

Virtsu, Puhtu, Laelatu



Virtsu kolmes tuulepargis on kokku 10 tuugenit.
There are all together 10 generators in all 3 windparks of Virtsu

Virtsu

Virtsu - nowadays a village, surrounding the local harbour, has relatively short geological history. The island emerged from the shallow coastal sea during the last 2 thousand years. Due to postglacial neotectonical land uplift it has increased in territory and with the help of road-dams eventually grown together with the mainland. The surrounding area further from the coastline is stitched with Stone and Bronze Age village sites and burial mounds, that are all of great interest.

Two sacrificial stones of ancient origin can be found close to the village, one of them with rare-shaped cavities (footprints of a wolf and a child).

Later history is undoubtedly connected with the local manor - Schloss Werder - founded by the Uexkyll family in 1430 and destroyed in 1534 during the war between the Margrave of Brandenburg and the Bishop of Ösel-Wiek. The ruins at the seaside denote the once magnificent building.

Later on, forbidden to build or live at the shore, the landowners had their manor-house in the middle of the former island. Most of the buildings of the latest manor have also been destroyed during the wars, although the park, the gate and some storehouses are still there.

The 20th century witnessed several crucial naval maneuvers and battles in the strait, including 'Albion' - one of the largest landing operation of the WWI.

Virtsu Harbour

The first written notes about the Virtsu Harbour are known from 1459. Beginning with the 17th century it has been used (among other purposes) for postal connection between the archipelago and the mainland. The original sloop, called '(h)uisk' (=serpent), was widely used in the Eastern Baltic countries for expeditions, raids and trading. The length of the sloop was from 12 to 19 metres and it could use 2 pairs of oars for navigation in shallow areas. The last 'uisk' was demolished in the 1st quarter of the 20th century.

The contemporary harbour is serving the ferry-line between Virtsu and Kuivastu. These days about half a million vehicles and about 1,3 million passengers cross the strait annually. The harbour contains 3 quays for ferries, 2 floating docks for yachts and a new 160 m cargo quay. The harbour is able to serve ships 120 m long, 20 m wide and with 6,5 m draught. Mobile hoists are used to lift the cargo. One can find a cafe, toilets and an ATM in the harbour. Border service, customs, fresh water, WiFi and other contemporary services are also available.

Next to the ruins of Werder stronghold there has been a fishing harbour for centuries. Lately the harbour, heavily demolished by the 2005 storm, has been restored and extended. The area is about 0,5 ha and the depth is 2,2 m. In a Natura 2000 area it is of utmost importance to constrain the local navigation spatially into a single harbour.

Virtsu is traversed by a narrow straight road, that used to be a cogwheel railroad from 1931 to 1968. When moving to NE along this road, one passes by two shallow inland bays. Spring and Autumn are the best periods to spot hundreds of waterfowl and waders, stopping here. One can see Mute Swan, Whooper and Bewick Swans, Widgeon, Goldeneye, Smew, Tufted Duck, Mallard, Teal, Redshank, Spotted Redshank and many other species. Grey Herons, Common and Black-headed Gulls and Common Terns constantly fish here. Occasional sightings of Little Gull, Sandwich Tern, Marsh Harrier and White-tailed Eagle are also possible.

Laelatu Wooded Meadow

The road dam passes Laelatu Wooded Meadow, once a 150 ha hayland, now mostly overgrown woodland. However, the middle part of about 25-35 ha is annually mown. In these meadow communities 76 vascular plant species per 1 square meter have been repetitively counted, that makes Laelatu meadows unique in the whole (Northern) Europe. Wooded meadows are considered to be our national landscape and in Laelatu we have one beautiful example. Due to the uniqueness numerous monitoring projects are going on, some already more than 50 years in a row. Among the nearly 500 plant species there are 24 orchid species and several other rare or protected ones. Sword-leaved and Red Helleborine, Lady's Slipper, Fly Orchid, Flecked Marsh Orchid, Dark-red and Broad-leaved Helleborine, Military Orchid and Musk Orchid are the highlights, while Twayblade, Fragrant Orchid, Early Marsh Orchid and Common Spotted Orchid are usually remarkably copious. Dyer's Plumless Saw-wort, Herb Paris, Bitter Milkwort, Alpine Saw-wort (*Saussurea alpina* subsp. *estonica*), Wood Cow-wheat, Clustered Bellflower, Bird's-eye Primrose and many others are really attractive.

Puhtu peninsula

When choosing the road, heading South from Virtsu, one passes the Vanaluubi resting area and finally encounters the Puhtu peninsula, first mentioned in the 15th century land ownership documentation of the local manor as 'Holm zu Pucht'. It was probably covered by broad-leaved forest in the middle of the 18th century, when Carl Thure von Helwig, one of the wealthiest landlords of his time in West-Estonia, settled on the island his summer-house and several maisonnettes for guests. He also established a park in Dutch style with numerous statues, dedicated to friends and relatives, including von Kursell, von Tiesenhausen, von Wrangell and others. Perhaps the most romantic commemoration was to "...all worthy female beauties (Allen liebeswürdigen weiblichen Geschönheiten der Vergangenen, Gegenwärtigen und Kommenden Zeit widmet dieses andken derer und der schönen kunstlosen Natur Verehrer Carl Thure Helwig J. 1800"

Undoubtedly the most famous one was dedicated to Friedrich Schiller, as one of the most outstanding libertines of the era. It is worth mentioning, that the monument was the second earliest one in the World. By the way, Helwig's wife and daughter were direct acquaintances of Charlotte von Schiller, the poet's wife. Later the manor and the park was owned by Elisabeth von Uexküll, who redesigned the park, built some more houses and built the road between the island and Virtsu. From there on we can speak about Puhtu peninsula. Maybe the best known Uexkyll of this family is Jakob von Uexkyll - a world-famous founder of bio-semiotics, a graduate of Tartu University, posterior professor of Heidelberg and Hamburg Universities and a theoretician.

Nature-wise it should be mentioned, that the abandoned park closely reminds remnant forests of the Atlantic period, although 3 thousand years younger in age. Due to mild maritime climate and well-aerated fertile soils we can find a multitude of interesting plant and invertebrate species here. The Southern tip of the peninsula is one of the most favourable sites for watching the Arctic waterfowl migration. 2-3 million different birds pass the strait per season and the bird-tower is the best spotting place. Long-tailed Duck, Pintail, Common and Velvet Scoters, Goldeneye, Barnacle and Brent Geese, Red-throated and Black-throated Divers are the most numerous migrators.

Bird migration

What makes the migration so spectacular, is the narrow strait (Suur Väin) between Virtsu and Muhu island, merely 8 km wide. This works as a bottleneck for all the scattered bird flocks, coming from the direction of the Livonian Bay. This strait is a part of Moonsund (channel sea), that is shallow, sheltered and favourable habitat for fish and other sea-life, migrating and breeding waterfowl therein. The deepest place in Moonsund - 24 m - is between Kesse and Muhu islands. There is also a handful of islets in the strait, biggest and oldest being the aforementioned Kesse island, remarkable for the Silurian alifer and primeval looking spruce-lime forest amidst alvar meadows and juniper stands. Most of the other islets are a strict reservation zone and mostly closed for visitors. North from Virtsu one can see another cliff - a 2-3 meters high domerite outcrop, bordering very shallow coastal sea and coastal plain. Pyrite congregations ("tinsel" in local dialect) and various fossils (brachiopods, trilobites, gastropods etc.) can be found here occasionally.

The surrounding beautiful landscape has been the shooting location of numerous Estonian movies, especially in the 60ies and 70ies of the previous century.

These sparsely settled areas are favoured also by birds and mammals. Pretty often Black Grouse, Common Crane, Black Stork, White-tailed Eagle, Fox, Elk and Wild Boar can be encountered here.

South from Virtsu the disjunct coastline continues and forms small shallow bays, occasionally cutting deeply into the mainland. These bays, usually partly fringed by reeds, serve as favourable stopping, feeding and breeding sites of waders and waterfowl. During the migration periods about 20 000 birds stop in adjacent areas constantly. The dominating juniper stands and deciduous woods are preferred by several passerines, such as Red-Backed Shrike, White-Backed Woodpecker, Barred Warbler and others. Autumn is the most spectacular time of the year to watch the passerines' gathering, feeding and migration.

229 bird species have been registered around Virtsu, including 137 breeders, 76 migrators and 16 sporadic guests.



Linnuvaatlustorn Puhtus.
Bird-watching tower in Puhtu



Laelatu puisniit.
Laelatu Wooded Meadow



Puhtu ornitoloogiajaam.
Puhtu Ornithological Station



Metssiga. Foto Kaarel Kaisel.
A Wild Boar. Photograph by Kaarel Kaisel



Endisel raudteetammil on nüüd autotee.
Now there is a road on the previous railroad dam



Mustlagled. Foto Kaarel Kaisel.
Brent Geese. Photograph by Kaarel Kaisel



2010. aastast sõidavad parvlaevad Saaremaa ja Muhumaa.
Ferries Saaremaa and Muhumaa navigate here from 2010



Metskits Laelatu puisniidul.
A Roe Deer in Laelatu Wooded Meadow



Virtsu vasallilinnuse varemed.
Ruins of Virtsu Vassal Stronghold