

# Estonia's Mammals

## Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

### Outline itinerary

<b>Day 1</b>	Fly Tallinn & overnight
<b>Day 2/4</b>	Matsalu National Park
<b>Day 5</b>	Brown Bear hide; Alutaguse
<b>Day 6/7</b>	Lahemaa National Park
<b>Day 8</b>	Fly London

### Departs

May or June

### Dates and Prices

See website (tour code EST06) or brochure

### Grading

A/B. Easy day walks; late nights searching for mammals

### Focus

Mammals and other wildlife

### Highlights

- A great opportunity to find Eurasian Lynx, Raccoon Dog, Pine Marten and Brown Bear
- Siberian Flying Squirrel is possible
- Up to six species of woodpecker
- Birding can be exceptional
- Boat trip for beaver and night singing birds
- Enjoy an overnight in a bear hide
- Picturesque landscapes of lakes & forests



From top: Eurasian Lynx, Siberian Flying Squirrel & Brown Bear  
(images courtesy of Shutterstock)



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## Introduction

Estonia is the smallest of the three former Soviet Republics which were known collectively as the 'Baltic States'. Always the most prosperous of the trio, the country has enjoyed moderate financial growth since gaining independence in 1991, and accession to the European Community in 2004 was a natural progression for a nation anxious to once again become part of Western Europe. The topography of Estonia consists predominantly of low-lying marshes, rivers and forests with over 1,500 lakes scattered throughout, whilst its western border is set by a deeply indented Baltic coastline, along which are countless islands of varying sizes.



Eurasian Lynx © M.Piismea

With a ban on hunting since 2014, combined with vast swathes of ideal and undisturbed habitat, Estonia now has an estimated population of around 600 – 700 Eurasian Lynx. It is therefore no surprise that this is considered the leading country in tracking and finding this usually highly elusive species. With its secret habits and unwillingness to show itself well to its admirers, this mostly nocturnal cat is top of most mammal watcher's species to see.

Matsalu National Park, in the west of the country, has a mix of forests and fields, which is perfect habitat for Lynx, as well as Eurasian Elk, Roe Deer, Golden Jackal and other mammal species. To search for mammals, we will mostly be surveying the area in the late afternoon and at dusk through periods of the night, plus some early mornings too, the latter dependent upon our successes during the holiday. Marshy areas and river margins are excellent places to look for Elk, of which there are a good number in the Matsalu area, so we have a reasonable likelihood of finding these large mammals. Beaver are also found in this area and we plan to go on a boat trip in search of them, during which time we'll also likely be able to hear a lot of night singing birds, particularly those species which favour damp areas, such as Marsh and Blyth's Reed Warblers.



Eurasian Beaver



Following three nights in Matsalu, we will make our way east, to Alutaguse for our night in a purpose built bear hide, where we will be hoping for some nocturnal visitors! From here, we head to nearby Lahemaa National Park – situated in northern Estonia and a mere 45-minutes from Tallinn and our base for the second part of this holiday – is the one of the top sites in the country for lynx, where groups stand a reasonable chance of locating this incredible animal. In late spring, Lynx become more mobile as both adults hunt to feed their kits. Without snow on the ground, tracking becomes more difficult, but with time and patience devoted to watching for Lynx and other mammals, we stand a good chance, all the while keeping an eye on the local birdlife as a variety of warblers,



Hazel Grouse in the forest

wagtails, finches and birds of prey which breed in the area, especially Honey-buzzard, as do Hazel Grouse and the mighty Capercaillie. We may even get lucky with one of the resident owls - Ural and Eurasian Pygmy Owl both occur here! Also, in May and June, we stand a good chance of locating the desirable Siberian Flying Squirrel.

This is sure to be an amazing experience, as we go in search of Europe's most difficult-to-see mammal!

## Itinerary

*Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.*

### Day 1

### Arrive Tallinn; overnight airport hotel

This evening, we will take a scheduled flight to Tallinn – the capital of Estonia. From here, we will be transferred to a hotel near the airport where we will spend the night.

### Days 2 – 4

### Matsalu National Park

This morning, we will have a short walk around the historic city of Tallinn before setting off for Matsalu, around two hours' drive away.

Early summer in Estonia is full of birdsong and around the hotel grounds, the delightful songs of Common Rosefinch, Thrush Nightingale, Fieldfare and Redwing should be a constant feature.



Eurasian Pygmy Owl

Further optional birdwatching walks could produce any of the owls in the area, with Ural and Eurasian Pygmy both being present, but June can be a difficult time to locate the owls, unless at night when the juveniles are calling. We can expect a whole host of summer visitors on this tour, with displaying Honey-buzzards a possibility. If our daytime mammal watching proves to be quiet, we can venture to the coast, or other

forest sections for more birdwatching or to the meadows to look for flowering orchids, although, one of our main emphases throughout will be looking for the Lynx.

Besides the Lynx, other special mammals we may encounter will hopefully include the bizarre Raccoon Dog, Wild Boar and Elk. There is of course every chance we could encounter a Lynx during the daytime, as these beautiful animals roam far and wide in search of food for their kits, meaning our paths could well cross at any time, but we can also look for clues to their presence as scat or other signs could well be found. Finding these clues is all part of the searching experience of tracking rare and elusive mammals.

Each evening, we will leave our hotel and head out into the wilderness, armed with torches, thermal image cameras, warm weather gear and insect repellent. Our mammal guide will be on constant watch throughout the slow journey as we negotiate the rural roads and tracks through the Lynx's habitat, ensuring that if a sighting is had, everyone gets to see this elusive creature. Patience and a sense of adventure is required to get the most out of these sessions, so please be prepared for long nights. Dependent on our successes, some nights may be shorter than others, but we will also be looking for the other mammals of the area.



Eurasian Elk (©Valeri Štšerbatõh)

During one afternoon, we will also visit the nearby historic city of Haapsalu, known as the

Nordic Venice. This summer getaway destination has been favoured by royalty, romantics and those

seeking the restorative benefits of sea mud. For centuries it was the centre of the Saare-Lääne bishopric, with the cathedral and remains of the castle located in the centre of the town. There may also be time to walk the promenade and contemplate the bay from Tchaikovsky's bench.

One day, we will aim to take a dusk boat trip on the Kasari River Delta, in search of Elk, Beaver, bats and night singing birds, such as Blyth's Reed Warbler, Marsh Warbler and Corn Crake, among others. Heading out in a traditional style

wooden boat, we'll watch the flood plains and reed bed areas for Elk, as these huge herbivores tend to follow natural trails through these areas, particularly around dawn or dusk.



Marsh Warbler

## Day 5

## Bear Hide, Alutagusein

Today, we will leave Matsalu NP and start exploring the famous region of Alutaguse in the northeastern part of the country, which is known as the wildest area of Estonia. The Alutaguse area is home to all of the iconic forest species that live in Estonia. The journey will take around three hours, however we will be making some stops along the way.

On arriving in Alutaguse, time permitting, we will visit the famous Tudu bog, where we can learn more about the bogland habitat. Boardwalk leads through the area to a picturesque lake, which is



a well-known wild swimming location, if anyone is feeling brave!

In the late afternoon, we will head to the Brown Bear hide, where we stay for the night. The comfortable and spacious hides are equipped with bunk beds, sleeping bags, pillows and a dry toilet. There's also a sensitive microphone outside the hide and speakers inside, so you can hear all the surrounding nature sounds from inside the hide.

Besides Brown Bears, Raccoon Dogs visit the place often and there's also chances of spotting Elk, Wild Boar, Badger and Roe Deer.

## Days 6 – 7

## Lahemaa National Park

The following day, we will leave the Brown Bear Hide to have breakfast before heading to Lahemaa National Park. Here there are many remote forest tracks and avenues we can explore as we continue



our search for mammal species, including Lynx, Brown Hare, Roe Deer, Badger, Pine Marten and Red Fox.

On our second full day here, we will head back toward the Alutaguse area, as this is the last area in Estonia where it's still possible to find the Siberian Flying Squirrel. These nocturnal mammals are one of the flagship species of Estonian nature conservation and only recently their population has started to grow again. We will spend the day with a local specialist and learn

about this very special arboreal mammal. In late May and June, when the days are really long, the squirrel has to often leave the tree cavity during the day where we have a great possibility of seeing it. If there is no movement during the day, we can return in the evening for another try.



Siberian Flying Squirrel © Rainar Kurbel

## Day 8

## Tallinn/London

After a final foray into the forest for some last minute mammal watching, we will return to Tallinn allowing those who wish a chance to walk the streets of this picturesque city and have a final meal together, before our return flight.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock, M Piisma, V Štšerbatõh, A Krust, NaTourEst & R Kurbel

## Tour grading

This tour is graded 'A/B'. A clear-windowed 9-seater vehicle will be used for the mammal excursions at night. There will also be short to medium length walks, mainly on tracks or board walk, however there can be steps or short sections of steeper slopes in some areas and the trails could be muddy underfoot. Walks can also be done from the hotel in Lahemaa on your own accord if time permits. There is plenty of time to rest during the day, but nocturnal sessions are paramount for finding mammals, especially lynx.

## Tour Focus

This tour focuses primarily on the region's mammals, including finding one of the hardest to see mammals in the northern hemisphere, the Eurasian Lynx. Luck, patience and commitment will be required to see one, so please expect long hours in the field. After dinner, around dusk, we will head out in search of our quarry, sometimes not arriving back until 2am.

We will also look at birds and other wildlife, especially if it's quieter on the mammal front.

## A few notes on the Mammal Watching

Every effort on this tour will be made to see the star mammals of this area but of course nothing can be guaranteed. We have chosen the very best months of year to visit for mammal sightings, these being late May or June. We will need to put in lots of effort, have patience and of course need some luck so succeed. For the Lynx, we will not be using hides or a baited area during the tour and any mammal seen will be going about its business as it naturally would do. We know this area supports a superb population and indeed a complete assemblage of Europe's native carnivores and through many hours spent in the field the best areas to focus on have been identified. In the hours when mammal activity is less likely, time will be spent watching birds and other wildlife of the area. At the Brown Bear site, we will be using specially constructed hides. Small amounts of bait are used to attract bears to the area, but done in such a way as to encourage a bear's natural foraging behaviour and strategies.

## Weather

In May and June, expect pleasant temperatures but longer days due to increased levels of daylight. The middle of the day will be used to catch-up on rest before embarking on a night vigil, typically returning at around midnight.

## Food & accommodation

**Meals** – All breakfasts are included in the tour cost. On the full days either a late lunch or early dinner will be included. Most typically this will be dinner, as these tend to be early in the day before heading out searching for Lynx. For anyone who would like additional food, items can be purchased close to the accommodation.

**Accommodation** – All included when in Estonia. Our first night in Tallinn will be a typical airport hotel due to the likely later arrival of our flight. We will have three nights in Matsalu National Park before heading to the Bear hide then a final two nights at Lahemaa National Park. The hotels and guesthouses are comfortable, although not luxurious, but all have private facilities.

The bear hide has an open plan layout with chairs by the windows in the watching areas. There are bunks with sleeping bags and pillows, as well as a dry toilet, but no shower facilities.



Bear hide

## Extra expenditure

Items of a personal nature such as drinks, souvenirs or tips are not included in the tour cost. Snacks, if required, will also need to be purchased.

## Extensions

Subject to availability on flights, the tour may be extended for a longer stay in Estonia and a popular option is to spend a few days sightseeing in historic Tallinn. We will gladly obtain a quotation for such extensions.

## Flights

We typically use direct flights from London Gatwick with Air Baltic for this tour, however these flights are not daily, so an indirect flight or alternative airport may be used. If you would like to travel from a regional airport please contact the Naturetrek office for information on available options.

## Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Estonia. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – [www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/estonia](http://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/estonia) regularly prior to travel.

## How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk), or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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