

Buckbird Journeys Ltd

Estonia and St Petersburg – The Jewels of the Baltic

Hugh (HB) and Caroline (CB) Buck

Estonia

16 – 25 May 2014

Estonian Nature Tours “Birds and Mammals” Tour led by Tarvo Valker with a short extension in North East Estonia with Udo Timm.

With almost universal warm, sunny (even hot) weather, Estonia in late spring was a delight. The infrastructure was good, the roads straight and quiet, the guest houses spacious and comfortable, the food good and the wildlife excellent. The unspoiled nature of the place can be summarized by a morning late in the trip in a meadow surrounded by Taiga forest in NE Estonia. We knew already that the forests here were the home of such as Elk, Beaver, Brown Bear, Raccoon Dog and Wild Boar and here, on the track through the meadow, were the unmistakable tracks of Lynx and (together with droppings rich in Boar hair) Wolf. A Lesser Spotted Eagle hunted at the meadow’s edge, a Great Snipe guarded his territory, Skylarks sang overhead and Whinchats dotted the tall grasses. Blackcocks cooed on lek, Corncrakes grated, a territorial Quail proclaimed his presence and there were Cuckoos everywhere. It was a glimpse of a Europe all but lost to the west but still surviving here. But one of several indelible memories

Itinerary

Thursday 15 May

Lufthansa and midnight arrival at Tallinn Airport. Overnight at nearby Uleemiste Hotel

Friday 16 May

Met Tarvo and group (6 persons) in early afternoon, Drive west to Roosta Holiday Village

Saturday 17 May

Poosaspea Peninsula, Haeska and Pogari-Sassi coastal meadows, Rannajobe and evening boat trip at Matsalu National Park reedbeds

Sunday 18 May

Early to Nova and Leidisoo Forests then to Variku, Haapsalu and on via Tartu to Mooste and the Mooste Vinavabrik (Vodka) Guesthouse

Monday 19 May

Jarvelja, Taevaskoja then Aardla west of Tartu

Tuesday 20 May

Matsu and North East Estonia. Overnight in Bear hide in Alutaguse

Wednesday 21 May

Alutaguse. 2nd night in Bear hide

Thursday 22 May

Alutaguse. Afternoon with Udo Timm and Flying Squirrel orientation. Squirrel viewing at dusk. Overnight Matsu Guesthouse

Friday 23 May

Alutaguse. Small mammals and Bats with Udo. Overnight Matsu Guesthouse

Saturday 24

Alutaguse then back to Tallinn with Margus Pensa. Hotel Taanlinna and walking tour and dinner in Old Town

Sunday 25 May

Tallinn Old Town

Monday 26 May

0800 LUX express bus to St Petersburg

St Petersburg**Monday 26 May**

Arrive 1600. Overnight 5th Corner Hotel

Tuesday 27 May

St Petersburg tour with KURS – StP. Church of Spilled Blood, St Issac's Cathedral, Peter and Paul Fortress, Food Market and Hermitage. Cloudy and cold and 000's of tourists. Evening "Feel Yourself Russian" at Nicholaevsky Palace followed by Fish Dinner

Wednesday 28 May

Cloudy and rainy. Leningrad, Catherine's Palace. Amber Room and Peterhof Gardens

Thursday 29 May

St Petersburg – Munich – Frankfurt – Edinburgh by Lufthansa

Birds

1. Mute Swan (Cygnus olor)
Present in large numbers
2. Whooper Swan (Cygnus cygnus)
A couple of sightings including a breeding pair near Tartu 19/5
3. Greater White-fronted Goose (Anser albifrons)
3 from the watchtower at Aardla 19/5. On their way north
4. Greylag Goose (Anser anser)
5. Barnacle Goose (Branta leucopsis)
The Netherlands wintering population was visibly on the move in NW Estonia 17 and 18/5. Several 000 seen
6. Brent Goose (Branta bernicla)
A few with the Barnacles 17/5. The dark bellied form *bernicla*
7. Common Shelduck (Tadorna tadorna)
8. Eurasian Wigeon (Anas penelope)
9. Gadwall (Anas strepera)
10. Eurasian Teal (Anas crecca)
11. Mallard (Anas platyrhynchos)
12. Northern Pintail (Anas acuta)
13. Northern Shoveler (Anas clypeata)
14. Common Pochard (Aythya ferina)
15. Tufted Duck (Aythya fuligula)
16. Common Eider (Somateria mollissima)
17. Long-tailed Duck (Clangula hyemalis)
18. Common Scoter (Melanitta nigra)
19. Velvet Scoter (Melanitta fusca)
20. Common Goldeneye (Bucephala clangula)
21. Red-breasted Merganser (Mergus serrator)
22. Goosander (Mergus merganser)
23. Hazel Grouse (Bonasa bonasia)
A pair flushed into a tree at Alutaguse 23/5. New for Europe for HB, previously only seen in Japan
24. Black Grouse (Tetrao tetrix)
3 lekking males on the road st Alutaguse 23/5 and another 2 24/5
25. Western Capercaillie (Tetrao urogallus)
A male flushed from the roadside Alutaguse 24/5
26. Common Quail (Coturnix coturnix)
Heard at Alutaguse 23 and 24/5

27. Red-throated Diver (Gavia stellata)
A pair in flight Poosaspea 17/5
28. Black-throated Diver (Gavia arctica)
A trio in flight Poosaspea 17/5
29. Great Crested Grebe (Podiceps cristatus)
30. Slavonian Grebe (Podiceps auritus)
6 breeding plumaged birds at Haapsalu 18/5
31. Great Cormorant (Phalacrocorax carbo)
32. Grey Heron (Ardea cinerea)
33. White Stork (Ciconia ciconia)
Happily still a common sight here
34. European Honey Buzzard (Pernis apivorus)
2 near Matsu 20/5
35. White-tailed Eagle (Haliaeetus albicilla)
At least 5 distant soaring birds Matsalu 17/5
36. Eurasian Marsh Harrier (Circus aeruginosus)
Regular sightings
37. Hen Harrier (Circus cyaneus)
A single female Matsalu 18/5
38. Montagu's Harrier (Circus pygargus)
Regular sightings of this handsome species
39. Common Buzzard (Buteo buteo)
Common. The eastern spp *vulpinus*
40. Lesser Spotted Eagle (Aquila pomarinus)
An excellent adult flushed off prey Alutaguse 23/5
41. Common Kestrel (Falco tinnunculus)
42. Eurasian Hobby (Falco subbuteo)
2 Nova 18/5
43. Corncrake (Crex crex)
Happily still a common sound in Estonia's summer meadows. One bird shepherded and flushed near Matsu 20/5
44. Common Moorhen (Gallinula chloropus)
45. Common Coot (Fulica atra)
46. Common Crane (Grus grus)
Apparently doing well here. Daily sightings
47. Eurasian Oystercatcher (Haematopus ostralegus)
48. Common Ringed Plover (Charadrius hiaticula)
49. Northern Lapwing (Vanellus vanellus)
50. Ruff (Philomachus pugnax)
Sadly no lekking activity
51. Common Snipe (Gallinago gallinago)
52. Great Snipe (Gallinago media)
Sadly no lekking at the site at Aardla but a territorial bird at Alutaguse 23/5
53. Eurasian Woodcock (Scolopax rusticola)
A few roding birds at various sites and close views of 2 different birds by the road near Aardla after dark 19/5
54. Eurasian Curlew (Numenius tetanus)

55. Marsh Sandpiper (Tringa stagnatilis)
A single near Aardla 19/5
56. Common Redshank (Tringa tetanus)
57. Common Greenshank (Tringa nebularia)
58. Green Sandpiper (Tringa ochropus)
Birds on territory especially at Alutaguse
59. Wood Sandpiper (Tringa glareola)
Several at Matsalu 17/5
60. Common Sandpiper (Actitis hypoleucos)
61. Little Gull (Larus minutus)
A pair near Aardla 19/5
62. Common Gull (Larus canus)
63. Herring Gull (Larus argentatus)
64. Great Black-backed Gull (Larus marinus)
65. Common Tern (Sterna hirundo)
66. Arctic Tern (Sterna paradisaea)
67. Little Tern (Sterna albifrons)
2 birds at Haeska 17/5
68. Black Tern (Chidonias niger)
Many in plumage birds over the ponds at Aardla 19/5
69. Stock Dove (Columba oenas)
70. Common Wood Pigeon (Columba palumbus)
71. Common Cuckoo (Cuculus canorus)
Happily common throughout
72. Tawny Owl (Strix aluco)
Heard at Mooste Viinavabrik 18/5
73. Ural Owl (Strix uralensis)
A splendid daylight bird near Haapsalu 18/5
74. European Nightjar (Caprimulgus europaeus)
A couple of sightings at Alutaguse 22 and 23/5
75. Common Swift (Apus apus)
76. Eurasian Wryneck (Jynx torquilla)
3 birds 17/5 including a copulating pair at Matsalu
77. Black woodpecker (Dryocopus martius)
A few sightings but sadly only of birds in flight
78. Great Spotted Woodpecker (Dendrocopus major)
79. White-backed Woodpecker (Dendrocopus leucotos)
A couple of good sightings Matsalu 17/5
80. Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker (Picoides tridactylus)
Heard Jarvelja 19/5 and Matsalu 22 and 23/5. Probably seen by CB at the latter
81. Eurasian Skylark (Alauda arvensis)
82. Barn Swallow (Hirundo rustica)
83. House Martin (Delichon urbicum)
84. Tree Pipit (Anthus trivialis)
85. Meadow Pipit (Anthus pratensis)
86. Yellow Wagtail (Motacilla flava)
A pair of nominate *flava* at Matsalu 17/5

87. White Wagtail (Motacilla alba)
88. Northern Wren (Troglodytes troglodytes)
Heard only
89. Thrush Nightingale (Luscinia luscinia)
Heard daily throughout and into the night. One bird played in for prolonged views near Viita 17/5
90. Black Redstart (Phoenicurus ochruros)
1 near Roosta 17/5
91. Common Redstart (Phoenicurus phoenicurus)
92. Whinchat (Saxicola rubetra)
Common in grassy areas
94. Northern Wheatear (Oenanthe oenanthe)
95. Common Blackbird (Turdus merula)
96. Fieldfare (Turdus pilaris)
A common breeding bird especially in the east
97. Song Thrush (Turdus philomelas)
98. Mistle Thrush (Turdus viscivorus)
99. River Warbler (Locustella fluviatilis)
Frequently heard in the east (although largely inaudible these days for HAB!)
100. Grasshopper Warbler (Locustella naevia)
An individual heard at Mooste Viinavabrik 19/5
101. Savi's Warbler (Locustella luscinioides)
Heard at Matsalu 17/5
102. Sedge Warbler (Acrocephalus schoenobaenus)
103. Marsh Warbler (Acrocephalus palustris)
Commonly heard in the east
104. Great Reed Warbler (Acrocephalus arundinaceus)
Heard at Matsalu 17/5
106. Icterine Warbler (Hippolais icterina)
Heard at several places. Individuals seen at Rannajõe 17/5 and Matsalu 21/5
107. Blackcap (Sylvia atricapilla)
108. Garden Warbler (Sylvia borin)
109. Lesser Whitethroat (Sylvia curruca)
Several encounters
110. Common Whitethroat (Sylvia communis)
111. Greenish Warbler (Phylloscopus trochiloides)
Two singing birds Taevaskoja 19/5
112. Wood Warbler (Phylloscopus sibilatrix)
113. Common Chiffchaff (Phylloscopus collybita)
114. Willow Warbler (Phylloscopus trochilus)
115. Goldcrest (Regulus regulus)
116. Spotted Flycatcher (Muscicapa striata)
117. Red-breasted Flycatcher (Ficedula parva)
Heard and 2 individuals seen Taevaskoja 19/5, heard at Alutaguse
118. Pied Flycatcher (Ficedula hypoleuca)
119. Marsh Tit (Poecile palustris)

120. Crested Tit (Parus cristatus)
Seen at Roosta 17 and 18/5 and at Taevaskoja 19/5. Ssp *mitratus*
121. Blue Tit (Parus caeruleus)
122. Great Tit (Parus major)
123. Wood Nuthatch (Sitta europaea)
124. Eurasian Treecreeper (Certhia familiaris)
125. Eurasian Penduline Tit (Remiz pendulinus)
Heard near Aardla 19/5
126. Eurasian Golden Oriole (Oriolus oriolus)
Brief views of a pair near Matsu 22/5
127. Red-backed Shrike (Lanius collurio)
Regularly encountered
128. Great Grey Shrike (Lanius excubitor)
An individual seen by some from the bus near Roosta 17/5
129. Eurasian Jay (Garrulus glandarius)
Nominate *glandarius*
130. Black-billed Magpie (Pica pica)
131. Eurasian Jackdaw (Corvus modularius)
132. Rook (Corvus frugilegus)
133. Hooded Crow (Corvus cornix)
134. Common Raven (Corvus corax)
135. Common Starling (Sturnus vulgaris)
136. House Sparrow (Passer domesticus)
137. Eurasian Tree Sparrow (Passer montanus)
138. Chaffinch (Fringilla coelebs)
139. European Serin (Serinua serinus)
One near Matsu 23/5
140. European Greenfinch (Carduelis chloris)
141. European Goldfinch (Carduelis carduelis)
142. Common Rosefinch (Carpodachus erythrurus)
Common and in good voice
143. Hawfinch (Coccothraustes coccothraustes)
4 at Rannajobe 17/5
144. Yellow Bunting (Emberiza citronella)
145. Reed Bunting (Emberiza schoeniclus)

Mammals

1. Mountain Hare (Lepus timidus)
Alutaguse 23 and 24/5. A forest animal here
2. Red Squirrel (Sciurus vulgaris)
One at Matsalu 17/5
3. **Siberian Flying Squirrel** (Pteromys volans)
A radio tagged male observed emerging from his tree hole at dusk near Matsu 23/5. He peered out then exit-ted swiftly up the tree and was lost to view and the transmitter showed he "flew" quickly. Only found in Europe in Estonia, Finland and Russia it ranges east to Japan but is rarely observed. It took our guide Udo 5 years of study to get his first sighting!

5. **European Beaver** (Castor fiber)
3 swimming at Matsalu 17/5 and one crossing a forest track and swimming at Alutaguse 23/5
6. Red Fox (Vulpes vulpes)
7. Grey Wolf (Canis lupus)
Only tracks and droppings at Alutaguse 23/5. Some 150 animals inhabit Estonia but the beast is rarely seen
8. **Raccoon Dog** (Nyctereutes procyonoides)
One after dark near Aardla 18/5 and at least 2 pairs from the Bear Hide, Alutaguse 20 and 21/5. Allegedly spread from captive animals in Russia in the 1950's it is now common and considered a pest in Estonia. Native to east Asia it is now spreading westwards
9. **Brown Bear** (Ursus arctos)
2 adults from the Bear Hide, Alutaguse 21/5, a surprising couple of youngish sparring in a meadow at 1300 hours 22/5 and a single young oblivious to our vehicle at 0800 on 24/5 Around 600 individuals in Estonia but they are not often observed away from Bear Hides. HB had previously only seen Grizzly Bear (Ursus arctos horribilis) in Alaska although CB had seen this species in Kashmir
10. Northern Lynx (Lynx lynx)
Fresh tracks only at Alutaguse 23/5. Around 800 individuals make Estonia one of the best places to actually see this elusive cat, February / March is allegedly the best chance but even then luck is needed
11. Wild Boar (Sus scrofa)
One at the Bear hide, Alutaguse 20/5
12. Roe Deer (Capreolus capreolus)
13. Elk (Alces alces)
A male and a female with 2 young Nova 18/5, 4 young males in a group near Tartu 19/5 and 2 Alutaguse 21/5
14. Daubenton's Bat (Myotis daubentonii)
One near Matsu 23/5. The lack of any other Bats was a rare disappointment on this trip
15. **Northern Birch Mouse** (Sicista betulina)
A freshly trapped individual at Matsu 23/5 allowed close examination in the hand
16. Bank Vole (Clethrionomys glareolus)
A single crossing the road near Matsu 24/5
17. Field Vole (Microtus agrestis)
3 individuals trapped Matsu 23 and 24/5
18. Common Vole (Microtus arvalis)
A sacrificed individual was, from skull shape, this species and not the wished for eastern Sibling Vole (M. socialis)

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