

Many trip reports mentioned that chances to see European lynx in Estonia were very good with the help and service of local tracker Martin Piispea. Martin has been studying lynx activity for many years and built strong experience where and how to find them East of Tallinn in the Lahemaa National Park where he lives. Many travel agencies are using his service for mammal watching in this part of Estonia and is therefore very busy. Impressed by the number and quality of lynx sightings described in the reports I read, we tried to contact him to book a trip but it was very difficult to find a time slot when he was available and thus, we had to book him 2 years in advance! After an interminable wait, the time finally came to travel to Estonia in February 2026.

Getting to Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia, is pretty easy from France with straightforward flights with Air Baltic. We had a full week to spend in Estonia and since based on his statistics Martin told us than booking 5 days/nights with him for lynx watching was more than enough, we also decide to spend 2 extra days in the Saaremaa island for some birding and try the iconic Steller's eiders who are wintering every year around the same places in the island. Many things have been said and written in past trip reports about birding in Saaremaa Island and mammal / lynx watching in Lahemaa NP so I won't go into too much details here as plenty of valuable information can already be found in reports posted on CloudBirders or Mammalwatching websites.

It was with great expectation and full of hopes that we landed in Tallinn airport where we took our rental car and drove straight to Saaremaa Island on the first day. We slept at the convenient Nospa hotel in Kuressaare, a lovely little town with a very nice and scenic castle worth visiting.

What struck us when we arrived in Tallinn and was a major hint for our week in Estonia were the weather conditions. It was most of the time sunny with blue sky but extremely cold with temperatures as low as -22°C. They had such freezing temperatures for several months and consequently all the sea waters in the bays and between islands were totally frozen. Ferry crossing between mainland and Saaremaa Island was pretty impressive with thick ice all around the boat. The landscapes with fields and forests full of snow and frozen trees were also gorgeous thanks to such low temperatures.

On the other hand, and very unfortunately considering our trip target, the wildlife activity was quiet and bird watching very tough due to all the ice. Indeed, sea birds could only be seen in far distance except for a few places in the North Western part of the island in local ports. As a result, we could not see many bird species and on top of that, no Steller's eiders were spotted. In terms of mammals, we could only observe the usual **red foxes** and **roe deers** that were pretty common though in the fields. We could also observe a few times some **red deers**, including 3 beautiful males, early in the mornings.

Things were not starting very well and after two days in Saaremaa, we drove back to mainland Estonia and Lahemaa National Park where we would stay for the next 5 days where we booked accommodation at the Sagadi Manor hotel, a very nice place with impressive buildings, warm and cosy rooms, and very friendly people. Breakfast was included and there is also a restaurant where you can have lunch and dinner. Not the best food we had in Estonia to be honest but Martin recommended us a few other nice places in the area.

We met Martin when we arrived at the Sagadi Manor hotel. He warmly greeted us and directly went to a meeting room where he explained us all the work he had been doing around lynxes, what would be the plan for the next 5 days and how we would spend time during the morning days for some birding and the evenings for mammal watching, mostly driving with his car and our thermal scopes to make it easier to find lynx. With 5 days, we had plenty of time so were very hopeful and optimistic on seeing a lynx 😊. However given the freezing cold temperatures added to some chilling wind and clear skies at night, we quickly found out that like in Saaremaa the wildlife activity was low and the amount of both mammals and birds we could observe very little. Martin told us they did not have such cold winter conditions since 2011! Despite all the effort and time we spent at night in the various places Martin knows to be good for lynx sighting and to make a long story short, after 36h of cumulative night drives and scanning we did not find a single lynx 😞... How disappointing! Even Martin felt sorry for us as we were there at the right time of the year based on his statistics and this never happened before to not see any lynx especially after 5 days/nights. Well to be fair, we could observe other mammals and besides the common **red foxes** and **roe deers**, we saw several **wild boars**, **mooses** and **brown hares** in the fields but only one **raccoon dog**, one **mountain hare** and one **pine marten**, all in conditions that prevented us from taking any good photos...

To conclude I can say this was a disappointing trip for us given what we could read and discussed with other people who visited Estonia before. Martin was definitely not to blame as he really tried hard with long driving hours until up to 1am several nights, much longer than what he usually does until 11pm max with other guests. Martin is also a very nice guy to discuss with and share his rich experience about wildlife watching in Lahemaa NP. I think the extreme weather conditions were explaining the poor wildlife activity situation and probably affected the lynx habits and movement during our week there. We will have to come back...

Mammals with photos or well seen (lifers in green)				
Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen	Pic
Striped field mouse	Mulot rayé	Apodemus agrarius	One observed stealing some food under the bird feeders at the Sagadi Manor hotel	X
European hare	Lièvre d'Europe	Lepus europaeus	Common in the fields during the night drives	
Mountain hare	Lièvre variable	Lepus timidus	Only one observed well one night but skittish and ran away before I could get any picture	
Red fox	Renard roux	Vulpes vulpes	Common days and nights in both Saaremaa island and Lahemaa NP	X
Common raccoon dog	Chien viverrin	Nyctereutes procyonoides	Only one observed one night crossing the road in front of the car	
European pine marten	Martre des pins	Martes martes	One observed in some distance high in a tree during one night drive	
Western roe deer	Chevreuril	Capreolus capreolus	Common days and nights in both Saaremaa island and Lahemaa NP	X
Red deer	Cerf élaphe	Cervus elaphus	Several groups observed in Saremaa island including 3 beautiful males crossing the track in front of us near Tagaranna village	X
Moose	Elan	Alces alces	Observed every night drive in small numbers but always fairly well hidden in the vegetation	
Wild boar	Sanglier	Sus scrofa	Observed every night in Lahemaa and sometimes in large groups	
Total Species Recorded = 10				

I'm adding below the only few pictures of mammals we could take during this trip...



Roe deer



Red deer



Red fox



Striped field mouse