

Finland's Mammals

Naturetrek Tour Report

20 June - 7 July 2019



Wolverine



European Brown Bear



European Brown Bear



Grey Wolf

Report & images compiled by Jan Kelchtermans



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Introduction

Finland's large carnivores

Finland is an amazing place to see Brown Bear, Wolf and Wolverine. In fact there is nowhere else in Europe where these three iconic predators can be easily seen. The use of hides and the provision of food makes seeing these animals more straightforward - especially Wolverine. But these are wild animals and we can never be too sure who will perform on the "taiga stage", but we will all be amazed with the views we get of these iconic mammals.

The Finnish no-man's land

It is a privilege to be present in Finland's no-man's land, spending a night inside a hide. It is a rare experience away from all noise and disturbance of urban living, with just the throaty calls of Ravens breaking the silence here. Especially when resident male Brown Bears on their local patch, feast upon their food. Only during the short period of twilight, Ravens become silent. Aside from distant sounds of chewing bears, the stillness of such a vast and desolate place is just beautiful and a privilege to experience.

The Finnish-Russian border runs roughly north/south, some 1340 km long and is mostly uninhabited taiga forests or sparsely populated rural areas. Especially near Kuhmo, not far from the Russian border, the Finnish no-man's land is devoid of humans. Instead, high densities of predators such as Brown Bear, Wolverines and Wolves, find a place to live and roam freely.

The 2019 trip was unique in that all three carnivores appeared in front of a hide during one night near Kuhmo. We watched the comings and goings of these large carnivores from early evening into the night until next morning. A truly memorable experience for us all.

Day 1

Sunday 30th June

Flight from UK to Helsinki & Nuuksio NP

The group met up with Jan at Helsinki airport and headed straight into the Finnish forests as the first hotel was situated within Nuuksio National Park. After dropping bags and have a bite to eat, a local guide showed us a tree cavity with recent activity of a Flying Squirrel family. Fresh, mustard coloured droppings at the base of the aspen tree, clearly showed the presence of these small critters. As it was a bit too early in the evening to see the squirrels leaving their home, we visited a nearby lake known as a breeding site for Red-throated Diver which was unfortunately diver-free! However Jan checked a nearby second lake where three summer plumaged Red-throated Divers were present.

Meanwhile, back at the first lake, the group enjoyed watching a diver fly in and feed its chick. We also saw Red Squirrel, Ravens, Teal and Common Gull. Back at the squirrel tree, the weather suddenly changed from clear sky into overcast so we were unlikely to have much luck - but we gave it a go before returning to the hotel seeing a juvenile Raccoon Dog in the headlights on the forest track.

Day 2

Monday 1st July

Helsinki & Saimaa Lake

After breakfast, we got on the road by 09:00, heading towards Lake Saimaa with one pitstop in between. Bird species noticed on the journey included flocks of Lapwings, Cranes, Whooper Swans, as well as a Mountain Hare crossing the road. Arriving at Lake Saimaa luxury resort, we went straight to the buffet, offering an abundance of local dishes.

Having a bit of spare time before the seal safari, we visited a small forest patch known the previous years as a reliable spot for Flying Squirrels. Unfortunately, we were not lucky but the seal safari afterwards was much more productive. While cruising through the vast archipelago in the golden light of the evening, we encountered several Saimaa-Ringed Seals popping up like from the mirrored surface of the lake. Besides the foraging seals, Canadian Beaver was seen twice. Birdwise, nesting Ospreys on small islands and big boulders were very confiding as were the resident Black-throated Divers on the lake along with Goosander, Red-breasted Merganser, Red-necked Grebe, Whooper Swan, Common Tern and Goldeneye.

Day 3

Tuesday 2nd July

Lake Saimaa to Lieksa (first hide session)

We had breakfast and left at 09:00 for our journey towards Lieksa with one pitstop in between. Although at a different location, a splendid lunch offered a wealth of local dishes again - a very tasty experience! We then continued for another 45 minutes to the first large carnivore base camp where our host Heini was waiting for us. After a short briefing, accompanied by coffee, tea and strawberry pie, we were divided into two groups before heading towards different hides for our first exciting night-time vigil! The first night was definitely a big hit at both locations!

The group in the smaller forest hide near the base camp saw at least three different Wolverines, more or less constantly from late afternoon to early evening at very close range with a total number of 17 appearances. Those in the larger lake hide had a Wolverine twice. First time in the evening and again next early morning.

Day 4

Wednesday 3rd July

Lieska (second night in hide)

After a productive night and our first big mammal target achieved, the forest hide group and the lake site group reunited around 08:00 at the Keljanpuro base camp. We then transferred to a nearby rural hotel where, after breakfast, en suite rooms were used to shower, refresh and rest before gathering again in the dining room around noon.

After lunch we returned to Keljänpuro lodge where we used the same hides for another night, with the two groups swapping locations. The group forest hides had, just like those here yesterday, a non-stop Wolverine presence with three different individuals and a total of 15 appearances.

At the lake site, a skittish Wolverine showed up briefly three times around 21:00. About half an hour later, the reasons for its behaviour became clear as a massive Brown Bear appeared at the forest edge bordering the swampy area near the lake. As it was still quite light, the bear was very cautious with the first approach to the baiting site aborted suddenly. The bear promptly stood still, listened with fixed ears, and retreated in a split second, back into cover of the nearby vegetation. For Jan this shy behaviour wasn't a surprise since these bears were more nervous than bears in the more remote and safer Kuhmo region. Fortunately, a bit later when it was a bit darker, the bear reappeared afterwards several times to the baiting site.

With both groups having the experience of multiple, prolonged and close views of several Wolverines, we felt this was definitely mission accomplished!

Day 5

Thursday 4th July

Lieska and the surrounding area

We started with the same morning procedure as yesterday. The hide session ended around 07:30, and we gathered with the others at the base camp and transferred to the hotel where after breakfast, en suite rooms were used to refresh and rest before meeting again in the dining room.

After lunch we visited the nearby Patvinsuo National Park where we enjoyed the walk on a wooden boardwalk through pristine pine bog habitat, typical of the Patvinsuo NP. Birds heard and seen during the walk included Goldeneye, Common Teal, Whimbrel, Golden Plover, Common Crane, Waxwing, Hobby, Whinchat, Tree Pipit and Common Redstart.

After our picnic dinner, we took a small forest road detour and saw our first Elk of the trip. Having maximised our time in the field, we arrived back at the hotel well before midnight. After two more or less sleepless nights in the hides it, without doubt, we were due a well earned night's sleep!

Day 6

Friday 5th July

Transfer to Kuhmo (third night in hide)

We enjoyed our last breakfast in the Lieska region and travelled further north in the direction of Kuhmo to our hotel for the next two nights. Once at the hotel, we had a bit of free time to relax. Once reunited, we drove a further 45 minutes to the next large carnivore base camp. Prior to our hide session, another great lunch was enjoyed in the base camp dining room. The large flipchart showing the daily log, told us about daily wolf, bear and wolverine sightings from the hides the previous weeks. We were all prepared for a memorable and unique experience!

After a decade of guiding these tours in Finland, tour leader Jan knows several bears, wolves and wolverines by (nick)name and behaviour. Jan offers a more detailed diary text of our extraordinary night and the unique atmosphere that only happens in these kind of hides in Finland.

Our first bear was seen at the edge of the bog, moving from left to right. This happened within 45 minutes after we entered the hide! Jan pointed out where the bear would appear and ten minutes later, it did! This first dark individual went straight to the carcass to

eat for about 20 minutes. At 18:34 the bear left the scene. Although it was clearly disturbed by something, no other bears were seen at that time. An opportunity for the resident flocks of Ravens to take over. Feasting on the newly ripped open carcass, they were joined by a sole Black Kite and three resident White-tailed Eagles. Both species doing the same: trying to grab their piece of the buffet. Then there was a new arrival, this time an adult Wolverine which came from the back of the hide at 19:14. The world's largest member of mustelids went, like the bear, straight to the carcass where it stayed until 19:34. With the appearance of a young Wolf at 20:00 we scored all three large carnivores within two hours! The immature Wolf left the scene as soon as a second adult bear appeared from the left. At 20:45 the same wolf reappeared and the second bear left. The wolf stayed until 21:14. Unlike the bears, the wolf never really went to the carcass to eat. Instead he strolled around in the bog where it sniffed around presumably trying to find some leftovers from the bears. At 21:30 another wolf appeared from the right. This individual, appearing rather scruffy and being more greyish in general, and wasn't limping as the first one. This wolf didn't stay long as a third bear - recognised by Jan as Breadhead - appeared from the left. At 22:00 another different bear joined Breadhead. As the first black one appeared, there were suddenly three different bears together on the set for about 15 minutes! At 22:35 the limping wolf showed up again to be joined by the other one at 23:00. Soon both wolves went after each other. It wasn't very aggressive as they were probably two non rival youngsters not interested in finding food or a territory for themselves. During the short period of twilight, most of us went to their bunk bed to rest for a couple of hours. It was actually only Andrew who kept an eye on the scene. The first wolf and the first bear kept him awake! At 04:00 a Wolverine appeared near the carcass for about 15 minutes and the first bear appeared again at 05:15. At 06:00 another Wolverine appeared and left with the remaining leg of the carcass! Certainly a constant variety of animals and a splendid night of wildlife watching!

Day 7

Saturday 6th July

Exploring Kuhmo and the surrounding areas

After this splendid night in the hide, we returned to our hotel near Kuhmo for breakfast. While the others had time to relax.

Later in the afternoon, we went to look for the elusive and shy Forest Reindeer (a subspecies of Reindeer) which are regularly spotted by our Jan in this area. Unfortunately, once at the stake out, the only signs of Forest Reindeer were fresh hoof prints. Forest Reindeer are very shy and hide as soon as they hear the sound of an approaching car. Clearly the Reindeer won the hide and seek game this time! Fortunately we had another good sighting of an Elk while cruising on the forest roads. We returned and enjoyed one last evening meal all together after an intense but hugely enjoyable week watching the fantastic wildlife of this stunning region.

Day 8

Sunday 7th July

Fly Kajaani - Helsinki to the UK

We had an early morning departure so transferred from the Kuhmo hotel to Kajaani with a packed breakfast before our domestic flight to Helsinki to say our goodbyes before different international flights back to the UK.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; fp = footprints; dr = droppings)

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July							
			30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	European Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		
3	Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>						✓	✓	
5	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>						✓	✓	
6	Finnish Forest Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus fennicus</i>								fp
7	Ringed Seal	<i>Pusa hispida</i>		3						
8	Siberian Flying Squirrel	<i>Pteromys volans</i>	dr							
9	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	✓					✓	✓	
10	Raccoon Dog	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	✓							

Mammals

1	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		✓				✓		
2	Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	✓							
3	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	✓	✓						
4	Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>		✓						
5	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
7	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>						✓		
8	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>						✓		
9	Shoveler	<i>Spatula clypeata</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
10	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
12	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	
13	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	✓	✓			✓			
14	Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓						
15	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>						✓	✓	
16	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	✓	✓						
17	Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	✓							
18	Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	✓	✓				✓		
19	Hobby	<i>Falco subbuteo</i>		✓						
20	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	
21	Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>					✓			
22	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				
23	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	✓	✓						
24	Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>					✓			
25	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
26	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>						✓	✓	
27	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓						
28	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
29	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>					✓			
30	Woodcock	<i>Scolopax rusticola</i>	✓							
31	Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>					✓			
32	Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
33	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
34	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
35	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July							
			30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
36	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	✓	✓						
37	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
38	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		
39	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		
40	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>								
41	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
42	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
43	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	✓	✓					✓	
44	Sand Martin	<i>Riparia riparia</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		
45	Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>	✓							✓
46	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>					✓			
47	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
48	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>					✓			
49	Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	✓	✓						
50	Dunnock	<i>Prunella modularis</i>	✓							
51	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
52	Common Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>				✓				
53	Whinchat	<i>Saxicola rubetra</i>				✓				
54	Northern Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe oenanthe</i>				✓				
55	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	✓		✓			✓		
56	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
57	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		
58	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	✓		✓	✓				
59	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	✓				✓			
60	Garden Warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	✓							
61	Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia communis</i>					✓			
62	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>								
63	Blackcap	<i>Sylvia atricapilla</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		
64	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓			
65	Wood Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus sibilatrix</i>								
66	Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	✓	✓	✓					
67	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>	✓					✓	✓	
68	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>	✓			✓	✓	✓		
69	Spotted Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>				✓	✓			
70	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓		
71	Crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>								
72	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
73	Blue Tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
74	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>					✓			
75	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓			
76	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>	✓							
77	Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓						
78	Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
79	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
80	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
81	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
82	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
83	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
84	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
85	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>					✓			
86	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>					✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July								
			30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
87	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	✓	✓							
88	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>					✓				
89	Linnet	<i>Acanthis cannabina</i>	✓		✓						
90	Common Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>	✓								
91	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	✓								
92	Yellowhammer	<i>Emberiza citrinella</i>	✓								
93	Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	✓					✓			

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Red-throated Diver



Wolverine



Grey Wolf