



## Lynx, Wolf, Brown Bear and Bison in front of EB5 Polish observation hide

8PM - Thursday 9th April 2015. Without doubt a milestone in the EB5 saga. Wednesday, the day before, I went up to the summit where our recently built and placed EB5 large carnivore hide is situated in the Bieszczady mountains of Poland. Some final details (attaching ballhead screws, installing stove and toilet,...) had to be done before I could overnight there with my wife and daughter. A very late winter resulted in a winter plumaged surrounding. Taking a route right through the forest is a mission impossible; even with snowchains on the car, its 'a not done' when trying to keep the ride free of hazards. Always safety first! So, instead of a 17K drive through prime large mammal habitat, there was no other solution than taking a 34K detour on public roads. Not always a disadvantage doing this. Both families who came over the following week saw a wolf pack of nine crossing the road while on the detour. In Bieszczady animals strike for sure!

Anyway, after a meet and greet with my local fellow Martin, we went uphill to the hide. Only advantage of the snow was the fact we could use a sledge to transport a full gas bottle of 30 Kilo instead of playing human camel.

Next day I went up again with my wife and daughter. This time heavily packed with sleeping bags, optics, snacks and beverages, laptop and cartoon books (to kill time for my daughter). Different too were weather circumstances: instead of snowing as yesterday, we had a full blue sky and spring temperatures of 13 °C! Being accompanied by my eight year old daughter the hike was rather a stroll; time enough to inspect mud and snow while walking up. In the usual mosaic of footprints/scats that is guaranteed here, I determined the presence of Roe and Red Deer, Wild Boar, Badger, Wolf, European Bison, Red Fox and very promising: Eurasian Lynx. But ofcourse, this forest phantom dweller is always a long time gone or watching you from an invisible vantage point. On the other hand, there is always the possibility of a lucky encounter, especially when taking in to account the number of signs of the magic cat at this stakeout. Moreover, last year we heard a lynx nearby too. Even more exciting was a recent Lynx sighting by my fellow Martin nearby. Driving along a forest road, he encountered a mother with three full grown cubs in the beam of his car lights; all four of them seated on the forest road staring at him. Worth mentioning too are the words of Bison researcher Ewa: 'I don't know why, but this year we have good numbers of lynx in this area.' But I never gave it a second thought let alone dreamt of what actually would transpire three hours later...

Once at the summit, we enjoyed the warmth of the late afternoon before entering the hide. With a drumming Black Woodpecker, whistling Hazel Hen and a displaying Goshawk the resident birds were doing the same. Winter definitely took too long for them too! Late afternoon migration of birds was a remarkable sight too. While scanning the splendid Carpathian view, the binoculars revealed the following species on passage: White Stork, Black Stork, Cranes, Golden Eagle, Lesser Spotted Eagle, Marsh Harrier and Ring Ouzel. In contrast with the abundance of bear tracks we found in three different valleys over the previous days, there were none here. Definitely too early as grass in the surrounding meadows is not yet lush green enough for the Bears to forage on. Only two Ravens appeared at the baiting site (corn, turnips) and once it was dusk they left the scene in peace. Once darkness fell, I decided to dig out my LED lenser torch I had brought with me. The hide offers a small window especially designed for this purpose. Early in the season, and not being in Scandinavia, this is a must to increase potential eye sightings of animals. So I opened the small window, placed my hand outside, turned on the torch and scanned the small grassy field in front of the hide. Right in the middle of the field, a distance of 35m, there he was: an adult lynx in the beam of light. All of a sudden my daughter was out of her sleeping bag and watching this seldom seen cat showing its features the full monty way: long legs, white belly, brown back, paws and body with little black spots, tufted ears, beard, stubby black-tipped tail. Watching us, obviously less excited and euphoric than we were, it sniffed the ground, stretched its front paws, curled its little stumpy black-tipped tail and continued its stroll through the field down to the line of spruce bordering the field, walked parallel with the border before disappearing behind it. Two very intense minutes. Not more. A magical moment for sure!

Was this more than just major luck? Time and more hide sessions will reveal the answer on that. But honestly, apart from the previously described positive info on Lynxes in the area, I am quite sure our hide is placed besides a walking pattern of a Lynx that is resident in the area. Let's hope more will follow!

Did we see anything else that night? Two Red Foxes, Roe Deer, a bunch of nine Wild Boar (all night long) and a perched Ural Owl on a branch of the chimney tree right beside the hide. Altogether not bad for a first night in the EB5 large carnivore hide! Apart from this Lynx sighting, I already had a Wolf sighting, found a grazing herd of Bison, had active Beavers near their lodge at four different sites plus video footage of several Brown Bears near the baiting sites of the Polish Forest Department (for deer and Wild Boar hunting later in the season).

Monday 13th April: we (myself, wife and daughter) were again in the hide. Much milder temperatures this time! A bright blue clear sky revealed nice afternoon spring migration with Common Crane, Hoopoe, Lesser-spotted Eagle, both White and Black Stork, Ring Ouzel, Marsh Harrier and a Weasel and a Badger. The early evening and night were rather blank regarding large carnivores. That's at least what our eyes (no night vision) informed us. Next morning trailcam images revealed something else as a Bear sneaked in several times to the baiting site. Even during dusk! Half an hour before midnight, a very short LED lenser lighting session pimped our human eye qualities: a big Bear rushed parallel with the row of spruce! Another marvelous moment after the smashing Lynx encounter earlier! Being satisfied, and to disturb wildlife as little as possible, we went to sleep for a couple of hours.

At 4.40 am; half an hour before dawn I was seated in one of the comfortable car seats in front of the hide windows. 'That bear must pop up again' I thought and then, at 5.25 am Teddy appeared on the scene. Quite a big, adult Brown Bear approached the baiting site from behind the most right hand corner where the row of spruce ended. I stood up as quietly as possible so as to wake my daughter and wife and immediately pointed my scope at the Bear. The Bear must have heard something and disappointingly for us it turned around and ran off straight away. 'Damn!' Three people awake but the target gone! Fortunately it soon reappeared and started feeding. We enjoyed this magic moment for 12 intense minutes! As the sun rose, the Bear must have thought that, with the increasing amount of light, the scene was too bright for him to stay around. In seconds it had left the scene, passing the trailcam as it went.

Also, the trailcam images showed that during the evening of the 14th the Bear appeared again as did a lone Wolf during the bright light of the afternoon.

Wednesday 15th April a group of people from both Belgian families (guided by EB5 in the area) occupied the hide. Just half an hour after going into the hide a lone Wolf appeared in the bright light of the afternoon. It inspected the baiting area, from the left forest cover bordering the field, for about two minutes before leaving. Perhaps because it was too bright or it was just a little too open to stroll around this time of day. Of course, they are probably aware that the baiting site is not natural. Similar to Spain, these animals do behave very shyly in such circumstances. A typical feature is that they hold their tail below their body, and keep on the move. As dusk fell and it had the advantage of being less visual, the animal reappeared, continuously moving around the baiting site for a period of 40 minutes. As soon as it left Foxes took over, but no Bear this time. Next morning at the crack of dawn a herd of 11 Bison were seen crossing the opposite meadow and were visible from the hide.

Thursday 16th April, one family occupied the hide. They had a similar experience as the previous night with Wolf and Bison being seen from the hide. The only difference being a duo of Wolves appearing around dusk rather than one. Stunning for them was a sudden encounter with a wolf that crossed a paved road just in front of their car on the way back to the cabin. In the end a pack of nine individuals -standing in a roadside field – were counted. Amazing! Video-footage of that encounter on the EB5 facebook chapter.

To summarise, all the main mammal targets, and a lot more besides, were seen in just four nights of hide watching in Bieszczady. More will follow without doubt. With shorter periods of darkness during the forthcoming spring and summer the chances of good sightings will only increase!

If you are interested in using the hide: do not hesitate to send an email to me.

Advice about where to sleep in between and where to eat can also be given.

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