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# *Where* the wild things **ARE**

“Enjoy life before you get kids”...

**Doomsayers** used to predict the end of his outdoor days to dad-to-be **ANTON KALLAND**, a guy who easily spent over **200 NIGHTS** a year sleeping outside. They couldn't be more wrong.

*Text Isabelle Vander Heyde - Photography Anton Kalland*



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Anton Kalland, a Finnish wilderness guide, journalist and Sloyd crafts teacher, practically lived outdoors before becoming a dad and some believed the birth of his first son, now six, would be the end of that. He chose to respectfully disagree, and has continued living his adventurous life with one, two and now three cubs in tow. "Life is so different now and priorities have shifted, but I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything. To be honest; it would be easier to stay home and let noisy toys, games or videos take care of my children. It's hard work to move three little humans, all the required equipment and food from one place to another. But it's worth it, time and time again!" Anton lives in Sweden with his Icelandic wife and their three boys - six, three and nine months old.

Their home is situated in the middle of the woods, nine kilometres from the nearest shop and bus station. Whenever Anton is not busy teaching his passion in schools or outdoor classes, the family's off into the wild. Winters are spent camping and hiking in dark, snowy forests, while summers are for sailing across the Swedish archipelago and other northern seas. It's a lifestyle that sticks with every member of the family: why bother with a tedious trip to some supermarket when mushrooms, berries and wild vegetables grow in abundance in the "backyard"? Anton shares their adventures on the captivating Instagram account @Prettybackward, a treasure chest of tips, advice and experiences for outdoor parenting. We sat down for a virtual chat with the man who lets his toddlers handle knives, sleep outside in -20°C and prepare their own food on self-made campfires. A father whose views on life are surprisingly gentle, given the fact he basically raises his sons in one big bootcamp.

*“Outdoor LIFE with small children has the same amount of drama as the urban lifestyle, but in nature even the bad moments get HUMOROUS frames...”*

“It’s not like I’m playing some sort of military game or like to push everybody’s limits, on the contrary. Everything is normal to kids, until someone proves otherwise. And being comfortable in nature and spending time outside should be a normal thing. The Sami had a komsio, a baby carrier carved out of wood and covered with reindeer skin. I love how the Nordic indigenous people organized their family life far from technologies and the modern way of living. I’ve taken all three of my boys outside from the minute they were born. I really believe showing them around the atmosphere, sound and smells of the forest can do them good, especially just after arriving into this noisy world. Modern houses often have bad acoustics, whereas forests with trees, mossy stones and a high sky offer a soothing, very relaxing experience. Also, as a father I like bonding with my babies by carrying them very close to me. I’ve been watching elks, eagles, owls, foxes and wild hogs very closely with my little boys; priceless moments of tenderness. It creates a deep connection between us and it’s also a very practical way of including them in my daily activities. My oldest son was barely three months old when he experienced his first overnight hike. Despite the freezing temperatures he seemed to love every minute of it. Even if he was sleeping most of the time, he unconsciously became familiar with nature. And what is familiar feels safe. Can you believe he is afraid of the dark at home, but has no issues sleeping all by himself under a makeshift shelter in a pitch-dark forest?” Back to the bootcamp part, as it is pretty bad-ass to see a six-year-old make his way through thorns and rivers, carrying four kilos on his back and keeping the pace for over ten kilometres. Anton is the first to put things into perspective: “Every child responds differently to challenges and parents ought to respect that before anything else. It all depends on someone’s personality. There are three little souls in our family, each one with his own developing character. My eldest does some pretty hardcore stuff, carrying up to twenty percent of his bodyweight. He is very sporty and loves long days of walking. He was only four years old on his first week-long trip. It’s a different story for my three-year-old: he also loves nature, but doesn’t like it when things get too uncomfortable. So, we need to find a way to please everyone. The last thing I want to do is force a child and create an aversion. All we can do is let them taste adventure and hope they’ll like it -as joy is always the best teacher. There is not one rule when it comes to ages and limits: it all comes down to watching -truly watching - your children, see who can and wants to handle what. I’m really sensitive and try to read my boys: once you really understand each one of your kids and rely on your intuition, all will be fine.”

Obstacles, risks and ultimately danger are part of the journey -even if one could easily argue city life is hardly free from hazard too. How do you cope with a two-year-old handling a knife, or lighting a fire? Is there some emergency code or ground rule that should prevent accidents from happening? The answer is simply no. “I let my kids be free out there, it’s not like we have specific outdoor rules. I prefer explaining their options rather than prohibiting something: ‘you could do this, but you may hurt yourself doing it, in the end it’s up to you to decide how you’ll do it.’ I want my boys to think for themselves, to figure out on their own what might be a dangerous or stupid thing to do. None of them ever got hurt with a knife. Of course, I do provide instructions: I tell them how to hold it, to hold my hand when we’re crossing a river, and to open the belt of their backpack so the river won’t carry them away if they fall. Those aren’t rules, rather indications. The only truly scary thing out there is that if something were to happen to me,





*“Can you believe my son is afraid of the DARK at home, but has no issues sleeping all by himself under a makeshift shelter in a pitch-dark FOREST?”*

they'd have to fend for themselves. We even have a scenario to cover this: I taught my son how to use a satellite phone to call for help should this ever happen. But let's hope it will never come to that.” What we like in Anton's approach is the delicate mix of softness and tough reality. The family forages and happily prepares mushrooms, fish, ant eggs and larvae - actually the children's favourites - on their campfire, but also carries some food in case they wouldn't find enough protein in the wild. Hunting is ultimately part of the plan, although the children are still way too young for that one. Even so, they are already being introduced to nature's law of life and death. “I don't think we should be afraid to show our children dead animals. It may sound twisted, but whenever I encounter one, I bring it home, open it and explain how it's built, why it looks the way it looks, etc. We found a squirrel the other day, and the boys were amazed by how big a heart such a little creature has: I told them it is that size because a squirrel needs extra blood and oxygen for energy, jumping and running around all day. My sons are always fascinated, not shocked, when they actually get to see how nature works. Some people don't understand that, but they do find it okay to let their children see dead flies, dead fish, and meat at the supermarket. Where is the logic in that? We also encounter a lot of living wildlife of course, especially elk and wild hog -which can make the whole camping experience a bit tense sometimes, but those animals are only dangerous when wounded.”

Last summer, Anton and his wife welcomed a third baby boy into their lives. With every new kid comes a new routine, the family adapts its adventures and dynamics. They decided to buy a sailing boat as it is temporarily difficult to leave with three kids on long treks. They still hike, but the boat permits them to spend two or more uninterrupted weeks in the wild. The Finnish archipelago is a family favourite, tasting the salty air, watching the sea roll on rough cliffs and listening to the song of hundreds of seabirds. Some days are less glorious than others and that's okay too “Outdoor family life with small children has the same amount of drama as the urban lifestyle, it's just that in nature, even the bad moments get humorous frames... We don't have to invent games or stuff to keep our boys occupied, they find their own games along the way and use everything to their advantage. There is nothing man-made in nature's playroom and that's the way we like it. Actually, they surprise me all the time with their ingenuity and imagination. It's amazing how they think, understand and make up the world around them. The best and most interesting part of being a parent is when the children are the ones to surprise you and teach you lessons, and I'm happy our adventures have made that happen!”

*“We all need longer lasting toys.”*

The amount of stuff that needs to be dragged around on outdoor adventures is daunting to many parents. In reality, it's not that bad. Some of Anton's tips on proper gear:

*“Good gear from the beginning means easier and happier learning, so invest in the right stuff for the children from the get-go.”*

*“Excellent hiking shoes are essential: they must be lightweight and flexible, even though most brands make them with hard soles.” You'll find soft, lean boots at Viking Footwear and Superfeet.*

**Wool** is about your best friend out there, as it works well in any weather. *“Kids are humid: whatever they do, they'll get wet... and water molecules and wool interact really well. Moreover, wool is chemically the same material as our bodily hair and that's why it balances body temperature and the microclimate surrounding our skin perfectly.”*

Should your camp go up in flames and you'd only be able to save one piece: it should always be a proper sleeping bag. *“My kids have been sleeping outdoors since they were born, in any weather. We can sleep outdoors with our kids down to -20°C. When it's colder we use several high-quality sleeping bags together, I like the brand Cumulus. Also, reindeer hide is my sleeping mat of choice in winter, but sheepskin does the trick too.”*