



Camera trap photo of a male Lynx on the second day of the tour (Zoltán Gergely Nagy)

EURASIAN LYNX TOUR IN TRANSYLVANIA with **SAKERTOURS** 5th – 11th March, 2022

Leaders: János Oláh and Zoltán Gergely Nagy

Our first Eurasian Lynx tour in Transylvania was an exciting adventure though very few participants actually saw a Lynx, so it was not a great success. We got very close to Lynx on minimum two occasions but luck was not on our side in 2022. However we knew this from the very beginning when we first planned to run a tour for such an elusive mammal species. We knew that we need to put a lot of work into getting up-to-date, almost live information but at the same time we also knew that a modicum of luck is required to see this 'forest ghost'. These mammals have huge territories and in forest habitat nothing is guaranteed. We have been monitoring at least 6 different individuals before the tour and our best Lynx tracker Ferenc-Alpár Gothárd has also been helping us. Our first very close encounter was at night, when a male Eurasian Lynx has been spotted by thermo camera as it was sitting on the roadside just a mere 10 meters away but in a rather unlucky spot, hence spotlighting was not fruitful. On our second encounter (also at night) tour participant Jon Hall spotted and spotlighted an individual in a bushy hillside which only allowed a short look, so only those on the correct side of the car saw it. It was Jon's 2000th mammal species. Congratulations! Although almost the entire time was spent looking for Lynx, we also had some other mammals and even visited a nearby cave to look for some bats. We had excellent looks of a great variety of much sought-after birds too, like many Hazel Grouses, Ural and Pygmy Owls and White-backed Woodpecker. In 2022 the weather was unusually cold for March but most probably this did not change our chances. We have learnt a lot more about Eurasian Lynx on this tour again, and I am sure we will have good chance to see one on our 2023 tour!



Roe Deer on the side of the road in the Harghita Mountains (János Oláh).

Searching for Lynx in the Harghita and Gurghiu Mountains

The tour started in Bucharest Airport and we made our way to our base, the Harghita Bear Lodge near Zetea in Transylvania. The weather in March 2022 started really well, with cool nights and sunny days, but, unusually, a cold front brought much colder air for the second part of the trip. We have spent the first four days only focusing on finding lynx, tracking them by using camera traps that send images in real time, spotlighting at night and spending as much time in habitat as we can. Right on the first morning, we had a message from a camera trap that a lynx was nearby, and we got into position at the end of the ridge where he was walking, in hopes that he would come all the way to where we were. Sadly it stopped just a few hundred meters away from our position in very dense vegetation...



A couple of camera trap images of Lynxes taken during the tour (Sakertours).

Following its tracks backwards towards the camera trap, we saw that it went in front of one of our DSLR camera traps too, resulting in the image that is on the cover of this report. It was a solitary male that we have been following for more than 6 months before the trip in his territory.

Over the next few days of the trip, we have had many encounters with some of the potential prey animals of these big cats, as well as other mammals living in the forested habitats of the Harghita and Gurghiu Mountains. Groups of Roe Deer, Red Deer were often seen, as well as foxes and squirrels. A hungry Bank Vole was out searching for food on the snow during the day, and a couple of Brown Hares were feeding on vegetation after sunset.



Roe Deer (top) and Red Squirrel (right) in the forests of Transylvania (Zoltán Gergely Nagy). Bank vole feeding on the snow surface at -8C gave us great looks (János Oláh).

On the evening of the fourth day of the trip we had our first encounter with a wild Lynx, but unfortunately in the form of only a couple of short glimpses by two people. Tracks in the fresh snow later confirmed that it was indeed a Lynx that was spotted close to a dirt road.



The group looking at fresh tracks and signs in the Harghita Mountains (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).



The same male Lynx that had triggered the DSLR camera trap on the ridge on the second morning investigating a Lynx poo that has been collected days earlier and strategically placed near a mountain road. Unfortunately only the camera trap was present to record him investigating it during the last day of the tour (Sakertours).

Exploring the Şugău Cave

On the next day we made a visit to the impressive Şugău (Sugó) cave with the help of the local outdoor association that oversees tourism in the area, and Jéré Csaba, a bat researcher who regularly surveys the hibernating bats in the Eastern Carpathians.



A hibernating Western Barbastelle (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Thanks to Csaba and his intimate local knowledge we have observed an impressive 6 species of bats in the span of a few hours. Highlights were stunning views of Western Barbastelle, a Brown long-eared Bat, and such close views of Greater and Lesser Mouse-eared Bats, that we could clearly see the differences between the two species.

By the afternoon we were back into our core territory, and on this day, we have seen three bears as new species for the trip. On the last evening we managed to get views of a Lynx again, but this time it was also seen only by some of us, as it was approaching a mixed group of Red and Roe Deer in the cover of darkness. Unfortunately, there was no time for photos, but just a week earlier very close to this place, participants on our Lynx photographic tour have managed to photograph a Lynx during the day, possibly the same individual.



A Lynx photographed a week before our tour, but in the same area where Jon Hall spotted one on our last night (Ferenc-Alpár Gothárd).



A Red deer in the area where we had our second Lynx observation (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

In conclusion, despite Lynx being notoriously shy and good at avoiding humans, we have managed to get close to two individuals throughout the trip, and were following their movements through the camera traps almost daily. This has made for a very exciting week, where the pictures coming in real time have been influencing our daily plans and have ultimately led to sightings. Even if they were not the sightings we all wanted! For the future we plan to improve our methods further, cover a larger area, and hopefully will get slightly luckier, so all participants can see this wonderful mammal species, the ‘tiger of the Carpathians’!

Despite this being a mammal-watching trip, we still had some stunning bird encounters too while on the field, including sightings of Eurasian Pygmy Owl, Ural owl, Hazel Grouse, White-backed, Three-toed and Black woodpeckers, just to name the most sought-after ones.



*Ural owl (top) and Eurasian Pygmy owl (right), (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).
On the left, a stunning female White-Backed woodpecker (János Oláh).*

A special thank you to all participants who have embarked with us on this exciting journey and also to the whole Sakertours team for the help and support before and during the trip, especially to Zsolt Babos, Ferenc-Alpár Gothárd and Szabolcs Kovács, and the hospitality of the Hargita Bear Lodge (www.hargitabearlodge.com).

MAMMALS –list of mammal species seen on the 2022 tour

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*

A fairly common species in the region, although only two individuals were observed on the tour.

Bank Vole *Myodes glareolus*

One individual was seen searching for food on the snow covered ground.

Eurasian Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris*

Common in the forests of Transylvania, we had great views of an individual crossing a road in front of us, as well as a few other individuals climbing on roadside trees.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

A commonly encountered species on the tour. We saw individuals both during the day and during the night on our Lynx searching outings.

Eurasian Lynx *Lynx lynx*

Two individuals were seen on the trip by some of us. We had almost daily sightings of fresh tracks, and images of them from the camera traps. Next time more lucky!



Fresh Lynx tracks in the Harghita Mountains (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Carpathian Brown Bear *Ursus arctos arctos*

The nominate race occurs in the Carpathians. We saw 3 individuals in total, one in a dense forest, and two more out on a meadow, enjoying the sunshine. Plus a female with three cubs on day 1 by the early arriving participants.



Brown Bears enjoying the spring sunshine (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

European Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*

The most common mammal of the trip, with tens of sightings daily on the trip. They are active at daytime as well but most of our sightings were at night and at dawn. They are the main prey item for Eurasian Lynx in the Carpathians.

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*

The Red Deer were still wearing their antlers from the autumn, and looked mighty impressive. Slightly less numerous than Roe deer, we still had plenty of observations both during the day and at night.

Lesser Horseshoe Bat *Rhinolophus hipposideros*

Hibernating in the galleries of the Şugău cave, we had incredibly close views of a couple of individuals, and in total have recorded 6 different individuals.

Brown long-eared bat *Plecotus auritus*

A single individual was seen in the Şugău cave.

Western Barbastelle *Barbastella barbastellus*

A total of 3 individuals were seen in various parts of the Şugău cave.

Lesser Mouse-eared Myotis *Myotis blythii*

A large sized bat resembles the following species which is more common. It is possible to ID only from up close. They are usually whiter below, have a pale spot on the top of the head, the ears are slimmer and the top of the tragus is usually not dark. We have seen numerous individuals that were close enough for ID-ing, but there were probably more of them in the larger rooms of the Şugău cave, where the bats were further from us.

Greater Mouse-eared Bat *Myotis myotis*

A large and common bat species. Numerous individuals were seen, and there were small groups of *Myotis* bats in the larger rooms, made up of both *Myotis myotis* and *Myotis blythii*.

Serotine Bat *Eptesicus serotinus*

Two were observed in a large crack at the entrance of the Şugău cave.



Serotine Bats in a crack at the entrance of Şugău cave (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).



A Lynx in front of our second DSLR camera trap on the last night of the tour (Zoltán Gergely Nagy).

Next tour dates:

2023: 11 – 17 March (1390 euro/person; SRS 150 euro/person): **availability and updates on our website:** <http://www.sakertour.com/bw.php?tour=lynx-tour-transylvania>



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