

Large rodents of southeast Poland

7 - 9 August 2026

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Introduction

This is a report of a short trip I did in southeast Poland while based in Kraków. The primary goal was to see Podolian Ground Squirrel, but while preparing I learned that Common Hamster also occurred around the same area. There should even be a chance of Steppe Polecat, but I couldn't find any observations so that was probably a long shot. Information was gathered from Mammalwatching reports and observations on Observation.org.

The Mammal Diversity Database has split Podolian Ground Squirrel from Speckled Ground Squirrel, and now this species only occurs in four countries: Belarus, Moldova, Poland and Ukraine. So with the current geopolitical situation in Europe, this corner of Poland is probably the only practical place to see this species at the moment.

The main areas for the ground squirrel are located around the city of Zamość. I had prepared three reserves: [Hubale](#), [Popówka](#) and [Suśle Wzgórza](#). All of them were very small, just a few hectares. Based on my fading memory of watching European Ground Squirrels a long time ago in Bulgaria, I expected Podolian Ground Squirrel to be easy to find, with just one reserve being enough, but it turned out to be much less straightforward and in the end I visited all three.

My accommodation was [Stadnina Koni Tarka](#), which is very close to Hubale. The location was great. The land of the accommodation itself contained nice forest and fields, which seemed good for finding mammals. I would definitely recommend it, although it could be a bit noisy if there are other guests (probably mainly during the high season in summer), especially if you want to go to bed early before a long day.

7 August

It was about a four-hour drive from Kraków. The first day it was very rainy, so I left late and only had the last few hours of daylight in the area, when the weather had cleared up. I did a first check of Hubale reserve, but could not find any ground squirrels. The only mammals present were two European Roe Deer and a hunting house cat... Roe deer are extremely common in this part of Poland by the way. I saw them constantly during this weekend.

After dark I went to Nielisz, the hotspot for hamsters in Poland. I did not have high expectations, as I could not find a lot of information about them, but when I pointed my thermal camera at the first field I already saw three! In the end I saw at least 10 of them during my night drive, without trying to find as many as I could. It felt like they were on every field and they were much more conspicuous than I expected. Note that a thermal camera is

important, because they didn't have any noticeable eyeshine, so finding them with only a torch could be harder. Other mammals I saw here were European Hares (one wearing a collar of some kind), Red Fox and European Roe Deer. A possible Raccoon Dog crossed the road, but was too fast for a positive ID. When I got back to my accommodation, a Northern White-breasted Hedgehog was foraging in a field.

This is the exact location where I saw three hamsters: [50.78309, 22.99324](#). I think this is a great place to start. From here you can drive around to the north and check other fields.



Common Hamster - Cricetus cricetus

8 August

Today I would focus on the ground squirrels. I started at Hubale in the morning and searched for a few hours in every part of the reserve. The only mammals I saw were the same roe deer and house cat as the day before. Then I went to Popówka reserve, which is different in that there is a fence in front, so you can only check it by scoping from the side. The view is not great, and again I only saw some roe deer. It was however good for raptors. When the heat waves became too bad, I went back to my accommodation for a nap. I ended the day at the final reserve: Rezerwat przyrody Suśle Wzgórza, which is close to the Ukrainian border. I saw some hares and roe deer, but again no ground squirrels... I started to wonder what I was doing wrong. On the way back in the dark I saw a Eurasian Badger, Red Fox and Northern White-breasted Hedgehog. Back at my accommodation there was another hedgehog in the same spot as the night before, but this time it was a very cute juvenile foraging undisturbed at the side of the road.

9 August

The next morning I decided to start very early in the place where I had ended the day before, Suśle Wzgórza, because it was the only place where I actually saw holes in the grass and it should have the largest population in Poland. Also, I just liked the remoteness of it. On the way in the very early daylight I saw a beautiful adult Elk with a young right next to the road. I turned around and they crossed right in front of me to disappear into the forest. I also saw some Red Foxes and European Hares on the way.

After a few hours of scanning in the reserve I had not seen any sign of ground squirrels again. Then a shepherd arrived on the scene to let his cows and sheep graze in the reserve. I asked him where I could find the ground squirrels, but he only spoke Polish. Nevertheless, he was very nice and eventually he guided me to a certain spot surrounded by holes and tracks in the grass. He instructed me to be very still for 20 minutes and scan with my telescope. And lo and behold, within minutes I saw the head of a ground squirrel peeking through the grass! It turned out that they were much smaller and shier than I expected. They were moving very carefully and even in the ankle-high steppe vegetation, they were very hard to see. What a relief! Eventually I saw two of them while standing in this spot. Every time I moved, they were gone and I had to wait for them to come back.



Podolian Ground Squirrel - Spermophilus odessanus

When I used Google Maps to navigate to the reserve the day before, it initially sent me to the wrong unpaved road on the opposite side of a stream. The correct unpaved road starts here: [50.48123, 24.01743](#). From here you just drive straight to the reserve. The exact spot where I was standing when I observed the ground squirrels is here: [50.48216, 24.01105](#).

On the way back to Kraków, I decided to check out a lake where I heard some waders at night while looking for hamsters. It turned out to be a spectacular spot with hundreds of waders, waterfowl and other birds. For example, I counted 250 Wood Sandpipers! For the birders: the spot can be found at [50.78044, 22.99163](#). The light was particularly good in the evening.

All in all, it was a trip full of surprises. The hamsters were unexpectedly easy to find and the ground squirrels unexpectedly hard. But in the end, it was a great success!



My car in Suśle Wzgórza reserve