

Finland - Just Brown Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 - 7 August 2006

Report compiled by Andy Lester



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Tour participants: Joan Rudd
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General weather conditions: Quite mixed; largely dry with cool and cloudy periods; thunder storms on the first night. Day time maximum 15-18C; night time minimum 8C.
Wind light and mainly NE 3-4.

Day 1

Friday 4th August

We arrived at Martinselkosen at 9.30pm local time after a straightforward and very pleasant journey from Helsinki to Oulu and then carried on to the base for the first night. The journey gave us a taster of what was to come. We passed several Reindeer by the road-side grazing unconcernedly as we sped past. Hooded Crow abounded, as did White Wagtail. At a brief stop for refreshments we were thrilled to find Black Throated Diver in breeding plumage-three in total; plus Common Scoter, a pair with three young. Siskin played in the tops of a pine and we watched several Yellow Wagtails flying overhead. A stunning adult Slavonian Grebe also put in an appearance. A warm welcome greeted us at the base and the dinner was most welcome. A stormy night followed with thunder and lightening - but the weather failed to dampen the optimism of the next day. The only excitement during the night was when Willie the pet Reindeer sneezed...sounding remarkably like a bear on the prowl!!

Day 2

Saturday 5th August

After a filling breakfast of local porridge and berry jam, eggs, meats and rolls we went out to visit a series of local lakes to see birds and mammals. The first stop was a pristine lake surrounded by acres of open marshland. A family of four Crane entertained us from the watch-tower, as did a party of six Whooper Swan (including three young). Wildfowl were plentiful, both Smew and Goldeneye put in an appearance and a further seven Black Throated Diver were located on the lakes. At a second stop, the team picked up a single Common Tern, Whimbrel, Black Kite and Common Buzzard. Numerous roadside stops gave ample opportunity for watching Black Grouse and viewing Waxwing with their delicate tinkling call. Other species that only winter in the UK include flocks of Redwing and Fieldfare. Willow Tit were everywhere; so why are they now so rare in Britain? Every now and then we glimpsed Great Grey Shrike from the minibus...presumably debating when to head south for warmer climes.

After a late lunch it was off to the bear hide for a memorable and inspiring evening watching these beautiful, shy creatures. Encouraged by the smell of fresh salmon we watched with baited breath as one after another the

brown bear strode out to begin their evening of gorging. A pecking order was quickly established with the larger male bears taking the lead and smaller juveniles and family groups made up of mums and youngsters following. Every now and then an older male would make a half-hearted run at one of the family groups sending the youngest cubs scurrying for protection up in the trees.

We were here for the bears; so were not disappointed by the lack of other wildlife around. Apart from a single Osprey, the ubiquitous Raven and a calling White tailed Eagle; the woods were devoted to the sounds of 21 contented bears and their dinner! A magical evening! At one point 18 bears were visible at the same time. According to Jarkki this was one of the highest counts of bears all in one view from the hide.

As dusk fell and the light dwindled silence descended on the forests. A place that was bright and sunny just hours before had become grey and cold. The hushed forest occasionally awoke to the sounds of snores from some of the group and the rustling and snuffling as a few of the bears searched for the last morsels of fish before retiring. The entire group eventually succumbed to sleep as the dawn began to bring a flush of rose on the horizon.

Day 3

Sunday 6th August

We left the bird-hide at 7.30am and began the walk back to the minibus. On the way we were entertained by a superb pair of Black Woodpecker, their red crowns glistening brightly in the morning sun. Several Crested Tit were calling from above the path, and sounded a little bit like someone trying to start up a car. Within an hour we were back at Martinselkosen for a welcome breakfast.

After a reviving bowl of porridge and a hot shower the group split in to two parties. Some decided to catch up on sleep, whilst the rest went out for a walk around the centre. For those who joined Andy and Jarkki for the walk, the efforts were justly rewarded.

Just minutes from the centre we tracked down a stunning female Three Toed Woodpecker. Never an easy bird to find, this one was located by its weak tapping on the bark as it pecked for insects. The group also managed to find a family party of Hazelhen, which were lured out of dense cover by a little whistle that imitates their call. A flighty flock of Rustic Bunting was a new species for some and views of Siberian Jay proved impressive. Two observers managed to get some prolonged views of hunting Hawk Owl. Unfortunately the bird could not be re-found for the main group; much to the chagrin of a few dedicated birders in the group!

There was a considerable supporting cast of typical northern species, including Merlin, Great Grey Shrike, Black Throated Diver, Black Kite, Common Crossbill and Waxwing.

We concluded the afternoon with a wander to within a stone's throw of the Russian border. A line of bright yellow marker posts denoted the frontier zone along with signs in four languages telling the intrepid explorer to "stop!" I couldn't resist putting one foot over the border, and then at least I could say I had bird watched in Russia! Northern Bullfinch appeared on the Russian side; so I am now the proud owner of a Russian bird list containing one species (a Guinness World Record I am sure).

Following a delicious stew of reindeer and moose a few members of the group went out again in the evening and felt a bit guilty seeing reindeer and moose (having just enjoyed eating some of their relatives!)

As the evening drew in; some of the group headed out for a second night in the hide; whilst the others retreated to their beds for a long night sleep. For those who went out to the hide; their perseverance paid off with outstanding bear watching and a very obliging White Tailed Eagle.

Day 4

Monday 7th August

Following breakfast we bade farewell to our hosts and made our way back to Oulu for the flight home. The combination of superb bear watching, great birdlife, the warm hospitality and silence of the northern forests made this an experience never to be forgotten.....and the highlight for most of the group? The first bear on the first night in the hide, which lumbered out of the dark forest cover to savour the salmon. Its power, size and grace were truly overwhelming. A magical experience!

Species lists

Mammal highlights

Brown bear (including 21 on night 2)
 Moose 2 (female with calf)
 Reindeer (common)
 Red squirrel 2

Bird highlights

Siberian jay (regular)	Common scoter 5
Hazelhen 8	Common crossbill 2
Three toed woodpecker 1-2	Hooded crow (abundant)
Hawk owl ** 1	Raven (Locally common)
Black throated diver (regular)	Baltic (lesser black backed) gull 15
Common crane 4 (incl 2 imm)	Goldeneye 8
Rustic bunting 6-10	Brambling 10**
Black kite 5	Fieldfare (Locally common)
Black grouse 4	Redwing (Regular in small numbers)
Smew 2 (female)	Osprey 1
Honey buzzard 1**	Tree pipit (Locally common)
Great grey shrike 6	Willow tit (abundant)
Slavonian grebe 1	Crested tit 2
Black woodpecker 2	Waxwing (common)
Whimbrel 1 seen (2 others heard)	Northern bullfinch (common)
Whooper swan 6	White wagtail (common)
Grey-headed wagtail (regular flyovers)	Northern wheatear 1
Spotted flycatcher (regular)	Redstart 5
White-tailed eagle 1-2**	crossbill sp 25-30
Red throated diver 1 (heard)	Merlin 1**

**Species seen by at least two individuals, but not by entire group. List does not include sightings by some of the group in and around Helsinki; or the very obvious species e.g Goldfinch, Treecreeper etc. The Hawk Owl was seen twice by two different individuals.