

Tour Report

Finland – Boreal Predators Photography

25 May 2022

Grey wolf by Bret Charman



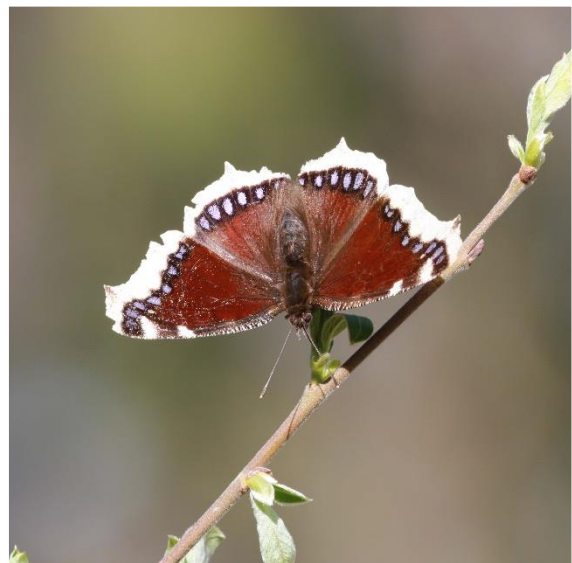
Wolverine by Kevin A



Brown bear by Kevin A



Camberwell beauty by Peter G



Compiled by Bret Charman

Tour Leader: Bret Charman

What an amazing 6-days in the far east of Finland's magical boreal forests. We saw all three of our target species and a host of supporting species from the purpose-built hides and the forests surrounding Basecamp Kuikka.

Day 1: London Heathrow to Kuopio (via Helsinki)

Wednesday 25 May 2022

The group flew from London Heathrow to Helsinki (where we had a tight connection thanks to flight schedule changes) and on to Kuopio where we met our driver. We made a short stop at a local supermarket, where the group were able to buy some extra supplies for the hides over the next few nights.

We then headed north, passing through the rolling hills and endless forests of central Finland as we made our way to our base for the remainder of the week – Kuikka Base Camp. On our way, we saw a number of familiar species including buzzard, lapwing, fieldfare and hooded crow as well as a large number of whooper swan. The only mammal seen was the brown hare, these are slowly spreading northwards with climate change as the mountain hare retreats northwards. As we closed in on the lodge a male capercaillie flew out of the undergrowth by the side of the road, before disappearing into the thick forest to the side.

Upon arrival at the lodge, we were quickly shown to our rooms and then treated to a wonderful meal in the warmth of the dining room.

Day 2: Kuikka & Hides

Thursday 26 May 2022

We awoke to a wonderful morning on the shores of Lake Kuikka, surrounded by Scot's pines filled with birdsong. Cuckoos could be heard calling, pied flycatchers were busy feeding, while siskin, chaffinch and bullfinch were busy at the feeding station. Breakfasts are a feast to behold and the group certainly didn't go hungry.

The first day is a relaxed day after having a good night's sleep. After breakfast, I explained a little about what settings would be useful from the hides and talked about the light and how it changes throughout the nights in the hides. We also enjoyed a walk along the lake shore where there was sign of beaver activity, Camberwell beauty and green hairstreak butterflies were on the wing, a pair of common crane were on the far shore, while a willow warbler sang loudly from the tree tops.

It was a beautiful day and we reconvened for a late lunch or early dinner (standard practice for this photography trip), whatever you would rather call it. After dinner, there was the opportunity to make sandwiches to take with us to the hides and to fill up our Thermos flasks with tea or coffee.

We headed off for the main hide at Paradise – a mistranslation, but very aptly named – for our first evening in no man's land. You can never be too sure about when or where something may appear, so the group sat in a row, waiting patiently for the iconic predators of Finland to show themselves. As we waited for the main act, the supporting cast were doing their best to keep us entertained. Paradise is a large open marshland and home to some excellent birdlife, with regular visits from species such as raven, black kite, white wagtail, barn swallow, hooded crow and black-headed gull all easily seen. On this particular evening, we were further treated to sightings of numerous waders, including golden plover, ruff, greenshank and green sandpiper as well as a pair of black grouse in the distance.

Finally, after many hours of waiting, a lone wolf appeared in front of the hides. For the next week, this wolf would be known as 'Scruffy', but it was much-loved by all the group and an excellent poser for everyone. After a few hours, the wolf reappeared again, in the gloom of dusk (as dark as it gets at this time of year).



Grey wolf 'Scruffy' by Bret Charman

Day 3: Kuikka & Hides

Friday 27 May 2022

We left the hides just before 8:00 and returned to Kuikka for our breakfast. After a great first night in the hides and with full tummies, it was time to get some rest before another night in the hides.

With everyone having caught up with some sleep, we reconvened for lunch/dinner and got ourselves ready for a second night in the hides at Paradise. We were entertained for the first couple of hours by a number of ravens and a black kite showing off its aerial prowess.

At around 9:00 a lone wolf appeared and it was recognisable as 'Scruffy', exploring the area in front of the hides for around half an hour, providing some excellent photography opportunities. The wolf started to look over to one side of the clearing, staring into the trees that surround the open marshland. It was then that the alpha male appeared in the tree line, followed by another wolf which was likely to be the alpha female. It turns out that the wolf den was off in the forest to that side, so it makes sense that they came into the open area from that direction.

The three wolves played on the edge of the tree line and the wolves moved around the area for around 20 minutes. Although the sighting was distant, it was lovely to watch the interaction and the behaviour. Unfortunately, the alpha pair never came closer to the hides and so the photography opportunities were limited.

There was a long period during the darkest hours where there was very little activity in front of the hides and this is when most people catch up on a little sleep. Most of the hides have somewhere you can sleep and recover a little before the light improves. With someone on watch at all times, it is the best way to make the most of the time in the hides.

As the sun started to rise above the tree line once more, a shape moved in closer to the hides once more. Against the bright sun, it was at first a little tricky to identify the individual, but as it moved across the landscape we quickly realised it was 'Scruffy' once again. He moved around in front of the hides, searching for the salmon scraps. Although he only stayed for around 10-15 minutes, all the group were able to see and photograph him in the soft morning light.

With just over an hour to go in the hides, he was back for one last check of the site, before disappearing off into the great expanse of the forest once more.



Grey wolf pack by Kevin A

Day 4: Kuikka & Hides

Saturday 28 May 2022

Each day we aim to leave the hides around 8:00 and ensure we are back at the lodge for a very well-deserved breakfast – today was no different. After two full nights in the hides, everyone was in need of good sleep and after finishing our meal, the group slowly dispersed as they went off to rest.

After reconvening for lunch/dinner, everyone made their sandwiches and prepared themselves for their third night in the hides. Tonight would be a little different as the group split up between two different locations – Paradise and Forest.

I joined a couple of guests in one of the smaller hides at Paradise once again, but both locations proved to be incredibly rewarding. Within a couple of hours 'Scruffy' made another appearance at Paradise, but this time in the pouring rain. He came incredibly close to the hides, posing in the most surreal conditions and allowing some exquisite photography despite the challenging conditions. The wolf kept coming to and fro for over an hour before heading off to the hides at Forest. There was also a very brief appearance from a large male bear, but it quickly headed off from the way it came.



Wolverine by Kevin A



Wolf in the rain by Bret Charman

Meanwhile, at Forest, they were treated to fantastic views of a bear (so all the members of the group were finally rewarded with sightings of a bear). As well as the excellent views of the bear, the clients at Forest were enjoying the red squirrels as they moved around the landscape. However, the undoubted highlight was a couple of visits from at least two different wolverines. The wolverine is the largest member of the mustelid family – think giant badger which is seemingly unable to stay still for more than a second.

Back at Paradise, there was a long lull throughout the night, but the morning was incredibly rewarding as the alpha male appeared in the beautiful morning light. He fed on the carcass for around 20 minutes when the Alpha female appeared. She joined the male by the carcass but quickly grabbed some meat and immediately disappeared off back towards her den.

The male then looked intently in one direction and I quickly realised something else must be moving in. Out of the side of the hide, I could see a bear moving in, with the wolf's gaze still fixed upon it. The two fed within only 20 yards or so of one another before they both disappeared. It was a fantastic evening at both locations filled with some excellent wildlife photography.

Day 5: Kuikka & Hides

Sunday 29 May 2022

Another fantastic breakfast was provided for the group before another day's rest and recovery after a night in the hides. Our final lunch/dinner at Kuikka was the opportunity to fill up for our last even in the hides.

Unlike the previous few nights, we would head back to the comfort of the lodge when the light levels dropped below the conditions necessary for photography. Once again the group split up, with the majority based in forest, with a couple at Paradise.

Paradise provided another evening of wolf sightings and some excellent photo opportunities, but in Forest, the group didn't have to wait long for a wolverine to appear. There was some bright sunshine, but the wolverine was not particularly cooperative. It kept moving to the back of the area in front of the hides, making photography a little challenging. After the wolverine made its exit, we watched several greater spotted woodpeckers as they fed on ants and salmon scraps.

After another couple of hours, a large shape appeared on the edge of the trees and a beautiful bear appeared. Making its way up the hill, it looked around for some food and focused on the carcass towards the back of the site. It was a great way to finish our time in the hides in this beautiful and remote part of Finland. As the light started to fade, we left the hides and picked up the rest of the group from Paradise before returning for a very well-earned rest back at the lodge.



Brown bear by Peter G

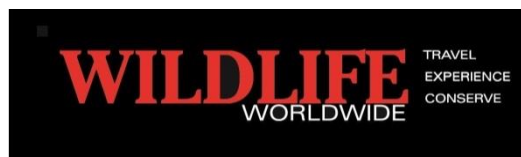
Day 6: Kuikka to Kuopio & Home

Monday 30 May 2022

After a full night's sleep (what a luxury), everyone ensured they were packed and we enjoyed our final hearty breakfast at Kuikka. We set off in the minibus after finishing off our food for the three-hour drive to the city of Kuopio. One couple made their own way to Helsinki and then on to the USA.

It was a straightforward drive on the long roads through a sea of fir and pine trees, before arriving safely at Kuopio airport. The group were all successfully checked in for their onwards flight to Helsinki, with their luggage checked through to the UK.

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>
1	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
2	Taiga bean goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>
3	Barnacle goose	<i>Branta leucopsis</i>
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
5	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Mareca penelope</i>
6	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
7	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
8	Capercaillie	<i>Tetrao urogallus</i>
9	Black grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>
10	Hazel grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia</i>
11	Black-throated diver	<i>Gavia arctica</i>
12	Black kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
13	Common buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
14	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
15	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
16	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
17	Common crane	<i>Grus grus</i>
18	Eurasian golden plover	<i>Pluvialis apricaria</i>
19	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
20	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
21	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
22	Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
23	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>

24	Ruff	<i>Calidris pugnax</i>
25	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>
26	Common gull	<i>Larus canus</i>
27	Lesser black-backed gull	<i>Larus fuscus</i>
28	Herring gull	<i>Larus argentatus</i>
29	Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
30	Wood pigeon	<i>Columba palumbus</i>
31	Common cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
32	Common swift	<i>Apus apus</i>
33	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
34	Eurasian skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
35	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
36	Common house martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>
37	Tree pipit	<i>Anthus trivialis</i>
38	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
39	Yellow wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>
40	European robin	<i>Erithacus rubecula</i>
41	Common redstart	<i>Phoenicurus phoenicurus</i>
42	European stonechat	<i>Saxicola rubicola</i>
43	Redwing	<i>Turdus iliacus</i>
44	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>
45	Willow warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochilus</i>
46	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
47	Spotted flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa striata</i>
48	European pied flycatcher	<i>Ficedula hypoleuca</i>
49	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>
50	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>
51	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
52	Jackdaw	<i>Coloeus monedula</i>

53	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>
54	Common raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
55	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>
56	Eurasian siskin	<i>Spinus spinus</i>
57	European greenfinch	<i>Chloris chloris</i>
58	Common crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
59	Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
60	Rustic bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA
1	Grey wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>
2	Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>
3	Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo</i>
4	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
	BUTTERFLIES	LEPIDOPTERA
1	Camberwell beauty	<i>Nymphalis antiopa</i>
2	Comma	<i>Polygonia c-album</i>
3	Green hairstreak	<i>Callophrys rubi rubi</i>
4	Holly blue	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>