

Lynx in Estonia

Mammal-watching

A Greentours Itinerary

In Estonia, March is the month when the land is covered with snow, or at least there are some patches of snow under the forest and on small dirt roads. Migrating birds are returning and the sun is moving higher and higher every day. Spring is not only in the air but also in the hearts of many birds and mammals. For example, it's the mating season for the main target of this tour – the Eurasian Lynx. It's the period when there are really good chances to spot one, as they are more active and come to open areas much more often. Estonia has perhaps the highest Lynx population density. These Lynx are amongst the largest of the breed and so an adult male is quite an impressive beast. Their main prey – Roe Deer, is doing better year after year and so is the local Lynx population. Right now, an estimated 600-700 Eurasian Lynx inhabit the forests of Estonia, and the best areas to spot them are Lahemaa and Matsalu National Parks in the northwestern parts of the country. Lahemaa was also the first national park grounded in the whole former Soviet Union and is still the largest national park in Estonia.

Looking for the Lynx will be done with thermal imagery binoculars and we start usually an hour/half an hour before sunset. Usually, we look until late in the evening or sometimes even until the first hours of the new day depending on our success and level of tiredness. We move and the Lynx moves and during these 6 evenings, there will be a very high probability that at one point our paths cross. It must be noted that looking for Lynx means quite a lot of driving around in the dark.

Although this tour concentrates on the Eurasian Lynx, we will most likely also meet other mammals sharing the same habitats, such as Elk, Roe Deer, Snow Hare, Pine Marten, and Raccoon Dogs, just to name the main ones. Daytime will be used for resting and looking for bird specialties, such as the forest grouse and woodpeckers. If the snow conditions are suitable, we would also go Lynx-tracking. Evening excursions will give us also the chance to spot several species of owls, such as the Ural Owl and Pygmy Owl.

Day 1 to Tallinn and to Matsalu National Park

We'll drive from Tallinn Airport to Matsalu National Park where we will stay for three days. During the first evening, we will not waste any time and be straight out looking for the Lynx.

Days 2 - 4(am) Matsalu National Park and the search for Lynx

Matsalu National Park is one of the most important bird migration areas in Europe. The mosaic of natural meadows and forests are also excellent habitats for Brown

Hares, Roe Deer and Moose. This abundance of prey attracts predators as well – Matsalu is home to Eurasian Lynx, Wolves, and, more recently, a newcomer: the Golden Jackal. March is a particularly active time for Lynx. We'll find the weather perhaps rather cool but the Lynx won't be noticing as spring is definitely in the air for them – it's the mating season and for a week or two at the end of March and at that start of April they are out and about far more than is usual. Excessively secretive for much of the year, they now take to the open, at least more than the rest of the year, in search of a mate. Sometimes, they even appear in broad daylight. We will drive through the meadows and forests of Matsalu National Park in search of Lynx and other wildlife. Nightly we usually start before sunset, and sometimes the drives last late into the night, as mammals tend to be bolder and easier to spot around midnight.

The first migratory birds arrive in Matsalu as early as March. Common early arrivals include Cranes, Lapwings, Skylarks, and Snow Buntings. In the ice-free coastal waters, we can also spot Arctic waterbirds such as Long-tailed Duck, Common Eider, Scoters, Scaup and Mergansers. But there is another fascinating mammal living along the western coast of Estonia – the ringed seal, whose local population is the southernmost in the world. In March, ringed seals give birth to their pups, and if the weather allows, we may spot seals resting on the sea ice or rocks, and perhaps even see white-coated pups. As a break from our Lynx searches, we take daytime walks along the coast to look for arriving migratory birds and seals.

Days 4(pm) – 7(am) **Lahemaa National Park and the search for Lynx**

Today we'll make the two and a half hour drive to Lahemaa National Park. Lahemaa is much more forested than Matsalu, though there are also meadows scattered among the taiga-like forests. In Lahemaa, we'll continue searching for Lynx and other wildlife. The climate in northern Estonia is more continental, and in March there is usually still a thick layer of snow, which means we may spot fresh Lynx tracks. If conditions allow, we might even follow the tracks on foot.

As with the first night, we will concentrate mainly on looking for Lynx, and the best time to see them is early morning before dawn, late evenings, and night time. For us, daytime will be used for recovery and on day tours to get the blood going and experience the beauty of Estonian spring. Lahemaa's extensive unspoilt bays, bogs, mires and forests was the very first national park created in the old Soviet Union and has thus been under protection for eighty years or so. Pine and spruce form Lahemaa's extensive forests. The understory is mainly lichens, Cowberry and Bilberry, and this low ground cover is very helpful when looking for our quarry – no problems with thick bramble and nettle beds here! We can't guarantee sightings but we'll not want to for trying and we'll hope for more than one sighting too. The researchers and your guides have a network of trap cameras watching the movements of the Lynx as well as helpful technology such as thermal imaging scopes and LED lamps to aid in our search. We'll concentrate much of searching effort at night but also early morning and evening too.

During our search for Lynx we'll undoubtedly come across some of the other mammals that inhabit Estonia's mix of forest and bogs. Roe Deer as mentioned are common nowadays. Pine Martens are very active at this season and Brown Bears will have recently woken and be wandering round forests where they are, like the Lynx, easier to spot at this time of year. Snow Hares are common and we'll also likely see Brown Hare. We'll undoubtedly encounter Red Fox and Badger and very likely the strange Raccoon Dog. Wild Boar are not so numerous, but there are around one hundred and fifty Moose living in Lahemaa and they particularly like the bogs and mires that here form extensive complexes. Contorted pines emerging from the sphagnum look like recent invaders but many are in fact two hundred years old! Beavers inhabit these areas and we've a small chance of a sighting or two.

Though mammals will be very much our aim we'll no doubt have sightings of Black Grouse, Western Capercaillie and Hazelhen as we search the forests, the raucous cries of Nutcrackers around us. Woodpeckers are numerous with seven species - Northern three-toed and Black Woodpeckers are amongst the easier to see, White-backed a little harder. During the week we should encounter Dipper, Willow Tit and Common Crane. At night we will most likely also meet owls, notably Ural Owl and Pygmy Owl. We can also hope to see Hawk Owls and maybe Waxwings too. Coastal waters may produce views of Whooper and Bewick Swans, Velvet Scoters, Smew, and White-tailed Eagles.

Day 7(pm)

Return to Tallinn and Departure

Today we can have the last look for whatever is still missing from our wishlist and then return to Tallinn for our flight home.

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our previous Mammal Watching tours to Estonia. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.

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