

Estonia

20th May – 27th May 2006

Leaders: Uku Paal and Roy Atkins.

Guests: Alan Lazell, Liz Huxley, Andrew Dodd, Joan Jacobs, Maggi Short, Mark Gibbons, Mary and Dave Braddocks, Nick Razey, Joanna Fort, Ian and Grant Findlay

Day 1

We meet up early at Gatwick Airport for our flight out on Estonian Airways arriving at Tallinn just after 2:30 pm. The baggage is rather slow appearing but outside we meet Marika who welcomes us to Estonia and leads us to the van where we load on our bags and drive to Roosta, where we are staying for the whole trip in delightful little wooden cabins. This takes around an hour and a half and we see our first birds en route - Hooded Crows, Magpies and Buzzard but little else. We are rather surprised by the amount of snow and Marika tells us that this is actually unusual for the time of year and that it is the first real snow they have had all winter! She also provides us with some very nice cake she has made plus some of the local tea - made from Sea buckthorn berries - and coffee. The tea is actually very nice!

We arrive at our accommodation where our guide Uku is waiting to meet us and after checking in we have a few minutes to settle into our cabins before meeting up to go for a short drive in search of wildlife. It is now 6:30 pm and the light is just starting to fade. The sun is setting behind the trees as we drive through the snowy scenery and it is really beautiful. There are extensive areas of woodland and fields and we drive along the snowy tracks scanning the trees and fence posts. A Roe Deer crosses the road ahead of us and as we pass where it disappeared in to the trees we spot three of them in the shadows. Further on we get out of the van to scan and listen. Uku immediately spots three Elk (or Moose if you're used to seeing them in America) at the far side of the field. They look like two females and a youngster and seem almost as interested in us as we are in them. What a great start! Apart from these it seems rather quiet with just a Common Crane calling distantly which is very atmospheric. The light is starting to really go now so we start driving back. Joanna and Uku spot a large bird perched near the road as we drive by and we reverse back to see a superb Ural Owl! We can't believe our luck even though the views are rather brief as the bird flies before we can really get a chance to admire it. It disappears amongst the trees and sadly refuses to reappear despite Uku's impressions which start another bird calling some way off. We head back for our evening meal and a roding woodcock crosses the road up ahead as we drive.

After a great evening meal we go through the checklist. We have only been here a few hours and we've seen Elk and Ural Owl already!

Day 2

We have decided to start the trip with a visit to Saaremaa Island – the only place where Steller's Eiders can be found, which means an early start as we have a long drive to the ferry and we don't want to miss it! The roads are still covered with snow as we travel and we haven't been on the road for long when we spot an Elk on the road up ahead. It walks into the trees as we get close we realise there are in fact five of them!

We eat breakfast on the way and keep our eyes open for birds in the fields it trees. Hooded Crows are common as are magpies and we see occasional Ravens and flocks of Skylarks. We say our farewells to Marika when we stop for petrel at Lihula and get out to stretch our legs. Almost immediately we find a Great Grey Shrike! It looks wonderful through the scope, lit up from

below by the snow on the ground, and even starts singing. A Yellowhammer is also in song behind us and we spot some distant geese. As we drive on a flock of White-fronted Geese fly over the van.

We arrive at the ferry port and get out to scan the sea while we wait to board. There are several Long-tailed Ducks, a few Goldeneye, various gulls and a few Goosanders. Then it's onto the ferry and we all head up to the deck to scan the sea from the higher vantage point. The crossing takes around half an hour and we find Common, Black-headed, Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls, Coots, more Goosanders and spot a White-tailed Eagle on one of the islands. The weather is perfect with blue sky and sunshine and just a light breeze, though still cold. We start seeing more and more Long-tailed Ducks and have counted several hundred by the time we reach the other side. In with them are a few Common Scoters and Common Eider. A flock of Whooper Swans fly past plus a few Barnacle and Greylag Geese.

Once on Saaremaa Island we still have quite a long drive but at least we can stop now if we spot things and make our first pause when Maggi spots a Common Crane close to the road. It's the first we have seen well and we enjoy a good view as it feeds along with Skylarks, Rooks and Woodpigeons.

We drive on eventually stopping to meet a local birder called Velto Volke. He is a really nice guy who rings White-tailed Eagle chicks and also studies Steller's Eiders and we hope he will be able to take us to the right spot to see them. He also knows a good place for Nutcracker and we make a stop a little way down the road and walk along a forest track playing Nutcracker call. The call is a little reminiscent of Jay and clearly one of the local Jays thinks so too and flies over to check us out. We can hear glimpses of Woodlark song and walking down the track Uku scans a little way ahead at the edge of a lake and spots it feeding quietly on the shore. It is great to get such good views of this bird before it flies up to a small tree and starts singing again. Sadly no Nutcrackers appear so we drive on pausing a little further on to admire two more Common Cranes in a nearby field that look superb as they take flight and flap slowly off over the trees.

Now we drive out to a headland where we are hoping to find the Steller's Eiders... the most important bird we are hoping to see today and for some people the main reason they came on the trip! According to our local guide this is the best spot to look for them. Scanning the sea there are lots of birds here including large numbers of Goldeneye, Eiders, Goosanders, Red-breasted Mergansers, Long-tailed Ducks, Mute Swans and several Red-throated Divers flying past - but no Steller's Eiders! We spend quite a long time slowly scanning as we know the whole flock can dive simultaneously so it is actually possible to miss them but after a while things are not looking good. Then scanning out in an area we have checked already Roy notices a large flock of birds flying straight towards us... they look like eiders from the front but the females look very dark and then as they bank round the orange is visible underneath and he shouts "Steller's Eiders!" There must be almost 300 of them! Elated we quickly have all the telescopes trained on the spot where they have landed in an incredibly tight flock. They are a little distant but you can see that there is some orange on the black and white males and the females look very dark indeed. Their behaviour is typical of this species as they are incredible tightly packed together. For almost half an hour we watch them, hoping they will drift closer, and although at first we think they are coming a little nearer eventually we decide to call it a day and head on for lunch.

Lunch is at a delightful spot rather like a village hall and the food is delicious - salmon, potatoes and salad plus a delicious desert. As we arrive we get fantastic views of a White-tailed Eagle as it glides high overhead and while we eat we can look out over the surrounding fields where a few Fieldfares and Lapwings are feeding. Once we have eaten we drive some local lanes and walk through the forest again hoping for Nutcracker but again with no luck. We do get great view of Willow Tit, calling loudly and looking rather smarter and greyer than those at home, plus

Treecreeper, Goldcrest and Coal Tit. A few deep purple flowers of Hepatica add a bit of colour along the verge.

Next we drive to Kuressare where we walk to the edge of a coastal bay and scan the sea. There are lots of Coots, Tufted Ducks, Mute Swans, Goldeneye and Cormorants, the latter of the continental race with very white heads and necks. But the real stars of the show here are the Smew. Scanning the whole bay we find perhaps twenty in all but some are really close and one particular group of four males and a female look fantastic in the bright sunshine and are even displaying, raising their little crests.

We eventually drag ourselves away as we are aware of the time for the ferry back to the mainland and set off in that direction, pausing some way down the road when a White-tailed Eagle flies up from the verge! It is incredibly close and we get fantastic views as it perches in the trees nearby.

As we cross Muhu Dam we make a short stop to see what else we can find. There are dozens of swans here and checking through them we soon realise that all three species are here making for great comparison of Whooper and Bewick's. There are a few Greylag Geese, lots of Tufted Ducks, Goldeneye and some more Smew including a very nice pair that look great in the sun near the reeds. There are also a few Scaup including two very smart males.

We head to the ferry but despite the temptation of more birding on deck the temptation of coffee is stronger and we spend the first half of the crossing watching out the windows while the coffee goes down a treat. It seems considerably quieter than on the way across this morning and we don't add anything else to what we have already seen before the light fades on the last leg of the journey. Our final stop is at the crossroads where we stopped this morning and saw the Great Grey Shrike which is still here! We also get great views of two Red Foxes hunting voles in the long grass, and they look superb with their thick winter coats.

We arrive back at Roosta quite late and well ready for our evening meal at the end of a really great day - a lot of driving but lots of really good birds and of course the great feeling of having seen those Steller's Eiders.

Day 3

We meet up at 6 am and drive to an area of mixed woodland and clearings with Juniper and as we arrive we see Stock Dove, Yellowhammer and Mistle Thrushes flying through. We enjoy a nice cup of coffee and some biscuits beside the van while we watch an Elk walking past and disappearing into the trees. We are really hoping for Nutcracker and Uku plays the call in a few places as we walk through the forest. The weather is beautiful again with a clear blue sky and brilliant sunshine but it is really cold and the snow now has a crisp crunchy layer on top. There is the occasional Blue Tit and Great Tit and more Mistle Thrushes and a Chaffinch but it seems very quiet. The walk is really enjoyable more for the scenery than anything. The snow makes everything beautiful and the cameras are out in force! We find lots of tracks of different animals as we walk and have fun trying to work out what has passed this way during the night. There are plenty of Roe Deer slots and the Elk tracks are easy enough to identify just by their size! Others are more difficult but the Wild Boar have made a real mess digging up the ground in several places presumably searching for roots and the tracks leading away into the trees look like chunky deer tracks. Further on we find, what look like, rather small dog tracks. It seems a very odd place for these and Uku suggests they could in fact be Raccoon Dog tracks which would make more sense and would be the right size animal. It is great to be able to compare them with some Fox tracks a few feet away. There are Brown Hare tracks too and some tiny tracks that might be Stoat but it is very hard to be sure. A lovely group of six Common Cranes fly over and the odd skein of geese then further on we get wonderful views of perhaps the smartest

Crested Tit I have ever seen. It somehow looks immaculately 'clean' perhaps because it is lit up so well by the sun off the snow, and it is also backlit with light shining through the crest... simply gorgeous! As we walk back towards the van we also get great views of a Willow Tit and a couple of Bullfinches fly over, looking really bright red beneath and presumably the northern race.

After a very enjoyable buffet breakfast we head out again and drive down to Matsalu National Park where we follow the north side of the bay driving down to a viewpoint with a tower over looking the water. As we walk to the tower we spot a couple of Tree Sparrows and a few Greenfinches. There are lots of Whooper Swans out in the bay and plenty of geese around flying over in various sized groups. They seem to be mostly White-fronted Geese and Bean Geese, with some of both races, but also a few Greylags. Out in the bay are dozens of Goldeneye plus Goosanders, Mallards, a few Pintail and a surprising number of Smew asleep on the ice. We see a couple of Snipe and there are lots of Lapwigs displaying over the fields including a couple that seem rather unhappy to discover a Red Fox trotting through their territory. It really is a beautiful animal with a thick red coat blowing in the breeze and it walks slowly through, straight to something in the rushes that it starts eating so presumably it already knew it was there. There are a few Bewick's Swans out there too and three fly past very close looking immaculate in the sunshine. We walk back to the van spotting a Sparrowhawk and a Marsh Tit as we go.

We drive further along the coast stopping to check out a flock of birds in the fields. They are mostly Skylarks with a few Yellowhammers but also a single Reed Bunting, a Meadow Pipit and a couple of Linnets. Further on a big flock of Snow buntings flies up and away across the fields, perhaps 200 in all. They look beautiful catching the sun and can be easily seen even a considerable distance away. We are due to be at our lunch spot soon so we decide to try for them on the way back. We make one more stop before heading for lunch where there are more Lapwigs, Goldfinch, and two White-tailed Eagles perched on a huge boulder together. There are more swans and geese here too and a few Pintail.

Lunch is at a renovated fish factory at the end of the peninsula and is simply delightful! We have a very friendly welcome from the lady owner and her little son who is full of energy! The room we eat in is really homely with a wood burning stove, settees, tables and book shelves covered in various ornaments, many related to fishing. Here are fishing nets and buoys everywhere as well as shells, model birds, a bear skin rug and all kinds of lovely things. We sit at the table on benches with rugs thrown over them and have a delicious Fish Chowder with salad and home made bread. There is Sea Buckthorn tea as well as ordinary tea and coffee and some delicious cake.

After we have finished eating we head back along the road to see if we can find the Snow Buntings. Taking a narrow track through the fields we soon find them and get terrific views through the scopes. We continue on our way back towards Roosta spotting a group of Common Cranes and more geese as we go. We are just driving through Haapsalu when suddenly Roy shouts, "Waxwings!!!" We are soon pulled in at the side of the road and dash back to see them, a lovely flock of around 40 birds very close to the road. They are always a treat and these birds are in perfect condition some of the males looking absolutely stunning! At first we watch from a little way back then, when we realise other people are walking past very close, we try getting a bit nearer and in the end get ridiculously close views. They are coming down to a hedge that is full of large berries and really stuffing themselves... fantastic!

We drive back to Roosta where we have a short break of a couple of hours before heading out again to go back into the forest in search of owls. We drive slowly through the forest spraying the melting slush either side as the temperature is now rising and the snow is melting fast. The forest looks really good and we drive through some areas that are good for Hazel Hen but no luck and all we see are a few Roe Deer. It seems that the snow has stopped a lot of bird activity

in its tracks as Uku says that last weeks there was a lot of bird song and owls were calling quite a lot but this week the forest is silent and we spend a frustrating walk listening for owls but hearing nothing. Finally we get back to the van having seen no birds and make a few stops to listen for Pygmy Owls. At the third spot Uku hears an owl calling and we all jump out feeling optimistic but despite our best attempts to coax it over it doesn't call again. You can tell Uku is feeling frustrated and he says it is really unusual to have so much trouble seeing these birds but we all know birding can be like that sometimes and can't help feeling a bit sorry for him after all his efforts.

Day 4

We start the day with a visit to an area of woodland that has a good reputation for sightings of Capercaillie and drive slowly scanning into the trees as go. An Elk crosses the road as we drive then we enter a beautiful bit of old woodland, very atmospheric and rather reminiscent of Speyside in Scotland. We make a stop and once out of the van decide to try playing a bit of Black Woodpecker as they are reasonably common here. There is an immediate response to the call, but not from a Black Woodpecker! As the call echoes out over the reedbed beside the wood a pair of Common Cranes raise their heads and call back in unison, a wonderful sound that seems to hang in the early morning mist and sends shivers down your spine! We walk through the trees listening carefully and watching for any movement but it is quiet and all we find are three Crested Tits. There is lots of evidence of Black Woodpecker with nest holes and obvious places where they have been excavating insects from the dead trunks but the birds themselves are not to be seen. The Cranes are calling now and again and we also watch a nice group fly over before we head back to breakfast where we are welcomed back by a singing Woodlark.

After breakfast we head south making our first stop at a rather scruffy bit of conifer plantation which has been partially felled creating a bit of a clearing. As we get out Uku spots a Nutcracker drop from the top of a distant tree and we scan around hoping it will reappear. After a minute or so there is no sign and we decide to try playing the call and to our delight this gets an immediate response and the bird flies straight over and perches right on top of a nearby tree. It is a fantastic view of this tricky bird that has been so elusive all holiday and we are thrilled to watch it fly across to another tree nearby allowing some people to get great photos. A few Jays also start flying through and we count six of them before we leave this spot.

With the change in the weather birds appear to be migrating this morning and there are regular flocks of geese and cranes passing overhead. We pause to scan a field where there at least three thousand geese, a mixed flock of White-fronted Geese and Bean Geese but they are rather distant and hard to check and frustratingly no roads head that way so we move on. Many fields have a pair of Common Cranes and in some they are even beginning to display, holding out their wings and jumping in the air.

We arrive at the Lihula Bog area and as we pass a large field we raise our binoculars to check a flock of Rooks... "Black Grouse!" shouts Uku and to our amazement what we thought were just Rooks and nearly ignored are in fact a flock of 20 Black Grouse, all males, feeding in a stubble field! We try getting out of the van to look at them properly and are surprised when they take flight as we really believed they were too distant to be worried by us. We walk round the edge of the field following a track in the hope of finding them again but with no luck however we do start finding quite a few small birds. There are Greenfinches, Chaffinches, Yellowhammers, Skylarks and Reed Buntings in the field and a Golden Plover flies overhead calling. As we walk back more small birds fly into a single tree in the middle of the field with a nice mix of Greenfinches, a Chaffinch, a few Bramblings, lots of Linnets and some really smart Mealy Redpolls with lovely frosty looking plumage and pale pink rumps. We check them carefully in case there are any Arctic Redpolls there but perhaps we are getting a bit ambitious! There is a lovely flock of perhaps a hundred Snow Buntings in the background then Joanna points out a

Buzzard hovering high over the same field. A quick check and we realise it is in fact a Rough-legged Buzzard, a real beauty with all the typical markings of this species including a white tail with black tip. It is hovering with deep wing-flaps then suddenly plunges to the ground though soon reappears having clearly failed to catch whatever it was after. We watch it for some time before it finally drifts away.

We drive on through Lihula town and then stop beside an old wooded meadow. The trees look old and gnarled and there is plenty of dead wood and Uku says it is a White-backed Woodpecker spot so we get out and listen. There are no woodpeckers drumming or calling at first then suddenly we hear the call of a Grey-headed Woodpecker. Uku does a very good impression and almost straight away a Grey-headed Woodpecker comes flying over and lands in the trees close by allowing us excellent views! It is clearly annoyed to hear another woodpecker in its territory and calls loudly several times flying from tree to tree and is then joined by its mate. Eventually they decide there is no intruder and calm down and well pleased with our sighting we travel on to Tuhu Bog. This is a large area of heathy bog-land with scattered rather stunted pines and at first we become a bit distracted by the plants as Roy points out Cranberry, Bog Rosemary, Cowberry and others but a Great Grey Shrike soon gets us back into birding mode and scanning around we pick up a couple of raptors. The first we check is a buzzard but there is great excitement when we realise the next is a Golden Eagle! Despite being quite distant we get prolonged views as it soars and have enough time for everyone to enjoy scope views of this impressive bird which seems almost out of place in such flat terrain!

Lunch is at Hanila Museum and proves to be another excellent spot with delicious home-made bread, stew and cakes as well as the opportunity to visit their interesting collection of Estonian items. These include farming and fishing equipment and all kinds of things that would have been used in the home or in cooking and manufacturing as well as old fashioned clothes and even the toilet is over a hundred years old! The warmer weather has woken a Small Tortoiseshell that is trapped in the building. As we say farewell to our hosts a Great Spotted Woodpecker appears in the trees outside and a couple more Small Tortoiseshells fly by.

Our next port of call is overlooking some marshes and reedbeds with large flocks of swans and geese. All three species of swans are found and there are hundreds of geese in the distance with smaller numbers feeding nearby including plenty of Bean Geese of both races again, White-fronted Geese and even a few Barnacle Geese on the water. There are plenty of duck here too with lots of Goldeneye, Tufted Ducks, Pintail, Smew and Goosanders plus our first Pochard and Wigeon. A Curlew flies past and we find a reasonably close White-tailed Eagle sat on the shore. It's a beautiful spot but there are definitely no grebes despite the rumours!

Heading back in the direction of home we make what we now call a 'tanking' stop. That is when the driver goes to fill the van while we wander around and do a bit of birding. This time we walk through some trees to a spot beside a ruined castle looking out from a crag over a wide expanse of fields. It's a great spot to scan for raptors and we soon find our first Kestrel of the trip. There are a few Linnets in the trees, lots of Rooks and Jackdaws which are interesting in that they seem to include both darker naped birds like ours in Britain, and others with paler napes and a short white semi-collar which are considered the northern race.

We are soon on the road again and suddenly there is a yell from Mary... "Stork!" In a field right by the road is a very smart White Stork and we pause to enjoy watching him, a very clean bird by White Stork standards! We give a little cheer as we pass the Waxwings in Haapsalu and arrive back in plenty of time to freshen up before our evening meal. What a great day it's been.

Day 5

We have an earlier start today as we want to get down to the best woodlands for woodpeckers

for early morning. It is still dark as we leave Roosta and we keep an eye open for owls as we travel and even stop at a couple of places to listen for Tengmalm's and Pygmy owls but no luck. We hear a distant booming Bittern and a Woodcock flies by. Most people sleep for the main part of the journey and miss a glorious sunrise through the mist over the fields and trees which is simply beautiful... especially with the occasional flocks of geese or cranes flying by.

We arrive at Luitemaa National Park with the sun already warming the air and there is plenty of bird song as we start a short walk listening for woodpeckers as we go. There are Mistle Thrushes, Blackbirds and Great Tits all singing as we walk and a pair of Buzzards displaying over our heads. Two Red Foxes run across the track ahead of us and two Redwings fly over. Uku tries playing a recording of White-backed Woodpecker but there is no response though as we walk back to the van a woodpecker flies over! Frustratingly it doesn't stop and vanishes over the trees but I am fairly certain it is a White-backed.

We move on to a new spot and Uku tells us we are right beside another White-backed Woodpecker territory. We decide to have coffee and breakfast first as we feel in need of something but we have hardly started pouring coffee when Andrew says he can hear a woodpecker drumming! A quick scan and immediately two woodpeckers are found - Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers - and they are displaying to each other, the female flying from tree to tree while the male gives chase raising his wings above his back whenever he lands and drumming a little. They are quite hard to follow as they are so restless but it is delightful to watch and while that is happening Uku says he can hear a drumming White-backed Woodpecker. He plays a little bit of the recording again and immediately it flies in landing really close and giving fantastic views. Alan is looking particularly pleased as this was one of the key species he came to see - this being the only species of European woodpecker he hasn't seen before. And what fantastic views! It perches right out in the open allowing good scope views and is joined by a second bird so we get to see every detail. Now we can really enjoy breakfast and coffee!

It is a lovely spot to stand and enjoy breakfast while listening to the birds, watching the woodpeckers and scanning around to see what else we can find, and soon enough we start finding other birds. A White Wagtail is feeding at the edge of a nearby field and flocks of geese are flying over at regular intervals, mainly White-fronted but also Bean Geese. A Red Fox trots across the field and we enjoy watching him through the telescope, a really beautiful one with thick fur. It is our fifth of the day as two crossed the road on the way here and two crossed the track earlier. They do seem incredibly common in Estonia! Next, four Black Grouse appear and we spend a while watching the males displaying, tail spread and making their bubbling call... a real treat and amazingly close.

We move on making a brief stop to try playing Black Woodpecker call and see if we get any response. While there we hear a Grey-headed Woodpecker calling and a quick whistle brings it bounding into view and perching on a tree in a clearing beside us. It stays there long enough for everyone to get really good telescope views before it flies back where it came. Our next spot is where Uku found a pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers last week. A Brimstone butterfly flies by as we park and what we think at first is a small orange butterfly turns out to be an Orange-underwing moth. We listen for woodpeckers but they are forgotten when suddenly a Hazel Hen calls from amongst the trees! Everyone listens quietly while Uku tries playing a little of Hazel Hen recording hoping it will fly across the track in front of us but it just carries on calling from where it is. It sounds so close it is a little frustrating but despite our best efforts in the end we just have to admit that we aren't going to get to see it. We walk a little way up another track to look at some tracks including some possible Lynx tracks and almost immediately in flies the Three-toed Woodpecker! Over the next fifteen minutes or so we get tremendous views of this bird and its mate as they perch right out in the open on a dead tree taking it in turns to drum. At times both birds can be seen in the same scope view and the yellow cap on the male is far

more colourful than any of the books show it.

We drive on and haven't gone far when suddenly Mary shouts "There's an owl!" We pull to a halt and looking back into the trees there is an enormous Ural Owl, perched out in the sunshine looking back at us! It is really close and surely the best view you could ever dream of getting of such a bird. After a moment it turns round on its branch and launches off with heavy flaps into the trees but we are elated and Mary is grinning from ear to ear!

Our next stop is beside a tall stand of conifers with a small felled area beside us and here we try playing Black Woodpecker call. Almost immediately a Black Woodpecker calls back then flies in over the tall trees and across the clearing perching on some trees on the far side. Soon it flies again this time landing in a more obscured spot but much closer and everyone is well pleased with their sightings. It flies again and looks huge as it vanishes over the trees again back where it came. It drums loudly but we resist the temptation to play more of the call and enjoy listening to it instead. While traveling earlier a couple of people glimpsed a Great Spotted Woodpecker so the running total is six species leaving only Middle Spotted to get - so now we head on to a local village where Uku tells us there is a pair nesting.

En route we pass through some farmland a spot a couple of White Storks in the fields as well as the occasional one's on the nests. They have only just arrived in the last couple of days. A lovely male Black Redstart is perched on a radio aerial of a small cottage and we pause to admire him before continuing. We arrive in the village and find a huge Wood Ants nest at the side of the road. It is incredible how despite the recent cold weather the warmth of today's sun has really changed everything with birds singing everywhere and this Wood Ants nest is very active indeed with millions of ants crawling all over the surface and through the vegetation all around. Within moments of arriving we hear both Lesser Spotted and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers calling and can't believe the views of we get of both species over the next ten minutes. Both are very active, calling and drumming, and seem completely unbothered by our presence perching on trees right beside us! What an amazing morning it has been... all seven Estonian species of woodpecker in one morning!

We are ready for lunch and head to a local farm where two lovely ladies have prepared a great lunch for us including bread with mushrooms in it and the most delicious cake I have eaten in I don't know how long! We also can't resist trying on the crazy hats on the hat bush! David and Mary buy a couple that look great on them. We eat at a table outside as the weather is now so warm and several Small Tortoiseshells, Brimstones and a Peacock butterfly fly through while we eat. Everyone has been really impressed with the lunches on this trip and this might be the best yet. Once we have eaten we are directed to a ditch just up the track where we can see some beaver activity, with several birch trees gnawed through or almost through at the base. It would be great to see the animals themselves but they are not so active at this time of year and are very hard to see.

Having done so well in the woodlands we decide to head out to the coast and see what we can find there and make a stop at a large area of pools and reedbeds. There is a small flock of Teal flying round as we arrive then from a small tower overlooking some pools we spot a Kingfisher. There are a few common ducks, gulls etc and several Grey Herons but nothing else so we follow a track through the reedbed listening for Bearded Tit. It isn't long before we hear one 'pinging' a little way ahead but deep in the reeds so Uku plays a little of their call to try and coax it nearer. He places the speaker on the ground at the edge of the reeds and we are astonished at how the bird comes right in and investigates the speaker itself hopping all round it! They really are the best views of Bearded Tit you could ever wish for and hopefully it headed back into the reeds feeling pleased that it managed to see off this little box invading its territory! It would be great to know what was going on in its head! We scan around before walking back and pick up a small

raptor skimming along above the reeds... a Merlin! It catches up with a Kestrel and starts mobbing it which makes for really great comparison of these two species with the smaller Merlin really giving the Kestrel some grief. Next a Sparrowhawk flies through gaining height and circling away towards the trees. There are loads of Herons here and we can hear a Bittern booming in the background. As we walk back Uku suddenly stops and listens. He gets out his i-pod and plays a few seconds of a high thin call and suddenly there is a Penduline Tit flying in and landing right beside us in the reeds! This is a very early record for Estonia and we are delighted to get such incredible close up views of this lovely male as it flits around the reeds. What a bonus!

Our final stop is at another reedbed and pools complex near Parnu and right on the coast. A Green-winged Teal was seen here a couple of days ago so we think with the way our luck is going today you never know! There is a large flock of gulls and geese on the shore though nothing unusual amongst them. We find three Teal they are just the normal European variety and there is no sign of the rarity, though a nice male Smew is a good find. Maggi finds a Kingfisher which pleases Joan enormously as she missed the one earlier.

We head for home and make a stop at our 'tanking' spot, again walking out to the ruined castle to scan the surrounding area. There are lots of Rooks and Jackdaws again and in the distance some large flocks of geese and swans, mostly Whoopers. Uku spots a raptor in the distance stood in a field and looking through the scope we realise it is an accipiter! Surely it is too bulky for a Sparrowhawk but we want to be sure however when it flies our suspicions are confirmed... a Goshawk! It circles behind some trees then reappears and starts hunting low over the edge of a field uncharacteristically more like a harrier! It works its way slowly along and eventually disturbs a flock of Rooks which mob it really allowing us to see how chunky our bird is in comparison. What a terrific ending to the day!

Back at base we have time to freshen up before our evening meal and after we have eaten we do our usual round up of the week in which we ask what people have chosen as their bird of the trip, place of the trip and their magic moment. This is not a trip with a huge bird list so it is amazing that as we go round the group the first nine people each choose a different bird! White-backed Woodpecker, Rough-legged Buzzard, Penduline Tit, Waxwing, Common Crane and Long-tailed Duck perhaps show the variety of birds that receive votes but both Ural Owl and Nutcracker receive three votes each! We decide to ask everyone to vote for which of these two should get the winning position of Bird-of-the-Trip and Ural Owl makes the top spot. Of the places we visited the woodland at Luitemaa - now christened Woodpecker Alley - beats all the lovely coastal meadows, reedbeds and other woodlands we visited, which after such incredible sightings there is perhaps not surprising. The magic moment is always more personal and often everyone chooses something different. It is great to hear of so many lovely moments from the last few days, with people reminiscing of their sightings of Black Grouse displaying, Elk in the morning mist, displaying woodpeckers, Steller's Eiders out to sea, calling cranes and the beautiful sunrise this morning but the only moment that got more than one mention was the incredible sight of that Ural Owl at the edge of the trees in the sunshine this morning.... wonderful! One thing we are all agreed on is that it has been a great trip and Joan makes a lovely speech thanking the guides and organizers of the trip for making it so good as well as the other guests for the fun we have had this week. It has been terrific and we have laughed and laughed.

Day 6

Today we have a very relaxed start and enjoy breakfast at 8am. We say goodbye to Uku here and Marika joins us for the journey to Tallinn where we will have time for a look around and lunch before catching our plane. She has organized a guide to meet us and she appears soon after we arrive. She is very good and has an in depth knowledge of the old town which is beautiful with some very impressive churches and other buildings inside the old town walls. The history is fascinating and it is shocking how recent some events happened that sound like they

should have been a century ago! Much of the history is of course linked with their struggle for independence from the Soviet Union, which finally happened in 1991. There was then a period in which they struggled through hyper-inflation, ration coupons etc before finding their feet and now things appear remarkably good as you walk round the shops. The cameras are all out as we walk through the narrow lanes and look in shop windows and inside a couple of churches with very impressive towers and spires, before we reach a spot where the view out over the town is superb. You can see out to the harbour and there are even a couple of Buzzards! Lunch is a very nice tavern and then time has just about run out as we have a last look at the shops on the way to the van. Soon we are at the airport and thanking Marika for all her help we head for our flight home.

Birds

Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocora carbo</i>
Bittern	<i>Botaurus stellaris (heard)</i>
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Bewick's Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>
White-fronted Goose	<i>Naser albifrons</i>
Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>
Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
Common Eider	<i>Somateria mollissima</i>
Steller's Eider	<i>Polysticta stelleri</i>
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyernalis</i>
Common Scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>
Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
Smew	<i>Mergus albellus</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Rough-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetri</i>
Hazel grouse	<i>Bonasa bonasia (heard)</i>
Grey Partridge	<i>Perdix perdix</i>
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>

Oystercatcher	<i>Haematopus ostralegus</i>
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
Woodcock	<i>Scolopa rusticola</i>
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>
Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Rock Dove	<i>Columaba livia</i>
Stock Dove	<i>Columaba oenas</i>
Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
Ural Owl	<i>Stri uralensis</i>
Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum (heard)</i>
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>
White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos medius</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>
Woodlark	<i>Lullula arborea</i>
Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>
Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis (heard)</i>
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
Song Trush	<i>Turdus philomelos (heard)</i>
Mistle Trush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula (heard)</i>
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
Bearded Tit	<i>Panurus biarmicus</i>
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalso caudatus</i>
Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>
Willow Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>
Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>
Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>
Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>
Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
Penduline Tit	<i>Remiz pendulinus</i>
Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>
Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
Magpie	<i>Piaca pica</i>
Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocactactes</i>

Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus gorone gorni</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus cora</i>
Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Mealy Redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>
Linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>
Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>
Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>

Total = 110 including 6 just heard

Mammals

Elk (Moose)
Roe Deer
Red Fox

Butterflies

Brimstone
Small tortoiseshell
Peacock
Comma
Orange Underwing Moth