

Sweden's Bears

Naturetrek Tour Report

31 August - 3 September 2009



Lake Stora Öjungen



European Brown Bear



Naturetrek group with Håkan and Eva (centre)



Hälsingland scene

Report and images compiled by Gwen Owen



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Day 1

Monday 31st August

An early morning flight landed us in Stockholm where we were met by our host and guide for the next few days, Håkan. Two of our group had spent a few days in the city prior to the tour and we met up with them for our drive to Hälsingland. This takes only 2½ hours thanks to a new highway which meanders through pine forest and cornfields, and passing the red and white painted wooden buildings synonymous with the Swedish landscape. The lack of traffic on the roads was particularly noticeable compared with the jams and tailbacks we are used to in the UK! A brief comfort stop at a service station allowed those of us who were a little peckish to pick up a bratwurst or two.

Arriving at Vargas Wilderness Lodge, we were welcomed by two very enthusiastic and friendly dogs, and our hostess for the next few days; Eva (Håkan's wife). Set on the banks of Lake Stora Öjungen, the lodge occupies a serene setting. After settling into our cosy cabins, we soon tucked into what was to be the first in a long line of Eva's fabulous home-cooked meals. The afternoon was spent at our leisure and most of us chose to explore our new surroundings on foot. The lake, surrounded by pine forest, made the perfect setting for an afternoon stroll and the calmness and beauty of the lakeside setting made it difficult not to wish we had longer than four days here...Most of us secretly hoped we would stumble across a family of European Brown Bears (*Ursus arcto*) or an elusive Elk (*Alces alces*)! Following some late afternoon sunshine and fresh air we were called to the lodge for a sumptuous 3-course meal of soup (made from wild Chanterelle mushrooms hand-picked in the grounds of the lodge), Reindeer steak and Swedish cheesecake.

Day 2

Tuesday 1st September

A respectable 9am breakfast gave us time to catch up on sleep from the previous days' early start. Following a relaxing morning, and another fabulous lunch, we packed up and headed over to the Bear hide, about a 20 minute drive from the lodge. Bears, unfortunately, are also popular for the wrong reasons, and are considered the highest trophy for a hunter in Sweden. There are restrictions on the numbers of Bears hunted, and in Hälsingland that limit is 35, which is quickly reached...

We drove through a pine forest until reaching a clearing where we parked up, donned our wellies, and headed into the forest, with strict instructions to keep chatter to a whisper so as not to alarm the timid Bears and any other wildlife that may be lurking. The ground, thanks to the recent heavy rainfall, was particularly boggy, and we were glad of our boots. We stopped several times for Håkan to point out recent Bear tracks, and trees where the animals had rubbed their itchy backs. Scratches were also etched into some of the trees, and the scale of their razor sharp claws became apparent.

Twenty minutes after leaving the car we arrived at the hide – a purpose-built wooden building covered in camouflage netting, built by Håkan and his father. In front of the hide a large clearing in the forest made perfect Bear-spotting territory. Håkan had been up to the hide previously that day to re-stock the Bear's picnic basket; a large rectangular wooden box filled with fruit and oats, which is placed in the clearing in front of the hide. Other goodies such as a bucket of orange juice, and, of course, the occasional jar of honey, are also placed at strategic spots outside the hide. This ritual distributing of treats however is not done every day, to prevent the Bears becoming reliant on the food. We crept into the hide which we found to be particularly well equipped and comfortable. Bunk beds along one side, and eight viewing slots each with camera hole and comfortable chair, along the other. A toilet was a welcome sight in one corner - the thought of bumping into a startled Bear or Wolf whilst creeping out into the dark forest at night to use the facilities, was just a little *too* exciting! We settled into our positions, claimed our bunks (of which use was optional).....and waited.

The Bears, to keep us on our toes, didn't have a set time that they would turn up each night. Indeed it cannot be guaranteed that they would even turn up at all! A couple of hours passed, some of us choosing to read in the fading light, whilst the rest kept a beady eye on the clearing, with cameras poised in the hope of a glimpse of one of Sweden's most elusive and timid mammals. A flock of Ravens (*Corvus corax*) entertained us by making a fuss over the titbits that had been left for the Bears. It was decided that it was a good idea to make a start on the beautiful feast that Eva had prepared for us, and as our starters were digesting (helped along with a glass of red wine!) there was suddenly the word we'd been hoping to hear"Bear"! And sure enough, in the corner of the clearing appeared a large Brown Bear! The hide was silent but for the click click of cameras, delighted that we still had enough daylight to photograph this magnificent animal. The Bear had been very considerate to turn up before nightfall! Seeming completely oblivious to the group of humans sat metres away, the Bear went about his business, snuffling around in the undergrowth for some tasty morsels, and ambling around, nose occasionally in the air....catching the scent of a Bear nearby perhaps?

After discovering, and proceeding to destroy, the picnic basket that Hakan had so lovingly spent time building, and filling with goodies, our visitor began to explore the clearing in more depth. An hour or so was spent roaming the area, passing within a few feet of the hide at some points, to the delight of its inhabitants! After disappearing into the forest a few times, and promptly returning moments later, our Bear was at one point joined by another! After a few stern looks, the two decided to keep their distance from one another. The first Bear decided eventually to head off, leaving the new arrival to explore the clearing and Hoover up any remaining morsels of food. After a couple of Bear-filled hours, the clearing was empty again, the shutters came down, the candles were lit, and our main course was served - a delicious meal of Elk and a Swedish potato salad, followed by delicious Pear cake. Eva had, again, done an amazing job!

With some in the group deciding to stay up for the night shift, the rest of us, exhausted by the excitement of the day, decided to turn in for the night.

Day 3

Wednesday 2nd September

Yet another clear sunny day greeted us. Following a 9am start with breakfast in the hide, we quietly headed back through the woods to the vehicle. We had a short drive back to the Lodge, and looked forward to the relaxing day ahead of us.

Some decided to utilise the boat and head out onto the millpond lake, whilst others decided to stretch their legs and head off for walks around the lake. A Black Mink was spotted darting across the path at one point (a possible escapee from one of Sweden's mink farms perhaps).

Later we returned to the lodge for another delicious lunch, and discussed plans for the rest of the day. Håkan and Eva, after speaking to a local contact, had heard that a lodge of Beavers had been seen at a river a short drive away. However, as we were about to leave...sad news...the Beavers location had also been discovered by a group of hunters, who had proceeded to wipe out the whole family that afternoon. However, we headed out anyway, to a lovely spot in the woods beside a rushing river. We had a brief stop, as a Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*), was spotted by the roadside. We arrived at the National Park in a setting where berry bushes abound amongst the towering pine trees. Following a lovely evening amble, we settled down at a campsite beside the river, a fire was lit and we sat around tucking into our meatball rolls and tea, with Håkan and Eva's dogs enthusiastically collecting any leftovers!

On the drive back an Elk darted out in the road - the only one we were to see this on this trip. Although their numbers outweigh the human population in Sweden, they are timid animals and are rarely seen in the daytime.

Day 4

Thursday 3rd September

Our final day with Håkan and Eva...and after a leisurely breakfast we packed up and pile into the minibus to head back to Stockholm and catch our afternoon flight. Overhead a flock of Common Cranes flew by, signalling the start of Sweden's autumn, and the end of our holiday in this little piece of tranquillity that Håkan and Eva have created in their corner of Sweden. Their philosophy of simple, sustainable living, and passion for the important things in life – good food, good company, the natural wilderness and its precious wildlife, is truly inspirational. A wonderful experience!

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Species Highlights

Mammals Highlights

European Brown Bear (*Ursus arcto*) 2

Elk (*Alces alces*) 1

Black European Mink (*Mustela lutreola*) 1

Bird Highlights

Capercaillie (*Tetrao urogallus*)

Three toed Woodpecker (*Picoides tridactylus*)

Fieldfares (*Turdus pilaris*) - locally common

Black throated Divers (*Gavia arctica*) - in full summer plumage

Common Crane (*Grus grus*) - flock

Raven (*Corvus corax*) - Locally common

Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)

Crested Tit (*Parus cristatus*)

Various Thrushes (probably Song or Mistle)