

Wise Birding Holidays

Bird and mammal watching tours



ESTONIA: Eurasian Lynx Quest

Wednesday 4th - Monday 9th March 2015

Tour Participants: Kevin Bryan, Susan French, Cheryl Antonucci, Colleen Benn, Sue Healey and Helen Booker

Leaders: Chris Townend & Tarvo Walker

HIGHLIGHTS OF TRIP

Eurasian Lynx: Great views at dusk of a single animal in torchlight at a range of approximately 70M for a good 3-4 minutes on our very first evening!

Eurasian Elk: Some excellent views of adults and calves during daylight hours totalling 8 animals on three different days.

Raccoon Dog: Single animals recorded on three different nights.

Eurasian Pygmy Owl: Superb close views of a bird just before dusk on the 4th.

Ural Owl: A bird was heard on the evening of the 4th and one was seen by everyone as it flew over the minibus at dawn on the 6th.



Sunrise over the field where we saw our Eurasian Lynx!

SUMMARY

This winter break to Estonia was focused on trying to see what is probably one of the most sought after and hardest mammals to see in Europe, the Eurasian Lynx. Though confident of a sighting due to the amount of pre-tour reconnaissance work and liaison with Lynx researchers, none of us were really prepared for a sighting on our very first evening! After such a great start to the tour, it was probably inevitable that would be the only Lynx sighting, but there were still plenty of other quality mammals and birds seen during the trip. These included no less than 10 other mammal species including Raccoon Dog, Elk, Mountain Hare and Pine Marten. There were also some quality birds such as Ural and Pygmy Owl, White-backed and Black Woodpecker, White-tailed Eagle and Nutcracker.

Wednesday 4th March

This tour started immediately after a successful winter birding break focused on finding Steller's Eiders, so no sooner had the birding group been dropped off at Tallin airport for their return flight, than the new mammal group arrived!

The flight arrived on time and our group was ready for a focused six days of trying to find Eurasian Lynx as well as the other great mammals and birds of Estonia. We left a bright and sunny Tallin airport and then travelled around 100Km south-east to the town of Paide which would be our base for the next two nights. En route, sharp eyed Kevin spotted a couple of Red Foxes from the road and nicely starting off our mammal tally. Once in Paide, we checked into our rooms and then enjoyed a late lunch before "Team Lynx" headed out for our first evening drive searching for Eurasian Lynx.

Our local guide Tarvo had been busy before our arrival and had already explored the area and so we headed to a Lynx hotspot. He knew from talking with researchers that there was a family group of Lynx present in the area. Of course, the definition of an "area" is pretty vast as a male Lynx home range can be anything from 100 - 1,000Km square though the females range is much smaller and youngsters remain with the mother for at least a year or two. So the pressure was well and truly on!

As we slowly drove the tracks through fragmented forest pockets and arable land we got off to a great start as Sue casually spotted a Eurasian Pygmy Owl from the back of the minibus. It was a great find and we all quietly disembarked the minibus and enjoyed some great scope views of this great little owl to the background noise of a calling Grey-headed Woodpecker. A little further on the track, we stopped and scanned the edges of some forest blocks where Tarvo

had previously found a Roe Deer kill. It was here that we decided to remain until dusk, scanning the surrounding area until the light faded. At around 7pm it was too dark to use optics and Chris then gave a slow sweep of the surrounding fields with a torch and then it happened! The distinctive swagger of a cat appeared in the light and somewhat scared to utter the words and still in disbelief, it soon became apparent that there was a Eurasian Lynx walking side on to us at about 70 metres range! A quick check that everyone could see the animal and then it was simply time to watch and enjoy. We were all treated to around 3-4 minutes viewing as the animal slowly changed direction slightly and then continued walking slowly away allowing the pale spotted coat, ear tufts and diagnostic dipped in ink floppy bob tail, to be clearly seen. It continued walking and headed towards a hedge line before finally turning back to look at us with bright green eye shine and then it slipped out of sight. However, it was certainly well and truly engrained into our grey matter for a long time to come! There was an atmosphere of exhilaration in the minibus and the highlights of the return journey back to the hotel almost became irrelevant in comparison, yet we still notched up some new mammal species including a distant Raccoon Dog, a total of nine Wild Boar, Roe Deer and a Mountain Hare.

Once back at the hotel, we had a celebratory meal, toasted the Lynx and then enjoyed an excellent and informative talk from two researchers about the Estonian Lynx population and the other larger mammals of Estonia.

Thursday 5th March

We were up at 5am all eager to return to our Lynx hotspot! En route we saw more Wild Boar as well as both Brown Hare and Mountain Hare and we then sat overlooking the area of our Lynx sighting from the previous evening. With the help of hot coffee, we all watched the sunrise over the arable fields and re-lived the memory of our sighting whilst a small group of 7+ Black Grouse and a couple of Northern Lapwing made for a pleasant distraction. We loitered around the area for a while and then took a drive on another track that looked so good for Lynx, but we had to make do with a frost covered Red Fox as well as Black Woodpecker and a fly over White-backed Woodpecker that called as it flew overhead. With clear blue skies and sunshine, we then headed back to our hotel for a very welcome breakfast and a siesta. A Pine Marten dashed across the road in front of us but was seen only very briefly.

Later in the morning, we headed out with the director of the Environmental Protection Agency Game Monitoring Department. We explored areas where radio collared Lynx had been recently detected and we looked for evidence of their kills. It was quite exciting searching and finding evidence of Roe Deer kills, knowing that a Lynx had been in the area just a matter of days previously. We found a number of Roe Deer kill remains, ranging from fur to bone fragments

and even whole bones. It was interesting to see the how Lynx had clearly dragged their prey into forest from the more open Roe Deer feeding areas. Whilst exploring the different sites, bird highlights included a cracking male Hen Harrier carrying prey and a noisy Spotted Nutcracker that called continuously from a nearby pine before flapping back into the forest. Highlight mammals included Red Fox and a wonderful adult Eurasian Elk with two older calves that stood in a roadside field and stared at us all for a couple of minutes before dashing back into the forest. We then all enjoyed a fantastic Estonian meal in a nearby restaurant before retiring to the hotel for a much needed siesta!

After a meal at a nearby guest house, we ventured out once more for some evening spotlighting. We returned to the same area as previously and drove the network of tracks. Another fairly distant Raccoon Dog showed its distinctive low slung gait and eye shine along with more Brown Hares and Mountain Hares as well as a group of eight Wild Boar. As expected, we were stopped on a couple of occasions by local hunters who had been forewarned about our spotlighting activities but were still a little curious! We then returned at around midnight allowing just a few hours sleep before another dawn attempt in the morning.

Friday 6th March

By now, everyone was familiar with the drill. Get up early and head out to the Lynx hotspot, spotlighting en route and then return for breakfast. Things seemed a little quieter on the mammal front today with just Roe Deer and both Hare species seen. The highlight for most was the enormous Ural Owl that glided over the bus and a nearby clearing before vanishing into the forest as the sun rose. Then en route back to the hotel our tenth species of mammal appeared in the form of a fine Red Squirrel.

After breakfast and some time for packing we headed for Western Estonia and the pine forests of Läänemaa. This was to be our base for our final three nights. As we travelled out of town a low flying Northern Goshawk gave some great views from the minibus before we ventured into more arable fields and fragmented forest. Three roadside Whooper Swans were very much appreciated as they slowly walked across an arable field and before long we arrived at our accommodation and took a siesta before heading out for the afternoon.

During the afternoon we did some birding. Highlights were a flock of 20+ Snow Bunting and a couple of obliging Great Grey Shrikes before the light faded and we focused once more on searching for Eurasian Lynx. We spent the early evening driving areas where Tarvo had seen Lynx on a number of occasions. We then enjoyed some more wonderful home cooked food at a nearby Manor House before a second late evening spotlighting session. No Lynx sightings but more Roe Deer and both Hare species.

Saturday 7th March

Today we stuck to our usual regime of pre-dawn spotlighting the best habit areas for Lynx before returning to our comfortable log cabin accommodation and breakfast! Highlights in the morning were a small group of Roe Deer complete with prominent white "butts" as both Cheryl and Colleen referred to them! We then learned all about the correct times for Brits to use the words "butt" and "ass" whilst in the United States! Bird highlights this morning included a small group of Fieldfare much to the appreciation of both Cheryl and Colleen and a Crested Tit whilst back in the grounds of our accommodation.

After breakfast we visited Dirhami Harbour for some birding where groups of Red-breasted Mergansers, Goosander, Goldeneye, a female Greater Scaup, and 30+ Long-tailed Ducks kept us busy. We also added our eleventh and final mammal species to the trip list as two Grey Seals bobbed around in the harbour staring at us and showing off their strong Roman Nose profile. We then took a short visit to the local shop as we needed to top up on our sweet supply and compulsory Mesi Kapps in particular!

During the afternoon we ventured into the forest and were treated to excellent views of a male Black Woodpecker as well as Crested Tit. Then as the afternoon light began to fade we continued our quest for another sighting of our feline friend. We also checked a spot for Eurasian Beaver with no luck. There were no Lynx sightings, but we all enjoyed another good sighting of two Eurasian Elk at the edge of the forest. Whilst driving the coastal fields, a total of seven White-tailed Eagles and 30+ Snow Bunting were certainly appreciated along with a Red Fox. We then re-visited the same Manor House as the previous evening and this resulted in yet another evening feast before a late evening spotlighting session. Our third Raccoon Dog of the trip was the highlight of the evening spotlighting session before we returned to our log cabins for sleep!

Sunday 8th March

Today was our last full day in Estonia and once again we were up pre-dawn spotlighting the best Lynx habitat. More Brown and Mountain Hares performed well whilst a couple of Eurasian Woodcock flushed from the side of the road and a hunting Long-eared Owl were both new additions to the trip list. As the light improved, a check of arable fields produced an impressive flock of 180 Whooper Swans in the company of one Bewick's Swan, 16 Tundra Bean Geese and 20+ Greylag Geese. We then returned to our accommodation and had breakfast.

After some rest we headed back out and Tarvo took us to his home town of Haapsalu and his favourite cafe where we all enjoyed lunch with compulsory Estonian puddings! We then explored the town a little, particularly for Jackdaws

that both Cheryl and Colleen were quite excited about! A walk in some nearby forest produced some good views of a female Lesser Spotted Woodpecker as well as Treecreeper and best of all the northern white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit. A second check at our Beaver spot was unsuccessful and then after dinner we explored the same area as during the morning in the hope of another Lynx sighting. Regardless of no Lynx we had some exceptionally close views of a Short-eared Owl. We then returned back late to our quiet and peaceful accommodation for much needed sleep whilst the locals celebrated Ladies' Day at the disco!

Monday 9th March

So as the saying goes, "no pain, no gain" so once more we did our final pre-dawn spotlighting session and we had to accept that our Lynx sighting on the first evening was to be our only sighting - but what a great sighting it was! The now expected mammals were seen with Red Fox, Brown Hare and Roe Deer making it onto the day list. We then had a final check for Beaver where it was another beaver no show, but three Long-tailed Tits and some fly over Common Crossbills were something different nonetheless. We then returned for a final breakfast at our accommodation and had some time to pack before we took the short 90 minute journey to the airport. Of course, in the absence of mammals there were still new bird opportunities and a flock of 13 Stock Doves were added to the bird list from the minibus!

At the airport, we waved goodbye to Cheryl and Colleen who had an extra day in Tallin before their flight back to the US and "Team Lynx" was no more, but the memory of the night of the 4th March 2015 would most definitely live on!

Conservation Donation – Following this tour to Estonia £180 was transferred to the Wise Birding Holiday's central conservation fund which shall be used to support a conservation project in the future, yet to be determined.

For the last three years Wise Birding Holidays has been supporting a number of small conservation projects following the successful completion of a tour. However, we now believe that in order to make a bigger difference to conservation it seems better to pool the donations from most of our tours into one central fund. Once a target amount has been reached this money will then be used to support a single project in the hope of achieving more for species conservation. However, some tours will still continue to donate money to help some of the smaller projects that we feel will still benefit from such smaller donations. Please visit our [Conservation News](#) and [Latest News](#) links to find out more.



Eurasian Elk and Lynx habitat near Paide





Roe Deer remains after a Lynx kill and Lynx Traps used for research purposes





Short-eared Owl and Eurasian Pygmy Owl





Whooper Swans and the town of Haapsalu





One of the many Estonian feasts

Eurasian Lynx habitat



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WISE BIRDING HOLIDAYS LTD – ESTONIA: Eurasian Lynx Quest, March 2015

Wise Birding Holidays Checklist:

ESTONIA: Eurasian Lynx Quest Checklist

Wednesday 4th - Monday 9th March 2015

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	Recorded on 3 days
2	Bewick`s Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>	A single bird in a large Whooper flock on the 8th was a god find
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	Recorded on 3 days with a peak count of 180 birds
4	Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>	A group of 16 birds on the 8th were of the Tundra form <i>rossicus</i>
5	Greylag Goose	<i>Anser anser</i>	A total of 27 birds on the 8th - 24 were in with the Bean Geese
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Recorded on 3 days
7	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
8	Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	A single female on the 7th at Dirhami
9	Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	A group of 30+ birds on the 7th at Dirhami
10	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
11	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
12	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
13	Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>	Recorded on 3 days with a peak count of 7 birds near our Lynx field!
14	Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	A total of 4 birds on the 7th
15	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	A single bird on the 8th was a Spring migrant
16	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	Recorded on 2 days with a peak count of 7 birds on the 7th
17	Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	A cracking male carrying prey on the 5th

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
18	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	A single bird was seen well in flight from the minibus on 6th
19	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Recorded on 2 days
20	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	Recorded on 3 days
21	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	Recorded on 4 days with birds beginning to return
22	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	Recorded on the the 8th and 9th with a max. count of two birds
23	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
24	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
25	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	Recorded on 4 days including the “yellow-legged” <i>omissus</i> form
26	Great Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus marinus</i>	Recorded on 2 days
27	Feral Pigeon / Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	Recorded on 5 days
28	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	A group of 13 birds on our last morning were migrants
29	Common Woodpigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	Two birds on the 8th were returning migrants
30	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>	A great spot by Sue on our first evening and it showed superbly
31	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>	Heard on the 4th and seen at dawn on the 6th as it glided over
32	Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	A bird seen by Tarvo only on the 4th was followed by one on the 8th
33	Short-eared Owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	A bird was seen very well in torch light on the evening of the 8th
34	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>	Heard on the 4th and 5th whilst in the Lynx hotspot
35	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	Recorded on the 5th and the best views on the 7th with a male
36	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	Recorded on 2 days
37	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	A bird seen well in flight as it called and flew overhead on the 5th

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
38	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>	Good views of a female on the 8th
39	Common Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	Another returning migrant with a bird singing on the 8th
40	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	Another returning migrant with a bird on our last morning
41	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	Small flocks recorded on the 7th and 8th
42	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
43	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	Great views of this Northern white-headed form on the 8th and 9th
44	Marsh Tit	<i>Parus palustris</i>	Recorded on the 8th only
45	Willow Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>	Recorded on the 7th and 8th
46	Crested Tit	<i>Parus cristatus</i>	Seen well on the 7th around Roosta
47	European Blue Tit	<i>Parus caeruleus</i>	Recorded on the 7th and 8th
48	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	Recorded on 4 days
49	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	This distinctive “northern” form was recorded on 3 days
50	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>	This distinctive “northern” form was recorded on 2 days
51	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	Recorded on 3 days with a peak count of three birds on the 7th
52	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	Recorded on 4 days
53	Common (Black-billed) Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Recorded on 5 days
54	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	A single noisy bird seen on the 5th whilst looking at Roe Deer kills
55	Western Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Recorded on 4 days
56	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	Recorded on the 8th only
57	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	Recorded daily

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
58	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	Recorded daily
59	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Recorded on the 9th only
60	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
61	European Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Recorded on the 5th only
62	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Recorded on the 7th only
63	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	Recorded on 4 days
64	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	A small group flew over on the 9th near our Beaver stake-out
65	Common Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	This “northern” form was recorded on 4 days
66	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	Tarvo had a bird on the 7th
67	Snow Bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>	Seen on both th 6th and 7th with a peak count of 30+ birds
68	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	Recorded on 5 days

MAMMALS

#	COMMON NAME	SCIENTIFIC NAME	NOTES
1	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	Single animals seen during spotlighting sessions on 3 nights
2	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Recorded on 5 days with a peak count of at least 5 animals on one day
3	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Two animals bobbed about looking at us at Dirhami Harbour on the 7th
4	Eurasian Lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>	A fantastic start to the tour with a sighting in torch light on the 4th
5	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Recorded on 2 nights with a peak count of 9 animals on the 4th
6	European Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	Recorded daily