

## **Butterflies of Estonia**

Despite its small size and northern position the country of Estonia is a superb place to see and photograph butterflies, dragonflies and other insects. Almost half of the country remains wild, and the population density in the remainder is one of the lowest in Europe (approximately 30 people per sq. km). It is a country of varied wilderness and enchanting beauty, undeveloped and unspoiled, with vast peat bogs, dense forests, water-meadows, numerous rivers and over 1400 lakes. Remarkably, some 18% of the entire country is afforded protection as national parks or nature reserves which are well cared for. Add to this an excellent infrastructure and road network that, for the most part, is almost empty, then it comes as no surprise that this is fast becoming a top destination for visitors with an interest in all forms of natural history.

I was unaware of most of this information when I agreed to join a friend for a week in early July 2013, and team up with another 7 butterfly enthusiasts on an Estonian Nature Tours trip. I had, however, seen the list of butterflies and dragonflies we might encounter - and it was a list to drool over! The butterfly fauna lists about 100 species which is almost twice the number we can see in UK, together with an impressive list of 48 species of odonata. Many of these insect species are rare elsewhere in Europe but thrive here in their natural habitats undisturbed by intensive farming and, dare I say it, by insecticides.

Estonia is at geographical crossroads for flora and fauna, where species with mainly northern and eastern distribution overlap with those from the south, providing an opportunity to find insects from the north alongside those from the south, some of them being at the extremes of their distribution.

Our group met in Tallin from where we travelled for 3 hours on good roads to the south-eastern corner of the country and our excellent accommodation at Mooste Viinavabrik, a superbly renovated vodka distillery, (free vodka on arrival), beautifully situated in countryside on the edge of a large lake.

This delightful location served as our base for three days from where we explored a variety of butterfly-rich sites. From the very first trip out it was obvious that there were insects here in abundance; all sorts of butterflies, dragonflies and day-flying moths, together with grasshoppers, crickets, bees and flies buzzed and flitted around us in a profusion of wild flowers - and this was only on a railway embankment! My highlight for that day was to photograph the elusive Cranberry Blue butterfly (*Plebejus optilete*), but, as with many of the days that followed, the astonishing variety and density of insect species was a source of both joy, and, at times, bewilderment; there were so many of them it was hard to know which to photograph first. Our time in the field was constantly punctuated with cries of discovery of this or that species. At times it was hard to settle to photograph a specimen before another, even more spectacular, was announced.

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Our railway embankment morning was followed by an excellent farmhouse lunch with plenty of home cooked regional specialties. Estonian food is an interesting blend of Continental and Scandinavian cuisine - with a hint of Russia in there - served in generous and tastily satisfying portions. Mealtimes were always a delight.

Next, to a wooded riverbank that nestled between flower-filled flood meadows. Sites like this are a rarity anywhere in UK these days and they are a reminder of what our flood plains and wet meadows may have looked like in times past. It may sound like exaggeration to say they were 'alive' with insects and birds but it's a fact that they were. In the chest-high grassy expanses there were enough flower species to thrill any botanist and those flowers supported an insect population to delight the entomologist - not just in number but in variety too. Here we photographed Yellow-legged Tortoiseshell (*Nymphalis xanthomelas*), a large butterfly with an Eastern European/Middle East distribution; any number of 'blues', and, by the riverside, we netted and photographed a lovely Green Snaketail dragonfly (*Ophiogomphus cecilia*), a species of Eastern European distribution and considered a scarce insect even in Estonia.

This first day was to be similar to the days that followed - out early and back late - having packed as much as possible into the day. We visited sites with differing habitats such as Kärkna Forest, where, on forest tracks and rides we found the threatened Scarce Fritillary (*Euphydryas maturna*); Lesser Marbled Fritillaries (*Brenthis ino*); Large Chequered Skippers (*Heteropterus morpheus*) and many, many others. In forested bog habitat, whilst being pestered by mosquitoes and horseflies, we were hushed to silence by the sinister, primordial atmosphere of the virgin forest, all the while ticking off insects both known and new. At times we heard, but never saw, the Corncrake (*crex crex*), and in rainwater puddles on the tracks we found many varieties of butterflies 'puddling' for minerals.

Each evening, at the guesthouse, a cold beer helped us wind down before dinner whilst watching for birds on the lake. At these latitudes in early July it never really gets totally dark but we put out a moth trap and enjoyed checking the moths before breakfast. It was completely light by 3a.m. and a good time to look for roosting butterflies and dragonflies. One morning, by the lake, I was pleased to find and photograph an Arctic Bluet damselfly (*Coenagrion johanssoni*), the most northerly of our European damselflies and considered scarce in the Baltic States.

For the second part of our trip we travelled west to the Baltic island of Saaremaa, stopping on the way at wooded meadows and species rich roadsides. On wide, well maintained and deserted roadside verges we found a variety of orchids and butterflies in almost overwhelming numbers. How strange it seemed to photograph Scarce Copper butterflies (*Lycaena virgaureae*) in dips and hollows at the roadside with scores of fritillaries, skippers and blues hanging like confetti on the surrounding wildflowers. It was almost surreal.

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Having crossed by ferry to the island, for the next few days we stayed at the lovely Loona Manor guesthouse on the west coast of Saaremaa and travelled out daily to a variety of habitats, including shoreline, meadow and woodland. One very special habitat we visited was an 'alvar' meadow: these can only be found in Estonia and southern Sweden. Alvar is an environment with very thin or no soil on a limestone plain producing sparse vegetation and fascinating flora and fauna. Here we found orchids in variety with lots of butterflies including Chestnut Heath (*Coenonympha glycerion*) and Dusky Meadow Brown (*Hyponephele lycaon*). I found and photographed a specimen of this latter butterfly that had been marked which indicated that this rare and remote environment was being well monitored.

Our guesthouse - Loona Manor - is in the centre of Vilsandi National Park and, once again, we were treated to excellent cuisine served at times by ladies in national costume.

On our penultimate day we travelled back to the mainland and spent an unforgettable day in the raised bogs of Laelatu and Murke. These (ombrotrophic) bog forests are pine forests but with a peat substratum that strongly hinders tree growth. At one point we traversed a well made boardwalk over 2 km long that wound its way through magnificent bog flora of sphagna, heathers, cotton grasses, cloudberry and stunted trees. The scenery was a spectacular mixture of mire, lakes and dwarf forest with a veritable snowfall of Silver-studded Blue butterflies (*Plebejus argus*). I confess I had to be dragged away from these iconic little butterflies but other rarities awaited in the form of White-faced Darter (*Leucorrhinia dubia*) and Eastern White-faced Darter (*Leucorrhinia albifrons*) dragonflies. What a truly wonderful environment with which to finish our Estonian adventure.

We spent the final night in Tallin, recounting our experiences whilst dining in a Tallin Medieval Experience hostelry. We had recorded 58 species of butterfly, (many new for me); over 30 species of dragonfly, including the majestic Baltic Hawker (*Aeshna serrata*); a splendid number of birds, beetles, orthoptera, and blur of botanic notables. On our last day we were treated to a free guided tour of this lovely city before we were taken to the airport for the flight home.

We saw no rain - which was a bonus - and the benign weather added to a really memorable and enjoyable holiday. Now, as winter approaches, my thoughts are drifting towards next year: with any luck I may get a chance to go again. My thanks to guides Wilf Powell and Peeter Vissak and Estonian Nature Tours.

Trevor Davenport  
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