



Trip Report Estonia - February 2026

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Intro

Estonia is an easy country to travel to, and is an ideal destination for a trip in late winter/early spring. Like most naturalists visiting the country in winter, we mainly focussed on two targets: first and foremost was the European Lynx. Estonia has become quite popular as a destination for this enigmatic cat, and night drives in early spring, during the mating season of the species, are often successful. Second, we also aimed to see the overwintering Steller's eiders in the west of Estonia. Apart from looking for these two targets, we spent our time looking for other birds such as woodpeckers, grouse and owls, and mammals. These species were, however, less of a priority on our trip. For example, we choose to rather spend an extra couple of hours on a night drive looking for Lynx, than getting up early to find Black grouse or Spotted nutcracker.

In total, we saw 13 mammal species and 55 bird species. All observations are available on this [link on observation.org](#). If you have any questions, you can contact daan.dekeukeleire@gmail.com.



The crew on Saaremaa

Practical points

Getting there and getting around

We booked flights from Brussels to Tallinn with SAS. Flights with a connecting stop in Copenhagen (outward trip) and Stockholm-Arlanda (return trip) were cheaper but lead to some stress. On the outward trip, our connecting flight was cancelled, and we had to spend 8 hours in the airport of Copenhagen. On the return trip, we almost missed our connecting flight to Brussels, due to a delay, and spent all but 4 minutes running from gate to gate in Arlanda.

For local transport, we rented a KIA Sportage from Sixt car rental at Tallinn Airport. The car was decent and in good shape. We didn't rent a 4 WD, but 2 WD was good enough for the forest tracks, even in icy or muddy conditions. When we returned the car, we did have to pay an extra fee for a chemical clean. Even though we were careful, the snow and mud apparently caused some stains on the inside, or maybe this is something the rental companies just charge standard.

To reach Saaremaa, you need to take the ferry at Virtsu. Ferry crossings are easily booked and paid for online, and take about 25min.

Accommodation

It was easy to find places to stay online on [booking.com](https://www.booking.com), also on short notice. The first night, due to a delay in flight, we couldn't pick up the car and had to stay in Tallinn. We stayed at [Airport Stay Tallinn](#), where we checked in after 1 am. It was close to the airport, cheap, but okay and clean.

In Lahemaa, we stayed in a Käsmu in [Ässa beach house](#). This was a nice older house, with a very friendly owner Sven. The house had two bed rooms with large stone stoves, that Sven put on every day, which led to a pleasant warmth. It is situated at a good location, 10 tot 20 minutes drive from the sites where we looked for mammals.

In Saaremaa, we stayed at [Just lodges](#), a wooden cabin with a sauna. It's located conveniently close to the ferry, but a bit longer to drive to the ducks.

Food

There are both small and bigger supermarkets around, easy to find on google maps. Restaurants were a bit more difficult, as many restaurants were closed in winter, and/or were closed at the time we wanted to get food. In Lahemaa, we had a late lunch at Sagadi Manor, a hotel with a restaurant, where many of the mammal watchers were staying. This restaurant also had vegetarian options on the menu, and the food there was very tasty and reasonably priced. Other times, we just had some quick fries at a gas station, or got something from the super market. On Saaremaa, there were plenty of restaurants (with vegetarian options) in Kuressaare, but not on the rest of the island.

Equipment

- We had three thermals (Pulsar XP 38, Hikmicro Falcon 2.0, and Thermal Master T2 Pro), and we would suggest that two thermals (one for each side of the car) are necessary to get the most out of the night drives. Night drives without a thermal (only spotlighting) is not advisable, as there are scattered houses in Lahemaa, and even in the middle of the night there is still some traffic. We should not worry or annoy locals with lights.
- We had two good spotlights (Fenix HT18). Again, having one good spotlight for each side of the car proved useful. Do take care not to use the spotlight near houses, for the aforementioned reason.
- A scope was very useful for ducks and waterfowl.
- The weather can be cold (we had nights of -20°), icy, and misty. You can't bring too many warm clothes for a night drive with open car windows, and decent shoes for tracking through 30+ cm of snow.

Itinerary

- 22 February: travelling Brussels - Tallinn, with a long overstay at Copenhagen airport
- 23 February - 26 February: Lahemaa NP - night drives and afternoon bird watching
- 27 February: drive to the west – afternoon and evening at Lihula - last ferry to Saaremaa
- 28 February: bird watching on Saaremaa
- 1st of March: drive back to the airport - travelling Tallinn – Brussels



Frozen bay in Laheema National Park with black woodland and blue skies, the colours of the Estonian flag – picture © Mathias D'haen

Sites visited

Lahemaa National Park

Lahemaa is a national park in the north of Estonia, and has gotten quite a reputation as a site for observing Lynx. The area is largely forested (mostly managed spruce and pine, but with some beautiful old-growth patches), interspersed with streams, grassland, arable land and scattered houses. There are also large bogs, but we didn't visit these. We were told the national park is home to circa 7 Lynx. Although Lynx densities are higher in eastern Poland, the many accessible forest tracks and good roads make night drives in Lahemaa often successful.

Mammal watching:

Every evening, we drove loops from Loksa in the west, over Vöhma, Palmse and Sagadi, until Tepelvälja, Oandu and Villandi in the east. We mainly tried to drive along small forest tracks. Normally, we started around 4 or 5 pm, shortly before sunset, and continued until 2 or 3 am, with a short break to eat some sandwiches in the car. Each night, we crossed two or three other teams also looking for Lynx. Daylight records are extremely rare, so we would advise not to put too much time into looking for lynx during the day.

During our 4 nights, we had two observations of **Lynx**. On the third night, Noé Terorde, a guide from Starling Reizen, sent us a whatsapp with coordinates, followed by a message 'lynx here now'. We were 18 minutes away from each other, and rushed to the given site. Once we arrived on the spot, we could see a beautiful Lynx in the spotlight. The animal was sitting calmly at the forest edge, circa 150m from us. After 10 minutes, the lights went out, and we had to let the animal be. Apparently, to not disturb the Lynxes in the region, the custom is to stop spotlighting after 30 minutes. Thanks to the quick message from Noé, we were lucky to have a beautiful 10 minute observation.

The next night, we had another observation. When driving through a dense forest between Sagadi manor and Tepelvälja, three warm spots appeared in the thermal. We first thought these would be Roe deer (when we saw multiple animals, this always turned out to be Roe deer), but when Mathias put the spotlight on the animals, it turned out to be a Lynx with two little kittens! The adult female was very skittish, and after a few seconds, it disappeared into the dense forest with the kittens following shortly. It is crazy how these animals can keep these tiny young alive in these forests with high snow cover.

Apart from Lynx, night drives in Lahemaa did deliver decent observations of **Elk, Roe deer, Wild boar, Raccoon dog, Fox, European hare, Mountain hare, Ural owl** and **Long-eared owl**. There were even some small animals active in the snow (**Bank Vole, Wood mice/Yellow necked wood mice, Short-tailed Field vole/East European Grey vole, Pygmy Shrew** and **Common Shrew**). We also found fresh tracks of Wolf (on a forest track east of Kakuvälja), Beaver (feeding signs at Oandu), Otter (Oandu) and Pine marten (Tepelvälja), but we didn't manage to see these species. In general, finding mammals during night drives takes quite some effort in Lahemaa. Densities of large mammals seemed low. It did occur, especially during the first and coldest night, that we didn't see anything for several hours. Another group we met spent some time driving around during dawn, but this yielded even fewer observations than driving around during dusk and the first part of the night.

Finding Lynx on your own is certainly doable in Lahemaa, but we still would advise to get in touch with local guides. In this region, Martin Piispea is a specialized guide for Lynx (Martin.piispea@gmail.com). During the period we were there, Martin was already occupied with other clients, but his local knowledge would certainly increase your chances.

Another tip is to keep in touch with other teams. Every night, we crossed two or three other teams looking for Lynx. We exchanged contact details with several of them, and kept each other updated. We are extremely grateful to Noé for Starling Reizen to share the Lynx observation with us!

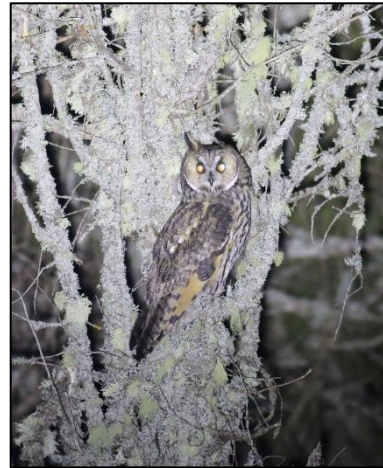


Roe deer, pygmy shrew and Lynx were some of the mammal species we observed in Lahemaa – Pictures © Mathias D’haen

Birding

After sleeping late, we spend some afternoons looking for birds. Some areas that are worth visiting:

- Old growth forest trail (Oandu loodusmetsa õpperada; 59.5656, 26.0998), a short walk through beautiful old growth forest. Here, we saw **Pygmy owl**, **White-backed woodpecker**, **Black woodpecker**, **Great** and **Lesser spotted woodpecker**, and some cool fungi (*Climacocystis borealis*, *Rhodofomes roseus*). Three-toed woodpecker is also present in this area, but we didn't observe it during our visit.
- Juminda peninsula (59.6478, 25.5080). At the northern tip of the peninsula, there was some open water, with **Common goldeneye**, **Common merganser**, **Smew** and **White-tailed eagle**. The peninsula also has some beautiful old growth forest. and on a previous trip Daan saw Hazel grouse, White-backed woodpecker and Three-toed woodpecker along a trail (Majakivi-Pikanomme loodusopperada; 59.5872, 25.5934). The bogs on this peninsula should be good for Black grouse. The weather was extremely bad when we visited this site (a storm with strong winds), so we didn't go into the forest or visit the bogs.



During night drives in Lahemaa we found Ural and Long-eared owls. Bird watching in the old growth forests delivered Pygmy owl, and woodpeckers such as White-backed woodpecker. Pictures © Mathias D'haen

Surroundings of Lihula

After our stay in Lahemaa, we went to Saaremaa, with a short stop along the way in the surroundings of Lihula.

- The old Kasari bridge (58.7322, 23.9922) looks like a good place to scan for **Otter**. The river has some open water during winter, and you have a nice view from the old bridge. We visited the site on our way to and back from Saaremaa, and both times saw fresh Otter tracks, but no animals.
- We also visited Klaas Huwel, a Belgian nature guide who lives in Estonia. After some coffee and cake at his place, with a view of **Yellowhamer**, **Willow tits**, **Nuthatches** and **Bullfinches** at the feeder in his garden, we still had some time left before we had to get the ferry to Saaremaa and decided for a short drive with the thermal. Klaas started by taking us to a field where he got lucky before. On this field, some Roe deer were grazing, but more interestingly, we could see a warm spot in the thermal, on top of a heap of logs at the edge of the forest. This turned out to be a **Lynx!** (our fifth one of the trip!). The animal was quite far (ca. 350m). It was skittish and disappeared quickly into the forest, but it was nevertheless a great observation of a Lynx in daylight, 15 minutes into our drive. Later in the evening, we saw lots of **Elk** and **Roe deer**, and some **European hares**, **Ural owls** and **Foxes**. Klaas also sometimes encounters Brown bears and Wolves in this region.

In general, the area around Lihula seemed at least as good for large mammals as the Lahemaa national park. The densities seemed higher, although the weather conditions could also have played a part in this (it was warmer than the previous nights). Another plus in our opinion was that the area has less scattered houses, and less traffic than Lahemaa, so you are less likely to bother or worry locals during a night drive. As with Lahemaa, we would advise you to get a guide with local knowledge, in this case Klaas Huwel (Klaas.huwel@gmail.com), to increase your chances.



Saaremaa

At Saareema, our main goal was to see the overwintering Steller's eiders. The first site we visited was Saareema Sadam (58.5367, 22.2377), where large numbers of water fowl were present in the harbor and the bay, with among others **Whooper swan, Mute swan, Long-tailed duck, Common Goldeneye, Smew, Tufted duck, Common** and **Red-breasted merganser** and **Red-throated diver**. Outside of the harbor, a **Baltic grey seal** was shortly present. Far in the bay, more than 500m away, we could see a raft of ca. 20 **Steller's Eider**, but this wasn't a satisfactory observation.

Second, we tried our luck near Undva (58.5164, 21.9211), where again, large numbers of water fowl congregated close to the coast. Apart from the previously mentioned species, **Velvet scoter, Common scoter, Common eider** and **Great Scaup** were present on the water, and several **White-tailed eagles** and **Ravens** were eating carrion on the beach. At this site, we were lucky to see a nice group of circa 15 **Steller's eider** actively foraging close to the shore.

One day seems enough to get the target bird species, but the landscape on the island is beautiful, so if you want to take it slow, you could certainly spend longer here.

A species we missed on Saaremaa was the Baltic ringed seal. There are some observations of this enigmatic species from the ferry crossing, but during our crossing, there was lots of mist. On our way back to the airport, we also went looking for ringed seals at Puise nina (58.7682, 23.4552) where there are some observations in March, but there too, visibility was limited due to the mist. We did however see some **Waxwings** as a consolation prize.



Top right: birding on Saaremaa (© Margaux Boeraeve) – top left: Long-tailed ducks were numerous and often close to the shore – bottom left: Steller's eiders and other ducks – bottom right: Waxwings (Pictures © Mathias D'haen)