

Trip report Nemunas Delta, Lithuania, 30th of May – 3rd of June 2019

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I made a combined birding & mammal trip to Nemunas Delta wetlands in Lithuania, which are considered globally significant and are protected under the Ramsar Convention. We drove over 800 kilometers from Finland to Lithuania, with my friend Rainer Häggblom and my younger son Roni.

We did count all the mammals we saw, from home door to Nemunas Delta and back. Both living ones and the roadkills. Total count was 142 mammals, of which 14 were roadkills and the number of species we saw was 17.

We stayed in small town called Šilutė, in the south of the Klaipėda County. It's located in eastern edge of delta, perfect place for ecotourists like us.

Nemunas Delta is amazing place! This was my first time there but definitely not the last. The area is a huge combination of polders, flood-meadows, reed beds, rivers, ponds, ditches and small forests. The most visible mammal in Nemunas Delta is the **Roe Deer** (*Capreolus capreolus*), we saw total 29 of them. The Finnish name "Metsäkauris" i.e. "Forest Deer", in my humble opinion, is not good for this deer, much more figurative would be "Niittykauris" i.e. "Meadow Deer" as meadows are their favorite feeding habitats and that's where we usually see them, at least in Finland and Lithuania.



Roe Deer at Ventė Cape

Other cervids we saw, were one **Red Deer** (*Cervus elaphus*) and total of 9 **Elks** (*Alces alces*). These bigger cervids were all on the northern part of delta, north side of Atmata River, and nearby fields. In addition to previous, **European Hare** (*Lepus europaeus*) was relatively common, we saw total 10 of them in meadows and fields.



Elks were either challenging to find from reed beds...



...or far from observation tower. Note the White-tailed Eagle in the tree.

European Beaver (*Castor fiber*) was surprisingly easy to see. There were at least 5 beavers in the pond in the center of Rupkalvių meadows, right next to pump station (see the map below). Also, in Rusnė fishponds, we found a big beaver nest.



Beaver hotspot near Šilutė



Beaver nest in Rusnė fishponds

Rupkalvių meadows was also the first place where we met bats. And not just some ordinary bat but the **Lesser Noctule** (*Nyctalus leisleri*) a lifer for me! Next to our lodge in Šilutė I found a hunting **Nathusius' Pipistrelles** (*Pipistrellus nathusii*).

Few evenings later I made also a pure bat trip in Šilutė town. The number of bats was surprising, during 3 kilometer walk around parks and downtown I found 66 bats. Two more **Lesser Noctules** (*Nyctalus leisleri*), 3 **Common Noctules** (*Nyctalus noctula*), 5 **Serotine Bats** (*Eptesicus serotinus*), 47 **Nathusius' Pipistrelles** (*Pipistrellus nathusii*), 7 **Common Pipistrelles** (*Pipistrellus pipistrellus*) and 2 **Parti-coloured Bats** (*Vespertilio murinus*). Serotine Bat and Parti-coloured Bat were both lifers for me.

In and around Šilutė, we found also 6 **Northern White-Breasted Hedgehogs** (*Erinaceus roumanicus*). Sadly, four of them were roadkills, only two were alive. Four of them were in downtown, two were near Šilutė, along the roadsides in countryside villages.

I placed two live traps in small forest near Šilutė, the idea and my hope were to catch at least Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*) or maybe even some of the four dormouse species that exist in Lithuania. But no, all I got was two caterpillars, maybe the forest rodent populations in this area were in low level this time – the fact that we did not find any forest owls support this idea.

In fields and meadows of the delta there were clearly lots of rodents, as we found soon two Short-eared Owls and later we saw a **Red Fox** (*Vulpes vulpes*) hunting for voles. Luckily, we were able to watch the hunting from short distance. The fox grabbed **European water vole** (*Arvicola amphibious*) and **Field Vole** (*Microtus agrestis*). It did not eat them, but carried them away, probably for its puppies somewhere near.



Red Fox with mange, carrying European Water Vole and Field Vole at Ventė Cape

Ventė Cape is a must visit in Nemunas, at least for birders, but it may be a surprisingly good spot for mammal watchers as well. Ventė Cape ornithological station locates in the tip of cape. It has the largest in the world bird traps (with metal poles, width – 60 m, height – 25 m), operating during the last 30 years. Not only birds, but also bats are trapped and ringed in the station. During 1985-2017 total 4990 bats, 13 species, were ringed in Ventė Cape. Captured birds attract mustelids into the traps. European Pine Marten and Beech Marten, more rarely, American Mink, European Polecat, Ermine and Least Weasel are found in the bird traps. Other mammals (Northern White-breasted Hedgehog, European Hare, Red Squirrel, Raccoon Dog and Red Fox puppies, Eurasian Badger, European Mole and Roe Deer) enter the bird traps accidentally.

Two species were found outside Lithuania: **European Badger** (*Meles meles*) in Finland and 6 **Raccoon Dogs** (*Nyctereutes procyonoides ussuriensis*) both in Finland and Estonia – all roadkills, though.

I had wished I could find more lifers to my life list. European Mink, Forest Dormouse, Garden Dormouse, Hazel Dormouse, Edible Dormouse, Wood Mouse, Pond Bat, Barbastelle, Wildcat, Wild Horse, Wisent, Golden Jackal... Well, a good excuse to revisit Lithuania, maybe already during next autumn.