

Bear witness

You don't have to go to North America or the Arctic to see bears, says **Mark Carwardine**. Sweden, Finland and Romania offer thrilling, close encounters.

Europe's brown bears hold the same place in the Continent's imagination as mountain gorillas do in Africa. Just like their African counterparts, the bears are struggling to survive in most parts of their range, and their impressive size, power and charm make them especially appealing to eco-tourists.

The brown bear, or grizzly as it is usually known in North America, was once common and widespread. It roamed across most of Europe (except on islands such as Ireland, Iceland, Gotland, Corsica and Sardinia), throughout northern and central Asia and across western North America, living in a vast range of habitats from tundra and desert to thick forest.

The species is still widely distributed, but forest clearance and other forms of habitat destruction combined with intensive hunting have taken a heavy toll. Wild bears probably became extinct in Britain by the 10th century – the date is uncertain because more animals were brought here from continental Europe for bear-baiting – but small numbers have survived on the Continent. Today, there are estimated to be some 14,000 bears left in the whole of Europe (outside Russia), and this remnant, increasingly fragmented population is scattered across more than 20 countries.

It's possible to see bears almost anywhere within their European range, especially where numbers are relatively healthy in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. But three countries in particular have properly organised and well-established bear-watching operations: Finland, Sweden and Romania. Finland boasts the largest number of sightings, with reports of more than 20 animals approaching one hide in a single night. There are larger bear populations in Sweden and Romania, but most of these animals are less accustomed to being tourist attractions and tend to be rather shy. However, with a little patience and luck (and, most important of all, the ability to keep quiet), it's possible to get close to some of Europe's largest and most exciting animals. ▶

A foraging bear emerges from the forest undergrowth near a bear-watching hide in Finland. The brown bear is Europe's largest predator, eating anything from ants to moose.

April is a good time to see Scandinavian bears against a snowy backdrop, such as this magnificent 250kg male, photographed outside Edsbyn in Hälsingland, central Sweden.



Steffen Widstrand

SWEDEN



Where to go

Organised bear-watching takes place in the Dalarna and Hälsingland regions of central Sweden, about 300-350km from Stockholm. The main bases are Orsa Finnmark, in Dalarna, with a population of about 600 individuals, and the area around Edsbyn, in Hälsingland, with a population of roughly 100.

When to go

The bears are active throughout the spring, summer and early autumn, but the best times to watch them are from the end of April to mid-August and from early September to early October. The second half of April is popular with photographers keen to take pictures in the snow. The period from late April to the end of May is good for females with cubs and the time when they are most active in daylight to avoid confrontations with large males. Bears are far less visible during the hunting season, which starts around 20 August and lasts for two weeks. The bears are mainly active from dusk to dawn, but the midsummer nights here are quite light and short.

Weather

Sweden is at its best and brightest from late April to September, with long days and short nights. There is slightly less chance of rain in April and May, but it typically rains about one day in three throughout the bear-watching season. In the height of summer, daytime temperatures can reach 22°C or more, but in April, May and September it can drop below freezing at night. Even in June, July and August it can be cool in the hides overnight.

How to get there

It's best to fly to Stockholm and drive from there. Orsa takes about three hours and Edsbyn four hours. There are several comfortable and friendly guesthouses and hotels in both towns.

Bear population and distribution in Sweden

There are estimated to be 1,635-2,840 bears in Sweden, and, unlike most other European populations, numbers are increasing. Distribution is patchy throughout much of the central and northern parts of the country. However, female bears are really confined to four core areas, and most individuals elsewhere are males.

A year in the life of a Swedish bear

Most brown bears in Sweden hibernate from the

end of October until mid-April, though the length of hibernation varies enormously according to latitude and the sex and age of the bear. Pregnant females in the north stay inside the den for up to seven months (and often do not emerge until early May). When they do emerge, they eat high-protein foods – animals, from ants to moose. They feed heavily on moose calves in midsummer. In late summer and autumn, they switch mainly to crowberries and blueberries.

Other wildlife

Large predators are especially difficult to see, but there's a variety of alluring northern birds, including 11 species of owl, as well as sea eagles, capercaillie and black grouse.

Who to contact

Sweden Active Holidays ☎ 00 46 3181 8355; www.swedenactiveholidays.com
Sweden Wildlife Tourism ☎ 00 46 2783 4096; www.swedenwildlife.se
The Big 5 Carnivore Visitors Centre ☎ 00 46 6514 1171; www.de5stora.com
Bears and Wilderness ☎ 00 46 2508 3040; e-mail andrea.friebe@web.de
Wildlife Worldwide ☎ 020 8667 9158; www.wildlifeworldwide.com

FINLAND



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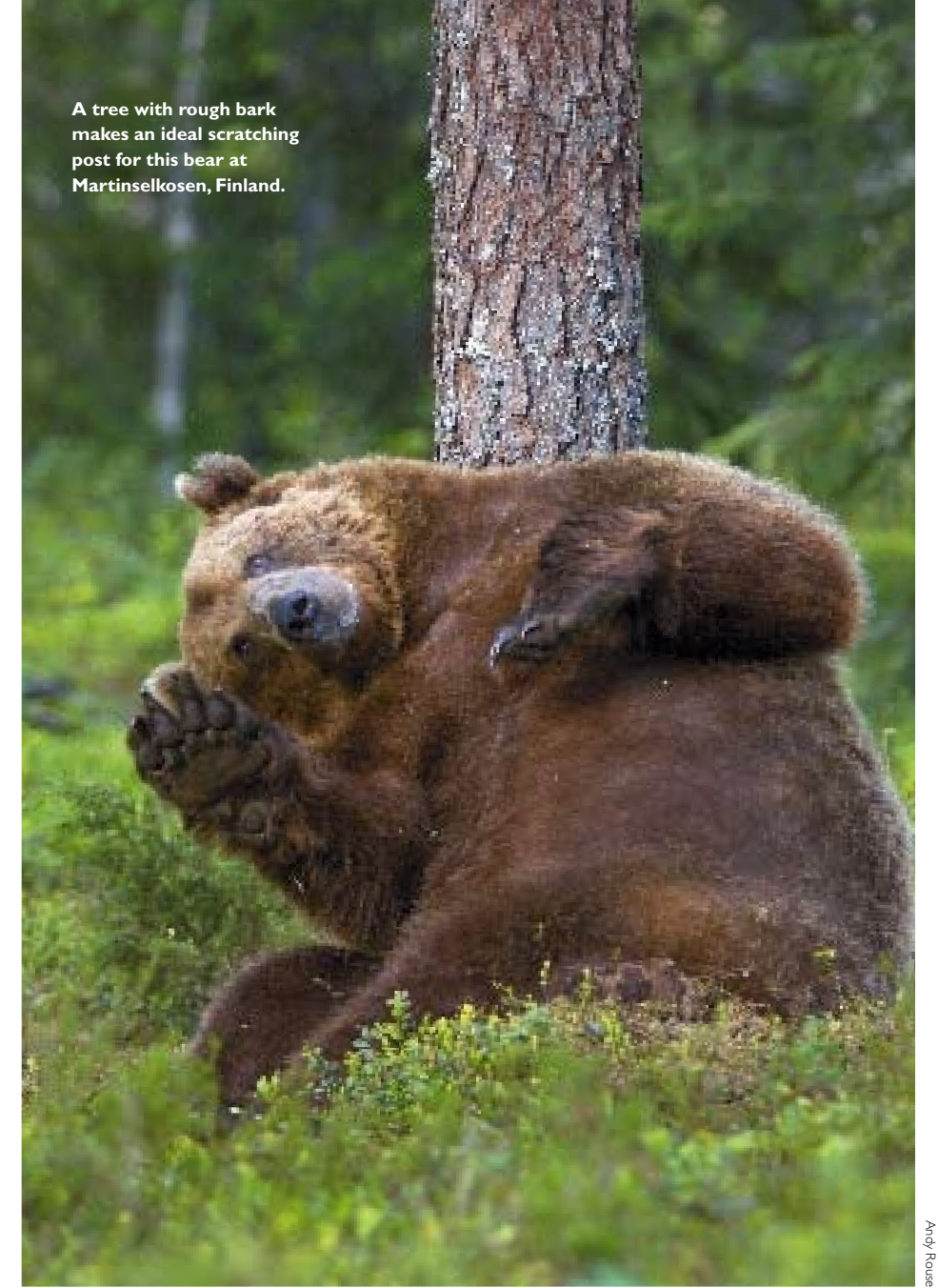
Where to go

The main bear-watching area is in central Finland, where dense taiga forest straddles the eastern border with Russia. There are three main centres: Martinselkosen Wilderness Centre, about 170km from Kajaani (65km north of Suomussalmi), with three hides holding two, six and ten people; Wild Brown Bear Lodge, about 120km from Kajaani, with three hides holding two, nine and ten people respectively; and Artimedia, near Kuhmo, 160km from Kajaani, with seven hides holding between two and five people.

When to go

The bear-watching season is from mid-April to late October, though precise dates vary from place to place. Bear-watching at Wild Bear Lodge runs throughout the season but is best during June, July and August (with a peak from 10 June to 15 August), and there are often good sightings in April, May and September. The season at Martinselkosen runs from mid-April to 10 August; bear-watching here is best during May and after

A tree with rough bark makes an ideal scratching post for this bear at Martinselkosen, Finland.



Andy Rouse

midsummer, but there are often good sightings during April as well. The Kuhmo season is 1 May to 30 September, while the best sightings are usually from 10 June to 15 August.

Weather

The weather is variable, but it tends to be cool in May. In high summer, temperatures rise to what you might expect in Scotland. The region is just south of the Arctic Circle and enjoys long summer days (12-16 hours of sunlight and 2-4 hours of twilight).

How to get there

All three locations are best reached by flying from Helsinki to Oulu or Kajaani, and then driving overland. The lodges all arrange pick-ups at Kajaani airport and will pick up from Oulu by special arrangement.

Bear population and distribution in Finland

Brown bears are scattered throughout the country, with the exception of the Ahvenanmaa Islands in the west and the open low mountain areas of Utsjoki rural district in the north. The population was estimated to be 430-600 in the early 1990s, but has grown to a more healthy 1,000-1,200 today.

A year in the life of a Finnish bear

Finnish brown bears follow a very similar yearly life-cycle to their Scandinavian neighbours. In late summer and autumn, they feed heavily on nuts and berries, eating up to one third of their bodyweight each day as preparation for hibernation.

Other wildlife

Finnish mammals include wolves, wolverines, lynx, red foxes, wild and semi-domestic reindeer, moose, beavers, muskrats, pine martens, flying squirrels and red squirrels, though most of these are shy and difficult to see and don't all occur in every region. Capercaillie, black grouse, hazel grouse and willow grouse can be seen, though they are also rather elusive, and there are white-tailed and golden sea eagles and about 10 different species of owl. There are also lots of mosquitoes.

Who to contact

Finnature ☎ 00 358 8345 737; www.finnature.fi
Martinselkosen Wilderness Centre ☎ 00 358 8736; 160; www.martinselkosenerakeskus.com
Wild Brown Bear ☎ 00 358 4074 68243; www.wildbrownbear.fi
Artimedia ☎ 00 358 8613 3900; www.artimedia.fi
Wildlife Worldwide ☎ 020 8667 9158; www.wildlifeworldwide.com

European brown bear distribution

Estimating the brown bear population in Europe is difficult and costly. European bears are essentially nocturnal, hibernate for much of the year, tend to live in dense, remote forests and wander far and wide with no respect for national borders. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, opinions on numbers differ widely and information for many European countries is as sparse as the bears themselves.

It's also difficult to compare population figures between countries because different techniques are used to make estimates. Some figures are based on intensive scientific surveys, while others rely on reports from hunting organisations or even rough calculations from discussions with tourists. However, these are currently the most widely accepted figures, compiled with the help of the IUCN and bear experts around Europe.

Albania ④

Threatened population, possibly as large as 250 animals, but little data.

Austria

There are two small populations: south-western Carinthia (8-10) and the two adjacent provinces of Styria and Lower Austria (15-20); wandering individuals occasionally recorded from neighbouring countries.

Belarus

Unknown.

Bosnia-Herzegovina ②

The latest official estimate is 1,195, in a large swathe from the Croatian border in the west to the borders with Montenegro and Serbia in the east, but, following the war, some experts fear there could be fewer than 100 left.

Bulgaria

There are approximately 500-520 individuals in the Rila-Rhodopes Mountain Massif, but the population appears to be decreasing.

Croatia

There are believed to be about 600 brown bears in Croatia, with the highest concentrations in Gorski Kotar and central Lika around Plitvice Lakes National Park.

Czech Republic

Perhaps a handful of bears in the east, but little data.

Estonia

Counting and measuring bear tracks suggests a population of about 230, but reports from hunters imply a figure as high as 600 (mainly in the north-east); most conservationists agree 440-600.

Finland

See page 37.

France

Only a handful survived into the 1990s and are now extinct, but a small number have been released into the

Brown bear distribution map



Pyrenees from Slovenia. These have probably been eliminated by hunters.

Greece

Two small populations (about 220km apart): in the Peristeri-Pindus range (95-110) and the Rhodopi mountain complex (15-20).

Italy

Central Italy harbours a bear population of about 80-90 (including some 40-50 in Abruzzo National Park and its buffer zone); a handful of native individuals survive in and around Adamello-Brenta Natural Park and a further 10 have been introduced from Slovenia.

Latvia

Very small and threatened population, but little data.

Macedonia ⑥

A rough estimate suggests a population of 90 bears, mainly in the south-eastern end of the Dinara Mountains.

Norway

There are probably 20-25 bears in Norway at any one time (10-20 emigrants from Sweden and 5-30 belonging to a Russian-Finnish-Norwegian population); these include an estimated 6-12 adult females.

Poland

Approximately 80-100 bears live in five main regions within the Carpathians in the south-east, including some 50 individuals in the Bieszczady Mountains.

Romania

See page 39.

Serbia and Montenegro ⑥

An estimated 250 bears live in Montenegro and 180 in Serbia (including 100 in Kosovo), mainly in the south-eastern end of the Dinara Mountains.

Slovakia

Hunter questionnaire surveys suggest a population of 1,000-1,200 bears, but this figure is probably exaggerated (and no allowance is made for bears moving between two or more hunting grounds); most conservationists accept a guesstimate of 600-800 as more realistic. They live mainly in the Slovak Carpathians and the population appears to be relatively stable, despite intensive hunting.

Slovenia ①

Despite intensive hunting, at least 450 bears are believed to survive in the forests and mountains of Slovenia (a substantial increase on previous estimates), mainly in the north-western end of the Dinara Mountains (Notranjska and Kocevje are core areas).

Spain

Two main populations in the Cantabrian Mountains in the north-west of the country (separated by about 50km of mountainous terrain): 12-16 in the east and 50-65 in the west.

Sweden

See page 36.

Turkey

There are no reliable population estimates, but small numbers are found throughout the Black Sea region from Bolu to Artvin. Hunting is also a threat here.



The citizens of Braşov regularly feed and play with the bears that stray into their town. Not surprisingly, several people have been attacked and badly injured.

Paolo Volpani

ROMANIA



Where to go

Organized bear-watching is based in Magura, a Transylvanian village near Zărneşti, in the foothills of a spectacular limestone ridge called Piatra Craiului. This corner of the Carpathian Mountains, which stretch all the way from southern Poland, Slovakia and western Ukraine into Romania, is the heart of bear country and part of one of the greatest expanses of unbroken forest in Europe.

Wild bears can also be seen raiding rubbish bins in Braşov, a Medieval town 30km away. Here, in the densely populated suburb of Racadau, as many as 40 bears amble down from the forest to tuck into a feast of leftovers. They seem to prefer certain bins, and current favourites, bins 197 and 198, are now a prime tourist attraction. Be careful, though – last year, a rabid bear ran amok, killing two people and mauling another 12 before it was shot dead.

When to go

Early May to mid-August is best. It's possible to see bears later in the year – at least until the end of September – but sightings are less predictable. The animals are mainly nocturnal, so bear-watching is best at dusk or dawn.

Weather

The last few years have been abnormal, so it's

difficult to predict. Traditionally, the weather is warm with some rain in May, dry and a little warmer in June and dry and fairly hot in July and August. Bear-watching takes place in the mountains where rain is more likely than at lower altitudes.

How to get there

Zărneşti and Braşov are about 2.5-3 hours drive from Bucharest's international airport. There are several comfortable and friendly guesthouses in Zărneşti and a wide choice in Braşov.

Bear population and distribution in Romania

According to official government figures, there are 6,300 bears in the country. But many conservationists hotly dispute this, and some believe that trophy hunting has reduced the population to nearer 2,500 in recent years. The actual figure is probably around 4,000. Bears occur mainly in thickly wooded forests in the eastern Carpathian Mountains, usually above 800m, though occasionally wander to lower altitudes in winter.

A year in the life of a Romanian bear

Hibernation usually ends in March (though sometimes as early as February, depending on the severity of the winter) and the bears are active until the weather deteriorates again in October or November. Their diet changes according to the season, from grass, carrion and roots in late winter to mammalian prey, such as young boar, deer and mice in spring and summer. In late summer, they feed on plentiful forest fruit, then switch to an

autumn harvest of acorns and beech nuts before retiring for the winter.

Other wildlife

Wolves, lynx, boar, red foxes and pine martens are fairly common. They keep a low profile and tend to come out after dark, so catching a glimpse of anything more exciting than a sheep is down to luck – or hard work and perseverance. There is some good birdwatching, and May and June are great for wildflowers.

Who to contact

Carpathian Nature Tours ☎ 00 40 740 022 384; e-mail cnt@rdslink.ro
Wildlife Worldwide ☎ 0208 667 9158; www.wildlifeworldwide.com

BBC Wildlife Shop

The Big Five by Magnus Elander; Staffan Widstrand and Johan Lewenhaupt (Max Strom, ISBN 9189204441, £49.95). Buy this book on p65, quoting code 061/107

Zoologist Mark Carwardine

is an award-winning writer; photographer; BBC Radio 4 presenter, lecturer and tour operator. He has written more than 40 books – mainly with a marine theme – but secretly watches bears in his spare time.



Staffan Widstrand

