

MAMMAL TOUR OF EASTERN ESTONIA June 1-8th 2012

Sandwich Bird Tours

Participants: Mike Brimson, Chris Dyett, Jim Law, John van der Dol

Guide/driver Tarvo Valker and local guides



Friday June 1st

After a fairly uneventful flight with Easyjet from Stansted we arrived in Tallinn and were met by our guide Tarvo. We loaded up the minibus and set off on our 185 km journey to Tartu in the south-east of the country, where we were to be based for the first three days of our tour.

En route we noted several White Storks which proved to be very common here and Hooded Crows are the common corvid in this region. We also saw a Roe Deer by the side of the road and a Pine Marten crossed the highway. After about two hours we checked in to our very comfortable accommodation, had dinner and retired fairly early in anticipation of an early start in the morning.

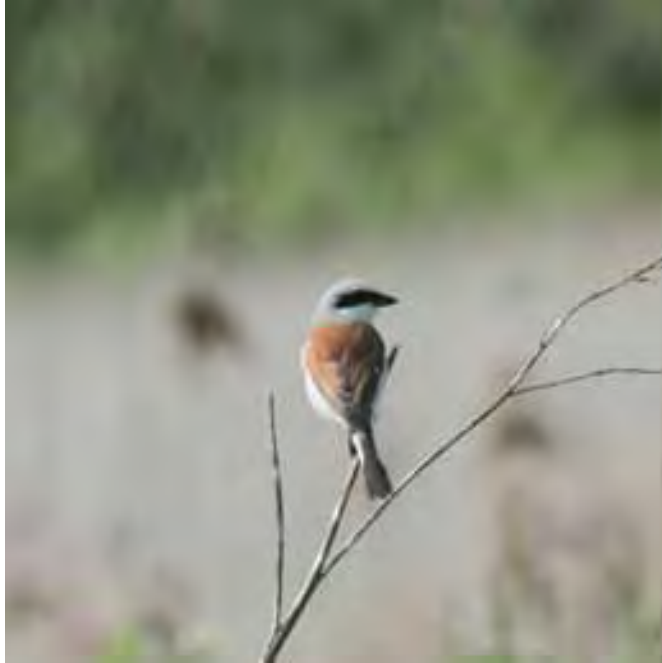
Saturday June 2nd

A day of forest and wetland area birding which proved very interesting. However it was quite cold and windy with intermittent showers. A buck Roe Deer with two juveniles was noted and birds of interest were Hawfinch, Icterine, Great Reed, Wood and Marsh Warbler while Thrush Nightingales were heard everywhere, but not seen. Hazelhen was heard and a bird disturbed may well have been it but we could not be sure.

The wetland area produced some waterfowl including Garganey and a female Goldeneye with

chicks while a Corncrake was heard only. Three Marsh Sandpipers were a bit unusual and a flock of a dozen Common Cranes were nice. Raptors included Marsh Harrier, Sparrowhawk and plenty of Buzzards.

The evening was set aside for a boat trip looking for Beavers and we were lucky that the heavy rain storm subsided not long after we arrived at the boats. Two Beavers were seen and a lodge noted.



Sunday June 3rd

This morning we did some birding round the polders and general agricultural land. We started the day off with a Lesser Spotted Eagle, three of which were seen eventually. Another wetland area produced 8 Red-necked Phalaropes, a Red-necked Grebe and more some Black Terns.

This afternoon we went Raccoon Dog tracking which was totally unsuccessful resulting in a collared dead specimen. We looked at a couple of Badger sets but in the heat of the day we could not really expect anything. However some lovely Red-backed Shrikes were photographed right next to the vehicle. A Honey Buzzard and Hobby

were seen too.

Some fishponds surrounded by trees and scrub resulted in a fine White-backed Woodpecker, a male Golden Oriole and about three Penduline Tits near a couple of nests. Three Whooper Swans were calling reminding us why they are called the way they are and a Black Woodpecker did a fly-over.

An Osprey was seen here too.

Wood Lark and Tree Pipits gave fine shows too in the forest.

This evening was spent at the Great Snipe lek and about half a dozen birds were seen and a Corncrake did three fly pasts. This proved to be a new species for most in the group. A single Black Stork was seen briefly as it flew low over the trees and disappeared behind them.]

We spent the evening driving through the forests in search of night birds but apart from about 10 Woodcocks little of note was discovered. River Warblers were heard but never seen.

Monday June 4th

After a leisurely breakfast we packed the van and left our accommodation for the forests of the North East. We virtually drove straight to our new base, the Matsu Guesthouse where we had our own chalets mostly decked out in pine. In order to have hot water we had to light the wood-burning stove which was no problem but the in order to get rid of the excessive heat we needed to open the doors and windows allowing unwelcome guests into our rooms. Mosquitoes are plentiful in this area at this time of year. However it was a great place to stay in the middle of nowhere surrounded by lush green fields and plenty of nice birds such as Icterine Warblers, Hawfinches and Common Rosefinches in the garden.

Another White-backed Woodpecker was seen today, but much of the afternoon was spent in the forest with the bear expert. She took us round showing us places where bears had hibernated out in the open underneath trees, scratch marks, broken trees and bear scats. About six o'clock we entered the bear hide where we were to spend the night. This is a very comfortable place with a dozen bunk

beds with sleeping bags, a dry toilet and comfortable chairs from which to survey the feeding station. The bait consisted of some Grey Seals which had been washed up dead in the Baltic and transported to this site. There appeared to be not much happening for the first few hours. As the light faded a little a Raccoon Dog turned up suffering badly from scabies, a disease which appears to be going through the population at the moment. Its fur on its sides and back was completely missing. It spent some time foraging around, took some meat away and then returned. This may well have been feeding young pups.

A little later a second Raccoon Dog arrived, this one in "splendid plumage". We watched it for a while before it got spooked and run off in a hurry. This appeared to be a sign that a bear may be in the area and sure enough one turned up within half a minute followed quickly by its partner. A dark brown male and a light coloured grey and brown female. They spent quite a long time at the station enjoying the seal meat. It now had got too dark to see them well and it was time for some sleep. Mission accomplished although it had never been possible to get any pictures and Mike's camcorder decided to play up so he had no luck either.

About 4 am Jim got up and sat himself down to start watching again. A Red Fox appeared briefly as did a third bear but he did not stay. After about 30 minutes last night's pair returned and those asleep were awoken to get excellent views in reasonable light. Some photos were possible. We packed up and left about 7am. It had been a fantastic experience and one I would love to repeat at some time in the future.

As we arrived back at the van Chris noticed a large animal on the road. It was our female bear again and she was joined by the male. Amazing that the few people who live out in the country live side by side with these magnificent creatures. We had been lucky as our specialist guide had only once seen a bear in the road and three bears from the hide was apparently very lucky indeed and the fact they stayed so long too.

Tuesday June 5th

We returned to the guesthouse for a late breakfast and a rest. After lunch we set off again for some afternoon birding and an all-night drive round the forest. They certainly don't believe in regular sleeping routines in this place.

The afternoon birding session produced a breeding pair of Three-toed Woodpeckers with the adults feeding young at the nest. Nearby some magnificent Lady's Slipper Orchids were in full bloom which certainly required some attention. A male Montagu's Harrier was found and appeared to turn into a male Hen Harrier which was rather confusing. However some record shots in the camera proved there to be two different species present.

We returned for dinner and about 8pm we set off again for our night crawl. We picked yet another



guide who immediately took us to a place where about 60 Lady's slipper orchids were growing by the roadside in bunches of 10-15 flowering spikes. Incredible sight.

Another Montagu's Harrier was noted and a Great grey Shrike sat high on a dead tree. We drove the forest roads checking for owls but apart from just hearing a Ural Owl we had no luck. June is really too late in the season for owls and woodpeckers.

We heard a Corncrake in the roadside verge and we managed to tape it out on to the road. A few photos later and it wandered off underneath the vehicle and disappeared. They are rarely seen but here in Estonia there are so many that chances are good of a view somewhere.

At one of our stops a female Elk with young was seen but they too disappeared back into the forest. As the light started to fade we started seeing Woodcocks and Nightjars. One of the latter was dazzled in the headlights and photos were taken at close range.

We drove through the night and by early morning we had not really seen that much. In the misty fields our guide spotted some Black Grouse, one of which was seen to be lekking, but there were no females. I think it was a practice run and great fun to watch before it just flew off into the mist. Another bear shot across the road and a Hazelhen flew up out of the verge but neither were great views.

We returned to the guesthouse by 5am and Tarvo was totally exhausted and we were just very tired.



Wednesday/Thursday June 6-7th

Two days of general birding which were nice but nothing of exceptional note was seen. A party of 4 Roe Deer on the road were nice and the afternoon of Thursday was spent with Estonia's chief researcher on Flying Squirrels. He is a very knowledgeable and very funny guy and we really enjoyed his company. We looked for nest

holes and signs of the squirrels and in the evening he took us to a nest box which has one female in it. It came out quite early but did not hang around. It shot up the tree and disappeared into the foliage. After a few minutes we saw it fly (or sail) some 50 or so meters to another tree at a huge speed. It was then lost to sight but it was a good and very rare experience. It is a rare and endangered and threatened species.

On the way back by the car he pointed out some Brandt's Bats which were new to all.

We said our goodbyes and returned to the lodge.

Friday June 8th

It was our last day and we decided to pack up early and drive to the west of Estonia and do some birding along the coast.

I was particularly keen to see some Military Orchids which are common in the west and some were duly found and photographed.

Along a coastal cliff-top walk we had a number of Black Guillemots., some Red-breasted Mergansers, and added a few common species to the list such Oystercatcher, Great Black-backed Gull and Common Gull and Lapwing chicks were found.

We then returned to Tallinn, met and had lunch with Marika, the owner of Estonian Nature Tours, and eventually drove to the airport for our flight home. All in all a very painless journey.



Summary

All in all a short but very enjoyable tour with many highlights. Brown Bears were just magnificent and the other mammals were great too. The birds were excellent if sometimes perhaps a little hard to find especially the owls but as already noted, it was a little late in the season. Butterflies were not numerous, but some good species were found and two terrific species of Orchid photographed.

The guide, Tarvo, was excellent. He is knowledgeable, sociable and very friendly and worked extremely hard. The specialist guides employed were excellent too.

The accommodation was good too and the food was superb especially in the Matsu Guest House. The country itself is stunning, unspoilt and very green with many unimproved meadows and as half the country is forest it was just great to drive around.

A fantastic one week's break and we will be sure to return soon.

Systematic List

Slavonian Grebe - Two in breeding plumage

Great Crested Grebe

Red-necked Grebe- One heard and one seen

Cormorant

Bittern- many heard

Grey Heron

Great Egret

Black Stork- A brief view as it disappeared behind the trees

White Stork – very common and often seen on the nest with large young

Mute Swan

Whooper Swan- a pair and a party of three

Wigeon

Gadwall

Pintail

Shoveler

Teal

Garganey

Tufted Duck
 Goldeneye- some seen with young
 Red-breasted Merganser
 Montagu's Harrier- Two males
 Marsh Harrier
 Hen Harrier- one male
 Sparrowhawk
 Honey Buzzard- two singles
 Buzzard
 Lesser Spotted Eagle- Three on one day and two on another day
 Osprey- Two singles
 Hobby
 Black Guillemot- several offshore
 Black Grouse – About six seen. A single male seen lekking at close range
 Hazel Grouse- One heard and another seen flying off the roadside verge
 Corncrake- Many heard and three seen. One by the side of the van on the road.



Coot
 Common Crane- two singles, two heard and a flock of eleven seen
 Oystercatcher
 Little Ringed Plover
 Golden Plover
 Grey Plover- a high migrating flock of about 60 birds seen
 Lapwing

Curlew

Marsh Sandpiper- a party of three birds was a little unusual

Green Sandpiper

Woodcock- common in the forests

Great Snipe- About six at a lek

Common Snipe

Red-necked Phalarope- a party of eight

Little Gull



Black-headed Gull

Common Gull

Herring Gull

Greater Black-backed Gull

Arctic Tern

Common Tern

Black Tern

Wood Pigeon

Stock Dove

Rock Dove

Collared Dove

Cuckoo

Long-eared Owl

Ural Owl- heard

Nightjar- About six

Swift

Black Woodpecker- a single fly-over

Grey-headed Woodpecker- heard only

Great-spotted Woodpecker

White-backed Woodpecker- Two singles

Three-toed Woodpecker- a pair at the nest



Skylark

Woodlark

Sand Martin

Swallow

House Martin

Tree Pipit

Meadow Pipit

White Wagtail

Yellow Wagtail

Wren

Dunnock

Robin

Thrush Nightingale- Many heard only

Whinchat

Northern Wheatear

Blackbird

Fieldfare

Redwing

Song Thrush

Mistle Thrush

River Warbler- several heard only
 Great Reed Warbler
 Sedge Warbler
 Marsh Warbler- fairly common
 Reed Warbler- A single heard
 Icterine Warbler
 Lesser Whitethroat



Whitethroat
 Blackcap
 Barred Warbler- a single seen on the coast
 Wood Warbler
 Willow Warbler
 Chiffchaff
 Goldcrest
 Pied Flycatcher
 Spotted Flycatcher
 Red-breasted Flycatcher- a few heard and one seen
 Penduline Tit- three seen at nests
 Blue Tit
 Great Tit
 Treecreeper
 Red-backed Shrike- common
 Great Grey Shrike- A single seen

Starling
 Golden Oriole- male and female seen and others heard
 Jay
 Magpie
 Raven
 Jackdaw
 Hooded Crow
 Rook
 Tree Sparrow
 House Sparrow
 Chaffinch
 Siskin
 Greenfinch
 Goldfinch
 Bullfinch Two pairs of the "northern race"
 Hawfinch
 Linnet
 Common Rosefinch
 Yellowhammer
 Reed Bunting

BUTTERFLIES
 Swallowtail
 Heath Fritillary
 Large White

Small White
Green-veined White
Wood White



Black-veined White

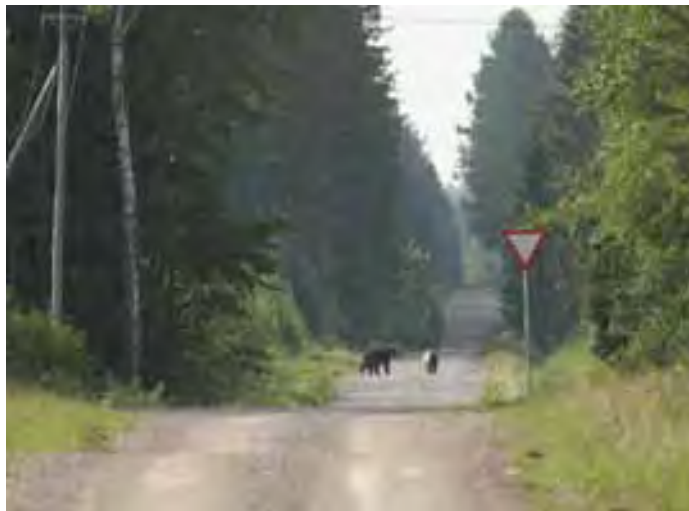
Orange Tip
Brimstone
Common Blue
Camberwell Beauty
Small Tortoiseshell
Map Butterfly

ORCHIDS

Lady's Slipper Orchid- about 60 in full bloom
Military Orchid- A dozen along the coast
Butterfly Orchid sp in bud
Twayblade sp in bud probably Lesser Twayblade
Spotted Orchid- leaves only

MAMMALS

Brandt's Bat *Myotis brandti*
European Brown Hare *Lepus europeus*
Mountain Hare *Lepus timidus*
Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*
Moose *Alces alces*
Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*
Pine Marten *Martes martes*
European Beaver *Castor fiber*
Raccoon Dog *Nyctereutes procyonoides*
Siberian Flying Squirrel *Pteromys volans*
Brown Bear *Ursus arctos*



John van der Dol
Sandwich Bird Tours June 2012

