

ESTONIA 2 MARCH -10 MARCH 2015

One of the things I like most about mammalwatching.com is not only being exposed to places I never thought I would want to travel to, but also learning of tour companies I would never know existed. In 2012 I learned about the company Wise Birding that is based out of Devon, England after the owner, Chris Townend, posted a trip report about searching for Mariscan Bears in Italy. I started off and on checking his website out, especially since he donates portions of all the trip funds to various conservation projects for the species his trips target. Last summer, by chance, I was looking at his website and saw his "Eurasian Lynx Quest" that was based in Estonia. Prior to this Estonia had not been high on my radar to go to, but the tour looked like it had a good focus on the species, and my wild feline species sightings are not high. I went with a friend from California and decided to go into the capital Tallinn two days early and stay one day late.

2 March – Landed mid afternoon in Tallinn after three plane connections of 14 hours of flying. We stayed at the St. Petersburg hotel that is located in the old city about 100 meters from the Town Hall Square. The hotel has a good central location and is located within walking distance to the main historical sites (which I did not go to) and plenty of overpriced restaurants.

3 March – We opted to go to the Tallinn Zoo. The zoo is currently the head of the captive breeding project for the European mink. They have an off sight facility (which I did not visit) of about 100 mink that they are using to supply other breeding facilities in Europe, as well as introducing mink on Hiiumaa and Saaremaa Islands. The zoo is also noted to have one of the best captive exotic sheep and goat collections in the world. They have many species that I have rarely seen in zoos such as Siberian ibex, Transcaspian Urial, Nubian ibex, Tadjik Markhor, East and West Caucasian Tur, Bukhara Urial, and Sichuan Blue Sheep to name a few. The zoo can easily be accessed from the old city via the number 6 trolley train for about 2.5 euros. The best tram stop from the old city is where Estonia Puiestee crosses Parnu mnt Street. The zoo was a nice break for the day, I saw a few new species, and in typical European Zoo fashion I watched as parents repeatedly let their children cross barriers to try to pet the zoo residents.

4 March – Met up with our tour group at the Tallinn Airport. This included Chris, his partner, three other guests, and our local guide Tarvo Valker who works for Estonia Nature Tours. Chris had contacted Estonia Nature Tours about the possibility of doing a lynx focused tour, and for the months preceding our visit they had worked with local researchers, University Students working with the species, as well as doing searches themselves in areas where lynx had been reported and even in spots Tarvo had seen them in the past. Considering the average hunting area of the species in 20-450 square km, they can travel up to 20 km in one night, they are mainly active at night, and that they tend to like to patrol their entire territory, going into the tour it was made clear we might not see a lynx. Early March was picked as the best time to look for them for the fact that it is the height of the mating season when they are most vocal, are more apt to be out during the day, and that there could be snow on the ground to help look for tracks. We first drove to the town of Paide which is approximately 100 km from Tallinn in the center of the country. We stayed at the Nelja Kuninga Hotel in the center of town. It reminded me of some of the business grade hotels that I have stayed at in Poland, minus the pamphlets for female companionship that are placed around the hotel come nightfall. The Paide region has one of the best studied lynx areas in Estonia. There was a core area that had one male, two females and two kittens from the previous year, as well as to the west another males territory. We opted to go in an area about 16-20 km from Paide to an area of old farm land and fragmented forests where lynx sightings had been reported, as well as a particular field area where Tarvo had recently seen a roe deer carcass (the preferred diet of the lynx). We started the driving close to dusk and had a nice prolonged sighting of an Eurasian pygmy owl.



Our first mammal sighting was of distant roe deer. From there we waited until dark and situated ourselves along the road in the area where Tarvo had found the deer. We discussed walking out to the sight, but opted not to in case we spooked a possible lynx. I was sitting in the vehicle directly behind Chris who was doing the spotlighting. At 7 pm he told the group “I’m going to turn the spotlight on and have a scan”. The next few minutes will go down for me as one of my best mammal watching experiences. The area was so dark we could not see anything until he turned the light on. Within seconds of him scanning from left to right, 60-70 meters in front of us, walking parallel to the vehicle, I was staring at a Eurasian Lynx. Chris basically got the light on her (based on size we suspected a her) stopped, said “is that a (with shock/surprise in his voice)..” and I replied yes, then made sure the entire group could see her. She was initially walking parallel to the vehicle, however once the light was on her she slowly turned around, then walked into the forest. She never seemed stressed or ran once we spotted her. I wish I could have gotten a picture, however by the time I could have set my camera and tried it most likely would just be her back end. After this we continued to drive along the tracks surrounding the area and saw wild boar as well as distant raccoon dogs. We went back to the hotel and met up with the owner of Estonia Nature Tours , Marika Mann. She seemed even more excited than we were about the sighting (there may have been a skipping/arm waving celebration dance done) and bought everyone drinks at the hotel in celebration. We finished off the night with a power point presentation from a University of Tartu student who was studying lynx. He went over his studies, populations, and basic information about the species. I had always read that Estonia had approximately 800 lynx. This was true until 2011 when a harsh winter caused a drastic reduction in the Roe deer population. Estimates now think there are only about 400 lynx in Estonia. In response to this, lynx hunting season this year (usually in Jan and Feb) was canceled.



The end of his presentation the student showed us a camera trap video of a tree in his study area that got a lynx scent marking, followed by a pack of wolves and topped off with a Brown bear.

5 March – we got up early (5 am) and drove back to the area we had seen the lynx the night before.

We ended up seeing more wild boar, roe deer, mountain hare, brown hare, foxes (including one that was covered in frost and caused a momentary lynx excitement squeal), and lekking black grouse. Tarvo also saw a pine marten in the road that we missed. Chris used his impressive squeaking skills to try to lure it back towards the road, but was unsuccessful. In the afternoon we met up with a worker from the Environmental Board who we had met with the pHD student the night before. He took us out to the territory of the male lynx to the west of Paide that was radio collared. Based on sent back signals (that are sent every few days), we walked to areas that were suspected sightings that he had dragged prey. Each area had varying remains from just fur to bone fragments to whole bones.



Also during this we saw more roe deer, a female Eurasian elk with two older calves, and



another fox.

We also saw a hen harrier with a dead mammal of unknown species, in its clutches. The evening we went back to our previously successful sight to spotlight. One thing that Tarvo had warned us about was that local hunters in the area from the surrounding village might see our spotlight and think we were poachers. At the start of



the evening, after seeing more raccoon dog, brown hares and what seemed like a mountain hare every 5 seconds (it was also their breeding season) a car was stopped off the side of the road, obviously waiting for us. A rather large, very “sturdy” looking individual got out and started talking to Tarvo trying to figure out if we were poachers. After Tarvo explained to him what we were doing, he seemed like he believed it (based on facial expressions, as he was speaking Estonian, I would give it a good 84.32% believe factor) and told us that other villagers had the road blocked near the village to stop us, and he would call them to tell them what we were doing. Maybe we should have checked that he actually had a cellphone, or knew how to use one, because 15-20 minutes later we were stopped a second time by another, less sturdy looking individual, however one who was angry we were there. He finally let us pass but did not seem happy about it. I have a plan if I ever get pulled over for spotlighting, to quickly watch the Youtube video of Christian the lion (Whitney Houston “I will always love you” version) when he is reunited with his owners, so I can be sobbing, and claim I lost my dog and I am looking for him. This did seem like a good option, not only because it would have been difficult for me to download the video in Estonia, but also would have been non believable with 8 people in a bright red vehicle.

6 March – We spent our last morning in the farm field area, saw a nice flying Ural owl and a Eurasian red squirrel crossing the road. After this we drove westwards towards Laaemaa which is close to where Tarvo lives and where he has seen lynx in the past. We stayed at the Roosta Holiday Village which was in a small pine forest based next to a beach. Tarvo had also seen pine marten in trees directly across from the restaurant at breakfast in the past. The area around the hotel had a large number of forest tracks, as well as open fields. We searched these areas around the hotel as well as the Nova River

area which is a known site for beaver. We ended up seeing more mountain hare as well as Roe deer.



7 March – In the morning we went to the Dirhami harbour mainly to look for birds. We also saw two rather curious grey seals in the water, then repeatedly would poke their heads out to look at us.



We had our second elk sighting (two individuals) and we spent the rest of the day driving the forest tracks and saw additional raccoon dog, mountain hare, and roe deer. We unsuccessfully looked for beaver a second time.



8 March – our last full day involved searching around a wind farm close to the hotel and seeing long eared owl in the morning, and a short eared owl while spotlighting. Around the forested areas we saw more roe deer and elk and at night more mountain and brown hares. We did a final beaverless sweep around the Nova river.



9 March – we drove back to Tallinn to part with the rest of the group at the airport. Tarvo had told my friend and I about Kadrioru park in Tallinn that had a habituated population

of Eurasian red squirrel. He told us many locals feed them and they were a good spot for them. The park is located about 5 minutes via taxi from the old town and is next to the Presidential Palace. While in the vehicle, I saw one squirrel on the ground, that quickly vanished when we went looking for it. We spent the next hour looking all over the forested areas of the park looking for squirrels and saw none. This may have been attributed to the large number of people walking their dogs at the time and also the large herd of small children that were screaming and playing a dodgeball type game with a cylindrical plastic object.

10 March – home

A couple thoughts about my trip -

- Sorry to be vague about where we saw things. Just like many Sri lankan trip reports, out of respect for all the hard work put in by Tarvo and Estonian Nature Tours, I did not include exact locations. I think this trip would be really difficult without local knowledge. Also, unless you speak Estonian, getting away from angry villagers who think you might be poaching would be difficult. Wise Birding is planning the trip again next year, including a possible stay in the Biome Nature Hide, which has been talked about in the forum, to look for lynx. We were unable to go to the hide because it does not open until May 2015. Jon uses the term “mammal watching birders” and this is pretty much what our group was minus my friend and myself. The trip was so well organized and Chris is one of the friendliest group leaders I have been around. I am already planning a Wise Birding trip next year. We also had one of the best group dynamics of any trip I have been on and all had a very team like approach to everything we did. I know a lot of people on this forum hate group travel. I tend to do both and there are many pros to being with other people. More people to look for things (we were so primed for things that humans, cars and even a large crane was identified as wildlife), good banter and also being exposed to new people. Two of my main travel partners are people that I have met in other countries on group tours. There can always be that one person who is annoying or complains, but that gives you someone to make fun of. I still consider myself an enthusiast with a strong desire to see as much as I can. I keep promising myself that when I grow up I'll be just like Richard Webb (I can almost not read his reports anymore just out of the “I can't believe he saw that! factor), but for now I also enjoy getting away and enjoying the country I am in as well.

-If you need to check mountain hare off your life list, go to Estonia.

-Disclaimer, I do not have an umlaut button on my keyboard so some words are not 100% correct. Estonians tend to like the umlaut.

Trip list

1. Raccoon dog – *Nyctereutes procyonoides*
2. Red fox – *Vulpes vulpes*
3. Grey Seal – *Halichoerus grypus*
4. Eurasian lynx – *Lynx lynx*
5. Wild Boar – *Sus scrofa*
6. Roe deer – *capreolus capreolus*
7. Eurasian elk (moose) *Alces alces*
8. European (brown) hare – *Lepus europaeus*
9. Mountain hare -*Lepus timidus*
10. Eurasian red squirrel – *Sciurus vulgaris*
11. European pine marten (seen by guide only) *Martes martes*

Honorary Mammals

1. Eurasian pygmy owl – *Glaucidium passerinum*
2. Ural owl – *Strix uralensis*
3. Long-eared owl – *Asio otus*
4. Short-eared owl – *Asio flammeus*