

Estonia: Eurasian Lynx Quest 13th - 17th March 2017

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I read with growing interest James Lowen's forum post, Blog and trip report on the mammalwatching.com website - *Twitchable Eurasian Lynx, Estonia 3rd -5th March 2017*. Please read his trip report and Blog which contains plenty of information. I reckoned that going to Estonia as soon as possible was my best chance of catching up with this elusive cat. James saw a female with a well grown youngster, probably around 11 months old. I had heard that the adult female had two other offspring with her; so with at least four lynx in one area I just had to go. I had looked for Eurasian Lynx in Poland, where I heard one, and Belarus, where I missed one by seconds, and had looked for them earlier this year in Ladakh whilst looking for Snow Leopards.

I contacted Marika Mann of Estonia Nature Tours and arranged everything through her based on the same type of trip that James had done. I know Marika from a previous trips to Estonia, my trip report is on the mammalwatching.com website: *Estonia 3rd - 10th May 2013 - a mammal watching trip*.

So on **Monday 13th March** I flew to Tallinn, met Marika and drove to the Jaagri Villa (hotel) in Alba in the Korvemaa Landscape Protection Area, arriving there in the early afternoon. The Jaagri Villa was an interesting place and as James said in his report full of stuffed wildlife including lynx. To be honest not my idea of good decor. Apart from that it was ideally situated a short drive from the forest. My room was comfortable and clean as were all the facilities, the food, which was plentiful, was very nice and they didn't appear to have any problems providing vegetarian food for me. The staff were friendly and helpful. My stay there, being out of season, was like

nothing else I had encountered as apart from the first night when Marika also stayed there I was alone in the whole place. The staff arrived at my feeding times - breakfast, lunch and evening meal - between meal times I had a key to let myself in and out. At night it was no problem for me but probably not for those of a nervous disposition, what with the stuffed animals and a silent dark hotel it was a cross between The Shining and A Night at the Museum!



The Jaagri Villa Hotel, Alba.

Marika said my guide/driver was to be the same man as James had - Aivo but he wasn't available until the following morning. In the afternoon Marika and I had a walk around the nearby open wooded parkland but apart from a few birds such as Nuthatches and Great Spotted Woodpecker we didn't see very much. In the evening we drove around forest tracks for an hour, but as Marika didn't have a 4x4 we couldn't go too deep into the forest as some of the tracks

were still snowy and icy. However, I did see a Red Fox. The real dedicated lynx search would begin tomorrow.

Tuesday 14th March. Weather - morning dull and overcast but brightening up in the afternoon, light rain overnight.

After a 05:00 pick-up by Aivo in his 4x4 we were on the forest trails by 05:15. I spot lit as we went being careful to switch off when approaching farmsteads and isolated forest houses so as not to disturb local residents and for us not to be mistaken for poachers. I had my M3X Triton Olight with me, Aivo also used a powerful torch. To be honest a big spotlight running off a vehicle battery rather than a torch/flashlight would have been better. But I just travelled out with hand luggage so no room and anyway I was hoping to see a lynx at dawn or dusk! Marika came with us to establish a rapport between myself and Aivo and to agree the routine with him for the next few days as he spoke only a little English. Marika wasn't going to be joining us after this morning's drive and departed mid-morning after breakfast. We didn't see any mammals at all on the drive but three White-tailed Eagles were good to watch.

The following routine was agreed: 05:00 pick-up for forest drive; 09:30 breakfast back at the hotel, 15:00 late lunch, 16:00 pick-up for forest drive, 21:30 evening meal back at hotel.

Mid-afternoon from my room I watched a Red Fox trotting across the fields behind the hotel. Aivo picked me up at 16:00 and we drove along the forest tracks seeing four Roe Deer and five Elk. At 18:00 I sat on a small portable chair by a canal that afforded good clear views along either side of the canal which was bordered by forest. Aivo drove off and was to return after dark at 20:00. It was a good tactic to try as I would have been able to see anything that used the open ground 40 metres or so either side of the canal and about 400

metres along the length of it either side of me. However, I only saw a Red Fox. Back in the vehicle with Aivo at 20:30 I picked up green eyeshine amongst the trees, we stopped and shone our torches and I scrutinised it carefully through my binoculars - it was a lynx! But on the edge of our light beams it wasn't a particularly good view and it was a bit obscured behind small trees and undergrowth despite Aivo's valiant attempts to manoeuvre the vehicle for better views. I suppose in all we had it in torch light on and off for around 2 minutes. So at last a lynx but was I happy - unfortunately not. The dilemma I had, and no doubt we have all faced at some time or other when out mammal watching, to tick or not to tick. It was a lynx yes but to me the views just weren't good enough. I just never got that warm satisfied feeling of job done when you catch up with a mammal you have been after for some time. No, for me it wasn't to be I couldn't count it - definitely a personal choice.



Lynx with Pine Marten. The stag is a Sika, the label just had the Czech Republic and a date when it was shot on it.

Wednesday 15th March. Weather - cloudy start, brighter later, cold at night.

A 05:00 pick-up. We drove along the forest tracks, first spotlighting and then as it got light just driving. We saw eight Roe Deer and four Elk and I was back for breakfast by 09:30. The afternoon session began at 16:00 and we tried different areas of the forest but only saw three Roe Deer. Between 17:30 and 19:45 I sat alone in an elevated deer chair - the type used for shooting, at the edge of a cleared area in the forest but didn't see anything. Back in the vehicle and driving along the tracks a Pine Marten crossed in front of us and was caught well in the headlights. A little later when we reached a tarmac road a Brown Hare ran across in front of us.

Thursday 16th March. Weather - cold clear morning following below freezing temperatures overnight. Rest of day cool but sunny.

Usual 05:00 pick-up. We spot lit 3 Brown Hares in a field before entering the forest. We went on to see 2 Elk before I asked Aivo to drop me at the canal again before it was light so I could stake out the area. I sat quietly from 06:00 - 08:00 but saw nothing of note. After driving along the tracks for another hour or so I was dropped off back at the hotel. The afternoon session began again at 16:00 and we drove along the tracks seeing very little. I was dropped off in the canal area again and sat and waited from 17:40 - 20:00, no mammals were seen but I was entertained by a Ural Owl which showed well. On the forest tracks a bit later we found five Elk and as we drove past an open grassy field we nearly ran over a Badger. Fortunately we stopped in time and had good views of a startled Badger before it trotted off back across the field.

Friday 17th March. Weather - cloudy, followed by rain.

Out again at 05:00 for my last drive. Only saw a single Roe Deer before it started raining heavily just after 06:00. I had to get back to the hotel for breakfast at 08:00 as I was going back to Tallinn for my flight home. Aivo drove me to the Airport, which only took an hour to get to - on the way I saw three Roe deer.

Further information and summing up: Depending on cloud cover it got light between 07:00 and 07:30 and got dark between 19:15 and 19:45. The night and day temperatures were variable over the five days and snow cover was gradually diminishing. This meant that it was much harder, almost impossible, for Aivo to track the lynx and find the area of forest they were most recently frequenting. I spent 30 hours in total looking for lynx driving/spotlighting or just sitting and watching. I would have got totally lost in the forests if I tried it independently and if stopped would have found it difficult if not impossible to explain to anyone who didn't speak English what I was doing out at night in the forest.

I would have expected to have seen Wild Boar but apparently there had been an outbreak of swine fever so the boar had been heavily 'culled' to stop the spread to domestic pigs.

Would I recommend Estonia Nature Tours? Yes without doubt, Marika has worked very hard liaising with local contacts to try and get viable lynx watching trips up and running. It's still early days but fingers crossed they will continue and Marika does hope to run them next year. Would I do it again? Yes of course I would maybe even in 2018. Or I might leave it until 2019 but should I try Estonia again or

give Poland another go? Well I'm not sure yet I'll just have to see how things pan out.

Mammals seen: Red Fox, Pine Marten, Badger, (*Eurasian Lynx*), Roe Deer, Elk (European Moose), Brown Hare.

Best Birds seen: Whooper Swan, Hazel Grouse, White Stork, White-tailed Eagle, Common Crane, Ural Owl, Black Woodpecker.



Wild Boar.



Elk (European Moose).



Red Squirrel (and Brown Bear).



Pine marten.



Grey Wolf.

The End