

Bieszczady - Poland

APRIL 2022

2/04

Everyone was at the airport on time, although not all arriving on the same plane. After some searching at the arrival gate all seven of us are quickly on our way to the border region of Poland with Ukraine; more specifically the mountain range of Bieszczady which is part of the Carpathians in Eastern Europe.

Initially the outward journey takes place in continuous rain. Our first stop, for lunch, is therefore welcome for both guides; it breaks up the ride in unpleasant weather conditions.

Some white storks on the way clearly indicate that spring has arrived. Also typical are frequent encounters with groups of roe deer in the urban areas that we cross. Equal with a rookery (colony of rooks) in an old oak forest just before the town of Pilzno. The noisy birds fluttering around their nests, and the continuous flying in and out of the forest results in a cloud of activity in the tree canopy.

As the last two hours of the ride will pass through open natural landscape, a brief stop is made to allow participants to dig out their optical equipment. Dan's hawk eye gets the first hawkfinch of the journey despite the bird sitting at the very top of a large spruce. A herd of red deer, a fox, a dipper and a few ravens are also seen.



Upon arrival at the lodgings, dinner is served almost immediately after everyone has installed themselves in their rooms. The stopping of the rain is a signal and an opportunity for both guides: dry weather after a period of rain is always a good time to spot wildlife. Once a period of sheltering from the rain has passed, animals then go out to look for food. Moreover, it is not too cold, windless and cloudy; perfect conditions for the main target species of the trip: the boreal lynx! We know what we are after!

Two sub-areas receive specific attention. It quickly yields sightings of the more common species that we typically see on our nocturnal excursions here: badger, fox, hare and roe deer. It is also teeming with mice in the thermal camera and, just like during the previous tour, we find hedgehogs again. Something we never managed to find in recent years when we only used the spotlights.

The outline of our first feline raises the tension but it is to be short-lived, when we swap to the spotlight, it turns out to be a domestic cat. Something that is not exceptional here either. Especially when there are a few houses on the route through the wooded area we are in.

But with the next feline it's bingo. The contours of a larger cat make both guides suddenly super alert. When Mark switches on his lamp and Jan sees a brown-black spot pattern moving through his binoculars, we know we've hit the jackpot: we've got a boreal lynx in our sights!

In a side profile, the most striking features of the moving lynx can be seen by Jan. In the open areas between the spruce trees, the typical features of the lynx can be seen: the head with whiskers, long and strong legs, the brush ears and the short, black-tipped tail.

Even though the lynx has subsequently moved a little higher up, invisible to the naked eye, both thermal cameras prove to be an incredible asset. All participants clearly see the contours of the animal, its brush ears and sideburns. Shining the spotlight unfortunately does not work as the animal is hidden too deep in the forest. The thick vegetation makes observation with the binoculars in the spotlight a mission impossible. But the species has been seen through the thermal camera and everyone is very satisfied. The lynx then moves position, and we can again view it from the minibus, but still only with the thermal camera. We then try to get the lynx to walk where Jan and the clients are positioned with a view of a forest path where it is hoped that the lynx will cross. But it doesn't. Halfway through his approach, he stops his progress. Only Mark, who approaches the animal to get it in our direction, gets the lynx nicely in his binoculars. But the lynx is still there, and in the end our persistence in getting it into view the real way, pays off! After frequent maneuvering with the minibus, we fortunately find two positions where we have the animal in the spotlight.

We all get out of the minivan several times, both guides give instructions and work with the spotlights, all things that do not disturb the animal in the slightest: then the animal looks at us, lays down for a while or licks the fur of its front paws and ears.

Unbelievable! The first evening and immediately a boreal lynx in the picture that can be viewed in detail by everyone. Judging by photos from third parties known to both tour leaders that were here in February, it seems to be the same individual from then. This location turns out to be a hotspot where local lynx like to hang out.



After having been actively involved in this observation for almost two hours, we decided to leave the scene. After all, it is almost midnight. The lynx itself? It is still there when we leave!

3/04

The morning looks completely different from the night before. It is only just above freezing, and it is snowing. The first sub-area ensures passport control by the straz graniczna aka the local border guards. While waiting in the minibus it is again Dan who discovers a good species: a ring ouzel. This obliging bird is surrounded by four other thrush species: blackbird, fieldfare, mistle thrush and redwing. It turns out to be bird species that we will see en masse in the coming week during their migration further north. The quantity of birds is still good here! The morning drive yields the first herd of bison, which are in a meadow visible from a vantage point. Carnivore wise, we only come across tracks and faeces of brown bear and wolf. Other bird and mammal species that we see during the morning are black redstart, buzzard, raven and roe deer.

Once back at the lodging, breakfast is served and there is time to sleep or time for leisure. After all, the night was very short! After lunch we head towards the border with Ukraine for the afternoon walk. A pit stop for hazel hen is not productive. But we do observe a dipper from the bridge that we cross back and forth in the patch of forest where normally the grouse are.

Near a beaver pool, we point out the call of a willow tit to the British; a species that isn't doing well on English soil. Here it is still an abundant species of passerine. Towards the border we also briefly see a grey-headed woodpecker and we quickly check a camera trap that was hung near a place where we found super fresh tracks of a mother lynx with three kittens during the previous tour. Many animals passed the camera trap in recent days, but not the cat with her kittens. A resident pair of nutcrackers play the game during the afternoon walk.



Play back of their call something that works quickly. Always nice to see these beauties! Since the recent snow, it is pleasant to walk through a landscape that looks enchanting. However, the cold is not! Photographing a beaver near a beaver pool is a matter of persevering as fingers get cold very quickly when manually focusing the lens. But the photographic results it produces are quite impressive and rewarding!



On the way back, Jan notices movement in the still water of a beaver pool. Experience shows that this is suspiciously reminiscent of otters. Something that is confirmed with a quick check through the binoculars: otter! We quickly get out and try to intercept the animal as it moves through a meandering channel that leads towards the nearby San River. Success: the animal swims past at very close range.

Once it is dark, we add some nice sightings to the list of observations: a different herd of bison, a raccoon dog, four beavers and a wolf. Unfortunately, the latter is a patrolling individual that is only visible through the thermal. Apart from the tour leader Mark, no one else sees this loner.



Seen by everyone are the tracks of a brown bear that crossed the road just in front of us. The paw prints are so fresh that they still light up in the thermal camera! We also find a second otter moving across the land just before we arrive at the lodging house! Wildlife encounters always any time at any moment and always different here!

4/04

The least productive day of the trip. The morning is one of splitting up. Jan scans a slope where wolves and bears were seen in the past; Mark and the group members do a full loop around a known pasture complex that lies in the middle of a wooded area bordering the San River. But both morning sessions are not productive. With Mark, only two fresh wolf droppings and a sighting of white-backed woodpecker are interesting; with Jan it is mainly the variety of bird species that is interesting: a lesser

spotted woodpecker, black woodpecker, grey-headed woodpecker, bullfinch, willow tit, nutcracker, goshawk and some ravens.

After breakfast it is time to sleep again. The afternoon walk yields two nutcrackers and two beavers. The nocturnal session reveals the same herd of bison as the day before, although this time they are hidden deeper in thickets of hazels quite far down an adjacent roadside. We still managed to take a picture though. We also saw a few of the more abundant mammal species of the area: roe deer, red deer, fox and hares. Avifaunal, we must make do this evening with a brief sighting of a Ural owl along with a long-eared owl that cooperates much better.

5/04

In terms of feeling like spring, the season seems to have taken a step back: it is freezing and everything is white. Moreover, the temperature feels a lot lower than the actual temperature because of the harsh wind. We see a lot of red deer, hare, red squirrels as well as fresh tracks of wolf. But so far, not one morning with a sighting of wolves patrolling their territory!

After breakfast, we pack before heading to the second host. A well-known walk-through prime habitat for bison is one that stretches our legs during the afternoon. After sitting in the minibus for a long time, something that feels quite pleasant.

Judging by very fresh hoof prints, it's clear that bison are in our immediate vicinity, but seeing them we don't manage. But we did see brambling, bullfinch, treecreeper and a white-backed woodpecker. A black woodpecker was also heard.



As so often, Jan locates fresh tracks and markings from a lynx at the highest point of the ridge over which the hiking trail runs. It is a permanent place where urine is always sprayed, or excrement of the species can be found. Fresh wolf and brown bear tracks that crossed the path also ensures that walking around here always provides a feeling of exclusivity. The awareness of being constantly surrounded by large herbivores and carnivores. Nowhere else in Europe is that possible!

Mark, who was waiting for us near point B where we left the forest, checked a nearby camera trap. On the memory card there are a lot of images of bison and bears. On the way out we first have a short break to eat our picnic meal. Being there just around dusk, we try to lure in three most wanted bird species resident in the area: pygmy owl, Ural owl and Tengmalm's owl. But it is only a tawny owl that is calling. Just before dark we saw a woodcock and the resident beaver.



At the place where Mark's camera trap hangs, a brown bear appears in the thermal, but the place is so badly located that spotting the species, just like last year, is a mission impossible here. Moreover, the animal, like all bears do here when it is discovered, immediately flees.

Bears are and remain the most difficult large carnivore to view during the dark here. The sound of a vehicle makes them super restless and when they are shined with a lamp, they immediately run away. Fortunately, shining with the spotlight succeeds again with bison twice: just before and just after the unsatisfactory bear sighting. This also applies to a wildcat near another beaver pool, a badger moving on an old train track, pine martens crossing twice, hares, foxes and deer. The evening ends with two bison cows grazing near the place where we observed the wildcat earlier in the evening! A very productive evening again!

06/04

At the first light of day, we are partly on our way again; after all, three of the five participants decided to get a good night's sleep following the previous nights, which were all very short. They are not there this early morning session and that's not that surprising. If you want to spot animals here, you must try at times when people are normally not active: dawn, dusk and night. A kind of irregularity that causes fatigue after a few days.

But back to the facts. Despite the wintry conditions, we still ventured out to take a shortcut to a core area where we found fresh wolf droppings in recent days. The faster you are in such an area and the greater your range, the greater the chance that you will meet these pack animals during their morning patrol to mark their territory.

But just before the highest mountain peak of our route, our way comes to a halt. The last 100 meters of the steep gravel road just before the summit is covered with too much snow. As a result, we lose grip on the road surface, and we get no further than some patina on site. Since getting stuck is not an option, we decided to make a U-turn. After all, we can also get to our core area via a different route. Moreover, we cross territories of the five wolf packs that are in the whole area we cover on this trip. Guiding knowledge and field experience that soon turns out to be correct: within half an hour, while taking the alternative route to the area where we want to be, we collide with another wolf pack. When our eyes first fall on excrement and super fresh paw prints on the freshly snow-covered road surface, we discover four wolves sitting together. They are on a somewhat higher small plateau bordering the road. One of the animals, sitting down, looks us straight in the eye. Goosebumps! Adrenaline! Completely overwhelmed by the moment, we try to shoot a proof plate of this moment as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, that just doesn't work as the wolves abruptly vanish from their look out. They immediately seek cover provided by the forest. Their nervousness and timidity clearly show that they have recently been on a hunt.



Busy ravens quickly reveal that the wolves apparently did more than just mark their territory here; there is a fresh wolf kill on the bank of the river adjacent to the other side of the road. The ravens fly to and from the fresh carcass of a red deer with their beaks full of meat. Two squeaking buzzards are also present.

We decided to position ourselves a little further with a view of the plateau where the pack was located and hope to get the returning animals in sight. Since this only works with one hiding pack member through the thermal camera, we don't stay on site for long. In addition, it is starting to snow harder, which obstructs the view. We decided to drive back and forth very slowly near the crime scene. But the wolves clearly understood our spying strategy! After all, tracks of three pack members, which have moved in an arc around us, reappear on the surface a little further on the main road!

What follows is an exciting hide and seek game that the wolves keep winning. The super fresh footprints of the trio, clearly on a nearby branching forest road indicate that the animals, instead of being discovered, managed to hide from us in the lower valley to the left. Or in the slightly higher part of the forest right of the forest road we drove down. Even when we turn around, fresh wolf tracks are visible in the opposite direction while we are driving. So, the pack twice ran in front of us without being seen! Way too smart are these animals!

However, since there were still no wolves present at the carcass a little later, we decided to take the forest road again that the wolves took earlier. Unfortunately, another side path on which the tracks continue is not accessible by car, so we lose track. With google maps we quickly find out where they might reappear in an open area further along the inaccessible track. But that is something we fail to do because of too much snow in that area.

But never mind as the first wolf pack sighting of this tour is a fact and, judging by the overall picture of the sighting, it is undoubtedly a highlight - second to the lynx sighting. Plus, with the kill, we have something to return to later in the day.

The plan to start a walk near the wolf kill changes as the carcass has been dragged. Contrary to what we expected, the wolves were at the cadaver, during the day. This is probably due to the grey, dark weather conditions and the many snow showers. Poor visibility is something wolves take advantage of. The changed situation means that we postponed a planned walk, in a nearby old spruce forest to look for three-toed woodpeckers.



Instead, we decided to position ourselves near the kill and hope for the return of the pack members. But that doesn't happen. We must content ourselves with the ravens, the buzzards, a fly by kingfisher, a dipper and a grey wagtail for the entire watch session of almost three hours. No trace of carnivores, however. It is only at dusk that an animal approaches the carcass. Unfortunately, it is a fox and not a wolf. Twice it quickly steals some pieces of meat and then disappears into the darkness again. When it is dark and we, agitated and disappointed with the absence of the wolves, prepare to drive away, the pack shows up from behind us. Unfortunately, from a completely wrong angle, five pack members cross the river at speed towards the carcass. All this is only visible through the thermal camera that Mark is using. Moreover, just when they are close to the cadaver, something startles them. A quick attempt to see something in the beam of the flashlight fails. The pack disappears as quickly as it appears, and we are left empty-handed.

Wildlife here is far from habituated and totally unpredictable as it turns out completely different than expected or hoped. Since the long sitting session in the minibus, we decided to return to the lodging so that we can be fresh and ready again tomorrow morning. Mark does offer the option to accompany him on a last attempt to observe the wolves at the kill. John and Dan do that. It turns out to be a master move! Initially they pass the wolf less carcass, but that is not the case when they turn around a little further on and return. Now there are two wolves near the carcass that can be seen with both the thermal camera and the spotlight. One of the two pack members leaves the carcass quickly, the other, which remains a little longer, can be viewed a lot better. Moreover, by imitating his call, Mark manages to get the wolves to howl. Something that is also seen through the thermal camera! Incredibly pleased with this sighting, the trio of Mark, John and Dan return to the lodging house afterwards. Mission accomplished!

7/04

Again, at the crack of dawn we drive away from the lodging house. In Eastern Europe this is already at 5:15 in the morning during this time of the year. Sleeping in is something that just isn't done during this trip!

The car is parked in the vicinity of the wolf kill. Unfortunately, the carcass has gone, eaten or probably dragged away. We first try to get the wolves to howl by imitating their howling sound. Something that works great! Up to three times they answer! Though, none of the pack members emerges from the forest to check out what is happening. It's obvious they don't want to cooperate as we wish. We leave the minibus and check the immediate vicinity of the kill to hang a trail camera. A drag trail eventually brings us to what remains of the red deer. But it's just leftovers. What is striking is how the fur is completely skinned and dropped a bit further away from the remaining skeleton which has remnants of flesh on it. Most likely a wakeful bear will pass here soon to gobble up the leftovers. Soon there will be no trace left of the crime scene that we investigate. Eat and be eaten something that literally applies to the situation here. The next day our assumption turned out to be correct. An adult brown bear passing by is visible on the camera trap images we put up.

We have breakfast a little earlier afterwards and, due to the better weather, offer a birding walk near the lodging for those interested. Where we managed to spot hazel grouse during previous tours, we bumped into a pair of three-toed woodpeckers. A bird species belonging to the rarer breeding birds of the area.

After lunch we tried to locate middle-spotted woodpecker at two locations, but they did not cooperate. But we did find a male black woodpecker!



Then the beaver pool is planned where we saw our lynx the first evening. Since we arrive here just at dusk, we immediately score with two most wanted bird species resident in the area: pygmy owl and ural owl. The ural owl showed well, calling, passing and then hovering over our heads; the pygmy owl is whistled in by Jan who's imitating the characteristic *pjuu* - call of the species. Something that works perfectly! In no time a bird responds to Jan's whistling and arrives close to the minibus around which we are lined up.

We then continue to check some nest boxes for Tengmalm's owl but, unfortunately, they are not occupied. Heading back, we see another beaver sitting on the ice and we find the third otter of the trip. A bit bizarre is that this mustelid is located within the fenced area of an artificial pond. But it is a wild otter without doubt!

On the way back to the lodgings, the pace of mammal detection with the thermal camera is fast: roe deer, red deer, hares and foxes are numerous. We also saw two wild boars, a badger, again beaver and the second otter for the evening. This time on top of a beaver lodge. Nearby are two bison and a woodcock. Without a doubt it was another very productive day!



8/04

The final early morning with a last chance for large carnivores at dawn; except for Dan, everyone is present. We start with a beaver sitting on the ice 10 minutes from the lodging house. Then we stop near a place where it is simply teeming with the pugmarks of several brown bears. The mosaic of footprints in the snow is impressive! Full of expectation we follow the tracks that are still visible on the forest path for a long way. We stop briefly for a hazel grouse that flies up from the forest path, but bears have not appeared on the scene so far. Once we arrive at the paved road of some hamlets, we decide, instead of continuing, to turn around so that we have a second chance to spot bears. To our great surprise something that works immediately. A young, skinny bear crosses the tarmac just as we have turned to start the ride back.



Running away quickly is something that the young animal does not do. This contrasts with other bear sightings in the recent past. Instead, the bear calmly strolls further up the slope. This means that we can follow the animal a little further and photograph it in the grounds of a resort with holiday cabins!

After the sighting of the lynx the first evening and the wolf pack at its kill the last two days, this is undoubtedly the third highlight of the trip! Nothing but happy faces and satisfied people in the minibus afterwards! On the way back we see another hazel grouse, add two more white-backed woodpeckers to the list of bird species on this trip, bump into a herd of red deer and see a red squirrel and some hawfinches when we stop briefly at the place to collect the camera trap. As thought, there is indeed a bear on it that indeed took care of the last remnants of the wolf kill! What a morning again!



In the afternoon we split up. Some go on a fixed walk with Mark, and some accompany Jan on a birding excursion. Some locations with deciduous trees receive specific attention. This is to look for grey-headed woodpecker, but the weather is too cold and grey for birds to be active. Though we eventually see a white-backed woodpecker and the first lesser-spotted eagle of the season. Mark's hike is also productive. During their walk they observe a herd of no less than 26 bison! The evening session provides a second wildcat for the trip as well as a beech marten. Another day that counts!

09/04

The morning is one that is used to sleep in. Afterwards it goes smoothly towards Krakow. There is only a brief stop to take pictures of a lesser-spotted eagle sitting in a meadow. Once we have arrived near Balice airport, it is time to say goodbye. A super pleasant trip consisting of nothing but nice, friendly and relaxed people whose efforts were fully rewarded with a series of fantastic and phenomenal sightings.

