



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT ESTONIA 14TH — 21ST MARCH 2016

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MONDAY 14TH MARCH– *Cold in light winds, 4C*

A typically early start at London Gatwick saw us arrive in Estonia's capital, Tallinn, a little behind schedule at around 1300. A short transfer saw us arrive at our hotel for check in, and then we were straight out for a short birding walk along the harbour front. Here around a dozen Goosander, four Long-tailed Ducks and a few Common Goldeneye were noted, along with a flock of redpolls which flew past looking pale! It wasn't really an afternoon for birding though, as we had arranged a short city tour after lunch around Tallinn old town. We ended the day outside the Prime Ministers residence, enjoying panoramic views of the city before winding our way down to the main square and finding an excellent restaurant for dinner. The eight pages of beer on the menu certainly swung it for us! We steered well clear of the Medieval restaurants though, serving Brown Bear!

TUESDAY 15TH MARCH – *Light winds and sunny spells, 4C*

A short pre-breakfast walk added a couple of Tree Sparrows in the park just across from the hotel, and we saw a couple of Goosander and Long-tailed Duck again. Meeting with our local guide Tarvo around 0845, we began the journey westwards across the country to Lihula. It didn't take much more than an hour and a half, and we did see a Black Woodpecker flying across the road along the way! After meeting with Marika of Estonian Nature Tours, and making a quick stop for coffee and toilets in the process, we began birding in earnest as we neared the ferry port at Virtsu. A White-tailed Eagle flew by and we soon found a roadside flock of grey geese and had just enough time before the ferry to get out and scope them. They were mainly Taiga Bean Geese, but with several Eurasian White-fronted, single Pink-footed and a few Tundra Bean Geese mixed in. It was great to see the Taiga and Tundra birds side by side, and see just how different the extremes of each race are. We realised then that we had taken a little too much time, and had only eight minutes to reach the ferry! Thanks to Tarvo putting his foot down, we sailed onto the vessel and they closed the door behind us! Right away, we were up on deck and scanning the beautifully calm sea for ducks. There were literally hundreds upon hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks here, quite unlike anything any of us had ever seen before. Perhaps there were around 1500 birds in total, forming great rafts on the sea. An amazing sight! A Ringed Seal was an unexpected bonus, bobbing in the water close to the ferry.



Northern Bullfinch, 15th March

Reaching the island of Muhu after thirty minutes, we continued to the causeway with Saaremaa Island, a super spot with shallow waters fringed with reeds. We parked up half way along and were soon watching small flocks of Smew, including some stunning drakes. The water was thronged with Goosander [several hundred] and herds of trumpeting Whooper Swans. Tarvo picked out two Bewick's Swans, which he said were a little later arriving on passage than their larger relative. Four White-tailed Eagles were in the same field of view, but there were another half a dozen much further in the distance – incredible! We really didn't know where to look here, there were so many birds, but we had to press on as lunch was waiting for us at the lovely Loona Guest House at Kihelkonna, our base for the next two nights. After an excellent lunch, we reconvened in the now beautiful warm sunshine and could hear the trumpet calls of Northern Bullfinches – we had super views of a group of three males in the trees nearby, such huge specimens with extensive white undertail and deep red breast. A Northern Treecreeper was also sighted briefly, but Tarvo had to drag us away as we needed to crack on up to Undva to look for our main quarry, the wintering flock of Steller's Eiders.

A Great Grey Shrike perched on a roadside wire was a welcome distraction en route, and soon we reached the bay after a fifteen minute drive from the hotel, and began scanning the calm waters offshore. There were many Common Goldeneye in this area, numbering hundreds, and a few Red-breasted Mergansers. Long-tailed Ducks were also common and a flock of about fifty Velvet Scoters were seen a bit further out. There was no sign of our target bird though – a flock of about forty Snow Buntings along the beach were a nice consolation, however. Trying a bit further around the peninsula, we drew a further blank, and Tarvo insisted that the birds must be in the area somewhere, even though we had now checked their two favoured spots without success. At a promontory a bit further down, there were many seafowl on the water – hundreds more Long-tailed Duck and Common Goldeneye, many Goosanders, five Northern Pintail, a dozen Common Shelduck and even four Common Eiders, but no Steller's! It was very cold here in a stiff breeze off the Baltic Sea, and we were reaching the point of giving up – just as one of our group spotted a tightly packed flock of seaducks very distantly on the water. Goodness knows how we had all missed them for so long, perhaps they had just flown in, but they were indeed the Steller's Eiders! There were around ninety in this flock, soon joined by another fifty from further out to sea, and they then proceeded to make four or five flights, circling the bay before dropping down on the water again, always equally distant each time. The flight views were decent – we could see the white upperwing coverts and orange-coloured bellies on the males quite clearly. After scoping them for about half an hour, and realising they weren't coming any closer, we decided to move on and return for another look tomorrow.

Our final stop of the day was therefore a small harbour at Veere, a superb place for getting ultra-close views of Long-tailed Ducks. There were, again, many hundreds distantly offshore here but a handful of birds insisted on flying right in and around the small harbour repeatedly, giving staggering close flight views. Three drakes also landed on the water at point-blank range – a treat that most of us had only seen rarely before. Another flock of Velvet Scoter were also present, but by now we really were cold, and it was time to head back to the guest house. There was still time for two more good birds though – firstly a juvenile Northern Goshawk which flew right across the road in front of us, and then two calling Common Cranes behind the hotel, seen in flight as dusk fell.

WEDNESDAY 16TH MARCH – *Early fog clearing to sunshine, 3C*

Our morning started with an amazing flock of around twenty Northern Bullfinches around the 'garden' of our hotel, such superb birds and so noisy too! Eight Hawfinches were also present, perched typically in the treetops at the far end of the garden, and some folk saw a couple of *borealis* race Willow Tits. Our plan for the morning was to revisit the Undva Peninsula to try and get better views of the Steller's Eiders, but it was soon clear that this was not going to happen – a dense sea fog had descended around the coast and we could not even see the sea – it was a good job we had found them last night! Instead, we headed directly to Piila, where an area of rough fields is a regular winter home for Rough-legged Buzzards with up to a dozen present here in some winters. We saw at least four this morning, and spent around two hours here studying them. Some of the closest views we had

were from the vehicle, as we twice flushed birds off the track, but the only real chance to have a look at them through a scope was to pick a spot with a good all round view, get out and set up the kit for a while. This eventually paid off with some great views of hunting birds – we saw both male and female, adult and juvenile plumages. Two adult White-tailed Eagles were also present, sitting in the middle of a grass field before taking flight and heading off over the track in front of us. Other species noted included Fieldfare, Yellowhammer, Common Buzzard and Eurasian Sparrowhawk.



Rough-legged Buzzard, 16th March

The small harbour at Nasva was our next stop, on the south coast of the island, and here we found a Great Grey Shrike hunting by the roadside using a hovering technique, and had great views of four Smew flying around low over the reedbed. Another White-tailed Eagle was fishing offshore, where we could see several hundred Long-tailed Ducks and had a small flock of Greater Scaup scuttling through on migration. Also of interest [to some!] were an adult pair of *argentatus* Herring Gulls sporting yellow legs – one to look out for back home! In the nearby town, we called at the excellent Mosaik Café and had a fantastic lunch, leaving us all quite full for our afternoon birding session! There were several Nordic Jackdaws around white distinct white collars, and another adult White-tailed Eagle flew over the car park in the town centre!

Viidumae Forest would be our destination for the entire remainder of a now beautiful and sunny afternoon. This is not easy birding, with vast tracts of habitat and not that many birds! We were hoping for Eurasian Pygmy Owl, but despite hearing birds call at two different spots, we weren't lucky with a sighting. More distinctive northern races of familiar birds kept us entertained – Northern Treecreeper, Continental Coal Tit and the fantastic pale borealis race of Willow Tit were all seen, as well as Goldcrest, Mistle Thrush, Great-spotted Woodpecker and a Black Woodpecker which flew high across the track. It wasn't to be with the owls today though, so we returned to base around 1930 just as the sun was setting.

THURSDAY 17TH MARCH – Overcast and breezy, 6C

We left the island of Saaremaa this morning and headed towards the ferry terminal, stopping briefly on the causeway en route where a number of Smew were feeding really close to the road. We stopped for a few minutes to scope them, the males displaying the females who were also throwing back their heads in response. There were once again large numbers of Whooper Swans here, but we didn't linger too long in order to avoid a repeat of Tuesday's Dukes of Hazard style boarding of the ferry! We had at least two minutes to spare this time, and headed up on deck to watch the Long-tailed Ducks as we made our way back to the mainland. Once ashore, we headed directly to Matsalu and in particular the park at Vatlja where an interesting area of deciduous woodland provided some fantastic birding. A Lesser Spotted Woodpecker called almost right away and was scoped briefly in the treetops before melting away in typical fashion, but thankfully we had several more sightings, including prolonged views of a male. There was also some drumming and a bit more calling to enjoy, and other woodland birds around included a pair of Marsh Tits and some absolutely stunning *europaea* Nuthatches. This distinctive Fennoscandia race is white underneath, with a bold black eyestripe and deep red spotted vent – they look more like Rock Nuthatches than Wood Nuthatches! While we were trying to photograph these birds, a loud burst of drumming from behind us signalled the presence of our main target – White-backed Woodpecker. A male was observed pretty well in the treetops at the far end of a small football pitch, but over the next half an hour we had prolonged close range views of two or three different birds, and were also able to observe their soft 'tick' call, sounding quite unlike a woodpecker at all. A stonking male Great-spotted Woodpecker of the northern race *major* was also seen, and a flock of European White-fronted Geese flew over calling.



White-backed Woodpecker & *europaea* Nuthatch, 17th March

Tuhu Bog was our next destination, a vast area of habitat including tracts of stunted pines growing in acid bog land [not unlike that at Abernethy in the Scottish Highlands] and big open areas of wet grassland flanked by Silver Birch woodland. Two Tundra Bean Geese dropped onto a small pool to join three Bewick's and ten Whooper Swans, and in the woods we had close views of *borealis* Willow Tits again. We tried for Hazel Grouse here, but didn't have any luck, so moved on towards the town of Haapsalu to the north. Two adult White-tailed Eagles circled overhead by the roadside, and then we came across a mixed feeding flock of around two thousand geese by the side of the main road. We were able to use a spinney of trees as cover in order to scope the birds without flushing them – mainly Eurasian White-fronted Geese and Tundra Bean Geese, but we had more chances to practice identifying the long-necked Taiga Bean Geese with their different bill patterns and head shape, as

well as their larger size. The light wasn't great, but we decided in the end perhaps 20% of the group were in fact *fabalis*. Lunch in the town of Maatsalu was another excellent affair – these had to qualify as the best lunches on a birding tour we had ever had!

The late afternoon was once again devoted to the conifer forests and their more elusive specialities. A Great Grey Shrike obliged as we headed into Leidisoo Nature Reserve, where the snowy tracks into the forest took us deep into mixed spruce and pine, where we hope to find Eurasian Pygmy Owl and Nutcracker. We tried and tried for both these birds again, but didn't even get close. In truth, there were very few birds and it was hard work – Crested Tit and Northern Goshawk heard only, were all we had to show for about 2.5 hours birding! It can be like this in the northern forests though, and we weren't disheartened – tracks and droppings of Elk entertained us during the very quiet spells! Tarvo had one last trick up his sleeve though, and we headed further into the forest for the days finale.

Arriving at a nest box Tarvo had erected, he told us that a pair of Ural Owls had become active in the area, and he believed the female to be sitting on the first egg now in the box. We parked up and took up a position along the edge of the forest, overlooking the box, and waited. Half an hour passed and dusk was approaching, but we heard and saw nothing. All of a sudden, a large grey shape appeared from the trees and landed on a branch in front of us in full view and began to call – the female Ural Owl!! We had stunning views of this forest giant for about ten minutes, until she bowed low in her branch – the male was coming. He arrived with a vole in his bill, which he presented to her with a quick flurry, before heading off across the track to our right and into the pines, where he too began to call. What a fantastic spectacle, and suddenly all the time over the last few days in silent forest had paid off with one of those once in a lifetime type sightings. We were also delighted to learn that we were only five minutes away from our next accommodation, in delightful log cabins close to the sea, tucked away among the forest. Yet another excellent meal saw us all off to bed early, as we had an early start in the morning.



Ural Owl, 17th March

FRIDAY 18TH MARCH – Light snow, -3C

Our coldest day so far as we woke to find fresh snow fall overnight as we loaded into the van in the dark for an early morning visit to a Black Grouse lekking area. It took around an hour to reach the area of open stubble fields surrounded by mixed birch and spruce woodland, and despite being

mainly confined to using the vehicle as a mobile hide, we enjoyed some of our most productive birding of the trip here. Black Grouse were incredibly numerous throughout the whole area, being seen in groups of up to forty birds, frequently flying across the track and being dotted about in virtually every field. We saw some great lekking activity, and from our breakfast spot we could hear their bubbling calls carrying on the frosty morning air. A Northern Goshawk drifted over, and we saw two huge flocks of Snow Bunting in the fields – the first over two hundred strong – not typical habitat we would normally associate them with. A Great Grey Shrike perched nicely and there were yelps of excitement as a smashing Rough-legged Buzzard drifted low over the vehicle and off across the fields! A super flock of about three hundred Tundra Bean Goose were looking very wary as we pulled alongside them to check through, but thankfully as we stayed in the vehicle they soon settled, with a herd of trumpeting Whooper Swans in the same field and yet more great views of Black Grouse. A single Common Crane stood sentinel-like in the middle of an enormous winter stubble field – all this among some pretty dramatic snow-clad scenery and icy channels where we saw several signs of European Beaver activity, including a dam.

Moving on to a spot in the forest, we tried again for Nutcracker, a species which Tarvo insisted should not have given us any trouble! We walked some more silent forest trails, and listened carefully, but we saw nothing. We tried again for Hazel Grouse too but to no avail. Back in the van and heading out along the track, and we spotted a dark lump in the top of a tree up ahead – it was a Nutcracker!! We bailed out and set up a scope, and had the bird nice and clearly for a minute or too before it dropped out of sight. We set off on foot, and relocated it – even better this time, low down on a sunlit branch. Two were seen gathering nest material and heading off into the forest – great stuff! We then realised that the track we were on was adorned not only by several Elk prints – we had great views of two Elk a little earlier – but also what looked very much like the tracks of Wolf. Very large dog-like prints, well-spaced with a long stride, and stretching purposefully over about a kilometre of track. From here, it only took around thirty minutes to reach our accommodation, where we had lunch before collecting our luggage from the rooms and checking out.



Nutcracker, 18th March

The afternoon was really devoted to travelling east across the country to our final base near the North-east coast, but we had time to visit another good area of forest on the way. Here slowly driving snowy tracks through the pines came up trumps as we spotted a male Capercaillie, standing motionless on a forest ride. Again, using the vehicle as a hide allowed everyone to get great views, then we drove a little further, parked, and walked back with a scope. The bird stayed put, and we had even better views, before it took flight along the ride and up into the trees. Tarvo saw a female close by too, while making a pit stop among the trees! Three Crested Tits also showed well here, in the company of a *borealis* Willow Tit, before we headed off on the two hour trip east.



Capercaillie, 18th March

SATURDAY 19TH MARCH – Cold and sunny, -10C and fresh snow

It was our coldest morning of the trip so far today, and we set out from Rakvere on frozen roads towards the forests of Suigu Nature Reserve, where we planned to spend much of the day birding. A party of Black Grouse were in roadside fields just before we turned down onto the forest track network – mainly males, and we went on to see one or two perched up in birch trees close to the van a bit further on. Despite the crisp, clear morning, the woodpecker activity we had hoped for did not really materialise. Instead the forest was deathly quiet, apart from the odd small roving party of tits. These included more *borealis* Willow Tits and the odd Marsh Tit. The fresh overnight snow had created perfect conditions for finding mammal tracks though, and we found several excellent European Lynx prints along the road – clearly one or two animals had passed this way just a few hours ago! Pine Marten tracks and another set of Wolf prints were also seen – the animals were definitely out there! Stopping in a sunny ride for breakfast, a White-backed Woodpecker drummed and we picked it up on a distant Poplar, a decent view through the telescope. Briefly, in the tree beside it, was a beautiful white-headed Northern Long-tailed Tit, a subspecies we were really keen to see. It quickly vanished, but gave us hope of finding another!

At another spot we tried for Hazel Grouse again, and Three-toed Woodpecker, but both went begging. The snowy scene was quite beautiful though, and we were all quite happy walking and listening and searching for more tracks in the snow. Two more Northern Long-tailed Tits then appeared right by the track, and allowed prolonged observation – these really are stunning little

birds! At a small park in nearby Tutu, we found a few Northern Bullfinches, the *europaea* Nuthatch, Northern Treecreeper and a Red Squirrel.



European Lynx tracks in the snow, 19th March

After lunch back at Rakvere, we headed out again in the afternoon to Sirtsu forests to try again for the elusive Hazel Grouse and other woodland birds. It was tough going, and we still couldn't find a Hazel Grouse even though Tarvo assured us it was ten times more common than Black Grouse, of which we had seen dozens! Anyway, another White-backed Woodpecker was seen, and we had absolutely superb views of a pair of Black Woodpeckers, calling and chasing around among the trees. Three more Northern Long-tailed Tits delighted us, and we had another opportunity to compare Marsh Tit calls and songs with the pale borealis Willow Tits, which look much more similar to Marsh than our own British race. At least twenty Common Ravens and several Common Buzzards were around a Wild Boar kill at the side of the track – a legacy of the night's activities of local hunters.

We had a quick meal nearby around 1800 and then returned to Suigu, the area we had explored in the morning, to try again for owls. The Northern Pygmy Owl had eluded us on the trip so far, so we were keen to try again. Under a full moon and starlit sky with Jupiter glowing overhead, we listened at several silent spots in this great forest, hearing two different Pygmy Owls including one no more than one hundred metres away. Sadly, it wouldn't show though. Another Ural Owl was heard too, a female giving its barking call – somewhere, a similar event to that we had witnessed a few nights previously was probably unfolding, as she left her eggs to call the male to come and feed her. An Arctic Hare was a highlight, seen really well at the roadside on the way back, in the headlights.

SUNDAY 20TH MARCH – Cold and sunny, -11C

Even colder this morning! Having found the Pygmy Owl last night, we decided to rise early at 0545 and return to the same spot at Suigu to see if it was calling again at dawn. It was, and we heard it well over the course of forty five minutes or so. It was more distant though, and sadly despite a valiant effort we could not track it down. In contrast to yesterday though, the woodpecker activity was far greater. A Three-toed Woodpecker was drumming close to the trail and we soon had it in the scope, high on a dead branch. This was a lifer for most people so we were really pleased to get a nice long

view of the bird, which was a female. Two different Grey-headed Woodpeckers were calling too, then one started drumming close by and again, we got that in the scope and had some good views. A third was seen a little further on, in a tree right above the track. White-backed and Black Woodpeckers were also drumming, the former being seen, but not the latter. We tried one last time to get closer to the calling owl, and while we were unsuccessful, we had our best views yet of a pair of Nutcrackers perched in glorious light right on the top of a big spruce – fantastic! We made our way back to the hotel for a very welcome breakfast, packed our things and were ready to move on again by 0930.



Three-toed Woodpecker and Nutcracker, 20th March

The remainder of our day was planned around driving back west to Tallinn, but Tarvo had planned a couple of stops on the way. The first was the forest park at Oandu, near the Baltic coast, and here we enjoyed a great snowy walk through the forest for about two hours – the longest walk we had done all week. We saw typically little, but what we did see was good – an amazing view of a White-backed Woodpecker, systematically removing the bark from a horizontal branch and winking out tiny invertebrates with the tip of its tongue. We watched it through the scope for ages, and it was still working hard as we left. Black Woodpecker was calling, and a pair of Crested Tits gave brilliant views just above the path, responding furiously to Tarvo's Hazel Grouse whistle! Sadly the grouse didn't respond in the same way!

Lunch at a nearby coastal village produced our first Eurasian Siskins, with flocks of Long-tailed Duck, Goosander and Common Goldeneye in the partially frozen bay. Our final stop was at the most northerly point in Estonia, the peninsula at Parispea. We spent time photographing the amazing ice formations on the rocks here, and the 'pancake ice' where the sea was partially frozen. A Great Grey Shrike watched from a distant tree top and the usual assortment of diving ducks were offshore. From here it was straight back to Tallinn, where we arrived just after 1800 to check in again at the hotel we had used on the first night. We were all extremely tired after a long few days, and crashed out pretty early ready for the trip home tomorrow.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Mute Swan
2. Bewick's Swan
3. Whooper Swan
4. Taiga Bean Goose
5. Tundra Bean Goose
6. Pink-footed Goose
7. Greater White-fronted Goose
8. Greylag Goose
9. Common Shelduck
10. Mallard
11. Eurasian Wigeon
12. Northern Pintail
13. Greater Scaup
14. Common Eider
15. Steller's Eider
16. Long-tailed Duck
17. Common Scoter
18. Velvet Scoter
19. Common Goldeneye
20. Smew
21. Goosander
22. Red-breasted Merganser
23. Black Grouse
24. Capercaillie
25. Great Crested Grebe
26. Great Cormorant
27. Grey Heron
28. White-tailed Eagle
29. Northern Goshawk
30. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
31. Common Buzzard
32. Rough-legged Buzzard
33. Common Kestrel
34. Common Coot
35. Common Crane
36. Northern Lapwing
37. Black-headed Gull
38. Common Gull
39. Herring Gull
40. Great Black-backed Gull
41. Stock Dove
42. Ural Owl
43. Grey-headed Woodpecker
44. Black Woodpecker
45. Great-spotted Woodpecker
46. Lesser-spotted Woodpecker
47. Three-toed Woodpecker
48. White-backed Woodpecker
49. Skylark
50. Blackbird
51. Fieldfare
52. Mistle Thrush
53. Northern Long-tailed Tit
54. Marsh Tit
55. Willow Tit
56. Great Tit
57. Blue Tit
58. Crested Tit
59. Coal Tit

60. European Nuthatch
61. Northern Treecreeper
62. Great Grey Shrike
63. Eurasian Jay
64. Magpie
65. Nutcracker
66. Hooded Crow
67. Rook
68. Nordic Jackdaw
69. Common Raven
70. Common Starling
71. House Sparrow
72. Tree Sparrow
73. Chaffinch
74. Greenfinch
75. Goldfinch
76. Northern Bullfinch
77. Mealy Redpoll
78. Eurasian Siskin
79. Hawfinch
80. Snow Bunting
81. Yellowhammer

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