

Baltic Mammal Challenge, May 2015.

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