

Finland 16th – 21st May 2013 Trip Report

I decided to go on a short trip to Finland to look for Brown Bear and Wolverine after being inspired by the trip reports to Finland on mammalwatching.com.

I contacted Ari Saaski the proprietor of the Wild Brown Bear lodge (WBB) (www.wbb.fi/) located near Kuhmo, Vartius, in Eastern Finland, and booked myself and my wife, Jane, in for 5 nights including 4 nights in the hides.

For further details about WBB and the modus operandi I recommend you read the excellent trip report: *The Quest for The Giant Mustelid, April 2011* by Steve Morgan, on this website. Not only is it a very good trip report, it contains all you need to know about WBB and consequently I would only be repeating it here. Check the WBB web site out as well of course.

Thursday 16th Travel day. Flew from London Heathrow to Helsinki then an internal flight to Kajaani where we were met by a member of the WWB staff and driven the 125K to WBB. En route and not far from WBB we saw a **Forest Reindeer** in roadside woodland. We arrived at WBB early evening and after dumping our bags and having something to eat we took a short walk around the surrounding area before deciding on an early night in preparation for time in the hides.

Friday 17th During the day we walked the local forest tracks but didn't see any mammals. We wandered up to the Russian/Finnish border zone area but didn't loiter. At 17:00 we walked to the hides and were allocated hide number 9. All the other hides were taken up by groups of Italian and Swedish photographers. One of the Italians had seen and photographed a bear on the 16th.

We waited and watched, Jane eventually crashed out around midnight but I stayed awake all night willing a bear or wolverine to appear but neither did. We did see a **Red Fox** that showed well and was on view for about 10 minutes but that was all.

Saturday 18th We all left the hides at 07:00 and went back for breakfast – nobody had seen anything and so my fox was the highlight of the night. Before breakfast Jane and I went for a brief walk and had decent views of a **Mountain Hare**. I slept for most of the day as I intended to be up all night in the hide again. Whilst I slept Jane watched a **Red Squirrel** coming to food put out for birds at a photography hide which is only 50 metres from the main WBB building. Ari told me that in the winter wolverines are frequent visitors after the fat put out for the birds.

At 17:30 we walked to the hides again, Jane and I were in hide number 12. It was only 20:30 and I was casually looking out when the very distinctive lope of a **Wolverine** caught my eye. With much excitement I got Jane onto it as it moved through some low bushes and then stood in open ground looking around. It then turned and went back the way it had come, diverted slightly to grab a chunk of meat, and then disappeared behind some taller bushes.

Seconds later, minus the meat, it loped along again and up onto a big rock where it stood looking around in the sunshine before turning and loping off and vanishing in the trees behind. To say we were happy would be an understatement – we were ecstatic!

I stayed awake for the rest of the night but the Wolverine never returned and unfortunately no bears showed up either. We all departed the hides at 07:00 and apart from a Swedish photographer, in hide number 1 adjacent to ours who also saw the Wolverine, no one saw anything.

Sunday 19th The rest of the day followed the same pattern as yesterday we had a short walk around the forest trails and then I went to sleep. Jane saw the **Red Squirrel** again near the bird photography hide.

At 17:30 we went to the hides, we were allocated hide number 1. The Italian and Swedish photographers had departed earlier in the day so there were plenty of empty hides. The wind had got up this evening and it was quiet cold in the hide and I must admit to nodding off a few times. Tonight there were no Wolverines, Bears or Foxes.

Monday 20th again we left the hide at 07:00 and went for breakfast. During the morning I went out for a walk with Jane and saw another **Mountain Hare** and had super views of the **Red Squirrel**. I got a few hours sleep in the afternoon.

At 17:30 we went to the hides, we had number 7. Only 2 other hides were used, one by a Swedish photographer and one by a German journalist doing an article on WBB for a German tourist company.

Apart from a very brief view of a **Fox** we didn't see anything all night. However, the Swedish photographer in hide 7 saw a Bear briefly. As usual we left the hide at 07:00.

Tuesday 21st After breakfast we had a quick walk around before departing for Kajaani at 11:00. Not far from WBB we saw a **Mountain Hare** and 3 **Forest Reindeer**. The rest of our journey from Kajaani to Helsinki to Heathrow went smoothly and was uneventful.

Trip round up: We both thought that WBB was a great place, comfortable, well run and friendly and of course some incredible mammals can be seen. The weather whilst we were there at least was warm and sunny every day. Only on the Sunday night was it chilly in the hides. I can thoroughly recommend a visit to WBB.

Obviously we were incredibly happy to see a Wolverine but also rather disappointed not to see a Brown Bear. Ari sensing our disappointment at not seeing a Bear made us a generous offer you just couldn't refuse – so we will be going back next year, probably in September to try again for Brown Bear and who knows what else! So thank you for that Ari.

The consensus of opinion on the absence of Bears was that it was the start of their breeding season and consequently they were more interested in each other than the food that had been put out for them. Nevertheless it was unusual (unlucky!) not to see one at WBB even during this time.

On return to the UK I emailed Ari about the Reindeer we had seen and he confirmed that the only Reindeer around WBB are wild Forest Reindeer. All the domestic Reindeer are much further north above the Reindeer fence.

Recent (June) sightings at WBB: Bears (of course), Wolverines, Wolves & Lynx.

Best birds of the trip: Goldeneye, Goshawk, Hobby, Crane, Capercallie, Black Grouse (heard), Wood Sandpiper, Green Sandpiper, Little Gull, Black Woodpecker, Redstart, Pied Flycatcher, Waxwing, Willow Tit, Crossbill.

Other: Common Lizard, Green Hairstreak.

This was my second trip to Finland. I went in May 2009 to the Oulu and Kuusamo areas with some friends on a birding trip looking for owls – we saw 6 species. Plus Steller's Eider, Black and Three-toed Woodpeckers, Siberian Jays & Siberian Tits, Red-flanked Bluetails. Mammals seen were Elk (Moose), Mountain Hare and domestic Reindeer.

John Wright, Essex, England.