

Tour Report

Finland – European Festival of Bears

8 - 13 October 2021

Crested tit



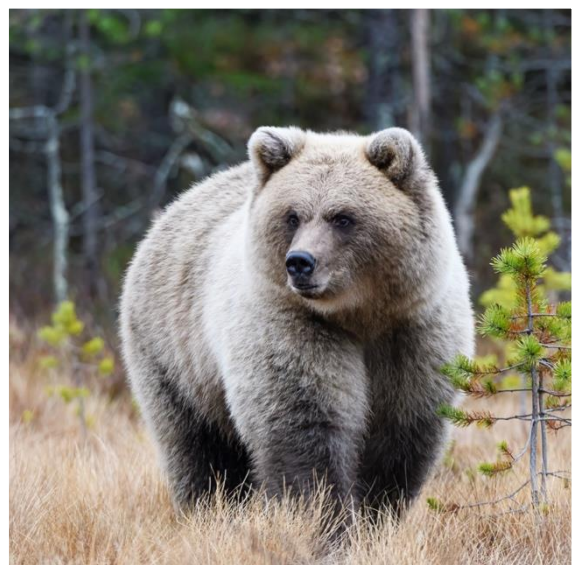
Wolverine



Willow tit



European brown bear



Compiled by Chris Breen

Tour Leaders: Mark Carwardine & Chris Breen

Day 1: UK to Oulu (via Helsinki)

Friday 8 October 2021

Weather: overcast and drizzly, 8° C

Most of the group flew from the UK (although a couple flew from further afield). They gathered in Helsinki and flew on to Oulu where they landed shortly after 5pm and were transferred by coach to The Bear Centre. They arrived some three hours later at around 10pm – it was well and truly dark when they arrived – where they were greeted by Mark and Chris, together with Juho and Katja from the Bear Centre. It was drizzly on arrival and after showing most people to their rooms (the five couples staying in the chalets would be transferred the short distance to the chalets by minibus after dinner), we went into the restaurant for a hot, welcoming dinner and a glass of wine.

After dinner we migrated to the auditorium where Juho did a short presentation giving an overview of the area and showing some images of the bears and other wildlife in the area to whet everyone's appetite for upcoming days. It was quite late after that so those being transferred to the cabins were given a short briefing before heading off, and the rest of us retired for the night.

Day 2: The Bear Centre

Saturday 9 October 2021

Weather: overcast 8° C

It was a busy morning! We had breakfast at 8am and shortly after went into the auditorium for a presentation by Mark – a fun and lively affair covering Finland, our location in Finland, bears around the world, conservation issues regarding European brown bears, and the European brown bears place in the 'bear hierarchy' followed by some key tips for photographing the wildlife in this area.

Next, we all walked up to the Bear House with its beautiful views over the forest and the bear hide area and discussed our plans for the late morning and afternoon – the big decision for some being whether to stay in a hide overnight or return to the lodge at dusk. With decisions made for the evening, Chris and Katja led a small group out on the forest tracks to the 'no-mans land' border line with Russia. On the way we saw great spotted woodpecker, plenty of great tits and a small group of Siberian jays. We also spent time listening to the calls and identifying red (common) crossbill which were periodically flying over in small flocks.

While Chris was out walking Mark was with a group doing a photography workshop at the bird hide. Creating different 'sets' to get interesting shots and then talking through techniques that included light levels, ISO, aperture and shutter speed settings, and discussing 'background / foreground' etc. All this time the birds were very relaxed and included crested and willow tit, great tit, Siberian and Eurasian jay. They also had treecreeper, great spotted woodpecker and blue tit.

Before lunch everyone went back to their rooms to get organised for our post-lunch visit to the bear hides area and while up at the cabins a number of people had a tremendous middle-of-the-day sighting of wolverine.

It was back to the restaurant for lunch and then, armed with our snack-packs consisting of a warming flask of tea and coffee, and sandwiches, we all headed out with great excitement to the bear hides for the afternoon (and in the case of many) an overnight. We didn't have too long to wait before one of the group saw a bear near hide 3, another reported seeing another bear opposite hide 21 and somebody else saw two bears (one light and one dark) opposite hide 25. Exciting stuff!

Then there was a pause of about 30 minutes before one of the group saw a dark coloured bear in front of hide 5 which was then joined by a blonder one – each of the bears lifting up the lid of the bait station to see

if there was any bait worth having and being very satisfied with what it was finding. As the pale coloured bear (Blondie) was in sight from hide 27 it was possible to hear wolves howling in the distance.

All too soon, as the light was fading, it was time for four of the group to leave the hide area and walk out with Mark and Chris while the others that had elected to stay out for the night continued to keep an eye out for bears and other wildlife in the fading light.

Day 3: The Bear Centre

Sunday 10 October 2021

Weather: overcast 10° C

Another busy day today. Shortly before 8am Mark and Chris walked out to the hides area to meet and escort those that had spent the night in the hides. Everyone gathered together their camera gear, binoculars and snack packs and headed back for breakfast along the boardwalk and back down the track to the restaurant.

After breakfast, lots of fun was had planning and negotiating, gathering props, setting up perches and creating sets for another bird photography session. Some were working better than others, and great fun was had in the process. Everyone ended up with fabulous pictures of great tits, willow tits, crested tits, Siberian and Eurasian jay, and a great time was had by all. At one point there were 17 people in the photo session – what a great way to spend the morning!

Whilst Mark was with the photographic group, Chris took a walk on the tracks out of camp - not in search of the Russian border this time but simply exploring and enjoying the forest. It was quite quiet on the bird front but in a few places there were large piles of dung (probably from last night) telling us that there had (clearly!) been bears in the area. Great spotted woodpecker, blue and great tit, Siberian jay and (possibly) black grouse – it was distant and flying away from us! – were seen.

Back to the lodge and it wasn't too long before lunch was served. Lunch complete, we readied ourselves for the main event of the day and headed out to the hides area. It wasn't long before the bear watching WhatsApp group came to life firstly with a bear seen from hide 22, (and the other hides nearby), and then a different bear from hide 23. After a short pause there was a wolverine seen on the rocks opposite hide 1 (and its nearby hides), and then another bear at hides 20-26 which sauntered through the woods and over the rocks and reappeared near hides 12 and 13. A little later there was a big male bear seen from hides 19 and 27.

There were also two excellent wolverine sightings with a cracking shot posted on the group WhatsApp shortly after capture by one of the group. The question is, which is more beautiful a bear or a wolverine? It surely has to be a bear, but wolverines are increasingly rare and only occasionally seen so it has been exceptionally exciting to see them, and to see them for such a prolonged period.

At around 6pm the light began to fade so Chris and Mark gathered up those in the hides around them and walked them back to the cabins – the long way! – and then collected those from the Bear House and with the rest of the group walked back down to the restaurant for a well-earned beer, glass of wine and supper.

Day 4: The Bear Centre

Monday 11 October 2021

Weather: overcast 8° C

The mood at the hides this morning when Chris and Mark went to collect the 'overnighters' was one of great excitement. They had had wonderful bear sightings late yesterday afternoon (along with the rest of the group), which continued into early evening as the light was fading after the rest of us had left the hides area. At least one of the bears had come very close to the hides and spent some time foraging for food. What a fabulous experience!

After a hearty breakfast we made some adjustments to the photography 'school' creating three new sets and moving it to an area with a little more light about 25 metres away. The birds took to it straight away. We also learned a very important fact about crested tits, which is that they prefer conifer branches when we put them upside down by mistake!

It was another popular morning with 15 people coming to Mark's session. Others were relaxing, reading, downloading images from the previous night in the hide and walking. Chris, Katja, and two of the group went for a brisk mid-morning walk on the tracks pausing to look at moose and fox tracks. The new bird of the morning was fieldfare photographed by another two.

Bears, bears, bears – that really is the order of the day and as the morning gradually disappeared, so our attention turned to lunch ('dinner' as it is known here!) and our visit to the hides. Everyone nominated whether they would like to overnight in the hides or spend the afternoon in the hides and return for a light supper, and after lunch we headed out as a group to the hide area. Eager with anticipation for what might lie ahead.

As before, it wasn't too long – 40 minutes or so this time – before the bears appeared, though as ever it was impossible to anticipate where they might appear from. Blondie was the first to appear – and in fabulous light. She moved from hide 24 (where she was first seen) to hide 4 and worked her way along the shoreline of the lake before disappearing back into the woods. She then appeared again on the rock opposite hide 1, had a look around, and again disappeared into the woods. It wasn't long before she appeared again near the rock, she then came away from the rock and out to take some of the food just in front of hide 12. She was quite skittish and as soon as she had taken the food she ran off as if she was being chased – which she wasn't. She slowed down, stopped and sat in the woods eating her food and then went deeper into the woods – just visible from hide 12 and lay there preening for 10 minutes or more. One of the group, who had stayed in her cabin for the evening saw Blondie a little while later in front of cabin 5 and moving towards the Bear House. Another had another bear sighting from hide 4, and another saw another bear. In the distance from hide 3. It was all happening!

At 1815 those that were returning to their lodgings were gathered up by Chris, Mark and Katja and then headed off. One of the group posted a 'back of camera' shot of a beautiful red fox that showed in the evening light in front of 22... and that was largely how the daylight hours ended. Another great day. At around 2100 Katja messaged to say that there may be a chance for Northern Lights this evening – so everyone was on high alert, but unfortunately it didn't materialise.

Day 5: The Bear Centre

Tuesday 12 October 2021

Weather: overcast 8° C

This morning was a little different to the others - PLF was this morning's activity... Passenger Locator Forms for those who've not travelled for a while! Forms complete, some headed out for a walk whilst others enjoyed another field-based photography session.

Juho had fired up the traditional smoke sauna down by the lake and, whilst a number of us made good use of the sauna, a few brave souls sauna'd and jumped in the lake - Nordic-style. It was unbelievably cold!

Shortly before lunch we all gathered in the auditorium to see one of the group's amazing video of the trip... lots of bears, lots of laughs! Two of the group members then each read a short entertaining poem that they had written which perfectly captured the spirit of the trip.

After a hearty lunch we set out to the hides for the final time - a last hurrah - and the last opportunity on this short holiday to see bears. Each of the hides is so different, and of course wildlife is so unpredictable. This evening it was 1630 before the first bear was seen, a beautiful large dark coloured bear called Putte (with a

very distinctive mark on his left shoulder). He was out and about for ten minutes or so before heading back into the woods. It wasn't long before another bear (an almost black one this time) was seen near hide 24. One of the group commented that it was one of the very best sightings that we have had on the trip.

Ten minutes later Blondie was seen on the first pond - but not for long as she was spooked by something and ran away. Having said that, when we were watching her yesterday, we think she may have tripped over and spooked herself which was quite amusing, so it was no surprise when she appeared from the woods again near hide 24... but this time it was a really good sighting and she wasn't spooked and she didn't run away.

At just gone 6pm, the light was fading, it was noticeably colder than it has been at any stage on the trip so far, and it was time to for the afternoon bear-watchers to leave the hide area. This evening only three of the group decided they were going to stay out overnight.

Everyone made their way along the boardwalks to the tracks and down to the restaurant where Juho had prepared some delicious pizzas. Chris and Mark became wine waiters for the evening and we spent the evening chatting about the amazing bear and wolverine encounters we have had during our trip.

Day 6: Departure day

Wednesday 13 October 2021

Weather: light cloud, 3°C

There was no time for birding or photography this morning as it was sadly time to pack up and head back to the airport. Ironically, the sky was fairly clear and the light was perfect for photography. Those who stayed overnight returned from the hides after another good evening of wildlife and photography (another bear, and a red fox appeared after the evening shift returned to the lodge yesterday evening).

Everyone had their bags out and ready to go in good time, and after a team photo in front of the lodge, we said our goodbyes to Juho and Katja, boarded the coach and headed to Oulu airport for the flight to Helsinki and onwards.

Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>						
1	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		✓		✓	✓	
2	Hooded crow	<i>Corvus cornix</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
4	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
5	Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula pyrrhula</i>			✓	✓		
6	Crested tit	<i>Lophophanes cristatus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
7	Willow tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
8	Blue tit	<i>Cyanistes caeruleus</i>		✓	✓	✓		
9	Great tit	<i>Parus major</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
10	Siberian jay	<i>Perisoreus infaustus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
11	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
12	Red crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	



13	Black grouse	<i>Lyrurus tetrix</i>			✓			
14	Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>		✓				
15	Treecreeper	<i>Curthia familiaris</i>		✓	✓			
16	Fieldfare	<i>Turdus pilaris</i>				✓		
	MAMMALS	MAMILIA						
1	European brown bear	<i>Ursos arctos</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	
2	Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo</i>		✓	✓			
3	Red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgari</i>		✓			✓	
4	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				✓	✓	

