

Finland - Just Brown Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

7 - 10 July 2011



Brown Bear cub



Brown Bear



Adult White-tailed Eagle



Great Grey Owl

Report and images compiled by James Lees



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Day 1

Thursday 7th July

We arrived in Helsinki late morning from our first flight from London Heathrow. Here we had some time to wander around the various shops and restaurants and got a real feel for the culture. Our second short flight of the day took us to Oulu where we met Jarkki, our local naturalist guide for the trip. Jarkki has been working with our Naturetrek groups for many years now. He lives on the edge of a lake near the Martinselkonen Wilds Centre and knows the local wildlife better than anyone. He kept the group entertained with the latest bear and bird news while we drove the three and a half hour trip to Martinselkonen.

Halfway there we stopped at a lakeside cafe for a break and some well deserved drinks and local cakes. The further we got from Oulu we saw fewer houses and more trees. After two hours, we were in real Taiga forest and started to see some great wildlife. We came across one male reindeer feeding very close to the road; he allowed us to stop and get some nice views. Later in the journey, we saw several Black Grouse and a herd of about 20 reindeer. We arrived late evening and were greeted by our hosts Marrku and Oili Maatta. Everyone settled into their rooms before we sat down for some dinner. Most people went to bed to get some rest ready for a full day of observations, but for some the 24-hour day light was just too tempting!

Day 2

Friday 8th July

We woke to fantastic weather - clear blue skies and the unmistakable pine smell of the untouched taiga forest. Some of the guests had wandered down to the bird feeding station at the bottom of the garden. Here they were rewarded with some stunning close views of at least 80 Siskins and 20 Northern Bullfinches. However, best of all were at least five Common Crossbills that came down to feed on the fallen sunflower seeds under the table. This also attracted several Grey-sided Voles and at least 3 Red Squirrels.

We then headed in for breakfast just as the bear-watchers from the night before had returned. They were eager to share their experiences and photos with us, and this got our group very excited. After a hearty breakfast of really tasty local foods we were ready to set out on our first bird watching trip with Jarkki.

So we set off in a 4x4 vehicle with cameras on laps ready to photograph anything we could find. We could not have asked for better weather; it was perfect for photography. Soon we came across a Hazel Hen with at least 10 medium sized young. We stopped and managed to photograph one of the young sitting in a tree close to the road. A short distance down this road we came across another female grouse with young - this time a Black Grouse. Again we stopped and were able to get some nice photographs.

The next time we stopped was for a very impressive bull Moose that was feeding on the roadside. It didn't stay long but some of the group managed to photograph this awesome animal before it disappeared into the woods. The next stop was an open area of wetland with lots of pools. Here we stopped and walked to a tower hide to view the wetland. We were treated to views of two Whooper Swans with two very small and downy young by their side. The wetland was alive with a busy Black-headed Gull colony, but among them were the truly beautiful Little Gull. At least 10 pairs of these tiny gulls flew around hawking insects low over the water. We were reluctant to leave this very tranquil area, but were heading for a much bigger lake with more to see.

We stopped on a causeway across this very large lake at least 5 miles long. There was plenty to keep us busy; in fact, it was hard to know which way to look! Several Common Cranes flew over and landed in the marsh where they began feeding. We also enjoyed great views of hunting Ospreys, Hen Harriers and Peregrines. On the lake we saw several Black-throated Divers in full breeding plumage and there were plenty of Yellow Wagtails feeding along the causeway. But, time had run out and we had to head back to the centre to recharge camera batteries, as well as our own, before our first night in the bear hide.

Late afternoon we sat down for a delicious meal of local food before we loaded into the vans and headed to the hides. It took about 15 minutes to drive down some tracks to a small car park. From here, we had to walk the final stage through the untouched and incredibly beautiful taiga forest. Throughout the 45-minute walk, we constantly saw signs of bears: footprints, scratch marks and droppings. We knew we were close when we began to hear the loud calls of Common Ravens that were also waiting to be fed.

We arrived at the hide just before 5pm. The hide has camera slots on the front and a row of bunk beds at the back. No sooner had the door been locked when the first Brown Bear arrived to feed on the Salmon and dog biscuits. Everyone grabbed their cameras and began photographing the bear at very close range. Then another and another arrived! In the first hour alone, we saw 16 Bears and by the end of the night, the group had seen at least 40 individuals!! The light was still superb and just perfect for photographing these magnificent creatures. We saw big males, females with 6-month old cubs, females with 18-month old cubs and 3-year old bears on their own. Over the next several hours we were treated to some excellent behaviour as big male bears chased smaller bears. But it was the females with cubs that were the most aggressive. They would take on full blown adult male bears and would stand up and fight with them to keep them away from their cubs. These were not play fights - far from it. Very vicious blows accompanied some of the fights. And all this was happening just a few metres from our lenses!

We were also kept on our toes by two Black Kites and four White-tailed Eagles that would swoop in and grab some salmon before disappearing into the trees. At one point, 25 bears of various ages and sizes had all gathered to feed. Again, during this time, several males got too close to females with cubs, and soon fights broke out. During these fights, the young cubs would run up the trees and climb anything up to 20-feet for safety.

Again, we could not have asked the bears to do anymore; we had observed and photographed all of their behaviours. Moreover, we observed all of this action whilst having a coffee and a sandwich! tFrom 5pm until 11pm, the whole group was constantly photographing Brown Bears as they would come and go from the feeding area. By midnight, the number of bears had dropped to just a few. Some people took this opportunity to get some rest, but other stayed up all night watching and photographing. Just before 2am there were almost 20 bears all feeding in front of the hide. The last bear left the feeding area around 6.30 am just in time for us to leave at 7am to walk back to the vans.

Day 3

Saturday 9th July

We returned to the centre for another wonderful breakfast where everyone was buzzing from a superb night of bear photography. Then we had some quiet time where some people went back to their rooms to rest. Others went down to the feeders and some went for a walk. Those that did wander around managed to see a Red-flanked Bluetail, Fieldfares, Tree Pipits, Great-spotted Woodpeckers and many Willow Warblers. Jarkki had also arranged a short guided walk into the woods to see a bear den. It was fascinating to see where these animals spend the winter. He gave us the opportunity to climb down into the deserted den for a closer look... but most declined!

Then we all climbed back into the van and headed off in search of one the most sought after species of bird in Europe. We drove through the beautiful wooded landscape that would occasionally reveal small boggy lakes. We managed to see several groups of reindeer that were feeding on moss beneath the trees. Then we arrived at an area where Jarkki had seen Great Grey Owls nesting very recently. The young owl had left the nest about a week earlier, but he was sure the owls would still be close by. We all crept around the forest looking up into every tree. Soon the call came from Jarkki - he had located the adult female Great Grey Owl roosting in a small pine! The group gathered and had stunning views of one of the best and biggest owls in the world. Then we realised that the juvenile was sitting directly above our heads the whole time. This juvenile was almost fully grown but still had plenty of fluffy down to make it look very cute. As photographers, we could not have asked for better views or light. We spent a good hour watching and photographing these magnificent birds. We then headed back to recharge batteries before another night in the bear hides.

So after some rest and yet another delicious local meal we were all set for another night with the bears. Once again we made the short drive and then walk to the hides. This time we were in a different hide slightly higher up with a different view. The weather was warm and sunny with superb light for photography. Within minutes of the salmon and dog biscuits being placed in front of the hides the bears arrived.

The first night photographing bears was better than any of us could have imagined, but the second night was even better!! Once again, we must have seen about 40 individual Brown Bears over the course of the night. At times there was so much action it was hard to know which bear to photograph. The cubs stole the show again and spent lots of time climbing trees and hiding behind their big mums. Everyone took full advantage of the sunshine and took plenty of photographs. We were also kept busy with two Black Kites and at least four White-tailed Eagles. Around 1am, one of the group members noticed an eagle just in front of the hide. Everyone managed to get great shots of the huge adult White-tailed Eagle as it fed on salmon on the ground.

Some of the group slept for a few hours while others stayed up all night and made the most of the 24-hours of day light. All too soon, and several thousand photos later, it was time to leave the hide. We returned to base very happy after another magnificent night of photography.

We then had time to pack our bags and have breakfast before the coach ride back to the airport. This was a fantastic short break; we had perfect light for photography and endless subjects. Everyone had a great time and went home with many very special photographs and memories.

Day 4

Sunday 10th July

Arrived back in the UK

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