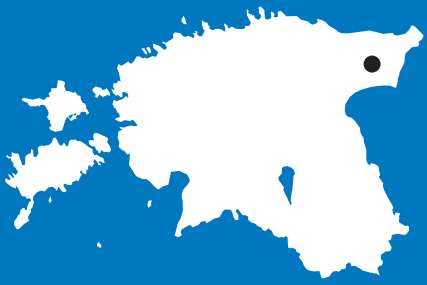
Republic of Estonia
Environmental Board

Alutaguse National Park



Alutaguse National Park

Ida-Viru County

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WELCOME TO ALUTAGUSE NATIONAL PARK!

Alutaguse National Park is situated in the Alutaguse lowlands and has always been known for its high proportion of natural landscape and sparse population. This is reflected in the population concentration of Alutaguse municipality, which happens to be the smallest of all local governments in Estonia.

Alutaguse National Park was established to protect the nature and cultural heritage of the rare mire, forest and coastal landscapes characteristic of eastern Estonia. Vast landscapes of bogs (23,855 hectares or 54%) and forests (18,759 hectares or 42%) make up the core of the national park, alternating with kame, esker and dune systems.

The national park covers 44,331 hectares and was established in 2018. It is formed of detached plots of land based on Agusalu, Muraka and Selisoo nature conservation areas, Kurtna, Smolnitsa, Jõuga, Iisaku, Struuga and Mäetaguse landscape conservation areas and the special conservation area of the upstream part of the Narva River. Alutaguse National Park includes the Agusalu, Muraka, Puhatu and Struuga SCI and SPA and the Jõuga, Kurtna, Mäetaguse, Selisoo and Smolnitsa SCI, which form part of the Natura 2000 network. The Muraka and Agusalu bog complexes are also part of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of international importance.

The national park is located in Ida-Viru County, mostly within Alutaguse municipality, although some parts of if cross into Lüganuse, Jõhvi and Toila municipalities.

LANDSCAPES AND BIOTA

The terrain of the Alutaguse lowlands began to form in the late glacial period around 12,000 years ago. The local landscape is one of long, steep-sloped eskers and dunes formed from the sand and gravel left behind by the melting ice sheet. The **Jõuga and Kõnnu eskers** are some 30-40 metres high. Five lakes stand at their base in the middle of the forest, marking the location of former ice shelves.

Tärivere Hill (94 m above sea level) in the Illuka-Iisaku esker system is one of the highest eskers in Estonia. The longest **sandy beach** in Estonia as well as **dunes** 5–20 m high can be found on the northern shore of Lake Peipus. The dune side opens to the south and has loose sand as well as clearances with bryophytes and lichen. The northern section of the protected area has the largest concentration of lakes in Estonia – **the Kurtna kame system, which consists of nearly 40 lakes**, incl. Lake Valgejärv and Lake Ahnejärv, both of which are home to rare species.

Osprey, Arne Ader

The varied landscape of Alutaguse boasts a wide variety of **forests**. Transitional mire and bog forests are the most common, but there are also oligotrophic pine forests and pine forests with lingonberry or bilberry dominants growing on sandy ridges. Muraka bog is among

Estonia's largest and best preserved **bog landscapes**, with a trail of bog islands and bog pools running across it from the north-east to the south-west. There are swamps and watery treeless sections to the north and wooded bogs and bogs rich in bog pools to the south. The Agusalu and Puhatu bog complex is one of the last **large transitional bogs** in Estonia and also home to the only **inland sand dunes** in Estonia. The dune fields were created at the end of the last Glacial Period when the wind formed sandy ridges from the sediment left behind by glaciers. There are around 200 of these narrow ridges, which run in a northeast-southwest direction and build up into a striated landscape together with the surrounding mires.

Mäetaguse wooded meadow, Jürgen Öövel

The eastern edge of the national park is marked by the **Narva River**, which has the greatest flow rate of any river in Estonia, together with **oxbow lakes** near the villages of Jaama and Karoli. The old meanders and lush **floodplain meadows** which have formed between them in the upstream part of the river make up a truly unique landscape. Struuga floodplain meadow and Mäetaguse oak forest are **cultural heritage landscapes** which require annual mowing or grazing in order to be sustained. **Mäetaguse oak forest** is one of the northernmost oak forests in Europe.

Biodiversity

Highly biodiverse natural forests reminiscent of primeval forests and rare species have survived in the hard-to-reach areas of the national park that are the least affected by human activity. Ratva bog, which forms part of the Muraka bog complex, marks the start of the protection of bogs in Estonia, as it was made a reservation for the protection of eagles in 1938. Five species of eagles live in these forests, and visitors may also catch a glimpse of the black stork, the great grey owl and the peregrine falcon.

Alutaguse is a nesting site for all our most important waders, such as the wood sandpiper, European golden plover, whimbrel, jack snipe and rare willow ptarmigan of the order Galliformes. The mixed spruce and aspen forest growing on Tärivere Hill is home to Siberian flying squirrels, which find food and suitable hollow trees here that can be used for shelter and nesting. The tall and broad-crowned trees in the Mäetaguse oak forest are some 300 years old and have varied biota, providing habitats for dozens of species and millions of specimens. Old natural forests grow on the islands and edges of the bog complexes, and the banks of the Poruni River are covered with a valuable forest reminiscent of primeval forests with floodplains between the wooded areas.

All of the stages of a bog, from fens to raised bogs, are clearly on display in the Puhatu and Agusalu bog complexes. Puhatu is the largest bog complex in Estonia and is known for its patchy landscape full of bog pools, lakes and wooded islands.

Great grey owl, Remo Savisaar

Bog complexes

As the ice disappeared at the end of the Glacial Period, it created relict lakes in the northern part of Peipsi valley. These started to close up around 9,000–10,000 years ago and formed vast fens. These transitioned into raised bogs some 3,500 years ago. Mires also started to grow and merge during this time, creating entire complexes. This is how the Alutaguse lowlands came to be the largest mire landscape in Estonia.

The largest mires in Alutaguse are the **Muraka, Agusalu and Puhatu bog complex**.

A trail of bog islands and bog pools runs across the **Muraka bog complex** from the north-east to the south-west. There are swamps and watery treeless sections to the north and wooded bogs and bogs rich in bog pools to the south. Ratva bog in the Muraka bog complex was the birthplace of Estonian bog protection history, as a reservation for the protection of eagles was established there in 1938.

Selisoo pool bog, Anne-Ly Feršel

All of the stages of a bog are on display in the **Puhatu and Agusalu bog complexes**, one of the last remaining transitional mires of its size in Estonia. The **Agusalu bog complex** is a mosaic thanks to its characteristic variation of high, narrow, sandy ridges or dunes with small bogs, transitional mires and quagmires. There is no bog here that is rich in bog pools, and Feodorisoo is the only bog with smaller bog pools. The **Puhatu bog complex** is patchy and connected by numerous lakes, bog pools, streams, forest strips, bog islands and quagmires. It is home to the largest population of willow ptarmigans in Estonia. Other important bird species include the golden eagle, short-toed snake eagle, white-tailed eagle and osprey.

Willow ptarmigans, Anu Soomets

The Mäetaguse esker borders **Selisoo bog** and all its bog pools and hollows from the west. Selisoo is one of the oldest bogs in Estonia: its bottom peat layers are estimated to be nearly 11,000 years old. Bog complexes make for excellent nesting and resting sites and habitats for many species. This is the nesting site of all of Estonia's most important waders, such as the European golden plover, wood sandpiper, common greenshank and whimbrel. The bog islands and forests bordering the mires are traditional habitats of eagles and forest-dwelling Galliformes, such as black grouse, Western capercaillie and hazel grouse.

Kame, esker and lake systems

The **Jõuga and Kõnnu esker system** and the **Illuka-Iisaku esker system** represent landforms in the national park that were created by glacier termini, whereas the highest peak, **Tärivere Hill** (94 m above sea level) in the Illuka-Iisaku esker system, is the second highest landform in Ida-Viru county. **Lakes Jõuga and Kõnnu** – two groups of a total of five lakes surrounded by forests – stand at the base of the eskers of the same names. Several rare species have been found on the shores and in the waters of these lakes, such as the *Cladium mariscus*, which is extremely rare in eastern Estonia.

The sandy shore of Lake Ahnejärv, Anne-Ly Feršel

Inland dune in Agusalu, Anne-Ly Feršel

The glacier-made **Kurtna kame system** consists of oblong kames in a north-south direction and the depressions between them. The 40 different types of lakes in the depressions make up the **Kurtna lake system**, the area with the greatest concentration of lakes anywhere in Estonia. Increasingly rare oligotrophic lakes such as Ahnejärv and Valgejärv are the most valuable in terms of nature conservation. Human activity has had a significant impact on the lake system in the past 50 years. This is most obvious in the extensive fluctuation of the water levels of the lakes (up to 4 m according to reports).

Dunes by Lake Peipus in Smolnitsa, Anne-Ly Feršel

Poruni River and floodplain, Anne-Ly Feršel

Inland dunes and the dune system on the northern shore of Lake Peipus

The Alutaguse and Puhatu bog complex is the location of the only **inland sand dunes** in Estonia. These dune fields were created at the end of the last Glacial Period when the wind formed around 200 narrow, sandy ridges 3–18 m high from sediment left behind by the glaciers. The inland dunes are like bridges across the difficult bog terrain. The dunes, together with their oligotrophic pine forests and pine forests with lingonberry or bilberry dominant and the bog complex surrounding the dunes, make up a peculiar striated pattern unlike anything else in Estonia. They can be considered the symbolic landform of Alutaguse.

The entire northern shore of Lake Peipus is covered with a **coastal dune system**, but the most magnificent dunes (up to 15 m high) are in Alajõe and Smolnitsa. The sand on the northern shore of Lake Peipus is known as 'singing sand' because of the sounds that result from friction.

Forests

The national park preserves highly biodiverse primeval forests as well as rare types of forests. The typological diversity of the forest biota in different areas is significant, but due to the large proportion of mires, **transitional mire forests and bog forests** surrounded by mires account for the largest surface areas. Rare **broadleaf floodplain forests** grow by the Poruni River and there are **eutrophic boreo-nemoral forests** reminiscent of primeval forests on hard-to-reach bog islands, where human activity has had minimal impact.

Siberian flying squirrel, Rainar Kurbel

Marsh gentian, Jürgen Öövel

Oligotrophic pine forests and pine forests with lingonberry or bilberry dominants growing in sandy soil are specific to the Kurtna kame system and dunes.

Coniferous forests dominated the area when human activities still had a limited effect on the forests. Even though the composition of the forests has changed, there are still species here that are native to the taiga, such as the Siberian flying squirrel and forest-dwelling Galliformes. The national park is home to five species of eagle and the black stork. Wolves, bears and lynx represent the mammal population.

Rivers and floodplain meadows

The eastern edge of the national park is marked by **Narva River**, which has the largest drainage basin and greatest flow rate of any river in Estonia. Together with the Jaama and Karoli **oxbow lakes** and the lush floodplain meadows growing between the meanders, the upstream part of the Narva River has developed into a unique landscape with valuable fish spawns and habitats for aquatic birds, as well as birds who live in the reed-bed and the floodplain meadows or migrate elsewhere when the time is right. The rarest plant to grow here is the marsh gentian, which grows in floodplain meadows. The vast floodplain meadows between the oxbow lakes are cultural heritage landscapes, which require continuous human intervention – mowing or grazing – in order to be sustained.

Mäetaguse oak forest is one of the northernmost oak forests in Europe. The tall trees have varied biota and are some 150-300 years old. Moderate human activity is also necessary to maintain the species composition of Mäetaguse oak forest and the characteristic look of a wooded meadow. It is important to mow and graze the area under the canopy to ward off scrub and make sure the oaks have a long life. As oaks tend to be rather scarce in eastern Estonia, preserving them is essential in terms of biodiversity.

Striated landscape of Struuga floodplain meadow, Land Board

Mäetaguse oak forest, Anne-Ly Feršel

CULTURAL HERITAGE OF ALUTAGUSE

In many ways, Alutaguse is a border area between east and west. Over the centuries this has been a meeting point for different ethnicities, combining the cultures, languages and religions of Estonians, Votes and Russians. This has led to interesting interactions and established relations. Estonian culture dominates at the heart of Alutaguse, while Russian culture is more prevalent along the Narva River and on the northern shore of Lake Peipus, and Votic influences are identifiable in the Iisaku and Jõuga area. This was the birth place of an original ethnic group that has since disappeared – the **Poluvernik people**. The folklore of Alutaguse is rich in depictions surrounding the Estonian epic hero Kalevipoeg, as well as the Virgin Mary, the Russian hero Dobrinja, Olga of Kiev, the Great Northern War and the golden carriage of Charles XII of Sweden, which is said to lie at the bottom of one of the lakes in Jõuga. Legends about Kalevipoeg date back much further in Alutaguse than elsewhere in Estonia. The places related to Kalevipoeg here include Kuremäe, Vägilaste Hill ('Hill of heroes'), the lakes in Kurtna and Kalevipoeg's grave in Kivinõmme.

Woman from Iisaku, Iisaku Parish Museum

Border areas have always flourished in peacetime and suffered in wars and raids. This is most obvious in the areas by the Narva River where you can see many signs of both wars and a bygone era of trading.

Folk costumes of the Poluvernik people, Iisaku Parish Museum

Trenches and bunkers from World War II can still be seen by the Narva and Poruni rivers, and the railway dam and timber trackways constructed by the Germans still stand out in the mire. For many centuries, the Narva River was an important trade route until smaller rivers could no longer handle the increased trade volumes. River barges were used to transport goods in the area – the barges would head downstream and were then pulled back upstream using horses and leather harnesses on the banks of the river. In springtime, the numerous sawmills in Narva awaited the arrival of logs obtained in winter. The logs were sent down the small rivers and streams of Alutaguse until they reached the shores of Lake Peipus, where they were then rafted to the Narva River. Once there, they were rafted further downstream. The logs were piled up high on the river banks and stayed there until they were taken to the timber market. Tanning became one of the principal activities in the area thanks to the large meadows between the villages of Vasknarva and Karoli that provided feed for a large number of cattle. It was still possible to see people all over Estonia wearing pegged leather boots made in Vasknarva even in the 20th century. In the 1930s, the meadows in Vasknarva, Jaamaküla and Karoli continued to feed more than 530 local cattle and numerous horses and sheep. People from the manors around Jõhvi and villages on the northern shore of Lake Peipus as well as in the Kuremäe and Iisaku areas came here for the hay-making season.

Settlements on the northern shore of Lake Peipus and the area surrounding the Narva River are noteworthy due to the local Russian Orthodox community. Russians who lived in the fishing villages on the shores did not tend to mix with inland-dwelling Estonians. Estonians were farmers and peasants who lived in scattered settlements. The fishermen on the shores lived in linear settlements and also made a living burning tar, foraging and transporting goods. Trade (grain for fish and grain for tar) was the main point of contact between the Estonians who lived inland and the Russians who lived on the shore. The village of Smolnitsa was named after tar burners (from smala in Russian).

Abundant cranberries and lingonberries provided extra income through foraging. Mushrooms were an important part of the menu and Slavs were particularly good at identifying and preparing different mushrooms – with mushroom dishes being the main substitute for meat during lengthy fasting periods. Hence, mushrooms were known as the flesh of wood spirits in Alutaguse. Foraging is still practised in the same form today and there is increasing interest in old recipes and skills. Fermenting mushrooms is starting to grow in popularity once again also.

The area around the Alutaguse bog complex has long been a source of natural resources and provided shelter for local people. 14 farms still existed on the islands of and forests surrounding Muraka bog in the mid-20th century, now marked by ruins or old-growth trees. The inland dunes surrounded by large mires provided shelter for villagers during wartime.

Berry pickers in a forest in Tuusna, Gustav Vilbaste

Cult stones have so far mostly been associated with northern Estonia, but in recent years such stones have also been found in fields around Mäetaguse and Kuremäe.

The iron smelting site in Metsküla has one of the longest histories of such sites in Estonia. The production of iron from bog iron represented one of the 'export articles' of this area.

The site of what is now Kurtna Youth Camp was used as a military training camp in the 1930s and during World War II. Old trenches and foxholes can still be spotted on the landscape. Today, Kurtna has a number of recreational sites and trails for hiking and practising sports. Alutaguse Resort and Sports Centre is located in Pannjärve. Kurtna is an important recreational area, primarily for the residents of nearby towns, but also for people from all over Estonia.

Jõuga has the largest barrow cemetery in Estonia, with nearly 270 barrows and four zhalniks or burial mounds, which were used between the 11th and 16th centuries. The Votes who immigrated to Estonia built their burial ground on the site of a Neolithic settlement, and the buildings in the village today were built on a former Stone Age settlement. Archaeological excavations revealed a small piece of needle-knit mittens around the wrist of a Votic woman buried towards the turn of the 13th century, making it the oldest needle-knit textile fragment anywhere in Eastern and Northern Europe. The mitten find dates the skill of knitting on needles in the Baltic region to the early 14th century, which is 300 years earlier than previously thought. Lake Pesujärv and Lake Liivjärv are popular places for swimming and recreational activities in Jõuga. Iisaku Parish Museum and an information board provide details about the Votes and the Poluvernik people.

Over time there have been some 16 manors in the Alutaguse area. At present, the **manor parks** of six of these manors are under protection: **Iisaku, Illuka, Kurtna, Kiikla, Pagari and Mäetaguse**. The manor parks are relatively small, feature mostly native species and are running rather wild. Nevertheless, they remain important and familiar to locals.

Forest following resin collection, Anne-Ly Feršel

The park layouts are mostly free-form and reveal lovely views of park meadows and old-growth trees, with old parkways opening up to the edges of the park or leading deeper into the green wilderness. The majority of the manor houses that have survived the twists and turns of history were built in the 19th-century classicist or historicist style. The main buildings of Kurtna and Kiikle manors stand empty and Iisaku Manor has been destroyed, but Illuka Manor has been successfully transformed into a school. Pagari Manor is one of the most outstanding original late-classical timber constructions in Estonia. A hostel now operates in the building. The 14 outbuildings belonging to Mäetaguse Manor have been restored and are now used as a hotel, restaurant, spa and more. The main building housed a school from 1922-1982 and then the municipal government. About a kilometre north-west of the manor, on Kabelimäe ridge, is the neo-gothic cemetery chapel (1874) of the Rosen family.

Mäetaguse manor park is said to have been established as part of a communal work day on the orders of Eugen von Rosen. People from all around came together, with each person asked to bring a tree and plant it in the park. The day ended with a feast and a dance for all of the workers.

Estonian writer Friedrich Gustav Arvelius worked as a tutor at Kiikla Manor. It was here that Arvelius penned the first Estonian-language storybook, *Üks Kaunis Jutto- ja Õppetusse Ramat I-II* (1782-87) and *Ramma Josepi Hädda- ja Abbi-Ramat* (1790).

The graveyard of **Pühtitsa Convent in Kuremäe** is home to a sacred oak. Dendrologists have estimated that this tree could well be more than 1000 years old. According to a convent legend, the tree stands in the very place the Virgin Mary appeared before peasants more than 400 years ago. The convent started out as a small Orthodox Christian church built in the 16th century. Today, Kuremäe is home to a beautiful and well-functioning convent.

The **skete or monastic community of the Prophet Elijah in Vasknarva** also forms part of Pühtitsa Convent. The church was badly damaged during the war, but has since been restored and is home to around 10 nuns.

The ruins of the **Livonian Order castle in Vasknarva** tower above the sandy banks of the upstream part of the Narva River. The castle faces Russia on the opposite side of the river and was first built in 1349 when it served as a border castle for Livonia. The structure suffered a lot of damage over the years and was repeatedly rebuilt to be even stronger, until it was finally destroyed in the Russo-Swedish War.

The **Vasknarva groynes**, i.e. the three wind dams (currently measuring 660 m, 570 m and 220 m) and one water dam built to alter the flow of water on the eastern bank of the river (measuring 1420 m), were constructed in order to narrow the river source and stimulate flow to prevent blockages from building up in the source.

HIKING THROUGH ALUTAGUSE NATIONAL PARK

The **centre of Alutaguse National Park** is in **Iisaku Nature Centre**, which houses a permanent exhibition about the local area and sustainable lifestyles. It also offers a variety of educational programmes upon agreement.

Kauksi Visitors Centre has a permanent exhibition about the natural environment in the county and offers educational programmes upon agreement.

Iisaku Parish Museum showcases local history and cultural heritage and runs educational programmes upon agreement.

- **Porkuni educational trail** (2.5 km) focusses on the river and its banks, which are covered in a broadleaf floodplain forest reminiscent of primeval forests, as well as the biota of the forest.
- **Poruni hiking trail** (10 km) runs along the river bank to the Narva River and back again. The trail serves as an introduction to the forest, its biota, local cultural heritage and military history as well as the impact of energy production on the natural environment.
- **Agusalu biking trail** (38 km) showcases the typical Alutaguse landscape in all its diversity: wooded sandy ridges or dunes, mires and the villages on top of and between the mires.
- **Selisoo educational trail** (4 km) examines the bog and its biota and the impact people have on the bog. Selisoo is packed with scenic bog hollows and bog pools.
- **Kotka hiking trail** (6.7 km or 4 km in the mire) offers fens and transitional mires as it stretches across woody bog islands and continues on long, sandy ridges or dunes.
- **Kurtna hiking trail** (9 km) runs across a diverse landscape with the highest concentration of lakes in Estonia, mesmerising visitors with its mosaic plant cover and bodies of water.
- **Kauksi Stream educational trail** (3.5 km) showcases the pine forest growing along the coastal dune system of Lake Peipus as well as its biota.
- Alutaguse Resort and Sports Centre is the starting point for a number of **Kurtna health tracks** of different lengths (1-10 km) and degrees of difficulty.
- **Tärivere Hill health track** (5 km) is a forest track with varying terrain.
- **Mäetaguse** is the starting point for several **health tracks** of different lengths (0.7-5 km) that run through the diverse, hilly landscape.
- **Iisaku viewing tower** provides a good overview of the forests and mires of Alutaguse. From the top of it you can see Pühtitsa Convent, the semi-coke heaps of oil shale mines, the hills formed by the chemical industry in Kiviõli and Kohtla-Järve, and Lake Peipus.
- **Jõuga rest area**. The lakes in Jõuga are popular swimming and recreational sites. The burial mounds of the Votes (with an information board) are situated nearby.

Information for visitors

- Before visiting protected areas, familiarise yourself with the area, incl. potential travel restrictions outside roads and official recreational sites.
- You may only remain on private land between sunrise and sunset provided you do not cause the owner to incur any damages. You need the permission of land owner to traverse fenced/marked private land.

- Use motor vehicles only on designated roads and park in designated areas.
- Non-power floating craft can be used to travel on internal water bodies, except for Lake Ümarjärv and Lake Pikkjärv in Kõnnu and Lakes Selisoo and Puhatu.
- When travelling on transboundary bodies of water, comply with the corresponding rules available on the website of the Estonian Police and Border Guard Board. Register the start and end of your trip on the transboundary body of water by creating a user account on the website www.piiriveekogu.ee.
- Recreational fishery is allowed in accordance with protection and fishing rules.
- Fires and camping are only allowed in designated areas equipped with facilities for these purposes.
- Do not use trees and bushes that are still growing for firewood.
- During periods of extreme fire hazard, making fires is not permitted even in allocated areas.
- Make sure all of your washing is done on dry land, because detergents are poisonous to aquatic life and facilitate the excessive growth of algae and plant matter.
- Use the outdoor toilet or dry land to satisfy your needs in these respects.
- Please keep your pets on a leash at all times, as they represent a threat to wild animals.
- Picking berries, mushrooms and other forest produce is allowed unless the produce in question is a protected species.
- Do not leave any traces of your visit.
- The recreational sites in the area can be found on the tourism website Visit Estonia.

If you become aware of any activities that are potentially harmful to the environment or that you suspect are illegal, call the environmental information hotline 1313 (free of charge).

If you witness violations of public order or damage to visitor sites, call 112 or 633 1313.

Lake Pesujärv in Jõuga, Anne-Ly Feršel

Did you know?

- Alutaguse National Park covers 44,331 hectares and was established in 2018, making it the newest national park in Estonia.
- It comprises several former nature reserves: the Agusalu, Muraka and Selisoo nature conservation areas, the Kurtna, Smolnitsa, Jõuga, Iisaku, Struuga and Mäetaguse landscape conservation area and the special conservation area of the upstream part of Narva River.
- Located in the Alutaguse lowlands, the national park is best described by its large proportion of natural landscapes and the sparsest human population of anywhere in Estonia.
- Mires make up a total of 54% of the surface area of the national park, while woodland accounts for around 42%.
- The Agusalu and Puhatu bog complex is one of the last sizeable transitional mires in Estonia. In addition, Alutaguse is the location of the only inland sand dunes in Estonia.
- The landscape with the highest concentration of lakes in Estonia as well as the river with the greatest flow rate can also be found in Alutaguse, as can Estonia's longest sandy beach and dunes that stretch along the northern shore of Lake Peipus.

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