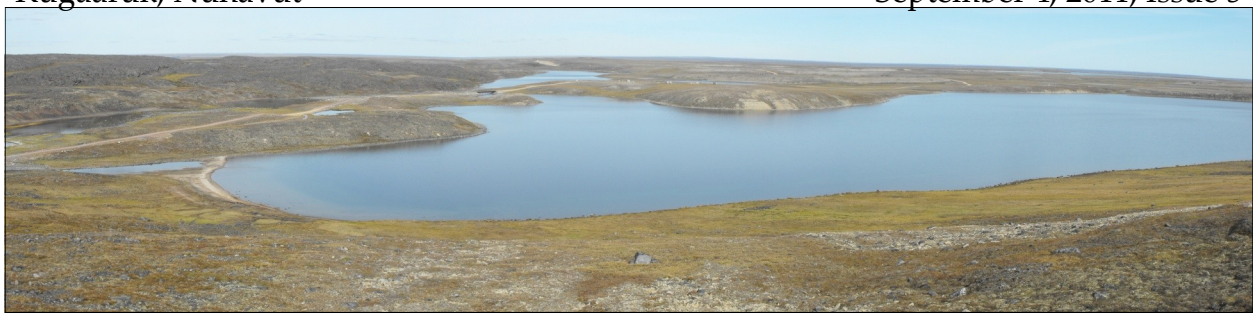
ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut September 4, 2011, Issue 5



A drive inland from Kugaaruk reveals a river valley and many lakes, including this one, known locally as the DEW Line Lake.

Journey Inland

Two weeks ago John, Aine and Mari took their first family trip far out of town.

Aine's Journal ~ August 20, 2011, Saturday ~

We caught our 1 p.m. ride with Mike Bartley and his son Maverick to the inland bridges (I wondered whether they were permanent bridges or stone structures repaired each summer) where many people camp during the summer and fall months. August and September classify as autumn in Nunavut. Mike rented Koomiut Co-op's double-cab Ford pickup for the journey and Herbert and Peter, two visiting school officials, joined us.

The river road branches off the airport road and heads east. It is gravel, like all the other Kugaaruk roads, but much bumpier because of the rocks that cover the ground in every direction. Talking was difficult because of the vibration. Mari, deprived of her usual naptime routine, fell asleep on our laps in the backseat despite the jiggling. She likes the absence of car seats.

We drove for nearly an hour to the mountain range running along a large lake called the DEW Line Lake. I imagine it has another name predating the DEW Line.

Much of the infrastructure of the Arctic – including the two bridges (made from steel beams and wood, incidentally) crossing Kugaaruk's river that we saw today – can be attributed to the era of the Distant Early Warning Line, a system of more than 50 radar and communication stations spanning Greenland across Canada's Arctic to the northwest coast of Alaska. The DEW Line, located within the Arctic Circle, was a Cold War project designed to detect Soviet bombers and a land-based invasion.

One of the DEW ground stations is visible from the river road. It sits among the rocky outcroppings to the south. I see (in a document I found while researching the history of the line) that the DEW operation in Kugaaruk (formerly called Pelly Bay) ceased in 1992. I don't know if that means it is still operating in some fashion under another name or if it is completely deserted. No one has said anything about it.

We drove up the foot of the mountain range to a spot overlooking DEW Line Lake and got out of the truck. The view was spectacular. From Kugaaruk, I would have imagined rocky hills encasing the entire area, but eastward a vast river valley spreads for miles; on either side you can see an increase in elevation, but to the north it is difficult to discern the incline, at least with the naked eye. I wish we'd remembered to bring our binoculars on this outing! John said he'd traveled north when he tagged along with the caribou hunters on Aug. 7.

During the warm months in Nunavut, many Inuit live on the land at camps, either made with tents or permanent structures. This camp is near the Kuugarjuk River where fish are abundant.

Ups & Downs **Aug. 27– Sept. 2, 2011**

Maximum = 8.0˚C/46.4˚F Minimum = -2.0˚C/28.4˚F

Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut

Mostly overcast — first few snowflakes spotted Aug. 30

JOURNEY INLAND CON'T.

Camps – containing white tents or plywood cabins – dotted the area. We'd passed a few dozen structures on our drive. We also spotted the remains of a fairly large plane that crashed on the foothills during the 1950s or 1960s, Mike said. It was too far away to see any details. Strangely enough, shortly after we returned to Kugaaruk this afternoon, we heard that a 737 had crashed in Resolute Bay. Seeing the remains of that old plane made today's tragic news grimly real.

I would have liked to linger on the mountain, but Peter and Herbert had a plane to catch in the afternoon so we drove back to the first bridge (we'd traveled as far as the second on our journey to the lake) where some of the elders have a camp. We stopped to visit. Herbert and Peter both speak Inuktitut and know many of the people so they were able to join right into conversation. Many of the elders speak limited English, if any. The elders invited us to share tea and bannock – dough consisting of flour, lard, water and baking powder that is deep fried over a heather campfire. It tastes like an unsweetened donut. Raisins added a bit of sweet to the batch we ate today. Some of John's students visited with us and the children always want to meet Mari.

A row of Arctic char hung upon a few wood beams near the tent, making a bright orange patch in the neutral landscape. The fish, often eaten raw or cooked, are also dried in the sun and wind.

On our way back to Kugaaruk, we stopped on the first bridge and leaned over the side to look into the crystal-clear water. Arctic char measuring two to three feet lingered in the shade of the bridge. They look so huge when you are used to seeing the mountain and lake trout of California!

London Shipment Arrives

Our goods from London arrived late morning on Aug. 22, minus part of a glider rocker, an exercise machine and a set of flannel sheets. The sheets make us think more is missing, but we cannot yet recall what.

The movers did deliver — at least part of the load — in the promised six to eight weeks. Attempts to track down the missing goods failed so far. We're hoping everything turns up but John's colleagues say those might be optimistic feelings.

The next delivery we're eagerly awaiting is the icebreaker with our shipment of food we ordered from Marché Turenne in Montreal on May 30. A sighting this week of the icebreaker's helicopter sparked speculation that the ship may arrive in early September.

We hope the ship isn't on the late side. Hard to pay Co-op prices when you've already purchased 353 pounds of flour. Estimating the amount of flour three people will consume in the course of 10 months is tough, especially when you only have a couple of days to do it.

John holds the seven-foot-seven ivory narwhal tusk, the male wale's more prominent spiral-shaped tooth, mentioned in last week's issue.

Quick Picks

- Nunavut is the newest Canadian territory. It was originally part of the Northwest Territories, but officially separated in 1999 and introduced its flag.
- The flag symbolizes the land, sea and sky with the colours blue and gold; the red refers to Canada.
- The inuksuk in the center represents the stone landmarks that dot Nunavut, guiding travelers and marking special places.
- The North Star, called Niqirtsuituq, symbolizes the traditional navigational guide and also the leadership of the elders, the older generation that guides the Inuit.

For More Information

- Visit Nunavut Parks photo gallery for more Arctic scenery http://www.nunavutparks.com/english/multimedia/gallery.html