



The hilly landscape of the national park, Arne Ader

KARULA NATIONAL PARK

The smallest national park in Estonia at just 123 km², Karula National Park is located in the Karula Uplands on the border of Valga and Võru counties. The varied terrain of Karula was placed under protection as a nature reserve in 1979 and became a national park in 1993. The park was established to preserve the natural environment found in the hilly landscapes characteristic of Southern Estonia with its forests and lakes, as well as the species under protection there and the cultural heritage of the area. Karula National Park belongs to the Natura 2000 network of protected areas in the European Union.

The unique terrain of the Karula Uplands formed more than 10,000 years ago as a result of the action of glacial ice. With the continental glacier retreating, the northern section of Karula came to feature predominantly dome-shaped kames. The hilly section of the national park is its most densely populated area. The southern part of Karula features groups of eskers and kames with mires and forests, where human settlement remains quite rare. The highest point in the uplands is **Tornimägi Hill** (138.9 m) in the village of Rebasemõisa.

The retreating continental glacier caused depressions to form which later developed into lakes. The Karula Uplands have 60 lakes, 40 of which are located in the national park. Typically, the lakes have marshy shores; sandy shores are a rare find. Various lake types found in Estonia are represented in the national park. There are eutrophic and oligotrophic lakes as well as brown-water and clear-water lakes, which can be found side by side.



Karula National Park features a variety of forests and lakes, Tuule Mürsepp

Most of the lakes are in relatively good ecological condition. The largest lake in the national park is Lake Ähijärv at 176 hectares. With its 3 km of winding shoreline, Ähijärv is a typical example of a eutrophic lake with all its biological diversity. The deepest lake in the area is the clear-water Lake Savijärv at 18 metres. There are no big rivers in Karula National Park. Karula Uplands represent the most important watershed in south-eastern Estonia, separating the waters flowing into the Gulfs of Finland and Riga. From the northern part of the uplands, the water flows via the Ärnü River to the Emajõgi River and from there through Lake Peipus into the Gulf of Finland. The waters of the southern part of the uplands flow into the Mustjõgi River before entering the Koiva River and finally emptying out into the Gulf of Riga.

Forests cover more than 70% of the national park, growing as old, unfragmented areas in the park's sparsely populated southern section and as smaller patches in the park's northern, hilly part. The southern part of the forest is **the largest of its kind under protection in south-eastern Estonia.** The hilly terrain creates various light and moisture conditions, which is why different types of forests are located side by side. Mesotrophic boreal forests are most common on the dark sides of the hills in the northern part, while on the southern slopes where there is more sun, dry oligo-mesotrophic boreal forests are more dominant. Eutrophic boreo-nemoral forests can be found in areas with more fertile soil, while wet depressions feature eutrophic to meso-eutrophic swamp forests and oligotrophic bog forests.

Most of Karula's **grasslands** are dry grasslands growing on mineral soil. Historically, the meadows in Karula have been wet, paludified meadows and marshy

meadows, which are currently disappearing from modern landscapes. Present-day grasslands evolved from long-standing fields which were left uncultivated for decades. In these places, vegetation characteristic of dry meadows is taking over. Only fragments of the former dry mesotrophic meadows have survived, and these serve as invaluable habitats for some rare species.

Karula is considered to have high conservation value due to its **heritage landscapes**, which are the result of thousands of years of continuous human activity. The distribution of heritage landscapes is predetermined by the location of arable land: hill tops and their steep slopes tend to be wooded and encircled by fields or meadows. Depressions between hills contain small lakes, peatland forests or wet meadows. In Karula, the landscape is dotted with small bodies of water between hills, locally known as lonsik, land or lump.



The European spadefoot toad needs shallow bodies of water for spawning, Siim Veski



The early marsh orchid, Tuule Mürsepp

Over the course of the last hundred years, the extent of heritage landscapes has decreased here by more than 50 percent. This is due to industrialisation (rendering obsolete steep slopes and hayfields, where nature has gradually taken over) and the deportations of the 1940s. Today, the hilly terrain is predominantly maintained by the local sheep and cows.

Bogs cover some 10% of the national park's surface area. The hilly terrain contains small bogs and quaking bogs that formed as a result of lakes becoming overgrown. The largest is the 219-hectare Aestamise bog, located in a depression on the edge of the uplands.

The flora and fauna of Karula are rich in species, as the alternating terrain offers various types of habitats. Mammals you may encounter here are the roe deer, elk, wild boar, red fox, wolf, raccoon dog, lynx, Eurasian otter, European hare, red squirrel and bat. In many places you will spot traces of beaver activity – keep an eye open for lakes with a higher-than-usual water level and flooded forests.



The black stork needs small clear-water streams to find food, Sven Začek

The majority of freshwater fish species registered in Estonia can be found in the lakes in Karula National Park. The most common are the perch, roach, pike, crucian carp and tench. Seven species of amphibians and five species of reptiles have been found in the national park. The rarest of these are the European spadefoot toad and the sand lizard.

A total of 157 species of birds have been counted in the national park over the years. Least often spotted are the black stork, fish hawk, lesser spotted eagle, three-toed woodpecker and white-backed woodpecker.

As many as 563 species of vascular plants (among them 19 species of orchids) have been found in the national park, including the extremely endangered chamomile grape-fern, leathery moonwort and bugle. Karula National Park is one of the few regions in Estonia and indeed anywhere in Europe where the chamomile grape-fern still grows.

Karula National Park is mostly located in the **former territory of Karula parish.** Karula is the name of an old parish and is believed to come from the word karune or karm, which means 'tough' in Estonian, characteristic of the difficulty in cultivating the local landscape. Karula parish belongs to the western group of Võru dialects, exhibiting common features with the regional languages of Tartu and Mulgi. Local place names have a beautiful ring to them – take for example Lajassaarõ, Peräkõnnu, Värtemäe, Tsigasmäe, Taropedäjä and Pirrupuusaarõ.

Agriculture has traditionally played an important role in Karula, with locals primarily engaged in growing cereal crops and in livestock farming, as well as forestry, beekeeping and fishing. **Forestry** work is characteristic of the area.



Threshing barn on Karkkilla Farm, 1969, EVMN 172: 53

The old pines once used as hive trees have not survived, but Karula can be considered the last bastion of this form of traditional beekeeping in Estonia. In earlier times, a large pine tree would be selected and a cavity hollowed out in its trunk using a gutter axe and large bowl gouge. The opening was then closed off with a board, in which holes for the bees to get in and out were made. Forestry work used to be the main source of livelihood in some areas where the poor, sandy soil was unsuitable for agriculture. The small farms of former forestry workers (known as *roomakesed*) and forest wardens employed by manors located in the large block of forest in the southern section of Karula are examples of this.

Nowadays, people are brought together by the Võru dialect, everyday practices and customs dating back to old times, family connections spanning centuries and a way of life shaped by the region's unique landscapes. Saturday is popularly called *puulpäiv*, meaning a half-day, because people work only until midday; the rest of the day is dedicated to heating and later enjoying the sauna. For many, a smoke sauna is still a sacred place that not only cleanses the body, but also the soul.

The **heritage of the Karula region** is linked, on the one hand, to cultural landscapes and architecture, and on the other to its ancient forest areas. Tales about old settlement and burial sites, farmsteads and musicians, popular jokes and stories about wild animals and legends about spirits living in the lakes circulate among people in the region. Local folklore is closely associated with the landscape, and there are many legends explaining the origins of place names. Traditional medicine and witchcraft are closely related to folklore, as are places with spirits and ghosts, springs with healing waters and stories about curses placed on people or animals.



Every summer Karula's inhabitants come together by Lake Ähijärv, Helen Kivisild



Hikers walking on the Peräjärve forest trail, Helen Kivisild

Hiking in Karula National Park

To make the most of your time in Karula, visitors are encouraged to start their trip from the **Visitor Centre** in the village of Ähijärv. This State Forest Management information centre provides information on hiking trails, campfire sites and things to see in the national park as well as in other protected and recreational areas. At the centre, environmental educational programmes are run and natural camps are organised. In addition, visitors can enjoy permanent and seasonal exhibitions.

The permanent exhibition in the barn showcases the folk culture of Karula parish and the living conditions in the first half of the 20th century.

A nature trail (0.5 km) and playground for children is located next to the Visitors Centre. This trail features a variety of playful activities for smaller visitors, who have a lot to discover along it.

Ähijärv is the beginning and end point of the 820 km long **Peraküla-Aegviidu-Ähijärv hiking trail**, which is marked in white-green-white colourings.

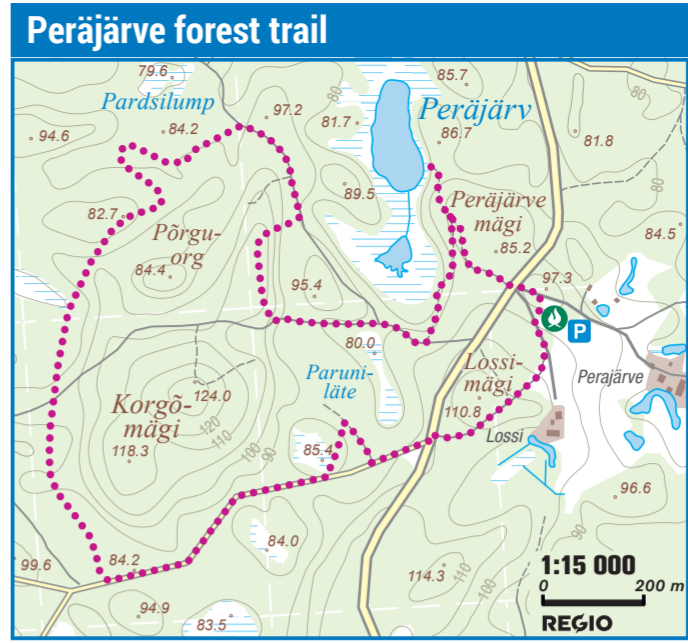


Smoke sauna in the Visitor Centre of Karula National Park, Merike Tsimmer

Ähijärv trail (4 km) starts on the shore of Lake Ähijärv by Karula National Park Visitors Centre. The network of roads around Lake Ähijärv was once very dense and different from what we see now. Hiking will lead you to roads once used by many people, and you can imagine what they looked like: a road along pasture lands, the Ähijärv shore path, footpaths, forest trails, winter roads and horse tracks. The northern shore of Lake Ähijärv offers scenic views of the lake and of the spectacular hilly Karula Uplands. You will get up close and personal with Karula's forests and farmlands. The trail leads you by swimming places and takes approximately 1.5 hours to complete. The trail is labelled with signs, marked with white-red-white colourings and equipped with information boards.



Ähijärv trail

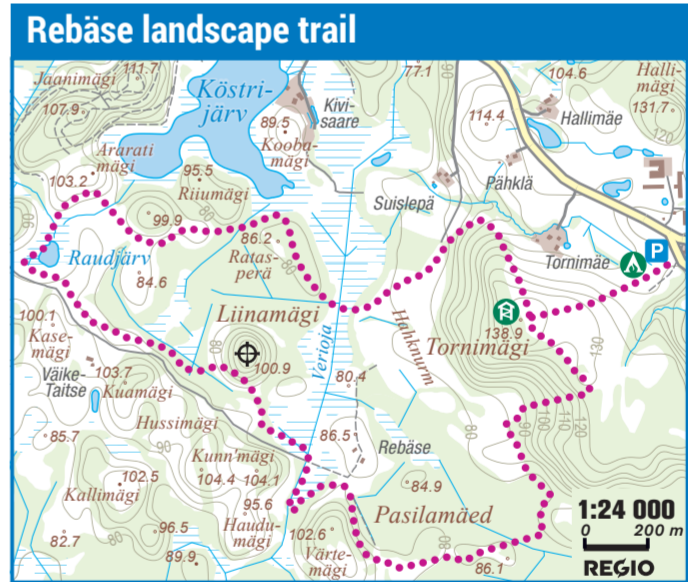


Peräjärve forest trail

On the **Peräjärve forest trail** (4 km) you will see different types of forests – mesotrophic boreal forests, oligo-mesotrophic boreal forests, oligotrophic boreal heath forests, oligotrophic (ombrotrophic) bog forests and calla swamp forests. It is the best trail on which to learn about Estonian forests. You will hike by Peräjärv, a small forest lake that is growing over, as well as places called Hundiaugu, Säitsmepõrguorg and the Baron's Fountain before ending up in Lossimäe. The trail is labelled with signs, marked in white-red-white colourings and equipped with information boards. Completing the hilly trail will take you around two hours.



Rebäse landscape trail, Helen Kivisild



Rebäse landscape trail

Rebäse landscape trail (7 km) runs through the varied terrain of Karula, starting from the Tornimäe car park. Hikers can climb the local Ararat (103.2 metres above sea level), peek into the iron-cold waters of Lake Raudjärv, see one of the oldest farms in the area, Taitse, built in 1586, and marvel at the ancient settlement of Linnamäe. On the slopes of Tornimägi Hill you will see the biggest gullies in the Karula Uplands. The trail is labelled with signs, marked with white-red-white colourings and equipped with information boards. The trail passes through grazing areas and takes around three hours to complete.

The long, walking-only hiking trail in Karula (36 km) goes in a circle, winding its way through the picturesque landscapes. Taking it counter-clockwise, you will enjoy spectacular views and find it easier to complete. The trail is marked in yellow-white-yellow colourings on its trees, with plastic hiker pictograms on its sign posts and with tin signs along major sections of the trail. The trail passes through the Veski, Mäekõnnu, Ödri, Rebasemõisa and Plaagi campfire sites and the Suuremäe campsite.

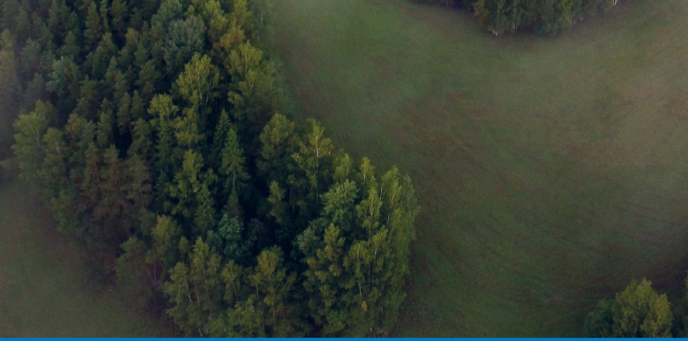
Karula's cycling routes (15 km or 38 km) follow narrow paths in the uplands of the national park and pass through fields and forests, with no definite starting or ending point. The most convenient place to set out from is by the Visitor Centre, where you can park your car and get a map. The trail is marked with both plastic and tin bicycle signs. You can camp at the Rebasemõisa campfire site.



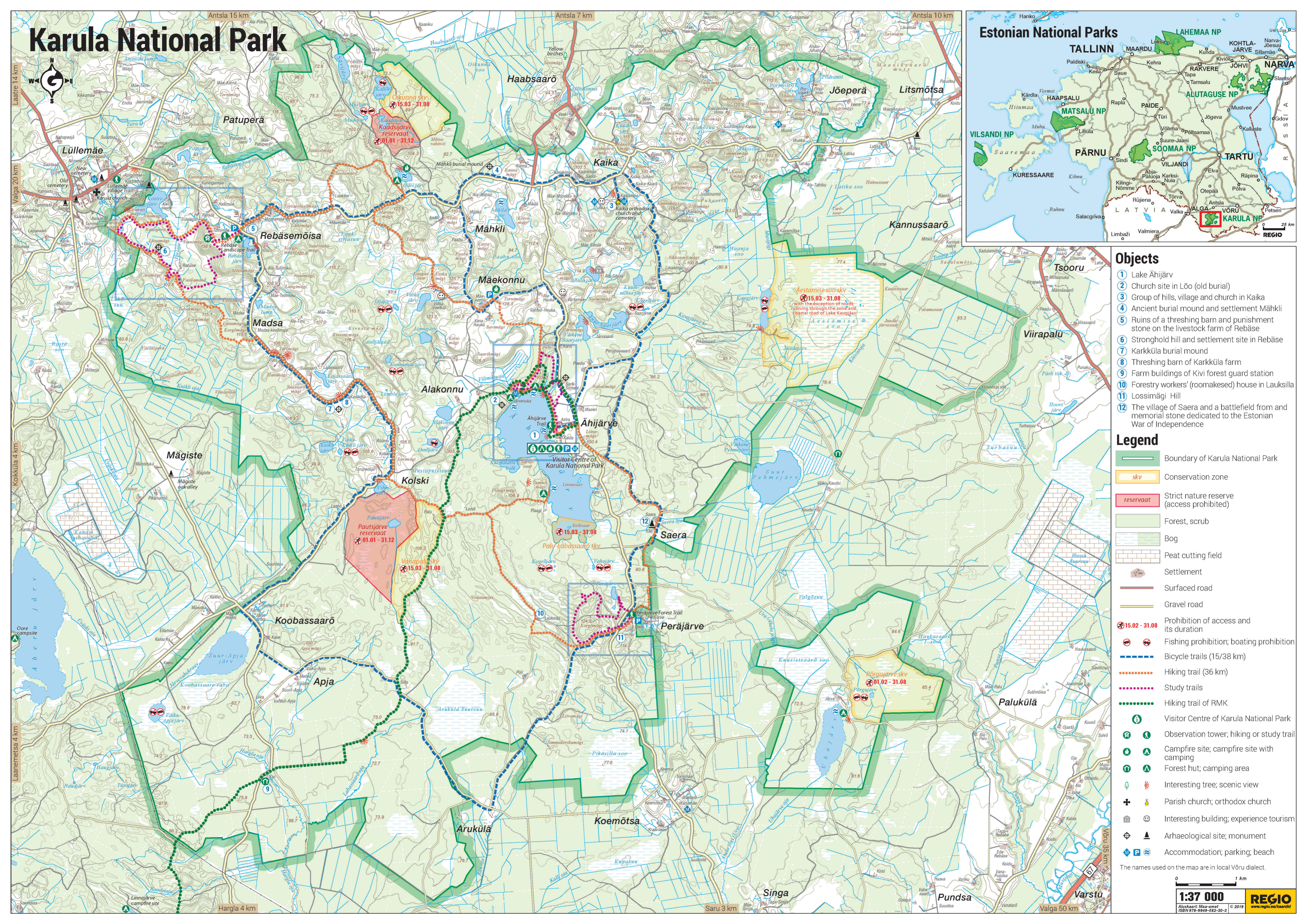
For emergency services, call 112.
Environmental emergency hotline 1313.
For environmental emergency services, call 112.
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Instructions for visitors

- Please do your utmost not to leave any trace of your presence, and keep as quiet as possible.
- Do not access private property unless you have the permission of the residents to do so.
- You can only camp and make fire in the designated places (see the map). When leaving, always put out your fire.
- It is permitted to pick berries, mushrooms and other things in the national park except in strict nature reserves or in conservation zones when restrictions on movement apply (see the map).
- The strict nature reserves in Pautsjärv and Kaadsijärv were established to ensure that the ecosystems in these areas evolve exclusively as a result of natural processes, which is why all human activity – even visiting the reserves – is prohibited.
- When driving a motor vehicle or rising a bicycle, use the designated roads and routes only. If possible, leave your car in a car park.
- When fishing or using a floating vessel, follow the restrictions in force in the national park (see the map). It is only permitted to use non-powered floating vessels on lakes in the protected area.
- When moving about in nature, dogs must be kept on a leash at all times.
- Hiking trails pass through grazing areas. Use the gates to pass through them, closing the gates after you. Do not disturb the cattle.
- Environmental emergency hotline 1313.



Karula National Park



- ### Objects
- 1 Lake Ahijärv
 - 2 Church site in Lõo (old burial)
 - 3 Group of hills, village and church in Kaika
 - 4 Ancient burial mound and settlement Mähkli
 - 5 Ruins of a threshing barn and punishment stone on the livestock farm of Rebäse
 - 6 Stronghold hill and settlement site in Rebäse
 - 7 Karkküla burial mound
 - 8 Threshing barn of Karkküla farm
 - 9 Farm buildings of Kivi forest guard station
 - 10 Forestry workers' (roomakesed) house in Lauksilla
 - 11 Lossimägi Hill
 - 12 The village of Saera and a battlefield from and memorial stone dedicated to the Estonian War of Independence

- ### Legend
- Boundary of Karula National Park
 - skv Conservation zone
 - reservaat Strict nature reserve (access prohibited)
 - Forest, scrub
 - Bog
 - Peat cutting field
 - Settlement
 - Surfaced road
 - Gravel road
 - 15.02 - 31.08 Prohibition of access and its duration
 - Fishing prohibition; boating prohibition
 - Bicycle trails (15/38 km)
 - Hiking trail (36 km)
 - Study trails
 - Hiking trail of RMK
 - Visitor Centre of Karula National Park
 - Observation tower; hiking or study trail
 - Campfire site; campfire site with camping
 - Forest hut; camping area
 - Interesting tree; scenic view
 - Parish church; orthodox church
 - Interesting building; experience tourism
 - Arhaeological site; monument
 - Accommodation; parking; beach