

# **ITINERARY**

## **Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> May**

Morning flight from London Gatwick to Tallinn, arriving early afternoon. Afternoon birding at Paldiski (cliffs) and Padise (monastery garden) en route to Hotel Haapsalu, arriving early evening.

## **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> May**

Morning birding in Haapsalu cemetery and the coastline in and around Matsalu Bay at Pogari (roadside viewpoint), Puise (walk to end of peninsula) and Haeska (tower – lunch in nearby woodland clearing). Afternoon birding at Vonnu (farmland and pond) and Haapsalu Bay, returning to the hotel late afternoon.

## **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> May**

Early start for pre-breakfast birding at Kasari (Black Grouse lek). Rest of day birding north of Haapsalu at Poosaspea (seawatching), Leidissoo Forest (lunch), Haversi (waders) and Sutlepa (reeds/lake from tower). Return to hotel early evening.

## **Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> May**

Transfer day: birding at Pogari, Avaste Forest (lunch) and Uulu (fields) en route to Hotel Lapanina south of Haademeeste, arriving late afternoon. Post-dinner birding at Pikla (reedbeds) and Nigula Forest.

## **Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> May**

Pre-breakfast seawatching from hotel. Rest of day exploring Nigula Forest, arriving back at hotel late afternoon.

## **Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> June**

Transfer day: birding at Haademeeste (reeds and shorebirds), Nigula and Soomaa Forests (lunch) en route to Hotel Kantri on the outskirts of Tartu, arriving late afternoon.

## **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> June**

Morning birding at Aardlapalu (wetland south of Tartu) and Laeva (farmland to north). Lunch and raptor watching at Laeva (“Hollywood Hill”). Afternoon birding nearby and at Ilmatsalu (fishponds). Arrive back at hotel late afternoon. Post-dinner birding at Karavere (Great Snipe lek).

## **Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June**

Birding in Rapina area south-east of Tartu: town park, shore of Lake Peipsi (lunch in nearby woodland) and reedbeds. Sightseeing in Tartu, arriving back at hotel late afternoon. Post-dinner birding at Karavere (Great Snipe lek).

## **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> June**

Morning birding at Ilmatsalu, returning to hotel mid-morning prior to transfer to Tallinn (lunch in woodland en route) for mid-afternoon flight to Gatwick, arriving late afternoon.

## DAILY DIARY

### Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> May

On arrival in Estonia we quickly met up with Antero, obtained some local currency, unpacked our telescopes and headed west. At first it seemed very different from what we were expecting – fast roads and modern buildings. However, we were soon ‘off piste’ and, negotiating our way through various relics of the Russian past, we arrived at the coast. A small number of Black Guillemots were soon located on the sea as we enjoyed the sunshine despite the wind, whilst we also found a number of Eider and our first Black Redstart.

Our second birding spot was a monastery garden, and this provided a clue as to what was on offer for the rest of the week: lots of interesting birds singing, lots of leaves to hide themselves behind but ultimately lots of good views to reward our patience! Here we saw Thrush Nightingale, Wryneck and Icterine Warbler as well as the commoner Tree Pipit, Pied Flycatcher and Fieldfare, whilst Siskins were feeding on the Wych Elm.

We headed along tracks through a mosaic of woods and fallow flower-rich fields, with Cowslips predominating. This was a world away from Tallinn and we found abundant Whinchats, common Red-backed Shrikes and our first Montagu’s Harriers. We arrived at Haapsalu in the late afternoon. Our hotel here was in the town centre and, being Saturday night, it was busy and relatively noisy, but on the following evenings it was much quieter.

### Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> May

A quick recce in the cemetery opposite the hotel produced a number of Redstarts and a singing young male Red-breasted Flycatcher which, after something of a chase, we all saw well. We then drove south to the coast via a wood where our first Wood Warbler was trilling, and some Cranes overhead called to give themselves away. From an elevated roadside viewpoint we saw a number of waders, including Avocet and Knot, as well as hundreds of Barnacle Geese; here, and at several other coastal sites, we could only imagine the huge numbers of birds present just a couple of weeks before – but then had we been here then we’d have missed most of the warblers and flycatchers!

At a coastal point we found Arctic, Caspian and Little Terns as well as Red-breasted Merganser and Garganey before returning to our first spot where a magnificent Red-necked Phalarope was seen on a roadside pond before being flushed by a Montagu’s Harrier. A Fox delayed us, then it was on to the first of many tower hides. The ducks and waders were relatively distant but clearly identifiable through a telescope. The highlights included a single White-front amongst the Greylag Geese and several Smew amongst the other diving ducks. Soon everything flew off, and we discovered why when a Lesser Spotted Eagle glided high overhead. We turned our attention to the tree-nesting Common Gulls before returning to the bus. Along the road we had magnificent views of a singing male Barred Warbler before eating our first picnic lunch – quantity and quality – in a picturesque woodland clearing, a Four-spotted Chaser dragonfly perching up for us to enjoy and Yellow Anemones being identified.

Antero's expert local knowledge – he really did know this country as his own – led us to a piece of farmland where the very local Ortolan Bunting was present and we were rewarded with great views of two singing birds. We then attempted to coax out our first Corncrake, this time without success, but were pleased when a rare Northern Chequered Skipper butterfly chose Ian as its perch! Nearby, a local pond held a nesting pair of Slavonian Grebes and a Moorhen whilst a Grey-headed Woodpecker appeared briefly. We walked down a track attempting to get closer to it: no joy, but we were pleased to find Wild Tulips.

At Haapsalu Bay near the hotel we found a number of ducks, a large flock of Grey Herons and a distant White-tailed Eagle before returning to base in good time for dinner. Some chose to walk to the castle and make the most of the long evening.

### **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> May**

Despite the temptation to get up early every day to make the most of the better birding it would offer, David was keen to restrict pre-breakfast birding to when it was strictly necessary – and today was the day! After a longish drive we arrived at a Black Grouse lek. Worryingly, several birds flew off immediately we arrived, but fortunately others remained and we had reasonable views of the bubbling males. One was a little different – a Rackelhahn, a cross with a Capercaillie – and it obligingly flew into a roadside tree and posed up for photos. A Grasshopper Warbler reeled right by the bus and gave super views – we were to see a number during the week.

Breakfast, including porridge, was welcome as we were rather cold! Then we headed off again, this time north. Another White-tailed Eagle flew right across the road before we entered the forest (with stunning views of Crested Tit, Goldcrest and Woodlark) en route to a seawatching point. Fog hampered viewing at first and Antero was disappointed but once we got set we most certainly weren't, with views of passing Red-throated and Black-throated Divers and sea duck including Velvet Scoter and Scaup. There were also perched Arctic and Common Terns to compare.

The nearby woodland was hard work birdwise – but near our lunch spot we found a wonderful adult male Red-breasted Flycatcher and there were a number of interesting flowers including Bogbean and Common Solomon's Seal. As we returned, first a huge Wild Boar crossed the road and then a Moose was seen, the latter staying around for ages.

At a coastal site we had a masterclass of small waders. A Little Stint to compare with Temminck's Stint and Sanderling in summer plumage, as well as good numbers of Broad-billed Sandpipers and Red-necked Phalaropes. We managed – just – to avoid grounding the minibus in a bog before heading for our last spot, another tower hide overlooking a reedbed and some pools. The sun came out and we noted a number of Little Gulls and Black Terns as well as a close Bittern and several Hobbies. We could have stayed but having been out since early morning it was time to return for dinner at the end of a varied and action packed day.

### **Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> May**

There was added spice at breakfast as we watched the local police checking 12-13 year old children for alcohol before they went off on a trip – an idea for David to take back to Ipswich perhaps?!

We checked out and headed south. A brief stop at the same place we'd been to on Sunday confirmed that numbers of shorebirds had dropped – it really was the tail end of the migration season now. We then drifted through some farmland and one stop proved to be inspired. More views of Wryneck and Barred and Grasshopper Warblers were welcome, but the Corncrake walking through the grass next to the track was very much more so! It was the only one we actually saw all week. A male Hen Harrier showed well to cap a fine hour.

By now we knew patience was the name of the game in the forests and today was no exception. We bided our time and eventually found a suitable clearing where, in quick succession, we found a Black Stork, two Golden Eagles and a singing Willow Tit. We lunched near a stream where white-headed Long-tailed Tits performed well, several Common Rosefinches were in song and Green Sandpipers were displaying overhead. Next we headed for the highest point in the area overlooking a bog. Two perched Cranes and a Honey Buzzard were ample reward.

A drive along a fast road soon took us through the fine town of Parnu, before we again headed along tracks. The eagle eyed members of the group helped spot a party of Whooper Swans – perhaps non-breeders? We added Stock and Turtle Doves before we arrived at our hotel right by the sea. There was time to check in and explore, and our reward was a superb Marsh Warbler which sung for over half an hour.

After a pleasant dinner we headed expectantly for a local reedbed. Great Reed and Savi's Warblers were in full song and both showed well, whilst an Otter appeared in front of one lucky observer and Bearded Tits were seen splendidly. There were no crakes and just a single Water Rail, but it was great to be out at dusk. We drove home via several forest tracks and although we had no luck with owls, our route proved to be an inspired one as both Nightjar and Woodcock landed on the track right in front of the bus, providing incredible views in the headlights. We arrived back at midnight, tired but exhilarated at the end of a magical evening.

### **Wednesday 31<sup>st</sup> May**

We awoke to perfect weather today – there was bright sunshine and the sea was flat calm. A speculative scan from the breakfast room produced a cracking summer plumage Black-throated Diver as well as Long-tailed Duck, Common Scoter and Red-necked Grebe.

We spent more or less the whole day exploring various parts of the local forest. It was, again, a day for perseverance, and we were amply rewarded. Our first major stop was at a clearing which looked much like any other, except that here we found a nest of Black Woodpeckers, with the young putting their heads out of the large hole, as well as at least two Grey-headed and one White-backed Woodpecker – all three species gave frame-filling 'scope views. As if this wasn't enough, a Blyth's Reed

Warbler sang on and off all the time we were there, allowing us to learn its song and see all the salient identification features. A truly amazing half hour.

Further on we tried for Hazel Grouse at a number of sites. This species is very difficult to locate, and so it proved. One bird responded to our tape by calling back, and another was glimpsed briefly by some as it flashed across the track. But try as we might we didn't get a real view. Spirits were soon restored, however, by a singing River Warbler sitting up long enough for everyone to get it in the 'scope – we were really fortunate to have such good views of the warblers all week.

We left the forest for a brief comfort break and saw a Treecreeper for good measure before finding a clearing for lunch. A ringtail Hen Harrier was pleasing but we spent more time looking at the dragonflies and butterflies here, with several species including Chequered and Northern Chequered Skippers, Camberwell Beauty, Map and Mazarine Blue. There were also a number of flowers to look at, amongst them Globe Flower.

In the afternoon we marvelled at the variety of trees in the forest as we drove slowly along, listening for different songs. Finally we were in luck, as a Greenish Warbler was heard. This proved more difficult to see but most had very acceptable views as it did a circuit in the tree-tops. A pair of Hawfinches vanished quickly but a Lesser Spotted Woodpecker was more obliging and we had the time to study a Beaver dam across one of the many ditches.

Our last stop was in some dry pines near the hotel where, bang on cue, a male Serin was heard and we had super views as it perched on an aerial. We returned to the hotel in plenty of time to explore the surrounding area once again before our excellent dinner.

### **Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> June**

All week the forecast for Thursday had been for rain and wind. In the event it wasn't as bad as expected, at least early on. We walked to a coastal spot which held Sandwich Terns and a Cormorant colony. A large flock of Grey Plovers heading north reminded us that migration hadn't quite finished. On the way we obtained good views of a Lesser Whitethroat as well as yet another Grasshopper Warbler and the by now seemingly abundant Common Rosefinches.

Antero's attempts to take us on a direct route through the forest met with several obstacles such as railway lines and rivers, but the forest still produced Nuthatch, another Willow Tit, a calling Pygmy Owl and (fleetingly) a family of Wild Boar. Our lunch was taken at a riverside picnic site – a Common Sandpiper conveniently flew past, one of only two for the week, whilst Marsh Cranesbill and Common Dog Violet were new flowers, Wood White an addition to the butterfly list and Broad-bodied Chaser a different dragonfly. Just round the corner a Snipe flew from the side of the road and careful observation revealed the presence of two chicks – they had amazingly long beaks for such tiny birds. We left them in peace but had soon stopped again, this time for a close Lesser Spotted Eagle mobbing a perched White-tailed. To complete a stunning few minutes, a Goldeneye was found to have young – what a contrast this had been to the seemingly birdless morning!

There was time to admire a fine meadow which at the right time of day would have been full of rasping Corncrakes before it was time to head for Tartu. This proved to be good timing as the heavens opened and we made for the hotel, only the somewhat bizarre roadworks slowing us down. On arrival the leader successfully located a number of bathplugs in the local hypermarket to impress the group!!

### **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> June**

It was windy today, but dry and sunny, and we set off eagerly anticipating a day of varied habitats and birds. We were not to be disappointed. First up was a marshland pool with breeding Black Terns and a fine pair of Citrine Wagtails which from time to time gave excellent views as they fed on the water's edge. A circuit of the area produced a stunning Lesser Spotted Woodpecker which spent most of its time perching up on reeds, as well as a less co-operative Golden Oriole.

Our only serious 'twitch' of the week proved successful, much to Antero's delight, as the Corn Bunting (an Estonian rarity) jangled happily on some wires. A Marsh Warbler perched up nearby vied for our attention.

Lunch was taken on *Hollywood Hill*, a vantage point with super 360 degree views over the forest. There was no sign of Greater Spotted Eagle, but we had compensation in the form of two Lesser Spotteds, yet another Black Stork and a White Stork descending seemingly through the atmosphere and down onto its nest. Another group of Lily of the Valley was noted, whilst in the trees across the road we found Downy Emerald dragonfly.

A further scan from a position further into the forest produced a Honey Buzzard and a fish-carrying Osprey before we explored an area of fishponds. We largely drew a blank here, except for Black-tailed Skimmer dragonflies and some youngsters convinced we were trying to steal their motor bikes. We vowed to return on our last morning in the hope of more birds and fewer people.

The day wasn't finished. After dinner we got back in the bus and headed back into the forest, singing Redwings, Song Thrushes and Robins much in evidence. We arrived at a series of fields shortly after 10 pm, set up our telescopes and waited expectantly. For the next hour we were treated to a wonderful display by the lekking Great Snipe as they clicked, strutted, jumped and simply posed for us. There are very few places in Europe where this spectacle can be witnessed so we felt extremely privileged. A Long-eared Owl flew over a couple of times to provide a distraction, whilst a Roe Deer was a fine background to the snipe. After an in-depth comparison of the relative performances of our 'scopes in the twilight we headed back happily to the hotel.

### **Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> June**

We drove south-east today to Rapina. A leisurely walk around the town park produced a wonderful Middle Spotted Woodpecker, a very difficult bird to see in Estonia, as well as fine views of Icterine Warbler and a nesting pair of Redstarts. On

the adjacent water Little Gulls and Black Terns were breeding and the views were excellent.

The village on the Russian border was memorable for being out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whilst the sight of border guards in the tower reminded us of times past. Back on the birding trail, another Black-throated Diver showed well on the large lake whilst, at our lunch spot, yet another pair of Lesser Spotted Eagles were on patrol.

In the afternoon we headed for a huge reedy area, famous for its crakes. Not in 2006, however, as it was far too dry. Instead we had to be satisfied with an amazing view of an adult White-tailed Eagle as well as a party of Black-tailed Godwits in a flooded field.

We returned to sightsee in Tartu before dinner when we celebrated Ann and John's wedding anniversary before returning to the Great Snipe lek – there was a coach-load of Austrians this time around but it didn't spoil our enjoyment!

### **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> June**

After breakfast there was time to return to our fishponds and successfully locate, and enjoy, at least one Penduline Tit as it remained faithful to the vicinity of its wonderful nest. The more intrepid members of the group walked down the track in the rain and added Grey Partridge to the list, whilst we all ticked off our last new bird, an adult Lesser Black-backed Gull. Then we packed up and headed north. We had our last picnic in yet another splendidly birdy piece of forest, complete with a visible Dunnock and a fly-over Bullfinch, before it was off to the airport for the trouble-free journey home. Estonia had provided wonderful birds and other wildlife in, for the most part, unspoilt landscapes. We firmly hope that if we return it will still be in the same state.