

Finland - Just Brown Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

4 – 7 July 2013



Report and images compiled by Bret Charman



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Day 1

Thursday 4th July

We arrived in Helsinki mid-afternoon after our first flight from London Heathrow and before long we had to catch our second short flight which took us onwards to the town of Oulu. The group picked up their luggage and we were met at arrivals by our local guide and naturalist Jarkki who lives locally to the Martinselkonen Wilds Centre. He has been guiding Naturetrek's groups for many years and has a great understanding of the region's wildlife. We stopped en route at a small café for a drinks break, this was to be the last town that we would pass through before driving deeper into the Taiga Forest. Swifts and Swallows flew over the small clearings in the forest, a Kestrel hovered by the roadside and a Curlew flew overhead. The only mammals we saw were a few Reindeer seen along the road on our way to the centre, losing their thick winter coats. We made it to Martinselkonen in the late evening and were warmly welcomed by the hosts Marrku and Oili Maatta. The accommodation itself is an old Finnish army border station that has been converted into a comfortable guesthouse. We were allocated our rooms and shortly afterwards headed to the dining room for a hearty meal. We were well fed and then it was time to get some much needed rest as the next day was going to be very busy indeed.

Day 2

Friday 5th July

After a comfortable night's sleep we awoke to a beautiful morning with blue skies. The group met up for a tasty continental breakfast, and ate well knowing that we had a few hours before Jarkki was to take us on a walk in the forest. Some of the guests decided to get a little more rest, others set themselves up in the small pop-up hide at the bird feeding station, while the rest of us went for a short walk along the gravel road to see what we could find. The feeders were busy with the usual suspects - Bullfinch, Siskin, Greenfinch, Chaffinch and Great Tit were all easily seen. On the short walk we saw a large number of butterflies flitting across the grassy roadside, Ravens flying overhead and the ever present Swallows were skimming across the open ground in search of insects.

We met up with Jarkki at the agreed time and set off for a leisurely walk into the forest. A variety of trails around the lodge gave us an insight into the bear's habitat and the other species that share their environment. Jarkki took us to a den where a bear had spent the winter hibernating, a small opening led to a small rounded hollow, where the bear would conserve its energy during the winter months.

We made our way along the meandering path, through the forest and soon heard a cacophony of noise which turned out to be family of Jays fighting over a honeycomb full of grubs. The leisurely walk lasted for a couple of hours in the warm sunshine, with Crested Tit being the species highlight. After an incident involving a camera battery, a river and a wet Jarkki, the group made their way back to the comforts of the guesthouse and for a late lunch! The reason for having the late lunch was because tonight was to be our first night in the bear hide. You do get snacks in the hide but making sure you have a full stomach beforehand is highly recommended.

After another lovely home-cooked meal it was time to pack up our camera gear and get ready for the imminent departure for the bear hides. The sun was still shining brightly, the air still and warm and the group got ready with lenses and cameras galore. We got into the vans and the 4x4s and set off down the road towards the Russian border. Most of the bears actually live across the border but come to visit the hides each night and eat the food left out for them. We arrived at the drop off point and set off on the 45 minute walk to the hides, the sun shining through the trees and the heat of the day still lingered. This part of the forest has been left untouched and is pristine, a true wilderness with lichens and mosses on the trees. It was also immediately apparent that there were bears in the area, fresh droppings and scratch marks on the trees were easily seen throughout the walk.

We arrived at the hides around 5pm and there, in front of us, was a fully grown Brown Bear no more than 20 yards away! The individual, a large healthy male, looked at us briefly before returning to his freshly prepared meal. We quickly, and quietly, settled into the hides and set up our camera gear. The lone bear was now joined by another bear, and before long it was hard to keep count! There were bears of all different ages and colours, and you quickly began to recognise individuals. It was fascinating to watch their behaviour. The large males chased off the younger males, and the females with their cubs, some yearlings and some from this year, stayed at the edges of the feeding area, ensuring they kept their distance. We enjoyed watching the interactions between the individual bears, especially the cubs which were extremely entertaining. At the “peak” time there were at least 20 individual bears around the hides all trying to make the most of the free meal on offer.

Before we knew it, it was gone 9pm and some of the bigger bears had moved off and the families started coming closer to the hides. We got some great images of the young bears, only yards away from us; it really was an incredible experience. At the same time there was a Black Kite which swooped down to pick up a piece of Salmon, Hooded Crows feeding on the periphery and a variety of gulls all trying to steal some scraps.

By about 1am most of the group had headed to the bunks at the back of the hide, catching up on a bit of sleep. Occasionally a new bear would turn up, and we would have a quick look before settling down for a little while longer. It was a warm night in the hide but it was certainly worth it for the enjoyable hours of bear watching we had been privileged to experience. At 7am it was time to leave the hides and head back to the cars.

Day 3

Saturday 6th July

After a long, fantastic evening in the hide we headed back to the centre for our breakfast. Everybody was still taking in the excitement from the night, and seemed to be very much awake. We helped ourselves to another filling breakfast and arranged to meet up later that morning for those that wanted to go on an excursion in the minibus. The feeders outside the front of the centre were once again busy, this time the usual suspects were

joined by a family of Great-spotted Woodpeckers. Some of the group passed up on the opportunity for the midday excursion but the rest of us climbed aboard the minibus and headed off in search of wildlife with Jarkki.

The weather was gloomy and spitting with rain but Jarkki assured us that this weather was good weather to find an Elk (Moose). He told us to keep our eyes peeled on the forest that lined the road and if we saw anything we were to let him know. We soon came across a couple of Reindeer, one was a mother with a young calf and a little further down the road we noticed some movement in the forest. We quickly realised it was a beautiful female Elk (Moose) and she posed perfectly for us, we managed to get some lovely clean images of her in the rich green vegetation...an unexpected bonus as Elk are notoriously nervous around people and usually disappear moments after you spot them.

As we drove along the gravel roads we came across a very noisy Wood Sandpiper, followed by Northern Wheatear, Tree Pipit and Song Thrush from the comfort of the minibus. We headed to a few small lakes in the area to see what we could find but all was quiet. After some further exploration we reached the area's large lake, we got out of the minibus and scanned the surroundings for some birdlife. Jarkki quickly spotted a distant Red-throated Diver, a family of Whooper Swans as well as a flock of Teal. In the forest, on the shore line, a Great Grey Shrike stood out as did the tell-tale noise of a flock of Great Tits and Willow Tits.

Before long we were back at the centre for our final lunch. We then returned to the main hide, and having already had such a successful night, the pressure was off and everybody was just happy to have a relaxed evening with the bears and enjoy what was presented to us. The walk to the hide was certainly cooler but with constant drizzle it was also a little damper. Things started much slower this evening, a few solitary bears showed up and fed but there was a noticeable lack of the mothers and cubs we had seen the night before.

A couple of hours passed and the skies cleared, the rain stopped and the sun re-appeared, suddenly the forest was transformed. The perfect light was back and more and more bears started to appear. They were noticeably fewer in number than the night before, but there were still bears aplenty and we were treated to some fantastic behaviour. Lots of mothers turned up with their cubs with four separate families, numbering fifteen individuals in total, and pushed off a large male who had been there all evening. Then the cubs relaxed and started to play. The highlight was towards the end of the evening when the light was fading, one cub decided it was going to play in a tree with its sibling, running up and down at amazing speed. Then the mother decided it was time to leave and three of the four cubs followed. One cheeky individual decided he wasn't going to come down from the tree and stayed put, the mother leaving him alone with other bears still in the vicinity. After ten minutes or more, she came back with the other cubs in tow and called to her rebellious offspring, with the youngster finally descending the tree.

A quick telling off and the family slowly made their way towards the Russian border (only a few hundred metres away from the hide). Another fantastic evening with the bears but most of the group slept well that night, the rain seemed to put off some of the bears from making an appearance and they moved on earlier than the night before. After a decent amount of sleep we awoke to find it was the morning proper and almost time to leave the hide. We walked back down the same path and climbed aboard the minibus and headed back to the centre for breakfast.

Day 4

Sunday 7th July

After our final breakfast, sharing our different experiences in the different hides and watching the bird feeders from the window, it was time to pack our things up ready for our journey to Kaajani airport. We said goodbye to our fantastic guide Jarkki, our hosts Marrku and Oili and headed off to the airport. After an easy check in we caught the flight to Helsinki, where many of us went our separate ways and then onwards to London for the remainder of the group.

An amazing few days with the bears was had by all, and everyone seemed to be happy with the photographic and wildlife watching opportunities that were on offer. A great many thanks to an excellent group who made this trip so enjoyable!

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