

Orchids & Mammals of ESTONIA June 2013



Participants: Sue Morton, Pauline McKenzie-Lloyd, Brian and Liz Baltera, Brian Summerfield and John van der Dol.

John van der Dol Sandwich Bird Tours

Peeter Vissak and Tarvo Valker Estonian Nature Tours

June 9th

We left the observatory at 08.30 in order to get our lunchtime flight to Estonia. It was an uneventful flight of 2.5 hours and we arrived in Tallinn only to find it raining contrary to all weather forecasts. However it was only a shower and off we went to the west in our modern minibus with our driver/guide Peeter Vissak, our botanist expert for the next few days. We drove the 130 km to the west without even checking into our hotel to start our holiday with a beaver trip. We met Marika, the owner of Estonian Nature Tours, and set off in a small boat in search of Beavers. It was not long before we encountered our first one crossing the river but it was just a short view. The boatman motored beyond that point, turned the boat round and drifted downstream. We eventually had good views of a second Beaver although no more than head and shoulders were ever seen. The littoral vegetation was too dense to have any hope of seeing one out of the water. We encountered our first Rosefinch and Goosander and birds heard were Savis and Great Reed Warbler, Bittern and Crane. On the way back we stopped briefly for Military Orchid and an attempt to see Elk was thwarted by thick mist which had come down in the late evening, but we were rewarded with three Lesser Butterfly Orchids, many of which we were going to see in the next few days.

Our picnic dinner consisting of some sort of cheese-garlic bread and a hot vegetable stew (and some meat) was enjoyed on the river. We eventually set off for our hotel in Haapsalu, another 60 km in the bus, collected the room keys which took all of 20 seconds for all of us and we retired immediately in anticipation of what tomorrow may bring.

June 10th

An fairly late start was rewarded with a juvenile White-tailed Eagle sitting on a rock on the other side of the bay outside the hotel. A wonderful setting for a hotel. A Wheatear was carrying food while we were having breakfast. We set off about 9 to drive to the port to pick up our little boat which was to take us to Osmussaare Island where we were going to primarily concentrate on finding orchids whilst birding on the way. It was an amazing day with lovely weather and lots to see in a beautiful landscape. We trampled through bog, over sandy and stony ridges and along the beach and everywhere there was something beautiful to look at. It is nice for once not to be concentrating wholly on birds. During the day however we did manage to find Red-backed Shrikes, Spotted Redshanks, Ruff, Goosander and Goldeneyes, a couple of genuine Barnacle Geese, a pair of Arctic Terns and a female Marsh Harrier. Orchids, however, took up much of the day and species found included Early Marsh (including a yellow variety), Military Orchid, and Twayblade. Butterflies included Glanville Fritillaries, Common Blue and Small Heath and thousands of Four-spotted Chasers amongst other unidentified dragonflies

We returned to the mainland and stopped on a roadside verge which looked good for orchids and added Lesser Butterfly, Fly and the Military and Early Marsh again. Marsh Helleborines were found but still in bud. This place is very rich in orchids. On our return to Haapsula we had a lovely dinner at Kuursaal restaurant on the waterfront. It appeared to be an old dancehall which couples as a restaurant. Lovely wooden architectural features.

June 11th

We arose at 0430, had a quick coffee and biscuits before making our way to the ferry to Haumaa island where we were going to spend the day looking for orchids. We were supposed to have breakfast on the ferry but most of us choose just a couple of dry pastries and a coffee. Apart from some Eider and Cormorants there was not a lot to be seen at sea.

We arrived on schedule at about 0630 and set off stopping at a roadside nature trail which took about 5 minutes to complete but had at least five species growing in it. We continued and looked at several patches of woodland and wooded meadow and clocked up 10 species of orchid during the day. The most spectacular sight was a patch of woodland just off the road where there must have been in excess of 1000 spikes of Lady's Slipper in big bunches over two feet in height. Some were fading but others were still very fresh. It really was a sight to behold and even our guide was amazed by this spectacle. It was a new site for him too.



A lovely lunch in a small restaurant consisted of tender pork for us carnivores while the vegetarians enjoyed stuffed peppers, all followed by death by chocolate.

The afternoon was again spent looking for orchids and the day list was as follows:

Lady's Slipper: Amazing display

Lesser Twayblade: A tiny little thing but very attractive. Just half a dozen were found but mosquitoes prevented further exploration. I still have bumps over the back of my head and neck three days after the event, but it was worth it.

Twayblade: Very common

Lesser Butterfly: Common

Military Orchid: Very common

Early Marsh: Very common

Fragrant: Just a few but a little early for this species

Fly: A few and some quite tall

Baltic Orchid: Just a few on a wet meadow in the south of the island

Red Helleborine: Many hundreds but the best still in bud. Another two weeks I expect.

Birds during the day were Honey Buzzard, Red-backed Shrikes, Wood Warbler, Spotted Flycatcher and back on the mainland on the lake outside the restaurant in Haapsula seven Slavonian Grebes in breeding plumage looking absolutely lovely in the low golden light.

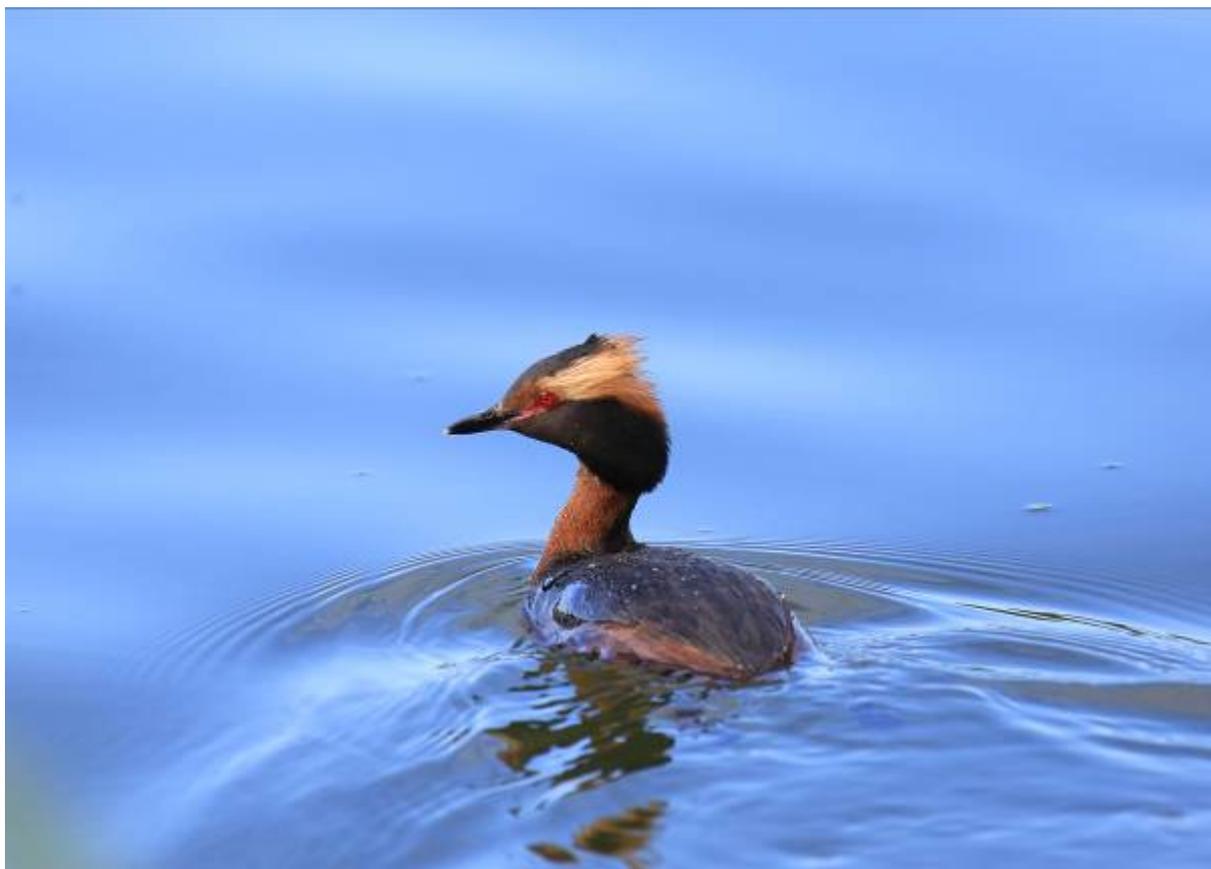
A superb day enjoyed by all, even those who never thought of looking for orchids.

June 12th

A slightly later start after yesterday's late finish. Tarvo joined us just after 8 and we had another look at the Slavonian Grebes. They were even closer than last night and more photos were taken.



We set off to the Puutu peninsula on the west of Estonia where again we looked for orchids. Several sites were visited and new species added today were Ruthe Orchid, very closely related to Early Marsh, Early Purple, Greater Butterfly, Sword-leaved Helleborine, Spotted Orchid, Marsh Helleborine (still in bud only) Broad-leaved Helleborine and Birds Nest Orchid. A total of 13 species was seen today.



Lunch was at Polli Farm where the food was graced with wild growing plants. An Icterine Warbler was seen in the garden while we were waiting for the lunch to be prepared.

A brief look at a marsh area for raptors was largely unsuccessful but we did get a Honey buzzard and a Black-tailed Godwit. An orchid found here was considered to be perhaps a form or split of Early Marsh Orchid. Sometimes known as Freckled Marsh Orchid, *Dactylorhiza cruenta*, or perhaps *D. incarnata cruenta*. It has yet to be specifically classified. It can be identified by the leaves being spotted on both top and bottom but to varying degrees.

Peeter left us at this stage and Tarvo took over and we started our journey east to Central Estonia. Two male Montagu's Harriers and Common Buzzard were added to the list while great views of a Lesser Spotted Eagle in flight and perched were had. White Storks totaled in excess of 30 birds and many were seen following the tractor cutting hay which also disturbed a couple of Corncrakes as the island of tall grass diminished to nothing. I fear a nest or two were destroyed in the process and one can see why the decline of this species has been so spectacular in Scotland by this farming practice. A late afternoon drive produced another Corncrake in the roadside verge, a roding Woodcock and an Arctic Hare crossed the road and a Red Fox was seen also. We checked in to the Toosikannu Guesthouse which was very comfortable and we all had a well deserved rest.

June 13th

A 0430 start on an open truck in search of Elk and Wild Boar was largely unsuccessful. It was very cold and due to the heavy early morning mist and rather damp. We had a coffee break back at the lodge before continuing the drive but apart from some Cranes with chicks not a lot was seen. Whilst driving ourselves through the forest we had brief views of an Elk. Who needs a safari?

We had breakfast and had a rest before lunch and checked out. We then drove to the NE of Estonia and the Alutagusa region. An area of extensive forest interspersed with unimproved grassland and where we would be looking for mammals and birds. En route we had another Lesser Spotted Eagle and a Nutcracker whilst a piece of parkland produced a couple of Icterine Warblers and a pair of Spotted Flycatchers.



We arrived at our accommodation, the Matsu Guesthouse, where we had stayed last year, and which we enjoyed immensely. Brian found a Wryneck but nobody else was there to see it.

At about 5 we set off for the bear hide where we arrived shortly before 6. We settled in, had our sandwiches and cake early before settling down to wait for any mammals to appear at the baited area in front of the hide.

Rather earlier than expected at 8.10 two Raccoon Dogs appeared in quick succession and in total throughout the evening and early morning we had about 10 sightings of this unusual mammal. Definitely two individuals were involved. Great and prolonged views were had although photography through the glass of the hide and the poor light was difficult. A Red Fox

appeared on three occasions too and looking quite different from the ones we see in the UK.

A Great spotted Woodpecker was clearly breeding in the area as it was seen on numerous occasions and once seen carrying a faecal sack.

Finally at 11.15 a female Brown Bear arrived and stayed feeding on the bait for about 25 minutes. We had great views but photography was impossible.

June 14th

It had been a great night and we even got some sleep as all the sightings were before midnight.

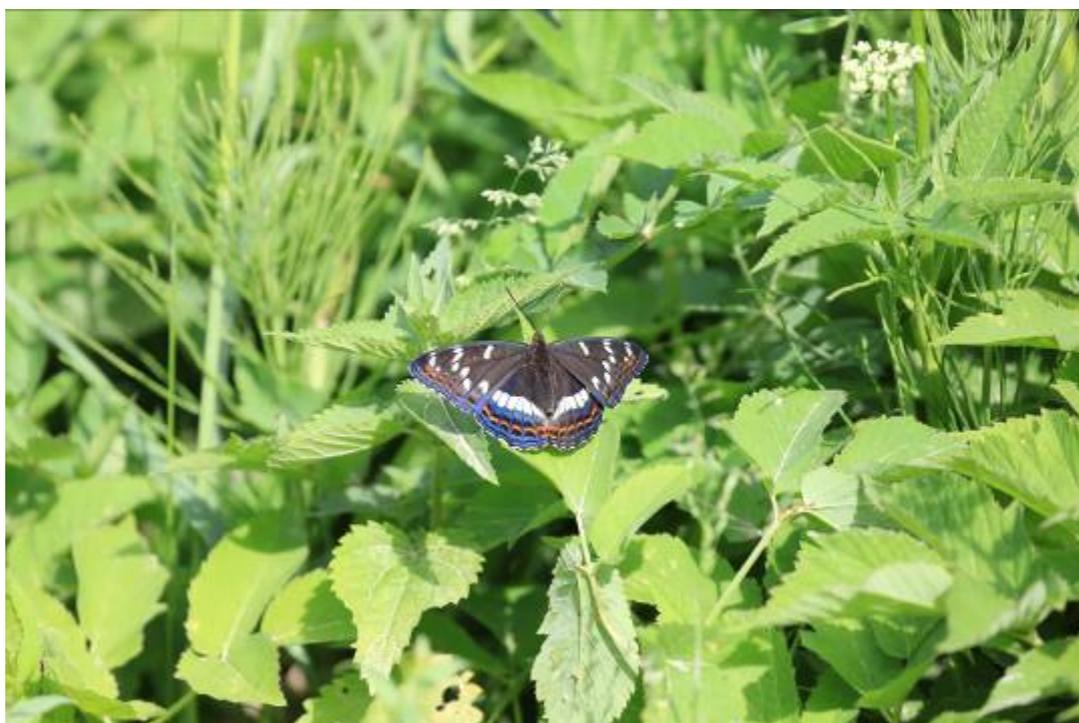
We left the hide just after 7.30 and wandered back to the van. On the way back to the accommodation we had a male Hen Harrier, a Snipe and a Whinchat. A Pied Flycatcher greeted us on arrival. We had breakfast, a rest and lunch before setting off again to do some birding and mammal tracking.

We spent the afternoon driving forest tracks but again it proved rather quiet but on the heath land near the Russian border we did find a family party of Great Grey Shrikes and more than 100 Lesser Butterfly Orchids.

This evening we met up with Udo, our mammal expert, and did a night crawl with him this evening but apart from some Woodcock on the road and a couple of Arctic Hares we again did not see a lot. He did, in the space of a few minutes, show tracks belonging to just about every large mammal known in this area. Quite amazing.

June 15th

We had a fairly late breakfast after which we did some birding but it was the butterflies which attracted our attention. Scarce, Heath and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries were numerous as were the beautiful Poplar Admiral. Black-veined and Wood Whites represented the Pieridae family, and second generation Map butterflies were noted, which at first glance look rather similar to white admirals. Birds seen were Osprey with a fish which it dropped as soon as I pointed the camera at it, the usual Red-backed Shrikes and Icterine Warblers and a River Warbler responding to tape gave us a brief but excellent view of itself at close range.



Poplar Admiral

In the evening we went out again with Udo in search of the Siberian Flying Squirrel. We spent an hour looking at the hole we thought it was in only to find it came out of another hole on the reverse side of the tree and only Tarvo and I saw it as it rocketed up the trunk to vanish in the gloom and foliage above. A little disappointing for those who have never seen one.

We returned to the guesthouse about midnight.

June 16th

We left Matsu for the last time and made our way towards Tallinn.

En route we stopped off at a farmhouse where Udo was staying the weekend and he had trapped some small rodents for us to see. A Birch Mouse was new to all as they do not occur in the UK and a Pygmy Shrew may not have been new, but was nice to see nevertheless.

We decided to do some birding at the Bakri Peninsula but the rain came down so heavy that birding was virtually out of the question. We did however manage about four Black Guillemots which is not really a bird one would immediately associate with Estonia. However they breed here on the cliffs. We returned to Tallinn for lunch and it continued with really heavy rain flooding the streets in places. However after we had eaten the sun returned and we set off for the airport.

The group checked in and I left them in departures in order to go and meet the second group who were to arrive on the same plane inbound. I said goodbye to Tarvo who went home for a couple of days well deserved rest and met up again with Peeter, our botanist.

A fantastic trip although the birds were a little quiet, the orchids and mammals were great. And the country is just a delight to travel in despite the mosquitoes.

John van der Dol
June 2013



Sword-leaved Helleborine

<p>Grey Lag Goose Barnacle Goose Mute Swan Shelduck Gadwall Mallard Teal Pochard Tufted Duck Eider Goldeneye Goosander Great Crested Grebe Slavonian Grebe White Stork Bittern H Grey Heron Great Cormorant Kestrel Osprey Honey Buzzard White-tailed Eagle Marsh Harrier Hen Harrier Montagu's Harrier Sparrow Hawk Buzzard Lesser Spotted Eagle Water Rail H Corncrake Coot Common Crane Oystercatcher Avocet Lapwing Ringed Plover Little Ringed Plover Woodcock Common Snipe Black-tailed Godwit Whimbrel Curlew Spotted Redshank Redshank Green Sandpiper Common Sandpiper</p>	<p>Common Gull Turnstone Dunlin Ruff Herring Gull Lesser BB Gull Black-headed Gull Common Tern Arctic tern Black Tern Black Guillemot Woodpigeon Cuckoo Swift Wryneck G S W/pecker Red-backed Shrike Great Grey Shrike Golden Oriole Magpie Nutcracker Jackdaw Hooded Crow Raven Great tit Willow Tit Swallow House Martin Skylark River Wblr Great Reed Wblr H Sedge Wblr Reed Wblr Icterine Wblr Willow Wblr Chiffchaff Wood Wblr Blackcap Garden Wblr Whitethroat Goldcrest Wren</p>	<p>Nuthatch Starling Blackbird Fieldfare Redwing Songthrush Mistle Thrush Robin Thrush Nightingale H Whinchat Stonechat Wheatear Spotted Flycatcher Pied Flycatcher House Sparrow Tree Sparrow Dunnock Yellow Wagtail White Wagtail Meadow Pipit Tree Pipit Chaffinch Greenfinch Siskin Goldfinch Redpoll Linnet Common Rosefinch Bullfinch Hawfinch Yellowhammer Reed Bunting</p> <p>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</p>	<p>MAMMALS Arctic Hare Siberian Flying Squirrel European Beaver Northern Birch Mouse Red Fox Raccoon Dog Brown Bear Roe Deer Elk</p> <p>AMPHIBIANS Common Toad Common Frog</p> <p>REPTILES Common Lizard</p> <p>BUTTERFLIES Essex Skipper Large Skipper Wood White Black-veined White Green-veined White Brimstone Small Blue Amanda's Blue Common Blue Lesser Marbled Frit. Scarce Frit. Glanville Frit. Heath Frit. Painted Lady Map Poplar Admiral Speckled Wood Large Wall Brown Small Heath</p>
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