

Estonia in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Tallinn
Day 2/3	Põõsaspea, Matsalu Reserve
Day 4/5	Forests/wetland of East Estonia
Day 6/7	Soomaa National Park & West Estonia
Day 8	Fly London

Departs

April or May

Focus

Primarily birds, but also other wildlife

Grading

Day walks only. Grade A

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code EST03)

Highlights

- Large numbers of migrant geese & wildfowl
- A fine selection of woodpeckers & owls
- Picturesque landscapes of coast, forests, bogs and lakes
- A chance to see Capercaillie, Black Grouse & Hazel Grouse
- Extensive reed-filled marshlands
- Spring migration in full flow



From top: Capercaillie, Slavonian Grebe, Edible Frogs



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Introduction

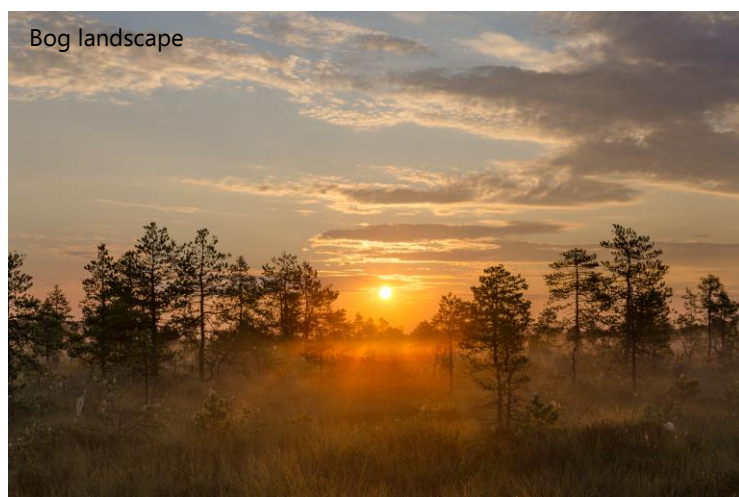
Estonia is the least populous of the Baltic States and since independence from Russia in 1991 its citizens have enjoyed a relatively prosperous standard of living evidenced by the Republic's admission to the European Community. Most of the country is low-lying and flat or gently undulating, with the highest point only 318 metres above sea level! Large areas are barren and stony, a legacy of the glaciers which once covered much of the landscape, but there are also extensive forests. This is a land of lakes and woodland, but another important habitat is provided by the indented Baltic coastline which embraces over 800 islands of varying sizes.



Corncrake

The country has always been known as a place where large numbers of wildfowl and waterbirds assemble during the migration periods but until recently the scale of these movements was not fully appreciated by the wider world. It is now evident that throughout early May huge flocks of ducks, geese and swans take advantage of the shelter and food afforded by the un-spoilt coastal marshes and lakes of Estonia before continuing their long journey to Arctic breeding grounds. Like all such migrations, the prevailing weather conditions determine when the birds arrive and how long they remain, but this north-bound traffic reaches a peak just as the ice retreats from the Arctic tundra to signal the beginning of another frenetic breeding season. We hope to find ourselves in the midst of this great avian spectacle during the first few days of our tour as we visit a range of wetland sites fringing Matsalu Bay and the Põõsaspea peninsula. Whilst Estonia is a welcoming host to so many migrants, it can also boast a fantastic diversity of breeding species and

later in the tour we will discover the richness of the country's avifauna as we explore marshes, lakes and woodlands in the south and east of Estonia.



Bog landscape

The largely untouched countryside in the Baltic States assumes ever greater importance as so many European wildlife areas face a multitude of threats and a spring visit to Estonia is a reminder of what birdwatching used to be like in the days of old! This is a land where the rasping of Corncrakes is still a

familiar sound in the summer hay meadows and many other species fast disappearing from Western Europe are still relatively plentiful.

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.

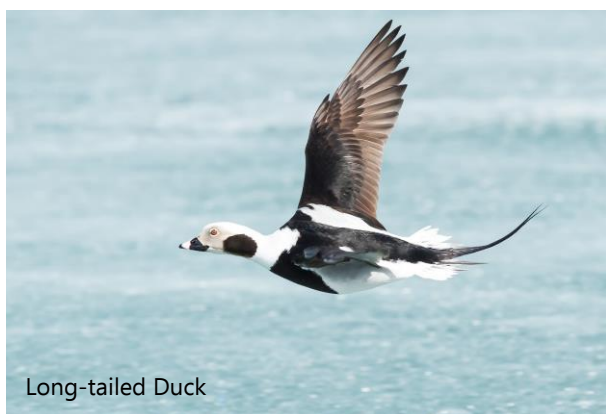
Day 1

Fly Tallinn

We fly from London to Tallinn, most likely on a late afternoon flight and transfer to our nearby hotel for the night.

Day 2

Põõsaspea, Haapsalu and Silma Nature Reserve



Long-tailed Duck

This morning we drive to the coast for a full day, which will start with observing migrating wildfowl, waders, divers and seabirds from the Põõsaspea Peninsula. The rafts of duck bobbing offshore from the coast will include scoters, Scaup and Long-tailed Ducks and with nesting just weeks away, the males will be busy displaying and calling giving the flocks an appearance of animation and excitement that is lacking during the mid-winter battle for survival. Divers may also occur on the sea and on rare occasions could include one or two

White-billed Diver in breeding plumage heading north.

As the morning migration drops off, we will move a short way down the coast to explore a former Baltic Sea inlet that now makes up the reed-fringed shallow mere of Sutlepa Meri. Breeding on the mere will be well underway with booming Great Bitterns, displaying Red-necked Grebes and hunting White-tailed Eagles. Around these wooded and agricultural districts of northwest Estonia we will keep a keen eye out for parties of migrating geese, and Common Cranes. A lunch of warm soup and traditional Estonia fare here will set us up for the afternoon's continued birding.

For the afternoon we will move to the northern side of Matsalu Bay where we will visit the famous Haeska bird watching tower, a record holding place that saw 128 species of bird listed from this one spot in a day. We might not set any records of our own today, but the location will give us exceptional views over one of Estonia's best wetlands packed full of wildlife and the possibility of us seeing over 100 species for the day. Regardless of whether our visit coincides with a peak or a trough in the migration movements we are assured a great day of birdwatching.

In the coarse grasslands and coastal marshes we will be on the lookout for the occasional stray individual Red-breasted or Lesser-White-Fronted Geese, among their commoner relatives, and flocks of both Whooper & Bewick's Swans. Passage migrants which might be encountered here include Black Stork,

Avocet, Ruff, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Ortolan Bunting whilst many rarities have been recorded from this area.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we will drive to the coastal hamlet of Roosta where we stay for the next two nights. We will settle into our cozy log cabins, just back from the Baltic coastline, nestled within the pine forests that we hope to explore over the coming days.

Much later in the day we may attempt to find owls in the vicinity of our accommodation and hope to hear or see Ural or Eagle Owls if conditions allow or see Elk as night falls.

Day 3

Leidissoo & Variku forests & Matsalu National Park

Once again we will continue to explore a variety of coastal habitats bordering Matsalu Bay and again the vagaries of migration play a big part in the range of species encountered. However, waders are particularly plentiful here, with the Broad-billed Sandpiper being one of the rarer passage migrants we will be hoping to find.

The day will begin with an early morning visit to a mix of wetland, heathland and forest habitats where the bubbling cries of displaying Black Grouse might greet the dawn and local residents include Capercaillie, Hazel Grouse and several woodpecker species. The open wooded clearings are also home to breeding Common Cranes and we could see a number of raptor species including Golden and Lesser Spotted Eagle. We will enjoy a warming lunch on the edge of Haapsalu Bay, and also visit sheltered pools on the edge of town to observe confiding Slavonian Grebes, often engaged in courtship and nest building at this time of year, usually giving photographers in the group a real treat.

Our afternoon will see us explore some more of the varied Baltic meadow habitat of Matsalu Bay. An observation tower giving commanding views over the wetlands will give a sense of scale to this internationally important wetland.



Common Cranes



Barnacle Geese

This is a wonderful reserve for birds with a great selection of residents including Bittern, Greylag Goose, Marsh Harrier, Caspian Tern and many other interesting species. A shallow sea-bay enclosed on the seaward side by an archipelago of large rocky islands, the reserve also embraces the delta and flood-plain of the Kasari River which creates acres of water meadows and grazing meadows ideal for hungry geese. The vast floodplain meadows around the Kasari River offer breeding habitat for a range of Estonia's breeding waders including Curlews with their haunting bubbling cry, Ruff and the Baltic race of Dunlin. At the height of spring

passage, the numbers of wildfowl recorded here have reached astonishing figures with estimates of up to 40,000 Whooper Swans, several thousand Bean Geese, 12,000 Barnacle Geese and more than a million diving ducks. In addition, Common Crane flocks often number several hundred and Ruff occur in huge flocks. Such figures relate to peak numbers but even though we are unlikely to witness such spectacles there will certainly be plenty to look at and a passing raptor, such as one of the White-tailed Eagles, which often occur here, will doubtless cause spectacular panic among the vast assemblies of waterbirds.

Day 4 Southeast Estonia via Nedrema Nature Reserve & Audru wetlands

After breakfast we will move further south on the Estonian Baltic coast towards the Latvian border. Our journey will take us via river valleys, woodland and farmland, stopping at various points on the way to explore the Estonian countryside and rich birdlife. To the east of Matsalu we will try our luck in an area good for both Spotted and Lesser Spotted Eagles, however it is claimed that hybridisation between both species has occurred in this region so we will need to take particular care of raptor identification here!

Lunch will be enjoyed in the vicinity of Nedrema Nature Reserve, a charming block of traditionally managed woodland pasture and meadow that boasts a phenomenal density of wildflowers on account of its coppice and meadow management. The wooded clearings are equally rich in birdlife with a good suite of woodpeckers, warblers and flycatchers; on past trips we have even happened upon a roosting Ural Owl.



Citrine Wagtail

We will continue further south in the afternoon and explore the dynamic and diverse wetlands and coastal meadows around Pärnu. The traditional grazing, cutting and flooding regime makes the wetlands here throng with birdlife. Large flocks of refueling geese, ducks and waders mix with breeders including Citrine Wagtails, Red-necked Grebes, terns and gulls. White-tailed Eagles are common in this area and often give the group good views; Beaver are another common part of the wildlife around Audru and we should see lots of signs of their activity.

Later in the day we will arrive at our second hotel, just back from the Estonian Baltic Sea coast.

Day 5 Soometsa Forests & Häädemeeste

At first light we will visit tracts of coniferous and mixed forests where we look (and listen!) for Black, White-backed, Grey-headed and Three-toed Woodpeckers, Hazel Grouse, Nutcracker and possibly a few Parrot Crossbills. Driving through woodland tracks we will also keep a keen eye out for mammals, with Elk being common, and rare sightings of Brown Bears and Wolf not beyond possibility. In the woods here we will also take advantage of local knowledge to get another chance of finding Capercaillie.

By midday we will visit the coastal strip in the vicinity of the village of Häädemeeste where we will enjoy a



Penduline Tit

local lunch before exploring a mix of habitats including dune systems that are being managed to increase numbers of Natterjack Toads and observe a large tree-top colony of Grey Herons. A stop off at Pikla Ponds will see restored fishponds, now home to Great Bittern, Bearded and Penduline Tit and Savi's Warbler, along with a range of migrant passerines. The meadows near Pikla are attractive to passage waders including Ruff, Broad-billed Sandpiper and Marsh Sandpiper.

In the evening, we might try our luck at spotlighting a few of the nocturnal residents near our hotel and with, Ural, Pygmy, Eagle and Tengmalm's Owls in the vicinity the results could be interesting!

Day 6

Soomaa National Park & Karevere

The bogs, flooded plains and swamps of Soomaa National Park will occupy us for the morning before continuing our journey west beyond Tartu. The National Park is a landscape of flooded meadows, bogs and swamp forest interspersed with areas of drier woodland, each type of habitat rich in birdlife. Black Storks occur here as do Capercaillie, Black and Hazel Grouse, Lesser Spotted Eagle and many other exciting species including migrating flocks of wildfowl and Common Cranes. We will settle into our comfortable hotel within a restored vodka distillery before enjoying a superb evening meal. Later in the evening, the marshes around Tartu will warrant our attention as this area is recognised as one of the best locations in the Baltic to observe lekking Great Snipe.

Day 7

Alam-Pedja Nature Reserve

Our itinerary today takes us to the fantastic wooded landscape of Varvselja, a biodiverse area of forest that is home to Black and Three-toed Woodpecker, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Hazel Grouse. We will then move a short way to the shores of the vast Lake Peipsi, like an inland sea it straddles the border between Estonia and Russia.

For the afternoon we will explore the wetlands of Ardlä on the edge of Tartu. There are many gems to look for here including Black Tern, Marsh Sandpiper, Spotted & Little Crakes, Citrine Wagtail and Penduline Tit but in such prime, under-watched habitats almost anything is possible and we will be hoping for a few surprises. We will finally enjoy our last evening meal back at our hotel near Tartu.

Day 8

London

We return to Tallinn to catch our homeward flight after an exciting and rewarding week of birdwatching in Estonia.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock

Grading

This tour is graded A, consisting of day walks only. You should expect to cover a few miles on foot each day at a relaxed pace, but no particularly steep or rough terrain underfoot is expected, although please note that the boardwalk can be slippery. Fields and forest tracks can be muddy, and the ground may be uneven in places.

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 on the region's mammals and general information.

Weather

Temperate, characterised by warm summers and fairly severe winters. In late April and May we can hope for reasonably sunny conditions but it can also be bitterly cold, with snow a possibility and rainfall can occur at any time, so warm, waterproof clothing is essential.

Food & accommodation

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

We will use a range of comfortable hotels and lodges for this tour, chosen for their proximity to the areas we wish to visit. All rooms have private facilities. While we will make every effort to stay at the establishments mentioned in the itinerary, occasionally circumstances will mean that we may need to stay at other local accommodation of a similar standard instead.

Extensions

Subject to availability on flights, the tour may be extended for a longer stay in Estonia and a popular option is to spend a few days sightseeing in historic Tallinn. We will gladly obtain a quotation for such extensions.

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

You have chosen to travel to Estonia. 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.fco.gov.uk/travel or telephone 0870 6060290 regularly 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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