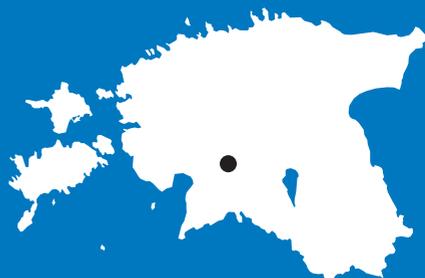




REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA
ENVIRONMENTAL BOARD



Soomaa National Park



Soomaa National Park

Viljandi and Pärnu County



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WELCOME TO SOOMAA NATIONAL PARK!

The predecessors of Soomaa National Park were the botanical reserve of Halliste wooded meadow, established in 1957, and four wetland reserves: Kikepera, Ördi (Öördi), Kuresoo and Valgeraba, founded in 1981. Soomaa National Park was established in 1993 with the merger of these protected areas. In 2005, the boundaries of the protected area were reviewed and came to include Riisa bog.

Soomaa National Park was created to protect the mires, flood meadows, forests and habitats of endangered species as well as the cultural heritage of the south-western part of Transitional Estonia. Soomaa is located on the borders of Upper and Lower Estonia, on the western slopes of Sakala Upland and in Pärnu Lowland, including the basins of the Navesti, Halliste and Raudna rivers. The national park is well known for its floods, popularly called the 'fifth season'.

The entire protected area measures 39,844 ha, of which more than half is in Viljandi County. The national park spans the municipalities of Kõpu and Suure-Jaani in Viljandi County, as well as those of Vändra, Tori and Paikuse in Pärnu County. As for its landscapes, the territory of the national park is categorised as follows: 51% mires, 5% flood meadows and 0.5% arable land, with the remainder being various forest communities.

43 species of mammals, of which eight are under protection, have been recorded here. 183 species of birds have been registered in the national park. Within the protected area, 539 vascular plant species have been documented, of which 33 are under protection.

On the basis of the degree to which economic activities are restricted, the national park is divided into one strict nature reserve, 29 conservation zones and one limited management zone.

There were 53 people living in the national park in 2013. People live in the villages of Tipu, Riisa and Sandra all year round. It is interesting to note that Sandra is the largest village in Estonia in terms of surface area (173 km²). The main sources of livelihood here have always been forestry and livestock farming. Today, tourism has become another important means of livelihood.

Soomaa has been categorised as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) since 1989. Also, it was added to the List of Wetlands of International Importance, or the Ramsar List, in 1997, and it joined the Natura 2000 network of protected areas in the European Union as a habitat and bird site in 2004.



Common cranes, Mati Kose

NATURAL VALUES

Mires

Despite its relatively flat relief, the region of Soomaa is one of diverse habitats. Over 80% of its surface area is taken up by marshland habitats, such as raised bogs, transitional mires, fens, paludified meadows and mire woodland. The mires in the national park started to form after the region became free of glacial ice, some 13,000 years ago. Once there was a huge lake on the border of Pärnu and Viljandi counties. In low-lying areas, subsiding waters created bodies of water which later turned into mires. Today, large mires have reached the development stage of bogs.



Cranberry fritillary, Urtica cardui

As for species under strict protection, the area is home to the golden eagle and willow ptarmigan. Other species typically found here, as in many other mires, include the common crane, European golden plover and Jack snipe. In autumn, vast marshlands serve as stopover sites for geese and cranes, and during the migratory stopover period horned grebes and common kestrels can be spotted on bodies of water and in bogs. On the edges of bogs and on bog islands you can spot lekking (mating) sites of the Western capercaillie, while in spring the bogs reverberate with the cooing calls of the black grouse.

For the most part, the national park is made up of **five very different bogs** – those of Kuresoo, Ördi (Öördi), Kikepera, Valgeraba and Riisa. Due to the formation of peat deposits, their surface level has risen some 5-6 metres above the surrounding mineral soil. The region is dissected by five waterways: the Halliste, Kõpu, Lemmjõgi, Navesti and Raudna rivers.

Kuresoo (11,000 ha) is the largest unfragmented area of bogs, incorporating 10 different parts. Its southern portion is known as Suitsna bog and its northern section as Leetva bog. In the southern part of the bog is **the highest and steepest bog slope documented in Estonia, reaching up to 8 metres** ^①. The best way to enjoy the views of this natural phenomenon is on **Ingatsi study trail** ^②. Kuresoo bog is the largest bog in Estonia which is almost unaffected by human activity, featuring large open areas that serve as an ideal rest site for passing geese and cranes.

Kikepera bog (6,900 ha) is located in a narrow, gently sloping basin which is 22 km long. To the east it borders the Halliste River; to the west the Kurina River, or Laasioja. The bog has formed as a result of the paludification of a lake, and features lots of bog pools, funnel-shaped cavities filled with water and excessively wet areas.

Ördi (Öördi) bog (4,910 ha) has formed as a result of a large and deep lake becoming overgrown. Here the peat deposits are up to 9.5 metres thick. Lake Ördi, the only lake in the national park, with a surface area of some 4 hectares and a depth of 3-4 metres, is all that remains of the body of water that once existed here. Perch, pike and roach inhabit the lake's dark, acidic and nutrient-poor waters.

Valgeraba bog (2,500 ha) is the oldest bog in Soomaa and boasts the thickest peat deposits (11 m) in the region. It is located in the area between the Lemmjõe and Raudna rivers.

Riisa bog (830 ha) is the smallest bog in the national park. The thickness of its peat deposits, which formed as a result of the paludification of mineral soil, is up to 6 metres. The bog is intersected by the Kõpu-Jõesuu road.



A bird's eye view of Soomaa, Mati Kose

Rivers

Rivers flowing through Soomaa National Park play a major role in shaping the local landscapes. When rainwater or meltwater runs off Sakala Upland, the rivers in Soomaa, which flow on flat terrain, are unable to accommodate it all at once and abandon their usual channels. In Soomaa, this exceptionally high level of water is accompanied by flooding and is called the 'fifth season'. Occasionally, high spring waters rise as much as 1 metre a day, for three or four days in a row. The floods can last anywhere from a couple of days to a couple of weeks. As a result, the Riisa flood area is created, with a maximum surface area of 175 km² and a width of 7-8 km. The rivers can flood at any time of year, but the most extensive flooding occurs in spring. The largest flood recorded in Soomaa occurred in 1931, when the water level was 553 cm above established zero at **Riisa hydrometric station** ③.

The rivers in Soomaa are inhabited by such semiaquatic mammals as the beaver, otter and American mink. 17 species of fish have been recorded living in the rivers, the most common being pike, roach, bleak and perch.

The central river in the network is the **Halliste River**, which has its starting point in Ainja in the southern part of Viljandi County. It receives water from the Raudna, Lemmjõgi, Kõpu and Tõramaa rivers and, in turn, flows into the Navesti River in Aesoo. **Tõramaa River** has its starting point in the village of Tipu, only a couple of hundred metres from the Halliste River, and flows into the Raudna River near Meiekose. The river is water-abundant in places; in others it is a shallow, marshy area where sedges dominate. The



Beaver, Arne Ader

normal course of its waters is interrupted by a gravel road leading from Tipu to Riisa. **Raudna River** flows through the area with the most varied terrain in Soomaa. By the village of Sandra its riverbanks are high and steep, and in spring they are lined with blossoming bird cherries. The ruins of a number of former farmsteads can be found along the river. The picturesque **Lemmjõgi River** and the **Kõpu River** are tributaries of the Raudna River. **Navesti River**, the most water-abundant tributary of the Pärnu River, flows along the northern borders of Soomaa National Park.



Oksa flood meadow, Arne Ader

Flood meadows

Flood meadows, occurring in areas flooded by the rivers in the national park, have been traditionally used as hay fields and pastures. Flood meadows and wooded meadows take up 1,500 ha of the surface area of Soomaa. The largest are those in Tipu, Lāti and Tõramaa, that in Kuusekäära on the banks of the Raudna River and the Mulgi hayfield and Oksa flood meadow on the banks of the Lemmjõgi River. To keep flood grasslands from becoming overgrown, they need to be maintained regularly. In Soomaa, hay-making takes place over 700 hectares. Floodwaters provide flooded meadows with additional nutrients, which is why these meadows boast lush grass. In flood meadows you can admire such plants as the Siberian iris, the meadow gladiolus and a number of orchids.

The oak groves on the banks of the Halliste River, forming the picturesque wooded meadow of Tõramaa, are a relict of times long past. You can enjoy excellent views of Halliste flood meadow and Tõramaa wooded meadow from Tõramaa observation tower.

Forests

Forests make up 42% of Soomaa, which is characterised by mire woodland, pine forests on the edges of bogs, old meso-eutrophic forests and alluvial forests growing on dozens of hectares of flood plains along rivers. The most common trees in Soomaa are the pine, birch and common alder.

Alluvial forests are periodically flooded by rivers. Broad-leaved trees, such as elms, oaks, lindens, ashes, maples and European white elms, grow in alluvial forests, which are becoming increasingly rare in Estonia. Typical examples of such forests are **Pääsma woodland** ④, Karuskose alluvial forest and Lemmjõgi forest (*keelemets*). Grassy areas on the forest floor host a variety of species. Here you can come upon wild garlic, species of the *Corydalis* genus and dog's mercury. Alluvial forests



Siberian iris, Arne Ader



Wild garlic, Arne Ader

are a habitat for a number of bird species, including the rare white-backed woodpecker and the middle spotted woodpecker.

Mire forests grow in areas where flood waters remain for a shorter time, i.e. further away from alluvial river plains. These forests are characterised by high hummocks formed by root plates and puddles of water glistening between the trees. The forest bed is moist, so mosquitoes abound in summer. Yellow iris, bog violet, marsh-marigold and tufted loosestrife grow here. Typical mire forests can be spotted further from rivers, in Pääsma woodland and Lemmjõgi forest (*keelemets*).

Meso-eutrophic forests grow on somewhat drier hillocks with mineral soil. Massive old aspens are characteristic of the meso-eutrophic forests in Soomaa National Park.

The landscapes in the south-eastern portion of the protected area are characterised by **dry heath** and **mesotrophic pine forests**. These forests are full of light and grow on the coastal dunes of what was once the Baltic Ice Lake. The former shoreline is indicated by the dunes in Ruunaraipe, Miiliaugu, Sauga and Osju. The highest elevation point in Soomaa, 46 metres above sea level and with a relative elevation of 11 metres, is located in the **Ruunaraipe dune system** ⑤. The latter's dunes are **the highest inland dunes in Estonia**.

The forests in Soomaa are home to large predators, such as the lynx, wolf and brown bear, as well as other species native to Estonia, such as the elk, roe deer and wild boar. Mire forests and meso-eutrophic forests are inhabited by such species as the black stork, Ural owl, boreal owl, black woodpecker and three-toed woodpecker.



Ruunaraipe dunes, Toomas Kalda



SETTLEMENTS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

The settlement and cultural traditions of Soomaa have been shaped by the local environment. Due to an extensive river network, human settlements have been present since days of old. This is backed up by findings of fishing spears and arrowheads made from bone and horn, stone axes and a stone burial mound discovered in the southern part of the national park.

The first written records of permanent settlements date back to the 16th century. Villages started to develop in the mid-19th century, but their heyday was during the period from 1920-1930. Among the most densely populated villages were Riisa, Sandra, Tõramaa and Tipu, amounting to more than a hundred farmsteads. In addition to dairy farming, people living in villages on riverbanks drew their livelihood from forestry, timber floating, fishing and hunting. The aftermath of World War II and the subsequent partisan movement and wave of deportations left many farms empty. Although little has survived of former settlements, you can still spot old trees and apple orchards as well as ruins (crumbling foundations, cellars and such) of farmsteads that once stood in these places. Today, the largest villages are Riisa, Sandra and Tipu.

Cultural history of the region

Riisa was a settlement as early as the Stone Age, with the earliest written records of its existence dating to 1599. The village was in its prime during the period before World War II, when people were involved in dairy farming and sales of dairy products. The village had a dairy, a primary school, an amateur acting group and a string band, and various associations were active. Today, the **Riisa hydrometric station of the Estonian Weather Service** ^③ is on the Halliste River, which flows through the village. The station started operating in 1929.

Sandra lines the banks of the Lemmjõgi and Raudna rivers and is the largest village in Estonia in terms of its surface area (173 km²). Its school, which was established in the first half of the 18th century on the largest farm in the village, was also run for a time after World War II. The village boasted the **Okša or Särgoja Inn**, built by the owner of Lahmuse Manor in the mid-19th century. The inn was open only in the winter season.

All that survives to this day of the impressive building (which stood 13 metres wide and 36 metres long) with its hip roof is a **mantle chimney** ⑥. The inn was closed due to the opening of the Viljandi railway line and vodka monopoly laws.

Tipu is the youngest of Soomaa's villages. Its predecessor was Halliste, by the river of the same name. Although the first written records date to 1811, it can be said that its development started moving at full speed in the 1860s when the owner of Kõpu Manor built a sawmill here as a part of his attempts at forest management. The Kõpu-Tipu road intersecting the village was commissioned by Alexander von Stryk, the owner of Suure-Kõpu Manor, in the 1860s. Tipu is also the location of the only subterranean cemetery in Soomaa, originating from the 2nd millennium BC. Panoramic views of the village landscape and Läti flood meadow by the Halliste River open up from an observation tower in the Läti campfire site.

Tipu schoolhouse ⑦ was built in 1932 where a sawmill had once stood. At its peak it provided education to between 40 and 50 children. The school was closed in 1964 due to a lack of students. After this the building was used as a community centre and library until 1968, when the university of Tartu converted it into a base for practical training. Since 2009 the former schoolhouse has been used by Tipu Nature School, an NPO providing nature education instead of traditional schooling.

The earliest written records of the former village of **Tõramaa** (the current villages of Riisa, Sandra and Tipu) are from 1839. The villages of Tõramaa in Pärnu County and Kõpu-Tõramaa in Viljandi County were considered to be separate, with the former being abandoned in 1979 and the latter in 1996. The only structures that have survived are a building on Pärna Farm, an old cellar on Abaja Farm and the ruins of an old threshing-floor dwelling in Üleoja. Today, **Soomaa Nature Centre** ⑧ of the State Forest Management Centre (RMK) stands on what was once the territory of Kõrtsi-Tõramaa, although in administrative terms it is located in the village of Tipu.

The former village of **Toonoja** (currently part of Karjasoo) is situated in the middle of Kuresoo bog. It was established in the early 19th century. At that time it included six highly viable farmsteads. The last resident left Toonoja in 1987. Currently only a couple of farmstead ruins, a root cellar and a farm building in Mardi are all that is left of the once thriving village.



Karuskose suspension bridge. Source: private collection



Making a dugout canoe, Aivar Ruukel

Cultural heritage

In the cold season, **winter roads** were established in what is now the national park, running traditionally between flood meadows and farms, and villages and towns. These direct routes through the forests and mires made it easy to transport heavy loads over frozen ground. The most well-known winter roads were those across the Valgeraba and Kuresoo bogs. The roads between towns were used until they were replaced by railways.

In the 19th century, inns were built at the intersections of winter roads. The best known among them were those in Tõramaa, Halliste and Oksa. Sadly, not a single inn survives to this day in Soomaa. All that marks the former location of **Oksa or Särgoja Inn** ⑥ in the village of Sandra is a massive mantle chimney.

Farmsteads on riverbanks had their own **suspension bridges**, which were used all year round. Such bridges survive in **Karuskose** ⑨ and Aesoo. In addition to suspension bridges, farmsteads also used temporary **trestle bridges**, erected each year after the ice cover disappeared and removed before the cold season set in. Sadly, these bridges have not survived and are no longer built in Soomaa. Due to an abundance of suspension and trestle bridges across the Raudna River, it was once called the Sillavalla ('Realm of Bridges') River.

In spring, the water-abundant rivers in Soomaa carry many hikers and nature enthusiasts, but before the 1950s these waterways were used for **timber floating**. For example, it took an average of three days to float logs from Halliste woodland to Pärnu. Forest management requires that forests be maintained and supervised, and these tasks were entrusted to forest guards for whom guard stations were built in the early 20th century. **Karuskose forest guard station** ⑩ is one example that survives to this day.

The **dugout canoe**, as displayed in the national park's Nature Centre, has come to be the symbol of Soomaa. It is thought to be the oldest means of water transport used in what is now Estonia. Dugouts were typically made using solid, smooth-barked aspen logs, or more rarely linden. They were used to go fishing or hunting, take milk to the dairy, bring hay from flood meadows, go to the shop, school or festivities, and run all

other everyday errands. When in Soomaa, don't miss the opportunity to go on a trip using this ancient means of transport or to participate in hands-on classes on how to make a dugout.

In Soomaa, the provision of **schooling** started in the mid-19th century. The first school, Riisa Orthodox primary school, was established in 1853. This was followed in 1895 by Tipu primary school, which was founded on the initiative of a local manor owner, and a school run in the dwelling quarters of Sandra Farm from 1946. Today, nature education is provided in Soomaa at Tipu Nature School as well as at the national park's Nature Centre.

A number of cultural figures are from the Soomaa region: composer **Mart Saar** (1882-1963), whose **home museum** ¹¹ is in Hüpassaare; cleric **Villem Reiman** (1861-1917), whose birthplace is on Pauna Farm in the village of Tipu; and painter **Johann Köler** (1826-1899), whose childhood home is on the very edge of Soomaa in Lubjassaare, which is also the location of his **farm museum** ¹². Another person of interest is **Jüri Riis** (1893-1961), born and raised on Hoolmiku Farm, who made a career abroad as a painter and teacher. In more recent times, **Jaan Rahumaa** (1929-2000), born on Päästala Farm, was a well-known local dugout-maker. He shared his knowledge on making dugout canoes with younger generations at dugout-making camps, a tradition established in 1996.

HIKING IN SOOMAA NATIONAL PARK

For visitors to enjoy the natural and cultural values of the national park and hikes in the region, there are nine study trails, 11 campfire sites and camping areas, four huts (Öördi, Meiekose Oak, Oksa hay barn and Oksa granary), one forest guard station (Karuskose) and four observation towers (Ingatsi, Riisa, Tõramaa wooded meadow and Läti flood meadow) in Soomaa. Also, the RMK Oandu-Ikla hiking route passes through the national park. An extensive network of rivers and occasional floods provide excellent opportunities for trips on water.

The RMK **Soomaa Nature Centre** ⁸ is in Kõrtsi-Tõramaa. Established in 1998, the centre was built on the former site of Naari Inn. To obtain information on the sights, hiking trails and campfire sites in the national park or to get answers to any questions related to visiting Soomaa, visitors are welcome at the centre. Here you can take a look at themed exhibitions, information displays, a photography exhibition entitled 'The Fifth Season 2010' and nature movies.



Soomaa Nature Centre, Toomas Tuul

There is a shelter with tables and benches, a camping and campfire site, a dry toilet, a water supply and a power supply unit for caravans near the centre. The beaver trail starts right outside.

Beaver trail (1.8/0.66 km) 13

This trail is accessible to pedestrians, wheelchair users and parents with prams. The length of the trail section for visitors with impaired mobility is 0.66 km (one way). The trail winds its way through various types of forests: a shady spruce forest; a forest of birches and ferns, full of light; and a wet mire forest. While on the trail, visitors may spot the beavers living by Mardu Brook and admire meadows which are periodically flooded. There are information boards along the circular trail.



Kuuraniidu study trail (1.0 km) 14

This boardwalk study trail winds its way through an old, fully-drained mire forest, bringing visitors back to the starting point. The trail is accessed on foot and there are information boards along the way. Sights include massive aspens, lush ferns and many species of mushrooms.

Lemmjõgi study trail (5.8 km) 15

This path leads along the banks of the Raudna River up to the point where it merges with the Lemmjõgi River. From there, it runs along the banks of the Lemmjõgi and ends up in Kuusekäära. Lemmjõgi forest (*keelemets*) is an alluvial forest that is under water when the water level is high during floods. Along the trail, visitors will see traces of the activity of beavers as well as the only protected nature monument in Soomaa National Park – the **Lemmjõgi Oak** 16. This tree is over 200 hundred years old, has a height of 23 metres and boasts a circumference of 470 cm.





Ural owl, Arne Ader

Hüpassaare study trail (4.4 km) ¹⁷

The beginning of the trail winds its way through a fully-drained mire forest for around one kilometre and then through Kuresoo bog, featuring a variety of mire landscapes. At the end of the trail is the **home museum of composer Mart Saar** ¹¹. The trail is accessed on foot.

Ingatsi study trail (4.3 km) ²

The first section of this trail runs through a mire forest, from where it rises along **the highest bog slope in Estonia** (8 metres) up to Kuresoo bog. There is an observation tower on top of it. From there, a boardwalk continues between bog pools. When climbing down the slope, you can choose whether to take the well-established trail or abandon the boardwalk and take a dirt trail through the forest. If it has been raining

a lot, the latter trail may be very wet and difficult to follow. The trail through the forest measures 1.2 km. The trail is accessed on foot and there are information boards along the way, providing details on the bogs. Near the trail are the **Karuskose suspension bridge** ⁹, the only one to survive in the national park, and the **Karuskose forest guard station** ¹⁰, an example of early 20th-century architecture.

Riisa study trail (4.8 km/1.22 km) ¹⁸

This trail is accessible to pedestrians, wheelchair users and parents with prams. The length of the trail section for visitors with impaired mobility is 1.22 km (one way). The trail's starting point is readily accessible, being located on the Kõpu-Jõesuu road. The trail goes in a circle and there are information boards along the way, providing additional details about it. The trail winds its way through a picturesque bog and forests along the Navesti River. From the observation tower you can admire the views over clusters of bog pools and enjoy the silence of the bog.



Ingatsi study trail, Toomas Kalda

Öördi study trail (2.4 km) ⑱

This study trail, which is accessible on foot, leads to the only lake in the national park, which has a surface area of 4.4 hectares. The trail gives an overview of the formation of a bog as a result of the paludification of a lake and of the species characteristic of such a habitat.

Meiekose study trail (5.6 km) ⑳

This trail is accessible on foot, by bicycle, on horseback and on skis. Running along the former Kõpu-Jõesuu dam road, it represents a great way of getting to know flood meadows in the delta of the Tõramaa River, counted among the heritage landscapes of Soomaa. The sights along the trail include beautiful river meanders and flood meadows with their stumpy oaks and plant communities. Visitors can choose either Tõramaa or Meiekose as the starting point. The trail includes side excursions to former farmsteads in Lilleniidu, Tammeraja and Metsaheinamaa. There are information boards along the way.

Pauna cultural history hiking trail (3 km) ㉑

This trail starts at Tipu Nature School ㉑ and includes important sites associated with the cultural history of the village. The trail is named after Pauna Farm, the birthplace of Villem Reiman (1861-1917), a public figure and cultural historian. There are information boards along the way.

RMK Oandu-Ikla hiking route (375 km) ㉒

The RMK Oandu-Ikla hiking route, running from one side of the country to the other, passes through Soomaa National Park. The section going through the park measures 56 km.



Lesser spotted eagle, Arne Ader.



Hikers in a wintry Valgeraba bog, Reet Vaiksalu

INSTRUCTIONS FOR VISITORS

- Please do your best to not leave any trace of your presence, and to maintain silence.
- When moving around in nature, follow everyman's right and best practice. To move around on private land designated as such or enclosed by a fence, obtain the permission of the owner.
- It is prohibited to visit the conservation zones of Kikepera and Valgeraba from 15 February to 31 July, and the conservation zone of Paelama from 15 March to 31 August. It is prohibited to visit the strict nature reserve in Tuhametsa.
- When driving a motor vehicle, use designated routes only. For safety reasons, maintain a moderate speed when driving on gravel roads.
- It is permitted to pick berries, mushrooms and other wild produce in the national park except in the strict nature reserve or in conservation zones when restrictions on movement apply (see the map).
- Fishing is allowed in the national park according to the Fishing Act.
- It is only permitted to use non-powered floating vessels on bodies of water, including the flooded area, in the national park.
- Camping and making fires is allowed in specially arranged and designated places only (see the map). Before leaving a campfire site, make sure to put out the fire.
- When moving around in nature, dogs must be kept on a leash at all times.
- When visiting the National Park during the flood season, contact the RMK Soomaa information desk for additional information on which areas are currently accessible.

If you become aware of activities that are potentially harmful to the environment or visitor facilities, call the Environmental Inspectorate hotline on 1313

For emergency services, call 112

The following sources have been used:

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Wolves, Toomas Tuul



Did you know?

- The Soomaa National Park was established to protect, study and raise awareness about large bogs, flood meadows, wooded mires, meandering rivers and the cultural heritage of the region.
- There are five large bogs and five rivers of diverse character in the national park.
- Kuresoo bog is home to the highest bog slope documented in Estonia, reaching up to 8 metres.
- The national park is renowned for its seasonal floods, occurring almost every spring and known locally as the 'fifth season'.
- A dugout canoe, thought to be the oldest means of water transport used in Estonia, has come to be the national park's symbol.
- The national park boasts the highest inland dunes in Estonia, reaching 11 metres.
- The bogs here serve as a stopover site for large flocks of migrating geese and cranes.



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