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‘This is a truly enchanting, riveting, and often harrowing account of a first-class naturalist, explorer, ethnographer, and man of the most sterling nature. Johan Koren made significant contributions to some of the world’s leading avian collections, among many other achievements, yet he has been largely overlooked in the scientific world. This account is exceptional in its scholarship, detail of presentation, and, especially, enticing style of writing. It is as fascinating a history of the man as it is a story of high adventure. Having worked, and survived, in many of the same areas as Koren – Antarctica, Southeastern Alaska, Aleutian Islands – I am thrilled to see this outstanding multifaceted biography.’

Bruce Marsh, Professor
Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences
Johns Hopkins University, US

‘This English translation of Steinar Wikan’s biographical study of Johan Koren is an exciting and welcome addition to the annals of polar history. It offers intriguing new insights into the history of field science in remote environments such as Siberia, Alaska, the Crozet Islands and Antarctica, as well as providing a damning account of the living conditions of Indigenous peoples detained on mission stations in places like Tierra del Fuego at the turn of the 20th century.’

Dr Joy McCann, Author
Wild Sea: A History of the Southern Ocean and
Heart of Ice: A Journey into Antarctica’s Frozen Realm

‘Like his famous but similarly adventurous and driven compatriots Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen, Johan Koren was determined from a young age to explore the world. He was a keen naturalist, enjoyed the outdoors and was drawn to exploring remote parts of the polar regions. As this book makes clear, many of his travels were not without risks, and he encountered several life-threatening situations in his determination to collect rare bird and mammal specimens. Koren’s extraordinary life was little known in Norway before Steinar Wikan published his biography. The translation of this excellent book into English makes Johan Koren’s fascinating story available to a broader international audience.’

Fridtjof Mehlum, PhD
Natural History Museum
University of Oslo, Norway

‘A fascinating reflection on the period of scientific exploration when collecting was central to the huge expansion of knowledge of the natural world taking place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.’

Michael Pearson, Emeritus Professor
School of Humanities & Languages
UNSW, Australia

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An Adventurous Life

JOHAN KOREN, POLAR EXPLORER AND NATURALIST

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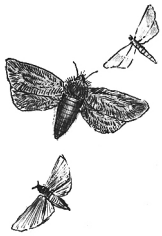

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An Adventurous Life

JOHAN KOREN, POLAR EXPLORER AND NATURALIST

Steinar Wikan

Translated by
Cathrine Harboe-Ree

Australian National University

ANU PRESS

NATURAL HISTORY

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To the memory of my sister, Elin Ree
(1950–2026)
Another adventurous spirit

This is a section of the book at doi.org/10.22459/AL.2026

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Cover image: Koren photographed during the winter in Antarctica. Source: Photograph by Frederick Cook. National Library of Norway (SURA0691).

Bird sketches by Johan Koren. Source: Koren Archive, National Archives of Norway.

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About the authors

Author

Steinar Wikan is a Norwegian zoologist and historian. He has published nine monographs and numerous scientific articles. In addition to his biography of Johan Koren, his monograph publications include: *Bjørn, Ulv, Jerv: Rovviltforskning i dag* [*Bear, Wolf, Wolverine: Predator Research Today*] (1983); *The Border Village of Neiden: Encounters Between Ethnic Groups and the Struggle for Resources* (1995); *Bjørnens År: Villmark og Rovvilt i Pasvik* [*Year of the Bear: Wilderness and Predators in Pasvik*] (1996); *Ellisif Wessel: En Biografi* [*Ellisif Wessel: A Biography*], (2008); and, *Kola—Grenselandet i Øst* [*Kola—The Border Country in the East*] (2009).

Wikan had a long career in the Sør-Varanger municipality in the far north-east of Norway. From 1962 to 1991 he held various positions as a teacher, museum curator, project manager and environmental protection advisor at the Svanhovd Environmental Centre in Pasvik. He has been involved in several nature conservation projects in Russia, including in Siberia. In order to write the story of Johan Koren's life, he visited a number of places in Siberia where Koren had been, including Kamchatka, Koryaky, Kolyma, Nizhnekolymsk, Yakutsk and Vladivostok. In 2013, he was awarded the King's Medal of Merit.

Translator

Cathrine Harboe-Ree is an Adjunct Research Associate in the School of Philosophical, Historical and Indigenous Studies of the Arts Faculty, Monash University, in Melbourne, Australia. From 2002 to 2017 she was the University's chief librarian. She has published a translation from Norwegian of her grandfather Anders Harboe-Ree's diary of the ill-fated voyage of HNMS *Cathrine*, which was shipwrecked on the Crozet Islands in 1906, as well as a biography of him in English, based largely on Norwegian-language sources.

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Translator's foreword

I first learned about Johan Koren while researching a 1906 Norwegian sealing expedition to the Southern Ocean that ended in shipwreck. My primary interest in that voyage was the captain of the ship, my grandfather Anders Harboe-Ree. However, Koren, who was on the expedition as a zoologist, seemed to me to be such a fascinating character that I was keen to find out more about him.

I quickly discovered that there was very little about Koren available in English, but there were two books in Norwegian. One, a book for younger readers by Håkon Evjenth published in 1938, was *Gutten Som Norge Glemt* [*The Boy Norway Forgot*]. The other book, written by Steinar Wikan and published in 2000, is this book, which was published with the title *Johan Koren: Feltzoolog og Polar-Pioner* [*Johan Koren: Field Zoologist and Polar Pioneer*]. The fact that Koren has not been well recognised in Norway is a strong theme in Wikan's book, as well as Evjenth's. Despite Koren's adventures and contributions to science, he has been largely forgotten in his homeland and beyond. Like Evjenth and Wikan, I think Koren is a person who should be better remembered, and I hope that this translation will go some way towards achieving that.

What a life Koren had! At 17 he was the youngest crew member on the 1897–1899 *Belgica* expedition, which resulted in the first overwintering in the Antarctic. He and his friend Hans Thomas Lange Schaanning were the first to systematically work in the field in Finnmark in far northern Norway and were among the first to overwinter on Novaya Zemlya, an archipelago north-west of Russia, for scientific purposes. Koren was the second person ever to overwinter in both the Arctic and Antarctic (the polar explorer Frederick Cook, who was also on *Belgica*, was the first). Like his famous compatriots Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen, Koren was a true adventurer—resilient, courageous and driven. He survived multiple shipwrecks and life-threatening incidents and lived for years in one of the most remote settlements on Earth, the small village of Nizhnekolymsk in northeastern Siberia.

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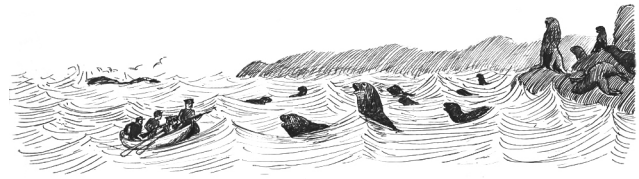

Koren had a keen interest in the natural world from a young age and spent many years of his life as a pioneering field naturalist. He was a skilled and experienced hunter and collector, providing an extraordinary number of preserved and documented bird and mammal specimens, as well as paleontological and ethnographic objects, to museums, universities and private collectors across Europe and North America. In Siberia his focus was on collecting for Harvard University, the Smithsonian Institution and the wealthy private collectors associated with them. Scientists from these two institutions named several species and sub-species after him, including a willow ptarmigan, a meadow mouse, a shrew and a vole.

This book begins and ends (Chapters 1 and 18) with the author's personal story of travelling in Koren's footsteps, 80 years later, to Siberia, including to Nizhnekolymsk, which he managed to visit after several unsuccessful attempts. Wikan wrote the entire book in the present tense. I have changed the tense used for the biographical part of the work (Chapters 2 to 17) to the more conventional past tense for ease of reading, with only the first and last chapters, those describing the author's experiences, retaining the first person present tense form. Apart from changing the tense, I have attempted to retain Wikan's original style in the translation, although I have standardised times, distances, numbers and measurements, which were not always consistent in the original. I have used the United Kingdom form of the common names of birds.

Wikan gathered information from archives in Norway and the US, newspapers, privately held material and various other sources, which are detailed in the Notes, Sources and Bibliography sections at the end of the book. In addition to this information, I have inserted footnotes and in-text square brackets to clarify, update or correct terms, references, details or names, in the interests of enhancing meaning or accuracy.

There are terms used in the book that are no longer in acceptable use, such as 'Eskimo', 'Samoyed', 'natives', 'Indians' and 'uncivilised', when referring to Indigenous people. For this modern translation, I have replaced these terms with 'Indigenous people' throughout, except in direct quotes from Koren or other sources.

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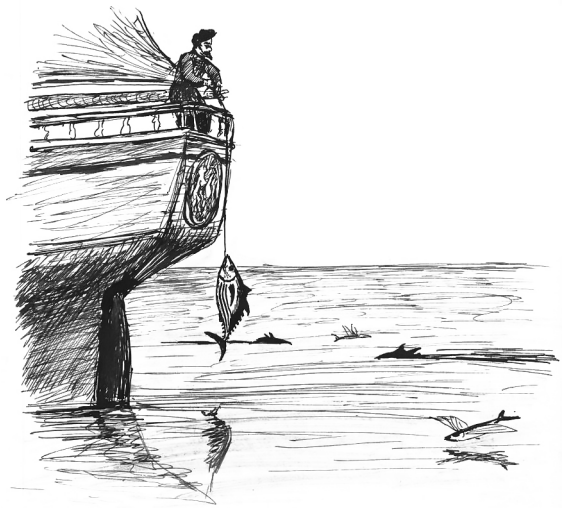
Modern readers are also likely to baulk at the extraordinary number of birds and mammals Koren killed in the interests of science or to obtain an income. Koren was, proudly, a hunter, but it must be remembered that this was a time when museums, scientists and collectors were eager to obtain as many specimens as possible to study and display. This was especially true of new and rare species. It was a time of encyclopaedic collecting, and Koren made a significant contribution to this amassing of scientific knowledge.

Translating this work has been a joy, more so because of the many people who have helped me along the way. Most importantly, I am grateful to the author and his daughter and son, Anne and Tor Wikan, for granting me permission to translate and publish this thoroughly researched and engaging biography. I hope I have done it justice. I would also like to thank: my brother, Henrik Harboe-Ree, who was my 'man-on-the-ground' in Norway and chief problem-solving buddy; my daughter Anna Ree Cutler, who edited the translation; Rod Clarke, who helped resolve some of the maritime conundrums; Sheila Fitzpatrick, who provided guidance on the Russian names; and, Euan Moore, who provided ornithological advice. I appreciate the assistance. Last but not least, I am thrilled that Nathan Hollier at ANU Press shared my belief that Johan Koren's extraordinary life warranted a broader audience, and I thank him, the Press's unflappable Production Coordinator, Gabrielė Gaižutytė, the book's inspired designer, Teresa Prowse, and the rest of the team for creating such a handsome work. I appreciate the assistance I have been given, while accepting responsibility for any errors.

Cathrine Harboe-Ree
Castlemaine, Australia
September 2026



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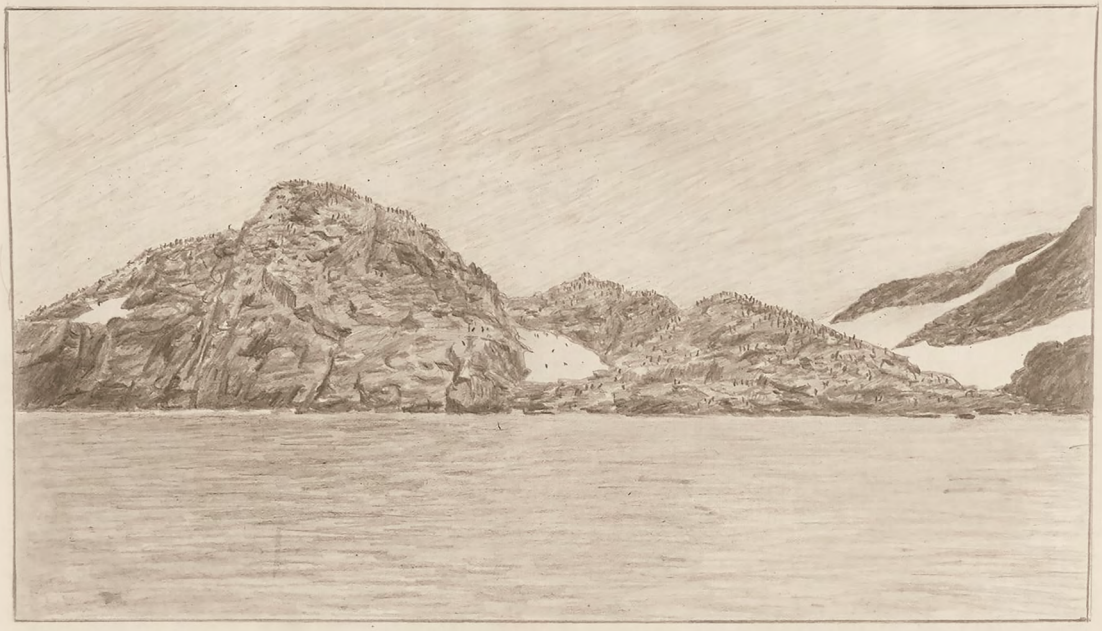

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Preface

Johan Koren had an adventurous life. His interest in nature was formed in Fredrikstad, in Norway, and by the age of 17 he was already travelling the world. He took part in the historic first overwintering in the Antarctic, lived as a zoological collector in Pasvik, studied the northern lights on Novaya Zemlya, caught elephant seals on the Crozet Islands in the Southern Ocean, hunted kangaroos in Australia and led several scientific expeditions to Siberia. He is considered to be the first white man to cross the Bering Strait on foot. He was shipwrecked several times but always got back on his feet—until he succumbed to the Spanish flu, not quite 40 years old. He has been called the boy Norway forgot. A great deal was written about him in newspapers and magazines when he was travelling and going on adventures, but since then he has been more-or-less forgotten.

In Siberia I met an old man who remembered Johan Koren and who was once his close friend. We discussed details of Koren's voyages of discovery and pioneering efforts as a field researcher, and before we parted I promised to do my part to spread the word about my forgotten compatriot. He certainly deserves a more prominent place in Norwegian consciousness, and that is my intention with this book. In Siberia, a nature reserve has been established in Koren's name, and there have been museum exhibitions based on his life's work. While people in Russia have taken this interesting man to their hearts, we in Norway should also know who he was.

I thank everyone who has helped me gather information along the way, and who has patiently read the manuscript. Special thanks to the Svanhovd Environmental Centre, the Norwegian Polar Institute and Svein Haftorn for technical advice, and to Viktor Nikiforov in Moscow who made the trips to Nizhnekolymsk and Vladivostok possible.

Steinar Wikan
Pasvik, Norway
March 2000

This text is taken from *An Adventurous Life: Johan Koren, polar explorer and naturalist*, by Steinar Wikan, translated by Cathrine Harboe-Ree, published 2026 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.