

I'll try to keep this briefer than my typical trip report as this was not my usual adventure. I've never been on a large tourist cruise and in hindsight that's probably for good reason, but I planned a Baltic Cruise to celebrate my son's return from a 2 year mission to Nicaragua. Since I was pretty sure I wouldn't see much wildlife in the ports of Oslo, Copenhagen, Warnemunde, Gdynia, Klaipeda, Riga, and Stockholm, I managed to book a stop in Iceland before and Finland after...

Iceland has spectacular scenery and Iceland Air has made it really easy to include a stopover on the way to Europe or back from the United States. I knew it was a trendy tourist destination but was still a bit surprised, and at times overwhelmed by just how much company we had on the roads and at the many waterfalls we visited. The weather cooperated for the most part and we managed to do a number of short hikes around the Golden Circle and southern portion of the Ring Road. My favorite stops were Bruarfoss, Seljalandsfoss, the Katla Ice Caves/Glacier, and Fjadrargljufur Canyon. Of course, the only mammals seen on those two days were sheep, tourists, horses and a few Icelanders. Not sure if I saw more sheep or tourists. I'd pinned my mammal watching hopes on our last day that was spent on the Snaefellsness Peninsula NW of Reykjavik. The good news was the relative lack of tourist company on that part of the island. The bad news was that I dipped again in my efforts to see an Arctic Fox even though there's a breeding pair that frequents the area around the Malarrif Light House. I spoke with the ranger who had seen the female the day before and spent several hours walking the trails in the area as well as driving all around the perimeter of the peninsula, but to no avail. We had better luck on a morning whale watching trip out of Olafsvik with Laki Tours. We were past the season for Orcas which I've seen many times, and Sperm Whales which I've yet to see, but we spent 30 minutes with a good-sized pod of White-Beaked Dolphins and enjoyed 2 sightings of Minke Whales and a single Humpback. They keep a nice daily record of sightings so you have a pretty good idea of what to expect based on the season. <https://lakitours.com/snaefellsnes-sightings/?wmonth=7&wyear=2025> In addition to the mammals we saw dozens of puffins on the boat excursion.



White-Beaked Dolphins



Minke Whale



Humpback Whale

During the actual cruise I didn't spend much time staring out into the Baltic Sea so didn't see any mammals. In Oslo we saw what was probably a brown rat near the Royal Palace. From Warnemunde we did a day trip to Berlin and saw a dozen or more Roe Deer along the highway. In Gdynia we walked from the cruise port to the train station and almost walked right into a family of not so wild boar that were clearly accustomed to being around people.



In Riga we saw a couple of presumably brown rats and in Stockholm we saw a Eurasian red squirrel in a cemetery. From Stockholm we flew to Helsinki arriving at 21:30. We drove to Kouvola that evening and saw a couple groups of roe deer and a single moose (elk) in the fields along the way but didn't stop as we were driving at freeway speeds. As documented in numerous other trip reports, if you want to see a wolverine, Finland is the place to go. Having grown up in Alaska after being born in Michigan (and thus a Michigan Wolverine sports fan), it has always hurt just a little to know I've never seen my favorite mammal so it was time to correct that.

From Kouvola we had another 5 hours of driving and arrived just before the scheduled check-in at 14:00. Coordinating and booking the visit with Era Eero https://eraeero.com/?page_id=3544&lang=en was quite easy. Era has built a wonderful retreat with rustic but comfortable accommodations, and most importantly, he's helped preserve some natural habitat that has allowed him to nearly guarantee wolverine sightings as he has fed them daily for years. He is careful not to meet their entire dietary needs, but they appreciate the handout enough to keep coming back. Sini runs the admin side of the business and speaks great English and was very responsive and helpful throughout. Era is quiet and reserved though I suspect he speaks and understands more English than one

might think. He's passionate about the animals and we felt his appreciation at the end of our stay when he gave my kids poster size prints of some of the best carnivore pictures taken from his hides. Two of his grandsons were spending the summer helping out and they were pretty excited to talk to my teenagers and play a few games during our down time.

After an orientation and time for questions we loaded up and followed Era, Sini, and Era's grandsons to Uuronlampi. Era has established hides in settings several miles apart. The first cluster of 5 photography hides is a short walk of a few hundred meters from his headquarters and the Keljanpuro Lodge (the old loggers' cabin) where breakfast and lunch are available. In addition to the lodge there are several "cabins" available for day use with beds for napping after the long nights in the hides. They'll have the sauna ready for use after breakfast and they've built a small pool in the creek nearby that is the perfect complement to the sauna. The recently updated website references hides at Rasku-Karhuniemi as well but I didn't inquire specifically about that location. We had arranged to spend 1 night in the more comfortable observation hide at Uuronlampi and then a night in the photography hide at Uuronlampi as well. The observation hide is split in two so can accommodate 2 independent groups at the same time. One half was spacious for our group of 6 (only 4 of my 6 kids joined us for the pre and post cruise travel) with bunks for each of us to rest on as well as chairs for viewing through the 2 large picture windows. The front portion of the hide with the view looks down on the pond below and had about 8 chairs, some in fixed positions and others movable. The back portion had a taller ceiling and a couple of tables and a dry toilet in addition to the beds. We hit Finland during a heat wave and temperatures were 10-15 degrees Fahrenheit above normal, reaching 80 degrees. Frankly it was a bit stuffy for the first few hours as there are only a couple of rules—don't open the doors once you are inside and do your best to stay quiet. By the evening it was quite comfortable, but the afternoon was too hot without any air movement. By the following night we would better appreciate just why there were no windows to open.



The view from the observation hide at Uuronlampi...the photography hides are in the flat below on the right just out of view...



View from the photography hides...observation hide is up in the trees on the left...

After dropping our belongings we sat down and watched Era traipse all over the flat below placing snacks and treats under rocks and logs, on branches and even wired to tree trunks directly in front of the window. As soon as he finished the gulls and ravens did their best to find all the morsels. By 15:30 we had the place to ourselves and the waiting began. The kids were getting stir crazy by 18:27 when without any notice there was a female wolverine directly outside our window. I think she may have come from beneath the hide. She didn't waste any time gulping down the assorted fish and pork chunks and then climbed the tree in front of us to get a larger treat. 10 minutes later she was gone and we were staring at each other in disbelief that we had just watched a wolverine from 5-30 feet away. At 22:00 I had to join a work call back in the states. Just a few minutes after it began my daughter spotted a larger, darker, male wolverine across the pond. Over the next 23 minutes the wolverine was in constant motion looking for the snacks. It crossed the log bridge at the ponds outlet stream and explored the open flat below us before disappearing. I managed to take pictures and stay mostly silent throughout my conference call! Just before 23:00 it emerged again and spent another 30 minutes in our view until it was far too dark to keep taking pictures. I stayed up until about 1:30 before taking a couple hour nap. I could still see enough to identify animals but nothing else showed up. It was light enough at 3:30 for pictures but we didn't see any other mammals until it was time to leave at 8:00. There was a couple from Germany in one of the photography hides down in the flat and we coordinated with them via WhatsApp to make sure there were no mammals in sight before we all exited the hides. It was nice to be able to communicate with them as the fields of view are quite different from the angles. They had spent the previous night in the photography hides in the forest where they had excellent close-ups of wolverines and wolves in better lighting so they were a bit disappointed to see just two wolverines while we were ecstatic.



Female wolverine the first night

While the views were fantastic and we appreciated the space of the observation hide, my pictures that night were pretty crummy because I was shooting through a glass window and looking down on the animals other than when they were too close for my lens

Back at the lodge we indulged in the Sauna and took short nap before lunch. We walked to the forest hides to check the scenery there and to try to decide where to spend that night. We had booked one night in the observation hide and one night in a photography hide but since there was just a single other guest booked for that night we had some flexibility of location. My family decided they would be more comfortable in the observation hide so I decided to stay in the photography hide at Uuronlampi to be in close proximity to them. We headed back to the hides around 15:00. In the photography hide I had the luxury of letting in a bit of fresh air through the opening for my camera lens though I had to be wary of mosquitos finding their way in. At 18:19 my wife messaged me that my daughter had spotted a wolf across the water. From my vantage point it was a bit difficult to see that far to the right but with their help I found it. The wolf seemed a bit skittish as it walked along the shore. After a few minutes it went inland and I hoped it would just skirt the bushes then come back and cross the log bridge for a photo but it was gone.



Our first wolf across the pond

An hour later we got a message from our 23-year-old daughter who had been on the cruise with us but was traveling on her own for a few days. She had exited a bus headed for Budapest to use the bathroom and it departed ahead of the scheduled time and she was left behind with literally nothing but a cell phone with a near dead battery. No wallet, no passport, no backpack. As we frantically messaged back and forth trying to figure out how to help her, my wife messaged that a wolverine was crossing the log bridge! After I finished taking pictures I caught back up with my daughter. Over the next 5 hours we were praying for and stressing for my daughter but thanks to a number of good Samaritans she was able to hitch a ride 90 minutes to Budapest, someone gave her a phone charger, she was able to use the tracking feature on her AirPods to find where the bus had been parked over night and some nice guys from the hostel she had booked rode over with her at 23:00 and they were able to get into the fenced compound when another bus arrived and retrieve her bags! That was almost as miraculous as taking pictures of a wolverine!



Male wolverine the 2nd night crossing the log bridge



Those dark eyes!

Over the ensuing 30 minutes the wolverine exhibited its determination, climbing skills, strong jaws while posing for pictures without ever holding still. At times it would lope in the distinctive weasel gate that looks almost like a rolling wave. It went up the trees in front of the observation hide and then passed directly in front of my family less than 5 feet from the window. It paused and looked up at my wife making brief eye contact then hurriedly disappeared around the corner of the hide.



Wolverine climbing for the bait wired to the backside of the tree

Immediately the wolf reappeared according to my wife but I couldn't see it. Turns out it was right next to my hide, less than 20 yards from me but out of my field of view. They sent me a picture from the phone to show me just how close it was. It kept edging further out into the open then retreating. Eventually it went far enough that I could see it's face and front legs protruding from the tall grass. For the next hour it circled back and forth behind the photography hide up on the road behind the observation hide and then along the forest edge on the other side of the flats. Its presence kept the wolverine from showing itself but my family could hear it just outside their door. They sent me an audio of it breathing on the landing on the other side of the door. It spent the next hour making noises outside while we watched the wolf. They now appreciated the rule to keep the door closed and understood why windows might not be a good idea.



Shy



Still shy, but looking right at me



Up close



Too close for my lens!

After 30 minutes without any sightings a pair of wolves emerged from the forest on the far side of the pond. They were both larger and thicker than the skinny skittish one that had been hanging around all evening. One had similar mixed gray and brown coloring but the other was almost pure white. I didn't quite get the white one in focus but am including a picture below--



The white ghost wolf

They were only visible for a minute but I hoped they would return. After 13 minutes I heard movement in front of me and sat up to get a different angle from my narrow window and the pair of wolves was about to pass directly in front of me! I snapped a couple of hurried pictures but they were too close and moving too fast. I messaged my family to ask if they had seen them but apparently the wolverine had seen them coming and decided it was time to leave so they had been distracted by the sound of the wolverine leaving their porch! By 22:10 all was quiet again and would remain so until we left at 7:45 the next morning.

After breakfast we bid farewell to Era and Sini and drove to Joensuu to attend church. We spent the afternoon hiking near Porosalmi and then took an evening cruise to look for the Saimaa Ringed Seal that departed from the Jarvisydän resort. I wasn't very optimistic based on all the reports that once the seals stop basking on the rocks in May when they are molting they are quite hard to find. Accordingly I didn't carry my 400mm lens and of course that meant I was bound to regret it! Shortly after we crossed into the National Park waters our guide spotted a young seal and we had prolonged distant views of two different seals for the next 30 minutes. They would dive for 4-8 minutes at a time but surfaced again within view. The pictures with my 75mm lens aren't worth sharing but I'll include as it was another lifer.



Mammal List:

13 species (3 **lifers**)

Iceland:

White-Beaked Dolphin

Minke Whale

Humpback Whale

Norway:

Brown Rat

Germany:

Roe Deer

Poland:

Wild Boar

Latvia:

Brown Rat

Sweden:

Eurasian Red Squirrel

Finland:

Roe Deer

Moose

Eurasian Red Squirrel

Wolverine

Gray Wolf

Bats (unidentified but many flying in front of the observation hides at night)

Hare (not sure if Brown or Mountain)

Saimaa Ringed Seal

Raccoon Dog (numerous roadkill only)