

Weedon's World



Where have Mike's birding travels taken him this month? Well, that would be Tallinn...

I don't know if you are the same, but I have a bit of a birdwatching routine. Apart from my regular cycle to work (which is getting darker by the day), I take some time at the weekends to visit certain favourite local spots, and there are certain birds in certain places and they are familiar. Things become habitual and cozy, though I am always on the look out for something new. In addition to the constant search for the unusual, there is a comfortable knowledge that this species will be around here and that bird around there, and they will be doing their stuff as they do every week or every year.

This is all well and good, but there is something thrilling about seeing the expected and commonplace in an unusual setting or context, or getting up to something brand new.

I've just come back from a week in Estonia, which you could regard as unfamiliar in itself, and it was indeed my first trip to one of the former Soviet Baltic states. But the flat-lying damp forests, bogs, heath and sandy coast had more than an air of the known, like an unspoilt version of what much of low-lying England may once have looked (though with fabulous roads and excellent facilities). The birding was excellent, with plenty of classic northern European birds on offer, such as Black Woodpecker and White-tailed Eagle, plus the odd Raccoon Dog and Elk (or Moose if you prefer) and a scampering Pine Marten to keep the other-wildlife-watching me happy. But perhaps the most striking was the familiar seen as unfamiliar.

Let me elucidate with a few examples. We had hardly started out on our journey from the capital Tallinn (in the north) to the west of Estonia and were already in wild country and seeing our first Roe Deer. "Surely, those aren't Roe Deer, are they?", thought I. But, after a view through binoculars it was clear that they were Roes, but they didn't look anything like the Roes over here: they were dressed in warm golden orange fur, not the rather dull grey-brown I naturally expect. We saw dozens of Roes over the course of the week and every time I was startled by their colour.

And to take matters to a more bird-related footing, as we drove around the country we flushed up flocks of thousands of Chaffinches, that most domestic of birds lifted to a new order of magnitude, almost becoming a new species simply by dint of numbers.

Similarly, while seawatching, the sheer numbers of birds was almost disorienting. I was impressed by the constant flow of migrant Black-throated Divers, the flocks of 30 plus Velvet Scoter, the hundreds of Scaup and the smattering of scarcer birds such as half-a-dozen Red-necked Grebes. But I just did not expect to see dozens of Sparrowhawks spilling over the waves.

Above the hawks, came more flocks of Chaffinches and White Wagtails, but there were other passerines, too, such as Willow Tit. Willow Tit is a species which I have been watching in the UK for decades. Sadly, their numbers are hugely reduced in counties such as

my own (Cambridgeshire) and these days I am lucky to hear or see one or two in my travels during the year; but their 'chay chay chay' call is engrained in my psyche since I was a young man. But the thing that really startled me in Estonia was hearing the call while seawatching on a northern shore. Well, not so much hearing the call from the pines next to our vantage point, but looking up to see a small pine packed with 30 Willow Tits together: migrants fleeing the harsh Fennoscandian winter to come.

In the western Estonian woods, Willow Tit was the ubiquitous voice, dominating everything else, even Great Tits. The forests tread a fine line between the familiar and the strange. The trees are narrow-trunked, like plantations in Britain, but they are wild, unplanted, old; just growing on poor damp soil. The vegetation is largely familiar, but the birds are subtly different in these Estonian trees: white-breasted northern Nuthatches; neat, grey, sleek Chiffchaffs; Long-tailed Tits with wholly snow-white heads; Bullfinches with weird, ringing trumpet calls; and there's the knowledge that there are White-backed and Grey-headed Woodpeckers out there.

On our final day, when bad weather gave way to clear, bright skies, the migration floodgates opened and the early morning sky became full of migrating passerines: familiar 'viz mig' but on a grand scale, drawing on depth of call-knowledge rarely employed back home. Overhead came flocks of Chaffinches and Bramblings, Tree Pipit with the Meadows, Hawfinch and Crossbill and Siskin; 20-strong flocks of Jays, and a steady stream of Nutcrackers. Classic northern European birds in the throes of deserting a freeze to come; something that just won't happen at home.

And talking of home, as I have hinted at in this column before, we now have Cranes breeding near Peterborough, and one or two Cranes are part of my regular birding year. Perhaps the ultimate highlight of my time in western Estonia was something that I was expecting from the itinerary, but still elevated an accustomed experience to an extraordinary one. As we drove around, we kept encountering groups of Cranes, part of an army of tens of thousand passing through Estonia in autumn.

On one evening, we set up camp on a birding tower and watched some 5,000 Cranes coming into roost in the nearby damp fields. But when I say 'watch', this is to diminish the experience; it's more about simultaneously looking, listening and absorbing flocks of hundreds and hundreds of Cranes flooding in. The sound of thousands of Cranes elevates a haunting, lonely trumpet to a triumphant fanfare to raise the hairs on the most hairless nape – a reminder, if ever we need it, to unexpect the expected! **EW**

■ Mike would like to thank the good people of Estonian Nature Tours for inviting him to Estonia. Look out for more from his trip in our January issue.

It was like an unspoilt version of what much of low-lying England may once have looked

