



*In recent years, herring gulls and cormorants have been nesting on the Lighthouse island, which is rarely visited by people. In exceptional cases, even the nests of razorbills have been spotted on the island.*

## Cape Kolka, Latvia – an excellent spot to see migratory sea birds!

Cape Kolka is the furthest northern point of the Courland peninsula. This area is a part of the coastline of the Baltic sea, where the Gulf of Riga meets the Irbe Strait. It is a perfect place to observe migratory birds, and it is widely recognized among the European bird watchers. The location of the cape creates good conditions for watching the migratory birds during the spring migration season, when birds fly from the south-west. In this period, one can observe a “bottleneck” effect at the cape, where the birds flying above land gather before setting off across the Gulf of Riga towards Estonia. Indeed, not all birds dare to cross the sea at once, and such hesitation before the long journey increases the concentration of the birds in the area around the cape. Cape Kolka is the best place in Latvia to watch the sea birds, especially in autumn, when the flow of terrestrial birds across the cape is not as intense as in spring. Here, you can come across the waders even in the middle of summer.

The first systematic records about the spring migration of birds at Cape Kolka were made in 1958. During the Soviet Period, this area was a closed territory for foreign bird watchers, and even Latvian ornithologists could access it only with special permissions. After restoration of Latvian independence in 1991, this area has been open for bird watchers and visitors from all over Europe.

A perfect bird-watching spot is located on the cape itself (57.46N;22.37E) near the ruins of the old Lighthouse. Recently, approximately 700 m to the West from the ruins of the old Lighthouse, a new bird observation tower has been erected (57.75N;22.59E). This tower provides an excellent opportunity to make photos of birds of prey flying close to the tower.

Years of observations have proven that the most intense migration at Cape Kolka occurs in the period from April to the beginning of May, yet some birds already start to migrate in March and some birds like European honey buzzards (*Pernis apivorus*), black kites (*Milvus migrans*), common swifts (*Apus apus*) and other bird species migrate until the beginning of June.



*The largest group of sea ducks on the banks of Cape Kolka are long-tailed ducks (*Clangula hyemalis*), which remain here from the end of September to the end of May.*



*Eurasian sparrowhawk is considered to be a background species among the migratory birds of prey at Cape Kolka. It migrates all day long, more than 60 sparrowhawks per hour fly over in the first part of the day; under favourable conditions, their number can reach over 400 specimens during the day.*

In the end of April, under favourable weather conditions, approximately 1 000 birds of prey cross Cape Kolka every day! In terms of quantity, the largest groups of birds of prey crossing Cape Kolka are made up of such species like Eurasian sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) and rough-legged buzzard (*Buteo lagopus*). During the day, under particularly favourable conditions, more than 400 Eurasian sparrowhawks and 100 buzzards cross Cape Kolka. Here, you can regularly observe ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*), white-tailed eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), harriers (*Circus spp.*), falcons (*Falco spp.*). Often, you can also watch golden eagles (*Aquila crysaetos*), lesser spotted eagles (*A. pomarine*) and greater spotted eagles (*A. clanga*). On rare occasions, although regularly you can spot a peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

Once, approximately 3 000 common cranes (*Grus grus*) were recorded in this area. Under favourable weather conditions, you can observe intense migration of Eurasian curlews (*Numenius arquata*) over the sea, when you can spot even several hundreds of these birds during the day.

Cape Kolka is an excellent spot from which you can observe the migratory sea birds. Loons (*Gavia spp.*), swans (*Cygnus spp.*), different species of ducks come close to the cape, when flying from the Irbe Strait to the Gulf of Riga. Perhaps, at Cape Kolka you might even come across such a rare bird as a yellow-billed loon (*Gavia adamsii*).

During the migration period, here you can see the major part of Latvian ornithofauna. However, you still have a chance to come across something unusual in this area that makes Cape Kolka such a special place – like a well-hidden treasure chest which you might discover by accident. At Cape Kolka, there have been recorded sightings of such rare birds as terek sandpipers (*Xenus cinereus*), African stonechats (*Saxicola torquata*), red-rumped swallows (*Cecropis daurica*), rosy starlings (*Pastor roseus*) etc.

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*Black-throated loons during migration, left in summer plumage, right in winter. Illustration © Peter Nilsson*