

## Mammals of Belarus

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Belarus is a large, very flat, 40% forested country. It lost almost a third of its population during WWII; the following decades saw mass migration of rural residents into cities, which accelerated after the country received most of Chernobyl nuclear fallout. In post-Soviet years Belarus rejected the siren song of IMF, so its economy remained in relatively good shape, but the birthrate was low, and many people emigrated. The result of all this is that the countryside is sparsely populated, particularly in the south where some of Europe's largest wetlands are located. Tiny outlying villages (*khutors*), with just a few aged residents and plenty of abandoned houses, provide excellent bases for exploring forests and swamps. There are no endemics or "specialties", but mammals are generally abundant, particularly in nature reserves.

Belarus is often called "Europe's last dictatorship"; this is only correct because Russia is no longer part of Europe. For twenty years President Lukashenko secured massive discounts on oil and gas by proclaiming loyalty to Russia and gradually sacrificing Belarus's sovereignty. In 2014, Russian invasion of Ukraine alerted him to the danger of getting too cozy with such a predatory neighbor, so now he is trying to court the EU as well. As an East Slavic proverb goes, "a gentle calf suckles from two cows". One consequence of this shift is that the country is reportedly becoming more Westerner-friendly (although even before 2014 it wasn't a particularly inhospitable place, as long as you refrained from political discussions). Tourism is still virtually non-existent, but this might change in the coming years.

The country has decent infrastructure; normally there is bus service to all villages except the smallest ones. Russian is the most widely used language; Polish is often understood in the west; knowledge of other foreign languages is pretty much absent. Serious crime is rare and usually alcohol-related. Winters are cold and somewhat unpleasant, but swamps normally freeze and snow tracking is great (as long as there is snow: long warm spells now occur almost every winter). Summers are cool and comfy. Spring and autumn have unstable weather and rural roads can be in dismal condition.

Belovezhska Pushcha National Park near Brest is Belarus's part of Bialowieza Forest. Few people are aware that it is larger than the Polish part and in better condition; at least 100 km<sup>2</sup> are said to have never been logged, uniquely for European lowlands. The park has the world's largest **wisent** population, but the herds move around a lot and are not always easy to find. The densities of other ungulates – **red, sika** (introduced), and **roe deer, boar, and moose** – are lower than in managed reserves of Central Europe, but carnivores are common: in February 1986 I sometimes saw tracks of 4-5 **lynxes** in one day. **Mountain hare** is abundant, except after warm winters. There are lots of hollow trees, so it's a good place for forest bats, reportedly including **giant noctule**. An isolated population of **speckled ground squirrel** lives just east of the forest. There is reportedly a new visitor center, but I don't know if anybody speaks English there.

Pripyatsky National Park is located in Polesye, a huge, partly forested, very scenic wetland along the border with Ukraine. Also in the same area is the larger and more interesting Polesky Zapovednik (strict nature reserve) which has no human population at all: everybody was forced to leave following the Chernobyl accident. There are still radioactive spots scattered around, so it's better to travel with a guide. If you want to play it safe, come in winter when there's no dust and cross-country travel is easier. Spring is spectacular: in most years, much of Polesye gets flooded and normally shy mammals such as shrews, mustelids, voles, and **common hamsters** can be easily seen from a boat as they seek shelter on remaining islands, in trees and shrubs. The densities of **wolf, otter, beaver, muskrat** (introduced), and **Eurasian water vole** are said to be the highest in Europe; there are also two species of **water shrews** (both very common), and small numbers of **wisent, bear**, and introduced **Przewalski's horse**. Many animals have moved into empty towns, so you can reportedly see **lynxes** and **badgers** in the streets sometimes. Abandoned houses shelter lots of bats in summer. In late December 1990, **American mink** (introduced), **European polecat, ermine, and least weasel** were so common in riparian wetlands that I got multiple sightings of each species in six days simply by watching places with lots of tracks.

Berezinsky Zapovednik in the north has more diverse habitats: extensive swamps and bogs as well as old upland forests. It has pretty much all mammal species of the region, including healthy populations of **wolf, bear, otter, badger, roe deer, boar and beaver**. It is reportedly one of very few places where **Northern birch mouse** can still be easily found in open forests and grassy clearings. In early November 1988, **Eurasian pygmy shrew, northern bat, Urals field mouse, and tundra vole** were particularly common in forest swamps; I found the bats in almost every woodpecker hole I checked. **Field, common, and East European** voles were abundant in fields and meadows, but very difficult to tell apart.

In the far north, Asveisky Zakaznik (nature reserve) on the borders of Russia and Latvia reportedly has the only known populations of **taiga shrew** and **Siberian flying squirrel** in Belarus, as well as small numbers of **bear, wolf** and **lynx**.