

Estonia, Seaducks & Grosbeaks, January 2009.

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A New Year mini-break, stopping off in Latvia to search for Pine Grosbeaks, a major rarity in the Baltic States, then continuing to Estonia for the seaduck spectacles - to a backdrop of snow and ice, over 800 Steller's Eiders, several White-tailed Eagles and rafts of seaduck that numbered in their thousands, an impressive way to begin a year.

1 January. At the stroke of the midnight hour, as Vilnius celebrated and fireworks lit the night, I was preparing a mini-trip to our northern neighbours. Fresh back from the high temperatures and sun of the Middle East, there seemed no better way to see in the New Year than to bird in the snows of Latvia and Estonia. My intention had been to merely travel up to Saaremaa, an island off the north-east coast of Estonia, the winter home to impressive numbers of Arctic seaducks, but with news of an unprecedented influx of Pine Grosbeaks into Latvia, a slight detour seemed much in order. By 3.00 a.m., with dog in the back, several sleeping bags in the boot, I was motoring north - deserted roads, snow falling, the year had begun! And then, padding across the road, my first sighting of the year, a Raccoon Dog! Super start to the year. Just over the border, in increasingly heavy snow, the mammal tally rose yet further - one Brown Hare and two Roe Deer.

My destination, presuming my understanding of Latvian was correct, was a park in the village of Raiskums. However, as dawn approached, I realised I was entering a national park - was the 'park' actually a national park not village park? Oo er, the perils of international twitching, finding eight Pine Grosbeaks somewhere in a national park might be rather hard, especially given I didn't know if they had been seen for five minutes or all day! Ah well, I also knew the birds were favouring larch, a tree not so common in this neck of the woods. Find the larches, find the birds, so went my thinking. First stop, still a tad dark, produced my first bird of 2009 - a fine Middle Spotted Woodpecker tapping away of a rotten trunk, followed moments later by a number of Jays flying across. No Grosbeaks though. In the distance I saw more larch, so headed that way. Hmm, what's that bloke doing, thought I. Coo, a birder! Didn't expect that, even better it was a birder who spoke English and better still the very birder who had found the Pine Grosbeaks the day before! Well that was lucky, and we were only 500 metres from the trees they had been. Up there we wandered, a Hawfinch sat in a hedge, an immature White-tailed Eagle flew over, Tree Sparrows and Magpies appeared too. Arriving at the spot, the larches were majestic old things and indeed right in the village. Plenty of Jays, quite a few Nuthatches, but certainly no chunky finches in shades of red or orange. Searched high and low, checking nearby trees, but nothing. After an hour, my Latvian companion was preparing to leave, a little sad not to have seen the birds in 2009, so I decided to walk back and retrieve my car. Half way back, I spotted a few more larches, so trudged through the snow to have a look. Jeepers, there're birds in those trees! And then I saw it, a cracking male Pine Grosbeak! At least two female types too, super! I raced back and got the Latvian, then we returned to savour the moment ...eight birds were feeding there - three bright adult males, an immature male and five female types, splendid. An hour later, it was time for me to depart too, I had a ferry to catch in Estonia. Took a few photographs of the location, then just as I was leaving, a male Hazel Grouse flew up from the roadside, an unexpected treat. Some hours later and 300 km north-east, I was on a ferry, making the 30-minute crossing to Saaremaa Island. No birds of note on the crossing and, with the days being short in these northern latitudes, it was approaching dusk by the time we were actually on the island. For some mad reason, not forgetting it was minus five with snow on the forecast, I was set to camp out this night, but not wishing to start that long night at 4 p.m. (!), I decided on a bit of 'owling'. Drove to the ancient forests of Vidumae in preparation for my search, I thought a few hours touring the forest trails should do the trick. Then it began to snow, very heavily! A rather major spanner in the works - half the time could barely see the trees, let alone any birds! One Wild Boar, one brief call of a Tengmalm's Owl and that was that. At 9.00 p.m., I found a nice spot and prepared for the night - two sleeping bags, the dog under a third. Parked the car on top of a hill, hopefully the snow wouldn't be too deep by morning! Day Two. I woke at 5.00 a.m. The snow was deep and still falling like crazy, I thought it prudent to get going before I got stuck in that forest forever more! Gingerly, on roads none too easy to see, I drove to the Undva peninsula on the far north-west of the island. Then I waited almost three hours for daylight, watching as the snow swirled and the wind picked up, it was going to be a wild day! And it was a wild day, blizzards and snow throughout the day. Fortunately, between the squalls brief lulls allowed the beauty of the place to be admired - small bays and rocky outcrops, birds galore. From the tip of the Undva promontory, White-tailed Eagles hugged the shorelines, whilst offshore the birds began to reveal themselves - masses of Goldeneyes, flocks of Goosanders, a few Red-breasted Mergansers too. Long-tailed Ducks zipped low over the surf, three Slavonian Grebes bobbed between the waves, distant Red-throated Divers flew low. And then I found the birds I had travelled all this way to see - Steller's Eiders. Though I can see them in Lithuania, here the setting was so much more dramatic - flying in over blocks of ice rising in the swell, a flock of 800 or more came crashing down onto the turbulent waters just off the point. Magical birds wherever, on those waters in that weather, they were simply in their element, amazing. Another snowstorm approached, soon I was in white-out, the sea no longer visible. I stumbled along, surprised to find 16 Starlings feeding on the tideline. Such birds don't even winter in Lithuania, but here they were, 600 km or so further north. Back in the car, still not stuck in the snow, I drove near blind for a while, taking a backroad back round the peninsula to look over other bays. Occasional other birds seen - Whooper and Mute Swans, a few Velvet Scoters, rafts of Long-tailed Ducks, occasional

gulls here and there, but the weather was now plain awful, it seemed the day's birding was over! Some kilometres on, I reached the small port of Veere, it would have been nice to check the bay I thought. Then a break in the storm, the sun briefly shone and the waters were still ...and absolutely packed with birds! In the gentle arch of a bay, raft upon raft of seaduck - perhaps a couple of thousand Common Scoters, dozens of Scaup, hundreds of Long-tailed Ducks and a good scattering of other birds, including 30 more Steller's Eiders, a few Velvet Scoters, occasional Great Crested Grebes and heaps more Goosanders and Goldeneye. A very nice bay indeed. Had the weather held out, I fancied a return to the Undva peninsula, but just as suddenly had the sun come out, so too did the snow return! By now, the afternoon was drawing to an end, the weather was closing in and I decided it time to head for home. In appalling conditions, drove 750 km home, sometimes at a crawl as the snow became ever heavier, arrived home at 4 a.m.!