

Baltic Mammal Challenge, 2015

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In lands inhabited by elusive critters such as European Lynx, Brown Bear and Flying Squirrel, I decided to dedicate 2015 to an attempt on a 'Big Year' in the three Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), the target being to see somewhere near 50 species of mammals by the year's end, a total I thought would be almost impossible.

For any hope of getting anywhere even close to the 50 mark, considerable luck and effort would be required throughout the year, the four main groups that were going to cause headaches being: 1. The elusive big ones - Brown Bear, Wolf and European Lynx, all present in very low densities and generally very difficult to see. A bear hide exists in Estonia. 2. Highly localised ones - Flying Squirrel, Ringed Seal, European Mink etc. Needed stake outs or luck, only the seal played ball. 3. The small stuff - all the rodents and insectivores - basically needed live trapping, was very difficult to find most. 4. Bats - purchased for the challenge, a bat detector assisted! Very many of the stories that follow were of failures and animals missed, such is the nature of mammals. It should also be noted, as I was not competing with anyone, my rules were perhaps less pure than they should have been ...if I recorded the species by any means, on the list it went! The basic aim was to see everything, but I also noted the species if I managed to capture it on my night cam or, with an asterisk, if I found tracks.

THE BIG YEAR ...

Scroll down this page for a full account of the year, or alternatively click on any of the links below to zoom directly to specific months: - January (incl. Pine & Stone Martens, Otter)- February (incl European Bison, Grey & Ringed Seals)- March (incl Daubentons, Brant's and Pond Bats)- April (incl Polecat, Moose, Natterer's & Northern Bats)- May (incl trips to Estonia, plus Polecat, Hazel Dormouse & Forest Dormouse)- June (incl Brown Bear and Striped Field Mouse, plus a mammal trip out of the Baltics)- July (incl Fat Dormouse)- August (incl Common Pipistrelle, Beaver, Pine & Stone Martens) - September (including Brown Bear, Ringed Sea, plus first bats back in roost) - October (the BIG 50 is reached, Mouse in the House!) With 50 reached, I then slackened off, the months of November and December adding just a single new mammal - Common Shrew at Labanoras.

MONTH TO MONTH ACCOUNTS:

JANUARY 2015.

Starters & Otter. And so it was, 2015 began and ideas of this challenge evolved. I didn't really get started in the first week or so - two attempts on Mountain Hare and Wolf both produced zilch (though I did see tracks of Moose and Wolf) and one on European Lynx in the far north of Lithuania was likewise unsuccessful (bar a flock of 70 Snow Buntings, unusual in Lithuania, and a Rough-legged Buzzard).

So, as mid-month slipped by, with just Roe Deer and Red Fox on the list (from the snows of Labanoras), this idea of a Big Year seemed a little nuts!

Then however things took an upswing - not only Roe Deer at several localities and quite a few Red Foxes, but also a star bunch of creatures on my land at Labanoras - a small herd of Roe Deer at my grain feeder (scoffing 20 kg of grain a week!) and, coming to meat bait, Pine Marten, Stone Marten and Raccoon Dog, all good mammals indeed. The Raccoon Dogs should have been hibernating, but with relatively mild conditions (a few degrees below freezing) this pair had obviously decided a nap was not in order. Highlight of the month however, present from about the 10th through to February, was a splendid Otter. With all water frozen, how was the animal hunting? A simple answer, it was accessing the water through a disused Beaver lodge, burrowing through from above ice and presumably thereafter searching for hibernating frogs, etc, in the otherwise inaccessible water.

For the Otters et al, [CLICK HERE](#) for video highlights of the night-time activities in Labanoras in mid-January. On the trail of cats and dogs.

As January neared its end, fresh snow made for ideal tracking conditions. So, time for another attempt on Wolves, Mountain Hares et al. A bit of a bitter wind blowing too, but as I arrived on site, some immediate success with eight Black Grouse rising from an area of stunted birch and pine. A mere twenty minutes in, I happened across the tracks of Wolves, relatively fresh but almost certainly not of the day. Nevertheless, for want of better route, I decided to follow the tracks, a pack of three animals, one seemingly a large individual. Over hillocks and beyond, a couple of kilometres I went, then a much better discovery – crossing the path of the Wolves, very fresh tracks of European Lynx! Not common at this locality at all, this was a bit of a surprise ...and looking at the tracks, certainly not more than a few hours old at most, maybe even far less. A detour in route, I then followed the Lynx for a couple of kilometres more, the cat following small ridges through the mosaic of open ground and forest belts. It is certainly a feeling of excitement to be in the midst of such animals, always the possibility that the next snow-covered ridge might be adorned with such a fabulous animal. But no, plenty of places where it stopped and sniffed, one place it had sat a while too, but on and on it went. Regrettably I was relatively short of time, so eventually gave up the pursuit, meandering back to my start point. Tracks of Mountain Hare beneath pines, a lone Moose cutting through, then refound the Wolf tracks and followed them a little more ...another kilometre and I found what must have been a temporary halting place, Wolf prints absolutely everywhere, scats too, plus several spots where they had been digging scrapes in the snow and soil.

So, still no sighting of Mountain Hare or Wolf, but a good day indeed...

All by tracks except the last on the list: Wolf (3), Red Fox (several), European Lynx (1), Mountain Hare (2), Moose (1), Roe Deer (several). So January ended:

The list so far... 1. Wolf (tracks only) 2. Red Fox
3. European Lynx (tracks only)
4. Otter
5. Pine Marten
6. Stone Marten
7. Raccoon Dog
8. Mountain Hare (tracks only)
9. Roe Deer
10. Moose (tracks only)

Hmm, I need to move up a gear for February! FEBRUARY 2015.

Month two of the challenge, European Bison appear on the list, so too odds and ends such as Red Squirrel, European Beaver, Brown Hare and Wild Boar. Top additions however, both courtesy of a trip to Estonia, the duo Grey Seal and Ringed Seal.

In the Lands of the Bison. 1st February, a little before dawn, a favoured forest some way north of the capital. Quite a cold wind blowing and fresh snow settling in the hour of two prior to dawn. Hot on the heels of action with Wolf tracks the previous week, so I stumbled across another set this morning ...three animals moving together, tracks exceptionally fresh, surely a maximum of an hour in front, maybe even just minutes. Through forest rich in prey, the three were covering quite some distance, but sticking to the easier-going forest tracks ...on which I could follow by car. High chance of an encounter I thought, following them for about 4 km before they decided to turn into a dense swampy area of growth! Not the day of the Wolf for me!

Also tracks of numerous Roe Deer and one Moose, one Red Deer crossed. Eventually ran out of forest and moved on for my main quarry of the day, European Bison! With the small population basically sticking to the Kedainiai to Panevezys area, winter is by far the best season to see them, the herds leaving the forest to gather on windswept agricultural areas adjacent, not entirely to the delight of the farmers! Well, thanks to the presence of a Calandra Lark the previous day (a first for the country), I was alerted to a herd located towards the northern extreme of their usual range. Got to the general area about 10 a.m., after after several Red Foxes and numerous Roe Deer on route and a little stop in at the Calandra Lark.

Quite a vast area, but it took all of minutes to spot a big bunch of big black blobs in the distance, a few smaller scattered black dots (Roe Deer) a little closer. Well the bigger blobs had to be them, and a quick scan revealed it was ...29 European Bison huddling as wafts of snow billowed up in the breezy conditions. Flat open fields carpeted in snow do not make for much in the way of opportunity to quietly sneak in closer, but after a while, the Bison began a slow plod down towards a stream, a small woodland providing cover for me to wait to watch rather closer, Worked a treat, one Brown Hare darting off as I approached, the whole Bison herd arriving a little later. I can't boast my fieldcraft was that good though, they soon spotted me and bolted back up the slope. Ooops!

Still, three new species for the year...

11. Brown Hare
12. Red Deer
13. European Bison Wolves Again, Beavers et al. Another few hours plodding the kilometres on the 5th February, once

again on the trail of Wolves - revisiting the area where I found both Wolf and Lynx tracks a week earlier, it was a little disappointing to see far less activity on this day: a fresh dusting of snow sometime prior to dawn obviously hid much, but I still the only finding was the trail of a single Wolf. Several Crested Tits and a half dozen Black Grouse added a dash of life to the skeletal landscape, but not a single actual mammal was seen. Tracks totalled one Wolf, several Roe Deer, one unidentified mouse and a single Moose.

Two days later, the tally rose by two - both at Labanoras, a Red Squirrel was active around my feeding station and, rather unseasonal, a European Beaver made its first appearance of the year above the ice. I didn't see the actual animal ...but unmistakable signs - a circular chewed hole in the ice, a padded down trail in last night's snow and, at the nearest hazel grove, one decapitated stump, a suspicious pile of chewed left-overs and dangling in mid-air a second hazel hanging where it had got caught in overhead branches.

14. Red Squirrel

15. European Beaver Voyage to Estonia Jaunt. 14-15 February, John Dixon hits the Baltics. Arriving in Vilnius at 10.30 p.m., we immediately headed for the forests and by midnight the adventures were already well underway - stopping in one area, vague hopes of a big predator predictably came to zilch, but a stunning roadside Ural Owl was ample compensation! Then followed a near six-hour overnight drive to Virtsu, a small port with ferries to the island of Saaremaa. Added Raccoon Dog on the drive up and one encounter with traffic police in middle Latvia!

On the islands, my key targets were Grey Seal and Ringed Seal, while the Steller's Eiders were naturally enough quite high on John's list of priorities. I am not sure that either of the seals are very easy without a boat to get out to their favoured offshore rocky islets, but my strategy plan was to scan the sea near Vilsandi Island for Grey Seal (they have a colony on the west of that island) and then, next day, hope for Ringed Seal from the ferry between mainland and the island of Hiiumaa. First up however, birds. The west of Saaremaa is truly an amazing experience, great rafts of Long-tailed Ducks cooing a treat, plus mixed flocks of Velvet and Common Scoters by the hundred and no shortage of Scaup, Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, etc, etc. So, with this bird fest ahead, and White-tailed Eagles already seen, our first stop on Saaremaa was at the small harbour of Veere. Rafts of Long-tailed Ducks and Scaups straddled the bay, but what I had not been expecting was a big head bobbing out of the water right inside the harbour itself - Grey Seal! Oh, that was easier than I had imagined - the Vilsandi colony is well beyond even optimistic scoping possibilities, so I had expected some problems with this one! And then there was another, and another! With two fishing boats at dock, it turned out that the Grey Seals were scrounging for fish scraps being dropped overboard, a grand total of six in the end! Next to Undva, key headland for Steller's Eider. Many birds present, a Black-throated Diver offshore, rafts of seaducks, but scanning left and right, no obvious Steller's Eiders! No worries, it was only a question of time, then three female Steller's Eiders came flying by, John breathed a sigh of relief. Spotting a number of birds in a bay some way to the left, we relocated and promptly found another small flock of Steller's Eiders, five this time and all females again, nicely in the company of several Common Eiders. So where was the big flock of Steller's? A bit of squinting into the distance and the answer emerged - far to the south, beyond a raft of Tufted Duck and Scaup, a dense flock of brown, white and orange blobs bobbed near the surf. Another relocation and soon we were watching them at rather better range - about 160 Steller's Eiders in all their glory, a good proportion males. Back to the mammals, an afternoon on Saaremaa had to be enough to find a Mountain Hare I supposed ...but baloney, not a whiff of one! Eventually, at about 3 p.m., we decided to head back to the mainland ...only a half hour or so on the ferry and John was initially opting for a lazy recline in the car for the duration. 'Na, I'm heading on deck, always a possibility of something out there', said I. And so we both went. A drake Smew at the port, assorted Long-tailed Ducks on route, then about two-thirds of the way across, the small squat head of a seal appeared in front of the ferry ... bobbing like a bottle, one Ringed Seal! Nice, it is rare indeed that you can see two seals in a single day in the Baltic States! Back on the mainland, the nearby Matsula National Park is a fabulous area for European Lynx ...albeit still offering only a remote chance of actually finding one on any given visit! It is also the initial location for the slightly mystifying discovery of Golden Jackals in the Baltic States ...animals have subsequently appeared in a couple of other Estonian locations, but have left no clue as to how they actually arrived at this spot. Anyhow with, the prime dusk hours available, off we went to tour. Lots of kilometres through excellent habitat followed ... several Roe Deer, one Red Fox. Quite a few domestic cats, no European Lynx, surprise surprise no Golden Jackal.

16. Grey Seal

17. Ringed Seal Day two of Estonia started with dawn explorations, ever hopeful for a European Lynx strutting itself across the frosted landscapes, a cool minus 7 C. Roe Deer and Red Squirrel were the only rewards however. And then, after deciding against a trip across to Vormsi Island for the two Hawk Owls wintering there, we began the long journey back to Lithuania. A detour to Soomaa National Park still failed to produce Mountain Hare, but a male Hazel Grouse at about two metres distant was nice, the last highlight before we left Estonia. Adventures would continue the next day in Lithuania! Boars Back, Lithuania. 16 February. A crisp minus 12 C, it was a good day on my Labanoras land - Grey-headed Woodpeckers, White-backed Woodpeckers et al on the feeders, an impressive seven species of tit also present (Great, Blue, Coal, Marsh, Willow, Long-tailed and Crested Tits) and a pair of Hazel Grouse too. This little haul was all the more impressive for the fact that I only recorded Crested Tit on my land for the first in December, and Hazel Grouse is none too common either.

Only mammals actually seen were a Red Fox on the land and a Red Squirrel nearby, but abundant tracks in the snow included many more species - as well as Red Fox and Roe Deer, an intriguing set that could have been a Wolf, and

rather more definite trails of critters such as Pine Marten, Red Squirrel, Otter and, the first this year, Wild Boar.

Wild Boars in Lithuania have been culled rather brutally over the last months due to a disease found in some animals - the powers that be have deemed the population needs to be reduced by some humungous percentage. So, from a healthy number that frequently used my land a year ago, the species is now rare. I had not seen sign of one for some months until this weekend ...but happily, the amount of turf rooted up suggests several animals were present, good luck to them.

18. Wild Boar (tracks and signs only) Subterrain, Bat Cave!

21 February ...a gash in the landscape, a gaping dark hole disappearing into the hillside, the entrance blocked by a three-metre wall and rough bank. Inside, so a non-wildlife colleague had told me, could be a few animals of interest. So, torch in hand, over the obstacles I clambered, dropping through a small gap into a vast dark interior … cold and snowy outside, cool and damp inside. Edging forward quietly, the critters I was seeking would be hanging from the roof of the cavern, and soon the first were found, little groups of Daubenton's Bats, fast asleep, some covered in a coating of dew. Odd ones here, a couple here, others huddled into small jagged cavities dotted across the roof. A shade smaller, and rather less abundant, Brant's Bats also hung from the roofs, mostly solitary, but a group of five in one place. Perhaps four hundred metres into the cavern, I thought I had reached the end, the couple of hundred bats that I had seen all belonging to the two species. It was not however the end … on hands and knees, a quick squeeze through a small hole and I was in a small chamber separated from the main cavity. And in here, a treat indeed, in great clusters on the ceiling, gatherings of Pond Bats densely packed. A few hundred in all, this was a fine finale to my subterranean sortie. With that, to minimise my time in the roost, I retreated and returned to the light of day … not just three new species for the year, but the first time I have ever seen any of these three species! Earlier the same day, I had also located the fresh tracks of Badger on my land ...

19. Badger (tracks only)

20. Brant's Bat

21. Daubenton's Bat

22. Pond Bat

MARCH 2015.

A bit of a duff month from the mammal challenge angle, not least due to the fact that I was in Japan for half the period (itself producing a selection of mammals including Sea Otter, Pilot Whale and Sika Deer) and the weather was far from amazing for much of the rest. Of the highlights whilst in Lithuania, a return to bat haunts allowed more views of Daubenton's, Pond and Brant's Bats. Rather less successful, several trips into the forests south of Vilnius yet again predictably failed to result in sighting of Wolf or Lynx, or Mountain Hare for that matter. Also not very successful, a number of sessions trying to catch small mammals resulted only in several Bank Voles and Yellow-necked Mice. That said, I did not actually do that much trapping as rather wet conditions prevailed, hardly conducive to trapping.

During the month, the only additions to the year list were American Mink and Stoat on the Moletai road and, by way of signs only (numerous fresh diggings), European Mole. Other species seen did include Red Fox and Roe Deer, while tracks of Wolf, Badger and Moose were also noted, along with a lot of tree-felling activity by Beavers. 23. European Mole (signs only) 24. American Mink 25. Stoat 26. Bank Vole 27. Yellow-necked Mouse

APRIL 2015 Start of spring, hesitant temperatures clambering up to the high teens by middle month, Polecat, Moose and assorted bats to celebrate, including Daubenton's, Natterer's & Northern Bats. 1-10 April. Rolling Again. After a bit of a stagnation in March, an upswing with the new month - all on the 4th, basements in Vilnius city adding four Brant's Bats and one Daubenton's Bat and forests north of the city contributing one Red Fox, two Brown Hares, a couple of Roe Deers and a herd of four Red Deers. Not bad for an afternoon trundle around! Better however, a week later, a Polecat scurried across the road on my way home late at night on the 10th, then I live trapped a Common Vole on my land on the 11th ...both new species for the year, and the vole also a new species for my Labanoras plot (the 24th species of mammal). Also at Labanoras, one large Moose stalking through hazel groves, a Red Fox in the meadows and a Pine Marten coming to bait at night. Unfortunately too, with spring gathering pace, so too a rise in roadkills - three Eastern Hedgehogs recorded between the 9th and 11th, along with one Brown Hare and one American Mink. Additions to the year list... 28. Polecat 29. Common Vole 12 April. Bat Des Res, Gruesome History. Heavy indeed is the historical backdrop to the latest additions to the Baltic Mammal Challenge. Constructed as western defenses to the Russian Empire in the 1880s, a series of forts and underground bunkers dot the landscape on the outskirts of Lithuania's second city, Kaunas. Today, rather ramshackle and overgrown, wildlife is taking over – frogs calling in flooded caverns, assorted birds in encroaching scrub and, most importantly, quite a mass of bats using the site as winter roost. Not so nice its history

though. Under assault by German forces in World War One, a ten-day period in 1915 saw 20,000 persons die at these forts in failed attempts to halt the eastward march of the German army. This though was mere child's play in comparison to the brutalities that would follow in World War Two – under Nazi occupation and aided by Lithuanian collaborators, the forts became the killing grounds of the Holocaust. At the Fourth Fort, today I found my first ever Northern Bat, a rare species in the winter roosts. At this very same spot on 18th August 1941, over 1,800 Jews were shot on the single day in the so-called 'Intellectuals Action'. On 28th October, over 9,000 were taken to the nearby Ninth Fort and executed, the 'Great Action'. More than 5,000 deportees from elsewhere in Central Europe would follow them, along with most of the remaining Jewish population of Kaunas. In the years since Lithuania regained Independence, the Ninth Fort has been converted into a museum dedicated to the Holocaust, but the other forts remain quiet echos of the former selves, slowly overgrowing, but still sporting extensive mazes of underground vaults and bunkers. Cue the bats, the forts today form the most important hibernation site for them in Lithuania! Knowing very little about the forts, not even whether it was possible to actually explore them, today was a revelation. Entering a couple of dozen or so vaults across several localities, several were flooded, some were empty, but others were not – slowly edging down into dark depths, stumbling over rock falls, splashing through pools on occasion, there I found bats – no large gatherings, but singles here and there, pairs and little groups also. Wandering from chamber to chamber, I soon lost count of the numbers, but Daubenton's Bats certainly dominated, perhaps 40 or 50 seen during my few hours underground. Brant's Bats also common, a couple of dozen of these seen. From my perspective though, the honours went to two other species, both lifers for me – a tad larger than the Daubenton's, pinker in the face and with long tragus and moderately long ears, the first was Natterer's Bats, about fifteen seen in all. The second new species was a single Northern Bat, not one that I had been expecting – rare in the winter roosts, and not common in Lithuania as a whole, this was a bonus. I had hoped to find Barbastelle as well, but much as I searched, not a single did I see. This however I can hopefully find during the summer with a detector. So, as I left the site, a mere slither of the sites explored, my year total had jumped by two. I wandered back towards my car, the sites basked under the relative warmth of early spring sunshine. It was hard to imagine their gory past.

30. Natterer's Bat 31. Northern Bat 15-20 April. Is it Spring?! Temperatures crashed back towards zero, flurries of sleet and snow on and off, few mammals spotted - one Polecat dead on the road, so too a couple more Eastern Hedgehogs. A few nice birds however - an impressive flock of 23 Black-throated Divers and one Red-throated Diver flying over my Labanoras plot on the 15th, then two days later the most image of four Black Storks cruising over Vilnius city in a snowstorm to the backdrop of Gedimino Castle, nice. 22-26 April. Spotlights and bat detectors. New equipment ...a cracking spotlight from Australia and a Magneta bat detector. Time to try them out! First up, the spotlight. Simply phenomenal, a 600-metre beam does a fantastic job of turning night to day! Taking a midnight amble up to Labanoras on the 22nd for its test run, the tally of critters picked up included two Red Foxes, two Brown Hares, several Roe Deers and one Eastern Hedgehog ...not bad for a maiden run, especially given the latter was my first sighting of a live individual for the year. Three Wild Boar the following night near my Vilnius garden were likewise welcome, as was Mountain Hare in Rudnikai Forest some nights later Also found an unexpected group of Fallow Deer, but they were in an enclosure!

As for the bat detector, Lithuania 2015 will not be remembered for its wonderfully warm spring! Will cold weather prevailing for much of the month, only on the 24th did temperatures rise enough for any real hope of any bats emerging from their hibernation sites. So there I was, fiddling around with the dials on my new bat detector as darkness fell, pointing in all ways hoping a few bats might lurk. Silence. Gave it about half an hour and then decided it was still too cold ...but as I walked back, the detector spluttered into life ...slightly metallic chip-chop chip-chop calls sounding out, peaking at somewhere just below 30 kHz. Overhead, flying through a woodland clearing, one Noctule Bat, a pleasing start to my bat detecting experience! Just as this disappeared, so the detector then started up again ...a quiet ticking at a little above 30 kHz. Buzzed around a couple of times, long enough to get recordings ...Brown Long-eared Bat! Also found one Daubenton's Bat on a wall. Also in these days, a couple of daytime Red Foxes, a nice Pine Marten strolling through the sunshine at Labanoras and a Badger road casualty. 32. Eastern Hedgehog 33. Noctule Bat 34. Brown Long-eared Bat 30 April. Final Addition of the Month.

One possible Wood Mouse at Labanoras, but couldn't confidently exclude the far more common Yellow-necked Mouse ...but a chunky Water Vole was rather easier for the identification - a new species for my Labanoras plot and species number 33 for the year! 35. Water Vole MAY 2015 Fifteen species of mammal in the first ten days of the month, including Polecat in Latvia, Hazel Dormouse and Barbastelle Bat in Lithuania and tracks of Brown Bear in Estonia, then later in the month a splendid ten species in a single day on my land in Labanoras, including Moose and Soprano Pipistrelle, before a super day with Forest Dormice in middle Lithuania. 1-2 May. Baltic Dash. Two days, three countries, 12 species of mammal …a cracking start to May! Departing at 1.00 a.m. on the 1st, darkness hours saw Lithuania and the southern half of Latvia slip by in a blur, a single Red Fox and a Brown Hare the only mammals seen. As dawn broke, meandering up through middle Latvia, a European Polecat made a mad suicidal dash across the road, prompt braking on my part the only thing saving it from an early grave. A few kilometres further, a European Beaver was less lucky – injured by the roadside, the critter had obviously had a very recent encounter with a car. I have doubts that it would survive. Onward, over the border into Estonia, flocks of Taiga and Tundra Bean Geese appearing by the roadside, one Montagu's Harrier drifting by. My destination for this mini trip was the far north-east of Estonia, or to be more exact, the extensive forests of Alutaguse. Within the depths of endless pines, bogs and mires, some of the most exciting of all European mammals lurk – healthy populations of European Lynx and Wolf, rare and elusive Siberian Flying Squirrels, Brown Bears at a density greater than almost anywhere else in Europe. To chance upon any however requires considerable luck! A roadside Capercallie served as greeting to Augutese, so too a Goshawk, another

Montagu's Harrier and numerous Cranes. Initial meanders through the forest and associated meadow clearings added the first Estonian mammals of the trip – several Roe Deers and a couple of Brown Hares. Plenty of tracks of Moose, also Red Fox, Wild Boar and Roe Deers. After checking into a local hotel, one singing Wryneck in the garden, I then set off for long meanders through the forest – not particularly productive for mammals, but a splendid collection of grouses – no less than eight more Capercaillies encountered, along with 12 Black Grouse (several at a late afternoon lek) and one Hazel Grouse. Also numerous Green Sandpipers in boggy ditches, a couple of Grey-headed Woodpeckers, a surprise male Pallid Harrier hunting across an agricultural field and a bevy of smart Ruff engaging in courtship. Mammals however were limited to more Roe Deers and a single additional Brown Hare. Also managed very successfully to put the car into a ditch – many thanks to the Estonian ladies who stopped and arranged for a vehicle to come and pull me out!

As dusk finally approached, with Woodcocks roding and Common Snipes drumming, hopes of critters rose considerably. Unfortunately, the much desired Brown Bear ambling out onto a trackside verge did not materialise, nor for that matter a Lynx or Wolf. I did however find fresh tracks of Brown Bear. More Roe Deers seen, one Beaver watched with a spotlight as it fed on a bank, then plopped into the water and swam upchannel. Approaching midnight, almost 24 hours on the road, I returned to my hotel, two Western Hedgehogs rounding off the day's action. At 5.00 a.m., a couple of hours later than I had planned, I departed the hotel again for another try in the forest. With the weather decidedly cool and the day turning to drizzle, not a lot was seen – a couple of Roe Deers only, plus seven more Capercaillies and four more Black Grouses. Also, one Lesser Spotted Eagle. I checked my small mammal traps – releasing two Bank Voles – then cut my plans to stay another night and headed south. One Mountain Hare seen in the heart of Alutaguse, two Red Foxes added in middle Estonia. By nightfall, I was back in northern Lithuania and decided to detour to do a couple of hours of spotlighting in woodland areas and forest edge – an excellent crop of species seen, one Pine Marten, two Red Foxes, eight Brown Hares, three Roe Deers and two Wild Boars heading the cast, one Long-eared Owl too.

Back home just after midnight, a little under 48 hours on the road, the tally of species recorded as following:

- Western Hedgehog – three Estonia
- Red Fox – one Latvia, two Estonia, two Lithuania
- Brown Bear – tracks Estonia
- Polecat – one Latvia
- Pine Marten – one Lithuania
- Wild Boar – two Lithuania, tracks Estonia
- Roe Deer – 15+ Estonia, three Lithuania
- Moose – tracks Estonia
- Brown Hare – one Latvia, four Estonia, eight Lithuania
- Mountain Hare – one Estonia
- European Beaver – one Latvia, one Estonia
- Bank Vole – two Estonia

Year tally rises by two:36. Western Hedgehog37. Brown Bear (tracks only) 7 May. Lithuanian Dormice, Part One. Three species of dormice reside in Lithuania - Hazel Dormouse, Forest Dormouse and Fat Dormouse. Of the three, only Hazel Dormouse is fairly widespread, with the other two rare and very localised. In the forests of south-central Lithuania, one of the country's leading mammal researchers has been conducting studies into Hazel Dormice for over 30 years, the result being one of the best studied populations of this unique animal anywhere in Europe. And on this day, I had the honour of accompanying him onto the field, a morning of checking the numerous nestboxes erected for the species. Cranes bugling, Pied Flycatchers in song, so I arrived at the appointed location. Over the next four hours, a total of about 60 nestboxes were checked (a tiny proportion of the total number of boxes in the area). Numerous pairs of Great Tits and Blue Tits nesting in boxes, several pairs of Pied Flycatchers building nests too, but the first hour seemed strangely devoid of dormice! All changed about 25 boxes in ...curled up in a box devoid of any nesting material, two Hazel Dormice in day torpor. Checked for ring numbers, weighed and returned to the box, they didn't even wake up! If memory serves me well, one was a female yearling, the second a two-year old male. Four more found over the next couple of hours, all single occupants of boxes, all within well-constructed nests, all fast asleep. Quite amazing these dormice - not only do they hibernate for half the year, but when they wake in spring they also go into this day torpor to conserve energy if the day temperatures are below 15 C. Hardly surprising that the Lithuanian name for them translates as 'sleeping mouse'! Plans are afoot for the other two Lithuanian dormice, but they hibernate even longer and even now, especially with Fat Dormouse, the animals may well still be in the winter hibernation sites! 38. Hazel Dormouse 8-10 May. Bats et al, eastern Lithuania. Warm days and evenings at last, migrant birds pouring in (Thrush Nightingales, Golden Orioles, Hobbies, etc), but better still for the mammal challenge, better odds of finding bats at night. Drew a blank at Dukštonos, failed to find any along the river in Vilnius, but stumbled upon a positive soup of bats congregating over and around a small wooded pool north-east of Verkiai ...an hour or so after dark, the bat detector started going crazy, clicks and smacking sounds at various frequencies. At least three species present, with both Daubenton's Bat and Barbastelle both identified and a third species rather less clear, perhaps Leisler's Bat. Using the detector to point, was also able to spotlight the bats, the Daubenton's Bats zooming around over the water, the Barbastelles zooming in along the edges. Meanwhile, up at Labanoras, Brown Hare seen in the meadows, Red Squirrel and Roe Deer in the forest. 39. Barbastelle Bat 10-23 May. Labanoras Big Ten ...and Two!The night of the 10th, Bitterns booming, a Savi's Warbler in song, Thrush Nightingales belting out their tunes, time came to spend a night on my land at Labanoras, forgoing the cabin to camp near the pools. But what a corker for mammals ...ten species on the single evening! Even prior to sunset, things were stirring ...a big Moose by my cabin, a Beaver in my pool, then yet another

Beaver in a drainage ditch! Not a bad start, but as dusk descended, Red Fox and Roe Deer also appeared in the meadows, then stars of the night, both Soprano Pipistrelle and Daubenton's Bats began hawking the waters in front of the cabin. Classic stuff, the first confirmed bat species for my land! And to round the action off, after dark rewards included Brown Hare and Stone Marten, with Yellow-necked Mouse and Bank Vole added thanks to live traps. A few days later, two more ... Red Deer and Red Squirrel also seen, a purple patch indeed at Labanoras! 40. Soprano Pipistrelle 24 May. Lithuanian Dormice, Part Two. The rare one! Of the three species of dormice in Lithuania, Forest Dormouse is the rarest, known to inhabit only two forest blocks in the entire country. So it was, with many thanks to Lithuania's number one dormouse researcher, I found myself at a forest edge in middle Lithuania on this sunny morning. In front of us, a quadrat of fairly dense pine forest, light pockets of deciduous mixed in. Not ideal looking dormouse habitat! However, a grid of 60 nestboxes lay across the forest, home in some years to six or even eight Forest Dormice, plus the occasional Hazel Dormouse too. Thirty boxes we checked, Great Tits and Coal Tits on eggs or young, a few Pied Flycatchers too, but not a sign of a dormouse. In the second half of the grid however, the habitat is rather better, adjacent forest clearings offer better feeding habitat and box number 36 produced the goods! In a ball of a nest, someone was snoozing! Carefully extracting (these critters bite), a smile from my companion ...moments later, I was face to face with my first ever Forest Dormouse! Highway man face mask, chubby cheeks, a right nice ball of fluff! Fortunately, he was a little dozy, so between the obligatory weighing and checking of ring number, he was quite content to allow a few photographs. Gently returned to the nestbox, we wandered over to box 37 and ...Hazel Dormouse! Super, we'd checked boxes for over an hour and a half with nothing, then got two species in two boxes! Completing the full 60 boxes, we found one more Forest Dormouse, a very active individual, no chance of pictures and quite happy to bite too! So a successful day, species number 41 for the year! 41. Forest Dormouse 28-29 May. Up the Bats! Superb thing is the bat detector ...getting quite into the swing of the sounds now, many of the species surprisingly easy to identify by a combination of the frequency, pattern and type of call, along with flight style of the actual bat. Latest bunch to be added to the list ... On the 28th, a Nathusius's Pipistrelle 20 km west of Vilnius ...one fast-flying individual zooming around over my head at the edge of open woodland adjacent to reeded pool. Call frequency peaking at almost spot on 40 kHz, wet slaps and clicks. On the 29th, several Noctule Bats and one Serotine Bat feeding along the well-wooded banks of the River Neris in Vilnius city. 42. Nathusius's Pipistrelle 43. Serotine Bat JUNE 2015

One of the Baltic's mega fauna species to start the month off, a cracking Brown Bear lurking in the forests of northern Estonia. Also several Raccoon Dogs, a couple of Wild Boars and assorted extras including Roe Deer, Brown Hare and Red Fox. From big to small, also added a Striped Field Mouse in Lithuania, a new species for the year. 5-8 June. Teddy Bear's Picnic, Return to Estonia.

Day One. 675 km slog north again, destination the forests of Alutaguse in north-east Estonia. Departed Lithuania mid-afternoon for a fairly uneventful drive up, one American Mink in Latvia, one Red Fox and one Roe Deer in Estonia. Arrived near midnight, a quick drive around the forest revealing little other than a couple of Woodcocks and several Nightjars. Into bed at 1.00 a.m. Day Two. 4.00 a.m., the temperature a mere 1 C, weak sun cutting through mists rising over damp meadows. A male Montagu's Harrier at roost, a racket of Corncrakes calling from all quarters, a male Red-backed Shrike on a bush. Into the forest I went, my first serious attempt to locate a Brown Bear in this, probably one of the best areas for the species in Europe. Five hours later, the day warming up to a pleasant mid-teens affair, the mammal quest was looking a bit of a flop ...one Brown Hare all I had for my efforts. Still, Goshawk, Lesser Spotted Eagle and regular Common Rosefinches and Thrush Nightingales were not so bad! Breakfast retreat, then another sortie into the forest ...one Roe Deer and one cracking set of fresh Brown Bear tracks, neat stuff plodding through wet mud! Following on from this, relaxed for much of the day, adventures were to come! Deep in a chunk of the Alutaguse pine forests, a small clearing exists. Echoing to the calls of Cuckoos and distant Cranes, a nondescript clearing perhaps, but on the edge, tucked up against the pines, there stand a couple of rather special hides! Constructed by NaTourEst, an Estonian wildlife company, these are the bear-watching hides! From spring through to autumn, daily offerings of grain, fruit and other tasty morsals tempt in an array of nocturnal visitors, Brown Bears the top billing. And so it was, a little after 5.30 p.m. I arrived in my little hide and settled down. Till 8.00 a.m. next morning I would be here, but would Brown Bears grace me with their presence? Most nights they do appear, but by no means are they absolutely guaranteed! And so the evening ticked by:

- 5.50 p.m. One Black Woodpecker calling, Great Spotted Woodpeckers at a feeder, Pied Flycatchers in and out of a nestbox, Cuckoos calling all around, a trill of a Wood Warbler.
- 6.00 p.m. A Red Fox appears, hesitant and brief, trots off into the forest beyond. 6.20 p.m. The first Raccoon Dog of the evening arrives, sniffes about, meanders off.
- 6.25 p.m. Two Raccoon Dogs together, thereafter a constant coming and going of Raccoon Dogs, animals always in view, mostly in pairs, a maximum of four together, probably 6+ visiting.
- 7.50 p.m. A Red Fox reappears, looks to be the same individual as earlier, Raccoon Dogs still present.
- 8.40 p.m. The first lull of the evening - Raccoon Dogs absent for the first time in over two hours. Great Spotted Woodpeckers feeding, nothing much else. 8.53 p.m. Single Raccoon Dog briefly, Crane calling in background.
- 9.20 p.m. Remaining quiet, Great Spotted Woodpecker still active. After a grand total of three hours sleep the night before, almost dozed off ...could have been a critical mistake!
- 9.23 p.m. Pair of Raccoon Dogs return.
- 9.30 p.m. Raccoon Dogs still present, Great Spotted Woodpecker returns to feed for last time this evening, Cuckoos still calling.
- 9.33 p.m. Raccoon Dogs depart.
- 9.47 p.m. Two different Raccoon Dogs arrive, feeding on bait.

- 9.54 p.m. Raccoon Dogs depart. I nearly fell asleep again!
- 10.05 p.m. Single Raccoon Dog walks in, present for duration.
- 10.20 p.m. Raccoon Dog departs.

- 10.27 p.m. Light beginning to fade, two Wild Boars appear in the forest to the right, trot through clearing and exit left. A slight worry about the lack of bears!
- 10.40 p.m. Presumably the same animals, two Wild Boars appear in the far edge of the clearing, slowly edging in to feed.
- 10.48 p.m. The Wild Boars depart, a final Raccoon Dog of the evening passes through, one Nightjar begins to sing.
- 11.00 p.m. Pretty dark, main bait area bathed in low light, but Raccoon Dogs either absent or missed in the twilight. Several Nightjars calling.
- 11.30 p.m. Half an hour passed with almost nothing happening, still light enough to scan well with binoculars. Beginning to think there will be no bears this night!
- 11.40 p.m. Heart jumps, from the forest to the left, one big beast moving in. One fantastic Brown Bear, a large blond-headed individual. Saunters over to the feeding area, remaining light catching the animal a treat. Feeds constantly for next 50 minutes, ambling around on occasion, sitting up and looking around. Truly an atmospheric end to the evening, a wild Brown Bear less than 100 metres distant, ambling around in the perpetual light of an Estonian night. Magical.
- 00.30 a.m. With the Brown Bear still feeding and me most content, I unroll the sleeping bag and retire for the night.

I awoke several times through the night and peered out, but saw nothing more. Next morning, as sun dappled the forest, Pied Flycatchers were in song, Cranes flew over. My adventures in Alutaguse were over. Retracking my route through the forest, I reclaimed my car and hit the road south. Close on 700 km later, I was back in Lithuania and home. 13 June. Success on the Little Front. After months of turving out Bank Voles and Yellow-necked Mice from my live traps, finally I caught one of my target species! Setting four traps in the early morning along a grassy ditch just north of Vilnius, I returned a little later to find three out of four triggered, quite a good result in itself! In the first of these, a very large snail was responsible (!), while in the second a Common Toad had flipped the door close. Hmm, so one out of four containing a small mammal, rather more typical. Fully expecting it to be yet another Bank Vole, into the little observation tank I released the individual ...then the full critter was on show, long tail and black stripe running the length of the back! Striped Field Mouse, nice! A common species in Lithuania, but nevertheless, an animal that always seemed to evade me. So, species number 44 for the year, and one that I was rather chuffed with. And then, hot on the heels of that little mouse, some luck on the bats ...spent the evening with the bat detector at various spots around Vilnius - a few localities along the River Neris, then at Verkiai and finally at a pool near Kairnai. Strange absence of any pipistrelles, but one Daubenton's Bat hawking the lake at Kairnai and quite a number of Noctule Bats, including some doing impressive dives to catch prey items. Amongst the Noctule Bats, picked up one bat with a slightly different call, similar frequency peaking at a little over 20 kHz, but not quite as forceful and seemingly with more clicks. Recorded the bat and comparing to recording on the internet, Leisler's Bat seems to match. This species is not abundant in Lithuania I think, but does occur in and around Vilnius, so perhaps not that unusual a record. 44. Striped Field Mouse. 45. Leisler's Bat.

19-28 June. Out of the Baltics, Into the Desert. No more mammals for the Baltic Mammal Challenge in June, but a cracking trip to the Western Sahara resulted in a super collection of mammals, including the rare and elusive Sand Cat, as well as Barbary Apes, assorted foxes and a variety of other excellent mammals, birds and reptiles. [CLICK HERE](#) for full details of this successful trip.

JULY 2015

A month dedicated to butterflies more than mammals, the highlight being a splendid 51 species recorded on a single day mid-month. However, still a nice bits and bobs on the mammal front, the best being six Fat Dormice in nestboxes near Vilnius. Also an American Mink in Labanoras, a Mole near Kaunas and assorted Red Foxes and Roe Deers scattered elsewhere.

9 July. Lithuanian Dormice, Part Three. After time-out for explorations in the Sahara, my Baltic Mammal Challenge was stumbling a little! Mammals were proving few and far between and I was also failing to catch anything at all in small mammal traps! Not all was doom and gloom however, as one classic mammal was added – with much gratitude to a post-graduate studying them, I accompanied a student on a nestbox check in Dukstos Regional Park on the 9th. Our quarry was Fat Dormouse, a rare species in Lithuania restricted to just ten known localities. Forty nestboxes to check, monitoring and repairs to boxes the basic aim, but mine clearly to find one of the elusive dormice, which, if successful, would not only result in a new species for me, but also complete the grand slam of the Lithuanian dormice! Two sectors for us to check, 20 boxes in each. So round we plodded, scrambling through high vegetation, checking box after box. Droppings of Fat Dormouse in a few, empty nests in a couple, dead Wryneck chicks in one, but as we approached box 16, still no dormouse! Hmm, not looking good. As the box 16 was opened however, a wry smile ...somebody was home! One Fat Dormouse asleep in the box! It turns out that this was actually an animal that

had been injured earlier in the season, its snout badly injured and skull exposed, quite possibly in a close shave with an owl. After a period of recuperation in captivity, the animal had been released again and now seemed to be doing well. Nice, but not wishing to subject the animal to undue disturbance, I can't say the views were very very good – a bundle of fur asleep with a big bushy tail over the top, then in the hand for quick examination! Maybe better views in another box, but not a single further individual did we find in the remainder of this sector. Still, another 20 boxes to check on the opposite side of the forest. With more hazel in the mix, this was apparently better habitat for Fat Dormice ...and so it turned out, very soon we found another one, this time peeking out of the nest at us, then an amazing pair in another box, then incredibly two more singles in another two boxes! Superb, nice views of them watching from the boxes, plus one deciding that he had enough enough of us and running out of the box and straight up the tree to watch from a branch up above. Edible Dormouse, species number 46 for the year. 10-30 July. Mid-summer lulls. My standard fare in these days was of Red Foxes and Roe Deers, plus tracks of Moose and lots of land rooted up by Wild Boars in Labanoras. One little surprise however, an American Mink running into a ditch mid-morning on the 12th at Labanoras - only my second in Lithuania this year and a new species for my Labanoras plot, the 27th mammal species recorded. A little better on the bird front at Labanoras - adult and recently-fledged White-tailed Eagles in the trees in the flood forest, Moorhens with chicks paddling about below (first breeding record on my land), Corncrakes calling in the meadows and two Grasshopper Warblers calling at night in rank grass. AUGUST 2015 With vegetation thick and grass long, August is not usually the best month for mammal spotting. And this year, with temperatures soaring to 30 C and more on a near daily basis, the heat further pushed mammals into the cooler depths of the dark shaded undergrowth. Still however, not all was so bad, highlights did include Moose, Pine & Stone Martens, Red Squirrel and, new for the year, Common Pipistrelle. Reflecting my activity rather than that of the mammals, Labanoras once again took the limelight - not only the regular Red Foxes and Roe Deer throughout the month, but a few nice little extras. Under bushes heaving with hazel nuts, dutifully attended by Nutcrackers, a pleasant sight was a mother Moose and yearling calf. Present for quite a few days, they lingered on a spit of land pushing out into the flood forest. Also here, one Red Squirrel teasing at the feeders, up to five Raccoon Dogs feeding together at an apple pile, both Pine and Stone Marten at night and an unexpected Beaver wandering across open land, presumably between pools. Revealing the relative abundance of the mammals visiting, a night cam left recorded no less than 320 videos of Raccoon Dogs in just two days, the animals present almost continuously through the night and regularly through the day ...when they sleep, I have no idea! By contrast, Brown Hare appeared once, Stone Marten four times and Pine Marten twice. Roe Deer sauntered in three times, Red Fox once. Highlight at Labanoras however was at dusk - hawking the flood forest, zipping through the skeletal remains, several Common Pipistrelles, echolocation at a frequency of 45 mHz. A new species for my land (species number 29), it was also the only new species for my new list in August ...the total now rising to 47. Also worthy of note at Labanoras, one non-mammal highlight - an amazing discovery, Water Rails were found breeding in the open flood forest, a pair feeding three small chicks mid-month. Not only a new breeding record for my land, but only the third year I have ever seen them on the land. Away from Labanoras, I also found Eastern Hedgehog and Noctule Bat near Vilnius, plus Wolf tracks in forests south of the capital. Better at this latter location however were the butterflies - very much the tail end of the butterfly season, a couple of nice bonuses were several Little Blues and a couple of Silver-spotted Skippers, both localized species in Lithuania. Year list: 47. Common Pipistrelle. SEPTEMBER 2015

Autumn arrives, temperatures finally dropping a few degrees. A good start to the change of seasons with a mini trip to Estonia resulting in both Brown Bears and Ringed Seals and then an assortment in Lithuania including highlights such as Daubenton's and Brant's Bats already in their winter roosts, Noctule Bats elsewhere and, critical additions to the year list, a Brown Rat near my home and Fallow Deer on the coast.

1-3 September. Baltic Magic, Bears & Seals. As first waves of migrant birds begin their southerly moves, to the north I went. The sub-plot of the trip was to try and find some small mammals still missing from my year list, perhaps a Birch Mouse or Pine Vole but with Brown Bears strolling the great forests, another encounter with those was much desired. So it was, a epic mini trip of 1860 km in little over 48 hours, departing Vilnius for the evening drive up to the forests of Alutaguse, one Raccoon Dog and one Red Fox on route. Arrived long after midnight, active again by 5.00 a.m., slowly trawling the forest tracks and paths in search of Brown Bear. Five hours in vain, sightings limited to a couple of Roe Deers, a single Pine Marten and one Red Squirrel, plus a Hazel Grouse and assorted other forest birds. Still, after a day of relative leisure, occasional Cranes and White Storks along the way, the evening offered considerable promise. Overlooking a small clearing surrounded by high pines, I had again decided to spend the night in the Natourest bear hide. Here I hoped, attracted by regular offerings of grain and other morsels, Brown Bears would appear during the evening.

Bear Log:16.00. Arrival, two Roe Deers adjacent, then a walk of a kilometer or so to the clearing, home for night this time a small squat one-man hide, big enough for me and not much more.

- 16.30. Into the hide, the first half hour quiet outside, a few Jays feeding, occasional Great Spotted Woodpeckers coming and going.
- 17.05. Red Squirrel scampers in, briefly feeding at the grain pile.
- 17.45. First Raccoon Dog of the evening arrives, spends five minutes sniffing about.
- 18.15. Raccoon Dog trots through, not lingering.
- 18.30-18.50. Raccoon Dog returns, twenty minutes feeding.
- 19.10. Two Raccoon Dogs in the clearing, one carrying an enormous fish head.
- 19.35. Black Woodpecker calling beyond the clearing. Forests otherwise silent.
- 20.20. Raccoon Dog makes another appearance.
- 20.25. Two Raccoon Dogs arrived in the clearing, spend about 15 minutes feeding. Fight breaks out between the two scattering them briefly.
- 20.39. Nervous glances from the Raccoon Dogs, both depart the clearing.
- 20.40. Brown Bear lumbers in from the rear left, a large blonde individual. Magic moment as it emerges from the pines, saunters into the clearing, sniffing the air.
- 20.45. Second Brown Bear arrives, strolling in from the centre left. A far smaller bear and somewhat wary of the brute already occupying the clearing. Circles round and lies amongst the tussocks about 30 metres in front of my hide.
- 20.45-21.15. Both Brown Bears feeding, appears to be mostly berries or grain scattered on the ground. Large bear occasionally approaching the smaller, latter wisely retreating each time.
- 21.15. Smaller bear exits left.
- 21.18. Larger bear exits right. Raccoon Dog immediately returns to feed briefly.
- 21.28. Smaller Brown Bear returns, again settling just in front of the hide.
- 21.30. Larger Brown Bear also returns, preferring an area near the rear of the clearing. Fast becoming dark, but low intensity lighting at the rear of the clearing still illuminating the bears at treat.
- 21.35. Full moon rises behind the Brown Bears, a classic image - almost aligned, the smaller bear about 20 metres in front of me, the larger bear directly behind, the full moon beyond them both, creating a most atmospheric silhouette.
- 21.35 onwards. A perfect evening, both Brown Bears present throughout. Mostly peacefully feeding 40-50 metres apart, occasional moments of drama as the larger bear chased off the smaller, the two bears thundering around the clearing for moments until calm resettled.
- 22.30. Called it a night, sleeping on the floor on the hide, the smaller bear again just 20 metres in front, the larger one a little further.

- 06.00. Brown Bears gone, Crested Tits calling at the edge of the clearing. All quiet for the next hour or so, one Nutcracker as I departed.

So ended a memorable evening with the bears. Checked my small mammals traps nearby - all empty - then headed off to a hotel for breakfast, thereafter departing the area for a three-hour drive to the west coast. Part two of the trip ...Ringed Seals. In these northern waters of the Baltic, two species of seal can be found around the Estonian islands - the more abundant Grey Seals tend to predominate on the outer fringes of the islands, while the rarer Ringed Seal occurs mostly on isolated islands between the larger masses of Saaremaa and Hiiumaa Islands, the colonies only accessible by boat. In the last couple of years however, I have discovered an occasional Ringed Seal hauled out on the low-lying Rukkirahu Island, quite conveniently viewable from the Hiiumaa ferry.

So, a little after midday I arrived at Rohukula ferry terminal, gazed out over the sunny waters and set up my scope to view the distant Rukkirahu Island. Little strings of white dots to the left of the island, Mute Swans, and an abundance of assorted grey blobs, boulders of assorted size, but amongst them, one blob of encouraging appearance ...surely a seal. From the end of the Barbour wall, the plump body and small head could be discerned, a Ringed Seal indeed, but at well over a kilometer, views were hardly amazing. Fortunately the ferry passes this very island, so purchasing a ticket, I boarded the 1 p.m. boat and 20 minutes later was cruising past the fringes of Rukkirahu ...many dabbling ducks

present, particularly Wigeon, also Goldeneyes and Mute Swans. Fortunately, so too was the Ringed Seal still hauled out, the views now far better, the distinctive body rings clearly showing, the small head appearing like something glued on the dumpy body.

As the ferry cruised on, the island fell to the rear, the remainder of the crossing was rather barren, a few Cormorants about the only birds seen. Didn't bother getting off the ferry, but just waited for the return leg. As we passed Rukkirahu again, there were now two Ringed Seals present, both hauled out on adjacent sobs of rock! And with that, as the ferry reached the mainland, I returned to the car and began the long drive south one Red Fox on route, reached Vilnius near midnight. Bats and Rats. 12-20 September. With pleasant sunshine prevailing, and temperatures sitting in the 20-15 C range, you'd have been forgiven for thinking it was still summer ...but in the underground lairs, the first of the winter bats were back in roosts.

Donning torches and venturing underground, a fair collection of bats were found in the Kaunas area, primarily Daubenton's Bats, but also a couple of Brant's Bats too. Hopes of a wayward Multicoloured Bat proved predictably over-optimistic ...in Lithuania, this rare species is most frequently encountered on the coast on autumn migration. I unfortunately know no site that offers a reasonable chance of success. Rather easier to find were Noctule Bats - a whole bunch of them sending my bat detector into raptures as they hawked low over pools near my home on the 12th, perhaps ten individuals or more. Also one Daubenton's Bat here too.

All nice stuff, but my year list was sitting at a stubborn 47 species, the last new addition being a Common Pipistrelle way back in mid-August! Though I now required just three additional species to hit my target, I began to wonder where these would come from ...House Mouse and rats of any description seemed the most likely route forward and with this in mind, I began to scout city rubbish piles and neglected corners with the idea of doing a little live trapping. One Brown Rat must have heard of my plight however ...returning home late on the 17th, a Brown Rat was scampering along the track just before my house! Nice little critter, species number 48 for the year! 48. Brown Rat. Nearing the Home Run, 25-27 September. A mere two species short of the Holy Grail, the grand 50th species in the Baltic States. I was starting to scrap the barrow however, not many easy ones left ...perhaps I could manage a Fallow Deer somewhere, maybe a House Mouse in Vilnius city, then what other possibilities? Scrutinizing the list, possibles included Black Rat (rare, maybe in Moletai), both Common and Pygmy Shrew (widespread, but I seem hopeless at catching or seeing these), Root Vole and Harvest Mouse (best chances are in the Nemunas Delta) and Muskrat (declining and localised). Well, needed to keep my act into order, so decided a mini trip to the Nemunas Delta would be a good idea - Fallow Deer exists in Kintai forest, Muskrat in Kintai fish pools and live trapping at the edge of reedbeds in the delta had possibility to produce Root Vole or Harvest Mouse (or even one of the shrews) ...a potential four or more species! So, how did it go? After a late afternoon departure, I drove the required 300 km and got there just in time to set my five traps at strategic points near Rusne, flights of Cranes yodelled in the sunset, flocks of geese passed overhead, a couple of Roe Deer sauntered through meadows. Time would now tell where the rodents would play ball! Meanwhile, 20 km to the west, now truly dark, I began exploration of Kintai Forest, spotlight flashing either side. Not a hint of a Fallow Deer (or anything else) for over two hours, woodland and adjacent meadow equally drawing a blank. Began to think a dawn trip would be a better idea when suddenly two animals emerged onto the track directly in front of me ...10.20 p.m., mother and calf Fallow Deer, nice! Kipped in the car, then met local birder Boris Belchev at dawn for a Muskrat stake-out ...nobody told the Muskrats, they didn't make the rendezvous! Still, a couple of distant Beavers paddling down a drainage channel got me excited for a few moments, wrongly jumping to the conclusion that they were Muskrats ...but na, no vertical tails, very Beaver-esque heads, they were not the desired ones! Back at the Rusne traps, results were also far from stunning ...one empty trap, next empty too, next triggered but not occupied, the next empty. Just one left ...and indeed there crouched a vole in the compartment. Maybe a Root Vole? Nope, a Bank Vole instead, a widespread species that I have caught countless times this year. So, of the potential four species, one successfully seen, the year list advances to 49! 49. Fallow Deer. OCTOBER 2015 The BIG 50 is reached. After early month highlights including rampaging Wild Boars, focus naturally turned to seeking a final species to bring my Baltic Mammal Challenge to its target, the Holy Grail of 50 species in 2015 in the Baltic States. Failed yet again to see a Muskrat at another potential location, failed to catch any new rodent species at assorted localities around the city ...but turning closer to home paid dividend on the 10th - House Mouse in my Labanoras house, a species that had been eluding me for weeks in more urban settings! Wreckers of the Night. Under the cover of darkness, 120 kg of grain vanished, grain box uprooted ...mystery vandals of the night! Several occasions it occurred, a feeder on my Labanoras plot trashed. Hmm, this feeder was a hefty thing, surely a brute of some size was the culprit ...maybe a Moose, perhaps Wild Boar, fanciful thinking even considered a wandering Brown Bear. I set the night camera and lay in wait, nothing for a couple of nights ...and then the guilty party slipped up, caught in action on film ...not a single animal, but a whole gang of them, Wild Boars all! For highlights of a couple of nights of destruction, [CLICK HERE](#) for the video clip! House Mouse, Mouse in the House! Having spent almost ten months hiking Baltic forests and meadowlands, tracking impressive critters over umpteen kilometres and meandering over virtually every corner of the three Baltic States, I had now reached 49 species, just one to go! In recent weeks however, I had failed to find either Root Vole or Harvest Mouse in the Nemunas Delta, I had failed to find Muskrat at both Kintai and the Scaron;al ia River, I had also failed to find House Mouse in any of several attempted locations in Vilnius city and had also drawn a blank on Black Rat at the only locality I know for them! Shucks, I should have looked closer to home! In true style, species number 50 was a humble House Mouse in my very own home in Labanoras! Long have I known that mice wander in on occasion, but I have always supposed that they were purely Yellow-necked Mice, the more frequent species in the area. In quite a few trapping sessions in and around my cabin, Yellow-necked Mice have proved themselves ten-a-penny common, but never had I actually paid much attention to the mice in the house, a

couple of kilometres away. A casual comment by an acquaintance some days earlier had got me thinking, "Hmm, rather than endless sessions in Vilnius Old City, maybe I need to check those mice in my countryside house". So it was, beside the sofa in the corner of a room, adjacent to a suspicious little hole, I left a pile of peanuts ...out popped a predictable Yellow-necked Mouse! No worries though, next was another mouse, a far smaller one ...yep, a House Mouse! And then there were two! So that was that, species number 50 in my living room, a classic ending to the grand Baltic Mammal Challenge. Leaving a camera overlooking the hole, House Mice visited no less than 155 times, Yellow-necked Mice a mere dozen or so occasions. Guess I should be thinking about a little relocation of the beasties now, but as I don't actually use this house, I reckon they will be fine till spring. **FINAL ROUND-UP** And so ended the **BIG YEAR CHALLENGE**, the **BIG 50** reached. Slackened off thereafter, adding just a single additional species in November and December, namely a Common Shrew at Labanoras. So there it was, 51 species of mammal recorded on the Baltic States in 2015, not too bad!