

EMAJÕE SUURSOO

Nature Reserve



Emajõe Suursoo wetland

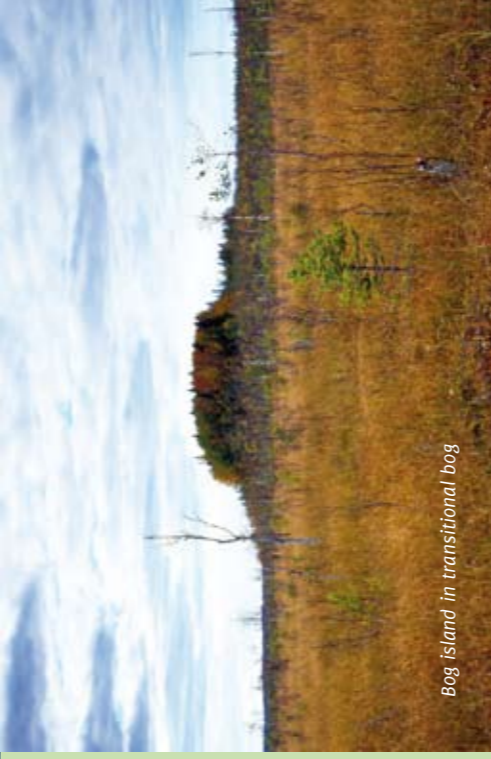
In the lower reaches of the Emajõgi River in eastern Tartu County, is a **delta marshland** unique in Estonia known as the Emajõe Suursoo. The marsh covers an area of almost 200 km² within five municipalities. The marsh developed owing to the rise of the land and subsequent slowing of the flow of the waters of **Lake Peipus** over time into the mineral-rich earth of the delta area of the **Emajõgi River**. The expanse of marshes are separated by the river itself, its branches and tributaries (Ahja, Koosa, Kargaja, Kalli, kaevandu and others). The northern part of the marshes on the left bank of the Emajõgi, that includes the Vamja, kargaja and Surnusoo marshes, is relatively flat and sparse in trees. The southern part of the marshes on the right bank of the river, that includes the Suursoo, Jõmmsoo, Pedaspää and Meerapalu marshes and bogs, has a more diverse landscape due to its large number of bog islands.

Although little more than one or two metres more elevated than Lake Peipus and the Emajõgi River, when in flood the waters of the marshes can cover an area as large as 18,000 hectares, leaving only the elevated Meerapalu bog and the highest islands exposed. These **bog islands** number more than 80, are of varying shapes and sizes, and found dotted throughout the landscape. Often used in the past as farmland, these islands are now covered with distinctive forests, some of them with impressive trees that are hundreds of years old.

The three stages of bog and marsh development are all represented within the Emajõe Suursoo area. Particularly striking are the vast **low-lying wet sedge marshes**, which account for almost 61% of the total area. **Transitional bogs**, where withered downy birch trees and a great abundance of cranberries grow in the peat moss turf, make up a further 31%. Only a small proportion (8%) of the area has reached the actual **bog** stage, represented by the relatively young Meerapalu bog with its scattered pine trees.



Lake Koosa



Bog island in transitional bog

The **rivers** and tributaries that divide the marshes are interconnected through a number of **lakes**. In total there are 8 lakes within the Nature Reserve, that covering an area of 655 hectares, with the largest being Koosa, Kalli and Leegu. Known as dark water lakes, they are generally no more than one and a half metres deep, rich in vegetation, and form excellent habitat and spawning sites for many species of fish.

Flora and fauna

Emajõe Suursoo was granted nature conservation status in 1981 and the reserve covers a total area of 221 km². The sensitive delta marshes and wetlands are in particular need of protection, owing to the often rare animals and plants that live in them. Around 10 endangered **plant species** can be found in the area, including the Siberian iris (*Iris sibirica*), the greater bur-marigold (*Bidens radiata*), the woolly butterbur (*Petasites spurius*) and the marsh gentian (*Gentiana pneumonanthe*).

The number of rare bird and animal species to be found in the reserve is even larger. The marshlands boast impressive **raptor populations**: white-tailed eagles (*Haliaeetus albicilla*), golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), greater spotted eagles (*Aquila clanga*) and lesser spotted eagles (*Aquila pomarina*) and osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). The area also contains important habitat for the Eurasian curlew (*Numenius arquata*) and black grouse (*Tetrao tetrix*). The lakes and rivers are used by a variety of waterfowl, both for nesting and as a stopping ground during migration. A total of 206 species of bird have been recorded in Emajõe Suursoo, 156 of them nesting. The area is a certified nature reserve of pan-European importance within the Natura 2000 network and has been recognised internationally as both an important bird area (IBA) and wetland (Ramsar Designation).

Golden eagle



Information for visitors

The Emajõe Suursoo **nature centre** of the State Forest Management Centre (SfMC/RMK) is located on the banks of the Emajõgi River close to the village of Kavastu. It is easy to access by land and water, and its history recalls the important role the Emajõgi played as a shipping river. At the end of the 14th century the **fortress Vardek** (known also as Uus-Kastre) was constructed here to defend Tartu's Episcopal castle, doing so with varying success until the river battle of the Great Northern War of 1704. At the end of the 18th century a tavern was erected from the ruins of the fortress, which came to be called locally as the **Kantsti tavern**. The tavern remained open until the 1920s, after which the building was abandoned. Construction of an ecological reserve centre commenced on the site of the inn in 2001. The building was completed in autumn 2004 and now houses the RMK Emajõe Suursoo nature centre, which provides exhibits on the wetlands and nature education activities as well as operating as a RMK information point. There is a traditional Estonian swing next to the building as well as areas for barbecue and camping.

A **nature trail** highlighting the natural environment along the bank of the Emajõgi river starts at the nature centre. The trail turns off into the valley flat and the low-lying marsh hayfields adjacent to the river, before following the old winter trails through the bog birch groves back to the river. The trail is 3 kilometres long and a combination of wooden walkways and woodchip paths. There are rest stops along the trail as well as a small viewing platform.

There is an 8-metre tall **viewing tower** on Pedaspää Bay from which you can observe migratory birds. The tower is reached by taking the Virvissaare road out of Meerapalu village. There are barbecue and camping site in the village of Virvissaare itself. The reserve is also meant to be used by those on the water, with sheltered rest areas with spots for barbecues on Ortissaare island and along the Emajõgi River where it meets the Koosa River.



Emajõe Suursoo Nature Reserve

KESKKONNAAMET



Agency responsible for the reserve:

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Agency responsible for visits to the reserve:

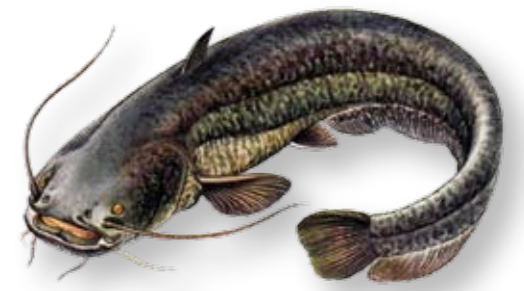
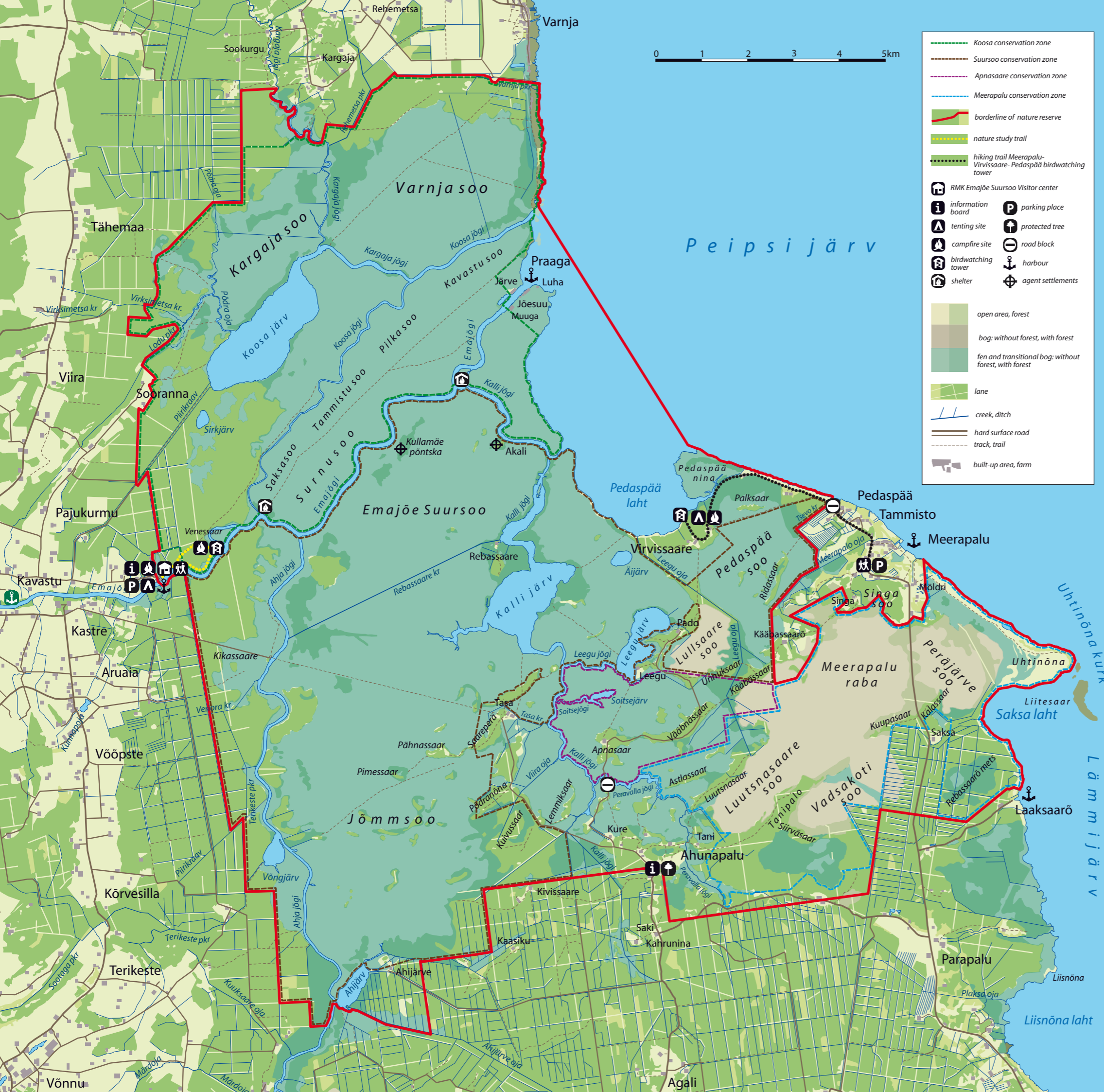
Nature Management Department of the State Forest Management Centre (SfMC/RMK)
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RMK Emajõe Suursoo nature center in Kavastu



Estonian biggest freshwater fish Wels catfish is under protection

Visitors to the reserve should bear in mind that:

- picking berries and mushrooms et al is permitted
- fires may be lit and tents pitched only in the designated areas
- motorboats can only be used on the rivers and Lakes Koosa and Kalli, while boats without motors can be used on all waterways
- when travelling by boat you must wear a life vest, pay due courtesy to other users of the waterways and avoid damaging the shoreline
- in addition to ordinary fishing restrictions, temporary bans are in force in the Emajõgi delta up to the beginning of the Koosa River from 1 May to 15 June, as well as on the Koosa, Kargaja, Agali, Kalli and Kaevandu Rivers in the channel linking Lake Leegu and the Kalli River, in the Ahja River delta up to Lake Lääniste Ahijärv, and on Lakes Lääniste Ahijärv, Võngjärv, Koosa, Kalli and Leegu from 1 May to 25 May
- driving and cycling is allowed on marked roads and in car parks
- you must always keep dogs on a leash
- you must take all rubbish with you when you leave
- by moving about quietly you will hear and see more
- if you notice any damage, call 1313

Blooming cranberries

