

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

3 – 10 March 2019



Eurasian Beaver



European Wildcat



Black-bellied Dipper



Nutcracker

Report & Images compiled by Matt Collis



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Tour participants: Matt Collis & Jan Kelchtermans (leaders) with seven Naturetrek clients

Summary

The March tour to south-east Poland was blessed with great weather for the whole week as winter began to give way to more spring-like conditions with sunny days and frosty mornings. The tour concentrated on looking for animals, birds and other wildlife in and around Bieszczady National Park, an extensive area of forest, meadow and river systems. Twelve mammal species were seen, with evidence found for several others. Our best sightings included multiple sightings of European Bison, some at close quarters, five European Wildcat, two brief sightings of Wolves, Pine Marten, European Beaver and a Raccoon Dog. Unfortunately this trip didn't include a glimpse of the Eurasian Lynx, surely one of the most difficult animals to see in Europe. The warming weather eventually brought plenty of birds to the forests with a mixture of residents and both winter and summer migrants recorded. Highlights included a handful of Woodpeckers (Grey-headed, White-backed and Black), close encounters with the enigmatic Ural Owl, Tawny Owl, passage Common Crane and Greater White-fronted Goose, and the wonderful Hawfinch.

In general, views of large carnivores and herbivores were made from mid to long range and so telescopes were required for better views. Close encounters were mostly made from within the bus which meant not everyone got the same experience or saw every animal; however, it remained the best way to encounter and observe their natural behaviour without disturbing them. It was a very exciting and intense experience as we attempted to see all five target species, and both patience and determination were required. Despite every effort made to maximise our chances, luck played an important part and it sometimes paid off!

Day 1

Sunday 3rd March

Our journey started at a very busy Stansted Airport during the early morning, where we flew with Ryanair to Krakow to meet our second leader Jan Kelchtermans. Most of our first day involved travelling, including a long drive from Krakow to our first hotel in Bieszczady, south-east Poland. However, our journey wasn't without wildlife as we encountered several good birds, including Buzzards, Great Grey Shrike, Goshawk and Hooded Crow. We also got our first look at some of the native mammals, including a beautiful pair of Roe Deer and a Red Fox crossing the snow in daylight.

Once we had checked into our hotel and the bags were dropped off, it was time for our first of many delicious Polish meals we headed back out for our first evening spotlighting. Three Red Foxes, including one crossing the road directly in front, and our first European Hare was our fill for the evening, which was cut a little short by the local border patrol which stopped us – a unique experience for all involved. After our long day travelling, it was then time for some much-needed sleep!

Day 2

Monday 4th March

A pre-breakfast drive delivered an exciting encounter with a Wolf, which quickly crossed the road in front before slinking its way through the sparse woodland down towards the river. Viewing was difficult, but most clients managed to spot the animal, which briefly stopped to give us all a good once-over with its eyes. After failing to

reconnect with the Wolf, we decided to investigate the river itself where a group of Ravens lead us to two fresh Red Deer kills – the reason the Wolf was in the area.

Our day walk involved a long walk through the forest and across snow-covered meadows, where the only actual mammal encountered was a surprise Raccoon Dog which was found freshly dead, with no visible signs of injury or ill health. Plenty of evidence of other mammals was encountered, including Wolf scat and both Bear and Lynx footprints. Birds were limited during this walk, but a small copse of wood provided fantastic views of a group of Hawfinch and our first Nutcracker and Great Spotted Woodpecker were heard. Willow Tit and Coal Tit were also seen, as were two Serin which passed overhead.

Our second evening of spotlighting resulted in our first Pine Martin; it was a little tricky to see as it hid in long grass, aware of our presence, but it did occasionally come into view as it jumped around. Red Deer were also encountered as they foraged high up in the tree line, but the highlight was a wonderful Ural Owl which sat proudly on a dead stump right by the road. It stayed for several minutes before giving us lovely flight views as it glided 30 metres back into the wood.

Day 3

Tuesday 5th March

Today's early morning drive was rather damp and revealed no mammals, but we did see some Bullfinch, a couple of Jay and Mistle Thrush. Our second outing was much more successful with two Goshawks displaying over a woodland ridge and several encounters with Buzzards and Ravens. We also stopped by the local village feeders and picked up Marsh Tit, Blue Tit, Great Tit, Chaffinch, Greenfinch, Yellowhammer and Goldcrest, all taking advantage of the seed. We attempted a brief walk up a snow-covered track in search of Hazel Grouse and Woodpeckers, but nothing seen on this occasion.

Our afternoon trip took us to a popular lookout point where you often encounter mammals. Due to a rogue photographer in the fields below, activity was limited, and mammals only arrived just as the light faded, with a group of 10 Bison, including youngsters, coming out into the open. Unfortunately, light and distance meant views were limited but a good start. Other wildlife of note included two Golden Eagles overhead, and a single Stock Dove in one of the trees in the valley. During our walk around the area we encountered more footprints of Wolf and Deer and also poo of Lynx, Wolf (fresh), Bear (old) and Bison.

During the drive back we encountered two Red Deer on the road, and two Roe Deer and another Ural Owl right by the road. Our evening spotlighting was quiet but revealed a Hare and potential Woodcock which we flushed off the road.

Day 4

Wednesday 6th March

The morning drive was incredibly scenic following a night of heavy snow. We stopped at various viewpoints to scan for mammals, with sightings of a single Red Fox and two Red Deer. Birds seen included another flock of Hawfinch, loads of Great Tit, fly-over Crossbill, many Buzzard and a Skylark.

Following breakfast, we headed back out and on to our new base location for the second part of the trip. Whilst briefly stopping off at a beaver lodge, we picked up two Nutcrackers and had fly-over Cranes, including two

groups of 30-35 birds. Once at our new location we encountered Tree Sparrow with plenty of Great Tits on a feeder, spotted lots of Hawfinch in the tops of the mature trees, and had brief encounter with Jay, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Bullfinch and Dipper on the river.

The afternoon trip focused on some locations known to be good for Bison, but none appeared, despite the feeding stations. Our final stop was tactfully positioned near some Bear tracks which criss-crossed the road and to our great joy a Brown Bear eventually crossed our path! It didn't linger long at all and only half the group got views, mostly of its hindquarters, but incredible to have even been in the near vicinity of this super-elusive creature.

Our evening spotlighting found a Red Deer and, finally, some Bison. The viewing lasted only a few minutes before the small herd of three returned to the forest, but it was our closest encounter yet. We also encountered a new mammal for the trip: a Polecat, seen by the side of the track as it ran for cover. We briefly saw signs of activity at a Beaver lodge although no animal came out.

Day 5

Thursday 7th March

The morning drive focused on searching some expansive open fields in the hope of Wolves, but only picked up a Roe Deer right by the road. After several days of hardcore mammal searching, the morning was given to relaxation time around the accommodation, where several different individual walks picked up more Hawfinch, Bullfinch, two Dipper, Grey Wagtail and some very visible Crossbill.

In the afternoon we headed up a new track to check out a viewpoint overlooking a small lake, in the hope of a few new birds. It was very windy, which made any birding very difficult, so our attention switched to mammals and a huge Beaver dam which stretched almost 20 metres wide. We also found a fresh Otter spraint by the river, but no news birds to add to the list. The rest of the afternoon excursion involved climbing a large hill to a viewpoint where we scanned for mammals. Today our luck was in as we picked out a Wildcat which walked nice and slowly across the open hillside, giving brilliant views for everyone. Then just before the light faded, we picked up a second Wildcat, stalking voles along the ridge.

Tonight's evening spotlighting turned out to be a good one with many species seen. The night started with a Hare on the road and a sleeping Red Fox in a field. We then encountered our third Wildcat of the day but this time only 40 metres or so from the van, sitting right out in the open. A minute later, it slunk behind some trees, where it stayed making viewing difficult and only the odd eye-shine revealing its location. Finally, we searched the track near the lodge and picked up a Pine Marten and two Bison standing on the edge of the forest. They were a little nervy but stayed long enough for everyone to see them before returning to the forest.

Day 6

Friday 8th March

Our morning session involved spotting from the hill at the back of the lodges; two Red Deer with full antlers and a Red Fox were the only mammals seen, but lots of birds in voice including Skylark, Goldfinch, Thrushes, Hawfinch, Crossbill and Grey-headed Woodpecker. Walking down, we stopped to scan the trees and picked out a White-backed Woodpecker and then later a Grey-headed Woodpecker – a real pleasure after many days of barely a call.

The afternoon excursion took us back out in the forest where in the fading light we encountered another Wildcat, this one sunning itself in a field and only about 40 metres from the bus. It posed for several minutes before retreating into cover. In an attempt to get more views, we positioned ourselves on the opposite edge of the glade. No Wildcat but a Black Woodpecker was heard calling nearby and eventually flew overhead into a dead tree where several people got clear views before it flew back over our heads to its original perch.

Our evening spotlighting produced a wonderful experience around a Beaver lodge, where four beavers, two adults and two sub-adults, were very active and interacting with one another. We watched for a short while as they sat eating some of the tree stems they'd stored and attempting to drag several others up onto the lodge. We searched behind the lodges once again, where the Bison were again present, and a Tawny Owl sat perched in the open allowing everyone intimate views of this elusive bird. Some also had a very brief glimpse of another Wildcat.

Day 7

Saturday 9th March

Our morning session involved extensive efforts to find a pack of Wolves who'd been reported in the local area but, despite our best efforts, we had no success. Additional wildlife of note included watching a wonderful Great Grey Shrike hovering and a flock of about 40 Greater White-fronted Geese which flew over us at one of our scanning spots. The rest of the morning was given as downtime before a longer afternoon/evening session which started at a popular viewing point we had visited once before where we had obtained distant views of Bison.

Today we were much more successful, with three Bison eventually coming out to graze in the nearest fields for over 20 minutes before walking up into the forest. Two Roe Deer were also spotted and remained visible the entirety of our session. We also encountered a very tricky Wolf which was first spotted by one leader from a viewing point away from the main group. After collecting all the clients, we returned to check for the Wolf but, unfortunately, it had gone. Five minutes later, it was re-found by the other leader, but was only viewable for a matter of seconds. This was the most frustrating of circumstances but exciting to know they were in the area.

Our evening spotlighting was busy, with many mammals encountered but not the last-minute Lynx we'd all been hoping for. The other mammals included several Red Fox, Red and Roe Deer and one European Hare, all found very close to the road. Our consolation was a close encounter with Ural Owl which was a nice end to the evening.

Day 8

Sunday 10th March

One final morning drive around was very quiet, with no mammals seen and included a failed attempt to spot Hazel Grouse in a popular feeding place. However, other wildlife sightings of note included a huge flock of Eurasian Crane (150) flying over the hotel prior to our departure and an early migrant Common Redstart that was hanging in some of the bushes by the lodges.

With our trip coming to a close, it was time to make the drive back towards Krakow before catching our evening flight to Stansted. We finished the trip a few hours in Krakow and a short tour around the Jewish areas, before having a wonderful Israeli-style evening meal when we mused over and celebrated our tour. We

successfully had encounters with four of the big five mammals we had come to see, but our luck just wasn't in for Lynx on this occasion. Until next time!

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; S = signs of, H = heard only; D = dead)

	Common name	Scientific name	March							
			3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
2	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>		1					1	
3	Eurasian Lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>		S	S					
4	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>			10	1	2	2	3	
5	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>		S	S	1			S	S
6	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
7	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
9	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scopa</i>			S					
10	European Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
11	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
14	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		1			1			
15	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>					3	2		
16	European Polecat	<i>Mustela putorius</i>				1				
17	Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		S			S			
18	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>		D						

Birds

1	Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>	✓							
2	Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>							40	
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
4	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
5	Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>		E						
6	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓							
7	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	E							
8	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			2					
9	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1						1
10	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1	1	2		1			
11	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>							3	1
12	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>				60			80	150
14	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>			✓					
15	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓							✓
16	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓							✓
17	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓							
18	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>			✓				✓	
19	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓				✓			✓
20	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓							
21	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>		✓			✓			
22	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>		1	1		1		1	
23	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
24	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>						✓		
25	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>				H		✓	✓	
26	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>				H		✓	✓	
27	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓							✓
28	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓				✓		✓	✓
29	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
30	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March							
			3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
31	Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		H	1	2				
32	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓							✓
33	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓							✓
34	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓							✓
35	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
36	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
37	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
42	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
43	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		H						
44	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			✓				✓	✓
45	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>				✓			H	
46	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			✓				✓	
47	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>				✓	✓			
48	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓
49	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
50	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
51	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>						✓	✓	
52	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>								1
54	Black-bellied Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus cinclus</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
55	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>			✓					✓
56	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>				1				
57	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>					✓	H	H	
58	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓							✓
59	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
60	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>							✓	
61	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
62	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
63	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>			✓					
64	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>					✓		✓	✓
65	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
66	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>		2						
67	Corn Bunting	<i>Emberiza calandra</i>	1							
68	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓