



# FOR BIRD WATCHERS BIRDS AT THE SLĪTERE



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The Slītere National Park (established in 1999 as a strict nature reserve) is known, with good reason, as an open-air museum which shows the historical development of the Baltic Sea. Nowadays evidence of geological events is seen in the Blue Hills of Slītere, which stand 20 to 30 metres high above what was the shore of the Baltic lake of ice 10,000 years ago. The Stiebri hills were former 8,000 or 9,000 years ago, while the Littorina Sea formed Europe's largest set of dune ramparts and damp hollows between those ramparts. This occurred between 4,000 and 7,000 years ago. The gentle climate of Northern Kurzeme is the reason why so many rare plants are found in the park – some 860 in all including Common Yew (*Taxus baccata*) and Baltic Ivy (*Hedera helix* var. *baltica*). Of certain value in the preservation of these treasures was the Soviet military machine, which has left behind army bases and other military objects in the area. The presence of the military meant that the area of what is now the Slītere National Park remained largely undisturbed for 50 years. The park includes one of the most popular tourist destinations in Latvia – the Cape of Kolka, which is visited by more than 50,000 travellers each year. During the spring migration of birds, tens of thousands of birds fly over the cape within one hour. Along the shore of the Baltic Sea is the so-called Livonian coast, which stretches from Kolka to Sīkriags and Oviši. Fishing villages and other cultural objects established by the world's smallest ethnic minority, the Livonians, can be found here. Tourists will enjoy interesting four nature trails, bicycling routes, viewing tower, and the Slītere lighthouse which is open for visitors.

**BIRDS AT THE SLĪTERE NATIONAL PARK: A SPECIAL TERRITORY**  
The geographic placement of the Slītere National Park and the diversity of the environment in this particular place have ensured two wonderful and unique characteristics and values for it. First of all, the park is crossed by the migration routes for birds travelling from the White Sea to the Baltic Sea. Second, many rare and particularly endangered species of birds can be found in the park itself. Of the 338 species of birds ever registered in Latvia, 261 have been spotted at the SNP. Of these, 66 are uncommon and highly protected in Latvia. 140 are endangered at the European level.

#### Best viewing locations

The best places to spot birds during and outside of migration season are the Ēvaži, Pēterezers, pines of Cape Kolka and Slītere nature trails, and on the seashore by the village of Vaide and at Cape Kolka (marked on the map with ). During the height of the migration season, literally tens of thousands of birds fly over Cape Kolka each hour. Nearly all of the Latvian species of birds can be spotted there during the summer. The coastal waters of Cape Kolka and the Irbe narrows are an important feeding place for migrating water birds, as well as those which spend the winter there. The spring is the best time to bird-watch at Kolka – the birds fly North along the coast, and there are both land and water birds – loons, ducks, gulls and terns which see the cape as a boundary along which there are very clear streams of migration. Not all species of birds travel at the same time. Spring migration begins in late February and continues until late May. April and early May are the best viewing times. In the autumn, there are different species and fewer birds – fewer predatory and more wading birds. The migration of water birds along the cape can be quite intensive during the autumn, too.

#### Finding a location on Cape of Kolka (Kolkasrags)

First, determine the direction of the wind. If the wind is slow (something that is not particularly typical at Cape Kolka in the autumn and winter), choose a place on the beach by the ruins of the old Kolka lighthouse. If there's a strong westerly or north-westerly wind, choose a spot at the edge of the forest where you will be out of the wind. Most birds can be spotted from a stationary location, but if you want to see everything that there is to see, plan to spend at least a couple of hours there. The birds fly above the sea, the forest, the pine trees and the scattered shrubs. Some are always on the beach. You can also walk along the beach on both sides of the cape.

#### BEST PRACTICE WHEN BIRD-WATCHING:

- Leave the birds alone!
- Remember that all species of birds are equally important.
- Protect the nesting places of birds.
- Respect the rights of yourselves and others.
- Write down your observations.
- Share your knowledge thoughtfully.
- Try to learn more.

#### Guides

**Vilnis Skuja** (mag. biol.), who has been an ornithologist since 1980. He spent many years studying the raven. Later he focused on mammals, amphibians and reptiles, and he is one of Latvia's most experienced natural researchers. He leads tours through the Slītere National Park. Ring +371 29365230.

**Helmutis Hofmanis** (mag. biol.) is an ornithologist whose work has centred on Latvia's largest bird of its type – the wood grouse. He has worked on various ornithological projects all over Latvia, and also offers tours of the Slītere National Park. Ring +371 26444121.

**Equipment.** The best binoculars for bird-watching will be 8x30 to 10x50 binoculars with an attached telescope. The binoculars will allow you to look at flocks of birds that are of interest to you, while the telescope will allow you to determine the species and other nuances about the birds. The diameter of the telescope's lens should be around 80 mm, and it should enlarge the image by around 20 times. Bring a bird guidebook to help you if you spot an uncommon bird or one with which you're just not familiar.

#### Bird-related events at the SNP

Two events dedicated to birds take place at the Slītere National Park each year – Bird Days at Kolkasrags, next scheduled for April 24-25, 2010, and International Bird-Watching Days, next due on October 2-3, 2010. See the homepage of the Latvian Ornithological Society ([www.lob.lv](http://www.lob.lv)) for more.

#### TOURIST SERVICES

**Accommodations:** Jaunlāči in Sīkriags, 29469614  
 Jaunlādiņi in Lapmežciems, 29467556  
 Upeskalni in Mazirbe, 29259510  
 Mazirbes Kalēji, 63248374, 29213412  
 Dzintariņi in Mazirbe, 26173009  
 Jauntīlmači in Košriags, 29412974  
 Pītagi in Košriags, 29372728, [www.pitagi.lv](http://www.pitagi.lv)  
 Krūmiņi in Saunags, 29452512  
 Purvziедi in Vaide, 63200179, 29395624  
 Ūsi in Kolka, 63276507, 29475692, [www.kolka.info](http://www.kolka.info)

Tenting grounds in Melnsils, 28605606

**Resting place** in Kolkasrags, Melnsils

**Shopping** in Dundaga, Mazirbe, Kolka, Melnsils, Vidāle

**Dining:** Dundaga, Kolka (only during the season)

**Information:** [www.liveons.lv](http://www.liveons.lv), [www.talsurajons.lv](http://www.talsurajons.lv)

63224165; [www.kolkasrags.lv](http://www.kolkasrags.lv), 29149105; [www.countryholidays.lv](http://www.countryholidays.lv) 67617600;

[www.ziemelkurzeme.lv](http://www.ziemelkurzeme.lv) 63232293, 29444395.

**Emergency assistance:** Ring 112

The Slītere National Park features several other hikes, as well as bike, water and auto routes. Look for a list of routes on [www.countryholidays.lv](http://www.countryholidays.lv) and for markings out in nature.



VIDES



MINISTRĪJA

LAUKU CEĻOTĀJS



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## THE SPRING

- 1** The **Capercaillie** is the largest bird of its kind the world. If you're lucky, you'll spot the bird at the side of gravel roads, gnawing on tiny pebbles which help it to digest its food.
- 2** The **European Eagle Owl** is Latvia's largest owl, and its hooting can be heard in February and March in the area of Kolka. The eagle-owl is mostly a ground-nester, using shallow holes near a tree stump or uprooted root. In the Gauja National Park, it also lives in cliff niches and on cliff terraces.
- 3** The **Common Chaffinch** is Latvia's most common species of bird and is found all over the country and in the widest variety of biotopes. Ornithologists think that there are some 2.5 million chaffinches in Latvia.

## THE SUMMER

- 4** The **Common Shelduck** is one of the largest and most colourful ducks in Latvia. It is often seen near the seashore. These birds tend to nest under nearby homes and ancillary buildings. The Saaremaa duck is known for "duckling kindergartens" – if one family's ducklings have become lost or orphaned, other families take them in. That's why you sometimes see families with as many as 20 or more ducklings.
- 5** The **Gray Heron** is the size of a stork and can often be seen near the seashore in Slitere. It mostly subsists on fish, but it has been known to eat other animals, too. Researchers at Slitere have found that these herons spend a lot of time at places where the Natterjack toad is spawning. Presumably the birds eat some of the frog-spawn.
- 6** The **White Wagtail** is Latvia's national bird and can be found all over the country. Here, at the Slitere seashore, the wagtail often nests in abandoned fishermen's boats, while the beach offers them an outstanding source of food.

- 7** The **European Nightjar** is often found on forest roads at night in June and July, and often it is run down by motor vehicles. When the birds takes flight, there are easily visible white spots at the ends of their wings. The nightjar winters in tropical Africa. If you see "shining eyes" in your headlights, slow down – you'll help birds and animals to avoid accidents.

- 8** The **Little Ringed Plover** is common at the Slitere seashore, but far less so than in the 1980s. It can be differentiated from the very similar ringed plover by the yellow ring around its eyes, and by the beak, which is completely black. During nesting season, the little ringed plover digs a small hole in the sand and lays three eggs. If an enemy approaches the nest, one of the parents starts to make a lot of noise to chase it away. Don't spend much time in such locations, please.

## THE AUTUMN

- 9** The **Great Cormorant** was quite uncommon in Latvia 30 years ago, but that's no longer the case. Cormorants can often be seen sitting on a breakwater or beach with spread wings. That means that they're drying their wings. The appearance of the cormorant in such cases is reminiscent of a cross, which is why the cormorant often appeared on Medieval heraldry.

- 10** The **White-tailed Eagle** is Latvia's largest predatory bird, with a wingspan of approximately 2.5 metres. The bird can be identified in flight by its silhouette – long and flat wings with very visible "fingers." Older birds have a highly visible white tail. The bird starts to nest at the age of five or six, and it builds its huge nest in old trees. Usually these nests are even larger than those that are built by storks. No white-tailed eagle nest has ever been found in Slitere, but the birds are often seen there. The nearest known nesting place is in the nature reserve that is known as the Ance swamps and forests.

## THE WINTER

- 11** The **Herring Gull** is the most common gull to be seen by the seaside. If you see one on the beach, then you can tell that it's a herring gull because of a yellow beak with a small red area on the lower beak.

- 12** The **Black Woodpecker** is the largest of Europe's woodpeckers. The holes that it pecks into trees for its nests are at least 40 cm in diameter. The bird makes nests in pines, birches and aspens. When the nest is abandoned, other birds and animals settle there – ones which do not peck holes themselves. These include the tiny Eurasian pygmy owl, which is Latvia's smallest owl, the Tengmalm's owl, the stock dove, and the European pine marten.

- 13** The **White-throated Dipper** is a migratory bird, arriving in Latvia from Scandinavia in November and going back again in March. The dipper lives near rivers and streams, feeding on various water-based invertebrates by diving under the water. In and around the Slitere National Park, the dipper can be spotted near river valleys.

## BIRDS DURING THE YEAR

A thick dark line means that the bird can be seen regularly, while a broken line means that it is not seen regularly.

Species	Place to spot	Month											
		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
1 Capercaillie	Pine forest, roadside	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2 European Eagle Owl	Pine forest	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
3 Common Chaffinch	Everywhere	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
4 Common Shelduck	Coast line	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
5 Gray Heron	Coast line	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
6 White Wagtail	Coast line and fishing villages	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
7 European Nightjar	Edges of swamps, pine forests	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
8 Little Ringed Plover	Coast line	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
9 Great Cormorant	Sea, coast line	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
10 White-tailed Eagle	Entire territory	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
11 Herring Gull	Coast line	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
12 Black Woodpecker	Pine forests	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
13 White-throated Dipper	Flowing water	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—



1 A Capercaillie, *Tetrao urogallus*



6 A White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*



2 A European Eagle Owl, *Bubo bubo*



3 A Common Chaffinch, *Fringilla coelebs*



4 A Common Shelduck, *Tadorna tadorna*



5 A Gray Heron, *Ardea cinerea*



7 A European Nightjar, *Caprimulgus europaeus*



8 A Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius*



9 A Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo*



10 A White-tailed Eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*



11 A Herring Gull, *Larus argentatus*



12 A Black Woodpecker, *Dryocopus martius*



13 A White-throated Dipper, *Cinclus cinclus*



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