

# Baltic Mammal Challenge, September 2015.

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Autumn arrives, temperatures finally dropping a few degrees. A good start to the change of seasons with a mini trip to Estonia resulting in both Brown Bears and Ringed Seals and then an assortment in Lithuania including highlights such as Daubenton's and Brant's Bats already in their winter roosts, Noctule Bats elsewhere and, critical additions to the year list, a Brown Rat near my home and Fallow Deer on the coast.

1-3 September. Baltic Magic, Bears & Seals. As first waves of migrant birds begin their southerly moves, to the north I went. The sub-plot of the trip was to try and find some small mammals still missing from my year list, perhaps a Birch Mouse or Pine Vole but with Brown Bears strolling the great forests, another encounter with those was much desired.

So it was, a epic mini trip of 1860 km in little over 48 hours, departing Vilnius for the evening drive up to the forests of Alutaguse, one Raccoon Dog and one Red Fox on route. Arrived long after midnight, active again by 5.00 a.m., slowly trawling the forest tracks and paths in search of Brown Bear. Five hours in vain, sightings limited to a couple of Roe Deers, a single Pine Marten and one Red Squirrel, plus a Hazel Grouse and assorted other forest birds. Still, after a day of relative leisure, occasional Cranes and White Storks along the way, the evening offered considerable promise. Overlooking a small clearing surrounded by high pines, I had again decided to spend the night in the Natourest bear hide. Here I hoped, attracted by regular offerings of grain and other morsels, Brown Bears would appear during the evening.

Bear Log:16.00. Arrival, two Roe Deers adjacent, then a walk of a kilometer of so to the clearing, home for night this time a small squat one-man hide, big enough for me and not much more.

- 16.30. Into the hide, the first half hour quiet outside, a few Jays feeding, occasional Great Spotted Woodpeckers coming and going.
- 17.05. Red Squirrel scampers in, briefly feeding at the grain pile.
- 17.45. First Raccoon Dog of the evening arrives, spends five minutes sniffing about.
- 18.15. Raccoon Dog trots through, not lingering.
- 18.30-18.50. Raccoon Dog returns, twenty minutes feeding.
- 19.10. Two Raccoon Dogs in the clearing, one carrying an enormous fish head.
- 19.35. Black Woodpecker calling beyond the clearing. Forests otherwise silent.
- 20.20. Raccoon Dog makes another appearance.
- 20.25. Two Raccoon Dogs arrived in the clearing, spend about 15 minutes feeding. Fight breaks out between the two scattering them briefly.
- 20.39. Nervous glances from the Raccoon Dogs, both depart the clearing.
- 20.40. Brown Bear lumbers in from the rear left, a large blonde individual. Magic moment as it emerges from the pines, saunters into the clearing, sniffing the air.
- 20.45. Second Brown Bear arrives, strolling in from the centre left. A far smaller bear and somewhat wary of the brute already occupying the clearing. Circles round and lies amongst the tussocks about 30 metres in front of my hide.
- 20.45-21.15. Both Brown Bears feeding, appears to be mostly berries or grain scattered on the ground. Large bear occasionally approaching the smaller, latter wisely retreating each time.
- 21.15. Smaller bear exits left.

- 21.18. Larger bear exits right. Raccoon Dog immediately returns to feed briefly.
  - 21.28. Smaller Brown Bear returns, again settling just in front of the hide.
  - 21.30. Larger Brown Bear also returns, preferring an area near the rear of the clearing. Fast becoming dark, but low intensity lighting at the rear of the clearing still illuminating the bears at treat.
  - 21.35. Full moon rises behind the Brown Bears, a classic image - almost aligned, the smaller bear about 20 metres in front of me, the larger bear directly behind, the full moon beyond them both, creating a most atmospheric silhouette.
  - 21.35 onwards. A perfect evening, both Brown Bears present throughout. Mostly peacefully feeding 40-50 metres apart, occasional moments of drama as the larger bear chased off the smaller, the two bears thundering around the clearing for moments until calm resettled.
  - 22.30. Called it a night, sleeping on the floor on the hide, the smaller bear again just 20 metres in front, the larger one a little further.
  - 06.00. Brown Bears gone, Crested Tits calling at the edge of the clearing. All quiet for the next hour or so, one Nutcracker as I departed.
- So ended a memorable evening with the bears. Checked my small mammals traps nearby - all empty - then headed off to a hotel for breakfast, thereafter departing the area for a three-hour drive to the west coast. Part two of the trip ...Ringed Seals. In these northern waters of the Baltic, two species of seal can be found around the Estonian islands - the more abundant Grey Seals tend to predominate on the outer fringes of the islands, while the rarer Ringed Seal occurs mostly on isolated islands between the larger masses of Saaremaa and Hiiumaa Islands, the colonies only accessible by boat. In the last couple of years however, I have discovered an occasional Ringed Seal hauled out on the low-lying Rukkirahu Island, quite conveniently viewable from the Hiiumaa ferry.
- So, a little after midday I arrived at Rohukula ferry terminal, gazed out over the sunny waters and set up my scope to view the distant Rukkirahu Island. Little strings of white dots to the left of the island, Mute Swans, and an abundance of assorted grey blobs, boulders of assorted size, but amongst them, one blob of encouraging appearance ...surely a seal. From the end of the Barbour wall, the plump body and small head could be discerned, a Ringed Seal indeed, but at well over a kilometer, views were hardly amazing. Fortunately the ferry passes this very island, so purchasing a ticket, I boarded the 1 p.m. boat and 20 minutes later was cruising past the fringes of Rukkirahu ...many dabbling ducks present, particularly Wigeon, also Goldeneyes and Mute Swans. Fortunately, so too was the Ringed Seal still hauled out, the views now far better, the distinctive body rings clearly showing, the small head appearing like something glued on the dumpy body.
- As the ferry cruised on, the island fell to the rear, the remainder of the crossing was rather barren, a few Cormorants about the only birds seen. Didn't bother getting off the ferry, but just waited for the return leg. As we passed Rukkirahu again, there were now two Ringed Seals present, both hauled out on adjacent sobs of rock! And with that, as the ferry reached the mainland, I returned to the car and began the long drive south one Red Fox on route, reached Vilnius near midnight. Bats and Rats. 12-20 September. With pleasant sunshine prevailing, and temperatures sitting in the 20-15 C range, you'd have been forgiven for thinking it was still summer ...but in the underground lairs, the first of the winter bats were back in roosts.
- Donning torches and venturing underground, a fair collection of bats were found in the Kaunas area, primarily Daubenton's Bats, but also a couple of Brant's Bats too. Hopes of a wayward Multicoloured Bat proved predictably over-optimistic ...in Lithuania, this rare species is most frequently encountered on the coast on autumn migration. I unfortunately know no site that offers a reasonable chance of success. Rather easier to find were Noctule Bats - a whole bunch of them sending my bat detector into raptures as they hawked low over pools near my home on the 12th, perhaps ten individuals or more. Also one Daubenton's Bat here too.

All nice stuff, but my year list was sitting at a stubborn 47 species, the last new addition being a Common Pipistrelle way back in mid-August! Though I now required just three additional species to hit my target, I began to wonder where these would come from ...House Mouse and rats of any description seemed the most likely route forward and with this in mind, I began to scout city rubbish piles and neglected corners with the idea of doing a little live trapping. One Brown Rat must have heard of my plight however ...returning home late on the 17th, a Brown Rat was scampering along the track just before my house! Nice little critter, species number 48 for the year! 48. Brown Rat. Nearing the Home Run, 25-27 September. A mere two species short of the Holy Grail, the grand 50th species in the Baltic States. I was starting to scrap the barrow however, not many easy ones left ...perhaps I could manage a Fallow Deer somewhere, maybe a House Mouse in Vilnius city, then what other possibilities? Scrutinizing the list, possibles included Black Rat (rare, maybe in Moletai), both Common and Pygmy Shrew (widespread, but I seem hopeless at catching or seeing these), Root Vole and Harvest Mouse (best chances are in the Nemunas Delta) and Muskrat (declining and localised). Well, needed to keep my act into order, so decided a mini trip to the Nemunas Delta would be a good idea - Fallow Deer exists in Kintai forest, Muskrat in Kintai fish pools and live trapping at the edge of reedbeds in the delta had possibility to produce Root Vole or Harvest Mouse (or even one of the shrews) ...a potential four or more species! So, how did it go? After a late afternoon

departure, I drove the required 300 km and got there just in time to set my five traps at strategic points near Rusne, flights of Cranes yodelled in the sunset, flocks of geese passed overhead, a couple of Roe Deer sauntered through meadows. Time would now tell where the rodents would play ball! Meanwhile, 20 km to the west, now truly dark, I began exploration of Kintai Forest, spotlight flashing either side. Not a hint of a Fallow Deer (or anything else) for over two hours, woodland and adjacent meadow equally drawing a blank. Began to think a dawn trip would be a better idea when suddenly two animals emerged onto the track directly in front of me ...10.20 p.m., mother and calf Fallow Deer, nice! Kipped in the car, then met local birder Boris Belchev at dawn for a Muskrat stake-out ...nobody told the Muskrats, they didn't make the rendezvous! Still, a couple of distant Beavers paddling down a drainage channel got me excited for a few moments, wrongly jumping to the conclusion that they were Muskrats ...but na, no vertical tails, very Beaver-esque heads, they were not the desired ones! Back at the Rusne traps, results were also far from stunning ...one empty trap, next empty too, next triggered but not occupied, the next empty. Just one left ...and indeed there crouched a vole in the compartment. Maybe a Root Vole? Nope, a Bank Vole instead, a widespread species that I have caught countless times this year. So, of the potential four species, one successfully seen, the year list advances to 49! 49. Fallow Deer. For a full account of the Baltic Mammal Challenge, [CLICK HERE](#) to open a new page.