

Finland 5th - 9th September 2014 Trip Report

My last trip to Finland was in May 2013 when my wife Jane and I visited Wild Brown Bear (WBB), Kuhmo, in Eastern Finland and although successful in seeing Wolverine we didn't see any bears. Ari Saaski, proprietor of WBB, noting our disappointment generously invited us back in 2014 for free - an offer we of course gladly accepted. See my 2013 Finland trip report on this website (mammalwatching.com). We decided to go in September this year to experience a different season in the Finish Taiga.

There is little point in me going into detail about how WBB operates and the general set up as it is all in its informative revised website: <http://www.wbb.fi/>

Friday 5th Sept: Travel day. We flew from London Gatwick to Helsinki in the morning and got a connecting flight to Kajaani late afternoon. We chose not to get a hire car and were picked up by a WBB operative for the 1 hour 25 minute drive to WBB. We arrived at 20:20 so too late to do anything other than have our evening meal and turn in for the night.

Saturday 6th Sept: We walked the roads and trails most of the day seeing three Red Squirrels, two of which were around (and in!) the bird feeding/photography hide nicking and caching peanuts, I also had good views of a Grey-Sided Vole feeding on seed spillage.



John Wright

After our mid-afternoon meal we walked to the hides and settled in by 16:20, we were in the west facing Hide 9. At 17:25 a very big male bear appeared to our left and stayed around for about 10 minutes snaffling up titbits. It appeared again for a few minutes at 20:00. At 21:05 just as it was getting dark another bear, a male again, but slightly smaller than the earlier one, made a beeline straight towards our hide from the trees a little way off and directly in front of the hide. It stopped and started eating the food only about 10 metres from the hide, we could hear its footfalls and its breathing as well as its chomping! It moved off to our right at 21:15 after which it got too dark to see anything really so we climbed into the sleeping bags after a fabulous first night watching two bears. Next morning, **Sunday 7th Sept**, we woke up and started scanning from the hide at 05:30 but nothing appeared and at 07:00 all the hides emptied to go back for breakfast. We strolled around for the rest of the day seeing the same two Red Squirrels around the bird feeding/photography hide and another squirrel elsewhere gathering lichen to line its drey with. I also watched a Musk Rat swimming in the big lake adjacent to WBB.

At 16:15 we were in Hide 11, north facing, and at 18:00 the very big male bear from yesterday appeared to our right but before long walked straight to the food in front of our hide. It wandered off a few minutes later and did a circuit of the other hides all the time sniffing out the food items left for it. It was on view for about 20 minutes before walking off into the trees. It re-appeared briefly at 19:10 in the trees someway off to the north of our hide.

Whilst the bear was absent a Wolverine showed up, at 18:35, and was on view for over 5 minutes to the right of our hide. It was eating titbits but also picked up a big bone and ran off with it - no doubt to cache nearby as it repeated the bone finding and removing process twice more between 18:45 and 18:55. Then at 19:00 the Wolverine, which must have come round the back of our hide, appeared just to our left and made its way right in front of us to where the food had been put out and where the big male bear had already visited a little earlier. However, it found enough to keep it occupied for nearly 5 minutes affording us excellent close views. With the characteristic Wolverine gait it loped off, across the wet grassland, to the far trees - the same way as the bear had gone 40 minutes earlier. We saw the Wolverine again over to our right for about a couple of minutes at 19:40. I presume the same individual Wolverine was involved in all sightings as there was nothing obvious in the physical appearances to suggest otherwise.



John Wright

We saw nothing else that evening so when it got too dark at around 21:15 we slept. We were up again the next morning at 05:00, **Monday 8th Sept**, but nothing appeared before we left the hides for breakfast at 07:00. At 07:10 whilst we were walking back we heard a wolf howl but it only howled once and sounded fairly distant. After breakfast we had the usual walk around the roads/tracks but only saw the usual pair of red Squirrels at the bird hide plus a Bank Vole there.

After the mid-afternoon meal we were in the hide at 15:50 - earlier than before because a bear had been appearing earlier each day. We were in Hide 4 which faces east and is a really good hide with a beautiful vista overlooking a pond, wet grassland, a small rock outcrop and forest. It also has larger viewing windows than the other hides we had been in which helps.

Just before 17:00 the big male bear of previous days appeared across the pond but after a few minutes ran off into the trees after being harassed/spooked by a flock of Hooded Crows that descended upon it in a raucous mass as soon as it uncovered food. This happened again when the bear re-appeared and went to the food until finally running for cover at around 17:10. I noticed this bear being spooked by the crows on the previous days as well. The bear appeared twice more on the other side of the pond between 17:45 and 18:15 before walking off and out of sight to the right of our hide.

At 20:10 a bear materialised out of the trees on the other side of the pond straight in front of us. It was a different bear, but another big male, with a huge round face and rotund body it had the look of the 'teddy bear' about it. It had obviously been eating very well in preparation for winter. However, it didn't hang around and after 3 or 4 minutes wandered back into the forest.

At 20:25 a female bear with a cub, approximately 18 months old, emerged from the trees to our left and then walked in front of us on the other side of the pond and snuffled about for at least 15 minutes before finally melting back into the forest. Watching the pair of them was a fine sight and we could hear the cub giving contact calls to its mother almost constantly, but especially when she moved a little way from the cub. At about 21:15 we got into our sleeping bags.

The next morning, **Tuesday 9th Sept** we were up at 05:45, at 06:10 a bear came into view to the left of our hide, strolled out of sight behind our hide, we picked it up again to our right before it walked in front of our hide but on the other side of the pond. Not sure it found any food as I can only assume the bear(s) of the previous night had munched the lot. Anyway at 06:25 it walked off out of sight into the trees. It wasn't the big male bear we had seen every night nor the 'teddy bear' bear so I'm sure as I can be that it was the male bear we saw from Hide 9 on Saturday at 21:00. We exited the hide at 07:00 to go for breakfast absolutely delighted having seen five different bears whilst ensconced in the hide.

We had breakfast, packed our things and had time for a short walk. At 10:30 we were driven back to Kajaani for our flight back to Helsinki and then onto London Gatwick and home.

Summary: We had a great time with superb sightings of five different Bears and a Wolverine from the hides. Plus Red Squirrels, Grey-sided Vole, Bank Vole and a Musk Rat elsewhere in the vicinity of WBB.

We saw 33 species of birds the best of which were - Black-throated Diver (pair in summer plumage), Black Grouse (one female), Hazel Hen (three seen), Goshawk, Long-eared Owl, Three-toed Woodpecker, Crested Tits, Waxwings. The best butterfly was Camberwell Beauty of which we saw three

Compared to our trip in May last year we didn't see as many bird species but birding wasn't the main reason for the trip. Each season has its pro's and con's but for us September had the advantage over May as there was no need to struggle to stay awake all through the long northern nights. In early September it was too dark to see anything well by about 21:15 and was light enough to view again by about 05:15. In any event the Bears and the Wolverine showed well for us in daylight as well as at dusk and dawn.

WBB was full the first couple of days we were there but emptied out somewhat by Sunday. Myself and Jane were the only English people there and the only pure mammal watchers as opposed to photographers (I mainly just take 'happy snaps' with my Panasonic Lumix FZ38).

The Photographers, a friendly happy bunch, came from other Scandinavian countries as well as Germany and Switzerland.

The food at WBB was tasty and plentiful and they catered without any problems for us vegetarians.

The weather was very good with above average temperatures, we had some light rain very early on Saturday morning which gave way to a warm and sunny day. The nights in the hides were also warm. A couple of the mornings were misty (very atmospheric) but again it soon burnt off and we were left with warm and sunny days with just a little amount of cloud gathering late afternoons.

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