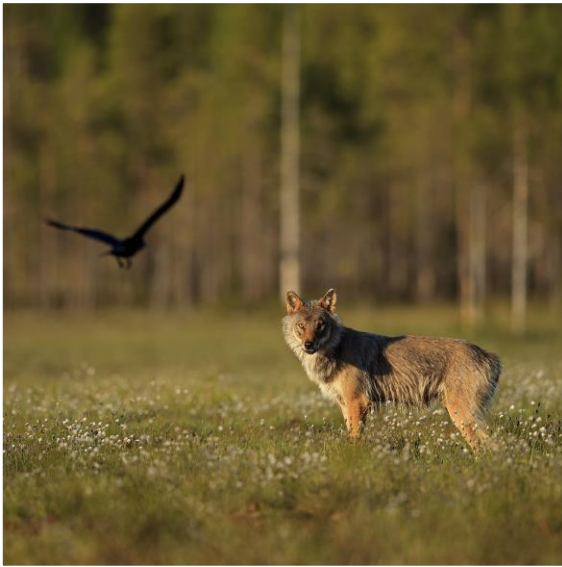


Tour Report

Finland – Boreal Predators Photography

9 - 14 June 2023

Grey wolf



Wolverine



Brown bear



Grey wolf



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to Oulu – On to Kuikka

Friday 9 June 2023

We had a morning flight from London Heathrow to the Finnish capital, Helsinki. I met two members of the group at the gate before we boarded the flight and settled into our seats. We enjoyed a very comfortable flight to Helsinki, landing slightly ahead of schedule.

Upon disembarkation, the three of us quickly made our way through passport control and had just enough time to grab some lunch from the busy terminal. With a selection of supplies, we waited close to the gate where we would catch a bus for our flight to Oulu. As we waited to board the bus, we met the final member of the group and were soon on our way to the plane sitting on the tarmac.

The internal flight to Oulu was very smooth once again and you cannot fault the service by Finnair – they are always excellent. Upon our arrival in Oulu, it wasn't long before we were in the baggage hall waiting for our luggage to come off the carousel. We were met by our driver at arrivals and within a few minutes we had packed our suitcases in the car and we were heading east towards our final destination. We drove for around four hours, always heading east as we made our way to Kuikka, which lies only a few miles from the Russian border.

We arrived just as the sun was setting behind the horizon. Now surrounded by the vast boreal forest, we settled into our base for the next five days. On arrival, we were treated to a hearty meal. Then we retreated to our rooms for a very well-earned rest. The plan was to meet again for breakfast and discuss the next few days in a little more detail.

Day 2: Kuikka

Saturday 10 June 2023

It looked as though the weather gods were going to be kind to us for the following days. We met for breakfast at 09:00, aware that in the evening we would have our first chance to encounter the iconic species we had come to photograph. With the rest of the day to relax and explore the area, I shared some images and explained the settings that I had used on previous visits, helping the group to understand the lighting conditions in each of the hide locations.

Armed with a good idea of what to expect from our nights in the hides, we decided to head out on a gentle walk along the forest tracks. You never quite know what you might see around the lodge. Near the accommodation itself, we spotted flycatchers, a female redstart, as well as plenty of swallows and house martins. The feeders in turn gave us excellent views of siskin, bullfinch, chaffinch, greenfinch, great spotted woodpecker and even red squirrels.

Continuing along the track, we found signs of capercaillie and willow warblers were calling from the treetops. We walked further along and then suddenly, a flash of movement erupted from our right. A female elk (or moose) was cantering away from us. This is an incredibly unusual sight in broad daylight, particularly on such a warm and sunny day. Elks are usually elusive and stick to areas of thick forest.

Our destination was a small bridge crossing a stream, where you can sometimes enjoy views of birds on the water and in the surrounding trees. With the sun rising higher in the sky and the heat of the day starting to build, it was unusually warm for this time of year, so we decided to head back towards the lodge. On our way, a bird flew up from the forest floor. It seemed to be a hazel grouse, but we didn't get a good view before it disappeared.

With a long night ahead of us, we spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing until it was time for a late lunch. As we would be spending the entire night in the hides, this was our last chance to stock up on food and drink. After another hot meal, we made sandwiches and filled our flasks with hot coffee or tea. At 17:00, it was time to head to the hides and so we got in Kuikka's old 4x4 and headed off to 'Paradise' for the evening. Paradise is the name of a large open area where there are numerous hides. This location is the best place to

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see wolves and also allows for sightings of both bear and wolverine (on occasion). We quickly settled into our hide and set up our cameras, then it was time to wait.

The sun was still high in the sky and there were plenty of ravens, common gulls, hooded crows and lesser black-backed gulls searching for food in front of the hides. A pair of lapwings would occasionally drive off any corvid foolish enough to fly over their nests and wagtails bobbed as they caught flies along the edge of the marshy ground. After an hour sat in the hide, we noticed a lone white-tailed eagle sitting in the trees at the back of the clearing. It was at that moment that the first of the mammals appeared from the trees on the right. A wolf emerged but was obviously nervous. It wasn't long before it disappeared again, leaving as quickly as it had appeared in the evening sun. It wasn't long before the same wolf reappeared at the back of the clearing, slowly making its way from right to left, before vanishing once more. I hoped it might show itself once again, as the wolves often do a full loop before coming back around in front of the hides.

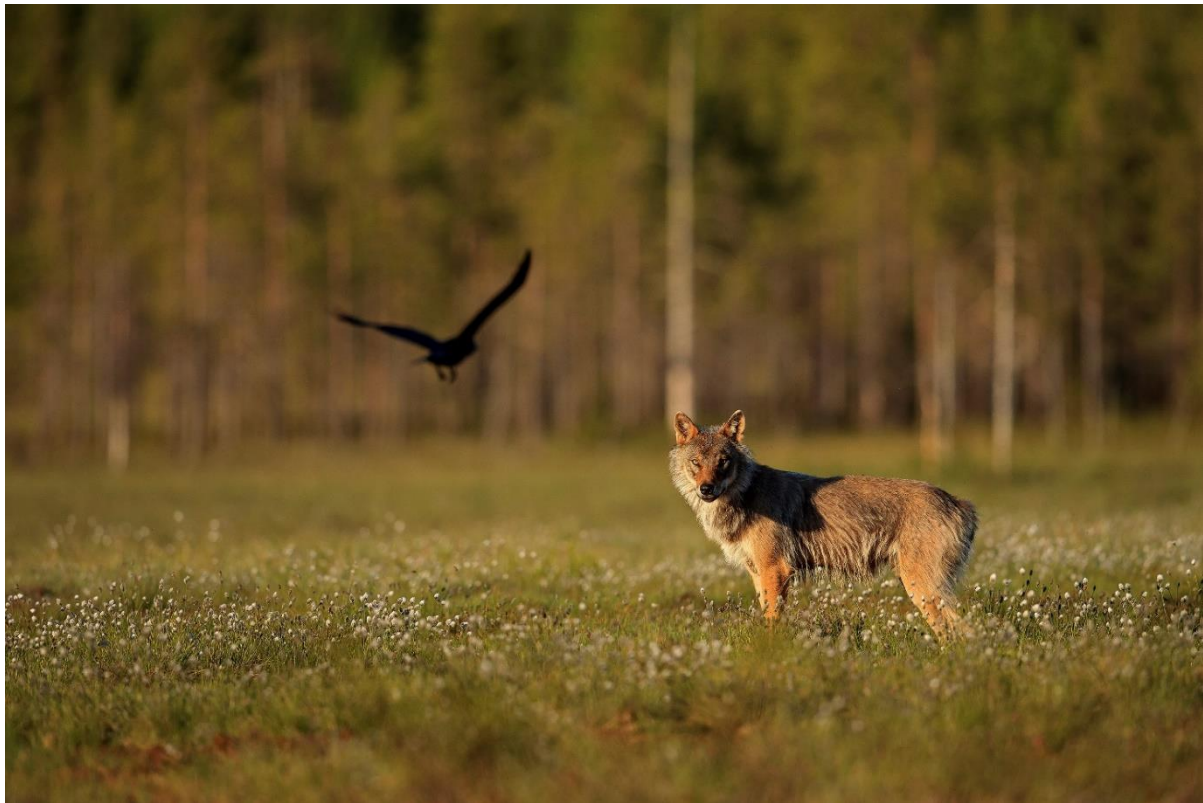
At just after 20:00, the wolf suddenly popped up to the right of the hides. It walked right out into the open, through the cotton grass and searched for food in the bright evening sunlight. It was magical to see a wolf in such a serene setting. It doesn't matter how many times you see a wolf in the wild, they always make your hairs stand up on end and bring a smile to your face.



This was a very healthy wolf and the photography opportunities it provided us with were second to none. It is always special when the wild cooperates and the light is exactly as you want it – rarely do the two come together. For the whole group, this was their first wolf encounter and they really couldn't have asked for more. Having visited this location for the past eight years, it was definitely one of the best encounters our groups have been lucky enough to enjoy.

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The wolf made its exit once more, though it would make another short appearance just before 21:00. Part of the thrill of sitting in a hide, is you never know what is going to show up and when. It is important to state that bait is put out, it is the only realistic way to enjoy sightings of these elusive predators in the wild. They have huge territories and it can be days before the same animals are seen again.

As the sun continued to set, we saw a hobby hunting across the marsh. It continued searching out dragonflies as the temperature started to drop. With the sun falling behind the trees, the temperature in the hide dropped quickly, so we layered up to stave off the cold. As midnight came and went, a flock of whooper swans flew across the blue sky, calling as they made their way towards the Russian border.

Heads started to drop as tiredness crept in and one member of the group retreated to a bunk at the back of the hide. A while later, just after 01:00, we spied some movement on the far side of the marshland, it was another wolf, but by now it was impossible to photograph it.

Then all was quiet until 04:55 when two wolves decided to show themselves. With the morning sun now well above the trees across the open area, the wolves searched the area in front of the hides for food. The warm sunlight was providing an entirely different set of photography opportunities. Backlit images of wolves can be tricky, but when they come together, the resulting images can be really special.

The entire group enjoyed photographing the pair of wolves, which spent around half an hour feeding in the magical light. The bog cotton behind them provided an ethereal quality and it was the perfect way to end a good night in the hides. Although we hadn't seen either of our other target species, this was a great first night in the boreal wilderness.

The next couple of hours were quiet and I took the chance to sleep for a couple of hours before it was time to head back to Kuikka for breakfast.

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Day 3: Kuikka

Sunday 11 June 2023

It only took 15 minutes to get back to Kuikka where we were able to sit down, enjoy a hot drink, and tuck into breakfast. With another night in the hides ahead of us, it was important to try and catch up on some much-needed rest. We took the opportunity to freshen up, before retreating to our rooms and enjoying a few hours of sleep.

We reconvened in the dining area before our late lunch, wondering what the night ahead might hold in store for us. With full stomachs, and the chance to prepare our food for our time in the hides, we gathered our things and met by the vehicle. We were going to spend a second night at Paradise and see what lady luck might bring us this time around.

The sun was still shining and the day had been very warm, particularly for this time of year, so we set off for the hides once again. It wasn't long before we had unpacked and set our cameras up, training them on the open area in front of the hides. Just as the night before, the first things we saw were ravens and common gulls, as well as a hooded crow and a couple of lesser black-backed gulls. The lapwings were still busy flying around, chasing off any potential predators.

All three of our target species remained elusive for the first few hours. Other than the birdlife, it was all pretty quiet and we had to be patient to see what was going to show itself. It was just after 22:00 when suddenly there was some movement. A wolf had appeared, it was a beautiful adult wolf and the animal came right up in front of the hide. When wolves approach the hides closely, it is not only a massive thrill but an absolute privilege. That evening, the wolf decided to do just that and the group were rewarded with truly exceptional photography opportunities.

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With the sun starting to fall behind the trees, the evening light illuminated the scene before us from the left. The wolf stared intently, looking right at us. But this didn't stop it coming closer and closer. It was among the best encounters with a wolf I had ever had from the hides.



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We were truly spoilt - with a couple of visits from this adult, and a youngster too. Although the light faded, we had enjoyed a particularly fruitful session. The wolves left just before midnight, with the sun now hidden behind a layer of thin cloud beyond the horizon. With the lower light levels, we wondered whether we may

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be joined by either a wolverine or a bear, but it seemed that on this night we were only destined to be joined by the wolves. The rest of the night in the hide remained quiet, and we had to content ourselves with the wonderful close approach from the adult wolf.

At sunrise, warm light shone through the windows of the hide, taking the chill off the morning air. With no sign of anything to photograph, we left the hides at 07:30 and headed back to Kuikka for breakfast.

Day 4: Kuikka

Monday 12 June 2023

We were the first people to arrive back at the lodge, so we unloaded our things and packed them away in our rooms. We reconvened just before 09:00 for our breakfast. With our hunger satisfied, it was time to retreat to our rooms and catch up on some sleep before our third night in the hides.

We managed to catch up on a little bit of sleep before meeting back in the dining area for a late lunch. We tucked into a traditional Finnish meal, then made our sandwiches and filled our thermos flasks. We gathered around the vehicle, waiting to depart. This time, we were heading to a different location – Forest.

At 17:00, we started to make our way along the forest tracks, heading towards no man's land and the Russian border. As other visitors turned off to spend the night at Paradise, we continued further along the track until we reached the turning for our hides. The hides in Forest are noticeably more compact, and therefore three of us occupied the largest hide, whilst one member of the group sat just to our right in a one-man hide.

After a quiet first couple of hours, a wolverine showed up through the trees at speed. With the lower light levels in the forest, it can make it very tricky to photograph wolverines, but when it all comes together it is definitely worth it. The first sighting only lasted a couple of minutes, but that wasn't the only chance we would have to capture some images.

For the next six hours, this giant mustelid visited a further 19 times. Each visit was relatively short but sweet and we were able to enjoy a range of behaviour throughout the night. The wolverine ate all of the salmon that had been left out, after which it didn't return. After the wolverine disappeared for the final time at around 02:00, we didn't see anything again for the remainder of the morning.

And so, after a night filled with wolverine activity, we packed up our things a little earlier than usual and headed back to Kuikka. We were the first to arrive at the lodge and had plenty of time to unload our camera gear and take it back to our rooms. With breakfast at 09:00, we met in the dining room for another well-deserved meal before heading to bed to catch up on some sleep.



Day 5: Kuikka

Tuesday 13 June 2023

The group met up again just before 16:00 for our last late lunch of the trip. It would also be our last night in the hides. Many people ask we only spend four nights in the hides, but by the start of the fourth night, the lack of sleep definitely starts to catch up with you.

After another meal and a chance to stock up on supplies, we met back outside in the sunshine and readied ourselves for our final hide session. The bears had so far eluded us, so we decided to try our luck again in the forest. Driving to the hides, the dust on the roads showed how hot and dry it had been for the duration of our stay. We arrived at hides nestled among the trees and quickly settled in for the night. This time we were spread out across three different hides, so each of us had slightly different views of the area.

At just after 21:00, a young bear appeared from the left, but it was very nervous. It was such a relief to finally have a bear. However, within a minute it had literally run away from us. We wondered what had scared it off, but it soon became apparent as another, larger bear appeared from exactly the same place. This bear was a lot more relaxed. It worked its way around the forest in front of the hides for around half an hour, providing some excellent photography opportunities.

The big challenge photographing in the forest is the amount of available light. It becomes apparent early on that your ISO has to increase, in order to keep a fast enough shutter speed to photograph a dark-coloured subject. However, we all managed to capture some lovely images as the bear really did put on a good show. After the bear left, the forest fell silent for the next few hours. Then the bear reappeared at around 01:30.

This time the bear stayed for nearly an hour and did its best to Hoover up all the food that had been left out for it. We did wonder whether that may mean that our night was done, but there was one last visitor before it was time to leave.

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At just after 04:00, as the morning sun started to illuminate the forest, we were treated to excellent views of a large wolverine. This individual was noticeably larger than the one from the previous night, with plenty of scars suggesting that it had lived a tough life.



It wasn't overly cooperative as a photographic subject, but we were able to get a few shots as it found remnants of food missed by the bear's visits. After around 20 minutes, the wolverine headed off through the

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trees and down towards a marshy area. With no more signs of life, we decided to call it a day (or night) a little earlier than usual, as the group were leaving for the airport at 09:30.

Day 6: Kuikka to Kuopio – Flight to London

Wednesday 14 June 2023

We arrived back at the lodge with enough time for the group to pack their things and enjoy a final breakfast. It was another glorious day by the lakeside and the bus arrived on time. I was staying on for a second group, so we said our farewells and the group headed off to Kuopio airport. From there, they would fly to Helsinki and then on to the UK (and Hungary).

Everyone had pictures of all three of our target species, so yet another of our popular Boreal Predators Photography Tour had delivered.

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