



Where to find

Europe's big five

Why visit another continent for awesome wildlife encounters? Some of the best are on our doorstep, says **John Malathronas**

Eurasian brown bear

The thrill: Watching 300kg furballs scavenging for berries in mountain forests dappled with sunlight. Resist the temptation to hug them as you ooh and aah: they'll attack if you get too close.

Where and when: Experts estimate that around 800 brown bears roam the Tatras mountains of Slovakia. They hibernate in winter, but from May to October you've an excellent chance of spotting them.

How: Exodus (0845 287 7562, exodus.co.uk) explores two regions in Slovakia's High Tatras National Park. A three-night trek starts at £969pp, including flights, guide, ranger and most meals.

Inside track: Cubs start making forays with their mothers from late June, so go right after the summer solstice to maximise the adorability factor.

Near and deer: clockwise from above, Europe's big five include reindeer; gray wolves; the rare Iberian lynx; killer whales; and Eurasian brown bears

Next best thing: Among the Continent's bigger beasts is the European bison in Poland's Białowieża forest. Wild Poland (wildpoland.com) has day-trips from Warsaw for £60pp and six-nighters from £800pp, full board; flights extra.

Gray wolf

The thrill: Feeling your heart leap into your throat as one of Europe's largest predators fixes its gaze on you. Suppress your Red Riding Hood fears, though – the fangs, eyes and lustrous coat belong to a sociable creature that's far more scared of you than you of it.

Where and when: One of the few places wolves still thrive (having been relentlessly hunted by man), is in Romania's Carpathian mountains. See them in early spring: they disappear into the thick forests after the snow has melted, making sightings rare.

How: Join a carnivore-tracking project in Romania with Wildlife Worldwide (0845 130 6982, wildlifeworldwide.com), but be aware that, although you will follow tracks and hear them howling, chances of sightings are only around 20 per cent. The four-night trip costs £1,095pp, full board, with flights.

Inside track: Ravens follow wolves around – by spotting the birds first, you may be able to guess their position.

Next best thing: The Cairngorms National Park is home to arguably the cutest predatory carnivore: the pine marten. Speyside Wildlife (01479 812498, speysidewildlife.co.uk) runs a three-hour Dusk Watch in a purpose-built mammal hide from £25pp.

Killer whale

The thrill: Sighting pods of these intelligent black-and-white whales crashing and thrashing on the hunt for fish, seabirds and turtles, their seven-metre-long bodies sending ripples of waves across the water.

Where and when: The North Sea around Iceland's Snaefellsnes peninsula is home to so many orcas from late December to April/May that they can often be spotted from shore – although for near-guaranteed

sightings you should hop in a boat. It's also when the Northern Lights make occasional appearances, so you might get lucky and catch both.

How: Discover the World (01737 214251, discover-the-world.co.uk) has four nights in Iceland from £920pp, full board, excluding flights but including two boat trips with expert orca guides.

Inside track: If the light is low, use a high shutter speed (say 1/1000 of a second) or a higher ISO (800-plus) to ensure good photos, because orcas whizz by much faster than you think.

Next best thing: Get up close to Britain's own gentle giants – basking sharks – off the coast of Cornwall. Elemental Tours (01736 811200, elementaltours.co.uk) in Penzance has a three-hour Ocean Safari for £38pp.

Iberian lynx

The thrill: Glimpsing the tufted ears and Fu Manchu-style beard of the world's most endangered feline (a mere 200 or so remain); stalking rabbits through scrubby mountains, with the scent of almond blossoms on the breeze.

Where and when: Andalucía is their sole stomping ground – these solitary creatures prowl, mostly at night, in the Coto Doñana National Park, southwest

IF YOU'RE LUCKY, YOU MIGHT SEE ORCAS AND THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

of Seville, and on the slopes of the nearby Sierra Morena. Their nocturnal habits make winter the best time to see them as the nights are longer and their prey is scarcer, so they're out more often.

How: Naturetrek (01962 733051, naturetrek.co.uk) has a five-night trip from £995pp, full board, with flights, with an 80 per cent sighting success rate.

Inside track: It takes, on average, 30 to 40 hours (over several days) spent within a lynx habitat to see one individual, so be very patient – and steady with those binoculars.

Next best thing: Track down the nearly-as-rare Scottish wildcat with Wild Highland Tours (01972 510270, wildhighlandtours.co.uk). The company uses thermal imaging and night-vision equipment in its four-hour evening expedition (£90pp).

Reindeer

The thrill: Observing male reindeer fight and race each other as they skirt the Arctic, over snowy peaks and grassy

valleys, all in a bid to woo the comeliest females. You'll hear the clashing of their enormous horns long before you see their deceptively doe-y eyes.

Where and when: Most so-called 'reindeer safaris' are trips to farms, where the animals stand around looking confused, waiting for slaughter. It's as exciting as seeing a cow. But in northern Norway, you can get close as hundreds traverse the islands, sometimes swimming, in search of the greenest grasses in summer.

How: Taber Holidays (01274 875199, taberhols.co.uk) has four nights at Lyngen Lodge, Norway, from £1,645pp, full board, including flights, car hire and a day trip to the island of Uløya, home to hundreds of migrating reindeer.

Inside track: The rutting season for reindeer is from mid-August to October. If you spot any then, stay well back as it's not unheard of for a human to get caught – and gored – in the crossfire.

Next best thing: Watch the death-defying European ibex, a curly-horned mountain goat, scale the near-vertical heights of the Gran Paradiso National Park in the Italian Alps. Alpine Treks (020 8133 4810, alpinetreks.co.uk) has a seven-night guided trek from £850pp, half board, excluding flights. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY; PHOTOSHOT; ROBERT HARDING