

Estonia, Butterflies & Orchids, July 2010.

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Renowned for birds, Estonia is equally rich in butterflies, thus this short break was dedicated to searching out a few species rarer further south in the Baltics. The basic plan was to visit the islands of Hiiumaa and Saaremaa, both with peninsulas rich in butterflies and orchids, then cut across the country to the far south-east, where Clouded Apollo sometimes lurks in river valleys close to the Russian border. Precious little information exists on butterfly sites in the country, even less so for timings that the different species are on the wing. For this reason, it was very much a 'blind trip', merely planned at the last moment when the weather forecast suggested sunny days ahead.

Day One. Hiiumaa. 2.30 a.m. departure from Vilnius, arriving at the port of Rohukula some hours later, 60 minutes before the 9.00 ferry. Weather looked good - a Peacock fluttered past, numerous Arctic Terns screamed round the ferry port. Out we chugged, the crossing almost two hours, Grey Seals appeared adjacent, pods of Common Eider and a lone White-tailed Eagle lingered on rocky islets. Arrival on Hiiumaa, the skies turned dark, then rain began. So much for the weather forecast! Certainly amongst the most scenic of places in all the Baltic States, we trundled across the island, arriving on the Kopu Peninsula to skies still overcast and spotting with rain. Bar a brave Wood White, no butterflies flying. One snooze in the car later, still rain threatened. No butterflies, so searched for orchids instead - not my speciality, but find them we did. Impressive flower stalks, Lesser Butterfly Orchids in a couple of places, Spotted and Pyramidal Orchids elsewhere.

With a certain brightness to the sky in the south, we relocated to Parna on the stunning coastline facing across to Saaremaa. And then out came the sun, a glorious late afternoon and evening following, blue skies set across crystal waters, idyllic. And with the sun, the first butterflies of note - a field full of Amanda's Blues, Chestnut Heaths and Small Heaths. Red-backed Shrikes and Common Rosefinches adjacent, a Hobby overhead, Common Eiders and Red-breasted Mergansers with chicks on the sea adjacent, all most pleasant. Stayed in a little cabin a kilometre from the ferry port, civilised end to the day.

Day Two. Saaremaa. Another morning ferry, this time from Hiiumaa across to Saaremaa. The weather was playing ball, unbroken sunshine and temperatures rising nicely. More Arctic Terns on the crossing, plus a couple of Black-throated Divers and another White-tailed Eagle.

On Saaremaa itself, plenty of orchids and a warm sun bringing out butterflies by the bucket load - random stops in forest clearings notching up plenty of interest, stacks and stacks of Little Blues and Black-veined Whites predominating, but also Speckled Wood and Large Wall Brown. For the day's highlight however, honours fell to the picturesque Undva Peninsula, a site last visited in the depths of a sub-zero winter eighteen months earlier. Quite a contrast now, wild flowers everywhere, including no shortage of orchids, a pleasant warmth radiating and butterflies in clouds. Little Blues were having a right field day, literally hundreds of them decorating meadows and roadside, but better from my perspective, the first of my target butterflies - in amongst abundant Amanda's Blues, there were Northern Brown Argus in numbers quite respectable, a new species for me. We slowly edged round the peninsula, stopping to admire the views and butterflies, slowly our tally rising - Grizzled Skipper seen, a couple of Painted Ladies, then my next new butterflies - first a Grizzled Skipper, then the rather smart Geranium Argus, several flying on a small bog. Crouched photographing these, up flew a bird from beneath my feet - I was towering above a Wood Lark nest! Rapid retreat, then onward with the butterflies, the next goodies being Granville Fritillaries, a total of four seen as the afternoon edged on. With our fill of the peninsula, we then tried to find a headland overlooking rocky islets, the hope being to see Hooded Seals. No such luck, I guess a boat trip would be the easiest way to secure these, maybe another time. As day edged on, we toured the southern half of the island, not really adding much, so then popped into Kuressaare, the only town of size on the island. Evening approaching, drove the 100 km across to Kuivastu, the ferry port back to the Estonian mainland. Took the 9 p.m. ferry out, then drove right across the country to camp near the Russian border, on site for our final destination on this whirlwind tour.

Day Three. Clouded Apollo, a small isolated population of this spectacular butterfly flies in a few remote river valleys tucked up against the Russian border, this was my quest. Despite amazing weather, I failed to find any - having no information on exact flight dates, I can only suppose I was a little early or late in the season. No despondency however - with Honey Buzzard and Lesser Spotted Eagle overhead, a Corncrake calling and Red-backed Shrikes and Common Rosefinches commonplace, the valley was also crawling with other butterflies. Super day all in all, with some spectacular species such as Poplar Admiral and White Admiral seemingly common, Granville Fritillaries encountered in a couple of places and a vast range of other species, including Large Coppers, Northern Brown Argus, Turquoise Blue and Amanda's Blue. I did have ideas of also visiting nearby raised bogs for various other specialities, but opted against it, leaving shortly after midday for the drive back to Vilnius, arriving in Lithuania just in time to watch Germany slaughter England in the football World Cup, I should have stayed in Estonia!