

When you see damage done to the nature or visiting objects, immediately inform the Environmental Inspectorate by phone 1313.



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Eurasian nuthatch, A. Ader

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from the drill holes have given plenty of information about the post-ice age development of the local flora.

The peculiarity and vulnerability of the Vällämäe forests have long been understood. The old Estonians regarded Vällämägi as a mysterious and holy place. They believed that a witch or a fairy lives on the hill, who guards the forest and punishes careless woodcutters. It is said that the buildings made of the wood cut on the hill have mysteriously set on fire. This is a reason why the local forests have remained intact.

The hill of Vällämägi is covered with grove woods, with the spruce as the dominating species of trees. Aspens, maples, rowans and bird cherries are the main deciduous trees. The undergrowth includes species of shrubs, typical of spruce groves: the common hazel, Alpine currant, raspberry and honeysuckle. The spruces have remarkable heights and dimensions (for example, some are more than 36 metres tall). The local forest is considered the oldest and most pristine in Haanjamaa. The rest of the forests in the Haanja Upland are younger and strongly affected by human activity. In the early 20th century, there were much fewer forests in Haanjamaa – fields, meadows and pastures were spreading instead of the present woods. A lot of wood was used for heating the manors' distilleries.

The grass vegetation of the Vällämäe forests is plentiful, with numerous species of flowering plants in spring, such as the liverleaf, wood anemone, violets, common wood sorrel, hairy wood-rush, yellow archangel and stone bramble. The more shadowy and damper places are rich in ferns; here you can find even six different species. The most remarkable species of mosses is *Neckera pennata*, which is typical of old natural forests. It grows on the trunks of deciduous trees and can



Photo: Vällämäe Forest, M. Kose



Photo: Vällämäe Hiking Trail, M. Muts

be recognized by its ascending, stair-forming stems. Attention should be paid to the lichens *Usnea* and *Bryoria* which grow on the tree trunks and refer to the clean air.

The shadowy spruce forests of Vällämäe are suitable habitats for various species of animals. Different mammals, such as the lynx, pine marten, squirrel, roe deer and elk, have been met here. The steep slopes of hills are suitable for badgers to dig their burrows and setts. As for the sedentary birds, you can meet the hazel grouse, spotted nutcracker, goldcrest, Eurasian Jay, bullfinch, great spotted woodpecker, three-toed woodpecker, black woodpecker, crested tit, willow tit, Eurasian treecreeper, and Eurasian nuthatch here. At night, the sound of the Ural owl and tawny owl can be heard. In spring, however, the woods ring with the polyphonic birdsong. If lucky, you can see the European robin, Eurasian wren, blackcap, blackbird, redwing, song thrush, chiffchaff, and pied flycatcher.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR VISITORS

- Cycle only on the roads and trails; drive your motor vehicle only on the provided roads and park it only in the car parks.
- You can move about on private land from sunrise to sunset unless you do damage to the landowner.
- Put up your tent and make a fire only in the designated places at the time of no wildfire hazard.
- Keep the information boards, signs, other facilities and objects.
- Keep your dog on the leash while moving about in the nature.
- You can pick berries and mushrooms everywhere unless you do damage to the landowner.



VÄLLAMÄE Hiking Trail

Haanja Nature Park



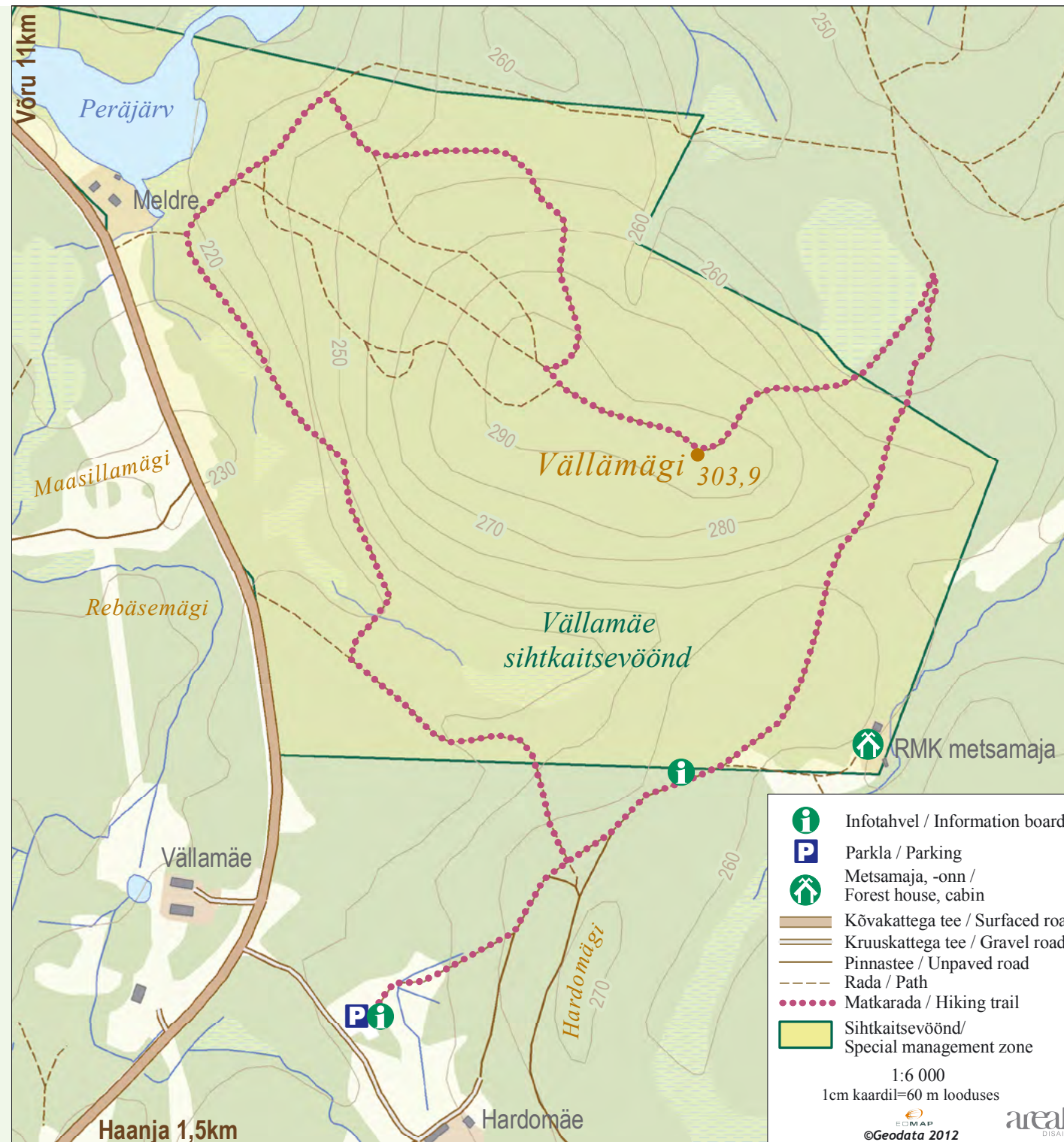
Photo: Vällamäe forest cabin, D. Pungar

THE VÄLLAMÄE HIKING TRAIL was opened in 1998. The 2.2-kilometre-long trail is provided with information boards, which help notice the distinctiveness of the nature of Vällamäe. Passing by the bog with the deepest peat layer in Estonia, going up Vällamägi Hill and coming down again, the hiking trail is rich in varieties.

On the way back the trail runs between two different forests: on one side, there is an old natural forest, rich in species of plants and grown without people's interference; on the other side you can see a forest planted in straight lines, a forest planted in straight lines in 1951 with the purpose of timber production. As several paths run at Vällamäe, you should follow the direction signs in order not to get lost.

There is a forest cabin belonging to the State Forest Management Centre (RMK) on the side of the hill of Vällamägi. The forest cabin where hikers can rest and stay overnight for a small fee was built in 1998.

The hill of Vällamägi (303.9 metres above the sea level) is located in the Haanja Nature Park in the heart of Võru County, which is the highest area in Estonia. The objective of the nature park is to maintain, restore and develop the landscapes and biotic communities as well as the historically developed way of life (sparsely populated villages, small patches of fields, hayfields and grasslands, different tillage methods proceeding from the hilly landscape), characteristic of the Haanja Upland. Vällamägi, having been under nature protection since 1959, lies in the zone with the strictest protection rules of the Haanja



Nature Park, which, on its own, belongs to the Natura 2000 network as a special protection area and a special area of conservation.

We know that there are no mountains but only hills in Estonia. If you look from the tower of the Suur Munamägi Hill, the Vällamägi Hill does not seem very high; however, after you have arrived at the top of Vällamägi on your walk, you would like to claim just the opposite. While Suur Munamägi is Estonia's highest hill (318.1 metres above the sea level), the relative height of Vällamägi as a single knoll is bigger – 84 metres from foot to top (Suur Munamägi is 60 metres). The slopes of Vällamägi are mostly very steep, at places the inclination is even 35-40 degrees. The hill of Vällamägi is a two-peak surface form which was formed by melting continental ice about 13,000 years ago when the sediments and moraine (pieces of rocks, sand, clay) accumulated in the lower places and formed hills higher than the surrounding ground.

How did the hill of Vällamägi get its name? The hills Munamägi and Vällamägi were known by old Estonians long before the settlement reached to this area. So these hills are always taken as a couple. The name Vällamägi refers to the word 'plain' in Estonian, pointing that Vällamägi is a massive, wide hill comparing to the round egg-like Munamägi.

A very special little bog lies on the slope of Vällamägi – the bog with the thickest (17-metre-thick) peat layer in Estonia. The bog was formed about 9,000 years ago when a covered block of ice melted in a hollow, and it has been an object of interest for researches of pollen and spores. The peat samples taken



Photo: Bog with thickest peat layer in Estonia, M. Muuts