

Four years in Poland

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Four years ago (beginning of July 2016) we “moved” to Poland. While my wife worked here the whole time, I kept my job in the Czech Republic and I had several serious problems that required my presence there, while I also turned my world travels to yet another level, so I probably haven’t spent the majority of the four years actually in Poland, but I have been here more than anywhere else at least. We were keen birders the whole time and have spent many days in the nature, but we haven’t started really looking for mammals until the beginning of 2019.

In this “report” I will summarize which species we **have seen** during those four years while mentioning other targets that we **failed to find**, sometimes quite spectacularly. All the observations refer to the eastern half of Poland (east of the Gdansk-Krakow line) and a vast majority to areas around or to the east of Warsaw (where most of the actual wild nature is). To put the sightings in perspective, it’s always important to have an idea about the amount of time spent to achieve them. We (especially I) have quite a lot of free time and thus we have over the years made several dozens of (sometimes extended) weekend trips around Biebrza, Narew, Bialowieza and other destinations, as well as many dozens of short outings to places in and around Warsaw. As I am lazy and get bored quickly if nothing is happening, thus only a limited effort was spent spotlighting – looking through our photos, I counted three night visits with a spotlight to the Narewka road in Bialowieza, two to Beibrza (mostly Carska Droga), one brief to Puszcza Niepolomicka, two nights in the Zamosc area, one around Minsk Mazowiecki and one to Kampinos, each of them netting a few hours maximum of slow driving plus a few night-time hikes in places (none of which was ever really useful) and some random pieces of nighttime effort around Sobibor (while searching for the Great Grey Owls).



Red Fox

Not unlike in the Czech Republic, on every trip, day or night, you are guaranteed to see **Roe Deer** and **European Hare**, the two most common species, closely followed by **Red Fox**. Those in particular are surprisingly common and sometimes unfazed by human presence, such as the one that kept hunting around one parking lot on Biebrza while we were sitting in our car waiting for the rain to stop. Conversely, **Eurasian Red Squirrels** and **Wild Boar** are surprisingly hard to find in the open country; I think we have seen Squirrels just once in Poland outside of Warsaw itself, where the squirrels will even eat from your hand in some parks and the boars sometimes scare me out of birding alone at our local patch a few minutes from our home. The boar digging marks in the soil are however easily visible almost anywhere in the country. A weirdly elusive species is **Northern White-breasted Hedgehog**, which we sometimes see from the car in the night in random places and it even appeared just below our window at home once and woke us up with its noise, but you can never really go somewhere to look for them and expect success.



Eurasian Elk

The two species that characterize why is Poland so different from my original home and which give the landscape its “vibe” are **Eurasian Beaver** and **Eurasian Elk**. The closest family of beavers lives about a kilometer from our home, deep within Warsaw, and they can be found across the NE lowlands around almost every water channel. Those who live near people are rather tame and can be sometimes observed in broad daylight, but dawn/dusk visits to waterways are the best; they presence is always apparent from damaged trees and dams. Elks are a bit harder to find, but we basically guarantee a sighting to our visiting friends. We have seen them in Biebrza, around Siemanowka, in Sobibor, Kampinos and other places, including several locations at the outskirts of Warsaw – basically any extensive marshland is a good bet.



Eurasian Beaver

Bialowieza is a world famous location for **European Bison**. The population is re-introduced, but since the species was at one point extinct in the wild, this is as good as it gets. It's also damn hard to find, virtually impossible in summer. Our only sighting was of two individuals in winter in waning light near a feeder outside Teremiski, after an exhaustive day of searching – during which we met people claiming to having seen a large herd around Narewka, which we could not relocate. There are apparently other herds, in Bieszczady and also Niepolemicem, but we did not look for those. Bialowieza is (together with the nearby Knyszyn forest) also probably the best area to look for **Red Deer**, which is otherwise not very common. The Narewka road is reported to sometimes produce **Lynx** but given our low amounts of effort, our chances were never high.



European Bison



Spotted Souslik

At first sight, the area around Zamosc is made of unremarkable, mostly agricultural landscape – but it’s also the westernmost area where **Spotted Souslik** is found. They currently survive only in a few reserves, including Hubale, which is very close to Zamosc itself and very convenient for watching the animals – you just look over a large grassland and see several of them going about their business. The same area is supposed to hold **Steppe Polecat**, but two short half-nights of spotlighting did not reveal any, neither did we find any **European Hamsters** for which the fields around the nearby Nielisz reservoir are supposedly the biggest hotspot in Poland, nor any **Southern Birch Mouse** reportedly discovered a few decades ago around Stary Machnow some 50 kms south of Zamosc – but admittedly, that was a rather wild dream. We did, however, run into a pair of **European Badgers** in the night in the Susle Wzgorza reserve (where we also observed a Spotted Souslik in the day) – this was only the second badger sighting ever for either of us (we have each seen one before independently).



European Badger



Pine Marten

Speaking of polecats, we went looking for **European Polecat** in the direction of Minsk Mazowiecki for one event, as that's where a lot of older reports are from, but found nothing and this species continues to elude us. So does for example **Beech Marten** which we also hoped to maybe see in that area based on existing information.

Since we went into mammalwatching, we kept hearing of people seeing **Pine Marten** left and right but we haven't been lucky for a while. Then my wife saw one in the last light on Biebrza (Osowiec-Twierdza) and immediately the next night we spotlighted one on the Narewka road. We were sad that we couldn't get a picture – and then, not long afterwards, we found one on broad daylight in the Lazienki



Krolewskie park in downtown Warsaw. It was not a very good looking individual (probably old or sick) which we found thanks to the disarray caused by corvids around it. Two weeks ago we then saw another one in daylight in the Wizna marsh near the Biebrza-Narew confluence. This was a magical trip for daytime mammals, because only two days later, we saw a **Wolf** casually strolling on a meadow near the Elk river just outside the Biebrza National Park – this area, NE of Kapice (a bit east of road 65 between Osowiec and Grajewo) is possibly the greatest accessible wilderness in the Biebrza valley.

Wolf



Brown Rat

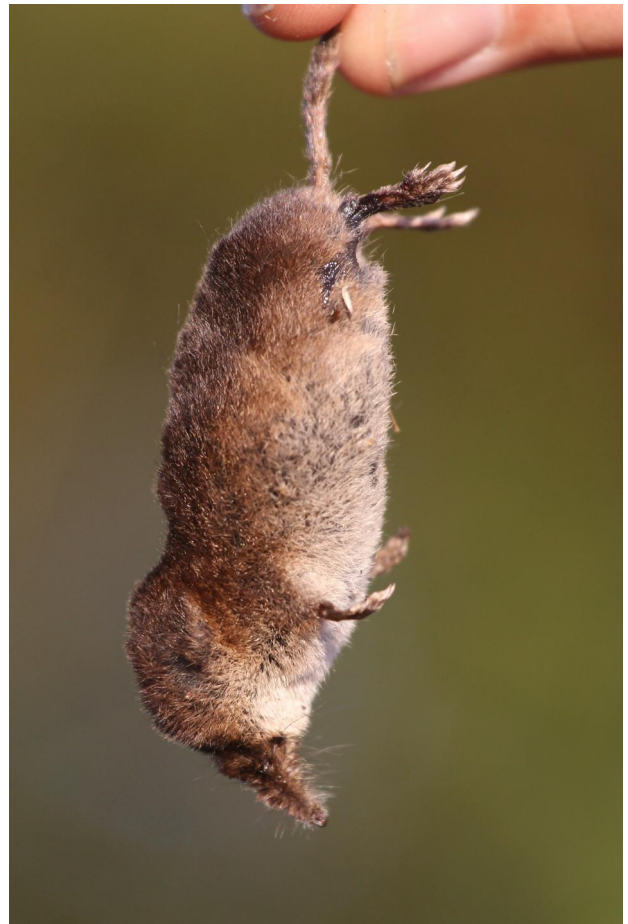
Even after a few years in mammalwatching, we are still not sure how is one actually supposed to see small mammals. There is a rich variety of **Shrews** in Poland, but we have so far seen just one dead (probably Common) and none alive, as well as no **Water Vole** despite it having become somewhat of an obsession of mine to search various ditches, streams and whatnot for them. The only vole we have somewhat consistently found in Poland is **Bank Vole** – especially striking was their number seen in the Lipowka reserve in Niepolomice during our March 2019 visit, where we would just walk through the forest, hear some noise, sit down and see a vole come out in a few minutes, repeatedly. The only other vole sighting was near Siemanowka, but the individual could only be put as either of **Common/Field/Root Vole**. Just a few days ago I have seen a rodent run across the road near Zamosc, which could have been **House Mouse**, but I am not confident enough in it and couldn't relocate it.



Yellow-necked Mouse

The saving grace of our rodent-related endeavors is, again, Warsaw itself. My wife found a **Striped Field Mouse** in the Lazienki Krolewskie park with her sister one day and when we visited the park together before dawn on a freezing winter morning, we saw not only those, but also **Yellow-necked Mouse**; I have since then seen some of the former while just biking through another park, while we have seen the later in Biebrza near the lookout tower in the forest a few hundred meters east of the Bobr campsite. The capital is also home to quite a lot of **Brown Rats** – I was a bit surprised to hear that as I never saw any, but once I started looking for them, I quickly found them at four different locations. They can be seen during the day, but really come out at dusk. Not far from the city, in the meadows near Modlin, we also saw our only **Muskkrat** in Poland.

To complete the list, I need to spell out a rather random assortment of sightings. On the Narewka road and in Puszcza Niepolomicka (where we however drove probably illegally on the forests roads) we saw **Raccoon Dogs** from the car, but couldn't take pictures. During one trip to the mouth of Wisla, I have seen a large group of **Gray Seals** resting on the sand bank where the Vistula Spit Cannal meets the Baltic sea (there should be also **Common** and even occasionally **Ringed Seals** on the coast, but have seen none). Finally many years ago, in 2012, long before we knew we will once live here, we have seen **Eurasian Otter** while paddling down Biebrza from Osowiec. There is also a plenty of bats around, but we have no idea how to deal with those – those we could take picture of in flight turned to be mostly **Common Noctule** with only one being clearly something else, but not yet IDed.



Dead (Common?) Shrew



Gray Seal



Bank vole

Other things that should be possible and we haven't seen include **American Mink** which is sometimes seen in Warsaw on the Wisla river, but we only saw one in Lithuania, some hundred kilometers outside Poland. From small mammals, **Harvest Mouse** is sometimes reported and maybe even **Northern Birch Mouse** could be seen around Biebrza. In many forests, **Edible**, **Forest** and **Hazel Dormouse** occur and as the relevant sites for the last one include the Mazowiecki Park Krajobrazowy which basically starts at our doorstep, this is something we want to look for in the coming months (we have seen Edible in Prague). The

Tatras hold **Alpine Marmots** and **Chamoix**, which I have both seen a long time ago not far from the border in Slovakia and also **Snow** and **Tatra Vole** possibly – I have no idea, how realistic their observation is though. The whole southern mountains have **Brown Bears** worth looking for, or even maybe **Wildcat**. Across the country, both **Stoat** and **Least Weasel** should occur, but since we saw those elsewhere, we never looked for them much. Interestingly, Bialowieza, Knyszyn and Wigry should have **Mountain Hare** – also a species which we have seen elsewhere and thus not looked for, but now we are thinking that we should have examined the hares in that area more just for the fun of it! Finally, **European Mole** is obviously abundant everywhere you look (as evidenced by its “hills”) but we never saw any – but we keep in mind Vladimir Dinets' advice to wait for the right flood to watch them!

More information on Polish mammals can be extracted from the fantastic online atlas at <https://www.iop.krakow.pl/Ssaki/> - it's all in Polish, but with Latin names, so everyone can get around.

