

Legends of the Arctic:

The Hälle Flygare Story

By John Bechtel
Freelance travel writer

Hälle Flygare is a living legend. A 79-year-old Swede residing with his wife Linda near Canada's Banff National Park in Canmore, Alberta. Hälle's six decades as an explorer and photographer pack out one of the world's best documented adventurer resumés.



Hälle Flygare has been a nature photographer in six of the eight member nations of the Arctic Council; he has traveled on all seven continents and 30 countries, including two trips to Spitzbergen/Svalbard in the extreme Arctic north photographing polar bears, and three trips to Antarctica in the extreme south.

He has photographed wildlife in Africa, on Caribbean islands, in Central America, on the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador, crossed the Andes Mountains on horseback in Ecuador, photographed birds in the Amazon rainforest, and sailed from Ushuaia at the southern tip of Argentina to the Falkland and South Georgia Islands photographing penguins.

He has thousands of beautiful wildlife and flower photos of Alaska, the Yukon and Northwest Territories, three of the five Nordic countries, and the Canadian and American Rockies. He is an expert on Arctic flora and fauna, and a prolific world-class wildlife photographer.

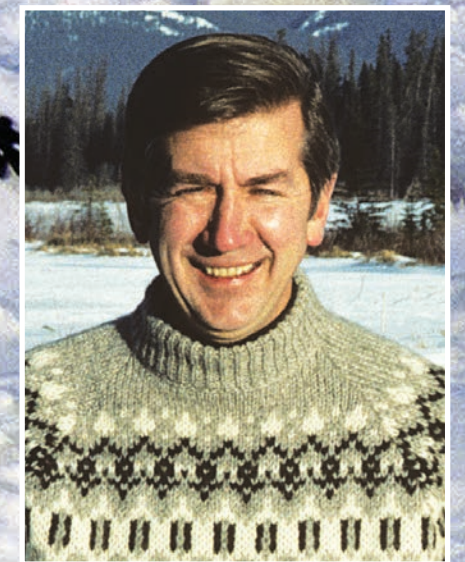
He has identified over 3,000 species of birds globally. He has authored 12 books and brochures, three of which are still available on Amazon while supplies last. After many years with the Canadian Park Service, Hälle devotes all of his time to travel and photography in his quest for nature in wild places. And Hälle says he's not done yet.

The Lure of the Arctic

Born in Lund, in the southeast of Sweden, Hälle, as a teenager, worked in a photography shop in nearby Hörby for three summers developing film and printing black and white pictures.

It was here that he purchased his first Exacta 35mm camera and became interested in nature photography. He met another student at a dance who said he could get him out of the lab and into an outdoors job in the south of Sweden. He jumped at the opportunity and over the next few years Hälle obtained placement in the Swedish forestry service and other jobs with

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Hälle Flygare

Photographs courtesy of Hälle Flygare

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private forestry companies that got him assignments from Skåne in the south to a little place called Svappavaara (near Kiruna of Swedish Ice Hotel fame) well north of the Arctic Circle. At a young age, he began reading Swedish trappers' books with tales of adventure and courage in the wilds of Canada. Hälle says he still has about 12 of those books that stirred his imagination and fed his dreams to immigrate and live in the Canadian wilderness.

Mapping the Wilderness

From 1959-1960, he worked for the British Columbia Forest Service as a Swedish exchange student, and liking the unexplored vast expanses of the Canadian northwest, he immigrated to Canada in 1962 and continued working for B.C. Forest Service until 1965. For the next seven years with a consulting forestry firm, Hälle marked out the right-of-way boundaries for the placement of two power lines totaling more than 1,500 miles in uncharted territory from the Peace and Mica



Atlantic Puffin range includes Norway, Iceland, Greenland and Atlantic Canada south to Maine.

hydro dam projects in the interior of British Columbia to Vancouver. He calculated the value of timber being cut down on private land by various logging companies. This was no road trip up a two-lane highway with an all-terrain sport utility vehicle. In many cases it wasn't even a dirt road,

but rather being flown into rugged terrain by helicopter with assistants, dropped into virgin forest with nothing more than maps and aerial photos to start with. They had their guns and some survival supplies. They marked trees of spruce and pine and calculated the volume of timber by the diameter and height of the trees. They calculated the quantity and cost of the trees, because B.C. Hydro had to pay private landowners for the timber they cut down. All information was documented and later reports were sent back to the head office in Vancouver. You lived in the wilderness, and survived off of the wilderness.

Never your typical 9 to 5 job, to be sure. Hälle says his most memorable wilderness experience, one of many, was when he and his Indian guide became aware of the near proximity of a male grizzly bear. Hälle's assistant took off into the forest—with their box of ammunition in his possession, leaving Hälle with three bullets. When the grizzly charged him, Hälle dropped him with a bullet to the throat, just ten feet away. When they cut him open, they found the remains of a black bear in his stomach. Hälle says that might be the most scared he's ever been in his life. It happened in late October and the bear was hungry looking for more meat to fill his stomach before denning up for the winter.



Grizzly bear in Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada. Established in 1885, it is Canada's oldest national park.



White-Tailed Eagle

Stalking Game...with a Camera

During this time Hälle also did stints as a big game hunting guide in Alberta and British Columbia. However, after years of seeing hundreds of animals being killed by vehicles on the Trans-Canada highway in Banff National Park he exchanged his guns for cameras and telephoto lenses. He discovered, to his delight, that it took more skill and was more challenging to get close enough to wildlife for great photos than it took to kill them. As an experienced outdoorsman and hunter, Hälle was well acquainted with wildlife behavior such as moose or bear in the forest, or stalking them on the tundra, tracking them, keeping downwind to avoid detection. For most wildlife photography, tripods are too cumbersome and your subjects are gone in a flash



Hälle and Linda Flygare in Banff National Park.

(no pun intended). As with hunting, a steady hand is essential. From then on any firearms he carried were for his protection, not for trophies.

Free Spirits Join Forces

Hälle met Linda in Whistler, British Columbia, in the spring of 1968. (Linda's grandmother had emigrated to Canada from Sweden in the late 1800s). They were married in the fall. Linda, a free spirit herself, had spent the previous 2½ years traveling the world, spending time in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. In 1972 they moved to Banff National Park, where Hälle served as a Banff Park Warden for the next 17 years.

Rediscovering an Ancient Trail

During big game guiding for Swedish moose hunters in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park, British Columbia, Hälle located an old Indian trail that had been used as a trade route for thousands of years. This trail runs 450 miles from the Fraser River in British Columbia to Bella

Coola, originally a small coastal village on the Pacific Coast.

This is the trail
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Nootka Lupine

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Scotsman Alexander Mackenzie successfully followed in 1793, in an overland search across what is today Canada, for a northwest passage to the Pacific, making him the first European to cross the North American continent from ocean to ocean, over 10 years before Lewis and Clark accomplished something similar in the lower 48.

During 11 of his years at Banff, Hälle was periodically excused from his park duties in order to locate, mark and clear the historic Alexander Mackenzie Trail. Most of the trail was in total wilderness, and Hälle says these were some of his most exciting on-the-job experiences. In 1981, he co-authored the trail guide book *In the Steps of*

Alexander Mackenzie from his eleven years of field notes.

In 1982, Hälle and Linda spent three months retracing Mackenzie's 1792 route across Alberta in Zodiac rubber rafts and north canoe replicas used by early traders, following the Peace, Athabasca, Clearwater and Slave Rivers from British Columbia to the Saskatchewan and Northwest Territories borders. In 1988 and 1989, Hälle was the ground support coordinator and photographer for Lake Head University Outdoor Recreation. During a two-month expedition with 20 paddlers, they retraced Alexander Mackenzie's 1789 search for the Northwest Passage following the 1,000 mile long Mackenzie River from Fort McMurray in Alberta to the Arctic Ocean.

Half-Ton Roadkill can Kill

During the construction of the Trans-Canada Highway, Hälle persuaded Parks Canada to build wildlife fencing and underpasses to eliminate highway kills of elk, moose,

white-tail deer, mule deer, wolf, coyote, grizzly and black bears. All collisions with wildlife are unsettling, but when a 3,000 pound car, hurtling along at 60 mph, hits a half-ton moose or bear, the results are ugly.

Hälle told the Canadian authorities that in Sweden they put up fences. Parks Canada Western Region Office temporarily assigned and funded him for a year to organize the effort to follow Sweden's example.

Author and Entrepreneur

One of Hälle's books, *Wildflowers of the Canadian Rockies*, sold 45,000 copies, and 80% of sales were handled by Hälle's own book distribution and marketing company. In the past ten years he has organized and led photography and birding tours all over the world. His plasticized Field Guides (*Wildlife of the Rocky Mountains*, and *Alpine Wildflowers of the Rocky Mountains*) are each filled with over 100 gorgeous photos, in a folded format



perfect for hikers, campers, and other tourists. In 2005, he was elected into the prestigious Association of Swedish Nature Photographers, an organization with only 100 members. After a lifetime adventure circumnavigating the globe, Hälle has come back to where he started; he is currently working on a new book, *Wild Arctic*, due to be released in 2017.



Tundra's beautiful fireweed



Hälle at work in northern British Columbia, Canada.

A Journey for Two with Heart and Courage

During the almost half century that they have shared, Hälle and Linda have enjoyed many years with the same employer, and sometimes they partnered on projects; sometimes they each had separate assignments in different locations for weeks or months at a time. They would bridge the separation gap with weekends, leaves of absence, and negotiations with authorities. On one occasion, Hälle accepted an assignment with Parks Canada as long as Linda was assigned with him as the cook. Understanding, the authorities quickly agreed that this particular excursion clearly required the services of a cook.

They have spent most of their working lives in cold climates of the north, the far north, the Arctic and Antarctic. This is their story. It is the stuff of legend, of two highly-knowledgeable, independent people

living life on their own terms, with heart and courage.

Like all legends, the Flygare story has potential to inspire us—to get off the couch and turn off the television; to travel, to witness both the beauty and the harshness of untamed nature, to marvel in jaw-dropping wonder; to gain perspective and possibly reframe our own priorities. Could this be the year to tap into the wild and untamed within you, to make that trip you have dreamed about, and to put on an explorer hat of your own? The Arctic, one of this planet's last frontiers, beckons.

For more information, see Hälle's website and photo gallery *Nature in Wild Places* online, at www.natureinwildplaces.com.



John Bechtel is a professional freelance writer for the food, wine, and tourism industries; ghostwriting non-fiction books; and web content strategist for businesses.

You can follow him on his website www.greatplainsdrifter.com.