



Estonia

February 19 2024 – February 24 2024

Lennart Verheuvell

www.naturebylennart.com

Introduction

While spotting an Iberian Lynx can almost be guaranteed with a week-long trip to the right areas in Spain at the right time of year, finding a Eurasian Lynx is an entirely different challenge. Despite its vast range, the Eurasian Lynx remains elusive. However, what was once an unattainable ghost has become slightly more accessible, thanks to emerging hotspots where sightings are increasingly reported. The Tibetan Plateau in China is one such place, though it's usually visited as part of a larger trip. Similarly, the Indian Himalayas occasionally yield Eurasian Lynx sightings, often as a "bycatch" during Snow Leopard-focused trips.

For many Western mammal watchers, Europe is the natural starting point for seeking this species. While Eurasian Lynx are present in numerous countries, sightings are typically a matter of great luck, often limited to residents or locals. In Romania and Poland, dedicated lynx-watching trips have been running for years with some success, making these countries worthy of consideration. However, Estonia currently seems to stand out as the most promising destination.

Since I am someone with a goal to see all wild cats of the world, Eurasian Lynx was obviously one I wanted to look for eventually, but I hadn't been too hurried to go on a dedicated trip. In my opinion there will always be an opportunity to go look for Eurasian Lynx and this might not be the case for other cats with much less known spots to go look for them. However you can only postpone things for so long. With my friends Arie-Wilem van der Wal and Jacob Molenaar I have spent quite some nights in the province of Limburg in the Netherlands to look for European Wild Cat. On one of these nights we talked about taking it up a notch: let's go for the big one!

With only a week available, I knew we needed a special location to maximize our chances of success. Estonia came to mind immediately. A little research allowed us to plan an independent trip, focusing on Eurasian Lynx for four nights, with an additional day dedicated to spotting rare ducks (Steller's Eider). Flights, car rental, and accommodation were quickly arranged, but as we delved deeper, we realized local guidance might significantly improve our odds.

After some more researching it was clear to us that Estonia's lynx success rides solely on the shoulders of one man: Martin Piispea. In particular Lahemaa National Park and the area's around it he knows inside and out and he even works with camera traps that send him real time pictures of the animals that pass by. He has spent years getting to understand the lynxes and anywhere you go in Lahemaa, Martin can probably tell you where he saw the closest lynx. Since we weren't all that certain about our success with only four nights we decided to reach out to Martin and he still had place to go with us for three nights. Later it turned out this was quite lucky as Martin is a popular guy at this time of year with many interested mammal watchers wanting to use his services to see a lynx. Lucky for us we had planned it just slightly before the most ideal time of the year and everything worked out really well.

Martin certainly delivered and we had our best sighting on the first night. We also had a really nice supporting cast of other mammals and the nights were usually full of activity, apparently much more so than usual, as we understood from Martin. We also couldn't complain about the weather which was basically perfect for using the thermal camera.

This actually also something that is important to take notice of: you can go to Estonia independently to search for lynx in this area, but a thermal is highly recommended or even outright required. The reason for this is that the lynxes hang out around populated area's. There are more people living in

those forests than you might think. Also they are very (very) wary (both people and lynxes) of strangers and will probably note down your license plate right on the first day. This is not exaggerated. To avoid getting into time-consuming confrontations with locals it is necessary to use a thermal as this is much less conspicuous than using a torch. Also you can be sure that any bad behavior by lynx watchers will reflect poorly on Martin and he has invested much to get the locals to support his work in these area's. Without Martin you wouldn't even have been in Estonia to look for a lynx, so it is only good manners to keep him out of trouble.

Finally, while you can go by yourself I would still recommend to at least reach out to Martin and let him know you are there. He might even give you some good tips and at least it will make it easier for him when locals ask him what the strange car is about. This happened also when we were there and another car was also looking for lynx. Word goes around very quickly in rural Estonia. That said, with enough time—say, at least eight days—and thorough research, you could have a reasonable chance of spotting a Eurasian Lynx independently. Hiring Martin, however, could cut this time in half. The choice is yours.

I will not give out specific location information besides Lahemaa National Park in general. That's because I also owe this information to Martin and it is not mine to share. Although in hindsight it turned out I had actually already gotten quite a few of the good locations down before we went, still going there with Martin was what finally confirmed how good they were. You can find more practical information below.

Schedule

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| February 19 | Departure from Amsterdam, and our first night out spotlighting |
| February 20-22 | Spotlighting every night while going out during the day. Usually we stopped spotlighting at 0.00. The one night we were on our own we stayed out until 2.00. |
| February 23 | Getting up at 3.30 and driving to the island Saaremaa. No spotlighting. For birders: it's really nice to observe Steller's Eider and Long-tailed Duck here. |
| February 24 | Flight back to Amsterdam |

Practical information

Contact information for Martin Piispea

You can find Martins information on his website: <http://www.gran.ee/info.html>. Right now his email address and number are: martin@gran.ee and +372 521 5255. Apparently he also offers accommodation to stay, but we didn't know that beforehand. Might be something to inquire about especially if you are by yourself or with a small group.

Paying and calling

For EU-citizens this a very easy country to travel in independently because you pay with euro's and can use your phone same as at home. Estonia is very well developed with contactless payment possible everywhere also while using Maestro.

Car

As always I used Sunnycars for booking because of their policy of covering all costs. We had the only 4x4 that was on offer, but it turned out to be a vehicle with more of an automatic support system, theoretically for all terrain. It did not have a high clearance and no spiked tires. It might be smart to specifically look for a car with spiked tires because the roads were basically ice when we were there and couldn't have been more slippery.

Accommodation

In Lahemaa we stayed at Sagadi Manor. They are on booking.com. I can really recommend this place. One of the few places that truly deserved a 10 on the review. First: you can enter at any time of the day and night which is very convenient for a mammalwatcher. Second: the breakfast is really good and they put something together for us when we left early for Saaremaa. The lady even woke up at 4.00 to get it for us from the fridge! For the rest it is very convenient with spacious rooms, drinkable tap water and not that expensive. And if you ever wanted to try eating Brown Bear you can do it here... We didn't though.

Useful links

<https://elurikkus.ee/en>

This is a very useful website, especially if you are a birder. It seems to be quite popular among Estonians and shows more locations than general websites like Ebird, Observation and iNaturalist do.

<https://www.rmk.ee/organisation/rmk-mobile-app>

This app is convenient to get information about the national parks. In the end we didn't end up using it though.

Observed species

1. Bank Vole (*Myodes glareolus*)

Correct me if I'm wrong. Observed close to Sagadi Manor on the side of the road.



2. European Hare (*Lepus europaeus*)

Common in the open fields.

3. Mountain Hare (*Lepus timidus*)

Not super common, but we got one or two each day. They stick more to the forest opposed to the European Hare. Easy to find with thermal.





4. Eurasian Beaver (*Castor fiber*)

We had one observation of 2 animals somewhere in a ditch, only with thermal. No eyeshine at all.

5. Eurasian Red Squirrel

Common to observe during the day.



6. Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*)

The big one! We had a really nice sighting right on our first evening. On the second evening another sighting of a lynx creeping up to some Roe Deer. We only watched it with the thermal so we would not disturb the hunt. We drove around a couple of times to give it time to do its thing, but when we came back from the last round all the deer were scattered and the lynx was gone. Apparently not a successful hunt. However, others saw it a couple of hours later again on the same spot. After that we did not have any more sightings.





7. Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

Common to watch. Can sometimes be a pitfall for lynx when using the thermal and when they are crouched down. Definitely don't write any off as a fox before you are completely sure. The black tip of the tail of lynx (as opposed to the pale one of fox) is actually more useful in these situations than you would think.



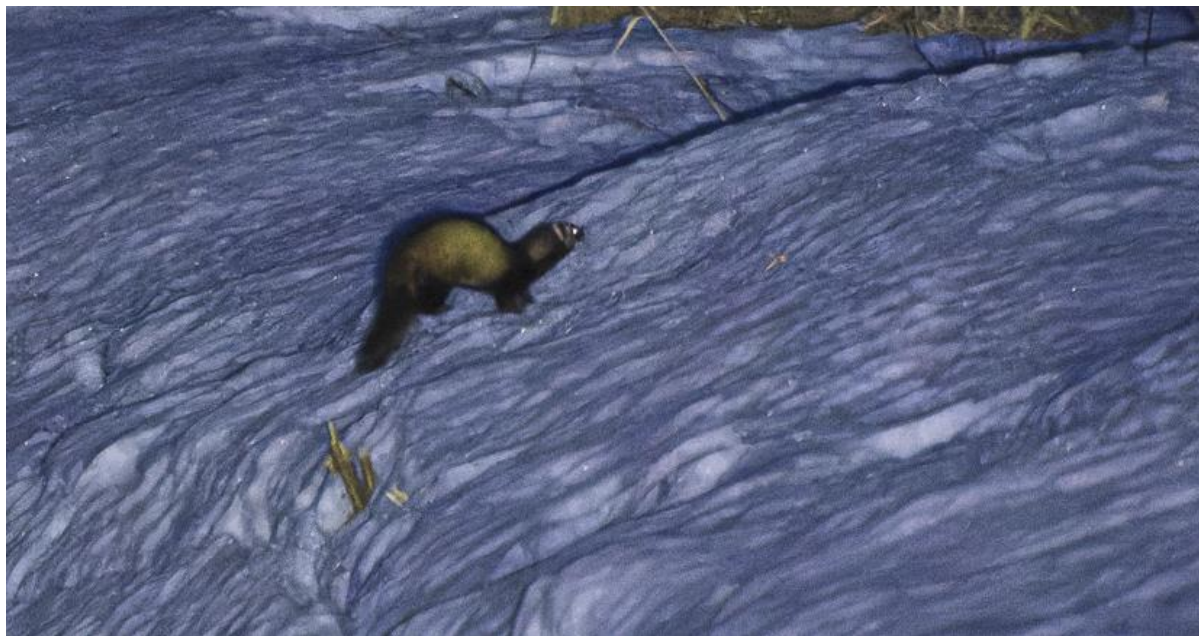
8. Pine Marten (*Martes martes*)

We had one observation at night of one in a tree.



9. Western Polecat (*Mustela putorius*)

We had two observations. One running across the road that we could watch for a little while. The other passing very quick, but also very close.



10. Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)

Some were out on the fields. Not seen every evening.

11. Elk (*Alces alces*)

We had them almost every evening, but I believe we were quite lucky with that. Martin said he also sometimes has tours without them. You should probably get at least one. They were usually by themselves, but we actually started with a herd of six.



12. European Roe Deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)

By far the most common mammal we saw.



13. Red Deer (*Cervus elaphus*)

We had one sighting on the island Saaremaa of four individuals. The only mammal we didn't see in Lahemaa.

Raccoon Dog (*Nyctereutes procynoides*)

Mentioned separately because they are a non-native pest. They were quite common to observe with the thermal, usually on the fields.

House Cat

Just putting it down to make you aware that there are some freakishly big house cats out in the forest of Estonia! I actually started taking pictures of one right away thinking it was a lynx...