

## Trip Report: Estonia (May 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> 2015)

The indented coastline, marshland, forests and bogs of western Estonia offer the prospect of world-class spring birding on one of the main migratory routes for Arctic waterfowl, so I was delighted to join Mikko Pyhälä for this, my first birding trip to the Baltic/Scandinavian region. We spent three full days birding together in the general vicinity of Haapsalu on the Northwest coast, and benefited greatly from the kindness of Mikko's network of friends in the region. We were particularly indebted to Prof. Kalervo Kulmala, a professor at the Finnish and Estonian Conservatoriums, who joined us for our first and last day of birding (and his friend, whose car we borrowed for the time that we spent birding on our own); to Samuli and Tiina Haapasalo, who welcomed us to the grounds of their country home in Haeska and so generously allowed us to stay in their apartment in the historic heart of Haapsalu; and to the "Finnish Geese Group", whose members were staying with the Haapasalo's during their annual monitoring of the Lesser White-fronted Goose migration, and who accompanied us on visits to some of the key migrant spots.



*European Capercaillie (f) [roadside between Nõva and Änglema]*

Highlights included seeing thousands of migratory geese and ducks (in roadside fields and also from the many purpose built bird observation towers strategically located along the coast), close-up views of both Eurasian Capercaillie and Black Grouse from our mobile hide (i.e. car), encountering all four European species of Harrier, enjoying the spectacle of large flocks of male Ruff's resplendent in their range of breeding colours, locating a pair of reptile-like Eurasian Wrynecks at a presumed nest hole, and concluding with an evening visit to the historic and picturesque centre of Tallinn. Of the 95 species identified, 27 were lifers for me. Mikko did not see any lifers, however he did pick up several birds that are not regularly encountered around Helsinki (including a roadside Hortolan Bunting, *Emberiza hortulana*, which I missed). Unfortunately we did not see any of the Lesser White-fronted Geese, one of the most endangered bird species in the Palaearctic. Whilst we were in the area two Lesser White-fronted Geese were reported near to Saare, however finding them amongst the ~20,000 near-identical Greater White-fronted Geese that were reported daily by the Finnish Geese Group represented not quite a search for two needles in a haystack, but certainly no small challenge to locate the two yellow eye-ringed geese amongst such sizeable flocks.





*Common Cranes [roadside fields near to Haapsalu]*



*Mikko on the coastal cliffs west of Tallinn where we saw Long-tailed Ducks a long way out past the line of rocks*





*Barnacle Geese [near to the Haeska observation tower]*



*Greater White-fronted Geese [in fields near to Haeska]*





*White Storks [Vanamõisa sild manor house]*



*Picturesque White Stork nest site atop an old kiln [Vanamõisa sild manor house]*





*View over the coastline and thousands of ducks, geese and shorebirds from the observation tower at Haeska*



*New, but traditionally constructed, café adjacent to the observation tower on the Haeska shoreline*





*Ruff's in a variety of breeding plumage colour combinations [Roadside fields near to Haeska]*



*Typical inland scenery: Fields, forest and a sky full of migrating geese! [Haeska]*



*Beachside barbeque, Estonian style, leading to lunch with Kalervo and Mikko [Café at Haeska observation tower]*





*Pine forest in the vicinity of Läänemaa Suursoo, between Haapsalu and Nõva*





*White-tailed Eagles disputing a falling fish [from the Tahu vaaterplatvorm (observation tower)]*



*Mikko and members of the Finnish Geese Group heading to the Tahu vaaterplatvorm*





*Scenes around Haapsalu's historical city centre and the adjacent coastal observation tower*





*Eurasian Wryneck [Haeska]*



*Pied Flycatcher [Haeska]*





*Chaffinch [Haeska]*



*Willow Warbler singing away [near to Haeska observation tower]*





*Yellowhammer [Haeska]*



*White Wagtail [Penijõe mõis manor house, near to Lihula]*





*European Toads [near to Haapsalu]*



*Roadside map in Risti, showing the region that we birded from our base in Haapsalu*



## 1. Bird Trip List<sup>1</sup>

Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only unless otherwise indicated. Birds in the trip list are identified as per ‘The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World’, Cornell, 2007 with updates through December 2010 (online version 6.5).

### ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

**Tundra Bean-Goose** *Anser serrirostris* \* : Several dozen seen in the company of Greater White-fronted Geese in inland fields around Harju-Risti, just where Mikko had seen them on a visit to Estonia during the previous spring. Not present amongst the larger flocks of geese in the fields around Haapsalu and Haeska.

**Greater White-fronted Goose** *Anser albifrons* \* : Many thousands in the fields in the vicinity of Haeska and Tahu. Up to twenty thousand were reportedly seen on one day by the Finnish Geese Group.

**Graylag Goose** *Anser anser* : Several individuals were seen mixed in amongst the other geese flocks.

**Barnacle Goose** *Branta leucopsis* \* : Many thousands were in the fields in the vicinity of Haeska in the morning and evening, then along the shoreline at Haeska during the daytime.

**Mute Swan** *Cygnus olor* : The ‘common’ swan, seen in large numbers around the coast, especially at Haeska.

**Tundra (Bewick’s) Swan** *Cygnus columbianus* : Our target swan, of which we saw a couple of pairs on Haapsalu Bay from the observation tower at Tahu.

**Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna* : A few seen along the shoreline.

**Gadwall** *Anas strepera* : A pair seen on the ocean from a cliff-top lookout to the west of Tallinn.

**Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas Penelope* : A few seen along the shoreline.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* : A few seen along the shoreline and inland waters.

**Northern Shoveler** *Anas clypeata* : A few seen along the shoreline.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* : A few seen along the shoreline.

**Green-winged Teal** *Anas crecca* : A few seen along the shoreline.

**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula* : A few seen along the shoreline.

**Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis* : A key target. Mikko’s local knowledge and scope proved invaluable for locating about a dozen floating and diving in the open ocean ~ 1 km offshore from a cliff-top lookout to the west of Tallinn.

**Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula* : Several seen on Haapsalu Bay from the observation tower at Tahu and on the ocean from a cliff-top lookout to the west of Tallinn.

**Smew** *Mergellus albellus* : A couple of pairs seen in Haapsalu Bay from the observation tower at Tahu. A pair was also seen on the ocean from a cliff-top lookout to the west of Tallinn.

**Common Merganser (Goosander)** *Mergus merganser* : A few seen along the shoreline, as well as a pair on the side of a small pond at the Padise mõis manor house where we enjoyed a wonderful lunch.

### GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae

**Eurasian Capercaillie** *Tetrao urogallus* \* : During a wet morning of birding from the car, two ‘bearded’ females were seen alongside a road that cuts through an extensive area of coniferous forest and bogs between Kuijõe and Nõva and then two more later in the day between Nõva and Änglema. Apparently the birds come to the roadside to collect gastroliths (gizzard stones).

**Black Grouse** *Tetrao tetrix* \* : Early in the morning two females were seen scurrying along the roadside and into the forest between Kuijõe and Nõva, then after the weather had improved in the afternoon we stumbled across three striking males displaying from ridge tops at a lek site inside the Läänemaa Suursoo (between Kuijõe and Nõva).

### PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae

**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* : Many pairs seen along the shoreline.

### CICONIIFORMES: Ciconiidae

**White Stork** *Ciconia ciconia* \* : A pair seen in warm evening sunlight at their scenically located nest atop an old kiln at the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

### SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo* : A few seen along the shoreline.

### PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae

**Gray Heron** *Ardea cinerea* : A few seen on inland lakes.

**Great Egret** *Ardea alba* : A pair seen flying overhead as we drove along an inland road.

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<sup>1</sup> First sighting ever for DJS; **E** = Estonian endemic species; \* = photo available



### **ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae**

**Eurasian Marsh-Harrier** *Circus aeruginosus* \* : The most frequently seen of the harriers, with several individuals seen patiently working their way across fields in search of prey.

**Northern (Hen) Harrier** *Circus cyaneus* : One seen in a forested area as we headed back towards Tallinn.

**Pallid Harrier** *Circus macrourus* : Seen from the Raanajõe vaateplatvorm, where Mikko found and scoped a pair that was searching for prey over a large open grassland.

**Montagu's Harrier** *Circus pygargus* : Seen from the Raanajõe vaateplatvorm, where Mikko found and scoped one that was searching for prey over a large open grassland.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* : One landed on a fence next to me whilst I was tracking down a singing Willow Warbler in the gardens behind the Haeska vaateplatvorm.

**Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* : One seen flying over the road on our way from Tallinn to Haeska.

**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* \* : Several individuals and pairs seen, including several perched on rocks round the shoreline. We observed one aerial combat near to the Tahu vaateplatvorm, where a fish was the apparent cause of the dispute.

**Common Buzzard** *Buteo buteo* \* : The most commonly seen raptor.

### **GRUIFORMES: Gruidae**

**Common Crane** *Grus grus* \* : Individuals, pairs and small flocks seen feeding in roadside fields and flying around the countryside.

### **CHARADRIIFORMES: Haematopodidae**

**Eurasian Oystercatcher** *Haematopus ostralegus* : Small numbers seen along the shoreline at Haeska.

### **CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae**

**European Golden-Plover** *Pluvialis apricaria* : Large flocks in breeding plumage seen in roadside fields.

**Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* : Very common in roadside fields and along the shoreline.

**Common Ringed Plover** *Charadrius hiaticula* : A couple seen along the shoreline.

**Little Ringed Plover** *Charadrius dubius* : A couple seen along the shoreline.

### **CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae**

**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos* : Several seen from a cliff-top lookout to the west of Tallinn.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* \* : A few seen including one individual beside a small pond near to the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* : Small numbers seen along the shoreline at Haeska.

**Wood Sandpiper** *Tringa glareola* : Small numbers seen along the shoreline at Haeska.

**Common Redshank** *Tringa tetanus* : Small numbers seen along the shoreline at Haeska and in roadside fields.

**Eurasian Curlew** *Numenius arquata* : One individual in a roadside field near to the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

**Ruff** *Calidris pugnax* \* : Flocks of many tens to hundreds of males were seen in roadside fields and along the shoreline. The striking colour variants - including combinations of black-and-white; rufous-and-white, and rufous-and-black - were quite extraordinary. Flocks of females were seen during our final morning at the Haeska shoreline.

### **CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae**

**Black-headed Gull** *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* : Common.

**Mew Gull** *Larus canus* : A few individuals.

**Herring Gull** *Larus argentatus* : Common.

**Greater Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus* : Small numbers.

**Caspian Tern** *Hydroprogne caspia* : A couple of individuals.

**Common Tern** *Sterna hirundo* : Small numbers.

### **COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae**

**Rock Pigeon** *Columba livia* : In urban areas.

**Common Wood-Pigeon** *Columba palumbus* : Common in the countryside.

### **PICIFORMES: Picidae**

**Eurasian Wryneck** *Jynx torquilla* \* : Heard on several occasions, before we finally enjoyed close up views of a pair of these reptilian-looking birds in Haeska, where they appeared to be inspecting a nest hole.

### **FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae**

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* : One seen from the Raanajõe vaateplatvorm, where Mikko scoped it perched in the grass eating its prey.



**PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae**

**Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius* : Several seen from the roadside.

**Eurasian Magpie** *Pica pica* : Many seen from the roadside.

**Eurasian Jackdaw** *Corvus monedula* : Many seen from the roadside.

**Rook** *Corvus frugilegus* : Many seen from the roadside.

**Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix* : Many seen from the roadside.

**Common Raven** *Corvus corax* : Many seen from the roadside.

**PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae**

**Sky Lark** *Alauda arvensis* : Several heard calling in the fields near to Haeska and then seen performing their display flight.

**PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae**

**Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* : Several seen from the roadside.

**Common House-Martin** *Delichon urbicum* : Several seen around a cliff-top lookout to the west of Tallinn.

**PASSERIFORMES: Paridae**

**Marsh Tit** *Poecile palustris* : A pair seen in trees near to the Raanajõe vaateplatvorm.

**Great Tit** *Parus major* \* : Common in gardens and open woodland, including a pair seen in Samuli and Tiina's garden.

**Eurasian Blue Tit** *Cyanistes caeruleus* : Common in gardens and open woodland, including a pair seen in Samuli and Tiina's garden in Haeska.

**PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae**

**Eurasian Nuthatch** *Sitta europaea* : A pair seen in a large stand of deciduous trees at the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

**PASSERIFORMES: Certhiidae**

**Eurasian Treecreeper** *Certhia familiaris* : A pair seen in roadside trees near to Haapsalu, at the location where we also encountered a pair of European Toads crossing the road.

**PASSERIFORMES: Phylloscopidae**

**Willow Warbler** *Phylloscopus trochilus* \* : A vociferously singing individual found in the gardens behind the Haeska vaateplatvorm.

**Common Chiffchaff** *Phylloscopus collybita* \* : Heard on several occasions and well seen in some deciduous trees enroute to the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

**Wood Warbler** *Phylloscopus sibilatrix* \* : One located in a patch of vegetation adjacent to the Haeska vaateplatvorm.

**PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae**

**European Robin** *Erithacus rubecula* : One found in a patch of vegetation adjacent to the Haeska vaateplatvorm.

**European Pied Flycatcher** *Ficedula hypoleuca* \* : Seen on a couple of occasions, including from close range as we arrived at Samuli and Tiina's house in Haeska.

**Black Redstart** *Phoenicurus ochruros* : One male well seen below the White Stork nest site at the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

**Whinchat** *Saxicola rubetra* : One seen in coastal grassland adjacent to the Keemu observation tower.

**Northern Wheatear** *Oenanthe oenanthe* \* : A common sight along the roadside on our first day, as an apparent wave of migrants passed through. By our third day, none were seen at all in the same locations and/or habitat!

**PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae**

**Eurasian Blackbird** *Turdus merula* : Several in open areas.

**Fieldfare** *Turdus pilaris* : Several, with their distinctive grey rumps, well seen in forested areas, especially alongside the road that cuts through an extensive area of coniferous forest and bogs between Kujjõe and Nõva.

**Redwing** *Turdus iliacus* *heard only* : One heard only.

**Song Thrush** *Turdus philomelos* *heard only* : One heard only.

**Mistle Thrush** *Turdus viscivorus* : A few individuals seen.

**PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae**

**European Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* : A few individuals seen.



**PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae**

**Western Yellow Wagtail** *Motacilla flava* : One seen alongside the road near to Harju-Risti.

**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba* \* : Common in open woodland and gardens.

**Tree Pipit** *Anthus trivialis* : Several seen calling from roadside trees.

**PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae**

**Yellowhammer** *Emberiza citrinella* \* : Common in open woodland and gardens.

**PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae**

**Common Chaffinch** *Fringilla coelebs* \* : Common alongside the roads in open woodland, gardens and forested areas, but extremely challenging to actually photograph!

**Eurasian Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* \* : One glamorous individual seen well in woodland near to Haeska in the company of the ubiquitous Common Chaffinches.

**European Greenfinch** *Chloris chloris* : Several heard and one seen near to Haeska.

**European Goldfinch** *Carduelis carduelis* \* : Several seen, including a confiding pair along a dirt road near to Haeska.

**Eurasian Linnet** *Carduelis cannabina* : One well seen in some deciduous trees enroute to the Vanamõisa sild manor house.

**Hawfinch** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* : A pair of these lovely birds seen in a large stand of deciduous trees at the Vanamõisa sild manor house and another seen the following day in some deciduous trees enroute to the Vanamõisa sild manor house. A lifer also for Kalervo.

**PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae**

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* : In Tallinn.

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus* : In gardens around the historic city centre of Haapsalu.

Total 95 confirmed species for the trip (including no Estonian endemics as per <http://avibase.bsc-eoc.org> and 2 heard only), of which 27 were 'lifers' for DJS.

## 2. Mammal Trip List

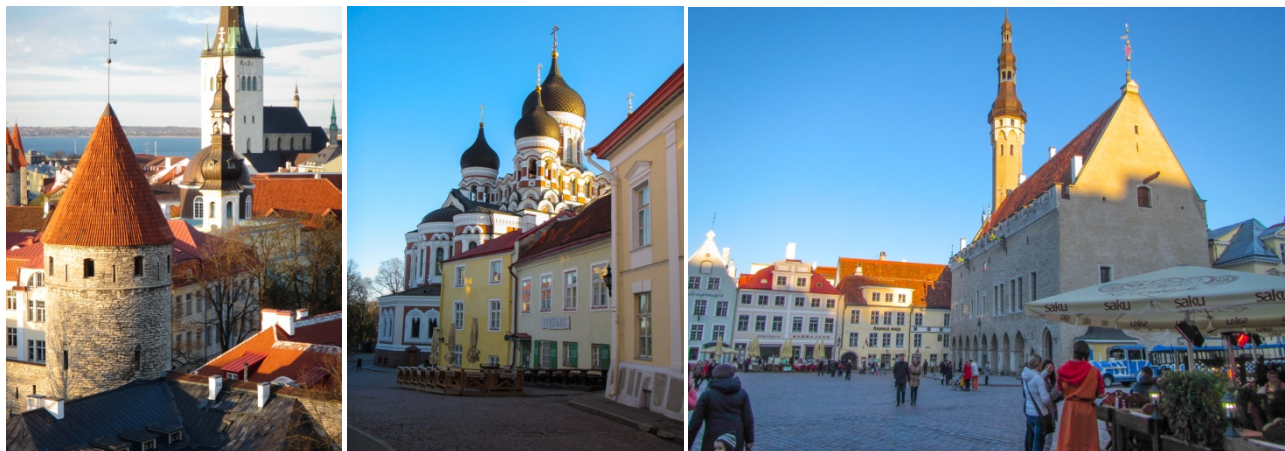
**European Pine Marten** *Martes martes* : One crossed the road as we drove from Nõva to Änglema.

**European Roe Deer** *Capreolus capreolus* : Three seen on a quiet country road near to Haeska.

**Eurasian Red Squirrel** *Sciurus vulgaris* : Several tufted-eared individuals seen in forested areas.

## 3. Amphibian Trip List

**European Toad** *Bufo bufo* : A pair seen slowly crossing the road near to Haapsalu.



*Scenes around the historic centre of Tallinn*