



Estonian Nature Tours

Trip	: BIRDS & MAMMALS IN AUTUMN
Period	: Fri 4th Sep – Fri 11th Sep 2020
Group size	: 4/7 pax
Grading	: Walking is mainly on good level tracks but we may also enter the forest in search of tracks and signs and this terrain can be a little more difficult
Accommodation	: Comfortable hotel and/or guesthouse with private facilities
Food	: Restaurants and local farms
Leader	: Kaarel Võhandu
Extensions	: Cultural/sightseeing extensions available on request
Organizer/Agent	: Estonian Nature Tours, e-mail: info@naturetours.ee

An 8-day fully-inclusive holiday amongst unique, untouched nature with winding rivers, vast floodplains, mires, bogs and primeval forests. We will search for mammals including Raccoon Dog, Red Fox, European Beaver, Wild Boar, Elk, Roe Deer and Brown Bears and enjoy birdwatching as well. You have a slim chance of seeing one of the more elusive residents such as Wolf and Lynx! Even if you don't see these animals, you will have plenty of fun deciphering the many mammal tracks we find along the way!

Estonian forests are renowned in Europe for their healthy populations of mammals with around 700-800 Lynx, over 150 Wolves, 500-600 Brown Bears and almost 20 000 Beavers – tremendous numbers for such a small country. In all, sixty-four species of mammals have been recorded in Estonia including several European rarities, the most endangered examples being the European Mink, several species of dormouse and the Flying Squirrel.

Day 1 Arrive in Tallinn, to Haapsalu

Day 2 Matsalu National Park

Day 3 Põõsaspea & Haapsalu; Beaver boat-trip – **an optional trip!**

Day 4 To central Estonia

Day 5 Soomaa National Park

Day 6 To North-East Estonia; Bear Hide

Day 7 Alutaguse forests: birding & tracking

Day 8 Departure

Highlights

Mammals: Raccoon Dog, Red Fox, Elk, Roe Deer, Wild Boar (difficult!), Brown Bear (95%), European Beaver (probably), tracks and droppings of Lynx and Wolves etc.

Birds: Golden Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, hundreds (or thousands) of Common Cranes, White-fronted and Bean Geese, thousands of Barnacle Geese, peak autumn migration of songbirds, waders and waterfowls, Ural Owl, Pygmy Owl, Goshawk, Peregrine Falcon, Black Grouse, White-backed Woodpecker, Three-toed Woodpecker, Black Woodpecker, Lesser Spotted

Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Yellow-browed Warbler (probably), Nutcracker, Crested Tit, Long-tailed Tit, Bearded Tit etc.

1 Fri (4th September) TALLINN, to West-Estonia

We will pick you up from Tallinn Airport and drive to West-Estonia. We make some birding stops at Taebala and Oru fields (or Vihterpalu forests) before check-in and enjoy dinner at a restaurant (Tuulingu Guesthouse).

2 Sat (5th September) MATSALU NATIONAL PARK

Following our coastal pursuit of migratory and staging waterbirds we reach Matsalu National Park. This is the most famous bird area in Estonia, known as one of the most important breeding and stop-over areas for waterfowl and shorebirds in the whole of Northern Europe. Over 40 sq km, this reserve consists of large open floodplains and coastal meadows, riparian and coastal woodlands, river delta and marshlands and shallow Matsalu Bay with 3,000 hectares of reedbeds, numerous islands and seven birdwatching towers around it. This makes this reserve wonderful as migratory staging place for vast numbers of coastal and waterbirds. Later in the Autumn, Matsalu Bay is typically covered with the white spots of about 10,000 Whooper and Bewick Swans, tens of thousands of Goldeneye, Pochard, Wigeon, Teal and waders. Also, several thousand Barnacle, Bean, Greylag and White-fronted Geese harvest the grass of local meadows and fields.

The Matsalu area is also well known as an autumn Common Crane staging area. As many as 20,000 birds gather around the bay and feed in the adjacent fields (peak time is mid-September!). We will drive to the Puise Peninsula in the early morning and explore a variety of Põgari-Sassi coastal habitats. We also visit Haeska watchtower (the record for the highest day list of bird species in Northern Europe was achieved from this tower in May – 128 species by nightfall). After lunch we drive around in more agricultural landscape where we hope to see flocks of migratory birds - including hundreds of Bramblings, Chaffinches and Waxwings. Besides passerine migration we hope to improve our bird list with several raptors, such as Rough-legged Buzzard etc. When it gets darker, we shall watch from viewing platforms and while enjoying the geese or late Cranes we'll also look out for White-tailed Eagles, harriers – and Elk. Dinner at the local guesthouse (Tuulingu Guesthouse).

3 Sun (6th September) PÕÕSASPEA & HAAPSALU; BEAVER BOAT-TRIP

We will start from the most north-easterly point, Cape Põõsaspea. This small north-stretching spit is situated at the migratory crossroads where masses of waterbirds coming from the gulfs of Bothnia and Finland meet. Cape Põõsaspea is the best place for autumn passage waterbirds. During one season, nearly 2.5 million Arctic-breeding wildfowl passed this narrow bottleneck, with daily totals sometimes exceeding 100,000. The biggest daily counts here include 8,400 Velvet Scoter, 6,000 Greater Scaup, and over 2,000 Red-throated and Black-throated Divers. Around 300,000 Long-tailed Duck pass the point during the first two weeks of October. Rare waterbirds seen from this location include White-billed Diver, King Eider, Grey Phalarope and Little Auk. Rare or scarce passerines have included Desert Wheatear and Yellow-browed and Dusky Warblers.

After a lunch at Dirham, we will visit Haapsalu town which has many shallow sheltered bays, coastal lagoons, marshlands and reedbeds. The spectacular view from the coastal promenade over Haapsalu Bay can deliver tens of thousands of Goldeneye, Coot, Greater Scaup, Tufted Duck, Wigeon, Smew and other wildfowl, including Smew. Regular distractions include White-tailed Eagles, and Common Cranes, swans, waders and other exciting birds are all present.

AN OPTIONAL: Later in the afternoon we will take a boat ride through the vast reed-beds in Matsalu, the largest expanse on the Baltic coast. Dusk is the time that Beavers leave their lodges to spend an industrious night felling riverside trees and saplings. A little quiet patience is required here, but with luck you are likely to see several individuals going about their nightly construction work and swimming about, with background sounds by thousands of geese and ducks. We eat our dinner in the boat or at a restaurant (Tuulingu Guesthouse).

4 Mon (7th September) To central Estonia

We will move to central Estonia in the late morning. On our way to Soomaa National Park we drive around in more agricultural landscape where we hope to see flocks of migratory birds - including hundreds of Bramblings, Chaffinches and Waxwings. Beside passerine migration we hope to improve our bird list with several raptors, such as Rough-legged Buzzard etc.

After a check-in we will have our evening meal at the guesthouse (Vanaõue Holiday Center).

5 Tue (8th September) SOOMAA NATIONAL PARK

Early morning takes us to the Soomaa National Park in central Estonia. With the territory of 390 km², Soomaa is our second biggest national park and one of the biggest nature protection areas in general. The national park is created to protect raised bogs, floodplains and paludifield forests.

The territory of natural park is mostly covered with large mires, separated from each other by the rivers. The natural woodlands mixed with swamps and rivers, makes it perfect habitat for many Western Taiga forest specialities. With the great network of hiking trails, Soomaa is really enjoyable birding place for any nature lover. Early morning we will be looking for Capercaillies.

As Soomaa NP has one of the strongholds for this endangered species, Capercaillie hens are fairly often found at the roadside when they pick gravel. With some luck one can spot males nearby trees or sometimes even lekking on the road. As the sunrise continues we will take few forest walks to search for Woodpeckers. Soomaa National Park is probably the best place to spot Grey-headed Woodpeckers, while Black and White-backed Woodpeckers are also regularly spotted. The same forests are also perfect habitat for another gamebird – Hazel Grouse. After refreshing lunch and some rest, late evening will be spent to look for the Owls. Pygmy and Ural Owl has both good breeding population here. Beside birds it is also worth to keep your eyes open for the mammals. Early morning drives are good to spot Elks, while night drives usually provide sightings of Raccoon Dogs (Vanaõue Holiday Center).

6 Wed (9th September) To North-East Estonia; BROWN BEAR HIDE

After the early breakfast, we will move to one of the most densely forested corners of Estonia - it is similar in appearance to taiga and is called Alutaguse. A large storm in 2001, and forest cuttings after that, have changed the look of this landscape a lot. New forest is the best place to find Roe Deer and Elk who in turn are targets for carnivores. Alutaguse is situated near the Russian border and forms a solid natural landscape through to St.Peterburg Oblast's forests and bogs. That's why Alutaguse is an area with huge number of Brown Bears and now – after hundreds of years – is also the heart of Estonian "bear culture". There are numerous real-life stories of young bears in human villages but local people still manage to take it with humor and live side by side with bears.

After lunch we have a rest at the guesthouse, then later in the afternoon the local specialist will guide us through the forest (1 km) to the Bear Hide. The wooden hide is cozy, with comfortable seats and viewing slots at the front and beds at the back so you can sleep in the very darkest part of the night or catch a nap. At the far end is a separate dry toilet (wet napkins/tissues provided).

Brown Bear can appear at any time during the night (sometimes even before). Raccoon Dogs and sometimes even Wolves occasionally visit the feeding place. Last autumn 6 - 10 Brown Bears appeared regularly at this site plus 6 - 8 Raccoon Dogs making for some thrilling viewing. We eat a packed dinner at the hide (Bear Hide/Matsu Guesthouse).

7 Thu (10th September) — ALUTAGUSE FORESTS: BIRDING & TRACKING

You will remain in the hide during the early morning then enjoy some birdwatching on our way back to the hotel. We will visit Western Taiga type forest in order to experience the autumn calling season of resident Black, Grey-headed, Three-toed and White-backed Woodpeckers as well as listen for the calls of Hazel Grouse. We may see Capercaillie and Black Grouse, as well as forest tits, Crossbills and other passerines. Sometimes single Golden Eagles and Buzzards also appear.

After breakfast at the guesthouse we'll catch up on sleep and enjoy lunch. In the afternoon, you will spend the rest of today exploring on foot and by vehicle in one of the Estonian's best known Brown Bear regions where you have a slim chance of seeing one of these more elusive residents. Even if you don't see any of animals, you will have plenty of fun deciphering the many mammal tracks you find along the way! Dinner at the guesthouse (Matsu Guesthouse).

8 Fri (11th Septemeber) — Departure...

We will return to Tallinn by late morning and have a pleasant guided tour of Tallinn Old Town. Tallinn was made a UNESCO World heritage Site in 1997 due to the medieval city centre, the finest in northern Europe, with cobble-stone streets & buildings that date back to the 15th century. We have some free time for shopping before we will drive to the airport to catch your homeward flight...

PRICE: **1695 € per person**
Single suppl. 210 €

Includes:

English speaking guide throughout the journey. All meals and all local transport. Entrance fees to protected areas and museums. City guide in Tallinn. All overnights on a twin/double shared basis:

www.tuulingu.ee

www.vanaoue.ee

www.matsutalu.eu

VAT.

Excludes:

Beverages and sauna. International tickets. Insurance.

CANCELLATIONS

More than 70 days	deposit (20%) only
70-15 days before departure	50% of total tour cost
15 days or less before departure	100% of total tour cost

INSURANCE

It is a condition of joining one of our holidays that you must be fully insured against medical and personal accident risks. Please send to us the name of your insurance provider, the contact telephone number, your policy number, expire date and details of the medical and repatriation cover provided.

Terms and Conditions Instruction: <http://www.naturetours.ee/terms-and-conditions/>

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