

Estonian brown bears head west

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Swedish brown bears are pictured at an animal park in January 2012 in Guestrow, northeastern Germany. Estonia's thriving brown bear population has spread nationwide after hunters eased up in their traditional territory, an expert in the Baltic state said.

Estonia's thriving brown bear population has spread nationwide after hunters eased up in their traditional territory, an expert in the Baltic state said Friday.

"Bears have been able to expand their living range from central Estonia through to the western regions on the [Baltic Sea](#), mainly because hunters

have been avoiding killing mother bears in central Estonia," Peep Mannil, head of wildlife monitoring at the Estonian Environment Information Centre, told the daily newspaper Eesti Päevaleht.

The [brown bear](#) population of heavily forested Estonia is estimated at between 650 and 700, making it the third-largest in the European Union after Sweden's and Finland's.

The bears' traditional territory has been along Estonia's eastern border with Russia, and the centre and south of the small republic of 1.3 million people.

Hunting is strictly controlled, and since 2003 hunters have been required to fill out a detailed questionnaire on every bear shot in order to improve collection of data on the population.

As a result of the bears' spread, the number hunted has doubled from 27 in 2007 to this year's 55, according to the Estonian Environment Information Centre.

Most of Estonia's bears have already started [hibernation](#), or are poised to.

Tracking bears' footprints in Estonian forests has become a new attraction in recent years offered by some farmers to bold tourists.

Fainter-hearted nature lovers opt to watch them online thanks to woodland webcams.

But not all Estonian farmers are happy, as honey raids by [bears](#) have hit beehives with increasing frequency in recent years.

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