

# Touch the Wild

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## Martinselkonen Nature Reserve

One of the absolute best of the various places that offer the possibility of photographing brown bears (*Ursus arctos*) in Finland is Martinselkonen Nature Reserve. Situated close to the Russian border in the municipality of Suomussalmi in Eastern Finland (150 kilometres from Kuusamo, 170 from Kajaani, 180 from Kuhmo and 270 from Oulu), this tranquil wilderness location is highly recommended - on occasion up to 20 bears and 8 cubs have been seen in a single night.

### **The Best Time of year**

The bears usually wake from hibernation around mid-April. At this time of year there is still plenty of snow, so it is possible to photograph them against a background of snow until early May. However localised spells of warm weather in spring can affect this, as brown bears do not hibernate fully so are woken easily. The first bears are usually seen around the end of March, and by early May they start to forage voraciously. During their long hibernation they use up large amounts of body fat, so at this time of year they are lean and hungry - but their coats are in excellent condition - which makes them highly photogenic.

Rutting normally starts in the last week of May. At this time you are unlikely to see large numbers of bears at the feeding site, but they are very active. You may see adult males vying for superiority, which can cause individuals to get extremely aggressive with one another. Each year some lucky visitors witness bears mating and capture amazing images. Although bears have been observed mating as late as the first week of July, experience suggests that best time to have a chance of seeing this is from the end of May through until the end of June. The long summer evenings at this time of year are perfect for watching wildlife.

Once the mating season is over, the bears start to forage again with gusto. Although there may be occasional fights between adult males, the forest is generally a more peaceful place in July. At this time of the year over a single night at the hide you may see as many as 20 or more individual bears. Females with cubs usually start to appear at the feeding site sometime in June, although some years they have been seen in May, and in others not until early July. However, as a general rule, it seems that July and early August are the best times to photograph females with small cubs.

Safaris to watch brown bear started in this area in 1996. At first few bears were seen, but over the years sightings have steadily improved to the extent that they are now frequent. During the summers of 2005 and 2006, for example, bears were spotted on each safari. Since 1999 the practice of leaving out carrion has attracted even mothers with cubs, who are usually extremely nervous of human presence, to the site many times. Some bears that appear have been seen regularly since first being seen as long ago as 1997. The bear-watching site is located in sparse coniferous forest beside a small bog, where bears can be seen from as close as five metres away. Forest is a more suitable environment than open bog, as bears feel more comfortable when there is some tree cover that offers places to hide, and thus safety – especially for cubs.

### **Other species**

The forest around Martinselkonen offers opportunities to see woodland birds such as woodpeckers, and rare eastern species such as Siberian jay and rustic bunting. The black kite, which is very rare in Finland, nests in the area and visits the carrion that is laid out to lure bears on an almost daily basis. Another frequent visitor is the white-tailed eagle (four were once seen together!), while a rarer visitor is the golden eagle. A feeder in the lodge garden attracts bullfinches, siskins and great spotted woodpeckers, plus the odd red squirrel. Nesting boxes have attracted Tengmalm's, pygmy and Ural owls (ten species have been spotted in the area, from the diminutive pygmy owl to the magnificent great grey owl), and passerines such as Siberian tit and pied flycatcher.

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## Martinselkonen Nature Reserve Bear Hides

The hides are located some two kilometres inside the forest, around 10 minutes drive from the lodge. The only access is on foot, so you need to be reasonably fit. Two purpose-built, wooden, main hides occupy a fantastic position in a forest clearing: the larger one has ten comfortable coach-style reclining seats, while the adjacent smaller hide has seats for nine people. Conditions are basic: each hide has bunk beds where you can rest (sleeping bags and pillows are provided), and a dry toilet; pro-hides (see below) have no proper toilet, only a bucket. In June and July there are a lot of mosquitoes, but these are generally not a problem inside the hide. Both hides are equipped with sound amplifying systems so you can pick up external noises easily, and camera ports that allow unobstructed photography.

If you wish to take photos of the highest quality, you can book one of six professional hides on payment of a supplement. Due to limited availability, these must be reserved in advance:

200 metres from the main feeding site is a boggy area, where the oldest pro-hide - for up to three people - is located. Roughly 100 metres away is a second pro-hide, also for up to three people. Each hide has six camera holes. From here you can photograph bears in a more open area against a background of old-growth forest, which offers better lighting than in the forest. In early spring, the snow remains longest on the boggy area - so this is the best spot to photograph bears in a snowy environment.

The newest pro-hide, which takes three people, is beside a small pond in an open boggy area, around 30 metres from forest cover, so lighting is good. It stands on a route bears use to approach the feeding site, around one kilometre from the two main hides, but only half a kilometre's walk from the drop-off area.

The forest site has one pro-hide for two people, and another for three. Both lie roughly 50 metres from the main feeding site in coniferous forest consisting of pine and spruce trees. The smaller pro-hide has four camera holes, whereas the bigger one has six. Visibility is up to 40-50 metres.

The first bears often appear soon after 17:00, so you need to have an early dinner to have sufficient time to get to the hide and settle in. In spring and summer this leaves plenty of daylight for photography. The bears may stay around until the following morning, so you cannot leave the hide until around 07:00 - as you have to wait for them to disappear into the forest. Your local guide will come to advise you when you can emerge.

Photographing the Bears

**Photography:** the bears get very close to the forest hides, so anything from a wide-angle up to a 500 mm telephoto lens will do; a 70-200 mm telephoto lens is good choice. In the hides beside the bog or the pond, you don't really need a wide-angle lens - the best choice is probably a 70-200 mm telephoto, or longer lens. There is no need to bring a tripod, however you may wish to bring a tripod head - which you can attach to a board in the hide. There are bean bags in each hide.

## Itinerary

### Friday: London to Kajaani

Fly from London to Kajaani via Helsinki. Details of the flight to be arranged independently. Advice can be given on request. On arrival at Kajaani Airport you will be met and transferred by road to your accommodation at Martinselkonen Wilderness Lodge - a distance of 170 kilometres i.e. around two hours drive. Once you reach Martinselkonen where you will spend 3 nights, you'll have a quick introduction to the area before dinner.

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## **Martinselkonen Wilderness Lodge**

This lodge is located close to one of Europe's premier bear-viewing spots, near Eastern Finland's border with Russia. The refurbished former frontier guard station provides clean and comfortable accommodation in 14 rooms for up to 26 people. There is a sauna that has a separate self-contained shower. The lodge is small with a highly personal atmosphere - local produce features in the meals and there's always a hot coffee pot in the dining room.

The highlight here, however, is an overnight stay in a bear hide. Located just 10 kilometres from the lodge in a forest clearing, two communal hides accommodate nine and ten people respectively, with comfortable coach-style seats, a sleeping area and a toilet. Other smaller, more rustic, hides are available for keen photographers. All the hides have camera ports and a knowledgeable guide is on hand to answer your questions and help you to see bears and other wildlife. Bears of all ages have been seen here, ranging from small cubs to 300 kilogramme adult males.

Dinner is included today.

## **Saturday: Martinselkonen Nature Reserve**

This morning after breakfast you can go for an optional walk in the nearby forest by way of an introduction to this ecosystem, returning to the lodge for lunch. In the afternoon, after an early dinner, at around 16:00 you will be driven to the drop-off point in Martinselkonen Nature Reserve, then walk nearly two kilometres along a forest track to the hide to settle in for your first overnight bear watch.

Normal outdoor clothing and waterproof walking boots are essential. The weather can be quite changeable, so bring a waterproof jacket and a warm fleece. The hides are unheated and may get quite chilly in the early hours of the morning, so prepare accordingly and dress in layers.

All meals are included today. A snack and drink are provided for your overnight stay at the hide.

## **Sunday: Martinselkonen Nature Reserve**

On return from the hide early this morning, you have an ample breakfast back at the lodge. You are then free to relax and review your photos from the previous night's bear watching. There may be an opportunity to do an optional activity in the vicinity. Once again, after an early dinner, at around 16:00 you are driven to the drop-off point in Martinselkonen Nature Reserve, then walk to the hide for your second night of bear watching.

**A night in a small private photography hide is included for you today.**

All meals are included today. A snack and drink are provided for your overnight stay at the hide.

## **Monday: Kajaani to London**

On return from the hide you have breakfast back at the lodge. Soon after it is time to check out and depart for the transfer back to Kajaani for your flight back to the UK.

Only breakfast is included today.

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## Prices Available on Request

Departures are flexible and available from the beginning of May through to the end of July.  
The price includes.

- 3 nights accommodation in Martinselkonen Wilderness Lodge.
- Breakfast, Dinner and Snack whilst in the hides
- Airport Transfer (as described)
- All services from tour driver/guide.
- All services from photographic guide.
- Bottled Water whilst on safari

The price excludes.

- Any flights
- Tips and Gratuities
- Any drinks other than water.
- Travel Insurance.

**To book a place we require an agreed deposit paid at time of booking. The balance is paid 2 months before departure. Additional extension days can be added to the itinerary with the possibility of hides for wolverine, Capercaillie and Black Grouse.**