



In the Steps of Alexander Mackenzie

Meet Hälle Flygare, the Scanian adventurer who mapped and protected Sir Alexander Mackenzie's pioneering trail through British Columbia to the Pacific Ocean.

By Kajsa Norman

Born in Lund in 1936, Hälle Flygare was always passionate about exploring and documenting the outdoors. As a teenager, he worked three summer seasons at the local camera store in Hörby, where he developed a love of photography. Flygare later went on to pursue a career in forestry which took him from his native Skåne in the south, all across Sweden to Lapland and Norrbotten in the far north. In 1959, he had the opportunity to spend

a year as a Forest Exchange Student with the British Columbia Forest Service in Canada. It was a dream come true.

"In my youth I read fascinating tales of Swedish-Canadian trappers. Their courage and experiences in the wilds of Canada fed my dreams to emigrate and live in the Canadian wilderness," Flygare recalls.

After returning to Sweden to complete his military service, Flygare emigrated to Canada in 1962 joining

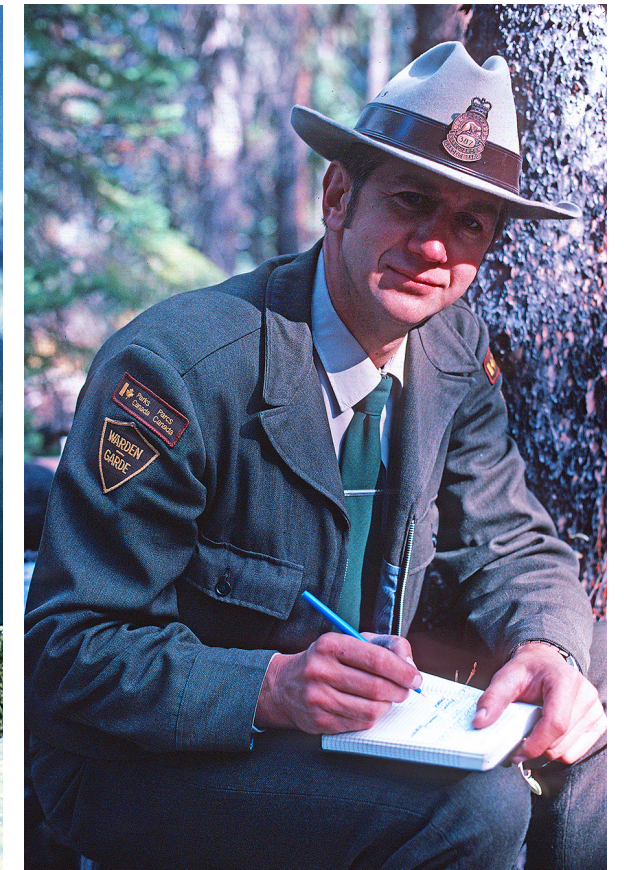
the British Columbia forest service. In 1972, he landed his dream job as Park Warden of Banff National Park, and shortly thereafter, he made a discovery that would forever change his life.

"While guiding moose hunters in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park in British Columbia, I came across long forgotten native trails, which had been used by Alexander Mackenzie in his search for a trade route across Canada to the Pacific Ocean," says Flygare.

A trader-explorer, Alexander

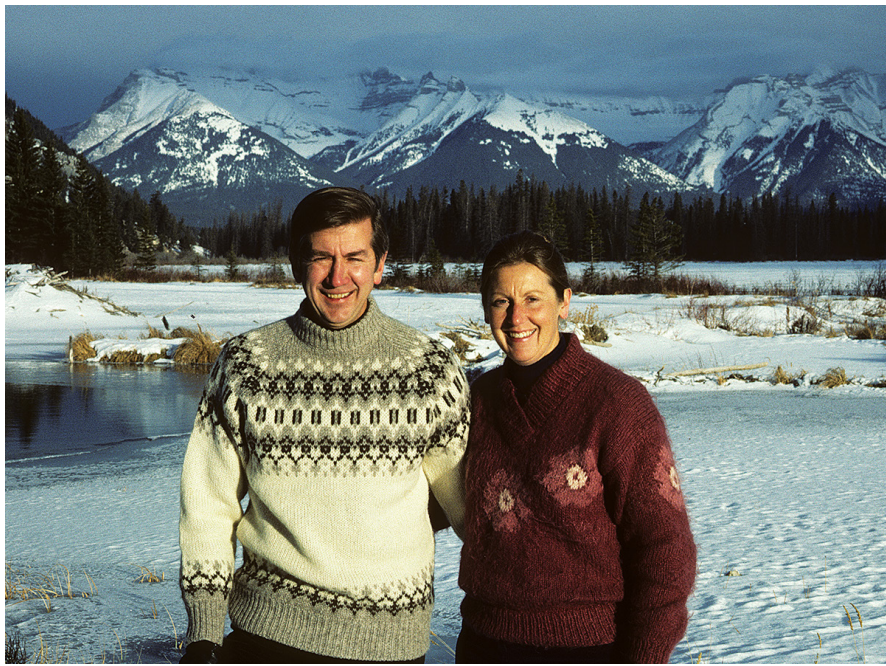


Ram in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Photo: Hälle Flygare

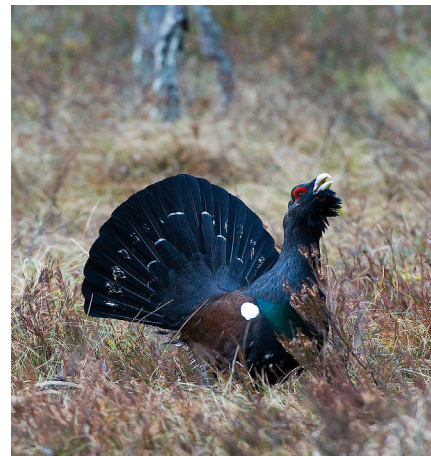


Flygare as a Park Warden in Banff National Park





Hille and Linda Flygare in Banff National Park, 1973. Top right: a hunting eagle in Norway. Photos: Hille Flygare



A capercaillie in Västmanland, Sweden.



Hille and Linda building rock cairns on the Mackenzie trail.



Hille Flygare in Antarctica.



Polar bears in Churchill, Manitoba.

Mackenzie was born in 1764 in the fishing port of Stornoway in Scotland. In 1774, he came to New York with his family. Because of the dangers posed by the American Revolutionary War, Mackenzie was sent to attend school in Montréal. In 1779, he became a clerk in the small fur-trading firm of Finlay and Gregory which would later merge with the larger North West Company.

In 1787, Mackenzie headed west to open up new trading routes. On June 3, 1789, he and his party left the North West Company's trading post Fort Chipewyan, located on the south shore of Lake Athabasca in what is now northeast Alberta. They paddled northwest in a birchbark canoe, in search of a navigable Northwest Passage to the Pacific. However, instead of finding a route to the Pacific, they ended up reaching the Arctic Ocean, discovering and mapping what would become known as the Mackenzie River in northern Canada. At the time, Mackenzie interpreted this as a failure. Over time, however, it would turn out to be an important discovery as the region would offer many trade

opportunities for the North West Company.

Three years later, after some additional astronomy studies in England, Mackenzie set out again in search of the Northwest Passage. On October 10, 1792, he left Lake Athabasca, following the Peace River to its junction with Smokey River at Fort Fork. He and his voyageurs spent the winter there and, in the spring of 1793, they embarked on the final push to the Pacific – canoeing the Peace, Parsnip and McGregor Rivers through the Rocky Mountains to the Fraser River. From here, Mackenzie and his voyageurs followed First Nations guides along a native trade route to Bella Coola River, which they paddled all the way to the salt waters of North Bentinck Arm in the Pacific Ocean. Thus, on July 22, 1793, Mackenzie became the first European to have crossed the North American continent north of Mexico.

In 1802, King George III knighted Sir Alexander Mackenzie for his remarkable explorations in Canada and the Mackenzie River was named in his honour.

“Alexander Mackenzie and his voyageurs took Canada's final steps to the Pacific Ocean, and today the Canadian coat of arms bears the following insignia, *A Mari Usque Ad Mare*, meaning Canada from Sea to Sea,” says Flygare.

Well aware of Mackenzie's historical importance as a pioneer and fur trader, when Flygare stumbled upon his trail in the BC wilderness, he felt strongly that it ought to be properly mapped and protected.

Flygare envisioned a walking trail where one could experience this remarkable journey just as Mackenzie described it, mile by mile, in his 1801 book *Voyages to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans*. Flygare launched a campaign to find support for his dream. Given its historical significance, and the fact that the route traversed an undisturbed cross-section of BC's Interior

Plateau, Tweedsmuir Park, and a coastal fjord system, the BC Government and Parks Canada, together with the Nature Conservancy of Canada, agreed to sponsor the project.

In 1975, Flygare was seconded by Parks Canada in Ottawa to do an inventory of the 347-km historic route, naming it Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail.

Spending each summer bushwacking and clearing sections of the trail, Hille and his wife Linda would devote the next decade to retracing and recording Mackenzie's epic voyage all the way from the north-east of Alberta to the Pacific, along trade routes once used by Nuxalk and Carrier First Nations.

Flygare also wrote and self-published six books about the historic trail, meant to assist travelers wishing to follow in Mackenzie's footsteps by land or water.

In 1989, Hille and Linda Flygare were awarded the BC provincial

Award of Recognition by the British Columbia Historical Federation (BCHF) for preserving, documenting and marking the trail.

“The most interesting was my rediscovery in 2022/23 of the 25-km trail Mackenzie used coming down from the Rainbow Mountains in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park guided by Ulkatcho or Nuxalk people. The key was Mackenzie's ‘Huge Rock’ missed in 1926 by the famous land surveyor Frank Swannell by not reading Mackenzie's journals correctly. This section of trail is now named Sluq'alhta Trail, meaning Grease Trail, by the Bella Coola Nuxalk. It had last been used in 1862 with the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic but kept open by grizzly and black bears,” says Flygare.

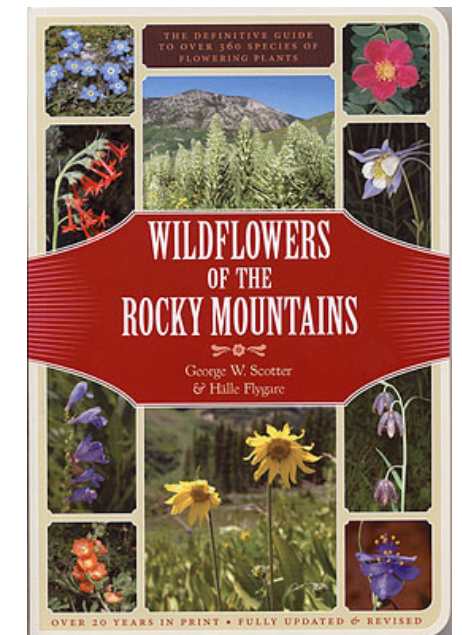
Today, the Alexander Mackenzie Heritage Trail is protected from logging and deforestation.

“But unfortunately, forest fires have consumed much of the pine and

spruce forests surrounding the trail,” laments Flygare.

After leaving the Park Service, Flygare devoted his time to the camera, leading nature and wildlife photographic tours in 30 countries.

His photographs have been published in nature magazines throughout the world and he has authored several wildlife books published in Sweden and Canada, including the book *Wildflowers of the Canadian Rockies*, which has sold over 40,000 copies.



Flygare is now 88 years old, but still going strong. He is currently living in Canmore Alberta, where he is working on a book about Swedish and Norwegian fur trappers in Canada and Alaska.

“I have books about 15 Swedish trappers and have just gotten a hold of the book about Waldemar Bergstrand, the last Swedish trapper, by Christina Falkengård. My next book will be a collection of their most exciting stories,” says Flygare.