Orchid and Mammal Tour of Estonia June 2013



Participants:

Christine Newell, Chris Percival, Peter Dean, Peter Pilbeam, John van der Dol

Tour organiser, John van der Dol, Sandwich Bird Tours with Marike Mann, Estonian Nature Tours

Guide drivers Tarvo Valker and Peeter Vissak and specialist local guides Udo (Flying Squirrel) and Bert (Brown Bear)

June 16th

The weather forecast for the first couple of days was not too clever with rain and thunderstorms expected.

Peeter and I picked up the group from the airport and drove straight to the Proomenade hotel at Haapsula. The planned Beaver trip was postponed at lunchtime due to the very heavy rain we experienced in Tallinn. It stopped the first group birding along the cliffs just after lunch. In the event we had a nice evening and could have done the boat ride.

As we drove along the road towards Haapsula we had a female Black Grouse with five chicks on the side of the road and these immediately flew into cover but the adult remained visible for a minute or so. What a lucky start! Lesser Butterfly Orchid and Twayblade were noted along the way but we did not stop as we were to be seeing plenty more over the next two days.

We checked into the hotel and the ladies immediately retired to their rooms while the guys were keen to see some more birds. We wandered down to the lagoon and clocked up five of the dozen Slavonian Grebes present there as well as a female Goosander and the usual Tufted Duck and Pochard.

June 17th

We awoke to a heavy thunderstorm over breakfast. The Wheatear outside our rooms looked extremely bedraggled. It was decide to cancel our trip to Osmussaare as it involved a small boat with only cover for 4 people. The island too has no cover and although we had a lovely day there last week with the first group, it had been lovely weather. There is no doubt it is a beautiful, little, virtually uninhabited island but the reason for going was more landscape than birds or orchids. In this weather that seemed rather pointless.

So a day on the mainland was spent mostly looking for orchids, although a few birds of interest were noted on the way. Juvenile and an adult White-tailed Eagles were seen and a Lesser spotted Eagle was also found. A male Hen Harrier was a little unusual in this coastal location at this time of year and Pete found a Black Redstart.

A grand total of 14 species of orchid were found which included the diminutive all green Fen Orchid which we actually found quite easily once the area had been located.

Other interesting species included Baltic Orchid and Birds Nest Orchid while the Military Orchid was one of the common species which is great for us considering its rarity in the UK.



RUTHE ORCHID

On the mammal front a Roe Deer was seen from the bus by Chris and Christine had a Brown Hare. Two groups of Elk totalling five animals were seen in the distance from a watch tower overlooking a large grassland area.

The postponed boat trip for Beavers took place this evening. It appeared hard work in that they refused to show. We had our supper on the boat after which we returned to base and eventually a single Beaver showed up swimming towards us for a while but still keeping its distance. A second one was seen almost immediately after. They were a bit distant but with binoculars the salient features were discernible.

A beautiful adult Little Gull flew over our heads and all this provided a lovely end to a long but very rewarding day.

On the butterfly front we found a superb Woodland Brown in one of the forest glades and this apparently is quite a rare species. A couple of Black-veined Whites and a number of Small Blues were good to see for UK visitors.

We returned home late and retired immediately as an early start was required to catch the ferry tomorrow morning.

June 18th

Today was planned for a visit to Hiumaa Island. The day dawned beautifully (if you can call it dawn, as it is virtually light all night)... Be great for gardeners if it wasn't for the mosquitoes.

We had a quick breakfast at 5.30 and drove to the harbour to catch the 6.30 ferry. The crossing was smooth and a small party of Common Scoter was noted as were small groups of Eider and Goldeneye. A female Red-breasted Merganser crossed the bow as we were having our early morning coffee fix. Cormorant and Tufted Duck were in evidence too.

This again was to be a day for plants and orchids in particular. A superb display of the latter was found with the highlights for all of us being a little orchid garden on a crossroads where no less than nine species were growing. It had been fenced off and a boardwalk constructed for their safety. The Southern Marsh Orchid on the opposite side of the road may well be the only place in Estonia where it grows.

In a patch of forest on the other side of the road behind some houses we were treated to a magnificent display of perhaps in excess of 1000 spikes of Lady's Slipper Orchid. They were fading a bit compared with last week but still some excellent fresh specimens were present. "Its bloody gudt ja; it sa not so bad!"

Fourteen species were eventually counted including hundreds of Dark Red Helleborines, none of which were unfortunately in flower. However a single flowering spike of Red Helleborine was discovered and was subsequently subjected to a barrage of photography from all angles.

A second plant nearby was still in bud. The next person to go there will no doubt find my very tasteful pair of spectacles.



Coffee and cake in a little cafe in the capital's town square were very much appreciated by all. What a wonderful little place and so peaceful. I am sure we could have sat there all day but we had orchids to find.

We continued on to another site for Lesser Twayblade which we duly found. A most insignificant plant until you blow it up on the back of the camera only to realise it is in fact quite beautiful.

Birds of the day included a pair of noisy Nutcrackers but they were a bit distant. While watching those we had a pair of Honey Buzzard which flew high over our heads mostly in silhouette against the bright blue sky. A few Crossbills and a Siskin were present too.

We had lunch in a strange restaurant next to an old lighthouse.

After further searching this afternoon we drove back to the port and caught the ferry with 30 seconds to spare. Peeter later admitted to being a little nervous. He appears to live his life to the nearest minute. An uneventful return crossing was followed by a lovely meal in a little restaurant on the lake with 5 Slavonian Grebes swimming just yards from the shore.

June 19th

Tarvo, our bird guide and driver for the second part of the tour, joined us after breakfast and we all proceeded towards the Puhtu Peninsula for some more orchids and some birds too. We stopped off

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at the office of Estonian Nature Tours and met the owner, Marika, who treated us to some fresh locally grown strawberries and coffee. Her office was situated in an old run down pre-war mansion and she appeared to be the only inhabitant in just one of the rooms. Great potential for someone with a few million to spare.



Birds noted this morning included 2 White-tailed Eagles outside the hotel, 2 Golden Eagles at a bog where Blacktailed Godwits and Wood Sandpiper were breeding.

Flecked (Marsh) Orchid and the very rare Ruthe's Orchid were seen. The latter at a secret site and this may well be the only place in the world where it grows or at least where it is known from. We were indeed privileged to get to see it.

We went to lunch at Pollis Art Centre, which as last week was very nice indeed. After this we said our goodbyes to Peeter and set off towards the east with Tarvo in charge.

After about 2 hours we arrived at Tootsikannu and the lovely hunting lodge. A lovely place to stay despite the hunting trophies adorning the place. The manager of this huge estate accompanied us on an old army truck for our mammal safari. Initially we were not seeing that much but as the light started to fade we came across a young Elk next to the track. It stayed with us for quite a while and we were able to get some reasonable pictures. Two further Elks were seen, one with a juvenile by her side but these were all a bit distant as was a Roe deer. A couple of Arctic Hares completed the mammals for the evening. We returned late and three of us had some coffee before retiring. It had been a long but very rewarding day again.

June 20th

After an early morning ride round in the van to a patch of forest where we saw our first Crested Tit and Golden Oriole, Pine Marten and another Arctic Hare we returned to the lodge to pick up our luggage. We then set off towards the north east in our quest for bears. After stopping for a quick coffee at what looked like an Estonian pole dancing club, a bar covered floor to ceiling in mirrors, and some dodgy looking customers, we finally arrived at Matsu Guesthouse in the mosquito ridden forests of the north east. It is a nice lodge with great food but lacking perhaps in quality maintenance. The bathroom plumbing has to be seen to be believed, but then we were not there on a plumbing convention but rather to see the wildlife of the area, and this we certainly did.

We did not waste any time. No time for unpacking. Lunch and out Flying Squirrel tracking with Udo, our newly met squirrel and general small mammal expert and fanatic. He has been studying these mammals for the last 30 years and admits himself to have caught the dreaded flying squirrel disease. We spent some time looking at Aspen trees, searching for excreta which are no bigger than mouse droppings. Who at home would believe you if you told them what you did on your holiday! Covered in mosquito nets, we must have looked a sight.

Of course the afternoon was just a lesson in Flying Squirrel ecology and forest management and looking for stuff more expensive than gold and apparently having the same effect as Viagra. Udo has indeed appeared to have lost the plot.

He also showed us a Common Vole or as he would call it Microtes arvalis. A mammal that does not occur in the UK and so new for all of us. Two pairs of Pied Flycatcher were noted in the forest.

Back for yet another meal at the guesthouse and out again. This time for the real thing. We found the tree where a male Flying Squirrel was sleeping on our tour last week and the precise hole it would appear from. The group missed it last week as we were watching the wrong hole. The squirrel is radio collared and this time we were able to precisely locate the animal and after an hour or so it poked its head out the hole for about half a minute before shooting up the tree like a rocket and out of sight for ever. An amazing experience even if it lasted only half a minute.

A Long-eared Owl flew over the forest and a Tawny Owl was heard. We returned to the lodge and got to bed about midnight with great anticipation of getting up for our 5am drive. It was going to be a 4am drive but I persuaded Tarvo that perhaps 5 would be more comfortable.

June 21st

After our late finish and our early start, I think the group are wondering whether this is a holiday or punishment for something they have done in an earlier life.

A River warbler was heard but could not be persuaded to show itself. Three Cranes were found in a field in the forest which Tarvo thought were in moult and unable to fly at this stage. We returned to the place at the edge of the forest where the trees have been thinned out by a big storm some years ago and many dead trees can be found. This is a good spot for woodpeckers but so far this month had been rather quiet. On arrival a White-backed Woodpecker appeared almost immediately followed by a pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers.

That was lucky! An Icterine Warbler was found singing there too but views of this one were brief. A couple of Honey Buzzards were found and a Long-eared Owl was seen quartering a field. What an amazing couple of hours.

On the way back we stopped at a house where Udo was staying and he had caught a couple of Birch Mice, a Bank Vole and a Common Vole. All to add to the mammal list for the trip.

BEAR HIDE



We arrived at the bear hide at 5pm, an hour earlier than normal. The news was out that the bears were coming much earlier so we needed to be settled in place in good time. A Great spotted Woodpecker was present as we arrived and within ten minutes the first Raccoon Dog appeared. A beautiful specimen which sat quite close to the hide in perfect light and gave great opportunities for a picture or two. A Red Fox too was seen but he was rather nervous and did not approach the hide.



was the same fox as last week. In total there were about 9 sightings of Raccoon Dog between 5 and midnight of probably just two animals.

At 7.30 the first of the Brown Bears arrived. This was a 4 year old male and a big bruiser he was too. We had great views as he dug up some of the bait and disappeared as quickly as he came. He returned at 9 o'clock and still the light was good enough for a photo. Again he only stayed a few minutes only to return 15 minutes later. At 9.40 and for the next hour we were treated to a spectacle that will stay in our minds forever. Two cubs of about 2 years old appeared playing and foraging and at one stage the older male chased them off at some speed. He returned for another feed and as he left for the last time the two cubs reappeared. They were a bit more nervous this time but still gave a great show on and off the set for the next hour or so. It had been a show of bears between 7.30 and 10.50 which we all remember and most of this was being watched at home in the UK via the webcam and the use of text messages. What would we do without this modern technology? It was great to share our live experience with family at home in real time.

A couple of further Raccoon Dog sightings before a couple of Wild Boar completed the party. They insisted on feeding really close to one and other and getting in each other's way leading to short fights. Quite bizarre as they have the whole forest to dig up.

By midnight we had all retired and got at least a few hours sleep before getting up again at about 7 and leaving the hide at 730 wondering whether it had all been a dream. Photos proved it had in fact been reality and an amazing experience. The bears reappeared about 2am according to the webcam but the whole group were fast asleep.

June 22nd

We returned for breakfast and a rest before lunch and back out into the forest with our mosquito nets, for some Brown Bear tracking. Bert who had joined us last night showed the group a hibernating nest and tracks of some of the mammals found in the forest. It is amazing that perhaps we could have been just a short distance from a bear without knowing it. Apparently they don't attack people which is just as well for the amount of time we spent wandering round the forest. We had great views of a Nutcracker and a Honey Buzzard and the butterflies at last included Popular Admiral, Swallowtail and the first generation of the Map. Large Wall Brown and Black-veined White were common and Lesser Marbled Fritillary was also noted.

Back for dinner before out again, this time for a night crawl. We started off about 9 and returned at 1 in the morning. Better than last year when we carried on until 5.

It was a great evening and very atmospheric as the orange sun dropped below the horizon and reappeared a few short hours later with the low mist hanging over the fields obscuring the middle section of some of the trees. It was mid-summer celebration time for the locals and parties appeared to be going on. We came across one guy who the spirit had got the better of him and he rolled his car into a field. Although clearly drunk and with his hands covered in blood he seemed Ok which is more than could be said for his car. He was trying to get to the main road to meet his friends and presumably wishing to join the party.

Four long-eared Owls were seen quartering the fields, several Woodcock roding and on the road,

and perhaps nicest of all a couple of Nightjars dazzled by our lights on the road, one of which allowed close approach and consequently everybody had great views. Despite our tired condition, it had been a memorable experience.

June 23rd

We had a leisurely breakfast at 7 and set off for Tallinn at about 9.30. A Black Woodpecker made it on the list as it flew across the main road, a Lesser Spotted Eagle gave great views and a Buzzard was also seen.

We drove to a peninsula just east of Tallinn (Haabneeme) where before the sea-mist set in we found a pair of Barred Warblers, the male making lovely song flights displaying its grey plumage, bars and yellow eyes and a solitary Booted Warbler. Two cracking species in the same place. Pairs of Reed Warbler and Whitethroat were present too. A Little Ringed Plover was photographed by Chris and at last a Woodlark appeared for the first time on this trip. A Black-throated Diver was heard but we could not locate through the mist. That concluded our tour, bird wise.

We continued on to Tallinn town centre, had a short walk round with the thousands of tourists, had yet another lunch and set off for the airport. We said our goodbyes to Tarvo and had an uneventful flight back to London.

In conclusion, a very successful tour, which was short on sleep, excessive on food and mosquitoes and superb for birds, orchids and mammals. The bear hide experience was one we will never forget.

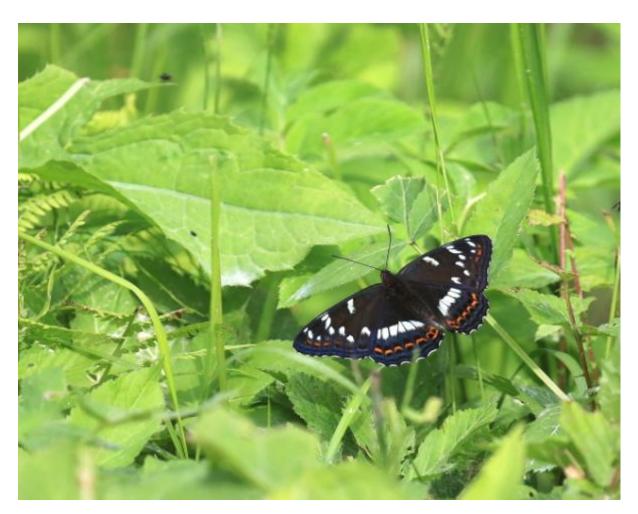
I would like to thank all our guides, Marika at Estonian Nature Tours for the excellent organisation and the group participants who all made for a wonderful week in this gorgeous country.

I said goodbye to the group only to find that their taxi was parked next to my car. Can't get rid of em! Perhaps "I go, I come back".

John van der Dol

Sandwich Bird Tours

June 2013



Poplar Admiral

Black Grouse Grey Partridge Grey Lag Goose Mute Swan Shelduck Gadwall Mallard Teal **Pochard Tufted Duck** Eider Common Scoter Goldeneve Goosander Red-breasted Merganser **Great Crested Grebe** Slavonian Grebe White Stork Bittern H Grev Heron **Great Cormorant** Kestrel Osprey Honey Buzzard White-tailed Eagle Marsh Harrier Hen Harrier Montagu's Harrier Sparrow Hawk Buzzard Lesser Spotted Eagle Golden Eagle Corncrake Coot **Common Crane** Oystercatcher Lapwing Little Ringed Plover Woodcock Common Snipe heard only Black-tailed Godwit Curlew Redshank **Green Sandpiper Wood Sandpiper** Common Sandpiper Common Gull

Black-headed Gull Little Gull Common Tern Arctic tern Little Tern Stock Dove Woodpigeon Cuckoo Tawny Owl H Long-eared Owl Nightjar Swift White-backed W/Pecker G S W/pecker Three-toed W/Pecker Black W/pecker Red-backed Shrike **Great Grey Shrike** Golden Oriole Jay Magpie Nutcracker Jackdaw Rook **Hooded Crow** Raven Great tit Blue Tit Crested Tit Long-tailed Tit Swallow **House Martin** Skylark Woodlark Grasshopper Wblr H River Wblr H Great Reed Wblr H Reed Wblr **Booted Wblr** Icterine Wblr Willow Wblr Chiffchaff Wood Wblr Blackcap Garden Wblr Barred Wblr Whitethroat Nuthatch

Fieldfare Redwing Songthrush Mistle Thrush Robin Thrush Nightingale H Black Redstart Common Redstart Whinchat Wheatear Spotted Flycatcher Pied Flycatcher Red-breasted Fly **House Sparrow Tree Sparrow** Yellow Wagtail White Wagtail **Meadow Pipit** Tree Pipit Chaffinch Greenfinch Siskin Goldfinch Linnet Common Rosefinch Crossbill Hawfinch Yellowhammer **Reed Bunting**

MAMMALS European Hare Arctic Hare Siberian Flying Squirrel European Beaver Northern Birch Mouse Bank Vole Common Vole Red Fox Raccoon Dog Pine Marten **Brown Bear** Wild Boar Roe Deer Elk Pygmy Shrew **AMPHIBIANS** Common Toad Common Frog

Grass Snake BUTTERFLIES Large Skipper Black-veined White Green-veined White Small White Brimstone Small Blue Amanda's Blue Common Blue Lesser Marbled Frit. Scarce Frit. Marsh Frit. Heath Frit. Red Admiral Painted Lady Small Tortoiseshell Map Poplar Admiral Speckled Wood

Large Wall Brown

Woodland Brown

Small Heath

REPTILES

Common Lizard

Herring Gull

Lesser BB Gull

Treecreeper

Starling Blackbird

	 	,
ORCHIDS		
Lady's Slipper		
Marsh Helleborine		
Dark-red Helleborine		
Red Helleborine		
Broad-leaved Hell.		
Bird's Nest Orchid		
Twayblade		
Lesser Twayblade		
Greater Butterfly		
Lesser Butterfly		
Fragrant Orchid		
Southern Marsh Orchid		
Baltic Marsh Orchid		
Early Marsh Orchid		
Flecked Marsh Orchid		
(cruenta)		
Ruthe Orchid		
Common Spotted		
Heath Spotted Orchid		
Military Orchid		
Fly Orchid		
Fen Orchid		
ren Orania		