

Finland – Just Brown Bears!

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1 Fly Kajaani or Oulu and transfer to Martinselkosen Wilds Centre.

Day 2/3 Brown Bear watching and birdwatching from Martinselkosen Wilds Centre.

Day 4 Transfer to Kajaani or Oulu and fly London.

Departs

May, June, July & August

Focus

Brown Bears, other mammals, birds and general natural history.

Grading

A straightforward wildlife tour with gentle forest walks. Grade A/B.

Dates and Prices

Visit www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code FIN02) or see the current Naturetrek brochure

Highlights:

- The best opportunity to view Brown Bears in Europe
- Spend the night in a comfortable log-cabin hide
- Over 20 different bears a night enjoyed by past tours!
- Superb photographic opportunities
- Elk, Red Deer & Red Squirrel also possible
- Birds can include Siberian Jay, Black-throated Diver, White-tailed Eagle & Brambling
- Extend your tour to search for Wolverine, Wolf.



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Introduction

The Eurasian Brown Bear has a fragmented range extending across most of Europe, but it is a creature that requires large tracts of undisturbed country in order to exist and as the human population has expanded, so that of the Brown Bear has contracted. Today, the small numbers that still survive, do so in the more remote, inaccessible areas of the continent and nowhere are these qualities better exemplified than in the wilderness along the Russian border with Finland. This is a region, especially on the Russian side (where the majority of the bears and other mammals come from), that modern Europe has passed by, leaving the birds and mammals inhabiting these endless tracts of forest to live their lives with the minimum of disturbance from man's activities (especially the autumn hunting permitted on the Finnish side of the border). The Brown Bears of the Martinselkosen forests are, in the main, Russian animals that venture over the border during the summer months when they are actively foraging, often with cubs in tow, over wide and fruitful ranges.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1 Fly Kajaani/Oulu, transfer Martinselkosen Wilds Centre

You are scheduled to depart from London's Heathrow airport mid-morning on Finnair's service to either Kajaani, Kuopio or Oulu, via the Finnish capital, Helsinki. On your arrival you will be met by your local Finnish guide who will drive you across an unpopulated land of unending taiga forest to Martinselkosen Wilds Centre. The journey from Kajaani takes around three hours and from Oulu takes around four hours, with a welcomed coffee break enroute. This Centre is a former border guard station which lies within a large, 6,000-hectare, nature reserve right on the Russian border. It is a peaceful and remote spot surrounded by forests, mires, small lakes and brooks. This is the western taiga, a land of healthy ecosystems where some fine coniferous forest (mainly spruce) predominates alongside some areas of deciduous woodland. Above all, though, the region benefits from its position adjacent to the great taiga forests that lie across the Russian border where the very low density of human population and lack of hunting - which is an obsession in Finland, as in other Scandinavian countries - have allowed the large carnivores (Wolves, Brown Bears and Wolverines) and other animals to thrive. Outside Finland's autumn hunting and shooting season, these fine mammals stray across the border into eastern Finland to forage and hunt during the quiet spring and summer months.

Martinselkosen's position could not be better, for it benefits both from a fine range of mammals that are either very rare or extinct in other parts of Europe, as well as from the traditional comfort and facilities that we have come to expect from European accommodation. The Centre is a friendly, comfortable and warm guesthouse run by our hosts, Markku, Oili and Riina. All rooms have twin beds with en-suite shower-room and toilet facilities. There is also an upstairs communal area with

balcony as well as the large dining/reading room downstairs. Tasty traditional Finnish cuisine based on game meat is prepared by Oili using a wide range of excellent local produce such as salmon, reindeer, elk and local forest fruits and berries. A small selection of red and white wine are available for purchase during dinner. This will be your base for the holiday, and you will be staying here tonight, and sleeping here on your final night.

You are due to arrive at the guesthouse mid to late -evening (depending on your arrival time into the regional airport) where you can settle into your rooms before having dinner. A good night's sleep is necessary to stand you in good stead for your next night and evening in the 'Bear hide'!

Day 2

Bear hide, Martinselkosen Wilds Centre

After a leisurely breakfast, your local guide will take you on a birding excursion this morning, looking at the flora and birdlife of the region. On the small lakes amongst the forest, Black-throated Divers breed; Rustic Buntings may occasionally be found by the lakesides and around the mires, whilst deeper in the forest you may encounter such elusive specialities as Black and Three-toed Woodpecker, Siberian Jay and Siberian Tit. There are few species of diurnal raptors in this part of Europe, but by keeping an eye skyward, Honey Buzzards may be seen and there is always a good chance of seeing a Common Buzzard, Osprey, Sparrowhawk, Merlin or Hobby. In the heart of the forest, resident Hazel Grouse are shy and elusive inhabitants, but those that are quiet and patient enough may be rewarded. Red-throated Divers, Whooper Swans, Red-breasted Mergansers, Goosanders, Wood Sandpipers and Common Cranes are other denizens of the north that may be found breeding on the Finnish lakes and mires. We have our best chance of seeing these on our journeys from, and back to, Oulu/Kajaani, though we may also make an excursion this morning to one of the better lakes. The more obliging and sociable bird groups of these Finnish taiga forests are the northern thrushes (including breeding Fieldfares and Redwings), tits and finches (Chaffinch, Brambling, Siskin, Redpoll, Scarlet Rosefinch, Crossbill and Parrot Crossbill amongst others). Waxwings are another possibility here and would be a highlight for our groups. The huge tracts of taiga forest around Martinselkosen also support a healthy owl population in good 'owl years', however these birds are extremely elusive and sightings of the more sought-after species are rare.

Returning to the Centre at around 1.00pm, there will be time to explore some of the trails around the lodge or enjoy the birds at the feeders before a late lunch (2.30 - 3.00pm). It will then be time to prepare cameras, clothes, etc. for a full night in the 'Bear hide'. Setting off after lunch, it is a short drive followed by a pleasant 45-minute walk along an undulating forest trail to the hide. This walk passes through some fine forest, providing another opportunity to look for and enjoy some of the bird species mentioned above. You are also likely to encounter signs of Brown Bear activity in the area: favourite scratching/rubbing trees, devastated ant hills, tracks, etc. By 5pm you should be safely settled in the hide (drinks and snacks provided!), ready for any Brown Bears – or any other animals, for that matter – that might appear!

The Brown Bears have been attracted to the Martinselkosen hide by a careful programme of summer baiting over a number of years and, today, Brown Bear viewing from this hide is the best and most reliable in Europe. Furthermore, being just south of the Arctic Circle, Martinselkosen

enjoys virtually continuous, 24-hour-round summer daylight (especially in June/July) and it is certainly light enough to watch the bears for most of the night, should you choose to do so.

The site has become so well known to so many bears that they seem able to mingle together, at times in some numbers, in a relatively peaceful manner. Only the approach of the largest solitary males sends others scattering, though there is a fascinating hierarchy that may be observed through the course of each night. Mothers arrive, with cubs in tow (the cubs are born during the winter months and stay close to their mothers for over a year); playful independent youngsters come and go throughout the night; single females forage timidly, whilst huge, stern males give one another space. During the course of the night, all forage, scratch, climb, sniff, scrap and play – displaying all the endearing characteristics which make bears and their cubs so universally popular with humans! For most of the period of observation the bears are likely to be at 10 to 30 metres range from the hide but at times they approach much nearer and a close-up view of an adult Brown Bear is a never to be forgotten highlight of the tour.

Although nothing is guaranteed in the world of wildlife viewing, we have an excellent chance of seeing these magnificent creatures, provided that silence is observed within the hide. Bears are very shy creatures and easily scared by sudden or loud noises. Although mainly nocturnal, the Brown Bears may be seen from late afternoon onwards, when their emergence may be given away by the croak of a local Raven. By this time you will be installed in the hide, and will stay there until around 7am the following morning when the bears will have become sated and gradually make their way back into the depths of the forest, no doubt intent on a post-prandial doze in a shady corner of the forest! This will be your cue to leave the hide and return to the guesthouse at the Martinselkosen Centre where you can enthuse about the night-time's events over a most welcome breakfast and cup of coffee.

There are two hides at Martinselkosen, each taking twelve people (as such, it is possible other clients of Martinselkosen could be in the hide with you).

There are comfortable front row seats, some of which recline, in each hide and the bears are observed through a long thin viewing window, below which there are lens holes in the canvas section for those keen on photography. There are plates into which you can screw a tripod or gimble head. The hides have compost toilets and also space for people to sleep in bunk beds should you wish to (sleeping bags are provided). Space is at a premium and, whilst it is functional, it is by no means luxury! It is important to appreciate that, to avoid disturbing the bears, it is not possible to leave the hide during the night. Once installed, you are committed to an overnight stay!

Although the Brown Bears are our primary objective, other mammals also inhabit the taiga and, although they are all shy and elusive (especially when there are bears in the vicinity!) such species as Wolverine and Pine Marten – even Wolves on one occasion – have occasionally been observed from the hide, whilst Elk, Red Squirrel and Arctic Hare can be found in the surrounding forests.

Day 3 ‘Evening bear hide’, Martinselkosen Wilds Centre

After your full night in the hide, the early morning forest walk back to the vehicle provides another opportunity to encounter some of the avian specialities of the Finnish taiga forests, at one of the best times of day. Hazel Grouse might possibly be feeding on or close to the trail, whilst feeding parties of warblers, tits and finches will be becoming active.

Back at the guesthouse, after a welcome breakfast, you will have the chance to have a bit of a rest before leaving for a boat excursion at around 11.00am. Your guide will drive you to a nearby lake where a small boat with an electric outboard motor will be waiting. The lake is located close to the Russian border and your guide will tell you about the interesting and colourful history of the area as well as pointing out the local wildlife. Along with enjoying the scenery, you may see Common Goldeneye, Black-throated Diver, Red-breasted Merganser, White-tailed Eagle, Elk and Reindeer.

If you would prefer not to go on the boat trip, you might like to catch up on some more rest after the night in the hide or take an unescorted walk into the forest around the guesthouse.

Those who joined the boat trip will return to the guesthouse at around 2.00pm and after a late lunch at 3.00pm, there will be a little time to repack for the visit to the ‘evening bear hide’ which departs at 5.00pm. The journey to this hide involves a short drive followed by an 800 metre walk along an easy forest trail. The hide is located on the edge of a wetland backed by forest, and offers a different, more open, setting to that of the ‘overnight’ hide you would have visited the night before.

Sightings from the ‘evening hide’ are good and it is not unusual to see up to 10 different bears in an evening, some of which will be the same animals watched the night before. White-tailed Eagle are also seen regularly.

During the evening, a light snack of sandwiches, hot drinks and biscuits will be served. You will leave the hide at around 11.00pm and return back to the guesthouse for a good night’s rest before travelling home tomorrow.

Day 4 Fly London

After breakfast, your driver will transfer you back to Oulu/Kajaani Airport for your return flight, scheduled to depart mid-morning to London Heathrow, via Helsinki. Alternatively, you may wish to extend your stay for further wildlife watching or stopover to explore Finland’s capital, Helsinki.

Martinselkosen Photography Hides

Martinselkosen Wilds Centre have built 3 small photography hides, set away from the two main viewing hides. Each hide takes up to two people and have been positioned with photographers in mind; for example offering a better backdrop for photographs and an eye-level angle on the bears.

A night in one of these hides instead of the group hides on the main tour currently costs around £100.00 for one person per night and £50 per person per night for two people.

Tour grading

Grade A/B. This is a straightforward wildlife tour that makes no great physical demands and should be within the capabilities of anyone who is of a reasonable level of fitness. The walk to and from the full night bear hide (1.5 kilometres) takes around 45 minutes and is along an uneven, undulating forest trail (as indeed are any walks undertaken from the guesthouse). Roots criss-cross the path in places and there are sections of 'rustic' boardwalks over the wetter parts. The walk to the 'evening' bear hide is shorter and includes a downhill section though this is not steep.

Weather

Although these short tours take place during Finland's summer, the weather can be very variable. May is often cool, being the spring, whilst in high summer, temperatures are similar to those you might expect in Scotland. Daytime temperatures are likely to be between 15°C and 25°C, dropping to 5-10°C at night.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price (apart from lunches on Days 1 and 4). However, it should be noted that our guesthouse at Martinselkosen provides two, not three, main meals each day. These consist of a buffet breakfast and a mid-afternoon lunch/dinner. There will be an evening meal on arrival on the first day. Whilst in the hide, sandwiches, coffee and other light snacks may be served, as they are in the Centre. All rooms at Martinselkosen Wilds Centre have en-suite facilities.

Drinks are not included in the tour price. A small selection of local beers, red and white wines are available for purchase during dinner.

NB – Please note that for the last several years, we have opted to amend the itinerary of this tour to replace the second full night in the bear hide with time in the 'evening' hide where bear viewing takes place from around 6.00pm to 11.00pm. Past groups have found two full nights in the hides overly tiring and this amendment makes for a less tiring tour and allow for a good night's rest before returning home.

When is the best time to go?

The answer, of course, depends very much on what you want to do and see during your visit. The best time for birds is generally the latter half of May and the first half of June. May and June are also good for other mammals; Elk, for example, are easiest to see when the snow begins to melt in early May. If it is just Bears you are after, then July and August are the times to visit, when the maximum numbers of bears are seen each night. Although to date no Naturetrek group have missed bears at Martinselkosen, less individuals tend to be seen during the mating season (last week of May and first three weeks of June) when the animals have other things on their mind!

NB: Please note that, dependent on weather conditions, it can be quite dark in the middle of the night in late July, early August, and that bears may be difficult to observe and photograph for a few hours.

Please also note that mosquitoes can be a problem throughout the summer in Finland. Numbers vary depending on temperature and rainfall, but they are usually at their worst from late June to mid-July.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.

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Extension options

Since this is a short tour of only 4 days you might like to consider extending your holiday with a few days in the capital, Helsinki, or perhaps a night or two at Boreal Wildlife Centre to the south, a more reliable spot for Wolverine or perhaps even Wolf! A couple of ideas are listed below, but please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051 if you would like to discuss these further.

1. Helsinki

Due to years of Swedish, Russian and international influences, Helsinki, the capital of Finland, is unlike any other Finnish City. It has retained a 'small-town' feel with no high-rise buildings and the

market square still surrounded by 19th Century architecture. During the summer, the cafes, beer terraces, parks and harbour are humming with life. Plus, there are numerous museums and galleries to visit and Finnish handicrafts to purchase.

There are many hotel options available so should you wish to extend your holiday with a stop-over in Helsinki, please do not hesitate to call the Naturetrek office for advice. Please note that Finnair charges a stop-over fee of around £40 per person.

2. Boreal Wildlife Centre

Boreal Wildlife Centre is an old border guard station that was renovated in 2009 to provide comfortable accommodation for wildlife enthusiast and photographers wishing to visit the nearby bear-watching hide. It is located near the town of Kuhmo, approximately two hours' drive south from Martinselkosen Wilds Centre. The accommodation and meals are very similar to that described for Martinselkosen, although the centre does not serve alcohol and only two rooms have private facilities.

The hide is a 5 kilometre drive from the guesthouse followed by a 50 metre walk. It overlooks a large clearing/marsh surrounded by taiga forest, in the middle of which the staff put out salmon and meat for the Brown Bears and other wildlife. The hide (which is a little more basic than at Martinselkosen) has seating for 12 people, a compost toilet and bunk beds at the rear for those who would like a quick nap. Bear viewing is rewarding, although numbers of individuals tend to be lower than at Martinselkosen. A night or two at the hide at Boreal Wildlife Centre does, however, offer a chance of seeing a Wolverine or Wolf. Wolverine can be seen from May through August, but their appearance is erratic and they tend to be very wary of the bears and stay away if bears are in the vicinity. Sightings of Wolves on the other hand have become more regular over the past couple of years and Boreal Wildlife Centre is now one of the best places in Finland for a chance to observe this shy species. For further information on this extension please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051.

Cost - Includes, 2 nights at Boreal Wildlife Centre (hide or guesthouse), all transfers, accommodation, food and the services of local naturalist guide.

£650 per person

£150 single room supplement