

A caper in the snow

Kate Gatacre heads to Sweden to try *toppjakt* — hunting on skis — and found it to be a true biathlon with blackcock and capercaillie as the target

I am not a natural athlete, so it was with some trepidation that I set off to Sweden for a few days of *toppjakt*, which is, to all intents and purposes, a biathlon, but with blackcock and capercaillie as targets. Samuel Jakoby, who runs Nordic Footprints, had emailed me a short list of what to take, mentioning that it was quite warm for the time of year — minus 20°C in January. Paul Quagliana, *Shooting Times's* intrepid photographer, was with me, and as we trundled some 200 miles north from Stockholm on a train, we nervously admired the frozen landscape.

The day's sport couldn't be that long, we told ourselves, and, indeed, when the train drew up at Mora station, in the Darlana province, despite it being only 4pm, the skies were dark. Distances are stretched in a country as big as Sweden, and we had yet another hour and a half to travel before we reached the hamlet of Husvallgölen, where Samuel lives. We were staying in the old village school, now renamed Valhalla. An early supper of delicious elk meatballs, cooked by Samuel, a glass of whisky for a nightcap and we retired early. "Breakfast at eight, then we'll set off at nine, as soon as it is properly light," Samuel said, as he left us to return to his home.

Our skis stood ready, stuck deep into the 4ft snowdrift outside the house. I've done plenty of downhill skiing, but never cross-country skiing, so the length of our "feet" for the next few days was a bit intimidating — the wooden skis were around 6ft long, and thin. A simple plastic strip with leather bindings was used to fix our booted feet on tightly. The wooden ski poles are also much longer than downhill ones, with larger baskets on the bottom and leather wrist straps. We walked along the road a few hundred yards, crossed and made ►



Learning the cross-country skiing slide-and-push action was the first task to master



“As we returned, just as dusk was beginning to fall, we saw huge tracks in the snow. “A wolf,” Samuel told us. Quite fresh”

Our way down a slope of about 30 yards to the edge of the frozen Fuluälven river where we put on our skis.

We were off. I'm glad to say Samuel carried the gun, a .222 with a shotgun barrel, the strap over his neck, the gun parallel to the ground across his chest, and on his back a fairly large rucksack. Paul was also burdened with a rucksack for his cameras, and I merely stuffed all I needed (water, which was frozen within the hour, an extra pair of gloves and an extra hat) in the capacious pockets of the huge off-white coats we'd been given as camouflage.

I kept to Samuel's tracks, Paul to mine, as we tried to ape his efficient and elegant slide and push motion. For the first 100 yards, I think we were both relieved. This wasn't that difficult.

It wasn't even that tiring. How wrong we were...

As soon as we'd crossed the river, which was bordered by the ever-present Norway spruce and birch trees, the landscape started to undulate. Samuel had decided that the first day would be more of a day for getting used to our transport than focusing too much on the hunting, which was definitely a good thing. I was quick to realise that it wasn't quite as easy as I'd initially thought. The crust of snow readily gave way, so the back of the ski would sink down and dig in, making it hard to move forwards. However, it was when there was an uphill slope to be negotiated that I really came

◀ A bird perched at the very top of a pine is known as a church cock

unstuck. I tried to copy Samuel's movements: plant right pole, slide right ski forward, transfer weight on to right ski, plant left pole, slide left ski — slither back down to the bottom. It was like playing snakes and ladders. There was definitely no talking that first morning, and our muttered cursing and huffing and puffing would surely have scattered any potential quarry.

Samuel clearly took pity on us, and we stopped for a cup of coffee early. “We just shot a wolf last week,” Samuel told us as we sipped our brew. “There are an increasing number now, so we have a quota, but it is the first year for a long time that we could shoot them again.” The wolf hunt involves all the locals, as the animals run for huge distances — and most of the hunting is done on skis, as it is the only way to get anywhere near the wily creatures. Elk hunting is also something that is usually undertaken by a co-operative, as one male beast can weigh up to 700kg.

Popcorn birds

A quick break had given us time to get our breath back and we set off once more. Samuel had given us instructions (pretend to keep moving, but ski on the spot if he holds his hand up — that way the birds won't be alarmed), so we felt more confident. The skiing got a little bit easier, allowing us to take stock of our surroundings. The snow sparkled under ski, birches and dark pine forests surrounded us, and there were animal tracks everywhere — rabbits, hares, foxes and, quite clearly, blackcock. Samuel stopped to show us a spot where the birds liked to sleep in the snow. A small hole with the clear markings of its wings on either side, like a miniature snow angel. “I call them popcorn birds — if you disturb them when they are in the snow, they pop out like popcorn.” A few minutes later, he held his hand up. We dutifully skied on the spot. “There, you see? At two o'clock,” he said, *sotto voce*. And indeed right at the top of a pine, sat a fine blackcock. And then I saw another, and another — there was a whole flock of them. We aped Samuel, hunching over slightly, and moving slowly, to get a bit closer.



▲ The cross country skis are 6ft long, made from birch and are the same as those used by the Swedish army, with a tarred base for better grip
◀ You can't turn easily on cross country skis — on the downhill you have to extend one leg and adopt a kneeling posture, falling is inevitable

Stopping and kneeling in one motion, Samuel turned back to me and whispered, “Take your skis off, Kate; Paul, you stay here.” I did as I was told, and unfastened my bindings. Stepping off the skis, I sank 3ft into the snow and waded over to Samuel, who had done the same and removed his pack. He loaded the rifle and we crept as subtly as one can in so much snow, towards a small pine. Hiding behind it, we glassed the bird. “We need to get closer, this is still too far,” he said. Another wade brought us to another tree. We played this hopscotch game for four trees, until he was satisfied that it was within range. Then, he handed me the rifle. “Lie down, and

get really comfortable. Then shoot, if you are sure.” I did as I was told, but finding a prone position in deep, soft snow wasn't as easy as I'd imagined. I did, however, and lined up my shot, remembering what Samuel had told me. “Find the white patch, at the top of the wing. That is your target.” I fired. And missed, completely. The birds scattered. After lunch, we came up on to a high plane. Samuel stopped, turned, and said, “This is where we always see capercaillie. Keep your eyes open.” Two slides on, he stopped once more. There, on the top of a pine, sat a caper. How he managed to balance on the delicate, spindly tip of a branch, I don't know. We took off our skis once ▶

It's not so easy to find a comfortable shooting position in deep, soft snow





Kate and Samuel with the capercaillie they bagged on the last day

again, crept forward, and got into position, though again, I found it near impossible to find a stable position. Raising the rifle slightly, I took aim, and breathed out. At the crack of the rifle, I knew I'd been way off. The bird lifted easily and sailed away, not in any particular hurry.

Unfortunately, those two weren't the only times I missed that week. The targets are small, particularly at between 100 and 150m. Add in the soft snow, and I just couldn't seem to get a steady enough aim.

That first day (and on every subsequent day), we carried on skiing for some six hours, arriving home exhausted. Over supper after our first day's hunting, we quizzed Samuel about the skis. "They are the same ones that the army uses. We used to have to ski with 20kg on our back. They are made of birch, then tarred on the bottom — this stops them getting wet and gives a small amount of extra grip," he told us.

The next morning, we set off once more, easing our aching muscles back into action as we crossed the river in the same place. Almost at once we stopped, seeing a large group of "blackies", as Samuel calls them, on the other bank of the river. So, we started to make our way along the edge of the river, which creaked and groaned alarmingly under us. Once more, I crawled through the deep snow, and once more I missed. "You'd better try the next one, Paul," I said.

We set off again, and soon enough, as we got to a woodland track, Paul spotted another group of blackcock in the pines ahead and to our right. I stayed where I was, while Paul and

Samuel left their skis behind and crawled into position. I heard the sharp report of the rifle, and saw the bird drop. Once their skis were retrieved, we set off to search for the fallen blackcock. It took a little while to find, despite all three of us having marked it — but then there it was, having plunged through the first crust of snow. Its blue-black feathers gleamed, and we spread out its curling tail feathers. "See its ears?" Samuel said, pointing them out to us. "That is why it is so hard to get near them. They have amazing vision, too."

The Finspitz method

Over a cup of soup and a sandwich, Samuel explained that this form of hunting the birds was tricky. An easier method, but no less exciting, is to use the Finspitz dog. Samuel has two of these fox-like canines, but they can't cope with the deep snow. The Finspitz is trained to range away from the hunters in ever-increasing circles until it finds blackcock — then it barks at the base of the bird's tree. The birds, which aren't so jittery as to fly away at the sight of a barking dog, are merely distracted, allowing the hunter to get within a closer range than we were.

On we went and, buoyed up by Paul's success, I decided to have another go. First of all, however, I asked for a quick test. A twig through a piece of paper, fastened to a tree at around 100m. When Samuel brought it back, my first reaction was dismay — I must have missed it completely, as there was no hole at all. But no, I'd hit it through the hole the twig had made. I'd used a rucksack as a rest, and it made all the difference. As we returned, just as dusk was falling, we saw huge tracks in the snow. "A wolf," Samuel told us. Quite fresh.

That night, Samuel brought out a thick, blackish-red liquor and the schnapps bottle after supper. "I won't tell you what it is until you've had some," he said, as he carefully measured out a tiny amount of the coloured stuff and filled the glass up with schnapps. It had a strangely metallic taste, reminiscent of the smell of poster paint. Not entirely unpleasant, but not entirely pleasant, either. "Can you guess?" Samuel asked. "It used to be used as medicine, to calm down mad people. Perhaps it will calm your nerves for tomorrow, Kate." It turned out to be beaver schnapps — made from the scent glands — *castoreum*, which is also used to produce perfume.

On the third day, we went further afield, driving to another area of Samuel's hunt. "This is normally a great area for capers," he told us. But the capercaillies weren't in evidence, though we saw their footprints and sleeping holes everywhere.

It did, however give us some wonderful opportunities of practising our downhill technique. One can't turn in cross-country skis, so, when you come to a downhill slope, the only method is to put one foot slightly in front of the other, and bend the back leg, as though you are kneeling. Falling was inevitable at first, though our balance gradually improved.

The church cock

On the final day, we crossed the river again, and just as we reached the far bank, we spotted a large blackcock right at the top of a pine, within range. Shaking with nerves, I once more followed Samuel, this time taking Paul's rucksack with me as a rest. I lay down, lined the rifle up, and fired. The bird fell. The rest of the flock scattered and we waited a few moments. "Wait here," Samuel instructed, as he fetched a cartridge for the shotgun. As he walked towards me, I spotted the bird, which was hard hit. Stupidly, I thought I could retrieve it, but of course, within seconds, it had disappeared. After a long search, we decided to resume our hunt and retrieve the bird on the way home.

By some miracle, the flock had not gone far. Not 40 yards further, we saw another "church cock" (one sitting right at the tip of a pine tree). Crawling forward, I found my shot and fired. "Hoo Ya!" Samuel cried. "When it falls with its feet in the air, you know it is dead." I stayed where I was, so that I could give Samuel instructions as to which tree to look under. It was Paul who found it in the end, as it had fallen into the dark bowl beneath one of the pines. What a relief!

We headed up the hill, and, passing some of the track we'd been on when Paul shot his first bird, came across another flock. Paul bagged another church cock and we continued up on to a high plane. As we passed a rather more open area, there was a rush of movement. The birds were, just as Samuel had described, popping out of the snow. More and more burst through the surface, some not more than 10 yards away, and whirred away as grouse would. It was a fine farewell to the stunning landscape of Sweden.

That night, we feasted on the fried breast of blackcock, cooked by Samuel with a bit of thyme and salt and pepper. After supper, it was sauna time — a wood fired sauna, with several escapes to sip cold beer and roll in the snow.

As we drove away the next day, we saw lots of elk and had to stop for five capercaillie wandering in the most leisurely manner across the snow-covered road. *Toppjakt* is certainly not for the faint-hearted, but, with stunning scenery, such a convivial host and guide and the challenge of skiing and shooting combined, it was one of the most gratifying and exciting hunting trips I've experienced. ■

► The fox-like Finspitz dog is also used to hunt capers



For more information...

To contact Nordic Footprints, visit www.nordicfootprints.com, or tel 0046 703 749074. In addition to *toppjakt*, Samuel can offer beaver, elk and ptarmigan hunting, as well as capercaillie and blackcock hunting with a Finspitz as well as with pointers. If you'd like to hunt in the snow, but find the idea of skiing too much, he can arrange for hunting from a dogsled. There is also outstanding trout, grayling, char, pike and perch fishing on offer.



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