

Estonia
March 2nd-11th, 2019
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I went straight to Estonia after searching for drills in Equatorial Guinea because end of February/early March is thought to be the best time for seeing a Eurasian lynx. Equatorial Guinea and Estonia are vastly different countries. Aside from starting with the letter “E” and having similar population sizes, I doubt they have anything in common. They’re definitely the strangest combination of countries I’ve done for a trip. Anyway, early March is the peak of the mating season for the Eurasian lynx, and the cats are more vocal and moving around more during this time, in theory making them easier to find. As mammal-watchers well know, however, seeing a Eurasian lynx is no small feat. With that in mind, I feel very lucky to have been successful on my first dedicated search for this species.

I chose Estonia for my quest because a guide there, Tarvo Valker (tarvo.valker@gmail.com), was recommended to me, and it is as good a place as any to find the cat. Lynx density in Estonia is relatively high, but that fact certainly doesn’t translate to easy sightings. Tarvo scouted the areas that had been productive in the past prior to my arrival, talking with the local people and looking for tracks in the snow. We started in northwest Estonia and the intelligence gathered indicated the presence of a big male lynx, which had shown itself to a few of the locals, and a female with two kittens. The female was being much less visible, seemingly only moving under the cover of darkness so as to conceal the kittens, but her tracks were very prominent. We found her tracks, very fresh, along with those of the kittens, right when I arrived, and the excitement of course grew exponentially. But no lynx was to be found on the first day and the second day. With that initial excitement now waning a bit, we located the tracks of the female and kittens again in new snow on the morning of the third day. The tracks led out from the forest and into a big field/wind farm, dotted with a few houses

as well. They meandered around one particular house, often going back and forth and in circles, as you might expect to see with a mother lynx trying to manage her rambunctious kittens. All of this meandering, though, made determining exactly where the lynxes went very difficult. I was guessing that they must have circled back into the forest, especially given that we couldn't see them anywhere in the field, but there was no line of tracks entering the forest. The field does contain several small islands of trees where the lynxes may have been staying out of view, or they may have nestled down close to one of the houses, as we were trying to be respectful by not crossing what we thought were the property lines. In any event, we were very confused, and obviously disappointed that we had just missed them. Just missing an animal is a painful part of mammal-watching, but despite the anguish of the moment, we liked our chances for catching up with the lynxes the following evening. They were somewhere very close, and we felt confident that they wouldn't wander off during the daylight hours because that wasn't the behavior of this female with her kittens.

We returned to the field for the first time around 5:00 pm, and checked it with spotlights several more times thereafter, but no lynx. To make matters worse, there was a heavy, wet snow now falling in strong winds, creating blizzard-like conditions. I struggled to see anything in the beam of my light, and differentiating between actual eyeshine and the sparkle of snowflakes was increasingly difficult. But then, at the end of my beam in the same area as most of the tracks, I got a strong glow that was unmistakable eyeshine. Tarvo quickly drove toward the eyeshine and positioned the car at the end of a side road with the headlights directly aimed at the animal. There, less than 50 feet in front of us, stood the female Eurasian lynx. She looked intently at us for about ten seconds. Although the falling snow was a bit annoying at the time, it certainly added elements of drama and beauty to the sighting. Burned in my memory is the face of the lynx, dimly illuminated by the car's headlights, with big snowflakes swirling about. Tarvo said in most other situations, the lynx would have remained in that spot, as intrigued about us as we were about it. However, being a good mother meant escaping the area with the kittens, and she disappeared from the headlights. I quickly found her again moving back and to the right, with two other

sets of eyeshine following behind! The kittens were right in the middle of the field, but just too far away for getting a decent view. Tarvo reversed the car and raced to another side road that transects the field. From there, we were able to get flashes of the kittens (mostly just a lot of eyeshine) as they hopped along in trying to keep up with their mom, who was totally out of sight at this point. They were pausing often and looking back at us, as if questioning why their mom was leading them away. I think they were more curious than frightened. The field was too snowy and bumpy to drive any closer. I probably could have gotten out of the car and chased them down on foot, but doing so would have crossed the ethical line; we were already disturbing them enough. We both remarked at how small they appeared to be, given that they should have been about nine months old. The breadth and openness of the field would make anything look smaller, though.

We tried, without success, to locate the female and kittens again over the next few days. After our encounter on that snowy night, the female was likely being extra cautious in her movements with the kittens. All in all, it was an unforgettable sighting. I wish I could have watched them longer in better visibility, seeing in more detail the markings, and ear tufts, and other features that define the Eurasian lynx, but any glimpse of this animal is a privileged one. We finished the trip in northeast Estonia, and didn't find any fresh signs of lynx activity. We honestly didn't see many mammals relative to the amount of time we spent searching. The mammals we did encounter were mostly deer, moose, foxes, and hares (brown and mountain hares). The highlight for the area was a terrific sighting of a raccoon dog, which, I think, is an underappreciated mammal. Raccoon dogs have big personalities (the one we were watching made a screaming noise at us) and are cool-looking animals.