

EUROPE'S BIG 5



FINLAND MAY 2014

A Finnish mammal tour focusing on spotting wolverines. With a 100% success rate during all previous EB5 trips (2009, 2012 and 2013) of wolverine observations while staying just one night in a specific hide we again planned our itinerary that way. Seems that we might have to change that strategy in the future as we missed the wolverines. Nevertheless, all planned other target species were fortunately much more cooperative. Below a photo summary of the journey.

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Meet and greet with both American participants Cheryl and Sue in a hotel down town Helsinki. After breakfast there with Simon (EB5 trainy), a cab drove all four of us to the airport with Kajaani as domestic destination. The plane dropped us straight into the vastness of Eastern Finland. Greetings with Jan and Kristof (2 more EB5 trainies) and Pierre and Marie, the French couple. The take off with our hired VAN took a bit more time than planned, but soon we all were en route to the remote Kuhmo region. This place is definitely one of Europe's best areas to observe large carnivores from special made hides lured in with bait. After a late lunch in a resident base camp, we were guided to the large main cabin with in the front a bear arena.



Gulls, ravens & crows consumed the bait straight away once we locked the cabin's door. Two different **White-tailed Eagles** a lot less eager to come in. They mostly overlooked the area from tree tops, flew over or were sitting where the bog bordered with the nearby bushes.





Star of the overnight stay definitely was a **she bear with two small cubs**. Being very aware of other bears, they only came in for short periods in the beginning. When no other bears present, they soon relaxed and were present for longer periods. Action and presence faded away between 3 and 4 AM. Despite the **howling wolves**, we heard briefly, no other large carnivores appeared on the scene.



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After a short drive, showers and breakfast buffet were much appreciated when back at the base camp. A nearby forest stroll afterwards produced a singing male **Rustic Bunting**. Once heading south, we soon were greeted by singing **Red-flanked Bluetails** exactly near the same hill where we saw them the year before. Around noon we arrived at our next destination - Lieksa. While eating lunch, **Red-Squirrels** appeared non stop in front of us at the bird feeder. A walk in the vicinity produced a most wanted breeding bird species: **Hawk Owl**. Especially a real 'hit' because this five star bird was a 'must to see' as no back up plan once further south. A short pitstop near the base camp was made before we went **Flying Squirrel** watching. Patiently waiting for about two hours we were rewarded: first two youngsters appeared near the entrance of the tree hole followed by at least two adults. What a brilliant experience it was! At dusk, flying over calling **Woodcocks** were a common sighting too.





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After breakfast visited several places in the nearby Patvinsuo NP. Also here a nice resident northern passerine was singing in the same patch of ancient forest as last year: **Red-breasted Flycatcher**. A nice self found bonus was a log occupied by a breeding **Tengmalm's Owl**. Then rain and wind disrupted our plans while tape luring other bird species like Willow Grouse and Three-toed Woodpecker. After a picnic, we returned to the wolverine base camp where our stuff was dropped off. With packed dinner for the next hide session, we left for the main hides. Apart from a pair of **Whooper Swans** and a few **Ravens**, we unfortunately experienced a blank night in the hides. Not one individual of the several resident wolverines appeared near the baiting site. Never happened before. A big disappointment. Even more painful was the sighting of a wolverine in front of the unfinished and not in use hides near the base camp. A local Finnish photographer was invited in to test one of these new hides before others were allowed to use them. . After watching evidence of push and shoot pics on his full frame body, we could only agree he succeeded in testing the new hides....





After breakfast we again worked our way in a southerly direction. Started straight away with a brief view of road side **Ural Owl**. Once we arrived near the Linnansaari lake, a quick check of a nestbox didn't reveal a well known resident breeding pair of these birds. Most probably the owlets had fledged from the nest. Fortunately KEJ had a back up plan further south for this owl species. A nice lunch was consumed before we boarded a boat for a ride through the labyrinth of the Linnansaari archipelago. A bonus was our guide Jari. Being retired and fishing all the time in this lovely environment his knowledge about where the rare **Saimaa-ringed Seals** (and concentrations of fish) are present was a big advantage. We had good fortune as we were soon watching an immature Saimaa-ringed Seal sunbathing on a boulder. Every one behaved well, so the animal didn't slip away into the water. Great and prolonged views. Good opportunities to shoot pics. The same with the many breeding pairs of resident **Ospreys** we passed. We left the scene with the seal still on the rock. Went ashore on castle Island; one of the many hilly islets within the boundaries of the Linnansaari NP. The walk towards a marvelous vantage points revealed dead trees that had been occupied by White-backed Woodpeckers in the past. Surprisingly and obvious were the droppings of elk we encountered during the short walk. Jari told us island elks inhabit these islets from which they move from one island to another during night time. With an afternoon snack and cup of coffee in our hands, we felt privileged while overlooking the area from the lookout. A calling **Hazel Hen** (third time this trip) produced the right backing vocals for sure. Idyllic circle closed! Amazing experience! After several hours, we returned to the jetty from where full luxury (compared with the hide sessions) followed : jacuzzi, nice beds and very delicious food! In good atmosphere we enjoyed a last evening meal together.





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Last morning brought us to Mikkeli; a city approximately two hours drive north of Helsinki. In 'Raikunen style' we drove from one spot to another targeting the following species: **Ural Owl**, **Great Grey Owl**, **Pygmy Owl** and **White-backed Woodpecker**. Owlets of the first one had just left the nestbox the day before we arrived. We had to be happy with an adult flying around from one branch to another in the nearby trees. Once we parked the car near the GGO stake out, we were greeted by a singing **Greenish Warbler** on top of a spruce tree. Definitely a bird way too far south and out of its normal range, but a nice bonus for sure! Once near the GGO stake out, we could only see the facial disk pattern of one adult bird still sitting on the nest. Then we joined a ringer in banding a nest of Pygmy Owls. Prolonged views of an adult nearby a much appreciated experience! After lunch last goal was the woodpecker. In a riverine area down town Mikkeli we checked a nest hole in a birch tree. Unfortunately also here the juveniles fledged a couple of days ago from their nest. Despite no wolverines a trip with lot of good mammal and bird sightings for sure!

Copyright of all pics: *Jan Kelchtermans and Kristof Goemaere* apart from the Red Squirrel close up, ancient forest group and base camp lunch pictures. Those by the © hand of tour participant *Cheryl Antonucci*. Thanks to *John Wright* for the editorial reading through the report

