

# Trip Report

LAND OF BEARS, BLACK GROUSES AND WOLVERINES

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## FANTASTIC FINLAND

An early spring, ten-day visit to the Martinselkosen Eräkeskus wildlife center to photograph Northern Europe's spectacular and wary wildlife





**Eurasian Brown Bear** *Ursus arctos arctos*

A large bear emerges from the boreal forest of the Martinselkosen Eräkeskus wildlife centre. To guarantee good photographic opportunities and clear sightings of this normally shy species three separate hides - where regular baiting is used - are at the disposal of visitors.





**Wolverine** *Gulo gulo*

Wolverines are the size of a medium dog, with a length ranging from 65–107 cm (26–42 in), a tail of 17–26 cm (6.7–10.2 in), and a weight of 9–25 kg (20–55 lb).

TEXT AND PHOTOS  
BY GUIDO MURATORE

When I think about bears, the first place that comes to my mind is Finland. The country has one of the largest bear populations in Europe, and the bear is the Finnish national animal. In April 2013, I visited Finland for ten days, trying to photograph the brown bears after they woke up from hibernation in the Martinselkosen Eräkeskus, a wildlife centre in the midst of the great Kainuu wilderness. The Martinselkosen Eräkeskus wildlife centre provides rather comfortable accommodation and dining services to visitors, and it is located in the municipality of Suomussalmi, in a place called Pirttivaara. There are three hides nearby - one in the forest, one in a swamp and the third by a pond - where baits are used and which are available to small groups and photographers. This was my first long photographic trip and it was very carefully planned, as this is the only time of the year when photographers can capture images of the bears on snow.

When you photograph wildlife, you always have to consider that it is possible head out and return home without pictures, because, as a friend says, "Nature is nature." While being with the right guide helps to increase the chances for good shots, we still felt lucky to see bears on our first night out. Around 20.00, a large male came out of the forest heading towards us. The excitement we felt was indescribable. He

began to get closer and closer, to a position about ten meters from the hide, allowing us to take some amazing photos. The most incredible thing was to see how he was aware of our presence because with every shot, he raised his head as if to scold us. During this time of the year, when the bears first rouse from hibernation, they are not very confident and any sudden movement might make them suspicious and flee, so every action must be well thought out. Nevertheless this bear remained in front of our hide all night, walking around and stopping to eat from time to time. We found him the next morning still there, so we could photograph him with the beautiful light of sunrise.

One of the things I like most in wildlife photography is to use a wide angle lens with animals. This isn't easy because of the extreme proximity of the subject required. From the beginning of the trip, I wanted to photograph a bear this way. The forest was definitely the most suitable place for the purpose, so I decided to try. Even though the bear approached our hide and allowed for many photographs in the beautiful light, it wasn't close enough to allow me to do the shot I wanted. After nearly three hours the bear finally found a seat right where I wanted him. The picture is not perfect; I would have preferred completely snow covered ground, but I was happy with what I got.

*continued on page 101* ➤

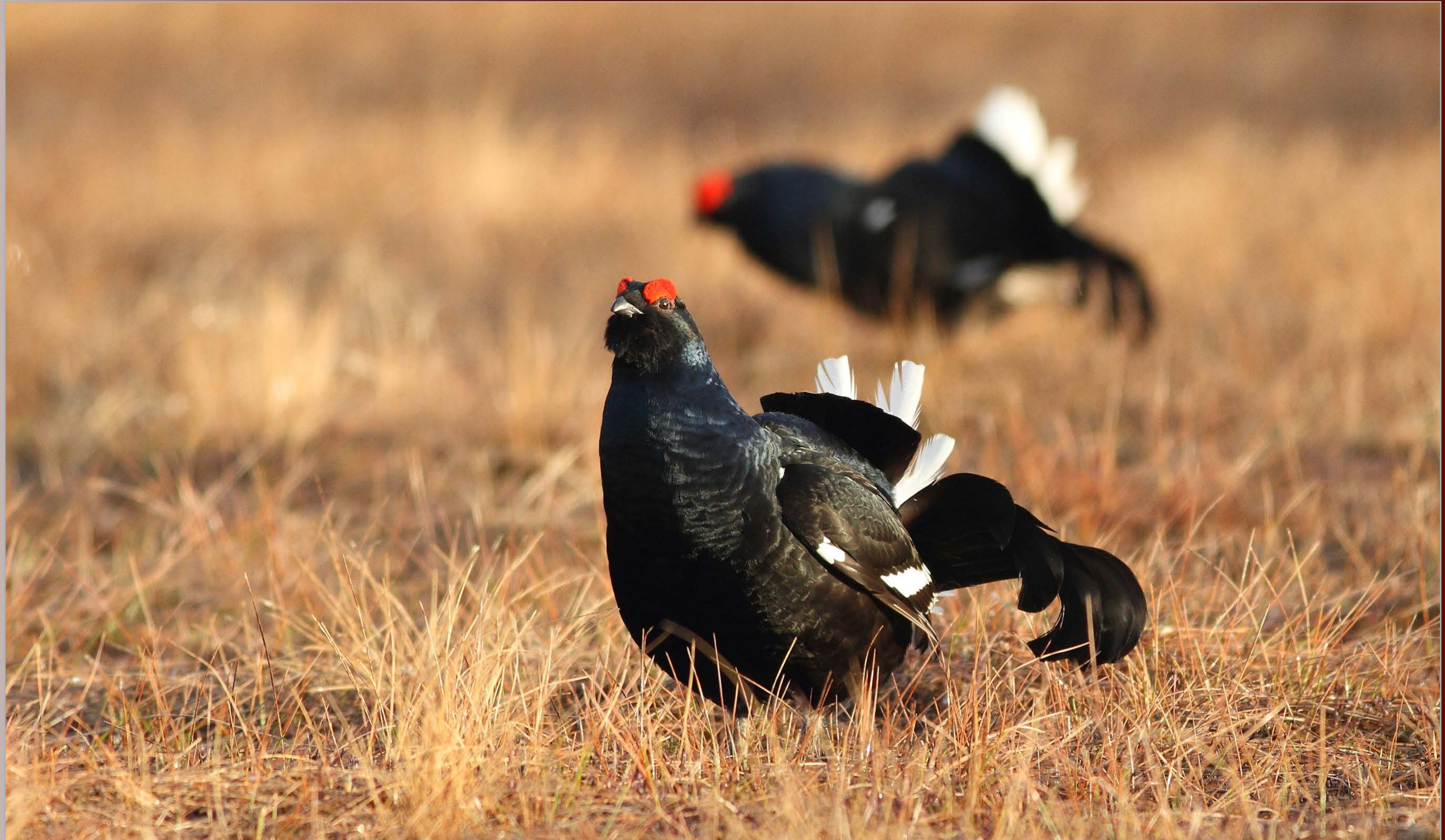




**Eurasian Brown Bear** *Ursus arctos*

A large male - bathed in a warm golden light - approaches the hide where visiting photographers sit in wait. Without the use of well-camouflaged hides and - above all - regular baiting, capturing such images would require an enormous amount of time and an inordinate amount of luck.





**Black Grouse** *Tetrao tetrix*

A large bird, with males being around 53 centimetres (21 in) long and weighing 1,000–1,450 grams (2.20–3.20 lb) and females approximately 40 centimetres (16 in) and weighing 750–1,110 grams (1.65–2.45 lb). Males sport black plumage, red wattles, a white wingbar, and a lyre-shaped tail, which appears forked in flight.





Although it was still April, at the end of our journey the snow had already melted and the landscape was completely transformed. The number of bears present grew day by day as they awoke from hibernation, and consequently increased the chance of seeing them. The last three days in particular I photographed bears in all possible conditions: sunrise, sunset, fog, and also under a snowfall. I could not hope for anything better!

The last night we definitely had the best show. Two young males had finished their snacking and began to play in front of our eyes, first rubbing their snouts against each other then standing up and beginning to sink. We could see it was not a real fight because the bites were only hinted at and there was no aggression in their hits. Unfortunately it was too late and too dark to take pictures, but I remained in ecstasy watching that scene, filming it as a record. I could not hope for better experiences from this adventure. I look forward to returning again at another time of the year to photograph the cubs with their mothers. They are easy to see in June and July, when you can photograph them in the treetops where they climb to escape from the big males who try to attack them to mate with females. I expect another fantastic Finnish adventure!

Finland is not just good for bears. I think it should be considered, at least in Europe, the paradise of every wildlife photographer, both for mammals and for

**Eurasian Brown Bear** *Ursus arctos*

The Brown Bears of the The Martinsekosen Eräkeskus forest are most active in late April and early May, at the end of their hibernation period. The landscape then can still be partially covered in snow.

*continued on page 103* ➤





**Eurasian Brown Bear** *Ursus arctos arctos*

Another dramatic close-up of a large Brown Bear. This extremely powerful and normally peaceful species is noted for its unpredictable disposition. However - unlike in America, where an average of two people a year are killed by bears - Scandinavia has only three fatal bear attacks in the last century on record.





### **Eurasian Brown Bear** *Ursus arctos arctos*

A full grown male weighs on average no more than 250 and 300 kilograms (550 and 660 lb). The largest Eurasian brown bear recorded was 481 kg (1,058 lb) and was nearly 2.5 m (8.2 ft) long. Females typically range between 150–250 kg (330–550 lb).

birds. There are so many animals that it is not rare to find a capercaillie on the roadside or white hare behind a house. On my trip, we focused our attention on two particular species, dedicating ourselves exclusively to them for few days: the wolverine and the black grouse. The wolverine is one of the shyest mammals and an absolutely fascinating creature. It is the size of a medium-sized dog and has long curved claws that are rather scary. Wolverines run with a curious gait, the awkward bounding stride characteristic of all mustelids. Anything but awkward, the black grouse is a beautiful bird that, during this time of the year, fights with other males for the conquest of the females. During these battles, you can sometimes see twenty grouses simultaneously in the arena, a pleasure for every photographer.

Finland has proved to be one of the most fascinating places I've ever seen. If you are a wildlife photographer, you should absolutely plan a visit. ●

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**Eurasian Brown Bear** *Ursus arctos arctos*

In antiquity, the Eurasian brown bear was largely carnivorous, with 80% of its diet consisting of animal matter. However, as its habitat increasingly disappeared, meat consisted of only 40% of its dietary intake in the late Middle Ages, till modern times where meat now amounts to little more than 10–15% of its diet.