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

Naturetrek Tour Report

26th March – 2nd April 2022





Pine Marten by Neil McMahon

Tawny Owl by Neil McMahon



Ural Owl by Neil McMahon

Tour report by Mark Kaptein & Neil McMahon



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Tour Participants: Mark Kaptein & Neil McMahon (leaders) with six Naturetrek clients

Summary

Our second tour of the spring in the south of Poland exploring the Carpathian landscape provided plenty of mammal sightings and between us we notched up an amazing 16 species. Many of these special animals were active during the early evening as darkness fell and we were fortunate to encounter Wild Boar, Pine and Beech Martens (also known as Stone Martens), Badgers and Wildcat during this period with diurnal highlights including Eurasian Beaver, Carpathian Red Squirrel, numerous Red Foxes, plenty of deer and of course a couple of encounters with those wonderful Wolves! A pack of five Wolves at the side of the road one early morning was very special with an opportunity of watching interaction at very close range, sadly brought to an end when a pedestrian wandered up the road and seemed oblivious to what was in front of him! Another Wolf was encountered mid morning as it loped through a meadow quite close to our second accommodation, and that is the joy of the Bieszczady national park and surroundings, everything is on your doorstep!

A Brown Bear provided a close encounter for two of our party and a herd of Eurasian Bison initially gave themselves up in the daytime on a just-greening meadow but were only seen at night thereafter.

Visible migration of birds was particularly noticeable in the week with particularly large movements of Chaffinches and other finches and thrushes. The White Storks arrived, and other highlights included Golden Eagle (one with a Brown Hare), an unexpected Pallid Harrier, Goshawk and lots of nocturnal sightings of Tawny and Ural Owls during our lamping sessions. A single Fire Salamander was a super find one morning, and all this against a backdrop of the mountains, forest, meadow, river and natural sound - no heavy traffic, very little footfall, clean fresh air and crystal clear night skies - it was time to breathe and live again after a tough couple of years.

Day 1

Saturday 26th March

All six guests were met at Krakow Airport by Mark and Neil and, while they were delayed swapping the minibus used the previous week for a newer model, we all enjoyed a slightly early lunch in the delicatessen at the airport. Once our brand-new vehicle (with just 13 kilometres on the clock) had been provided we began the long drive, first east and then south, for our Bieszczadzki adventure. Plenty of Roe Deer were out feeding in the fields and common birds were seen en route. We took a comfort stop before veering south and thereafter it was rather cloudy with just a few spots of rain, but relatively mild. We finally reached our hotel on the outskirts of Lutowiska and after room allocation we enjoyed our 7pm evening meal.

It had been a long and wearisome journey for most and only Peter and Duncan were up for a night drive spotlighting for animals. By this time, it was raining, and the rule-book would suggest that such a foray was unlikely to succeed in finding much. One thing that was predicable was that the amphibians would take advantage of these conditions to make their spring migration to breeding pools or similar sites. And so it proved to be with literally hundreds of Common Frogs and rather fewer Common Toads out on the wet roads. This made driving slow and rather difficult attempting to avoid this mass migration. I'm afraid most other motorists just didn't make the effort and there was wholesale carnage. At one stage there were so many frogs on the road ahead of us it took nearly 15 minutes to decamp and pick up singles and mating couples before we felt confident

enough to drive on! This scenario was probably why we went on to see quite a bit of the wildlife that was also trying to take advantage of something of a banquet. We saw at least 10 Red Foxes and singles of both Pine and Stone Marten, two big Ural Owls and two or three Tawny Owls. One of the Tawny Owls was photographed with a frog in it's talons.

We were back at the hotel by about 11.40pm but the change of the clocks to summer time overnight meant that we were going to lose an hour's sleep!

Day 2

Sunday 27th March

We mustered at 5.30am and it was in -1°C with a cool breeze, but dry. We drove the roads slowly, noting thrushes, Yellowhammers and Chaffinches at the roadside as dawn broke. At one stage a Wolf crossed the road ahead of us and vanished up a wooded gulley. It was so quick that only two of the guests saw it. We went on to check good areas locally and noticed that most of the squashed frogs on the roads from the previous night were now gone – something had been making a meal of them. The previous week we had found a Wolf kill (Red Deer) and we had left a trail camera trap set up recording any activity. This was retrieved and the video footage included Red Fox, Raven, Common Buzzard, Goosander and a Brown Bear! We then drove some forest tracks, finding fresh Wolf scats, Bear poo and Bison dung but not the animals themselves! Carpets of Spring Snowflakes were emerging plus plenty of the purple Two-leaf Squill. Birds had increased in number with lots of finches, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush and Chaffinches. The first returning Robins were noted, three Hawfinches were seen and a party of Bullfinches were seemingly gritting on the track.

We returned to the hotel for a late breakfast and birds around the hotel included a Ring Ouzel and two Black Redstarts. There was a birding walk post-breakfast which succeeded in locating Skylark, Redwing, common finches, more thrushes, four fly-over Crossbills and a Common Lizard.

There was then an opportunity to rest, wander nearby or both, before readying ourselves to go out again at 3.30pm. We drove through woodland and then parked up and went for a walk in meadows and woodland edge. Here we made the fatal mistake of splitting into two parties, with Mark and Duncan electing to walk further on to examine a historic Wolf den whilst the remainder of the party chose to watch over a beaver pond. For those who remained to scan the ponds, the tactic paid off with a Eurasian Beaver parading on the nearest section of water and providing good views. The group also witnessed a pair of Goosander, the female of which eventually devoured a frog. Roe Deer were also about, and a Water Rail was heard squealing. With the light starting to fade we slowly made our way back to the minibus with a steep hill climb to tackle en route!

We were happy with our lot but Mark and Duncan had come across a herd of Red Deer, then up to 10 Eurasian Bison in a meadow, and then to cap it all a Brown Bear lurched noisily through the woods, completely oblivious of their presence until almost bumping into them! The bear broke cover and caused the bison to run too! It's sometimes all about being in the right place at the right time!!

It had been dark for some time before Duncan and Mark made it back to the waiting minibus, so we arrived back at the hotel for a rather late hot meal and a short night drive provided views of a couple of Red Foxes and up to three Wild Boars and we were in bed by midnight.

Day 3

Monday 28th March

A sunny and much milder day commenced with a 5.30am morning excursion in the minibus. Shortly after leaving the hotel, we saw a cracking Ural Owl on a telegraph pole in a meadow. We drove out to the usual venue for our road safaris, but it was generally quiet for the larger animals. We found plenty of fresh Wolf scats but no Wolves. So we progressed to forest tracks and came across a herd of seven Red Deer, a few Roe Deer and then a Red Squirrel which are typically large, dark and with very prominent ear-tufts in the Carpathian region. A Great Grey Shrike in some trees was a rather brief sighting and we saw our first White Stork of the trip. A couple of Robins, a singing Dunnock and a calling Hawfinch were further indicators of new spring arrivals. We arrived back at the hotel for a 10am breakfast and a rest, completed our checklists for the last couple of days and then ate our hot meal of the day just after 1pm in order to try and take advantage of the early evening for mammal-spotting.

We left the hotel at about 2pm and subsequently enjoyed a good walk around the meadows and woodland edge. On parking the minibus, a Woodcock flushed up and came down just a few feet away, but despite a thorough search we couldn't find it again. Walking out into the meadows we could see a perched eagle in the distance, and when it took flight, it was confirmed as a juvenile Golden Eagle. Some Roe Deer, a Red Fox and a Sparrowhawk were also subsequently seen. We walked to another meadow, carefully picking our way through dozens of mating Common Frogs around the streams and damper areas. Emerging flowers included Common Squill, Primrose and Golden-leaved Saxifrage.

As a group we staked out the meadow where Mark and Duncan had seen the bison and bear the day before. However, there would be no such repeats, but a herd of 26 inquisitive Red Deer was by-far the largest gathering of the trip. With the daylight beginning to fade we took a slow walk back to the minibus encountering Roe Deer and a Wildcat in the process.

After taking some of our number back to the hotel, the remainder elected for a night drive in the minibus, eventually returning back and retiring at midnight. It was probably the change in the temperature that saw us notch up an impressive list of animals – a lingering Wolf next to the road, a Wild Boar, one or two Pine Marten, a Brown Hare, a few Roe Deer and finally a Wildcat with a vole on the grass outside the front of out hotel on our arrival back! We also saw an unprecedented seven Ural Owls, most of them showing very well, and a Tawny Owl too.

Day 4

Tuesday 29th March

This was to be our transfer day when we left our hotel and drove outside the national park to some accommodation near the village of Wola Michowa. After a rather hectic day of wildlife watching the previous day, this was to be a much quieter day.

Nevertheless, the minibus and occupants departed at 5.30am and committed to searching the usual haunts with mammalian highlights amounting to a Red Squirrel, Red Fox and Roe Deer. Several Hawfinches and now reasonable numbers of Robins and Black Redstarts indicated that the migrant floodgates had opened. After our final buffet breakfast at the hotel we said our good-byes to our hosts just after 11am and took a slow drive to the Maniowke area. We stopped at some roadside beaver ponds and walked along the road watching the water for signs of beavers and the trees for birds. No beavers were seen, and although we could hear distant Black

Woodpeckers, there were no noteworthy bird sightings either. We visited shops in Cisna and arrived at our new accommodation at about 1pm. After a succession of early morning forays and late nights many of our party rested during the afternoon and our drive out with the remainder was unspectacular with mammals amounting to just a few Roe Deer and Red Foxes.

Despite the milder temperatures there was still plenty of snow around, but this did not seem to stop the bird migration. Three flocks of White Storks glided over Maniowka numbering about twenty-five birds and high-up raptors included the only Lesser Spotted Eagle of the trip; a Marsh Harrier was seen earlier over Cisna.

After a delicious evening meal provided by Asia and her mother (our family hosts) we decided to have a night off from driving, the only evening we didn't go out armed with torches.

Day 5

Wednesday 30th March

After the quiet day previously and in order to provide a choice of options for all attendees, the early morning scour for wildlife offered a trip in the minibus or a wildlife walk from our accommodation taking in meadows, woodland and a stream-side track. Mark, Peter and Duncan utilized the minibus and came across an interactive group of five Wolves which at one point were just a few metres from the vehicle and very relaxed. Unfortunately, a pedestrian caused the canids to move away temporarily, but they regrouped after he had gone and continued to delight the observers. It was still quite dark when the fortunate trio encountered the pack, so photo opportunities were challenging, but video comes into its own at such times. Red Deer and plenty of Goosanders were also seen by Mark and his team.

In the meantime, Neil, Anne, Jan and Joanne enjoyed a pleasant walk, witnessing a huge movement of migrating Chaffinches with intermingled Goldfinches and Bramblings. A very close adult male Marsh Harrier ghosted past followed a short while later by a female-type. Lots of thrushes were on the move which included plenty of Fieldfare, Redwing and Mistle Thrushes and Skylarks sang from the ridge-lines of the meadows. White and Grey Wagtails and Meadow Pipits were also obvious, the local white-headed form of Long-tailed Tit delighted and a flock of six Hawfinches flew over low.

After meeting up for breakfast there was time for some respite from all this action but another venture was made on foot to explore the area around the nearby village of Wola Michowa. Anne and Chris ventured into woodland to seek out some beaver pools but were put off by active forestry operations. A circular walk around one of the meadows, much of which was still snow-covered, yielded common birds, a newly arrived Firecrest, a couple of vocal Hawfinches and a hunting Red Fox. However, the best sighting was saved for last, when a lone Wolf ambled into the upper section of the meadow and scanned around whilst first sitting and then relaxing and lying down. This animal was as cool as a cucumber and leisurely walked from the meadow into the trees and was gone – but not before he or she posed for some rather distant photos in poor quality light.

In the afternoon Asia and her father escorted us to some woodland nearby in search of Bear and Bison, but we failed to find any. Whilst checking the meadows north-west of Wola Michowa we took the opportunity to drive a little way into Slovakia which also exhibits lovely scenery and an extension of the rolling meadows and managed woodland.

After our evening meal Chris, Anne and Jan took the opportunity to watch from a hide which had been baited with food in order to attract Bears, but sadly there was no show and no fresh Bear foot-prints for the remainder of the week either. The rest of the team undertook an evening drive and managed night-time views of seven nervous Bison feeding on meadows, lots of Red Foxes, Roe Deer and two Badgers. Four different Ural Owls and a Tawny Owl posed very nicely for us.

Day 6

Thursday 31st March

A big change in the weather saw steady rain for most of the day resulting in there being no takers for the early morning walk out from Maniowke, but there was still plenty of visible migration with good numbers of Goldfinches and Redwings on the move. The observation tower on the ridge meadow provided refuge from the light rain and Chaffinches kept sweeping north despite the weather. A camera trap was checked and the area rebaited with food – the review of the footage later indicated regular visits from Red Foxes but little else. The minibus team also had a quiet time of it, but the rain had persuaded a smart Fire Salamander to break cover and was well photographed. A Black Woodpecker and plenty of Goosanders were the other highlights.

After a scrumptious breakfast we checked the bear hide and at 11am took another excursion to the area around Wola Michowa. It was quiet in the snow-laden and wet woods but the lower meadows provided close views of White Storks, one of which was seen catching and swallowing a Weasel!! An immature male harrier flew in and landed in the meadow not far from the minibus. Scrutiny of its features confirmed this harrier to be a Pallid Harrier and not the anticipated Hen! As we watched, one of the White Storks walked right up to the harrier and made it fly. With the rain intermittent and light, we decided on a walk up a forestry track and we saw six Hawfinches, two Firecrests, a Siskin and some of the fabulous white-headed Long-tailed Tits. We returned to Maniowke early in the afternoon and tried an afternoon excursion by minibus in the rain, but this was mostly quiet.

We enjoyed an evening meal at a more amenable time than we had of late, and again took to spotlighting from the minibus in an effort to find interesting mammals. A Badger showed and we went on to see our only Hedgehog of the trip and lots of Red Foxes and Roe Deer and plenty of rain-induced Common Toad and Common Frog activity.

Day 7 April Friday 1st

Our last full day was wet and cold with fresh snow from mid-evening the night before onwards.

Despite these conditions most of us committed to a 5.45am morning drive in a last effort to find more special animals. Perhaps not surprisingly, it was mostly uneventful in flooded conditions, but we found the ever-present Roe Deer and Red Foxes, White Storks and a variety of common birds. We returned for a 9.30am breakfast and despite periods of heavy rain, some short walks were undertaken around Maniowke with the star bird being a Goshawk found by Anne and Chris.

At about 2.45pm we took an afternoon drive and scan in the forests to the north and east of the village, but it was quiet in wet conditions, and we couldn't find the hoped-for Bison. However, we did encounter a juvenile

Golden Eagle, which showed nicely, and the images taken of it revealed that it had a Brown Hare in its talons. We trooped back to our accommodation for another superb meal at the hands of Asia and went out for a last, determined lamping session until about 11pm. This proved to be the most productive period of the day and we encountered special creatures in the shape of Wildcat, a Pine Marten, Red and Roe Deer, Red Fox, three more Ural Owls and a Tawny Owl.

Day 8

Saturday 2nd April

Our last day was all about travelling back to Krakow. It was snowy and cold as we ate our breakfast at 5.45am and we left Maniowka at about 6.20am for the long journey. We saw plenty of Roe Deer on the journey, plus a single Red Deer and a Red Fox. The snowfall and melting sides of the road ensured that migrant Chaffinches, Robins and Black Redstarts in large numbers showing well at the sides of the carriageway with birds flying up all the time during the early stages of the drive. At Krakow we dropped Anne and Chris at the airport as their flight was much earlier than the homeward journey for the rest of us. We then visited a part of the old city of Krakow and took lunch in the main square there. Even in the parks there were common birds to be seen and we acknowledged the efforts of a group of Ukrainians raising funds to assist their families and friends just across the border to the east.

We then dropped Mark off at a far-flung hotel (to continue leading three more Naturetrek tours!) and the rest of us drove back to the airport, dropped off the minibus and returned back to Stanstead courtesy of Ryanair.

In total we had seen 16 species of mammal with multiple sightings of Wolf, Bison, Wildcat and Pine Marten. We also encountered over seventy species of bird including Golden Eagle, Goshawk, Black Woodpecker, Ring Ouzel, Firecrest and Pallid Harrier. Our weather was varied, but generally rather cool and wet during this intense and challenging Naturetrek tour to a very special East European venue.

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Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only, J = juvenile)

					Ma	rch - A	April 20	022		
	Common name		26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2
1	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
2	Eurasian Teal	Anas crecca		1						
3	Goosander	Mergus merganser	√	✓	√	√	✓	✓	✓	
4	Black Stork	Ciconia nigra			1					
5	White Stork	Ciconia ciconia			c6	c25	2	2+	4	√
6	Great Egret	Ardea alba		2						
7	Grey Heron	Ardea cinerea		√	√			√	3	√
8	Lesser Spotted Eagle	Clanga pomarina				1				
9	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus		1	1	1		1	1	
10	Northern Goshawk	Accipiter gentilis							1	
11	Western Marsh Harrier	Circus aeruginosus				1	2			
12	Pallid Harrier	Circus macrourus						1		
13	Black Kite	Milvus migrans		1						
14	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos			1J				1J	
15	Common Buzzard	Buteo buteo	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
16	Eurasian Woodcock	Scolopax rusticola	_	1	1	<u> </u>	•	•	•	_
17	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus			1					
18	Black-headed Gull	Chroicocephalus ribibundus	✓		-					√
19	Rock Dove	Columba livia	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \	√	√	√				√
20	Stock Dove	Columba oenas	V	2	V	\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \				
21	Common Wood Pigeon	Columba palumbus	✓	<u>-</u> ✓	√	√	√			√
22	Eurasian Collared Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	✓	V	V	V	V			✓
23	Water Rail	Rallus aquaticus	V	Н						
24	Tawny Owl	Strix aluco	2+	- ''	1		1		1	
25	Ural Owl	Strix araco	2		8		4	3	3	
26	Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	Dryobates minor					Н	3	3	
27	·	•		Н	Н					
	Middle Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocoptes medius					,			4
28	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopos major		1	Н	√ H	✓	√		1
29	Black Woodpecker	Dryocopus martius		Н		Н		1		_
30	Common Kestrel	Falco tinnunculus								5
31	Great Grey Shrike	Lanius excubitor			1					
32	Eurasian Jay	Garrulus glandarius	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
33	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
34	Western Jackdaw	Coloeus monedula	✓							✓
35	Rook	Corvus frugilegus	√	✓						✓
36	Hooded Crow	Corvus cornix		✓				1		✓
37	Northern Raven	Corvus corax	✓	✓	✓	✓	30	✓	✓	
38	Coal Tit	Periparus ater		Н	Н	✓	✓	✓		
39	Marsh Tit	Poecile palustris		Н	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
40	Willow Tit	Poecile montanus		Н		Н		Н	✓	
41	Eurasian Blue Tit	Cyanistes caeruleus		√	√		✓	Н		
42	Great Tit	Parus major	√	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
43	Eurasian Skylark	Alauda arvensis		✓	√	√	√	✓		✓
44	Long-tailed Tit	Aegithalos caudatus		√	√	√	✓	√		
45	Common Firecrest	Regulus ignicapilla					1	2		

					Ма	rch -	April 20	022		
	Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2
46	Goldcrest	Regulus regulus			Н		√	Н		
47	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes		Н	Н					
48	Eurasian Nuthatch	Sitta europaea		Н	Н	✓	√		Н	
49	Eurasian Treecreeper	Certhia familiaris		Н				Н		
50	Common Starling	Sturnus vulgaris	✓	✓	√	✓	√	✓	✓	√
51	Ring Ouzel	Turdus torquatus		1						
52	Common Blackbird	Turdus merula	✓	✓	√	✓	√	✓	√	✓
53	Fieldfare	Turdus pilaris	✓	✓	✓	✓	√	✓	✓	√
54	Redwing	Turdus iliacus		2+			√	✓	✓	Н
55	Song Thrush	Turdus philomelos	✓	√	√	√	√	✓	√	√
56	Mistle Thrush	Turdus viscivorus	✓	✓	√	✓	√	✓	√	√
57	European Robin	Erithacus rubecula		1	2	✓	√	✓	√	✓
58	Black Redstart	Phoenicurus ochruros		3	2	✓	√	✓	✓	√
59	European Stonechat	Saxicola rubicola		1						
60	Dipper	Cinclus cinclus					3	3	2	Н
61	House Sparrow	Passer domesticus		Н	√	✓				
62	Dunnock	Prunella modularis			Н		5		Н	
63	Grey Wagtail	Motacilla cinerea		√	√	√	√	✓	√	√
64	White Wagtail	Motacilla alba		√	√	√	√	✓	√	√
65	Meadow Pipit	Anthus pratensis					√	✓		
66	Common Chaffinch	Fringilla coelebs	✓	✓	√	✓	√	✓	√	√
67	Brambling	Fringilla montifringilla					c12	с8		
68	Hawfinch	Coccothraustes coccothraustes		3	Н	Н	7	6		
69	Eurasian Bullfinch	Pyrrhula pyrrhula		✓						
70	(Northern Bullfinch)	Pyrrhula pyrrhula			Н					
71	European Greenfinch	Chloris chloris		✓	√	Н	Н	✓		
72	Common Linnet	Linaria cannabina		✓						
73	Red Crossbill	Loxia curvirostra		4	1			2		
74	European Goldfinch	Carduelis carduelis	✓	√	√	√	√	✓	√	
75	European Serin	Serinus serinus				1				
76	Eurasian Siskin	Spinus spinus				Н		Н		
77	Yellowhammer	Emberiza citrinella		√	√	√	√	√	√	
78	Common Reed Bunting	Emberiza schoeniclus		Н	Н					

Others (S = Scat)

Common name				Ma	arch -	April 20	22		
	Scientific name	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2
Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	10	5	15	√	c12	4	6	1
Wolf	Canis lupus		1	1		6			
European Bison	Bison bonasus		10			7		4	
Brown Bear	Ursus arctos		1						
Red Deer	Cervus elaphus		3	33		✓		12	1
Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	√							
Red Squirrel	Sciurus vulgaris		1	1					
Wild Boar	Sus scofa		3	1					
European Beaver	Castor fiber		1			1			
European Hare	Lepus europaeus			1			1		
Pine Marten	Martes martes	1		1+				1	

				M	arch - A	April 20	22		
Common name	Scientific name	26	27	28	29	30	31	1	2
Beech (Stone) Marten	Martes foina	1							
Wildcat	Felis silvestris			2				1	
Badger	Meles meles					2	1		
Weasel	Mustela nivalis						2		
Hedgehog	Erinaceus europaeus						1		
Amphibians									
Common Lizard	Zootoca vivipara								
Common Frog	Rana temporiria								
Common Toad	Bufo bufo								
Fire Salamander	Salamandra salamandra								
Plants									
Spring Snowflake	Leuciojum vernum								
Common Squill	Drimia maritama								
Mistletoe	Viscu album								
Primrose	Primula vulgaris								
Golden-leaved Saxifrage	Chrysosplenium oppositifolium								
Butterflies									
Small Tortoiseshell	Aglais urticae								
Brimstone	Gonepteryx rhamni								