

Baltic Mammal Challenge, June 2015.

Contributed by Jos
Last Updated Wednesday, 26 August 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 Kairiai. Strange absence of any pipistrelles, but one Daubenton's Bat hawking the lake at Kairiai 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. For a full account of the Baltic Mammal Challenge, [CLICK HERE](#) to open a new page.