

The Quest For The Giant Mustelid

Finland

April 16th to 21st 2011



Steve Morgan

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1 Objectives

The single objective for this trip was to observe the world's largest mustelid, the Wolverine (*Gulo gulo*). Having failed in 2010 on a previous trip to Finland, I was determined this time to get my target, irrespective of how many long, cold, tedious hours of waiting in a hide it might take!

The site I had chosen offered potential for other interesting diversions, such as European Flying Squirrel, Capercaillie or Black Grouse but these were only to be explored if and when the much-wanted Wolverine was already "in the bag".

2 The Wolverine Site

My target area was near Vartiuss in Eastern Finland, close to the border with Russia. Here, I stayed at the *Wild Brown Bear Lodge*, run by Ari Saaski. This is an excellent operation and, because Ari baits the site all through the year, the chances of Wolverine are as good as (if not better than) anywhere else in Europe or North America. There are other similar operations in Eastern Finland offering baited sites with photographic hides but most of these are oriented totally towards Brown Bears and thus only start baiting in April when the animals come out of hibernation. At Ari's site the resident Wolverine(s) can rely on free food all through the long winter and therefore do not seem to stray very far. Ari claims to have Wolverine visits on about 3 to 5 days per week on average through the year. (From what I've seen this might be an under-estimate!).

The site is quite large and comprises a big open area on its western side and two lakes to the east. It is surrounded on all sides by forest of spruce and silver birch. Ari baits the open western side using carrion (domestic pigs, elk etc) in winter and the lake side using fish (salmon) in summer.

There are some 14 hides, some facing towards the open area, some facing the lake and a couple with photographic panels facing both ways. In summer, hides 1,2, 3 and 4 look best whereas in winter hides 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 are probably favourite. But, as Ari himself says, you only know in the morning which hide was best on any given night; the animals do not necessarily appear where the script tells them they should!

The hides themselves are functional rather than luxurious. They are fitted with basic sleeping facilities and a toilet pail and the observer is provided with a picnic supper and a hot flask – so it is not so hard to survive a fifteen hour stint. I liked the way the hides were lined with polystyrene to muffle noise and there are sensible rules governing behaviour in the hides.

Finally, the lodge itself is very pleasant and sits unobtrusively in the forest next to a large and attractive looking lake. The food is good and the ever-helpful and multi-lingual Sabrina Logeais does a fine job looking after guests.

3 Day-by-day Record

Saturday 16th April

I arrived, via Helsinki, on the afternoon flight to Kajaani where I was met by Sabrina. Wearing heavy winter clothing I was rather surprised to find summery weather and temperatures in the high teens.

There was still some snow in Kajaani and, as we drove eastwards, rather more towards Vartiuss. At the lodge around 20-30 cm of old snow remained, an important advantage in the quest for a Wolverine as spotting animals in poor light would be so much easier against a background of white.



The main priority that evening was to get a very good night's rest as the next four nights in the hide would allow little time for sleep. I had timed my visit to coincide with the full moon and so, given clear conditions, I hoped for more or less clear visibility through the night, though the hours between 23.00 and 03.30 would still be rather dim. I was expecting Wolverine activity to peak in the evening and again at dawn, but these creatures are unpredictable and I knew that I would have to be alert to opportunities at any time.

Sunday 17th April

After a hearty breakfast I decided to spend the morning in the hide. The normal regime is to go to the hide at around 16.15 and to return at around 08.00 the following morning, but visitors have the option of mornings too if they wish. The chances of a Wolverine sighting in broad daylight are not particularly great but I wanted to take a look at the hides and get the "feel" of the place straight away. And, besides, every hour in the hide is another hour when a Wolverine *might* turn up.

Sabrina therefore drove me the 700 metres to the site and I spent four unproductive hours in Hide 8 watching Ravens, Hooded Crows and Black-billed Magpies picking at the remains of an old pig carcass thirty metres away. At 14.00 Sabrina and a colleague arrived with a fresh pig which they deposited some sixty or seventy metres to my left in front of Hides 9 and 10. This signalled the end of my first short stint in the hides.

With new bait in place the half dozen (or so) hopeful Bear/Wolverine watchers set off later that afternoon, after dinner, with great optimism. The weather had turned cooler and an unpleasantly brisk wind had sprung up but the skies were still clear. With moonrise due at 21.00 I thought that prospects looked very bright. I had been allocated Hide 8 again, lying at the right hand end of the open area. On arriving at the hide I set up the scope and trained it in readiness at the fresh pig carcass and generally made myself comfortable.

All was quiet, except for the Ravens and Hooded Crows, until 21.30. Then a Brown Bear suddenly materialised on the extreme left of my field of view and approached the carcass. I could see that it was a large male and from its pale greyish head I could tell that it was the dominant old Bear known as "Valery". He was joined, shortly afterwards, by a second quite large male – this one appearing uniformly dark and with big "teddy bear" ears. I surmised (correctly) that this was the Bear known as "Aulis". The meeting was far from amicable and Valery immediately took a very proprietorial attitude to "his" pig, chasing Aulis over a hundred metres away and growling with displeasure. Aulis seemed to know his place and retreated meekly.

Valery then returned to the carcass and sized up the situation, sniffing the ground where Aulis had previously been. He then, to my dismay, picked up the carcass in his teeth and dragged it ten or fifteen metres further away. I had feared that he might drag it all the way into the distant trees (thus ruining my Wolverine prospects) but thankfully he left matters there. I re-aligned the scope on the new carcass position and watched as Valery helped himself to several kilos of pork.

At 22.00 another Bear arrived, this one a much smaller, younger male. Obviously deferential to Valery, he kept his distance and had to be satisfied with a few mouthfuls of gristle from the two old carcasses in front of my hide.

I watched the comings and goings of these three Bears until about 00.30. They had been present on the site more or less the whole time and I was doubtful that a Wolverine would risk appearing in the open with so much Bear activity in progress. I decided to risk a couple of hours sleep – the sky had now clouded over and the light levels had dropped to the point where very little was visible anyway.

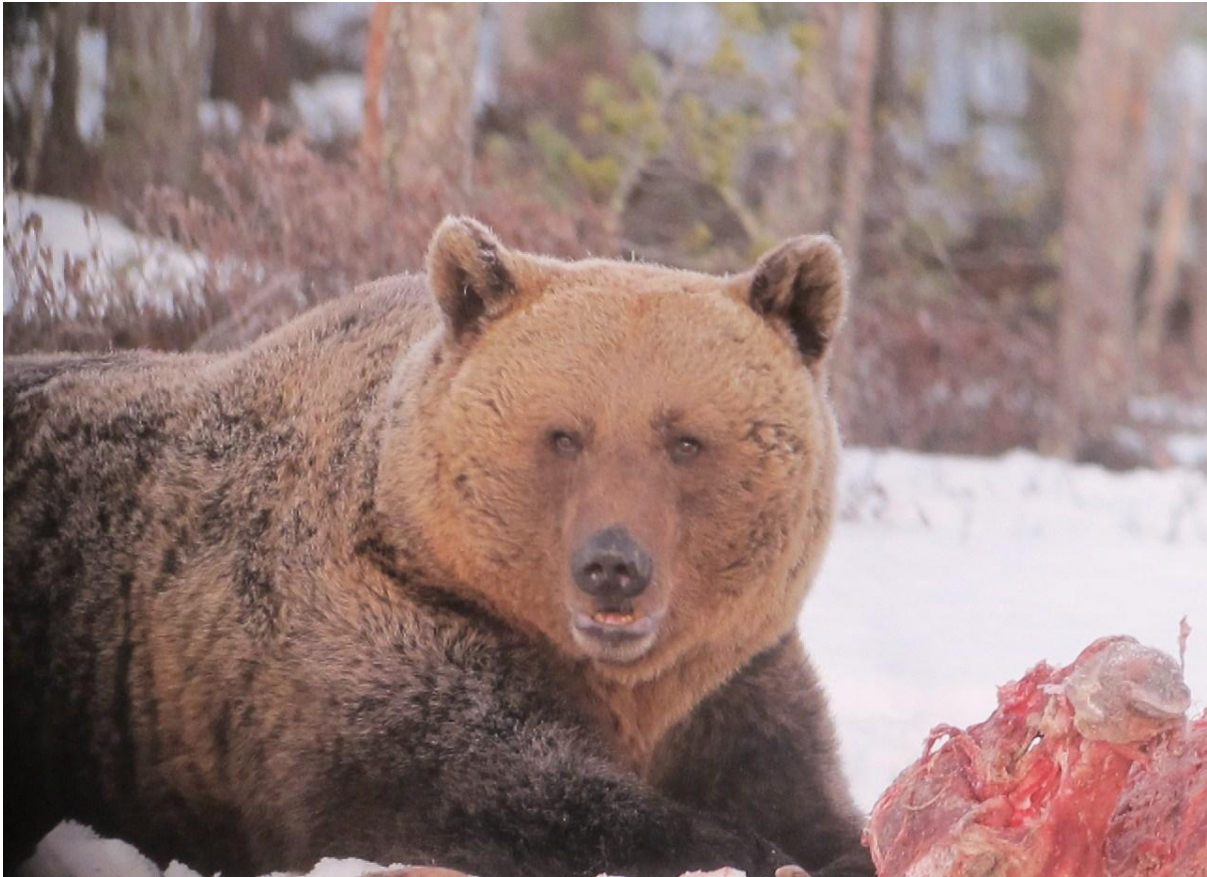
I awoke at about 03.45 and checked the situation outside. Valery was still there on the carcass and the other two were still mooching about in the general vicinity. Apparently little had changed then while I had been asleep. Dawn was still over an hour away but visibility was improving steadily. I hoped that the Bears might leave soon and create a "window" for the Wolverine but it was not to be. The Bears *did* leave, at around 04.30 as the light became quite bright but despite a long vigil until 08.00 nothing further transpired, except for the arrival of a White Wagtail, a Common Gull and a Great Spotted Woodpecker.

At 08.00 we all trooped back for breakfast. This had been the first night in two weeks, Ari later told me, that the Wolverine had not come. I groaned inwardly at the looming prospect of another failure and the need to come back in 2012 for a third try.

Monday 18th April

“Every night is different” said Sabrina, in an attempt to inspire new optimism. Ari just shrugged, still expecting Wolverine to be more or less certain on at least one of my remaining three nights.

The weather did not look great at all. Gone were yesterday’s clear skies which were now leaden with heavy cloud. The squally wind persisted and daytime temperatures struggled to a peak of around 8 degrees. For the coming night I had been moved to Hide 9, a slightly better position given the current location of the carcase.



The pattern of activity followed the same course as the previous night. Nothing happened during the early evening. Then, as the gloom of night began to fall, the first Bear appeared. It was Aulis, who strode confidently up to the carcase and began feeding. However, his luck didn’t last long; at 21.45 Valery arrived in an obviously bad frame of mind. Aulis abandoned the meal and left before trouble started, scarcely even stopping to look round before putting a hundred and fifty metres between himself and the carcase. Valery was clearly unhappy at having his pig raided by a subordinate. He sniffed the ground and the carcase and turned to stare and snarl at the now distant Aulis. Then, as I feared, he picked up the carcase and began dragging it into the forest. This time he reached the tree-line before dropping it. I was forced once more to re-align the scope. In its original position the carcase would have offered superb views of Wolverine at around 40 metres but now I would have to be satisfied with more difficult views at seventy metres – should one even turn up at all!

With the light becoming ever poorer under the low cloud cover I kept scanning the whole field of view – more in hope than expectation. But then, quite suddenly, something moved to my left at

about sixty metres. A fairly large black, shaggy object, too small to be a Bear but far too large to be a Raven, stood silhouetted against the snow. I had just glimpsed, moments before, its galloping gait and its highly arched back – though for a moment the creature stood stock still, gazing intently at Valery on the carcass. I realised straight away what it must be and two seconds later the binoculars confirmed it – a Wolverine! I could hardly believe it. At last! Then, just as I got the animal in perfect focus, it was off, galloping away into the distant trees. I checked my watch and saw that it was 22.10.

Well, it had been brief. But it was a Wolverine nevertheless. It obviously wanted to get onto the carcass but, equally obviously, was very wary of Valery. I had a hunch it would soon be back and kept scanning the tree line for signs of movement.

Sure enough the Wolverine was soon back. During the next hour it reappeared five or six times, always keeping its distance but twice exploiting Valery's temporary absence and reaching the carcass for a few quick bites. On one occasion I got it perfectly in the scope and could just make out some facial detail – the piggy black eyes, pointed muzzle and silver forehead patches. I was enjoying myself enormously watching the interplay between the quick and opportunistic Wolverine and the slow but jealous Valery.

At 23.00, or just after, the Wolverine appeared for the last time. Coming into my field of view to my left, it crept cautiously forwards towards the carcass. But seeing Valery, as ever standing guard, he lost his nerve and began galloping directly towards me. Scarcely pausing, he carried on galloping through the snow, passing at one point thirty metres in front of me before disappearing eventually into the trees a long way to my right. Now the fun was over, it seemed, and with no further signs of activity by 00.30 I decided to snatch a few hours sleep.

At 04.00 I woke to see that the sky was already becoming lighter. I immediately checked the scope, which I had left trained on the carcass, and was delighted to see the Wolverine already there, tearing enthusiastically into great chunks of pork. In the slightly better light I could just make out the yellow-brown flash on his flanks as well as most of the facial detail that had just been on the edge of visibility a few hours before. But, as previously, he didn't stay long and was soon galloping away to the safety of the forest.

I kept up my vigil till 08.00. Valery returned soon after the Wolverine's departure and stayed till about 05.00 when a big flock of Ravens (at least thirty) descended for a noisy dawn "pork party". There was no further sign of the mustelid but I wasn't worried in the least. Finally I had got to grips with this elusive chap. Now, however, I was becoming greedy: I wanted a good, close-up daytime sighting!

Tuesday 19th April

The bone-aching wind seemed to be dropping at last though the day remained overcast and cool. By the time we set off for the hides again at 16.30 the brooding cloud cover had begun to disperse and dazzling shafts of sunlight were beaking through.

I had Hide 9 again and Sabrina and her colleagues had thoughtfully moved the carcass back to its proper central position. I was in pole position once more it seemed – at least until Valery decided otherwise! The Bears apparently liked to appear at around 21.30 when presumably the light levels were low enough to make them feel sufficiently bold to come out of the forest and to depart as

dawn broke. Therefore, I wondered if my best chance of a good Wolverine sighting might be in the critical periods 20.00 to 21.30 and 04.00 to 05.30 – times when the light would be low enough to embolden the Wolverine but when it could venture out with least competition from Bears.

The early evening passed uneventfully but the clearer skies gave better light and even at 21.00 it was still very bright. Then, at 21.25, I spotted movement along the distant tree-line. Instantly I had the binoculars trained on the spot and I was thrilled to see my mustelid friend once more. He moved cautiously, stopping every few steps to sniff the air and scan the area around the carcass. Satisfied that the coast was clear he then galloped out into the open straight towards the carcass. I held my breath, hoping that he wouldn't lose his nerve at the last minute; I knew that I was about to get an absolutely superb view in what was still very good light. Soon enough he reached the carcass – whereupon he wasted no time in getting down to business. He immediately climbed on top of the pig and began ripping away and gulping down big lumps of pork. I could actually hear the chomping as he used his carnassials to tear apart the flesh and the clicking as his canines snapped against each other with every bite. A serious set of dental cutlery! The Wolverine is clearly born to munch carrion and is ruthlessly efficient at the job. He spent about two minutes on the carcass, in which time he must have consumed between one and two kilos of meat. Each crunching bite took a chunk of around 100 grams – the equivalent, say, of a modest pork chop – and the bites were just incessant. This was “power eating” at its most impressive! From what I had seen before, a Bear would require an hour or more to consume the same quantity.

At thirty-five metres or so the view had been fantastic. All the facial detail was clear, as were the yellowish flank bands. This was the view I had hoped for and which I could hardly expect to better. All too soon the Wolverine decided he had had enough and, job done, trotted off back into the forest. I realised that such efficiency at eating would require him to feed for only short periods and, perhaps, relatively infrequently. I could see that this factor might account for the long periods when the Wolverine “goes missing” and is hard to see.

The Bears showed up at 21.45, a little later than before (possibly due to the clearer skies and the better light?). The usual pantomime then unfolded with Valery angrily chasing away his rivals every time they got within sight of the meat. However, for once, he didn't try to move it and the pig spent the whole night in more or less its initial position. By 23.00, with no re-appearance of the Wolverine, I had seen enough and took a break to work on the Energy Conservation Project.

Back on duty at 04.00, the temperature had plummeted under the clear skies. Dawn was not far away and already I could see the whole field of view in front of me quite clearly. Valery was busy chewing the carcass (what a surprise!) and a few Ravens were gathering in anticipation of his imminent dawn departure. The frost-encrusted snow glistened and as the dawn came I was expecting little of note to happen.

Then, at 04.45, the peace was shattered – and I do mean *shattered* – by three deafening and unearthly howls. Wolf! And obviously quite close. Valery nearly leapt out of his skin, which amused me no end. It was good to see the big bully knocked out of his stride by something at last! Of course I had no expectation of actually seeing the Wolf (or Wolves) but kept carefully scanning the tree-line opposite just in case they *might* be incautious enough to break cover. But at 05.00 a miracle

occurred. A single Wolf strode out of the forest into the sunlight and calmly stopped to survey the scene, his breath visible in the chilly air. What a magnificent creature! And what a magnificent setting! He spotted Valery on the carcase and for a few seconds the two erstwhile adversaries gazed at each other at a distance of about two hundred metres. Then, the Wolf decided not to press the point and turned around and walked back into the trees.

Valery seemed unsettled now and left shortly afterwards, though to my surprise he returned at 05.25 for a few minutes. But the sun was now very bright and it was time for Bears to retreat into the forest and for the Ravens to have their early morning pork party. Precious little of the pig remained however and the birds had to work hard to pick away scraps of gristle.



At 07.30, with the air temperature apparently minus 7 degrees, Ari came to pick us up and take us back for a well-earned breakfast.

Wednesday 20th April

I had hoped, now that Wolverine business was more or less concluded, to spend the last evening searching for European Flying Squirrel. But Ari was sceptical since it was still very early in the year and activity levels would probably be low. Moreover, by afternoon, the morning's fine weather was a distant memory and sleet was now falling. Faced with a long drive, a cold, wet evening and a poor chance of seeing the Squirrel I ducked out and decided to spend the last night in the hide after all.

The last night was again to be in the favourably situated Hide 9 – now looking out over a new pig, positioned thirty or so metres directly in front. The weather was dire: slate-grey skies, driving sleet

and a chilly breeze. Nevertheless, with Wolverine and Wolf already accounted for, anything else would be a welcome bonus.

Aulis arrived at 21.20, followed at 21.40 by two smaller Bears which he promptly drove away. There was no sign of Valery and, in the absence of the Great One, Aulis assumed ownership of the new carcass. He ate relatively little but resolutely defended the carcass and several times chased the smaller contenders across the snow. By 23.00 nothing much had happened and I took to my sleeping bag for a few hours.

The effect of four nights in the hide had taken its toll and I slept soundly for a full five hours, waking at the obscenely late hour of 04.00. Surprised to see the sky already getting light I got up and peered out at the familiar snowscape outside. To my surprise the Wolverine was coming into view. I had woken not a moment too soon! He loped along, passing by the old carcass to my left, and made straight for the new carcass. As before, he wasted no time saying Grace and tucked in with his customary relish. For two or three minutes all that could be heard was furious chomping and another kilo or two of pork disappeared in double quick time. Then, as the previous day, he simply stopped eating and loped off into the forest looking for all the world like a black Afghan Hound. Given the quantity of pork he had just consumed I wasn't at all confident he might return but at 04.45, with Bears strangely absent, he did. This time he didn't stop to feed but collected a leg (a remnant from the old carcass) and carried it off to be cached somewhere in the forest.

This behaviour is characteristic of Wolverines but with so many Ravens around I wondered how successful it might be. I later saw Ravens, six or seven of them, digging furiously in the snow in the forest and uncovering meat. I strongly suspect that the Ravens, being intelligent birds, watch the Wolverines carry off meat and keep a mental note of where it is hidden.

At 05.00 I noticed something moving along the distant tree-line. My first reaction was that it might be a second Wolverine but, to my surprise, it turned out to be the previous day's Wolf making a return visit. Quite incredible! This time it was a very brief sighting indeed but welcome nevertheless. Ari hopes that it might become a regular visitor now that it knows there is food always available at the site.

By 06.00 the sleet had turned to snow and by 07.30 back to sleet. I returned to the lodge for the last time – in miserable weather but delighted with the results of the previous four nights.

Thursday 21st April

By 11.00 Ari and I were on the road heading back to Kajaani. We saw Bean Geese in fields just out of Vartius and Lapwings at Kajaani, thereby just getting the bird list into double figures.

4 Summary and Advice for Wolverine Watchers

The trip was hugely successful with around 10 Wolverine sightings (all the same animal I think) and two sightings of Wolf (again a single animal). Four different Brown Bears were seen, each on multiple occasions. Good views of all three species were obtained.

Those wishing to see Wolverine should seriously consider a visit to Wild Brown Bear. Three or four nights should be sufficient.

The following points might be helpful:

- (a) The best time seems to be April, before the Bears become too active and too numerous. The nights are too long and too cold earlier in the year. The first two weeks of April, especially if they coincide with a full moon would be perfect.
- (b) Bring plenty of warm clothing as nights in early Spring can still be very cold. It is not allowed to wear shoes in the hides (too dirty and too noisy) and so you should think about very warm socks and/or fleece-lined slippers. I used the sleeping bag as a coat which was reasonably effective in preventing my toes freezing!
- (c) Remain vigilant as the Wolverine can come at any time. I had to wait around 24 hours in the hide (21 of them awake!) before I got my first sighting. Patience and determination will reap rewards.
- (d) Keep scanning the tree-line as the Wolverine often seems to hang back when Bears are around.
- (e) Be especially alert at dusk and dawn – particularly if Bears aren't around. A Wolverine visit could be imminent!
- (f) Bring plenty of sweets and/or little snacks. The lodge provide a picnic supper but those extra little treats are good for morale when nothing is happening and it is bleak and cold. I would suggest a hip flask but alcohol is not allowed in the hides.

Good luck to all those who try!

Annex 1: Summary of Mammal Sightings

| Species | Latin Name | 16/4 | 17/4 | 18/4 | 19/4 | 20/4 | 21/4 |
|----------------------|--------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Grey Wolf | Canis Lupus | | | | X | X | |
| Wolverine | Gulo Gulo | | | X | X | X | |
| Brown Bear | Ursus Arctos | | X | X | X | X | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Total Species | 3 | | | | | | |

Annex 2: Summary of Bird Sightings

Very little attention was given to finding birds and very few (at this time of year) were available to be found. Results were commensurate with effort and a meagre total of 11 species were recorded.

| Species | Latin Name | 16/4 | 17/4 | 18/4 | 19/4 | 20/4 | 21/4 |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Bean Goose | Anser Fabalis | | | | | | X |
| Northern Lapwing | Vanellus Vanellus | | | | | | X |
| White Wagtail | Motacilla Alba | | | X | | | |
| Common Gull | Larus Canus | | | X | | | |
| Great Spotted Woodpecker | Dendrocopus Major | | | X | X | X | |
| Raven | Corvus Corax | | X | X | X | X | X |
| Hooded Crow | Corvus Corone Cornix | | X | X | X | X | X |
| Black-billed Magpie | Pica Pica | | X | X | X | X | |
| Chaffinch | Fringilla Coelebs | | | X | | X | X |
| Greenfinch | Carduelis Chloris | | | | | | X |
| Bullfinch | Pyrrhula Pyrrhula | | | | | X | |
| | | | | | | | |
| Total Species | 11 | | | | | | |