

Estonia in Spring

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 - 10 May 2008



Great Snipe Lek



Estonia wetland



Little Gull (adult, summer plumage)

Images and report compiled by Gerald Broddez



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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 joining the European Community. Most of the country is low-lying and flat or gently undulating with the highest point only 318m 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.

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. 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 found ourselves in the midst of this great avian spectacle during the first few days of our tour as we visited a range of wetland sites fringing Matsalu Bay and the Poosaspea peninsula. While Estonia is a welcoming host to so many migrants, it also boasts a fantastic diversity of breeding species and later in the tour we discovered the richness of the country's avifauna as we explored marshes, lakes and woodlands in the south and east of Estonia.

The weather was very variable throughout the tour with overcast skies and rain alternating with short spells of blue skies and sun; temperatures varying between 3 and 19°C.

Day 1

Saturday 3rd May

London to Tallinn to Roosta

The flight from London to Tallinn via Helsinki arrived on time and, after meeting with our local guide for the trip, we drove to Tallinn for a short, but very interesting city tour. After this we drove towards the resort of Roosta where we stayed overnight. En route we stopped for a coffee break and heard our first Woodlarks. Upon arrival there was time to settle into our chalets and have a first tour of the hotel grounds and beach area.

Day 2

Sunday 4th May

Poosaspea to Silma Nature Reserve to Haapsalu

Weather: sunny, cool & windy

We made an early start, as we wanted to watch the migration on the Poosaspea Peninsula. On the peninsula the weather was excellent with hardly any wind. From the peninsula we could see a few Common Terns and Wheatear perched on the rocks below us while at sea we saw lots of Long-tailed Ducks, Barnacle Goose and several Common and Velvet Scoters, Red and Black-throated Divers, Sparrowhawk, a distant White-tailed Eagle and a few song birds migrating through.

We then drove to the Silma Nature Reserve with its large lagoons and reedbeds. Our first stop at the northern part took us to two bird towers. From these we saw and heard several Savi's Warblers, Bearded Tits and Reed Buntings. Flying over the lagoon was a small flock of Little Gulls with a few Black Terns accompanying them. A large group of Tufted Duck were also present and in the trees around the lake there were several Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs and Lesser Whitethroats. A walk on the boardwalk, between the reed beds, produced several singing Sedge and Reed Warblers, with Water Rail and Bittern calling loudly but staying well hidden. On the way back to the bus we found a rare Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell perched on the ground giving fantastic views.

We drove for lunch to Haapsalu and birded the seaward area of the town. Caspian Tern and Goosanders kept us entertained during lunch. We then walked along the seawall to the bird tower on the edge of the lake adding Tree Sparrow to our list. We had a fantastic view from the top and saw several Goosanders, Gadwall and a single Greater Scaup. There was a profusion of Great Crested Grebes who were clearly pairing up, evidenced by lots of headshaking going on, and nest building starting. A large group of waders, mainly Ruff and Redshanks, were seen in the distance.

The afternoon was spent at the southern part of the reserve. Here we walked along a small trail to one of the new towers at the lake edge and were rewarded with good sightings of several Caspian Terns, large groups of White-fronted and Barnacle Goose, White-tailed Eagles, and Spotted and Common Redshank both in full summer dress. A few Lesser Whitethroats and Linnets were in the bushes below the tower.

After dinner we went for a night excursion. At one of the open areas in the forest we had a displaying Woodcock overhead, but despite trying hard there was no sign of any Owls, so we contented ourselves by admiring Saturn and its rings.

Day 3

Monday 5th May

Variku to Matsalu Nature Reserve

This morning the circumstances (a non-starting car) forced us to change the programme a little bit. While we waited for a new car to arrive we did a short walk in the forest surrounding our chalets. Several Tree Pipits were showing off their 'parachute' display flight and a Crested Tit was seen at close range. In the top of the spruce trees, we had great views of a group of Crossbills.

Near the shore we found a group of singing Woodlarks overhead whereas on the calm sea, we soon found lots of floating ducks: most common were Long-tailed Ducks, with smaller groups of Eider, Red-breasted Merganser and a pair of Black-throated Divers in summer plumage.

Driving south we stopped en route for several cranes, geese and best of all, Lesser Spotted Eagle. After lunch at a roadside cafe we drove to Matsalu National Park where we spent the rest of the afternoon. Our first stop was at Haeske where, at a stop along the river, we saw several Curlews and a hidden singing Thrush Nightingale.

In the Pogassi area several pairs of Common Gull were nesting on the roof of the house while the gardens held several Yellow Wagtails of the Flava race. In the meadows we found a good selection of ducks and waders. Many Ruff and Dunlin (in breeding plumage) were displaying with feeding Whimbrel, Curlew and Ringed Plovers nearby. On the water we found Pintail, Little Tern and lots of Barnacle Geese with a few Bean Geese. We then drove to the Puise peninsula where a fantastic dinner was enjoyed at a local farm.

Day 4

Tuesday 6th May

Matsalu

Weather: overcast & windy

We made a short detour inland in search for Black Grouse. We were not to be disappointed and we soon found a nice group of about 10 males displaying in the fields, closely watched by a few Golden Plovers in summer dress. Driving to the eastern part of Matsalu we stopped at another area of farmland. Here we drove along the small tracks and found our quarry – a Lesser Spotted Eagle perched in a tree, soon followed by a Greater Spotted Eagle!! We drove a bit closer and had great scope views of what is a very rare raptor in Estonia.

At the Matsalu Reserve we stopped at another tower and were rewarded with sightings of Montagu's Harrier. A Thrush Nightingale was singing its heart out but refused to show itself and several White Storks were breeding in the small patches of forest. Before lunch we drove to the visitor centre. Here we had a look in the natural history museum before driving to our picnic site, a roadside cafe where we again had local food specially prepared for us; and as usual the food was excellent.

A boat trip was scheduled and soon we were motoring up a narrow channel with reed beds around us. As soon as we hit the open water, we saw birds everywhere – lots of Mute Swans, smaller number of Garganey and Teal, smart Little Gulls overhead, several Sea Eagles and beautiful Ruffs and tinkling Bearded Tits. A Hobby perched on a dead tree eating a dead House Martin, and a Montagu's Harrier flew by at very close range.

Before moving on to Parnu we made a last stop at a marshy area outside town. Here we searched for another rare Estonian breeding bird, Citrine Wagtail. We heard and briefly saw the birds in the high grass but we did not get very good views (this was made up later in the trip when we saw several males in full breeding plumage at very close range and had excellent scope views).

Day 5

Wednesday 7th May

Soometsa

Weather: overcast

Before breakfast we visited the Soometsa reserve where we were looking for Woodpeckers and Grouse. Once at the reserve we walked into a mixed spruce and birch forest and heard a Grey-headed Woodpecker and Wood Warbler but not much else, so we decided to have a breakfast break, during which a Nutcracker suddenly started calling from the top of a small spruce tree giving excellent views.

We stopped and made short walks in different parts of the reserve and little by little most of our target species showed themselves. Great-spotted Woodpeckers were common, a pair of Black Woodpeckers put on a great show, a Grey-headed Woodpecker played hide-and-seek for a while, calling hidden in the forest before finally showing itself. Several Cuckoos were calling and we had good views. We then made a walk into the boggy forest along a pleasant boardwalk with a stop at another tower (the highest in Estonia), overlooking the forest. Crossbills and Linnets were calling overhead.

Lunch was at local farm with Hobbies flying overhead while we were eating. Again we had some really good homemade 'farm' food. We then travelled to Haademeeste and its coastal dune systems. Our first stop was at a local park, which produced a nice male Middle-spotted Woodpecker, singing Serin and very good views of a Thrush Nightingale. A stop at a small pond turned up at least 11 Horned Grebes in summer plumage at close range, so we stayed for a while observing these smart birds.

After dinner we went for a short 'owling' session. After a bit of convincing at last we had a Pygmy Owl calling from the top of a large spruce tree allowing scope views. It was a fitting finale to a Grand Day!

Day 6

Thursday 8th May

Tartu

Weather: overcast with sunny spells

After breakfast we left the coastal part of Estonia and drove inland. We reached the lake of Vortsjarv with its large wet meadows by mid-morning, and had a wonderful time admiring the thousands of waterbirds and waders that were present. There were enormous flocks of Bean, White-fronted and Greylag Geese feeding and flying all around us, closely watched by large groups of smart Little Gulls and waders of 10 different species. Best were the large numbers of Ruff and Wood Sandpiper, all in breeding dress, and smaller numbers of Curlew, Greenshank, Redshank and Green Sandpiper. It was one of the highlights of the trip.

We reached Tartu at midday and after lunch in town we spent the remainder of the afternoon in the forest north of town.

It was hard work, but we heard a calling Hazel Grouse which refused to show itself then found an old tree with a nest of Ural Owls. We could clearly see three young and an adult in the nest – a great sight, not easily forgotten.

Travelling further north we went for a walk through the mixed pine and deciduous forests and almost immediately found a very co-operative pair of Black Woodpeckers putting on a great show for us. We continued to the tower at the edge of the heath land and found a roosting White-tailed Eagle and had good views of a pair of Crested Tits on the way.

Sunset found us at a large river admiring a family of Beavers and several Roe Deer. We then visited an area known as one of the best spots for Great Snipe in the Baltic. Unfortunately, with darkness the fog came in and although we could hear the birds clearly only some of us glimpsed a few birds between the fogbanks...

Day 7

Friday 9th May

Alam-Pedja to Aardla

Weather: rainy & overcast

Our itinerary today took us to Alam-Pedja, an area of marsh with adjacent forest. This is a truly remote and wild region of undisturbed floodplains and winding rivers in which it is claimed there are only nine human residents amid 260 square miles of wilderness!

We drove to the central part of the reserve, one of the main breeding areas for Eagles in Estonia. Our walk had just started when we heard a Sparrowhawk calling deep in the forest. We then heard our first Corncrake. Although we tried very hard the bird would not come out into the open, but we all heard the typical 'Crex-crex' call. A Hawfinch was calling and briefly seen by some.

Because it was still raining hard we decided to try another part of the reserve, stopping briefly for coffee at a place called 'Hollywood'. A flooded marshy area of the reserve gave us our only Whooper Swans of the trip and small groups of Pintail.

After lunch in town we drove to the vast expanses of wetlands near Aardla. This marshy area with lakes and ponds usually holds a good selection of water birds. It did not take long before we found our main quest, a nice Red-necked Grebe in full breeding dress, several Wood Sandpipers, a male Garganey and at least two to three different Citrine Wagtails (some at very close range allowing fantastic scope views), thousands of White-fronted and Bean Geese overhead and in the dead trees we found thousands of newly arrived Barn Swallows. A flyby Goshawk at close range, several Marsh Harriers and an Osprey were the raptor highlights.

After yesterday's foggy evening we decided to return to the Great Snipe lek and we were not to be disappointed this time as we saw and heard at least a dozen birds displaying and uttering their bubbling display calls. A pair of Woodcock and several Thrush Nightingales added to the excitement. It was a fine climax to our last full day.

Day 8

Saturday 10th May

Tartu to Tallinn to London

Weather: sunny & pleasant

After an early departure and breakfast en route we arrived in Tallinn by mid-morning, in time for our homeward flight after an exciting and rewarding week of birdwatching in Estonia.

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Species Report

Birds

- Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata*
 Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*
 Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
 Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
 Great Bittern *Botaurus stellaris* Heard
 Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*
 Bewick's Swan *Cygnus columbianus bewickii*
 Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons albifrons*
 Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*
 Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*
 Common Teal *Anas crecca*
 Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*
 Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata*
 Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*
 Common Eider *Somateria mollissima*
 Common Scoter *Melanitta nigra*
 Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*
 Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*
 Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
 Eurasian Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*
 Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*
 Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*
 Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*
 Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo*
 Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia* Heard
 Common Crane *Grus grus*
 Common Coot *Fulica atra*
 Pied Avocet *Recurvirostra avosetta*
 European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*
 Little Plover *Charadrius dubius*
 Great Snipe *Gallinago media*
 Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*
 Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata*
 Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*
 Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*
 Common Redshank *Tringa totanus*
 Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*
 Little Gull *Hydrocoloeus minutus*
 Great Black-backed Gull *Larus marinus*
 Little Tern *Sternula albifrons*
 Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*
 Arctic Tern *Sterna paradisaea*
 Rock Dove *Columba livia*
 Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*
 Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*
 Eurasian Wryneck *Jynx torquilla* Heard
 Middle Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos medius*
 Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*
 Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*
 Collared Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*
 Northern House Martin *Delichon urbicum*
 Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis*
 Blue-headed Wagtail *Motacilla flava flava*
 Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica*
 Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*
 Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus*
 Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*
 Eurasian White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*
 Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*
 Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis fabalis*
 Greylag Goose *Anser anser*
 Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*
 Gadwall *Anas strepera*
 Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
 Garganey *Anas querquedula*
 Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*
 Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*
 Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*
 Velvet Scoter *Melanitta fusca*
 Smew *Mergellus albellus*
 Goosander *Mergus merganser merganser*
 White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*
 Montagu's Harrier *Circus pygargus*
 Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis*
 Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*
 Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*
 Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix*
 Grey Partridge *Perdix perdix*
 Water Rail *Rallus aquaticus* Heard
 Eurasian Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*
 Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
 Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*
 Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*
 Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*
 Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*
 Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus*
 Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola*
 Dunlin *Calidris alpina*
 Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*
 European Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*
 Mew Gull *Larus canus*
 Caspian Tern *Hydroprogne caspia*
 Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*
 Sandwich Tern *Thalasseus sandvicensis*
 Stock Dove *Columba oenas*
 Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*
 Eurasian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum*
 Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*
 Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*
 Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*
 Wood Lark *Lullula arborea*
 European Swallow *Hirundo rustica rustica*
 Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
 Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

Northern Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*
 Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus*
 Redwing *Turdus iliacus*
 Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*
 European Robin *Erithacus rubecula*
 Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*
 European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca*
 Savi's Warbler *Locustella luscinioides*
 Great Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus arundinaceus*
 Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*
 Blackcap *Sylvia atricapilla*
 Lesser Whitethroat *Sylvia curruca*
 Bearded Tit *Panurus biarmicus*
 Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*
 European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*
 Common Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*
 Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*
 Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*
 Eurasian Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*
 Rook *Corvus frugilegus*
 Common Raven *Corvus corax*
 House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*
 Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*
 European Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*
 European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*
 European Serin *Serinus serinus*
 Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*
 Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

Dunnoek *Prunella modularis*
 Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*
 Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*
 Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*
 Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus*
 Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*
 Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*
 Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*
 Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*
 Wood Warbler *Phylloscopus sibilatrix*
 Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*
 Common Whitethroat *Sylvia communis*
 Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*
 Coal Tit *Periparus ater*
 Great Tit *Parus major*
 Eurasian Penduline Tit *Remiz pendulinus*
 Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*
 Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*
 Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*
 Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*
 Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*
 Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*
 Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*
 Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus*
 Common Linnet *Acanthis cannabina*
 Common Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*
 Yellowhammer *Emberiza citrinella*

Mammals

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*
 Moose *Alces americanus*
 Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*
 European Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*
 Eurasian Beaver *Castor fiber*

Butterflies

Small White *Artogeia rapae*
 Orange Tip *Anthocharis cardamines*
 Green Hairstreak *Callophrys rubi*
 Common Blue *Polyommatus icarus*
 Small Tortoiseshell *Aglais urticae*
 Grizzled Skipper *Pyrgus malvae malvae*
 Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell *Nymphalis xanthomelas*

Green-veined White *Artogeia napi napi*
 Brimstone *Gonepteryx rhamni*
 Holly Blue *Celastrina argiolus*
 Peacock Butterfly *Inachis io*
 Map Butterfly *Araschnia levana*

Excellent sighting of this rare and range restricted butterfly!