

FINLAND 2013



*wolverines, endemic seals, bears
and birds*



Intro An intensive, sudden and pristine experience of Nordic nature, is what a group of Belgian nature lovers were after. For this, Europesbig5 focused on the vast and desolate area of Eastern Karelia. It showed us striking, rare mammals plus some very specific taiga bird species. It is difficult to choose 'the best' as all targets are beauties on their own. Despite spring in Northern Finland often being chilly, weather was brilliant. Sunny and warm all the time. Felt like summer!



Day one

After an early breakfast in the hotel down town Espoo, Finland's capital, on the road towards lake Saimaa. A couple **Black-throated divers** sat on a lake near the highway, much appreciated. A bit of stroll birding before embarking the zodiac on the lake, produced an occupied **Ural owl** nest box. As usual with these birds, only a part of the head and tail were visible. White-backed woodpecker area was silent. Also a quick and blank visit near the flying squirrel forest patch.





During the zodiac ride in search of the endangered **Saimaa-ringed seal**, we encountered several breeding pairs of **Osprey**, resident in the area. Marvelous to see these birds in their home land! Quite numerous too! Other obs were **Black Grouse**, **Whooper Swans**, **Goldeneyes** and **Red-breasted Mergansers**.



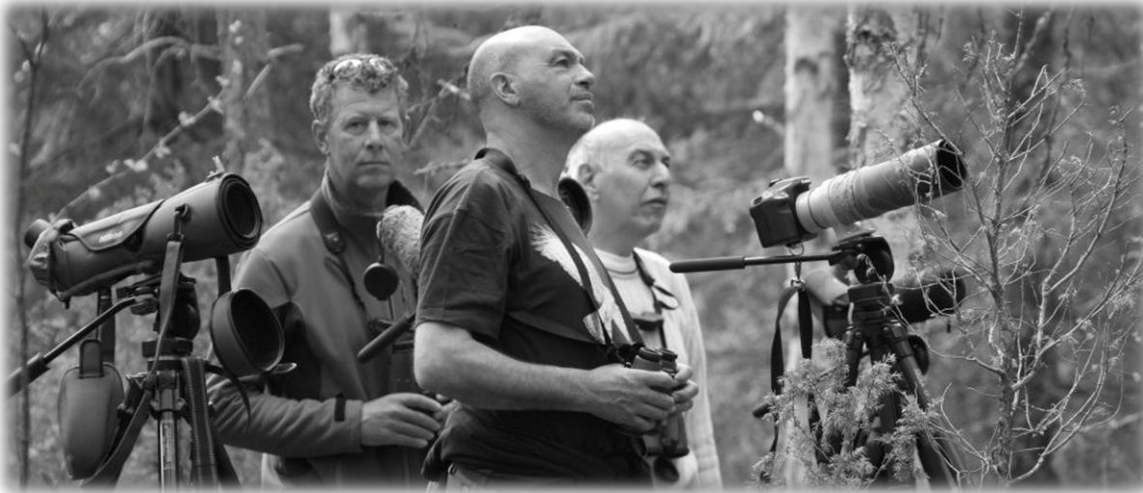


World population of the endangered **Saimaa-ringd seal**: about 320 individuals. We saw two.



After the pleasant and successful seal excursion, we once more visited the forest patch hosting flying squirrels. Although these creatures didn't appear in the canopy scene, we experienced a full board of other local wild life. **Black grouse** and **Black-throated divers** were calling nearby all the time, a **Black woodpecker** was present during the complete period and, once becoming midnight, a pair of **Tengmalm's owls** started with feeding their offspring. Also several **Woodcocks** displaying above us as well as a **badger**, on the move right in front of us. On the way back to the hotel we encountered a female **Capercaillie**.





Day two: On our way to the wolverines, we stopped near a breeding pair of **GGO'S**. What few people seem to know, is that these owls also occur away from the well known Oulu region. Many breeding pairs for example this year in the Joensuu area. It's all about good vole numbers; then the owls follow. Once near the spot, it's always the same with these birds. Park the car, get on your wellingtons and, when being well equipped with optic material, enter a dense patch of pine forest trying to locate these grey ghosts. KEJ found them first. Of course, he had the GPS coordinates and treasure map! Fortuned we were with both birds present near the nest. The female breeding; the male perched in a tree nearby. A most wanted and five star bird for sure!





Let's again steal the wolverine's diner...



But first grab and remove that obstacle!



Now I've got a good grip to lift it up!

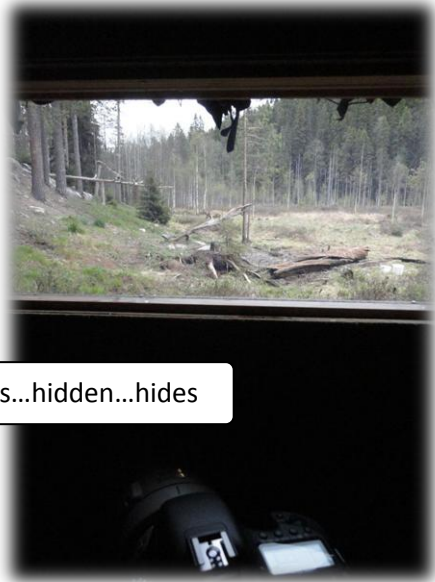


Better eat fast with all those fellows arriving!

It didn't took long before the resident Gulo's showed up. Raven fest over in a minute! It was a pleasure to observe the typical, restlessness behavior of these animals once they appeared on the scene. Especially when they moved from one place to another in their, almost comical, gait. Two local sisters, most active very early in the morning, showed how powerful these largest members of the *Mustelidae* family are. With effortless ease, they demolished and removed the spine of an elk carcass in no time!







guides...hidden...hides



Day three After the full swing wolverine night, we were picked up in the morning. **Hazel hen** calling when repacking the car. A short ride back to the base camp where breakfast was served. In an ancient forest nearby we couldn't find the so hoped for breeding pair of Three-toed woodpeckers. This time of the year you really need to know the nesting tree of these birds as they behave silent and secretly. And too late during the day already. Woodpeckers are active during very early morning; especially with these temperatures! Pleasant were the several singing **Red-breasted flycatchers** we had. And the weather of course! Yeah, right: still summer time during spring!





En route to the Finnish-Russian border (sequel of our hide and seek game with large carnivores) we tried to tape Willow grouse. We also drove a desolate gravel road to encounter Capercaillies, but like with the woodpeckers earlier; already too late during the day for these birds. While driving, Erik spotted an immature moose standing on a side track of the main road. Animal behaved confused and lonely, most probably as it was forced away by it's own mother. This time of the year adults give birth to their new born. Before another night shift, a nice late souper was served in the base camp.



During April last year we watched a late wolf night show, this year it was teddy time!



A mating couple brown bears appeared at 1.30 AM. The male being much bigger than the female.



The smaller female, submissive behavior while eating from the carcass



Twilight conditions means high ISO's & low shutter speed. Animals only sharp when standing still like a statue!



Day four: After the teddy show and **White-tailed eagles** the previous night and early morning, we drove back, with a Russian sight seeing detour, to the base camp for breakfast. Accompanied the lodge owner on his **Red-flanked bluetail** prospection in a NP nearby. Seems these birds are assured away from Kuusamo these days! On our way towards the spot, again **Black Grouse** and **Capercaillie**. Bluetails singing from the moment we opened the VAN's side door. At least three different individuals were heard and seen. The southern expansion of this species means that, when combining an Eastern Karelia visit with the Varanger/Pasvik area, all potential Scandinavian birds and mammals are possible in one trip! We work on that one...





Leaving the desolate Finnish-Russian border area behind us, we drove back south. A short cut produced another large mammal on and near the road: **Forest reindeer**. Unfortunately the animal ran into the forest before photo equipment was ready. Apart from that, a much appreciated and unexpected encounter with this not domesticated and range restricted species! We tried again the same old growth forest with a resident pair of Three-toed woodpeckers, but again an attempt in vain. Consolation was a **Willow Grouse**, calling nearby a path through a vast taiga swamp. Informed by one of KEJ's network locals, we decided where to go during the evening in search for Pygmy Owl. Those still awake, joined the ride to the nearest spot for this little forest gem. Parked the car near a woody hill bordering a small lake and jetty opposite a smashing summer house. Both owners were absent!



EUROPE'S BIG 5





Day five: After breakfast we moved towards another 'three-toed forest'. This time in the suburbs of Joensuu. All woodpeckers heard and seen, yet not the one from the wish list. Very high numbers of **red squirrels**! And **Red-breasted Flycatchers** singing again. With the long drive back to Espoo on the schedule for our flight back, the pristine experience of the previous days came to a sudden end. Back into the real world!





Notes about the trip KEJ's 16th Scandinavia visit. Everything seen and experienced before, apart from the splendid weather. Walking in a T-shirt through dense moss covered forests and swamps without mosquito's repellent was unique.

Guided group consisted of very nice people. Friends that had been abroad together before. Those guys share the same passion. Apart from joy, when sharing a good sighting, there was a lot of hilarity and laughter amongst them. A pleasure to take them into the field.

Leaving a mammal hide, with breakfast in the nearby base camp afterwards, not the best strategy for post bird watching. Early hours important to encounter some active specific bird species; especially woodpeckers.

May a month that birds have occupied their nests or already feed their young. Adult's behavior silent and elusive. Knowing the exact tree where they breed important when limited in time. For GGO, Ural Owl and Tengmalm's Owl we worked that way. For Three-toed and White-backed WP plus Pygmy Owl we knew the precise forest, but not the exact tree. More time and luck were necessary there.

Southern expansion of Red-flanked Bluetail means it's possible to skip Kuusamo. When combining Eastern Karelia with the Varanger/Pasvik area, all potential Scandinavian birds and mammals are possible in one visit. Pine Grosbeak, Siberian tit, Hawk Owl, Greenish and Arctic Warbler also occur in Pasvik. The adding of a domestic flight the only necessity when planning such a 14 day trip. It's just a matter of puzzling all gems into an ultimate schedule. Yeah, right!



All pictures taken effectively during the trip © **by Jan Kelchtermans**. Except: hidden Saimaa-ringed seal © **by E. Enho** / Red-flanked bluetail © **by L. Rautiainen**/ female Capercaillie, 2nd Black-throated Diver and Red-breasted Flycatcher © **by D. Braem** / group shots page 2, 14, 15 and 17, middle page 12 table gathering, page 5 KEJ seal scanning © **by D. Dierckx** /White-tailed eagle drawing © **by Detlef Tiebax** Special thanks to KEJ his local fellows, all tour participants and **Karl Van Ginderdeuren**