

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

25th March – 1st April 2023



Wolf



Eurasian Lynx by Mark Kaptein



Scenic group shot!



European Bison

Tour report by Neil McMahon, images by Neil McMahon unless stated



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Tour participants – Neil McMahon and Mark Kaptein (leaders) with five Naturetrek clients.

Summary

The first of this season's tours in and around the Bieszczady National Park employed some new tactics first used last year - now finely honed - to find those tricky animals of the Polish forests and meadows. And on this occasion, we were also able to utilise a thermal camera which proved to be a game-changer when scanning forest edges and open terrain for the herbivores and carnivores in one of the most mammal-diverse areas in Europe. We experienced a mixture of weather which included sunshine, a heavy fall of snow, freezing temperatures down to minus 8C at night, rain and variable wind strengths. Our accommodation suited our needs perfectly, providing plenty of hot food and warm comfortable rooms when we needed it after our early morning starts and lengthy evening and night drives.

Multiple sightings of the beautifully grizzled Carpathian Wolf, with a close animal near to our minibus for over half an hour in daylight conditions, was the pick of the canid viewing. We have probably never seen so many Eurasian Bison before on this trip, with almost daily sightings and with over 20 animals seen some days. Red Fox, Roe Deer, Red Deer, Eurasian Beaver and Brown Hare were common, and we also connected with a single Raccoon Dog and two Wildcats plus a couple of droves of Wild Boar. A huge Brown Bear, Red Squirrels and a couple of Otters were much appreciated. For many though the most magical sightings were of the mystical 'phantom of the forest' after we located and watched at length no less than two different Eurasian Lynx at close range at night! The only 'large cat' in Europe, the Eurasian Lynx has proved to be a tough find in previous years, but this tour scored spectacularly with lead-ups of tracks in the snow, yowling animals vocal in the forest and concluding with outstanding views.

There was little time to search for birds, but we connected with some quality species with Hazelhen, Nutcracker, Grey-headed and Black Woodpecker, Goshawk, Long-eared Owl, Ring Ouzels and plenty of Woodcock and Hawfinches.

A very happy if somewhat fatigued band of Naturetrekkers returned to the UK with amazing memories and experiences!

Day 1

Saturday 25th March

The tour began with four of us meeting up at Stansted Airport for a flight to Krakow and once there both guides and five guests were ready for the first "Poland's Mammals" tour of the year! Our hire vehicle was a new Toyota Verso mini-bus and we bought some food at the airport appropriate for something to munch en-route and set off from the airport to begin our adventure.

Our journey initially took us east and then south with a comfort stop on the way and we arrived at Lutowska in good time. Here we checked into the hotel only to find that this wasn't the correct hotel for this particular tour! A little embarrassed, we drove for a further fifteen miles and arrived at our usual Carynska hotel where a hot meal awaited us. The subsequent WhatsApp group we created for all tour participants was called 'Wrong hotel group Bieszczady'!

On our journey, in dry and sunny conditions, we saw excellent numbers of Roe Deer and a herd of about a dozen Red Deer. Birds included early arriving White Storks, Common Buzzards, Sparrowhawk, Kestrel, Black Redstart and common finches and Brimstone butterflies were on the wing – all very spring-like! The Bieszczady National Park is a beautiful area but winter often lingers well into the months traditionally thought of as spring elsewhere. The forests and meadows are quiet during the winter months with many birds moving away during periods of snow and low temperatures. Thrushes, Robins, finches and the like were arriving at the same time as us but of course the mammals are present all the year round. Summer months typically see high temperatures and lots of tourists here from within Poland and thus most of the animals hide away. Our visits to this rich-in-biodiversity area try to coincide with maximum mammal activity with very few people on the ground.

After our meal we took our first night drive, travelling tracks and roads familiar to the guides from previous years. We very nearly ran over an Otter – brakes were rapidly applied as this usually aquatic mustelid crossed a forest track right in front of the mini-bus! The Otter continued on its way regardless of the near-miss! We found no less than four Hedgehogs, a profusion of frogs and toads and other animals included Red Fox, Brown Hare and Roe Deer. Fans of nocturnal birds were pleased with close views of Woodcock, Tawny Owl and Long-eared Owl. We concluded at midnight and were then off to bed to steal a few hours sleep before the early morning drive on day two!

Day 2

Sunday 26th March

We started our morning drive at 5.45am and headed south. With a one-hour time difference to the UK, we had had even less time in bed! No exceptional mammals were found but we still enjoyed views of Red Fox, Brown Hares and Roe Deer. For the first time we were using a thermal imaging camera on this tour, and this picked up on far more mammals than were visible to the human eye. With one guide driving and the other using the camera we were able to cover more ground than the conventional tactic of stationary scanning. This clever device even provided some appreciation of just how many small rodents such as mice and voles there were in the choice areas.

Large numbers of migrant thrushes included Ring Ouzel and flocks of migrant finches were predominantly Brambling, Chaffinches and Siskins. Jays were obvious too.

We returned for a late breakfast at 9.40am followed by an opportunity to catch up on some sleep or to explore the wildlife-rich area around the hotel – or a combination of both. There was some nice sunshine again, but the breeze was cool and there were some light showers too. Basking Adders included the standard marked reptiles, but we also found a beautiful Black Adder. The Common Buzzards were displaying and calling non-stop, some Firecrests showed well, and other quality birds included two Grey-headed Woodpeckers, a fly-over Black Stork, over-flying flocks of fourteen and eight Ravens, Dipper, Grey Wagtail, Black Redstart and confiding Marsh Tits. A possible Large Tortoiseshell butterfly flew off before identification could be confirmed.

We had our hot lunch/dinner at 2.30pm at the hotel and left about an hour later, supplied with a pack-up to sustain us later as we planned to be out for the rest of the day.

It initially seemed quiet for mammals but an area near to the Ukraine border with a large meadow and mixed woodland borders was definitely worth investigating. We took a walk out with the guides splitting up to cover more ground. Neil and the group took the high ground, with a small vale below and spotted a group of six grazing

Eurasian Bison. As we reduced the distance the animals became inquisitive and walked slowly towards us and then branched off towards some trees. The group walked parallel to the herd for a while but eventually the bison decided they didn't like having company much and trotted off and crossed the river and a meadow right on the Ukraine/Polish border. In the meantime, Mark had accidentally flushed a Wildcat from cover and now together we watched a Hen Harrier slowly fly over us at some height. Roe Deer slowly invaded the edges of the meadow. Mark tried his impressive Wolf howl impersonation and almost straight away there was a response – but not from a Wolf! A Eurasian Lynx began yowling from a block of forest behind us, perhaps a challenge or even a female calling to her cubs that a Wolf was nearby? This loud and distinctive call echoed around the edge of the meadow but pinpointing exactly where the cat was proved too difficult. A vocal roding Woodcock was just a shadow in the evening light while we spent some more time in this general area, hearing the Lynx again, but not seeing it.

Our next encounter was brief, but exciting, when a large Brown Bear bounded away from us as we were driving one of the village roads. Never an assured sighting on these trips, this was turning out to be a very interesting day! Next we were treated to two spotlighted Wild Boar next to the River San, not a common animal in the National Park. We ate our packed meal in a hide overlooking a Beaver Pond and we saw our first Eurasian Beaver of the tour too!

Happy with our lot and a little weary we drove back to the hotel only to espy an animal in the road ahead of us – a Raccoon Dog. Although common in some countries nearby, this was a first for most of the guests on the trip and an excellent end-of-session bonus - and with a super clear night sky overhead!

Day 3

Monday 27th March

Our early morning drive began at 5.45am. It was quite cold but pleasant, but the weather forecast suggested a change was on the way. After the excitement of the previous night this was a much quieter day. A good deal of the effort we put in for the morning drives is to find Wolf. Two packs operate around the area we were concentrating on and if we find them we can sometimes see them at quite close range in daylight conditions. However, no Wolf was found on this day, but the usual signs of scats and footprints indicated they weren't far away. Two or three Red Squirrels were a delight and again Roe Deer and Brown Hare showed themselves. A female Black Woodpecker was probably the best of the birds.

We returned to breakfast at 10am and first rain and then snow set in. The snow was settling well by lunch time and the amount on the ground increased steadily during the afternoon – it was a world away from the sun-bathing Adders of the day before! We ate our hot meal in the early afternoon and then ventured into the Narnia snowscape, but saw very little despite our best efforts, the plummeting temperatures and heavy dump of snow curtailing the mammal activity. Most of the songbirds ceased singing and melted away into cover and once again Bieszczady returned to winter.

So, having seen very little, we elected to return to the hotel at a reasonable hour and catch up on some sleep ahead of a new day on the morrow.

Day 4

Tuesday 28th March

It was still wintry for our 4.45am morning drive and although we didn't connect with anything exciting, the snow at least helped us to see the footprints of Wolves and Eurasian Lynx. All the tracks were fresh and we considered ourselves unlucky not to have seen the big canids in particular. After breakfast back at the hotel it was time to pack our bags and move on to our second venue, this time outside the National Park near Wola Michowa. As we drove slowly north-west, checking the countryside carefully as we went, more snow began to fall and little could be seen. A roadside stop for two Nutcrackers foraging on the side of the road in the snow was memorable. We obtained some fuel and supplies at Cisna and arrived at our new accommodation at about noon. Here we were told that the winter just gone had seen little in the way of snow so the snow that day was something of a surprise. We checked into our rooms and there was an opportunity to explore the area before our main meal at 3pm.

Afterwards we concentrated on the forest tracks, some being quite difficult to make progress on with the snow and temperatures being below freezing. Perseverance provided us with three Eurasian Bison, Red Fox, Red Deer, Roe Deer, European Beaver and Brown Hare with birds including Woodcock, the white-headed Long-tailed Tits, Common Treecreeper and the like.

We were back at the hotel by 10pm and enjoyed some rest at our lovely new lodgings.

Day 5

Wednesday 29th March

A determined 4.30am start in search of Wolf provided a brief view of a single animal – but not a classic Bieszczady experience. Still, we were inching closer to our goal of enjoying better views of these free-ranging predators and our brief glimpse provided hope. It was another morning with falling snow and all the roads and tracks were under inches of the white stuff. The sun shone all day and it all looked splendid! The usual hares, foxes and deer continued to entertain us, even if we were thinking of Asia's home-cooked pancake/doughnut treats for breakfast! We returned for our well-earned breakfast at 9.30am and as usual there was time to relax or sleep for the rest of the morning.

At 2pm we caught up with the Naturetrek checklist and ate our main meal of the day at 2.30pm. We left our lodgings at 3.20pm and didn't return until 1.15am! During the afternoon we walked a short section alongside the River San and then the party split with a long walk led by Mark heading off into the wilds and Neil remaining with the rest of the party checking out other parts of the river and a series of forest tracks and look-outs by bus. A male Goshawk right overhead and Common Sandpiper were seen by the latter group and the hiking group enjoyed more sightings of Bison with both groups encountering typical birds of the area including several Woodcock.

The groups were reunited in the dark at 9pm when we consumed our packed meal in the minibus. Then we resumed our night drive and found plenty more Bison which permitted a close approach with spotlights. Almost certainly the same Eurasian Lynx was yowling from the forest again (but again was unseen) and we connected with Red Fox, Red and Roe Deer, Brown Hare and European Beaver. A Ural Owl was heard calling, but declined to show itself.

Day 6

Thursday 30th March

Our 5.15am start and a long drive south paid off when Mark spotted two distant Wolves in a meadow. These two animals were interacting beautifully and trotted out of the meadow and we guessed their trajectory and drove around some hillside woodland tracks to where we thought they might emerge and this paid dividends when both animals were found crossing a wooded ravine right next to our track. Without so much as a sideways glance at us they gently loped off as we drove slowly past them and we parked up and waited hoping for another viewing, but they had moved on. Both animals were in good condition and it was speculated that they might have been the local park's dominant matriarch and her partner. I think we all felt elated after all our hard work and series of early morning starts! En-route back another Wolf showed briefly in a roadside meadow, spooking a Red Deer in the process which didn't know which way to run.

Our earlier-than-normal breakfast was a celebratory affair with an opportunity to rest or sleep afterwards to compensate for the early start. At 12 noon a couple of us went for a walk around Maniowka where we found a Tawny Owl sitting in a nest box designed for Ural Owl, Skylarks, Long-tailed Tits and a Peregrine which came perilously close to a fly-over Ring Ouzel! Footprints in the now-melting snow indicated at least one Brown Bear somewhere nearby.

We took our main meal of the day at 3.30pm and with warming conditions decided to stay out all evening again. These conditions proved to be suitable for mammal activity and our efforts paid off with some superb wildlife sightings. In no particular order we encountered ten European Bison, a Wild Cat, a Wolf, a troop of eight Wild Boar, the standard mammals and no less than two Eurasian Lynx – both cats showing very well indeed. The memories of the frustration, confusion, obstructions, amazement, elation and awe-inspiring viewing will remain with everyone in the mini-bus for many years to come. Woodcock, Tawny Owl and Long-eared Owl were the bird contributions to the list. It was a band of tired but happy Naturetrekkers that finally got to bed at 1am the following morning! Job done, we just needed a close, sustained view of a Wolf...

Day 7

Friday 31st March

Well you don't rest on your laurels despite significant success, so we were up for a 5.30am drive. No Wolves showed this morning, but two Otters in the River San showed pretty well and there were no less than four Red Squirrels on and near a single tree – two of the red variety and two of the black morph. They appeared to be four siblings, so the colour type seems to be a random and diverse occurrence. A herd of Red Deer showed nicely too – these animals are much more pensive and alert with predators to think about than the rather sedate and laid-back British deer. Two Hazel Grouse were smart, even if they did hide particularly effectively. A Kingfisher flying along the River San was a noteworthy record.

We returned to Maniowka for a 10am breakfast and went for a birding walk at 2pm down to the outskirts of Wola Michowa. The highlights were Dipper, Hawfinch, Firecrest, a fly-over Marsh Harrier and both Willow and Marsh Tits.

With our last hot meal consumed in the afternoon, we again ventured out for an evening night drive. We didn't find the Lynx this time, but four Bison were nice to see plus Red Fox, Brown Hare, Eurasian Beaver and Red and Roe Deer. With an improvement in the weather, migrant finches and thrushes were beginning to arrive in numbers

Day 8

Saturday 1st April

Our last morning drive was a particularly early one and as we drove gently along forestry tracks we saw a Wolf on the track ahead of us. He went up a ravine and we slowly drove past and turned around and waited and sure enough the gangly canid came back down on the track and trotted in our direction. Just like us, they choose the passage with the least resistance and often use roads and tracks routinely to patrol their pack territory. With us now in front of him, he was a little unsure and walked off-track to circle round and watched us. We remained in the bus – any attempt to alight from the vehicle and he would not have hung around for long. Again we gently eased past him and awaited his next move. He was either curious or for some reason he didn't want to leave this particular spot and he continued to watch us from cover and then walked gingerly towards the mini-bus, permitting some good photo opportunities. In due course, and after what seemed an eternity, any interest in us dissolved and he melted away into the forest – fantastic!

In Europe the Wolf has a hard time of it coping with humanity. This predator is protected in Poland and Italy, but elsewhere they are hunted and persecuted. Despite this, long-distance dispersal has ensured new populations are springing up in Western Europe – and long may that continue.

We spotted a couple of Bison in an area close to the Wolf, both species of deer, Red Fox and Red Squirrel and back at Maniowka Asia showed us a Common Lizard recently emerged from hibernation. The birds were singing again as the day temperatures rose and the remainder of the snow melted.

With our flight back to the UK in the evening, we were permitted some leisure time to pack, reminisce and enjoy the location before the long drive back to Krakow to wing our way home. Mark was to remain in the city overnight as this was the first of four back-to-back tours for him in search of the special mammals of Poland's Bieszczady National Park.

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Species lists

Mammals

GO = Guide only		March/April 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Wolf	<i>Canis Lupus</i>		GO			1	3		1
Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>		GO				1		
Eurasian Lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>		H			H	2		
European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>		6		3	23	10	4	2
Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>		1						
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			✓				4	1
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		2				8		
European Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>		1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eastern Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus roumanicus</i>	✓	✓						
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>	1						2	
Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>		1						
Mouse sp.		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Birds (H = Heard only)

		March/April 2023							
Common name	Scientific name	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>								4
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>							2	
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>								✓
Black Stork	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>		1						
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓							✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>			✓		4	2		✓
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓	✓				✓		
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>					1♂			
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>							1	
Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>		1						
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					GO			
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	2	✓		1	3+	2	5	
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>								1
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>					1			
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	✓							1
Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓							
Stock Dove	<i>Columba oenas</i>	✓				1			
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	✓				✓			✓
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	✓				H	✓		

Common name	Scientific name	March/April 2023							
		25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>					H			
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>	1					1		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>							1	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			1		H			
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>						H	H	
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>		✓	✓			H		✓
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓							✓
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>						1		
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		H		2				
Western Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>	✓							✓
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>	✓							✓
Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>								✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>		H				H	H	✓
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓			H		H
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>					1			
Common Firecrest	<i>Regulus ignicapilla</i>		✓				H	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>						H		
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>			H	H	✓	H		
Eurasian Treecreeper	<i>Certhia familiaris</i>		H		1			1	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓		
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	✓	✓	✓					✓
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓							✓
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>								✓
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		✓		✓				

Common name	Scientific name	March/April 2023							
		25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓	✓				✓	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>			✓		✓	✓	4	✓
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
Common Linnet	<i>Linaria cannabina</i>		✓						
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		H		H		H	✓	H
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Others

		March/April 2023							
		25	26	27	28	29	30	31	1
REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS									
Common European Adder	<i>Vipera berus</i>		✓						
Common Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>								1
Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>	✓	✓	✓				✓	
Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
BUTTERFLY									
Common Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>	✓	✓						