

Tour Report Finland – Boreal Predators Photography 16 – 21 June 2025

White-tailed eagle



Brown bear



Brown bear with cubs



Grey wolf



Compiled by Bret Charman

Monday 16 June 2025

Day 1:

London to Kuopio (via Helsinki); drive to Kuikka

Most of the group were on a morning flight with Finnair to Helsinki, while one member had flown the previous evening from Manchester. We arrived in Helsinki at lunchtime, where there was a chance for the group to enjoy lunch without rushing – we had a few hours before our afternoon flight to Kuopio.

Arriving in Kuopio, we were met by our driver and soon had the luggage loaded into the van. Setting off, the drive would usually take around three hours (maybe a little more), but for some reason, we seemed to go a slightly longer way round. One advantage was that we did see a wild forest reindeer on the way. We stopped in the town of Kuhmo, where we were able to buy some drinks and snacks for our upcoming days in the hides.

Arriving at Kuikka, there was a hot meal waiting for us, and we were able to leave our luggage in the van until after we had finished. With plenty of time tomorrow before our first session in the hides, there wasn't too much to cover. With dinner finished, we unloaded the luggage and everyone settled into their rooms. Of course, it was still daylight outside.

Tuesday 17 June 2025

Day 2:

Kuikka

We awoke to a cooler, damper day, with a rather mixed weather forecast for the week ahead. We all met in the dining room for breakfast and after a little time, we met back there where I gave some examples of what to expect from the coming nights. I shared some of my favourite images from my many previous visits and gave the settings too. Hopefully, by knowing what to expect and what settings you can use when, the group will be well prepared for their time in the hides. Furthermore, I ran through the basic rules for the hides and explained a little about the animal behaviour that they might see.

We would have over 14 hours in a hide each evening and with a long night ahead of us, I suggested people make the most of the downtime or enjoy the wildlife around the lodge. There are bird feeders on site, and it is common for many species of coniferous specialists to present themselves. The resident red squirrels are also a popular thing to photograph when not in the hides.

'Dinner' was to be served at 4 pm, and I encouraged everyone to arrive a little earlier to prep their sandwiches and thermos flasks for the hide session. The group diligently made their sandwiches, prepared their hot drinks and then settled down for another delicious home-cooked meal. Once everyone had their fill, we returned to our 'common room', grabbed our bags and loaded ourselves into the van.

The hides are around a 10-15 minute drive from Kuikka, situated on the edge of no-man's land between Finland and Russia. We drove along the gravel roads, arriving at 'Paradise' for our first night in the hides. As there was another large group staying, we would be split into three different hides, but we had a phone signal to alert one another to any potential sightings.

We all settled into our respective hides and for the first few hours, the world seemed to be quiet, except for the birds, that is. We had lesser black-backed, common and black-headed gulls, while the corvids included magpie, hooded crow and raven. For much of the evening, we had the call of a cuckoo ringing through the forest.

Just after 9 pm, our first bear appeared from the left. It was running at speed, flying across the open ground, before disappearing in the trees across the open meadow. It was too fast for any decent imagery (particularly with the lower light levels) and it was another 15 minutes or so before a female with three

cubs (from the previous year) made her first appearance. Unfortunately, just as she was approaching the hides, another bear emerged out of the trees and spooked her. This bear worked its way round in front of the hides for around 15 minutes, before heading out of sight. The next visitor was a male who appeared at around 10.30 pm, only to move off again to one side of the hides. There was then a prolonged period where there was a noticeable lack of mammal activity, but a lone greenshank perched up, providing us with a focus as the light dropped to its lowest levels.

It wasn't until just before 11.30 pm that a bear made a couple of brief appearances, but it never hung around, always on the move. At midnight, a mist descended across the open area in front of the hides, slowly creeping in from either side. At 12.45 am, the mother and the three-yearling cubs made another appearance. The light levels were incredibly low and photography in this 'dusk' is always a challenge. 20 minutes after the bear family appeared, a lone wolf showed up. At first, it kept its distance, but then it proceeded to follow the bears as they fed in front of the hides. We watched as the wolf followed the bears, and they took it in turns to drive it off.

This incredible behaviour carried on for around an hour. The wolf and the bears seemingly partaking in some sort of game. The cubs were chasing the wolf around, playing on and off in between feeding. It was almost impossible to capture any images, but the video opportunities were rewarding.



It wasn't until 1.30 am that the bear family finally had enough. Maybe they had their fill, or perhaps they were fed up with the wolf, but they disappeared into the forest once more. The wolf remained, feeding on scraps in the gloom of the early morning, but the sun would be rising imminently. It was around another ten minutes when a couple of bears turned up, a male and female, which chased the wolf away. They didn't stay long, and the wolf reappeared again, very briefly, before making a quick exit to the far left of the hides.

Except for the brief appearance by a bear at around 2.30 am, all was quiet until 5.50 am, when a pale-coloured wolf appeared. She spent around an hour in front of the hides (in good light). We were able to photograph this stunning wolf as she moved around in front of us, picking up a scrap of meat and moving

backwards and forwards in the open ground ahead of us.



After the rain and drizzle, the ground and vegetation were sodden, which meant that the wolf's coat was wet. It was wonderful to enjoy such prolonged and good views of this beautiful animal.



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The wolf stayed with us until just after 6.30 am when she trotted off to the left of the hides and disappeared. Although we had a quiet start, there was a lot of activity throughout the night. Due to the overcast conditions, the photography conditions during the darkest hours were extremely challenging, but the morning wolf was wonderful and an unexpected highlight.

At 7.30 am, we departed the hides. I drove the group back to Kuikka, where we had a little time to unpack our things, put our batteries on charge and back up our images. We enjoyed a cooked breakfast before retiring to our rooms for a very well-earned rest throughout the morning and into the middle of the day.

Wednesday 18 June 2025

Day 3:
Kuikka

By the time everyone was up and about, it was much brighter than the previous afternoon. It was, however, noticeably cooler today. Everybody was up and making their sandwiches before our afternoon meal was served. Another hearty meal had been prepared by the team at Kuikka, and we soon had our fill. With their sandwiches, snacks and full thermos flasks, we grabbed our camera gear and loaded everything into the van. We were spending the night back at 'Paradise'. With a brighter forecast, we were hoping to enjoy better conditions for photography. Fingers crossed, we would be lucky again tonight.

We were split among two hides (next to each other) and as we settled in for the night, we were joined by the gulls and corvids once more, but then a white-tailed eagle made an appearance. We'd only been in the hides for half an hour or so when it arrived.



It initially perched up on a more distant branch, before flying to a young Scots pine much closer to the hides. We were enjoying photographing the eagle when our first bear of the evening showed up at 6 pm. This male bear was soon followed by a female bear. Both of them came right in front of the hides and posed beautifully

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for the group as they captured some full-frame portraits.



The female was a particularly beautiful bear, with lovely golden fur around the face.



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We enjoyed photographing both bears as they moved backwards and forwards for around 20 minutes, before a much bigger bear arrived, pushing the younger bears off. All the while, the white-tailed eagle was putting on a fantastic show, taking off and landing in different trees right by the hides.



The wildlife continued to be incredibly cooperative, but the big male bear moved off pretty quickly, seemingly on the trail of the young female he had pushed off. As he disappeared, the duo of bears had moved around the back of the hides and reappeared from the left before heading across the open area and into the trees on the far side. What an unbelievable start.



At around 7.30 pm, the mother bear with the three growing cubs came into view briefly, before moving off once again. However, it wasn't long before they came back in front of the hides. We had the whole family approach the hides, but they kept rising up on their hind legs and looking to the right. This made for some fantastic photographic opportunities, with everyone's cameras firing off a reel of shots.



It was 8.55 pm that a wolf showed up from the left side but didn't really stay very long. We did manage to capture some stunning images of this handsome wolf as it moved across in front of us.



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The wolf reappeared at around 9.30 pm, coming from the right side of the hides, walking across in front of the hides. We were absolutely spoiled for the next 20 minutes or so as the young wolf not only walked across in front of the hides repeatedly, but then walked out into the open and started to howl. It was mesmerising.



You really can't ask for a magical night with the wolves. I've been coming for many years and the howling is still a rare occurrence and something very special.



After spending around five minutes howling, the wolf finally decided to move off, and peace fell upon the forest. It wasn't until the family of bears returned at around 10.20 pm. The whole family moved right in front of where we were sitting and started to feed without any disturbance from wolves or other bears. It allowed us, despite the now falling light levels, to capture some intimate pictures of the mother and cubs. Seeing this family was as rare as it was to see and hear the wolf howling, so we had been treated to an exceptional evening already.



As two other bears made an approach, the mother became increasingly nervous. She called the cubs out into the middle of the meadow, and there the whole family stood on their hind legs, nervously watching the other bears as they approached.



It was an amazing sight to watch the family of bears, but then they decided it wasn't safe to remain and they darted off into the cover of the trees. The two bears appeared, with a female staying in front of the hides, searching for food, while the big male seemingly followed the scent of the mother and the cubs. The female bear stayed around in front of the hides as a lone wolf appeared across the open area, on the edge of the forest. It was 10.40 pm and the female bear stayed put, with the wolf watching on from afar. In fact, the wolf wouldn't come closer as the bear carried on searching for food in front of the hides and although the light was a little low by now, it was wonderful to capture the wolf in this environment. After a little while, the wolf moved in, once the female bear had moved off. It grabbed a huge bone, which we think was likely to be an elk femur, moving slightly further back again.



At 11 pm, a bear appeared again from the right side, and by 11.15 pm, there were four bears. The wolf was now stuck in a bear sandwich. It decided to keep a low profile as the bears moved around. One was a particularly large male and pushed the two younger bears away. The wolf was still watching as the bears kept one another occupied.

At this time, the cloud cover had come over and there was a noticeable dusky gloom across the boreal landscape. The last of the bears had moved off by 11.40 pm and the wolf came much closer to the hides. With the low light levels, photography was now a real challenge without extreme ISOs and very slow shutter speeds. Another bear showed up, and the wolf lay down in front of the hides. We had both wolf and bear within proximity to one another, but instead of photographing, we simply watched. This bear moved off, and after a final close approach to the hides, the wolf finally called it a night and moved on.

We were treated to a few more bear sightings, including a huge male and tiny female, definitely engaged in some romance. However, these sightings all happened during the darkest hours of the night. By the time the light had improved, all was quiet in the forests of eastern Finland. With a quiet morning, we were able to catch a couple of hours of sleep. Emerging from our hides at 7.30 am, we loaded our things into the van and drove back to Kuikka. There was a little time for everyone to unpack and put everything to charge before we headed to the dining room for breakfast.

Thursday 19 June 2025

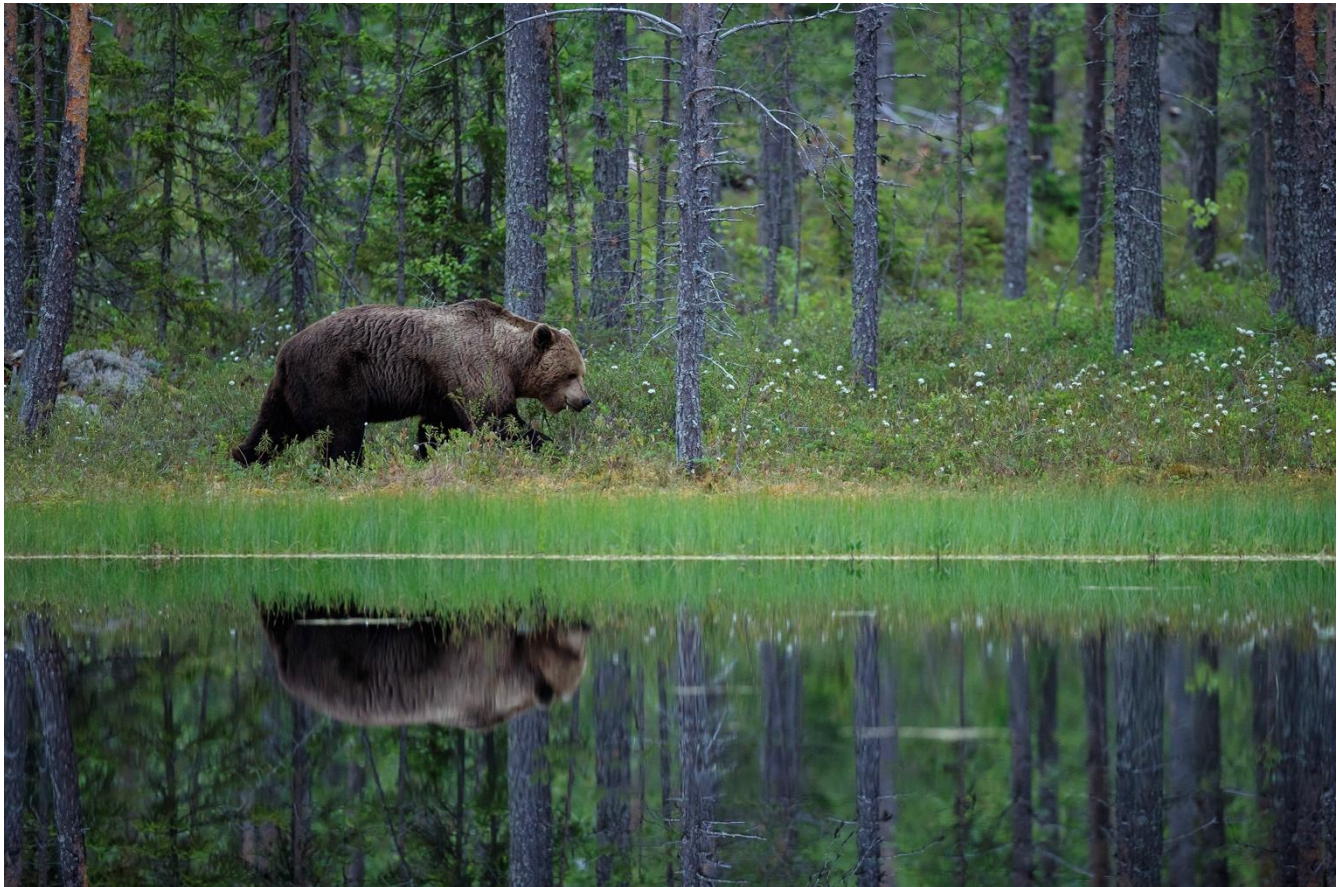
Day 4:
Kuikka

By now, everyone was used to the routine. After breakfast, we returned to our rooms to catch up on some much-needed sleep. Spending the middle of the day sleeping or enjoying some rest, everybody met up in the dining room to make our sandwiches and enjoy our afternoon meal.

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After another hearty meal, it was time to gather our things and climb aboard the vehicle once more. Tonight, we were heading to a new hide location, built around a lake in the forest. We arrived at the hides and quickly settled in along the south side of the lake. Within ten minutes of settling in, a bear arrived on the right-hand side. Unfortunately, for whatever reason, it was extremely nervous, sprinting off only moments after appearing. This didn't seem to have anything to do with us in the hides, just one of those things.

Things remained quiet throughout the evening. The setting was absolutely beautiful, but no large mammals made an appearance when the light was at its best. Instead, we had to make do with the resident birdlife, including white wagtail, swallow, spotted flycatcher and common teal. It wasn't until 10.25 pm that the huge male and tiny female bears, the romantic couple, appeared across the lake. They were not very cooperative, always on the move, and after 20 minutes or so of limited photography, they moved off.



Next up was a male bear, but again, he didn't hang around, heading off shortly after arriving. The best photo opportunities happened when the light levels were at their lowest. We had to wait for the moments when the bears stopped moving to try and capture some beautiful imagery. The water was smooth like glass, and it was then that a golden female bear showed up that we were presented with the best opportunities to capture some beautiful imagery.

Although she was very nervous, we were able to photograph this golden bear just after 11 pm. She only stayed for around 15 minutes, but that was enough time to add some very different images to our already growing portfolio. One of the great things about staying at Kuikka is the ability to photograph in such an array of settings, quickly adding a variety of images of these elusive predators. A spectacular mist formed across the water, but at this time, we were not visited by any bears (or wolves for that matter).

The activity died down just as the light started to improve. We enjoyed further visits from the large male and small female bears, we heard a wolf howling and even bears roaring (or growling – whatever you prefer). As the sun started to break through the canopy of the forest, the sightings and photography opportunities dried up.



After a quiet morning and a cold night, we packed our things and loaded our bags and then ourselves into

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the van. We were looking forward to warming up in the lodge, enjoying some hot drinks and another cooked breakfast.

Friday 20 June 2025

Day 5:
Kuikka

After another day recuperating from a long night, we made our sandwiches and snacks, filled our thermos flasks and readied ourselves for our final session in the hides. With a long day of travel the following day, we wouldn't spend an entire night in the hides. Instead, we would return to Kuikka for a night's rest at around midnight. We would be visiting the 'Forest' location this evening, where we hoped we might finally catch a glimpse of a wolverine and, more than likely, enjoy some bear action.

We'd only been in the hides for 45 minutes or so when a big male bear approached from the left side. The great thing about being in the forest location is the proximity to the wildlife, and enjoying close encounters. It is only now that you realise just how large these animals are.



This male bear was busy searching every piece of the forest floor for food. He gorged himself for the 40 minutes before finally calling it a night and moving away through the dense forest. It wasn't long before our next bears made an appearance. The mother and the three cubs were back, and we were delighted as they moved all around, happily feeding and posing for the group. They were with us for 20 minutes, with the cubs proving to be particularly energetic, while the mother was much more deliberate with her movements.

Bears will never waste energy unless they have to. After all, with freezing winters, these bears need to put on as much fat as possible for hibernation. The summer months are all about packing on the pounds, finding the most calorific foods possible.

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The family moved on, continuing in their relentless quest to find food. However, we didn't have to wait long for another bear to make an appearance. We actually had two. The large male and small female decided to make another appearance for the group. In this close-up, it was just apparent how big the size difference was. The male dwarfs the female. Their love affair continuing, they didn't stay too long and soon we were left to enjoy the peace and serenity of the forest.

At just before 10 pm, another bear appeared, but it always kept its distance and skirted around the edge of our view. The forest remained quiet until 11.25 pm when the family made one final appearance. The light was very low at this point, and it was a lovely farewell.

Waiting a little while to make sure that there were no bears around, we proceeded to exit the hides at midnight. Keeping quiet, we placed all our belongings in the back of the van and drove back to Kuikka. Within 15 minutes, we were back at the lodge and able to freshen up before heading to bed.

Saturday 21 June 2025

Day 6:

Kuikka to Kuopio; fly to London via Helsinki

Most of the group were able to enjoy some sleep overnight, allowing us to be a little more refreshed for the journey back to the UK. Having our bags packed, we headed to the dining room for breakfast, knowing we would soon be setting off to Kuopio.

Having had our fill and being suitably refreshed, we gathered the bags and loaded them into the van. It was going to be around a three-hour drive to Kuopio, but we stopped in the town of Nurmes (around halfway) to grab some lunch and drinks. Carrying on with our journey, we arrived in Kuopio and unloaded all our luggage, moving into the small terminal building. One of the group was catching an earlier flight, while the rest of us waited in the lobby before checking in and heading through security.

We enjoyed a smooth flight to Helsinki, and after a few hours, we grabbed some food in Helsinki and boarded our onward flight to London. Upon landing at London Heathrow, we progressed through immigration with speed and by the time we were in the baggage hall, our bags had already arrived.

After a fabulous week, we said our goodbyes and look forward to future travels together.

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