
Birding Estonia

Trip Report

September 18-22, 2008

Day 1

September 18, Thursday

Arrival and sightseeing in Tallinn

The party of birders arrived at lunchtime after an early morning start from Stansted airport. After picking them up from the airport we drove to the old town to check in to a hotel which has been converted from an old friary. We went for lunch at an Italian restaurant and then toured some of the sights of the old Hanseatic town. Several members of the group were tired after the early start and went to rest before dinner. Dinner was at one of the best and most authentic Estonian restaurants in Tallinn.

Day 2

September 19, Friday

Matsalu Bay and Haapsalu

We picked up our group from the hotel at 08:30. The sky was bright blue, sun shining bright, and temperature already 14 degrees C. It was so good to see the beautiful sunny day after weeks of cloud and rain we had recently endured.

From Tallinn, we drove west towards Lihula. On the way we saw jays, jackdaws, magpies, and a black woodpecker fly-over.

As we approached Lihula we started to see several skeins of geese flying over. There was some excitement as we knew we were approaching our birding. Before we reached Lihula we caught sight of cranes in a field by the road. We stopped, got the scopes out, and watched over 500 cranes with several bean and white-fronted geese eating grains left over from the harvest.

At Penijoe, we parked the car and then walked along the river where we were accompanied by yellowhammers and goldfinches in the trees and a few greylags flew over. As we were approaching a line of small trees next to the track we saw several birds flying from perch to ground and back. We got the scopes on them and saw thrush nightingales and a red-breasted flycatcher.

As we went further we passed three beavers' lodges on the way to the watchtower. From the tower, overlooking many hectares of reed-beds, we watched harriers (marsh and hen), merlin, common snipe, chiffchaff and willow warblers.

On the way back Ella spotted a juvenile red-backed shrike hopping around the top of a bush.

Next to the visitor centre, we sat in the sun and had coffee and Estonian cheese cake, much appreciated by the group, and smoked salmon sandwiches. While we were enjoying this snack, buzzards and a lesser spotted eagle flew over, woodpeckers were

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drumming on trees in the park behind us, and we saw coal tits, willow tits and bramblings flitting through the branches of the trees next to us.

After our snack, we drove on to the next tower in search of geese. We were disappointed to find none there, so left immediately. As we were driving away we saw flocks of birds over the other side of the field and as we turned the corner we met up with them and stopped the car. For half an hour we entertained by greenfinches, linnets, yellowhammers, and chaffinches flying to and fro between trees and rapeseed crop. Brian found a lesser spotted woodpecker which we watched for several minutes.

As we approached Haeska we saw hundreds of fieldfares and starlings in the trees. A flock of goldfinches were eating seeds by the car park, and from the tower we saw many lapwings, a few oyster catchers, grey plovers, many herons, wigeon, and gadwall, but no geese. At one point we saw forty jays on migration flying in loose formation in the shape of a giant ball.

Heading towards Haapsalu we stopped at another tower where we saw reed buntings, a great-grey shrike, greater spotted woodpecker, and 100 cranes fly over and land in front of us.

We then drove to Haapsalu, and on the way saw a couple of marsh harriers gliding low over the fields.

Arriving at the hotel, a great spotted woodpecker welcomed us from the trees in the car park. We didn't spend any time to unpack, but got our scopes out on the balcony overlooking Haapsalu bay on which thousands of coots were swimming, grey herons and twelve great egrets were standing in the shallows, cormorants were occupying all the rocks which form tiny islands in the bay, and a couple of white-tailed eagles were overseeing all this activity.

We went down for a delicious dinner at the hotel and reasonably early to bed. We were going to have an early start the next day.

Day 3 Spithami and Silma Nature Reserve

September 20, Saturday

We picked up our guide, Taivo at 06:00 and drove to Spithami, the most north-eastern point of Estonia. It was still dark and we had to slow down as there were hundreds of thrushes sitting on the edge of the road and flying up in front of the bus as we approached. At Spithami we were in time to watch the sun come up for another beautiful morning. On the sea and flying over we saw red-breasted megalansers, black-throated, red-throated, and great northern divers, goldeneyes, and eider. A migrating rock pipit flew on to the rocks in front of us. Our Estonian friends were very happy to see this for it is relatively rare in Estonia.

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We then drove round to Dirhami harbour where we saw spotted nutcrackers and black woodpecker fly over, barn swallows and house martins perched on the wire, and cormorants on rocks. Driving away from the harbour we all were really excited when a black woodpecker flew out of the trees and flew by the side of the bus for a few seconds down the road – we had a really close-up view and clearly saw its red cap.

On the way to Silma nature reserve we stopped by an estuary surrounded by reed beds where we saw reed warbler, chiff-chaff, and four little stints. This is usually a good place for waders during the summer but most of them had already left. Back at the car, whilst we were eating our gravalax salmon and cucumber sandwiches, we watched crested tits, coal tits, and goldcrests flying out of trees into sun and back. Taivo heard a wood lark and then spotted it sitting on a branch of a tree next to the track. The sun had brought out several species of butterfly including Camberwell Beauty and Brimstone.

Later we were driving along a small track in the Silma national park when Brian said he saw a strange looking cat – I stopped and reversed – we saw it properly this time, the size of a dog with big pointy ears – a lynx is a rarely seen although there are a few around – that was a real treat! We went on to a watchtower, from which we saw great egrets, thousand of widgeon, and a few greylags. We counted twelve white-tailed eagles perched around the bay, and seven of them were all perched together on one large rock. On the way back one of our company shrieked as a grass snake slithered away from under her feet. Driving back to Pürksi we stopped to look at a black bird in the road – it was a spotted nutcracker picking up and throwing something – we got very close and watched it for several minutes. We could clearly see the white spotted breast and white band in the tail. It was probably one of the tamer eastern variety on migration.

Later in the afternoon we stopped at some woods near Risti. As we were entering the wood Taivo pointed out to us the high-pitched whistle of hazel grouse which we could all hear but we were unfortunately not able to see it. We saw more spotted nutcrackers fly over, and bullfinches and long-tailed tits in the trees.

After quite a long day we drove back to the hotel at Haapsalu where we were welcomed with a glass of hot wine.

Day 4
Luitema Nature Reserve and Kabli

September 21, Sunday

We didn't want to start so early, so we had time for a good breakfast. The sky was overcast and grey and the temperature markedly cooler. Today we were driving south to Pärnu and beyond. On the way stopped to watch 50 cranes fly over the car and land in field next to us – although we had already seen so many it was still a pleasure to watch them gracefully gliding down to earth. We reached the first birding stop at some old fishponds south of Pärnu. They are now covered with reed beds and as we were driving in we saw sedge warbler, another flock of migrating goldfinches, and close-up view of a great grey shrike perched on top of a small tree next to the track. From the tower we saw

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little grebes in a pond nearby, whooper and Bewick's swans fly over, and a pair of juvenile grey plovers wading in the shallows of Pärnu bay.

At Luitema Reserve we went in search of white-backed woodpecker having had a tip from a local ornithologist that one was living there. As we went we tapped on the old trees to try and attract his attention. We couldn't find him, but had close-up views of a few greater spotted woodpeckers and we saw many goldcrest flitting through the high branches.

At Kabli birdstation the nets were out in full to catch migrating birds for ringing. We had the delight of a close-up inspection of a bearded tit as it was being ringed and then set free on its way south.

We then changed our direction to head back to Tallinn. On the way we stopped at some fields to watch hundreds of fieldfares and redwings walking about.

On reaching Tallinn everyone checked in to the hotel and then we went to a restaurant in old town.

Day 5 Souvenir hunting and departure from Tallinn

September 22, Monday

Ella took our guests round the old town to guide them to some of the better typical handmade Estonian souvenirs. One bought some linen embroidered with birds. Then on to the airport for the flight back to Stansted.

We had had three full days birdwatching plus some time sightseeing in the old town of Tallinn. We hadn't seen as many geese as we had hoped for (barnacles came in their tens of thousands over the next few weeks) but we had had a good three days, 87 species in all, and we saw a lynx.