

Baltic Mammal Challenge, January 2015

Contributed by Jos
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Month one of the challenge, the country under a layer of snow, juicy critters to start things off - Pine Marten, Stone Marten and Otter on my land at Labanoras; tracks of Moose, Lynx and Wolf for added effect

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!