

# Running with the pack

YOUR MIND CAN PLAY TRICKS ON YOU AFTER DUSK. WHO HASN'T BEEN SECRETLY AFRAID OF A SNARLING SHADOW OR A MYSTERIOUS HOT BREATH OF WIND? THIS SEPTEMBER, MATT MAYNARD RAN THE FOREST TRAILS AND LAKE SHORES OF VÄSTMANLAND, SWEDEN. ONLY THIS TIME, HE HAD GOOD REASON TO BE AFRAID. THIS IS HIS STORY OF RUNNING WITH WOLVES

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**W**hen did humans last run? You know, really run. To spear a woolly mammoth so we wouldn't go hungry. Or to chase away a wild animal who is circling our campfire. All that good stuff died out somewhere between the last ice-age and the invention of the light bulb. Granted, Deliveroo is far more reliable than throwing a sharpened stick, and Netflix is a fall back if you need a good scare. But somewhere in Homo sapiens' progress from lion-skin leotards to long-johns and lycra, perhaps we lost a little something along the way.

With these primal feelings awakening, I did a little research this autumn. While the UK's most fearsome woodland animal is the rogue energy-gel-stealing squirrel, in Europe it's a different story. Moose, wolverine, lynx, brown bear and yes, wolf still stalk the forests. In fact, the wolf has recently been making a resurgence and there are now

12,000 grey wolf across the continent. Resolved to run some trails, while reconnecting with my inner savage, I hastily booked a ticket. Västmanland in Central Sweden, I discovered, was as stocked with wild animals as any self-respecting safari park. And to ensure I didn't turn chicken when heading out among the wolves, I recruited my younger sister to add the necessary social pressure. In less than a month, we were on the ground in Scandinavia.

## FIRST SIGHTING

We launch our trip from the pint-sized city of Västerås, or as the Swedes pronounce it, "Westeros", (this *Game of Thrones* rip-off is a point of pride for local Swedish fans). The fantasy world connection continues as we study maps of the endless enchanted woodland that stretch beyond the city limits. A whopping 70% of Sweden is covered by trees. The UK barely scrapes 10%. It's

almost dusk by the time we lace up on the first evening – and we pack our headtorches. Picking up a convenient and quiet river trail, we jog north towards the city limits. Houses peel away almost immediately, replaced by tall stands of Scots pine. The Swedes are an outdoorsy, playful folk. On this warm autumn evening many are out strolling, exercising the dog or partaking in an impromptu school-sports-day style sack race... with no children in sight. After five miles the trail suddenly narrows, and the trees change from coppiced wood to thick, undergrowth-heavy forest. We stop here, and just before beating a hasty retreat, we peer deep into it with our headlamps. There's a shudder of leaves. A horned roe-deer races away into the night. Have we finally reached where the wild things are?

## INTO THE WILD

The next day we drive 40 miles deeper into



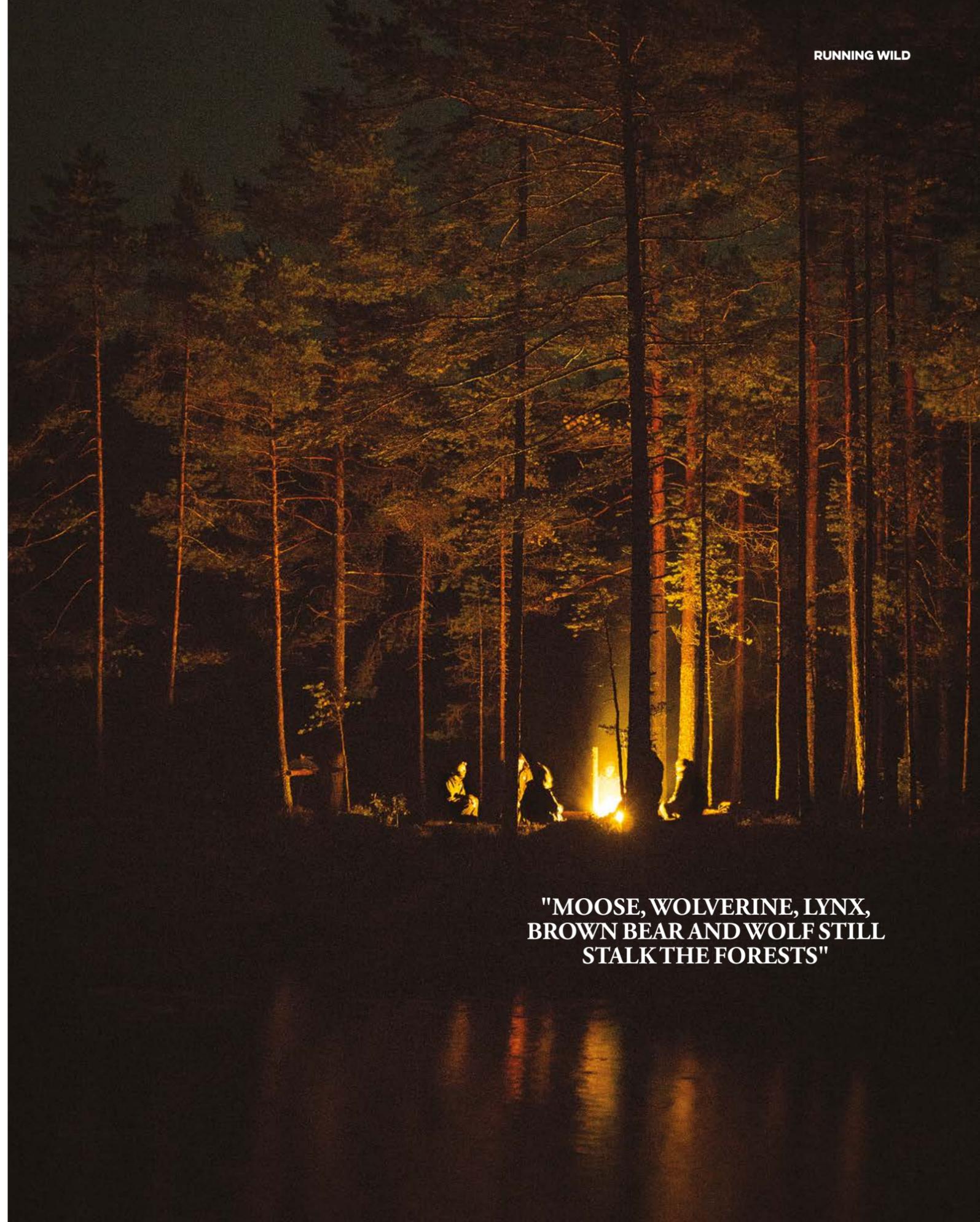
Marcus Eldh raids the Pensionat Udden underground wood store



Breakfast time in the Kolarbyn hobbit hole



Swedish woodland hospitality



"MOOSE, WOLVERINE, LYNX, BROWN BEAR AND WOLF STILL STALK THE FORESTS"



"THE TERRAIN IS OFTEN FLAT OR ROLLING, MAKING FOR FAST RUNNING"

the Västmanland province, towards the small town of Skinnskatteberg. Rural roads in Sweden are well maintained and wide, but the tunneling effect of the ever-present pines makes us feel like unnatural imposters in our brightly coloured box. Our garish gold hire car, we hope, however, is a big enough bullet for stray moose to dodge. Every year it's estimated that 4,500 cars collide with these super-sized deer. That's more than 12 Swedish drivers smashing into half a tonne of beast every day. Sweden's environmentally responsible car giant Volvo – as well as going 100% electric or hybrid by 2019 – is now installing "moose-dar" technology across its fleet.

After last night's adventure, we take today for rest, recovery and strategic wolf

planning. Over the next few days our plan is to run further into their territory, so we recruit the advice of Marcus Eldh. Besides sporting a wicked wild-man beard, Marcus is famous for his wolf howl, and his company Wild Sweden have been leading trips into the territory of the Aspa wolf pack since 2004. Meeting him at the Pensionat Udden guesthouse on the outskirts of town, he reassuringly tells us that attacks on humans are very uncommon. Wolves apparently don't see us two-legged creatures as prey. We'd also have to be quite lucky to see one (or run very far indeed). The territory of packs extends between 230-300sq. miles.

The evening is spent creeping through darkening woodland on the trail of the Aspa wolf cubs. "Wolf urine," whispers Marcus

enthusiastically at one point with his nose to the ground, "pass it on." We sit around a campfire until the early hours, as Marcus howls into the night hoping to attract a response. The forest is silent. On the return drive we see shadowy SUV-sized moose grazing among the clearings. Tomorrow night we resolve to lace up and cover more ground.

**MOONLIGHT SCARE**

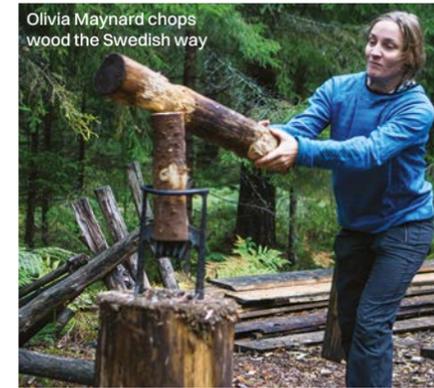
As the light begins to leak out of the forests once more, we jog away from our car, picking up a single-track trail close to the shore of Lake Skärnsjön. Wolves hunt at night. Their prey, the moose, try to make it as difficult for wolves as possible by grazing under the cover of darkness and sleeping

during the day. We had not been so indulgent on our trail running holiday. Instead we squeezed in a spot of daylight cross-training on Canadian canoes, spying busy beavers and bounding deer. Now, however, as we begin to patter through the spongy woodland trails, I begin to wish we had rested. I keep reassuring myself of the wolves' menu choice: "Four legs good, two legs bad." But I dart ahead of my sister all the same, pretending to bravely lead the way.

Gravel roads weave through the interior of Sweden's forests. The terrain is often flat or rolling, making for fast but remote running. As we pick up one of these wide tree-lined cut-throughs, the miles begin to click away. The temperature is dropping, too, and birds are calling out to announce their



The floating sauna at Kolarbyn



Olivia Maynard chops wood the Swedish way



**WILD RUNNING SAFETY TIPS**

LEAVE YOUR DOG AT HOME. BEARS AND WOLVES MAY SEE IT AS A THREAT

TELL PEOPLE WHERE YOU'RE GOING

TAKE A PHONE AND A MAP, AND CONSIDER PURCHASING A SPOT GPS DEVICE

MAKE NOISE, ESPECIALLY ON BLIND CORNERS, TO AVOID SURPRISING BEARS

KEEP THE ANIMALS SAFE. RESPECT THEIR TERRITORY. LEAVE NO TRACE



Beats the nine to five

evening landing in nearby lakes. Out here on the exposed road, each footfall makes a monstrous crunching noise compared to the mossy sound-proofed single-track. Soon I notice how we are both running on the balls of our feet, perched higher and pacing quietly like alert prey animals.

We are now in the territory of the Billsjön wolf pack. While we don't run into any wildlife this evening, we do run into some trouble when turning back. Under a full moon and thick mist, we spend a few anxious minutes disorientated in a flooded field on the shore of Lake Dramboln. The single-track options in Västmanland will lead you astray if you let them. Resolutely we follow the gravel track for the return leg, but it's hours after sunset when we finally make it back to our woodland accommodation at Kolarbyn Eco Lodge.

**WHIPS, SAUNAS AND THE LONG RUN**

The line between smelly runners and wild animals becomes even more blurred the next morning when we wake up underground. Kolarbyn Eco Lodge comprises a cluster of simple wooden apex shelters, each half-buried and sealed beneath pitched roofs covered with moss, bracken, wild grasses and fungi. Each hobbit hole has two sheep-skin sleeping berths inside, and a small open-fire pit.

Today is long run day. To prepare I head down to Lake Skårsjön for a swim and a wash. Towards the end of a peninsula I discover a wobbly jetty leading to a small floating hut with smoke already billowing out of its chimney. "It's a floating sauna," explains a topless Scandinavian, emerging from behind some beech trees. "We use these," he says, gesticulating with the knife in one hand to the freshly-cut leaf throngs in the other, "to whip one another once inside." Right, I think to myself. When in Sweden...

Washed, whipped and sweated, I lace up my off-road shoes at today's trailhead in Ulvsbomuren. It's a 30-minute drive from Kolarbyn, but you can pick up the Bruksleden Trail here and run a decent 15-mile loop. The distance is at the limit of my training right now, but the weaving forest trails, adventurous route and spine-tingling sensation of track-sharing with predatory animals keeps motivation high.

Darting solo through the depths of the Scandinavian forest certainly has a touch of pioneering spirit to it. (Wise sister has stayed indoors with our host at the Ulvsbomuren Wildlife Safari and Lodging.) Sure, I have a map in hand for backup (see below) and there are orange trail-marking blazes on both trees and boulders, but this humid forest is not made for man.

Across the forest floor, thick beds of coral-shaped reindeer lichen create a pale-green sea. Sprouting through their ranks comes the Destroying Angel – a mushroom so powerful that a tiny piece blended into a soup would kill all who consume it. Gnarled tree roots, boulders and branches make a twisting, ducking, side-stepping obstacle course for the runner. And somewhere out here – among the shadowy trees in this damp forest – is the Färna wolf pack, digesting last night's meal. Nature here is king.

**SWEDISH TAKE AWAY**

After seven miles of trail, I begin to close the loop at the town of Ramnäs. From here I pick up a back-road for three miles to Seglingsberg, passing ancient ironworks and quaint little homesteads. The mist comes down and the rain sets in over the final five miles of dirt track through fields and forest. I arrive like a stupidly happy wet dog.

On our last day we run a steady out-and-back on the Bruksleden Trail, venturing five miles further east from Ramnäs. Once back at the car, we take a wash in the lazily flowing river. On this trip we didn't see any wolves. But by living and running outdoors, we awoke that primal feeling. The wolves were certainly out there with us. Exchanging concrete living for earthy forest territory is enough excitement for any man. 🐾



Tread carefully and the animals appear



Fry-up and river safari with Edens Garden



Mushrooms and mud are an autumn theme in Västmanland



Dawn is the best time for animal sightings



Matt runs the wooden boardwalks of the Bruksleden Trail