

Holiday Highlights

Estonia

1 – 6 April 2009

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Day 1 Our flight out to Tallinn leaves a little early to our surprise and we look down on a slightly snowy looking Estonia as we approach the airport. We are met by our guide Uku and Marika, who run the company we are using as our ground agent. They welcome us to Estonia and soon we are on our way to our accommodation in Parnu.

It is an enjoyable drive through a varied countryside with large areas of forest between more agricultural areas and despite the lack of any hills it is rather attractive. We also see our first birds with some common species such as Rook, Hooded Crow and Magpie amongst more quality species such as White Stork, Common Crane and White tailed Eagle. We even see a couple of mammals with Red Fox trotting through one of the fields and a group of eight or so Roe Deer feeding in another. There are Buzzards on many of the telegraph poles and the weather is very pleasant with clear patches of sky and a temperature of around 4°C.

We arrive at the hotel and settle into our rooms, then meet up for our evening meal together before chatting about the coming days and the plans for tomorrow.

Day 2 We meet up at 6:30am and are soon on our way, taking breakfast with us. Our focus this morning is woodpeckers and we want to be in the forest as early as possible as this is when they are at their most active. We head straight out to a large area of forest nearby and are only momentarily distracted by a huge flock of geese in the fields en route, mainly Bean and White-fronted Geese but also some Barnacle Geese in amongst them. We decide to come back to look at these later and continue on our way. A White Stork flies over as we travel on and we also see a couple of Common Cranes and a White-tailed Eagle.

We arrive at the forest and stop to check out a bird perched in the tree tops to our right... a female Black Grouse! Well pleased we set up the scopes and discover that there is a male as well. A Grey-headed Woodpecker is calling from the scattered trees in the clearing here and there are at least three

Great Spotted Woodpeckers too. We try imitating the call of the Grey-headed Woodpecker with good results as it flies in our direction into some nearby trees. We get excellent views as it flies across into a bare tree and is joined by a second bird. We are watching this when a Black Woodpecker starts calling though this bird doesn't show itself. There are crazy numbers of Great Spotted Woodpeckers with now 5 birds visible here - which is two more than we saw on the entire trip last year!

At the next clearing there are yet more Great Spotted Woodpeckers, at least three in the tree tops when we arrive and more later plus a couple of Mistle Thrushes and overhead a few Redwings fly over. We get a brief glimpse of a Marsh Tit and small flocks of Bean and White fronted Geese fly over, plus Common Crossbill and surprisingly four Snipe! Another Black Woodpecker is calling quite close but again it refuses to show. We get good views of very smart male Bullfinch of the northern race which is a touch bigger and brighter than those at home, and also see a couple of Siskins.

We move on and at our next stop we get fabulous views of a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker calling and drumming in the bare branches and nearby Dawn finds a lovely Nuthatch, which looks very different to ours at home being white beneath with chestnut streaks on the flanks. Yet another Black Woodpecker is calling nearby and Uku does a pretty good imitation which gets an immediate response with the bird flying straight in and landing in the trees nearby. It is pretty restless moving from tree to tree but we all get excellent views as it flies around from one tree to another. It flies off only to come flying past again a few moments later... brilliant! Before we leave Wayne finds a Treecreeper and just down the road we get fabulous views of Crested Tit. The weather is perfect with clear blue skies and no wind, so despite it being cold it doesn't feel it with the sun now on us and a wonderful calmness to the air making everything look crisp.

We move on and when we make our next stop we get out of the van to hear the remarkable sound of Common Cranes calling loudly somewhere in the forest nearby. It echoes all around us... a fabulously atmospheric call and we simply stand and listen for a little while. A Raven flies over calling and as we walk down one of the tracks we spot a Jay then get excellent views of another Grey-headed Woodpecker. We discover that we are treading in the footprints of an Elk; huge prints which make the Roe Deer tracks beside them look minute! There are yet more Great Spotted Woodpeckers here which brings the total now to over 20! Uku tells us that normally during the Autumn migration in Estonia a count of twenty woodpecker in a day is considered a pretty good total - so the counts last Autumn of over 2,000 on some days were spectacular. Goodness knows

how many must be in this forest at the moment. We find a small flock of Long-tailed Tits, the delightful northern race with pure white heads that look so clean and pretty. We suddenly hear a woodpecker drumming with a rather slower speed than Great Spotted and suspect it is a Three-toed. We look carefully then suddenly there it is in a dead tree with its mate on the same tree just below it. They put on a very good show, their crests raised as they work their way up the trunk before flying off and bring our total to five species!

We drive a little further on with Uku getting out at intervals and listening for White-backed Woodpecker, but they are the only species here that don't seem to be calling today. At our next stop we get good views of Willow Tit plus Goldcrest and another Crested Tit then find another closer flock of Long-tailed Tits. As we drive away Mary suddenly asks what she has spotted running down the side of the road up ahead. It is a mammal and at first we think it is a mink as it looks quite dark and is clearly a mustelid. We drive down the road to get closer and as it runs off into the trees we pull level with it and it suddenly seems to realise we are there and turns to look at us... at which point we see the white markings on its face... it's a Polecat! We are thrilled! This is such a tricky mammal to see anywhere and is pretty scarce in Estonia - even Uku has never seen one before. It seems remarkably unbothered by our presence and carries on running along parallel to the track for some time before disappearing into the trees. We also see a Red Fox trotting down the road towards us before it too realises we are there and cuts into the trees, a very dark looking animal without even a white tip to the tail.

We decide to try for one last woodpecker before lunch and head to a small village nearby where we listen for Middle Spotted Woodpecker calls. At first we seem to be finding just more Great Spotted Woodpeckers - too big - then we hear a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker calling - too small, then finally there it is, a Middle Spotted Woodpecker flies in to the trees by the stream and shows very well - just right! We enjoy excellent views of this bird plus a very smart Bullfinch, a flock of Mealy Redpolls fly over and we get brief views of a Kingfisher before we head off for lunch.

Lunch is excellent! In the village two ladies from a nearby farm have prepared a very enjoyable stew with some delicious mushroom bread and delicious cakes for dessert... definitely better than a packed lunch! After that we head round to the coastal marshes where there the melting snow has caused streams to flood across the path to the hide but from the car park we can see lots of birds out on the marsh including a good mix of ducks such

as Mallard, Teal, Wigeon, Pintail and distant Goldeneye. There are lots of distant geese and at least three White-tailed Eagles on the shoreline.

We decide to try further round where there are some flooded fields and find masses of ducks and geese here. There are enormous numbers of Mallard and surprisingly large numbers of Pintail plus more Wigeon and Teal and a few Gadwall. There are large numbers of Bean, White-fronted and Barnacle Geese in the background and occasional swans are flying through with several Bewick's Swans and a pair of Whoopers that land in front of us which make for good comparison. Eight Common Cranes fly over, we find a couple of Oystercatchers, then scanning from another spot find a couple of Golden Plovers and a Curlew some distance away. Val spots a couple of Red Foxes, beautiful animals with incredibly thick looking fur. They wander through the wildfowl which seem to pay them no attention at all which seems very surprising - they are literally just a few feet away from large numbers of geese and ducks that don't even look nervous! There are lots of Skylarks, a Yellowhammer on the wire and couple of Linnets fly past.

The wind is beginning to pick up a little now so the temperature feels colder, but we get out further on to check out some flocks of finches in the fields here. There must be literally hundreds if not thousands of them and though mainly Chaffinches there are a few Bramblings in amongst them and quite a lot of Greenfinches. There a small number of Linnets, a few Yellowhammers and the whole time there is the delightful song of a Woodlark that is perched on the wires nearby. In the background flocks of geese are flying past all the time and we spot a White-tailed Eagle cruising across above the trees plus a few Buzzards and before we leave a stunning male Hen Harrier.

We move on to the next field where there are literally thousands of geese. In fact an estimated 5,000 comprising two main flocks, the vast majority of which are Bean Geese and White-fronted Geese. What a fabulous sight they make as they feed in the stubble and we can work through them looking for anything unusual. There are a few Barnacle Geese and at one point we think we have found a Pink-footed Goose as a rather paler looking bird certainly looks very different to the other birds there. After closer inspection we realise that this is rather an odd bird and certainly not a Pink-foot though not quite right for anything else either! Perhaps it is a leucistic Bean Goose or even a hybrid, perhaps between Bean Goose and Greylag.

We move round to the far side of the same fields where the flooded area is full of hundreds more duck and geese making a fabulous scene. There are, we think, around 700 ducks but to our surprise they are almost all Mallards!

When the geese are disturbed they look brilliant in a mass. There are lots of Skylarks and Meadow Pipits and we finish with good views of a Great Grey Shrike before heading back to the hotel. It has been a great start to the trip and we head back feeling well pleased with the days sightings.

Day 3 Today we have an unavoidably early start as we are heading over to Saaremaa Island and have to catch the 8am ferry, which means leaving the hotel by 6:15am. After an excellent breakfast we are soon on our way and it is only just getting light as we start on our way. We travel quite some distance before Uku suggests that since we have made good time we should stop at a Pygmy Owl territory he knows. We make a very short detour down a track then wait in the bus while Uku stands on the track and does his excellent impression. At first we think nothing is happening then he beckons us out of the van and we gather on the track and listen. Sure enough there is a Pygmy Owl calling nearby and we stand in silence as Uku whistles again and suddenly there it is - perched right on top of one of the nearby birches... a tiny owl glaring around with fierce yellow eyes. It really is tiny and I think everyone is a little surprised just how small it is! We drive on spotting several Roe Deer in the fields, with a group of around 15 in one spot, then shortly before we arrive at the ferry there is an Elk in a clearing in the forest though frustratingly only a couple of people see it as, by the time we stop and reverse, it has strolled into the trees.

While we wait for the ferry we scan the bay finding lots of gulls, Goosanders and surprisingly, Coots on the sea! The ferry ride itself is very good and we gather on the top deck to scan the sea, picking out hundreds if not thousands of Long-tailed Ducks as we go. Many are very close and others in tight flocks flying pass at a distance. There are also flocks of both Velvet and Common Scoter and occasional smaller groups of Scaup and Eiders. We see two Red-throated Divers, quite a few Cormorants which have very white necks suggesting they may be continental Sinensis race birds, then Uku picks out a Grey Seal. The weather is perfect with lovely sunshine and almost no breeze which means everything is looking perfect, especially those lovely male Long-tailed Ducks.

Once on the island we drive pretty much directly to the Steller's Eider sight, seeing a few Buzzards, the occasional Common Crane, Lapwings, Jays and a nice flock of Fieldfares and Mistle Thrushes en route. We arrive at the end of the peninsula and almost as soon as we are out of the van Uku spots a flock of Steller's Eiders flying across, low over the sea but very distant. We follow them as they fly away to our left where they land on the sea but only as they bank round to land can we get any impression of the orange

colour of their bellies and once landed they look like distant black and white dots. Hopeful of finding more we start scanning the sea and start finding other birds. There are several Red-breasted Mergansers, lots of Mute Swans, Goldeneye, Common Eiders, Common Scoters and a large flock of mixed gulls. On one of the rocks is a single 'Baltic Gull', the Scandinavian race of Lesser Black-backed Gull which has a very dark back almost like a Great Black-backed, but the legs and feet are bright yellow. We find a Sandwich Tern and a Black-throated Diver flies past some way out. There are few passerines migrating through including a few Twites which is a scarce bird here. There are also occasional Buzzards over the distant trees and we get a rather distant view of a Goshawk.

Uku finds another very distant flock of Steller's Eiders then a smaller flock fly past and you can really make out some orange on these birds. Things get even better when a small flock including six males flies across and lands on the water, these are much closer allowing us to pick out some of the plumage features. We are enjoying these birds and feeling very pleased when Mike spots a single male that is half the distance away and now we really are excited as this one is close enough to see every detail! The orange belly and chest are obvious and we can even see the small dark markings on its head. We are absolutely thrilled and after enjoying prolonged views celebrate with some drinking yogurt left over from yesterday's breakfast... you know the way you do!

Delighted with our sightings here we decide to head on to check out one of the local harbours before heading to lunch. There is a mixed flock of Scaup and Tufted Ducks here and some close Red-breasted Mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks, and a long way out to sea a single Great Crested Grebe.

From here we go to lunch which is in a 'manor house' that is clearly used for functions and we enjoy some very tasty local food and cakes. We then work our way back to the ferry via a selection of places. First we drive along stopping at promising looking flooded fields where there are lots of gulls and lapwings but little else then in one very large field amongst the trees there are dozens of swans of all three species as well as Bean, White-fronted, Greylag and even a few Canada Geese. There are a couple of Common Cranes which take flight and shortly a large flock of them come circling up over the trees - clearly migrating. The weather is glorious and with the warmth of the sun a few butterflies are even out... including Small Tortoiseshell, Brimstone and Peacock.

We head along a forest track and are intending to search for Nutcracker at a spot Uku knows but when we get there we find a friend of his who has just been here trying for Nutcracker and clearly they are not showing so we decide to give up on them and try something else. We drive instead to Kurresaare where we stop to admire the old castle before walking round to the sea front to scan the water here. There are lots more swans here, Goldeneye, Goosander, Merganser, Greylag Geese, Grey Heron and lots of Coots but the bird we are most pleased to see are a small flock of Smew, three males and a female.

Heading back to the ferry we don't see much else and from the ferry see the same species as this morning with mainly large numbers of Long-tailed Ducks. Then as we drive back we make a small detour to have a look at Tuhu bog. This is a huge area of moorland with stunted pines and spruce and is incredibly wet with water right up and over the edge of the road in places. We scan round the area but spot very little though there are distant flocks of migrating cranes in several different directions.

We continue on our way but stop a little further on to admire a pair of Common Cranes feeding in a field close to the road and spot another pair as they fly towards us. At that moment Uku spots a male Black Grouse in a field a little further on and we drive on to see if we can get close enough for a photo. As we drive towards it Jays starts flying across the road, 1... 2... 3... 4..... 9...10... 11... incredible! More than any of us have ever seen in one flock before. The Black Grouse is very obliging staying put while we have a good look and Uku gets a few shots before it takes flight. In the same field are lots of Lapwings and Skylarks. Further along the road we get fabulous views of a Great Grey Shrike then as we drive along a Black Woodpecker flies above the trees keeping pace with us for a good minute or so!

Day 4 It is funny how after two very early starts, having breakfast at 7:30am suddenly seems like a lie in! The aim this morning is to try and connect with some of the species we missed in the local woodlands but our first birds are in Parnu itself, with Tree Sparrows from outside the hotel in the park then as we drive through town we spot two flocks of Waxwings. The first is pretty convenient as we can simply pull off the side of the road to watch them as they come down to a compost heap to feed on some very old looking apples... we can't help thinking they must be fairly desperate!

We enter the forest tracks and make a stop at a likely White-backed Woodpecker spot as this is the only woodpecker species we have not already seen. We stand around and listen and see a few other birds while we wait including Buzzards, two Great Grey Shrikes, Jays etc then when we

find nothing else we head to a second spot which is much more successful. Here we soon get fabulous close views of a White-backed Woodpecker which flies in and perches in the tree tops very close to where we are stood. It even starts drumming and we get great views through the scopes. This track is almost un-driveable so we head back and enter the wood on a different track making a stop where we heard Hazel Grouse last year. We hear a distant Black Woodpecker drumming but nothing else so we stop at a spot further on that looks good for Nutcracker. While here Uku hears a bird tapping in the trees and walks in a little way to see what it is. He comes out excited because he has just seen a Hazel Grouse in the trees here so we wait on the path while he goes in again and tries to coax it in our direction. We wait for while and suddenly it flies into one of the trees right beside the track but almost immediately flies back into the trees behind...a frustratingly brief glimpse. Those who are able to cope with jumping the ditch at the side of the track walk in a little way and glimpse it again as it flies back through the trees but we feel this is as good as we are going to get. We hear a Green Sandpiper singing but don't see it and those of us outside the trees watch a Willow Tit come to a hole it is excavating. Eventually we give up and get back into the van and just as we start to drive away the Hazel Grouse flies across the path right in front of us and into the densest area of trees!

The tracks in the forest really are dreadful now with the snow melting as the temperatures increase they are muddy and slippery and very hard to drive so we decide to return to the roads and as we do so we spot a pair of Grey Partridge in one of the fields, a bird few of us see very often these days.

We drive slowly on through any areas of trees hoping for a Nutcracker as they seem to be very scarce at the moment. We see a few Jays, the occasional Buzzard, and one possible Nutcracker as it flies over the road but there is no sign of it when we get to spot where it flew into the trees. In the end we give up and drive round to the fields where we saw all the ducks the other day. The water level has dropped a bit and the number of ducks is a lot smaller but there are still a lot of Mallards and plenty of Wigeon, quite a few Teal, small numbers of Pintail and new are Shoveler and Redshank. There is a big flock of Barnacle Geese at the back and several Skylarks are singing making it feel like Spring! We enjoy our lunch as we watch the birds here but suddenly all the geese start taking off as do many ducks and lapwings and we suspect there is a raptor around. Uyku suggests that there might be a Goshawk and scanning around Roy suddenly finds it circling above the geese. In the chaos it is a little hard to point out but everyone manages to get onto it as it gains height and heads off. We get good views of a female Marsh Harrier then after we have eaten

we drive a little way down the road and watch a flock of Siskins feeding in the alder trees with a couple of Mealy Redpolls amongst them.

Our next stop is a large area of reeds where there is a nice male Marsh Harrier hunting when we arrive plus a couple of Reed Buntings in the bushes and amongst the reeds. There seem to be Grey Herons flying in every direction and Uku explains that there is a huge heronry in the trees the other side of the fields here, with perhaps as many as 400 pairs! Next we get incredible close up views of Bearded Tit, right beside the path, at least two males and female. There are flocks of Common Cranes migrating north the whole time and a single Ringed Plover is spotted flying past, heard by Uku then found by Mike.

We drive from here back to the fields where there were large numbers of geese, spotting a couple of Northern Wheatears en route. There are a huge number of geese and we scan through them generally enjoying the whole scene. In the flood of water in the field here are perhaps 4-5000 geese, hundreds of duck, Whooper and Bewick's Swans and Skylarks all adding to the atmosphere. The weather is glorious with blue skies and warm sunshine. There are a couple of Stock Doves, a Redshank and a Merlin flies through very quickly behind us, low over the trees. The geese are the stars of the show with thousands of Bean Geese being the species in the largest numbers, though there are also lots of White-fronted Geese, a small number of Barnacle, five Canada Geese and Uku brilliantly picks out a couple of Pink-footed Geese, a scarce species in Estonia. It seems totally weird scanning through big flocks of Bean Geese to try and find a Pink-foot! Once found they are surprisingly distinctive not just because of their pink feet but also their pale grey backs and pale chests plus smaller rounder heads. It is a lovely scene but eventually we drag ourselves away... we are intending to go out again later owling and may be out late so we head back for a bit of a break passing the Great Grey Shrike that lives here as we go.

After our evening meal we set off in our quest for owls. We drive to the same area of forest where we have been looking for woodpeckers and start driving slowly checking all the clearings and trees as we go and making the occasional stop to listen. There are quite a few Roe Deer out but otherwise things seem rather quiet. At one spot where we stop Uku does a very passable impression of a Ural Owl and gets a response from a long way away. We wait and try again and this time get a response from the other direction. We try this for a while hoping one of these birds will come over to investigate but after some time it is clear that they are not coming nearer. While we wait a Woodcock flies past in its distinctive display flight. Further on there is a call from a Tengmalm's Owl at another spot but it also does not

respond and in the end we drive slowly through the tracks until it turns completely dark spotting nothing in the headlights and despite Uku trying his impressions at several other spots there is no luck. It is surprising as it has been a beautiful evening and the stars are out and the moon bright so you would imagine it would be a perfect night for this. But I guess that is owling for you.

Day 5 We meet for breakfast at 6:30am then head out towards Matsalu National Park. The weather is if anything even better than previous days, cold with clear blue skies and no wind, a perfect morning for birding. En route we make a stop in some forest, driving a short way from the main road and making a stop after a few hundred yards when we are in some suitable looking habitat for Nutcracker. We are delighted when within a few minutes a Nutcracker appears and perches right out on top of a nearby tree where we get the most perfect full frame views through the telescope.

After enjoying this bird for a while we move on, slowly driving the tracks in the hope of finding an Elk, but although there are plenty of Roe Deer there are no Elk to be found. In one clearing we can hear woodpeckers drumming and after a couple of whistles we call in a Grey-headed Woodpecker, while a Great Spotted is drumming in the trees above us. The Grey-headed shows particularly well and everyone gets good scope views before it eventually flies. Uku points out the sound of what must surely be an Elk running through the forest but it never appears and we also enjoy the sound of Common Cranes - the call incredibly loud and echoing right round the forest. We take a short walk along the track but there is little else around and after a while we decide that we actually have a long way to go today and we ought to get moving.

Birding en route produces several pairs of cranes in the fields, a pair of Black Grouse flying across one field and lots more Roe Deer. There are Buzzards, Ravens, White Storks, including some on their nests on polls by the road and at one point we pass a 'mixed flock' of Roe Deer, Cranes and Fox! There seem to be a lot of swans migrating and we spot regular flocks flying low over the trees all heading the same way, mainly Bewick's but some mixed flocks of Bewick's and Whoopers. As we arrive in the Matsalu area we chase a couple of Grey Partridges along one of the lanes, then pause further on to check a flock of geese. There is a real mixed flock here with White-fronts, Bean Geese, Greylags and Barnacles all mixed in together with two species of swans as well.

We drive round to some coastal meadows and are shocked to discover that the whole of the sea is frozen! This is very unusual here and knocks on the head the chances of seeing certain birds but on the other hand is very beautiful! We are surprised to find that along the edge of the shore there are

some melted areas and still some waders to be found with quite a few Redshanks, at least 4 Avocets and quite a few Ringed Plovers. We find a small group of Dunlin and suddenly a Rough-legged Buzzard flies over our heads and away across the bay. There are more swans migrating through and also flocks of cranes. We find a Wheatear and spot a distant Sparrowhawk.

We move on and find ourselves way ahead of schedule since the lack of geese and frozen coast have meant we have arrived at the end of the peninsular where we are intending to have lunch a good hour or more earlier than expected. We are not too worried however as there are lots of birds here and the weather is glorious, surprisingly warm in the sun, and the scenery with the frozen sea and piled up ice on the shore is spectacular.... there is even a big iceberg out there! Some areas of sea are unfrozen and are packed with birds... something like 3,000 Scaup are here! There are Long-tailed Ducks in the background, lots of Goosanders, Goldeneye and a lovely flock of around 20 Smew with lots of superb males looking fantastic in the sunshine. A Grey Seal is hauled out on the ice looking, as Dawn says, like seals should look. There are a few Wigeon, Teal and Pintail, flocks of Cormorants and swans and even some small birds migrating. There are occasional flocks of Chaffinches and Linnets flying over and at one point a single Hawfinch! The weather really is lovely and we sit and chat while enjoying the whole scene.

After an excellent lunch we move on and try a number of spots round the coast but it is pretty pointless as the whole area is frozen up and the highlight is a peacock butterfly and some very impressive steam trains outside the train museum in town. In the end we decide to head off inland in search of more geese. We drive some lanes where there are often flocks of geese and after thinking that there are obviously none in the area we eventually hit a couple of fields where there are some geese and swans which we check carefully and find a couple of Pink-feet in amongst the Bean Geese. We drive on but fail to find any more flocks though we get great views of more Common Cranes, and Great Grey Shrike then eventually arrive at Lihula. Here is the office of our ground agents and Marika is waiting for us with a very nice surprise... but first while Roy and Marika head off to get the van washed as it is not even possible to tell what colour it is at the moment, Uku takes the guests to a high spot to scan for raptors. This proves rather fruitless with just a couple of Buzzards and a Fieldfare but after Roy returns we are treated to coffee and some delicious homemade plum pudding that Marika has made. After that we head pretty much straight back to the hotel and our evening meal.

After the meal we make a final run through the checklist before going round the group to reminisce about the trip, each person selecting a bird of the trip, a favourite place and a magic moment. There are a surprising number of species chosen as bird of the trip with Bearded Tit, Nutcracker, Osprey and Three-toed Woodpecker all receiving votes but perhaps predictably it is the Steller's Eider that receives more votes than any other species. Our lunch spot at Puise receives one more vote than Saaremaa island when voting for favourite place. There are as usual many choices for a magic moment including the Nutcracker, Long-tailed Tits, the Polecat and the Foxes that walked through the ducks and geese without disturbing them at all! But the winning moment of the trip is the moment when the Pygmy Owl appeared on top of the spruce tree, looking so tiny yet so fierce with bright yellow eyes scanning around looking for the intruder in its territory.

Day 6 We decide to do some birding before packing for our journey home and head out to the local woodlands first to see if we can find any Elk. We drive through the trees coming out eventually to a large clearing by a gravel pit where we get out and scan around but there are no Elk, just a few birds such as Goldeneye and we hear a distant green Sandpiper. We then head round to large wetland area near the coast. The sea is frozen and along the distant shoreline are thousands of ducks but too far to check thoroughly. Inland from here is a huge complex of reedbeds and small pools and we find a male Marsh Harrier hunting over the reeds. A pair of Smew look lovely on a small patch of open water nearby, the closest we have seen.

We drive further round and take a walk down to scan a large area where there are lots of duck, geese and swans feeding. It is a wonderful place with so many birds and the constant calling of geese and swans makes for a lovely atmosphere in the early morning sunshine. There are all three species of swans here and lots of White-fronted Geese with Bean Geese and a small number of Canada Geese, big flocks of Mallard and Teal and a few Shoveler, Shelduck, Wigeon and Pintail. There are Redshank and lots of Lapwings but no other waders. Although we don't add anything new to the list it is a wonderful finish to the trip and a superb area to visit before we head back to the hotel where we finish our packing before heading back to Tallinn.

We wave good-bye to Uku in Pärnu and head on to Tallinn where we pick up Marika on the outskirts of town and she takes us to a very nice restaurant where we have a delicious lunch before we meet up with a guide who shows us round the town. She shows us the main areas of town with the seat of power in the high part of town with all the commerce happening lower down. The buildings are beautiful, from impressive churches to the government building and old wall of the town which is mainly intact.

Even the less important buildings are all painted pretty colours. She also tells us of the chequered history of the town and the country itself as it has passed from the control of one nation to another – Denmark, Sweden and Russia etc before finally gaining independence again as recently as 1990. Time runs out all too quickly and we head to the airport to bid our fond farewells to Marika and head for home after what has been an excellent trip.

BIRDS

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Great Crested Grebe
Cormorant
Grey Heron
White Stork
Mute Swan
Whooper Swan
Bewick's Swan
Bean Goose
Pink-footed Goose
White-fronted Goose
Greylag Goose
Canada Goose
Barnacle Goose
Shelduck
Wigeon
Teal
Mallard
Pintail
Shoveler
Gadwall
Pochard
Tufted Duck
Greater Scaup
Common Eider
Steller's Eider
Long-tailed Duck
Common Scoter
Velvet Scoter
Goldeneye
Smew
Red-breasted Merganser
Goosander
Osprey
White-tailed Eagle
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Sparrowhawk
Goshawk
Common Buzzard
Rough-legged Buzzard
Merlin
Black Grouse
Hazel Grouse
Grey Partridge
Common Crane
Coot

Oystercatcher
Avocet
Lapwing
Golden Plover
Ringed Plover
Woodcock
Common Snipe
Curlew
Redshank
Green Sandpiper (heard)
Dunlin
Common Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Herring Gull
Lesser Black-backed Gull
(Baltic Gull)
Black-headed Gull
Sandwich Tern
Guillemot
Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)
Stock Dove
Wood Pigeon
Ural Owl (heard)
Pygmy Owl
Kingfisher
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
White-backed Woodpecker
Middle Spotted Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Three-toed Woodpecker
Black Woodpecker
Grey-headed Woodpecker
Woodlark
Skylark
White Wagtail
Meadow Pipit
Goldcrest
Waxwing
Blackbird
Fieldfare
Redwing
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Robin
Northern Wheatear
Bearded Tit
Long-tailed Tit
Willow Tit

Marsh Tit
Crested Tit
Great Tit
Coal Tit
Blue Tit
Nuthatch
Treecreeper
Great Grey Shrike
Jay
Magpie
Nutcracker
Jackdaw
Rook
Hooded Crow
Common Raven
Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Chaffinch
Brambling
Greenfinch
Siskin
Mealy Redpoll
Goldfinch
Linnet
Twite
Bullfinch
Common Crossbill
Yellowhammer
Reed Bunting

Total Species: 125

MAMMALS

Elk (Moose)
Roe Deer
Red Fox
Polecat
Brown Hare
Grey Seal

BUTTERFLIES

Brimstone
Small tortoiseshell
Peacock
Orange-underwing Moth