

KARULA NATIONAL PARK

The Karula National Park is located on the lands of Antsla, Karula, Mõniste and Varstu Rural Municipalities, on the borderline of Valga and Võru Counties. The landscape protection area, established in 1979, became a national park in 1993.

The objective of the national park is to preserve the landscapes rich in forests and lakes, the cupola hills and other surface forms, the nature and cultural heritage characteristic of southern Estonia. Due to the rare species and endangered habitats, the Karula National Park is a part of the European ecological network Natura 2000. Karula with its area of 123 km² is Estonia's smallest national park.

Proceeding from the varied landscape, the nature in the Karula National Park is really diverse. The Karula Upland was formed over 10,000 years ago as a result of the movement of the great continental ice sheet. When the ice sheet melted, the northern part of Karula was left with round hillocks – cupolas, which are now covered either with fields or forests with wet meadows, patches of bogs, and lakes or brooks between the hillocks. This region is the most densely populated area in the national park. In the southern part of the park, boggy and woody elevations with sparse population lie. The highest point of the Karula Upland is **Tornimägi Hill** (about 138 metres) in the Rebäsemõisa Hamlet.

The ice sheet left behind plenty of hollows which later became lakes. There are 60 lakes on the Karula Upland, 40 of which are located in the national park. Most of the lakes have rather swaying than sandy shores. Most of Estonia's different types of lakes can be found in the national park: eutrophic and relatively oligotrophic lakes, lakes with brownish mire water, and lakes with clear water. The amount of different species in the lakes also varies: some lakes are rich in species, including rare ones; others are poor in species, destroyed by swamping or human activity. **The largest lake** in the national park is **Lake Ähijärv** (176 hectares) with its scenic shoreline;



Photo: Lake Lajassaarõ in Rebäsemõisa Hamlet, K. Mändla

the deepest is **Lake Savijärv** (18 metres). There are no big rivers in the Karula National Park.

The Karula Upland is the most important watershed in the South-East of Estonia, dividing the waters between the Gulfs of Finland and Riga. From the northern part of the uplands, the waters flow through the Rivers Äru and Emajõgi into Lake Peipsi and farther on into the Gulf of Finland; the waters from the southern part, however, flow into the River Mustjõgi, from there into the River Gauja and, finally, into the Gulf of Riga.

Forests cover over 70% of the surface of the Karula National Park as a primeval forest mass in the sparsely populated south, and as smaller groves on the cupolas in the north. The diversity of landforms causes different light and moisture conditions, which leads to the variety of the forests – the northern slopes of the hillocks usually grow spruce pristine forests, the sunny southern slopes have dry heath forests; there are deciduous forests on more fertile soil and bog woodlands in wet hollows.

Tiny bogs and quagmires, formed from overgrowing lakes, have also found their place between the hillocks. Two of the bigger ones are the bog of Aruküla Suursoo and the mire of Aestamise. Similarly to the landscape, the local flora and fauna are also diverse.

Mammals such as roe, elk, wild hogs, foxes, wolves, racoon dogs, lynxes, otters, grey hares, squirrels and other species can be met here. In many places the traces of beavers – flooded forests and higher-levelled lakes – can be seen. The rarest mammal species are bats.

Most Estonia's freshwater fish can be found in the bodies of water at Karula, the most frequent of which being the perch, roach, pike, crucian carp and tench.



Photo: Black stork (Ciconia nigra), L. Michelson

Seven species of amphibians and five species of reptiles have been found in the national park. The rarest of them are the common spadefoot and sand lizard.

During the years, the total of **157 species of birds** has been counted in the Karula National Park. Here some rare species, such as the black stork, osprey, lesser spotted eagle, three-toed woodpecker and white-backed woodpecker, have founded peaceful nests for themselves.

563 species of vascular plants grow in the national park, among them some endangered species such as the daisyleaf grape-

fern, leathery grape-fern, and blue bugle. Also, **19 species of orchids** have been found in these areas.

Although the English word for 'karu' is 'a bear', connecting the name of the national park with these animals would be a mistake. (In South Estonia, bears were referred to by the name of 'ott'; compare to the town of Otepää, literally 'Bear's head'). Karula is an old parish name that is believed to stem from the words 'karune' or 'karm' ('rough, harsh'), which describes well the local woody landlocked hills.

The important value of Karula is its **cultural heritage landscapes**, which have developed as a result of thousands of years of human activity.

There are over a hundred farmsteads within the national park, more than a half of which are several hundred years old. The settlements typical of Karula are dispersed: farms stand alone or in pairs between the hillocks. The farm buildings are mostly typical log structures dating back to the beginning of the 19th century. The look of the heritage landscapes is determined by the location of arable land: the tops and steeper slopes of the hillocks are covered with trees and surrounded with circular fields or meadows. The hollows between the cupolas contain small bodies of water, bog woodlands or wet meadows.

The traditional fields of activity in the territory of the national park have been agriculture, mainly grain-growing and cattle-breeding, but also forestry, bee-keeping and fishing. The small farmsteads of former loggers (lumberjacks) and forest rangers lie in the middle of the large woods. On Lake Ähijärv there is the lodge of the lake warden, whose job was to keep watch over the peasants to make sure that they did not catch too many fish from the lake.

The Karula folklore includes stories about old settlements, farmsteads and burial sites, musicians and taverns, as well as about wild animals and spirits living in the lakes. The local lore is closely linked to the landscape and the origin of the place names. The tradition of folk medicine and 'witchcraft' is also strong here. There are also stories about places where ghosts and spirits can be seen, brooks and springs with healing properties, and people and animals bewitched with the evil eye.



Photo: The Tätta Farm in the early 20th century. From the archives of the Karula Heritage Society

The language spoken in the Karula Parish belongs to the Western group of the Võru language, which has common traits with the Tartu and Mulgi languages (dialects of the Estonian language). The local places have melodious names: Lajassaarõ, Peräkonna, Värtemäe, Tsigasmäe, Taropedäjä, Pirrupusaarõ. At present, more than a half of the people living in the national park speak the Võru language. It is mostly used at home and in the community life, less as in official situations.

Nowadays local people feel contacted by the local dialect, old everyday customs and habits, centuries-long blood relations and the lifestyle stemming from the peculiarity of the landscape.



Photo: New dwelling place of beavers, O. Tii

STUDY TRAILS

The Karula National Park has four study trails, provided with information stands and signs.

CHILDREN'S NATURE TRAIL

A children's nature trail and playground is located near the Visitor Centre of the Karula National Park and is, first and foremost, meant for the smallest visitors. The trail includes a slide, an observation tower, swings, a sandpit, a rope merry-go-round, and nine information stands introducing the main concepts and phenomena of the nature. The exposed bird nests and animals' paw prints offer joy of discovery.

ÄHIJÄRVE TRAIL

The trail is 4 km long and it takes at least 1.5 hours to walk it through.

The Ähijärve trail starts near the Visitor Centre of the Karula National Park. The trail presents the nature near Lake Ähijärv as well as the history of the Ähijärve Hamlet, including the local folklore. The trail runs along the former and present roads and tracks – a hayfield track, a shore track, a footpath, winter roads, horse trails and forest paths. You can examine both Lake Ähijärv – the largest lake of the national park – and the relief, forests and farm landscapes of the Karula Upland. The trail passes by places for swimming and camping. The most scenic views can be enjoyed from the northern shore of Lake Ähijärv.

Lake Ähijärv (176 hectares) and the Ähijärve Hamlet are located in the middle of the Karula National Park. Several legends and folk tales are connected with the lake. The hills in the bottom of the lake, which reach nearly the water surface in the middle, arouse interest. The axis of the lake is mysterious: at the sunrise, one can see a smooth streak of flicker across the lake. Naturalists regard Lake Ähijärv as a typical eutrophic lake, which needs protection against growing over.



Photo: View of Luukina, P. Kama

REBÄSE LANDSCAPE TRAIL

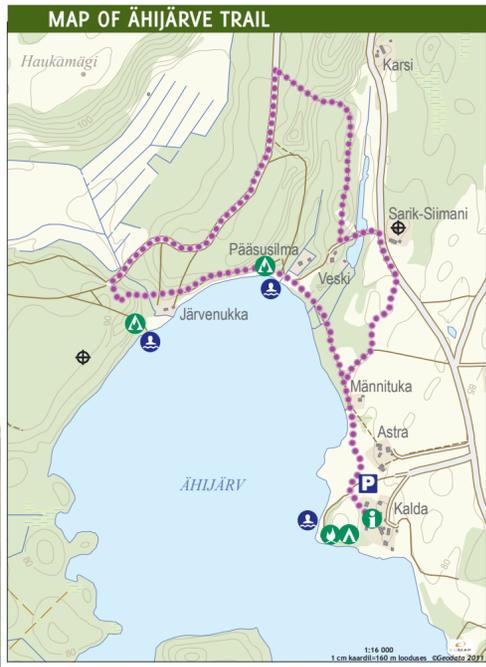
The trail is 7 km long and rather hilly and it takes about 3 hours to walk it through.

The Rebäse landscape trail introduces different landscapes typical of Karula and how they were formed. The trail starts at the Tornimäe car park. A hiker can climb the local 'Mount Ararat' (103.1 metres above the sea level), look at Lake Raudjärv (*Iron Lake*) with its iron-cold water and pass by the oldest farmstead in the area – the Taitse Farm, founded in 1586. The trail swerves to an ancient fort hill (Linnamägi) and arrives at the abode of beavers the newcomers. Having returned to the slopes of Tornimägi Hill, a hiker can see the biggest gullies of the Karula Upland, hidden by a grove.

Tornimägi Hill (*Tower Hill*) at Rebäsemõisa was named by the triangulation tower, which was built for land survey. From the top of each such tower, two other similar towers should have been seen. In 2004, an observation tower was constructed on Tornimägi Hill, where a beautiful view of the Otepää, Haanja and Aluksne Uplands as well as the Kaika cupolas opens before a hiker.



Photo: Resin trees on the Peräjärve forest trail, T. Trapido

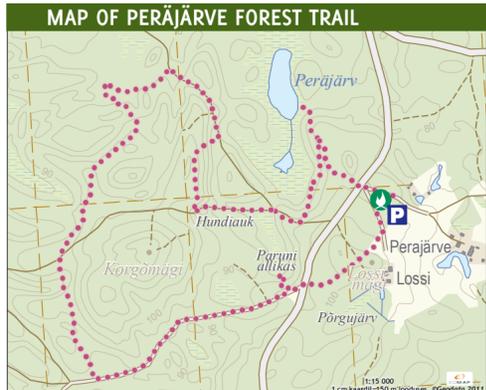


PERÄJÄRVE FOREST TRAIL

The trail is 4 km long and rather hilly, so it would take about 1.5 hours to walk it through.

The Peräjärve forest trail shows a hiker the diversity of the local forests: heath forests in the higher places, pristine forests on the slopes, and bog woodlands in the wet hollows. When Estonia was governed by German landowners, the local forests belonged to the Vana-Antsla landlord, who managed them and went hunting there. The folklore has preserved tales about his hunting trips, and remembers places such as the Baron's spring and Wolf's Hole Pavilion. A hiker can get a survey of the use of woods throughout ages, a vivid example of which being the trees near the trail from which resin has been collected.

The trail passes by Lake Peräjärv, a small overgrowing lake, which is the last ('perämine' in the Võru language) in the string of Ähijärve lakes. The trail also swerves to the Baron's spring and terminates on Lossimägi Hill where you can see the silhouette of the Haanja Upland above the forests.



ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES IN KARULA

● **Hostel of the Visitor Centre of the Karula National Park** in Ähijärve Hamlet accommodation for 31 people, seminar room, smoke sauna phone +372 782 8350

● **Järvenukka Farm** in Ähijärve Hamlet (May – September) holiday cabins for up to 9 people phone +372 523 2069, +372 505 6293

● **Tuhka Farm** in Kaika Hamlet (15 May – 15 September) accommodation in granary, smoke sauna and camping site for tents phone +372 520 6690

● **Mundi Farm** in Jõepera Hamlet (April – September) holiday house with kitchen corner and toilet, smoke sauna phone +372 5342 7108

● **Karula-Lüllemäe Health and Sports Centre** at Lüllemäe trails for recreational sport, playgrounds, adventure parks; reserve accommodation and catering in advance (hostel for 50 people) phone +372 5345 6006, www.karulatsk.ee

● **Lajassaare Farm** in Rebäsemõisa Hamlet (May – September) possible to rent granary for accommodation, smoke sauna and campsite phone +372 516 7801

● **Laane Forest Hut** in Kolski Hamlet possible to rent for hike stops or camps phone +372 517 2646

● **Marjamägi Farm** in Koemetsa Hamlet possible to rent sauna for hike stops phone +372 5340 4141

WOODS CRONE FAMILY PARK

Woods Crone Family Park a co-operation of farms which offer impression tourism. The Woods Crone's cottages are real homes of real people who live their real every-day life there. If you wish to see their activity you should pre-register on phone +372 5345 4222, www.metsamoore.ee

DOS AND DON'TS FOR VISITORS

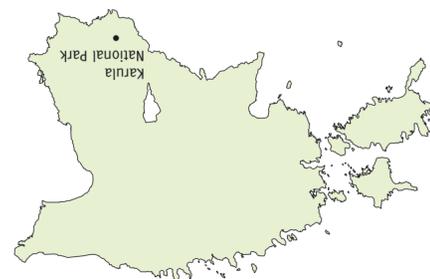
Thanks for visiting our national park!

- Go to the local people's home yards only with their permission.
- Honour the peace and quiet – loud music and noisy parties do not belong to the nature.
- Put the trash you have produced into the trash can, or even better – take it with you.
- Build fires and camp only at specific sites prepared for this (see the map), and definitely put out the fire when you leave the campsite.
- Leave your car in a car park when you go hiking.
- Do not ride motor boats or jet skis on the lakes of the protected area.
- Drive your motor vehicle only on public roads and ride your bike on roads and paths.
- Keep your dog on the leash while moving about in the nature.
- On fishing, observe the Fishing Act and the protection rules of the Karula National Park.
- Seek approval of the Environmental Board for events at non-prepared sites involving more than 40 participants on email voru@keskkonnaamet.ee or phone +372 786 8360.

The trails pass pastures, which may be surrounded with electric fences. That is why:

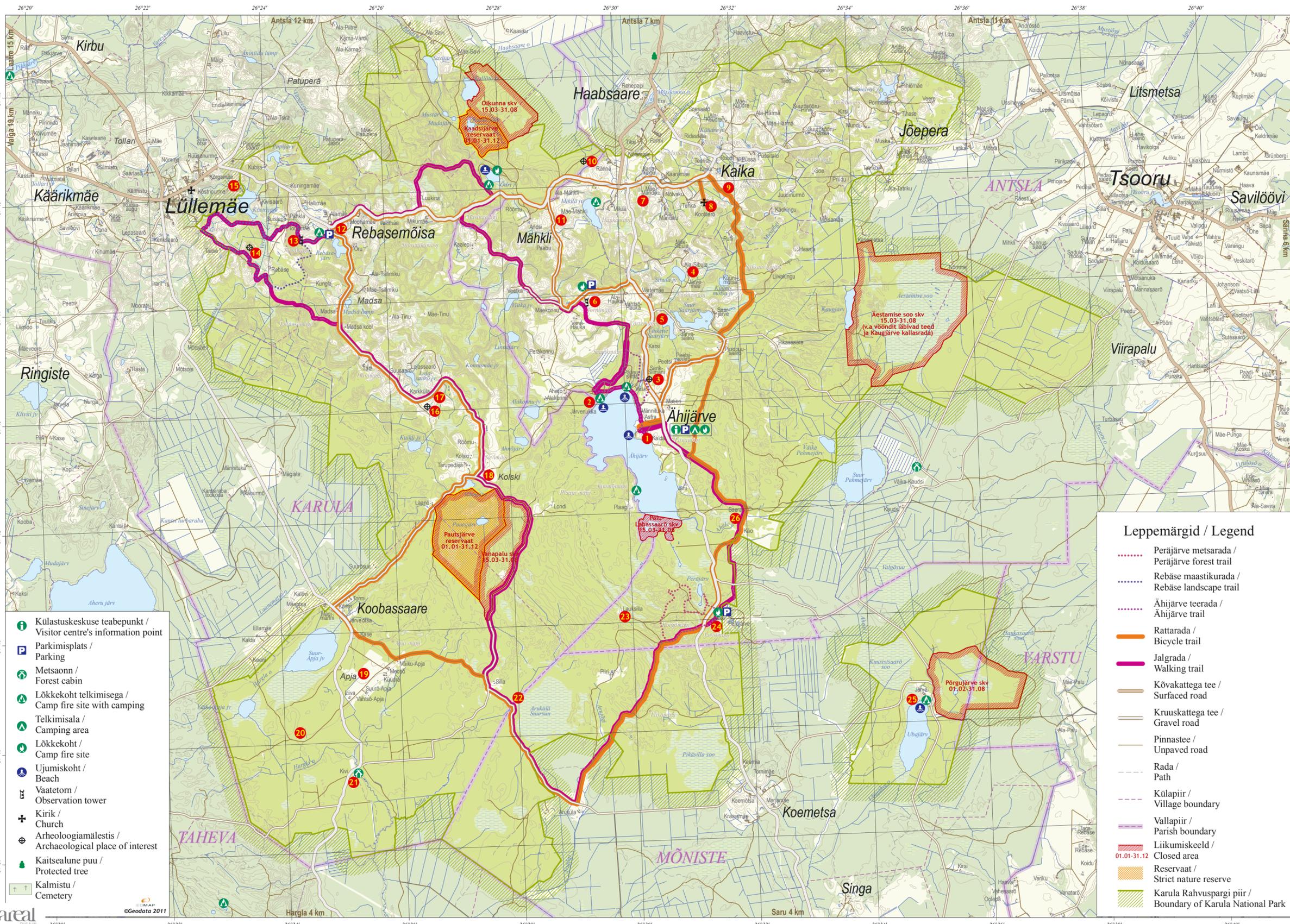
- Use passages and gates in order to go through the fences.
- Do not touch the wires and other metal parts of the electric fences because they may be electrified.
- To open the gates, use the plastic handles.
- Close carefully all the gates behind you.
- Do not disturb the cattle.

When you see damage done to the nature or visiting facilities, inform the Environmental Inspectorate on phone number 1313 or the police on phone number 110. In case of a fire or accident, call 112.



KARULA National Park

SIGHTS ON MAP



- Visitor Centre of the Karula National Park** – visitors can see exhibitions, a film and a presentation on the nature and cultural heritage of Karula. The centre houses an information centre of the State Forest Management Centre (RMK). Access to Wi-Fi.
- Church site at Lõo (old burial site)** – a stone barrow dating back to the Iron Age (50-450 A.D.). According to the legend, there was a small church-like chapel here in the Middle Ages. The church fell apart and its spire dropped into the Brook Vilimiku, where it was never found. It is said that in calm weather it is possible to hear gentle tinkling from the brook.

- Village grave field at Sarik-Simani** – a village barrow below and near the farmstead buildings, where inhabitants of the Ahijärve Hamlet were buried in the 13th–17th centuries.
- Sibula Farmhouse; birthplace of the conductor, Karl Leinus** – a farmhouse with a barn of the old Southern Estonian type. Karl Leinus (1889–1968), an Estonian well-known conductor and promoter of music, was born on the Sibula Farm. In the farmhouse, the room-museum of the conductor is open for visitors in summer.

- Site of Gate Värtemäe** – the word 'värte' is the Võru language word for 'a gate'. In the early 17th century, the boundary of Sweden and Poland ran through this point. There was an iron gate on the small road here and it was heard far away when the gate was being closed.
- Observation Tower at Mäekonnun** – located on Tornimäe Hill, 128 metres above the sea level, which is the divide between the Koiva and Enajõe river basins.

- Hive-pine at Mändiku** – the last known hive-pine in Estonia grows on the lands of the Mändiku Farm. The tree is over 300 years old and constitutes a monument to the former big branch of economy – wild bee keeping. A big pine tree was chosen for a bee hive and a cave was hollowed into its trunk with special tools. The cave mouth was closed with a board into which entrances for bees were made. The tree top was cut down for the tree not to break during storms.

- School, church and cemetery at Kaika** – in the 1890s, a Russian Orthodox church was built on Kaikamäe Hill with the support of a businessman from St. Petersburg. The church had two onion-shaped domes. By now, the church has decayed. The school was established simultaneously with the church. First, it was a Russian-language parish school, later the language of instruction was Estonian. The school was closed in 1999 and at present the building is used as the community centre. The cemetery behind the church is still in use and in good order. From the hill, you can have a nice view of the Kaika cupolas.

- Birth and living place of Peeter Koemets (member of the first parliament of the Republic of Estonia)** – P. Koemets (1869–1941) is the best-known historical character connected with Karula. He, being later the municipality mayor and a member of the first Estonian Parliament, was born on the Kaika Farm. In the meeting of the Provincial Assembly in Riga, 1918, P. Koemets objected to the formation of the Baltic Dukedom and submitted a letter by Estonian peasants with the claim to Estonia's independence.
- Ancient mound and dwelling place at Mähkli** – an old burial site and a dwelling place dating back to the 1st millennium B.C. can be found in the Mähkli Forest. According to the customs of those times, the dead were burnt and their bones together with some of their belongings were scattered between the mound walls.
- Birth and living place of August Kerem (Minister of Agriculture of the Republic of Estonia)** – A. Kerem (1889–1942), a member of the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia, the Minister of Agriculture, Defence and Roads (1931–32, 1933), was born on the Mähkli Farm. The big farm of Mähkli once owned 190 hectares of land.
- Threshing barn and caning stone at the Rebäse Dairy Farm of the Karula Manor** – the threshing barn is made from granite, with a stone with the shape of a bench built into its wall, where peasants were punished by beating with a cane for not doing their corvée or for other sins.
- The Tornimägi Observation Tower at Rebasemõisa** – on Tornimägi Hill, the highest "peak" of the Karula Upland (137,8 metres above the sea level), a wooden observation tower was completed in 2004, the top platform of which is 30 metres high from the ground.
- Linnamägi and place of settlement at Rebäse** – Linnamägi (Stronghold Hill) with its oval shape and steep slopes was once the location of a stronghold, a local centre of power. In the Viking Age (800–1050 A.D.) the hill was probably connected with beaver traders, who bought furs and sold them on to the Arabic countries. During the Estonians' fight for freedom in 1208–1227, the Germans surrounded the stronghold and evidently destroyed it.
- Confirmation and school house at köstrejärve** – a massive three-storey building of red bricks and granite, constructed in 1892–1893 by master builders from Pskov, was the dwelling place of the parish clerk of the Karula Church. The confirmation school was also active here until World War II. In the 1950s, the building housed a 7-year-school, and later a sports centre and a border guard station.
- Grave field at Karkküla** – under a grove of trees, an oval heap of stones, covered with moss, is hidden. It is a stone barrow dating back to the Roman Iron Age (50–450 A.D.).
- Threshing barn of the Karkküla Farm** – a barn separate from the farmhouse, typical of Karula, recently reconstructed. The barn was used for drying grain and processing flax. When threshing machines were introduced, the barn lost its purpose.
- Kolski Hamlet** – the former populous village is waking up again. The local people carry along and maintain the local heritage culture.
- Apja Hamlet** – the little hamlet lies on the sandy edge of the Apja Bog. Once the village used to be big and powerful, but when the manor's dairy was established here, the village people were deported from the good agricultural lands to their present location, the so-called Apja Bog.
- Pine-heath forests near the Apja lakes** – the Estonian word for a heath forest is 'palumets', which comes from the Võru language word 'palama' – to burn. It indicates that pine forests used to renew through burning.
- The Kivi farm buildings of a forest ranger** – the farmhouse with a barn, typical of Southern Estonia, built in 1846. The dwelling house and sauna have been destroyed, only the granary and shed are still there. There was once a mill on the Brook Apja, which flows past the farm.
- The Brook Labassaarõ** – a crooked forest brook, which discharges into the Stream Hargla. It is partly the boundary of Võru and Valga Counties.
- The Lauksilla lodge of loggers (lumberjacks)** – a log house for two families on a small clearing in the woods. The land here is very sandy and unsuitable for grain-growing; therefore logging was the main source of living.
- Lossimägi (Castle Hill)** – was named by the hunting lodge (or 'hunting castle' in Estonian) of the baron of the Vanatsla Manor, one of the largest manors in the neighbourhood. The hunting lodge was located on the verge of the manor deep in the woods, but it was destroyed in fire in 1921. The former location of the two-storey, balconied lodge is now marked with big arborvitae and larches, stove ruins and a granite cellar.
- Lake Ubajärv** – a separate part of the national park. The lake with its surrounding forests and lands makes up an area, which has habitats of very valued protected species.
- Saera Hamlet and the battle field of War of Independence** – a hamlet with two farms on the verge of the national park. In Saera, a battle between Estonian armoured train no 3 and Latvian Red Hunters took place during the War of Independence, which the Estonian forces won.