



Finland: Brown Bear

At the Easternmost Point of the European Union:



Forty Bears and 2,000 Hunters

Text: Rolf D. Baldus

Photos: Rolf Baldus, Jaana Puhakka, Getty Images



Finland is almost as big as Germany, but has only five and a half million inhabitants, and a lot more trees. Suomi, as its inhabitants call it, is therefore the most forested country in Europe. There is also room for almost 200,000 lakes between the forests. With a hunting friend I fly from Helsinki to the far east of the country, to the Finnish Karelia on the border with Russia. The farther northeast we go, the more trees and forests and fewer human settlements there are. It is an area made for hunters and other nature lovers.

We are invited to Iломantsi, the easternmost city in Finland, with just 5,000 inhabitants. A little further away, on the small island of Virmajärvi, is the easternmost point of the European Union, on the border to Russia. The Iломantsi municipal area covers 3,000 kilometers, which means there are on average less than two people per square kilometer. The density of wild game is however also low. Additionally, wolf and bear numbers have increased in recent years, causing a dramatic reduction in the moose population. As a result the moose season was cancelled for the current year, and the quota for bears was increased. The quota for all of Karelia is 137, forty in Iломantsi.

We traveled north primarily with the expectation of experiencing a unique natural area and exciting hunting, but less with the expectation of actually killing a bear. However, one always hopes for Diana's benevolence, and it is well known that hope dies last. Our optimism takes a hit when we discover after our arrival that at least 2,000 hunters will be participating in this hunt. It will take less than two weeks for the quota to be filled. Unfortunately, we have only planned for a single day of driven hunting. A quick calculation reveals that statistically we have a chance of less than 0.1 percent of killing a bear. That fact is sobering, but it in no way reduces our anticipation and excitement.

On our drive north we pass many vehicles that have some form of hunter's orange visible. The bear hunt starts on August 20, and at four o'clock that morning we meet at a clubhouse that belongs to several hunting associations. More than a hundred hunters are gathered there for final instructions. Maps are studied, hounds bark, instructions are given, and then suddenly everything is in motion, with members of every club moving to their own areas. For relatively small fees the hunting grounds are leased by the state or by private landowners. Hunting in Finland is a



Left: Planning for the next driven hunt.

Above: Hounds are an essential element in every bear drive.

Right: In the course of his life this hunter has killed four bears with this old Mosin-Nagant army carbine from the Second World War. The rifle still shoots perfectly.

common practice and readily available for everyone. It doesn't cost much: a few euros for a lease, a state license, and membership in a local hunting club. The hunters are all quite well-equipped. Most have modern rifles. The stereotypical farmer-hunter who hunts with the Mosin-Nagant that his father brought home from the Winter War in 1944 still exists, but has become exceedingly rare. Almost everyone has a



Bear Hunting in Finland

Requirements:

- Finnish Hunting License
- Permit for the specific hunting area
- Bear License
- Rifle License
- Shooting Test Certification (granted locally)

Most bear hunts take place in north and east Finland on state land. The national organization Metsähallitus assigns the necessary hunting permits. It however does not offer or arrange hunts. Interested foreign hunters usually have to get in touch with a hunting association that has been approved to hunt a specific area. There are 4,000 hunting associations in the country. Regarding the success rate; it is important to keep in mind that the hunting areas are very large, and the overall success rate is relatively low. Without local guides, hunting by foreigners isn't possible.

The quota for bears is set annually. During the hunt it is also necessary to check online to see whether the quota has been filled.

Bear season: August 20 to October 31.

Female bears with cubs are protected, as are all bears younger than one year of age.





Left: This brown bear was taken during one of the driven hunts.

Bottom left: To protect the prized hide, the bear was carried out of the difficult terrain.

two-way radio in their pocket, and most are connected via an app. Unlike in Germany, mobile phones seem to work even in the most remote corners of the Finnish forests.

The Tracker App shows the exact location of all the participating hunters, along with a host of other information, including the amount of charge they have left on their phones. The dogs are also visible on the app, and you can follow their movements exactly. How often and how long they bark is also displayed. From this, everyone can get a pretty accurate picture of whether they are just searching or actually following game.

At the outset of the first drive it appears as if a hound is active and chasing a fleeing bear. But soon the phone rings. The dog is behind a moose. This is verified by another hunter. Our vehicle picks me up and we drive to another area and are positioned at new stands that are quite far apart. The two hunters who share their car with us have never shot a bear and are extremely nervous. They are literally trembling with hunting fever. In the second drive the hounds are quickly on game, and soon leave the designated area. Like dervishes, a couple of hunters rush past me to cut off the bear. Behind them, a cameraman gasps for air as he passes. The hunting association films everything, later to be posted on Facebook.

On my app I can follow the path the bear takes as he leaves the area. I hear later that he had crossed the border into Russia, which was only two kilometers away, and in this way saved his hide, literally. Apparently, the bears do that often. They have precise knowledge of the local geography, even without an app.

At midday there is a break in the hunt. I just get comfortable for a short nap in our small cabin when our guide knocks violently on the door. A dog handler had continued working in another spot, and is now on a bear. We have to move fast. The hunt resumes. But first, our hosts rush us along narrow forest roads with tight curves in the direction of the drive. They already know where they will put us. At first I just hope that no vehicle comes from the opposite direction. Unfortunately, this drive proceeds like the previous one, with the bear illegally entering into the former USSR.

In the evening the final drive of the day is organized. This time I stand along a path that winds through an open patch of tall spruce that is surrounded by thickets. A dog is obviously behind a bear less than two kilometers away. Since I am a bit old-fashioned and don't rely completely on my Tracker App, I follow the dog's path with my ears. Apparently he is coming straight toward me. But at just a hundred and twenty meters the hound obviously turns left and moves straight in the direction of my hunting friend, who has traveled with me from Germany. Soon a shot breaks. However, to my disappointment, I can see on my app that the dog doesn't stop running. Did he miss? Even worse, did he wound the bear? My friend is a very experienced hunter and a really good shot. He has previously killed two brown bears in Sweden behind moose hounds. Hunting fever shouldn't have been a problem.

However, that doesn't apply to his nearest stand neighbor, one of our two guides. I would soon learn that the bear passed by him at fifteen meters and he cleanly missed. Just before that, the bear raced past my friend at only about thirty meters. He heard it, saw the bushes moving, but not a single hair was visible. His bullet remained in the barrel.

The shooter is still trembling with excitement and disappointment when I arrive. The miss certainly wasn't due to faulty equipment. He looks like an elite soldier just before a parachute jump. The antenna from a two-way radio sticks up from his functional GoreTex camouflage jacket. The remote control for his action

camera is mounted on his bicep. The camera itself is on his cap. A GPS is attached to his forearm with Velcro. His rifle is of the latest German high-class production, with a silencer and an adjustable synthetic stock. "It was a difficult shot," my friend tries to console him.

The dog is still chasing the bear, so all the shooters get set up again to attempt to cut them off. The effort proves to be in vain. With approaching darkness the hunt must be broken off.

As we arrive at the hunting lodge, a bear is just being skinned. It weighs perhaps a hundred kilograms. Two more bears have been taken in the area. The next morning our hunting party shoots a bear and yet another one in the evening. We would have liked to have been there. Unfortunately, we were only scheduled for a single day. Instead, we drive to the nearby summerhouse of the president of the Hunters Association of Karelia. In the evening we enjoy the obligatory sauna, followed by a jump into the lake. The next day we unexpectedly get the opportunity to participate in a few more drives. We enjoy the experience and the scenery, but the sight of a bear eludes us. We have to be satisfied with what we get. Having a bear pass by me at a hundred and twenty meters and by my friend to thirty meters was significantly more than we could have statistically expected with the 0.1 percent probability of success.

This was the second time I have hunted for bear. Four years ago, I was in Ontario with six friends to hunt black bear over bait. None of us even caught glimpse of a bear. In that regard this hunt was clearly more successful. Certainly though, there is room for improvement. Perhaps Diana will give me another opportunity, and surprise me with a gracious smile. ■

Important links

Finnish Wildlife Agency: www.riista.fi

Metsähallitus: www.metsa.fi