

Tour Report

Finland – Boreal Predators Photography

25 – 30 July 2022

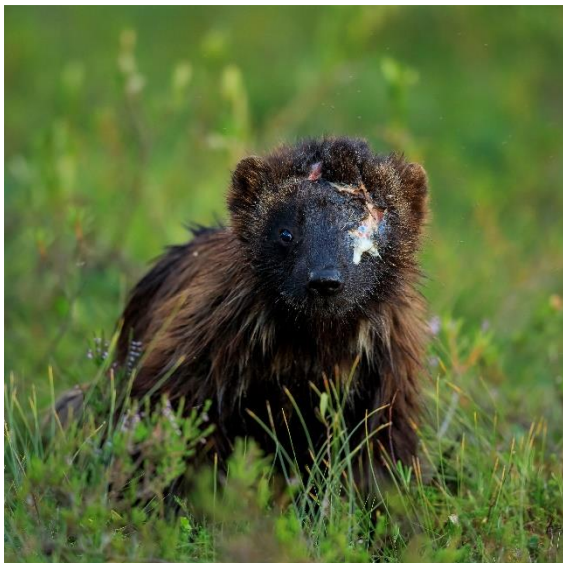
Grey wolf



Great grey owl chicks



Wolverine



Brown bear



Compiled by Bret Charman

Tour Leader: Bret Charman

Summary

We had an excellent 4 nights in the hides at Kuikka, photographing all three of our target species – brown bear, wolverine and grey wolf.

Day 1: UK to Kuikka, via Helsinki & Oulu

Monday 25 July 2022

The majority of the group and myself flew from London Heathrow to Oulu. We flew via Helsinki, where we met one of the group who had flown from Manchester, before flying on to Oulu itself. This is where all the group were together for the first time.

We met our bus driver and started to make our way eastwards towards Kuikka. Making our way from the west coast to the eastern border with Russia, we were on the road for around 4 hours. We finally arrived at Kuikka where we would be stationed for the next 5 days. The group were shown to their rooms before a hearty meal cooked by the wonderful team at the lodge.

With a busy few days ahead, we went to bed for a good night's sleep, enjoying the peace and tranquillity of this vast stretch of the taiga forest.

Day 2: Great Grey Owl & Hides at Paradise

Tuesday 26 July 2022



We awoke to a glorious morning, with red squirrels and woodland birds visiting the feeders outside our rooms and before long another hearty meal was laid out before us – breakfast. There was the opportunity for some of the group to head north-west, to a great grey owl nest around an hour away.

So, we headed north to meet a local guide and we were then escorted a little further on to the nesting site. Upon arrival, we could see two chicks in the nesting tree and one on the ground nearby – they were just about to fledge. We spent the next four hours in the hide, photographing the two chicks in the nest as they stretched their wings, readying themselves for their first steps and flights from the nest.

One of the adult birds flew into one side of the nest. All of us held our breath as we waited for the adult to fly into the nest. Unfortunately, the adult didn't cooperate and instead we had to satisfy ourselves with images of the chicks instead. It was great to see a nest and capture such good imagery – it is a rare occurrence.

With a night in the hides ahead of us, it was time to return to Kuikka and fill ourselves up with some more delicious home cooking. This also allowed us to make some sandwiches for later in the hides, as well as make teas and coffees to fill up our thermos flasks. I also showed the group a range of images I had captured previously. This meant that everyone had an idea of settings and possible photographic opportunities from the hides.

For our first night hoping to photograph the predators of Finland's boreal forests, I split the group into two hides in the location known as 'Paradise'. This is the best location to see all three sought-after species – the brown bear, wolverine and grey wolf. To start our evening off though, and to whet everyone's appetites, a wolf was in front of the hides as we pulled up in the vehicle.



This was only the start of an excellent evening as we were treated to excellent views of an adult and juvenile white-tailed eagle. It wasn't long before the wolf returned and walked across in front of the hides, searching



for the carcass left out in the long grass. The wolf disappeared once more, before again coming back in search of food. We noticed the wolf was staring intently in one direction – a bear had appeared and it was moving towards the wolf. Neither were particularly concerned with one another's company and they both came incredibly close to the hides.

Suddenly, the wolf darted at speed towards the carcass and it was only then we realised a wolverine had managed to sneak in without anyone noticing. The bear and the wolf melded away, disappearing into the trees from where they came before the wolverine made another appearance.

As the light faded to a dusky gloom, the bear made another appearance, quickly followed by the wolverine again (right next to the hide). I stayed on watch as the group slept, making sure that nothing made any further appearances. Except for a very brief visit from the wolf, all was quiet until 6:00 when a wolverine appeared.

After an action-packed first night, it was time to head back to the comfort of Kuikka for a very well-deserved breakfast. Stocking up, it was then time to head back to our rooms to catch up on some sleep before another night in the hides.

Day 3: Hides at Lake

Wednesday 27 July 2022

Some of the group were able to sleep, while others explored the lodge's surroundings. This peaceful part of Finland is home to a wealth of wildlife and around the lodge, there are nesting pied and spotted flycatcher, as well as swallows and house martins too.

Another late lunch was in store for us, allowing us to refuel for our second night in the hides and stock up on hot drinks and sandwiches. Tonight, we would be heading to another location, with the group spread out across four different hides – we would be based at 'Lake'. This is a beautiful spot and another good location to see all three species of predator.

Not long after we arrived in the hides, some of the group were able to hear wolves and their pups greeting one another in the forest somewhere in front of the hides. Although we couldn't see them, or photograph them, this was a real treat. It is something rarely heard in these forests and a real highlight for anyone lucky enough to experience it.

A couple of hours passed before a lone bear made its way around the side of the hides before eventually coming out in front of us. It put on an incredible show and the group were able to capture some magnificent imagery. It worked its way backwards and forwards, searching for any morsel of food before it headed off towards the trees where we had heard the wolves. A wolverine appeared at around 21:00, spending a lot of time on the right-hand side of the lake. It finally plucked up the courage to swim for some scraps of salmon lodged on a patch of floating vegetation. It spent a prolonged period in front of the hides, providing wonderful photography opportunities. Sadly the wolverine was badly injured and had a huge wound on its face with the remnants of an eye.

The last of the light had nearly disappeared when a bear appeared next to the hides and went for a swim right in front of the left-hand hide. As the light faded to near darkness, the hides fell silent. A wolf made an appearance in the gloom at 12:25 before a wolverine showed at 01:55. The wolverine disappeared when the wolf reappeared, followed by another wolf some 20 minutes later.



All fell quiet for the rest of the morning except for a female goldeneye that landed on the pond, diving and preening herself, before taking flight. A pair of crossbills flew by, as did a noisy flock of jays before it was time to pack up our things and head back to the lodge.

What another incredible night in these magical forests. We arrived back at Kuikka with plenty of time to spare for breakfast. At 9:00, as per every day at Kuikka, a hearty breakfast was served and we were able to talk about what we had seen and photographed.

After a morning's rest, it was time to reconvene once more for a late lunch and get everything ready for our third night in the hides. With everyone well fed, rested and raring to go, we headed to a third location for the trip – 'Forest'. This location is quite different from 'Paradise' and 'Lake' as it is situated in a stand of mature pines. Light levels here are much lower, due to the dense canopy above, but the photography can be excellent. These hides are probably the most reliable for excellent photography opportunities for brown bear, but wolverine is without a doubt the main focus.

We arrived and the group had to spread out across numerous smaller hides. It was quite overcast, meaning that photography was a little trickier, but we were quickly rewarded with a very cooperative bear. In fact, the bear was so comfortable it came within only metres of the hides and hoovered up nearly all of the food. All of the group were able to capture a wide array of imagery as the bear moved around in front of us.

A little bit later, just after 20:30, a wolverine appeared. Typically, as wolverines do, it ran around like a lunatic. It rarely stopped and posed for more than a fraction of a second, working its way around in front of the hides searching for any remaining salmon. This was a different wolverine from the one we had seen with the wound, and it came incredibly close to the hides. It was possible to capture full frame images of the wolverine's face before it disappeared as quickly as it arrived.





As the light levels were falling, a second bear showed up. This one seemed to be an older bear. It arrived at 21:45 and moved around the trees in front of the hides, hoping to find any scraps that had been missed by the earlier bear and the wolverine. It stayed for around 15 minutes, but with such low light levels, it was tricky to photograph and so it was easier to capture some short video clips.

The sun dropped below the horizon, making it a good time to catch up on some sleep. In the gloom, another bear appeared, and very early another wolverine made a very brief appearance. For the rest of the time in the hides, the forest was quiet.

We left a little earlier and headed back to Kuikka for yet another delicious breakfast and some downtime for our final session in the hides.

Day 5: Hides at Lake

Friday 29 July 2022

For our final night along the Russian border, the group all agreed they wanted to return to 'Paradise'. We had such a good night there earlier in the week, that we hoped for another action-packed evening.

With a morning departure to Kuopio Airport, our time in the hides would be shorter tonight. We planned to depart the hides once the light had gone and make our way back for a full night's sleep. This would also give everyone time to pack their bags for our morning transfer to the airport.

We had our final late lunch, filling our Thermos flasks with tea and coffee, before heading out for our final hide session of the trip. We arrived at lake and spread out across all the hides as per the second night, positioning people in different locations to ensure they all had different views and photography angles.



As most of us were still setting up, a bear appeared on the edge of the tree line and walked towards the small lake. It must have been watching us from the forest, waiting for us to enter the hides, before showing itself. The bear walked around the far shore of the lake, providing some incredible reflections. It also entered the water, swimming in search of salmon scraps and shook itself dry, further adding to the excellent encounter. The bear worked its way around the whole area, standing on its hind feet as it plucked food from the trees.

It was great having a bear so early, but the only issue is that bears hoover up the available food and it makes it less likely that a wolverine or wolf shows up. The bear stayed for some time, but once it was sure it had eaten everything, it sauntered off into the surrounding forest.

Around 20:45, another bear showed up, searched the area for food, but quickly departed. The first visitor had obviously been extremely thorough, making sure that every morsel of food had been eaten. We had no more sightings, and with the light fading, it was time to head back to the lodge. We arrived back well before midnight, which gave us plenty of time to catch up on some sleep,

pack our things and be ready for our morning transfer to the airport.

Day 6: Transfer to Kuopio; Flights to UK

Saturday 30 July 2022

Everyone was packed and ready to go before breakfast. Our comfortable bus arrived as we were eating our meal and it wasn't long before we were all on the road to Kuopio. In terms of wildlife, it was another quiet drive through these vast forested areas. We made excellent time, stopping halfway, before continuing to the airport.

It was here that one of our group left, catching a taxi to Kuopio city centre for a couple of days enjoying the local sights, while the rest of us checked in for our flight to Helsinki. The flight left on time, but with a tight turnaround, we had to rush through Helsinki. Here our group split further as one member was flying on to Manchester as the rest of us caught our flight to London Heathrow.

We made our way quickly through the airport, reconvening at baggage reclaim where we had a bit of a wait. Everyone said their goodbyes, making their respective journeys home.

What a fabulous few days we had, observing and photographing all three of our target species in Finland's boreal forests.