

Estonia 3rd – 10th May 2013 - a mammal watching trip

I organised a mammal watching trip for myself and four friends using the services of Estonian Nature Tours (www.naturetours.ee/) a superb company already mentioned on the Estonia page of this website. Estonian Nature Tours is still ably run and organised by Marika Mann. This trip was no exception with everything running smoothly, great accommodation and with a really nice and knowledgeable driver/guide Margus Pensa.

Estonia is a superb country for wildlife with good populations of a range of mammal species. In fact it is also really good for birds, butterflies dragonflies and flowers so you can't go wrong really. Whilst we were there the early mornings were a bit chilly and we had a couple of short rain showers but other than that we had warm sunny and settled weather.

Although in the main a mammal watching trip we were bird watching as well. However, this trip report will concentrate on the mammal sightings.

We arrived in Tallinn from London Gatwick late afternoon on Friday 3rd May and were driven to the Aludaguse area in the north east of the country. A few hours later we arrived at our accommodation, the Matsu Guesthouse, near the village of Sahargu, between Oonurme and Tudulinna. The small pond in the grounds was alive with breeding Common Toads and a few Smooth Newts were also present.

After our evening meal we drove around some of the nearby forest tracks until dark. Coming across a couple of **Roe Deer** and 2 **Raccoon Dogs** and although a prolonged view it was not brilliant as it was getting dark. We also saw a few bats that were identified as **Nathusius Pipistrelles**.

Birds of the day: Taiga Bean and White-fronted Geese, Black Grouse, Capercallie, Crane.

Saturday 4th May. An early start to drive the local forest tracks in search of mammals and birds. We had super views of a couple of **Mountain Hares** feeding alongside one of the tracks and a total of 3 **Roe Deer** before returning for lunch.

The afternoon and evening was Siberian Flying Squirrel time and was spent in the company of Udo Timm who has been studying the squirrels in the in the small remnants of mature forest that remained around Tudu for the last 25 years. He told us all about the natural history of this species as we looked for field signs – mainly their yellow poo at the base of trees with natural (woodpecker made) holes as well as those trees with nest boxes put up specifically for the squirrels. It is a sad fact that the Siberian Flying Squirrel is a rare and declining species within its European range of Estonia and Finland.

After our evening meal we were out again with Udo this time to find and hopefully see a Flying Squirrel. As part of his research Udo has managed to capture and fit a radio collar on two of his subjects and it was just as well! I think it would have been impossible to select the specific tree hole or nest box that a squirrel was sleeping in with any certainty – yellow poo or not! The squirrel we were seeking was a lone female that had taken up residence in a small isolated patch of mature forest.

After checking 5 or 6 nest boxes/tree holes we came across a nest box that recorded a buzz on the detector indicating the squirrel was present. We sat down at least 30 minutes before dark and in silence watched the box that was only about 10 foot off the ground. At around 21:50 Uudo nodded that the squirrel was moving inside the box and almost to the exact minute predicted by Uudo the squirrel emerged – deep joy! At first it just poked its head out of the hole but soon climbed onto the top of the box and just sat there giving superb views. No one moved as under strict instructions there was to be no moving or talking until the squirrel had left the box completely and was in the tree. As soon as it moved into the tree and around the far side it felt safe and we were then able to move around the tree and watch it as it sat on a branch looking down at us. We were also allowed to talk quietly and Uudo even put a spotlight on it briefly although it wasn't dark by any means. After about 3 or 4 minutes remaining stationary the squirrel ascended the tree and leapt off gliding into the night. What a superb evening with super views and the bonus of seeing it 'fly' - what more could you ask for.

However, there is a rather sad footnote to this as 4 days later we heard the squirrel had died. Uudo could detect no movement from inside the nest box from the radio collar for 2 days and later it was confirmed it had died in the box.

Birds of the day: Black Grouse, Crane, Great spotted, White-backed, Grey-headed & Three-toed Woodpeckers, Crested Tit, Hawfinch.

Sunday 5th May. We were to spend tonight and Monday night in a bear hide but first a 04:00 start to look for mammals in the forest around the Sirtsu Nature Reserve. We were joined by Triin Ivandi of Nature Tour Estonia (www.natourest.ee/) the forest area was one of her stomping grounds so she knew it well. The first mammal we came across was an **Elk** (European Moose) and then a **Red Fox** and a **Roe Deer**, the first of 5 we saw that morning. A **Beaver** showed well, albeit briefly, in a very small stream alongside one of the forest tracks. We also had very good views of 2 pairs of **Mountain Hares** with one pair giving prolonged views. We had breakfast in the field.

We got back to the guest house around 10:00 and then headed off to the northern end of Lake Peipus at Vasknarva opposite Russia for a spot of birding. We got back to the guesthouse for lunch at 13:00.

A 15:00 we met up with Triin again and drove and walked along some forest trails where we found bear tracks and Triin showed us a hibernation site deep in the forest that had been used by a bear that winter. She also told us that they estimate there to be 300 bears in the Aludaguse region.

At 17:00 we walked to the bear hide where we were to spend the night. A **fox** was seen en route to the hide. The hide has been set up by Nature Estonia and it is good to see both companies - Nature Estonia and Estonia Nature Tours - sharing resources for the benefit of visiting naturalists. The hide holds 12 people with a corresponding number of viewing windows and bunks with sleeping bags supplied. There were 7 of us in the hide, the 5 of us plus Margus and Triin. There was a dry toilet in a small room in one corner. We brought along our evening meal of various snacks and coffee which was dished out and eaten as

quietly as possible. Any talking was to be in whispers. The bear food, biscuits and fish, had been hidden under logs and scattered about in front of the hide earlier in the day.

Unfortunately no bears showed up. There was a period of about 3 hours not covered when everyone fell asleep at a time when it was too dark to see anything anyway. However, there is a solar powered light that lights up a small area so if you did stay awake all night even when completely dark you could see a bear if it appeared. It wouldn't be a great view in the dim light but nevertheless recognisable. There is also a webcam trained on the spot which was checked later by Triin and she confirmed that no bears turned up while we slept.

What we did see however was a pair of **Raccoon Dogs** that showed superbly at dusk on and off for an hour or so as they munched on the food. A pair of **Foxes** also showed up in the evening and the following morning, looking fabulous in their luxurious thick winter coats.

Birds of the day: Black Grouse, Capercallie, Hazel Hen, Cranes, Montague's Harriers, Black Woodpeckers, Great Grey Shrike.

Monday 6th May. We left the bear hide around 06:30 and went back to the guesthouse via a drive along some forest tracks, did some birding and ate breakfast in the field.

After an early lunch we went out birding a short drive from the guesthouse and at 18:00 we went back for a night in the hide. Again not a single bear showed up much to our disappointment. Only the 2 hours between 02:00 and 04:00 weren't covered as everyone was asleep and again Triin checked the webcam later on and got a message to us that no bears appeared during that time. However, we did see a single **Fox** and the 2 **Raccoon Dogs** performed really well again.

Birds of the day: Hazel Grouse, Black Woodpecker, Whinchat.

The following morning Tuesday 7th at 07:00 we left the hide and said our thanks and farewells to Triin and headed back to the guesthouse for breakfast. We made a small detour en route along some forest tracks. We saw a **Mountain Hare** a **Roe Deer** and a **Red Squirrel** dashed across the track in front of the van but that was it on the mammal front.

After breakfast we packed the van and headed towards Tartu, in the South East of the country, birding en route. We had lunch in Tartu and then headed for the nearby Aardla wetlands where we continued birding. The geese put on a spectacular show and I was pleased to find a Black Kite – a rare bird in Estonia. We arrived at our accommodation at 18:00 a fabulous place, a former Russian vodka brewery called the Mooste Viinavabrik Guesthouse, located south east of Tartu. I can thoroughly recommend it.

We took food out with us for our evening meal and ate in the field at Karevere. Before dark we watched at least 6 Great Snipe lekking in the damp grass adjacent to the flooded Emajogi River. The only mammal sighting there was of a single **Fox**. We had a brief drive around a nearby forest track after dark and saw a **Mountain Hare** but not much else.

Birds of the day: Barnacle, Bean and White-fronted Geese, Whooper Swans, Great Snipe, Black Kite, Citrine Wagtails.

Wednesday 8th May. On a pre-breakfast walk from the guesthouse we came across 2 **Roe Deer** and a **Fox**. After breakfast we drove to the Illmatsula fish ponds, seeing a **Fox** en route. Amongst other things we had great views of a Great White Egret, a couple of Penduline Tits and Red-necked Grebes. Not far from the fish ponds in a flooded field we had a spectacular site of approx 600 Ruff in their diversely coloured full summer plumaged finery. In the afternoon we went back to the Aardla wetlands and came across a **Brown Hare** sharing a field with about 1,000 White-fronted Geese.

After an early evening meal we drove to the Emajogi River road bridge at Karevere to meet a couple of boatmen who were to take us out on the river in search for European Beaver. We split up into 2 small boats and pushed off out into the river. We had decent views of 2 **Beavers** eventually but it wasn't easy as the river was in full flood following the thawing of late winter deep snow. In places the river was more like a huge lake with acres of surrounding fields and woodland underwater.

It was getting dark when we alighted from the boats and as we hadn't come across any Wild Boar on the trip so far a quick decision was made to try for some. Margus made a hurried phone call to a local naturalist, whose name I think was Jan, and arranged a quick visit to a Wild Boar feeding site. We made a dash a few kilometres along the road to a forested area with a small accommodation complex where we met Jan who opened a gate for us and let us into the small car park. A hundred metres or so away a couple of hides had been erected in front of a baited feeding area. A **Wild Boar** was feeding in the baited area but it wasn't happy with the disturbance and made off. We waited around for the next 15 minutes or so but no boar appeared. We did see a few medium sized bats (bigger than Pipistrelles) but they remained unidentified. It was soon too dark to see anything so we decided to leave. Apparently hunters stay at the complex and the area is baited to keep the boar in the vicinity for the hunters to shoot later in the year. We then drove around some nearby forest tracks for a little while hoping to see something in the van's headlights but didn't see any mammals only a few Woodcock.

Birds of the day: Great White Egret, White-tailed and Lesser-spotted Eagles, Black and White-winged Black Terns, Wood Sandpipers, Ruff, Black Woodpecker, Thrush Nightingales, Common Redstarts, Penduline Tits, Wood Warblers.

Thursday 9th May. A 04:00 start to do a forest area near Karevere where we were joined by Jan who we met the previous night and who knew this local forest and its mammal inhabitants extremely well. We had good views of 2 **Elk/Moose** that just stood and watched us for some time before turning and trotting off. A **Beaver** showed briefly twice but each time it did a panic dive and splash as it disappeared under water. All along the narrow forest drainage channels signs of beaver were obvious with gnawed trees and worn pathways showing frequent use by beavers. A **Fox** was seen briefly and we came across bear tracks and bear poo but not the elusive bear. We had breakfast in the woods and later drove to the ancient forest at Jarvselja.

We returned to the guesthouse for lunch and after which we birded the Rapina polders for a couple of hours before heading back to the guesthouse for a slap up evening meal and a few beers.

Birds of the day: Hazel Grouse, Montague's Harrier, White-tailed Eagle, Red-breasted and Wryneck, Pied Flycatcher, Redstarts, Icterine Warbler.

Friday 10th May. On a pre breakfast walk around the surrounding fields of the guesthouse we saw a **Roe deer** and a pair of **Foxes**. At 09:00 we left to make our way to Tallinn Airport, birding and lunching en route. After trying a couple of sites known to Margus we eventually nailed a fine male Middle Spotted Woodpecker which was the 7th woodpecker species of the trip. We flew out of Tallinn at 15:45.

It was a great trip and thoroughly enjoyed by all, the only disappointment being no Brown Bears. We hoped for but didn't really expect to see Lynx or Wolf and were surprised we only saw one Wild Boar.

Mammals: Nathusius Pipistrelle: European Brown Hare, Mountain Hare, Siberian Flying Squirrel, Red Squirrel, European Beaver, Red Fox, Raccoon Dog, Wild Boar, Elk/Moose, Roe Deer.

Reptiles/Amphibians: Common Lizard, Common Toad, Common Frog, Edible Frog, Smooth Newt.

Best Butterflies: Camberwell Beauty, Map.

Birds: 127 species.

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