

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

10 - 17 February 2018



Report compiled by Peter Ramsey (client), and Jan Kelchtermans & Detlef Tibax (leaders)
Images courtesy of Peter Ramsey (Crested Tits and pano landscape views), Derek Smith (Eurasian Lynx)
Jan Kelchtermans (Red Deer and Red Foxes) and Detlef Tibax (all paintings)



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Summary

The trip delivered rural and wild Eastern Europe at the height of winter. It was bitterly cold at times, around -15°C with windchill one morning stood at the top of the high mountain pass within the UNESCO East Carpathian Biosphere Reserve. Winter weather resulted in outstanding photographic opportunities with great vistas of snowy landscapes, of hills, mountains and valleys, and of meadows, woodlands and forests. A real experience of showing nature at its most raw was finding five wolf kills over the course of the trip. Magical were superb and prolonged views of the trips title target species: Eurasian Lynx, together with a surplus of European Bison, Wild Cat, Wild Boar, Pygmy and Ural Owls, and five species of woodpecker. Poland, perhaps too, has lessons for Western Europe. The places visited showed how populations can live alongside the indigenous large fauna, particularly carnivores, without the need to control their populations down to unsustainable levels.

Day 1

Saturday 10th February



Ural Owl
Sketches Feb 18
© Detlef Tibax

The trip commenced with a Ryanair flight from Stansted to Rzeszow. After collecting luggage there was the usual gathering of clients and guides; in this case a small group of seven guests and both tour leaders, first guide Jan and second guide Detlef. On exiting the small but smart airport, we emerged into the cold and harsh Polish winter, loaded up the vehicle and headed off deep into the countryside. There was snow on the ground, covering

rooftops and clinging to trees, with huge icicles hanging from the eaves of houses, the like of which western Europeans haven't seen since long! Definitely winter up here!

While cruising a three-hour journey (to the first of our two homes for the week) we got a nice start to the trip with a good view of a Ural Owl perched in a roadside tree. According to Jan, guiding in the vast Bieszczady region for already nine years now, day active Ural Owls are a typical snowy winter phenomenon. Softer snow conditions during the daytime often results in Ural Owls switching their hunting behaviour from nocturnal to diurnal. During the tour we encountered several Ural Owls perched like this on trees and electricity pylons close to the road. Quite spectacular!

When we arrived at a hamlet near Cisna, we had a light soup lunch and we were then shown to our accommodation for the next three nights: lovely little wooden summerhouse-type buildings with a large lounge, small kitchen and shower room downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs, one with a balcony overlooking the valley.



Before dusk we left our base camp to visit a spot nearby known to be visited by some resident Bison bulls. According to Jan, Europe's heaviest terrestrial mammal had not been lingering in the area recently. We observed footprints in the snow indicating that only Red Deer had passed by. The same for Red Fox and Wild Boar. As the dark began to close around us, we hopped back into the minibus and Jan and Detlef used a bright spotting lamp to try to find wildlife as we drove along the forest roads and tracks. This had some significant success with Fox and Roe Deer observations, followed by another first and only for the trip: a Wild Cat. On returning to our new home, we had a very good and large evening meal.



Day 2

Sunday 11th February

On the first morning we settled into a pattern for the next six days: heading out early before breakfast to scan for wildlife from vantage points or by driving along quite rural roads and tracks, and stopping for walks. We would then return to the accommodation for a large breakfast before heading out again for the day. While scanning, warm clothes (multiple layers) suitable for winter conditions are highly recommended and good footwear is essential. Windproof trousers and jackets are key elements to keep body temperature stable.

We would either return for lunch and go out in the afternoon or stay out all day until after dusk, finishing the day with more spotlighting. The area where target species roam is endless and while exploring the area and searching for Lynx, these explorations take place in vast and endless forests and landscapes. Participants require stamina, determination, flexibility and an open-minded spirit as animals seem to be everywhere and nowhere, but certainly somewhere.

Without someone like Jan knowing the area very well, tracking animals really seems a mission impossible here. Nevertheless, the snow helped to give us an indication of the vast amount of wildlife activity in the area with so many tracks left behind. There were Deer tracks everywhere, both Roe and Red, Fox and Wild Boar, but we also came across plenty of Bison and Wolf prints, Pine Marten and those of two Lynxes.

Pre-breakfast scanning and walking revealed four different Red Foxes (hunting voles) and some vocalising or overflying bird species like Black Woodpecker, Nutcracker, Pygmy Owl, Bullfinch, Red Crossbill, Raven and Fieldfare. Some fresh *Canidae* tracks proved that resident Wolves (known as the Voitec pack) patrolled a forest track a bit earlier than we did! Our morning excursion brought us to a second spot known to be visited by resident Bison herds. On our way another day-active Ural Owl was spotted from the vehicle, but snowy conditions forced us to keep on driving. Once arrived at the different Bison location, massive hooflike prints indicated that they were definitely present in the surrounding area, but knee-deep snow made tracking them down a mission impossible. Also a female White-backed Woodpecker behaved too elusive to be seen.

Prior to limited afternoon leisure time near our host, we enjoyed lunch in a cosy restaurant! Before the second spotlighting session we revisited the spot nearby our host to check the presence of resident Bison bulls. Again in vain. At a second stakeout, Richard spotted a Pygmy Owl on top of a large spruce. Imitating its "pjuu" call was fruitless. Instead of answering, the bird hopped from one tree top to another before disappearing into the forest. Wolf tracks also proved that the Voitec pack recently visited this area. A spotlighting session revealed again Red Fox, some Roe Deer and a brief observation of a Beech Marten.

Day 3

Monday 12th February

A dawn session brought us back to the hill top behind the cabins. We again watched the resident Red Foxes, and Great Grey Shrike was a new bird species. This morning's excursion brought us to a third spot known to be regularly visited by resident Bison herds. On our way, the same Ural Owl from yesterday was spotted from the vehicle. Once at the Bison locations, plenty hooflike prints indicated that also here Bisons definitely were present in the surrounding forests. Due to the deep snow, entering a forest location (where Bison hide during daytime) again made tracking them down a non-issue. Trying to locate them by walking on maintained forest track 'only'

revealed more hoofprints of Bison and those of two Lynxes: according to their size, most probably of a male and female Lynx coming together for a few weeks over the mating season.



Timber activity brought us in touch with a resident forester who was kind enough to share his knowledge on local wildlife. For Bison, we had to return this afternoon, he said. They leave the forest then appear in the adjacent meadows. As instructed, we returned after our lunch. Two very obliging Ural Owls took a bit of our time, as well as a foraging male White-backed Woodpecker. As the light was starting to fail, Detlef spotted large dark shapes standing out against snow covered woodland – we finally had found Bison! We didn't have a long look at them because as the minibus came to a halt, the five animals slowly melted into the surrounding foliage. They lingered just between the trees for a short while, giving us tantalising glimpses of their massive bodies, before heading further into cover. Spotlighting revealed a Wild Boar.



Day 4

Tuesday 13th February

Besides an obliging Nutcracker and a party of four Roe Deer, the morning session was a rather blank outing. Before moving on to our second base, the morning excursion started with a long walk along snowy forest tracks looking for birds and more Bison. The sun came out as we strolled along, bringing a break in the freezing cloudiness we experienced throughout the trip. Quite clear too that harsh winter conditions made animal activity zero; the forest kept dead quiet. A big flock of gathering Ravens and a Common Buzzard were the only observations made. No Hazel Grouse, no woodpeckers, no Golden Eagle; but the walk itself was in a beautiful winter wonderland, with the sun shining down on the sharp white snow: looking for wildlife in a rich and complete natural environment is definitely worth the effort.

As we rounded a corner we came across another of the many Bison feeding stations we visited. There was food put out for the animals but it was only a flock of small birds, mainly Coal and Marsh Tits, taking advantage. However, we found more signs of bigger animals with scratch marks from European Brown Bear claws high up on a tree trunk, and the remains of a Red Deer taken by the Wolves.

After lunch we made the one hour journey to our second centre, a hotel in the heart of the national park near Ustrzyki Górne. It was tough going on the road as we had to make our way over a high snow-filled pass and the minibus struggled, slipping and sliding its way up and down the hills. However, without incident we arrived at the hotel, checked in and then headed out to check a few locations around our new base.

After driving up another steep hill we saw Ravens fly up from beside the road; we had stumbled across a double Wolf kill. We staked out the location for an hour or so but the Wolves had disappeared and we had to leave as the light started to fail. Not for the first or last time on the trip, we were stopped by the Polish border guards who patrolled both areas in which we stayed. Our bases were very close to the border with Ukraine and at one point we were only 50 metres from the river that forms the dividing line between the two countries. As they always were, the guards were friendly and efficient, and they often seemed surprised that we were on a holiday to see the wildlife that they see on a regular basis.



Day 5

Wednesday 14th February

Our pre-breakfast session brought us to a vantage point overlooking the national park. An outstanding viewpoint for sure, but a very, very cold experience. Most of the people stayed near the vehicle. Scanning resulted in views of Red Fox, Roe Deer and Raven.

After breakfast we headed back to the double wolf-kill site, to find a further deer that just had been killed by the wolves a short distance down the road. It is always a gamble to decide where to go in this vast area. 'If we would have been here early morning' is always easy to say afterwards. Anyway, we were given the opportunity to get out of the minibus and take a look at what remained of one of the earlier carcasses. After sliding and stumbling across the rough and snowy ground we found a small flock of tits feeding on the virtually bare red deer skeleton. They were mostly Coal Tits, but as we waited they were joined by two Crested Tits, all feeding on the remaining frozen flesh. According to Peter, it was a moment to remember as he took some of the most spectacular photographs in his life so far. Shots of 'cresties' are rare enough, but to see them feeding from inside the remains of a wolf kill was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity he wasn't going to miss.



Near the border we scanned the open landscape in search of wolves. The scanning session revealed Roe Deer in the far distance and some nice, typical local bird species like Lesser Spotted and White-backed Woodpeckers, Ural Owl (again) and Great Grey Shrike. We spent dusk in a field focusing on carrion in the distance but apart from 25-30 Ravens and two Buzzards, no predators appeared. Quite obvious the wolves preferred to make kills themselves instead of visiting a baiting site! Deep snow is a horrible situation for ungulates, but a feast for wolves to catch prey!

Day 6

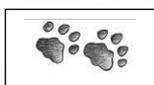
Thursday 15th February



During the pre-breakfast session we tried to reach yesterday's vantage point overlooking the Polish – Ukrainian border but, caused by fog, we had to abort these plans and return. The remaining half hour before breakfast was spent in a different field focusing near yesterday's baiting site. A massive stag was seen while driving. Once in the open, his nervous behaviour indicated that ungulates really are aware of predators roaming the area! Once at the vantage point, we noticed just little Raven activity and two Buzzards were eating from the carcass. Foraging ungulates (Roe and Red Deer) nearby were obvious additional signs that Wolves were not in the vicinity.

Once noon, our efforts started to pay off as we struck lucky with our mammals. Along the frozen San river, we reached

some magnificent vantage points high above the valley floor. At the first, we had our first good, prolonged views of Bison with a mixed herd of 15 feeding in the open snowy fields. We watched them for quite a while before some of us decided to walk to the next viewpoint with, on the way, another White-backed Woodpecker. But it was at the next viewpoint that things got really interesting. The eagle-eyed Detlef had, somehow, spotted an Eurasian Lynx sat relaxing in a gap in the woodland on the opposite side of the valley about four to six hundred metres away. We spent three and a half hours watching it, observing its every small move: sitting, dozing, stretching, yawning - all the time it was aware of us and the nearby Red Deer. At one point we thought it had wandered off only for it to return to its original position. Overlooking the river valley with a long view of forests broken by large meadows, at one stage we had a wealth of wildlife in front of us: the Lynx, Roe Deer, Red Deer, a Red Fox and eventually a herd of Bison appeared from over a hill. These were pretty magical three and a half hours that fortunate clients and leaders probably will never forget. Eventually, we had to leave as the forest tracks didn't look great for night driving, and regrettably we had to leave the Lynx behind, still sitting in the same spot at which we had first spotted it. Wildlife watching at its best without doubt! Was it as good as watching the latest BBC 'Big Cats' wildlife series? No - it was better! As our prime target was seen extremely well during daylight, Jan decided to skip the spotlighting session! Yes, he gave us a bit of leisure time!



Day 7

Friday 16th February

For our pre-breakfast session we tried to reach yesterday's vantage point overlooking the Polish – Ukrainian border. Although we succeeded in reaching the site, no Wolves could get spotted. Efforts to continue on the same border road were limited due to heavy timber trollies coming from the opposite direction. Once again, we were forced to turn around and leave the area.

The daytime was spent looking for Wolves but, like many of the other days, they always seemed to be a few minutes ahead of us. In the morning we found another wolf kill in the San river. Detlef flushed over fifty Ravens from the location as he went down the hill to find it. The previous day a forest worker had told us we had missed a pack of three, stood on the frozen San river drinking water from a hollow in the ice, by mere minutes! We found plenty of prints and could almost feel their presence around us, but it wasn't meant to be and we headed home without seeing them.



That afternoon, we went back to the two viewing points of the previous day and found even more Bison: more than 50 (a big herd) but, not surprisingly, the Lynx had gone. We spent the last hours of daylight scanning the valley for Wolves, seeing a Grey-headed Woodpecker, but as the snow started to come down more heavily once again, we headed back for a last night at the hotel.



Day 8

Saturday 17th February

Today we had an early departure time to leave for Rzeszow airport, and we started the three-hour journey with packed breakfast. En route we stopped to clean the vehicle. We made good progress and arrived at the airport in time for our flight back to the UK. We said our farewells to Jan and Detlef and were soon back in the UK after a wildlife-filled adventure that will live long in the memory.

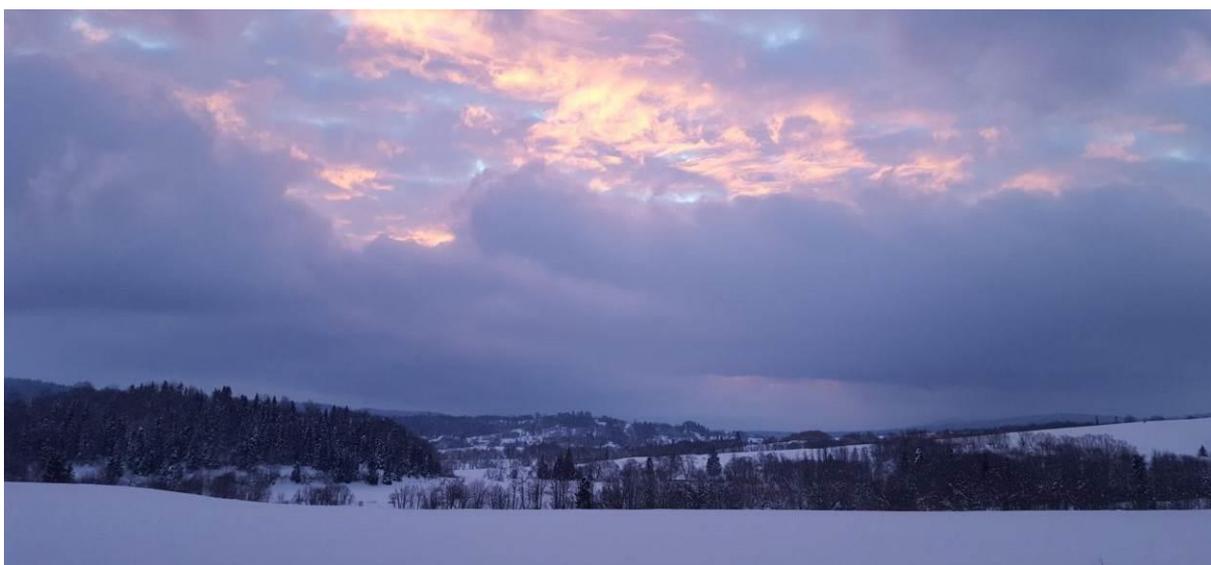
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Species Lists

Mammals

Eurasian Lynx *Lynx lynx*: While scanning from a vantage point, one sat relaxing in a gap in the woodland on the opposite side of a valley, about four to six hundred metres away. Superb and prolonged telescope views of this individual for three and a half hours. Observed its every small move: sitting, dozing, stretching, yawning. Once it had wandered off, only for it to return to its original position. Pugmarks of two other individuals were seen too

Wildcat *Felis silvestris*: Good views of an animal while lamping

European Bison *Bison bonasus*: Took some efforts to locate a first herd (eight bulls near our first base at dusk). Once we succeeded in spotting these firsts, we had several different herds near the Lynx vantage point where they were seen two days in a row. Total number of at least 60 individuals

European Beaver *Castor fiber*: According harsh winter conditions, there was just limited activity of Europe's heaviest rodent. Only a few active lodges were seen with a brief view of an individual near our second base while lamping

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*: Although brief, one animal seen well while lamping

Red Fox *Vulpes Vulpes*: Commonly seen

Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*: A few seen over the week, mostly in small groups. Also one huge stag with massive antlers.

Roe Deer *Capreolus capreolus*: Seen

European Hare *Lepus europaeus*: Two seen while lamping

Pine Marten *Martes martes*: Briefly near a forest road while lamping. Pugmarks were seen too

Birds

Mute Swan *Cygnus olor*: Seen on the way to the airport

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*: Seen on the way to the airport and near the San River

European Herring gull *Larus argentatus*: Seen on the way to the airport

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: Big flocks flying over near the San River

Goosander *Mergus merganser*: A few seen on the San River

Common Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*: A single one seen on the way to the airport

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: A few seen flying over near the San River

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: One seen

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo*: Seen well: perched, flying and near a Wolf kill

Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus*: A few seen

Eurasian Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*: Seen on the way to the airport

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*: Several seen well perched at roadsides

Eurasian Pygmy Owl *Glaucidium passerinum*: Heard twice and one seen at dusk perched on big spruce

Lesser Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos minor*: Superb views of a female drumming and calling

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos*: Excellent views of at least four individuals

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: Common

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

Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*: Heard plus binocular-filling views at the Lynx spot

Great Grey Shrike *Lanius excubitor*: Four birds seen

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*: Seen frequently

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Seen

Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: Heard and a few seen very well

Western Jackdaw *Coloews monedula*: Seen

Rook *Corvus frugilegus*: Seen

Hooded Crow *Corvus cornix*: Seen on the way to the airport

Northern Raven *Corvus corax*: Seen daily

Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: Seen and heard regularly while scanning from vantage points /walks in forests

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*: Seen and heard during walks in forests. Accompanied roving tit flocks

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris*: Seen and heard while scanning from vantage points /walks in forests. Also from restaurant table near base one

Common Firecrest *Regulus ignicapilla*: Seen and heard while walking in forests

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: Seen and heard while walking in forests

Coal Tit *Periparus ater*: Seen

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*: Seen

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*: Seen and heard during walks in forests. Nice to come across the Eastern Europe *caudatus* birds with a pure white head

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*: Common tit in the forests and on feeders

Eurasian Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus*: Seen

Great Tit *Parus major*: Seen

European Crested Tit *Lophophanes cristatus*: Two seen on/in a wolf kill

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Seen. Especially from the vehicle while cruising through rural villages

Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*: Seen and heard while scanning from vantage points /walks in forests

European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*: Seen and heard while scanning from vantage points /walks in forests

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs*: Seen

Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus*: Heard once while walking in forests

Bullfinch *Pyrrula pyrrula*: Seen and heard while scanning from vantage points /walks in forests

