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THREE EURASIAN LYNX TOURS IN ESTONIA: 6 DIFFERENT INDIVIDUALS SPREAD OVER 12 (!) OBSERVATIONS

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About the tour

Tour	Eurasian lynx tours 2024: 3 in a row
When	24/02 - 16/03/2024
Number of travelers	6 + 6 + 4



Guide

Mark Kaptein

Semi-professional nature guide with a specialty in mammals.

Observations

6 individual Eurasian lynx spread over 12 observations

moose

pine marten, polecat, raccoon dog, ...

pygmy and ural owl

white-backed and gray-headed woodpecker

caipercailly

northern lights

... great atmosphere thanks to our 100% succes rate!

This year's lynx season in Estonia has been exhilarating, mind blowing, frustrating (at times) and above all extremely interesting, as it allowed us to learn a lot about one of the world's most secretive felines. This year we ran three consecutive tours, with travellers from Belgium, the Netherlands, Catalonia and the UK. We are extremely happy to report that all these enthusiasts got to see Eurasian lynxes in the wild and all of them had the opportunity to take photo's/videos and to learn more about the behaviour of this charismatic species.

This was the most successful year yet and we had well over a dozen sightings (!) of at least six individual lynxes (3F/3M). Close to impossible to exceed this result anywhere in the world. The sightings of the females were often brief as the individuals are rather shy but the males provided us with some long quality sightings at close range. Resulting in some spectacular photographic opportunities. During all tours a supporting cast of mammals and birds kept us focussed and entertained during the day and night. Capercaillie, black grouse,



hazel grouse, grey partridge, white tailed eagles, grey headed-, middle spotted- and white-backed woodpeckers, nutcrackers, European cranes, pygmy and Ural owls were all seen during the tours. The mammalian by-catch consisted of the ever-present raccoon dogs, moose, roe deer, fox, mountain hare and European brown hare, beavers, red squirrels, pine martens and polecats.

The perfect start

The fastest ever sighting of a wild **lynx** for a group happened this year, before we even had the chance to do an introduction, we got a call that a lynx had been seen during daytime. The location of the sighting, in combination with the fact that the animal was described as a male made us optimistic about our chances of relocating it. We rushed to get ready and drove out on our first afternoon safari. By the time we reached the location where the lynx had been seen, it was gone.... But with some knowledge of the behaviour and a suspicion about who this individual was, we were patient and managed to relocate the large male. We have seen this male now for 3 years in a row and we called him 'light grey 11'. This male would be the star of the show for the first group and apart from several good sightings, we found him on a roe deer kill during the end of the week. Sightings of this particular male became so frequent that we set out to find other species like **pygmy owl, white tailed eagles and moose**.

On the final night of the trip, we decided to go and check if light grey was near his kill, but upon arrival we didn't see any sign of him. Martin and I have placed many camera traps in the area to ID individual lynxes and to study their behaviour, so we knew the approximate size of light greys territory. Since it is mating season, the males are always looking for females and we knew a shy female hid in a dense patch of forest, relatively close to his kill. While driving to the forest we spotted two shapes in my thermal camera and quickly understood they were two lynxes. **Our male found his female!** Seeing a mating pair of Eurasian lynxes in the wild is really rare and we had a great sighting although unfortunately the female was shy and moved off rather quickly.



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Changing conditions, frustration and the Northern lights

With an active kill and a fairly relaxed male lynx around we thought the second trip would start like the first. We couldn't be more wrong ... Nature has a way of surprising you and it is really true to always expect the unexpected. We placed camera traps on the kill that would give us a live notification whenever light grey would come back to feed. **Roe deer** were rather scarce this year and lynxes normally feed on a carcass for anything between 3 and 10 nights. We knew that he killed the roe deer only 2 nights ago so we were confident he would return. However, the **female lynx** must have been very attractive and he did not leave the dense forest to feed that night. Female Eurasian lynxes are strict seasonal breeders and only come into oestrus for 3 – 7 days per year. Whenever this happens, she has to find a mate and the pair will normally be inseparable for a few days. Her shy nature and the location of the kill close to a main road probably didn't help. The weather had also changed and warm cloudy nights had made way for cold and clear skies. Cold and clear skies are not good for mammal activity



and we had some rather quiet nights. The next night light grey came back but both live camera traps that we placed on the kill malfunctioned, bad luck..... The **ravens** discovered the kill the day after and they made short work of it together with **hooded crows, magpies and raccoon dogs**. I sat for a full night at the kill to make sure we wouldn't miss another opportunity but unfortunately light grey never came back to the remains after the ravens found it.

Now this meant we needed another plan and different lynxes, luckily the area we work in has at least six resident lynxes at the moment so we shifted our efforts to a different area. This paid off during the 4th night when a creature was spotted in a field. There was some confusion about what it was at first but as soon as we put the spotlight on, we could confirm it was a **lynx**. The problem was that it was shy and it quickly trotted back to the forest edge. Everyone saw it, but not the great sighting we had hoped for. We did however manage to relocate the animal and got a brief but very close view where some clients saw it very well. The lynx highlight for the second trip came a night after the first sighting though, we found a young male (known as Ookull – 18) on dirt road close to a little creek. The male showed himself well and at one point the whole group was out of the van and on foot no further than 10m away from the lynx. The lynx moved to the forest edge where it fell asleep under a spruce! Great celebrations and happiness after a rather frustrating start of the week. Other major highlights this week were an amazing show of the northern lights and a very prolonged sighting of a **polecat** on the prowl.



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Playing with broken ear and reconnecting with an old friend

The last group consisted of 4 Catalanian Biologists who were very keen on tracking. Now, the main job was to track large carnivores so we were happy to show them around. With light grey 11 still AWOL and the young male (Ookull) from last week not seen for a few days we started from scratch. We did get some interesting camera trap footage during the daylight of a male lynx we had only seen once this season. It was a very large male with a distinct broken ear. Him being so active during daylight, walking the same trail and returning in the way he came from with a full belly could only mean one thing. There was a fresh kill somewhere! We went out to track the kill but it proved more difficult than expected, I have never found a lynx that likes to move its kill as often and as much as broken ear. On top of that he hid his kill very well by burying it with pine needles, leaves and snow. We did however find the kill and placed live camera traps on it, the lynx came back in the evening and we expected him to feed for a while. Once we arrived at the location we were in for a surprise, there was no sign of broken ear or off the kill. He had moved it another 200m into the forest and regardless of us putting camera traps near the kill or not, he kept moving it around in a thicket of spruces next to a large field. We had to sit and wait, and it paid off with a good sighting of him moving between forest patches after feeding.

The next day we returned to the place of the kill and we could see broken ear behind the spruces with the thermal camera, he however was not coming out. Suddenly, around midnight a call echoed through the forest and we could clearly hear another **male lynx calling for a female**. It sounded like he was making his way towards the field. After a short drive around, we returned to the field to find the young male (Ookull – 18) in the middle of it. He was



relaxed and we had a great observation from 20 meters away. Then while looking back with my thermal I could see broken ear had come out to check on this other lynx. But he was not alone, broken ear was with a female! This was our second mating pair during the season and it was wonderful to see them interact. This female was also very shy and she quickly led broken ear back into the forest but not after he gave a clear message to the other male, who quickly left the area. A wonderful interaction and really cool behaviour! Two nights later we got a call that someone had seen a large male lynx calling in the area of light grey. I knew it must be him and if he is calling, it means he is looking for a new female! We made our way to his area and picked him up on the forest edge after an hour of searching. He crossed a field and jumped on a few rocks to call for a mate, this gave us the most wonderful views and we followed him for another hour or so. The last night we found a small female with this group and this means that the last group saw a total of **5 different individual lynxes!** A record for the trips.



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This year's lynx season was great and we hope to have equally good sightings and experiences next year!









