

Tour Report

Finland – Boreal Predators Photography

15 - 20 June 2023

Grey wolf



Brown bear



Brown bear



Grey wolf



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to Oulu – On to Kuikka**Thursday 15 June 2023**

All members of the group were on the same flights from the UK to Helsinki, then on to the city of Oulu on Finland's west coast. I was there to meet them at arrivals and soon we were packing our bags into the minibus, ready for the four-hour journey to Kuikka.

We took the opportunity to stop at a supermarket on the way, allowing people to buy some snacks and drinks for the nights ahead in the hides. The journey went smoothly and we were even treated to views of a couple of elk (moose) on the way. We arrived at the lodge on the shores of Kuikka Lake at around 22:30 and enjoyed our first meal in the comfort of the homely dining room. After such a long day of travel, we quickly retreated to our rooms for a very well-earned rest.

Day 2: Kuikka**Friday 16 June 2023**

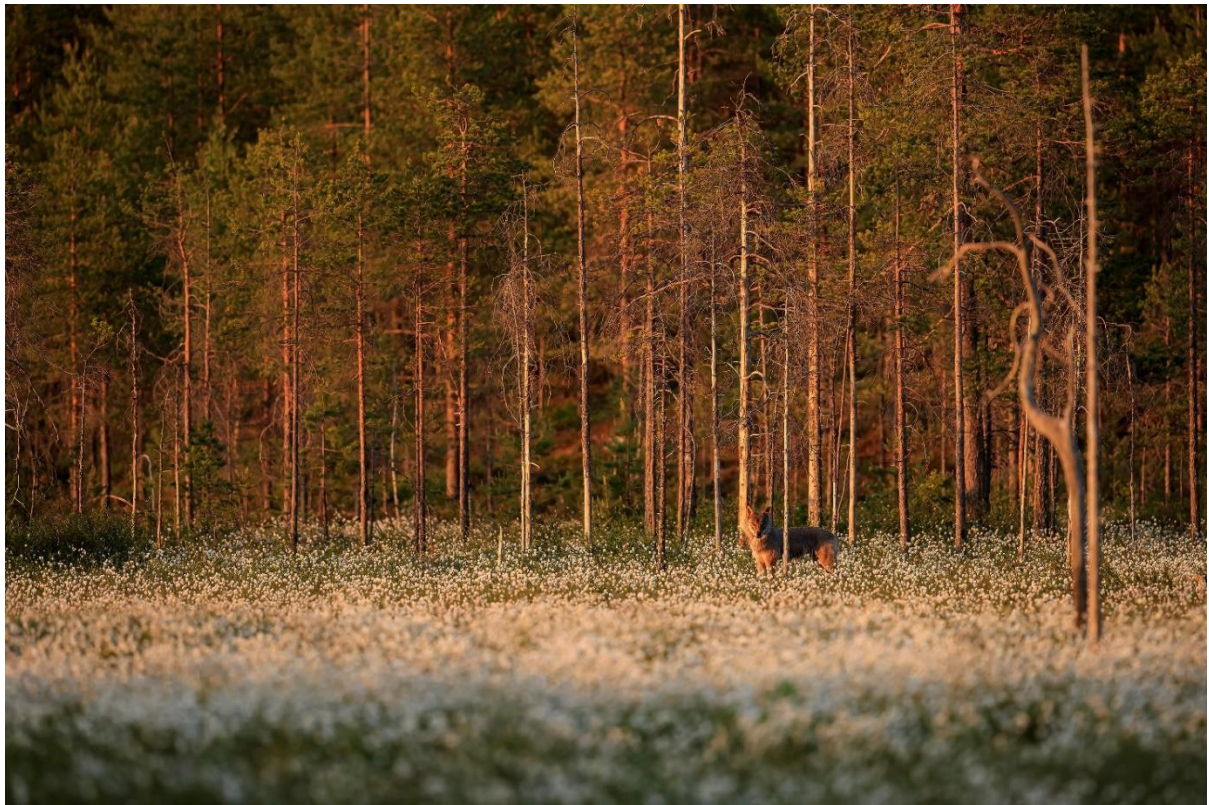
The group met in the dining area for breakfast. We enjoyed a leisurely meal, talking about what we hoped to experience and photograph over the coming nights in the hides. With breakfast coming to an end, I fetched my laptop and showed the group some images from previous trips, so that they could better understand the opportunities available and the light we could expect from each location. Once they had this foundation to work with, it was time for everyone to rest and enjoy the lodge. Some of us tried to catch up on sleep, while others enjoyed the stunning surroundings at Kuikka. Red squirrels and great-spotted woodpeckers aplenty always provide entertainment for those struggling to sleep.

We reconvened in the dining area for a late lunch at 16:00 and I talked a little more about what to expect from the night ahead. We would be heading to Paradise – a large open area that is a particularly reliable location for photographing wolves, but it is also often good for bears and wolverines.

We arrived at the hide at around 18:00 and settled in, unpacking our camera gear and getting comfortable for the night ahead. Speaking in a whisper, I explained where the mammals were likely to appear so that we could work together and keep our eyes peeled. For the first couple of hours, there was a noticeable lack of any mammals, instead, we made do with numerous bird sightings, such as raven, hooded crow, magpie, lapwing and white wagtail.

At 19:50, a wolf appeared on the edge of the treeline at Paradise. Unfortunately, it never came closer to us than a couple of hundred metres away, so photography options were limited. However, it was great to have a sighting so early and it certainly helped everyone to relax. Now, we just had to wait for the wolf to return, or maybe for another species from the vast surrounding wilderness to show itself.

At 21:30, suddenly there was movement on the edge of the treeline to the right. Another wolf was moving through the trees and into the open. It slowly made its way through the bog cotton and across the open marshland to the far side of Paradise. It took nearly 20 minutes for the wolf to cross the open area that lay before us, but once again, it never came within a hundred metres of us. Frustratingly, the light was absolutely spectacular. We were able to capture some beautiful environmental shots, which sometimes are more atmospheric than the close-up portraits that many people are after.



The wolf kept appearing and quickly disappearing again into the forest for the next half an hour or so, but always at a distance that made it nearly impossible to photograph. However, just after 22:30, finally, our patience was rewarded. A large adult wolf approached the hides and walked right in front of us, providing some wonderful images.



It was the perfect start to the trip and as always, it was an amazing experience to see wolves in the wild. I am unaware of anywhere else in Europe that gives you such close and reliable encounters with wild wolves. The

sun set below the trees, but at this time of year it doesn't get dark early, so we stayed up, keeping an eye out for anything else that might show itself.

Another lone wolf appeared in the distance just before 02:00. Then there were a few hours where very little showed itself (even the birdlife was quiet). At 06:00 though, a hobby did a flyby - seemingly it was hunting for dragonflies across the marshland. Just as we were giving up hope of seeing another mammal, a wolf appeared from the left and investigated the carcass that had been left out, before moving across the marshland and disappearing to the right of the hides.

With our first night coming to an end, we packed up our things and headed back to Kuikka for our breakfast.

Day 3: Kuikka

Saturday 17 June 2023

Another breakfast at Kuikka could only mean one thing. It was nearly time for a chance to catch up on our sleep! We retired to our rooms, after agreeing that we would meet up in the dining room later for lunch.

We met for our afternoon meal, packed our sandwiches and made ourselves some tea and coffee. The weather was unusually warm for the time of year, so Lassi suggested leaving a little later than usual, at 17:30. Warmth and bright sunshine can decrease animal activity, as the larger mammals often try and keep out of the sunlight and avoid the heat of the day as best they can.

With the van packed up, we headed off along the dusty track back to Paradise. We hoped for more excellent views of wolves, or just maybe, the bears and wolverines would decide to show themselves. Settling into the large comfortable hide once more, we readied ourselves for our second night. As we sat there and the warm sun shone across the open marshland, the birdlife was particularly busy. The cuckoos were calling from all around - their tell-tale double-noted call echoing across the landscape. All the while, ravens were toing and froing, common gulls were on the wing, and greenshanks probed the soft soil in search of a meal. A little while later, a black kite appeared over the trees and perched in a dead pine tree on the edge of the marsh. The common gulls were then joined by a lesser black-backed gull – the bully boy of gulls in the area.

At 19:40 our first wolf of the evening decided to show itself. The light was just magical and the animal spent around 10 minutes near the hides. We were treated to some excellent views before it melted away into the forest. It appeared again across the far side of the marshland before we lost sight of it in the trees. The wolves in Finland are like ghosts. One moment there is nothing, and then suddenly a wolf is standing right before your eyes.

Between 20:30 and 22:00, we saw a couple of different wolves around the wet ground on numerous occasions, but unfortunately, they never came close enough to the hides for striking photography. However, the group were content to watch them and take the odd photograph. We just had to cross our fingers and hope that we would be treated to another close encounter like the night before.



As the sun started to dip below the trees, around 22:30, a wolf appeared before quickly heading off again. Luckily, this time the wolf came back pretty quickly and walked right in front of the hides. We were spoiled for photo opportunities as it came right towards where we were sitting.





This was clearly a much younger wolf and it had nearly moulted its winter coat. We were so lucky with the views that it afforded us and the light was just perfect. What a great way to enjoy a long summer's evening in Finland's boreal forests!

The wolf kept moving around the marshy area in front of the hide and approached the carcass. It never went too close, always skirting around the free meal, seemingly nervous that it may be dangerous. As the youngster moved away from the carcass, the pale wolf from earlier in the evening made yet another appearance. This time it was clear that the wolf was intent on trying to feed from the carcass. It spent a prolonged period circling the carcass and checking out the surrounding area. Eventually, after what seemed like an exceptionally long period of time, the wolf finally plucked up the courage and started to feed from the carcass.

As the wolf tentatively tore off pieces of meat and its stomach noticeably grew in size, the younger wolf decided to show up again. Just as earlier, it never came too close and the pale dominant wolf took a defensive stance. There was a stand-off between the two for some time before the pale wolf decided to lay down in the long grass and seemingly enjoy a sleep. The other wolf never went too far from the potential meal, so we spent the night watching the two of them.

The pale wolf also made a particularly close approach to the hide and we were able to capture some full-frame portraits as it paused in front of us. With such low light levels at this time, we all had to push our cameras to some pretty extreme settings, but the images you can capture with modern cameras are always impressive.

The wolves continued to spend time in Paradise until eventually, in the early hours of the morning, a beautiful bear turned up.



The wolves disappeared as the bear fed from the carcass. The sound of an adult bear feeding is truly remarkable. The strength they exhibit as they pull off large chunks of meat is something that you won't forget in a hurry. The bear didn't stay too long but it provided us with a wonderful view.



After the bear finished feeding and headed back into the forest, the pale wolf made a final appearance before disappearing just before 05:00. Finally, at just before 06:30, a young scruffy wolf appeared from the back of

Paradise and came to investigate the carcass. All in all, we had been treated to views of three different wolves and one bear on our second evening at Paradise.

With an action-packed night behind us, it was time to pack up our things and drive back to Kuikka for breakfast.

Day 4: Kuikka

Sunday 18 June 2023

We arrived back at the lodge in time for breakfast. After refuelling in the dining room, it was time to head to bed and sleep off the night's excitement.

Just before 16:00, we met in the dining room for our afternoon meal and readied ourselves for another night in the hides. That night we would be heading to another location – Forest. Forest is the most reliable place to see and photograph bears, as well as wolverines, so we would try our luck!

We had the place to ourselves, so we just had to wait and see what would show itself. We had only been in the hides for around 50 minutes when a bear appeared from the right. It was a beautiful young bear and obviously very nervous. The large number of biting insects wasn't helping its anxious disposition. It ran off not long after arriving, but it returned within only a few minutes and put on a fantastic show for us. The whole group was able to capture some excellent images of this beautiful bear.



The great light made the encounter even better. We really couldn't have asked for a more cooperative subject. Over the next few hours, we had repeated visits from a further two bears, but the light was never as good as when the first bear had arrived, and it was this encounter which rewarded us with the best imagery.



The largest of the three bears made a second appearance at 23:30, by which time the light had all but gone. This area of forest is the most challenging for photography of all the hide locations, but when it delivers it can be very special. On this occasion, the cloud cover started to build after sunset and at around 01:00 the rain started to fall and the sound of thunder resonated through the trees. Unfortunately, it seemed as though the weather had scared off the wildlife.

The remainder of the morning was quiet, but the rain had definitely cooled everything down and the weather promised to be brighter again later in the day. We packed up and headed back to Kuikka for breakfast.

Day 5: Kuikka

Monday 19 June 2023

We arrived back at Kuikka with plenty of time before breakfast. It gave us all a chance to freshen up a little before enjoying our meal. Then it was time to try and sleep before our final session in the hides.

On waking up, it was apparent that the weather was on the cooler side. It was brightening up once again though and we were looking forward to the night ahead. With a full day of travel the following day, we decided we would leave the hides at 23:30, so it was to be a shorter night. This would allow the group time to pack their bags and get some sleep before the transfer to Kuopio Airport and onto London via Helsinki.

Everyone in the group wanted to head back to Forest, hoping that on our last night, we might get lucky with wolverine. So after the meal, we headed off to the hides for the final time. We settled in across two different hides and waited to see what the night had in store for us.

At around 20:30, a wolf appeared to the left of the hides, but unfortunately, it was just passing through and never came into the area where we could photograph it. Nonetheless, you can never complain about seeing a wild wolf. Sadly, for the rest of the evening, the wildlife eluded us. We didn't see the wolf again, nor did we see any bears or wolverines.

Our time in the hides had come to an end and we headed back to the lodge. With the lower light levels, it was a good time to encounter elk (moose) and we saw one briefly as it trotted off from a clearing and into the cover of the forest.

We arrived back at Kuikka and went to our rooms to pack and sleep before our journey home in the morning.

Day 6: Kuikka to Kuopio – Flight to London

Tuesday 20 June 2023

We awoke to a slightly cloudy day and met up for our final breakfast. Some of the group also made sandwiches, as we thought we wouldn't have much of an opportunity to buy lunch at any of the airports. At 09:30, with our bags packed, we boarded the minibus and started the three-and-a-half-hour journey to Kuopio.

The wild delights of Kuikka and its hides were exceptional. There really is nowhere quite like it in Europe. It's a unique destination that offers some exceptional sightings and first-rate wildlife photography.