

Finland - Just Brown Bears! Photography Special

Naturetrek Tour Report

22-25 June 2007



Report & photos compiled by Chris Gomersall



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Local guides: Jarkki
Mikka

Participants: Claude Lester
Keeley Bishop
Jack Rawlins
Dave Goodger
Kim Goodger
Russel Webb
Dave Ball
John Devries
Dean Rotheram

Day 1

Friday 22nd June

Heavy rain at Heathrow, so a good day to be leaving England. We shared our flight with the Great Britain athletics team, on their way to compete in the European Cup at Vaasa. Take off was slightly delayed, so that made for a tight connection in Helsinki. We made it, but unfortunately the luggage didn't. In Oulu we were greeted by clear skies, and our local guide Jarkki, and commenced our four-hour drive to Martinselkonen. At least there was plenty of leg room.

Midsummer festival celebrations were underway throughout Finland, so we were lucky to find a place selling emergency supplies of toothbrushes, chocolate and salty liquorice. We made a brief coffee stop by a forest lake where we saw a well-grown brood of Common Scoters. Driving through the evening on ever quieter roads, we were thrilled to spot a couple of Elk at separate locations. Then everyone was relieved to arrive at the Wilderness Centre for a late dinner of home-cooked herring and potato, washed down with home-made root beer, shortly followed by an early night.

Day 2

Saturday 23rd June

Fine, cool start, becoming warmer.

A few brave souls endured the mosquitoes to take pictures around the bird feeders – of Red Squirrel, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Siberian Jay, Siskin, and Bullfinch. After breakfast, we split into two groups for birding excursions with Mikka and Jarkki – one group to Lake Hirvasjärvi, the other to the forest. Mikka's group quickly located a lake with a pair of Black-throated Divers, a Whooper Swan, and a pair of breeding Waxwings hawking for insects. At the tower hide, we were surprised to find a Yellow Wagtail (grey-headed race) nest on the steps, with newly hatched chicks. Hirvasjärvi Lake yielded a pair of Common Cranes with two young, another brood of Common Scoters, and a scolding Wood Sandpiper, as well as the usual colony of Black-headed and Little Gulls. There was a Muskrat lodge quite close to the hide, and Mikka spotted a distant swimming Beaver.

On our return journey, we saw more Black-throated Divers, a female Goosander, a family party of Great Grey Shrikes and a Hazel Grouse with a brood of tiny chicks close to a forest track. Jarkki's group had similar success, visiting nests of both waxwing and Siberian Tit, and they were also extremely lucky to find a Three-toed Woodpecker. Back at base, the pancakes at coffee break proved to be very popular.

Lunch followed indecently soon; just as we were finishing our elk (or vegetarian alternative), a taxi arrived to deliver our delayed luggage. This prompted a hasty change of clothes, and recovery of essential items like insect repellent and battery chargers. We then set off from centre at 4pm, for the short drive followed by a 2km walk through forest to the bear hides, guided by Mikka. Almost before we could settle in the hide and extract our cameras there were bears in view at the back of the feeding area. From that point on, we enjoyed their continuous presence until well after 1.00 am.

There were maybe up to ten different bears in view for some of the time. A mother and two cubs of the year (approx six months old) were quite bold and appeared soon after 6pm, and it was our fantastic good fortune to have photo opportunities with them in good light - especially as the cubs shinned up a tree whenever a male bear came too close. At one point we heard a loud roaring in the forest as two male bears were fighting, then about twenty minutes later a bear with a fresh face wound appeared at the feeding site.

Birds here included Black Kite and a pair of White-tailed Eagles, the latter not quite bold enough to come down for the fish bait. Most bears finally disappeared about 1.30pm, with only occasional visits after that. Most humans managed to grab some fitful sleep.

Day 3

Sunday 24th June

Calm, clear dawn and fine day.

As we were leaving the hide about 7.00 am, an old male bear appeared again, so we all dived back into the hide until the coast was clear. Then we returned to the centre for breakfast and welcome sleep. Dave B celebrated his birthday with a lie-in, while Dean was the only taker for Jarkki's birding excursion at 11.00am – they were duly rewarded with views of Red-throated Diver on its breeding lake, plus Great Grey Shrike, Green Sandpiper, Pintail, and Waxwings. We discovered later that they also managed to fit in a crafty beer break at Jarkki's summer cottage!

After lunch we prepared ourselves for another session in the bear hide, and everybody elected to do the second night. By now, it was clouding over and there was a freshening breeze. To our surprise, there was a male bear in open view from the footpath as we approached the swamp photography hide, but he soon turned tail.

John was seen in to the forest "professional" hide for a night of close contact with the bears, while the rest of the party installed in the large, rather more comfortable cabin hide with Jarkki. The bears were soon present again, though they seemed more nervous this evening, perhaps because of the strong wind. Once again, two cubs put on a good show, in view almost continuously from 6pm until just after 10pm.

Black Kites swooped down intermittently, and a White-tailed Eagle took up an open perch for a while, and even came down to the ground at one point to pick up some dropped food. It was much gloomier this evening however, with rain showers developing, so most of us bedded down by 11pm.

Day 4

Monday 25th June

Rain showers, much cooler.

There was just time to have breakfast and pack before saying farewell to our hosts Markku and Oili. We left Kim, Dave and Jack behind as they were going on to do the tour extension to Wild Brown Bear, while the rest of us boarded the bus for Oulu. It wasn't long before Jarkki found us another Elk, a juvenile this time, and this one even posed out in the open long enough for photos. Other sightings en route included a group of 11 cranes, plus another pair, and an osprey in flight carrying a fish.

Naturally we made a stop for cake and coffee, at a rendezvous point for those going on to the Owls extension (Keeley, Claude, Dave and John). Only Russel and Dean were left to accompany Chris on our flight home.....

Summary

We had our own midsummer festival with the bears; lots of them, perhaps up to twenty different individuals each night, including a mother and two young cubs, all within easy range of the hide. The first night in particular was blessed with clear conditions and good light for photography, and everybody had a number of excellent opportunities with the camera. It gets tricky at 1.00am when you're down to 1/10 second exposure, but we all learned how to pass off the blurry shots as "in the Finnish style."

Other wildlife sightings included three magnificent elk, plus northern European bird specialities such as Black-throated Diver, Whooper Swan, White-tailed Eagle, Common Crane, Hazel Grouse, Waxwing, and Siberian Jay, while Three-toed Woodpecker was a distinct bonus for some.

Species Lists

	Scientific name	Common name	June			
			22	23	24	25
Mammals						
1	European Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>		c20	c20	√
2	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>		√	√	√
3	Elk (Moose)	<i>Alces alces</i>	2			1
4	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	√	√	√	√
5	Short-tailed vole	<i>Microtus agrestis</i>		√	√	
6	Muskrat	<i>Ondatra zibethicus</i>		√		
7	Beaver	<i>Castor fiber</i>		√		
8	Brown hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	√			
Birds						
1	Red-throated diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>			√	
2	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		4	2	
3	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		1		
4	Common scoter	<i>Melanitta nigra</i>	√	√		
5	Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		1		
6	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>		√		
7	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			√	
8	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		√	√	√
9	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		1		
10	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		2	1	
11	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>				1
12	Black Kite	<i>Milvis migrans</i>		1	2	
13	Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>		1+		
14	Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		4		13
15	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	√			√
16	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	√	√	√	√
17	Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>		1		
18	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa achropus</i>			1	
19	Little Gull	<i>Larus minutus</i>		√		
20	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>		√	√	√
21	Common Gull	<i>Larus canus</i>		√	√	√
22	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	√	√	√	√
23	Lesser Black-backed Gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>		√	√	√
24	Arctic Tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>		√	√	
25	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	√			√
26	Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	√	√	√	√
27	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	√			
28	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	√	√	√	√
29	Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides tridactylus</i>		1		
30	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	√	√	√	√
31	House Martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	√			
32	Meadow Pipit	<i>Anthus pratensis</i>			√	
33	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>		√	√	√
34	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	√	√	√	√
35	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	√	√		

	Scientific name	Common name	June			
			22	23	24	25
36	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulus</i>		√	√	
37	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>	√			√
38	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>		√		√
39	Song Thrush	<i>Turdus philomelos</i>			√	
40	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>			1	
41	Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		1		
42	Siberian Tit	<i>Parus cinctus</i>		2		
43	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>		√	√	
44	Great Grey Shrike	<i>Lanius excubitor</i>		3	√	
45	Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>		√	√	
46	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	√			√
47	Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	√			√
48	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		√	√	√
49	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	√	√	√	√
50	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	√			
51	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	√	√	√	√
52	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>		√	√	
53	Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>		√	√	
54	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>		√	√	