

Baltic Mammal Challenge, April 2015.

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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. Polecat29. 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 Bat31. 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 Hedgehog33. Noctule Bat34. 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