

*Here: the brown bear is an omnivorous, generally solitary creature - catching a glimpse is a rare treat, especially mothers with cubs*

# If YOU go down to the woods today

Heading to the hides of the Wild Taiga network of east Finland, Ben Illis finds an unspoilt wilderness, where the long days (and all too brief nights) are spent in the company of forest predators, including brown bears, wolves and wolverine

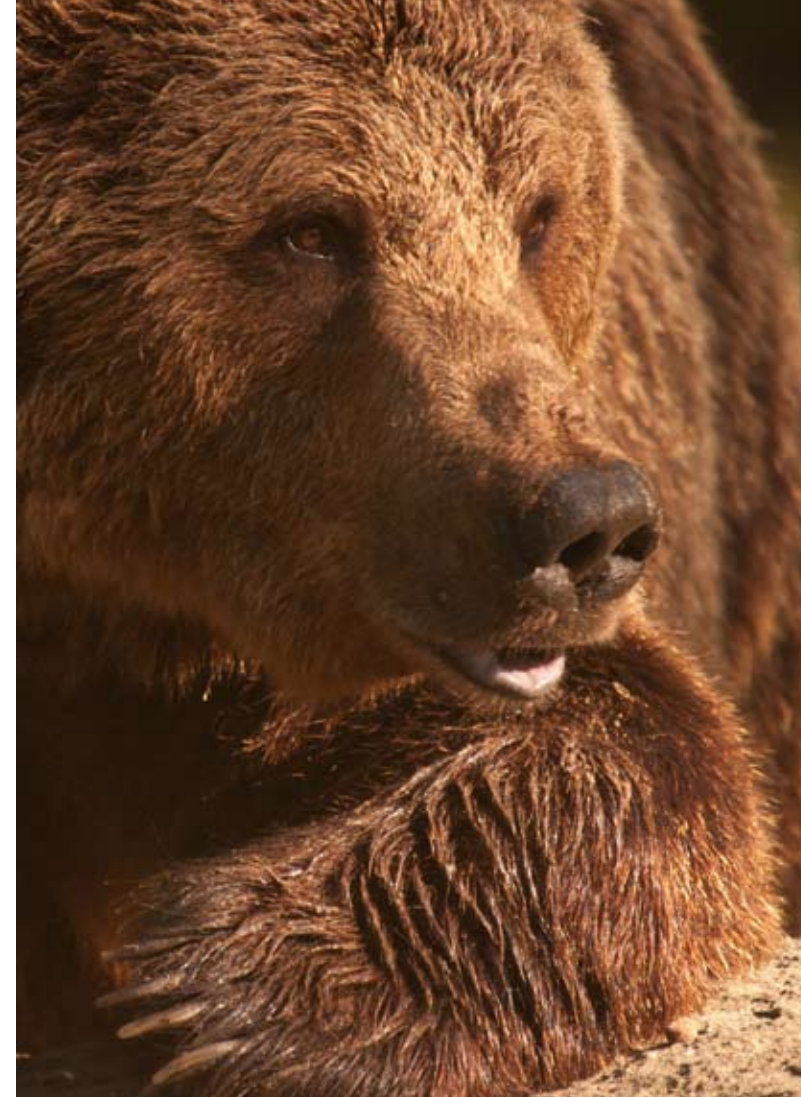


As I survey the field of cotton-flowers, their seed-heads bobbing gently in the breeze, a familiar silhouette lumbers heavily into view, knee-deep in the marsh. It is an adult European brown bear. I can tell it's a female from the comparatively narrow set of her head and shoulders. Her cream-tipped, chocolate coat is lustrous even in the flat light of an overcast day. She is magnificent. She is in her prime. A smaller shape noses into view behind her. Then a smaller one, followed by two more the same size as the first. It's Laura, a regular visitor here, whose very unusual litter of four cubs I have been desperately hoping to see. Born last winter, three of her cubs are about the size of a spaniel, the fourth more like a terrier. The runt turns out to be the boss, leading the way in exploring, gambolling, play-fighting; always employing impossibly cute behaviour. It's hard not to use words like 'cute' when describing bear cubs. Bears have a unique place in the age-old relationship between man and animal. As children, we are tucked up with a teddy bear and read fairy tales in which bears serve as totemic bogey-monsters; a warning not to stray from the beaten path. My heart wants me to play with the cubs; my head tells me it would mean instant death.

#### FAMILY FORAGE

Back at the swamp, there are five other adult bears in view and Laura places herself between the closest adults and her cubs at all times. Despite playing apparently freely, the cubs too are watchful. A huge, battle-scarred male appears. Immediately, all four cubs rear up on hind legs, sniffing the air cautiously. Laura also pricks up her ears, suspicious of his intentions and all eyes are fixed on the newcomer, as he ambles slowly towards them. This is Badari, known to be at least 42 years old, possibly even around 50, making him a strong contender for the world's oldest wild brown bear. He is the size of a small cow and, while visibly elderly, is far from frail. These days, during the mating season, when males fight for supremacy and the right to mate, Badari absents himself. His age and size, however, assure him high status among the clan, despite his effective retirement from the breeding arena. As he approaches, it's clear he has only feeding in mind and, maintaining a safe distance, Laura relaxes. Two cubs go back to foraging. The little one, with a sidelong glance, pushes the fourth cub over, tumbling on top in a snarling play-fight, which the others swiftly join. Yes, impossibly cute.

I am at Martinselkonen Eräkeskus, in the no-man's-land between the Finnish and Russian borders, on the westernmost fringe of the vast Eurasian taiga forest

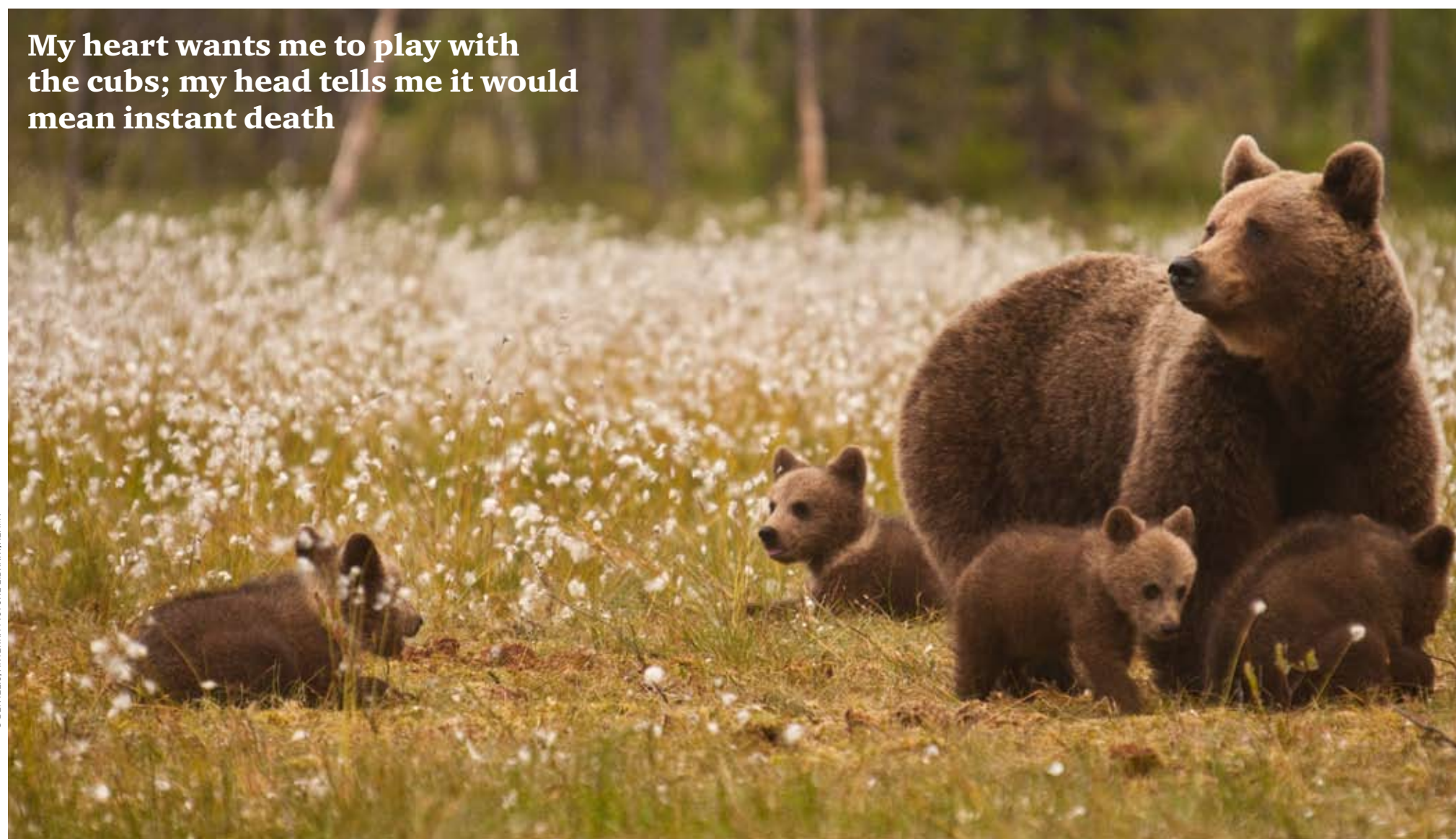


Clockwise from below: Ben waits patiently at the swamp hide, Martinselkonen Eräkeskus; Laura with her cubs; foraging along the water's edge; much of their diet consists of nuts, berries, fruit and roots



### My heart wants me to play with the cubs; my head tells me it would mean instant death

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that stretches across Russia and into Mongolia beyond. The taiga is the planet's largest forest and is characterised by dense coniferous woodland and open expanses of swamp, filled with hummocks of spongy moss and cotton grass. There are some 60 independent tourism companies operating across this stretch of eastern Finland linked by an independent association, Wild Taiga, which was established to promote tourism.

Another brown bear, Ram (short for Rambo), was named before her gender had been established and has been visiting Martinselkonen since she was herself a cub. Her arrival this spring with her first litter of three has been a wonderful reward for Markku Määttä and his family, for their years of patience in establishing trust in the region's bears. It is this familiarity and trust that affords visitors such an excellent chance of seeing cubs. Mothers with cubs usually stay in the deep forest and even to glimpse them is a rare treat, let alone to sit watching them for hours as I am lucky enough to do. In two nights at Martinselkonen I see no fewer than four mothers with litters – two sets of twins, Ram and her triplets and, of course, Laura and her quads.

Trust has been earned here, as it has across the region, by baiting the hides with food. This causes conflicting emotions – am I in a glorified open-air zoo? The bear-feeding programme has been established in close association with large predator experts. One of them, Maria, was my guide at the Boreal Wildlife Centre and she explained that in this area, over-fishing has resulted in the drying up of the annual salmon run that is so well-documented in North America and that →

## WILD TAIGA

The wildlife you might be able to see in east Finland's forests



## BEAR

There are an estimated 1,500 brown bears in Finland. They have a life expectancy of around 25 years, with females living a little longer. Females have their first litters at about six, while males must wait until they succeed in the fighting arena for their chance at fatherhood.



## WOLF

There are thought to be only around 140 grey wolves resident in Finland, although some estimates put numbers as high as 300. Despite their relative scarcity, the grey wolf's range and distribution is vast and they are not considered threatened globally in any way.



## WOLVERINE

The world's largest terrestrial mustelid (weasel) is both a fearsome predator and effective scavenger. Despite their relatively small size (65-107cm in length) they are fierce and have been known to drive bears off a carcass. An estimated 130 wolverine live in Finland.



## LYNX

Although seldom encountered, the lynx is Finland's most populous predator, numbering over 2,000 individuals nationally. Lynx don't feed on carrion, so are not attracted to the hides. It feeds on small prey, including mammals and birds, which it hunts for itself.



## FOREST REINDEER

There are thought to be between 700 to 1,000 forest reindeer in the region, roughly one third of the national population. Larger than domesticated northern reindeer, the forest reindeer is considered threatened and exists largely in forests, rather than on open tundra.

The Petola Visitor Centre just outside Kuhmo gives a fascinating insight into the status of the region's four large predators and main prey species. Visit [www.wildtaiga.fi/en](http://www.wildtaiga.fi/en) and [www.outdoors.fi](http://www.outdoors.fi)



*Clockwise from here: sunrise over the taiga; cubs rear up in reaction to an approaching male; an impressive array of birds can also be seen in the area; some hides are also geared up to spot wolves; Ben and fellow kayakers on a lunch stop before paddling to the beaver-flooded plain on day two of his trip*

**In the summer months, the sun sets around midnight and rises again by two in the morning**



formed a vital part of the bears' seasonal diet, as they fatten up for hibernation. The richness of the salmon run also explains why North American brown bears, which are the same species, are up to 30 per cent bigger than their European counterparts. By laying out food in such a way as to encourage natural foraging behaviour among the bears, we are both replacing food which we have made unavailable, as well as drawing bears to areas where visitors can observe them in the wild, thus facilitating bear conservation. It's a persuasive argument.

## WHITE NIGHTS

My first 24 hours in the taiga were spent with a gentle introduction to the land of the midnight sun from Urpo Piirainen of wilderness activity company Wilds Piirainen. In summer months, the sun sets at around midnight and rises again by two in the morning. This leaves only two hours of twilight, allowing for all night photography but, of course, making eight hours sleep a rarity. Instead, you nap for a few hours here and there, seizing the day – and night – with both hands. At midnight I found myself under a spectacular sunset, swimming rapids in a dry suit, before spending my first night at Routa Travel's husky farm on the spectacular shores of one of Finland's estimated 300,000 lakes of over one hectare. Day two saw me gently kayaking across a beaver-flooded plain. Lunch was a feast of sausages, grilled on a sharpened stick over an open fire, before swimming in the cool waters of the lake

below. The water of these lakes is filtered through peat, so while otherwise very pure, it takes on an inky stain, resulting in some magical, other-worldly reflections. Blue skies and billowing white clouds seem more intensely coloured in the water than in the skies above. The absolute joy of an environment like this is that it is all but devoid of pollution – even light and noise – as cities and aeroplane routes are far, far away. It is the best kind of wilderness: utterly unspoilt.

That night came my first taste of the hides when I visited Urpo's one-man wolverine hide, just a few miles from Kuhmo town limits. Notoriously shy, wolverine are unpredictable at the best of times and sadly failed to show that night. All the anticipatory thrill of the chase was there though, and my appetite was more than whet for what was to come. The following night, at an Arcticmedia hide, I elected to go for wolf. The hide was larger this time, with beds for five and an ensuite eco-toilet – not for nothing is it nicknamed 'Paradise'. Arcticmedia is run by award-winning wildlife photographer Lassi Rautiainen and family and, in addition to giving free advice, they rent kit and offer lessons to the uninitiated. Like most, they operate at more than one location; some geared to bears, some to wolves or wolverine and some to the impressive array of birds that visit the region throughout the year. That night I see my first bear and I'm gripped for a good 90 minutes as he patrols the area, marking his territory, eating and foraging. After his departure, I take to my bunk, leaving Mika, my guide, to take his turn on watch. An hour or so

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