

Natural Resources and Reflection: Summer Adventures in Sweden

Liz Stern

Liz Stern is a sophomore in Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology: Wildlife Science Concentration with a minor in Global One Health. She hopes to combine her studies with public service through collecting data on wildlife disease in North Carolina. Her interests in art, education, and outreach inspire her to look for opportunities to creatively engage communities.

I had little idea of what to expect from the experience of traveling for a month or living in a new country. I looked forward to getting out of my comfort zone while expanding my understanding of ecology and wildlife in different climates. What I found most impactful were the small experiences and common themes that occurred around our outings, lessons, and learnings that wove the whole month together: connection between cultures, exploring unfamiliar ecosystems, and finding new routines and balance in the bustle of traveling. What stayed with me most were not just the lessons or field trips, but the quieter moments and recurring themes that wove the month together – building connections across cultures, exploring unfamiliar ecosystems, and finding new routines and balance amid the bustle of traveling.



(L): Liz Stern in Gotland, Sweden holding a hare skull

(R): A forest near Kolarbyn Eco Lodge – Skinnskatteberg, Västmanland, Sweden

I braced myself for the disorientation of traveling abroad for the first time as I practiced basic Swedish on the plane, expecting the challenge of navigating a foreign language. Only to arrive and find nearly everyone fluent in English. Even the street signs felt oddly approachable, with familiar common root words shared between English and Swedish. While I was grateful, I also felt a bit apologetic at leaning so heavily on others while being a tourist in their home country. But over the next few days, the unexpected familiarity deepened: Johnny Cash playing in restaurants and American crime shows on hostel televisions. I realized then that our connection ran deeper than a shared vocabulary. People and cultures find common ground in the music and stories — even when across an ocean.

The true “culture shock” came only after leaving the cities. On the bus from Uppsala to the rural town of Skinnskatteberg, a landscape stretched outside of the windows both familiar and entirely new. While species like Norway spruce and Scots pines can be seen in the Pacific Northwest United States. The scattered boulders, natural lakes, and flat yet alpine terrain — shaped by ice age glaciers — formed an ecosystem that was largely new to me. Along our journey I delighted in spotting Eurasian jays, white-tailed eagles, roe deer, red deer, and huge hare. But, as I listened to the same handful of birds and insects each day, I grew increasingly appreciative of the chorus back home. Nothing compares to returning to my “little rainforest” near Raleigh, where over twenty bird species might greet you in a single hour. I feel grateful to be surrounded by such biodiversity and even more inspired to share North Carolina’s biodiversity with others — through stories, art, and connecting over backyard species — while working to protect the wildlife that makes our state’s wild places so extraordinary.



Mountain Hare near Badhusparken in Mariehamn, Åland

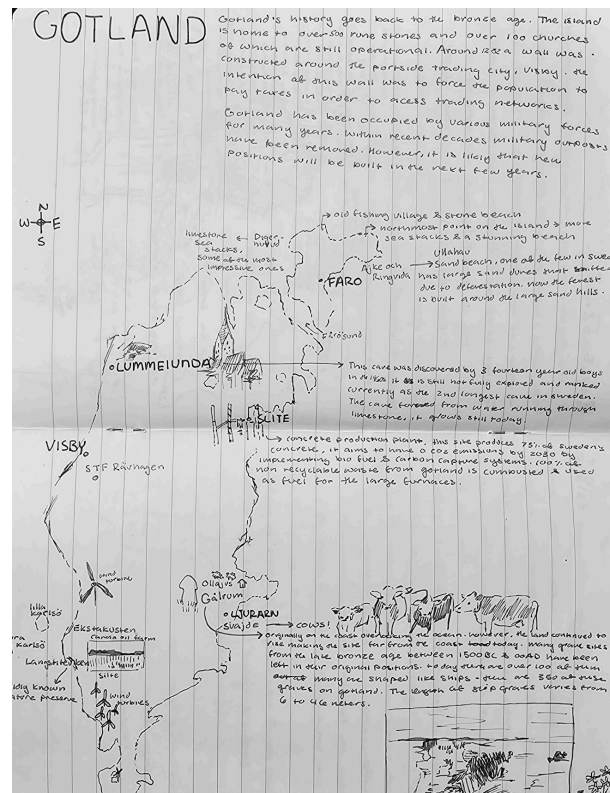
Spending a month abroad was a unique opportunity to build a new routine from the ground up. While we had a busy schedule of outings and field trips distributed over the four weeks, we were still left with many hours to find our own rhythm in a new country. It was like a mini experiment

as we adjusted to living out of a suitcase in an almost constant state of traveling from one place to the next. This separation from my usual student life gave me space to try new rhythms. I found myself learning how to balance finding time to myself while building a community among the cohort. Sometimes this manifested in venturing solo to nearby forests to look for birds other times it meant spending the afternoon sketching to recharge after a busy day.

The challenge of a daily journal requirement was unexpected. I struggled to find the quiet time and focus needed to reflect on the day. Despite this, journaling became grounding. On past trips, I had felt torn between wanting to fully absorb every moment and needing to slow down to process them. Journaling allowed me to put the worry of forgetting important moments and details aside while also forcing me to reflect almost daily.

While journaling was just a small part of my days while studying abroad, it is one of the aspects of the trip I have been most grateful for. Some of my favorite memories in Sweden are tied to journaling. During our first week in the small town of Skinskatteberg, I spent one evening sitting on the lawn outside of our kitchen door, writing in my journal listening to the dinner group cook pizza. Nearby, my friends discussed their own entries or shared recent developments in their novels. We shared company late into the evening as the latitude meant it was bright out for many hours past dinner. That night, it felt like our group truly clicked, all of us slowing down to reflect in our own ways. The moment stands out even more vividly than our adventure into a historical silver mine earlier that day.

Now back in the United States, I am working hard to continue a journaling habit. While I often find myself so busy on the task of journaling that I struggle to have time to reflect in the moment, I look forward to developing my skill in turning observations into insights. My completed journal from our trip now sits on my desk — not just as a record of the trip, but as a reminder of the value of making space for reflection.



Journal entry and sketch from our days on Gotland an island in Sweden