

Tracking wolves in Finland

by Bethany Smith

I should probably start by explaining why I've been chasing top predators through the Finnish wilderness in the middle of winter. For as long as I can remember I've been fascinated by animals, particularly large, carnivorous animals like wolves and bears, and I'm completely set on a career in animal conservation. To gain some practical experience in this field, I spent November and December 2015 in Finland, volunteering as a research intern on a large carnivore project with the organisation Deep Karelia.

I got off to a rocky start, initially missing my flight, but after negotiating with the airline manager, a sleepless night in Helsinki and a six-hour train journey, I finally arrived at Lieksa train station. To my relief, Vladimir Bologov and Laetitia Becker, the founders of the organisation, were waiting for me on the platform. After another 45-minute drive, during which it started to snow (a pretty exciting sight for a Brit), I arrived at my final destination — a large, yellow school-house in the forest. I was introduced to my cohabiters — three other interns, a cat who could pass for an MI5 agent, he was so stealthy in his attacks, and a Yugoslavian mountain dog the size of a bear but with the temperament of a teddy bear. I was then informed that I'd be able to shower twice a week from a bucket once the water had been heated by the sauna. I was pretty mortified at first but you quickly get used to it!

It was soon Monday and I was extremely excited to be starting work. 'Work' meant driving or walking set loops in the study area looking for animal tracks. I therefore had quickly to learn how to identify the prints of different animals: wolf (large, elongated prints with claw marks); lynx (circular prints with or without claw marks) and wolverine (large prints with five toes). We found prints of other animals too, such as moose, reindeer, mountain hare, fox and pine marten, but it was the prints of the large predators that we were interested in. Once tracks were found we set about following them in both directions, recording our location with handheld GPS devices, a process called snow-tracking.

I spent many days tracking a mother lynx with her two kittens and found several mountain hare remains along the way. I also found a place where a wolverine had dug up one of his buried kills. From the size of the jaw bone and the number of teeth, we concluded that the remains belonged to a small mustelid, probably a stoat. One day, we stopped tracking a wolverine to resume the next day, only to work out from the tracks that had we continued another 100m the day before, we would have come across the wolverine sleeping! The animals I did manage to see were pretty amazing: a red squirrel, plenty of capercaillie (rare in the UK), a beautiful mountain hare who was sneakily following in our tracks, and the last animal I expected to find — a baby adder!

The highlight of my wildlife watching, though, has to be spotting eagles and wolves from a photo-hide. A few weeks into my internship it was my birthday and I couldn't think of a better way to enter my 23rd year than in a

hide in the middle of the wilderness. The hide consisted of a bunk bed, frozen barrel of water, camping stove, heater, dry toilet and a fantastic view over a marsh where pig carcasses were placed as bait. When I woke in the morning I was greeted by the sight of several golden and white-tailed eagles, and shortly afterwards three wolves materialised out of the dusk haze and began to feed on a carcass only 50m away from the hide. I cannot put into words how amazing this experience was!

When I wasn't tracking large predators or looking for wildlife, I spent my time being attacked by the bosses' energetic children, avoiding being attacked by the cat, looking out for the aurora borealis (with no luck) and processing excrements that I had collected. Processing excrements does indeed mean picking through wolf/lynx poo to find bones, fur and plant matter, which is as gross as it sounds but also extremely interesting.

I was filmed by a Finnish reporter one day, and spent time at nearby Ruunaa National Park, which is incredibly beautiful. I was really impressed to see places every few kilometres where wood and fire pits were provided. The fire pits even had grills installed so I thought it only right to make a grilled cheese sandwich (see 'cheesy' photo below).

I hope it's clear that I had an amazing time, but I'd like to finish on a few lessons I learned that I feel the need to pass on:

- 1) If you leave a motion-sensitive camera in the forest, you will record one video of a wolf and the rest will be unflattering, close-up shots of your face.

- 2) Don't disable your mobile phone if it's 11 km back to house and you only have 1 hour and 30 minutes before it's pitch black.

- 3) If it's -5°C your snot will freeze, if it's between -10°C and -15°C your hair and eyelashes will freeze, and if it's -25°C, don't go outside to look at the moon without a coat on!