



Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Estonia
7 – 14 June 2019

Holiday participants

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Leader

Rein Kuresoo (NaTourEst). Report by Rein Kuresoo with additions by Tim and Cheryl Hunt.

We stayed at

Sagadi Manor in eastern Estonia near Lahemaa National Park www.sagadi.ee
Altmõisa Guest House in western Estonia near Matsalu National Park www.altmoisa.ee



Photos by Tim and Cheryl Hunt and Rein Kuresoo.

Above: Sagadi Manor (RK). Below: the group at Matsalu (CH), except Cheryl who is taking the photo.
Cover: brown bear (CH) and Slavonian grebes at Haapsalu (RK).



This holiday, as for every Honeyguide holiday, also supports conservation of the wildlife that we enjoyed in our host country. In Estonia this year our donation was £400, £40 per person topped up by an additional donation and gift aid through the Honeyguide Wildlife Charitable Trust. The sum given by Honeyguide is being spent on volunteer working camps of the Estonian Fund for Nature, to enhance breeding habitat/feeding places for black storks. The total for all conservation contributions through Honeyguide since 1991 is £133,762 (October 2019).

DAILY DIARY

7 June – from Tallinn to Lahemaa National Park

The Honeyguide group arrived at Tallinn airport before noon. We started our trip with lunch in a buffet restaurant LIDO (a Latvian restaurant chain, known for its wide choice of dishes and quick service) near the old town. After the lunch we climbed up to Toompea hill to have a stunning view to medieval Tallinn. When descending to downtown of old Tallinn we heard our first marsh warbler singing in the bushes near the town wall – probably a late migrant. We walked down to the town square and strolled through some of the oldest quarters of the city. Having finished the city tour, we drove to Lahemaa National Park and booked in to Sagadi Manor Hotel.

There are three impressive manor complexes of former Baltic German landowners in Lahemaa NP – Palmse, Sagadi and Vihula. All of these manors are well restored and converted partly or entirely to hotels. Like most Baltic German manors they have a lot of buildings around the main manor – like a granary, coach-house, the workers' house, cattle sheds, dairy, etc, and of course (very essential) a distillery, which was usually an important source of wealth for the Baltic German nobility in the Russian Empire through 19th century. More important from our perspective is that all the manors have also impressive and well managed parks with old trees and many interesting birds like icterine warblers, thrush nightingales and different woodpeckers.

After the dinner we made a short trip to the old fishing village of Altja, where we heard and saw Blyth's reed warblers, reed warblers and great reed warblers singing. At the sea we saw several red-breasted mergansers and goosanders swimming together.

8 June – Käsmu peninsula and bear hide

In the morning we visited Käsmu peninsula. Black woodpecker was seen in the forest and velvet scoters at the sea. After a nice walk at the peninsula we made a stop at an observation platform near Käsmu and had a nice set of birds: Blyth's reed, marsh and grasshopper warblers and scarlet rosefinch singing simultaneously.



Promontory in Käsmu and scarlet rosefinch (RK).



Goosander with young, Käsmu Bay (CH).

We went to the bear hides in the late afternoon. The hides are situated in the north-east part of Estonia in a most forested region of the country called Alutaguse. This year the sixth national park in Estonia, Alutaguse NP, was established. It consists of several big peat bogs and forests surrounding it. The bear hide is quite close to one part of the park on forest land privately owned by NaTourEst.

Although in order not to scare animals off it is important to go to the bear hide in the late afternoon, the bears will in most cases still appear quite late in the evening. But the time waiting for the bears was by no means wasted: racoon dogs started to visit the area soon, feeding on barley scattered around the hide. At first there were three racoon dogs coming and leaving again, later we lost track how many animals there really were. Raccoon dogs have been introduced to Baltic countries and western Russia in Soviet time, 1950s, from the Soviet far east. Now these omnivorous pests have become extremely numerous. They are not strictly territorial animals and different individuals seem to get along well, until there is some food to share.

A common crane came to the hide, willow, crested and great tits, great spotted woodpeckers, jays and bullfinches visited the feeders. Even a white-backed woodpecker was seen by some, although it was quite far from the hide.



Raccoon dog and red squirrel from NaTourEst's bear hide (CH).

Finally, when the sun started to set, the first bear arrived, soon to be followed by the second one – both of them still young. After having dug out a salmon head, they disappeared for a while, appearing again after some time.

Since I have seen many bears during my guiding career and had to be fresh in the morning to drive, I decided to go to sleep at about 11 pm. As I heard in the morning, the bears kept coming all night, and there were definitely different animals, somebody proposed that there were seven altogether. It may be quite possible, but difficult to say, because I even have seen 11 during one stay. The busiest time seemed to be after midnight and despite the Estonian light night and very dim lamps that lit up the area, it was still too dark to say exactly.

9 June – Vihula, Oandu nature trail

After the night in the bear hide we had a late breakfast in the hotel and had a little rest. In the afternoon we visited another manor, Vihula, which was nice, but did not deliver the hoped for woodpeckers, though kingfishers were spotted on the ponds of Vihula manor, while goldeneyes and gosanders were with their chicks on ponds of both manors.

Oandu nature trail is quite close to Sagadi. It is about a 5 km long hike in a forest. The trail makes a loop through different forest types – a pine forest regrown in an area of extensive forest burn and an old-growth spruce and mixed forest down the slope, which is actually an old coastal ridge buried under the glacial sediments. Whereas the pine forest is nice with extensive mats of 'reindeer lichens' *Cladonia stellaris*, it was poor for birds, as usual here, and only crested tits were noteworthy this time. In a damper and darker old-growth forest with lot of undergrowth a much richer set of species waited for us. We heard several red-breasted flycatchers, although they did not sing very actively, and we failed to see them.

On the forest floor the most exciting plant was twinflower, a tiny creeper, which still manages to form quite dense mats in some places. It was only starting to flower but mostly it was in buds. Some common spotted orchids started to show flower spikes. Ostrich and lady ferns covered large areas in the undergrowth.

10 June – from Lahemaa to Matsalu National Park

In the morning we started to drive to western Estonia. I chose a scenic route through Lahemaa National Park and then we continued with the tour to Kõnnu Suursoo peat bog. A boardwalk led us to a tower hide in the bog and back. There were a lot of bog plants to see (e.g. oblong-leaved, round-leaved and English sundews all present in one bog) and also several dragonflies (emperor, large white-faced darter and dark whiteface). Some of us saw an adder, but it managed to disappear quickly. We saw a nice red-backed shrike and this is usually a clear sign that its bigger relative, great grey shrike, does not breed in the vicinity. Wood sandpiper and redshank were present, plus a distant hobby and some whinchats.



Dark whiteface (RK), white-faced darter (CH) on the boardwalk.

We lunched at a roadside service station, with fine hamburgers, then had a rest break at a superb wildflower meadow farther on. We arrived at our hotel at Altmõisa and after settling in we walked from Altmõisa hotel to the sea. The wooden trail is quite old but was still walkable this year. It leads through former coastal meadows now overgrowing, but we saw some nice specialities of this place during the walk. We were looking for barred warbler, which breeds in juniper stands here. Finally, we heard a song and had a glimpse of the flying bird. Also some redpolls were heard singing – this is one of very few places in Estonia where it breeds. At the coast we saw among other birds little ringed plover, Caspian tern and avocet. On the way back both Montagu's and marsh harriers were seen.

After dinner in Altmõisa we made an evening drive to Rannajõe in Matsalu National Park. From the platform we saw a one very distant elk. Some roe deer, a fox and hen harrier were also seen on this vast meadow.



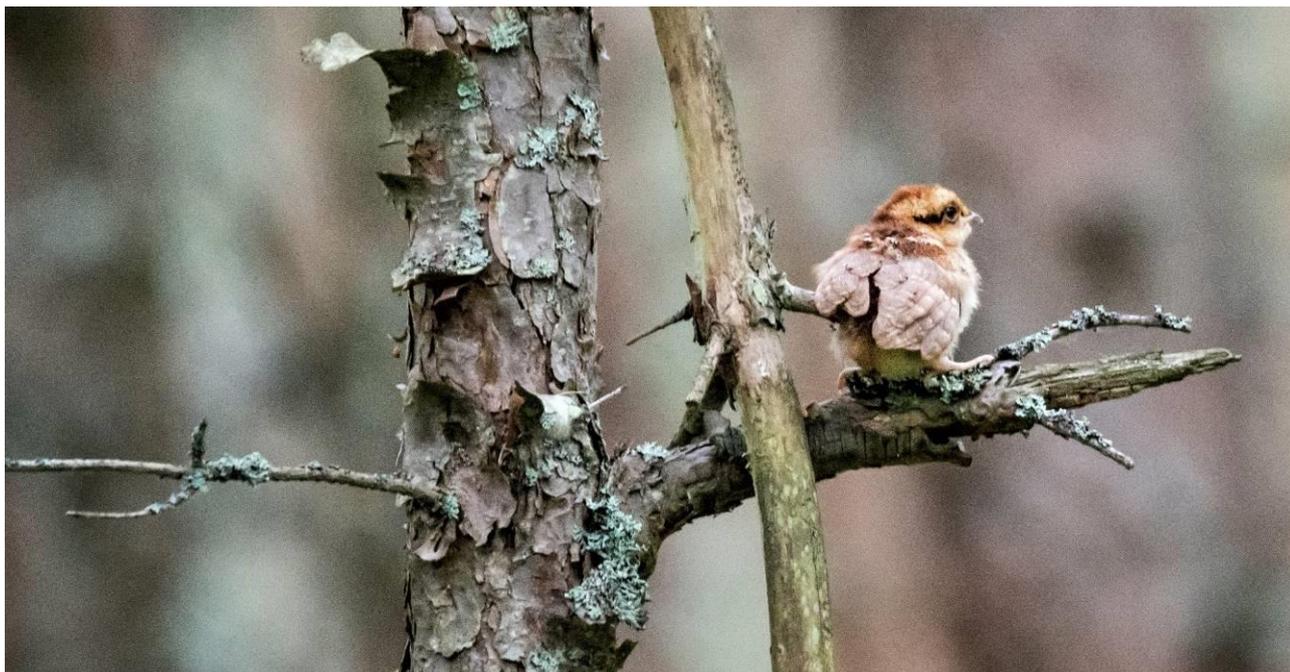
Heath fritillary, Essex skipper and wood tiger moth in today's meadow (CH).

11 June – Noarootsi peninsula

In the morning we drove to Silma nature reserve in Noarootsi peninsula. We spent quite some time in two tower hides at a big Sutlepaeri lagoon (a former sea-strait) largely grown into reedbeds. Among many other species we heard bittern and water rail and saw Caspian tern, little gulls, black terns, bearded reedlings, Savi's warbler and red-necked grebes from the tower hide. There is also a colony of great white egrets in the reeds: this species is quite new to Estonia.

We also visited Spithami promontory, a famous place for migrating arctic waterfowl. After migration time it was quite quiet. Some common shelducks and oystercatchers were busy on the coast, some eiders were resting on the stones and finally we saw also a small flock of common scoters, which were evidently late onto the migration train. We also looked at the lakes Tānavjärv and Veskijärv and a burnt forest area and a peat bog around these. We saw a nest of the osprey with a bird on it.

I drove back by a quiet forest road, hoping to see some tetraonids (grouse). And finally, we saw a family of hazel grouse. As it often happens, the adult bird flying off from ground was seen only by me and some of the group in the front seats. But there were many chicks, which were just a few days old. And they could fly!



Hazel grouse chick (RK).

12 June – Haeska, Haapsalu

After breakfast we headed south, stopping on the way for a group photo by the coast. We then moved on to Haeska, a village in Matsalu National Park renowned for its extensive coastal meadow. In migration time Haeska is one of the best places in Matsalu to see many waterfowl on stopover: sometimes tens of thousands of barnacle geese, thousands of bean and white-fronted geese would feed on the meadow, whereas the bay is full of Bewick's, whooper and mute swans and different ducks and the coast teems with waders. In June the migration is over and at the time of our visit the water level is very low. The sight from the tower hide is therefore not so impressive as in May, but still there was a small flock of barnacle geese, some black-tailed godwits, ringed plovers, greenshanks and curlews and a lot of lapwings.



Railway station in Haapsalu (RK); birdsnest orchid (TH).

For lunch we drove to Haapsalu, which is a resort and town with an interesting history. It is also definitely one of the best towns for birding in Estonia. The main birding attraction for us was the Slavonian grebes breeding on one of the small inlets in town. We found one pair immediately and spent quite some time with these magnificent birds. Later a third bird appeared. Supposedly one female was incubating, and the other pair had so far failed to breed. Slavonian grebes breed here in a tiny artificial rock covered with reed. The grebes breed in a colony of black-headed gulls for security. Despite the protection from predators this is quite a crowded and busy place and nests get destroyed quite often, and sometimes they are also wiped out by floods. We visited the Tsar's private railway station on the way back to Altmõisa.

In the evening we drove to Kloostri in the southern part of Matsalu to look for elks. A cow with a calf was visible from a quite high iron tower-hide overlooking the vast alluvial meadow. Not everybody wanted to climb the tower, so some had to do with very far sightings of elks from Rannajõe tower. At River Kasari also some beavers were swimming – although away in the distance, they were quite nice in the telescope.

Altmõisa area, like many other regions around Matsalu, has recently been colonised by golden jackals – recent unexpected intruders from the southeast. The first jackal was killed in the southern part of Matsalu NP in the winter of 2013 (although, as hunters have later witnessed, they were there already some years earlier). Now there may already be 6-7 breeding pairs of jackals in Matsalu NP and its surroundings and they are heard quite often from Altmõisa hotel. Jackals are mostly nocturnal, so even though we tried to hear the howling chorus of jackals on different evenings we did not hear any. Summer days are long in Estonia and sun sets about 10.30 pm, so probably everybody got to sleep before the normal activity of these predators started.

13 June – Puhtu, Laelatu, Tuhtu

Puhtu is a protected peninsula near the village of Virtsu (the place from where the ferry goes from Estonia's mainland to the island of Saaremaa). About a hundred years ago Puhtu was still a small island, but in a process of lifting land-crust a neck of land has developed between the mainland and islet. The process of land-rise is going on in most of the north-western coast and western islands of Estonia and it has turned islands to peninsulas, bays into lagoons and lagoons into marshes. The soil in this part of land is calcareous and this makes it a suitable habitat for many interesting plant species. Puhtu peninsula is mostly covered with old-growth deciduous forest; in some parts of the peninsula some small coastal and wooded meadows still exist.

This walk was mainly a botanical treat. The forest was dominated both visually and by scent by flowering wild garlic. Among many other plants we also saw parasitic toothwort, white swallow-wort, birdsnest orchid, wonder violet (*Viola mirabilis*) and sea kale. We also had good views of red-breasted flycatcher.

After Puhtu we visited Laelatu wooded meadow. Wooded meadows were once quite widespread on the areas with calcareous soil, in the Baltic region mostly on the Swedish islands of Gotland and Öland and in northern and western Estonia. In the beginning of 20th century the wooded meadows were a dominant landscape type in this part of the country, but nowadays most of the wooded meadows have been abandoned and grown over.



Wood cow-wheat, fragrant orchid (CH); early marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata* var. *ochroleuca* (RK).

The history of using Laelatu wooded meadow goes back over thousand years and part of it is now managed as a nature reserve. Laelatu has extremely rich flora with almost 500 vascular plant species recorded here. In one plant study 76 plant species were found here on one square metre.

Needless to say, it is also very beautiful flowery place with specific highlights in any moment of spring and summer. In early spring, the blue of the flowers of common hepatica would be the carpet colour, later in May white and yellow of wood and yellow anemones will take over with occasional patches of blue and purple of spring vetch and less conspicuous dog and other violets. In the end of May it is time for globeflowers, common cowslip, and bird's-eye primrose in the areas with damper soil.

At this time of the year the plant visually dominating the scene was wood cow-wheat (*Melampyrum nemorosum*), though there were also wood cranesbills, viper's-grass, angular and common Solomon's seals and lilies-of-the-valley.

Showy snowdrop anemones and viper's bugloss were blooming at the roadsides and of, course, also a lot of orchids had put on a show. The lady's slippers had mostly already passed their best, with some flowers in somewhat better condition in shady areas, but sword-leaved helleborines and marsh fragrant orchids were at their best, while abundant military orchids started to fade away. Rosefinch, icterine warbler and golden oriole added with their songs to the idyllic atmosphere.



Poplar admiral (RK); pearl-bordered fritillary by the boardwalk on 10 June (CH).

On the way back to the hotel we drove quite some distance on a former railway dam, in order to avoid the part of the road which was in construction. And it paid off – we saw several freshly hatched beautiful butterflies which the group called purple emperors. Although I agreed at the time it was because I have a little bit of mess in my head with the English names of insects and plants. Although these were actually poplar admirals, it was still a great sight.

We also visited Tuhu bog: a small gravel road goes straight through the peat-bog here and we made a stop at a tower hide. Besides black-tailed godwits and red-backed shrike no noteworthy birds were present, but we found interesting white-flowered specimens of early marsh orchids (*Dactylorhiza incarnata* var. *ochroleuca*).

14 June – back to Tallinn and airport



Tallinn with herring gull on the arrival day (TH); military orchid (CH); crane from the bear hide (TH).

WILDLIFE LISTS

Lists compiled with the help and photos of Tim and Cheryl Hunt. A full plant list wasn't kept, though orchids are noted.

BIRDS		
H = heard		
Diver sp.	Great crested grebe	Red-necked grebe
Slavonian grebe	Great cormorant	Bittern
Great white egret	Grey heron	White stork
Mute swan	Whooper swan	Greylag goose
Barnacle goose	Shelduck	Teal
Mallard	Gadwall	Shoveler
Pochard	Tufted duck	Eider
Long-tailed duck	Common scoter	Goldeneye
Red-breasted merganser	Goosander	Smew
White-tailed eagle	Lesser spotted eagle	Marsh harrier
Montagu's harrier	Osprey	Sparrowhawk
Common buzzard	Hobby	Hazel grouse
Corncrake H	Coot	Crane
Oystercatcher	Avocet	Ringed plover
Lapwing	Black-tailed godwit	Ruff
Woodcock	Curlew	Green sandpiper
Redshank	Spotted redshank	Greenshank
Grey phalarope	Black-headed gull	Little gull
Common gull	Herring gull	Greater black-backed gull
Caspian tern	Sandwich tern	Common tern
Arctic tern	Feral pigeon	Woodpigeon
Cuckoo	Swift	Kingfisher
Grey-headed woodpecker	Green woodpecker	Great spotted woodpecker
White-backed woodpecker	Lesser spotted woodpecker H	Skylark
Sand martin	Swallow	House martin
Meadow pipit	Tree pipit	White wagtail
Yellow wagtail	Grey wagtail	Wren H
Dunnock H	Robin H	Thrush nightingale
Northern wheatear	Whinchat	Fieldfare
Song thrush	Redwing H	Mistle thrush
Blackbird	Sedge warbler	Grasshopper warbler
River warbler	Reed warbler	Marsh warbler
Blyth's reed warbler	Great reed warbler	Icterine warbler
Barred warbler	Lesser whitethroat	Whitethroat
Garden warbler	Blackcap	Greenish warbler
Wood warbler	Chiffchaff	Willow warbler
Goldcrest	Spotted flycatcher	Red-breasted flycatcher H
Pied flycatcher	Bearded tit	Crested tit
Blue tit	Great tit	Coal tit H
Penduline tit	Nuthatch	Treecreeper
Golden oriole	Red-backed shrike	Magpie
Jay	Jackdaw	Rook
Hooded crow	Raven	Starling
House sparrow	Tree sparrow	Chaffinch
Greenfinch	Goldfinch	Siskin
Linnet	Crossbill	Scarlet rosefinch
Bullfinch	Hawfinch	Yellowhammer
Reed bunting		

MAMMALS				
Elk	Roe deer	Brown bear	Wolf (droppings)	Fox (droppings)
Raccoon dog	Pine marten	Red squirrel	Brown hare	Mole (dead)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS			
Common frog	Common toad	Common lizard	Adder

BUTTERFLIES			
Northern chequered skipper	Brimstone	Peacock	Green hairstreak
Essex skipper	Poplar admiral	High brown fritillary	Small copper
Large white	Map	Bog fritillary	Common blue
Small white	Tortoiseshell sp.	Pearl-bordered fritillary	Speckled wood
Black-veined white	Painted lady	Marsh fritillary	Small heath
Orange tip	Red admiral	Heath fritillary	Ringlet

MOTHS			
Hummingbird hawk-moth	Common heath	Wood tiger	Small purple and gold (mint moth)
Black-veined moth	Peacock moth	Drinker (caterpillar)	

ODONATA			
Emperor	Eastern White-faced darter (Dark whiteface)	Four-spotted chaser	Northern damselfly (Spearhead bluet)
		Broad-bodied chaser	
White-faced darter (Small whiteface)	Black-tailed skimmer	Beautiful demoiselle	Red-eyed damselfly
		Common blue damselfly	

OTHER NOTABLE INVERTEBRATES	
Dor beetle sp.	Hornet

ORCHIDS	
NIF = not in flower	
Lady's slipper <i>Cypripedium calceolus</i>	Lesser twayblade <i>Listera cordata</i>
Fly orchid <i>Ophrys insectifera</i>	Common twayblade <i>Listera ovata</i>
Military orchid <i>Orchis militaris</i>	Greater butterfly orchid <i>Platanthera chlorantha</i>
Early marsh orchid <i>Dactylorhiza incarnata</i>	Lesser butterfly orchid <i>Platanthera bifolia</i>
<i>Dactylorhiza incarnata</i> ssp <i>ochroleuca</i>	Red helleborine <i>Cephalanthera rubra</i>
Heath spotted orchid <i>Dactylorhiza maculata</i>	Broad-leaved helleborine <i>Epipactis helleborine</i> NIF
Common spotted orchid <i>Dactylorhiza fuchsia</i>	Birdsnest orchid <i>Neottia nidus-avis</i>
Fragrant orchid <i>Gymnadenia conopsea</i>	