

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



ESTONIA: Steller's Eiders & Woodpeckers

Friday 27th February - Wednesday 4th March 2015

Tour Participants: Mike and Julie Lockyear, Dave Carr, Jude Rutherford & Sue Healey

Leaders: Chris Townend & Tarvo Walker

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Steller's Eider: On our first morning on Sarreemaa Island we were treated to 245+ of these fantastic ducks giving some great scope views on the very calm sea.

Nutcracker: A single bird showed well at Vidumae Nature Reserve, Saaremaa Island.

Long-tailed Duck: Superb close views of a crazy displaying flock at Veere Harbour.

Grey-headed Woodpecker: Very close views of a male low to the ground at Tudu.

Black Woodpecker: A number of good views including a male on Saaremaa island.

Puddings: Peach Cheesecake at the Padise Manor House and Pavlova at Haapsalu!



This Steller's Eider flock was part of at least 245 birds seen on our first day!

SUMMARY

This winter break to Estonia was focused on trying to see the regular wintering flock of Steller's Eiders off Saaremaa Island as well as searching for the many other forest specialities that Estonia has to offer. The spectacle of a feeding flock of 245+ Steller's Eiders on our first morning was certainly a highlight, along with fantastic flocks of displaying Long-tailed Ducks and a male Black Woodpecker. Back on the mainland the weather really worked against us and at times birding was very very tough for little gain. However, with a little perseverance and pure determination we still managed to find a superb Grey-headed Woodpecker, Black Grouse, White-tailed Eagles, Willow and Crested Tit and some wonderful views of Eurasian Elk.

Friday 27th February

We arrived into a fairly bright Tallin airport and met with our local guide Tarvo Valker and then headed off to a nearby restaurant for lunch to experience some great Estonian food - soon to be a regular feature of the tour!

After lunch, we enjoyed the first "Northern" Bullfinches in a nearby garden and then continued our journey south to the harbour town of Virtsu where we took the short ferry trip to the island of Muhu. The winter weather was quite mild compared to that of a more typical Estonian winter, but regardless of this we still all required plenty of layers, hats and gloves whilst we scanned the sea! Highlights from the ferry were most definitely the huge flocks of Long-tailed Ducks that amounted to around 750 birds, plus Goosanders and Goldeneyes before we returned to the minibus to thaw out! We continued our journey across the island of Muhu and then across the bridge that connects Muhu to Saaremaa Island. The light was fading fast but Common Buzzard, Common Raven, Hooded Crow and a small group of three Roe Deer were seen before arriving at our hotel in the town of Kuressaare.

After dinner with conditions so calm, we headed off into the forest for some Owling, but despite our best efforts, we came away empty handed.

Saturday 28th February

After much needed coffee and a tasty breakfast, we headed out shortly after dawn. First bird of the day was a Hawfinch that called and flew overhead just as we started to get into the minibus. We had one clear objective today and that was to try and find the Steller's Eider flock that regularly winters off the Cape Undva Peninsula. A Great Grey Shrike was a pleasant distraction en route to the site and after some good scope views we headed on for our main target species. No sooner had Tarvo driven us to the headland than we were immediately enjoying some excellent views of a large flock of at least 245 Steller's Eiders! It was unusually calm and the sea was flat so the conditions were just perfect. We all enjoyed great scope views of these superb sea ducks

as the males bobbed up out of the water and bowed their heads every now and again showing off their lovely orange breast markings and broccoli green rear head patches! As we all simply took time to take in the great spectacle in front of us, smaller groups of Long-tailed Ducks and Velvet Scoters slowly floated past in the background and a couple of snow white Whooper Swans flew overhead. We enjoyed some coffee to warm us up and a Bohemian Waxwing flew overhead calling whilst an immature White-tailed Sea Eagle sat on nearby rocks. A little further scanning of the sea produced both Black-throated Diver and Red-throated Diver as well as Common Scoter before we headed off to a nearby harbour. In the harbour we had some amazingly close views of displaying Long-tailed Ducks giving exceptional photographic opportunities as the males called and bobbed their heads in a crazed state! Also present were various Herring Gulls (including the yellow-legged *omissus* form) and then we had some great scope views of a vocal male Black Woodpecker. Lunch was then calling so we headed off and en route we found a large flock of around 30 Hawfinch and groups of Fieldfare feeding on the grass fields beside the road.

Lunch was quite simply a highlight in itself as we enjoyed the wonderful home cooked food at the beautiful Loona Manor Guesthouse. Here we took advantage of the warm log fire and enjoyed the fabulous food, in particular the tea and cake! During the afternoon we visited the Vidumae Nature Reserve where things were pretty quiet other than the scolding nasal calls of Willow Tit. However, with some patience we soon found another of our target species as a brilliant Spotted Nutcracker came and perched in a nearby conifer tree to be admired by all. The final highlight of the day was a sighting of two elegant Elk that stood cautiously at the edge of the forest and allowed some prolonged views before simply vanishing back into the forest. We returned to our hotel and enjoyed yet another great Estonian meal complete with expanding pink puddings!

Sunday 1st March

Today we returned to the mainland and re-traced our route crossing Saaremaa Island and then Muhu Island before taking the ferry once again, this time across to the harbour of Virtsu on the Estonian mainland. The weather was calm but foggy and so birding was difficult, though Yellowhammer was a new addition to the trip list along with the "pink tree" that we all paid our respects to!

Once on the ferry we all headed out on deck and despite the poor visibility we still managed to find more Long-tailed Ducks, Goldeneye and Goosander as well as a few Common Gulls. On the mainland it was still fairly grey and foggy though this did not stop our enthusiasm as we enjoyed some coffee and scanned a mix of farmland and trees hoping to find a Hawk Owl that had been frequenting the area in recent weeks. A singing Great Grey Shrike was a pleasant distraction during coffee and scanning and although the Hawk Owl failed to show itself, a single flock of 60+ Black Grouse was quite a spectacle! We then headed onward towards the town of Haapsalu taking in a group of five Smew sat on the sea as well as the now expected White-tailed Eagle.

In Haapsalu we took an all important lunch break where the quality of food was once again very high and with first class puddings! We then continued our journey to the Nova Forest where we spent some time birding the forest trails. The wind had increased and some light rain made things a little harder and although a Willow Tit was the best we could muster, everyone was simply pleased to be out in the Estonian Forest landscape reminding themselves of the words, "No pain, no Gain!"

During the early evening, we arrived at our forest lodges in the very quiet and rural Roosta Village.

Monday 2nd March

This morning the weather seemed to have worsened and the rain was fairly heavy and continuous, but we didn't let that stop our hardy team from trying to find our target species! We ventured out on foot for a walk in the forest and despite getting very wet, we still gritted our teeth and continued our birding. During a slight easing of the rain a Crested Tit performed well in nearby pines before we were beaten into submission and breakfast was definitely calling!

After breakfast we continued our tour of Estonia and headed east trying some wooded parkland for White-backed Woodpecker en route, but once again it seemed the weather was hindering our best efforts. Mammals were a little less elusive as a sounder of at least ten Wild Boar dashed across the road whilst searching for the woodpecker. A second stop further on yet again failed to produce the hoped for White-backed Woodpecker, though a very obliging "Northern" Nuthatch allowed us time to examine this distinctive race being very different compared to birds back in the UK. So, when birding in Estonia and the weather is poor and the birds are not performing, what do you do!? The answer is of course simple - Head to the nearest and grandest Manor House you can find and enjoy a spectacular lunch with superb puddings! So that is exactly what we did!

With stomachs now full, we continued our journey towards the town of Rakvere and the ancient forests of Alutaguse not far from the Russian border. As we ventured further east the weather was still grey and the rain eased a little and snow patches began to appear at the roadside. We checked into our hotel adding Rook to our trip list, hoping it would be a sign of good luck!

We then headed straight out to explore the forests around the village of Tudu and once again, despite the wind and the rain, we ventured out into some excellent forest clearings, simply crying out for woodpeckers! However, rather

frustratingly the only woodpecker of the day was a Great Spotted Woodpecker, as once again the weather scuppered our efforts and it seemed our "lucky Rook" was perhaps not so lucky after all!

Tuesday 3rd March

Today was our last full day in Estonia and everyone was keen to get back to the forest and enjoy a good day. After a warm breakfast and much needed caffeine we headed back out to try the same forest areas as the previous day.

Things got off to a good start as the rain seemed to have abated for the morning. A group of nine Black Grouse and a Great Grey Shrike from the roadside suggested maybe our run of bad luck was about to change!? We slowly drove some of the forest roads hoping for other grouse species. Julie did well to spot a small mammal hunting one of the wet ditches beside the road. It was an American Mink. Perhaps not the most wanted of mammals, considering it is an introduced species, but good to get good such close views nonetheless. A Willow Tit performed well beside the road and looked even more impressive in the light snowfall. Then, three Hazel Grouse flushed from the side of the vehicle, allowing everyone to get a view before they vanished from view. Quite a typical view for Hazel Grouse and a good start to the morning. After buying some snacks in the nearby village of Tudu, we continued our birding, this time focusing more effort on woodpeckers and after a number of attempts we finally had some fantastic views of a male Grey-headed Woodpecker. It was feeding very close to the ground and allowed some very close views. Somehow it seemed all the better knowing how hard we had worked for it! At least three Tree Sparrows fed on nearby garden feeders and we then returned to the town of Rakvere for a late lunch full of smiles.

After lunch, we returned to the forests for a final early evening drive and although no new bird species, the definite highlight was another great sighting of two Elk as they watched us from just inside the forest edge.

Wednesday 4th March

After an early breakfast, we packed our bags and headed back west towards the city of Tallin, but not before a couple more birding stops en route! We visited a couple of Manor House gardens and surrounding woodland in the hope of connecting with a White-backed Woodpecker, but once again it seemed the dreary weather and wind had returned, thus forcing birds to be silent. A couple of Black Woodpeckers showed very well though and a couple of Common Crossbill were new additions to the list before we finally waved goodbye the forests and returned to the hustle and bustle of Tallin airport where our birding tour ended.

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Estonia £150 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund which shall be used to support a specific conservation project in the future, yet to be determined.

For the last three years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects following the successful completion of a tour. However, we now believe that in order to make a bigger difference to conservation it seems better to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will then be used to support a single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. However, some tours will still continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from such smaller donations. Please visit our [Conservation News](#) and [Latest News](#) links to find out more.



Steller's Eiders at Cape Undva, Saaremaa Island





Just some of the fantastic desserts in Estonia





Watching Steller's Eiders at Cape Undva and birding the forests near Tudu





American Mink and Eurasian Elk





Male Grey-headed Woodpecker near Tudu



Long-tailed Ducks on Saaremaa Island



Pleasure and Pain!



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WISE BIRDING HOLIDAYS LTD – ESTONIA: Steller's Eiders & Woodpeckers, Feb 2015

Wise Birding Holidays Checklist:

ESTONIA: Steller's Eiders & Woodpeckers Checklist

Friday 27th February - Wednesday 4th March 2015

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Recorded on 4 days
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Two birds on the 28th and the 1st
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Recorded on 4 days
4	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Recorded on the 28th on Saaremaa Island
5	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	Recorded on the 28th and the 1st whilst on Saaremaa Island
6	Steller`s Eider	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>	A superb flock of 245+ birds on the 28th whilst on Saaremaa Island
7	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	Recorded on 3 days with a peak count of 750+ birds on the 27th when travelling to Saaremaa Island
8	Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	Two birds recorded on the 28th on Saaremaa Island
9	Velvet Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>	A large flock of 150+ birds present whilst watching Steller's Eiders
10	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Recorded on 4 days
11	Smew	<i>Mergus albellus</i>	Five birds seen on the 1st whilst on the mainland
12	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Recorded on 2 days with a peak count of 10 birds
13	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	Recorded on 3 days
14	Hazel Grouse	<i>Bonasa bonasia</i>	Three birds were flushed from the roadside when near Tudu and another seen briefly by Chris
15	Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>	Recorded on two days with a peak count of 71 birds on the 1st

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
16	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	Three birds off Saaremaa Island on the 28th
17	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	Three birds off Saaremaa Island on the 28th
18	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Recorded on the 28th only
19	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Single birds recorded on the 28th and the 1st
20	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Recorded on 4 days with a peak of at least four birds on the 28th
21	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Recorded on 3 days
22	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Recorded on 3 days
23	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	Recorded on 3 days
24	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Recorded daily including the “yellow-legged” <i>omissus</i> form
25	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Ten birds on the 28th
26	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	Recorded daily
27	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	Fantastic views of a male at ground level near Tudu on the 3rd
28	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	Recorded on three days with the best view of a male on the 28th
29	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Recorded on 5 days
30	Bohemian Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>	A single bird flew over calling on Saaremaa Island on the 28th
31	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Recorded on 2 days
32	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	Recorded on 3 days with a peak count of 120 on the 28th
33	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Recorded on 3 days
34	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>	Recorded on 3 days
35	Willow Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>	Recorded on 3 days

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
36	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	A single bird seen well near Roosta on the 2nd
37	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	Recorded on 1 day
38	European Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	Recorded on 5 days
39	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Recorded on 6 days
40	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	This “northern” form was recorded on 4 days
41	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	This “northern” form was recorded on 3 days
42	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	Recorded on 4 days with a peak count of three birds on the 1st
43	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Recorded on 3 days
44	Common (Black-billed) Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Recorded on 4 days
45	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	A single bird seen well on the 28th at Vidumae, Saaremaa Island
46	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Recorded on 5 days
47	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Up to 2 birds in Rakere on the 2nd and 3rd
48	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Recorded daily
49	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Recorded daily
50	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Recorded on 2 days
51	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	Recorded on 2 days with up to three birds on the 3rd
52	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Recorded on 1 day
53	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Recorded on 3 days
54	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	Recorded on 4 days
55	Common Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>	Recorded on 1 day

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
56	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	Recorded on 2 days and scoped on our last morning
57	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	This “northern” form was recorded on 4 days
58	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	A definite movement on the 28th with 36 birds recorded
59	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Recorded on 2 days with a peak count of 30+ birds on 1st

MAMMALS

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Recorded on 2 days with up to two animals
2	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	10+ animals ran across the road on 2nd
3	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Recorded on 2 days
4	Eurasian Elk	<i>Alces alces</i>	Some great views of two animals on both the 28th and the 3rd
5	American Mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>	A single animal watched in a ditch near Tudu on the 3rd

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