











Just Wolverines

Destination: Lieksa, Finland **Duration:** 4 Days **Dates:** 2nd May – 5th May

-  Having a total of 30 different sightings of wolverines over 3 nights in the hide
-  Watching a juvenile golden eagle feeding from 10m away for 45 minutes
-  Spotting a mother brown bear and her cub on the road at close quarters!
-  Having the expert help and guidance of local expert guides throughout
-  Enjoying travelling around the Finnish wilderness in comfort of Esa's campervan
-  Observing the different behaviours of the male and female wolverines at the food
-  Walking through the bogs, swamps and fells of the Patvinsuo National Park
-  Spotting some of the wonderful migratory birds such as common cranes
-  Staying over night in the wonderful and remote pro wilderness hides in Lieksa
-  Seeing at least 2 different wolverines (one male and one female) numerous times

Tour Leader / Guides

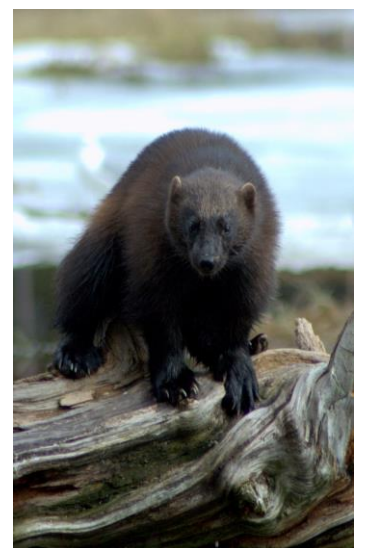
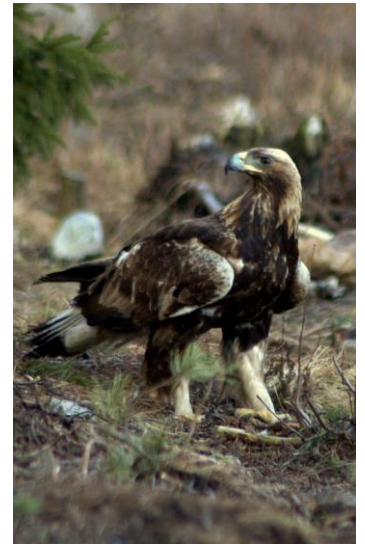
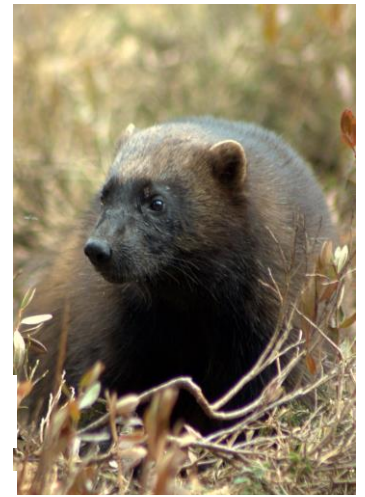
Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
 Esa (Guide & Driver)
 Eero (Wilderness Lodge and Photography Hide owner & host)

Participants

Mr. Christopher Scharf

Overview

Day 1:	Kontiovaara
Day 2:	Kontiovaara
Day 3:	Kontiovaara
Day 4:	Lieksa





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 get a sneak peek into the lives of some of the resident wolverines.



Day 1 **Kontiovaara Wilderness**

Arrival & Wildlife Watching

This morning after collecting Chris from 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 capercaille leks, woodpecker sites, beaver dams and other areas of wildlife activity. So Chris was in very good hands with the help of zoologist escort Martin and local guide Esa. After a couple of hours travelling through the seemingly endless forests (both old and new growth forests) we arrived at the wonderfully remote and stunning beautiful 1940's log cabin hidden in the woods. After some lunch at the wilderness lodge hosted by the enigmatic Eero, we departed the 7km to the pro photography hides established by Eero and regularly baited so that the resident wolverines and brown bears can be easily and reliably observed from the comfort of the hides 24 hours a day. We arrived early (13:30pm) and we had a while to wait. But before the first wolverine arrived we were treated to plenty of bird behaviour. The resident greater-spotted woodpeckers, great tits, European robins, Eurasian jays, herring gulls, common gulls, mallards, common ravens and pied wagtails were all in good form as they fluttered and fed around the hide. Most of which were feeding on the baits left for the wolverines. These must be some of the best fed woodpeckers and great tits in the world, fresh steak and salmon every day! But as the sun was beginning to dim beneath the tree line surrounding this wonderful valley one of the resident female wolverines decided to pay us a visit. At around 20:00pm the female arrived and ate one of the small baits before taking one away to cache in



the forest somewhere. But within 20 minutes she was back and began to feed on one of the larger carcasses before she was apparently spooked by an unseen animal or unheard sound from up the hill, She grabbed some food and ran off, but again 5 minutes later she was back and feeding for around 5 minutes on the carcass. After she left this time it was nearly an hour before a female arrived again, it is hard to tell whether this is the same female as the light was dimming fast but it is possible she is the same female as she took more small baits away to cache and then came back to feed on the carcass. This is typical behaviour for females with kits and as the birthing interval for females is 2 years, the 3 females in the area seem to breed in a rotation system. So that there are not many different kits of the same age looking to disperse and settle their own territories at the same time. Well this female (or a different one) returned to the site and continued to take some baits a further 2 times. But shortly after she left for the final time the resident male (noticeable by his increased size, they are often up to 30% larger and can weight twice as much as the females) arrived and fed from the carcass before dragging the carcass towards the banks of the lake and feeding for around 10 minutes, After he left the light had well and truly gone so we called it a night. But what a first day of wolverine watching!

Day 2 **Patvinsuo NP & Kontiovaara Wilderness** *Wildlife Watching*

This morning was very quiet in the hide, there was a heavy snowfall and we were quite looking forward to the prospect of some nice wolverine photography in the snow this evening. But unfortunately the snow cover was not going to last as the sun began to shine through the clouds and in fact today saw a huge melt of the ground snow. The only animal of note that we saw from the hide was a pair of goosanders seen swimming on the far side of the lake, these migratory birds are just now beginning to arrive now, but they were finding fish a little difficult as the ice on the lake was still quite large and the fish had plenty of room out of reach under the ice to hide.

After we departed the hide and breakfasted at the main lodge we rested for a while before leaving with Esa in his campervan to visit Patvinsuo National Park. This small national park covers a large expanse of Finnish marshland which usually hosts hundreds of migrating birds at this time of year. However the snowstorm this morning and the continuing high winds had halted most of the migrating birds. This meant that after we traversed the boardwalk to the spotting tower in the centre of the marshland there were not too many birds to see. We did entertain ourselves with identifying the various scats and dung deposits along the boardwalk. We found pine marten, red fox and lots of capercaillie latrines; and from the tower we did spot some excellent species. This included a couple of common cranes, lots of frolicking northern lapwings, Taiga bean geese, Eurasian curlews as well as a fly by from one of the first ospreys back in Finland for the summer and a small flock of smew in the distance.

On leaving Patvinsuo we saw many fresh tracks of moose, who frequent the wetlands in summer to feed on the willows and other vegetation. Then after a later lunch at the main lodge we left for the pro hides once again. However we didn't have the same luck as yesterday and in fact we didn't have any wolverines visit whilst we were watching. We just had the commonly seen birds and spent lots of time watching the different gull species and their feeding politics around the baits and the carcasses. It always intrigues me that the ravens, who are primarily scavengers of large carcasses, always stay well clear of the meat available here until there are large carnivores feeding from the carcass. Once they have been 'comforted' by the predators interest they suddenly seem very interested in the food. It is amazing to see these very intelligent and powerful birds standing and watching woodpeckers, tits, jays and gulls feeding on the free and readily available meat without competing for it. But the large number of ravens here suggests that they do manage to get enough food from somewhere even if it is not the baits and carcasses here.



Day 3 **Kontiovaara Wilderness** *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we noticed that one of the carcasses had been moved a considerable distance so one of the wolverines or possibly a brown bear had paid a visit late last night. But other than that the morning was very very quiet and there was nothing else to note. Once we returned to the main lodge and breakfasted we had a few hours to wait there until we could return to the pro hide and hopefully more luck. Whilst killing time around the main lodge we saw plenty of great birds feeding on the feeder, such as great tits, willow tits, Eurasian siskins, European greenfinchs, chaffinches, bullfinches, blue tits, greater-spotted woodpeckers and the resident red squirrel. The red squirrel shows up around lunch time every day, possibly because at this time all the guests staying here will be occupied in the main lodge and no one will be in the photography hide set up close to the feeder.

Well after some more rest and the chance to download images and save them onto laptops and charging batteries we left and headed back to the pro hide with renewed optimism. And we were justifiably rewarded after only 45 minutes as at 15:45pm the male arrived and ate one of the baits before taking another one with him and off he went. We had actually hidden a couple of the choicest baits underneath some heavy rocks on a log, as a means of



reducing the chances of the birds stealing the baits before the wolverine arrive. The hidden baits allowed us an excellent chance of seeing wolverines show off their dexterity as they searched amongst the rocks and logs for the food. This male did not disappoint as during the next 40 minutes he came back 5 times, taking pretty much every bait, feeding on the carcasses in turn and also using his very large snow-shoe like front paws to lever up the rocks. This was interesting to watch as he didn't just use his weight to push the rocks off the log but instead carefully levered the rocks up and showed surprising intelligence and dexterity. But after the 5th visit he ran off over the frozen lake, scent marking on his way and off and into the forest. Even though we had just had some of the greatest wolverine encounters ever in the bright daylight of the afternoon, we still had lots more hours of sunlight to hope that we would get some more action. For the next couple of hours we watched with interest the gulls as the common gulls were mobbed by the lone lesser black-backed gull until the larger still European herring gulls came along and bullied the lesser black-backed gulls but oddly enough left the common gulls alone.

Then all of a sudden we had a visitor...from above the hide a huge golden eagle flew down and landed on the carcass. The plumage of the bird clearly showed that it was just finishing its second winter and heading towards its sub-adult plumage. As we had noticed some of the carcasses being eaten and moved during the daytime hours we were not in the hides over the last couple of days, we guessed that this bird was the responsible party. The eagle stayed for a short while before being spooked off. But 20 minutes later at 19:10pm the eagle returned and began to feed on a couple of the carcasses for around 45 minutes. As soon as the eagle showed up the ravens were out and mobbing the eagle, trying to steal scraps of food from the carcass and one individual was very interested in trying to pull the eagle tail. Watching the ravens displays, communication and overall playful nature around the eagle was very enlightening to watch. These birds had remained in the trees and flying around the hide and ignoring the food, but now they were all excited and their interactions were brilliant to watch and interpret. With the eagle only 10m away for so long we were able to really gain an appreciation for the animals power and prowess before it had had its fill and sluggishly took off and into the forest with the ravens in hot pursuit. But as I suspected with the ravens nervousness around carcasses, none of them returned to feed on the now empty carcass.

As we collected ourselves from the incredible last couple of hours we watched a pair of European teals on the far side of the lake, but it wasn't long before the male wolverine returned (20:35pm) and he came back a further 2 times and took off food to cache. When he came back the final time at 21:30pm he fed from the largest carcass and then took off carefully across the frozen lake as the ice is thinning all the time now, scent marking along the way. Well as we had just had the best wolverine encounter in Royle Safaris history and also one of the best golden eagle sightings ever we decided to call it a night when the sun finally set. An unidentified wolverine did come back around 22:30pm, the splashing was enough to wake me up but it was impossible to identify the sex.



Day 4 Kontiovaara Wilderness & Lieksa *Wildlife Watching & Departure*

Early this morning (at around 04:00am) the male wolverine was back again splashing around and trying to find any remaining baits that he hadn't taken yesterday. The bird activity was constant but not anything we hadn't seen before. So after breakfast a rest and the lunch at the main lodge we left at 15:15pm and headed through the forests back towards Joensuu. Along the way we spotted various species of birds such as whooper swans, common cranes, hen harriers, hazel grouse and female capercaillies. But the highlight of this drive and one of the rarest sights in all of Finland was that of a brown bear shooting across the road around 100m ahead of us and at breakneck speed. This shocked us all a little. It is still early in the season for bears to be out and this bear seemed small, possibly a cub, but the distance from us and the speed made it difficult for us to fully tell the size. We pulled up to where we guessed the bear had headed into the woods, Esa got out of the vehicle and went over to see if he could see any prints and perhaps get closer. However Chris and I said that the speed of the bear meant that it had probably bolted far into the forest and that there is no point in trying to get closer. But then from a previously unseen bear ran from cover only around 20m away from us and directly where Esa was about to go and wander! This bear was clearly an adult and we guessed that it was a different individual from the one that crossed the road. But only 2 minutes later the smaller cub sprinted out across the road again and into the forest on the other side of the road. We thought this behaviour odd and with us spotting a suspicious looking vehicle pulled off the road about a mile back, we thought it best to call one of Esa's old colleagues on the ranger and border patrol service. The problem being that the bears seemed very scared of something and scared enough to come out and onto the road (which is incredibly rare in Europe as the bears are still persecuted here they are much more timid and wary than North American brown bears); Esa had a feeling that the owner of the vehicle was perhaps training hunting dogs and this is illegal at this time of year. The bear season is not for a few more months, but of course poaching and illegal hunts still continue. So we drove back and collected his registration number and took a picture of the vehicle and informed the ranger in the area. Whether or not anything was going on, we thought this is the best course of action and if the owner of the vehicle was doing no wrong then the worst that would happen is he would receive a phone call to ask what he was doing.



Well this sightings certainly sparked a little flurry of activity down this stretch of road as a male hazel grouse posed on the side of the road, followed by 2 mountain hares (no easy to spot as they are still almost all white against the now brown forest floor). But all together this was a great way to end the tour and complete a great few days wildlife watching in the wonderful Finnish wilderness.

Species List

Just Wolverines / May 2012

Mammals (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name	MAY			
			2	3	4	5
1	Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>	*		*	*
2	Canadian beaver	<i>Castor canadensis</i>	*	*	*	*
3	Wolverine	<i>Glutton glutton</i>	8		11	1
4	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	1			2
5	Pine marten	<i>Martes martes</i>		*		
6	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>			1	1
7	Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>				2
8	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		*		

Birds (* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name	MAY			
			2	3	4	5
1	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	1			
2	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		1		
3	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		1	1	1
4	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	2		2	
5	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>				2
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	1	3	7	5
7	Tiaga bean goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>		2		
8	Red-throated pipit	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>				2
9	Meadow pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>		4		
10	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>			1	
11	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		4		
12	Bohemian waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>		~30		~20
13	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		1		
14	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			2	1
15	European greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>			2	3

16	Common redpoll	<i>Carduelis flammea</i>
17	Eurasian siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
18	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
19	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
20	Common raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
21	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
22	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
23	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
24	Greater spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
25	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
26	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
27	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
28	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
29	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
30	Common crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
31	European herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
32	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
33	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
34	Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>
35	Common goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>
36	Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
37	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>
38	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
39	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>
40	Common magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
41	Willow tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>
42	Eurasian bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>
43	Eurasian woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>
44	Black grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>
45	Western capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>
46	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>
47	Common redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
48	Song thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>
49	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
50	Mistle thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>
51	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>

			18
	13	15	8
	4		2
	1		1
12	22	28	5
2	2	1	1
1	2		3
	2		2
1	4	1	2
	5	2	
1			
1	25	~30	17
		1	12
1	4	3	1
	2		
5	5	2	1
3	4	6	3
1		1	
	11		
	2		
3	9	7	4
	1		
	1		
2	13	5	12
		3	4
		3	2
	2	4	2
		1	
	1		
	7		2
			1
	1		
1	3		
	8		
		2	
	13		