

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

Naturetrek Tour Report

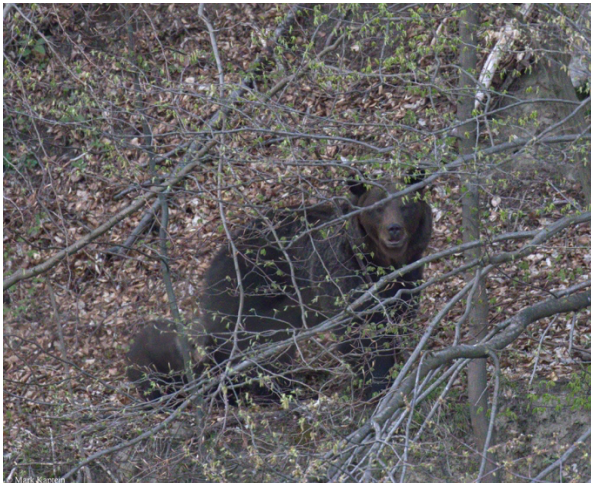
18th – 25th April 2023



Pine Marten



Wolves



Brown Bear



European Lynx

Tour report by Keith Buchanan, images by Mark Kaptien



Naturetrek

Mingledown Barn

Wolf's Lane

Chawton

Alton

Hampshire

GU34 3HJ

UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour participants: Keith Buchanan and Mark Kaptien (leaders) with five Naturetrek clients.

Summary

Wolves and Eurasian Lynx are notoriously difficult to see, and this trip set out to do just that. Using the novel approach of active searching through locating fresh scat, local knowledge of the Wolf packs and their territories, local knowledge of the daily pattern of activity and movements of these animals greatly increased our chances of success. The other secret ingredient was the use of a thermal camera which enabled searching when these animals are most active, ie. in the dark. As a result, we had a wonderful 40 minutes with a sub-adult female Lynx, a close encounter on foot with a pack of six Wolves and great views of a female Brown Bear with a young cub. Added to this were, for example, herds of Bison and fantastic views of a Ural Owl. This was all set in a magnificent landscape with few other visitors and hosted in friendly locally owned hotels. What a week!

Day 1

Tuesday 18th April

A later than usual flight to Krakow meant a late afternoon arrival, compounded by the luggage carousel breaking down briefly. But the group set off in the hired vehicle in high spirits, looking forward to the week ahead. A couple of hours into the journey we stopped at a roadside diner for dinner. Afterwards, as the light faded, we eventually deviated off the main roads and began to look for animals; most of the sought-after mammals being nocturnal. A thermal camera was our secret weapon here and as one leader drove, the other scanned for heat signals in the surrounding countryside.

The thermal camera revealed an astonishing number of deer grazing in the roadside meadows – Roe, Red, and Fallow were all seen, with the first two being particularly numerous. Red foxes were regularly encountered, including one feasting on a hare by the side of the road. On ponds near the road, excellent views of Beaver were obtained and a number of Eastern Hedgehogs, just a little different from the UK sub-species, were encountered in the shorter grass. Smaller rodents were also regularly evident but were difficult to identify. The occasional domestic cat and dog were reminders of the human population.

We were seeing so much that we were rather late to arrive at our comfortable hotel, and were thankful to retire, after midnight, to warm and cosy bedrooms.

Day 2

Wednesday 19th April

Wolves are early risers, so we had to be as well, and dawn was slowly lightening the sky as we set off. We explored the area around the San River, methodically driving minor road and tracks, initially with the thermal camera and then by eye. The weather was dry, overcast and calm. Evidence of Wolves was found on a number of occasions – fresh scats on the tracks indicated a recent passing. One particular pile of scats was too much for one animal, prompting speculation as to what had been going on. On one stretch of road, we found Wolf footprints which were still wet, meaning the animal had crossed only minutes before. On another section of track, barking Roe Deer signalled the presence of Wolves but another vehicle drove past us and may have moved the Wolf off the road ahead, so nothing was seen. Another close encounter was very fresh Bear scat, which had been deposited no more than 20 minutes previously. Although these close encounters were frustrating, it reassured us that the animals were present.

In between these events we had other encounters. Two Fire Salamanders were found on the tracks, and we stopped to photograph these wonderful animals before carefully placing them out of harm's way off the road. A typically smoky grey Red Squirrel gave us good views, as did a Lesser Spotted Eagle hunting for earthworms in a field. High above, Common Buzzards soared, although we were a little puzzled by the absence of Ravens, often good indicators of Wolf activity.

We returned to the hotel for a delicious breakfast. Following that, some of us went out for an hour's bird watching. Breeding Fieldfares, and a Willow Tit were probably the highlights amongst a chorus of more familiar singing birds. By then it was time for a rest before the activities later in the day.

After a late lunch we set off to explore more areas near the San River, this time a little closer to the Ukrainian border. Things were relatively quiet, and so we walked up to a field in the forest and waited patiently as dusk fell. Out on the grass, a pair of Ring Ousels entertained while, from the forest behind us, a Tengmalm's Owl called repeatedly. As we got back to our vehicle, a Border Police patrol vehicle approached us. We explained why we were there, and they were very friendly as they checked our passports.

Moving on, things were still quiet when a Beaver was picked up on the thermal camera. As we stopped to check this out, two young Wolves appeared in the field nearby. All got reasonable views as these two ran rapidly back and forth before eventually crossing the road and disappearing. Later, stopping to look at a Wild Boar, we realised that it was in the process of being hunted by up to four Wolves from the same pack. Although this drama was difficult to witness other than through the thermal camera, it was exciting, and eventual examination of the scene showed blood and hair from the Boar which managed to escape that episode, but permanently escape? We will never know. Then it was time to return to the hotel after a long day.

Day 3

Thursday 20th April

Today we set off again just as dawn was breaking. As we approached the river, the thermal camera picked up something on the water's edge. It was a Pine Marten, and it seemed to be trying to cross the river. We reversed and waited. Our patience was rewarded when the Pine Marten came across the road in front of us, stopped, sat up and looked at us, then disappeared on the other side. A great start to the day. A little further on, a lone young Wolf was seen on the far side of the river, again, aiming to cross. We reversed rapidly to try and get behind it but it was too quick and we saw it cross the road in the rear view mirror.

Taking an unsurfaced track, we made our way slowly along. Rounding a bend, an adult Wolf was seen trotting ahead of us on the road. On seeing us it accelerated and turned off the road into the forest and we did not see it again. Further along, now in full daylight, we saw what we initially thought were two deer in a meadow, but they were in fact two adult Wolves. They stood and watched us watching them then one ran off. The second continued to watch us then it too retreated out of sight. An excellent encounter, in good light. Another Pine Marten crossing the road in front of us was also in good light. Watching a Coal Tit collecting hair for nesting from an old Wolf scat in an act of natural recycling seemed a fitting way to end our morning outing.

Some of us, after breakfast, had a walk around the village to look for local wildlife. We saw a nice range of birds, as the previous day, but added Wood Warbler, found in a nice area of wet woodland.

In the late afternoon we set off for a heavily forested part of the park. A walk along forest trails, then across a wide meadow, brought us to an impressive beaver pond. The stream had been dammed, and a lodge constructed against one bank. As we watched, a beaver emerged and began to graze on the bank. At another pond, a beaver and an Otter were both found. A Ural Owl flew overhead as we started back. At the car park, high pitched squeals alerted us to another otter in the adjacent pond. On the night drive which followed, a Long-eared Owl was found on a branch close to the road, giving close views, and a Pine Marten explored a small pond. Then it was time to go back to the hotel.

Day 4

Friday 21st April

Early morning brought us back once again to the San River. An early find for the thermal camera was a Woodcock but it was too well hidden to be seen with binoculars and we proceeded to drive around a likely road circuit. Again, the thermal camera picked up a Woodcock and this individual turned out to be just on the edge of the track. In the vehicle we were less than two metres from it, yet it was still remarkably hard to see, with its stunning camouflage. Eventually it had had enough and flew up with that typical explosive flight.

The call of a woodpecker caused us to stop again, and all got out to look at the Grey-headed Woodpecker which was making its way up a nearby tree. It adopted the usual woodpecker trick of moving around the back of the trunk to make viewing difficult. As drove back for breakfast two Hazel Grouse flew up from the roadside and disappeared into the forest, in typical fashion. After that it was time for breakfast and then to transfer to our new accommodation.

We arrived at our new location but before checking into the lodges we drove up a track to check for sunbathing Adders. Two, including a melanistic individual, were briefly seen but because the sun was now warm they were partially hidden in the vegetation. Several Common Lizards were also found, and we resolved to come back earlier on the following day at a time when they would be basking out in the open. As we checked into our lodges, a Lesser Spotted Eagle lifted off from the field opposite and drifted away.

This evening, we set off in pursuit of Bison. High above the valley, in a meadow, we spotted two large bulls. We enjoyed them through the telescope, but then decided to try and get closer. We walked carefully up through the first meadow, keeping close to the forest edge to disguise our shapes. We carefully avoided scaring a Roe Deer near to the Bison in case it spooked them. Keeping to cover, we eventually had to step around a small copse to see the animals. They looked at us for a moment, then melted away into the forest, wary but not alarmed. At that point they were only 100m distant, so it was a very pleasing sighting.

We returned to the vehicles as it got dark, and set off to drive some forest roads. Everything was quiet until suddenly, as we approached a small bridge, the cry of 'Lynx, Lynx, Lynx!' alerted us to a Lynx which had been sitting on the road. It jumped off the road, across a stream, then sat a few metres back in the forest edge, only about 20m distant. We manoeuvred the vehicle and got a largely unimpeded view. We watched her for a full 40 minutes before she retreated back into the forest – a fantastic Lynx encounter!

Day 5

Saturday 22nd April

The day was bright and cold as we set off in the early morning. After just a few minutes we pulled over at the side of the road, at one of the few grassy meadow areas in that vicinity. Beside us, Mallard and Beaver cruised across the pond. Further back, a female Bison grazed on the flat round at the base of a hill, with another female further up. Most managed to get out of the van for a better look, but the female nearest eventually decided that she had been gazed on enough. Impressively, she scaled the steep hill behind, with little apparent effort, to join the other female. The rest of the early morning passed uneventfully, wildlife wise, although a temporary problem with the van meant that we were back rather late for breakfast.

However, before going for breakfast, we drove past our accommodation a short distance and parked. The morning was just warming up and we were hopeful of finding basking Adders. Sure enough, we almost immediately came upon a melanistic Adder, but it heard the vibration of our footsteps and retreated into the grass. However, we proceeded to find several other adders, including another melanistic one. Most were male (they emerge earlier) but there was one large female. All the non-melanistic individuals displayed the lovely zigzag pattern on the back.

After breakfast two of us explored the meadow and woodland edge. Several Tree Pipits were display flying over the meadow and, up in the wood, Chiffchaffs were joined by Blackcaps and a single Bonelli's Warbler. A Red Fox was watched exploring a distant field which we crossed to get a better look at a large raptor in a tree. This turned out to be a Lesser Spotted Eagle but, more distant, a Golden eagle could be seen soaring.

In the evening the group were dropped off in the forest to have a walk over the ridge. On the way to the drop off, a Pine Marten came out and gave great views in full daylight. The van was driven to a rendezvous point and the second leader walked up with the telescope. Large meadows were visible from the top and 30 Bison were counted, mainly females and calves. It was a beautiful, still evening, interrupted only by the barking of Roe Deer in the forest, indicating the probable presence of Wolf.

The night drive which ended the day encountered many of the familiar species; but the most notable was a Polecat actively hunting alongside a little stream.

Day 6

Sunday 23rd April

We headed east this morning, to investigate another part of the range of the Wolf pack we had been targeting. As we drove along a small road, a line of animals could be discerned in a distant field. Walking along a track in a line suggested Wolf and this turned out to be the case. Although very distant, it was clear that there were six; which indicated the whole pack. Here, a pack consists of a breeding pair and their offspring, the latter being one or two years old. The youngsters then leave their natal pack. They were moving quickly west so we turned the van and tried to find a location which they might cross in their journey back into the heart of their territory. We found a minor road, parked the van, and climbed a steep hill to get a viewpoint. We stopped to catch our breath at the top of the hill and waited. It was possible that they would follow the river and bypass us. We had given ourselves two more minutes when suddenly the whole pack emerged, in single file, from the forest edge about 200m from our location. The breeding female was leading the way followed by the juveniles and breeding male. On seeing us they became alert but not alarmed. They watched us with curiosity, one or two taking a few steps forward. We kept still and quiet, and after five minutes they disappeared out of view in order to circumvent us. It had been a wonderful

viewing. We descended to the van but could not pick them up again and we headed back to breakfast well satisfied with the morning.

When we arrived back at the accommodation, we watched a male Montagu's Harrier quartering the ground above us, clearly hunting.

After breakfast a couple of us ascended the hill behind our accommodation and entered the forest near the summit. Here we examined the Ural Owl box but the Tawny Owls which had used it were no longer present. In the flooded tyre track nearby, however, we did find two Yellow-bellied Toads in amplexus; presumably about to lay eggs.

The evening took us back along the San River. We were driving in full daylight along the side of the river when the shout of 'Bear!' went up in the back of the van. We all jumped out and ran to the side of the road in time to see a female Bear with young cub in tow grazing on the grass on the other side of the river. The cub was very small, perhaps three months old. She looked at us briefly then led her cub back into the forest and up the slope. We were able to watch them ascend the slope over the next few minutes.

Moving on from this excellent sighting, we parked further along the river and took a path through attractive woodland parallel to the river. By now light was fading fast but just as we started to turn back, another Bear was briefly glimpsed by some of the group. A little further on we all stopped to watch a dark blob on the other side of the river. This was a young Bear, perhaps three years old, and he started to cross the river towards us. Suddenly he sensed our presence and changed direction. A spotlight was shone on him briefly to give everyone a view in what was now near darkness and the bear swam rapidly to the side then scrambled up the bank. Four Bears in one evening!

The rest of the night drive was uneventful aside from a Hare which stubbornly refused to get off the road and ran ahead of us for a surprisingly long time.

Day 7

Monday 24th April

In the early morning we drove out towards where we had seen Wolves the previous day. Soon we came to a Beaver pond, where we could see at least one Beaver swimming. At the foot of the slope behind the pond a female Bison could be seen, with another female nearby. They allowed us to view them for several minutes before making their stately departure up the slope and out of sight. A little further on, in almost full daylight, a canid running across the field turned out to be a large Red Fox.

It was quiet after that. Wolf scat was found in many places, much of it fresh, suggesting that the pack had passed through recently, but none were seen. We stopped on hearing the call of a White-backed Woodpecker; it called again but did not show itself. On our way back we stopped in the town of Cisna where some purchases were made and a friendly man in tourist information handed us maps of the area.

After breakfast, some of us walked along the minor road near the accommodation. Birds were singing freely, including a number of Tree Pipits. We explored up into the adjacent woodland, where Willow Tit was seen and Marsh Tit and Wood Warbler heard. On the way back to the accommodation, Lesser Spotted Eagle was seen in

flight, and Green Woodpecker heard. A Hoopoe in the garden of the hotel was a nice ending for those lucky enough to see it.

Evening brought us back eastwards and to a part of the forest containing a Beaver dam. This consisted of a complex of dams, channels and large pools, with an impressive lodge at the edge of the biggest pond. The pools were peppered with dead trees, killed by the raising of the water levels – perfect habitat for woodpeckers. The pools were also full of breeding toads, illustrating the potency of beavers as ecosystem engineers. As we left the site, a Hazel Grouse was seen briefly before it disappeared into the forest.

On another section of road, we stopped to try and see an animal which had been picked up by the thermal camera. We didn't find it but, on hearing a Ural Owl hoot, we played a Ural Owl recording. This was immediately answered and soon a Ural Owl landed at the top of a tree beside us, giving wonderful views.

On the way back we briefly encountered a Wild Cat, but it was difficult to see. On returning to the hotel, we discovered a large herd of about 35 Bison grazing in the meadow opposite, as well as a brief encounter with a Beech Marten in the fringing woodland.

Day 8

Tuesday 25th April

Due to flight times and hold ups on the road system this morning we all headed back to the airport directly after breakfast. The only rain of the week was falling which made us all feel better about leaving such a lovely place and we arrived in good time for our return flight.

Receive our e-newsletter

Join the Naturetrek e-mailing list and be the first to hear about new tours, additional departures and new dates, tour reports and special offers. Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk to sign up.

Social Media

We're social! Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and be the first to hear about the launch of new tours, offers and exciting sightings and photos from our recently returned holidays.



www.facebook.com/naturetrekwildlifeholidays



www.twitter.com/naturetrektours



www.instagram.com/naturetrek_wildlife_holidays

Species lists

Birds (H = Heard only)

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Mute Swan	<i>Cygnus olor</i>								✓
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						✓		
Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>				✓			✓	
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>								✓
White Stork	<i>Ciconia ciconia</i>	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓						
Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Clanga pomarina</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>				✓				
Montagu's Harrier	<i>Circus pygargus</i>						✓		
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>					✓			
Common Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>		✓		✓	✓			
Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>								✓
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						✓		
Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>								✓
Rock Dove/Feral Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>						✓		✓
Common Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>								✓
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	H	H	H	H	✓	
Tawny Owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>							H	
Ural Owl	<i>Strix uralensis</i>							✓	
Tengmalm's Owl	<i>Aegolius funereus</i>		H						
Long-eared Owl	<i>Asio otus</i>			✓		H			
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>					2		1	
White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>							H	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	H		✓		H	
European Green Woodpecker	<i>Picus viridis</i>				✓		✓	✓	
Grey-headed Woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>				✓				
Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>		✓		✓	✓			
Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>								✓
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Spotted Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>		✓	✓	✓		✓		
Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>								✓
Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓		✓	✓	H	
Coal Tit	<i>Parus ater</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>							H	
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>					✓	✓		
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>						✓	✓	
Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>			✓					

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Bonelli's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus bonelli</i>					H		H	
Eurasian Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>		✓	✓	H	H	H	✓	
Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		✓	H	H	H		✓	
Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	H	H	H		✓	
Common Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>			✓				✓	
Ring Ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>		✓						
Common Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	H	
Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>				✓	✓			
Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
European Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochrurus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>						✓		✓
Duncock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>		H	✓	✓	H	H	✓	
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>		✓				✓		
Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>				✓	✓	✓	H	
Common Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>		✓						
Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	✓		✓	✓	
European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	H	
Common Redpoll	<i>Acanthis flammea</i>		✓						
European Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓	H		H			
Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>		✓		✓	H	✓	✓	

Other vertebrates

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Wolf	<i>Canis Lupus</i>		6	4			6		
Wild Cat	<i>Felis silvestris</i>							1	
Eurasian Lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>				1				
European Bison	<i>Bison bonasus</i>				✓	31	1	35	
Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>						4		
Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus capreolus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
European Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Pine Marten	<i>Martes martes</i>			2	1	1			
Beech Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	✓	✓					✓	
European Polecat	<i>Mustela putorius</i>					1			
Eastern Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus roumanicus</i>	✓							✓
Eurasian Otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>			2					
Badger	<i>Meles meles</i>	✓		✓		✓			
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>					✓			

Common name	Scientific name	April 2023							
		18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Wood Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>						✓	✓	
Reptiles & Amphibians									
Common European Adder	<i>Vipera berus</i>				✓	✓		✓	
Common Lizard	<i>Zootoca vivipara</i>		✓		✓		✓	✓	
Fire Salamander	<i>Salamandra salamandra</i>		✓						
Yellow-bellied toad	<i>Bombina variegata</i>						✓		
Common Frog	<i>Rana temporaria</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Common Toad	<i>Bufo bufo</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Butterflies recorded

Common Brimstone	<i>Gonepteryx rhamni</i>
Camberwell Beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>
Peacock Butterfly	<i>Aglais io</i>
Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>
Small Tortoiseshell	<i>Aglais urticae</i>