

Bird-watching in Estonia 31st May – 6th June 2006

Trip Report by Morten Brendstrup-Hansen

Morten Brendstrup-Hansen
Nybrovej 212
2800 Lyngby
morten.brendstrup@agrsci.dk

My wife and I visited Estonia 31st May – 6th June 2006 hoping to see some of the interesting bird species that are breeding in the extensive forests, bogs and meadows which are characteristic of the Estonian landscape. Estonia is also famous for the huge number of spring migrants passing the country on their northeast bound journey, but the migration is almost over by the end of May and, among the birds we observed, only a Red-throated Loon and a Honey Buzzard appeared to be actually migrating.

Distances in Estonia are short, roads are good and, if you travel by car, bird-watching sites are easily accessible once you know where they are. When planning our trip, we noticed, however, that it was not that easy to locate information detailed enough to guide us to the most important bird-watching sites (we neither understand Estonian nor Finnish). My main reason for writing this short report is to make available such information about at least a few Estonian localities.

Itinerary

We entered and left Estonia via Tallinn Airport and travelled around the country by rented car. Our first stop was in central Tallinn to buy maps from the Rahva Raamat bookshop at Pärnu mantee 10. We had brought a road map, 1:400.000 by International Travel Maps, and the car was furnished with a similar map from another publisher. From the bookshop we obtained a significantly more detailed 1:250.000 map of South Estonia published by the local company E.O. Map; unfortunately a similar map covering North-West Estonia was not available.

31/5 Tallinn-Haapsalu via Vihterpalu

1/6 Haapsalu: Matsalu Bay, woodlands NE of Haapsalu in the evening

2/6 Haapsalu-Pärnu via Sooma

3/6 Pärnu-Tartu via Sooma

4/6 Tartu: Kirna Trail, Ilmatsalu and Kärevere

5/6 Tartu: Aardla, Kirna Trail and Selli-Sillaotsa Trail

6/6 Tartu-Tallinn

Except for the last day of our visit, which was grey and cold, we generally had pleasantly sunny weather with just sporadic, local showers now and then. The northerly and north-westerly winds, however, were often strong enough to influence bird-watching negatively.

Sites

Haapsalu

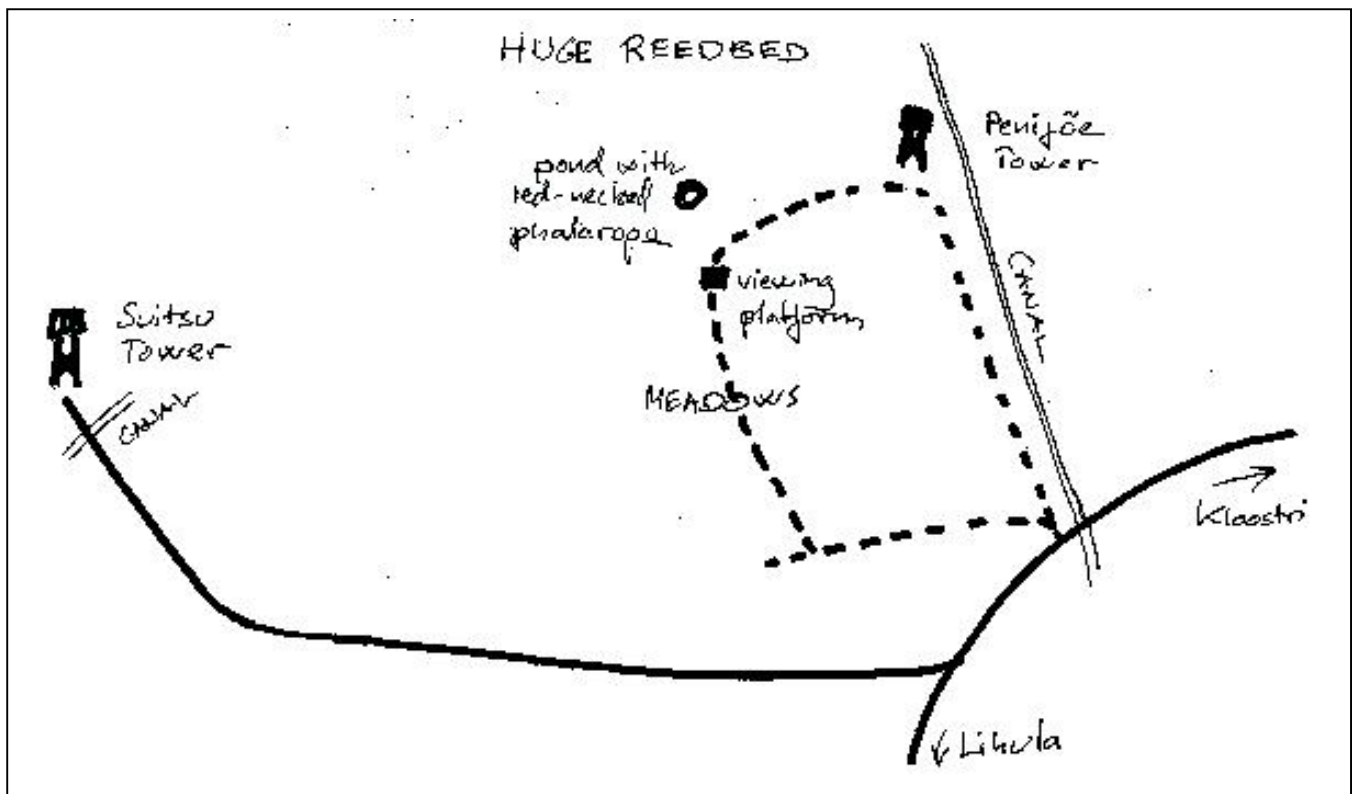
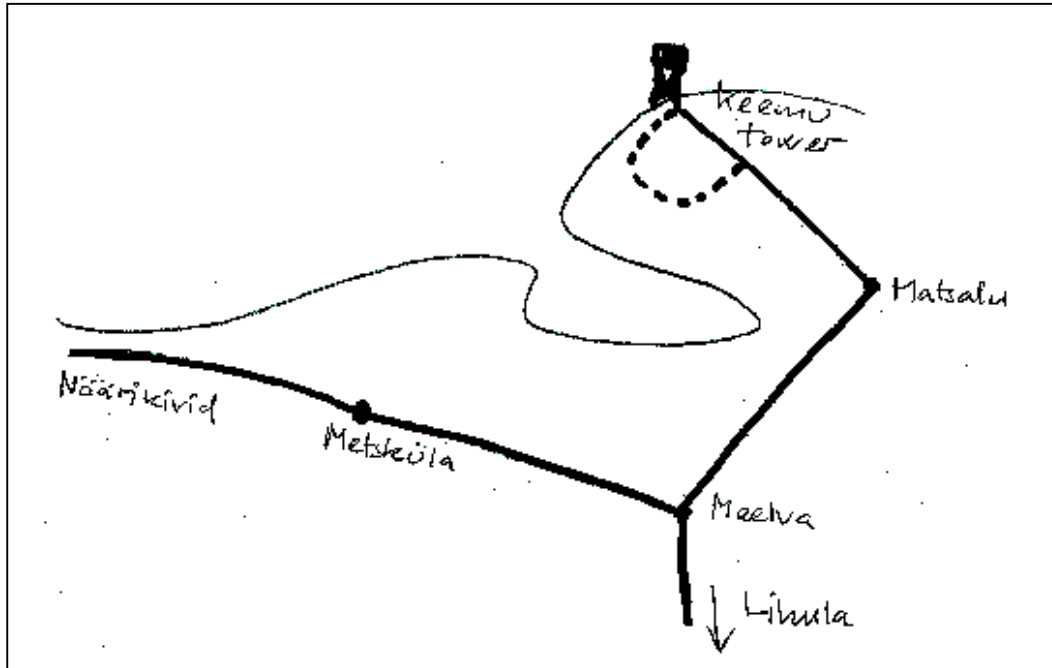
From the small town of Haapsalu on the West Coast, there is easy access to wetlands around the Haapsalu Bay just north of town and the Matsalu Bay a little to the south. North-east of town, there are large, very thinly populated, stretches of woodland with bogs and meadows. In town, the centrally located Haapsalu Hotel is very friendly and good value; there are shops and a restaurant neighboring the hotel.

Matsalu Bay

The whole of Matsalu Bay plus considerable areas of land all around it are included in the Matsalu Nature Reserve. There are several access points, mostly with observation towers.

Far to the west, on the southern coast of the bay, the coastal meadows of **Näärikivid** look like a good place for roosting geese during migration, but were less interesting at the time of our visit.

At **Keemu**, the littoral marshland and shallow water held more birds than did Näärikivid and there is a nice walk looping first along the coast and then through mixed woodland and farmland (see map).



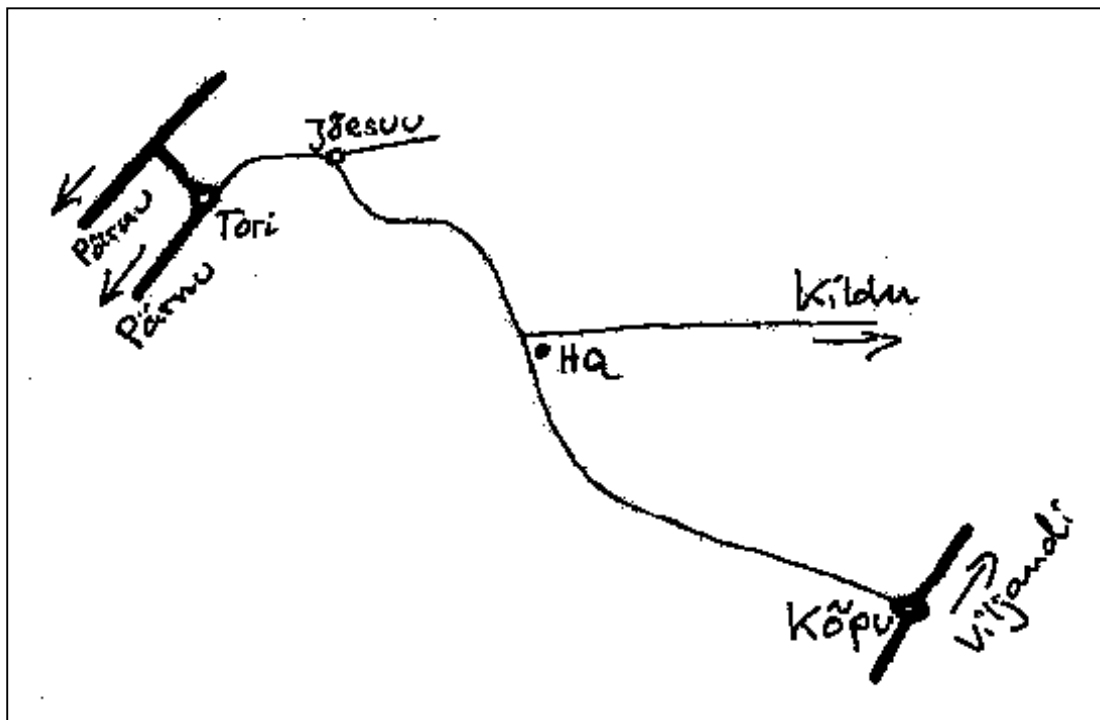
Further to the east, near the town of Lihula, there are observation towers at **Suitsu**, **Penijõe** and **Kloostri**. Penijõe is especially interesting because of the walking trail along the canal and through meadows (see map); this trail is ca. 2 km.

Visible from road #31 to Haapsalu, between Kurevere and Keravere, there is an observation tower overlooking large meadows north of the bay at **Rannajõe**.

The road to Haeska, continuing to the **Haeska Tower** on the northern shore of the bay, branches off from road #31 just to the west of Keravere.

Sooma National Park

The Sooma National Park contains large areas of bog and, mostly forested, riverine marshland. Park Headquarters are located at the Jõesuu-Kõpu road ca. 45 km from Pärnu in South-West Estonia (see map). We stayed overnight in Pärnu where there is a wide selection of accommodation; using Viljandi, to the opposite side of the Park, as a base would no doubt have been equally convenient.



There is a handful of good walking trails in the Park and a leaflet obtainable from the Park HQ describes these in detail.

The Riisa Bog Trail a few km north of the HQ goes almost entirely through bogland, a fascinating landscape with few birds.

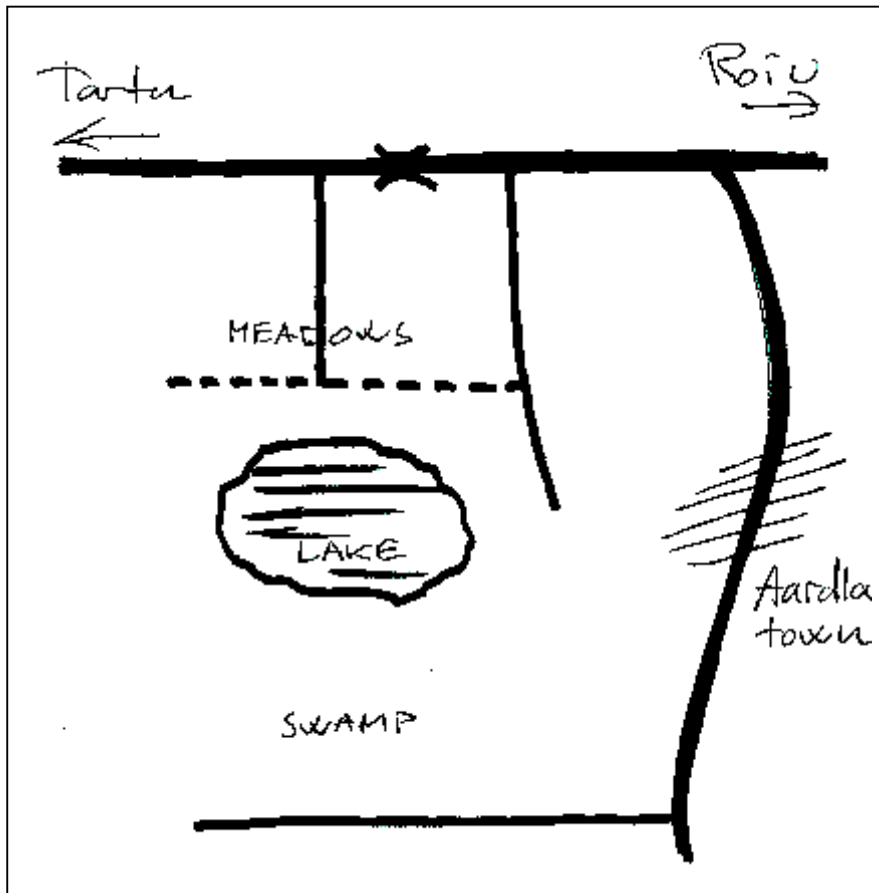
Just south of the Park HQ, the Tõramaa Wooded Meadow trail branches off from the Kõpu road; River Warblers were numerous here and we saw a Lesser Spotted Eagle in display flight.

The Kuuraniidu Study Trail, through old forest, as well as the Lemmjõgi River Spit Forest Trail, through meadows and riverside forest, branches off from the Kildu road. These trails are both recommendable as is the road itself; we saw a Hazel Grouse cross the road a few km to the east of the HQ. - Other trails seem less interesting to the visiting bird-watcher.

Tartu

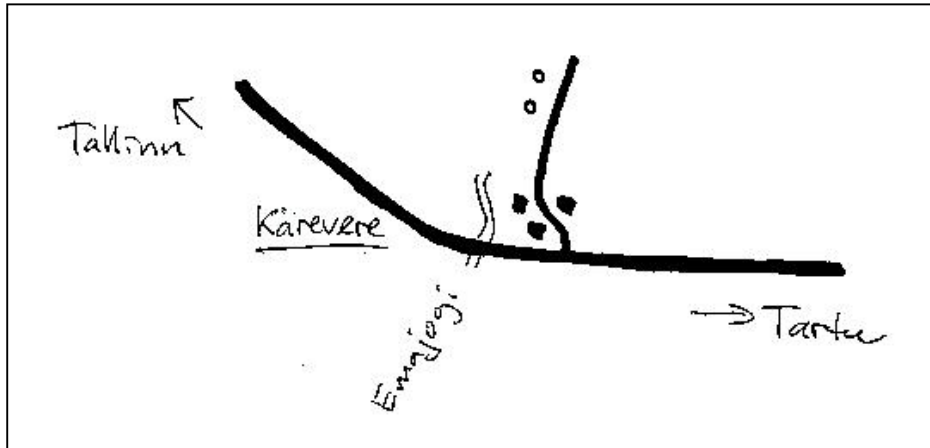
This charming old university town lies close to at least three extraordinarily fine bird-watching sites; the Aardla meadows, the Kärevere meadows, and the Kirna Trail of the Alam-Pedja National Park. The centrally located, but quiet Park Hotel may look a little dull but is quite good value.

Aardla



Just 5 km from central Tartu, the meadows, lake and swamp by the village of Aardla hold a good variety of water birds. The place is famous for its breeding Citrine Wagtails; look for them in the partly flooded, but easily accessible, meadows to the north of the lake.

Kärevere



The meadows east of the village of Kärevere are famous for their Great Snipe lek. Locate a small group of buildings (one of them with a stork's nest on top) just off Highway #2, the main road to Tallinn. The buildings lie to the east of Kärevere close to a bridge, and a road winds its way north between them. After about 300 m along this road you will see two poles in the meadow to your left. The poles indicate where to stand and watch the fabulous performances of the snipes without disturbing them. Kärevere is about 15 km from central Tartu.

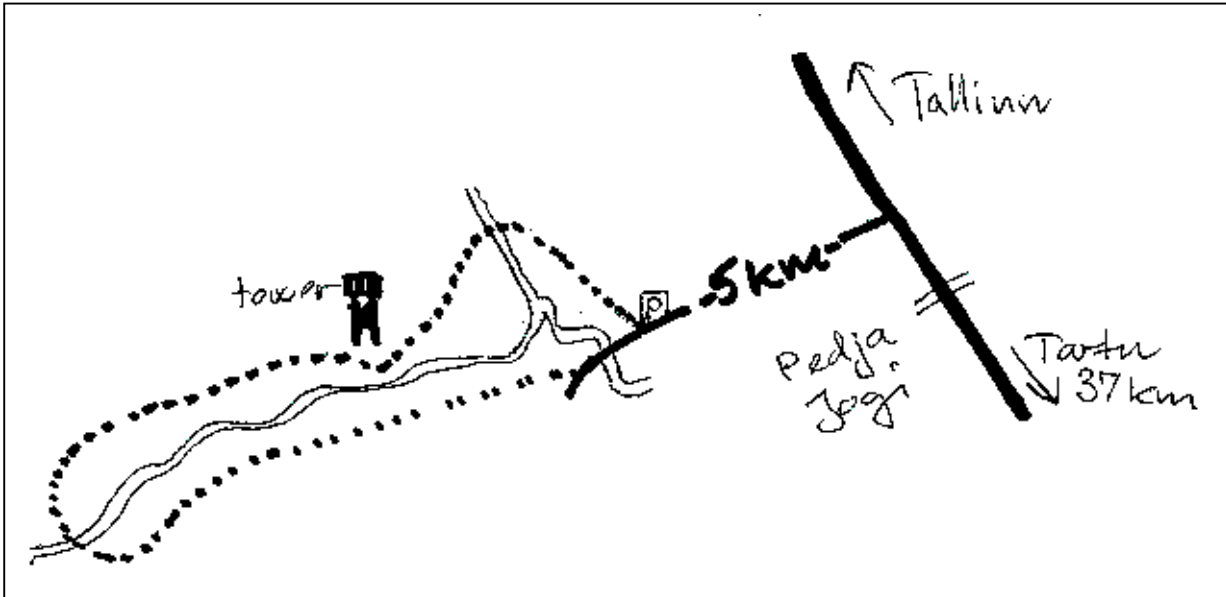
Ilmatsalu

The village of Ilmatsalu is ca. 7 km west of Tartu; it lies on the edge of a mosaic of ponds, bogs and riverside forest, and an easily found dirt road leads out of the village to the west, between fish ponds, into this area. Trails branch off from the dirt road and one of them connects the area with the Kärevere meadows. The whole area is worth exploring. It can, of course, also be accessed from the Kärevere side; the trailhead is at the parking lot south of Highway #2.

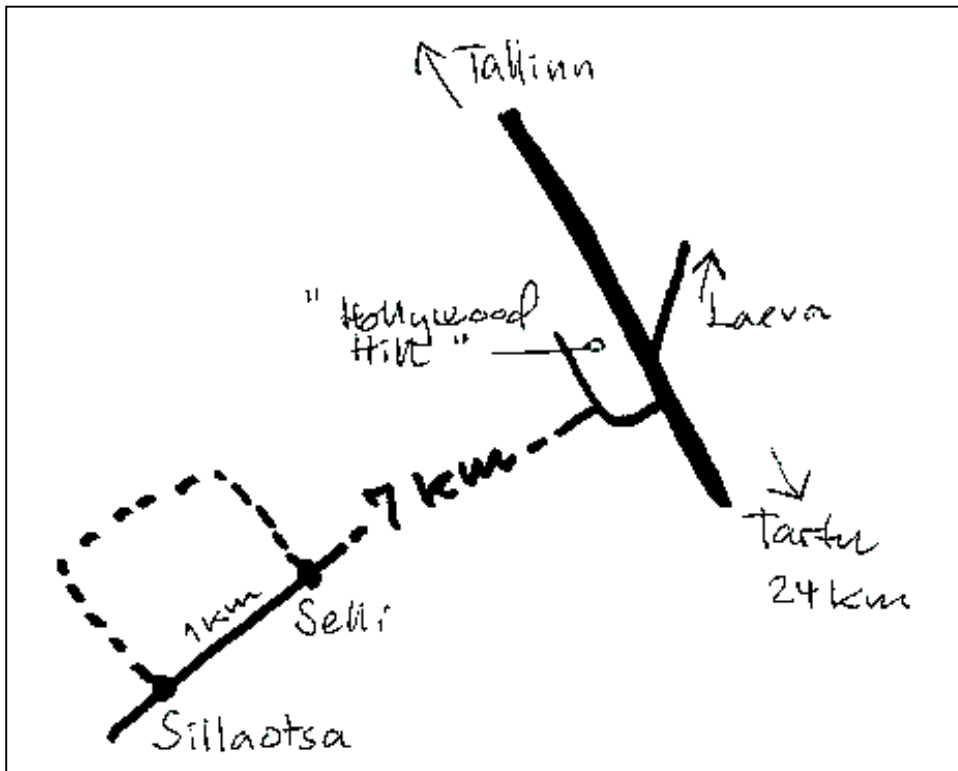
Alam-Pedja National Park

About the same size as Sooma National Park, this is another wilderness of bogs and riverside forests. The Park is located to the southwestern side of Highway #2 between Kärevere and the town of Puurmani. There are two easily accessible walking trails, the wonderful Kirna Trail through riverine forest, and the Selli-Sillaotsa Trail over bogland, beautiful but not with many birds. - See maps.

The "**Hollywood Hill**" at the Laeva junction (see map) is favoured by some for raptor watching.



Above: Kirna trail
 Below: Selli-Sillaotsa Trail



Species Account

Nomenclature and sequence of species follows (roughly) Svensson L & Grant PJ (2000) Collins Bird Guide.

+ = recorded, ++ = numerous

F=female, M=male

Several common species, like Thrush Nightingale, Wood Warbler, Starling and others are no doubt underrecorded.

Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellata*

1 migr. The coast W of Vihterpalu 31/5

Black-throated Loon *G. arctica*

1 Lake at Paunküla by Highway #2 6/6

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*

15 Keemu 1/6

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

5 Keemu 1/6

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*

2 Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, 5 Soomaa 2/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*

Seen regularly during the whole trip, several on their nests

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*

2 The coast W of Vihterpalu 31/5, 50 Keemu 1/6, + Aardla 5/6

Whooper Swan *C. cygnus*

+ Ilmatsalu 4/6

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

50 ad + 20 pull Keemu 1/6, + (incl. pull) Haeska 1/6

Barnacle Goose *Branta leucopsis*

40 Keemu 1/6

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*

2 En route 31/5

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

+ Penijõe 1/6, 20 Keemu 1/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6, + Kirna Trail 5/6

Gadwall *A. strepera*

10 Keemu 1/6, 2 M + 2 F Haeska 1/6, 2 Aardla 5/6

Pintail *A. acuta*

10 Keemu 1/6

Shoveler *A. clypeata*

2 M Keemu 1/6

Wigeon *A. penelope*

20 Keemu 1/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6

Teal *A. crecca*

2 M Keemu 1/6

Garganey *A. querquedula*

1 F Penijõe 1/6, 1 M Aardla 5/6

Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*

4 The coast W of Vihterpalu 31/5, 100 Keemu 1/6, + Näärikivid 1/6, 2 Lake at Paunküla by Highway #2 6/6

Goosander *Mergus merganser*

3 M + 1 F The coast W of Vihterpalu 31/5, 10 Keemu 1/6, + Haeska 1/6

Red-breasted Merganser *M. serrator*

5 Keemu 1/6, + Haeska 1/6

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*

1 Keemu 1/6, 1 Kloostri 1/6, 2 ad Ilmatsalu 4/6

Lesser Spotted Eagle *Aquila pomarina*

1 in display flight Sooma 3/6, 1 Kirna Trail 5/6

Greater Spotted Eagle *A. clanga*

1 Kirna Trail 5/6

Marsh Harrier *Circus aeruginosus*

3 Penijõe 1/6, 1 M Keemu 1/6, 1 M Soomaa 2/6, 2 Aardla 5/6

Montagu's Harrier *C. pygargus*

1 M En route 31/5, 1 M En route near Matsalu 1/6, 1 M + 1 F with nest material Penijõe 1/6, 1 F Soomaa 2/6, 1 brown Kirna Trail 5/6

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*

1 Vihterpalu 31/5, 1 En route near Kloostri 2/6, 1 En route 3/6, 5 Tartu-Tallinn 6/6

Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus*

1 migr. Vihterpalu 31/5, 1 Soomaa 2/6, 1 in display flight Kirna Trail 5/6, 2 Tartu-Tallinn 6/6

Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*

1 En route 3/6

Hobby *Falco subbuteo*

1 Kirna Trail 5/6

Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia*

1 Sooma 2/6 – crossed the Kildu road in front of our car

Corncrake *Crex crex*

5 Sooma 2/6, 1-2 Kirna Trail 4/6

Coot *Fulica atra*

2 Aardla 5/6

Crane *Grus grus*

10 En route 31/5, 4 Penijõe 1/6, heard Näärivid 1/6, 2 close to Sooma 2/6, 1 or 2 heard Selli-Sillaotsa 5/6, 4 Tartu-Tallinn 6/6

Oystercatcher *Haematopus ostralegus*

10 Keemu 1/6

Lapwing *Vanellu vanellus*

+ Vihterpalu 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, 2 Penijõe 1/6, 10 Keemu 1/6, + Fields near Sooma 2/6

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*

1 juv Soomaa 2/6, 1 Sooma 3/6

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*

2 Sooma 3/6, 1 Kärevere 3/6, 2 Kirna Trail 4/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6

Redshank *Tringa tetanus*

+ Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu 1/6, + Haeska 1/6

Curlew *Numenius arquata*

1 Keemu 1/6, heard Kloostri 2/6

Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*

1 Kärevere 3/6, 1 Kärevere 4/6

Great Snipe *Gallinago media*

4-5 Kärevere 4/6

Common Snipe *G. gallinago*

+ Penijõe 1/6, 1 Soomaa 2/6, 1 Kärevere 3/6, 2 Kirna Trail 4/6

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*

2 Penijõe 1/6

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*

2 M Keemu 1/6

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*

+ The coast W of Vihterpalu 31/5, ++ Keemu 1/6 (small colony), + Aardla 5/6

Common Gull *L. canus*

+ The coast W of Vihterpalu 31/5, a few pairs nesting Haeska 1/6

Herring Gull *L. argentatus*

+ En route 31/5, + Keemu 1/6, + Aardla 5/6

Little Gull *L. minutus*

12 Aardla 5/6

Common/Arctic Tern *Sterna hirundo/S. paradisaea*

+ Keemu 1/6, + Näärivid 1/6

Arctic Tern *S. paradisaea*

2 Haeska 1/6

Black Tern *Chlidonias niger*

5 Keemu 1/6, 9 Aardla 5/6

Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*

12 En route 31/5

Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

+ Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, + Soomaa 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Swift *Apus apus*

++ Haapsalu 31/5, 5 Penijõe 1/6, 1 Keemu 1/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*

1 Soomaa 2/6, 1 Kirna Trail 4/6

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

1 Soomaa 2/6, 3-4 Kirna Trail 4/6

White-backed Woodpecker *D. leucotos*

2 Kirna Trail 4/6

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *D. minor*
+ Ilmatsalu 4/6

Wryneck *Jynx torquilla*
+ En route near Matsalu 1/6, 1 heard Penijõe 1/6

Skylark *Alauda arvensis*
+ En route 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Penijõe 1/6

Woodlark *Lullula arborea*
1 Soomaa 2/6

Sand Martin *Riparia riparia*
1 Penijõe 1/6

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*
+ En route 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, ++ Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu 1/6, ++ Soomaa 2/6, ++ Kirna Trail 4/6

House Martin *Delichon urbica*
10 Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu (5-10 nests in the watch tower) 1/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6

Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*
+ Penijõe 1/6, + Aardla 5/6

Tree Pipit *A. trivialis*
+ Penijõe 1/6, 1 Sooma 3/6, + Selli-Sillaotsa 5/6

Pied Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
+ Tallinn 31/5, + En route 31/5, + Keemu 1/6, + Sooma 2/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6, + Selli-Sillaotsa 5/6

Yellow Wagtail *M. flava*
2+ Penijõe 1/6

Citrine Wagtail *M. citreola*
2 F + 1 M Aardla 5/6, one of the females carrying food

Robin *Erithacus rubecula*
1 Soomaa 2/6, 1 Kirna Trail 4/6

Thrush Nightingale *Luscinia luscinia*
1 Tallinn 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, 2 Keemu 1/6, 1 Raanajoe 1/6, + Soomaa 2/6

Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*
1 M En route near Matsalu 1/6, 1 M Näärikivid 1/6, 1 F Kloostri 1/6, + En route 3/6, 1 Sooma 3/6

Whinchat *Saxicola rubetra*

+ En route 31/5, ++ Keemu 1/6, + Sooma 2/6, + Aardla 5/6

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos*

+ Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, 1 Kloostri 2/6, 2 Soomaa 2/6

Redwing *T. iliacus*

3 singing Kirna Trail 5/6

Fieldfare *T. pilaris*

2 En route 31/5, + Haapsalu 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, + Sooma 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Blackbird *T. merula*

+ Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Soomaa 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Garden Warbler *Sylvia borin*

+ Vihterpalu 31/5, 1 Penijõe 1/6, + Sooma 2/6

Blackcap *S. atricapilla*

1 Penijõe 1/6, + Sooma 2/6

Lesser Whitethroat *S. curruca*

+ En route near Matsalu 1/6

Whitethroat *S. communis*

+ Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, + Keemu 1/6, + Sooma 2/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*

1 Vihterpalu 31/5, 3 Penijõe 1/6, 1 Raanajõe 1/6, 1 Kärevere 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

River Warbler *L. fluviatilis*

2 Sooma 2/6, 5 Sooma 3/6, 5 Kärevere 3/6, ca. 10 Kirna Trail 4/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6

Sedge Warbler *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus*

2+ Penijõe 1/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

Reed Warbler *A. scirpaceus*

1 Penijõe 1/6

Marsh Warbler *A. palustris*

+ Aardla 5/6

Great Reed Warbler *A. arundinaceus*

1 Kirna Trail 4/6, 2 Ilmatsalu 4/6, 2 Aardla 5/6

Icterine Warbler *Hippolais icterina*

+ Vihterpalu 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, + Soomaa 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*

+ Haapsalu 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, ++ Keemu 1/6, ++ Soomaa 2/6

Wood Warbler *P. sibilatrix*

1 Kloostri 2/6, + Soomaa 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Chiffchaff *P. collybita*

+ Vihterpalu 31/5, + Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, 1 Keemu 1/6, ++ Soomaa 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata*

2 Soomaa 2/6, 2 Kirna Trail 4/6

Great Tit *Parus major*

2 Sooma 2/6, 4 Sooma 3/6

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

1 En route near Matsalu 1/6

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

1 Soomaa 2/6, 1 ad at nesthole Kirna Trail 5/6 - young inside were audible

Red-backed Shrike *Lanius collurio*

+ Vihterpalu 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, 1 M + 1 F Penijõe 1/6, 1 M Sooma 3/6, 1 Kirna Trail 4/6, 1 pair Kirna Trail 5/6

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*

1 En route 31/5

Magpie *Pica pica*

+ Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, + Keemu 1/6, + Sooma 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6

Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

2 Soomaa 2/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6

Nutcracker *Nucifra caryocatactes*

1 En route NE of Haapsalu 1/6, 1 Soomaa 2/6

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula*

+ En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Aardla 5/6

Rook *C. frugileus*

+ En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Aardla 5/6, 2 colonies noticed in central Tartu 5/6

Hooded Crow *C. corone cornix*

+ En route 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu 1/6, + Fields near Sooma 2/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

Raven *C. corax*

1 Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, 2+ Keemu 1/6, 35 Raanajõe 1/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6, + Aardla 5/6, 5 Kirna Trail 5/6

Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*

+ Tallinn 31/5, + En route 31/5, + En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu 1/6, + Soomaa 2/6, + Kirna Trail 5/6

Golden Oriole *Oriolus oriolus*

1 Soomaa 2/6

Tree Sparrow *P. montanus*

+ Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu 1/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6

Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*

+ En route 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, ++ Soomaa 2/6, ++ Kirna Trail 4/6

Linnet *Carduelis cannabina*

1 M + 1 F Keemu 1/6

Goldfinch *C. carduelis*

6 Penijõe 1/6

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*

+ Vihterpalu-Haapsalu 31/5, + Penijõe 1/6, ++ Keemu 1/6, ++ Soomaa 2/6, ++ Kirna Trail 4/6, + Ilmatsalu 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*

+ Penijõe 1/6, + Kirna Trail 4/6, + Aardla 5/6

Yellowhammer *E. cintrinella*

+ En route near Matsalu 1/6, + Penijõe 1/6, + Keemu 1/6, + Aardla 5/6