

# **BIRDS AT PEIPSI AND ON THE SHORE LANDSCAPES OF THE LAKE**

PEIPSI GUIDE



It seems as if people and birds have agreed in one thing. Considering the northern shores of Lake Peipsi, where we think are the most beautiful sandy beaches – there are very few birds. And thus it is not surprising when someone, returning from a summer holiday, could comment about the bird-life on Peipsi: “There was not much at all, some gulls on the waves, swifts high up on the verge of the clouds!”

However, Peipsi is indeed rich in birds – altogether, at least 232 species have been observed on the water surface and close to the lake, 175 of them have also built their nests in this locality. Even in the immediate vicinity of the lake, in reeds and flood plains, one can come across hatching birds of up to 60 species.



Laossina shore

The most densely bird inhabited shore section is located in Kallaste, with more than a thousand Sand Martins nesting on a two-hundred-meters-long sandstone outcrop. However, the population density of eagles in Emajõe Suursoo

mire at Lake Peipsi could offer even more to a bird-lover – could you imagine a sight with six White-tailed Eagles sitting on top of the birch trees on the shore, before their early morning fishing trip?

Chaffinches have been the most numerous migrants to the shores of Peipsi; in autumn 1967, more than 4 million birds were counted here during their flyover. Whereas during the bird watches at the turn of the cen-



Kallaste



Tundra Swans – *Cygnus columbianus*

ture, the Tundra Swans, having become rare in the world, have deserved the most of people's attention. Approximately one third of their population, i.e. up to 10 thousand Tundra Swans, during their autumn-time migratory halt, gather their strength exactly here, on the pondweed grasslands of Lake Peipsi, between Lohusuu and the mouth of the River Emajõgi.

Peipsi's water areas are as extensive as a sea, providing the birds with more options where to nest, rest or fly. But, for bird-watchers, this means more of a puzzle as to how to be in a right place at a right time. This current publication indeed endeavours to contribute a little to the success of the first bird trips to Lake Peipsi.

Peipsi is the fourth largest lake in Europe and its shape, squeezed in the middle, makes it possible to observe it in three separate parts: the northern large water area is called Lake Peipsi, the southern extension Lake Pskov and the narrow section, uniting the two parts, is Lake Lämmijärv. In the current publication, Lake Peipsi is conceived as all these parts together if not stressed otherwise.



Common Coot – *Fulica atra*



Peipsi shore at the mouth of the River Emajõgi



- ★ – a good observation site during the nesting of the birds
- ★ – a good observation site during the migration of the birds
- ★ – a good observation site during the nesting and migration of the birds
- 🗼 – bird tower

## WHERE TO GO, WHERE TO STOP?

### When starting from the north and moving towards the south:

- ★ **1 Vasknarva** – here it is possible to hear and see the birds on the Struuga bottom-land meadow; fascinating world of bird sounds during spring and summer nights; a view to the same bottom-land meadow also opens from Jaama and Karoli villages.
- ★ **2 Kauksi beach** – one of the most beautiful beaches of Lake Peipsi, worthwhile for visiting; however, this site offers few opportunities for watching water birds.
- ★ **3 Mustvee mole** at the river mouth – a strategic observation location, providing the view of the entire vicinity, from Kalma to Omedu; one of the best observation sites of swans and ducks during their autumn migration.
- ★ **4 River mouth of the Omedu River** – a potential place for watching ducks and swans during their migration in autumn.
- ★ **5 Shore escarpment behind the Kodavere graveyard** – here you cannot miss seeing the birds; during autumn migration, it is a halting site for ducks, geese as well as swans.
- ★ **6 Kallaste sandstone outcrop** – the location of one of the largest colonies of Sand Martins in Estonia; a good view of the lake.
- ★ **7 Nina lighthouse** – one of the best sites for the observation of migratory sea birds inland.
- ★ **8 Lahepera Lake** – in windy weather, the birds of Peipsi come for storm shelter here; rich in species of hatching avifauna, the ones worth highlighting comprise the numerous Black Terns and Little Gulls; a suitable location for watching predatory birds.

Kallaste outcrop



Sand Martins  
– *Riparia  
riparia*



★ **9** Boat canal dam at the rear of the **Varnja Church** – the shore of reed birds; good view of the lake.

★ **10 Pedaspea cove** – meeting place for eagle watchers; during migration, it is also possible to see the Anseriformes and Charadriiformes here; avoid stepping on vipers on the canal dam leading to the tower!



★ **11 Piirissaar** – something for everyone in a compact manner. Walking on foot is toilsome if not impossible in the mire covering the western part of the island; it is easy to bump into a real frog lover here: Piirissaar is also the paradise of frogs in Estonia.

★ **12 Mehikoorma** border guard station – one of the key sites in the transmigration of the birds; the narrowest part of Lake Peipsi.



A view from the Pedaspää bird observation tower



★ **13 Rāpina polder** – a loved halting place for migratory Anseriformes and Charadriiformes; in the peak time of autumn migration, thousands of Bean Geese and Greater White-fronted Geese halt here. During a more watery spring, it is also a place for bounteous hatching avifauna, represented by the species of Anseriformes and Charadriiformes; the occurrence of Spotted Crake and Little Crake is also noteworthy.

★ **14 Võõpsu bridge** – a view to the flood plain of the Võhandu River; a convenient observation site for those interested in Black Tern; the boundary line of Setomaa.

Võõpsu

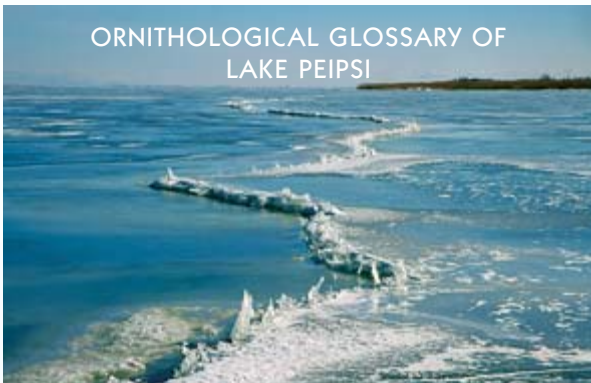


★ **15 Beresje** – a suitable place for watching migratory water birds during their halt; among other features, two tiny shore lakes are of interest.

★ **16 Lüübnitsa** – a splendid heritage landscape, loved both by people, birds and frogs. A good location for observing ducks and Charadriiformes; a view opens from here to the shore meadows of Audjassaare, the mires of the neighbourhood and the expanses of Russia.

★ **17 Väraska Health Resort** – a convenient bird watching site near the café, unfortunately, in the majority of instances relatively poor in birds; Lake Õrsava, only a few kilometres away, is also worth checking.

## ORNITHOLOGICAL GLOSSARY OF LAKE PEIPSI



### **From ice to ice**

As is common knowledge, the best opportunities for watching birds are indeed during the ice-free time. On Peipsi, this mainly means the period starting from the end of April until the end of November. But, as each year has its own face, it is better to follow the weather and weather forecast!

### **Swan song bays**

Nordic Tundra Swans and Whooper Swans stop in the coves of Lake Peipsi, both during their spring and autumn migration. The best observation opportunities are in autumn, when the swans are attracted by the Peipsi pondweed grasslands between Lohusuu and the mouth of the River Emajõgi. The quantum of Tundra Swans stopping in the western shores of Lake Peipsi reaches 10 thousand individuals, the number of Whooping Swans is approximately a tenth of that.

### **Eagle silhouettes on the verge of clouds**

The demesnes of White-tailed Eagles and Ospreys in the lower course of the Suur-Emajõgi River and the shores of Lake Lämmijärv are among the most spectacular ones



Tundra Swans – *Cygnus columbianus*





A view of Lake Peipsi from the Emajõe Suursoo Mire



in Europe. About fifty eagles come fishing on the lake in this locality – half of them from Estonia and the others from Russia. From our side, it is mostly the White-tailed Eagles, which reach the fishing waters, whereas the majority of Ospreys proceed from Russia. The flying arches of Lesser Spotted Eagles and Golden Eagles – not so much linked to the lake – keep a little away from the shores, but it is fully possible to notice them on the local beaches.



### **The shore of Sand Martins in Kallaste**

Kallaste and Sand Martins are inseparable. Each year, more than a thousand little beaks are engaged in re-shaping the Kallaste sandstone outcrop. In the best times, even up to 2000 Sand Martin pairs have nested in the Kallaste colony.



### **Wandering mussel gourmets**

Something curious is being associated here with the wandering mussel (Zebra mussel), which has probably spread to Lake Peipsi



from the Caspian Sea, as always with ecdemic species, originating from elsewhere. At the same time, Zebra mussel is an ailment for a number of diving ducks –



**Tufted Ducks – *Aythya fuligula***

these exotic mussels are being caught from the generally shallow-bottomed Lake Peipsi by a number of hatching birds, such as Tufted Ducks, Common Pochards and Goldeneyes. During migration, there are plenty more wandering mussel gourmets on the lake –

at this period, Greater Scaups, Long-tailed Ducks and Black Scoters make a stop on the lake mirror surface.

### **Inhabitants of reed thickets**

The shores of Lake Peipsi are often bordered by reed, the wider strips of this remain southwards from Varnja and also on the shorelines of Piirissaar island. Such areas appeal to Great Bitterns and Great Reed Warblers, whose populations at Peipsi are one of the most representational in Estonia. The reed thicket also hides the colonies of gulls, terns and Black Terns and the floating nests of Great Crested Grebes.



**Sedge Warbler – *Acrocephalus schoenobaenus***



The reeds in Pedaspää

### Thinking of the Orient

It is not enough that, on Lake Peipsi – the eastern border of Estonia, the day starts a little earlier than in the rest of the country. More than that, even the random visitors to Estonia, appearing from the East, are also met here more frequently – e.g. the Great Grey Owl, White-winged Tern, Terek Sandpiper, Booted Warbler.



Migrating flock of Ruffs – *Philomachus pugnax*

### Many faces of the autumn migration

The autumn-time migration of water birds on Peipsi is interesting not solely due to the frequent occurrence of swans. There are also other exciting aquatic birds such



as Tufted Ducks, Eurasian Wigeons, Greater White-fronted Geese, Bean Geese, Common Goldeneyes, Smews, Little Gulls, divers, grebes...

## Everything changes

Peipsi and its birds have changed a lot during the course of time. As many of the lakeside hayfields and pasture-lands are by now covered with brushwood, a number of meadow Charadriiformes have disappeared or are currently disappearing from among the hatching birds – Ruff, Black-tailed Godwit, Common Redshank. At the same time, reed and shrub-wood bird



Black-tailed Godwit –  
*Limosa limosa*

species have settled here. Alterations are also fully noticeable in the migration of birds. For instance, half a century ago, the most numerous migratory water bird on Lake Peipsi was the Long-tailed Duck, which today, is observed here in remarkably smaller amounts. At the same time, Barnacle Geese which have not been noticed here earlier, have now appeared on the shores of Peipsi.



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