

Baltic Mammal Challenge, July 2015.

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A month dedicated to butterflies more than mammals, the highlight being a splendid 51 species recorded on a single day mid-month. However, still a nice bits and bobs on the mammal front, the best being six Fat Dormice in nestboxes near Vilnius. Also an American Mink in Labanoras, a Mole near Kaunas and assorted Red Foxes and Roe Deers scattered elsewhere.

9 July. Lithuanian Dormice, Part Three. After time-out for explorations in the Sahara, my Baltic Mammal Challenge was stumbling a little! Mammals were proving few and far between and I was also failing to catch anything at all in small mammal traps! Not all was doom and gloom however, as one classic mammal was added – with much gratitude to a post-graduate studying them, I accompanied a student on a nestbox check in Dukstos Regional Park on the 9th. Our quarry was Fat Dormouse, a rare species in Lithuania restricted to just ten known localities. Forty nestboxes to check, monitoring and repairs to boxes the basic aim, but mine clearly to find one of the elusive dormice, which, if successful, would not only result in a new species for me, but also complete the grand slam of the Lithuanian dormice! Two sectors for us to check, 20 boxes in each. So round we plodded, scrambling through high vegetation, checking box after box. Droppings of Fat Dormouse in a few, empty nests in a couple, dead Wryneck chicks in one, but as we approached box 16, still no dormouse! Hmm, not looking good. As the box 16 was opened however, a wry smile ...somebody was home! One Fat Dormouse asleep in the box! It turns out that this was actually an animal that had been injured earlier in the season, its snout badly injured and skull exposed, quite possibly in a close shave with an owl. After a period of recuperation in captivity, the animal had been released again and now seemed to be doing well. Nice, but not wishing to subject the animal to undue disturbance, I can't say the views were very very good – a bundle of fur asleep with a big bushy tail over the top, then in the hand for quick examination! Maybe better views in another box, but not a single further individual did we find in the remainder of this sector. Still, another 20 boxes to check on the opposite side of the forest. With more hazel in the mix, this was apparently better habitat for Fat Dormice ...and so it turned out, very soon we found another one, this time peeking out of the nest at us, then an amazing pair in another box, then incredibly two more singles in another two boxes! Superb, nice views of them watching from the boxes, plus one deciding that he had enough of us and running out of the box and straight up the tree to watch from a branch up above. Edible Dormouse, species number 46 for the year. 10-12 July. Mid-summer lulls, Labanoras. My standard fare in these days was of Red Foxes and Roe Deers, plus tracks of Moose and lots of land rooted up by Wild Boars. One little surprise however, an American Mink running into a ditch mid-morning on the 12th - only my second in Lithuania this year and a new species for my Labanoras plot, the 27th mammal species recorded. A little better on the bird front - adult and recently-fledged White-tailed Eagles in the trees in the flood forest, Moorhens with chicks paddling about below (first breeding record on my land), Corncrakes calling in the meadows and two Grasshopper Warblers calling at night in rank grass. 13-26 July. Butterflies, the Half Ton! Given perfect conditions in mid-July, forest rides and meadows of eastern Lithuania are a Lepiptera treat - it is peak butterfly season, species by the dozen, individuals in their hundreds. At key localities, with a little effort, it is not unusual to find 30 species in a day, bit on occasion totals can be far higher. In the lead up to July, 2015 was not shaping up to be a classic year for butterflies - cool damp conditions prevailing, sunny days the exception. Numbers of butterflies were generally low and diversity poor. In early July however, a run of fine days, gave hope of some excellent sessions ahead. And so it was, I embarked upon an attempt to see 50 species in a single day, a feat I have only ever managed once before in Lithuania. ATTEMPT ONE. 13 JULY Kicked off in the Labanoras area, initial mooching around revealing a relatively limited bunch of species such as the standard Heath Fritillaries, Ringlets and Small Heaths typical of the area, but with a move to a flower-rich embankment adjacent to wetlands things took a decided upswing – not only an impressive four species of coppers (Large Copper, Scarce Copper, Purple-shot Copper and Purple-edged Copper), but also both Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Lesser Marbled Fritillary, neither particularly abundant butterflies on my day-to-day searches. However, pride of place at this locality, flitting from flower to flower in quite a damp area, a very nice Geranium Argus – a very localised species in Lithuania and the second I have ever seen in the country. In total, 18 species of butterfly at this locality, not particularly high.

For any hope of a high total, an approximate ad hoc plan evolved for the remainder of the day - shifting 90 km, my next localities were among my favourite butterfly sites in the country: forest rides and meadows to the south of the capital and nearby heaths – in the peak of the season, 30 to 35 species per day are possible. With the relatively low numbers this year however, I was far from sure this would be achievable. First up, a long forest ride and flowery margins – Silver-studded Blues and Amanda's Blue, White Admiral, High Brown Fritillary and Silver-washed Fritillary, the tally rose. Numbers not exceptionally high, but the variety was there. One Large Wall Brown, the trio of Pearly, Chestnut and Small Heaths, a grand total of four skippers, the best being a couple of smart Large Chequered Skippers. At the end of the ride, I broke out into open meadow – Queen of Spain Fritillaries greeted me, one of my favourite of all butterflies. Also Commas, more White Admirals, a very early Pale Clouded Yellow, a couple of Weaver's Fritillaries and both Scarce and Purple-edged Coppers. 28 species recorded in this little segment, 14 new to the day.

A short drive away, an area of heath and adjacent forest land offers opportunity for a few restricted-range species, so an hour or so here also added more – key among these, freshly emerged Spotted Fritillaries, a single Niobe Fritillary, a good number of Moorland Clouded Yellows and, after considerable searching, two or three Graylings (searched high and low on the heaths, then found them settling on my car!). Also added Lesser Purple Emperor here, plus Reverdin's Blue and Small Copper. I failed however to find Rock Grayling or Dusky Meadow Brown, both species usually quite

common at this spot. Still, 20 species seen, eight new to the day, the session's tally was now sitting at 40 species!

To add a few more, I need to add kilometres – in late afternoon, I quickly zipped to a road embankment some kilometres west of Vilnius, smoothly adding Turquoise Blue at a regular location for the species (but failing to find either Little or Short-tailed Blues, also sometimes at the same site), then moved a little to the north to end the day in Dukstos Regional Park. Lots of old deciduous forest here, plus flower-rich meadows ...by hook and crook, seeking them out along the edge of woodland and in meadow, a total of 20 species noted in these final hours of the day, six new to the day: Holly Blue, Mazarine Blue, Purple Emperor, Large Tortoiseshell, Painted Lady, Woodland Brown.

So, in a year far from classic, a grand total of 47 species seen. I missed a few common species, such as Red Admiral and Peacock, and failed to find several that I could expect on a dedicated day, including Dingy Skipper, Rock Grayling, Little Blue and Short-tailed Blue. Also no haristreaks, but these are never easy. So, all in all, not bad. ATTEMPT TWO. 25 JULY With a weekend forecast bordering on perfect, unbroken sunshine and temperatures hovering around 25 C, it seemed a very good idea to take another stab at breaking the 50 species mark, even more so as quite a few more butterflies seemed to be on the wing than on my previous attempt, two weeks earlier. So it was, a route chosen to minimize the kilometres, but maximise the time spent in optimal locations.

I began early near my home to score with Turquoise Blue at the only location I know for them, then rapidly moved onto to the same forest rides and meadows as visited two weeks before. Over a few hours, a simply superb selection were noted, including no less than eight species of fritillaries (including Pallas's and Queen of Spain Fritillaries), five species of copper and five species of blue. Critically, these included Cranberry Blue and Reverdin's Blue, both species that are not too easy to find. Also clocked up Purple Emperor and White Admiral and, both species that were not on the wing two weeks earlier, Map Butterfly and Red Admiral. Brimstones were two-a-penny, various heaths and browns common, including Large Wall Brown, and skippers abundant.

Departing this splendid location, my day tally was already on 39 species, all bar Turquoise Blue and Small Heath from this site itself. Still however, another 11 species was going to be a tall order ...I needed to find all of the specialities at the next couple of sites, plus a few extras! Well, it went like clockwork – a few Moorland Clouded Yellows were still flying at the first site, while the heathland of the next location eventually produced all the goods that I was hoping for. None very common, the species sought and found were, in order, Spotted Fritillary, Niobe Fritillary, Grayling, Rock Grayling and Dusky Meadow Brown. Of these, Niobe Fritillaries are usually very scarce, but I managed to find at least half a dozen, while the Dusky Meadow Browns are usually common, but I found only a single after about an hour of searching. Lots of Silver-studded Blues also here, plus a handful of Small Coppers.

I was now on 45 species, five short of my target. The problem was where to find additional species – I could bump into a Peacock perhaps (although I had not seen any flying for quite a while), maybe a Painted Lady with a bit of luck, plus always a chance of a Swallowtail or Camberwell Beauty. None however had any specific sites, so instead I moved a little to the north of Vilnius to Dukstos Regional Park – Mazarine Blues and Lesser Purple Emperors had been flying a few days before, so I thought I had a reasonable chance of these. A half hour or so of nothing, then I stumbled across a very fine site – two Lesser Purple Emperors on a small ride and, immediately adjacent, a nice flower meadow absolutely buzzing with butterflies. A very pleasurable half hour or so followed, loads of butterflies, but best of the lot, Short-tailed Blue, Mazarine Blue and, finally, a Peacock.

Well, I was now on 49 species. Searched high and low for a Dingy Skipper or something, perhaps a Large Tortoiseshell. Scanned the forest edge for a wayward hairstreak of some sort. Nothing.

Hmm, it was now a bit late in the season, but perhaps I could find Woodland Brown at a site close to Vilnius itself. Also drew a blank, it was now late afternoon and I began to think my tally would stay one short of fifty. Then, the butterfly gods must have smiled down upon me, a large patch of roadside flowers caught my attention. I stopped and took a wander, a lot of common butterflies such as Ringlets and Small Tortoiseshells. Also a couple of Holly Blues. Then, a small dark butterfly on a distant flower ...crept in, oh wow, a hairstreak, grabbed a couple of record shots to ensure there would be no identification mishap with this sometimes difficult group, then took a closer look. What a wonderful little butterfly, a White-letter Hairstreak, my first for two years and, importantly, species number 50!

Three minutes later, a Painted Lady settled adjacent, species number 51. Day over, a splendid selection. Though it does not quite reach my personal record of 53 species, the rare barrier had been smashed, 50 species in a day in Lithuania. For a full account of the Baltic Mammal Challenge, [CLICK HERE](#) to open a new page.