

Finland – Just Brown Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

26 - 29 May 2016



Report and photos by Simon Dicks. Clockwise from top left: Red Squirrel, European Brown Bears.



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

W: www.naturetrek.co.uk

Tour Participants: Jarno Kela (leader) & Simon Dicks (Naturetrek) with four Naturetrek clients.

Day 1

Thursday 26th May

London to Kajaani

After a morning flight from Heathrow and a few hours waiting in Helsinki for our onward flight, we arrived in Kajaani at around 7pm. Our group of 5 were met at the small airport by our guide Jarno. Jarno has guided our Bears tours for many years and has enormous knowledge of the wildlife in the area. We collected our luggage and made our way to the minibus outside to begin our two hour journey to Martinselkosen Wilds Centre, our base for the next few days. We arrived at around 9pm and were given a warm welcome by our hosts. The accommodation is a recently refurbished, former Army



Bullfinch

border station. It is modern and very comfortable with ensuite facilities. After being shown to our rooms, we made our way to the dining room where, we instantly noticed the busy bird feeders outside the window. Red Squirrel and Bullfinch were busily feeding and they were joined by a Great spotted Woodpecker. Although tired, we happily tucked into delicious, light meal that had been prepared for us, excited about what the forthcoming days and nights would have in store for us. After the lovely meal, a few clients went for a walk and a brief explore before turning in for the night.

Day 2

Friday 27th May

Martinselkosen Wilds Centre

After a restful night's sleep, we awoke to beautiful blue skies and glorious sunshine. After a delicious breakfast, some went for a walk in the woodlands surrounding the lodge. We were being collected by Jarno at around 11am for our first excursion but that still left a couple of hours for some exploring or to catch up on some more rest as it was going to be a long night ahead of us. Those that chose to go for a walk around the lodge were treated to more Red Squirrels and Bullfinches on the feeders and the woods nearby. The woodland was alive with birds, Siskin, Greenfinch, Great tit and Blue tit along with some particularly obliging Pied Flycatchers. Cuckoo were heard as well and would turn out to provide the main soundtrack throughout the tour.

We all met up at 11am back at the lodge to depart on our excursion for the day. We all hopped into the minibus and began our tour of the local area with Jarno at the helm. We were taken to various lake areas. The whole area is a beautiful mosaic of Pine forest and stunning lakes. One particular Lake was a real treat producing excellent views of Common Crane, Ruff, lots of Little Tern zipping around, all viewable from an observation tower. Greenshank, Whooper Swan and a Cuckoo were also seen well. Another lakeside viewing provided some distant but clear views of Reindeer on the bank and Osprey above. We also took some short walks amongst the copious woodland areas to be shown a Ural Owl nest hole, a Musk Rat nest along with signs of Moose, Bear and a Beaver dam. Unfortunately the animals themselves proved elusive but it is lovely to know they are there.

A last couple of lakeside viewing sessions provided good views of Black-throated Diver in full breeding plumage along with Goosander and Goldeneye.

After a productive day in beautiful sunshine, it was time to return to the lodge for a late lunch before heading to the Bear hide for a full night. You get snacks, sandwiches and tea and coffee in the hide but a lovely home cooked meal is a splendid way to prepare for the long night ahead.

At around 4pm, we gathered our things including our camera gear and boarded the minibus for a short 20 minute journey into the woods. Once arrived, we had a short preparation talk before setting off on foot through the woods to the hide. Jarno led the way and our convoy



Brown Bear

followed him keeping an eye out for any Bears. The paths through the woods are clearly marked and easy going. As we made our way, we heard a huff over to our left. We stopped and looked over and stood up on her hind legs around 30 feet away was a Brown Bear. Our first Brown Bear and roaming around in the woods as we make our way to the hide. It certainly raised the excitement level of the group, not to mention our heartrate. One of our group noticed she had two cubs with her as well which made us even more excited. What an introduction to the Bears of Finland.

At 5pm we arrived at the hide on a high from our first encounter. We got into the hide and couldn't resist having a look out of the windows. Already, there were a few bears outside and they were so close. It was to be a fantastic night of Bear viewing. The hide is only 2km from the Russian border and most of the Bears cross the border to come and feed on the food that is left out for them by the lodge owners.



We quickly settled into our chairs and set up any camera gear that we had brought. There were a good number of Bears around now comprised of mother and cub groups and some solitary females. It was a real privilege to have such amazing views of these animals and so close as well. The view from the hide was fantastic with nice clear windows and comfortable chairs from which to enjoy the view.

Throughout the evening, lots of Bears came to feed and we could begin to recognize individuals that had visited and then wandered off, only to return for more food. We had great views of 18 month old cubs which were playful and enjoying their time together in their little family group.

At one point in the evening, there was an air of tension which came across the groups. In a couple of moments, the reason became clear. A huge male came sauntering into view, scattering the Bears already present. He came to feed and the rest of the Bears gave him plenty of space and were watching carefully at a distance. Once he had

finished and began to move through the clearing, the groups returned to their relaxed state and came back to feed and play.

Another real treat was that a mother with two very young cubs began to approach the clearing. We could see them off to the left being quite apprehensive. There were a lot of Bears around at the time so the mother's apprehension was quite justified. These two cubs were very young and much smaller than those we had seen so far. They and the mother remained on the periphery picking at food and not venturing into the clearing with the other Bears. They didn't stay long but it was wonderful to see such young cubs this early in the season.



Brown Bear Cubs

At the peak of activity, we were lucky enough to have 16 Bears in view at once and we saw 25 different individuals throughout the evening. It was a real privilege to watch so many Bears and see them interacting with each other. By midnight, with the light deteriorating more, we had been so lucky to see so many Bears that most of us decided we could happily turn in for the night to try and get some sleep. It never got dark but in the wooded clearing, it certainly began to get darker as the sun dipped down so low.

Behind the chairs are sets of bunk beds with sleeping bags. We climbed into our sleeping bags facing the window as we could still have a little view out to the Bears. We did our best to sleep but it was very hard to resist peeking out to the window. We eventually drifted off after a fantastic evening of Bear viewing.

Day 3 Saturday 28th May

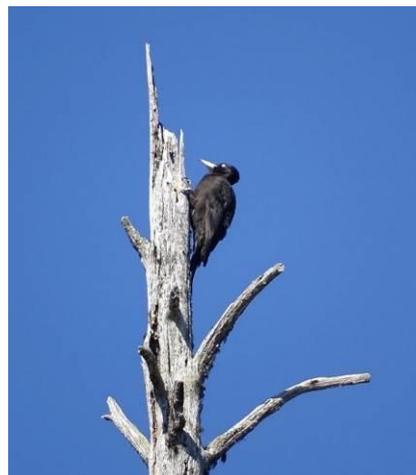
Some of the group awoke early in the morning and resumed their Bear watching. For others, waking up at around 6 am, we had another hour before we left the hide to return to the vehicles and make our way back the lodge for breakfast.



Back at the lodge, we enjoyed a delicious breakfast. We showered and changed and then got ready to depart to a large lake for our boat trip.

It was another beautiful day, warm with glorious sunshine and not a cloud in the sky. Our guide Jarno had explained that summer had come early this year. We arrived at the lake and parked where we had the night before when we went to the hides. Jarno and Mika, another guide, prepared the two boats and fixed the electric motors to the back of the boats. We set off and instantly noticed the silence. The electric motors made no sound whatsoever and enabled us to move silently through the water in the complete tranquility of the beautiful setting. It is a large lake with a long spit of land in the middle of it. As we made our way along, we

spotted a mother bear with two cubs ahead on the shore. As we cruised along, the family ran off into the forest. It was a magical experience to see three bears that we recognized from last night, just on the bank as we cruised along in silence. As we made our way around the bottom end of the island, we could see Russian-Finnish border and an unattended watch tower. We knew we were close to the border but it certainly brought it home just how close we were seeing the border itself. We rounded a bend and up in a tree top was a Black Woodpecker. We had been hoping to see one and enjoyed excellent views as we cruised by. We carried on our cruise and made our way to the bank of the spit. We tied up the boats and climbed ashore to go for a short walk. This piece of land is wooded so offered some respite from the blazing sun. We were shown scratch marks on the trees made by the Bears in the area. After a short time we returned to the boats to continue the journey on the beautiful blue lake and make our way back to the minibus and back to the lodge.



Black Woodpecker

We arrived back at the lodge and had some tea, coffee and snacks. We then had some free time before lunch to catch up on some rest or go for a walk around the lodge. After a lovely lunch, we had another hour or so before it was time to get ready to leave for the evening hide.

At 5pm, we hopped in the minibus and made the short 10 minute journey to the evening hide. After a 5 minute walk, we arrived at the hide just in time to see a White-tailed Eagle being mobbed by a Raven. The evening hide is on the other side of the woods that we were watching last night. The views from this hide are more open and grassy with smaller trees and bushes.

We settled into the hide and after a few minutes a male and female Bear came running out of the bushes past the hide and off into the woods. A few minutes later, the female returned and spent some time foraging and feeding to give us some great views.



This hide produced more relaxed, sporadic bear viewing without the large, consistent numbers of last night but very good views for half an hour or so at a time before the bears slope off into the forest. Throughout the evening, we enjoyed excellent views of a total of 7 bears for around half an hour at a time in excellent light. Certainly enjoyed by the keen photographers of the group. At around half past ten, after more lovely views of the bears in golden evening sunlight, we were ready to head back the minibus and back to the lodge to get some much needed rest before our travels back to London tomorrow.

Day 4

Sunday 29th May

After a good night sleep, we made our way to breakfast at 8am. We spent our time reliving and sharing our experiences and enjoying our final views of the Red Squirrels and Bullfinches on the feeders outside. One of the clients shared a story of how he flushed a Capercaillie while walking around the lake by the lodge last night after coming back from the hide.

All too quickly it was time to pack our things to leave this wonderful place and drive to the airport to begin our homeward journey. We said our goodbyes to our hosts who had looked after us so well and boarded the minibus for the journey to Kajaani.

A fantastic couple of days and nights with some great birds and amazing Bears and wonderful company had come to an end in this beautiful part of Finland.

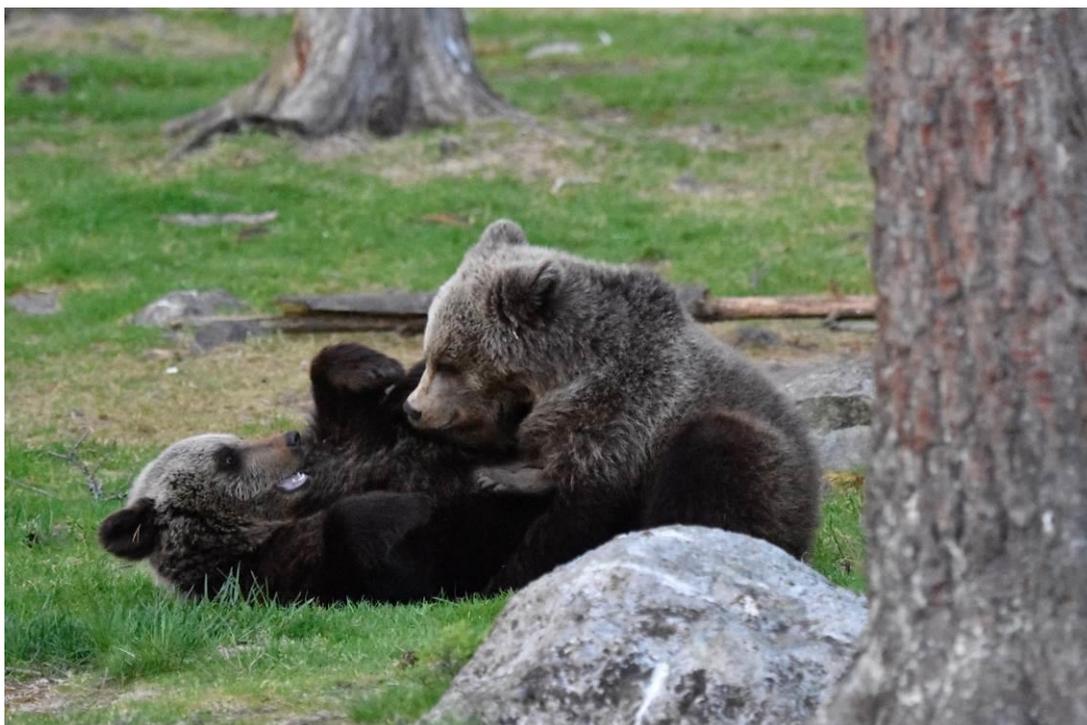
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Species List

Birds (✓ = recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	May			
			26	27	28	29
1.	Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>		✓		
2.	Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓		
3.	Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>		✓		
4.	Barnacle Goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>		✓		
5.	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>		✓		
6.	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓	
7.	Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>		✓	✓	
8.	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓		
9.	White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓	
10.	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		✓		
11.	Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>		✓		
12.	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓	✓	
13.	Little Gull	<i>Hydrocoloeus minutus</i>		✓		
14.	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	H	✓	H	
15.	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓	
16.	Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	✓			
17.	Black Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus martius</i>			✓	
18.	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>		✓		
19.	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>		H		
20.	Willow Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>		✓		
21.	European Pied Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>		✓		
22.	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
23.	Hooded Crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓		
24.	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>			✓	
25.	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>		✓		
26.	European Greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>		✓		
27.	Eurasian Siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>		✓		
28.	Eurasian Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
29.	Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>			✓	

Mammals (✓ = recorded but not counted)

1	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos arctos</i>		c25	c10	
2	Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus</i>		✓		
4	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>		✓		