

## Estonia - Apr 2005

*by Dot Lincoln*

Having accepted the unexpected offer from Moonsund Eco of a free place on a promotional tour of bird reserves in western Estonia, I cannot praise the experience too highly. Apart from the flight, everything was included: accommodation in one fair sized and one small guest house (no ensuite facilities, just a communal sauna but organised to be single sex!), all meals with mostly good plain cooking and plenty of it, all transport by minibus, small boat and ferry: our every need was taken care of. The first main day we spent in part of the huge nature reserve at Matsalu Bay on the west coast of the mainland. At various points around the bay there are high metal watch towers left from Russian occupation times, and now used as bird observatories. Struggling up the flights of steep stairs with a scopak on the back and standing exposed in a howling gale at the top was quite something. Although elk, white stork and cranes plus terns and gulls were seen from here, we soon descended to comparative warmth at ground level. The highlight of this day and indeed the whole trip was the small open boat trip through the reedbeds to the not very open sea of the bay where we had superb views of numerous white tailed sea eagles, immatures and adults, swooping and fishing in the sea. There were also close views of Caspian tern, and green sandpiper.. The weather was much like North Norfolk in February and as I was wearing my usual six layers of clothing – thermal, wool, fleece and windproof etc I did not get cold except at the top of the towers. In better weather and with more time I believe you could spend a whole day going from tower to tower round the enormous bay, but you would have to drive round on the roads as much of the area is inaccessible wetland and protected area.

In the evening we were driven to the ferry port at Hapsalu where there were scaup in the harbour. En route to Hapsalu we saw the flat terrain with fields recently ploughed and waiting for potatoes or carrots to be planted and large grassy areas of hay meadows still brown from the ravages of winter. Hooded crows were evident and white stork nesting on the occasional chimney. The crossing to the large island of Hiiumaa (the whole of which is a protected nature reserve) took one and a half hours across the shallow sea, a distance of about 20 miles. We saw lots of sea duck but had closer views of them all once on the Island. We stayed for three nights in a small guest house hidden in the woods, and in the grounds among the trees I saw siskin, bullfinch, a pair of crossbills and lesser and middle spotted woodpecker. The two days on the island were spent being taken to various bays around the island and walking by the sea and through the coniferous forests. There were flocks of common and velvet scoter, eider duck and innumerable long tailed duck constantly on the move. The sheltered bays revealed Bewick and Whooper swans, also mute swan (a fairly recent addition to this area) and several groups of smew. By rights the swans should have moved on in their migration, but were held up by the strong northerly winds, as were the expected but yet to arrive flocks of waders and warblers. The only waders we saw were a group of about fifty avocets in one bay, and the occasional lapwing and oystercatcher. The final day was taken up with the return drive across the island to the ferry port, the ferry trip and the one hour drive to Tallinn. We had had snow showers the whole of the previous day but the mainland had evidently had more so the landscape looked like fairyland, with snow on the conifers and bare branches of the deciduous trees. A walking tour of the mediaeval old town of Tallinn and a splendid meal in a Russian cellar restaurant completed this excellent trip provided by Moonsund Eco a small enterprise formed to promote nature and landscape conservation. They will provide tailor made trips with guides and accommodation if requested on [www.moonsund.ee](http://www.moonsund.ee).