

The LYNXES of SALGARDA MEADOW

A Three Day “Twitch” For Eurasian Lynx in Southern Sweden

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Introduction

We heard about Lynxes at Salgarda in Sweden quite by accident. A mutual friend, Mark Bibby, alerted Phil to the intriguing fact that a birding trip, run by Naturetrek, had been fortunate enough to stumble across a pair of Lynxes (a mother and sub-adult) at one of their regular owl sites. On closer investigation it turned out that these cats had been seen regularly for some six or eight weeks previously. I got a call from Phil on the Thursday (May 5th) bringing me this astonishing news and we decided, there and then, to drop everything and set off as quickly as possible to see if we could get a sighting. The Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*) is one of the hardest cats in the world to see in the wild and this opportunity was simply too good to miss!

By Sunday afternoon (May 8th) we were on a Ryanair flight to Stockholm's Vasteras airport on a three day "Lynx twitch". We crossed our fingers that the Lynxes were still in town – if they were, then perhaps our chances of a sighting might be 50% or better.

The First Evening – May 8th

We were met at Vasteras by a local guide we had engaged to show us the site and who had worked previously with Naturetrek. After picking up our hire car, we drove the thirty minute journey to Skultuna, a small town to the north-west of Vasteras, and checked into our hotel, the newly refurbished Brukshotellet. Wasting no time, we then proceeded to Salgarda, some eight or nine kilometres to the south-west, where we were told the Lynxes were being seen.

The site consists of two large meadows, separated by a farm track on which a red and yellow metal barrier blocks unauthorised access to vehicles. The meadows are each about 200 to 300 metres across and 500 to 600 metres long, forming two adjacent rectangles. One lies broadly to the north-west; the other roughly to the south-east. A narrow drainage ditch winds its way through the meadows, lined with ancient fence posts. Barbed wire once connected the posts but this has been removed and some six kilometres of it now awaits collection and disposal by the Forestry Department! The meadows consist of rank grass and other vegetation. They are more or less open but the ground undulates and there is thus a lot of "dead ground" – so superficial scanning can easily miss whatever is present. Most importantly, the meadows are absolutely stiff with Water Voles, which attract predators such as Great Grey Owl, Red Fox and, of course, Lynx. The meadows are surrounded by dense forests of spruce and silver birch, the ground carpeted by thick moss.

We arrived at about 16.45 to find several wildlife enthusiasts already in situ. These, it turned out, were mainly interested in photographing the resident Great Grey Owl, though they were also aware of the Lynx and one person we spoke to had seen it six times in twenty-four visits to the site over the preceding two months. We set ourselves up on the access road near to the barrier, thereby giving ourselves a clear field of view across both meadows. Then began the waiting game; we could do no more than keep scanning the meadows and hope that a Lynx came into view.

By 18.00, the mammal list still awaited its first entry though we had seen a few interesting birds: Tree Pipits, Whinchats and Mistle Thrushes seemed to be common and the descending scale of the Willow Warbler could be heard almost continuously. A couple of Common Cranes flew overhead and

a Sparrowhawk circled the north-western meadow. Then, I noticed something dark-backed and low-profiled weaving its way through the grass on the eastern side, at about 150 metres. My pulse rate quickened as I grabbed the scope for a closer look. But a second or two later we both groaned in disappointment as we realised that it was a Red Fox, not a Lynx.

As evening came the temperature dropped and the mosquitoes became ever more active. Woodcock were roding overhead and more Cranes came and went. But no Lynx. By 21.00 quite a gallery of wildlife watchers had gathered; around fifteen people now lined the causeway, most wanting to see the Owl, from what we could gather. At 21.45 it was too gloomy to scan effectively and our fingers were numb with cold. So, with neither Lynx nor Owl to show for our first effort we gave up and headed back to Skultuna.

We took a slight detour on the way back, not entirely intentionally, and found ourselves a little to the north of Skultuna where we discovered an interesting looking canalised arm of the river. Making the most of being slightly lost we decided to check it for bats. In trees next to the water I picked up the familiar “wet slapping” sounds of Soprano Pipistrelle at the regulation 55 Khz on the bat detector. At 60 Khz, as expected, these morphed into fast dry clicks. Turning our attention to the canal itself, I was delighted to pick up more fast, dry clicking immediately, only this time at 45 Khz. Obviously a Myotis species was the culprit, but which one? Daubenton’s, the natural diagnosis, doesn’t occur here. That left, as reasonable candidates, Pond Bat, Natterer’s Bat and Brandt’s Bat. But the volume was far too high for Natterer’s and the clicks too much of a staccato rattle rather than a continuous “sizzle”. And when we finally saw the bats themselves, skimming low across the surface in fast and agile zig-zags, we were left in no doubt – Pond Bat it was.

Morning Session – May 9th

Rising at first light, we were back at the causeway at about 05.00. The sky was clear and it had been a cold, frosty night. A chilling mist hung low over the meadows. We were a little surprised not to have the site to ourselves at this ungodly hour but one other enthusiast was already in place. He beckoned us over and, to our delight, pointed out the Great Grey Owl sitting on a rock two hundred metres away. For the next thirty minutes or so we forgot the chill and watched intently as the Owl moved from one vantage point to another, quartering the meadow in search of Water Voles. And we didn’t have long to wait before seeing it finally grab one and make off with it into the forest.

But the main order of business was Lynx and we soon enough got down to some serious scanning. At 06.00 the sun appeared over the eastern tree tops and the meadows began to receive warmth and light. By 07.00 the temperature had risen to comfortable levels and the frost was fast disappearing. But, despite much determined scanning, we still had no Lynx.

Then, at 07.40, on yet another routine scan of the south-eastern meadow, I picked up a small dark object just to the left of the ditch, at perhaps 250 metres. Quickly lining up the scope I could see straight away that this wasn’t a Fox. I alerted Phil and another local enthusiast with whom we’d been in conversation earlier. I called “Lynx” but, to be honest, I wasn’t absolutely sure. The animal was sitting down and only the head and shoulders were visible above the grass. Our Swedish companion called “Domestic Cat”, though even at that range I could see that if it was then we were looking at the world’s biggest moggie! I wondered for a moment if it might even be a Roe Deer. But suddenly all our doubts were swept away as the animal got up and walked a few paces. Now we

could see clearly the whole profile of the animal and Lynx it most definitely was! In the slight heat haze we were struggling to see much detail but the black-tipped bob-tail, the pointed ears and the brown spots on its tawny flanks were all fairly clearly visible. We presumed that it was the sub-adult rather than the mature female based on size and general characteristics and also on the fact that we had been told that the female had quite a pronounced white beard.



Since the cat seemed to be gradually heading left, towards the northern edge of the meadow, we decided to walk round to the main track and get a closer look. Creeping into position, we got to about 150 to 200 metres and re-positioned the scope, using a small bush as cover. Now, more detail was apparent. We could see clearly some facial detail, including the ear tufts, and the intricate pattern of spots and streaks on its flanks and legs. The backs of its ears were white, edged in black. It stalked its way along the ditch, gradually getting closer. But, just when it seemed it might come within good camera range, it stalled and retreated into the ditch. We had a few last glimpses but at 08.05 it disappeared for good. We had enjoyed 25 minutes of continuous viewing in good light and at reasonably close range. We were off the mark!

After half an hour of patiently hoping it might return we gave up the hunt at around 08.45 and went back to the hotel for a celebratory cup of tea.

Evening Session – May 9th

Armed with provisions from the local supermarket in Skultuna, we were now self-sufficient and could spend whatever time we wanted in the field without starving. We returned to the causeway at about 16.30 in brilliant sunshine and temperatures of 25 degrees Celsius. Quite a contrast to earlier that day!

We were expecting the Lynxes to be more or less crepuscular, though in fact quite a few of the earlier reported sightings had been in broad daylight. We shouldn't therefore have been too surprised to see the young Lynx re-appear in the eastern meadow at about 17.00. This time it was rather more distant, perhaps as much as 450 metres and in the rippling heat haze it was a somewhat indistinct object. We decided to try to get a bit closer on the main track and made a stealthy approach on the northern flank of the Meadow. But two other watchers had spotted the Lynx too and had similar ideas. However, their movements were not as discreet as ours and, by the time we had crept into good positions, the Lynx had bolted into trees on the far side of the Meadow.

I decided to sit tight and await events. And, half an hour later, my patience was rewarded with a brief re-appearance of the Lynx. It slinked its way out of the distant shadows and looked around the Meadow, obviously nervous and uneasy. It emerged a couple of metres out of the trees, hesitated, and then lost its nerve and scuttled back into the sanctuary of the forest. There was nothing else to do but wait, hoping for another encore. But after two hours of fruitless vigil it was clear that it wasn't going to return and I reluctantly made my way back to the causeway.



Here, quite a gaggle of enthusiasts had gathered and were absorbed in watching the Great Grey Owl – which had returned to hunt for Voles once again. Phil and I ate a picnic supper and chatted to local bird watchers but by 21.00 it was obvious that our Lynx-watching was done for the day and we gave it best. Once again the mosquitoes were out in force, if anything even more so than previously.

Morning Session – May 10th

We made another excruciatingly early start, arriving at the causeway at about 04.50. One other enthusiast was present and we exchanged pleasantries as we set up our gear. Once again the Great Grey Owl was in business - and successfully too – taking at least two Water Voles as we were

watching. Otherwise, the early morning passed uneventfully, save for a Water Vole crossing the track and a Cuckoo flying past over the eastern Meadow.

Then, at 07.30, the young Lynx materialised (it seemed) from nowhere and I spotted it walking across open ground at about 300 metres. It is quite amazing how they do this. I had spent the previous thirty minutes scanning the Meadow hard. Then, suddenly, it appeared, bold as brass, right out in the open. How did it get there? Nevertheless, there it was – intently stalking Water Voles.

The way it hunts is fascinating to watch. First it sits and watches, looking for telltale signs of movement in the grass and listening for the slightest rustle. It scans all around, its ears pricked, its concentration obvious. Then, having spotted a target, it prepares itself, carefully judging the distance and timing the exact moment to strike, its rear haunches tensing in readiness. Several times it might seem about to pounce but, having decided that the right moment is not yet at hand, it relaxes momentarily. Then, everything at last being right, it launches itself – like a Serval – all four feet off the ground, landing (it hopes) on top of its prey, which it dispatches instantly with a killing bite. On this occasion it tried twice but both pounces failed and left it pawing empty grass in disappointment.

We repeated our tactic of trying to get a better view by creeping quietly round to the main track. But this time it veered off towards the far end of the Meadow and we were left with rather distant views of it sitting down next to a pair of dilapidated fence posts next to the ditch. Eventually it disappeared altogether and, despite a long and patient wait, it did not reappear.

Evening Session – May 10th

Since all three Lynx sightings so far had been in the eastern Meadow, we decided to concentrate on that area and take the risk that it might re-appear on the western side, (where the majority of sightings prior to our arrival had been, apparently).

We found a good area near to the main track from which we could scan the eastern end of the Meadow and where, hopefully, we would be inconspicuous. The wind, blowing from the east, was behaving itself well and we hoped that, if we were quiet and still enough, we might be able to observe our Lynx at close quarters and get some good photographs. We got into position at around 14.00 with the sun blazing and the air temperature well into the twenties.

Hours passed and, with no sign of the Lynx, we began to wonder if our close proximity to the Meadow might be suppressing its appearance. Our stealth had been extreme but knowing just how supernaturally good the cat's vision and hearing were, we started to doubt our strategy.

But then, at around 19.00, miraculously the Lynx appeared, this time to our left at the far end of the Meadow. Phil spotted it first, only the cat's head being visible above the grass. At only 70 metres, this was the close-up view we had been seeking for so long. In binoculars, every facial detail was gloriously apparent: the yellow eyes, the juvenile beginnings of a white beard (I hadn't spotted these before), the little spots and streaks on cheeks and forehead, the vibrissae, the black ear-tufts. We gazed at the cat – and the cat gazed back at us.

The Lynx clearly knew we were watching even though we were almost completely obscured from view, we had been silent and the wind was blowing in our faces. Nevertheless, it wasn't about to let us interfere with its hunting and it soon settled down and began scanning the grass for a Vole. It

wasn't long before something caught its attention and we watched with bated breath as it tensed itself for an imminent pounce. Two or three times it seemed about to strike but each time it thought better of it and waited for the proper moment. Then, suddenly, it leapt forward – for a moment completely air-bound. As soon as it landed we could sense that this pounce had been successful. The head and front paws disappeared into the grass and the rear half of the body tensed as the killing bite was delivered. A moment later, the head re-appeared, the yellow eyes glaring at us defiantly and a black Water Vole dangling from its jaws. Job done, the cat took to its heels and in a flash it was across the Meadow and into the trees on the far side.



We surmised that, having hunted successfully, the Lynx would take its time to enjoy its meal and would not re-appear for a while. Phil had got his pictures and I had got my close encounter and so with our mission accomplished we headed back to Skultuna for a couple of beers.

The Last Morning – May 11th

Rising at an unprecedented 03.50, we arrived back at the Meadow just after dawn to find it swathed in mist. A female Elk had ventured out into the open and gazed back at us from about a hundred and fifty metres. And, to complete the atmospheric scene, our old friend the Great Grey Owl sat on a fence post a short distance away surveying the ground for Voles. We started at the Barrier, scanning for signs of the Lynx, but found none. So, after a quick cup of tea, we resumed our stake-out in the Eastern Meadow at our rocky vantage point of the previous afternoon.

It was nothing like as cold as the previous two mornings and the rising sun soon burnt off the mist. A Black Grouse sat on top of a spruce tree opposite and began vocalising, a job it sustained for over an hour. A Buzzard caused panic in the Meadow as it quartered the forest edge and a pair of Great

Spotted Woodpeckers entertained us with their antics in the trees behind us. But, disappointingly, no Lynx appeared and by 07.50 we decided to go back to Skultuna for breakfast.

We returned a little later to kill an hour or two before our flight home but all was quiet in the warm, still midday sun. There was a little pool next to the main track and one last diversion was provided by a Common Lizard sunning itself in the grass.

Summary

We got four sightings in three days, spending around 27 hours in the field. Having previously each spent well over 100 hours, on various trips to Poland, Romania, Estonia, Belarus and so on, for a single sighting, we were obviously more than pleased! (We are grateful also to Mark Bibby for telling us about the opportunity, disappointed though he must be at not being able to join us on this trip).

However, the situation at Salgarda Meadow is extremely unusual and will probably only persist for a short while. As the young, inexperienced Lynx learns to hunt more substantial prey, such as Hares or Roe Deer, it will spend less time in the open Meadow and will become less active diurnally. Anyone wishing to see this Lynx thus needs to move quickly!

The area is also coming under ever greater pressure from wildlife watchers as news of the Lynx spreads. Fortunately most of those we saw present behaved well and the Lynx, for the moment at least, seems to tolerate human presence at a distance. Nevertheless, stealth and patience will be rewarded!

We wish anyone who decides to rush to Salgarda this summer the very best of luck in seeing one of the world's most elusive and enigmatic cats.

List of Mammals Recorded

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Eurasian Lynx	Lynx Lynx	Four sightings of the sub-adult cat, one for ten minutes at 70m.
Red Fox	Vulpes Vulpes	Two sightings (probably same individual) evening of May 8 th .
Mountain Hare	Lepus Timidus	Group of 4 or 5 in fields near Salgarda.
Elk	Alces Alces	One in Salgarda Meadow very early on morning May 11 th .
Roe Deer	Capreolus Capreolus	In fields around Salgarda on several occasions.
Northern Water Vole	Arvicolor Terrestris	Seen several times on Salgarda Meadow.
Pond Bat	Myotis Dasycneme	Recorded visually and by at detector, evening May 8 th at Skultuna.
Soprano Pipistrelle	Pipistrelle Pygmaeus	Recorded by bat detector, evening May 8 th at Skultuna.
Total	8	

List of Birds Recorded

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Grey Heron	Ardea Cinerea	One in flight over Salgarda Meadow.
Mallard	Anas Platyrhynchos	Several in Salgarda Meadow.
European Sparrowhawk	Accipiter Nisus	Twice in flight over Salgarda Meadow.
Common Buzzard	Buteo Buteo	Several times over Salgarda Meadow.

Black Grouse	Tetrao Tetrix	One calling from treetop, morning May 11 th .
Common Crane	Grus Grus	Common around Salgarda.
Lapwing	Vanellus Vanellus	Several times in fields around Salgarda.
Lesser Black-backed Gull	Larus Fuscus	One group of 4 or 5 in flight over Salgarda Meadow.
Woodpigeon	Columba Palumbas	Common throughout.
Cuckoo	Cuculus Canorus	Regularly over Salgarda Meadow.
Great Grey Owl	Strix Nebulosa	One individual seen regularly hunting the Meadow.
Green Woodpecker	Picus Viridis	One individual in flight in track near Salgarda.
Great Spotted Woodpecker	Dendrocopus Major	Common around the Meadow.
Skylark	Alauda Arvensis	Several in fields near Skultuna.
Tree Pipit	Anthus Trivialis	Very common in Meadow.
White Wagtail	Motacilla Alba	Several at Vasteras airport.
Robin	Erithacus Rubecula	Common around Meadow.
Whinchat	Saxicola Rubetra	Common on fence posts in Meadow.
Blackbird	Turdus Merula	Very common around Meadow.
Song Thrush	Turdus Philomelas	Heard several times around Meadow.
Mistle Thrush	Turdus Viscivorus	Very common in and around Meadow.
Blackcap	Sylvia Atricapilla	Seen once on Western side of Meadow.
Willow Warbler	Phylloscopus Trochilus	Abundant around Meadow. Very vocal.
Pied flycatcher	Ficedula Hypoleuca	Pair seen morning May 11 th next to Meadow.
Great Tit	Parus Major	Common throughout.
Blue Tit	Parus Caeruleus	Common around Meadow.
Jay	Garrulus Glandarius	Several seen, various locations.
Black-billed Magpie	Pica Pica	Common throughout.
Hooded Crow	Corvus Corone Cornix	Abundant in open fields around Skultuna.
Jackdaw	Corvus Monedula Soemeringii	Abundant throughout. NE European race.
Raven	Corvus Corax	Several in flight over Meadow.
House Sparrow	Passer Domesticus	Seen once in Skultuna.
Brambling	Fringilla Montifringilla	One sighting on track next to Meadow.
Chaffinch	Fringilla Coelebs	Common round Meadow.
Siskin	Carduelis Spinus	Several around Meadow.
Total	35	