

Tour Report Finland: Boreal Predators Photography 14 -19 July 2025

Grey wolf



Brown bear



Brown bear



Brown bear



Compiled by Bret Charman

Monday 14 July 2025

Day 1:

London to Helsinki; Helsinki to Kuopio; Kuopio to Kuikka

Much of the group had travelled separately, with only a few of us flying together from London Heathrow on a morning flight. We enjoyed a smooth flight and landed in Helsinki with plenty of time before our onward, afternoon flight to Kuopio. I met up with a few members of the group at the departure gate for Helsinki before we boarded the flight.

Arriving in a very warm and sunny Kuopio, the group were now all together. All our luggage arrived, and we were soon loaded up in the minibus and starting the three-hour drive to Kuikka. Summer had reached this eastern part of Finland with temperatures in the high 20s (Celsius) as we made our way through the endless forests and lakes. With a brief stop where we were able to buy some supplies for our stay (and a bathroom break), we continued our journey onto Kuikka.

We arrived at the lodge at around 9 pm and headed straight to the dining area for a delicious first meal. I gave everyone a little introduction and some timings for the morning, and then we were all able to settle into our rooms and enjoy a night's rest after a long day of travel.

Tuesday 15 July 2025

Day 2:

Kuikka & night in hides

We awoke to another warm day and met up in the dining room for breakfast at 9 am. After breakfast, I gave everyone a walkthrough of what to expect in the hides, showing some example images and talking about wildlife behaviour. I also explained the timetable for the coming nights. There were a couple of hours down time, before we had our afternoon meal at 4 pm. With the days being particularly hot and the light being quite harsh, our departure time to the hides had been delayed until 6 pm. Our first night would be spent at 'Paradise', where we hoped to see our first predators.

Loading up the minibus, we departed on time and made our way on the 15-minute drive to the hides. Upon our arrival, there were two bears already there and a wolf too. As we exited the vehicles and entered the hides, all three mammals moved away, but it wasn't long before they were back in front of the hides. Firstly, a pale bear appeared, before a large male made his presence felt and pushed the smaller bear off. It wasn't long before the wolf also made an appearance.



The wolf moved away and disappeared into the trees on the far side of the clearing, while the bear moved away from the carcass to feed in peace in the long grass. We even had a surprise flyby from some common cranes, while a white-tailed eagle was also hanging around, keeping an eye on things. It was just before 8 pm when the wolf reappeared and walked across right in front of the hides.

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By now, the light was magical, but sadly, all the wildlife had disappeared, and for the next couple of hours, except for a brief visit by a juvenile white-tailed eagle, all was quiet in front of the hides. It wasn't until around 11.20 pm that four wolves came in at speed from the left-hand side of the meadow. They seemed to be just passing through, but they did spook the pale wolf out of the trees, which was now out in the open.

This individual wolf slowly worked its way back across the open grassland, disappearing into the trees once more. It stayed quiet for another half an hour, when a lone bear wandered in from the right. The bear was only passing through, though, slowly moving out of sight in the far trees. Then there was chaos. The wolves were in pursuit of the bear. Absolute pandemonium ensued in the dusky conditions. It was too dark to photograph, but magnificent to watch this activity.

At just after 12.30 am, the bear suddenly came into view again, but within a few moments, five wolves (including the pale individual) were bearing down on it once again. Still, it was too dark for photography, but behaviour like this doesn't happen too often.

It was after this that the pack all headed towards us and came in front of the hides. They just wandered around, scent-marking and exploring the area. Most likely, they were checking for any signs of an intruder, exerting their control of the area.

At 1.15 am, the forest came alive as the pack of wolves started to howl and call from the trees beyond the clearing. Even for me, this is a magical experience. I can count on one hand the number of times this has happened. Everyone was mesmerised and transfixed by these ghostly calls in the twilight of dusk. This is what makes this part of Finland so special. After coming here for the past ten years, I am still amazed at the wolf encounters. Even when photography conditions are less than optimal, the experience is second-to-none.

On the next page, I have included a frame from a video of the wolves when the light was too poor for photography.



For the next hour and a half, the light levels were low, mainly because of cloud cover. The wolves had disappeared and we wouldn't see them again during this hide session, but we were spoiled with some more bear encounters. The highlight was just after 4 am, when a large male with a broken jaw (familiar to me) walked directly toward the hides, putting on a very cooperative performance for the group.



He ended up walking straight toward our hides, before walking through the middle of them and heading out of sight into the forest behind. There was little activity thereafter and so we left the hides at 7.30 am after a

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busy night with Finland's apex predators putting on quite the show. Upon our arrival at Kuikka, we had a little time to unpack our camera gear and organise ourselves before breakfast. We enjoyed another delicious, cooked breakfast before retiring to our rooms for some much-needed sleep.

Wednesday 16 July 2025

Day 3:

Kuikka & night in the hides

We reconvened in the afternoon, before our afternoon meal and I gave a little digital darkroom guidance to some of the guests. Everyone then went about prepping their sandwiches and hot drinks for the night ahead. The food at Kuikka is homely but hearty, the perfect sustenance for a long night in the hides, and so we had our fill before getting our camera gear ready and loading ourselves into the van just before 6 pm. It was yet another warm evening, but it promised to cool down in the middle of the night.

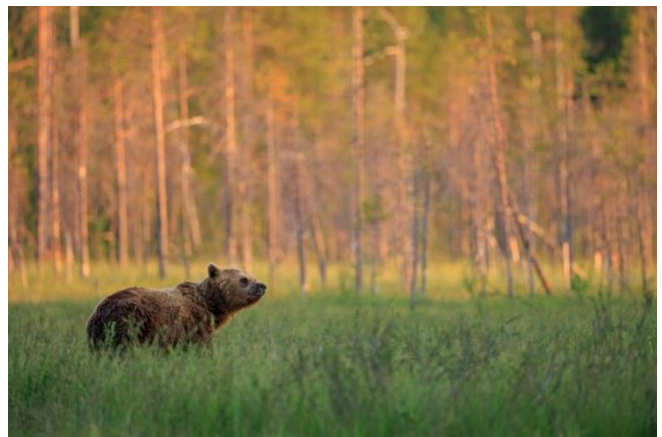
As we approached the hides, a bear was there waiting for us, while a mother and her three cubs were just to one side. As everyone was settled in, the bears were already coming. It was a race to get our cameras set up before they were within reach. The action had already begun.



Within a few minutes, as well as the big male, the mother and her cubs started to approach the hides. The first 20 minutes in the hide were action-packed – non-stop action and some wonderful first photography opportunities. It was rather toasty in the hides, but we couldn't have asked for a better start. When things are going well, the activity can be relentless. However, this is always interspersed with some downtime and it is these moments that allow you to catch your breath.



After this initial glut of activity, things settled down and we were left to enjoy the serenity of these remote forests. A juvenile and an adult white-tailed eagle flew by on separate occasions, while a hobby also made a couple of appearances. Things remained quiet on the mammal front until after 9.30 pm, when a beautiful bear came into view from the left of the hides. He worked his way across to where the carcass was, posing perfectly with the incredible golden light behind.



Everybody fired off plenty of shots and built up an impressive portfolio of images, as this handsome bear couldn't have been more cooperative. It didn't seem to matter where he moved, he was always producing the goods and allowed the whole group to capture some wonderful scenes – from environmental imagery to closer, more portrait style images. The large male with the broken jaw moved in and drove the lighter and smaller male off to one side. It wasn't long before the larger male was following the trail of the smaller one.



All of this toing and froing just made for more photography opportunities on this stunning, still evening.



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Once he had decided the smaller male was no threat, broken jaw headed off to the far side of the clearing and slowly melded into the trees. The smaller bear stayed in front of the hides until around 11 pm, so he really did linger and allow everyone to capture plenty of memorable images. The world outside the hides remained pretty quiet (except for a few passing bears) until 3.15 am when a mist was lying across the scene that lay before us. It was then that a bear made a brief appearance in the mist, posing for a short moment.



All was still again until at 5.45 am a wolverine darted along the edge of the treeline. It never came any closer than a few hundred metres, and nobody in the group was able to capture an image. We left the hides after 7.30 am and drove back to Kuikka.

Our routine would be the same each morning, with a little time before breakfast, and after having our fill, it was time to head to bed and catch up on some sleep.

Thursday 17 July 2025

Day 4:

Kuikka & night in the hides

We had been blessed with exceptional weather. The only issue was that upon entering the hides, it was very warm. The group had all met back up in the dining room, where we were treated to another delicious home-cooked meal. Once we had finished eating, we had the usual time to get everything prepared for another night in the hides. Tonight, we were changing locations and heading to the new lake location. The conditions looked to be promising, with relatively little wind and clear skies, meaning we should be treated to some excellent reflections.

As we pulled up to the lake, the mother bear and her three cubs were there. Unfortunately, we spooked the family, and they darted off into the surrounding forest. The family had returned by 7 pm and were busy feeding across the lake from where we sat in our hides.



The reflections were pretty good, almost immediately, although there was still a slight breeze at this time, so they were not quite perfect. They kept moving backwards and forwards, always searching for any morsel of food. Less than ten minutes had passed before a young bear appeared from the right, but within seconds, the mother charged and chased it off. For the next ten minutes or so, the interloper kept on coming back and grabbing some food, with a few mock charges from the mother bear. It led to some great behaviour, and we enjoyed some fabulous views as this action unfurled before us.

The family stayed in front of the hides for around an hour, always feeding and making the most of every bit of food it could find. It had afforded the group countless opportunities for stunning photography and memorable moments, which we will not forget. For another hour or so, we kept on having multiple views and visits of the younger blonde bear that came when the family of four were feeding. The bear worked its way through the trees and along the side of the lake, scouring every inch of ground and even up the trees. On one occasion, the bear climbed a tree – this is something I have never seen an adult bear do before and it was really quite exceptional.





We really were blown away and everyone captured some absolutely stunning images.



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The family of bears kept on returning too and so for a few hours we had almost non-stop activity. These sorts of nights don't happen all the time and so everybody was happily making the most of it.



Until around 11 pm, there was nearly constant activity on the far side of the lake, with the family and the young pale bear providing most of the entertainment. There was, however, a large male bear, which we assumed to be broken jaw, which could be seen through the trees on the right, but never came in and allowed us a better view.

Not long after the bears wandered off, the forest came alive once again, but this time to the sound of wolves howling from over where we had spent the previous two nights. To hear this incredible sound twice in one trip is absolutely unheard of and something to savour.

There was less activity during the hours of dusk, with a couple of bears making brief appearances, but the photographic opportunities were very limited due to the low light levels. We had a bit of a surprise when a lone wolf appeared at 4 am. Amazingly, this is a wolf I hadn't seen for at least a year. The only downside was that there was a thick layer of mist, and the wolf didn't want to stay still. The wolf rolled around in front of the hide on the right, allowing for some fabulous views. Almost as quickly as it appeared, it seemed to just be enveloped by the mist as it headed into the trees and we didn't see it again.

The rest of the morning was absent of any of our target species, but the sunrise through the forest and the mist that was hanging over the lake was absolutely magical. The night had been cold, with temperatures dropping drastically, but as the sun rose above the trees, the warmth of the sun was particularly welcome.

After a night with a notable lack of sleep but memorable wildlife encounters and photography, we made our way back to Kuikka for breakfast. Here we were able to refuel before heading to bed for one last hide session tonight.



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Friday 18 July 2025

Day 5:

Kuikka & night in the hides

For our last evening in Finland, we would not be spending the entire night in the hides, planning on heading back to the lodge just before midnight for a full night's sleep. So, after dinner, we packed up the van for the last time (for the hides at least) and drove to the final location – the Forest.

As I was driving the minibus down the track toward Forest, a couple of bears darted across the road ahead of us. We arrived, and I spread the group across the range of hides nestled within the trees. Within only a few minutes, while the group were still setting up, the first of the bears appeared.



It was the adolescent siblings who arrived first, literally within a few minutes of us entering the hides – they must have been watching and waiting. They were feeding in front of the hides when they were suddenly startled. The large male bear, the one with the broken jaw, had also made an appearance. We were treated to constant activity, within only metres of the hides, until after 7 pm. This allowed the group to capture a wealth of different imagery with the bears in much closer proximity, using smaller lenses, which gave us an alternative perspective. It is worth saying that the harsh light filtering through the trees did make some photography moments a little challenging.

There was then a little downtime until 7.45 pm, when the young blonde bear arrived and the male sibling arrived. They didn't spend too long with us, but gave us further opportunities as the light was softer with the sun lower in the sky. This level of activity was carried on until around 9.30 pm, when the regularity of visits started to dwindle. The last bear to visit came in at 10.25 pm and we remained in the hides until 11.30 pm. With the light now completely gone, we left the hides and boarded the minibus for the drive back to Kuikka.



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Upon our arrival back at basecamp, we headed off to our rooms and enjoyed a full night's sleep.

Saturday 19 July 2025

Day 6:

Kuikka to Kuopio; Kuopio to Helsinki; Helsinki to UK

We awoke to yet another glorious morning. In fact, it was already getting warm before breakfast. We settled into the dining room for breakfast. A couple within the group were leaving at 9.30 am and so after breakfast, we said our goodbyes. The rest of us were leaving at 12.30 pm, which meant we had plenty of time this morning to pack.

Some of the group enjoyed photographing the red squirrels and the great-spotted woodpecker at the feeders, while others caught up on a little sleep before we departed. We enjoyed a smooth journey to Kuopio, arriving at the airport just before check-in opened. We were soon through security and waiting in the departure lounge. Unfortunately, our flight was delayed, and so we had a slightly longer wait in the small airport before we finally boarded.

We arrived in Helsinki later than planned, but there was plenty of time for us to head through passport control and wait for the final leg of our journey home. The flight left on time and we enjoyed another smooth flight back to the UK. Arriving early, there was a slight delay for the steps to allow us to disembark, before we were bussed to the terminal. After cruising through passport control, our luggage soon arrived and we were saying our goodbyes before heading home.

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