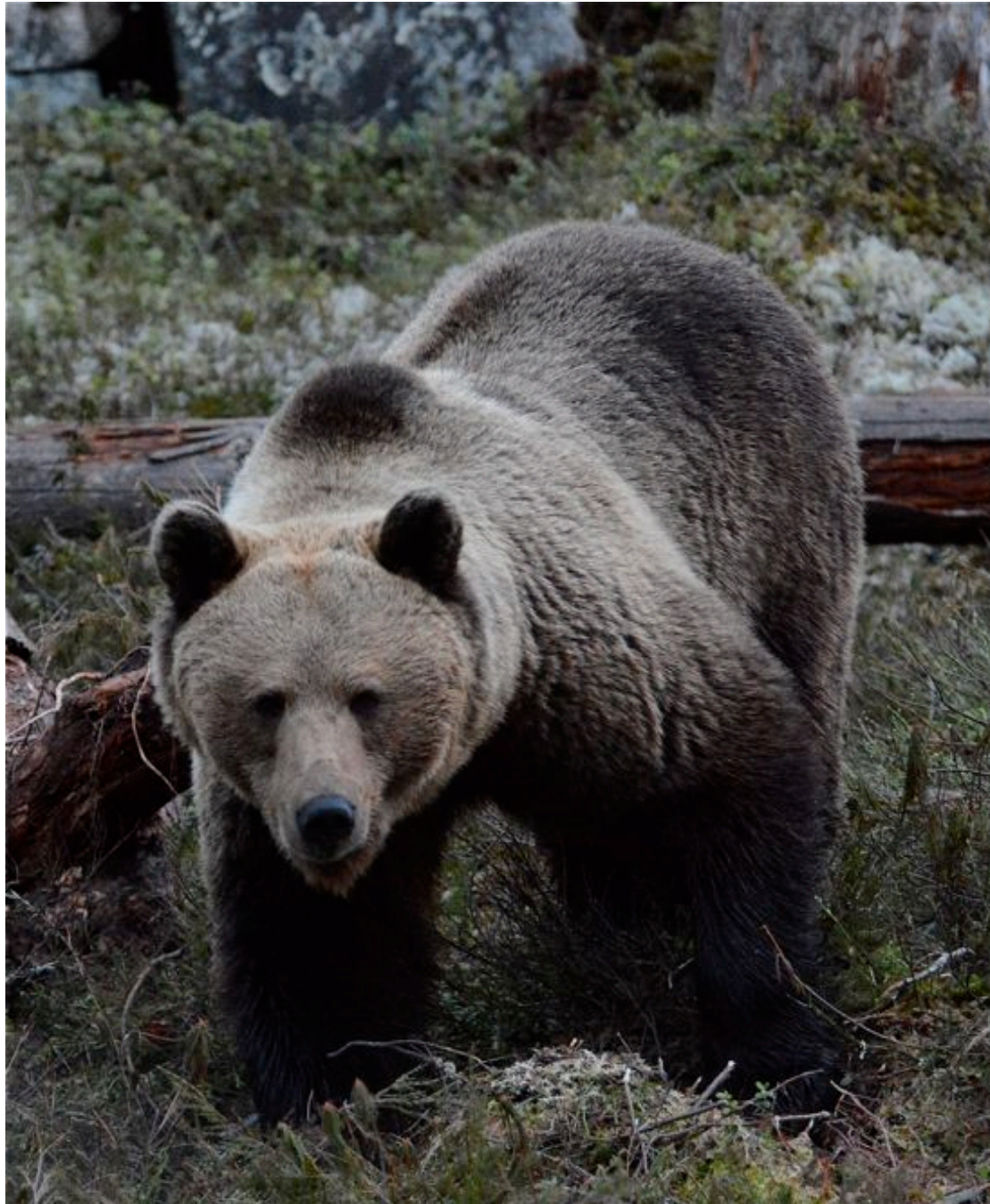


Kainuu, Eastern Central Finland – May 2015

Report by Sjöf Öllers

This is a short follow-up report on my solo visit in 2013; this time my wife hoped to see wolf, bear and wolverine. The mammalwatching was successful with excellent sightings of all three target species; a welcome bonus was a sighting of a male forest reindeer. Birding highlights included a spectacular black grouse lek with at least 21 males, Northern hawk owl, willow grouse, hazel grouse, and capercaillie.



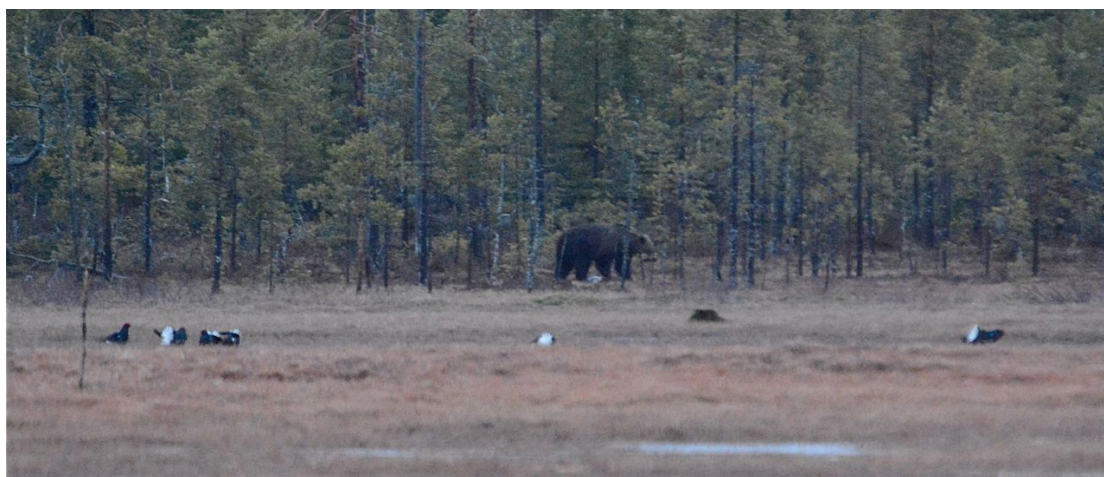
Brown Bear at the Caravan Hide



Female Capercaillie

Itinerary

- May 13 Flights Amsterdam-Helsinki + Helsinki-Kuopio and taxi to Kajaani
Drive to Kuikka Base Camp
- May 14 Kuikka Base Camp/Hides
- May 15 Kuikka Base Camp/Hides
- May 16 Kuikka Base Camp/Hides
- May 17 Kuikka Base Camp/Hides
- May 18 Drive back from Kuikka to Kajaani Airport
Flights Kajaani-Helsinki and Helsinki- Amsterdam



First bear and (part of) the Black Grouse Lek

General Information

In 2013 I had a great time at Kuikka Camp and especially in the so-called Paradise wildlife viewing hide (see report on Mammalwatching.com or Cloudbirders.com). After hearing my enthusiastic stories about Kuikka my wife was keen to visit this place as well and this year we finally had time for a short trip to Finland and try our luck and see wolf, bear and wolverine in a single visit. Since my last visit things have changed at Kuikka in the sense that the main mammalwatching hides are now located in a different area. The permit that Lassi Rautainen and his family had for the original concession area had not been renewed by the border control authorities so recently a new permit for an area several kilometres north of the original area has been issued to them.

Currently there are two main mammalwatching areas, but there are plans to expand. Just like in the original concession area, the Paradise hides are set up along the edge of a large marshland and the Caravan hides are in a forest area. They also have hides/tents for a number of bird species including capercaillie, whooper swan, bean goose and sometimes owls.



View over the left corner of the swamp from the Paradise Hides

Some of the animals that used to visit the hides in the former concession area have discovered the new feeding sites and visit regularly but new animals have started eating from the carcasses as well, but some of them are still very wary. Despite some differences between the old sites and the new sites, my impression was that the mammalwatching and photography opportunities are equally good.

The new Paradise hides overlook a much larger open swamp than the area I had visited in 2013 and (at least this year) the new area had the bonus of having an active black grouse lek in the middle of the swamp. The lek was about 200–300 meters from the hides, so a little too far for photography, but it was sensational to see the males displaying in full swing although a scope is very useful for close-up views. The lek site is in use from about mid-April to mid-May. The last week of April and the first week of May are probably the peak period to witness the most spectacular displays of the grouse. On our last day in the Paradise hide the activity of the males was already much lower and less spectacular than on the first day.

The Paradise hides consist of one large well-equipped hide (the actual Paradise hide) and several smaller 1–3 person pro/photographer hides that are still fairly comfortable although unsurprisingly space is at a premium. There are pros and cons to being in one hide or another in terms of viewing angle, photo opportunities, etc. but in my opinion in the end it doesn't matter that much which hide you get.



Early morning at the Paradise Hides (the main hide is the centre hide)

The Caravan hides consist of the main hide (indeed an old caravan) and two smaller hides. Away from the main area there is also a tiny hide near a small pond. The main hide in the forest is located on a slope so from the main hide you look upward into a small arena-like area cornered left and right by the two smaller hides and a series of rock at the top of the slope. Beyond the top of slope there is a plateau-like area and most animals enter the feeding area via that plateau area. A bit of a disadvantage of the main hide is that you have a partly obscured view of the plateau area and shy animals often stay behind or near the rocky area at the top of the slope. From the main hide it was therefore difficult to get good pictures of the shier animals that stay on the plateau or behind the rocks. The benefit of this, however, may be that shy animals feel secure enough to come up to the carcasses at all. However, if animals

are confident enough to enter the “arena” area in front of the hides, then great photo opportunities are guaranteed (distance between you and the animals is less than 15 metres in the “arena”). The two smaller hides are closer to the top of the slope and probably have better views of (parts of) the plateau area. However, these two hides are very close to where the animals usually show up so it would be imperative that people are very quiet and don’t make sudden movements. And from some angles in the smaller hides the animals will be in front of the other smaller hide, something that is unlikely to happen from the main hide.



The actual Caravan Hide (left) and the two pro hides (right) in the forest

Just like in 2013 everything was well organized at Kuikka (website: articmedia.fi), the food is good, great hospitality and easy going atmosphere, and there is some entertainment directly around the lodge: bird feeders in front of the main house, beavers are sometimes seen on the lake next at the base camp, and good birding both on foot from the lodge and short driving distances away. If you stay at the hides the routine is still the same: at 4 pm there is a communal dinner and around 5 pm you drive to one of the hides. They try to give every group of clients a hide of their own. The next morning usually between 8 and 9 am you are picked up and driven back to the base camp to have breakfast.

Weather

When we drove into the Kuikka area it was clear that there was more snow this year than in 2013. When I asked Lassi Rautainen’s son Sami, he told me that that they had had a lot of snow in early spring this year. They had been using snow scooters until the week before we came. Then the temperature went up and it rained non-stop for several days in a row and all the snow had disappeared within 4-5 days, which made the smaller unpaved roads in the area very soft and water-saturated.

The weather was very stable during our stay – about 5-7 °C in daytime with half of the time sunny/half cloudy conditions and the other half low clouds with rain or showers. At night it was typically between –3 and +3 °C. The combination of high humidity, relatively low temperatures and sometimes a cold wind made us wear thermal underwear, down jackets and gloves in the hides in the middle of the night

but we didn't turn on the heaters because they make you (or us at least) way too sleepy.



The dominant male at the Caravan Hide

Day-to-Day Accounts

May 13: Arrival

Finnair made a mess of our flights this time and all flights were late. They had changed the flight schedules several times and only a few weeks before our departure the connecting time between our two incoming flights had been reduced from 2.15 hours to 45 minutes, and of course this went wrong with delays during the take-off in Amsterdam and getting landing permission in Helsinki: we missed our connecting flight to Kajaani by 5 minutes or so. Rather annoying that they didn't wait for us.

We had already anticipated that things might go wrong and luckily Finnair had the same plan B as we did. So they flew us to Kuopio and then organized a private taxi to Kajaani, where we were to pick up our rental car. If you ever consider taking a long-distance taxi in Finland: Kuopio airport to Kajaani airport costs 300 Euros. After missing our connecting flight we called Hertz how we could now pick up our rental car (since we would get to Kajaani outside office hours and the airport would be

closed as well); the arrangements they made were excellent and all went fine. Good and pragmatic service by Hertz.

Around 21.30 we were finally at Kajaani airport and then made the 2.5-hour drive to Kuikka. Late evening is a great time to drive: many arctic hares on route and roding woodcocks above the forest edge along the road. The larger grouse species were also very active at this time of day. We also saw a larger mid-sized owl fly across the road around dusk, which must have been an Ural owl.



Mew Gulls

May 14: First night at the Paradise Hides

We spent our first night in the Paradise hide in the hope that we could “tackle the wolf” on the first night and then focus on the wolverine. Looking at the sightings board at the base camp the sightings at Paradise hide in the previous week had been mouth-watering (“four wolves, one wolverine, and forest reindeer” or “four wolves, two bears, one golden eagle and one white-tailed eagle” and a few more nights like that. However, in the days before we came it had been: “one bear”, “only black grouse, no mammals”, etc.

Around five in the afternoon we (plus another couple and a group of three people) headed to the Paradise hide. All three groups got their own hide and as chance would have it, we ended up in the same hide that I had two years ago. The first hours in the early evening I had a great time watching the displaying black grouse. Around 20.45 a bear showed up at the far end of the swamp and then slowly made its way to the carcass at our end of the swamp. This bear was shy and always came

in quickly to rip a large chunk from the carcass and then went back in the forest. This continued until about midnight. A good start, but unfortunately not much happened during the “night” (i.e., the twilight between midnight and 2 am) and in the morning. I was a bit surprised that no eagles had shown up and this would remain so the other nights.



The first bear at the Paradise Hide on May 14

May 15 and 16: The Caravan Hides

We spent the next two nights in the Caravan hides. A much more intimate setting; if the animals show up, they are typically 5–30 meters away. The carcasses are only

about 10-15 metres from the hide, but well hidden so the animals have to make an effort to obtain the meat. In front of the main hide there is also a bird feeder that during our stay attracted great spotted woodpecker, siskin, chaffinch, great tit and occasionally willow tit. Only once a common redstart showed up in front of the hide to hunt insects.



Bears at the Caravan Hide

On the first evening on our walk to the Caravan hide we ended up in a sleet shower. I entered the hide first and put my gear and sleeping bag on the bed and glanced outside for a second. To my surprise a bear was already there! I whispered "there is

a bear!”. Mikka and my wife looked at me with a mixture of surprise and disbelief, but they quickly joined me in the caravan to see for themselves. We had been chatting all the way up to the hide so maybe the sleet shower had muted the sound of us talking but I am still surprised that the bear did not seem to have heard us. Mikka waited for five minutes and then sneaked out of the hide. The bear didn’t run away. Only after the sleet shower had stopped, the bear suddenly started sniffing the air and we could see him getting more restless. He must have caught our scent as he started sniffing the air intensely and then ran off at great speed. After all this excitement we finally installed ourselves and for a couple of hours nothing happened. In the early evening a relatively small and shy bear showed up at the far end of the viewing area. She was nibbling away on one of the carcasses partly obscured by a large rock but she was never quite at ease. At some point she moved away from the carcass and also started sniffing the air intensely and then ran off like crazy to the right. A minute later or so, a much larger bear suddenly came racing through the forest from the left (ignoring the food completely) and ran in the direction of the first bear. After about 15 minutes the second bear returned and now headed directly for the pig carcass and then stayed at or near the carcass for most of the evening.

Around midnight I made several power naps but looked outside every 10 minutes or so. Around 1 am I saw a bear even larger than the second one very close to the hide. I watched him for several minutes and then he disappeared again. By now I was really tired and was struggling to stay awake and my wife was fast asleep. Around 2.30 am (after obviously having dozed off again) I had another perfunctory look outside: *Etron Fou Leloublan*!!!! Illuminati will know that Etron Fou Leloublan were an intriguing French avant-garde rock band from the late 70s/early 80s with the puzzling band name “Crazy shit, the white wolf”, but wow there was indeed the white wolf radiating in the subdued green and browns of the forest!



Video still of the wolf and bear 3 at the Caravan Hide

I was worried that the wolf would run away at the slightest movement so I tried to make no sudden movements but my wife was so deep asleep that I really had to

shake her and shout-whisper “there is a wolf” at least four times. All went well and we managed to install ourselves without scaring the wolf away. In the beginning I didn’t take any pictures and we just watched this magnificent animal slowly gaining confidence to eat from the carcass that was furthest from the hide. Luckily my wife got some video footage of the wolf by filming through one of the viewing windows. The wolf stayed very wary and never really came out in the open. After the wolf had been around for quite some time he suddenly became nervous, but we were clearly not the cause. Shortly after, bear 2 showed up again and chased the wolf off the carcass. For a while the bear was feeding on the carcass while the wolf was watching him some 10 metres behind him. Brilliant stuff. Unfortunately, I could not really take pictures because the camera position was too low to get both animals in the same shot and releasing the camera from the ball head would definitely have chased both away. After the wolf left, the bear kept feeding for a while, but then left too. I was convinced that the wolf would not show up again, but around 3.45 am he/she was suddenly back. The wolf was a bit more at ease now and I could make a few record shots. The wolf stayed for about 10 minutes and then left again. During the remainder of the morning not much happened, but what a night! The couple that stayed at the Paradise hide had first seen two wolves and then a different single wolf during the two hours of twilight at the far end of the swamp, but the wolves never came to the carcasses.



Typical view of the wolf in the forest: crouched and wary

Our second night in the hide started off a bit quieter, but in the early evening bear 2 and 3 of the previous night showed up on and off. Bear 3 (unlike 2) was very bold and completely unconcerned of moving around in front of the hides. He was the only bear that came into the little arena in front of the hides. At some point bear 2 was feeding left of our hide and bear 3 to the right with only ten metres between them. Bear 3 was clearly the dominant one and there was a strange uneasy peace between them. Eventually bear 2 left and a minute later bear 3 left too, seemingly in the other direction, but shortly after bear 3 came running across the plateau beyond the

feeding area and headed in the direction of bear 2. A minute later we could hear several loud growls and other disturbing sounds of what must have been a pretty intense fight. After a while bear 3 returned to the feeding area and after this event we didn't see bear 2 anymore around the hides. Bear 3 kept coming back to the feeding area for short feeding frenzies all evening, but around midnight his visits became less frequent and around 1 am he visited for the last time. It was again particularly difficult to stay awake during the twilight hours, but I forced myself to stay seated although I sometimes was in some delirious half-sleep state. Early in the morning (around 2.45 am) I suddenly saw something move in the back; this bouncing brown ball was not a bear!! The wolverine had finally shown up. I quickly woke up my wife. The wolverine only stayed for about ten minutes, but did all the hyperactive frenzy that you would expect from a wolverine and also came bouncing into the arena area for several minutes and put on a nice show by walking across the rocks with a rib bone in his mouth and then stopped on top of one of the rocks still holding the bone proudly in his mouth – quite funny. After the wolverine had left, an intense tiredness kicked in and around 4 am I curled up in the sleeping bag and slept until about 7.45. My wife stayed up a bit longer but at some point the humid cold made her retreat to the sleeping bag as well.

May 17: Paradise Hides

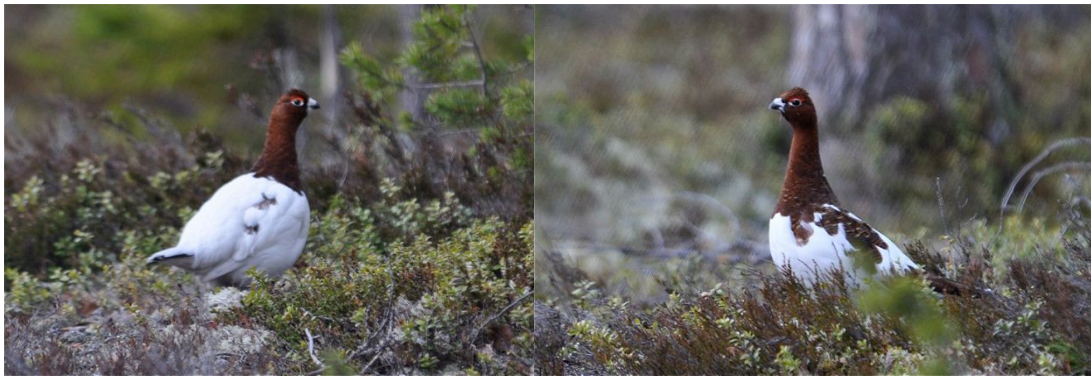
Our second night in the Paradise hide, absolutely nothing of interest seemed to happen for hours and hours. No mammals, no eagles, no interesting waders and even the black grouse at the lek only gave half-hearted displays and seemed more interested in eating than displaying. So just when we were about to leave and walk back to the car a large brown bear showed up from the area where the car was parked. Not a good time to leave the hide then. After we had waited for the bear to finish eating from the carcass, we had almost packed up when we saw an animal approach in the far left corner of the swamp: it was a male forest reindeer! The animal was very wary and constantly looking in the direction of where the bear had gone. I am not sure whether it could see the bear or smell that the bear had been around. Unfortunately, my camera was still on the ballhead and I didn't want to chase the reindeer away by making noise, so we just watched the reindeer's nervous antics for several minutes but in the end it ran off at high speed in the opposite direction of where the bear was. Because one of Sami's children was ill we had driven to the hide ourselves, so it was just the two of us on the drive back. Only after driving a kilometre or so, a large wolf suddenly crossed the road. Wow! We raced to the spot where it had disappeared into the forest but of course no sign of the wolf. We had barely recovered from the reindeer and wolf adrenaline rushes when we saw a bear on the road in the distance. The bear seemed to turn around and walk away but we stopped the car immediately and turned off the engine. This helped. The bear seemed a little indecisive and made a 360° turn but then decided he was going to continue in our direction. He walked several tens of metres in our direction but then slowly walked into the forest. Undoubtedly my most amazing 30 minutes of mammal watching in Europe. Sami told us that it was rare to see either wolf or bear away from the hides. And seeing a bear on the road without running away immediately was even rarer!

May 18: Back Home

The drive from Kuikka back to Kajaani airport was pretty eventful with a female moose, an ermine, a male capercaillie next to the road and good views of a goshawk in flight.

Daytime Excursions

Our initial goal was to visit the beautiful forests of the Elimyssalo nature reserve, but this proved impossible with our tiny Ford Fiesta (although it would have been relatively straightforward with a 4x4). We tried both access roads from Kuikka but both roads still had a lot of stretches covered with snow and ice. The shorter snow/ice stretches could only just be negotiated with our car, but after almost getting stuck on a longer stretch we gave up. One also had to be really careful not to get stuck in water-saturated soggy road stretches and especially on the soft shoulder of the road. So we just tried any of the smaller roads in the area until our Fiesta couldn't go any further and then walked along the road or into the forest from there. Capercaillie and black grouse were regularly encountered. Good sightings were a couple of willow grouse (uncommon in the area) and a pair of hazel grouse. We also had good views of a small group of Bohemian waxwings along the road. Best bird sighting for me was a Northern hawk owl, which showed well the first time, but flew off almost immediately the second time. The hawk owls like the edges of clear-cut areas, regrowth areas or single trees or small group of trees in clear-cut areas. Just check all birds perched in those areas and at some point you might get lucky. We looked for the owl four times and found it two times in such areas only 3-4 kilometres from the base camp. Sami also took us to a nice piece of older forest to see if we could encounter any owl activity, but no luck.



Willow grouse

MAMMAL LIST

Note/erratum: In the 2013 report I wrote seeing European Beaver Castor fiber at Kuikka. This is wrong. In eastern Finland one (exclusively?) encounters Canadian Beaver Castor Canadensis and the ones at Kuikka are the North American variety. In Finland the European beaver has been pushed back by its North American cousin to the southwest corner of the country.

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* – just one on route

Arctic Hare *Lepus timidus* – about a dozen on the main highway between Kuopio and Kajaani and several tens in all colour variations on the route Kajaani-Kuhmo-Kuikka. Only a few in the Kuikka area.

[West European Hedgehog *Erinaceus europaeus* – only seen as a roadkill]

Gray Wolf *Canis lupus* – one beautiful and very pale individual was seen from the Caravan hide; this animal could be identified from the wolf photos in one of Lassi's books (it was born in 2007). Wolf sightings in the forest are very rare, so we were extremely lucky. Then we had an even rarer sighting of another white/pale-coloured wolf crossing the road in the area near the Paradise hides.



Video Still of the Wolf at the Caravan Hide

Brown Bear *Ursus arctos* – one from the Paradise hide on May 14, three different animals (probably one female and two males) from the Caravan hide on May 15, the

same two males from the previous night on May 16, one male on May 17 from the Paradise Hide was possibly again bear 3 that we saw in the Caravan hide. On May 17 we also saw a largish bear on the road.



Bear 3 at the Caravan Hide

Ermine *Mustela erminea* – one crossed the road near Heikkilä (east of Kuhmo), also a roadkill near Kuhmo

Wolverine *Gulo gulo* – one seen from the Caravan hide

Forest Reindeer *Rangifer tarandus fennicus* – a male seen from the Paradise hide

Moose *Alces alces* – a female crossed the access road and a neighbouring swamp about 6 km south of Kuikka Base Camp.



Record shot of the moose and our last bear sighting

BIRD LIST

Whooper Swan *Cygnus Cygnus* – a handful of sightings en route and twice in the Kuikka area

Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* – two on the ground and six in flight seen from the Paradise Hide on May 17

Common Teal *Anas crecca* – a female in the Kuikka area

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* – one drake on the lake at Kuikka Base Camp

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* – about a handful on lakes and marshes near Kuikka Base Camp

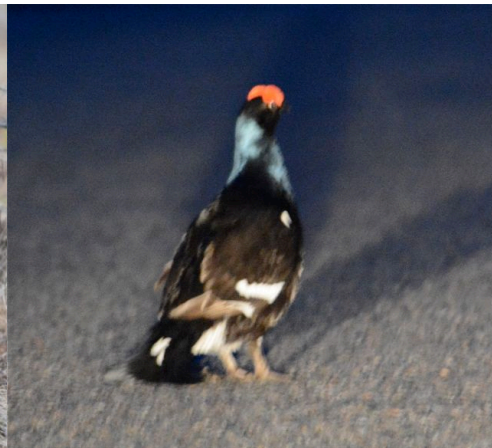
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* – a total of four on lakes and marshes near Kuikka Base Camp

Hazel Grouse *Bonasa bonasia* – a male seen well on the road to Elimyssalo (and a female in flight in the same area)

Black Grouse *Tetrao tetrix* – At least 15 (mostly females) late at night on the access roads from Kuhmo to Kuikka. Several seen daily (typically flushed only) on walks in the Kuikka area. A spectacular lek with 13–21 males and 0–2 females was active in the marsh at the Paradise hides.



Male Capercaillie



Black Grouse at night

Western Capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus* – a total of four males and about ten females seen on walks and drives in the Kuikka area

Willow Grouse *Lagopus lagopus* – a pair was seen several kilometres from Kuikka Base Camp

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* – one seen well in flight on May 18

Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo* – two in the Kuikka area and one near Sotkamo

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* – 1-2 daily in the Kuikka area and a few on route

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* – two in flight over a lake near Kuikka Base Camp

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* – a few en route

European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* – three from the Paradise hide on May 14

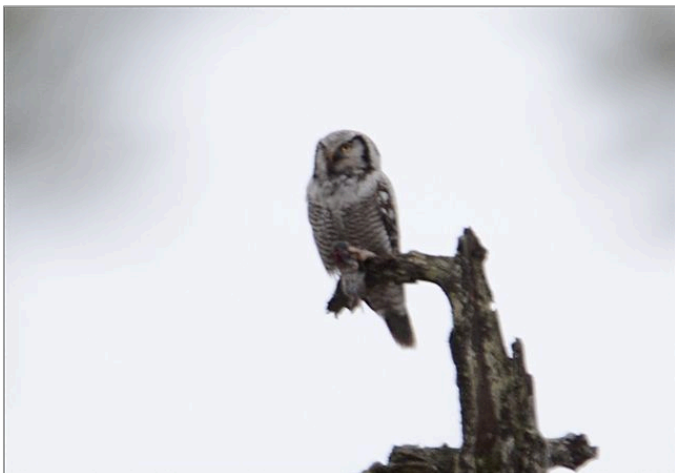
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* – 1-2 from the Paradise hide and several on route

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* – many seen in flight between 22.00 and midnight on our drive to Kuikka on May 13. One flushed on a walk in the Kuikka area.

Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* – one calling and flying around above the swamp at Paradise hide
 Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* – regular on route
 Spotted Redshank *Tringa erythropus* – one from the Kuikka hide on May 17
 Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* – common in the Kuikka area, a pair was constantly present in front of the Paradise hide
 Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* – four in front of the Paradise hide on May 14
 Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* – a few seen in the Kuikka area
 Little Gull *Larus minutus* – one on a lake near Kuhmo
 Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus* – common, seen daily
 Mew Gull *Larus canus* – common, seen daily
 Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus* – two in the marsh at the Paradise hides, one checked out a carcass at the Caravan hides
 Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* – regular sightings
 Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* – a few on route
 Common Wood Pigeon *Columba palumbus* – only a few on route between Kuopio and Kajaani
 [Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* – heard only once on May 17]
 Northern Hawk-Owl *Surnia ulula* – one (probably the same bird) seen twice a few kilometres north of Kuikka Base Camp
 [Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* – a larger mid-sized owl seen around dusk on May 13 must have been this species, but views too short to be sure]
 [Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* – heard only]
 Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* – 1-2 seen every day at both the hide areas, also 1-2 at the feeders in Kuikka Base Camp, a few sightings in the Kuikka area on walks.
 Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* – 1-2 daily
 White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* – 1-3 daily
 Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus* – four on May 16 and two on May 17



Bohemian Waxwing



Northern Hawk-Owl

European Robin *Erithacus rubecula* – only a few sightings in the Kuikka area
 Common Redstart *Phoenicurus phoenicurus* – three sightings in the Kuikka area, one on route near Kuhmo

[Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* – a possible sighting near Kuikka, flushed bird but quite distant]

Common Blackbird *Turdus merula* – only a few sightings in the Kuikka area, more seen on route

Fieldfare *Turdus pilaris* – common

Song Thrush *Turdus philomelos* – only one sighting in the Kuikka area

Redwing *Turdus iliacus* – about 10-15 on route

Mistle Thrush *Turdus viscivorus* – 1-3 daily

Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus* – three sightings in the Kuikka area

[Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* – heard only]

European Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* – one pair at Kuikka Base Camp, several seen on walks in the Kuikka area, one pair east of Heikkilä

Willow Tit *Parus montanus* – two at Kuikka Base Camp, a few at the Caravan Hide, and a few on walks in the Kuikka area

Blue Tit *Parus caeruleus* – a few on walks in the Kuikka area

Great Tit *Parus major* – fairly common in the Kuikka area

Common Magpie *Pica pica* – common in urban and rural areas, fairly common in forest areas

Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* – common in urban and rural areas, scarce or absent in forest areas

Hooded Crow *Corvus corone cornix* – a few daily

Common Raven *Corvus corax* – common in the Kuikka area, in particular around the carcasses

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* – only a few on route

Common Chaffinch *Fringilla coelebs* – common

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* – common to abundant

Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea* – twice a group of 4-5 birds seen well in the Kuikka area

A very handy tool for checking bird distributions is the Finnish Bird Atlas:

<http://atlas3.lintuatlas.fi/results/specieslist>



Siskin



Pied Flycatcher

HERPS

Common Frog *Rana temporaria* – a pair at Kuikka Base Camp. Large numbers of frogs were seen crossing the road late in the evening on May 13, but we didn't stop to check which species they were.

