

FINLAND – AUGUST 2009

After three years of long haul flights the family decided that a shorter trip was in order this year. We looked around Europe and read several trip reports. Spain, Poland, Rumania were all considered before we settled on Finland. There was a lot of wildlife in Finland that we wanted to see and it's a great country for walking. Flights to Finland were also available from Stansted at a reasonable price. We decided to spend a few nights at the Wild Brown Bear Lodge to see bears and then a week in a cottage in the Finnish Lake district.

August 15TH. Our family group of six caught the late afternoon flight from London Stansted. It was dark by the time we arrived in Tampere. We picked up our cars from Hertz without any problems, although finding them in the dark was not easy, and headed to the Hotel Orivesi , in Orivesi, for our first night.

August 16th. The plan was to have a leisurely drive to another hotel which was about half way to WBB, stopping along the way for views and short walks. This did not work. It was cold and raining hard when we got up and continued to rain until about 7.00 in the evening! We stopped once for a cup of coffee! We reached the Hotel Sandels in Siilinjarvi about 3.00 (about 3 hours earlier than planned!). We had pizza for tea before having a short walk once the rain had stopped.

August 17th. Sunshine and showers day today, but at least better than yesterday! Today was to be our first taste of getting off of the main roads. We were making good progress and decided to go to Hiidenportti NP to see the gorge. We soon discovered that you cannot rely on road signs to find the way around. We had expected National Parks to be well signposted, but they are not. It took us nearly two hours to find Hiidenportti, and it was raining when we got there! It was a good walk with some nice views but we did not see any animals or birds. We filled up with petrol and supplies in Kuhmo before WBB. Booked in about 6.00. Had a meal and a short walk before getting to bed.

August 18th. Tonight was to be our night in the bear hide, so we had to be at the Lodge at 5.00. We decided to head for a local nature reserve, Iso Palonen, which is known for Wild Forest Reindeer, to see what else we could find. We drove slowly, looking around and reached the reserve at lunchtime. We took the trail around the lake. Our first bird of interest of the trip was a Three Toed Woodpecker, but we saw little other fauna. Finnish forests in August are full of lichen and fungi, which makes any walk interesting.

We returned to the Lodge for our evening adventure. After the evening meal we met with the guides in the seminar room to receive our instructions for the night. What an excellent night it turned out to be! We headed through the forest to the bear hide about 6.00. We settled in the hide and had our first bear within half an hour. A total of SEVEN different bears were seen throughout the next three and a half hours before it got too dark. We all got some wonderful photos with bears coming to within a few metres of the hide. A red fox was also around early in the evening but did not appear once the bears were about.

August 19th. We slept in the hide overnight and awoke one at a time in the early hours of the morning. No more bears were seen but a close view of a Black Woodpecker and a battle between the resident crows, and a pair of Sparrowhawks were highlights. After a disturbed night in the hide we spent the remainder of the day wandering around the Lodge, including walking to the Russian border! White wagtails are the most common bird in the region.

We set off after the evening meal to search for more animals. We went north to Lapinsuo Park which is more of an area rather than a park. We drove around minor roads and tracks for over two hours and saw nothing! One interesting feature that we did see was the Reindeer fence. The fence starts at the Russian border and runs about halfway across Finland. The purpose of the fence is to keep the Wild Reindeer pure by not allowing them to meet the semi-domesticated ones. Will the fence

eventually have to be across the whole country?

August 20th. Lentua Nature Park was our travel target today; the last of the three local parks known for wild Reindeer. Stopping for a break on the way there, a common frog hopped out of the car. How it got in, we do not know. Again, the walk was worth it and there were excellent views, particularly along the rapids. Five different Great Spotted Woodpeckers were the animal highlight, although we could see some distant ducks and the huge Wood Ant nests were interesting. We returned to WBB for our evening excursion.

We had previously booked with Sabrina for an evening of Mammal watching. She took us to Iso Palonen where the Beavers could be seen during the evening. We had to wander off path and soon found our feet covered in water. The Lake is gradually getting larger as the beaver dam grows. We did get some good views of beavers but it was difficult to get decent photos as they are constantly on the move in the water. We had hoped to spot a few mammals, particularly Reindeer or Elk, on the return journey but nothing was seen.

August 21st. Having not seen any Reindeer so far, we decided that we had to cheat! You cannot go to Finland and not see Reindeer! We were really looking for wild reindeer but decided that the semi-domesticated version would make a reasonable substitute. These can only be found north of the Reindeer fence that we had seen a couple of days ago. We went north towards Suomussalmi, passing the Winter War Monument on the way. Upon reaching the Suomussalmi visitor's centre we decided to visit the Variskongas waterfall. It was a good choice. After travelling a couple of kilometers towards Variskongas, the second car stopped. They had spotted a reindeer! We drove back. There were actually three. Okay, so they had collars on, but it's better than no reindeer at all. The waterfall was worth a visit with a short walk to and around it. Two more semi-domesticated reindeer were seen on the journey back towards Suomussalmi. A detour through Lapinsuo park produced no

further animals. A quiet evening was spent packing ready for our change of abode tomorrow.

August 22nd. Today was all about moving from Vartiuss in the wild north to Oravi, in the Finnish Lake District where we had a villa booked for the next week. We called in at the Petola visitor centre, which specializes in information about the local carnivores. Worth a visit for an hour or so. We continued our journey to Oravi, stopping at several places along the way including stocking up with groceries at a large hypermarket on the outskirts of Joensuu.

August 23rd. Today was designated a non-driving day after the long drive yesterday. Our cabin was one of seven sitting on a Lakeside. About half an hour's walk away was Lake Linnansari, which is a national park and home to the rare Saimaa Seal. (More of them later). Several butterflies including Brimstones, Commas, Painted Ladies and a single Camberwell Blue were seen, along with brown hawkers, more white wagtails and small common frogs. We scanned Lake Linnansaari but no sign of any seals.

August 24th. This was our day to visit Siikilahti, a large bird reserve near the Russian border. We visited the wooden church at Kerimäki on the way. We also took the chance to have a look at a couple of other birding sites. After an hour trying to find one birding tower (They have towers rather than hides in Finland), we gave up and went to another one at Pohjanranta. The tower overlooks a lake. There were no birds at all on the lake, although we did see some Cranes flying over. The highlight was undoubtedly the White Backed Woodpecker on a telephone post. We also saw a trapped Raccoon Dog on the walk to the hide. We could not get close as it was the other side of a stream. We do not know why the animal was trapped by they are considered a pest. Siikilahti was relatively quiet but there was some action. Fishing Osprey and about 40 Cranes flying in were highlights although we also saw Black darters, a great green bush cricket and a Common Lizard.

August 25th. Today was a short trip day. A Great Spotted Woodpecker put in the first of several appearances at the Lodge, and a Willow Warbler was seen near the Lake. The afternoon was spent walking around the small part of Kolovesi NP which is not a Lake. Again, good walk, great views, fungi and lichen, but no birds or mammals.

August 26th. Unfortunately, when looking for wildlife, particularly mammals, days like this happen. We had read and been told that Patvinsou NP was the best Park for wildlife. It was over 100miles from our base but we decided that it was worth it. It wasn't! We saw more wildlife within 10 miles of our base than the rest of the day. A few miles down the road were two Cranes standing in a field right next to the road. On the way back late in the evening we saw four Raccoon Dogs and a Hare (type not known – too dark) The rest of the day we drove and walked and all that we saw was a Three Toed Woodpecker, two Whooper Swans and a Southern Migrant Hawker dragonfly. No Mammals at all! Not much of a return from a long day.

August 27th. We visited Savonlinna today. Worth a visit for a day (castle, harbour, church, boat trips) but we were surprised to see “Closed for Winter” on restaurant doors at the end of August! The two Cranes near the road had been joined by two more. Savonlinna harbour held several Wigeon, as well as other common birds.

This was the evening of our trip on Linnansaari Lake to look for the rare Saimaa Ringed Seal. This was one of our target animals but given our luck so far, we were not hopeful. Saimaa seals are a freshwater seal which became a separate sub-species when the Lakes were cut off from the sea at the end of the last ice age. There are less than 300. We set off on the boat at 6.00. We soon saw Great Spotted Woodpecker (Although our guide said it was a White Backed) and a few Osprey, and an old Osprey nest. We flitted around the lake, visiting places where seals had been seen in the previous couple of weeks. After a couple of hours we

stopped for a break on the main island, visiting the old crofter's cottage, and having a cup of coffee and a biscuit. A seal had been in the bay during the previous week, but not now. We returned to the boat for the final hour before it got dark. We went to see a beaver lodge but there was no one at home. Then, "seal". There was movement in the water as it disappeared. We hung around waiting for it to come back up. Either the same one or another one re-surfaced about 50m the other side of the boat. We drifted around watching it for the next quarter of an hour. Great views were had but photos were difficult as it was in the shade with only the head visible for a short time. We were also moving around in a boat. Whilst watching the seal we were lucky to see a beaver swimming in the distance.

We really did not expect to see a seal. To see one when we had already spent two and a half hours searching was wonderful and makes all of the time spent looking for wildlife worthwhile.

August 28th. Our final full day in Finland. We visited the Linnansaari visitor centre in Rantasalmi in the morning. As the crow flies Rantasalmi is only about 10 miles from Oravi but by road it was over forty! The afternoon was spent around the lodge, where we saw Brown and Common Hawks, as well as the resident Great Spotted woodpecker.

August 29th. Long drive to Tampere airport for the flight home. We stopped at Mikkeli and the Lahti ski jump on the way. Respect to all ski jumpers. It was bad enough standing at the top of the jump yet alone launching yourself off it. The Dutch and Danish ladies football teams were warming up on the pitch below the jump in preparation for the match in the European Championship later in the day.

Flight home uneventful. We saw Red Deer, rabbit and a hedgehog on the journey home from the airport.

Mammals seen: Brown Bears, Fox, Beavers, Raccoon Dogs, Hare and Saimaa Ringed Seal, and Semi-domesticated Reindeer.

Best Moments: Finding the rare seal after almost two weeks of basically disappointing viewing and over two hours searching that evening. We had expected to see bears at the hide but to see as many as seven was a bonus.

Biggest Disappointment: The general lack of wildlife, particularly mammals. Four of the mammals that we did see were on organized outings. We drove over 2000 miles, walked many tens of miles, visited local and national parks and saw almost nothing! No wild Reindeer, no elk, not even a squirrel!

Lessons learnt: When to visit is as important as where. The end of August was not the right time for Finland.

General: Anybody who enjoys walking in wild country would enjoy Finland but don't expect to see wildlife at every turn.