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A Day—and 150 Years— in the Nordmarka

Skiing through a Norwegian forest is everyone's right

Sam Martland



THE ODDEST MOMENT THAT DAY WAS WHEN I CAME TO THE LIBRARY—sort of—among the trees. At a complicated junction of groomed and ungroomed trails, I chose an ungroomed one that looked like it would lead to a good hilltop view. A few hundred feet up the slope, the trail led me past a little green sign that said “Framtidsbibliotek.” I came upon the trees by chance, but I knew about the project. In 2014 the Future Library Trust and Scottish artist Katie Paterson planted an acre or so of firs in a recently cut area especially so that in 2114 they can be cut down and made into paper for a special set of books. Every year the trust commissions a new book, and the Deichmanske Bibliotek in Oslo seals it up unread until then. Thus, two of Norway’s defining shared resources, public land and public libraries, were together that day on that green and white mountainside.

I was working my way on snowshoes through the Nordmarka, a Norwegian forest. The trails in that part of the woods run mostly north and south, but I was headed east, so most of the time I was off trails. Norwegians do even more cross-country skiing than an average American viewer of the Winter Olympics might imagine, but they rarely snowshoe. I wandered the trackless woods alone except when I crossed ski trails. It was the best time of the year to do it. The day was clear and bright, with just a touch of a breeze. It was late enough into the winter that the sun had come back up in the sky from the yellow days of December. The snowiest winter since 1952 had put more than a meter of snow all through the woods, and it had crusted so that my snowshoes barely left tracks. Places that would have been swampy and buggy in spring, summer, or fall were easy to traverse.

EARLIER IN THE DAY, I HAD PUSHED THROUGH A THICKET AND COME OUT onto Kong Olavs løype, a cross-country trail named for the king from 1957 to 1991, who skied it often with his dog. He hadn’t been born Norwegian, but Danish. In 1905, when Norway voted to stop sharing Sweden’s king and take up full independence, the country invited a Danish prince to become king. The new king changed his name to Haakon and his son’s name to Olav; I don’t know if he set out to have his son be a great Norwegian skier, but on purpose or not the son did just that, building trails and jumps in the public park around the palace from a young age and eventually competing in the ski jump championships at Holmenkollen. Weaving through the firs and

A picnic table along a public trail offers a respite with a view of a lone farm. SAM MARTLAND

birches, his favorite trail led me from patches of gray shade into patches of bright sun and back again, a perfect scene for a king to be a Norwegian, or for an American to try doing the same.

After Olav grew up, but before he was king, these woods turned warlike. The Nazis invaded Norway on April 9, 1940. Men escaped through these woods, many along these very trails; according to C. J. Hambro, president of Norway's parliament from 1935 to 1945, some of them "met in the ski hills," formed the Sørkedal Ski Company, and presented themselves to the army "as a fighting unit thoroughly welded together." He wrote about this in his book *I Saw It Happen in Norway* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1941). Throughout the war the marka was a big asset to the resistance, one of the reasons Germany needed well over 300,000 troops to occupy a country of little more than 2 million. Here and there in the woods little signs mark the location of clandestine radio stations. From southeastern Norway people hiked to Sweden to escape, and today special markers point out the Flyktningeruta, one of many routes used by refugees, to modern hikers, much as stone crosses mark the pilgrimage route to the Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim and white blazes mark the Appalachian Trail.

I ate lunch all alone among young firs on the side of a ridge with views to fir-topped hills miles away—a lovely modern Norwegian meal of pita, hummus, and vegetables from a small supermarket owned by the children of Jordanian immigrants. The steam from my hot chocolate rose straight up in the still air.

There was no one to tell me to stay on the trail. No one was allowed to. A Nordic custom—and Norwegian law—called *allemannsretten* (everyone's right) allows all to hike, ski, and camp on all undeveloped land. It allows anyone to cross farmland when it is covered in snow, and to pick berries, flowers, and mushrooms in season. Politeness discourages barging right up to the edge of people's yards and requires asking permission to camp near homes, but there is no posted undeveloped land in Norway, Sweden, or Iceland. In the winter, most people do stay on trails because the favorite outdoor activity then is skiing and many trails are groomed, but in the summer people wander through the woods, leaving a maze of little paths through the blueberry bushes that many American hikers would find distasteful. In summer 2020 Norwegian park authorities wanted people not to bother the musk oxen in Dovrefjell-Sunndalsfjella National Park; they asked visitors to stay on the designated trail, but they couldn't legally require them to. In general, the right to use the outdoors freely translates into many people hiking and camping and

strong public support for keeping open space open, even in the face of the similarly strong urge to build and visit *hytter* (cabins or cottages ranging from primitive to luxurious) out in the woods. In June 2021, in fact, one town with a lot of *hytter* decided not to allow any more.

As I picked my way down a steep slope in a dark green patch of woods, I saw that I was coming to a groomed trail. I came out of the trees about half-way up a steep stretch of a hundred yards or so. An older woman was working her way up on skis. Slowly and carefully, with far more skill and balance than I would have had (not saying much). I kept out of her way and off the ski tracks, and remembered a moment not many days before: Walking down the hard-packed middle of another trail, I had seen three skiers, with cargo sleds in tow, come around a bend—one in each set of ski tracks and one in the middle heading straight for me! I had leapt over one set of tracks and landed up to my waist in fluffy snow just off the trail. “Det er god hensyn!” called out one as they passed: “That was considerate.” Today, I waited for the lone skier to go by uphill before I followed the trail downhill for 50 or 100 yards to where it met three others in a maze of diamonds and triangles. Two young women glided past on one of the other trails, pulling babies in special sleds.

On the far side of the crossing, a footpath wound up the hillside enticingly. The slanting sun lit up the southwest-facing slope. A homemade wooden sign showed that the path was not part of the official system. The little path tempted me, but my map and my watch insisted that I keep heading east. As I headed for the main trails again, a rumbling announced the approach of the only other person I was to see that day: the driver of a municipal trail-grooming truck.

THAT’S RIGHT: A MUNICIPAL GROOMING TRUCK. I WAS WITHIN THE CITY LIMITS of Oslo; my snowy adventure took me about a half-mile from the city’s outer houses. Most of the trails I crossed were carefully groomed public ski trails, some even with streetlights. I was making my way from hilltop Frognerstøseter station (469 meters above sea level, according to the signs on the platform), at the end of what just might be the biggest ascent made by any city subway system in the world, to lakeside Sognsvann station (198 meters) at the end of another line. But don’t let proximity to the city center fool you. These two stations are jumping-off points for outdoor adventure. At Frognerstøseter, people ski right off the end of the platform into the surrounding woods. Some go for a couple of hours, but others go for days. You can ski or walk for twenty miles in some directions without crossing a road open for



The Frognerseteren station overlooks Oslo 469 meters above sea level, at one end of a subway line. From here, one can ski twenty miles in either direction. SAM MARTLAND

general use. I was nearly alone and enjoying a feeling of peaceful remoteness. That's how the Nordmarka is, at least on a lot of weekdays.

Not every weekday is peaceful, and not everywhere. Subway, bus, and trolley—or just walking—can take you to the forest from anywhere in Oslo in perhaps under an hour, usually well under, and people take advantage of that closeness. All winter you see people in Oslo carrying skis on trains, buses, and trolleys. All year you see people with backpacks. At the beginning of my hike, a few hundred yards from Frognerseteren station, I passed 50 or 100 kids out skiing with their school. They were a typical group of Oslo schoolkids: features and colors from all over the world, all dressed warmly and out enjoying the outdoors. They weren't all experts; three girls tried over and over again to herringbone their way up a little slope, and fell again and again, laughing uproariously. My own kids had been out skiing with their school, too. They went to Språksenteret, Oslo's special intensive Norwegian-as-a-second-language school for new immigrants, which taught skiing and hiking as parts of becoming Norwegian.

In March and February 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic began, Norwegian officials said explicitly that it was a good idea to hike. Indeed, outdoor life is so central to Norwegian life that hiking popped up in all sorts of announcements and FAQs. One of my favorites was, “Can I go hiking with my 83-year-old mother?” I loved the image of the active mother, the close parent-child ties, and the idea that going out into the woods would be a compelling activity for people of any age. Even people in home quarantine were allowed to hike if they could get from their homes to the marka without getting close to other people. “Nearly everywhere in Norway there are places where one can hike alone,” said one national health official, and because of the Nordmarka this was true even for Oslo. When these orders first went out it was still cross-country ski season in much of Norway; authorities throughout the country stopped grooming the ski trails so that people would stay home or spread out through the woods. So many people took advantage of the marka that in late March, with the snow gone, the trash cans that the city of Oslo maintains along some of the bigger ski and bike trails were filling up faster than workers could empty them even on a five-times-a-week schedule.

The headquarters of Den Norske Turistforening (DNT), the Norwegian Trekking Club, share one of Oslo’s main squares with a government ministry, the national labor union organization, and two major political parties. Den Norske Skiforening (DNS) or Norwegian Ski Club is not so prominently housed, but it also weighs in on national issues that affect “open-air life,” from trail maintenance to wind farms. Partly thanks to that political weight, no major road leaves Oslo going west or north, and I could find remote woods and acres of clean snow close to town.

Of course, given Norwegians’ particular ties to their forests and open space, staying on the trail is for convenience, not to keep the rest of the woods pristine. Most of the vast forest is managed for timber, so my snowshoe route took me through groves of tall firs and cutover patches scattered with saplings. It was precisely that type of forest management that made it a good home for the saplings of the Future Library, which could be planted in a recent clearing but grow up in a recreational forest where many people will stumble on them just the way I did.

Some of the Nordmarka belongs to the city of Oslo, but most of it is a centuries-old timber estate. My day depended on *allemannsretten*. *Hytter*, huts in the Appalachian Mountain Club sense, some staffed, some unstaffed, some belonging to universities and scout groups, and some serving waffles and coffee, dot the Nordmarka. There are several chapels for people who want

to combine a hike and a church service. DNT and DNS maintain huge networks of marked trails. Many of the cross-country ski trails have lights, even miles into the forest. From mid-November through early February, the sun rises after 8 A.M. and sets before 5 P.M., and on December 21, it rises at 9:17 A.M. and sets at 3:11 P.M.

One night in January I took my daughter to cross-country ski lessons at a huge outdoor base with hundreds of people, from middle-aged folks skiing with their dogs to little kids learning to ski jump. Snow was falling, lights were shining, and biathletes' rifles were cracking in the background. Another hardy group was playing soccer in the snow. Armed with snowshoes, I took a footpath uphill among the trees while the lights on the trails a few hundred yards to either side of me made an eerie artificial moonlight.

I missed the bus home with my daughter, but it was easy to walk home that night. The city goes right up to the forest. In most directions there is no gradual suburbanization. Houses on small lots, or even apartment buildings, just stop short at the *markagrensen*, the legal border of urban development. The *markagrensen* began as a technological and health limit. In the 1600s Oslo began to pipe water from its small central river, Akerselva. During the next three centuries, both Oslo and its water system grew. As Oslo expanded its water system through the 1800s, the main intake moved farther and farther up Akerselva, reaching upstream of the sawmills, textile mills, and other more polluting factories. The more the city drank, the less the factories had for their wheels and turbines. Eventually the city took its water from the river's Maridalsvannet, a natural lake raised by a small dam, and was not inclined to pump water above that height. The elevation of the lake became the limit of urban development. Oslo continued to fight with Akerselva factories over how much water it could take, but it cooperated with the big timber company that owned much of the Nordmarka to manage the water in Maridalsvannet. In the ensuing decades, many of the dams and reservoirs originally built by the timber company became part of the drinking water system. The city also bought land around the lake to keep the water clean. Simultaneously, the growing urban population of Norway took up skiing and hiking as a connection to the land and as nationalist activities.

By the time the built-up area reached the limit originally set by the water supply, public opinion had made that line almost impossible to cross. Some development followed the winding Holmenkollen electric railway up the city's largest hill toward Frognerseteren early in the twentieth century, but otherwise the city mostly stayed below. The final stop on that line, where

I started my snowshoe trek, is out in the woods, with just a few outdoor-oriented businesses nearby. The *markagrensen* moves only by deliberate government action, often against substantial opposition. Oslo's suburbs therefore lie south of the city on either side of the fjord, or northeast of the city along the main roads and rail lines to the northern parts of Norway, not in the forests on the city's north, west, and east.

I'M FINISHING MY WEEKDAY HIKE NOW. AFTER THE LIBRARY, I CUT CROSS-country again. A bit of floundering in powder brought me up a steep slope to another ridge with a view to the east. Sognsvann itself, a former reservoir, was hidden from view, but I could see the much larger Maridalsvannet a couple of miles away, with wooded hills beyond it and just a few buildings in sight. Time was running on, and so must I. The next ski trail I hit ran in the direction I needed to go, so the snowshoes came off and went under one arm while I hustled down the middle of the path. Sooner than I would have liked, but just in time to catch the subway down to pick up my son from school, I emerged from the forest, tramped across the granite dam at Sognsvann, and climbed the short slope to Sognsvann station. Two months later, at a picnic organized by my seventh-grader's Språksenteret classmates, one of their teachers would casually mention that before the picnic she had skied 30 kilometers, and on this day I joined a thin stream of skiers and backpackers; at the station we mixed with people dressed more like historians—or archivists—because the national archives are right there at the station, next to the trailheads. I was back in the city after my day in the marka.

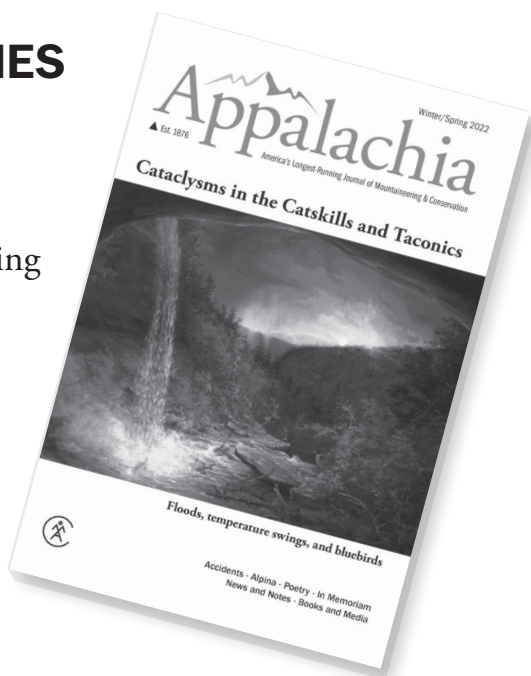
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