

Baltic Mammal Challenge, February 2015.

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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 For a full account of the Baltic Mammal Challenge, [CLICK HERE](#) to open a new page.