



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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## ESTONIA

**Date - January 2020**

**Duration - 4 Days**

### **Destinations**

Tallinn - Lahemaa National Park - Loksa - Palmse

## Trip Overview

The last time I visited Estonia, it was because a friend had recently encountered a Eurasian lynx there, an animal I had already spent more than twenty years searching for across more destinations than I can even remember. I travelled on the off chance of seeing the same lynx and although I was not successful on that occasion, almost five years later I had a similar opportunity, when another friend noticed online camera trap footage of a female lynx with three or perhaps even four cubs. The film had been posted by a UK operator advertising a brief trip to look for this same family, but it would not depart for more than two weeks and I therefore decided to see if the local guide who had actually captured such an extraordinary sequence might be available any sooner. Fortunately he had nothing planned for the beginning of the year and within a few hours we had arranged a four-night stay. I remember writing after my last visit



back in 2015, that Estonia probably represents the best chance of seeing this elusive cat and I had been planning to return for some time, not only for the lynx, as this is one of Europe's premier wildlife destinations and deserves far more time and attention than the occasional fleeting visit to look for a single animal. In fact, I have been working on an extended mammal tour here to search for a few of Europe's rarest species, lynx of course, but also the critically endangered European mink, which now only endures in a few fragmented areas, and the Siberian flying squirrel, which in itself is not rare, but only occurs as far west as Estonia in mainland Europe. A major conservation initiative has seen the European mink reintroduced to Hiiumaa Island, where there is also a population of red deer, and genuinely wild brown bears are also regularly encountered in some areas, as opposed to the highly habituated animals that are baited at hides across much of the continent. Most of Europe's iconic mammals occur in Estonia, including wolf, moose, beaver, badger, red squirrel and wild boar, and they can be particularly easy to encounter here, partly because the country is relatively small, considerably less than 300 kilometres from west to east excluding any islands, and also because most of its forest is so accessible. In a way this is also a problem, as there is no doubt that deforestation is a serious issue in Estonia, as it is across most of



the planet of course, and that far too much primary forest is being destroyed. Some areas are protected, but nowhere near enough and even where so called sustainable logging does occur, it is being implemented far too intensely and with obvious environmental consequences, particularly in terms of the vulnerable species that rely on these precious ecosystems. Entire wildlife areas have either been lost or severely damaged and the country is simply not large enough to be able to sustain this level of destruction for a prolonged period. The issue is at least being discussed on a national level and it can only be hoped that the situation will improve, as for now many beautiful and productive natural areas remain in Estonia, most of which can be reached and explored easily. My time would be spent in and around Lahemaa National Park on the north coast, which was apparently the first ever national park in the former Soviet Union and, at 748 km<sup>2</sup>, is the largest in Estonia. Around a third of the reserve is actually sea and includes the tiny Mohni Island, Loksa, the most northerly town in the country, and Palmse Manor, which dates back to the 13th century and is one of four impressive and contrasting grand manor houses located within the national park. I would be able to visit precisely none of these and although I did take some enjoyable forest hikes during the day, most of my time was devoted exclusively to searching for a lynx. I consequently



experienced very few diurnal sightings, a couple of foxes and an otter to be exact, and whilst I did encounter slightly more at night, I did not try for photographs, purely because I did not want to waste a great deal of time attempting to shoot distant roe deer or absconding raccoon dogs. Very unusually for me, this was a one target trip and I basically pursued absolutely nothing that was not a lynx, which is why the picture at the top of this report is of a distant fox. Even given this slavish devotion to the cause, I have to say that to fail to see a single moose in Estonia was both a surprise and a first for me, as they are fairly common here, even if the north is not the best area to find them. Obviously this was a very brief trip, but even so, I had still expected to see moose and the situation was certainly not improved by how intensely they are hunted, as there are only around 12,000 of these huge distinctive creatures in Estonia and licences were issued to kill a staggering 6,000 in 2019. Whilst moose numbers have been relatively stable over recent years, there are too few here in my opinion and the population is far too young, as very few individual animals can expect to live anywhere approaching a full lifespan when they are being killed at this horrendous rate each year. The hunting season for moose had only finished on the 15th of December, which no doubt largely explains their unexpected absence, and the situation was similar in terms of roe deer, which were seen beyond the forest at night, but were also completely invisible during the day. You can usually rely on photographs of both of these commonly observed ungulates more or less anywhere in Estonia, but the roe deer hunting season had been extended from the 31st of December to the 15th of January and was in full swing during my four-day stay. Although I did not actually encounter any hunters, I did not see any roe deer either, at least not to photograph during the day, and wild boar numbers are I think at an all-time low, both in Estonia and across much of Europe, where literally millions of these extremely significant environmental engineers have been butchered in a misguided attempt to prevent the spread of African Swine Fever. For those who are interested, I explore the subject in much further detail in my 2018 Poland trip report, but, suffice to say, 95% of the wild boar in Estonia have already been slaughtered and all for a disease that was introduced to the continent by man and is almost exclusively transmitted by contaminated livestock. As elsewhere in Europe, excessive hunting is a major conservation issue in Estonia and brown bear and wolf are still legally killed here. There are thought to be barely 200 wolves in the entire country and they are so strictly controlled that the average lifespan of an Estonian wolf is a truly appalling one year and nine months. There are subsequently no old alpha wolves to teach the young pack members which prey they should take, which consequently leads to more domestic animals being killed and of course yet more wolves. While these ancient predators remain hated, feared and persecuted in almost equal measure, lynx have a somewhat better reputation, partly because they very rarely kill livestock. They have not been hunted in Estonia since a small number of permits were issued on Vormsi Island when I was last here in 2015. Sadly, hunters simply lied about where they had killed one of these elegant cats and after more lynx were shot than actually occur on the island, a complete ban was introduced the following year. The guide that I was going to meet has been living in the area his entire life and probably knows the



behaviour of these extraordinarily elusive predators better than anyone. He operates a system of camera traps that instantly report any activity directly to his phone and he routinely patrols an extensive network of reliable lynx tracks and territories. Furthermore, he is exceptionally good company and cares deeply about both the wildlife of his enchanting homeland and the continued welfare of his local community. I have to say that, regardless of any success or otherwise, he was a pleasure to spend time with and I am very much looking forward to exploring more of this wonderful country with such an enthusiastic and knowledgeable professional. He was with me at all times during the evening and early morning and there is no doubt that it would have been almost impossible to search with any precision or real expectancy without his considerable local expertise. High winds and blizzards hampered our first two days, which were blank, but by the evening of day three conditions were pretty much ideal. I have to admit that, having spent literally years in areas where they occur, I was not overly confident on this occasion, regardless of the change in the weather, and as I explained to my guide when we first met, as far as lynx are concerned, I travel more in hope than expectation. The previous two nights had not been particularly promising either, as there had been no lynx activity on any of the camera traps and the mother and cubs had not been recorded at all for more than two weeks. There had been one set of tracks in the snow very late on the second night, but we were unable to pick up the tracks again the next evening and moved on to another likely area that my guide also knows well and visits regularly. It is actually a good spot for moose and we were considering the unusual absence of this animal when he suddenly indicated that he had finally found one. I presumed that we were still discussing moose, but as I turned my head to follow his light, I found myself staring at my very first Eurasian lynx. Having searched for this one enigmatic creature for so long, it is extremely difficult to convey the emotion of those initial moments, pure joy and elation, mixed with almost utter disbelief I would guess, but there was also a deep personal satisfaction and a profound sense of peace and fulfilment. Although the lynx was no more than 25 metres away and I could see it clearly, I reached for my binoculars instead of my camera and asked my guide to take a reference shot while I held the spotlight for him. Having waited for this moment for more than a quarter of a century, I was instantly aware that I should not waste it scrabbling around for a shot that was never likely to be much more than mediocre. As my guide held the light, I watched this enthralling beautiful animal for what I thought was about 30 seconds, but what he later mentioned was almost two minutes. However long it was or felt, the lynx ultimately moved from where it had been sitting staring directly at us and walked parallel to our vehicle before disappearing into the depths of the forest, at which point we followed briefly and photographed its tracks. In terms of sightings, it was not by any means the greatest that you could hope for, as lynx are curious creatures and have been known to remain at a site for an hour or even two in some rare cases. However, to me it was everything that it needed to be and my only regret was that my son James was not at my side, as he has searched for a lynx with me for more than fifteen years and I thought of him the moment I realised that it was not a moose. I had no idea how to tell him later that evening, but a few seconds after I had replied to his text asking me how I had got on, the following response arrived, *'Brilliant...we did it at last!'*, which says far more about my son than I ever could. I know that we will see a lynx together at some stage, as the next night, my fourth and last, I proved that the curse had been lifted once and for all by spotting my own, which was on my side of the car as we were spotlighting. It was fairly distant and we even thought that it may be the lynx from the previous evening, as we were less than five kilometres away from that spot and these furtive cats can easily travel that distance in a single night. However, entirely unbelievably, an hour or so later we spotted this second lynx at exactly the same location, but this time at no more than 40 metres and could clearly see that it was a smaller, younger animal. At one stage my guide had observed that you need both persistence and luck to see a lynx in the wild and having searched patiently for more than 25 years, my persistence had finally been rewarded with an extraordinary measure of good fortune. Three encounters in two nights with one of the rarest creatures on the planet was certainly worth the wait and we did indeed do it at last son.





No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Eurasian Lynx	Lynx lynx	Three sightings of two animals, all at night.
2	Raccoon Dog	Nyctereutes procyonoides	Three individuals on three different nights.
3	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Low numbers observed on a daily basis and the only mammal encountered during the day and at night.
4	Eurasian Otter	Lutra lutra	Lone animal hunting in the harbour of the small coastal village of Viinistu during the afternoon.
5	Roe Deer	Capreolus capreolus	Several sightings each evening, but none during the day.
6	Mountain Hare	Lepus timidus	Four sightings, all during the evening or early morning.
7	European Hare	Lepus europaeus	Three individuals, all at night.



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