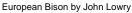
Poland's Mammals: In Search of the Eurasian Lynx!

Naturetrek Tour Report

24 - 31 March 2017







European Beaver by John Lowry



Wolf by John Lowry



Spring Snowflake (Leucojum vernum) by Terry Swainbank

Report compiled by Tom Mabbett Images courtesy of John Lowry, Terry Swainbank and Tom Mabbett



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Summary

An action packed week dedicated and focussed on seeing Europe's most sought after and enigmatic mammals. With determination and effort the sightings were superb and with a quite remarkable end to the week we achieved our ultimate goal of finding Lynx on the very last night! As well as the Lynx we enjoyed excellent views of Wolf, Wildcat, spectacular views of Bison with the Beavers being a real favourite and Otters a surprise highlight. In total 19 species of mammal! A host of special birds were encountered with great views of Greyheaded, White-backed and Lesser-Spotted Woodpecker and a range of lovely wild flowers. It was an exciting week with night time spotlighting key to our success and we all enjoyed exploring this remote and untouched region of Europe. Of course a lot of fun was had along the way too.

Day 1

Friday 24th March

After a short morning flight of just two hours we were soon landing into Krakow, where we met our leader Jan and the rest of the group before boarding the vehicle and heading for one of the most remote, wild and undervisited areas of Europe: Bieszczady National Park. After a journey of around four hours and a lunch stop half way, we arrived at our first base. On the journey, notable sightings were 20 - 30 White Storks returning to the area and more impressive were two Black Storks with one close by, feeding on a flooded area created by Beavers. After settling in, we walked up the hill just behind our rooms to scan the area and get our bearings. It was dusk by now and after a short watch, we enjoyed dinner before heading out on our first night excursion.

We travelled along a very muddy forest track, spotlighting as we went and noting our first of many Hare and Roe Deer. We reached the end of the track and walked in the snow along an old railway line in the hope to find Tengmalm's Owl. In the snow, a surprise find was a Slow Worm; initially seeming dead, it came back to life in Tom's pocket! Unfortunately, the owl was only heard, as was the splash of a Beaver by a few before we returned to the vehicle. We continued spotlighting with Jan on the high-power spotlight, searching for eye-shine, while Tom did his best to avoid potholes and position the vehicle when we found something. Heading back for some much needed sleep and very close to our accommodation, we had a very close encounter with a lone bull Bison! It was laid down when the spotlight dropped on to him just a few metres off the track. He stood up and moved slowly away: magic! A great end to the day and time for some sleep!

Day 2

Saturday 25th March

We were up early for a pre-breakfast drive at the perfect time for mammals - our first Red Deer were seen and a brief view of Red Squirrel. Whilst driving around there were thrushes everywhere with Fieldfares and a few Redwing, Mistle Thrushes and Song Thrushes almost constantly flying up from the roadside. Hares and Roe Deer were seen again before we returned for our first delicious breakfast.

After enjoying the lovely spread including the best pancakes and scrambled eggs, we went back out for a relaxed walk along a lovely forest stream. On the way out we had a bit of a surprise with a fresh Wolf kill in the river right next to our rooms! A Red Deer had been forced into the river and taken! We took some photographs before continuing and stopping briefly to pick up our forest permits. Here our first Fox was seen hunting in a nearby field and we went on to enjoy Northern Bullfinches with Willow and Coal Tits all around, and hearing Firecrest.

Driving back for lunch we stopped to enjoy a cracking flock of around 15 Waxwings which were in the top of a larch with a few Crossbills, which also showed well with good telescope views. We enjoyed lunch back at our lodge and then took time to relax. Some opted to go birding and exploring here with such wonderful habitat on our doorstep. A male Crossbill was taking grit from the drive with Hawfinches all around and Grey-headed Woodpecker calling nearby. We set up a camera trap on the Wolf kill during our down time and, after a relax, we headed back out at dusk to view from a vantage point.

We had a short walk up a hill, watching a Hawfinch in the telescope and we found some Lynx scat! Tom set his camera trap nearby and we settled in to scan open areas across the valley. Unfortunately little was seen mammal-wise whilst scanning and as darkness was nearly upon us, we headed for dinner at a local restaurant. It was good to warm up a bit!

Following a lovely dinner we headed back out with the spotlight and in a couple of hours saw yet more Hares, Foxes and also a lone Badger. We drove the tracks near to the lodge before deciding to stop for the night and get some sleep.

Day 3

We were up at 5.30am and watched the area from just outside our rooms as there were so many signs of Wolf activity right on our doorstep. Bird-wise, it was notable that a lot of Ring Ouzels had arrived with a smart male near our vehicle. As it approached 7am some of us decided to go for a walk along the river while two of the group walked up to the vantage point behind the lodges. Here they struck lucky! A lone Wolf crossed open ground just 150 metres from them: an amazing encounter! We knew wolves were all around and it was great to have our first sighting. Birds were everywhere along the entrance track with lots of Hawfinch and Ring Ouzel, Fieldfares on territory and Crossbills seen.

Following breakfast we went for a drive into the heart of some wonderful nearby forest. This was after a smart Grey-headed Woodpecker showed very well in a tree by the driveway and we all had great views in the telescope. Within the forest we got out to check some very clear Bear tracks in the snow, with Wolf tracks also here. A Woodcock was seen on the ground not far from the vehicle and, after working higher through the forest,

Sunday 26th March



Bear tracks

we went for a walk on a meadow and enjoyed some stunning views over this wild area. Such a huge expanse of forest and open meadows and full of wildlife! We then returned for lunch and some down time.

Back at the lodge we checked the camera trap that was on the Wolf kill but alas, the carcass had moved. It appeared that a local dog was the only visitor! We headed out for a scanning session in the early evening and went for a short walk to a promising looking viewpoint. A very nervous Roe Deer was watched with roding Woodcock flying over and a Firecrest seen, but unfortunately no predators. It was again a cold evening with snow from earlier in the day, so we headed to the restaurant for a nice meal.

Following dinner we were out again for a spotlighting session and returned to drive along the remote forest tracks we had done earlier in the day. Shortly into the session and panning the spotlight over an open field, eyeshine was picked up and we had a feline! A Wildcat! We had fairly prolonged views as it was hunting along the forest edge; its sheer size striking and thick banded tail obvious. A great start! We continued on, seeing some close up Roe Deer before leaving the area back towards the lodge. We passed a Beaver lodge and slowed to shine the torch to try and see one at work. Surprisingly we spotted two Otters! We had very good views as they checked out the lodge and fished in the pools! Superb! After watching them and all having had good views, we continued on and were stopping again almost straight away as a Beaver was seen! We had great views of two animals stripping bark with a third animal noted. They are such amazing creatures and it was wonderful to see them doing their thing! They eventually moved away from us and we carried on towards home. A Woodcock was dazzled in the spotlight and an eared owl species was caught in the lights in front of the vehicle. It was hard to tell which for certain, but it appeared to be a wintering Short-eared Owl. We were at our base now and just one final scan across the field behind the lodges revealed two sets of eyes! It was difficult to be sure at first, but a little movement revealed they were Wolves! Two Wolves right by our rooms! They looked at us, moving their heads up and down, checking out who was shining a light on them before running towards us and then melting away using the lie of the land to dip out of sight. What a buzz!

After an amazing spotlighting session we called it time and off to bed.

Day 4

Monday 27th March

For those who wanted, we were again up early for a scanning session just up the hill behind the lodges. There were lots of finches going over with flocks of Brambling, Hawfinch and Crossbill, and also a few Siskin and Chaffinch. Interestingly, small flocks of Coal Tits were moving high above us too. After a short time and scanning the woodland edges, we spotted three Wild Boar. They disappeared into the wood before coming out into the open and charging across the meadow, giving great views of these very large, dark animals.

We enjoyed breakfast and relaxed until lunch. Some of us went for a walk nearby with a Weasel seen hunting along the river bank and a Field Vole also noted. Again lots of birds were around with Dipper seen on the river

with Grey Wagtail, and a White-backed Woodpecker briefly spotted.

Following a relax and lunch, we now drove for around 45 minutes and went on a superb walk along the river San to a viewpoint. There were tracks everywhere: Bear, Wolf and Bison. As we rounded a corner we stopped very suddenly as a herd of 16 Bison were on the river's edge. They walked into the river and stood watching us for around 20 minutes before moving away. A wonderful encounter with these giants of the forest! Along the walk we found Carpathian Newt, enjoyed lots of wildflowers, mating frogs and heard a Tawny Owl.



Carpathian Newt Lissotriton montandoni

We relaxed at the scanning point, noting Roe Deer and Fox. Heading back to the vehicle, we spotted the Bison a little further up river on a far bank and counted 21 now! We scanned until darkness fell with no luck and then headed for the restaurant, stopping to watch our only Ural Owl of the tour on the way.

Our spotlighting session produced Hares and two Badgers before we turned in.

Day 5

Tuesday 28th March

Another early scan for those who wanted resulted in the usual bird species going over, but nothing too exciting mammal-wise. After breakfast we went for a walk nearby and looked at a Beaver lodge and dams close up. They are truly remarkable animals in the way they create their ideal habitat. We then enjoyed a lovely walk nearby with Golden Eagles soaring and Nutcracker giving great views. We heard drumming Black Woodpecker and tried to see Hazlehen, achieving brief views and hearing their very high pitched song. A highlight here was the movement of Common Cranes with four or five flocks up to 200 strong passing over with some very low and the sound very special.

We had lunch and then said our farewells before heading for the National Park and our second base. First Tom went to check the camera trap which revealed just a Fox, while others enjoyed watching over a meadow.

After around an hour and a half we reached our second base. After settling in we went for a scanning session, watching Red and Roe Deer and a tame Fox in the car park, with many Ring Ouzels showing very well and a Hen Harrier hunting a ridge above.

Following dinner we headed out spotlighting and enjoyed Hares, Badgers, Fox and great views of Beavers feeding.

Day 6

Wednesday 29th March

This morning we were up early again and went for a scanning session from the same viewpoint but alas, no key mammal species were seen. A Hen Harrier was seen again, as were Ring Ouzels. After breakfast we went to the Ukrainian border, around 45 minutes away, and went for a really great walk. A pool was teeming with Common Frogs, all busy breeding. We enjoyed a super circular walk with the highlight being the woodpeckers. In one small patch of woodland we had super views of a drumming Lesser Spotted Woodpecker which was then seen off by a White-backed Woodpecker! As if that was not enough, a Grey-headed Woodpecker flew in to join them: a woodpecker fest!

We carried on in lovely weather and had a picnic lunch with Firecrest and the northern race of Long-tailed Tit showing well. We then drove back for some free time, seeing a Hoopoe on the side of the road near the hotel. In the early evening went for a walk to try and see Hazelhen and we succeeded in seeing this elusive species.

Rather than a scanning session this evening we decided to drive slowly through a prime area but, despite our best efforts, only the usual species of Hare and Roe Deer were seen. We enjoyed dinner and then headed out for more spotlighting. A Pine Marten ran across the road in front of us and we worked hard to find eye-shine. We indeed found a lot but not of the real target species with Fox, Hare and Roe Deer regularly encountered.

Day 7

Thursday 30th March

We were up early again for those that wanted to venture out for a scanning session and headed back to the Ukrainian border. We watched an area but unfortunately no wolves appeared. A Marsh Harrier flew through and

we enjoyed a Great Grey Shrike before slowly driving back. We stopped for one more scan and our efforts paid off! Jan spotted a lone Wolf just over the border. It trotted along, stopping occasionally, looking at us and allowed some really excellent scoped views and photographs to be taken. It was a wonderful sighting of a special animal and after it melted away, we boarded the vehicle full of enthusiasm and optimism for the rest of the tour.

After breakfast and a relax we went for walk nearby and a scan of a glade. A displaying Goshawk and Nutcracker were the highlights of the walk, and we spotted signs of Wolf and Bear. We enjoyed a picnic next to a beautiful river with Dipper seen and a very fresh Bear scat on the road.

Returning, we had some time to rest and get ready for the final night session before heading back to the first viewing point for the pre-dinner scanning session. The events of next seven hours or so were full of every emotion and some extraordinary sightings, and what follows documents them as accurately as possible. Our scanning session started around 6.20pm and while Tom waited and scanned with the group from the main vantage point, Jan was in a different spot a short distance away. Soon after the diligent scanning had begun and our first Roe Deer had been spotted, we heard a yelling from Jan that could only really mean one thing - he had spotted a Lynx! We rushed over but to our dismay, when we got there, it had disappeared behind some small bushes on the hillside! After all the hours, it was a panful wait in fading light with no-one on the animal. We knew the spot it was in; telescopes were trained; but no animal.

As the light was really fading and it was almost too dark to scan, an animal moved out from behind these bushes, but only Tom and Jan could make it out in their telescopes. There was no doubt it was the Lynx and it appeared to be hunting Hares; running and stopping time after time. We jumped into the vehicle and headed round to spotlight the field but with no luck.

Our chance appeared to be over and it was time for dinner. Some were understandably a little subdued at dinner, but we picked ourselves up and boarded the vehicle for the final big push and spotlighting session. Being around a 20 minute drive from where we had glimpsed the Lynx earlier, we tried the field that we knew had been so productive in previous years closer to base first. We had driven up and down this road multiple times over the last couple of nights but this time we almost instantly caught eye-shine and it was no Fox! Remarkably we had a Lynx here! Once again it was quickly in cover but a few people saw its outline and shape and we all saw the eye-shine. It was tantalisingly close to being in the open but we quite quickly lost the eye-shine. We decided we had to leave the glade and not shine the torch for a while in the hope it would come out. We drove slowly past the area a few times but alas, a fleeting glimpse was all we had. This animal does not give itself up easily!

We decided to leave the spot and drive back to the area we were scanning earlier and set off, spotlighting as we went. Reaching the glade and hillside we had watched earlier, we swept the spotlight across but nothing was to be seen. Well, the odd Hare and Fox but no Lynx. We continued on a little while further and eventually turned around for home. We shone the torch light down to a Beaver dam and here an Otter was seen very well in indeed. We stopped for some time watching it hunting and it even could be seen underwater at one stage. When the Otter had been lost we carried on and approaching the glade, knowing we had one last shot at it. As soon as the spotlight centred on the glade, there it was! A Lynx clearly in our spotlight in the middle of the glade! We could see its straw coloured spotted coat, black tipped tail and distinct head shape. We were in disbelief and the whole vehicle went into somewhat of a meltdown. Struggling to keep our composure, we stayed on the animal as it moved off to the left and then sat with its back to us, looking away for some time. Everyone had finally seen a Lynx! To our amazement, eye-shine very high up the hillside revealed a second Lynx and they moved towards each other before disappearing into the night. We were all ecstatic and it was celebrations all round. What an end to the final spotlighting session! We made our way back to the hotel and on getting out of the vehicle it was hugs

and handshakes all round after a remarkable session. Persistence pays off! We went to bed with the adrenaline still pumping until morning!

Day 8

Friday 31st March

Today it was time to leave for Krakow airport and we started the four hour journey after breakfast. En route we stopped to scan a roadside flood and our only Garganey of the week were spotted. We made good progress and arrived at the airport in plenty of time for our flight back to the UK. We said our farewells to Jan and were soon back in the UK after a wildlife-filled adventure that will live long in the memory.

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Species Lists

Mammals

Eurasian Lynx *Lynx lynx*: The persistence paid off and incredibly, on the very last spotlighting session, 3 different animals were seen: 1 very briefly near to base and then 2 on the same hillside where we had earlier glimpsed an animal on a scanning session. Good views obtained of one initially on the hillside.

Wolf Canis Lupus: 1 seen well at around 7am behind our first base. 2 seen spotlighting very close to our accommodation. 1 seen very well and scoped views at the Ukrainian border. A fresh kill also found.

Wildcat Felis silvestris: 1. Good views of an animal hunting.

European Bison *Bison bonasus*: 1 lone male seen very close to our first base. Herd of 16 crossing a river giving wonderful views and later 21 counted grazing at the river's edge.

European Beaver Castor fiber: Superb views, 3 at one time was a record count but seen on 3 evenings.

Otter Lutra lutra: A surprise highlight with 2 seen well around a Beaver lodge and a single animal feeding on a pool on the last night.

Wild Boar Sus scofa: 3 animals seen well on a morning scanning session.

Red Fox Vulpes Vulpes: Commonly seen

Red Deer Cervus elaphus: Only c10 seen over the week

Roe Deer Capreolus capreolus: Seen daily with c10-12 average.

Red Squirrel Sciurus vulgaris: A few seen.

European Hare Lepus europaeus: Commonly seen

Weasel Mustela nivalis: Good views working a stream near first base

Pine Marten *Martes martes*: Briefly across the road spotlighting

Badger Meles meles: c5 seen

Wood Mouse

Field Vole

A Shrew species

A Bat species

Signs of:

Brown Bear Ursus arctos: Signs seen very regularly. Fresh tracks, scat... but no animal itself.

Birds

Mute Swan Cygnus olor. Seen on the way to the airport

Mallard Anas platyrhynchos: A couple seen

Hazel Grouse *Tetrastes bonasia:* Worked hard to try and see this difficult species and succeeded as one bird came onto a track. Heard well!

Common Pheasant Phasianus colchicus: A couple seen

Black Stork Ciconia nigra: 2 birds seen well on roadside pools.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia*: 12 – 15 newly arrived on our first day.

Grey Heron Ardea cinereal: Seen

Eurasian Sparrowhawk Accipiter nisus: One seen

Northern Goshawk Accipiter gentilis: One seen displaying briefly

Western Marsh Harrier Circus aeruginosus: Male migrating on penultimate day

Hen Harrier Circus cyaneus: 2 seen: 1 at each base. Both ringtails.

Golden Eagle Aquila chrysaetos: 2 birds seen well.

Common Buzzard Buteo buteo: Seen well

Eurasian Woodcock Scolopax rusticola: Seen on the ground well, roding and dazzled whilst spotlighting!

Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon Columba livia:

Common Wood Pigeon Columba palumbus

Eurasian Collared Dove Streptopelia decaocto:

Tawny Owl Strix aluco: Heard only

Ural Owl Strix uralensis: 1 seen well perched at a roadside

Tengmalm's Owl Aegolius funereus: Heard only

Eurasian Hoopoe Upupa epops: 1 was seen multiple times feeding at a sandy roadside.

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos minor. Superb views of drumming and calling.

White-backed Woodpecker Dendrocopos leucotos: Excellent views after chasing away Lesser Spotted Woodpecker

Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos major: Common

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius:* Only brief views and in flight.

Grey-headed Woodpecker Picus canus: Scope-filling views and commonly heard.

Common Kestrel Falco tinnunculus: A few seen

Great Grey Shrike Lanius excubitor: 2 birds seen with singing too,

Eurasian Jay Garrulus glandarius: Seen frequently

Eurasian Magpie Pica pica: Seen

Spotted Nutcracker Nucifraga caryocatactes: 1 seen very well

Western Jackdaw Coloeus monedula: Seen

Rook Corvus frugilegus: Seen

Hooded Crow Corvus cornix: Common

Northern Raven Corvus corax: Seen daily

Coal Tit Periparus ater: Common

Marsh Tit Poecile palustris: A few seen

Willow Tit Poecile montanus: Common Tit in the forests here.

Eurasian Blue Tit Cyanistes caeruleus: Seen

Great Tit Parus major. Seen

Eurasian Skylark Alauda arvensis: A few seen and heard.

Long-tailed Tit Aegithalos caudatus: The northern white-headed race seen a few times well.

Common Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*: Heard and seen.

Common Firecrest Regulus ignicapilla: Seen well one a couple of occasions and heard frequently

Goldcrest Regulus regulus: Seen and heard

Eurasian Wren Troglodytes troglodytes: Seen

Eurasian Nuthatch Sitta europaea: Common

Eurasian Treecreeper Certhia familiaris: Common

Common Starling Sturnus vulgaris: Common

Ring Ouzel Turdus torquatus: An arrival during our stay and many seen with a flock of 18.

Common Blackbird Turdus merula: Common

Fieldfare Turdus pilaris: On territory and very common

Redwing Turdus iliacus: Seen daily and singing near base.

Song Thrush Turdus philomelos: Very common

Mistle Thrush Turdus viscivorus: Seen daily; common

European Robin Erithacus rubecula: Seen

Black Redstart Phoenicurus ochruros: A few seen and around accommodation.

European Stonechat Saxicola rubicola: Just 1 seen on first day

Northern Wheatear Oenanthe oenanthe: Male seen on first day

House Sparrow Passer domesticus: Seen occasionally

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Seen but only on one day.

Dunnock Prunella modularis: Heard and seen by some

Grey Wagtail Motacilla cinereal: Seen on rivers

White Wagtail Motacilla alba: Seen

Meadow Pipit Anthus pratensis: Flying over

Common Chaffinch Fringilla coelebs: Common

Brambling Fringilla montifringilla: Huge flocks flying over forest, c1000 in flocks of c100 going over.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*: Seen and heard regularly.

Eurasian Bullfinch Pyrrhula pyrrhula: Seen

European Greenfinch Chloris chloris: Seen

Common Linnet Linaria cannabina: Seen

Red Crossbill Loxia curvirostra: Superb views at first base.

European Goldfinch Carduelis carduelis: Seen

Eurasian Siskin Spinus spinus: Seen and heard but only on one day.

Yellowhammer *Emberiza citronella*: Seen on a couple of days.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Seen on one day.

Waxwing Bombycilla garrulous: 15 of these special birds seen well.

Goosander Mergus merganser: A pair seen very well with the odd other sighting.

Dipper Cinclus cinclus: 1 seen well.

Common Crane Grus grus: 4 or 5 flocks migrating in c50 - c200 strong flocks

Garganey Anas querquedula: 3 birds seen on final day: 2 male, 1 female.

Butterflies

Brimstone Gonepteryx rhamni

Comma Polygonia c-album

Small Tortoiseshell Aglais urticae

Peacock Aglais io

Camberwell Beauty Nymphalis antiopa

Reptiles and Amphibians

Slow Worm Anguis fragilis:

Viviparous Lizard Zootoca vivipara:

Common Frog Rana temporaria:

Common Toad Bufo Bufo:

Carpathian Newt Lissotriton montandoni:

Plants (Courtesy of Terry Swainbank)

The status in the UK is also shown: NF= Not found, U = uncommon, C= common, I = introduced, R = Rare

Scientific Name	Common Name	Status in the UK
Coryllus avellana	Hazel	С
Corydalis solida	Fumewort	I but R
Corydalis capnoides (?)		NF
Scilla bifolia	Alpine Squll	NF
Chrysosplenium alternifolium	Altleaved Golden Saxifrage	U
Petasites albus	White Butterbur	I
Petasites hybridus	Common Butterbur	С
Tussilago farfara	Coltsfoot	С
Caltha palustris	Marsh Marigold	С
Cardamine granduligera		NF
Primula elatior	Oxlip	U

Scientific Name	Common Name	Status in the UK
Mercuralis annua	Annual Dog's Mercury	U
Leucojum vernum	Spring Snowflake	R
Pulmonaria mollis		NF
Daphne mezereon	Daphne	U
Bellis perennis	Daisy	С
Gage lutea	Yellow Star-of-Bethlehem	U
Hepatica nobilis	Hepatica	NF
Salix capraea		
Galanthus nivalis	Snowdrop	I
Gagea spathaeca		NF
Veronica persica	Common Field-speedwell	С
Anemone nemorosa	Wood Anemone	С



Spotted Nutcracker by Tom Mabbett



Grey-headed Woodpecker by Tom Mabbett



Hepatica nobilis by Terry Swainbank



Group watching Bison by Tom Mabbett