

Just Wolverines

Destination: Lieksa, Finland **Duration:** 4 Days **Dates:** 27th April – 1st May

-  Having a total of 11 different sightings of wolverines over 2 nights in the hide
-  Watching 7 male black grouse strutting their stuff in an early morning lek
-  Seeing at least 2 different wolverines (one male and one female) numerous times
-  Having the expert help and guidance of local expert guides throughout
-  Successfully trailing the new 'mobile-hide' – to get closer to wildlife in comfort
-  Observing the different behaviours of the male and female wolverines at the food
-  Walking through the bogs, swamps and fells of the Finnish wilderness
-  Spotting a total of 8 different species of raptor; including the first ospreys this year
-  Staying over night in the wonderful and remote pro wilderness hides in Lieksa
-  Seeing two of the resident aquatic mammals, the Canadian beaver and muskrat

Tour Leader / Guides

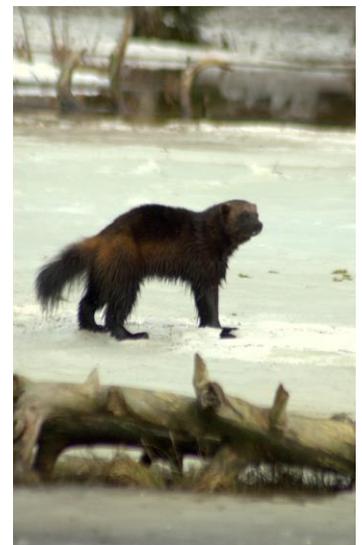
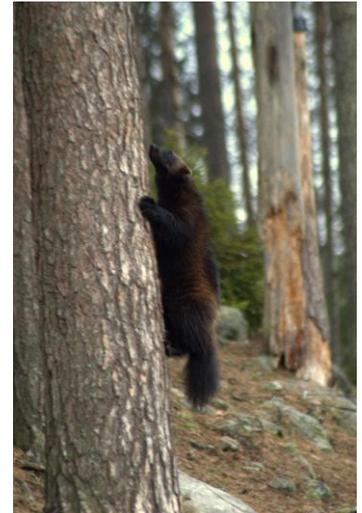
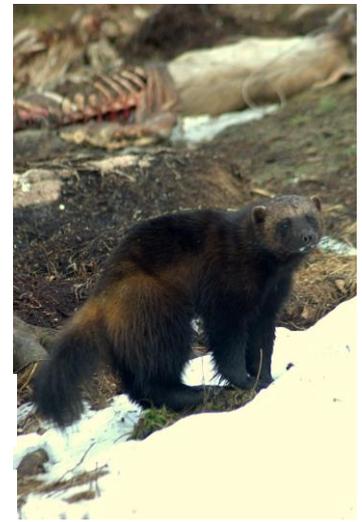
Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Esa (Guide & Driver)
 Eero (Wilderness Lodge and Photography Hide owner & host)

Participants

Mr. Robert Dockerill

Overview

Day 1:	Lieksa
Days 2-3:	Kontiovaara
Day 4:	Lieksa
Day 5:	Home





Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

Widely regarded as a creature of true wilderness and a phantom of the forests the wolverine is a notoriously difficult animal to pin down to any one spot. Capable of covering 30-40km in a single day and averaging 4km/h over all terrains, in all weathers and through all obstacles this medium sized predator / scavenger is one of the toughest and 'no-nonsense' animals in the world. With a huge bite-force, capable of cracking a moose femur; insulating hydrophobic fur, allowing them to lie on snow without even melting it and a ferociously dependant attitude, they are the perfect animal to take on the sub zero winters, high altitude cliff tops, seemingly desolate Taiga forests as well as battling for food against intelligent wolves, secretive lynx and powerful bears throughout their circum-boreal distribution. These amazing adaptations coupled with their huge home ranges (often hundreds of square miles) and naturally low densities they are seldom ever seen. Even their researchers remember individual encounters over decades of traipsing the wilderness in search of the ultimate forest wanderer. Fur trappers (who so often see the rare and elusive animals of the forests) always regarded the wolverine as the Holy Grail. Not just because their fur was so thick and water repellent but also because they next to never caught one.

The elusive nature of the wolverine along with the snippets of information people got from the rare encounter told of an unsociable, gluttonous demon-like spirit to the wolverine. However as researchers grow to understand the animal more and specialist hides like this one in Finland become increasingly frequented the secrets of this amazing animal are being revealed. First off they are incredible travellers, capable of covering mileage across mountains, rivers, glaciers and other obstacles as if the terrain was flat. But they are anything but unsocial, recent studies have shown that the mothers are particularly caring and the young spend large amounts of time with both mother and father periodically after weaning until they are large enough and learned enough to make a go of it on their own. Sometimes three generations can be seen moving together after independence and for no 'obvious' reason, other than they like each other company and that the younger ones are still taking advantage of their parents or grandparents and their better knowledge of the area. There are still hundreds more unanswered questions about this species, but importantly we are getting to understand the ecology of wolverines and the timing couldn't be better. As the boreal regions of Europe, Asia and North America increase in temperatures and snow fall decreases we are now understanding the only factor that seems to limit their distribution is late spring snow cover. This is critical for the females to build natal and maternal den sites to protect and raise their kits. It is now thought that to raise awareness of this species it is important to use the wolverine as the flagship species of the Boreal regions in much the same way the polar bear is the flagship species of the Arctic regions.

This tour will take you into the heart of the Finnish / Russia borderlands of Northern Karelia and to just about the only place in the world where wolverines can be seen with any regularity and with a little bit of luck we may be able to get a sneak peek into the lives of some of the resident wolverines.



Day 1 **Kontiovaara Wilderness**

Arrival & Wildlife Watching

After collecting Robert from the airport in Joensuu we left the relative busy urban areas around the capital of North Karelia and travelled around 150km north-east towards the Finnish / Russia borderlands under the expert guidance of Esa who was the deputy officer for North Karelia on the Finnish border patrol. His knowledge of the area and its wildlife is unparalleled and he has expertly searched the wilderness around here in search of new black grouse and capercaillie leks, woodpecker sites, beaver dams and other areas of wildlife activity. So Robert was in very good hands with the help of zoologist escort Martin and local guide Esa and in addition to these guides we were trailing a new method of getting around and staking out wildlife. This was in Esa's campervan, the idea being that we can find a promising location for beavers, Russian flying squirrels or a lekking site and spend the night in the luxury of the campervan and be in prime viewing position when the wildlife decides its time to make an appearance. So after some lunch at the wilderness lodge hosted by the enigmatic Eero, we decided to try our luck for some of the rarer birdlife and then stake out a beaver lodge which was viewable from the roadside. First off we went for a stroll to a section of old growth forest which is sometimes home to black woodpeckers and the three-toed woodpecker. In truth we were a little late in the day and the weather was not perfect for these species. But Esa played their calls out through the forest and we waited. However the only notable bird that paid us a brief visit was a parrot crossbill. But the bird watching did get better as we spotted 3 female capercaillies on the roadsides as well as a kestrel that flew over us and then a golden eagle seen from a distance.



The capercaille sightings were of particular importance as the capercaille lek that we usually use for photography was currently under water and the birds not performing, so whilst we were in the wolverine hide tomorrow night, Esa would be staking out this area with the females and seeing if this is a new lekking site.

So after the bird watching the next port of call was the beaver lodge, we get settled in the van, with people staked out at every window and the curtains closed to reduce the animals disturbance. It wasn't long before the 'beaver, beaver' was whispered by Esa and on the left hand side of the road the tell tale wake of a beaver was spotted swimming towards us. However when the animal climbed onto a small island and it was apparent from the size of the animal and foraging behaviour that it was a musk rat. Still an impressive sized member of the rodent family all the same. We stayed for a while longer, but with us having a 03:00am start tomorrow we decided to call it before it got too late. Just before we left we were approached by a couple of beaver hunters (the beaver season was still going on for a couple more days) and we hoped that this elusive beaver would stay in his lodge for a few more hours and avoid the watchful gaze of the hunters.

Day 2 **Kontiovaara Wilderness**

Wildlife Watching

This morning we rose before dawn at 03:00am and Esa transferred us to the nearby black grouse lekking site. Only 7km away from the lodge is a large boggy clearing with a few isolated islands just rising above the snow covered watery marsh. This is an ideal location for the black grouse. We had previously come here and set up hides so that once we made our way over to the hides through the foot deep snow and water we could set up inside the hides and wait patiently for the males to start to show up. Lekking sites are an unusual part of animal biology, for a long time it was unclear on what the females were looking for from the males and with only a very small percentage of the males mating each year the reasons why the 'lesser' males bother to show up and expend so much valuable energy in displaying was unknown and seemed to contradict natural selection. However due to increases in genetic studies we are now able to know that all the males in a lek are very closely related and that it is the females in a given area that disperse further away from where they are hatched. This combats inbreeding as the same males use the same leks for most of their lives and if the females didn't disperse they would end up mating with their mothers, sisters and other relations. But this didn't seem to explain why small or weaker males were happy to display with no real chance of them mating in the presence of stronger males. This was explained when scientists observed many different leks over many seasons and found that it is the size of the lek that is really important and could even be more important than the actual size and fitness of the male. So this implies that it pays for related males to stick together and display in as big a lek as they can. By this means the females that mate with a male in your lek will be helping to pass down some of your genes from a related individual.

Well aside from the genetics and the science behind the lek system the displaying males are a sight to behold. They call in a turkey-like gobble (but far more musical) which is made almost continuously throughout the display that includes fanning the lyre-shaped tail and fanning out the wings to reveal the white vent feathers and bobbing down with red eye wattles raised and prominent. Throughout the morning we had a total of 7 different males displaying, the first arriving around 05:00am and the last flying down at 06:45am. The lekking was all down on the few small islands in front of us and the males regularly tried to steal prime locations when the resident male was distracted by a female or another invading male. These little squabbles rarely lasted longer than a few seconds and nearly always the defending male remained unmoved. Up until they stopped performing (around 08:30am) they had only managed to attract 3 females and we didn't observe any successful mating.

After the display finished we headed back to the main lodge for a rest before an early lunch and then our first night in the wolverine hide. During the day there were some nice birds visiting the feeder outside the window of the lodge. The resident great, blue, coal and willow tits fed alongside lots of chaffinches and siskins. There was also a visit from the local greater-spotted woodpecker and red squirrel. On the way to the wolverine hide we tried for another beaver briefly as Era had seen this particular beaver a couple of hours earlier, as it was we once again the beaver eluded us and a pair of frolicking common sandpipers were the major sight.

So finally at the wolverine hide we did not have long to wait before the first animal arrived. In the local area there is one resident male and 4 resident females (plus their kits and transient males). A female wolverine produces around 2 kits every couple of years and during this time of year any mothers with kits are busily finding lots of food to cache and take back to the den as their energy demands increase 2.5 times that of a non-lactating female. The first animal to arrive (at 19:10) was however the male and he didn't eat any of the baits or carcass instead he passed swiftly through and then stopped by 15mins later and 30mins after that again. On the first occasion he marked the area with urine, in the usual wolverine squatting position (also excreting a greenish mucus like secretion). This secretion is odourless (to humans) and the exact role of the substance is unknown. The second time he arrived he fed from one of the carcasses and tried to carry it away with him but he didn't get very far before rolling in the snow and running off into the forest. The last time he showed up he once again rolled around in the snow and marked the area further before disappearing for the night. Then at 20:10 one of the females arrived and made 3 visits; like most females with kits she came and grabbed a couple of the smaller baits and cached them nearby before the third visit when she fed for around 15mins on one of the carcasses.

The frequency of seeing wolverines at this very special site is so good that is easy to forget that seeing these animals within 10m of you and have them forage, feed, cache, scent-mark and play is just exceptional. So the first night in the wolverine hides ended with 2 different wolverines and a total of 6 different sightings.



Day 3 **Kontiovaara Wilderness**

Wildlife Watching

Today at dawn (04:00am) there were 21 ravens around the carcasses (but not feeding on the carcasses), for the remainder of the morning they were joined by three species of gulls (lesser black-backed, herring and common gulls) feeding periodically on the carcasses and waiting for the next load of baits to be placed later on this afternoon. We did find out after we left the hide and went back to the main lodge for breakfast that a brown bear had visited the hide in the darkest part of the night. It is still quite early for bears to be out and as they are hunted in Finland (during the short but productive hunting season) they are a lot more skittish and wary than brown bears in North America. We decided that tonight we would take 2 hours shifts and stay up throughout the darkest part of the night to see if we could spot the bear (presumably a male that is usually the first to show up at the hide each spring). But before we left the hide we were treated to another visit from the male wolverine. At 07:10am he came from the forest around 60m ahead of us and went back into the trees, but at 08:05 he was back and lopped across the frozen lake in the typical mustelid fashion.

When we had breakfasted and rested for a while we found out that Esa had had no luck in scouting out the new capercaillie lek. So we left for a vehicle safari around the Finnish woodlands and lakes and decided that we would be back here tomorrow and see if we have any further wolverine encounters and possibly a visit from the bear again. It wasn't long before we saw more capercaillie tracks, both male and female tracks and we also saw several female capercaillies. We also saw plenty of other interesting bird species the highlight of which was the first osprey of the year heading back to the nest at the bird tower in Leiksa. It was also interesting that today saw a significant reduction in the snow cover and this led to a huge increase in the number of raptors around. They can now hunt the mice and voles as they have less and less snow to burrow through. Rough-legged buzzards, steppe buzzards and hen harriers were added to the Eurasian sparrowhawk and northern goshawk we had already seen today. In addition to the great raptor views we also saw lots of waterfowl as well as many migratory species of birds that are either settling in Finland for the summer or using the fields and lakes as stop over points on their way to Siberia or the far Arctic. Exploring the lakes in provided great views of bean geese, whooper swans, northern lapwings, curlews, whimbrels, fieldfares, wigeon, black-headed gulls and many other species.

So with a lots of snacks prepared we headed out to the pro hide once again. For the second successive night we didn't have to wait very long and at 19:15pm the male wolverine came bounding into view from the far banks of the Uurolampi pond around 100m away from the hide. He stayed pretty far away behind the cops of birch trees, running between the trees and rolling in the snow. Then just as the light was fading (at around 21:30pm) the female showed up and began feeding from a large carcass before grabbing a couple of smaller baits and caching them. All in all this encounter lasted around 15mins. We also watched as one of the smallest mammals in Finland foraging around the hide as a tiny yellow-necked mouse moved noisily outside the hide. This was the last action until 01:45am when an unidentified wolverine began to feed on the carcass in the very low light. Unfortunately the sightings were not as good as last night but still we were able to watch wild wolverines for a total of 1 hour at very close quarters. This place is truly a magical location; even when the wolverines are not around the baits and carcasses the birdlife is prolific here with greater-spotted woodpeckers, Eurasian jays, common magpies, common ravens, lesser black-backed gulls, herring gulls, common gulls, mallards, goosanders, Eurasian robins, pied wagtails, great tits, song thrushes and other passing birds such as the occasional white-tailed eagles and golden eagles.



Day 4 **Kontiovaara Wilderness & Leiksa**

Wildlife Watching

This morning at the hide was very quiet, there were just the resident birds feeding on what was left of the baits. The greater-spotted woodpecker, Eurasian jays and great tits have learnt that the little pieces of meat left clinging to the trees or around the ground are an excellent and easy way of obtaining protein. But in addition to the 'usual' species a couple of fieldfares joined in the foraging. This species has arrived in large numbers and is the most commonly seen bird in Finland's urban and semi-urban areas; feeding on the lawns and fields of private properties in large flocks. We decided that today we would have a drive around and visit some more birding areas as well as searching in another possible beaver pond for this elusive animal. Today is the last day of the beaver hunting season, so it pays for the beavers that have lodges close to roads to be very wary and elusive. Which goes a long way to explaining how hard they can be to see here. Esa had also been told of a possible capercaillie lekking site very



close to a road yesterday, so our plan was to set up the campervan opposite tonight and in the morning see what we could see. We also visited a relatively new birding location close to the town of Leiksa, here from the watch tower we saw 2 ospreys on their large nest in the distance. One of these ospreys was the one we saw yesterday and they are already showing promise that they will breed again here this summer. We also spotted a large common crane striding across the marshlands. After leaving here we continued our travels around Karelia and this brought us further views of whooper swans, wigeons, bean geese as well as couple of northern pintails, we then walked around the beaver-made streams and waterways around their dam and lodge in search of the occupants. Of course during the beaver season it is not always possible to know if the beavers are still alive and unfortunately it can feel like your fighting a losing battle sometimes. However our luck was to change and all of a sudden around 10m away from us a beaver's head and shoulders were seen swimming parallel to the shoreline. This was one of the best sightings of a beaver that you can ask of in Finland and a great way to end this afternoons spotting before heading back to the capercialle site and setting up the campervan. There were fresh male capercaille tracks walking next to the campervan so we were hopeful of some action in the morning. We relaxed into the evening with some pink Champaign and dinner for an early night.

Day 5 **Liekka**

Wildlife Watching & Departure

At around 03:00am we awoke and began our stake out around this potential capercaille lek. The problem in trying to find a new and undiscovered lek site in such a short period time is that capercailles have very different sites for feeding, practising, roosting and of course lekking and for the most part these sites can be indistinguishable from each other. So we can only wait and hope (until our normal site dries out and the birds return). As it turned out we didn't have any luck as no capercailles although Esa did hear a couple of male capercialle in the very early morning. But none materialised and as we ate our breakfast in the van a very spooked and incredibly fast mountain hare (still in its full winter coat, despite the lack of snow around now) ran down the road and very carefully took the next right turn before continuing on a pace.

Then came the time to take Robert back to Joensuu and the airport, along the way we saw more great birds including great views of a male hazel grouse next to the road and 2 common cranes feeding close to the road in a field. We also had close up views of a male hen harrier flying low over the road as well as a rough-legged buzzard on the ground (presumably finishing off a mice or other small rodent). Then before we knew it we were back in the town of Joensuu and Robert's flight was beckoning.

Species List

Just Wolverines / Apr – May 2012

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name	APRIL				MAY
			27	28	29	30	1
1	Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>	*	*		*	*
2	Yellow-necked mouse	<i>Apodemus flavicollis</i>			1		
3	Canadian beaver	<i>Castor canadensis</i>	*	*	*	1	*
4	Wolverine	<i>Glutton glutton</i>		6	4	1	
5	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>					1
6	Musk rat	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>	1				
7	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		1	1	1	
8	Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	*			*	

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name	APRIL				MAY
			27	28	29	30	1
1	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>				1	
2	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>			2		
3	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		3		3	
4	Northern pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>				1	
5	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>			5	9	
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	4	5	18	24	6
7	Pink-footed goose	<i>Anser brachyrhynchus</i>		5			
8	Tiaga bean goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>			6		2
9	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>	3				
10	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	1				
11	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					5
12	Bohemian waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>		~25			
13	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		1			
14	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	5	1	~20	30	
15	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>					1

16	Rough-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>
17	European greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>
18	Common redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
19	Eurasian siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
20	Common rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>
21	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
22	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
23	Wood pigeon	<i>Columba plumbeous</i>
24	Common raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
25	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
26	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
27	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
28	Greater spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
29	Rustic bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
30	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
31	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
32	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
33	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
34	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
35	Black-throated diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
36	Common crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
37	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
38	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
39	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
40	Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>
41	Parrot crossbill	<i>Loxia pytyopsittacus</i>
42	Common goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
43	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
44	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
45	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
46	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>
47	Coal tit	<i>Pariparus ater</i>
48	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
49	Common magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
50	Willow tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>
51	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
52	Black grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>
53	Western capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>

		1		1
3	5	6	6	
2				
2	5	6	9	
1	1			
4		~50	15	
				1
		2	5	
4	22	30	22	
		1	1	
5	1	2	1	
*		8	8	2
1	4	2	3	
			3	
		2		1
1				
~30	7	27	~30	
	7		1	
1	3	1	1	
1				1
	1		2	1
2		14	4	1
		~80	21	1
	4	6	2	
2				
1				
		4		
	5	7	4	
		4	2	
		1	2	
6	6	10	4	
1				
	2			
		10	2	1
5				
	2	1		
2	10	2		2
4		*	3	

54	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>
55	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
56	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
57	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
58	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
59	Ring ouzel	<i>Turdus torquatus</i>
60	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
61	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>

				3
		~10		
		~80		
*		2	23	
~70	4	~95	5	32
		1		
		1		
		~85		