

Holiday Highlights
Estonia Mammals
21-28 May 2011

Guides: Roy Atkins and Uku Paal, plus researchers

Guests: Norman & Christine Haynes, Sue Joy, Joan Hunter and Mark & Sheila Devlin

Day 1 The flight leaves a little late but all goes fine otherwise and we arrive to find Uku, our Estonian Guide, waiting to greet us as we exit the airport in Tallinn. It does not take long to sort out the minibus and soon we are on our way eastwards first heading up towards the coast. Today is our only opportunity to have a look at the coast so we make a couple of stops at places scanning the sea and rocky shore.

En-route we spot a few birds such as Common Buzzards, Jackdaw, Goshawk and a selection of owls including Tawny, Ural, Long-eared and Eagle Owl!! What a shame they are stuffed and mounted on the wall in the converted barn where we enjoy a very tasty lunch! We do at least find a real live Common Buzzard or two as we drive and also spot Northern Wheatear, Lapwings and Hooded Crows. Once at the coast we add a few birds in the bushes before we even look at the sea. A Whitethroat is singing behind us and we find a nice male Whinchat. There are Reed Buntings in the reeds and Reed Warbler too. Out on the water are Goosanders, Goldeneye, Mute Swans, a selection of gulls including Common, Herring and Black-headed, lots of Cormorants and a big flock of distant Long-tailed Ducks. The best bird here is a Great White Egret that shows well on an island and is in breeding plumage with a dark bill.

We try another spot where there are closer Long-tailed Ducks - indeed quite a large flock of them and a couple of Scaup as well. A Black-throated Diver is flying past and we get very close views of Common Terns. There is a flock of Grey-headed Wagtails flitting around the tops of the pine trees!! This seems a bit odd at first until you realise there is a mass of gnats flying around just above the trees and they are flitting up and catching them. All seem to be this race of Yellow Wagtail and some are very smart indeed with dark grey caps and cheeks. In the reeds here are Whitethroat and Chiffchaff and on the sea a couple of Shoveler.

We try another spot but it doesn't add anything new so we start making our way towards our accommodation driving through flat agricultural land and extensive areas of forest. We spot the odd Buzzard as we go and check each one for Honey Buzzard until finally we hit the jackpot and get excellent

views of a nice male. It is a good enough view to even make out the three bars under the tail. We spot a Common Crane in a field and another group circle above the trees before slowly descending into a field just out of sight. There are occasional White Storks including several on big nests atop the telegraph poles. At one stop there is a whole patch of Lilly-of-the-Valley and lots of Wood Anemones. In the forest we can hear the songs of Wood Warbler, Pied and Red-breasted Flycatcher and on one tree top we spot a Cuckoo.

We arrive at our accommodation to the song of Common Rosefinch and Thrush Nightingale - and a brief snippet of Icterine Warbler! We settle into our rooms then come to the dining room to enjoy a delicious evening meal. We chat about the itinerary and what is going to happen tomorrow but it is still quite early and broad daylight so we decide to take a walk.

We have not gone far before we find a European Beaver dam! It is perfect and crosses a small stream but we would be lucky indeed to see the animals responsible before dusk. Further on we hear singing Common Rosefinch and some of us manage to find the songster - disappointed to discover it is a drab male that looks just like a female! We hear Garden Warbler, plenty of Willow Warblers, Chiffchaffs and at the far end of the walk get good views of a Common Crane. As we walk back we enjoy rather silhouetted views of a pair of Common Rosefinch - this time the male is a nice red one! A little further on a Thrush Nightingale is singing wonderfully, really belting it out and after a bit of patience we manage to get excellent views. Woodcocks are roding as we finish the walk and the day ends calm with a clear sky.

Day 2

Outside the cabins before breakfast there are Redwings and Fieldfares singing and a couple of us watch a hunting male Hen Harrier. After breakfast we drive round to a nature centre in the nearby village and meet our 'Flying Squirrel Guide' Uudo Timms. He takes us inside the centre and we spend a while learning about the local area and the wildlife found there. It is a massive area of scattered woodlands and huge bogs where Brown Bear, Lynx, Golden Eagle and other exciting wildlife can be found as well as being the best part of Estonia for Flying Squirrels. There are skulls and skins to look at and other displays including a board with information about the squirrels and Uudo shows us some droppings and explains how the best way to find where they are living is by examining the bottom of the trees for these droppings - they are rather like pale coloured vole droppings and not like squirrel droppings at all. When we go back outside a Thrush Nightingale is singing and we get great views of a singing Icterine Warbler.

We follow Udo to some tracks through the forest and drive along keeping an eye open for anything. We stop and he shows us the kind of habitat that Flying Squirrels need - old Aspens with thick trunks and holes in them with an understorey of Sitka Spruce. It is a lovely habitat and is also very good for birds and interesting flowers. It is slightly frustrating that a female Capercaillie flies across the track as we stop but that only Roy sees it. Also we can hear a Hazel Hen calling but it really does not want to show itself (though this is pretty typical of this species!) We do however have much better luck with Wood Warblers that are singing all around and while listening to Udo tell us about the area they are flitting around in the surrounding trees and showing very well. We also get fantastic views of a Three-toed Woodpecker! It flies in when Uku plays a little of the call and starts drumming in a big Aspen right by the road - fantastic! We hear Black Woodpecker as well and a singing Red-breasted Flycatcher, get excellent views of a Cuckoo and then a male Pied Flycatcher puts on a good show.

There are quite a few butterflies on the wing as the weather is lovely and warm. Small White, Brimstone, Map Butterfly, Green Hairstreaks and Holly Blue are all identified and flowers include Lilly-of-the-Valley, May Lily, though not in flower, Spring Pea, Serrated-leaved Wintergreen, Herb Paris and some lovely ferns such as Oak and Ostrich Ferns. We walk a little way into the forest to try and see the Hazel Hen that is calling but it won't respond to Uku's whistle, however we hear a singing Greenish Warbler a little further in and try for that instead. Frustratingly it is in some pretty impenetrable forest and won't come closer. We find plenty of evidence of animals of the forest with several piles of Elk droppings as well as places where they have eaten the bark of the trees. There is a Pine Marten scat and you can see where Wild Boar have been digging.

Lunch is back at the centre and we enjoy a very nice meal before spending a few minutes outside scanning for raptors. We watch two Honey Buzzards above the forest and find a couple of Black Redstarts in the field behinds the centre then glimpse a Hawfinch as it flies over.

Back out again to the forest we pause en-route to examine a Brown Bear track in the mud! It is really big and makes you realise how huge they are. We take a walk following the bleep of a Flying Squirrel with a radio tag. It is quite hard work but we have a stop when we find another singing Red-breasted Flycatcher. After playing a bit of its call it comes in and flits around in the trees nearby at times allowing us very good views. We find more Elk droppings and tracks and Raccoon Dog tracks which are rather like tiny fox footprints though a touch rounder. Eventually we arrive at the tree where the Flying Squirrel is holed up and sort out a rope method of going up the

tree just to check on it. Uku goes up on this contraption, which looks like quite hard work, and using a gadget for looking into the holes he has a look and can see a bit of eye shine in the bottom of the hole. Apparently it is pretty deep! It is fun watching him struggle up there to look, and also interesting to see the very recognisable dropping around the base of the tree - but just makes us all the keener to see the animal itself!! We head back to the vans and go back for a short break and our evening meal with our fingers crossed for this evening.

Later in the evening we set off again but as it is still too light we make a short stop just along the road and find a selection of waders in a field. There are four or five Golden Plover a Curlew and a stunning summer plumage Black-tailed Godwit as well as Lapwings and a distant Common Crane. A Brown Hare is loping across the field too. We drive back up the track we took earlier today to have a try for Pygmy Owl as Uudo knows of a couple of territories up here. Uku does an excellent imitation but initially all seems quiet except for a couple of Green Sandpipers singing overhead. Then a distant call alerts us to a bird some way down the track and we walk along a little before trying again. Soon Uku has found it perched some way off on a bare branch right out in the open - a great little bird staring round fiercely with brilliant yellow eyes.

We drive next to the site we are going to try for the Flying Squirrels. There is a short walk into the forest to a spot where two nest boxes are fairly close together. We decide which one would be the best to watch based on how good a view of the squirrel you are likely to get and after Uudo explains what the squirrel is likely to do we set up the receiver to check it is still in there and settle down to watch. We listen for fluctuations in the sound of the beep from the transmitter which would indicate the animal is moving. The constant beep of the radio receiver is very reassuring and we sit there in the knowledge that surely it will come out eventually. The light fades, we watch the hole, the light fades some more... it is getting quite hard to see with the naked eye but through binoculars it is still bright enough to see plenty of detail when suddenly it pops straight out of the hole and round on top of the box! It sits there for a few moments before vanishing round the back of the tree. It appears again higher up, hops across to the next tree and pauses on a tiny twig sticking out of the trunk - it is a lovely view of this delightful little animal. Suddenly it is on the move again and this time dashes right up the trunk high into the canopy where it vanishes from sight. We know it is still there because of the continuing beep from the radio receiver and Uudo informs that that it will almost certainly fly from there right over our heads and away into the trees. We wait and wait and the beep continues and then suddenly this tiny rectangle of animal flies

at incredible speed away from the tree and over our heads and is gone! It is so fast one or two people miss it but what an astonishing sight and incredible to believe it is in control and can see where to land going at that speed! We are thrilled and very happy to have seen such a rare and elusive animal in the flesh, Uudo was telling us earlier on that he was studying these animals for seven years before he ever saw one and here we are expecting, and succeeding, in seeing one in a single night! It puts into perspective just how lucky we have been.

He plays around with the dial on the radio receiver and tells us to come quick as the other squirrel is still in its box!! We walk quickly to the other box and stand quietly watching the hole. He tells us the animal is moving in the box and we wait a few minutes - the air of expectancy rising all the time. Then suddenly there is a face at the hole, seconds later he is out and off up the tree in a flash! We watch as he vanishes into the leaves and higher branches then reappears on a side branch very near the top of the tree. He is hard to point out and we are still giving directions to some people when he too leaps out and glides away into the night. Everyone has now not just seen a Flying Squirrel but has seen one fly!! We are all grinning from ear to ear as we walk back through the forest to our van and after thanking Uudo profoundly for his help, we head back for our beds. It is already approaching midnight and we are meeting up again at 4:00am!

Day 3

We meet up at the vans feeling ready to go despite so little sleep and meet our guide for the day Triin. She has her own minibus which we are using and once we are all aboard we set off for a large area of forest further west. There is mist hanging above the fields as we travel and our first mammal of the day is a Red Fox walking through the mist in one of the fields. It is very atmospheric and watching a Common Crane flying just above the mist in front of the trees as the light increases is a beautiful sight. We travel a little way before coming off the main road onto a dirt track through the forestry.

We drive a steady pace - the perfect speed to check the rides and open areas and amongst the trees as we go and she pauses at every track coming off to the sides to scan the length of them in case there is anything. We have not gone far when Uku shouts that there is an owl up ahead! There, sure enough, is a big owl perched on a telegraph pole and as we approach it flies. It is very big and is clearly a Ural Owl - a great find. We continue on and a ringtail Hen Harrier flies past giving good flight views. We add Common Buzzard and then spot our first Black Grouse of the day with two males flying up into the tree tops. More Black Grouse follow with birds on the track ahead and flying down the tracks towards us landing in the

trees to our side and giving excellent views in the early morning sunshine. There is a Green Sandpiper feeding in a roadside ditch and a Black Stork flies past - a nice surprise as they are a scarce bird. We get far to brief a view of a Goshawk flying down the track ahead of us and landing briefly in a tree before dashing off again seconds later.

Somehow the mammals are proving extremely elusive despite this being the best time of day to see them and it seems bizarre that we are not even finding any Roe Deer. We make a stop at some good habitat for White-backed Woodpecker and try playing a little bit of the call. Immediately a bird flies in! It lands on a large tree nearby and starts drumming, giving us wonderful scope views in the process, you can see all the plumage features that separate this from the other black and white woodpeckers. Black Grouse are bubbling in the background and we add Red-backed Shrike and Tree Pipit.

We make a stop at a nice spot to have breakfast and enjoy cheese, meats, boiled eggs and various breads and yogurt in the company of Sedge Warbler and Whitethroat, with the background symphony of Thrush Nightingale and Common Rosefinch. We see more Black Grouse as we travel and at another stop find another White-backed Woodpecker.

At one muddy patch beside the road we find a very interesting selection of tracks in the mud. First we find Roe Deer tracks, then some huge prints that look like a cross between a dog and a cat print! Triin points out the features that make these Lynx tracks and we all try to imagine it walking through this exact spot and away into the trees - could it even be watching us now?? There are tiny Raccoon Dog prints and some rather deer like prints that on closer inspection turn out to be Wild Boar tracks. They are quite big but the imprints of the hind toes are not visible on most of them which makes it a little harder to recognise - though in fairness they are too big for Roe Deer and too small for Elk so what else could they be! A few yards further on are some huge Brown Bear prints looking rather like enormous badger tracks but about as long as our own footprints or slightly bigger! The pads are all in a row and the claws are clearly very big, making a striking indent in the mud. It seems that all the animals we are keen to see have been here at some point - but despite our best efforts we can't seem to find any of them this morning - though it is nice to know they are here!

Further on we stop to admire a couple of Whinchat but we don't find anything else of note until we are on our way back and passing some suitable looking habitat for woodpeckers and Uku suggests we try for Grey-headed Woodpecker. He whistles the call several times and suddenly bird calls back!

It sounds distant and after some time has not called again so we are about to give up when suddenly it calls from just the other side of the road. It flies into a nearby tree and poses beautifully for us, disappears into the trees then returns and perches right in the bare branches giving good scope views until we have all had our fill... superb!

We head back to the guesthouse and have a break for the rest of the morning - we have four hours available to catch up on sleep. We meet again at 1:00pm and find that it has clouded over and is beginning to rain. By the time we have eaten it is pouring down so we do a run through the checklist and then give it another hour to see if it has stopped by 3:00pm, the plan then being to go out and do some birding on the way to the Bear Hide where we are spending the night! At 3:00pm it is absolutely lashing down so we postpone it again and enjoy a little more sleep before finally getting going at around 4:30pm. The rain having now stopped and the clouds breaking up we feel much more optimistic and with our teddy bear pyjamas packed we meet up again and once more take to the forest tracks in search of wildlife on our way to meet up with Triin

We have not got very far when we spot a couple of harriers hunting over the fields. On one side of the road is a superb male Hen Harrier but it is hard to decide whether to watch this bird or the equally superb male Montagu's Harrier on the other side of the road!! This must be the first time any of us have seen these two species hunting in the same spot. We enjoy prolonged views before setting off along one of the tracks through the trees pausing again when Roy spots a Nutcracker in one of the tree tops. It stays until, everyone has had a good view, then we try carefully getting out as it is a little tricky to see it properly in the back of the van - but it won't quite put up with that and off it flies.

We meet up with Triin and take a walk to the Bear hide where we are soon settling in nicely. It is very comfortable with rugs on the floor, comfy chairs, surprisingly comfortable beds and even a dry toilet! The windows have perfectly clear plastic in them to stop the mosquitoes which would otherwise be a nightmare and we are all impressed with how clear they are - you can barely tell they are there at all! We have a long wait ahead as the hide owners are very keen to make sure the Bears are not disturbed so we are here and enjoying our picnic meal by about 6:00pm and the bears are unlikely to appear before 10:00pm! So we chat very quietly and enjoy watching the flycatchers - Spotted and Pied are both here. We aren't expecting to be sharing the hide with one though! There is suddenly a fluttering noise in the air vent at the back of the hide and on inspection a Pied Flycatcher flies out and into the room panicking as it flies from one

end to the other. We open the door and stand back and it soon spots its escape route and is gone into the forest. We find Wood Warblers and Goldcrest but little else. After a couple of hours we are entertained by the appearance of a Red Fox. He dashes this way and that and finally spends a while focussed on a spot trying to dig something up, a vole perhaps but he is not interested in the seal carcasses put out for the bears at all.

He vanishes eventually and we wait on and as the light really starts to fade we start wondering if the moment will be soon! Then suddenly at 10:50pm a dark shape moves into view - it is big!! It is a Brown Bear and is followed by a second and they walk, one behind the other, through the bushes in the background, sniffing the air and climbing over fallen trees towards the seal carcasses at the back. Triin says she thinks they are most likely to be a male and female as they are both adults and this is normally unusual - but this is the mating season and the males follow females around until they become receptive and allow them to mate. They look fabulous and are particularly attractive looking bears with lovely patches of slightly paler fur around their heads and pale tips to their ears. The female is very pretty and apparently very hungry as once they arrive at the first carcass she just starts tucking in, pulling out pieces of meat and eating it with gusto. The male seems less keen and although he also tucks in at first he is soon wandering about and looking around as if making sure no-one else is around. He keeps returning to her and sniffing at a second carcass and tugging at the one she is eating but she is just eating the whole time! The light starts to fade even more but modern binoculars are amazing and it is still possible to make out a good level of detail. After about twenty minutes or perhaps a little more he wanders off through the bushes at the back and disappears. She continues to feed for a few more minutes as if she is not bothered - or perhaps she simply hasn't realised he has gone - either way she feeds on for another five minutes then seems to suddenly realise he has gone and after sniffing around a bit follows him, vanishing into the night.

We are absolutely thrilled but we are meant to be quiet so as not to alert the Bears we are here and so it is a rather muted group who grin at each other in the darkness - thumbs up and punching the air. We watch for a little while longer but Triin says that they rarely come back for seconds, so feeling tired after a long day we head to bed and are soon dreaming of teddy bear picnics.

Day 4 A couple of us wake before 4:00am and get up to see if anything is happening. All seems incredibly quiet - just the odd flycatcher flitting around. There is a Hooded Crow at one point and Mark spots a large rather grey backed bird fly through that may be a Goshawk - but otherwise

it is too quiet to help you keep your eyes open and in the end we go back to sleep and wake properly at around 7:00am to gather our things and walk back to the van.

Back at the van we can at last start chatting about the Bears and it is as though we have been bottling up the excitement. We spot a Fox in the field behind the bus and find a Woodlark before we head back to our accommodation for breakfast - surprised at how hungry we are!

After breakfast we head out for a bit of birding. Our first stop is a small gravel pit a little way up the road where we quickly locate a pair of Little Ringed Plovers. They seem nervous and we assume they must be breeding here somewhere. There are Lapwings, Common Gulls, Whitethroat singing, Whinchat and Wheatear but we then notice that seem to be a few raptors coming up from the forest. We spot a couple of Buzzards, then a bigger bird with drooping wings circling up above the distant trees - a Lesser Spotted Eagle! It circles briefly with a Buzzard, then drops behind the trees again. We find a better vantage point and soon the bird reappears allowing us all scope views and although distant you can certainly make out the key identification features, the rather pale back, drooping wings, pale patches in the primary bases, short tail etc and when it is circling with a Buzzard it is clearly bigger. We find a very distant Hen Harrier then a Kestrel and a couple of Honey Buzzards - not a bad collection.

We move on and decide to drive down to the nearest thing here to a coast. Lake Peipsi not very far away and is worth seeing in its own right being a huge lake and part of the border with Russia. Many of the villages along its shore are still occupied by Russians. We arrive and it really is like going to the coast as the far side of the lake is too far away to see! In the first reedy fringe of the lake we can hear Reed and Sedge Warbler singing plus the gravelly sound of a singing Great Reed Warbler. The Sedge Warblers are song fighting and showing very well but to try and coax a Great Reed into view we try playing a bit of song and although it does not seem interested one does shortly appear in the reeds a little way off and shows very well indeed as it hops clumsily from stem to stem pausing now and then to sing. We get wonderful views of a White-tailed Eagle which dwarfs the Hooded Crow flying behind it. A Bittern booms, we find a nice male Reed Bunting and out on the water there are a few Goldeneye and a couple of Mallards. Herring Gulls and Black-headed Gulls seem to be the only representatives from this family and overhead are lots of Swifts. Further along the road we relocate the White-tailed Eagle and get out to watch as it circles, the white tail gleaming in the sunshine. A Marsh Harrier makes a fly past as we are about to get back in the van.

Our next stop is a bit more open and we find a few Yellow Wagtails here of two subspecies - *flava* and *thunbergi*, a nice opportunity to make a comparison. There are several White Wagtails too and a Wheatear. Out on the water are more Goldeneye, a Great Crested Grebe and a small flock of Whooper Swans fly in. There is a pair of mating Little Ringed Plovers, a fishing Common Tern but nothing else new.

We start back towards the hotel and try a couple of spots along forest tracks for woodpeckers again. At one we get brief but close views of a couple of Black Storks - a very nice find. One bird reappears briefly and looks almost pterodactyl like in shape as it circles round and drops back into the trees. A Tree Pipit is singing but there is little else then just as we arrive back the accommodation we find a stunning male Montagu's Harrier hunting over the field the other side of the road. He looks superb as he flaps and glides around low over the grass, close enough to see every detail and the cameras are snapping away like crazy!! It is a delight to watch and we spend a while just enjoying it until it drifts a bit further way. We drive into the parking area for our accommodation which is just over the road and as we get out we realise that there is now a male Hen Harrier here too so we walk over to enjoy the sight of both species hunting the same field - and for a moment they even having a bit of a tussle!!

After an excellent lunch we take a long break for a bit of sleep - tonight we are again to be up until late as we are going spotlighting for mammals along forest tracks with Triin. After our evening meal at 8:00pm we are then soon on our way but we have not been driving for more than a few minutes when looking up one of the dirt tracks into the forestry we spot something big and dark. We pause and have a look and to our amazement it is a Brown Bear!! We cannot believe our luck - but we are even more astonished when a second bear appears out of the bushes. This one is almost blonde! It is a lovely creamy brown colour with darker patches and a real beauty. This one vanishes back into the bushes for a little while but the darker one stays out and we watch for several minutes and try and get photos even though the light levels are not so good. The blonde Bear reappears and they walk down the track towards us for a few moments before finally disappearing into the bushes on the other side of the track. We are elated and for a few moments just have to sit and take in what we have just seen.

We continue on our way taking dirt tracks through forest and past meadows. A larger part of this route is through open fields and we scan every clearing picking up the occasional Roe Deer - but it is a big surprise when a Lesser Spotted Eagle suddenly flies up right in front of the van and perches nearby.

It is a fantastic view and we can't believe our luck when it stays there allowing frame filling views in the binoculars. Norman is thrilled - it was a bird he had seen before but only badly so he was keen to see a closer one and we joke that he could certainly never get a closer one than this one!! We see more Roe Deer, then a Red Fox followed by another, then a Green Sandpiper hops out onto the road right in front of us. It calls noisily and flutters away and we figure it must have a nest very close by. We hear a River Warbler singing and make a stop to see if we can find it. They can be very tricky sometimes but this bird eventually appears in some bare branches and we even get scope views, watching it sing with its bill wide open, turning its head slowly back and forth.

We continue on and get good views of a Mountain Hare on the track ahead. It is surprisingly big but the white feet and completely white tail and shorter ears are distinctive enough and Triin tells us they are scarce but regularly seen around this area. Now the light is really going and we suddenly see eye-shine on the road ahead - they are very close to the ground and as we get closer we realise it is a Nightjar. We are amazed at how close it allows us to get and soon you can see every detail in the headlights. It seems pleased to have the moths lit up and jumps up to make a grab at one as it flies by. Further on we find another and over the next hour or so see perhaps four or five in total.

We spot more eye-shine in a field and suspect it is a Raccoon Dog though it disappears before we get to see it - however Triin believes there is a den just there. We wait a little while but it doesn't reappear so we move on pausing to see if we can see any Corncrakes when we hear at least four calling in one small area. We see more foxes, making a total of around five, and as we are almost finished spot a Brown Hare - but again we are absolutely astonished to have not seen any Elk!

Day 5 Today we have a bit of a journey ahead of us and after a good lie-in and a late breakfast we are soon on our way. They are fast roads and we have gone a long way before we make a short stop to check some gulls. Uku has spotted a dark backed bird in a flock of Herring Gulls and we are hoping for a Baltic Gull. We are a little disappointed to discover it is a Great Black-backed Gull – though this is a good record so far inland.

As we arrive in Tartu we make a stop at a cemetery where we take a short walk in the hope of finding Middle Spotted Woodpecker. Instead of this species however we find a singing Wryneck and find it perched out in full view! There are Pied and Spotted Flycatchers here too but little else of note

so we head to lunch in a very smart restaurant in town. The dessert is particularly delicious!

After lunch we head out of town to check a patch of woodland where Uku says there may be Black Woodpeckers. We stop and he walks on a little way ahead then beckons us forwards. He is a rascal - his Black Woodpecker turns out to be a wonderful close up of a Ural Owl on a nest - looking out of a hole in a tree!! He grins at us as we all gaze at this fabulous sight - a pair of eyes staring back at us from the hole and beautiful streaking around the head... a real treat.

Our next stop is at a gravel pit which can apparently be good for waders sometimes. We quickly find a Temminck's Stint here along with Dunlin and Ringed Plover. In the background are Garganey, a couple of Little Gulls, Marsh Harrier and a pair of nesting Whooper Swans. The water here must be quite iron rich as both birds have orange stained necks. We walk back to the van and glancing back we notice a huge bird above the trees - a White-tailed Eagle. It is joined by another, then another and then another!! Yes, four White-tailed Eagles all circling together - a very impressive sight, and we spend a while just enjoying the spectacle.

Our next spot is at a huge wetlands area. There are trees poking out of the water so it would appear to be a flooded area of grassland and scattered trees. There are birds everywhere! Out of the larger lakes we find quite a few ducks with Pochard and Tufted Duck quite numerous, Gadwall, a few Garganey and quite a few Shoveler. We find a nice pair of breeding plumage Slavonian Grebes and a superb Red-necked Grebe too. There are more Whopper Swans and a few Mutes and in the distance lots of Little Gulls and both Black and White-winged Black Terns.

We follow the road round the edge of the wetland stopping at other spots. We find singing Great Reed Warbler and zapping low overhead are about a zillion Swifts - though Uku's estimate of about 1500 might be more accurate! We arrange to meet up briefly with Marika - the lovely lady who has organised this trip for us - and she is clearly delighted that we have seen so many good things so far and wishes us well for the rest of the trip. We then drive round to the tower where we get brief views of a female Citrine Wagtail and enjoy the Swifts as they fly so low over our heads.

We finish the day stopping at a spot where the road disappears into the water, stopping at the furthest point to eat our picnic meal and watch the terns and gulls. What a treat this is - we have Little Gulls, Black Terns and best of all White-winged Black Terns just yards away, dipping to the water

to pick up insects and we simply take our time to enjoy the spectacle. It is always great to get good close up views of birds but when they are of this calibre it is very special indeed and we just can't take our eyes off them. We have time to enjoy them as well as try and get some photos - which is surprisingly difficult! Out of nowhere a stunning male Citrine Wagtail appears on a rock right behind the van and then a very smart breeding plumage Marsh Sandpiper appears at the edge of the water. It is amazing to watch this bird delicately picking at the surface with White-winged Black Terns just above its head! Does it get any better than this!

Day 6

Another early start sees us heading towards our meeting point with Remek at 4:45am. We arrive and follow him to a spot where we pull off onto the verge and after introducing himself we follow him through a little woodland and down to the edge of the small wetland area. There are lots of dead trees, marshy ground full of rushes and two separate Beaver lodges are visible with a small tract of water between them. He tells us that they swim from one to the other and that we need to keep very quiet. We work our way down to an area from where we can see the water where we stand and watch. It is a beautiful morning and as the sun slowly appears above the trees we spot one or two birds including Pied and Spotted Flycatcher, Tree Pipit, Common Redstart and a rather worried looking Goldeneye. We are particularly pleased when a Blyth's Reed Warbler calls in the trees and drops down to the reeds right in front of us!

We wait and watch. It is hard to concentrate but we keep watching and after perhaps three quarters of an hour suddenly a Beaver appears at the surface. It surfaces without making any ripples and is amazingly easy to miss even on such a small pond as the shadows make it less than obvious and most people don't get onto it before it dives, reappearing much closer to the lodge then swimming behind it and vanishing from view. After another forty minutes or so it has not reappeared and Remek says he does not think it will come out again for the rest of the day - so we walk back to the vans feeling slightly frustrated. The place itself is beautiful - it is just a shame the Beavers did not perform better as Remek assures us that sometimes they are quite active. At least we have another chance this evening.

We drive round to a lovely spot in the forest with picnic tables and a lovely view over a lake where we have breakfast. We watch Goldeneyes and a Wigeon on the water and in the trees are Goldcrest, Coal Tit and amazingly Wood Warbler and Pied Flycatcher which seems astonishing to us in Pine woodland but seems completely normal to Uku.

Next stop is a huge Beaver lodge! It is enormous and apparently has eight Beavers in it. Remek tells us all about Beaver life - how they survive the winter by storing food under the water and don't even have to surface to get it. The lodge entrance is under the water and there are 'rooms' inside, feeding areas and bedrooms. They have two cubs per year and up to three generations live in one lodge. We are not likely to see any Beavers at this time of day so we say farewell to Remek and agree a time to meet up again this evening then head for a walk in the nearby woodlands with Uku.

We start our walk from a bridge over a river which has loads of padlocks clicked into the metalwork of the bridge. Apparently this is a tradition related to marriage - you get your names engraved on to the padlock as a symbol of being joined in marriage and then padlock it to a bridge - there must be twenty or more here. The woodland is particularly beautiful and we follow the river downstream to a small area of sandstone cliffs, hearing Wood Warblers and more flycatchers as we walk. Apart from that it seems rather quiet so we are very pleased when we find a Red-breasted Flycatcher as we walk back which comes right down onto the ground. Mark and Sheila get good views of a couple of Kingfishers and a Treecreeper. We add Jay and a very nice female Broad-bodied Chaser.

We move on and make a stop to have a quick check of a small pool Uku knows that had some good waders recently. There area Tufted Ducks, Black-headed Gulls and a Goldeneye with little fluffy chicks. Scanning the mud we find Little Ringed Plover, Green Sandpiper and then Uku says he has a Red-necked Phalarope!! This is a great find and we are delighted to see this lovely bird in full breeding plumage. We are so busy enjoying this bird we take quite a while to register that there are actually more waders here. There is a Dunlin but better than that are three Temminck's Stints including a couple that are extremely close. These however are trumped when we spot two Broad-billed Sandpipers! Another good find, we spend a while watching them and trying to imagine how excited we would be to find this little collection on a little pool in the UK - now that would be a red letter day!

We drag ourselves away and as we drive on we pass a patch of scrubby bushes with a Red-backed Shrike perched right out on top. We stop to have a look then in the background spot a Lesser Spotted Eagle. We watch as it is joined by another bird and then further left find a third much to our surprise. It is not often you see this many in one place and we watch as one in particular gets closer and closer and finish up with

wonderful close views as it hangs in the wind scanning the ground below and circles. It is a great opportunity to take in all the plumage features

We head back for lunch in the hostelry next door to our hotel then go out again later making our first stop at some small pools to listen for Penduline Tit. There seems to be huge numbers of dragonflies and damselflies here and we take photos to identify them later as we don't have a book with us. There are several species and later we identify them as Downy Emerald, Blue-tailed, Red-eyed, Northern and Variable Damselfly, Four-spotted Chaser, Lily-pad Whiteface and Yellow-spot Whiteface - a pretty good collection! Then suddenly we remember why we are here when a Penduline Tit calls! We head in its direction and Uku spots the nest in a Willow. In the strong wind it is blowing around all over the place, swinging up in the air and down again and you can't help thinking any bird inside must be feeling quite sea sick! It is beautifully made and an amazing construction and we are admiring it when suddenly the male appears and vanishes inside. He doesn't stay long and soon out he pops and away. We don't have to wait too long for a repeat performance and we wait a while to see it yet again. It is all over very quickly each time and he doesn't hang around, and we presume he is feeding the female who is incubating.

We head next to the tower at the big wetland and enjoy our evening meal sat on the first deck. We enjoy views of Little Gulls, Marsh Harrier, Garganey and a fly past Citrine Wagtail amongst other things before we leave and head round to the area where we are to meet Remek. But first we decide to have a quick look at the Great Snipe lekking area. We were meant to come here a couple of days ago but it was too windy and the whole area has been under water recently so we figured there might be no birds. Arriving now we realise that the water levels have dropped a lot and within moments Uku says he thinks he can hear a bird calling. We walk a little nearer and watch and sure enough we hear a dry rattle and suddenly a bird hops up into view above the tall grass. It flutters back down and a second bird does the same! Over the next 45 minutes or so we enjoy some great views of these birds as they jump up and make their odd dry rattling call and we even manage to find the occasional bird visible in the grass. They mainly sit quietly but occasionally stand up a little taller and call, pushing out their chest as they do so. We are very pleased as we had thought we might not get to see this because of the conditions.

Time is flying by and we drive the short distance to meet Remek and his friend at the river bank. They have two small boats and we divide into two groups and climb aboard. The river has flooded out over a huge area creating a beautiful scene and as the wind dies down and the sun sinks

it is serene. As we slowly motor around the bays and channels created by trees and bushes standing in the water we enjoy watching Marsh Harriers, Whooper Swans and various ducks. A Spotted Crake starts to call and the sun reflects in the water creating some lovely atmospheric photo opportunities. We explore one long channel and as we start coming back up suddenly Remek's friend is pointing – there is a Beaver swimming the other side of the trees! We watch this big male swimming along and follow it for a while before it dives and vanishes. We decide to try going round to the where it was seen and spend a while searching for it - but it has out manoeuvred us and appears back where we were before! We race round again and soon relocate it in the bushes where, for a short while, it is feeding out of the water before dropping back in and swimming away across the open water. We follow it but now it picks up that we are there and does a loud tail slap as it dives. It surfaces again and swims faster towards some bushes and for a little while we stick with it as it looks at though it might come back out on the land again but then it heads off down a channel and after running parallel for a short while we decide to leave it in peace. It has been a great sighting and we are delighted.

We are feeling on a high as we thank Remek for taking us and head for home, deciding to try taking a couple of short forest tracks on the way. We have not gone far when a couple of eyes shining back down the path cause us to stop and check what it is. It is a Raccoon Dog! Frustratingly it doesn't hang around soon trotting off the path and into the forest but a few people manage to see it well enough to identify it. We are amazed that as we then head back to town we spot a Red Fox, a Brown Hare and a Long-eared Owl then another Fox in the city!

Day 7

We take breakfast at around 6:00am then set off for the Alam Pedja reserve. This huge reserve includes the enormous flooded area where we went in search of Beavers last night but also some enormous forest areas and bog lands. We drive through tracks in the forest in the hope of picking up an Elk - it is bizarre that we have not seen this species on this trip as they are not usually difficult in Estonia. We spot a few common birds including Green Sandpiper singing above the trees and launching up out of the ditches. We spot Bullfinch, Siskin, Tree Pipits, Wood Warblers and other common birds but nothing new -where are the Black Woodpeckers?? We get lovely views of a Roe Deer but no other mammals.

We make a stop to take a walk through the forest out to a tower that looks out over the bog lands. It is a beautiful walk and although quiet for birds we enjoy the lovely forest scene and the flowers which include quite a mix of berry bearing plants... Bilberry, Cowberry, Northern Bilberry, Cranberry,

Bog Rosemary, Cloudberry and Crowberry are all here as well as the rather oddly named Labrador Tea and Leatherleaf. We find Lily-of-the-Valley, May Lily, Bogbean, Chickweed Wintergreen and Serrated-leaved Wintergreen too.

Scanning out over the bog there are many Tree Pipits singing from the trees and a couple of distant Ravens but little else and sadly no Golden Eagles - a species possible here. As we walk back we find a little group of Crested Tits which perform very nicely. Back at the vans we have a look in a small pond at the frogs. They are one of the water frog species and a careful check of photos later, plus the fact that their air-sacs are white, identifies them as Pool Frogs.

We drive to the end of the road where there is a lovely little flooded area with Black-headed and Little Gulls. There are a couple of Garganeys and a White-tailed Eagle flies over. In the bushes we find Common Rosefinches with at least two pairs and possibly more. The males are spectacularly red and one poses beautifully first in some apple blossom then on a rock amongst a lovely selection of Tulips!! A Thrush Nightingale is singing here as are Common and Lesser Whitethroats and Garden Warbler.

As we head back towards Tartu we make a stop to scan the big flooded area we visited yesterday. The weather is lovely and warm now and it seems the perfect time for raptors to be coming up - and it is!! We spot White-tailed Eagle, Common Buzzard, Marsh Harrier, Honey Buzzard and Lesser Spotted Eagle. There are several White Storks, a couple of Black Terns and lots of Swifts and Swallows. There are dragonflies everywhere and we identify a few including Club-tailed Dragonfly, Banded Demoiselle, and Red-eyed Damselfly. A Thrush Nightingale puts on a wonderful show singing from a low bush in full view. The song is wonderful to hear so close with beautiful ringing notes like Nightingale as well as rasping rattles.

After lunch we set off again out to a lovely wetland. It is a bit of a drive but we arrive to find a field full of Black-headed Gulls and in amongst them a single Oystercatcher and two Grey Partridges. Looking out over the wetland we start scanning and find Ruff, Dunlin and then a very close Marsh Sandpiper, followed immediately by a second. There are lots of Common Terns fishing and couple of Black Terns and Little Gulls then we pick out a superb breeding plumage Grey Plover. There are more ducks here than anywhere else we have been and as well as Shoveler, Garganey, Wigeon and Gadwall we add Pintail and Teal to the list. We find more Marsh Sandpipers including one behind us in the field taking the total up to at least five! Marsh Harriers are hunting along the back of the reeds and a Black Stork circles

up above the forest in the background. Norman finds a Black-tailed Godwit in the field and we hear a Bittern booming.

We drive a bit further along the track and find Red-necked Grebes quite close to the road looking superb in breeding plumage. There are several Cormorants, a couple of White-winged Black Terns and we get brief views of a couple of Yellow Wagtails of the flava – Blue-headed- race. The bushes along the edge of the road seem to be full of Sedge Warblers and we hear several Great Reed Warblers singing though they seem to be remaining well hidden. We find more Red-necked and Great Crested Grebes at the far end, a couple more Garganey and hear Golden Orioles – even glimpsing one in flight between the Poplars. It is a great place and we have a relaxed time enjoying the birds before finally deciding that we should start back to the hotel or we won't get there in time for our evening meal.

Tonight we are eating in a very nice place and we are surprised to find that we have been given a room to ourselves. This is ideal as it means that after we have finished we can sit and go through the checklist and do our traditional round up of the holiday going round the group to see what bird and mammals they have enjoyed the most, if they have a favourite place and a magic moment. As always it is wonderful listening to what people have chosen and why and brings back memories of the holiday from day one right through to today. The chosen mammals are almost exactly split however between the Brown Bears and the Flying Squirrel, with just one vote for European Beaver – but it is the Brown Bear that just squeaks into the top spot. The birds are a bit more varied with votes for Ural Owl, Red-necked Phalarope, White-winged Black Terns and Marsh Sandpiper - but Thrush Nightingale scores two after its amazing vocal performance this morning and Lesser Spotted Eagle scores two which is well deserved after such close views of two birds. It is nice that so many places get votes and the forests near Tudulinna, the flood at Valguta and the wonderful flooded area where we saw the Beavers all scoring votes. It is the floods at Aardla with their wonderful close up views of White-winged Black Terns that score the highest however. Magic moments are always very unpredictable but there is a definite Bear and Beaver theme this evening with votes also for the Ural Owl on the nest and the White-winged Black Terns - but it is the Brown Bear sightings that score the highest. We also give our thanks to Uku who has made a huge difference to the list of birds we have seen, finding all kinds of excellent species for us making it as much a birding trip as a mammal trip!

But the evening is not over yet. We received a phone call from Marika earlier today asking if anyone would be interested in visiting a Wild Boar feeding station so after we have finished we head out for a final outing.

It does not take too long to get to the spot and we arrive as the light is beginning to fade. There is a small hide and a tower but we don't end up using either of them because to our surprise the Wild Boars are already there!! We can see them from the van so we simply stay put and enjoy wonderful views as they feed and shunt each other about in small fights to get the best spot. There are about nine altogether, mainly well grown young ones but one is a bit bigger and we assume this is Mum. We watch them for a while then suddenly they all run off and we assume that is it for the evening so we turn the vehicle and drive out of the car park quickly checking the track before we head off - and there on the track is a Brown Bear!!! We are completely astonished! It is a young one and walks a few paces towards us, sniffs the air then wanders into the trees and is gone. Uku just can't believe it. He has lived in this area most of his life and has never heard of anyone seeing a Bear around here. He phones the guy who has the Wild Boar feeding station and he has only heard of a sighting of an old bear and is also astonished at our news. It just goes to show that you never know what is round the corner on a trip like this.

MAMMALS

Flying Squirrel
Brown Bear
European Beaver
Raccoon Dog
Red Fox
Roe Deer
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Wild Boar
Plus tracks/signs of...
Lynx
Elk
Pine Marten

BIRDS

Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Wigeon
Gadwall
Teal
Mallard
Northern Pintail
Garganey
Shoveler
Common Pochard
Tufted Duck
Scaup
Goldeneye
Goosander
Red-breasted Merganser
Long-tailed Duck
Hazel Grouse
Black Grouse
Grey Partridge
Great Crested Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Great Cormorant
Great Egret
Grey heron
Bittern
Black Stork
White Stork
European Honey Buzzard
White-tailed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Montagu's Harrier

Northern Goshawk
Common Buzzard
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Common Kestrel
Water Rail h
Spotted Crake h
Comcrake h
Moorhen
Common Coot
Common Crane
Oystercatcher
Little Ringed Plover
Ringed Plover
Golden Plover
Grey Plover
Northern Lapwing
Temminck's Stint
Dunlin
Broad-billed Sandpiper
Ruff
Common Snipe
Great Snipe
Woodcock
Black-tailed Godwit
Curlew
Marsh Sandpiper
Greenshank
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Red-necked Phalarope
Little Gull
Black-headed Gull
Common Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Black Tern
White-winged Tern
Rock Pigeon
Stock Pigeon
Wood Pigeon
Common Cuckoo
Pygmy Owl
Ural Owl
Long-eared Owl
Nightjar
Swift
Kingfisher

Wryneck
Grey-headed Woodpecker
Black Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
White-backed Woodpecker
Three-toed Woodpecker
Woodlark
Skylark
Sand Martin
Barn Swallow
House Martin
Meadow Pipit
Tree Pipit
Yellow Wagtail
Citrine Wagtail
White Wagtail
Wren
Dunnock
Robin
Thrush Nightingale
Black Redstart
Common Redstart
Whinchat
Northern Wheatear
Blackbird
Fieldfare
Song Thrush
Redwing
Mistle Thrush
Grasshopper Warbler h
River Warbler
Sedge Warbler
Reed Warbler
Blyth's Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Icterine Warbler
Blackcap
Garden Warbler
Lesser Whitethroat
Common Whitethroat
Greenish Warbler
Wood Warbler
Willow Warbler
Chiffchaff
Spotted Flycatcher
Red-breasted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Goldcrest
Crested Tit

Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Treecreeper
Penduline Tit
Golden Oriole
Red-backed Shrike
Jay
Magpie
Nutcracker
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Greenfinch

Goldfinch
Siskin
Linnet
Bullfinch
Hawfinch
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting
157 species

BUTTERFLIES

Brimstone
Orange Tip
Green Hairstreak
Map
Holly Blue
Small White
Camberwell Beauty
Small Tortoiseshell

DRAGONFLIES

Blue-tailed Damselfly
Northern Damselfly
Variable Damselfly
Red-eyed Damselfly
Banded Demoiselle
Downy Emerald
Four-spotted Chaser
Club-tailed Dragonfly
Lilypad Whiteface
Yellow-spot Whiteface

AMPHIBIANS

Moor Frog
Common Frog
Pool Frog
Common Toad