

Bulgaria Mammal Report: 10 to 17 May 2015

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Striped Field Mouse (*Apodemus agrarius*)

Introduction

Bulgaria is an interesting destination for the European mammal enthusiast. The country contains Europe's highest density of Golden Jackals along with thriving populations of Brown Bear and Grey Wolf. Although extremely elusive, Eurasian Lynx numbers are said to be increasing, while other exciting natives include both Marbled and Steppe Polecat. Bat diversity is also high with almost all of Europe's bat species recorded in the country. For the serious mammal aficionado sought after Bulgarian rodents include Romanian Hamster, Balkan Short-tailed Mouse and the extremely rare Roach's Mouse-tailed Dormouse.

Despite the above I'd never seriously considered Bulgaria as a holiday destination, that is until Sarah suggested we visit for a week in May 2015. Although the vacation was primarily for relaxation purposes, we booked hotels well away from the burgeoning tourist strips on the Black Sea coastline. With easy access to the countryside I was able to set small mammal traps most nights and enjoyed plenty of opportunities for late evening drives in search of wildlife.

Travel details

Flights with budget airlines from the UK to Bulgaria are relatively cheap, especially if purchased as part of a package tour. As usual we booked our trip last minute and choices were limited. We ended up flying with Wizz Air from Luton to Bourgas which was hassle free both ways. Our hire car (Nissan Qashqai SUV) came courtesy of Budget and was in very good condition (at least when we

collected it!). A common theme in birding trip reports from Bulgaria seems to be cars hired out in very poor condition.

When the roads are good, driving in Bulgaria is far more pleasurable than the travel guides have you believe. Unfortunately many routes are in very poor condition with huge potholes even on major highways. Police speed traps are routine and it's mandatory that drivers use their headlights in the day time. Failure to do so will ensure you are pulled up and cautioned (or fined) at the next police checkpoint!

In recent years several Bulgarian based birding/eco tour companies have started to offer mammal focused trips, including bear and wolf watching. Although I much prefer to find my own wildlife when I can, both Spatia Wildlife (spatiawildlife.com) and Neophrone (neophron.com) cater for general nature enthusiasts and should be able to provide a suitable guide for those that require one.

North-eastern Bulgaria: 10 to 15 May 2015

For the first five nights of the trip we were based at the fabulous Villa Bulgara Eco (villabulgaraeco.com) in the tiny village of Kyulevcha (Shumen Province). The landscape around the hotel was dominated by a huge rocky outcrop and the surrounding farmland and forest was a haven for wildlife. Farmland birds now extremely rare in the UK were abundant, no doubt benefiting from the traditional agricultural practices favoured in this part of Europe.

Daytime exploration around the quiet country roads and farm tracks didn't reveal many mammals although two **Red Deer** crossed the forested road (2082) east of Kyulevcha early one morning. We also found a large **European Souslik** colony in a meadow on the outskirts of Snezhina (N43.16139 E27.25835).

Night drives were more productive with the roads almost free from traffic after dark. **Red Foxes** were numerous especially in the small villages and several sightings were of vixens with tiny cubs. **Beech Martens** also proved fairly common with at least four seen in the area around our hotel. The road between Madara and Kaspichan (2006) seemed especially good for this species. A single **Eastern Hedgehog** was spotted not far from our hotel in Kyulevcha while numerous *Apodemus* mice (most likely Wood and Yellow-necked Mice) were seen on the roads at night.

The hotel owner was a keen outdoorsman and confirmed that Golden Jackals are quite numerous in the area. However, they are extremely shy due to hunting pressure and some luck is required to see them. On one night drive we had a probable jackal cross the forested section of road east of Kyulevcha but it was distant and with so many dogs and foxes in the area I was not totally convinced. Several days later I was on the third floor hotel balcony at 2am waiting for the hotel owner to arrive with a key (long story involving being locked out of our room by a member of staff). A dog in the neighbouring house became extremely agitated and I looked down to see a **Golden Jackal** trotting nonchalantly down the road. Although undeterred by the barking dog, the jackal quickly disappeared down a side track once it heard the owner's truck approaching. By this time I had seen several more jackals (see below) but I was still very happy at such close views

despite the unusual circumstances. The hotel owner was less delighted with being dragged out of bed in the early hours and I wouldn't have liked to have been in the shoes of his staff the next morning.



European Sousek (*Spermophilus citellus*)

With so many interesting small mammals in the area I dedicated quite a bit of time to live trapping. I avoided placing traps in woodland so not to capture scores of Wood and Yellow-necked Mice and instead concentrated on field margins and areas of damp meadow. I had no success on the edges of crop fields perhaps because the corn was already quite high and the animals had moved away from the margins. The grassy areas around the hotel were slightly more fruitful and I captured both **Wood Mice** and **Striped Field Mice** over a couple of nights. I was a little disappointed not to have captured any shrews or voles but I did find a **Lesser White-toothed Shrew** hiding under a piece of discarded junk in the same area.

Nos Kaliakra

One of the best places to look for Marbled Polecat, Steppe Polecat and Romanian Hamster in Bulgaria are the arid remnant steppes on the Black Sea coast near Kavarna. The Nos Kaliakra headland is a protected nature reserve and is popular with birdwatchers keen to observe the migration of raptors, storks and pelicans.

I didn't have enough time to explore the area properly but I was determined to make a couple of visits to see what I could find in terms of mammals. Unfortunately things didn't go as planned with our first late afternoon recce curtailed by a flat tyre. By the time we had replaced the half-sized, underinflated spare tyre we were too far from the reserve to make the first visit viable.

The next day we made the 2.5 hour trip from our hotel and spent the day exploring the Nos Kaliakra area, paying particular attention to any tracks we could spotlight at night. The main road in from Kavarna (and through Balgarevo) passes through fantastic pseudo-steppe and eventually

leads past a pay booth (unmanned at night) and to an old fort at the tip of the headland. The restaurant at the end is surprisingly upmarket and serves nice food, while Bottle-nosed Dolphins are often seen offshore.



About 1 km from the tip of the headland a road leads inland (north) passing through more steppe habitat before reaching a marsh and beach after a couple of kms. Incidentally the wetland proved to be a good place to see Dice Snakes and is home to some very nervous European Pond Turtles. These roads together with the many wind turbine service tracks (drivable with care *or* a hire car) all cross suitable habitat for polecats and hamsters. During daylight we tried without success to find any of the souslik colonies which would later attract predators. Other wildlife was abundant and it was easy to pass the time driving around the various tracks.

At this point I should mention that the military occupy a couple of small bases on the headland and the military police patrol the roads day and night in a Land Rover Defender. Obviously care should be taken not to stray anywhere near restricted areas and it's advisable to have a note written in Bulgarian explaining what you're doing. I managed to avoid confrontation during my short visit by turning down side tracks whenever I suspected the Land Rover was approaching. Needless to say this tactic would not last very long before the police became suspicious.

A pre dusk drive away from the headland for fuel and snacks produced our first serious mammals of the evening. A **European Hare** was spotted in a field near to Kavarna, while a quiet back road near Topola produced a **Badger** and **Golden Jackal** in quick succession. Back at Nos Kaliakra we fired up the spotlight and began working the headland roads. In several hours we saw a **Beech Marten**, many **Red Foxes** and a couple of **Golden Jackals**. With so many fantastic mammals on offer I could have continued spotlighting all night. However, when Sarah fell asleep at the wheel for the third or fourth time we decided to make the long drive back to our hotel seeing an **Eastern Hedgehog** en route.

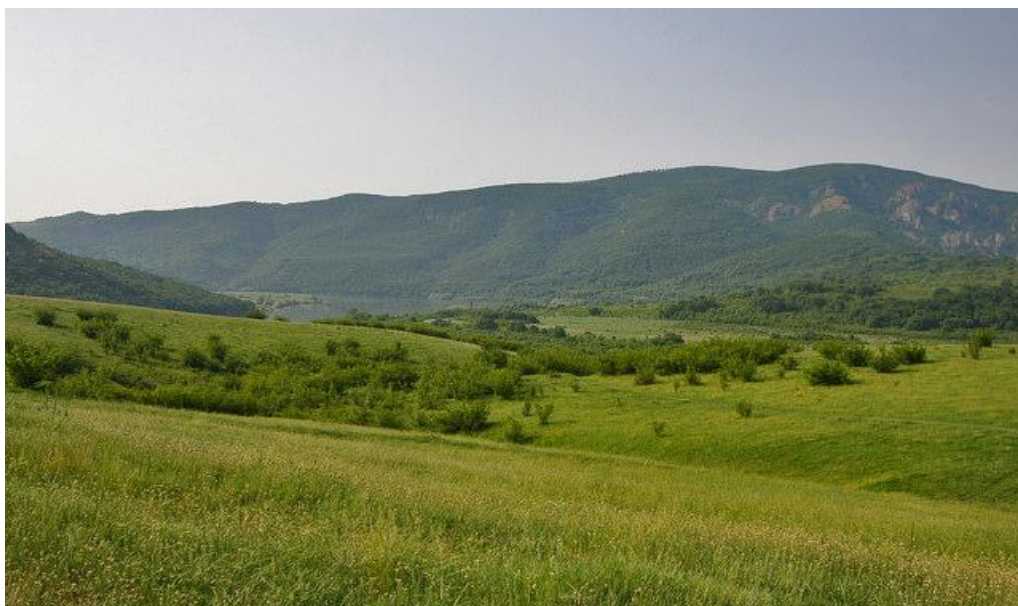


European Hare (*Lepus europaeus*)

There is no doubt that Nos Kavarna has much to offer the mammal enthusiast, with both Steppe and Marbled Polecat possible with lots of work. It may also be worth trapping for Romanian Hamster although this may not be advisable in the actual reserve. I certainly hope to return some time in the not too distant future for a more dedicated spotlighting session, perhaps staying in Balgarevo or Kavarna to maximise time at the reserve

South-eastern Bulgaria: 15 to 17 May 2015

For a change of scenery we opted to spend our last two nights in Svilengrad where we stayed at the Parish Hotel (recommended). All our remaining time was spent in the Eastern Rhodopes where we enjoyed spectacular landscapes and fantastic wildlife.



Hoping to catch a Sibling Vole or Balkan Short-tailed Mouse I set my traps in damp meadows well away from areas of woodland. I was therefore quite disappointed to find my only captives were some unusually coloured **Wood Mice** and a single **Striped Field Mouse** (the latter actually out of range in this part of Bulgaria according to the IUCN map).

While driving towards the village of Efrem early afternoon I saw a **European Wildcat** walking along the edge of a small patch of woodland. Although the cat quickly disappeared into the trees I saw it well enough to note the various characteristics that differentiate Wildcats from their domestic relatives. On this animal the thick clubbed tail with black rings was particularly impressive.

A roadside cliff face (N4139.230 E2552.223) near Madzharovo is reportedly home to a small colony of European Free-tailed Bats so I spent an hour waiting for them to emerge at dusk. I never saw any free-tails but good numbers of *Myotis* bats exited the large cave at the foot of the cliff and some *Pipistrelle* sp. fluttered overhead. I'm afraid that without a bat detector and not wanting to miss the free-tail emergence I neglected the other bat species, although from other people's observations it's probable the smaller species were Savi's Pipistrelles. Driving back to the hotel we saw **European Hare** and **Red Fox**, while the roads crossing the flat agricultural land nearer to Svilengrad were alive with *mus* mice, probably **Balkan Short-tailed Mice**.

Mammals aside, the Rhodopes are a herpetologist's paradise. Without trying I found some fantastic amphibians and reptiles including Common Tree Frog, Aesculapian Snake and Nose-horned Viper.



Nose-horned Viper (*Vipera ammodytes*)

Needless to say a day and a half in the Eastern Rhodopes barely scratched the surface of this beautiful area. With more time I would have liked to explore some of the abandoned buildings for bat roosts. This would be tricky as it's surprisingly hard to determine which of the seemingly derelict houses are actually occupied. Clearly some local knowledge or a command of Bulgarian would be advantageous here. Mist netting over the river would also be productive with potential

captures including Greater Noctule and Golden Myotis. Other interesting mammals present in the area include Edible and Forest Dormouse, Grey Wolf and Eurasian Otter.

Bourgas area: 17 May 2015

Driving back to Bourgas airport mid afternoon I thought my mammal watching would be restricted to the occasional road-killed jackal or marten. With time at a premium we opted to take the fastest routes including the 79 – a surprisingly traffic free, newly paved single lane highway. Approximately 50 km from Bourgas we saw a relatively fresh road-killed European Wildcat on the hard shoulder. Not giving it much thought we continued on our journey and ten minutes later I spotted another **European Wildcat**, only this one was very much alive. It was walking along a concrete drainage ditch paralleling the road, perhaps looking for the many dead snakes that littered the asphalt. Like the cat we saw the previous day in the Rhodopes, this animal quickly disappeared into the forest once we turned the car around. However, our views were good enough to rule out feral domestic cat. Not a bad finale to an excellent week in Bulgaria.

Species seen

1.	Eastern Hedgehog <i>Erinaceus concolor</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual seen late night south of Kavarna (13 May). • One seen late evening in Kyulevcha (14 May). • Common road kill.
2.	Lesser White-toothed Shrew <i>Crocidura suaveolens</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single animal found under artificial refugia in Kyulevcha (14 May).
3.	Golden Jackal <i>Canis aureus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probable seen late evening east of Kyulevcha (12 May). • One observed crossing road at dusk near Topola (13 May). • At least two seen in spotlight late at night at Nos Kaliakra (13 May). • Individual watched briefly at close range in Kyulevcha early hours of 14 May.
4.	Red Fox <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common and seen daily throughout trip. • Especially numerous on night drives, in particular on the edge of villages.
5.	Beech Marten <i>Martes foina</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At least four observed on night drives around Kyulevcha. • One seen while spotlighting at Nos Kaliakra (13 May).

6.	Badger <i>Meles meles</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief sighting of animal crossing road at dusk near resort of Topoli (13 May).
7.	European Wildcat <i>Felis silvestris</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One seen well, albeit briefly early afternoon near Efrem in Eastern Rhodopes (16 May). Second individual seen from road late afternoon, approximately 40km from Bourgas (17 May). <p>With both sightings the structure of the cat together with pelage markings were consistent with true Wildcat and neither showed obvious signs of hybridisation with domestic cats.</p>
8.	Red Deer <i>Cervus elaphus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two crossed road distantly east of Kyulevcha early morning on 15 May.
9.	European Hare <i>Lepus europaeus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One seen in field early evening near Kavarna (13 May). Single animal observed at dusk near Madzharovo (15 May).
10.	European Souselik <i>Spermophilus citellus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large colony observed late morning in a meadow outside Snezhina (11 May).
11.	Striped Field Mouse <i>Apodemus agrarius</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two trapped in meadow near Kyulevcha (12 May). Single trapped in meadow near Borislavtsi in Eastern Rhodopes. This site is slightly out of range for the species according to IUCN range map.
12.	Wood Mouse <i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two trapped in farmland/meadow habitat in Kyulevcha (12, 15 May). Two trapped in meadow in Eastern Rhodopes (16, 17 May). Many <i>Apodemus</i> seen crossing roads at night in vicinity of Kyulevcha. It is likely these were both <i>A. sylvaticus</i> and <i>A. flavicollis</i> (Yellow-necked Mouse).
13.	Balkan Short-tailed Mouse <i>Mus macedonicus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The many <i>Mus</i> mice seen crossing the road late night in the treeless, flat agricultural areas near Svilengrad were most likely this species.

Conclusion

In terms of mammal watching the trip was moderately successful with some nice species observed with minimum effort. Highlights were multiple sightings of Golden Jackal, Beech Marten and European Wildcat.

I was a little disappointed with the mammal trapping, although I'm sure I would have fared better later in the summer when rodent and shrew densities are naturally higher. Adding dried mealworms to the bait mix (for shrews) also proved problematic as the traps were quickly swarmed by ants, even in the wet meadows.

It would have been nice to spend more time exploring Nos Kaliakra where I believe there is a good chance of observing both Marbled and Steppe Polecat. The former at least is occasionally seen by birders. I also virtually ignored bats on this trip, something I would be sure to rectify on a future visit.

In addition to the mammals Bulgaria turned out to be a fantastic country for other wildlife and proved a pleasant place to unwind from the stresses of modern life for a week.

