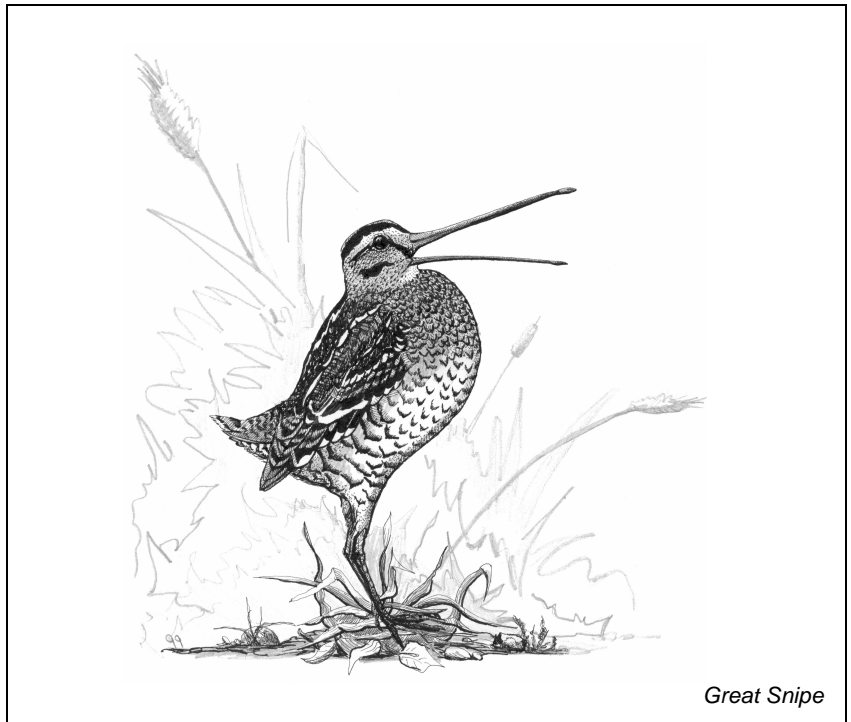
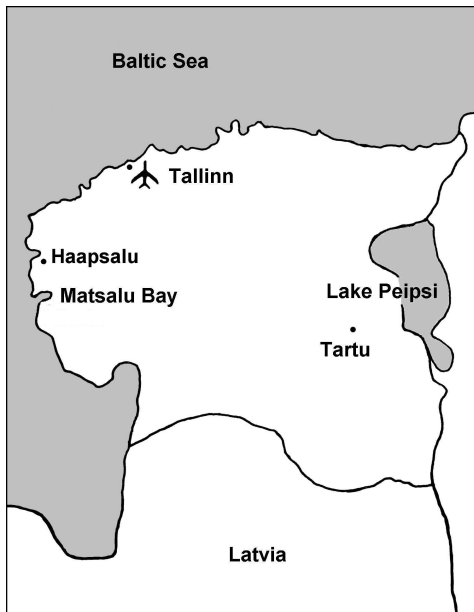


ESTONIA

migration and breeding birds in this unspoilt corner of Europe



From time to time various countries catch the imagination of the travelling birdwatcher, and become very popular almost overnight. Estonia has rapidly become a favourite.

Having completed 12 successful trips to this Baltic country, we have been enthralled by the surprises it has to offer. With its Siberian-like forests, Scandinavian peat-bogs, watermeadows full of geese and waders, and a fascinating coastline, together with a low human population, empty roads and excellent infrastructure we have found it impossible to fault the country.

Our quest for Great Snipe, Red-necked Grebe, Long-tailed Duck, White-tailed Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Capercaillie, Ural Owl, Wryneck, Thrush Nightingale, Penduline Tit, Common Rosefinch and various other eastern migrants will see us visiting a substantial portion of this small country. Estonia's wetlands are situated on the Baltic flyway and are used as a brief stopover for migrants en route to Siberia. The birdwatching record books are being re-written as birders log amazing numbers of migrants here.

The timing of our visit is important; any earlier and some sought-after summer migrants will not have arrived; any later and the spectacular wildfowl migration would be finished and the Great Snipes would be hidden in long grass. Get it just right, as we believe we have, and it is possible to watch the lekking antics of Great Snipe, find migrant Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch and Corncrake and listen to the beautiful song of the Thrush Nightingale.

Estonia is a wonderful land that gives a glimpse of how Western Europe used to be before the ravages of modern man took their toll. It holds annual surprises, as migration is unpredictable but always rewarding.

ITINERARY

MATSALU BAY

Having arrived at Tallinn, we will drive straight to Haapsalu, a journey of 70 miles. Haapsalu will be our base for the first four nights. It is well located for visits to Estonia's premier reserve, Matsalu Bay, as well as for watching migrants moving through the Gulf of Finland and searching for birds in nearby ancient forests.

Matsalu is one of the most important wetlands in Northern Europe; a vast coastal bay where deciduous and mixed forests give way to water-meadows, huge reedbeds and a large but shallow lagoon. Black-tailed Godwits breed; Bitterns boom; White-tailed Eagles hunt nervous wildfowl; and Fieldfare nest colonially in villages. Wrynecks are fairly

common, the first Red-breasted Flycatchers should be arriving, Barred Warblers and Red-backed Shrikes are likely, and we will check the flooded fields for Garganey and three species of harrier. White Storks are common, nesting in close proximity to farmhouses, and the rare Black Stork is also possible.

One day we will look for migrating birds passing through the Gulf of Finland. A staggering one million Long-tailed Ducks pass through here on migration, peaking in May. Velvet and Common Scoters, Goldeneye, Common Eider and Black-throated and Red-throated Divers all move through, given favourable winds. Last year four Steller's Eiders were the highlight. Migration can be unpredictable, but has the potential to provide surprises. On our last visit we recorded 14 species of raptor in one day, including Rough-legged

Buzzard and Pallid Harrier. Barnacle Geese use the area as a rest-stop, and up to ten thousand birds can be seen, again peaking in mid-May. The beautiful Red-breasted Goose regularly occurs, but finding one can be a challenge. Waders present include summer-plumage Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Turnstone and jet black Spotted Redshank, whilst numerous terns can include Caspian, Little, Arctic and Sandwich. In broadleaf forest Thrush Nightingale will be singing, having just arrived from African wintering grounds. Elsewhere this is a difficult species, but we have enjoyed amazing views of this skulker on each trip.

Attractive woodland flowers should just be coming into bloom. Camberwell Beauties and Map butterflies may be seen sunning themselves, while Icterine Warblers and Hawfinch are fairly common. Even in the towns, Fieldfares provide entertainment as they see off Jackdaws and Hooded Crows.

A half hour drive from Haapsalu will take us to the forested area of Leidisoo. Many of the best birds here are either uncommon or rather shy, so a certain amount of luck will be required to see them. Black Grouse should be reliable as they gather at traditional lekking sites to display in the morning. Black Woodpeckers too, are fairly reliable. Tricky species include Capercaillie, Hazelhen, Three-toed Woodpecker and Nutcracker.

We will also check reedbeds and ponds at Haapsalu. These are home to nesting Penduline Tit, Bearded Tit, Savi's Warbler, Great Reed Warbler and Garganey, while migrants seen here in the past have included both Red-backed and Northern Grey Shrike. Ospreys and Common Cranes can be seen heading northwards; visible migration is one of Estonia's highlights.

TARTU

On day five we will head east to Tartu, for our next four nights. In the plain of the Emajogi river we will check the marshes for migrant waders and wildfowl. Black Terns nest on floating vegetation, while Little Gulls form large feeding flocks that periodically break away to drive off a marauding harrier or Goshawk. Wryneck, Penduline Tit, Common Rosefinch, Golden Oriole and Redwing nest in the copses and Savi's Warblers reel from the reedbeds. Blyth's Reed, Marsh and River Warblers may also be found, whilst wet meadows resound to the rasping calls of Corncrakes by day and Spotted Crakes by night.

In the evening we will look for lekking Great Snipe. Estonia has become *the* place to see this species. There is also the possibility of seeing Ural Owl, Nightjar and Woodcock.

There are plenty of sites to visit. These include peat bogs, large fishponds, flooded meadows and taiga forest. The list of possible species is almost endless. Hazelhen and Nutcracker can be found in the woods, but are not seen on every trip. Nuthatch, Black Woodpecker, Crested Tit, Pied Flycatcher, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Wood Warbler are all more likely. We have seen Citrine Wagtail increase from a rarity to become a regular breeding species. Marsh Sandpipers also breed here now, and are beautiful in their summer plumage.

We will see an example of a raised peat bog, one of the most threatened habitats in Europe. Although short on bird species the experience of looking into the bottomless inky black pools is not to be missed. Plants are interesting here, with Bog Rosemary and Shuttlecock Fern very common. Occasional

Great Grey Shrikes can be seen perched on stunted pine trees and Goldeneye nest by the pools.

Black Stork, Black Grouse, Capercaillie and Lesser Spotted Eagle all nest in the area, but can be hard to find. Middle-spotted, Three-toed, Grey-headed, White-backed and Black Woodpeckers have all been seen by our previous groups.

Estonia is one of the few European countries to retain healthy populations of European Beaver, Brown Bear and European Elk. All are naturally shy and difficult to see, but we have seen all three on previous tours.

On day nine we will head back to Tallinn for our flight home. Alternatively, why not extend your stay and spend a couple of days visiting Tallinn, or perhaps join us on our tour the following week, searching for Estonia's special mammals.

PACE

Breakfast will be taken at about 7am, perhaps later if the previous day has been tiring. Basic fitness is all that is required. Full days will be spent in the field and short/medium length walks on the flat will be undertaken regularly. There are no uphill walks.

ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD

Full-board accommodation is provided with four nights at the Hotel Promenaadi, Haapsalu and four nights at a lovely rural hotel near Tartu. All hotels are of good standard and all rooms have en suite facilities. Packed lunches will be taken every day.

PRICE INCLUDES

All birdwatching excursions with expert leader, full-board accommodation (starting with dinner on 19th, ending with breakfast on 27th), local transport by mini-bus, reserve entrance fees, soft drinks at meal-times, international flights and airport taxes.

WHAT IS NOT INCLUDED

Travel insurance. Personal items, alcoholic drinks, laundry.

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS

Return flights from both London Heathrow and Manchester to Tallinn (via Helsinki) using the scheduled services of Finnair. Outbound flight departs late morning, with return landing late afternoon.

8 nights:	19th to 27th May 2012
Principal leaders:	John McLoughlin
Maximum group size:	7 clients with one leader or 13 clients with two leaders
Cost with discount (if you book before 3rd February 2012):	£1680 per person sharing
Full Cost:	£1780 per person sharing
Single supplement:	£170
Deposit:	£300