

Holiday Highlights
Estonia Spring
10 – 17 May 2015

Guide: Julian Sykes and local guide, Uku

Guests: Ken and Ann Jones, Daphne and David Knight, Marilyn Freed, Annette Hall, Evina Montgomery and Charles Gordon

Day 1 We land at Tallinn Airport both safely and on time, getting through passport control and baggage collection pretty quickly. We are soon in arrivals where we first meet our Estonian guide for the week – Uku, quickly followed by Ken and Ann who have arrived early from Manchester; always a good start when there are multiple arrivals and this continues as Uku leads us out of the terminal and to a very nice 15 seater vehicle with our own dedicated driver. The bags are loaded, we climb aboard and set off west towards our first accommodation for the next three nights.

The weather is a little inclement but we are still in good spirits and this improves as we pass fields with flocks of (mainly) Greater White-fronted and Barnacle Geese. Ever present Hooded Crows are soon added to the list with Annette pointing out a White Stork and Charles spotting a few Barn Swallows. It is obvious spring has not advanced as it has in the UK with many deciduous trees still not in leaf and a definite coolness to the air – hope we've brought enough warm clothing! A few roadside Common Cranes are added before the landscape becomes much more forested with predominantly Birch and Spruce. As we travel along we see more of the commoner Estonian birds such as Herring and Black-headed Gulls, White Wagtails, European Starling and Fieldfares but a male Montagu's Harrier on migration is an excellent find and making a welcome break to the journey.

Eventually we arrive at the accommodation, which is a series of stunning cabins, reception and dining buildings amongst a lovely pine forest. Chaffinches call from the trees and a Red Squirrel is seen later that evening during our first meal. It is relatively late and we are tired but manage to complete the checklist after dining, followed by Uku giving us instructions for the following morning that involve meeting at 05.30am outside the main office! He also sadly tells us the bear hide is going to be an unlikely proposition as the national forces are on maneuvers (because of the conflict in Crimea) and the area is heavily disturbed – which is a bitter disappointment to us all. Still you cannot legislate for these things and we will make the best of it.

Day 2 We meet at reception for 5.30am with the songs and calls of Chiffchaff, Willow Warbler and Chaffinch all around and soon set off towards the main road. It's a dull morning with very little wind but we didn't realise how misty it was until we neared the Baltic Sea. A short way out of the hotel complex Ken says "here" followed by Julian shouting "ELK – on the right" and we get point-blank views of

Estonia's largest ungulate. In fact there are three with two adults and a young animal all within a 100m of us and showing incredibly well. However they are generally shy creatures and soon depart into the thicker undergrowth – great start!

We drive out towards the coast but abandon the idea of looking for wildfowl on the sea as the visibility is so poor. However it's not all bad news as on the way we first see a Common Crane fly up from the side of the road followed by Uku spotting our first Roe Deer on the edge of a forest clearing. We abandon the coast and decide to head inland a little finding more Common Cranes plus Common Buzzard, Lapwing, Herring Gulls and a Red Squirrel at the side of the road.

After a while we eventually reach Variku fields - our breakfast stop, which doesn't look much different to anywhere else we have travelled through, but Uku knows this area and almost immediately latches onto the target species – Black Grouse. In all there are at least 17 lekking males, which is fabulous and always a pleasure to see. It isn't just the grouse here and on the vegetated fields we see many waders mostly Lapwing but smaller numbers of Ruff, Golden Plover, Curlew all in summer plumage. A couple of Whimbrel and a few Black-tailed Godwits are especially note-worthy being passage migrants and still heading north. A surprise is a female Hen Harrier that flies through, along with a pair of more expected Montagu's Harriers, giving a good comparison between the similar species. Skylark song fills the air as they display along with several Yellowhammers in the nearby Willows. Uku finds a stunning male Whinchat and a Cuckoo flies over being quite vocal as do several Yellow Wagtails disturbed by the harriers. It has been a terrific hour here along with some very welcome food and a hot drink as it is pretty cold.

We start back down the track stopping first for a pair of gorgeous Northern Bullfinches followed by a couple of Common Buzzards. The mist has now cleared mostly so we start back towards the Baltic Sea stopping off at the lake near Saunja. As we arrive Julian immediately latches onto a second year Little Gull dip feeding alongside lots of Black-headed Gulls, lots of Great Crested Grebes and Mute Swans on the water, Grey Herons and Great White Egrets along the edge. We stand at the side of the large reed-fringed lagoon and continue to scan, there's Common Terns flying by, a large group of Goosander across this large body of water, a pair of Marsh Harriers quartering the reeds, Mallard, Gadwall and a surprise pair of Black Tern in the distance – what a great scene!

Uku is keen for us to take a walk along the lightly wooded track so we duly follow, now coming to expect something good is going to happen. There are snails all over the footpath and a little way on Ken and Ann find a dead Common Shrew but as usual the birds dominate the area. This is a new set of species and after half an hour we add Great and Blue Tit, (Northern) Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Thrush Nightingale, Robin, House Martin, Magpie, Blackbird, Common Starling and heard only Sedge Warbler to the day's list. Julian then nonchalantly says "Black Kite overhead" to which Uku nearly has kittens quickly taking a few images as it

drifts over – apparently they are quite scarce in Estonia! The walk continues and we keep hearing different birds such as Blackcap, Garden Warbler, Goldcrest and Redwing but these prove difficult to see in the cold windy conditions. Then something flies up, which looks larger than the other woodland passerines and Uku thinks ‘woodpecker’. Again he knows this area and starts to imitate a ‘White-backed’ and within minutes it's landed in a tree just ahead of us – brilliant this is one of Europe's toughest woodpeckers. Over the next few minutes we all eventually get great view of this handsome male White-backed Woodpecker, with a lucky few seeing another new migrant with a very vocal Pied Flycatcher.

It is now time to leave as we are continuing south towards Haapsalu and Uku wants to check out another wee site. The sewage farm is quickly found and it is again out of the warm minibus, into the cold wind of the morning but a female Red-backed Shrike quickly gains our focus being the precursor to more new birds. An immature White-tailed Eagle flies around above the skyline, showing it's huge size alongside the local Marsh Harrier and Common Gulls. As we walk along the edge of another large reedbed we can clearly hear Savi's, European Reed and Sedge Warblers but all are sadly keeping low, however a couple of Bearded Tits make two flights over the phragmites so we can see their distinctive jizz in flight. We soon return to the vehicle and as we walk back a flight of Wood Sandpipers go over calling, right on cue. Next is a short drive into Haapsalu town and before lunch at noon, a check of one of the bays for Slavonian Grebe. We park in the town and walk through a small parkland area finding a few Tree Sparrows, having already seen House Sparrows driving in. Then arrive at the water, where Sand Martins vied with Barn Swallows hawking insects above the water, with Julian calling a single Common Swift amongst them – must be quite early arriving? We scan the grey waters of the Baltic and find a single Barnacle Goose along with Mallards and Black-headed Gulls on a small island, before a Slavonian Grebe gives itself up in a far corner of the bay. However this isn't actually the highlight as we are thrilled over a female Goosander with 10+ chicks riding on her back – a real Disney moment! A fabulous way to end such an incredible morning and to lunch we go.

A very short drive into the centre of town, we park, going to the very quaint Muuriare Café for our lunch of meatballs, salad and sauce followed by a raspberry yoghurt-type dessert. This is both lovely and most welcome, being almost six hours since breakfast. Just before 2pm we set off out back to the accommodation, which takes about 45 minutes and the tiring morning catches up with most of us in the warm van. It is a fairly quiet journey but a few kilometers before the accommodation turning Julian sees a pair of accipiters flying over the road, which are clearly Goshawks but sadly most people miss them as we cannot stop here. We pull into the complex's driveway just after 2.30pm and Daphne is spot on with her comment of “we have done a day's birdwatching in one morning!” – We have been out a little over 9 hours!

It is now siesta time and for the next few hours until dinner we are free to do what we think prudent, which for most of us means a very necessary sleep to

catch up. At 6pm we reconvene in the dining room and swap stories of the afternoon with a few of us going down to the local beach and Charles enjoying views of a Crested Tit. Then once dinner is completed we give ourselves some time to get ready before the evening session at Spithami. Around 20 minutes later we meet outside the main reception and can hear a Crested Tit so with a little patience and persuasion we manage to get very good views of it before leaving.

The journey was a fairly short one and just in from the headland we stop alongside some open fields where we find several Whinchats, Meadow Pipits and a male Northern Wheatear. A little further we stop at the rocky shoreline of the Baltic Sea with the first birds being two Oystercatchers sat on off-shore rocks. The scanning starts with Uku and Julian and they quickly find a couple of (very late) Bewick Swans, Red-breasted Mergansers, Goldeneye, Eider and some gorgeous Long-tailed Ducks on the water. Quite a few Common Sandpipers sleep on the rocks, followed by Julian spotting a Ringed Plover and Uku a sleeping Greenshank (thankfully it wakes up later). It is a wonderful scene in the evening sunlight, with calm winds and still fairly warm rays, but we have lots to do and can't loiter there too long. As we are about to leave a large skein of 150+ Barnacle Geese appear and give a fabulous flyby – superb.

Uku is keen to return to the pastures where we have seen the Whinchats etc so back along the road we go, this time getting out and walking the tracks in this immediate area. This proves incredibly successful as a quick count of the chats show there are possibly 20+ Whinchats and several Northern Wheatears plus a few Greater Whitethroats and some Yellowhammers. Uku then sees a male Bluethroat that is also seen by a couple more of us but sadly disappears and isn't re-found despite some searching. Just before we move on Julian then finds a female Common Redstart, adding yet another bird to our massive day list. So we continue to wander, seeing Mistle Thrushes, Willow Warbler and eventually Greenfinch after hearing a few during the course of the walk. Uku gets another brief look at a Bluethroat but can't tempt it out, but while doing this we all hear a Wryneck a short distance away. We follow the distinctive song and eventually find it showing well at the bottom of a dead bush, where it remains until we leave, even with fairly close approach for photographs. A Tree Pipit sitting on a wire is our final new species for this area as the sun is lowering over the horizon – it is time for our twilight drive.

We haven't gone too far along the forest tracks when Uku says "Wild Boar!" As a huge male crosses in front of the bus but disappears into the forest within seconds. This is a great start and when Annette, Ken and Charles shout "owl" and Uku (who is on the right side) sees it, quickly says "Ural Owl – wow", it is just getting better. It has been sat on a telegraph post but when we stop it has moved slightly to the next pole, where it remains allowing us to get astonishing views through the telescope. This is such a bonus as they can prove incredibly difficult to see on any given trip to Estonia. Woodcock are also roding, which adds to this wonderful 'end of day' scene. The owl eventually departs and we carry on driving the 'forest rides' stopping to try and hear Pygmy Owl but hear another

Ural and see more Woodcock. Then at one clearing we make a random stop and just before setting off again Julian says "Stop - there's an Ural Owl". Uku cannot believe it we have now seen two of these difficult owls and heard a third, which is absolutely fabulous and we are treated to more extended views of it also in flight as it (presumably) catches a flying insect and returns to the same perch! It is now getting late so we start back towards the main road but only get a few hundred meters before we flush a European Nightjar off the track. We are in luck as it returns to the ground and we get great views in the beam of the headlights – what a finale to such an amazing day.

We get back to the accommodation in darkness and most of us head off to the lovely chalets and to bed, with Julian and Charles taking half an hour to do the checklist ahead of the next day. It makes for incredible reading with the total for the day of seen and heard species being 113, it has been long but such a worthwhile day out on the Baltic coast of Estonia. Not quite sure how we are going to top this achievement!

Day 3 A more relaxed start to the day with breakfast initially at 7.00am but David and Daphne are lucky to hear both Wood Warbler and Common Redstart from their lodge. After this we meet at the minibus and just before 8.00am we set off again for the Poosapea Headland where we had visited the previous evening. As we are driving out Julian nonchalantly says "Collared Dove" and Uku nearly falls off his seat and immediately stops the bus. Duly asks if Julian is certain as he has never heard of one in this area before – Julian is now slightly hesitant having not even used his binoculars! Uku gets out and comes back wide-mouthed saying it is one and after backing up a little there on the overhead wire is a Collared Dove! This leaves Julian in tucks of laughter. We continue and just a little further Julian calls eight Red-throated Divers heading north which is encouraging for our forth-coming sea-watch. A Hobby appears over the pines but only briefly and is seen by a lucky few but Uku seems to think we will have a good chance of more sightings as they hunt the migrating Hirundines as they fly north.

We reach the peninsula and there on the rocks are the same Oystercatcher, Common Sandpiper and Ringed Plover along with a Redshank flying along the coast. We quickly get out, grab the scopes and set up alongside an empty cabin out of the wind. Uku has seen a Turnstone and goes looking for that with Julian pointing out a few Yellow Wagtails on the adjacent rocks. Instructions are issued for the protocol of sea-watching and we settle down for 90 minutes of seabird observation. It is brilliant fun to watch and call the birds as they fly both north and south bizarrely with the southerly passage actually being the most prominent. We see lots of Common Scoter, Long-tailed Ducks, Eider and Red-breasted Merganser with smaller numbers of Red-throated and Black-throated Divers, Velvet Scoter, Goldeneye and Greater Scaup. A steady passage of Arctic Terns are moving and Julian finds our only Arctic Skua of the session along with a single Common Pochard and a couple of Gadwall found by Charles. Some big flocks of Barnacle Geese are seen and waders, including a small party of Dunlin with Golden Plover and a Greenshank. All in all it is excellent to stand there in relative

comfort learning the identification criteria of these birds. Annette, Ken and Ann have decided they would rather beach-comb and enjoy their time exploring the rocky shoreline in the warm sunshine.

Mid-morning we decide to leave and try the meadows again but the wind is still strong making things a little difficult, but a short walk produces several Tree Pipits, Northern Wheatear, White and Yellow Wagtails. As we walk back towards the van Uku sees another Hobby and this time we all get pretty good views of it over the nearby buildings. A Kestrel then appears and starts to hunt over fields; making for a great 'falcon' double, with this wing actually scarcer than the Hobby – very unlike Britain. We set off back south with a coffee stop in mind back at the accommodation but haven't got far before we come to a halt for a female Capercaillie at the side of the road found by Charles. What a fabulous bird! Soon enough we are back at the hotel where most of us call for a hot drink but Marilyn, David and Daphne decided to look for the Wood Warbler and are very successful.

We need to set off south along the coastline in order to get some birding in along the Puise Peninsular, which forms the northern border of one of Estonia's primary reserves – Matsalu National Park. The drive is easy and we add Sparrowhawk to the list as we negotiate the countryside roads stopping briefly at a small pond for any breeding passerines that might have arrived recently. Unfortunately the wind is not helping our cause and it's very quiet although Julian adds a little interest by finding a Leech in the slow-running stream. Eventually we reach the north coastline of Matsalu Bay and stop to check the shore-line. We spend a good time here finding several new waders with several Avocets and Temminck's Stints, Charles points out a lovely 'brick red' Knot showing why indeed they should be called Red Knot and Julian shows us a beautiful summer plumage Spotted Redshank and we wonder why it's not called Black Redshank? Other waders here include lots of Lapwing, Dunlin, Common Redshank, Ruff and over 100 Ringed Plover along with lots of Common Terns and Barnacle Geese.

It is now lunchtime so on we go the short distance to Puise Nina farm where we are treated to an excellent lunch overlooking the bay through huge picture windows. This is one of the best places for Greater Scaup and there are at least 500 individuals in the bay. A few Little Terns fish along the edge of the water and there are several Wigeon in the near, calmer waters. During lunch Julian starts scanning around and finds our first pair of Garganey of the holiday, which doesn't cause much of a reaction as we are all having our delicious soup. After lunch we do our own thing for the next half hour, which for most of us entail a courteous visit to the farm craft shop that sells all handcrafted products made from local materials.

Soon enough we leave and continue to another site along the coast where we stop just before the car park and wonder at the number of Ruff in the adjacent field. There must be over 500 birds here, which include lots of summer plumage males, some of which are sparring with each other. Marilyn finds a particularly

handsome orange and white one, commenting that if she was a Reeve, he would be her preferred choice – nice one. Once we have got our fill of these fabulous waders we drive the short distance to the car park. Here we encounter another small group of UK birdwatchers who tell us of a Marsh Sandpiper a little way down the road to the viewing platform and café. We quickly make our way to the spot and after a bit of searching find this scarce delicate wader feeding in the long flooded grass alongside a Wood Sandpiper, which is nice for comparison. We stay there a while enjoying the bird along with more views of very handsome Ruff, Barnacle and Greater White-fronted Geese. Eventually we walk onto the tower watchpoint but the high winds preclude our entry on to it, so we settle down on the verandah of the café. This was just as good with Julian initially finding our only drake Eurasian Teal of the trip so far and Uku doing better with three Redhead Smew and a couple of Pintail. There are several Common Cranes on a large island along with more Greater White-fronted and Greylag Geese, Grey Herons, Garganey and a distant White-tailed Eagle. Mid afternoon and it is time to move on, all refreshed from the relaxed birding here, with some of us even making full use of the café and their refreshments.

Back at the minivan we climb aboard, flabbergasted with the sheer numbers of birds we are seeing and again we are fast approaching another day with a 100+ species total – amazing. We leave the Matsalu area and start to think about our evening boat trip for European Beaver, which is going to start slightly inland of where we are. We drive east and a stop at a wooded river near Lihula is a welcome break as it gives us some respite from the annoying high winds and good for the addition of Icterine Warbler to the list. We also do well with David finding a female Pied Flycatcher, Marilyn a singing Wood Warbler and Evina a nesting Common Buzzard. Ken and Ann are doing their own thing and checking the river, see a Common Frog, along with Peacock Butterfly with Daphne adding a Brimstone. However this is just an interlude to the main event as we need to be at the river mooring for 6.00pm and it is fast heading there.

We actually arrive at the river slightly ahead of schedule but our boatman and Marika are ironically running a little late, which gives us time to explore the area. This is quite productive as during the next hour we get views of two very vocal 'Common Cuckoos', brief looks at another very vocal Thrush Nightingale, a couple of Goldfinches are new to the list and in the agricultural fields there are Whinchats, Northern Wheatear, Yellowhammers, European Starlings and Greenfinch. Marika arrives first with our hot dinner, which we are taking onboard the large shallow punt, quickly followed by our skipper. We don our very fetching bright floatation jackets (Julian's aptly having the letters 'tiit' on the collar!), struggle aboard the boat and set course along the river into the heart of this extensive reedbed.

Savi's Warblers sing every few hundred meters and we even manage to get some decent views of them as we chug slowly past. This is quickly followed by views of Reed Buntings and Sedge Warblers, our first (of six) White-tailed Eagles flop across the reeds causing some disturbance with the local Grey Herons. Uku calls

a couple of Elk at the side of the channel but they quickly disappear followed by a much co-operative Roe Deer. We reach the main channel and head out towards the huge Matsalu Delta with the distant 'boom' of Great Bittern in the air. Along here we find a patch of open water in the reeds and get stunning views of summer plumage Black Terns and a few second year Little Gulls, surrounded by another four White-tailed Eagles – superb. We reach the open water and stop by the reeds listening and hearing the sights and sounds of this fabulous wetland area with a huge mixed flock of Great White Egrets and Grey Herons flying over but thoughts are now on our 'al fresco' evening meal.

Uku and Julian do a sterling job dishing out the surprisingly excellent meal of hot meat stew with bread (and for some traditional garlic butter) followed by this delicious cake with some strawberries donated by Daphne, coffee and even a snifter of Estonian liquor. This has all been prepared by Marika and got to this magical scene in one piece and still hot – what a great experience. The threatening weather has also dissipated somewhat and the scene is set for a memorable finale to the river cruise with sightings of European Beaver. It isn't long before we are passing one of their large lodges followed by Julian saying "I've got one crossing the channel" and sure enough we can see this head moving through the water from one side to the other. This happens several times over the next hour with us getting views down to about 20m before the animal submerges and swims away from the punt. Photos are attempted but it is incredibly difficult in the low light and there is certainly nothing taken to complete in the BBC Wildlife competition!

We start back towards the boats mooring place having successfully negotiated this section of the river with it's pretty high density of European Beaver and on the way get good views of another Elk but a little further away. It is nearly dark as we get back and a military style operation ensues of disembarkation, collection of floatation aides, clearing the dinner pots etc and soon enough we are saying "goodbye and thank you very much" to the boatman for a fabulous experience. We need to stop off at Marika's place to drop off her dishes and utensils before heading straight back to the accommodation. This is punctuated with semi-stops for creatures on, or crossing the road, which include Brown Hare, Roe Deer and Woodcock. Just before midnight we arrive back to a locked gate but Uku phones the night watchman and gets us let in. We go straight to our chalets, where we all quickly get to our beds after a very long, tiring but (again) incredibly successful day.

Day 4 It is still quite grey and overcast but thankfully the rain has stopped as we head for breakfast at 8.00am, still pretty jaded from the previous long day out in western Estonia. We plan to leave at 9.00am but after a bit of confusion with collecting the bags from each chalet we leave this lovely place a little later. Today is a traveling one, as we head east and south to Tartu, across the other side of the country but with stops planned along the route.

Our first proper one was again at the north side of Matsalu NP, where we had been the previous day just before lunch. Having seen a male Montagu's Harrier in transit and stopping to check a large gull flock of Common and Black-heads plus some very nice 'pale collared' Jackdaws. Here though waders again dominate the scene with three figure counts of Ringed Plover and Dunlin, along with a few Little Stints and Grey Plover (both new to the list), Temminck's Stint, Common Redshank, Ruff and a single Knot all in pristine summer plumage. Julian first finds a diminutive Little Tern sat with its much commoner cousin – Common Tern and two adult and a single first winter Little Gulls are fabulous to see together. Barnacle Geese are again in good numbers as are the Lapwing and Skylarks on the salt marsh. Marilyn sees a lone Great Black-backed Gull and also off-shore are Great Crested Grebes, Red-breasted Merganser, Mallard and a Cormorant – great place. The rain starts and heralds our return to the vehicle setting off across country on this pretty miserable day – thankfully we are 'transient!

As we get south the weather improves and we make good progress towards Parnu, where we are having lunch but a comfort stop at Lake Nedremi is necessary before arriving just before 1.00pm. Lunch is in a very nice town centre restaurant and consists of fish, with black rice for most of us and butternut squash with a salad of radish, rocket, pine nuts and cowslips! We all have the delicious cake for dessert and the freshly ground coffee is more than welcome. This is a very relaxed affair but once completed we leave and drive the short distance to the Bay of Parnu on the coast. It is incredible as the strong winds have pushed the water's edge right up to the parking area and covering a children's play park. Still we persevere and check the flooded lawns and dykes finding a few things. David spots a Great White Egret and Charles a male Yellow Wagtail, with Julian spotting a couple of Garganey, Wood Sandpipers and Raven, not a bad little mix of species but the wind is hampering any reasonable viewing so much we don't even leave the minibus.

So we leave Parnu and the coast and head inland stopping off at a vast track of pine forest to try for Black Woodpecker and Pygmy Owl. None are seen or heard, in fact the strong winds again cause frustration as nothing is moving at all, just the distinctive song of Goldcrest, which is impossible to see. On the way back to the main road Ken does spot a Jay, our only sighted bird of the detour! Back at the main road Uku informs us the next stop is our accommodation at Tartu, which is about 90 minutes away so we settle down for our journey across Estonia. White Stork is seen on a nest by Marilyn, Wood Sandpiper in flooded fields, male Marsh Harrier and around Viljandi Julian points out our first Rooks of the week although the rigors of the past two days have caught up with most of us.

An hour or so later we arrived at Tartu and negotiate our way through this busy city to our lovely hotel where we quickly get allocated our rooms and enough time to freshen up before dinner. We reconvene in the restaurant at 6.30pm and enjoy our first meal here with a very welcome drink from the bar. We had planned to go back out that evening but the rain starts to fall and our guides

abandon the idea, not that any of us are complaining, it has been a very demanding couple of days. So the checklist for the last two days is completed and we are all up-to-date, although Uku does warn us of a very long day to follow and to get plenty of rest!

Day 5

Another 5:30am start today but the weather is awful with rain, grey skies and a cold moderate wind – not great for finding woodland passerine species. Uku decides we will slightly alter the day's itinerary and go first to his 'local patch' – Aardla Wetlands. This network of small lagoons surrounded by reedbed, fields and small isolated patches of trees is a haven for birdlife, both on passage and breeding here. We arrive and walk slowly down the track seeing a small flock of Greater White-fronted Geese fly over and the song of Whinchat in the air. Uku knows this site very well and soon enough we are watching a pair of Citrine Wagtails in the wet meadow, the male is particularly handsome being bright lemon yellow and black. It is uncomfortable in the cold, biting wind so we move on down the track towards the main lake where lots of Black Terns are hawking insects over the water with at least two stunning White-winged Terns are amongst them. On the lake are summer plumage Red-necked Grebes along with Tufted Ducks and Goldeneye, making for a very memorable scene and forgetting about the miserable weather. Wood Sandpipers feed along the edge and deep within the phragmites croaks a Great Reed Warbler but it is sensibly keeping low. Before long we walk slowly back to the minibus reflecting on what we are seeing and how lucky Uku is to have this place as his local patch. We move on but only a short distance, staying within the boundary of Aardla we stop by some man-made ponds where Uku knows there is a pair of Whooper Swans, adding another waterbird to the species list.

However we have a 40 kilometer journey (or so we think) to the next site so we strip off our outer layers and settle down to an hours drive. This was turned completely upside down as we stop about 5 minutes later at a large school with extensive grounds with some lovely mature deciduous trees and a pond in the centre – quite lovely. Uku is keen for us to see a Grey-headed Woodpecker, so we wander around with him whistling it's very distinctive call in hope of a reply. Sadly this is not forth-coming but we are treated to the sight and sounds of some more excellent woodland species such as Marsh Tit, Nuthatch, Wood Warblers, Pied and Spotted Flycatchers, a Wryneck calls but remained elusive apart from Julian getting a brief view as it flies out of a tree and away out of sight.

This time we complete the 40Km drive to another stretch of ancient woodland and get out of the minibus to the sounds of Wood and Willow Warblers, Blackcap, Chiffchaff and Garden Warbler, along with Chaffinch, Wren and Blackbirds, which are simply magical. Although a coach loaded with school children soon dominates the experience so we know it is time to embark on another walk through the forest. The information board tells us this is the unpronounceable Teavaskoja Forest and there is a track that leads down to a lake and an interesting sandstone cliff. The weather is improving as we wander slowly down the track and Uku stops suddenly as he has heard a Red-breasted Flycatcher singing from

deep within the canopy, so we spend five minutes trying to find it before moving on. At the dammed lake we check the river for Dipper but nothing, so on we go and a little further we hear a woodpecker tapping. Both Uku and Julian suspect it's a Three-toed Woodpecker and after some searching we find a lovely female working her way slowly up the trunk of a pine tree. We can get astonishingly good views through the telescope and even the photographers amongst us manage to get some excellent images as she seems very unconcerned with our presence – most unlike this normally shy species. Eventually the woodpecker flies off to investigate another tree so on we go and soon arrive at the sandstone cliffs with the river at their base. A tree has crashed through the wooden steps leading up and round them so we cannot go any further, but there's our first Wren sighting as it sits on the railing and sings. Ken finds a Common Frog in the stream, with Small White and Peacock butterflies starting to show in the (now) warm conditions. With our way ahead blocked we start back and again, get fabulous close looks at the female Three-toed Woodpecker, along with a Bullfinch and Wood Warbler. Then as we pass the Red-breasted Flycatcher sings again and this time it sounds closer so a more concerted effort is made and we find this beautiful 'fidula' flycatcher amongst the dense branches. With a little patience and effort we all manage to get a decent look at it but it's not easy with such an active passerine. It was now getting towards lunchtime, which had been organised at Mooste Viinavabrik, an old vodka distillery some 30kms away so we make our way back to the minibus, in very good spirits and head off.

It is a glorious day as we arrive at this historic building on the edge of a small reed-fringed lake, with Sedge and Great Reed Warblers singing from the phragmites and Goldeneye on the main body of water. A 'ringtail' Montagu's Harrier shows briefly before we go into the restaurant, but Julian stays for a few minutes longer and actually sees the pair with the male doing a display flight. Inside the distillery building there are remnants dotted around from the old workings but the centre piece is a huge chandelier made out of vodka glasses – it is amazing. Before sitting down to lunch we are given a short guided tour of the building, which is now not only a restaurant but also rural accommodation. Everything has been very tastefully done, trying to keep a sense of history about the place. The meal also is superb, which we suspected would be the case with the attention to detail being spot on in other areas. It would have been good to spend more time inside the building having a look round but Julian and Uku want to try again here for Grey-headed Woodpecker. Once outside we quickly find both Whinchat and Reed Bunting near the lake but it is a small wood surrounded by out-buildings that brings the greatest rewards. Here we first get good views of another male White-backed Woodpecker followed by Uku pointing out a handsome male Black Redstart and Julian finding a Wryneck sat right out in the open for several minutes and at quite close range – brilliant.

It is now time to return to the hotel as we are quite keen on a wee rest before the proposed evening session, but this is somewhat foreshortened as Uku could not resist trying another site for Grey-headed Woodpecker – now it is getting personal! We don't entice a Grey-head to show itself but we do get good, but

brief, looks at a male Middle-spotted Woodpecker, which makes the detour worthwhile, especially if you add to that Tree Sparrow, Pied Flycatcher, Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper and Tree Pipit. We get back to the hotel in Tartu with thankfully some time to rest before we need to leave, these are very full days!

Sadly the rain has returned when we reconvene at 4.00pm and doesn't improve much all evening, in fact for a while it gets quite heavy – good job we can watch from the bus. We are at the superb Laeva wetlands, another of Uku's local patches and who wouldn't want this place on their doorstep? It is heaving with more waders and Ken finds our first Little Ringed Plover on the wet ploughed fields adjacent to the small pools. A summer plumage Marsh Sandpiper next to the bus is much appreciated as are Spotted Redshanks, Greenshank, Golden Plover, Wood and Common Sandpipers. A few Little Gulls and Black Terns hawk insects over the water but it's the sight of 100's of hirundines, which is captivating, with Barn Swallows dominating the scene along with smaller numbers of House and Sand Martins. The rains eventually cease and the sun comes out so we do the same, exiting the bus and walking slowly along the track that dissects the large ponds. A Moorhen sits in a poolside bush found by Julian; another new bird for the list. Uku and Charles first hear the unmistakable call of Spotted Crake followed by the much more subtle Little Crake call but both these very secretive birds remain so, in the dense reedbed. However what is rather more showy, but unfortunately distant, are a couple of sub-adult White-tailed Eagles sat in a bare tree. Even so far away they look incredibly impressive through the telescope but another heavy rain shower takes us back to the bus and back to town for our evening meal.

Instead of having dinner at the hotel like the previous evening we are booked into a restaurant associated with Tartu University and quite Avant Gard. This is not to our tastes and we think we should have again gone to our hotel, as the food was unanimously agreed as preferred to this 'class' establishment – still it was an experience.

Our 'very full' day isn't still over as we now need to visit the Great Snipe lek and hope the weather will stay calm and rain free. The wet grass field is just outside town and when we arrive we meet up with another group of birdwatchers who are hoping to see this rare breeding wader. Our local guides know exactly where to target and soon enough we are enjoying views of several in display flight, dancing around with their beaks in the air – brilliant. Rising mist is making things difficult but by the time we leave most of us have had a good view along with Common Snipe and Woodcock – seeing three snipe species in one place is quite unprecedented. Ann finds a Red Fox from the van as we start back and back on the main road we make one more stop for five Wild Boar on the verge, which is most unusual as they are hunted in Estonia quite extensively. It is quite late by the time we get back to the hotel, we were very tired but this had been another fabulous day.

Day 6 After breakfast we collect our luggage, load the minibus and set off out of Tartu, to a series of fish ponds at Llmäe. In total contrast to the previous day it is lovely and sunny with lighter winds and it is a great pleasure walking slowly along the track dividing the shallow ponds. Penduline Tit is our main target here and if doesn't take Uku long to locate our first, which he gets briefly in his telescope. Unfortunately not all of us see this individual but certainly have done by the end of the walk, around the their distinctive nest; (where they get their name) and feeding on the top of the phragmites. We are again seeing lots of good species including a few more new ones but these are starting to get more difficult. Marilyn and Charles are the only lucky ones to get a sighting of Blyth's Reed Warbler but we all see the Bluethroat, Great Reed and Marsh Warblers, which have only been heard previously. Other highlights included a stunning male Citrine Wagtail sat on an overhead wire, a singing Thrush Nightingale unusually sat out in the open, a white-spotted Bluethroat (scarce now in Estonia) and fabulous views of Tree Sparrows in the bright sunshine. David and Daphne do very well finding a male Red-backed Shrike, Evina sees a pair of Whooper Swans flying in, Ken and Ann enjoy finding their own Map Butterfly and Northern Winter Damsel, with Annette taking time out to just enjoy the whole peaceful and relaxing scene. We spend more time here than was expected but it just does not matter as we are really enjoying ourselves.

We eventually leave but don't have time for our second planned wetland stop and after a very welcome (but costly!) comfort stop at a roadside services we drive north. It is a good journey on quiet roads, through extensive birch and coniferous forest, open fields and small quaint villages to our final hotel in Rakvere about 100Kms away. As always there are many roadside species with several White Storks, Montagu's Harrier, Common Buzzard, Sparrowhawk, Fieldfare, Curlew and Ravens to keep us occupied along the way. We get to Rakvere around 1.30pm and we are checked in, assigned rooms, freshened up and in the restaurant by 2.00pm. We have a lovely meal followed by a break for a couple of hours, when we meet in the hotels breakfast room to catch up on the daily checklist, which understandably takes a wee while, as we again cover three days!

A little after 6.00pm we climbed into the minibus and drive north east to the small town of Tudu and continue through for another few kilometers until we reach a fabulous holiday complex where we are having our evening meal. The bar/restaurant is incredibly rustic and beautiful being totally of pine, with mounted antlers, and carvings of the walls. Our meal is again typical of the area with a main course followed by a sweet, which is delicious, along with cranberry juice, tea and coffee. We are in a buoyant mood for the prospect of the next few hours driving the tracks and roads of this heavily forested area. This was supposed to be our 'bear hide' night but very recent army maneuvers in this area made it very unlikely we would see any European Brown Bears, so we opt for the next best thing – driving through the forest.

As we set off, Julian calls a halt to the minibus as there is a gorgeous male Hen Harrier quartering the adjacent fields, not too far away and showing very well – great start! Then we stop at a quarry pool and find a Greenshank and several Goldeneye followed by another very productive stop where Uku points out three male Black Grouse, Golden Plover, Curlew, Whinchat and a calling Corncrake – always fabulous to hear these. Further along the road we turn into the forest and start searching, seeing Song Thrush, Fieldfare, Woodcock, Common Snipe and a couple of Common Buzzards sat on dead trees. David spots a couple of interesting birds on top of a short pine, which are identified as a pair of Common Rosefinch. The female flies away quickly but the stunning red male remains long enough for us to get some telescope views incredibly. A Grasshopper Warbler was reeling and Uku magically manages to get his scope on it, which is brilliant. As the evening wears on we see a few mammals with Roe Deer, Mountain Hare and a brief look at a European Beaver for a lucky few. As dusk falls we start to see more Woodcock roding but one of the night's highlights is seeing Black Grouse sat at the top of the large pine trees. It gets darker and we are getting tired and a little cramped being in the bus for so long, so Julian thinks it is a good idea to start back but not without first seeing a European Nightjar on the track in front of us.

The drive back to Rakvere is quiet as expected both inside the van and outside but Uku never gives up trying, stopping to spotlight in strategic places but sadly doesn't yield much in the way of mammals for us. Still it has been an interesting experience and grateful to Uku for even trying and his constant hard work. A little before midnight we go back to the hotel, very much looking forward to the prospect of our beds and a good night's sleep ahead of our final full day in this superb, wildlife-rich Baltic country.

Day 7 Breakfast is at 8.00am but we are all keen and have finished and ready to leave 45 minutes later, with a morning plan of returning to the forest around Tudu in search of woodland species particularly Grey-headed Woodpecker and Nutcracker. It is a lovely sunny morning but with a cool wind that means for the first few hours we are heavily protected from the cold. About an hour after leaving Rakvere we make our first short walk along one of the many tracks that dissects this extensive wooded area. A Red-breasted Flycatcher is singing but remains elusive however it's Pied cousin is much more receptive showing quite well along the edge of the track. Also on this initial stop we see Marsh Tit, Wood and Willow Warblers, Fieldfare and a Tree Pipit – not a bad wee start.

The slow drive continues with Uku leaping put of the minibus periodically to whistle for one of our targets or just scan the surrounding bit, which doesn't produce anything new apart from a singing Garden Warbler, which remains hidden. The next proper stop for a walk is much more conducive with the air temperature being slightly better and our first layers are being shed. A Common Cuckoo is singing from the forest and David does incredibly well to find it on top on a large Birch tree, and we all get fabulous views of it through our telescopes. A little further Uku hears something he hoped would appear and after a brief view

of it crossing the track we all get great looks at a Nutcracker, literally just metres away in a tree. Julian is particularly pleased as it is something he has not seen well for quite a few years. We turn to the minibus and continue in the same vein with the next little walk now producing a White-backed Woodpecker flying over and Blackcap for Charles, plus Ken, Ann, Evina and Annette are looking for odonata and see both Brimstone and Map Butterflies very well.

The morning is going fast and our last hour before starting back for lunch is a little disappointing although we do start to notice more raptor activity with Common Buzzard, Kestrel and Sparrowhawk on the wing – would the good weather produce something interesting? We get back to the main road and head south towards Tudu and a raptor seen by Uku has us pulling over but this turns out to be a Common Buzzard. However as we are getting out a Green Sandpiper flies over and we decide to have a speculative walk along the track. The highlight is a stunning Swallowtail, along with more Brimstone and a Green-veined White but we are frustrated with a Honey Buzzard seen by Uku, which quickly disappears. The drive back again gets under way but soon after Julian is very excitedly asking for the van to be stopped – two very large eagles and one mid-sized bird are circling overhead. The eagles are as expected a pair of adult Golden Eagles keeping an eye on a Common Buzzard moving through their territory and we got fabulous views of them above us – this good weather is certainly helping today! On we drive south to Rakvere but another distant large raptor has Uku stopping the bus and this time it is an Osprey, which is then joined by a lovely adult Honey Buzzard and a Sparrowhawk. In fact these birds eventually split up and Julian continues to watch one of his favourites the Honey Buzzard, which continues to climb high and starts to display doing fabulous ‘wing clapping’ – absolutely brilliant. Then as we stop again, for Uku to check a buzzard the lucky front row people in the van see a Pine Marten cross the road and disappear into the deep vegetation – how lucky is that?

These extra stops mean we now need to get back to the hotel for lunch and we do on time with a couple of minutes to spare. We freshen up quickly and reconvene in the restaurant where we again enjoy another lovely meal before having a 30 minute break before leaving for the afternoon session. The plan has again changed with Uku keen to get out and actually target migrant raptors on this glorious afternoon. We head out of town and within half an hour pull into someone's farm get out and scan the surrounding forests. This isn't too productive with a few Common Buzzards, Common Kestrel and Uku sees a Hobby. It looks like Ann and Annette had a better time walking off and photographing some rusty farm machinery! We set off and after a brief stop to allow Marilyn, Evina and Annette to take a photo of a pair of White Storks on their nest, drive on to the next place.

The place is bizarrely a bus stop on the edge of an expansive agricultural field surrounded by forest – we haven't seen a bus so the Estonians have to use them for something! This does prove productive after the initial few Common Buzzards and a Grey Heron, Uku calls a Lesser Spotted Eagle in semi-display over the pine

forest – raptor species number 15. We are getting good views through the telescopes before it disappears back into the trees, later Julian sees another which could indicate potential nesting in the area. The wind has now increased, not conducive to looking for birds of prey so we head for the same forest area as the morning and make a couple of long walks, which are a welcome change. Although another speculative, brief stop does yield an incredibly close Wryneck to the front of the minibus. The walks are generally quiet, but we do manage to see and hear several key species with Three-toed Woodpecker showing well, along with Red-backed Shrike, Siskin, Mistle Thrush and Common Cuckoo.

Dinner is booked for 6.30pm and it is now early evening so we start to make our way towards the restaurant we had used the night before. However Charles has a request to stop at the place we had seen Common Rosefinch and Grasshopper Warbler yesterday, and this was not a problem as we are passing it soon. Charles makes a good decision, as when we arrive, there a couple of Corncrakes calling, one quite close to the track. As a rule these birds are impossible to see, but David gets very lucky and sees it hop up and down changing its position in the long vegetation. A female Montagu's Harrier flies towards us and in the bushes we see a cracking close male Red-backed Shrike and a Jay, but sadly no sign of the rosefinch or warbler, we had hoped to see again. We really need to move on so once aboard the van we head out of the forest with the final highlight here being a sub-adult Lesser Spotted Eagle flying in front of the van then perching on an open branch for a few seconds right next to the track. On we go and once we reach the main tarmac roads it isn't long before we reach our lovely rustic restaurant with just five minutes to spare.

The meal is ready and waiting so we sit down to another enjoyable meal, although the dessert is interesting especially Daphne's which is bread and raspberry sauce! Thankfully the coffee, cake and homemade biscuits make up for this. We finish our meal and decide to head straight back to Rakvere but outside we are slightly side tracked by a lovely male Northern Wheatear around the car park and from the minibus a Woodcock roding in broad daylight – brilliant. We get back to the hotel a little before 9.00pm, which means we could now get chance for a good night's sleep ahead of traveling home the following day.

Day 8

We wake to another fine and sunny morning and after breakfast we (for the last time) load our luggage into the minibus and leave Rakvere ahead of schedule. We drive west towards Tallinn but make a slight detour to a lovely stately home set in tremendous wooded grounds with a large pond. We are at Lahemma and spend nearly two hours wandering around, pretty much doing our own thing. Ann, Evina and Annette go to the excellent visitor centre where they enjoy most of the time looking at the exhibits, watching a very informative video (in English) and buying a few presents from the local crafts on sale here. The rest of us walk out into the grounds with our binoculars where we are informed of a Black Woodpeckers nest hole, so we duly headed there.

On the way we see Common Sandpiper, Goldeneye and Goosander on the lake and Uku shows us a Redwing singing from the top of a mature tree. In the more wooded area we can hear the Black Woodpecker but it isn't showing, but we do manage to see Pied Flycatcher, Siskin, Wryneck, Marsh Tit and Nuthatch near the occupied hole. After a while we slowly disperse and start investigating more tracks through this deciduous woodland with us all seeing different things. Marilyn gets good views of a Stock Dove calling from the top of a tree, David and Daphne find a Garden Warbler and hear a Red-breasted Flycatcher but frustratingly don't locate it, Charles finds an Icterine Warbler and Ken even manages to photograph a few Crossbills. Julian finally gets good views of the female Black Woodpecker while stood with Marilyn after a couple of brief flight views, which is what he had hoped for. Uku is always on hand to help with identification and even hearing a 'fly over' Waxwing, which is very late departing for its breeding grounds much further north.

It has been a fabulous and very fitting end to the wildlife portion of the week but now we need to drive to Tallinn and spend a couple of hours before lunch looking around this beautiful city on a guided tour. This is a great experience and our excellent city guide highlights the trials and tribulations of the capital through the ages. Lunch is taken at the Golden Pig, which is superb being arguably one of the best meals we have had all week, which is a fitting end to the holiday.

After this we finally complete the checklist, go through our special moments and experiences of the week before walking slowly back to the minibus. The journey to the airport is an easy one, although a small car pulling out on us could have made things interesting – not in a good way! We get to Tallinn Airport right on time for Ken and Ann's flight who are leaving slightly earlier than the rest of us. Everything goes very smoothly and we all get back to the UK in one piece with fabulous memories of this wonderful Baltic country.

Species of the trip

David	Penduline Tit
Daphne	Penduline Tit
Ken	Common Crossbill
Ann	Three-toed Woodpecker
Evina	Wryneck
Annette	Wryneck
Marilyn	Thrush Nightingale
Charles	Three-toed Woodpecker
Julian	Summer plumage Ruff

Species of the trip

David	Aardla Wetlands
Daphne	Laeva Wetlands
Ken	Beaver boat trip
Ann	All the forest walks
Evina	Hapsalu Lake
Annette	Beaver boat trip or Taevaskoja Forest
Marilyn	Beaver boat trip
Charles	Picnic site on the boat trip
Julian	Picnic site on the boat trip

Magic Moment

David	Seeing the huge flock of summer plumage Ruff
Daphne	Actually seeing the three toes on the woodpecker
Ken	Finding the Ural Owl
Ann	Being at the Laeva Wetlands in the rain and seeing so much
Evina	Seeing the Goosander chicks sat on their mother
Annette	Seeing the numbers of Ruff and Black Terns in summer plumage or the Art Café!
Marilyn	Picnic on the boat trip with Black Terns floating past etc
Charles	Seeing the huge flock of summer plumage Ruff
Julian	White-winged Tern amongst 100+ Black Terns at Aardla Wetland

BIRDS

Slavonian Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Grey Heron
Great White Egret
Great Bittern (heard only)
Mute Swan
Bewick's Swan
Whooper Swan
Greylag Goose
Greater White-fronted Geese
Tundra Bean Goose
Barnacle Goose
Shelduck
Gadwall
Eurasian Teal
Mallard
Shoveler
Pintail
Eurasian Wigeon
Garganey
Common Pochard
Tufted Duck
Greater Scaup
Goldeneye
Smew
Red-breasted Merganser
Common Scoter
Velvet Scoter
Goosander
Eider
Osprey
White-tailed Eagle
Black Kite
Golden Eagle
Lesser Spotted Eagle
Common Buzzard
Rough-legged Buzzard
Honey Buzzard
Goshawk
Sparrowhawk
Marsh Harrier
Hen Harrier
Montagu's Harrier
Common Kestrel
Hobby
Capercaillie
Black Grouse
Water Rail (heard only)
Common Coot
Moorhen
Spotted Crake (heard only)
Little Crake (heard only)

Corncrake
Common Crane
Oystercatcher
Avocet
Lapwing
Ringed Plover
Little Ringed Plover
Grey Plover
Golden Plover
Common Snipe
Great Snipe
Woodcock
Whimbrel
Curlew
Black-tailed Godwit
Common Redshank
Spotted Redshank
Greenshank
Wood Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Marsh Sandpiper
Knot
Dunlin
Little Stint
Temminck's Stint
Ruff
Arctic Skua
Black-headed Gull
Little Gull
Common Gull
Herring Gull
Great Black-backed Gull
Little Tern
Common Tern
Arctic Tern
Caspian Tern
Black Tern
White-winged Tern
Razorbill
Feral Pigeon
Stock Dove
Woodpigeon
Collared Dove
Ural Owl
Three-toed Woodpecker
Middle-spotted Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
White-backed Woodpecker
Black Woodpecker
Wryneck
Skylark
Barn Swallow
House Martin

Sand Martin
Tree Pipit
Meadow Pipit
Blue-headed (Yellow) Wagtail
Ashy-headed (Yellow) Wagtail
White Wagtail
Citrine Wagtail
Dunnock
Wren
Robin
Common Redstart
Black Redstart
Bluethroat
Whinchat
Thrush Nightingale
Northern Wheatear
Fieldfare
Redwing
Blackbird
Song Thrush
Mistle Thrush
Sedge Warbler
Grasshopper Warbler
European Reed Warbler
Blyth's Reed Warbler
Great Reed Warbler
Marsh Warbler
Savi's Warbler
Garden Warbler
Blackcap
Greater Whitethroat
Lesser Whitethroat
Icterine Warbler
Wood Warbler
Willow Warbler
Common Chiffchaff
Bearded Tit
Penduline Tit
Coal Tit
Crested Tit
Willow Tit (heard only)
Marsh Tit
Blue Tit
Great Tit
Spotted Flycatcher
Pied Flycatcher
Red-breasted Flycatcher
Nuthatch
Eurasian Treecreeper
Red-backed Shrike
Jay

Magpie
Nutcracker
Hooded Crow
Rook
Jackdaw
Raven
European Starling
House Sparrow
Tree Sparrow
Common Rosefinch
Chaffinch
Greenfinch
Goldfinch
Common Crossbill
Siskin
Linnet
Bullfinch
Hawfinch
Reed Bunting
Yellowhammer

MAMMALS

Elk
Roe Deer
European Beaver
Brown Hare
Mountain Hare
Pine Marten
Red Fox
Red Squirrel
Wild Boar

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

Common Frog

BUTTERFLIES & OTHER INSECTS

Brimstone
Small Tortoiseshell
Map Butterfly
Peacock
Common Blue
Small White
Green-veined White
Orange-tip
Leech
Dor Beetle
White-tailed Bumblebee
Green Lacewing
Firebug
Pond Skater
Siberian Winter Damsel