

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



ESTONIA: Eurasian Lynx Quest 1

Tuesday 1st – Sunday 6th November 2022

4 Wise Birding clients

Leaders: Tarvo Valker and Martin Piispea

This tour report is written by Tour participant John Weir

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE TRIP

Eurasian Lynx: A sighting of a male Lynx (3-4 years old), initially spotted by thermal imaging was observed from several vantage points over an extended period.

(Read details of sighting in report)

Eurasian Elk (Moose): Two juveniles observed close to the track in undergrowth, two adults observed from a distance moving in the forest.

Raccoon Dog & Red Fox: Several observed during the trip on most nights.

Pine Marten: A good sighting close to the track of an adult in a tree.

Eurasian Beaver: Observed well on two nights.

Owls: Ural, Tawny, Long-eared and Tengmalm's all observed well.

White-tailed Eagle: Several exceptional sightings recorded.

Wildfowl: Significantly large flocks of migrating Long-tailed and Velvet Scoters observed.



Ural Owl, Estonia by J. Weir

SUMMARY

This short wildlife viewing trip to Estonia was primarily focused on securing a sighting of the highly elusive Eurasian Lynx (ssp. lynx). Most wild cat enthusiasts will readily agree this species is not particularly one of the rarest cats, but that it certainly is one of the hardest species to see throughout its extensive range. Optimism amongst our small group was high and we certainly couldn't have been in better hands to secure success. Tarvo has organised many successful Lynx tours over the years and has observed Lynx on numerous occasions in Estonia. He is also one of Estonia's leading ornithologists so provided some great birding opportunities outside of the key Lynx search times. Martin was our Lynx expert of the area and he took charge of our night-time Lynx searching activities and he proved to be highly successful in this role. His knowledge on the Lynx population in and around Lahemaa National Park developed over many years working in the field, is second to none. Both leaders proved to be exceptional guides and great company to be with. To eventually secure a meaningful Lynx sighting was entirely down to the hard work of both guides. Eleven other mammals were recorded during the trip and 66 bird species, it should be noted that this was not a specialist birding trip. Estonia proved to be a beautiful country, with very interesting wildlife habitats & everyone we met were extremely friendly.

Tuesday 1st November 2022

The 4 participants (2 couples) were picked up by Tarvo in Tallinn around 09.00. We had travelled together before to Uganda with Wise Birding so no introductions were necessary. Our collective main aim was to secure a Eurasian Lynx sighting and also other Northern European Mammals, we were also keen to spend some time birding. The birding experience in the group was varied and Tarvo was able to adjust his approach accordingly.

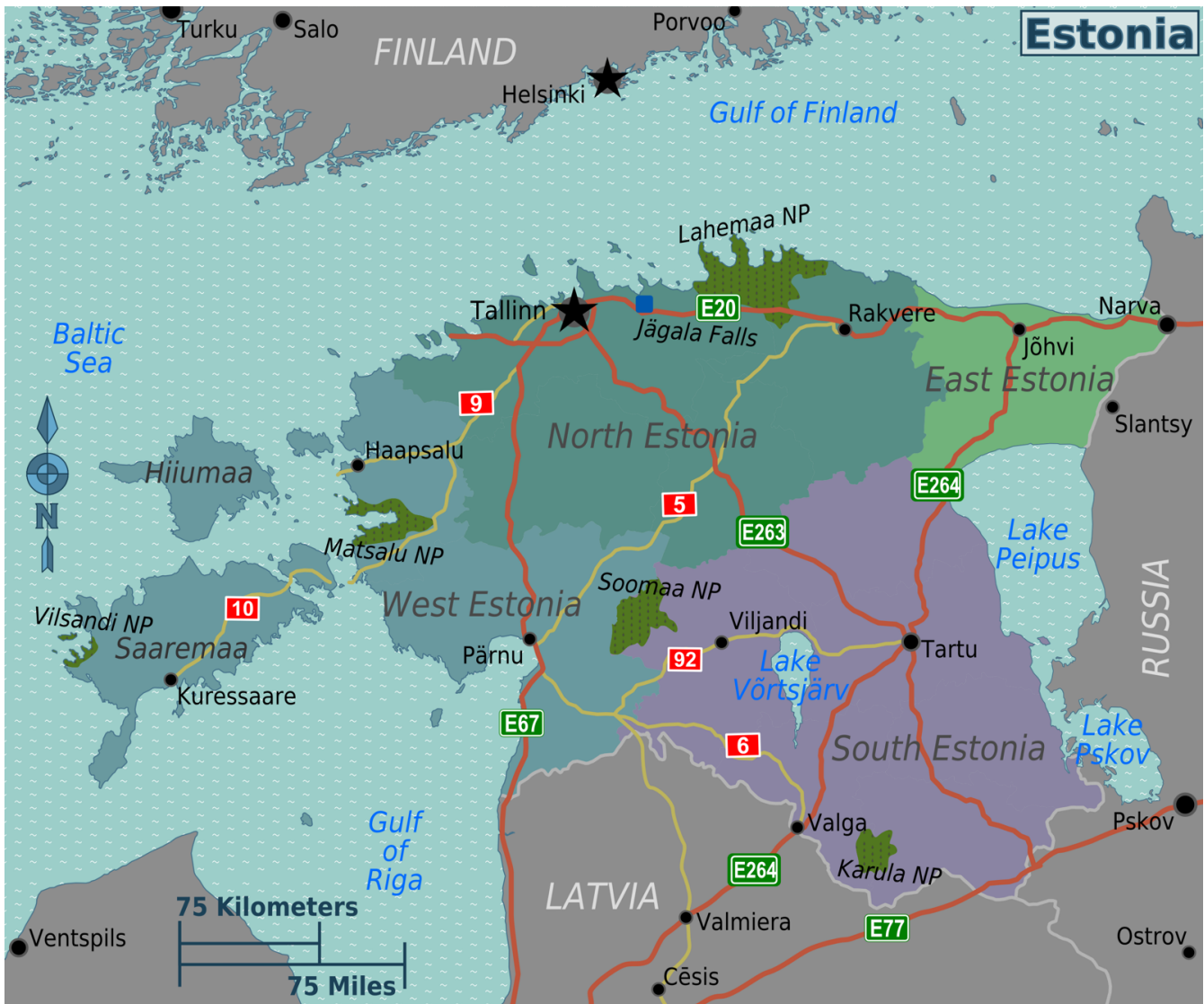
We travelled throughout the trip in a 7-seater minibus which meant the participants each had a window seat; seating was rotated on a daily basis.

We drove directly to Lahemaa NP a distance east of around 70km. We would spend 5 nights at a Manor Hotel situated ideally in the centre of the park. Lahemaa N.P. is situated on the northern coast of Estonia (Gulf of Finland), briefly the park is 747 km² in an area, a third of which is marine habitat. 70% of the park consists of coniferous woodland and peat bog. Farming takes place within the park boundary and amazingly hunting is permitted at certain times of the year. (Not Lynx they are protected throughout Estonia). Bears and Boar are regularly recorded in the park and occasionally Wolves. The E20 motorway runs to the south of the park and several tarmac roads link various small towns and villages inside the park.

There is an extensive network of ungraded roads (great condition) that radiate throughout the park and it was on these that most of the driving took place in search of Lynx.

En-route to our hotel we stopped at a couple of birding sites, one in the forest quite close to our hotel and the other at the Palmse estate. Good sightings of White-tailed Eagles (3), Eurasian Nuthatch, Great Grey Shrike, and the white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit were amongst the 20 species of bird observed on our first day. Before signing in at our hotel we stopped for lunch at a delightful roadside café and enjoyed a hearty bowl of seafood chowder and a desert to die for. Once at our hotel we enjoyed some down time before meeting up with Martin (17.30), our Lynx guide, I think we knew within minutes of meeting him that we were in safe hands and that he and Tarvo would do all they could to secure a Lynx sighting.

Our first Lynx spotting session(s) was from 17.30 until 19.00 and then from 20.00 until 00.30 we returned to the hotel for dinner during the split. During these session numerous Mountain and Brown (European) Hare, 2 adult Moose, lots of Roe Deer, several Raccoon Dogs, 2 Red Fox and 2 European Beaver and a Pine Marten were observed.



Map showing Lahemaa N.P. in relation to Tallinn and the other N.P.s of Estonia

We took a conscious decision at the end of our first evening that on the following evenings we would not stop for the more common mammal sightings and concentrate on our target species. All our efforts to locate a Lynx took place in the national park mainly in and around two areas, one SW of the hotel in woodland and the other in mixed woodland and a farmed area near Loksa, both areas were very well known to Martin and he had enjoyed many good sightings in these areas. One site was nicknamed Lynx Road. Intermediate areas were also repeatedly searched. Martin spent most of the sessions using a thermal imaging monocular with great success. This technology has undoubtedly revolutionised nocturnal mammal watching in recent years. Our first sighting of a Ural Owl was recorded during this session and also a Tawny Owl. We had by popular consensus, made a good start.

Wednesday 2nd November

During the whole trip the weather was unseasonably mild, only on one evening did the temperature drop to around freezing, it was generally dry and we had no snow. Most of our cold weather gear was not used. During the day, temperatures were in the range 10 – 4 °C. Mammal sightings proved to be rare during the day. Each day basically followed the same format 08.00 breakfast, out at 09.00 until around 14.00, mainly birding during this time although we were always on the lookout for mammals, a large delicious lunch was taken during this period. Rest period until 17.30, then dinner, out at 18.00 for the night shift (Lynx searching) until around 00.30.



Typical habitat that was searched both day and night for Lynx

The first morning was spent on the coast at several locations on the Parispea peninsular. The highlight proved to be large migrating flocks of Long-tailed Ducks (1000+) and Velvet Scoter (including some Common, 350+) passing by on their journeys to warmer climes. Other interesting sightings included Red and Black-throated Divers and Red-necked Grebe. A large flock of Greenfinches (50+) was also noted, they certainly are not as common in the UK as they used to be. Well out at sea from the harbour at Viimistu a Grey Seal was spotted. The nominate form, not the ssp. *atlantica* recorded in UK waters.

The evening drive lasted from 18.15 until 23.30 and proved to be very successful.

LYNX SIGHTING

About an hour after leaving the hotel whilst driving down a track (not dissimilar to the image above) relatively close to the hotel, Martin picked up a medium sized mammal on his thermal imaging scope after several minutes he became convinced it was a Lynx it was lying down about 20 metres from the track partially hidden by some bushes. Initially it had been walking parallel to the track. He was 100% sure it was a Lynx, he passed around the scope and we all saw a very strong thermal image which was unmistakably a medium sized Cat. Eurasian Lynx in this area are apparently quite bold. When Martin initially picked it up it was walking parallel to the track. However, for me to record it as a sighting I needed to see it with my own eyes. Noise from the vehicle eventually persuaded it to move on which it did and crossed the track in front of us at a distance of about 250m. Although it crossed the track slowly not everyone got a good view, I certainly didn't. We decided to move on and return to the area later in the evening. Returning 90 minutes later on the same track but travelling in the opposite direction close to where the Lynx had originally been spotted, we stopped as something was interesting Martin and the Lynx suddenly crossed the track again this time at a distance of 100m.

Unfortunately, the only person who saw it cross was Tarvo, the Lynx eventually settled down behind some trees at a distance of 200m, which gave us the opportunity to get out of the vehicle and set up a spotting scope. This gave us good views of the Lynx in subdued lighting and enabled us to get a natural sighting when the lighting was increased. We all enjoyed a good frontal view of the cat; its ear tufts and some body blotches were clearly visible. Martin had seen this individual before; it was a 3 to 4 year-old male in perfect condition. As the Lynx had returned to where it was originally sighted it was thought it possibly had a kill close by. We observed the Lynx for about 15 minutes before moving on. A successful sighting, unfortunately just too far away to get any decent images. Personally, I only record sightings I have actually seen with my own eyes; however I was happy that this sighting was secure and this species could now be included in my *Felid* species sightings list.

Later in the evening we disturbed some Woodcock in a field and enjoyed a good sighting of a Tengmalm's Owl (*ssp. liturata*), as it flew slowly in front of our vehicle. We had a very close sighting of a Raccoon Dog, it is hard to believe this species is a true *canid*, it looks like its unrelated namesake and has unusually short legs. Apparently, it is more closely related to the Foxes than the Dogs. We returned to the hotel in good spirits. We celebrated with a pre-ordered beer which tasted particularly good.

Thursday 3rd November

The Sagar Manor Hotel was outstanding in every respect, the food, breakfast and dinner was of the highest quality, the hotel was warm, the rooms were comfortable and clean and the staff were very friendly and helpful at all times. We would certainly return.

This morning's birding location was the Oandu Trail (4.5km) which went through some beautiful old-growth forest, a significant part of the walk was on a raised boardwalk, which was quite slippery. The walk was relatively easy and very pleasant. Lots of Willow and Crested Tits were observed in the woodlands. Several Common Crossbill showed well, their unique bills being clearly visible to all.

After the walk we briefly visited the coast on the Vergi peninsular close to Vergi Harbour not before stopping to record a Grey-headed Woodpecker feeding in a garden en-route. At the coast we enjoyed a good view of a White Wagtail and several Greater Scaup. We then drove inland to enjoy another delicious lunch before we returned to the hotel for some relaxing down time. This trip should have been titled, 'Lynx Quest with Fine Dining'.

The evening session started early at 15.00 as it was very much felt that the Lynx, we had seen the previous evening may have had a kill in which case there was a slim possibility that it could still be in the area, unfortunately it wasn't so we return to the hotel for dinner at 17.30 and ventured out again at 18.45 until 22.30. During the second period we broadened the search to include several areas where Martin had enjoyed good Lynx sightings.

Unfortunately, we were not successful but again had good sightings of Raccoon Dog, both Hares, Eurasian Beaver, Red Fox and lots of Lynx food, Roe Deer. By now we had seen several Red Fox, I would suggest that their pelage was lighter than those regularly seen in the UK.

Friday 4th November

In the morning we visited Nommeveski Bridge and followed the track close to the fast-flowing River Valgejogi past a derelict hydroelectric plant. A White-throated Dipper was showing well in the shallows but seemed to cope well feeding in the rapids also. Numerous other birds we had already recorded were also seen. From here we drove to Kasispea as Waxwings had been seen there (in the town) regularly in recent days, we soon located a flock of around 25 birds which unfortunately took to flight on our arrival. From the town we drove out to the coast and recorded several species of ducks the highlight being Greater Scaup. Driving along the coast towards the Vihasoo Observation Tower a single Smew was observed with several Mallard on a tributary. Once at the tower more Smew were seen out at sea and our first Pochard.



White-throated Dipper by J. Weir

The highlight here however was four adult White-tailed Sea Eagles which we were able to observe for 20 minutes at close proximity. They were huge. The tower itself was about 200m from the shoreline, and gave an excellent view of the coastline. To the left was a group of quite flimsy trees which the Sea Eagles seemed to favour as their vantage points. Watching them land in the trees was quite amusing as the trees seemed to struggle with the weight. It was quite cold and exposed, so yet another 3-course gourmet lunch came to our rescue.

In the evening we went out from 18.15 until 11.45 hoping for a Lynx sighting but unfortunately it was not to be, although a good thermal image eventually proved to be a Fox, excitement over. The usual mammals were recorded and we enjoyed a good sighting of two young Moose close to the track partially hidden by some shrubs. We again disturbed some Woodcock in a field, and Ural and Tawny Owls were again seen. We were still hopeful that on our final night we would secure another Lynx sighting.

Saturday 5th November

This was our final full day in the park and we again spent the morning birding visiting the area around Rakvere well to the south east of the hotel, in fact we may well have been outside the national park. We were looking for Black Grouse but were unable to locate any. This area at the right time of year is particularly good for Brown Bear apparently. We recorded a good number of Bird species but nothing out of the ordinary, we did come across a large flock of Common Gulls (250+) which we followed for quite a distance as they headed towards the coast. We enjoyed yet another 5* lunch and returned to the hotel at 14.00.



White-tailed Eagle comes in to land in the trees around the Vihasso Tower by J. Weir

Our final night drive lasted from 18.30 until 24.00 and unfortunately, we did not record another Lynx, the evening however turned into 'The Night of the Owls' with excellent close sightings of Ural (x5) and Long-eared Owls. Sadly, we parted company with Martin at the end of this session. He worked so hard to secure our sightings. and was one of those people you hope to meet again.

Sunday 6th November

We left the hotel at 10.00 and headed for Tallinn, stopping en route to do some birding. We hoped for a Goshawk sighting in the city centre for which Tallinn is famed, however we only managed a Sparrowhawk. Lunch was taken in the city and then we said goodbye to Tarvo who had also proved to be a highly efficient tour leader and great fun to be with. My wife and I stayed on in Tallinn for a couple of nights to enjoy the historic delights of a great city.

The tour was a huge success, the target species the Eurasian Lynx was observed well. There can be little doubt that the Lynx sighting possibly would not have occurred without the use of thermal imaging technology, its use will undoubtedly revolutionise the techniques used to successfully observe mammals.

The tour was expertly led and guided, the accommodation and food were first class. Estonia proved to be a beautiful and very clean (no litter) country. We would certainly return and probably will, and do this tour again. I would recommend it to all Felid Fans. A big thank you to Tarvo, Martin and Wise Birding and the other 2 trip participants who in different ways made the trip so enjoyable. The trip represented excellent value for money.

Tour participant, John Weir

'THE NIGHT OF THE OWLS'



**Long-eared Owl (top) and Ural Owl (bottom)
By J. Weir**



Wise Birding Lynx tour 1 Species List 1- 6 Nov 2022

The following mammal checklist mostly follows the IUCN framework (Red List) but also the Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) www.gbif.org and Handbook of The Mammals of the World. The bird checklist follows the nomenclature and classification from Gill F, D Donsker & P Rasmussen (Eds). 2022. **IOC World Bird List** (v12.2).

The IOC World Bird List complements three other primary world bird lists that differ slightly in their primary goals and taxonomic philosophy, i.e. [The Clements Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), [The Howard & Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World](#), 4th Edition, and [HBW Alive/Bird Life International](#).

Total number of mammals recorded: 12 species

Eurasian Lynx

Lynx lynx

main target mammal on our second night drive. First found on thick clearing and we all had very poor views. But about 10 minutes later same individual slowly crossed the road at front of us about 250 meters from the van. About half a hour later Tarvo saw it crossing the road for the second time and shortly it was found on the clearing about 150 - 200 metres away. Everyone managed to get out from the van and had a view through the scope while our tracker was holding the spotlight.

Raccoon Dog

Nyctereutes procyonoides

Seen on four different nights. Several very close by the roadside.

Red Fox

Vulpes vulpes

Seen on a number of nights

Grey Seal

Halichoerus grypus

Distant scope views on day 2.

European Pine Marten

Martes martes

Good views of one individual on a tree during our first night drive.

Eurasian Badger

Meles meles

Only seen by local guides on our first night.

Wild Boar

Sus scrofa

Seen only by local guides.

Elk / Moose

Alces ales

Seen in small numbers on 3 different nights.

European Roe Deer

Capreolus capreolus

Most common mammal on the trip, seen every day.

European Hare

Lepus europaeus

Good numbers on every night.

Mountain Hare

Lepus timidus

Seen in good numbers on every night drive.

Eurasian Beaver

Castor fiber

Views in the spotlight swimming along the river on nights 1 and 3.

Total number of birds recorded: 66 species

Barnacle Goose

Branta leucopsis

Mute Swan

Cygnus olor

Whooper Swan

Cygnus cygnus

Small numbers on the fields and coastal areas.

Eurasian Wigeon

Mareca penelope

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Common Pochard

Aythya ferina

Greater Scaup

Aythya marila

Velvet Scoter

Melanitta fusca

Noted on 2 days. Around 350 birds passing during 1hr seawatch on day 2.

Common Scoter

Melanitta nigra

Long-tailed Duck

Clangula hyemalis

Seen on three different days. Max. count of 1,000+ individuals recorded on day 2.

Common Goldeneye

Bucephala clangula

Smew

Mergellus albellus

Seen only on Day 4.

Goosander / Common Merganser

Mergus merganser

Red-breasted Merganser

Mergus serrator

Feral Pigeon

Columba livia

Red-necked Grebe

Podiceps grisegena

One bird in near breeding plumage on day 2.

Great Crested Grebe

Podiceps cristatus

Eurasian Woodcock

Scolopax rusticola

Recorded on 3 nights

Black-headed Gull

Chroicocephalus ridibundus

Common Gull

Larus cans

Great Black-backed Gull

Larus marinus

European Herring Gull

Larus argentatus

Red-throated Loon

Gavia stellata

Half a dozen on a sea on day 2.

Black-throated Loon

Gavia arctica

One swimming close to the shore on day 2.

Grey Heron

Ardea cinerea

Eurasian Sparrowhawk

Accipiter nisus

One bird seen from the café in Tallinn on last day.

White-tailed Eagle

Haliaeetus albicilla

Seen on 3 days, very close views on day 4.

Eurasian Buzzard

Buteo buteo

Surprisingly scarce, seen only on day 5.

Tengmalm's (Boreal) Owl

Aegolius funereus

One bird flying over the clearing and crossing the track in our van lights on day 2.

Long-eared Owl

Asio otus

Close views of a perched bird on the roadside on our final night drive

Tawny Owl

One bird seen during the night drive on day 1 and day 4.

Ural Owl

Recorded on 3 different nights. 8 individuals seen & 5 birds on final night drive.

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Seen every day in good numbers

Black Woodpecker

Heard only on Day 3.

Grey-headed Woodpecker

Three birds in total. Seen on days 3,4 and 6.

Great Grey Shrike

Seen on day 1 and 5.

Eurasian Jay**Eurasian Magpie****Spotted Nutcracker**

Heard only on day 3 and 5.

Western Jackdaw**Rook****Hooded Crow****Northern Raven****Bohemian Waxwing**

A flock of 13 briefly perched on day 4.

Crested Tit**Willow Tit****Eurasian Blue Tit****Great Tit****Long-tailed Tit**

Seen on days 1,3 & 5

Goldcrest**Eurasian Nuthatch****Eurasian Treecreeper****Common Blackbird****Fieldfare****White-throated Dipper**

Seen on day 4

Eurasian Tree Sparrow**House Sparrow****White Wagtail**

One late individual in the harbour on day 3.

Common Chaffinch**Hawfinch**

One migrating on day 2.

Eurasian Bullfinch**European Greenfinch*****Strix aluco******Strix uralensis******Dendrocopos major******Dryocopus martius******Picus canus******Lanius excubitor******Garrulus glandarius******Pica pica******Nucifraga caryocatactes******Coloeus monedula******Corvus frugilegus******Corvus cornix******Corvus corax******Bombycilla garrulus******Lophophanes cristatus******Poecile montanus******Cyanistes caeruleus******Parus major******Aegithalos caudatus******Regulus regulus******Sitta europaea******Certhia familiaris******Turdus merula******Turdus pilaris******Cinclus cinclus******Passer montanus******Passer domesticus******Motacilla alba******Fringilla coelebs******Coccothraustes coccothraustes******Pyrrhula pyrrhula******Chloris chloris***

Red Crossbill
Eurasian Siskin
Snow Bunting
One in flight on day 2.
Yellowhammer

Loxia curvirostra
Spinus spinus
Plectrophenax nivalis

Emberiza citrinella

Eurasian Lynx by Tarvo Valker
Not the individual seen on this tour.
Photographed a few days later on Tour 2



Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Estonia, £100 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund.

For the last few years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects. However, we now believe that to try and make a bigger difference to conservation it seems best to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will be used to support one single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. Currently this amounts to over £9,000. Some tours will continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from smaller donations. Please visit www.wisebirding.co.uk to find out more about the projects we support.

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