

Latvia and Estonia February 2013

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Introduction

After hearing about stable populations of Wolf as well as Lynx in the Baltic region, we decided to spend our week off in some of the wilder areas of Latvia and Estonia. A week is short to find (one of) both species but we gave it a try anyway, with a possible prospective of a future visit and a better background on the possibilities here. We visited Kemeru National Park near Riga in Latvia and then drove further to Estonia where we spent most of our time in and around Soomaa NP, Matsalu NP and Viimsi near Tallinn. No Lynx or Wolf was seen but we got quite close and the experience of visiting this region in a quiet moment of the year (most birdwatchers go in spring) with only short days and desolate, snowy landscapes was certainly rewarding.

We learned a lot about Wolf and Lynx populations in this region (both not doing too well this winter) and about how local people look upon them. Both Lynx and Wolf are still managed as game species in Estonia, leading to some sad stories during our visit. Locals told us about Wolves being shot illegally on quite a big scale, rather high hunting quota on Lynx (when a map was shown of a not so big forest area near Matsalu where 7 Lynxes were shot during winter until now, we were quite shocked...). Wolf populations are descending fastly.

On the other hand, the incredibly high forested area and low densities of inhabitants provide an ecosystem which is probably unseen in Europe. The areas looked wilder and less managed than e.g. in Sweden or Finland, which is also clear from the occurrence of some species that stand for ecologically high-quality forests: let's name just the White-backed woodpecker. Or as a local brochure states that 'more White-backed woodpeckers might live in one national park in Estonia than in the whole of Sweden'. I guess going there could maybe convince local people that Lynxes and Wolves might have a higher value alive than dead. Let's try that since the potential is huge.



Lynx tracks in Soomaa, Estonia

A short report of our trip...

- Friday February 1st : Flight to Riga and drive to Kemeru NP

We took our flight from Charleroi (Belgium) to Riga and drove to the Kemeru National Park in the evening. We stayed at the Jaunmoku Palace, which was really nice.

- Saturday February 2nd : Dundura meadows

Driving to the Dundura meadows we spotted some **Roe deer** in the fields along the road. When we arrived at the access road to the meadows the road got too snowy for our VW Golf to drive through so we had to leave the car at the farm where the gravel road begins and walked the 7-8 kilometers to the watchtower by foot. This is a great area for Wolf with wide views and good populations of Wild boar and Roe deer. **Wolf tracks** were easily found in the surrounding forests as well as **footprints of Pine marten and probably Ermine** (let's say a smaller martes spec) . We waited on the tower for about two hours overlooking the meadows with the Heck cattle and Konik horses where Wolves had been seen earlier. **Two foxes** were hunting nearby, amazingly efficient while jumping into the snow and catching about two voles in 5 minutes. Winter is very harsh here... A **White-backed woodpecker**, the symbol of the park, gave a short demonstration.



Fig. 1 Kemeru NP

In the afternoon however, visibility got very bad so our chances of seeing Wolves got close to zero for that day. As we walked back we heard a **Beaver** just about 20 meters away from us gnawing on willow branches and then plunging into the water with a great splash. Very

spectacular... The water was frozen apart from some scarce open spaces in the ice. We almost felt guilty of just being able to leave for our warm hotel room at Sander's motel.



Fig. 2 Mist coming up over the Dundura meadows

After dinner, we decided to go for a short ride through some wilder areas of the national park. We encountered **two Foxes** and parked the car on a nice spot in the forest for a short while to see if we could hear something (although it was maybe too early in Winter for Lynxes to mate) . **A young Wolf started howling**/yawning right next to us in the forest, the distance was approximately only 60 meters. Vegetation was too dense to see the animal and we decided not to go closer in order not to disturb it if it wouldn't come our way. Nevertheless again a great

experience. Since quite high numbers of recreationists are not uncommon in Spring and Summer and a busy road divides the park in the middle, staff told us that Wolves and Lynxes are extremely vulnerable in this area. We could only agree so we would not leave the path to try and catch a glimpse.

- Sunday February 3rd : Kemeru NP -Soomaa NP



Fig. 3 Frozen Baltic Sea

In the morning we drove the road of the previous night once more and saw **three Foxes** as well as an impressive **Elk** bull standing close next to the road. **Fresh wolf tracks** on the road as well. We then drove further to the Dundura meadows but the horses as well as the cows looked very relaxed and apart from some Ravens everything was quiet. On the way back to the hotel **two immature White-tailed eagles** flew overhead near the village of Slampe. Quite big **groups of Roe deer** in the fields.

In the afternoon, we started our drive to Soomaa (about four hours). A quick stop on the way there and looking over the frozen sea revealed a lot of Goosanders but very far away. Other ducks were there as well but not within reach to determinate.

Before reaching the village of Tori, we took a gravel road towards Polendmaa and found some fresh **Wolf tracks** near the village of Laati. Arriving in Joesuu, on the edge of the forests of Soomaa, in the evening we spotted **several Brown hares** (Snow hare is there too but never in very high numbers), **Foxes , Roe deer and a first Raccoon dog.**

- Monday February 4th : Soomaa NP

We left the hotel and visited the information center at first. On the way there a group of **Seven Roe deer** were seen in a field near Riisa and we found **some tracks of a dog/Wolf** that had been following the road for about three kilometers without one hesitation; in this case we tend more to think of Wolf but it's difficult to be sure. The lady from the center told us that she had seen a Lynx along the main road to Kopu in the park last year and that there were several other observations. Chances of course were still minimal.



Fig. 4 Ice-hole: refreshing!

We spoke to the man performing Wolf and Lynx research in Soomaa, we were surprised by the amount of research that was done here. Lynxes are caught here to release them in Poland and Wolves are being studied with collars. He told us that illegal poaching for both species but especially for Wolf forms a very big problem. Wolf numbers have declined strongly in a short time scale and a pack of ten Wolves that roamed here in summer 2012 mysteriously 'disappeared' during this winter. So far our chances to see Wolf during our stay in Soomaa.

Lynxes would be very difficult to find as well, since they tend to leave the national park area in winter (following the Roe deer that find more food around villages in harsh periods) and resources on their whereabouts in winter are scarce. Our chances would be higher around the villages

surrounding the park but it was hard to tell where exactly the Lynxes were active.

We made a walk through the forest to the tower overlooking the wooded meadows and found **tracks of Lynx, Wild boar, Squirrel, Capercaille and Hare which was probably Snow hare** in a dense forest like this. The meadows were quiet apart from **two Roe deer** but this should be a great area to see e.g. Wolves if they would return to the area as well as Beavers

and Elks. The path towards the tower is particularly good for Woodpeckers (Three-toed as well as White-backed), Hazel grouse and Capercaillie, Pigmy owl, ...

We drove the road to Kopu for a while and found some very **recent tracks of Lynx** (first picture of the report) following and crossing the road. It seemed like there was still some activity of the species in the park...

Back in the hotel, we got into the sauna (in Estonia people are proud of the high temperatures of about 100°C compared to Finnish sauna, which to them is really a 'cold sauna') and jumped into the kindly provided ice-hole (picture), very refreshing indeed.

Going out for some spotlighting in the evening, we saw **three Raccoon dogs and a Fox**.

- Tuesday February 5th: Soomaa NP



Fig. 5 Roe deer

On Tuesday, we made a drive through the rural areas north of Soomaa NP. Roe deer indeed were much more abundant here but we found no tracks of Lynx. A **male Black grouse** flew over the road and some local foresters said that Lynx was there 'somewhere'. The road was very bad for our car and as it kept on snowing, it got more and more difficult to drive so spotlighting here would be no option. The mix between open fields (with lots of **Roe deer**) and forested areas with some wild areas and felling surfaces looked attractive.

We drove to Pärnu for a pizza and spotlighted on a smaller road leading to Polendmaa where we had a nice view of a **hunting Ural owl**, always a very impressive species. **Roe deer and Foxes** were seen as well.

- Wednesday February 6th: Soomaa and Matsalu NP

Around dawn I went out for a short drive along the road to Kopu and watched a **Fox** hunting near Riisa. A **Squirrel** crossed the road near the Latvian watchtower near the village of Tipu. As it started snowing and I drove back to the hotel Wonderful Life of Black started playing on the radio once more, adding to the dramatic ambience of the landscape, exactly what we needed!

We had breakfast and started driving to Tallinn via Matsalu National Park. We took the small forest road to the village of Tuhu while it started snowing even harder. The forests around Tuhu are very good for Wolf, Lynx, Elk and Pine marten. A **group of Waxwings** was seen here as well as another **male Black grouse**.

The tower at Keemu was very windy but four **distant White-tailed eagles** on the frozen bay were worth the visit.



Fig. 6 Snowy weather near Tuhu, Matsalu



Fig. 7 Elk at dusk between Lihula and Haapsalu

We visited the visitor center at Penijoe and someone had found Lynx tracks near the Penijoe tower just a couple of days ago. A place where you wouldn't immediately expect them.

Driving the road from Lihula to Haapsalu around dusk was good for some close encounters with **four Elks** that are apparently a local attraction since they tend to visit the felling surfaces there for younger twigs that are left behind.

- Thursday February 7th : Tallinn

We visited Tallinn on this day. A very nice city with some lovely old churches and a lively atmosphere in the evenings (Olde Hansa, the medieval restaurant in the center was certainly worth visiting).

- Friday February 8th : Viimsi and Soomaa NP

A Lynx has moved to the Viimsi peninsula just about a 15 minute drive away from the city of Tallinn. This event even made it to a local newspaper since the Lynx was spotted there last year with two cubs in a forest area right in the middle of a rather densely populated area. She

had been seen by joggers and local people, even visiting gardens. Natourest posted this on their blog and we decided to spend a day there to see if the animal was still there.

It was snowing very hard at the time of visiting and footprints vanished within time ranges of a quarter of an hour to half an hour. We were excited about finding **tracks of a Lynx** after about half an hour of walking, these had to be very recent seen the weather conditions. It was not possible to follow the track after a while and we decided to walk around on pure luck. Snow got even harder but we managed to find new footprints. This time we could even still see the places where she had been urinating. Again, the track vanished within minutes and we agreed it was impossible to see something in this weather and decided to return to the car for our drive back to Soomaa (weather forecast for the next day was more or less the same).



Fig. 8 Taken during a three minute snow-pause at Viimsi

We realized that we had been close. Chances to see Lynx here are perhaps way much higher at this time but we didn't have enough time and the weather conditions were rather unfortunate. The abundance of tracks of Roe deer and Hares (spec.) might keep her there for a while but it is unsure what will happen in mating time...

We spotlighted along some roads around Viljandi and the long road between Kopu and Joesuu and saw **Fox and some Roe deer**.

- Saturday February 9th : Soomaa NP - Gauja NP - Riga

In the morning (not so early because we were both tired by the long trip of the previous day) I drove through some more open areas north of Soomaa national park and saw some more



Fig. 9 Striped field mouse

Roe deer, again it was snowing rather hard so visibility was limited.

Around noon we started our drive to Riga via some smaller roads and crossed the border with Latvia near the village of Killinge Nomme (which is said to hold some superb caves for bats). Here are some very nice areas with mixed open meadows and dense forests. We saw **an Elk and several Roe deer** along the road at dusk. Some old bunkers and

cellars didn't hold any wintering bats but a nice

collection of moths was present. We stopped in Cesis in Gauja National Park for two hours of skiing before heading to Riga. When leaving the ski station, a mouse suddenly jumped across the road and we could only just avoid it. I stepped out of the car and it turned out to be a **Striped field mouse**, a new species for both of us.

Arriving quite late in Riga, we managed to find some food in the Irish pub.

- Sunday February 10th : Riga and flight to Belgium

Time to say goodbye to the dark days and dense woods of the Baltic States. Within about two months this will be a birdwatcher's paradise with thousands of migrating birds, a Matsalu bay that will be full of life with the sounds of Whooper swans, returning Caspian terns and so many more, the drumming of eight species of woodpeckers, Roe deer and Elks returning to the forests with abundance of food, Bears wandering around again and open trails that allow you to make long walks through the bogs and bicycle tours in the enormous forests. For now, everything is still covered under a thick layer of snow, the Baltic sea and rivers mostly frozen, short days sometimes with only the sound of a cold wind. But less harsh times are definitely on their way.



Soomaa National Park, Estonia