

## Estonia Mammal Trip

2nd - 8th May 2010 Phil Telfer

Have just spent a very enjoyable and interesting week searching for mammals and other wildlife in Estonia.

The trip was organised through Estonia nature tours - [www.naturetours.ee](http://www.naturetours.ee) which is very efficiently run by Marika Mann.

It's only a small country, bordering Russia, but with over 50% of the land covered in Taiga forest it holds strong populations of Lynx, Wolf and Brown bear as well as other interesting mammals such as Raccoon dog, Elk, Beaver and Flying squirrel. Within Europe the Flying squirrel is found only in Estonia and Finland, and having failed to see one in Finland this was a priority species for me on this trip.

They have a new and comfortable bear hide in a forest clearing and as well as bears, wolf and racoon dog are sometimes seen here. The roads in Estonia are good with just light traffic and the forests are criss-crossed with many driveable tracks, which give good potential for spotlighting. Walking these tracks during the day revealed many footprints of wolf, lynx, bear, elk, wild boar, racoon dog and pine marten.

The accommodation was always comfortable and spacious and the food was something else, probably the best I've had on any trip. We met with several different specialist guides who spoke good English and were very enthusiastic and knowledgeable on their subject.

The country also has an amazing number of birds, common crane, hazel grouse, black grouse and even capercaillie were all fairly common and without putting in much effort we also saw wryneck, penduline tit, citrine wagtail, great snipe, woodcock, lesser spotted eagle, Montagu's harrier, bean goose, spotted redshank, gargany and breeding ruff.

This all adds up to making a great trip destination with the bonus that it's only a two hour hop on Easyjet from Stansted.

Day 1 sun 2nd may

Arrived into Tallin at 10 in the evening where I was met by Marika from Estonian Nature Tours and introduced to my fellow traveller, Ben Hoare from BBC Wildlife magazine who was to prepare an article on Estonia. We then met our driver, Tarvo Valker who was also our bird guide a job he proved to be very good at. We then drove away from Tallin to the east for about 60 miles to Lahemaa national park where we checked into the Vihula Manor House and had a late dinner.

Day 2 mon 3rd may

Today we visited 2 forest reserves, Ohepalu and Korvamaa close to Lahamaa. We were accompanied by 2 local mammal-tracking experts, Bert Rahni and Triin Ivando who really knew their animal signs and gave us lots of interesting information on the mammals of Estonia. We saw much evidence of activity of Elk, Wild boar, badgers and footprints of Lynx, Wolf, Bear and racoon dog, the latter apparently very numerous.

After darkness and a picnic dinner, we spotlighted our way out of the forest seeing 6 or 7 wild boar and on joining the main road a red fox ran across. A few minutes later we found 2 Raccoon dogs off the left side but they quickly disappeared into the forest and I didn't get a good look. Within another 10 minutes there was more green eyeshine from 2 animals in a field ahead and as we approached a Raccoon dog trotted across the road in front of the vehicle and off into a field on the other side giving a great view.

Day 3 tues 4th may

Today was Flying squirrel day and we drove to Oonurme in the north east of the country close to the Russian border. At the village visitor centre we met Uudo Timm the flying squirrel specialist who has been studying them for 25 years. During the day we were shown the habitat of the squirrels in flooded forest including some old nest holes after which we were taken for a wonderful home cooked dinner at a local farm. We re-joined Uudo at 8pm and went to a forest area known as Palasi. Here Uudo has a couple of radio-tagged squirrels and the plan was to visit nest holes and wait for an animal to emerge. We were in luck and the signals indicated a resident squirrel at the second tree we visited. Even better the hole was much lower down than others we'd seen only about 7 metres up and in a dry area so we laid down on the forest floor to wait. After about an hour and just before darkness the signal changed showing the animal was moving about and as we focused on the hole the squirrel's face appeared to check what was going on around its home. After a few moments it emerged fully and spent a few minutes scampering about the tree gradually going higher before launching into a fantastic glide right over our heads to a tree about 50 feet away. It repeated this with another climb and glide and then was gone - a really fantastic sighting. We invited Uudo back to the guesthouse for some celebratory drinks and learned more about his efforts to conserve the squirrels. Overnight at the pleasant Matsu guesthouse.

Day 4 weds 5th may

A 5am start this morning to the Sirtsu nature reserve, a large forest area in the Alutaguse area of Eastern Estonia which has the country's highest concentration of Brown bears and also healthy Lynx and Wolf populations.

We again found many tracks but the only mammal sightings were a Red fox and a couple of Roe deer. We did however get nice looks at a pair of Montagu's harriers and a fine male Capercaillie out in the open on a forest road.

The night was spent in the bear hide. There's actually 2 hides, one for 8 people and the other for 2. They were well equipped with chairs at the viewing window, bunk beds with roll mats and sleeping bag and a dry toilet.

At 5.30 pm in the afternoon, Ben and I settled into the 2 person hide armed with a packed dinner and a flask of tea. About 50 metres away was a horse carcass and a camera trap set to record any action. Bears had been seen for the first time this year only a couple of days before so we were delighted when 2 bears appeared at around 9.30 pm still in good daylight. It was a male and female engrossed in play-fighting. This went on for about 10 minutes and was great to watch but they then sauntered off without going to the carcass. At 10 pm they were back and this time one of the bears stood right by our viewing window no more than 10 feet away, really impressive at that range. The other bear fed at the carcass for a few minutes but they were nervy and again disappeared after 5 or 10 minutes but by now it was starting to get quite dark.

Day 5 thurs 6th may

We left the bear hide at 7.30 am and drove back to the Matsu guesthouse for breakfast where we said our goodbyes to Bert and Triin and wished them well for their bear watching enterprise.

We then drove to Southern Estonia to the Ardla wetlands area and checked into the luxurious Trofee guesthouse set on the banks of a river.

Spent the afternoon birdwatching at the wetlands and onto Karevere for the evening at the Great snipe lek where 4 or 5 birds were performing well.

Day 6 fri 7th may

Up again at 5am to meet the the Beaver specialist, Remek Meel at the Emajogi river for a boat safari. The river had disappeared in flood, we could have been at sea and this morning the weather had turned against us, cold, windy and driving rain. All in waterproofs we decided to try and the boat struggled in the waves for an hour and a half. Amazingly we did briefly spot a beaver as we sat huddled in the boat cold and soaked. We decided to pack it in early and returned to warm up and dry at the hotel arranging to meet Remek later to try for beavers in their forest habitats.

Meeting Remek again the weather was now fine and sunny and we were taken to several beaver lodges in various settings and had good sightings of 3 different animals. En-route to one of these we saw an Arctic Hare at the side of the road and later several Wild boar bolted across the road in front of the vehicle.

Day 7 sat 8th may

Final day and after some relaxed birding a farewell lunch before driving back to Tallin for the return flight.

Mammal list

Arctic Hare

Wild boar

Red fox

Racoon dog

Roe deer

Siberian Flying squirrel

Brown bear

Striped field mouse

Beaver

So overall a very enjoyable and successful trip, we surprisingly missed seeing Elk and spotlighting the forest roads would give a chance of Lynx and Wolf.