

## Mammals of Ukraine

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Ukraine is a country of gradients. Founded under the name of “Rus” by Norse traders in Slavic lands, it was shaped by a long struggle between forest-dwelling farmers and steppe-roaming nomads, followed by centuries of conflict between Russian Empire to the east and various Catholic entities to the west. Today western Ukraine is mostly pro-West, pro-democracy, with clean little towns and prosperous villages, while eastern Ukraine is poor, corrupt, and poisoned by Russian propaganda. In 2014 a puppet president plundering the country on Russia’s behalf was toppled by a revolution. Russian dictator Putin, enraged and scared of any real democracy, invaded Ukraine. The West, scared of any conflict and thoroughly corrupted by Russian influence networks, betrayed Ukraine to appease Putin in a chilling re-enactment of the run-up to WWII. Against all odds, Ukrainians, who had no military to speak of, mobilized and stopped the invasion at great cost, but not before Russia occupied two large chunks of the country. The war did more damage to Russia than to Ukraine: while Ukrainian nation was united by a common threat, Russia was flooded with fascist propaganda and turned into an Orwellian hellhole of lies and hate. Today Ukraine’s drift towards Europe seems unstoppable, while Russia is rapidly sliding into the Dark Ages politically, culturally and psychologically, and is trying to drag the rest of the world with it. The best reading for understanding the current developments in the region is Vols. I-II of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Russian-style systemic corruption was so pervasive in Ukraine that it will take decades to trim it down to European levels. It is taking its toll on all aspects of life, including environmental protection. Many nature reserves (particularly “national natural parks”) exist only on paper. Deforestation (sanctioned by bribed forestry officials) and poaching are rampant. Intensive agriculture and industrial pollution are also causing a lot of damage. Natural areas under Russian occupation are being converted into private estates of Putin’s buddies. But Ukraine is still worth visiting. It is a beautiful country with lots of interesting mammals, some of them endemic or near-endemic. Strict nature reserves (*zapovidnik*) are better protected. People are mostly friendly, the infrastructure is improving, and crime levels aren’t too high except in the east. Russia continues a barrage of cyberattacks and a low-level terror campaign; there are also frequent shellings and firefights along the frontlines in the east; but a tourist’s chances of getting hurt are low outside the conflict zones. Visiting the areas occupied by Russia is out of question (thousands of people, including foreigners arrested for the most ridiculous reasons, have disappeared in underground prisons there), but I’ll provide some information in case these parts of the country get liberated eventually. Be careful near borders and military installations: vestiges of Soviet paranoia might still exist and are difficult for a Westerner to comprehend (just an example: in 1977, at the tender age of 8, I was arrested for walking too close to a border guard post in the Crimea, and the soldier who arrested me got reprimanded for not shooting me on sight).

Russian is understood everywhere except in rural western Ukraine. Polish is widely spoken in the far west. Many Ukrainians travel to Western Europe for work, and foreign tourism is on the rise, so the knowledge of Western languages is rapidly increasing from near-zero twenty years ago. The best time to visit is May-September in the north and the west, late April to May and mid-September to mid-October in the south where summers are hot. Winter weather has become too unpredictable in recent years. From late October to mid-April some rural roads can be in bad shape. I traveled in Ukraine a lot in 1977-1996, and briefly in 2011-2017.

### The forests

Northern and western parts of the country were once densely forested; there are still extensive pine and oak forests left, plus riparian forests and large wetlands along Dniepr and Pripjat Rivers. Floodplains of these rivers along the border with Belarus, known as Polesye, are worth visiting in early spring as widespread flooding makes many shy mammals easier to see. However, the Belarus part of Polesye is larger and better preserved. A good riparian forest is just across Dniepr River from Kyev and can be easily visited on a day trip, but it isn’t particularly mammal-rich. Rivnensky Zapovidnik reportedly has the country’s largest populations of **lynx** and **moose**. Nearby Cheremsky Zapovidnik has similar fauna, and also **wolf** and possibly **European mink**. Polesky and Drevlyansky Zapovidniks have **wolf** and **lynx**; the former is also said to have a healthy population of **garden dormouse**. All four should be good for **European polecat**, **least weasel**, **pine marten**, **badger**, **raccoon dog** (introduced), **boar**, **roe deer**, **mountain hare**, and particularly for semi-aquatic mammals such as **Eurasian** and **southern water shrews**, **otter**, **beaver**, **European water vole**, and introduced **American mink** and **muskrat**. Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is famous for high densities of larger mammals, particularly **wolf** and **lynx**, but seeing them is not easy because poaching is rampant so they are very shy. Also, arranging a nature-oriented visit is difficult, and the only mammals likely to be seen on regular tours are **European hare** and introduced **Przewalski’s horse**.

If you don’t want to bother with permits to visit the zapovidniks, you can spend a few days in Lyubech, a scenic town where my mother-in-law lives. It is within walking distance from pine forests and riparian wetlands; steep slopes around

the historic center are covered with oaks and lindens where **forest dormice** occur. **Northern white-breasted hedgehogs** can often be seen in the streets at night. In a few days you can find common mammals such as **Eurasian shrew, red squirrel, striped, yellow-throated and long-tailed field mice, common, field, East European, Eurasian water and bank voles, and European hare**. Nearby villages abandoned due to Chernobyl fallout are inhabited by **common and lesser noctules, Brandt's and Daubenton's myotis, Nathusius's and Kuhl's pipistrelles, serotine, and brown big-eared bat**. Less common are **pond myotis, northern bat, common pipistrelle, Urals field mouse, Eurasian harvest mouse, European pine and tundra voles, and mountain hare**. Look for **giant noctules** around the tiny village of Huta near the town of Slavutych (where **particolored bats** roost under apartment block roofs).

Oxbow lakes of Desna River near Murav'i are the only place in Ukraine to look for **Russian desmans** (in December 1990, the best lake was at 52.354N 33.396E). Today it's a border area, so you might have to consult local authorities before visiting. In winter you can sometimes find desmans by trails of little bubbles frozen into lake ice; these bubbles are formed by the air escaping from the animal's fur as it forages, so the trails fan out from the underwater burrow entrance. The bubble trails weaken the ice, so in spring it breaks first near the burrow entrance, and oxygen entering the water attracts numerous small animals to the burrow, where many of them become desman snacks. If you find a burrow and the ice is transparent, you can see the desman exiting and entering a few times per night. Use red light: desmans are almost blind, but prefer darkness. In spring their burrows often get flooded, and they can sometimes be seen sitting at night near the water's edge on remaining islands among flooded areas. Watch also for **beaver, muskrat and European water vole**.

The beautiful city of Lviv in far western Ukraine has a large park where Museum of Folk Architecture is located; in addition to some of the world's most beautiful wooden churches it has lots of **lesser noctules and hazel dormice**.

### The grasslands

More than a half of Ukraine was once beautiful grassland; today it is almost entirely ploughed over, with precious few patches of natural vegetation left. All of the country's endemic and near-endemic mammals are grassland species; unfortunately, they are difficult to see even if you manage to find perfect habitat. Widespread mammals of the grasslands include **lesser white-toothed and bicolored shrews, red fox, great jerboa** (in places with sparse grass), **steppe mouse, striped field mouse, Eurasian harvest mouse, common and grey hamsters, East European vole, and European hare**.

The northern part of the grasslands is the so-called "forest-steppe" or "meadow steppe", similar to the tallgrass prairie of North America. Kyiv, Ukraine's capital since the 9<sup>th</sup> century, is at the northern edge of this zone; the charming Pyrohiv Museum of Folk Architecture on the southern outskirts of the city is a good place to look for **Strand's birch mouse and Podolian blind molerat**, while **European pine vole** lives in the nearby forest. The same species occur in Kanivski Zapovidnik farther south. Zapovidnik Mikhailivska Tselina near Lebedin is the best remaining patch of meadow-steppe, where **speckled souslik**, three species of **birch mice (Strand's, Severtzov's and southern)**, **striped field and Eurasian harvest mice**, and **gray hamster** were common in May 1996. Zapovidnik Medobory near Ternopil is reportedly good for **giant noctule, pine and stone martens, badger, boar, roe deer**, and endemic **Podolian blind molerat**; it also has caves where **lesser horseshoe bat, lesser noctule, brown long-eared bat, and Bechstein's myotis** are said to roost. In 1980 I spent two summer months in a nearby village surrounded by forests (not today according to Google Earth) and fields, and didn't see many mammals: caught a **European mole** and a **bicolored shrew**, saw a **pine marten, a garden dormouse** and a **long-tailed field mouse**, and found a colony of **speckled sousliks**. In the far west of the grassland belt, Tarashany village near Chernivtsy is said to be the best place in Ukraine for **Balkan blind molerat and European souslik**.

Further south is the "real" steppe, once a sea of feathergrass growing on blackzem, the world's most fertile soil. All nature reserves here are small, and always under pressure from surrounding farms. The best one is Askania-Nova, the largest remaining patch of never-ploughed feathergrass in Europe. A third of it has been turned into a safari park with all kinds of exotics; that part is the only one shown to most tourists. You can, however, walk into the wild steppe where **little souslik, common hamster, steppe mouse, steppe field mouse, and social vole** are usually common. There are also said to be **steppe polecat, greater blind molerat, northern mole-vole, southern birch mouse, and recently reintroduced bobac marmot**. Farther north, **steppe polecat** and **bobac marmot** are said to be common in a small zapovidnik called Elanetsky Step. I spent July 1978 in a village west from there, and once rescued a **Podolian blind molerat** from two local boys about my age; the molerat was worth the fight and the bruises and made one of my first mammalwatching successes, but due to the scarcity of books on zoology in the Soviet Union it took me a few years to figure out what it was. There are also small zapovidniks in the steppes of far eastern Ukraine, but they are under Russian occupation or too close to the conflict zone; species of interest include **long-eared hedgehog, steppe polecat** (both very rare), **little souslik, bobac marmot, greater blind molerat, steppe mouse**, and possibly **steppe lemming** (if it still exists in Ukraine). In the far south, the

Ukrainian part of Dunai Delta reportedly still has **European mink** and **marbled polecat**, but the only mammals I found in 1989 were **lesser blind mole** and **field vole** near Izmail and **boar**, **Severtsov's birch mouse** and **Eurasian water vole** in Dunaisky Zapovidnik near Vilkove. **Golden jackal** has recently colonized the area. A weekly boat goes from Vilkove to Zmeiny Island, one of the last places in the Black Sea where **monk seal** occurred; it is reportedly great for migrating bats and large herds of **common dolphins** in late spring, and has lots of **steppe mice** and **water voles**.

Semi-desert stretches along the coasts of Black and Azov Seas from the mouth of Dniepr River to the Russian border. Chernomorsky Zapovidnik on the southern side of Dniepr Delta is mostly famous for birding, but it has endemic **sandy blind mole** and Europe's only **thick-tailed three-toed jerboa** (look for both in Oleshky Sands about 40 km WSW from Kakhovka). In September 1988 there were also **Eurasian shrew**, **steppe** and **pond myotis** (in abandoned buildings), **steppe polecat**, **sika deer** (introduced), **little souslik**, **southern birch mouse**, **steppe field mouse**, **northern mole vole**, and **social vole**. The northern side of the delta is also worth visiting: the edges of salt pans near Solonchaki at the mouth of Pivdinny Buh had lots of **great jerboas**, **Podolian blind mole** and **steppe mice** in the same month (I also caught a **lesser white-toothed shrew** there). Along the northern coast of the Sea of Azov there are five large sand spits that often turn into islands due to wave action; the best one is Biryuchy Island/Peninsula where **onager** has been reintroduced and rodents such as **southern birch mouse**, **great jerboa**, **steppe field mouse**, **northern mole vole**, and **social vole** are said to occur. **Steppe myotis** was common in abandoned buildings throughout the area in 1989. Watch for **harbor porpoises** offshore: the only cetaceans in the Sea of Azov, they are easier to see here than in the Black Sea.

### The mountains

The Ukrainian Carpathians are not very high, but they are scenic and have lots of excellent hikes, often leading to secluded villages with colorful customs (particularly on summer solstice). Karpatsky Zapovidnik is my favorite part. You can easily climb Hoverla (2061 m), Ukraine's highest mountain, to look for **alpine shrew**, **Tatra vole**, and **European snow vole**. Nearby Pozhizhevska Mt. has small caves where **whiskered**, **Geoffroy's**, **lesser** and **greater myotis** and **soprano** (most likely) **pipistrelles** roosted in August 1989. Wet alpine meadows between the peaks are inhabited by **Eurasian pygmy** and **Eurasian water shrews**, **ermine**, **tundra vole**, and **montane water vole**; **Alpine marmot** has reportedly been reintroduced. Dense coniferous forests and old-growth beech forests below them have **Eurasian shrew**, **southern water shrew**, **European mole**, **northern white-breasted hedgehog**, **pine marten**, **European polecat**, **badger**, **otter**, **lynx**, **bear**, **wolf**, **boar** (I've only seen tracks of the latter four), **red** and **roe deer**, **red squirrel**, **edible** and **forest dormice**, **yellow-necked**, **long-tailed** and **Urals field mice**, **bank** and **European pine voles**, and reportedly **wildcat**. **Brandt's**, **Daubenton's**, **pond**, **Natterer's** and **Bechstein's myotis**, **serotine**, **lesser** and **common noctules**, **brown** and **gray big-eared bats**, and **western barbastelle** occurred in hollow trees, abandoned buildings and wooden village churches in August-September. Karst caves at lower elevations reportedly have small colonies of **lesser** and **greater horseshoe bats** and **common bentwing**, among other species. A disjunct part of the zapovidnik is the Valley of Daffodils (Dolina Nartsissov) where **northern birch mouse** and **common vole** were easy to see in September 1989. Beyond the mountains is a Hungarian-speaking plateau where **lesser blind mole** occurs (try Cherna Gora/Fekete Hegy Nature Reserve near Vynohradiv, where **stone marten** and **garden** and **hazel dormice** were also present in 1989).

The Crimean Peninsula, currently occupied by Russia, has a range of low mountains covered with pine, oak, and juniper forests, inhabited by endemic races of **red fox**, **red deer**, **least weasel** (almost as large as ermine), and **common vole**. **Southern water**, **Eurasian pygmy** and **Eurasian shrews**, **northern white-breasted hedgehog**, **badger**, **boar**, **roe deer**, **fallow deer** (introduced), **mouflon** (introduced), **red squirrel** (introduced, of Altai ssp.), and **European hare** are present but rare. The best forests are in Krymsky Zapovidnik, accessible from Hwy P34; **lesser** and **common noctules** were common there in hollow trees in October 1988. **Southern water shrew** occurred above Jugjur Falls in July 1977, while **least weasel**, **red fox**, and **steppe field mouse** were common in Yaltinsky Zapovidnik in May 1982. There used to be large bat colonies in local caves, but most have been destroyed (common bentwing went locally extinct after tens of thousands were killed, mounted and distributed to Soviet schools as "educational prompts"). The best remaining site is the endless labyrinth of ancient quarries near Kerch; in January 1992 it had **lesser** and **greater horseshoe bats**, **western barbastelle**, **lesser**, **Natterer's**, **Geoffroy's** and **steppe myotis**, **serotine**, **Savi's** and **common pipistrelles**, and **particolored bat**. There are also rare minerals, fossils and piles of WWII ordinance (including zarin containers left by the Nazis who tried to gas the guerillas hiding in the quarries) to look for. **Northern mole-vole** and **steppe mouse** were common at Bulganak, a field of mud volcanoes near Kerch. Nearby Opukski Zapovidnik reportedly has **steppe polecats** and **great jerboas**. The southern coast between Balaklava and Koktebel is an island of Mediterranean vegetation, now largely destroyed by resort development. In summers of 1979-80, Karadagski Zapovidnik had **stone martens**, **badgers**, **social voles**, and huge herds of **common dolphins** offshore; small groups of **bottlenose dolphins** could be occasionally seen from boats running between Sudak and Koktebel. All three Black Sea cetaceans are distinctive subspecies.