethargy overtakes the birds and they will be scattered over the water of the bay, sleeping fitfully with heads tucked into scapulars. We will spend most of our time on Saaremaa watching these rare ducks but will also be alert for any rarer species among the flocks of wildfowl inhabiting the island.

Day 4

Parnu Region & Luitemaa

In the morning we will have time for further sea watching searches around Saaremaa Island before crossing back to the mainland and heading to the Parnu region of the country to look for woodpeckers and other forest birds in the mixed coniferous and broad-leaved woodlands. Later in the breeding season it becomes infinitely more difficult to locate woodpeckers but in late March we have excellent chances of tracking the various species as they proclaim their territories by bursts of 'drumming' and chase rivals from tree to tree. Jackdaw sized Black Woodpeckers are among the more flamboyant of the woodpecker residents but Green Woodpecker-like yaffling calls may draw our attention to one of the local Grey-headed and two other species of particular interest will be

the White-backed and that denizen of the northern forests, the Three-toed. As we search for the fine selection of woodpeckers in this area we may also come upon more Hazel-Hens and Nutcrackers whilst in the conifer woods delightful little Crested Tits will scold at us from the trees.

We have a late evening meal at the comfortable hotel which is our base for two nights. If time permits before sunset we can scan the area around Tuhu Bog for more Black Grouse and possibly a Golden Eagle sailing over the moorland.



Grey-headed Woodpecker

Day 5

Soometsa and Nigula Forests

We make our way to Nigula Nature Reserve, which was first declared a sanctuary in 1957. A combination of wetlands, pastures and forest in one of the least populated areas of the country make this a refuge for some of the endangered larger mammals such as Lynx, Wolf and Brown Bear. In practice we have only a very remote chance of encountering any of these secretive mammals during our brief visit, but the possibility will add an exciting *frisson* to our time in the reserve. The avifauna of the reserve includes Goshawk, White-tailed and Golden Eagles, Black & Grey-headed Woodpeckers which will hopefully ensure that we end our short visit to Estonia with more excellent birdwatching.

Day 6

Tallinn/London

We return to Tallinn for the return flight back to London later in the day, but before travelling to the airport we will hopefully have time for some roadside birding along the way and a brief look at the historic city of Tallinn where we have our final lunch of the tour (flight timetables permitting).

Tour grading

This tour is graded 'A/B'. This is a traditional birdwatching tour with a moderate amount of walking. There are no particularly long walks, however walking can be more tiring if there is deep snow and several miles may be covered on foot over the course of a day. It can also be icy underfoot. This holiday is suitable, therefore, for anyone with an 'average to good' level of fitness, able to walk several miles over the course of a morning or afternoon. Should you require additional information on the tour please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051.

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

Estonia has a temperate climate, characterised by warm summers and fairly severe winters. In late March/early April we can hope for reasonably sunny conditions, however it can also be bitterly cold, with snow a possibility, so warm clothing is essential. If it has been a dry winter, then there may be very little snow lying, but it can still be cold.

Food & accommodation included in the price

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 6, 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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