

# Finland - Just Brown Bears!

Photography Special

Naturetrek Tour Report

26 - 29 June 2006

---



Report compiled by  
Chris Gomersall



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: [info@naturetrek.co.uk](mailto:info@naturetrek.co.uk)

W: [www.naturetrek.co.uk](http://www.naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour leader: Chris Gomersall (Naturetrek)  
Jani (local guide)  
Mikka (local guide)

Tour participants: Bill Pound  
George Land  
Angela Land  
Ron Elvins  
Rebecca Ford  
Robert Malpas  
Peter Bradley  
Anthony Bradley

## Day 1

Monday 26 June

Light cloud, mostly sunny. 22-24C

We are happy to depart Heathrow airport on time and escape a rainy day back home. Slightly early into Helsinki, so there are no problems making our connecting flight and everybody's luggage arrives safely at Oulu. Here we are met by Jani in the minibus and some fine summer weather.

Our four hour drive eastwards takes us through continuous taiga forest, with only occasionally enough relief in the topography to offer a more distant view. Traffic dwindles to the occasional lumber truck, and we are entertained by the sight of cross-country skiers and speed skaters in their summer plumage. Here and there we have to take evasive action for domestic reindeer which have strayed on to the road, and at one point, most excitingly, a magnificent hen capercaillie hogs the highway. At Martinselkonen we are greeted by Markku and Oili and Wili the reindeer (now 11 years old and a little grumpy because he's moulting), and shortly proceed to tuck in to some very welcome Finnish home cooking and root beer. We take a short walk after dinner to stretch our legs and have a closer inspection of the forest.

## Day2

Tuesday 27 June

Light cloud and sunny periods, cool breeze at first. 18-20C

Some early risers manage to photograph red squirrel, bullfinch, siskin and willow tit around the garden bird feeders before breakfast.

We take a short drive to Lake Hirvasjärvi where we almost immediately flush a blackcock by the footpath to the tower hide. Greenshank and yellow wagtail (grey-headed race, M f thunbergi) make their presence known, presumably nesting close by. We're pleased to find a family of common crane in residence at the lake (two adults and two juveniles). There's the usual breeding colony of black-headed and little gulls, a few wildfowl including goldeneye with small ducklings, and a beautiful summer plumage spotted redshank atop a Norway spruce. On the way back to the Lodge we pause at another lake (Lake Myllylahti) to look for goosander and black-throated diver, but instead find a pair of whooper swans and some common sandpipers. Returning from here, we spot a

spanking crimson male common crossbill feeding on spruce cones, and he's soon joined by a female. We have great views and one or two people manage a photograph.

After coffee and cake, a few of us take a walk in the forest led by Mikka and we are treated to a first-hand encounter with elk and wolverine poo and lots of mosquitos. Bird life a little sparse now in the heat of day, but close to the lodge we find nesting fieldfare and pied flycatcher.

Following a late lunch (or early dinner) we take the short drive and 25-minute walk to the bear hide, arriving by 4.45pm. Along the way, Mikka points out some bear scratch marks on a tree trunk, a scenting post, and a raided wood ants nest. Within minutes of being installed in the hide, Elina (mature female bear) arrives on the scene, even before Jani and Markku have finished distributing the food. Different single bears come and go for the next few hours, feeding and scratching themselves on tree trunks, but the main activity takes place between about 10.00pm and 1.00am with up to six bears present at one time, occasionally within a couple of metres of the hide. A black kite flits through the trees in an attempt to make off with some of the salmon bait. Quite soon we come to accept the bears' presence as normal and maybe even become a little blasé. Some of the non-photographers tease us about "second-hand experience" as they glance up from their reading novel/knitting/Sudoku puzzle, but even they become more animated as the behavioural activity intensifies and we witness two juvenile bears in a practice mating. The sun sets at about 11.30 pm but it's never duller than twilight. Some of us manage a fitful sleep in the makeshift bunks or reclining chairs. In the least light part of the night there are some great bellowing noises emanating from the forest – and apart from that, the bears are quite noisy too. Mikka reckons there were at least sixteen different bears visiting the site during the night.

Just before 7.00am we pack up and leave the hide and head back for breakfast.

## Day 3

Wednesday 28 June

Calm weather with cloud increasing through the day and evening. 20-22C

The rest of the morning is devoted to catching up on sleep.

Following coffee at noon, Mikka takes an expeditionary party to the wilderness lodge on the lake. Here they find wood sandpiper (but still no black-throated diver) and manage to add bear poo to the excreta list – Rebecca and Angela thereby successfully complete their "tracks and signs" badge. Mikka enlightens the group with his tales about Finnish history. Meanwhile, Chris holds a theory session for some of the photographers, reviews their work from the previous night, and offers a few words of constructive advice on technical matters and composition.

George, Angela and Rebecca decline a second night in the bear hide, while the rest of us appreciate the extra sandwiches. It's a duller evening and the bears slower to appear, but we still have up to four bears present for large parts of the night and some great displays of back-scratching. At one point, a juvenile white-tailed eagle swoops for the bait but fails to collect. He perches in trees nearby for a couple of hours, giving great views and some passable photos. There's a burning dawn shortly before 3.00am, which conveniently backlights a passing bear. A couple of bears hang around until about 3.30, then quietly disperse.

## Day 4

Thursday 29 June

Cloudy start, slowly clearing. Much cooler. 16-18C

We leave the bear hide shortly before 07.00 and head back to the lodge for breakfast. We have reasonable time to shower and pack and say farewell to our hosts, before boarding the minibus for the drive back to Oulu. Our departure from Martinselkonen is marked with a fly past from a pair of cranes, while the coffee stop is distinguished with better cakes on the return journey. We make Oulu in good time and thereafter our flights and connections to Heathrow are all straightforward.

### Summary

A fabulous wilderness experience just a few hours from home, it's hard to believe that wild brown bears can be so accessible. We were privileged to enjoy two nights of bear watching and photography, with up to sixteen different individuals present around the hide at surprisingly close range. The photographers all managed to fill a few memory cards with close-up images. Unfortunately the cubs didn't put in an appearance because of recent male aggression, but we did at least see the early signs of future cubs.

A three day trip doesn't allow too much time for birding, but nevertheless we managed to see most of the taiga specialities such as crane and whooper swan, capercaillie and black grouse. Black kite and white-tailed eagle were a bonus.

## Bird list

	Common name	Scientific name	May 2006			
			26	27	28	29
1	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		2		
2	Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>		X		
3	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		X		
4	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		X		
5	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		X		
6	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			1juv	
7	Black Kite	<i>Milvis migrans</i>		1		
8	Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>	1f			
9	Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>		1m		
10	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		4		2
11	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>				1
12	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>		1		
13	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		1		
14	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>			1	
15	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>		2	2	
16	Little Gull	<i>Larus minutus</i>		X		
17	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	X	X	X	X
18	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>	X	X	X	X
19	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>		X	X	X
20	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		X	X	X
21	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	1			
22	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>		X	X	X
23	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>		H	H	H
24	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	X			
25	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		1	1	
26	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	X	X	X	X
27	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>		X		
28	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>		X	X	X
29	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>		X	X	
30	Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	X			
31	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		1	1	1
32	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>	X	X		
33	Lesser whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>		X		
34	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		X	X	X
35	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>		X		
36	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		2	2	
37	Willow Tit	<i>Parus montanus</i>		1		
38	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		X		
39	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	X	X	X	X
40	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	X			
41	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		X	X	X
42	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	X	X	X	X
43	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		X	X	X
44	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		X	X	X
45	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		X	X	X
46	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		X	X	X
47	Common Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		X	X	X