ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut October 9, 2011, Issue 10

Ice starts to dull the river's reflective surface, as seen from the Miseks' duplex. The mountaintop cross is located on the far right.

Waiting Games

The reality of everyday life in the Arctic Circle hit home this week.

Aine's Journal ~ October 3-7, 2011 ~

My weekly routine screeched to a halt Monday at 9 a.m. as John raced down the hill from the school just before classes started with a message. "You are leaving on a 2 p.m. flight for an ultrasound in Cambridge Bay!"

A doctor used to fly into the hamlet with an ultrasound machine a couple of times a year to conduct prenatal exams but discontinued the program this year. As of last Thursday, I was informed that no definite plan for filling the void existed. Yellowknife's medical facilities can't presently handle all of western Nunavut's ultrasound needs.

I'm in the twenty-second week of my second pregnancy and knew that I'd likely end up traveling somewhere for an anatomy scan sometime in the coming month or so, but needless to say, I was more than surprised at John's announcement.

Four hours notice might not have phased me so much if I didn't have a 2-year-old. The possibility of not returning home until Thursday or Friday added to the angst I felt. Fortunately, a new friend, the wife of one of the RCMP officers, offered to babysit.

As it turned out, the Monday afternoon flight was cancelled because of bad weather and I was rescheduled for an evening flight Tuesday, which would take me to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, where I would catch a flight Wednesday to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.

My ultrasound appointment was set for Thursday afternoon. No return flights were booked; that would be worked out after I actually reached Cambridge Bay.

Tuesday morning I was informed that I'd be departing Wednesday evening at 5:15 p.m., flying directly from Kugaaruk — with a refuelling stop in Gjoa Haven — to Cambridge Bay. That pleased me. I didn't really want the added Yellowknife travel time.

By Wednesday morning I felt ready to head west and the weather was practically balmy, but that rapidly changed. A nasty ice storm blew in during the afternoon and the Wednesday evening flight was cancelled.

Health centre personnel said they'd keep me posted as to whether or not they could get me to Cambridge Bay before the ultrasound technician left. I guess they don't have a permanent ultrasound setup.

Winds died a few times this week, allowing Kugaaruk's mostly ice-free bay to reflect the first snows.

John and Mari warm themselves Sept. 25 while burning cardboard boxes from the 2011 sealift down near Kugaaruk's historic stone church.

WAITING GAMES CON'T. — Satellite malfunctions left all of Nunavut without internet and long-distance telephone service Thursday (we could still make calls within Kugaaruk) so that put the hamper on additional travel planning.

In the end, I completely missed Kugaaruk's Cambridge Bay ultrasound expedition. A few women who left on Tuesday evening may have made their appointments, though I haven't heard if the weather prevented them from completing the trip in time and I don't know when they'll return.

According to the latest update, I'll travel to Yellowknife for my ultrasound. I wonder what sort of notice I'll receive for that trip … I think I'll keep my bag packed and pray for excellent weather.

Polar Bear Season Opens

Polar bear hunting season opened Oct. 1 and Kugaaruk's Inuit hunters filled their tags — some of which were left over from the previous year — killing more than 20 of the white giants in a single day.

Canada is home to more than 15,000 polar bears, approximately two-thirds of the world's population, according to Nunavut's Department of Environment. The overall harvest levels from aboriginal hunts account for 3.5 percent of the country's polar bear population.

The U.S., Greenland and Russia also permit indigenous polar bear hunts.

According to anecdotal, unofficial evidence from Coast Guard members delivering Kugaaruk's 2011 sealift, the polar bear sightings during this autumn's voyage were at an all-time high. But that's not necessarily a sign of a flourishing population.

Scientific surveys, according to Polar Bear International and other groups, indicate increased bear sightings are likely attributable to climate warming and the resulting loss of sea ice, which drives polar bears landward and diminishes their habitat range.

Mari marvels at a polar bear hide, complete with head and paws, stretched in the snow near a Kugaaruk residence Oct. 2. The bear's front right paw dwarfs John's 8-inch-long left hand. The Inuk hunter gave the Miseks a piece of the bear meat.

Ups & Downs Oct. 1 – Oct. 7, 2011

Maximum = -2.6˚C/27.3˚F **Minimum** = -6.0˚C/21.2˚F
Sunrise = 6:41 a.m. **Sunset** = 4:53 p.m. MDT
Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut [Oct. 1,3,7,8]
Mostly overcast; some rain showers and snow flurries

Quick Picks

- Commonly known as the **polar bear**, *Ursus maritimus* (*sea bear* in Latin), is the world's largest land carnivore and only marine bear.
- Polar bears only inhabit areas surrounding the North Pole, including the northern, mainly arctic, regions of Canada, the U.S. (Alaska), Greenland, Russia and Norway where they feed primarily on seals.
- The word *arctic* comes from the Greek word for bear (*arctos); Antarctica* originates from Greek word meaning just the opposite — *without bear*. Hence, penguins never see polar bears.
- Adult males are 2 to 3.1 meters (6.6 to 10 feet) long and weigh about 350 to 550 kilograms (770 to 1,200 pounds). Adult females are about two-thirds the length and half the weight of males. The largest polar bear on record was a 1,002-kilogram (2,209-pound) male.

Source: Polar Bears International