

A short visit to Czech Republic

Czech republic is not a popular destination for mammal watchers. It is better known for Prague, beer, tennis players, beautiful women and successful hockey teams. Well, it has all of that and much more. Czech Republic is also blessed with fantastic landscapes hundreds of castles and manors, picturesque villages, good kitchen, friendly people and the largest network of cycling paths in Europe.

The country is also reasonably forested (33,4% of the land surface), well stocked with animals and knowledgeable naturalists (sadly hunters in most cases) who are able help tracking wildlife. It also has disciplined local population (low level of poaching) and growing eco awareness. For those who had a chance to grow up in Central Europe Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia in those days) was also home to famous cartoon character- highwayman Rumcajs (Loupežník Rumcajs) eager environmentalist protecting his home Řáholci forest from bad local prince willing to chop it down (sorry! develop the unproductive area). I'm sure that for many of us Rumcajs was an important source of inspiration.

Czech republic has a typical central European set of mammals with three large carnivores (wolf, lynx and brown bear), couple of small ones (wild cat, beech and stone martens, badger, red fox, weasel, hermit) and numerous herbivores (Eurasian elk, roe and red deer). Taking into account the popularity of hunting number of game species, such as: fallow, white tailed and sika deer, chamois, wild sheep (mouflon), raccoon dog and European rabbit were introduced in the country. The full list of Czech mammals with a distribution maps is available on the page <http://savci.biolib.cz>.

Sadly the population of large carnivores in Czech Republic is relatively small and restricted to two mountainous regions (mostly Šumava National park and Male Karpaty). Šumava also hosts the only resident population of moose in the country. Interestingly that species has recolonized Czech republic spontaneously, after being expatriated in nineteenth century. Now Czech elks form the southernmost sub population of the species. Czech republic is also on the limit of distribution of jackals, but you are unlikely to see them.

Visitors in Czech Republic are guaranteed to see large numbers of roe deer and hare (in strong decline in Central Europe). Red deer are also fairly common. Wild

boar are rarely seen (hunting pressure), but present all over the country. Introduced fallow deer and mouflons are present in most mountainous areas. Chamois can be observed in Karkonose Mountains.

I had a chance to visit Czech republic on several occasions hiking, among others, in Šumava, Czech Switzerland (České Švýcarsko), Karkonoše and, recently Podyj National Parks.

1. Podyj

Podyj/Thayatal National Park is a transnational protected area combining Austrian and Czech national parks (interestingly all Czech national parks are part of transnational protected areas). The total surface of the park is only 73km², but it has a high level of biodiversity, interesting landscapes and reasonable set of mammals.

As elsewhere in the EU there is no border checks and crossing between Austrian and Czech protected areas is trouble free.

Podyj/Thayatal parks protects beautifully forested valley of the river Dyje (Thaya in Austria). The canyon of the river creates numerous meanders and it is surrounded by deeply incised valleys of side streams, variety of rock formations, boulder fields and rocky cliffs.

Several well marked trails allows to hike all along the park from Znojmo up to Vranov nad Dyje village. The hike, which usually take two to three days to accomplish, is easy and allows, not only to see mammals on the road but also many cultural monuments such as old town in Znojmo (place of discoveries made by Gregor Johann Mendel), castles in Podmoli, Hardegg and Vranov and vineyards of Sobes.

Accommodation is available in all villages bordering the park (in local B&B called "penzion"). Regional portal <http://www.znojemsko.info> provides information on the available places. Another portal (<http://www.mapy.cz>) makes all tourist maps of Czech republic available on line (choose "Turistická" from the banner on the left). Web pages www.nppodyji.cz and www.np-thayatal.at provide more scientific info on the national parks.

Podyj/Thayatal is easily accessible by public transport from two sides of the border. You can either fly to Vienna or to Prague and then take the train (to Retz from Austrian or Znojmo from the Czech side of the border). Starting the hike from Znojmo is more practical, as the town virtually borders the park.

Ticks are common in Podyj (as elsewhere in Central European forest), and carry of a number of diseases (including Lyme). Checking of cloths and body after a hike should make part of daily routine.

A total of 152 species of bird, 7 species of reptiles and 65 species of mammal have been recorded in Podyj/Thayatal. During my recent hike I had a chance to spot roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), hare (*Lepus europaeus*), red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and a red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) there.

The highlight of my trip in Podyj/Thayatal was spotting of European otter (*Lutra lutra*) in the Dyje river, near the village of Hnanice around the place called Judexuv mlym. First time on my checklist!

Of course there is a number of mammals I missed, including bats and rodents (17 species present in national park). Podyj is also considered to be an important stronghold for two species of dormice but I missed that as well. Parks authorities conducts the programme of reintroduction of wildcats, but they are very shy and rarely seen by hikers.

2. Šumava

Šumava National Park has a surface of 68 064 ha It also borders German Bavarian Forest National Park (*Nationalpark Bayerischer Wald*) of 24 217 ha. Together combined, those two protected areas form one of the largest forest in Central Europe.

The park protects complex of forested hills (alluvial spruce forests in the valleys, mixed mountain forests on the hillsides and mountain spruce forests in the high areas) dotted with peat bogs and small lakes. Due to the large area of the forest and good protection measures the place is known for number of mammals and bird species.

The undisputed king of Šumava/Bavarian Forest complex is European Lynx successfully reintroduced to the area. The extent of the lynx territories can by

consulted on the web page <http://www.luchserleben.de/na-stope/>. Other large carnivores such as bear and wolf were eradicated from the mountains in 19th century.

Šumava also host three forest species of the grouse family- capercaillie, black grouse, and hazel grouse.

The most common mammals in the forest are roe and red deer. Elk is rarely seen as it tends to stay in the wooded areas. Unfortunately hunting is still allowed in the park, which makes ungulates rather vigilant.

The park is easily accessible from both German and Czech sides of the border. An excellent network of trails allow trouble free exploration of the place. Two day long hike from Zelezna Ruda up to Strazny village leads trough the most interesting parts of the park. Accommodation in "pension" is available in most of the small villages on the road, such as: Prasily, Srni, Modrava, Kvilda and Borova Lada. The park is situated close to the famous and beautiful city of Cesky Krumlov.

During my hike in Šumava NP I have a chance to see all three species of deer (red, roe and elk) as well as couple of small forest rodents. I was also happy to see all three species of grouse in one place, which a very unusual in this part of Europe.

To sum up. Czech Republic is worth a visit both for hikers and mammal watchers alike. The country is beautiful and friendly. It can also provide interesting wildlife observations.

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