

Finland - Just Brown Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

25 - 28 July 2008



Report & images kindly compiled by participant Joan Hunter



Naturetrek Cheriton Mill Cheriton Alresford Hampshire SO24 0NG England

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

F: +44 (0)1962 736426

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Local Guides:	Jarkki Mikka
Tour Participants:	Joan Hunter Andrew Joseph Amanda Joseph Damien Patton Alleyn Plowright

Day 1

Friday 25th July

We arrived late afternoon on our various connecting flights in Oulu to be met by Jarkki, our local naturalist guide for the trip. Summer had at last arrived in the UK and any regrets about leaving behind such sunny, warm weather quickly dissolved when we encountered the same warmth and sunshine in Oulu.

Ahead of us lay a three and a half hour journey by minibus to the Martinselkonen Wilds Centre. After about an hour into the journey we stopped for a coffee break beside a lake. This brief stop yielded our first “spot” of the trip – a pair of Black-throated Divers. The remainder of the journey took us through mile after mile of forest during which we occasionally had to slow down to avoid colliding with Reindeer on the road!

Just before 10.00pm we arrived at the Martinselkonen Wilds Centre, tired but happy to be in such peaceful, beautiful surroundings. We were warmly welcomed by our hosts Marrku and Oili Maatta, and by Vili – the rather elderly resident reindeer with the most impressive set of antlers.

After a delicious meal of reindeer hotpot (sorry Vili’s relatives!) and homemade beer to wash it down, we retired to our beds in the recently built guest block. We looked forward to making the most of a good night’s sleep in these clean and comfortable rooms, each with their own en-suite facilities, as the next two nights would be spent in the hide.

Day 2

Saturday 26th July

At breakfast this morning, the bear watchers from the night before had returned. Looking slightly dishevelled, they were eager to share their experiences and photos with us. After a hearty breakfast we were ready to set out on our first birdwatching trip with Jarkki.

Our drive through the forest yielded a pair of Waxwings perched high on a dead pine tree, Great Spotted Woodpeckers, and a tantalising glimpse of a low flying Black Woodpecker.

We then moved on to a hide overlooking a beautiful lake where the sun decided to appear after a cloudy start to the morning. On the pathway to the hide we stopped to pick some of the ripening cloudberries of which Jarkki was so fond. From the hide we spotted a pair of Whooper Swans, a young Goldeneye, and a female Smew. We didn’t stay long here as a pair of Swallows had built a nest in the roof of the hide and were anxious to get to their young to feed them.

Our next lakeside stop was more fruitful with plenty of activity. Here we saw Pintails, Arctic Terns, Little Gulls flying overhead displaying the black undersides of their wings, Common Sandpipers, Lapwing, Curlew, Yellow Wagtails, Swifts and a family of Goldeneye. Just as we decided to move on, we were treated to an Osprey flying along the tree line for several minutes.

On the way back to the Wilds Centre for well earned coffee and pancakes, we saw a female Black Grouse and its young crossing the road, and took plenty of photo-stops for the numerous Reindeer we came across. Before a late lunch we had time to prepare for our first night in the hide. At 4.00pm we left for a 10 minute car journey and then a 30 minute brisk walk through the forest to get to the hide. As we reached the hide we were rapidly ushered in by our bear hide guide, Mikka, and told to get our cameras ready. No sooner had we taken our seats than the first bear appeared in the forest clearing, sniffing the air and making his way towards the bait of dog biscuits and salmon that Marrku had just put down. For the next six hours we sat enthralled as we watched the bears come and go. We must have seen at least 20 different bears and at one point in the evening I could see 19 bears – the bolder ones in full view, the more timid staying amongst the trees and bushes.

The stars of the show had to be the young cubs – about the size of badgers, but with longer legs! There were two sets of twins and a set of triplets. At the first sign of a skirmish or full blown fight between the adults, the cubs would dash up the nearest tree while Mum stood guard at the bottom. As soon as calm was restored, they would clamber clumsily back down. On these occasions, it was difficult to decide whether to focus our cameras on the fights or on the reaction of the cubs.

The cub action also included play fights, standing on hind legs looking up at the Gulls (Herring and Black-headed) which circled the site and chasing Pied Wagtails and Ravens. Every now and then a Black Kite or White Tailed Eagle would swoop down to grab a scrap of fish, startling the cubs. Other bird visitors included Chaffinches, Hooded Crows and Magpies. By 11.30pm the last of the bears disappeared into the forest and we were able to settle down for the night in our sleeping bags, trying to sleep amidst the calls of the Ravens, Gulls and Eagles.

Day 3

Sunday 27th July

At 7.00am we emerged from the hide and made our way back to the Wilds Centre in a state of bleary-eyed bliss. Four hours later, after breakfast and a brief rest, we met up again with Jarkki for coffee and buns and to discuss our next foray into the forest. On his journey to the Wilds Centre, Jarkki had nearly run into an Elk on the road close by, so Elk was high on the agenda as we set off for our forest walk. By now the sun had come out and the forest had an evocative feel in the dappled sunlight where the only noises to be heard were the leaves rustling in the breeze and the occasional whine of a mosquito around our ears.

Our morning's highlight was a Hazel Grouse and young which we were able to follow for a few minutes, but sadly there were few other birds showing themselves or calling this morning, despite Jarkki's best endeavours. The lone songbird in the forests was a Robin. We came across plenty of fresh Elk footprints and a place where one had obviously spent the night, but there were none to be seen. Jarkki then turned our attention to cloudberry picking instead – he was addicted to them and we were fast becoming converts to this juicy berry that

resembled a yellow blackberry, turning from red to yellow when it is ripe. On the journey back to the Wilds Centre for lunch, Jarkki spotted a Redstart disappearing amongst a pile of small boulders.

After a delicious salmon lunch followed by, guess what, cloudberry jelly, it was time to head off for our second night in the hide. Three of our group opted to pay extra to stay in two small hides designed for professional photographers. These were sited in a swampy area, very close to the main hide. The main benefit of these hides was that you could photograph the bears against a different backdrop.

In the main hide, the full on action started almost immediately again. Knowing all of them individually, Mikka explained the relationship between the bears – particularly the females and the cubs. After having taken so many photographs the night before, it was good to be able to sit back and study the interaction between the bears and to watch their behaviour. The only missing participants were the mother and three cubs who eventually turned up about 11.00pm when most of the adult males had left the scene. The sun was shining this evening and we were able to take photographs in good light for longer. We noted that it was the same two bears again who stayed to the end.

Whilst the White Tailed Eagles and Black Kites were not as numerous or vociferous this evening, we were joined by a Red Squirrel leaping in the tree tops above the bears. Another highlighted spotted by an insomniac at 4.30am was a Red Fox!

Day 4

Monday 28th July

Our walk back to the Wilds Centre on this bright, chilly morning produced a good sighting of another Red Squirrel who posed nicely on a branch for his photograph. After breakfast we said our sad farewells to Marrku, Oili and Mikka, as Jarkki came with us back to the airport. Ahead of us lay three and a half more hours of Elk spotting opportunity, but sadly we did not manage to see one. There were plenty more Reindeer and we spotted a Siberian Jay flying across the road and Goldeneye on a pond close to our coffee stop.

As we left Jarkki at the airport we were all very envious of the next Naturetrek group which he would meet in four hours time. What a treat they had in store...it was such a shame that the incoming group was full – I would gladly have done the trip all over again!

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Species Lists

Birds

	Common name	Scientific name	Day recorded
1	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	1, 2
2	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	2
3	Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	2
4	Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	2, 4
5	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	2
6	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	2, 3
7	Buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>	2
8	Black Grouse	<i>Tetrao tetrix</i>	2
9	Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>	3
10	Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	2
11	Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	2
12	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	2
13	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	2
14	Little Gull	<i>Larus minutes</i>	2
15	Black-headed Gull	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>	2, 3
16	Herring Gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>	2, 3
17	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	2
18	Wood Pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>	2, 3, 4
19	Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	2
20	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>	2
21	Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>	2
22	Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	2
23	Great-spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	2
24	Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	1, 2, 3, 4
25	Tree Pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>	2
26	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba alba</i>	2, 3
27	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	2
28	Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla garrulous</i>	2
29	Robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>	3
30	Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>	3
31	Mistle Thrush	<i>Turdus viscivorus</i>	2
32	Siberian Jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>	4
33	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	2, 3
34	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	2, 3
35	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus corone cornix</i>	1, 2, 3, 4
36	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	2, 3
37	Siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	2
38	Parrot Crossbill	<i>Loxia pytyopsittacus</i>	2

Mammals

1	European Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	2, 3, 4
2	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	3, 4
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	3
4	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>	1, 2, 4