

Finland – Just Brown Bears!

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Kajaani or Oulu and transfer to Martinselkosen Wilds Centre.
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- Day 2/3** Brown Bear watching and birdwatching from Martinselkosen Wilds Centre.
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- Day 4** Transfer to Kajaani or Oulu and fly London.
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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 a night and evening 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



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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. There are double and twin rooms available and even one triple room with two single beds and a sofa bed. Most rooms

have en-suite facilities. Our groups will be in rooms with ensuite 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 full nights in the 'Bear hide'!

Day 2

Birding excursion, full night bear hide

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. Red and Black-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, Common Rosefinch, Crossbill and Parrot Crossbill amongst others). 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 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 a trail to the hide. Please note this may be wet and boggy as this walk goes through a swampy area with boardwalks. You will have the opportunity to look for and enjoy some of the bird species mentioned. 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 and photograph 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. Cubs can be seen from May through to August but the best months are usually from late June onwards to view these playful independent youngsters as they come and go throughout the night. Solo 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 quiet 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.

You will spend one full night and one evening in the hides at Martinselkosen, both in a forest area each taking twelve people (as such, it is possible other clients of Martinselkosen could be in the hide with you). The full night is spent in hides and faces onto a clearing with a background of fairly dense pine trees. The evening hide is in a different location with a more open vista in front of you.

There are comfortable front row seats, 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, during the full night stay, 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 have occasionally been observed from the hide, whilst Elk and Red Squirrel may be found in the surrounding forests.

Day 3

Leisurely boat trip, evening bear hide

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 as 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 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 bear hide for the evening 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. They are very small and basic so they can be easily moved throughout the season. They contain only 1 chair in them and a small mattress which can be used for taking low level photographs from. They are not designed for sleep or comfort but are designed for those very keen photographers who are willing to stay up all night with the purpose of photography at the forefront of their thoughts. If you are desperate for some sleep, some can be had as there are sleeping bags in the hides. There are no pillows available. The photo hides have a bucket toilet in them with a small privacy screen. They 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 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). The trail uses boardwalks through a swampy area so it is likely to be wet, slippery and boggy. Tree roots may be encountered as well. Walking poles are useful for this route if it has been particularly wet at the start of the season and applies to the May and first June tour potentially. Poles may be borrowed from the lodge if required but you can of course bring your own. 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. On the day excursions, walks will likely be a couple of miles each day.

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 starting with dinner on day one and ending with breakfast on the departure day. 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. It should be noted the lodge is in a very remote area. While vegetarians and vegans can be catered for, please be prepared for a lack of variety with these meal options.

Tour Reports

Unfortunately, production of a tour report is unlikely on this tour due to our guides' limited access to IT and being extremely busy during the bear watching season. Should anybody within our group therefore be willing to compile a tour diary then we'd be delighted. Once you're all home, we'd be delighted to format the report and add any images supplied to us, before providing you all with a copy to remember the tour with.

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 easier to see when the snow begins to melt in early May although you would be fortunate to see Elk. There is a good chance of seeing Reindeer while you are out during the day. If it is just Bears you are after, then there is no real optimum time as numerous bears are usually seen throughout the night during the season. To see very young cubs, the later months of July and August are the best but they have also been seen in June as well. To date no Naturetrek group have missed out on seeing bears at Martinselkosen.

NB: Please note that, dependent on weather conditions, it can be quite dark in the middle of the night in late May and 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. We can arrange flights around this plan and there is good deal of choice of hotels in Helsinki at varying prices.

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 in Helsinki but we do not have any affiliation with any hotels so should you wish to extend your holiday with a stop-over in Helsinki, we would advise researching hotel options yourself. We will be happy to arrange the flights on the dates required after a stay in Helsinki.