

Estonia

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1-5

Lahemaa National Park

It is a ninety minute drive from picturesque Tallinn to our fine 'manor-house' hotel set in the Kunda Valley just east of Lahemaa National Park. Lahemaa's extensive unspoilt bays, bogs, mires and forests was the very first national park created in the old Soviet Union and has thus been under protection for eighty years or so. Roadside verges are a colourful mosaic of bellflowers, champions, cinquefoils, pansies and the improbably lurid purple and yellow cow-wheat *Melampyrum nemorosum*. Of course all this finery is particularly alluring to butterflies. Scarce Coppers here belie their name - the shimmering orange males are a wonderful sight. Second brood Maps, Large Coppers, and Silver-washed, Lesser Marbled and Heath Fritillaries are all plentiful.

Bogs and mires are to many of us a rare habitat but in Lahemaa they form extensive complexes, and consequently are home to a distinctive and varied fauna and flora. The superb raised bog at Viru has an elegantly constructed boardwalk that allows us into the heart of this otherwise difficult (for us!) world. Three species of sundew will be flowering amongst the ten species of sphagnum moss that have constructed this wonderfully atmospheric landscape. Pretty pink Cranberries (both species) and pale *Ledum glandulosum* mix with Marsh Cinquefoil, starry Bogbean and the One-leaved Bog Orchid. The delicate Bog Rosemary is common here and Moorland Clouded Yellow and both Cranberry and Frigga's Fritillaries are among the butterflies special to these bogs. All four Estonian species of 'White-faced Darter' are found here along with plentiful Black Darters and several species of hawk. Contorted pines emerging from the sphagnum look like recent invaders but many are in fact two hundred years old! Taller pines and spruces form Lahemaa's extensive forests. In the understory of lichens, Cowberry and Bilberry, bloom Creeping Lady's Tresses, Lesser Twayblade and the lovely Twinflower. Wintergreens are common with no less than seven species here, among them the pretty One-flowered Wintergreen and the rare pink Umbellate Wintergreen. Richly-hued Cranberry Blues fly along woodland paths and Purple Emperors descend to inspect any animal dung - Lynx droppings are a favourite. We'll not see these beautiful cats though we'll find indications of their presence. Wild Boar are easier to see and so too Moose, there are 150 of the latter at Lahemaa and we might encounter them more or less anywhere. Common Cranes, Hazelhen and Capercaillie are likely to be encountered on our walks and raucous cries in the trees will reveal Nutcrackers. Woodpeckers are numerous with seven species - Northern three-toed and Black Woodpeckers are amongst the easier to see. The European Beaver is always hard at work (a wonder they are so difficult to see!) and we'll see dams and lodges along watercourses that are home to some fine odonata. Brown Hawks are joined by brilliant *Aeshna subarctica* and huge *Aeshna serrata*. As well as a host of damselflies there's Downy Emerald, shimmering Brilliant Emerald and lovely Beautiful Demoiselle.

Days 6 & 7

Matsalu Nature Reserve

Observation towers overlook thousands of hectares of reedbeds, coastal and river meadows and deciduous woodlands. Plentiful Purple and Lesser Purple Emperors descend to sit upon the tracks and paths through woodland also home to Purple Hairstreaks. Some years we've seen the rare Pallas's Fritillary here, a most beautiful species, and we'll find numerous Silver-washed, some of the green 'valezina' form, as well as Dark Green, High Brown and Lesser Marbled Fritillaries. Montagu's Harriers and White-tailed Eagles should be seen and we should keep an eye out for the Black Storks that breed in the area. There are abundant damselflies including White-legged and the lovely Banded Demoiselle. The greatest diversity of flowering plants in Estonia is found in the wooded meadows of Puhtu-Laelatu-Nehatu. Red Helleborines and Burnt-tip Orchids will be in flower and Pied Flycatchers and Wood Warblers sing from ancient oaks. Down by the shore there are plenty of waders and wildfowl and a varied flora such as Seaside Centaury, Glasswort, Sea Aster, abundant Irish Fleabane and some lovely *Dianthus superbus*.

Days 8 - 10

Saaremaa Island including Tagamoisa and Vilsandi National Park

34 out of Estonia's 36 orchid species are found on the limestone island of Saaremaa. We'll explore unspoilt Vilsandi National Park where along ancient raised beaches left by the freshwater Ancylus Lake, the Baltic's predecessor, we'll find masses of Dark Red Helleborines, Fly Orchids and Fragrant Orchids. Scarlet Rosefinches sing from Whitebeams as we search coastal marshes for the impressively tall Baltic endemic marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza longifolia*. Vilsandi Island has a beguiling mosaic of habitats from coastal marshes to juniper scrub and pine forest to reedbed. Maiden Pinks, Yellow Rattle, Thymes and *Allium carinatum* colour tracksides where we'll encounter colonies of Silver-studded and Large Blues. We'll find Large Heath, Purple Emperor, White Admiral, Woodland Brown and Nickerl's Fritillary, and Geranium Argus is abundant amongst all the Bloody Cranesbill. Bared Warblers and Willow Tits frequent shrubberies surrounding patches of richly diverse grassland flora with Danzig Vetch flowering with Lesser Butterfly Orchids, Round-leaved Wintergreens, Forked Larkspur, Angular Solomon's Seal and Herb Paris. Black-lined Skimmers and Yellow-winged Darters overfly fens where we'll encounter *Dactylorhizas curvifolia* and very rare *ruthei*, and in disused limestone quarries there's a fine show of Musk Orchids and Marsh Helleborines. In the finest mires the tall Moor King flowers above abundant Fen Orchids!

Day 11

Return to the UK

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