

Gone Fishin'

Pull up your waders and find unexpected peace in the act of fly fishing. Schools of women all over Sweden are braving sub-zero conditions to cast a line. We travel north to the Daläven river to dip our toe in this beloved sport and try to get a nibble.

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"Everyone has a story," Sivan Jansson tells me as we stand on the banks of the Dalälven river. "Everyone has a story but not everyone gets a chance to tell it. That's why I like fishing trips, it's an opportunity to open up."

Jansson knows how to tell a story, and she's got plenty to draw on. She's been captain of the Swedish women's fly fishing team for the past 16 years. She runs her own fishing tour company. Plus, she's the founder of women's fishing association Fjallorna, which encourages other women to enter the sport.

It is minus seven degrees when we meet up to fly fish, just four kilometres from her home in Älvkarleby, Sweden. When the

temperature dips below zero, the rings on the rod turn to ice as the water passes through it, making it difficult to cast. We attempt anyway, quipping that here, the weather never cooperates, not

We are joined by Jansson's niece, Frida Johansson, and her dog, Orvis, poignantly named after the fishing-wear brand. A border collie-cross-retriever, he runs between us as we spread

"I went to Norway with her to fish salmon and I just stood there thinking, 'Please don't catch anything, please don't catch anything.' I didn't, but something happened inside me. I loved how while fishing all your troubles just go away."

Jansson starts her fishing days with a coffee and home-made kanelbulle around a campfire. "I always have a fire going because if we catch a fish I want to be able to cook and eat it straight away," she says, laughing with her infectious cackle. The fire is also a gathering point, a source of heat that people can come back to warm up and share how their day is going.

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even for *Vogue*. But I soon discover that fly fishing is more than casting a line. The magic doesn't lie in the outcome. Like many things in life, it lies in the experience.

out along the shoreline, making sure we're all okay. Johansson, 34, became a member of Fjallorna around six years ago after years of her aunt's persistence.



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Today, we're fishing for sea trout which means we'll be using a two-handed rod. A layer of snow covers the stream and ice has begun forming on the water surface, the low midday sun making everything sparkle. It's chillingly beautiful – serene, even. We practice the manoeuvre; rod up, turn to the side at an 11 o'clock angle then back to the front with a sharp forward movement. The sound of the line is like a gentle whip. It's tricky; my left hand wants to overpower my right. Jansson suggests that I've been watching too many Hollywood movies with Brad Pitt, referencing his 1992 film *A River Runs Through It*. Judging by her face, his technique needed work, too.

We are looking for mirror-like circles on the water surface, indicating trout is underneath. "What I like about it is you're dealing with a live creature," fly fishing instructor Jennifer Olsson tells me a couple of days later over a video call. "You're playing their game. It's not chucking something out and trying to trick them. The fly is an imitation of their food, so understanding aquatic insect life is profoundly important."

I notice a pair of silver fish earrings dangling from Jansson's lobes. When I begin to make a comment, her niece jumps in: "You should see her house". In her 1700s-built home, old rods are used as railings and a recent renovation saw fish wallpaper plastered throughout the bathroom. "My cat gets very frustrated," she laughs.

As a child, Jansson spent winters with her family cross-country skiing, finding places to fish in the ice. "One of my favourite memories is when I was a child and we were out pimple fishing with the whole family," she says. "My little sister, big brother, dad and my mother, who was blind. We skied to a small pond in Jämtland. We lay on the ice and peeked for Arctic char. Then we made a fire and grilled falu

sausage, drank hot chocolate and ate sandwiches."

She moved on from these family excursions, not knowing fishing would become such a big part of her life. Then she met her husband. "The first thing he told me was 'I'm a salmon fisher'," she says. "We went to Norway and I caught salmon the first time I fished. And then I was hooked." Salmon is the hardest to catch, "about 200 casts for one fish." This catch in itself feels fated.

The hobby soon evolved into instructing others. Seeing it as a great way of meeting people but a little sick of the company "largely being men," in 2003 Jansson formed Fjallorna, an association for women who want to fish. Today, Fjallorna has over 400 members with the notion that if you are some-

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where in Sweden, you always have someone to fish with.

I ask why she thinks fishing has been so male-dominated. She cites the obvious traditional roles, but she also sees clothing as an obstacle. "When I started fishing in the 1980s, I had to buy my waders from England. I couldn't get them in Sweden. Now you can buy them in Sweden, from brands like Sims and Orvis and Patagonia, but it's so expensive." She notes that the offering for men is larger with a bigger range of price points.

Jansson would often hear, "Just get the men's one, it doesn't matter what you look like," but it's not about aesthetics, it's about "safety and comfort." If she wears oversized mens waders, she'll need to wear bigger shoes. "It's not safe to wade in the water with huge shoes," she

explains. "And then if you have a men's jacket and the arms are too long, the fly line can get caught."

Growing up fishing with her mum and sisters, Emilie Björkman, flyer fisher and presenter of Swedish fishing programme *Fiskeliv*, didn't realise how rare women fishing was until she turned up to study a specialised two-year programme on the industry. "I was the only woman," she recalls. "It was weird." For Björkman, fronting a TV show on fishing is an important part of representation and an act she hopes helps change the face of the sport.

"I remember getting into a fight with a photographer once," Olsson says. "He wanted to take photographs of me fishing. I was wearing a dress in the river and he didn't want that picture."

I mean, how can you ask me about my whole life and then turn around and ask me to become manish when I'm trying to tell you as a woman, I fish differently and I'm not ashamed of it?"

Fishing brands have often portrayed women in the sport as having hyper-masculine qualities. Olsson tells an anecdote about a well-known label asking her for feedback on an ad. It portrayed a woman fishing solo in a very strong, typically 'masculine' way. "If you want to promote women as strong warrior women, that's fine but does this mean if you're a housewife or maybe timid or shy or very 'girly' you can't do it?" she says.

For a sport that is technically a form of hunting, the women I spoke to all possess the utmost respect for the fish and their environment. "The fish is a bonus,"

explains Jansson, her niece nodding in agreement. "Of course, if I fish salmon I want to catch a very big, big, big one. But it's not the point, it's not the reason I do it." Then she turns the most serious I've seen her all day: "When you go fishing you need to take responsibility. You need to know the rules."

Nowadays in Scandinavia, catch and release is enforced nationwide, with very tight restrictions around the fish you can actually take home as well as the types of hooks you are allowed to use. Even for today's trip I had to obtain a licence. It's also about care in releasing the animal: hands must be wet to avoid them getting sick and, as Jansson explains, "You need to place the fish gently back in the water, you have to watch it swim away."

Fishing took a different turn for Jansson when she suffered a stroke in 2011. Being in nature, being in the water became her rehabilitation and therapy. "There's so much science and research that says it's very good to spend time in the forest. Your stress levels go down after just five minutes in nature." She found that her brain would get tired from going into stores or being surrounded by people, "but if I just looked at the water, I would become calm." The stroke also impacted movement in her left arm. Each day she would grab her fly rope and wading rod and walk into the water, after a week she had "almost completely restored movement to the left side."

As we return fishless to the fire for piping hot goulash, Orvis following dutifully behind, conversation shifts to Jansson's favourite fish to catch. She starts laughing and says "Bonefish." I ask why. "Because you catch it on a Caribbean island as you stand on the beach with a cocktail in hand."



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Fishing is only a small part. It's about creating an experience to socialise and relax.



Älvkarleby on the Dalälven river is a popular place for fishing.

