



ORIOLE BIRDING



TOUR REPORT ESTONIA 15TH – 20TH MARCH 2018

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THURSDAY 15TH MARCH – *Clear blue skies and light winds, -5C*

After our early morning departure from London Gatwick, we arrived in Tallinn on schedule just before 1pm and enjoyed a swift passage through the airport. After meeting with our ground agent, Marika from Estonia Nature Tours, we took two taxis and made the fifteen minute ride across the capital to our hotel close to the harbour. As we had a bit of time after check in and before our evening walking tour of the old town, we opted for a short walk down to view the harbour area. This was, if nothing else, an opportunity to acclimatise to the weather, which was very cold! In the harbour we saw several **Goosander**, including a nice close drake, and further out were a scattering of Common Goldeneye and **Long-tailed Ducks**. As we headed back towards the hotel, we picked up a large raptor circling over the town – it was a young **White-tailed Eagle**, doing its ‘flying barn door’ impression! The walking tour, which we took from 4pm – 6pm, took us around the old town and we learnt a lot about the history of this fascinating place. Birds included a yellow-legged *argentatus* Herring Gull [so called ‘*omissus*’ – most of the birds here seem to fall into this category] and a few Hooded Crows. After an excellent dinner in the ‘oldest pub in Tallinn’ we retired to the hotel ready for our first days proper birding tomorrow.

FRIDAY 16TH MARCH – *Sunny and crisp with fresh north-east winds, -6C*

Some of us opted for a rather brave pre-breakfast walk around the small park close to our hotel in Tallinn, but as expected we noted few birds other than a couple of Tree Sparrows and a fly-by Goosander! Just as we got back to the hotel, as we were waiting by a busy pedestrian crossing, we thought we heard a **Waxwing** call, but just then a tram went past as well and it was quite noisy, so we weren’t sure. We continued, up the entrance into the hotel and there right in front of us in a low juniper bush were three stunning **Waxwings**! So we had heard them! Several more flew down from the roof of the hotel, and soon we had a bush full. 15 birds in total and a lovely way to start the day! After breakfast we checked out and met with our birding guide Tarvo for the two hour transfer west towards Virtsu and the ferry crossing over to Muhu island on the north-west coast of Estonia. The journey was easy on good roads, and once clear of the town we began to see a few birds. Fieldfare, Mistle Thrush, Common Linnet, Rook, Skylark and Common Buzzard were among the roadside birds, but we also saw a nice **Great Grey Shrike**, and a cracking adult **White-tailed Eagle** mobbed by two Common Ravens. About twenty minutes before reaching Virtsu, we had what would surely be our most exciting impromptu roadside stop of the tour, as we spotted a **Northern Hawk Owl** perched on the top of a tree by the roadside! We bundled out and enjoyed marvellous scope views of this irruptive winter visitor – this was the best year for them recently and so we had hoped to connect! Tarvo said they were normally quite tame, so we approached closer and sure enough the bird remained on its lofty perch, frequently spinning its head round to look for prey. The views were really awesome! Eventually it flew a short distance and landed on a pole by the roadside, and we saw it very close from the vehicle here before it flew again back towards its original perch. It was amazingly sparrowhawk-like in flight – what a bird! Now we only had about ten minutes grace before the ferry, so we continued there without stopping.

The ferry journey was impressive not because of birds, but because the sea was entirely frozen and the ferry was basically powering through pack ice! None of us had ever experienced anything quite like it! Once on Muhu, we drove again for just over an hour, picking up another roadside **Great Grey Shrike** just before we reached our accommodation on the adjoining island of Saaremaa. Lunch was on the table waiting for us – a lovely fish soup with rye bread and best of all a hot cup of tea! After dropping our bags in the rooms, it was straight back out into the field, to try for the **Steller’s Eiders** on the sea off Undva. Just around the hotel, we had some nice views of a small group of stocky **Northern Bullfinches**, and were able to listen to their diagnostic trumpet call. Heading up to Undva, Tarvo negotiated the icy roads with aplomb, but the final section of the track beat us and we had to abandon the van and go on foot due to the sheer amount of ice. It was hard enough walking on it! Soon we reached the point overlooking the bay though, where we hoped to find the fabled flock of birds. They weren’t here, but there was a good selection of other species – **Whooper Swan**, **Goosander**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Common Goldeneye**, **Long-tailed Duck**, **Great Crested**

Grebe and a few Tufted Ducks. It was a beautiful, if cold afternoon and we returned to the vehicle in order to drive up to the point and check there. It was windy and exposed here, and absolutely freezing as a result! We scanned hard, finding a flock of **Greater Scaup**, but no Steller's. Some of us retreated behind a stone building, to get out of the arctic wind, and continued scanning. Eventually perseverance paid off as a flock of ducks scuttled in showing a lot of white on the wings – it was a flock of around 100 **Steller's Eiders**! We had to find a sheltered spot where we could hunker down and scope the birds, to try and get better views. Over the next half hour, with the help of some hot coffee, we gradually put together better views – the birds were about 1.5km distant. Every now and again, they would all take flight in a bustling flock, and now with the sun catching them we could pick out more detail, such as the bold white upperwing coverts and terracotta washed underparts of the drakes. Not the closest of views, but in the end we were all pretty happy with what we had seen, and the warmth of the van was beckoning!



Northern Bullfinches, Pilguse, 16th March. These superb birds were a daily sighting on the tour

Heading south, we called at the small harbour at Veere. This was another very cold spot with the wind coming in off the sea, but we managed some cracking views of **Long-tailed Ducks**, a single female Common Scoter and further out, a raft of about 150 **Velvet Scoters**. It was by now gone 5pm, and time to start making our way back to the hotel. A nice Red Fox crossing the road and some more mixed groups of thrushes were seen on the way back – a cold but very rewarding day.

SATURDAY 17TH MARCH – *Light winds and sunshine, -12C up to -1C*

It was a bit chilly this morning as we left our guest house and headed into the forest at Viidumae, with -12C showing on the van thermometer! Thankfully there was not a breath of wind, and so it really was a beautiful morning to be out with the hoar frost twinkling on the branches of the bushes as we drove along, making them look as though they were adorned with Christmas fairy lights! Our plan was to use the first part of the morning to look for tricky birds of interior forest, and so we

parked up and began walking and listening – we knew it would be hard work with generally few or no birds to be had at all for the most part. The ubiquitous Great Tit was indeed the only species noted to start with, until we reached a clearing where we found a couple of **Northern Great-spotted Woodpeckers**. Another half hour of wandering and listening though, and we had not recorded a single bird more! We decided to try playing the call of **Pygmy Owl**, just in case one was nearby. Initially there was no response, but then we heard one calling back just a hundred metres back along the road, and it sounded like it was right on the edge of the forest! We walked carefully towards the calling bird, and scanned the trees hard, nervous that we would not spot it before it flew back unseen into the dense forest. Thankfully, it flew up and landed right on the top of a conifer and continued calling, and we had our first **Eurasian Pygmy Owl** scoped up in perfect light! We all had a turn at the scope, and were just getting ready for seconds when a **Nutcracker** called loudly, and promptly flew in and dislodged the owl from its perch! Amazing stuff! We now had the Nutcracker in the scope, but had lost the owl, which flew back into the forest. Thankfully the **Nutcracker** hung around long enough for everyone to go round on the scope again, and we had both our top target birds in the bag! This was truly a fortunate experience, and certainly set us up well for the rest of the day. Now we returned to the guest house and collected our packed lunch, before making our way back across Saaremaa to the ferry port and over to the mainland. A superb **Great Grey Shrike** was seen along the way, perched in Juniper by the side of the road, but we didn't see much else until we reached the mainland itself, via another fun crossing on the ice breaker ferry!



Nutcracker – just after it had dislodged a calling Pygmy Owl!

Tuhu Bog would be our next area to explore, a vast area of open acid bog land somewhat reminiscent of parts of Abernethy Forest in Scotland. In summer, Wood Sandpipers breed here but now it was covered in thick ice and there were not many birds to be found. We parked at a spot for lunch by the forest edge, enjoying wonderful hot soup and savoury pastries, but with only Great-spotted Woodpecker for company! As we crossed a flowing stream though, Tarvo spotted a **Black-bellied Dipper** at the water's edge, and we all had some nice views of this winter visitor. Tarvo suggested we try the small park around the visitor centre at Matsalu, and this was much more birdy as feeders were attracting **Common Redpolls**, Eurasian Siskin, Tree Sparrow and lots of tits. Northern races of **Common Treecreeper** and **European Nuthatch** were also enjoyed here – the latter with its snow white underparts and bold black eye stripe. A **Nutcracker** also flew over here, and it was interesting to note its short-tailed silhouette and rather rapid flight action as it passed by against the blue sky. Woodpeckers were conspicuous by their absence though, so we moved on ten minutes to another small area of parkland to try again. More views of the Nuthatch and Treecreeper, but no sign of our main quarry, which was White-backed Woodpecker. At another stop for the latter species, we found a confiding male **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** which posed nicely for us for several minutes, often in the company of a singing Marsh Tit.



Lesser Spotted Woodpecker – this male posed nicely for us this afternoon

As afternoon progressed towards evening, we headed out into open winter stubble fields interspersed with belts of birch woodland amid a wind farm. Here we stopped to view four male **Black Grouse** which had perched along the top of a distant line of trees. Another **Hawk Owl** was then spotted, also on a lofty perch along a distance ridge of trees, but a long way away – its silhouette was nonetheless distinctive after our point blank sighting yesterday. We drove along the network of tracks to get closer, finding a beautiful close **Great Grey Shrike** in the process which allowed us to park right alongside it for photos. Initially, we couldn't relocate the owl, and then as we turned a corner we

found it perched on the end of one of the shelter belts and had some nice views of it through the scope – our second **Hawk Owl** in as many days! Now it was time to head into the nearby forest close to Roosta, and try specifically for Ural Owl there. A shout of **Hazel Grouse** went up from the back seats as we drove along one of the forest tracks, but despite turning round and heading back up and down several times, it wasn't seen again. We then stopped by a nest box, where we had seen the owls two years ago, but now the forest had been partly cleared here and Tarvo didn't think the box was active. A super bonus while we watched was a **Black Woodpecker**, which popped out of a hole and began scaling a nearby tree. We had seen lots of fantastic evidence of their feeding activity on our walks in the forest during the day, so it was great to actually see the bird to round it off. It moved trees a few times, but allowed most of the group a scope view before melting away into the forest. As dusk approached, and the temperature began to plummet, we drove several more tracks checking clearings for Ural Owl, but no luck – we would try again in the morning.



Great Grey Shrike, Tuhu, 17th March

SUNDAY 18TH MARCH – *A breezy day with sunny spells, 1C*

We opted for a pre-breakfast excursion today, taking hot coffee with us, and heading slowly along some forest tracks in the hope we might bump into an Ural Owl hunting in the clearings at first light. Sadly we didn't find one, and so headed up to the nearby promontory overlooking the Baltic Sea for a spot of seawatching. There was a stiff north-east wind blowing off the sea, but the seawatching hide

on the point provided ample shelter from the weather and the light was absolutely superb. On the choppy water, were flocks of Common Goldeneye, **Long-tailed Duck** and **Goosander**, bobbing in the surf and catching the bright morning sunshine. The shoreline itself including most of the beach, was frozen solid! The nearby forest produced our first **Willow Tit** of the race *borealis*, a lovely singing bird right on the top of a pine which posed for good views. At the opposite end of the size scale, an immature **White-tailed Eagle** circled over the woodland at the edge of a clearing – a daily occurrence on the tour so far. Back for breakfast, then check out, which was completed by 10am.



Drake Long-tailed Duck – stunning views in the small harbour at Roosta today

Before we left the area, we called in at the small harbour by Roosta [we had actually been looking towards it from the seawatching point earlier]. There were lots of Scandinavian Herring Gulls here of the race *omissus*, but we all remarked at how surprised we were that white-winged gulls were rare here in winter. An immature **White-tailed Eagle**, probably the same individual seen earlier, loomed into view above the fishing boats in the harbour and gave some super close views – we saw it again making another close pass a little later on. The highlight in the harbour itself, which was partly unfrozen, were the spectacular numbers of **Goosanders**. We estimated around 300 birds, and this was a sight like none of us had ever seen before! The light was amazing too, and the salmon pink flush on the males was really visible. Amongst them, we picked out a single redhead **Smew** – our first of the trip – and there were some beautiful **Long-tailed Ducks** including a fine drake right in the harbour. Next we drove to an area of pine forest to look for grouse species – notably Hazel Grouse and Capercaillie which both occur in reasonable numbers. We didn't find either, but we did have good views of a pair of **Common Crossbills**, and managed to eke out a **Crested Tit** among the pines. It was now almost a two hour drive east across the country and around Tallinn, to our lunch stop at

Palmse – a fantastic rustic little restaurant in a big barn with three foot thick stone walls and wooden beams. An excellent lunch was had here, too!



Goosanders – at least 300 were seen at Roosta this morning

Refreshed, we headed back into the field to try a couple of small parks [actually the gardens of spectacular manor houses originally owned by Baltic Germans] to look for woodpeckers. The first of these didn't produce much at all, but the second was rather more productive. We had been hoping to connect with the stunning white-headed **Northern Long-tailed Tit** of the race *caudatus*, and here we had excellent, if brief views of two birds in the big trees in the arboretum. There were one or two **Common Redpolls** about here too, and more nice views of the *europa* Nuthatch. The highlight here though were the excellent views we had of a pair of **Middle-spotted Woodpeckers**, working away quietly extracting sap from the trunk of a tree right above our heads. There was still no sign of any **White-backed Woodpeckers** though, and a third park also drew a blank on this species – but we did enjoy more lovely views of the **Northern Bullfinches** in the process. Our journeys between these sites, had also produced one or two interesting roadside birds, such as groups of **Yellowhammers**, another **Great Grey Shrike**, and a covey of **Grey Partridges** hunkered down in a sheltered hollow in the snow. From here we continued the short distance to the town of Rakvere, where we would be spending the next two nights.

MONDAY 19TH MARCH – *Overcast and milder with a fresh breeze, 2C*

A very tough day of forest birding today! It certainly showed us how lucky we had been with our sightings so far, as almost nine hours of observation yielded virtually nothing! We departed the hotel just before 8am, and headed about half an hour east towards the Russian border, and the extensive mixed forests of Alutaguse. The main targets for the day would be woodpeckers, but other than the ubiquitous **Northern Great-spotted Woodpecker**, which we saw everywhere, we struggled to notch anything different. The first stop was at least a little birdy, with **Marsh Tit**, several **Eurasian Jays** and

europaea Nuthatch noted. At our coffee stop, another patch of forest produced a nice **Black Woodpecker** which was calling away near to the track, and made a couple of close flybys. Slowly driving miles of forest tracks was the tactic, to cover as much ground as possible, and frequent stops to walk and listen, and to play the whistle of Hazel Grouse to try and entice one to the forest edge. We were also looking hard for Capercaillie, but the closest we got to one was a pile of feathers – the remains of a recent European Lynx kill, as we could clearly see the prints of the animal and imagined the whole episode unfolding! We did see two female **Black Grouse**, perched high up in some roadside birches, before reaching our spot for lunch. This was, in truth, the highlight of the day so far – a fabulous and warming wild boar stew served at another rustic and remote location – just superb!



Elk mother and calf, Alutaguse forest, 19th March

The second half of the day followed a similar pattern to the first, and we noted two more flyover **Black Woodpeckers** on forest tracks but sadly no other woodpecker species. There were frequent tracks in the snow to be found of large mammals such as Elk, Lynx and possibly also Wolf at one location, but they had to remain figments of our imagination! At one stop though, we chanced on a young Elk, feeding in a ditch by the side of a forest track. We were already out of the vehicle when we spotted it, and so it was quite easy to scope the animal without disturbing it. As we watched, the mother appeared from the trees and we watched them both together for some time, before they melted away back into the dense forest. That turned out to be our last meaningful action of a frustrating day, as light snow closed in the visibility and saw us heading back to Rakvere a bit earlier than planned. You win some, you lose some!

TUESDAY 20TH MARCH – *Light-moderate snow and light winds, -2C*

We awoke to a winter wonderland in Rakvere, where there had been fresh snow fall overnight. We breakfasted at 7am, and were soon loaded up and ready to leave towards Tallinn for our lunchtime flight back to the UK. There was a little time for birding en route, in the forests around Laheema on the north coast of the country. After negotiating the snow-bound roads, we arrived in the forest and

tried a couple of spots again for Hazel Grouse, White-backed and Three-toed Woodpecker. Tarvo assured us that there were estimated to be 30,000 pairs of Hazel Grouse in Estonia – what we would have given to see one of them! Woodpecker activity was at zero due to the snow, and we had to make do with a Crested Tit before returning to the manor house park where we had seen the **Middle Spotted Woodpeckers** two days previously. Both birds were still present, in the same tree! We weren't able to add any further species though, and so made our way along to Tallinn for the 1335 flight back to London.



Middle Spotted Woodpecker, Laheema forest

SYSTEMATIC LIST

1. Greylag Goose
2. Mute Swan
3. Whooper Swan
4. Mallard
5. Tufted Duck
6. Greater Scaup
7. Steller's Eider
8. Velvet Scoter
9. Common Scoter
10. Long-tailed Duck
11. Common Goldeneye

12. Smew
13. Goosander
14. Red-breasted Merganser
15. Black Grouse
16. Grey Partridge
17. Great Cormorant
18. Eurasian Sparrowhawk
19. White-tailed Eagle
20. Common Buzzard
21. Eurasian Coot
22. Northern Lapwing
23. Black-headed Gull
24. Common Gull
25. Scandinavian Herring Gull [*omissus*]
26. Great Black-backed Gull
27. Stock Dove
28. Common Woodpigeon
29. Collared Dove
30. Eurasian Pygmy-owl
31. Northern Hawk-owl
32. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker
33. Middle Spotted Woodpecker
34. Great Spotted Woodpecker
35. Black Woodpecker
36. Great Grey Shrike
37. Eurasian Jay
38. Common Magpie
39. Spotted Nutcracker
40. Eurasian Jackdaw
41. Rook
42. Hooded Crow
43. Common Raven
44. Eurasian Skylark
45. Crested Tit
46. Marsh Tit
47. Willow Tit
48. Blue Tit
49. Great Tit
50. Northern Long-tailed Tit [*caudatus*]
51. Eurasian Nuthatch [*europa*]
52. Northern Treecreeper [*familiaris*]
53. Goldcrest
54. Eurasian Blackbird
55. Fieldfare
56. Song Thrush
57. Mistle Thrush
58. Common Starling
59. Bohemian Waxwing
60. Yellowhammer
61. Common Chaffinch
62. Northern Bullfinch [*pyrrhula*]
63. European Greenfinch
64. Common Linnet
65. Common Redpoll
66. European Goldfinch

67. Eurasian Siskin
68. House Sparrow
69. Tree Sparrow
70. Black-bellied Dipper

Other Wildlife

1. Roe Deer
2. Elk
3. Red Fox
4. Red Squirrel

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