



ESTONIA MAMMALS & BIRDS TOUR REPORT – 30TH APRIL – 8TH MAY 2011

By tour leader Richard Webb

Leaders – Richard Webb and Tarvo Valker plus additional local guides.

NB: The 2014 WildWings Tour itinerary includes some different sites to this report, but does include a number that we will re-visit.

Introduction

After the success of previous mammal trips to Brazil and Chile 2011 saw the first Wildwings' mammal tour closer to home with our inaugural tour to the increasingly popular destination of Estonia.

Estonia is one of the easiest countries in which to see large mammals in Europe but notwithstanding, mammal-watching in temperate forests is always a challenge. However the trip provided a great success, if somewhat tiring at times, with 13 species of mammal being seen by everyone on the group, another, Red Squirrel by four of the group and two others seen by single observers.

The highlights were undoubtedly the five-minute view of a Eurasian Lynx, the female Brown Bear with three cubs and the fantastic Raccoon Dogs although close range views of an American Mink (if only it had been a European Mink) were also greatly appreciated. Birding was harder than expected in part due to the late spring but highlights included 10 species of raptor including Lesser Spotted and White-tailed Eagles and a Peregrine killing a Ruff, lekking Black Grouse, great views of several Capercaillies, some close Wrynecks and a nice northern Long-tailed Tit.

30th April

A very early start saw us arriving at Stansted at a ridiculously early time of the morning not helped in my case by the closure of the M11 to the north of the airport due to an accident. Nevertheless being one of the first flights of the day our Easyjet flight left on time and we arrived in Tallinn ahead of schedule.

We were met by our excellent Estonia guide Tarvo and headed off east seeing our first mammals, a dead hedgehog and a **Red Fox** for two of the group, and stopping after 90

minutes for our first Estonian meal in Viitna. The food was excellent and set the trend for the trip. Even I, who usually loses weight on trips, gained weight in Estonia!

After lunch we headed off into Lahemaa National Park where we walked the Oandu Forest Nature Trail finding plenty of mammal signs including scat of Pine Marten, Moose, Mountain Hare and Roe Deer. Being mid-afternoon the birding was fairly slow but we still managed a good number of forest birds including Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, our only Crested Tit of the trip, and the first of many Pied Flycatchers plus a Common Toad.

We also saw our first Cranes and evidence of the large passage of Greater White-fronted and Bean Geese that occurred throughout our stay in Estonia.

Having walked off lunch, we returned to the minibus and set out for the 90-minute drive to our guesthouse, no drives in Estonia are particularly long, stopping briefly at a roadside marsh where we saw our first Greenshank and a variety of wildfowl which included what appeared to be a sleeping group of Bewick Swans.

We eventually arrived at the guesthouse and settled into our rooms before another excellent meal. After the early start everyone was grateful for the early end to the day and retired for the night after dinner.

1st May

A late breakfast provided the opportunity for further recuperation although some of the group were up and about around the guesthouse well before breakfast.

After breakfast we joined forces with Uudo, a flying squirrel researcher, and visited a local forest where he showed us lots of evidence of flying squirrels, some trees having a lot of droppings around their base. We also found more Pine Marten and Moose scat and saw evidence of how prolific vole populations are in the area with lots of evidence of vole runs both in the forest itself and an adjacent meadow. We also found evidence of Weasels using the vole runs to hunt prey.

Birding was slow but we did see a Black Kite, a relatively unusual bird in Estonia, which particularly pleased Tarvo.

We returned to the guesthouse for lunch and then went back out with Uudo and visited another forest area where we found more evidence of flying squirrels and some of the group saw **Roe Deer** and **Mountain Hare**. We also found the first bear tracks of the trip before returning to the guesthouse for dinner.

After dinner we set out again seeing two **Red Foxes** and a nice male Capercaillie roosting in a roadside tree before meeting up with Uudo at another of his research sites. After seeing a couple of trees occupied by flying squirrels the previous year we were taken to a nestbox known to hold two **Siberian Flying Squirrels** and waited patiently for the squirrels to emerge with roding Woodcock, drumming Snipe and a distant Ural Owl as a background. The squirrels unfortunately emerged later than hoped for and the light was very poor by the time the second emerged meaning that most of the group only saw them badly as they emerged from the box. However once they had climbed the tree Uudo and Richard spotlighted them to enable the group to get better views including a nice glide from one tree to another. We walked back to the van in darkness.

A short detour on the way back to the guesthouse produced calling Tengmalm's Owl but not the hoped for Raccoon Dogs but we finally returned to the guesthouse with two more **Red Foxes** on route, satisfied to have the first target mammal under the belt.

2nd May

After what seemed like no more than a catnap we were back out at 0500 for our first attempt to look for mammals in the nearby extensive forest reserves of Sirtsu and Muraka meeting up with a local tracking specialist Triin. It turned out to be well worth getting up early.

We had only driven a few hundred metres into the forest when we encountered our first **Moose** (Elk) in a roadside marsh. Moose can be a difficult species at this time of year so this was a bonus so early in the trip. We continued on seeing the first of about 20 Black Grouse including several males lekking on the track in front of us. We then stopped to enable Triin to show most of the group a Wild Boar wallow a couple of hundred metres from the track while Richard, Sheila and Paul kept an eye out for mammals on the tracks. We then stopped at a pool where Triin pointed out evidence of lynx a species that it turned out she had never actually seen before.

Keen to maximise the early hours driving the tracks looking for mammals rather than tracks I persuaded Triin to concentrate on driving the tracks rather than stopping to look for tracks and we continued to encounter Black Grouse before eventually stopping for an al fresco breakfast, mainly to give the group a coffee and sugar fix to keep everyone awake. Continuing our drive after breakfast we struck gold when Triin and Paul simultaneously spotting a **Eurasian Lynx** sitting 80-100 metres down a forest ride. The whole group were able to enjoy the lynx for nearly five minutes as it sat seemingly unconcerned at our presence, particularly when it started yawning. After a few minutes it got up giving everyone a nice profile before sloping off into the forest. I walked part of the way down the ride to try to squeak it out again but failed abysmally, c'est la vie.

Understandably the rest of the morning was somewhat of an anti-climax but we did have the first of several great views of female Capercaillies for the day

After lunch back at the guesthouse and the requisite rest we were back out in the forest during the afternoon finding lots more Capercaillies, a distant Black Woodpecker and some relatively fresh bear droppings before heading off into the bear hide in the early evening. We quickly consumed the picnic dinner and settled down to wait for bears, Ravens and Hooded Crows being the main distraction for most of the evening. Fortunately eventually just as we thought our luck was out a female **Brown Bear** appeared with three well-grown cubs and walked across in front of the hide albeit c.50 metres away and in fading light.

We spent the rest of the night asleep in the bunks, some of the group more successfully than others, and while some of the group rose at first light in the hope of more mammal activity it proved fruitless and we eventually left the hide to return to the guesthouse for breakfast.

Although the views of the bears were perhaps not as good as we would have liked everyone left satisfied with only Les wanting to return the following night and he soon decided to go spotlighting instead.

3rd May

A relatively quiet day after the excitement of the day before and given the fact that some of the group had not slept as well as others in the bear hide the remainder of the morning was free to bird around the guesthouse or catch up on sleep before a late lunch.

After lunch we were back out in another area of forest for the afternoon and a distant feral cat on the track caused some excitement before it was correctly identified. More depressing was a beautiful Raccoon Dog dead on the side of the track with no obvious cause of death.

Mammals were non-existent as you tend to expect at this time of day but the birding was good with nice views of a few recently arrived summer migrants including Wryneck, Tree Pipit and Redstart. A stop to look at a Hen Harrier also produced two Lesser Spotted Eagles. We also had a slightly bizarre encounter with a local man collecting sand in the forest. Those in the front of the van had brief views of a roadside **Wild Boar** as we drove back to the guesthouse.

After another excellent dinner back at the guesthouse we were back out for a long session driving the tracks looking for mammals although a Short-eared Owl hunting roadside fields delayed us on route to the forest. As is often the case in temperate forests the spotlighting was hard work and not particularly rewarding although most of the group did have close albeit brief views of a **Raccoon Dog** in front of the van before it quickly disappeared and Richard, Sheila and Tarvo saw another briefly towards the end of the session although it was not much more than eyeshine. The only other mammal seen was an equally skittish **Red Fox**. I suspect that hunting in the forests makes things wary.

We returned to the guesthouse, said goodbye to Triin and gave everyone another lie in before breakfast knowing we would have a long night the following day.

4th May

After a late breakfast we left the guesthouse for the final time and made the short drive north to Rakvere, checking into the excellent Art Hotel, our base for the next two nights.

The group then took the opportunity for a wander around town, either to stock up on chocolate and other provisions at the supermarket, or to wander around the castle where some of the group saw Black Redstart and Brambling.

We then met back at the hotel before lunch at the adjacent Art Café.

The afternoon saw us out this time with a other local guide Bert, who suggested an afternoon birding on the coast, before heading into the forest for a spotlighting session. The group preferred to look for mammals in the forest so we set off for Ohepalu via a diversion caused by an unexpected road closure.

Once again as expected the forest was fairly quiet given the time of day and the highlights were our only Great Grey Shrike of the trip, another five Black Grouse along with our first Goosander and Common Sandpiper, 24 Cranes and lots of evidence of Raccoon Dogs. We also found relatively fresh Wolf tracks shortly before arriving at the guesthouse where we were dining for the night.

The lack of mammals resulted in some of the group starting to hallucinate with a discarded glove being misidentified as bear scat and a stump being identified as a bear itself, no names mentioned.

After dinner we were back out on the tracks spotlighting for mammals but after a couple of hours with only one **Mountain Hare** we were becoming a touch jaded. A freshly dead Badger with no obvious signs of cause of death was interesting given it had not been there when we had passed two hours earlier but hardly made for a good night's spotlighting.

We left the forest shortly after midnight and suddenly everything changed with the first two of three **European (Brown Hares)**, a couple of **Red Foxes**, and at least seven **Raccoon Dogs** being seen over the next hour, with a couple of the Raccoon Dogs giving good views as they turned to look at us. Why bother spotlighting the forest when everything's out in the fields after midnight I asked myself.

We returned to Rakvere, a dead Beaver on the main road being a surprising sighting, although a **Red Fox** which had already found it clearly found the taste of Beaver to its liking.

We eventually stumbled into our beds at 0230 (but not before Marilyn spotted a **Brown Rat** as we came into Rakvere) and scrapped any plans for an early morning session a couple of hours later.

5th May

After a well-deserved lie in and given the experience of the previous afternoon we opted to head out for a spot of coastal birding in Lahemaa National Park and this proved a good move. The only mammal seen was a **Red Fox** on route but the birding was excellent with good numbers of seaduck, geese etc being seen.

Highlights included a juvenile White-tailed Eagle, Black-throated Diver, Red-necked Grebe, large numbers Greater White-fronted and Bean Goose along with smaller numbers of Barnacle Goose, Whooper Swan, Smew, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, Eider and good numbers of attractive Long-tailed Ducks in both winter and breeding plumage not to mention good numbers of Velvet Scoter. All in all it made for a pleasant break from the forests.

We returned for Rakvere for a late lunch and further free time before heading out again in the early evening heading south from Rakvere to a farm where the farmer puts out food for **Wild Boar**. We quickly scored a lone animal disappearing as we arrived. After a short wait another boar appeared and gave us prolonged views followed shortly afterwards by a nice **Red Fox**.

The lone boar disappeared and after another 30 minutes wait was replaced by a sounder of 16 boar including what were presumably young from last year. These also gave prolonged views before surprisingly appearing to be spooked by a flock of geese flying over.

Well satisfied we left the farm, and stopped for a picnic dinner before heading out for another spotlighting session in nearby fields seeing a live **Badger, European Hare** and **Roe Deer** for our efforts. We arrived back to the hotel shortly after 0100.

6th May

After another lie-in and a late breakfast we left the hotel and headed south to Tartu stopping at Endla on route.

At Endla we walked along the boardwalk to the observation tower and saw a few nice birds including White-tailed Eagle, Marsh Harrier, Smew, Whooper Swan and Tree Pipit and some of the group saw Common Lizard and an as yet unidentified green frog.

We continued south eventually arriving at our next hotel, the Trofee Guesthouse set in a beautiful riverine setting. Unfortunately the setting of the guesthouse was not matched by the internal furnishings with the numerous hunting trophies (both European and African mammals) adorning the walls to the dislike of the group and the leaders. We will be staying elsewhere next year which is a shame as it is a nice locality.

After a delayed lunch we headed out for an afternoon birding at Aardla marshes near Tartu. The birding from the road was excellent with highlights including drake Garganey, Wood Sandpiper and good numbers of Little Gulls with a few Black Terns flown in for good measure. A walk down to the observation tower produced the first Osprey of the trip, a couple of Barnacle Geese and brief views of two male Citrine Wagtails. Mammal interest was limited to a skittish **Roe Deer**.

Leaving Aardla we headed off for an evening at the Great Snipe lek at Karevere however despite spending three hours on site we drew a blank with no sight or sound of the snipe. The pools did however include a wealth of waders including lots of Ruff in breeding plumage, Spotted Redshank, Greenshank, Wood Sandpiper and the first Little Ringed Plovers of the trip. Large numbers of Little Gull also passed over during the evening.

After an hour or so the wader flock suddenly took to the air and a Peregrine stooped into the flock to take an unfortunate Ruff which it then proceeded to eat on the edge of the floods providing great views. Nearby four **Roe Deer** provided some mammal interest. Unfortunately some interesting eye-shine on route back to the guesthouse could not be identified to species.

7th May

An early 0430 start this morning saw us driving south to meet up with the local beaver expert, Remek, at a site south of Tartu but not before a stop for a sounder of 13 **Wild Boar** in a roadside field.

Meeting Remek we tried three beaver sites drawing a blank at the first and last of these but at the second one or two of the group obtained brief views of a **European Beaver** near its lodge. Unfortunately it quickly realised we were there and only gave the briefest of views to one or two people.

Leaving Remek we headed back to the Trofee Guesthouse for breakfast via a brief stop at a Ural Owl nest. Unfortunately the adult owl was barely visible on the nest.

Arriving back at the guesthouse we settled down for a well-deserved breakfast only for it to be disturbed by Paul spotting an **American Mink** swimming across the river. After a couple of minutes the mink disappeared into a small creek and I decided to see if I could re-find it. It proved to be a good move, the mink was swimming around in the creek and fortunately was struggling to get back to the main river. Each time it entered a pipe linking the creek to the main river the current swept it backwards. It eventually gave everyone good views both in the creek and on the bank before heading back and swimming back across the main river.

The rest of the morning was free time and some of the group caught up on their sleep while others went birding near the guesthouse, Paul encountering another **Moose** during a walk near the guesthouse.

The late afternoon was spent birding at Ilmatsalu Fishponds near Tartu. The water levels were extremely high and the main trail proved to be flooded beyond the observation tower but a

short visit still produced Red-necked Grebe, a nice drake Smew, Marsh Harrier and the only Hobby of the trip.

After growing bored of staring at mammal heads over meals at the Trofee I decided to head into Tartu for dinner and everyone had a great meal at the excellent La Dolce Vita in Tartu before heading back out to Karevere to meet up with Remek for look for beavers again.

This time we were more successful and a 90-minute boat trip produced good views of two **European Beavers**, a large relatively rare black morph, and a smaller more common brown morph. Far more satisfying than the morning's sightings. We also had our only Great Egrets of the trip and more Little Gulls and Black Terns. Well pleased we headed back to terra firma and returned to the Great Snipe lek only to find another **European Beaver** in a creek along the track. Yet again there was no sight or sound of Great Snipe.

With the group divided on whether they wanted to go spotlighting again we decided to have a short spotlighting drive in Alam-Pedja and were rewarded with **Mountain Hare**, a **Moose**, a Ural Owl flying across the track and an unfortunately brief, and distant, **Raccoon Dog** before returning to the guesthouse.

8th May

Most of the group decided to have a lie in this morning but being the final morning I rose early and was rewarded with a **Raccoon Dog** across the river from the guesthouse about 45 minutes after first light.

After breakfast most of the group paid a relatively unrewarding visit to another area of Alam-Pedja, an Osprey, a distant Black Woodpecker and calling White-backed Woodpecker and Wood Warbler being the highlights. However the a stop in the town park in Puurmani on route back to the guesthouse was more rewarding with nice views of Middle-spotted Woodpecker and brief views of a nice Hawfinch even if the hoped for Red Squirrels alluded us.

We finally left for the drive back to Tallinn early afternoon and the journey back produced two **Red Foxes**, a **Roe Deer** and unfortunately only for Tarvo, the driver, a **Pine Marten** which sprinted across the road.

We arrived back in Tallinn early afternoon and while some of the group went off for a tour of the old city Sheila, Paul, Tarvo and I headed of for a nearby park where we immediately had great views of at least three **Red Squirrels**, very grizzled animals looking very different from their British counterparts. A fitting end to the trip.

We returned to meet up with the rest of the group for a final meal in Tallinn before saying goodbye to Tarvo at the airport at the end of a successful first Wildwings' tour to Estonia.

Fortunately the Easyjet flight departed on time and we arrived back in Stansted ahead of schedule.

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