

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 March - 7 April 2019



Roe Deer



Goosander



White Stork



Roe Deer

Report by René Matthys
Photos by Neil McMahon



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Summary

Spring was firmly on its way during Naturetrek's second Bieszczady trip of this year. Chilly mornings remained but layers were quickly peeled off once the sun came out. This is a tour that requires some stamina, with early morning starts and late-evening spotlighting sessions. Our keen group remained on focus the whole week, although the big prize of an alpha carnivore initially kept eluding us. Eventually, the final day rewarded us with a fine lone Wolf, lying and strolling in a field at mid-range, in view for over 10 minutes and enjoyed by all through telescopes. During the week, the supporting cast included a second Wolf during the last evening, various sightings of European Bison, a Wild Cat and four sightings of Pine Marten (two during daytime) and some highly prized birds such as Ural Owl, six species of woodpecker and out-in-the-open views of an intricately patterned Hazel Grouse. Most of all, everyone thoroughly enjoyed the vastness and quietness of this truly wild area in South-eastern Poland.

Day 1

Sunday 31st March

We all met at Krakow Airport and, after picking up our hire vehicle, set off for the long drive towards Bieszczady National Park. En route, we recorded some birds that we would not encounter much afterwards, notably the corvids such as Jackdaw, Rook and Hooded Crow. The Rooks especially, were very obvious with large groups foraging in the fields and some extensive rookeries close to the small villages. Our first mammals of the tour were Roe Deer grazing in the meadows.

We took a short break for drinks and facilities and enjoyed the lovely weather that would accompany us for most of the week. Butterflies were much in evidence with Brimstones and Small and Large Tortoiseshells on the wing. In the early evening we arrived in our hotel in the National Park and, after our first Polish dinner, all were eager to go out for the much-anticipated spotlighting session. We started with Red Fox, Hares and Roe Deer. A Beaver showed well, swimming at his pond and clambering up the dams. We found a grey Tawny Owl and our first Ural Owls of the trip, with three of these powerful owls seen, including one which posed nicely for pictures.

Day 2

Monday 1st April

April Fool's day at dawn saw us at a nice river area with lots of Beaver ponds. We had our first spell of morning bird activity and quickly acquainted ourselves with some species typical for the area. A fine male Firecrest was much appreciated and we all studied the subtleties of Willow and Marsh Tits which occur here in the same habitat. More exciting were the woodpeckers; a pair of White-backed Woodpeckers at their nest hole and fly-bys from Grey-headed and Black Woodpeckers.

We then moved on to the Ukranian border, home to the big carnivores that this trip is all about. A fair time of scanning the open fields produced little mammal-wise except a few Roe Deer and a Red Fox. Thrushes were more a feature of this pre-breakfast outing with high numbers of Fieldfares and Mistle Thrushes on the move. We also picked up our first Redwings and a cracking male Ring Ouzel.

After breakfast we returned to the same area and completed a circular walk through Spruce forest and open meadows. We were all excited to find our first Wolf prints and scats. The fine weather brought in-coming Black Stork and our first Lesser Spotted Eagle. More Ring Ouzels were seen on the meadows and during our picnic lunch we were entertained by stunning white-headed Long-tailed Tits. We had another stop at the Beaver ponds for more views of the White-backed Woodpeckers.

After a short break we drove to a spot where we could overlook some meadows. The hoped-for resident Wolf pack did not materialise and we had to console ourselves with some Roe Deer and roding Woodcocks.

After dinner, it was time for another spotlighting session. There wasn't much movement and all we could find in the spotlight were some Roe Deer and a Ural Owl. Not everyone got on to the first Pine Marten of the trip. We were stopped and checked by the Polish border patrol. These guards patrol the border area 24 hours a day and occasionally come across Lynx. One of the guards showed us some mobile phone footage of a Lynx taken the morning before at exactly the same spot. Although we didn't see any of the big carnivores that night, hopes were high for the next days to come.

Day 3

Tuesday 2nd April

At 5.15am we were at the same road that we had driven just a few hours before. We scanned and scanned the whole area for a few hours, but other than the usual Roe and Red Deer, Hares and a nice ginger Red Fox in a snow patch, nothing new was encountered.

After breakfast we did a nice riverside walk with another picnic lunch at a viewpoint overlooking an extensive area of meadowland. Along the way, the only Goshawk of the trip sailed over. Some mudpools on the path were adorned with fresh tracks of Brown Bear, Wolf and the first Lynx tracks. Springtime flora was on its way and we saw some nice butterflies, notably Large Tortoiseshell and Camberwell Beauty. There were lots of Hawfinches, but most of them were typically flighty and unobtrusive, although in the end everyone enjoyed good views. A pair of Goosander swam on the fast-flowing river. A Hazel Grouse was flushed and, much to John's delight, Sue spotted a second individual on the track. This one stayed long enough in the open for most of us to appreciate the beautifully intricate plumage. Our scanning session at the viewpoint produced little other than a patrolling Red Fox.

Another viewpoint, overlooking the same area from another angle higher up, was next but our two-hour vigil didn't deliver anything we hadn't already seen. The last hour of daylight was spent in the National Park, scanning an area where we had seen Lynx in the previous years but alas, we drew another blank.

We headed back to the hotel for another fine dinner and before long, it was lamping time. Again, it was very quiet in the fields with the only eyeshine from a small herd of Red Deer; another Tawny Owl suggested there were plenty about this spring.

Day 4

Wednesday 3rd April

This was our last morning in the National Park and again, we had little reward for our efforts. We slowly drove the roads with frequent stops for scanning, but other than a close Black Stork, nothing of interest was seen.

After breakfast and packing, it was time to move on to our second base. The more lodge-style accommodation ('domkis') just outside the National Park boundaries is surrounded by an exciting pristine area of meadows and woodlands.

After lunch we ventured into the surrounding meadows and our hosts took us to a carcass of a European Bison. They told us that this Bison had been killed by a pack of Wolves, a rare occurrence in this area. Over the next days, we took some time to check the carcass and scan the area, but unfortunately, no big carnivores were revisiting.

In the late afternoon, we went for a walk close to an impressive Beaver dam. We found prints of Lynx, Wolf and European Bison. We took our positions for another scanning session overlooking a promising-looking area of clearings and woodland. Unfortunately, our attempts proved futile when just before dusk a car came out of nowhere and started cruising the fields, in the process disturbing the already present Roe Deer and deterring any other mammals from showing themselves in the open.

Evening lamping was quiet, with the only excitement coming from a large herd of Red Deer next to the road.

Day 5

Thursday 4th April

Early morning, Sue and Sally were the first ones at the watchtower on the hill behind our 'domkis' and were rewarded with a small herd of six European Bison in the open fields. A distant herd of Red Deer and some Red Foxes and Roe Deer were the other mammals around.

After breakfast, we drove a quiet forestry road, stopping frequently at promising-looking spots. At a Bison feeding station, we found evidence that a Brown Bear had been trying to raid the supplies in a nearby shed. It was quite impressive to see the prints of the huge paws of the bear on the wooden walls of the shed. We heard a Hazel Grouse nearby, but this one wouldn't show. A little further on, a huge male Pine Marten crossed the road just in front of the vehicle, only barely avoiding getting run over.

The afternoon saw us in prime Bison territory, but our walk produced no mammals other than another daytime Pine Marten, spotted by Sue. This animal was walking along a little woodland stream and showed itself better than the one in the morning. Driving the forest roads, we flushed two Hazel Grouse but none were subsequently relocated. Our route to the next vantage point was interrupted by two European Bison. These impressive animals stood motionless between the trees, giving us some thorough looks before they went about their business.

In the evening we climbed a hill to get to our vantage point overlooking a large forest clearing. This is a fantastic area with lots of potential for a good sighting, but again only the usual suspects showed up. Some Roe and Red Deer, Red Foxes and a few roding Woodcock were reward for our efforts. On the way out, a European Bison stood on the road in front of the vehicle. Spotlighting was a very quiet affair and spirits were not at a high at the end of another long day in the field.

Day 6

Friday 5th April

The diehards went for another early morning at the hill behind the accommodation. Bird migration was gathering pace and the first Tree Pipits, Redpolls and Serins were recorded. Mammal-wise little moved. A smart and charismatic Hoopoe was found foraging in the verges of the forest road at our domkis.

After breakfast we decided on another visit to the woodland clearing where we were yesterday. The sun was out in full force and encouraged the newly arrived Lesser Spotted Eagles to display. We again found Lynx prints on a forest path but little else was seen. Our stops in the forest and glades produced a White-backed Woodpecker at its nest and a Hazel Grouse was flushed. Another group of European Bison was seen in the forest; these animals gave better views than the ones we saw the day before.

After lunch and a little downtime at the domkis, we went for a stroll in the forest, seeing some more common birds and heard a Pygmy Owl calling. A close Red Fox was still in its winter coat, and Red Crossbills were singing at the tops of the spruce. We moved to a viewpoint with a phenomenal 360-degree panorama of open fields where Wolves had been seen the days before. We scanned for some time, planning to come back here the next morning, but little was seen. We then stood vigil until dark overlooking a field where Brown Bear was seen several times over previous days, but we were just not getting lucky.

The spotlighting session on the return from the restaurant to our accommodation was very quiet again, so most of the participants decided on a drop-off at the domkis. Only Sue and John joined what proved to be one of the best lamping sessions of the trip. Just past the domkis, a massive bull European Bison stood like a statue right out in the open. Close to the road, we finally connected with a Wild Cat; this one stayed a long time in view, slowly trotting to the other end of the field. In the forest a Badger crossed the road and we also espied yet another grey Tawny Owl.

Day 7

Saturday 6th April

We went for a very early drive along the same loop as yesterday, ending at the viewpoint. The setting was perfect, and you could almost sense the presence of Wolves, but alas, nothing materialised. Back at the domkis, we had what was probably the same Hoopoe, on the road.

We then had a long break to regain forces for our final attempts. Some people chose a last stroll in the surrounding fields and woodlands for views of the resident Dippers or the pair of Grey-headed Woodpeckers that nest nearby. Hawfinches and Serins were on show and a Lesser Spotted Eagle flew over.

After lunch we returned to a previously visited site to do a short walk to a viewpoint. The clouds were threatening and we had our first rain of the trip. Nothing new was noted on our walk so we retreated to the vehicles for a short drive to another panoramic viewpoint nearby. The rain brought out gorgeous Fire Salamanders on the forest track so we stopped to admire these fabulous creatures. On arriving at the viewpoint, now in heavier rain, almost immediately a lone Wolf was spotted lying in a field at mid distance. Telescopes were trained on this fabulous canine and everyone managed sustained views for the next 10 minutes. Then the Wolf decided to stretch, do a little stroll in the meadow and disappeared in a nearby woodland. All of us were elated,

having finally found one of the big three and, more importantly, enjoying good views out in the open. We stayed at the spot for quite some time hoping the Wolf would reappear, but then the rain drove us off.

It was time for some celebratory drinks at the restaurant before we set off for the drive to the National Park for our final spotlighting session. A Wolf that turned up in the spotlight only two metres from the car spurred some early excitement but was unfortunately not seen by everyone before it dived in a ditch and vanished. We caught up with the usual Hares, Roe and Red Deer and Red Foxes. A Ural Owl was flushed, and we went out of the minibus to investigate an interesting-looking mustelid which turned out to be another Pine Marten. We tried hard for a few more hours but we just couldn't find our main quarry, the twisted-eared cat. It was well into the next day when we hit the sack.

Day 8

Sunday 7th April

We treated ourselves to our first lie-in of the trip and all that was left was packing and the long drive back to Krakow airport. It had been another tough, but rewarding, trip into the wild Eastern Poland.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	March - April							
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>								✓
3	European Wildcat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>						✓		
4	European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>					✓	✓	✓	
5	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	European Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	✓							
8	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓		✓	✓				
9	Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		✓			✓		✓	

Birds

1	Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>			✓	✓	✓			
2	Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	✓							
3	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
4	Goosander (Common Merganser)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓	✓				✓	
5	Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>						✓	✓	
6	Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓					✓	✓	✓
8	Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓			✓			✓	✓
9	Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		✓				✓	✓	
10	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓							✓
11	European Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓							
12	Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
13	White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓
14	Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓	✓				✓
15	Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
16	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
17	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>			✓					
18	Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>		✓						
19	Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
20	Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓		✓			✓		
21	Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>	✓	✓		✓				✓
22	Eurasian Pygmy Owl	<i>Glaucidium passerinum</i>						H		
23	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓
24	Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>								
25	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos minor</i>			H					H
26	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
27	White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>		✓	✓			✓		
28	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>		✓			H	H	H	
29	European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>								✓
30	Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓							✓
32	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
33	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓							✓
35	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓							✓
36	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>	✓							✓

	Common name	Scientific name	March - April							
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
37	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
38	Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
39	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
41	Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
42	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
43	Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
44	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>		✓		✓			✓	
45	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
46	Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>						✓	✓	
47	Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
48	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
49	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
50	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
51	Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
52	Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
53	Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			
54	Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
55	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
56	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
57	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
58	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
59	European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
60	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	European Stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>						✓	✓	
62	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				✓			✓	
63	Black-bellied Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus cinclus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
64	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
65	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>							✓	
66	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
67	Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
68	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
69	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>						✓	✓	
70	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				✓			✓	
71	Water Pipit	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>		✓						
72	Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
73	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		✓						
74	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
75	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		✓	✓	✓			✓	
76	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
77	Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓			✓	✓	✓	
78	Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>				✓			✓	
79	Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓	✓	✓				
80	European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
81	European Serin	<i>Serinus serinus</i>						✓	✓	
82	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
83	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
84	Common Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>		✓	✓					

Amphibians and reptiles

1	Carpathian Newt	<i>Lissotriton montandoni</i>			✓					
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	Common name	Scientific name	March - April								
			31	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
2	Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>								✓	
3	Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Common Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			