

# Trip report Rumania

*'A quest for the Eurasian lynx'*

12 – 15 march 2020



Dear reader,

After searches in 2019 for new cats in the Sahara & South America this year I wanted to give it another try for Eurasian lynx. It is the hardest cat to find in the wild in Europe and chances are more or less always limited. A previous search winter 2017 in the forests of Belarus delivered only tracks as proof they were around. Also in Poland I tried a bit in Bieszczady Mountains 2016 but didn't use the right strategy and was in wrong season. Now I wanted to try my luck in the Carpathians of Rumania in late winter/early spring.

I asked my english friend Stuart Hill if he would be interested to join me this tour. Together we have done successful trips for pumas in Chile, snow leopard in India and wild cats in Spain. He was happy to join for this one!

As finding wild cat species has become my 'bucket list' this 'hard to get' one needed a new attempt. I always try as best to make good pictures of a cat if I got to see it in the wild. Although for this tour I wasn't having great expectations for a very good sighting, a 'proof shot' would make me more than happy, and happy I (we) got!

I hope you'll enjoy this report. Feel free to commend or ask questions!

At last always thanks again to [www.mammelwatching.com](http://www.mammelwatching.com) for presenting such worth full trip reports.

I hope this report can add some information for this less visited country. Rumania has much to offer for wildlife viewing of European big Carnivores.

Best regards,

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## General information

### Preparation

Last years I searched the internet for 'Lynx watching' and found a Rumanian website: <https://www.absolute-nature.ro/> I had contacted them previous years and it was either 'full' or 'not the best time of year', but they (Simona) responded quickly. I didn't got the idea there was many experience from other travelers and mammalwatching didn't show any previous reports with succes for lynx. Anyway I thought 'why don't give it a try'.

This year I was well in time and planned a tour for half march which according to Simona was statistically the best time because it is also lynx mating season. They offer a *2-day lynx search* including airport pick-up. I changed this in a 3-day full field days and skipped the transfer because we would use our own rental car. We booked the car for 7 days so we would have another 3 days extra after the tour to go on our own. We hoped to have a further look for wildlife or just see the country.

The tour is quit expensive and 2 persons is minimum people to go. In my opinion the balance between the tour-price and what the guide, who does all the work in the field, gets was rather lop-sided (We spoke about what we paid Simona and he told what he got paid...) On the otherhand the touroperater brings it all together. I will not mention any details of costs prices but you can findout for yourselves.

We stayed in a nice guesthouse in the smal town Zarnesti. A 10 minutes drive brings you to *Piatra Craiului National Park*. Here a nice walk through a gorge is famous. We had breakfast and diner after the morning and afternoon stake-outs. Mimi the very friendly lady host served breakfast and diner for us and she speaks English. It was clear they have had more guests who came here for wildlife tours and she hoped we would see a lynx.

Our guide was Marius, he is a very good expert on wildlife and especially *large carnivores*. He works also for the local forest department as wildlife researcher. He previously worked on the '*Rumanian large carnivore project*'. You can contact him via mail: [wolfmanbv@yahoo.com](mailto:wolfmanbv@yahoo.com)

### Corona virus crises..

Just when we would start our trip the Corona virus crises started to become more serious, so all the news was about that. When the news started of 'closing borders' and 'no flights' I got a bit worried. In the end we decided to leave after 3 days. The news was running up so quickly that we were afraid of maybe getting stuck or 'in quarantine' so a pity we had to skip our extra last 3 days in the field... But we got home (and with the target seen, there was not much pain of that decision).

### Money

I had some trouble with the ATM at the airport that got out of order exactly at the moment it was supposed to give my money!? Quit a hassle and finally I phoned my dutch bank. Luckily the money was returned on my account but this took us 45 minutes. We decided not to use any other ATM. You can pay in most places by card so cash is not really needed. Also we changed some cash in the guesthouse by Mimi which in the end wasn't really nessecary.

### Roads/Safety

Traffic is always a bit strange in another country especially when 'horse carts' are on the main road here and there. But careful driving is always good and roads are mostly good. It's a 3 hours drive to Zarnesti. You cross the Carpathians on the way and little snow was left on the higher parts in the woods. People are friendly, but actually we were mostly in the field.

### Daily schedule

We went to 3 different spots where we had morning and afternoon stake-outs in the mountain forests *outside* of the national park Cruiliui. Marius told us that the density of Carnivores was a little higher outside the national park. I think also because the park exists mainly of the highest mountain peaks (rocky area). You can enter these private owned forest areas on your own and sometimes by car, but you are not allowed to walk off-tracks and most viewpoints are away from the main track... We were told fines are extremely high *1300 euro* if you would be caught of track on your own without a guide. Only with an authorised person you can go around. Another disappointment was that spotliting is also strictly forbidden... fines or prison. So I felt our chances lowering because I thought spotliting could be the solution to find the cat...

Another thing is that there are lots of brown bears around and it seems you really have to be careful since every year accidents (with casualties) happen. Marius had to scare off a bear the next day during his mid-day field-work. That's why we borrowed bearspray from Simona for our own walks. (Marius had his own of course)

### **Weather conditions**

Normally there should have been snow everywhere in the forests time of year in March. It was all green... probably another symptom of global... We even had temperatures of 18 degrees Celsius and sunshine. Nice conditions but not good for lynx watching. Although the last day temperatures dropped to freezing at night and 4 degrees in daytime. Well it is a mountain terrain where weather always can change quickly.

### **Day one**

5.30 we were picked up for a half our drive and a 20 minute walk to the first spot. We had an early morning sit-and-wait on a rather steep forest hill. From here we had views down in the open forest but only clear sight for about 100 metres far. I thought this would give only a very small chance since it was only a small patch of the whole area. Apparently Marius thought this was the best strategy since he had seen fresh tracks here... only nothing showed.

Just before lunch we had a walk on our own in the gorge of the national park try to see the Chamois that we were told should be easy to find on the cliffs. But besides a nice walk we didn't find any.

The afternoon we went to the same spot but now to a more open area and a bit further walking. Here we had a much wider view over an open grassy field. I had a better feeling with this place. We waited until almost dark but again nothing showed-up... Even Marius was clearly a bit surprised because usually deer should come out he said. Well we went back to the guesthouse and I thought this could become some nervous next 2 days.

### **Day two**

Trying in a different place of the mountains the next morning. Here we had a bit longer walk and after a rather slippery steep up-hill track we reached an, in my opinion, even better viewpoint. It started promising with 3 male **red deer** on the other end of an open field and a **wild boar** that ran in the bush just close-by. We waited again for 1-2 hours but again no lynx showed-up... We saw a **roe deer** but actually that couldn't make me very happy.

After lunch we went back on our own to the first place and we walked a bit on the main track. We saw a **red fox** in an open field, it watched us for a while and disappeared in some bushes. Around 15.30 Marius came and together we walked up further in the forest and climbed-up higher to have a better view over all of the valley. We now could overlook two large fields. While we were just sitting down I climbed a tree to even have a slightly better view. We then heard some rough noises from the bushes and forest just 50 meters down of us... a *bear!*? Unlucky we just only *heard* it as it walked down. *Marius told us this could only be a bear, because of the sound and behaviour.* On the other hand meeting a bear too close wouldn't be that nice according to Marius. Well we were here for lynx so I guess he was right.

After half an hour two **roe deer** came out grazing in one field. They seemed a bit worried or at least focussing on the forest edge but it was pretty far away and I guess they will be checking around all the time with wolves and lynxes as their neighbours. On a very far higher slope we saw a brown animal that looked like a bear, but having a better look at the pictures it showed that it was just a **red deer** hind.

After two hours again we had to go back again without a glimpse of the lynx. Day 2 and no lynx and only one day left with Marius...

### **Day three**

Next morning we decided to give it another try to the open area of the first viewpoint. We hid a bit under some trees and still could overlook a large field. Again 2 hours waiting and nothing... So now we had only one afternoon left...

Marius told he had one other option for us, a longer, one hour hike to a much higher lookout point. Because sit and wait is not my personal favorite I thought 'yes, let's do that!'. Stuart also agreed and we drove for half an hour, parked the car and followed a logging track for a while. From here we passed some fields and bushes on the muddy track were lots of tracks: *bears, deer, wild boar, wild cat and even wolf and lynx.* Also Marius pointed out scat of wolf and lynx. This obviously gave a bit of a boost, but still nothing was seen on our walk. After 45 minutes we reached the highest point of the area and we got a very nice view over the area.

Again we had to sit-and-wait. After 45 minutes, as it was rather windy and cold and I had sweat way too much from the hike, I really got cold... But now the funny thing: because I off the cold I wanted to stand and do some knee-dips to warm-up. Marius said it was better to stay down, and just as I was going down again I saw something in the part of the field which we could only see while standing... So I directly moved-up again to have just one other check.. it was gone...!?

Looking to the left there was movement and there it was a **lynx**!! It crossed the field down of us some 300 meters away. Totally enthusiastic we tried to make photos while it walked the field. I guess the field was about 150 meters wide but there were some trees in front of us so taking pictures was a bit difficult. But anyway this is all in the game. The lynx stopped at the forest edge and marked/sniffed a tree, than watched over the field our side for some 10 seconds before it walked further into the forest.

After a minute it walked much further away over another field close to the forest edge but it was hardly recognisable.

So totally unexpected a lynx walked an hour before dark over the open field!? Marius showed us he knows where to check 😊

It was a large male lynx with a nice red-brownish color (I thought it would be more gray in winter). Just a privilege we got to see this mysterious cat!

On the walk down we didn't see any wildlife anymore. But the beers tasted very well in the guesthouse!

Next morning we decided to go back to the airport because of all corona trouble. With the target seen it was not a very difficult choice although we would have liked to try more for bears and wolves.

I probably go back once when there is snow.

On the drive to the airport we saw a **rabbit** just outside Zarnesti.

In my opinion the chances of seeing a lynx here in the Carpathians is still rather a lucky chance, but I guess you just have to spend time and be lucky. In snow conditions tracking lynx is probably better and also wildlife is more easy to spot. Marius for sure know what is best and said sometimes you have more luck than others. But if you have time (more days) he can help you find your targets.

## TRIPLIST MAMMALS

**Red deer** - 3 stags in the early morning from the second viewpoint and 1 hind from the first viewpoint

**Red fox** - 1 animal in a field from the forest road in the the early afternoon

**Roe deer** – 2 in a field from the first high viewpoint in dusk, another one was seen from the second viewpoint in the late morning.

**Wild boar** – 1 animal ran of while we just arrived at the second viewpoint early morning.

**Rabbit** – 1 in a field just outside of Zarnesti

**Eurasian lynx** – 1 animal crossing a meadow at ca. 350 metres down. Clearly seen for about a minute.

**Brown bear** – heard only, pretty clear noises of a busy digging large animal only 30-50 meters away from the viewpoint in thick forest and bushes. But not seen...

**Many prints of:** bear, wolf, wild cat, lynx, deer, boar

### Stuff we missed:

*Chamois*, we tried the gorge in Piatra Criuliu one time in the late morning but couldn't find any. We didn't focus on other mammals





**The Carpathians**



**A look over the area on a less sunny day**





Tracks of wolf & lynx





**Fresh bear track**



**The lynx, see the white spots on the ears**





A last look before the lynx walked into the forest



Scent mark





3 red deer in early morning light (crop/zoom, it was 250 meters away)



red fox





**A roe deer from far away**



**A red deer hind, almost mistaken for a brown bear**





**a typical roadview**