



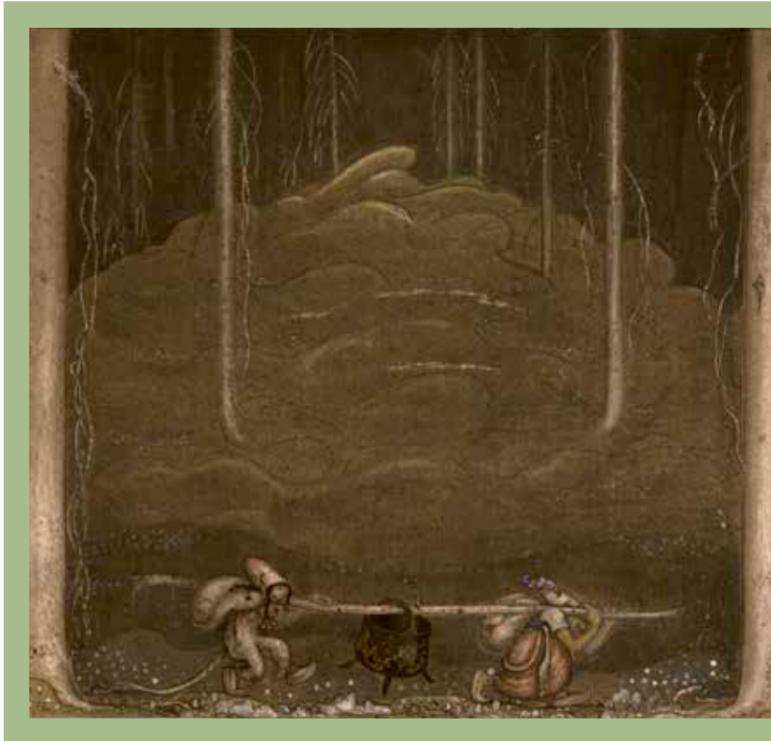
Fantastic beasts and where to find them

The forests, lakes and wetlands of Småland receive few visitors – humans, least of all. Explore this forgotten corner of Sweden in the footsteps of John Bauer, whose illustrations brought the country's fairytales to life

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WHO WAS JOHN BAUER?

Born in Småland's largest city, Jönköping, in 1882, painter and illustrator John Bauer is to Sweden what Beatrix Potter is to England. Aged 16, he moved to Stockholm to attend the Royal Swedish Academy of Arts, where he began to pick up commissions to illustrate stories in books and magazines. It was at the Academy that he also met his future wife, artist Ester Ellqvist. His most celebrated works are his muted watercolours for *Among Gnomes and Trolls*, first published in 1907 and still Sweden's most loved anthology of fairy tales (pictured left).

Below left: Floating 'hotel' on Lake Klokesjön. Below: Local film maker Peter Torell. Opposite: Riverbank tree roots, as seen between lakes Bunn and Ören during the John Bauer boat tour



Captain Frederik Lind scans the woods from the prow of his boat, waves swishing at its mahogany hull.

Exploring the narrow channels of Småland's Lake Bunn, as he has since he was 13, he scrutinises indistinct shapes and shadows among the trees. 'The magic here is strong,' says Frederik, 'and woodland creatures are always out of sight, playing behind mossy boulders.' A tree stump could be an impish troll; a pixie may be hiding under a toadstool. The soaring forests, sparkling with dew, provide sanctuary for moose, wild pigs, and — legend has it — fairy princesses. 'If you believe that sort of thing,' Frederik adds, throttling the engine.

Not so long ago the people of Småland kept faith with such fantastic folk tales, a proud storytelling tradition that lives on today. 'People love to hear stories of trolls and gnomes,' says Frederik, his sing-song accents lilting over the water. *Among Gnomes and Trolls*, the best-known work of Småland's favourite son, John Bauer, is an enduringly popular anthology. 'The forest sends out signals to let us know it's watching,' says Frederik, my guide for a tour of the places where Bauer lived and worked. 'Sometimes I half-believe the folk tales myself.' From the deck, the view is otherworldly. Gnarly branches cling to the bank for dear life, and so many trees crowd the water's edge that moving through them feels like scything through a maze. ➔

NÄR KVÄLLEN KOM, SMÖGGOTROLLAR OCH FOLKINEN UTUR BERGET BY JOHN BAUER / COURTESY OF JÖNKÖPINGSGÅSLANS MUSEUM

The geography of this small southern province is mapped in the Swedish imagination, Småland's candy-red farmsteads and labyrinthine forests long a source of inspiration. Children's author Astrid Lindgren, creator of Pippi Longstocking, told stories about its hay fields and hundred-year-old oaks, while Vilhelm Moberg's popular novel series *The Emigrants* charted the experiences of the area's mid-19th-century farmers, who sought new lives in the US. Then came Ikea, which named its magical forest-themed crèche Småland, bringing a touch of Swedish arboreal sorcery to out-of-town retail parks the world over. But none have captured the province's enchanting hills, woodlands and lakes so evocatively as John Bauer.

With the eye of a poet, Bauer brought the forests and marshes of his childhood home alive

through caricatures of shaggy-haired trolls and merry woodland creatures. Even when living elsewhere he constantly looked to Småland for inspiration, and he maintained a connection with the place all through his life. The success of his books allowed him to buy a house on Lake Bunn with his wife Ester, where his son Bengt was born. Here, he was free to resume his favourite childhood hobby of wandering the woods, and imagining the creatures that dwelt there.

'Every town in Småland has its folk tales, but they are being lost,' says Jan Evanson, pausing to load our canoes with paddles, life jackets and a picnic hamper. 'People don't have the time to keep them alive, and we're losing our connection with nature.'

Feeling the same call that first took John Bauer into the woods, Jan – a mechanical engineer

turned philosophical canoe guide, coffee barista, crayfish farmer, boat mechanic and storyteller – moved to Ramkvilla, a small settlement southeast of the city of Jönköping. His business, Ramoa Adventure Village, sits on the shores of Lake Klockesjön, among the most bewitching of Småland's 5,000 lakes. Sixteen miles long, it is both in the heart of the province and in the middle of nowhere.

At Jan's traditional lakeside retreat, visitors are encouraged to focus on life's simpler pleasures. Its pine-cone-strewn paths are dotted with red cabins trimmed in snow white. Guests spend their days exploring the surrounding forest before returning muscle-sore to recuperate in the fairy-lit hot-tub or timber sauna. Come evening, they gather around campfires, sharing stories, as well as plates of kroppkakor (potato dumplings with bacon), isterband

(sour pork sausages), and ostkaka (bitter almond cheesecake). 'If you are alone it doesn't matter,' says Jan. 'Here, nature becomes your companion.'

Canoes are the best way to explore the water, and it's an experience little changed since John Bauer's time. We paddle to Lake Klockesjön's remoter islands, Jan unspooling one of the area's more macabre folk tales as we go. It tells of village witch Black Anna who, furious after an argument with a local womaniser, cursed the church tower bell. When it chimed noon it dropped like a guillotine, beheading her foe. 'The bell rolled into the lake afterwards,' Jan says, peering into the water's depths. 'But it has never been found.'

After an hour dipping paddles, we glide towards a dreamlike islet. On it stands a centuries-old one-bed cabin that might have

been a blueprint for JRR Tolkien's Hobbit huts. Cranes land to scout for fish as we come ashore, and a pair of nesting ospreys flutter skyward, startled by the sight of other creatures. For a moment, the only sound is the water's suck and draw on the pebble beach.

As Jan bids me farewell, the stars grow heavy and I settle into island life. The cabin is an original summerhouse from Bauer's era, built of driftwood, and containing little more than a box-bed and blanket, candles and a lantern. Before I turn out the light, mist begins to fall and a crescent moon appears, making the sky look like the backdrop to one of John Bauer's paintings.

A love of the great outdoors is a given in Sweden. The country all but invented summering at the lake, and Allemansrätten – the

legal right of public access to roam freely in the countryside – is a core cultural value. With so many lakes, woodlands and hollows to explore, it's rare to encounter others on a journey in Småland – which suits ranch owner Ulrika Johansson very well. She regularly heads out alone on horseback, riding old mill roads and surveying the land that has been in her family for nine generations.

On this day, her horse trots along placidly through a pine forest cloaked in a thin veil of drizzle. She points out the remains of stone stacks used for making charcoal in harder times, and various forest-floor edibles – berries and bulbous mushrooms, including penny buns and chanterelles. 'This landscape is typical of western Småland,' says Ulrika, as her steed begins to canter. 'It goes up and down, steep and undulating like ➔'



Taking out a canoe on Lake Klockesjön at sunrise

leather bellows on a concertina.'

In season, Ulrika and her daughter Lina guide visitors on the trails surrounding Stall Sonakull, the family's 30-hectare farm right on the border of western Småland. To the west the landscape becomes progressively flatter towards Gothenburg, the forest clearing to reveal Denmark across the Kattegat strait. East are moss-coloured hills and birch woods. At their stables, Ulrika and Lina tend to 17 Haflinger horses, all with flowing blonde manes and talismanic names like Modig ('brave' in Swedish). John Bauer was never a horseman, but his illustrations of mounted knights and long-haired princesses riding elk in the moonlight stirred Ulrika's imagination as a young girl. 'It's easy to read your own thoughts and feelings into such tales,' she says. 'But it was hard not to feel inspired when, as a child, I was always on horseback.'

Joined by Lina, we head off to a nearby lake, clip-clopping over tangled roots and through copses of beech where elk roam – though there are none visible today. 'It's better this way. If the horses hear a noise, they can get frightened,' says Ulrika. 'They are always prepared to bolt.' After a mercifully sedate ride we reach the edge of Björnsbo Lake, a mirror-still pond that recalls Bauer's most famous watercolour, *Princess Tuvstarr Gazing Down into the Dark Waters of the Forest Tarn*. In the painting, Bauer's wife and muse Ester becomes a translucent princess who appears more connected to the starry night sky than to the human world.

Lighting up the twilight, Ulrika strikes a match to the birch-wood fire she'll use to cook dinner, and Lina wanders off to pick cranberries. When the flames catch, Ulrika relates a story her grandmother once told about Näcken, a naked water sprite known to lure men and women to drown in the lake by playing enchanting music on a fiddle. 'It's a typical Swedish story,' she says. 'Too much melancholy.' By the time we return to the stables it's dark, our eyes seeing little, but our ears alert, listening out for the keening of a violin.

If ever there were a landscape that cried out for a water sprite poised on a toadstool, it's the untamed marshlands of the South Swedish Highlands. A short drive east from the Johansson ranch, this is one of Småland's least explored and most arresting landscapes. Encompassing one of

Europe's last peat bogs, it contains a wealth of plants, mosses and lichens. The terrain is crisscrossed by wolverine and fox print-trails. Here, ancient stories also tell of the mammoth and giant deer that once roamed the land.

The area's star attraction is Store Mosse National Park, a vast, open fen and marshland where life is hidden in every nook. In drifting mist, bobtail deer play peekaboo, Black-throated divers, curlews and raptors nest here. Bog frogs dance, embracing the Swedish love for hoppa i pölar: jumping in puddles.

Hiking the park's dry hummocks and wet hollows with park ranger Carina Härlin, I am struck by small details in the soft moss and shadowy roots – the same delicate features that John Bauer saw and drew on his wanderings. As Carina plots a route over the carpet of moss, she introduces some of the bogland's more ➔

Crayfish cooked in white wine and dill at Ramoa's restaurant. Opposite: A house by the cycle path on the edge of Ramkvilla village

Lina Johansson brings out the horses at family-run Stall Sonakull horse trails, near Kulltorp. Below: Marshland boardwalk in Store Mosse National Park. Opposite: woods near Kulltorp



notable species. Though it's largely free from trees, Carina explains, there are dwarf pine and billowing swathes of bog myrtle, butterwort, water horsetail and bottle sedge. All of which would sound right at home on a troll's allotment. 'There's a universe under your feet,' Carina says, bending low to examine a clump of white moss. 'When you first look, you don't realise how many things are alive.'

The 8,000-year-old marsh is the territory of ravens and pied flycatchers, but local lore also lists the devil and wicked elves with a fondness for twilight dancing as residents. Another tale tells of lantern men enticing people into the bogland. If a horrible scream cuts through the silence, Carina explains, it is the cry of an unwanted baby. 'The tales had a purpose – they were cautionary, to keep children away at night,' she says, the damp moss squelching under her boots. 'But it doesn't work today, because any sceptical kid can just Google it.'

As evening sets in, we cross shrub-dappled wetland, a spongy spectrum of pink, yellow, orange and red peat that comes to an

abrupt end in front of sheltered woodland. 'This is where the story of the bog ends and the world of the forest begins,' Carina says, ducking through a gap and crossing into the kingdom that lies beyond. 'It's as if you are opening the wardrobe and entering Narnia.'

Like some of the most haunting fairytales, Bauer's Småland story did not have a happy ending. A century ago, aged just 36, he and his family were drowned when the boat they were taking across Lake Vättern to Stockholm sank during a storm. The personal letters documenting his life indicate a tortured soul, who found comfort only in Småland's forests, which, in his own words, 'offered refuge'. It's no coincidence that his characters ventured into the woods to sit and dream, to learn and change – for this is a place where transformation seems possible. 



MIKE MacEACHERAN is a freelance writer. In Småland he spotted elk, deer and osprey, but regrettably no trolls or frog princes. He travelled to the region with support from Visit Sweden.

SCANDINAVIAN FOLK TALES

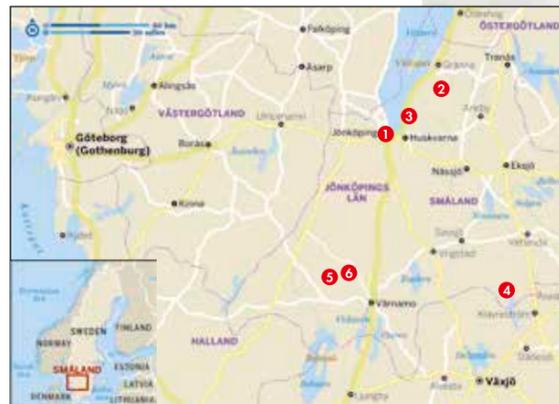
Scandinavia's obsession with folk stories began as many fairy tales do: with a troll. These fantastic characters emerged as part of the oral storytelling tradition in Iceland, and the tales were later written down in the *Edda*, a 13th-century collection of medieval Old Norse poems. As the stories spun off throughout the region, plot lines and characters were embellished and fuelled by Scandinavia's love of Norse legends, and were later influenced by 18th-century German romanticism.

Today, folklore remains a crucial cultural thread and can be traced throughout Scandinavia. You can find it in Denmark, in Hans Christian Andersen's stories *The Little Mermaid*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *The Snow Queen* (a template for Disney's *Frozen*); glimpse it in Iceland in the tales of the hidden *huldufólk* (magical elves that lurk in the mountains); see it in Norway's love for all things 'troll'; and experience it – of course – in Sweden, thanks to the world of John Bauer.



MAKE IT HAPPEN

Småland



ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Småland is easily reached from Gothenburg Landvetter Airport. Norwegian, Ryanair and British Airways fly to the city from the UK (from £72 return; ba.com). From the airport, it's a 1hr 45min drive to Jönköping, the heart of Småland.

GETTING AROUND

All the main towns and attractions in Småland are clustered together, and the province can be easily navigated by hire car. The usual rental firms have desks at the airport (swedavia.com/landvetter; from £22 per day with Hertz).

WHEN TO GO

May to September is a great time to visit, weather-wise, and the province's dazzling lakes are at their most inviting at the end of summer, when the water is warm for swimmers.

FURTHER INFO

Pick up a copy of our Sweden guide (£15.99) for information on Småland and beyond. There's also lots of information on the official regional website, visitsmaland.se/en. See more of John Bauer's illustrations in the book *Swedish Fairy Tales* (around £12; amazon.co.uk).



BEHIND THE SCENES

The Småland apple harvest was in full swing on the Rudenstam family farm, and we had come to partake of fika – coffee and cake. In the café, we could hear spoons plunging into double cream and the biscuity crunch of straight-from-the-oven apple pie. For many years, Swedes have kept fika a secret. With apple pie this good, we weren't surprised.

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its polkagris (peppermint candy; pictured below left), first baked by Amalia Eriksson in 1859. Polkapojkarna shop puts on demonstrations (polkapojkarna.se).



3 From Gränna, it's a half-hour drive south along the shores of Lake Vättern before the road curves east into the middle of Småland's densely forested interior. Stop for fika (Sweden's daily coffee and cake) at family-run Rudenstam, a farm store/café amid orchards (rudenstam.se; pictured above).



2 From Jönköping, it's a 30-minute drive northeast to BauerGården. This John Bauer-influenced hotel and restaurant is on the lakeside where he once lived, and bedrooms feature botanical wallpapers and fabrics (from £75; bauergarden.se). Boat tours of the area's Bunn and Ören lakes with Frederik Lind are available with Trolska Båtturer (tours from £18, June to August; trolska.se). A few miles north is the lakeside town of Gränna, famous for



4 Ramoa Adventure Village is outside Ramkvilla, on the northern shore of Lake Klockesjön. The retreat offers activities and places to stay, including cabins (pictured above, hammocks, a teepee, a floating one-bed 'hotel' and a private island summerhouse. Owner and host Jan Evanson (pictured top right) is a great cook (ramoa.se).



5 A 90-minute drive west takes you to Stall Sonakull, surrounded by oak forests populated by elk. Take a horse trail, and the owners will prep your horse for the ride and lay on a lakeside salmon barbecue (£35; stallsonakull.com). Nearby Björso Lake (pictured opposite) is home to two cabins available to rent (£40 each; bjorsbo.nu/produkt/cozy-cabin).



6 From the ranch, it's 15 minutes to Naturum, the headquarters of Store Mosse National Park. There are trails, plus a birdwatching tower that looks over the park. Dusk is a good time for birdwatching, or you can take a snowshoe tour of the marshlands (book ahead, £55 including lunch; nationalparksofsweden.se). In autumn, the sphagnum bog mosses turn psychedelic. It's then a two-hour drive back to Gothenburg Airport.

JULIBOCKEN BY JOHN BAUER/COURTESY OF JÖNKÖPINGS LÄNS MUSEUM