

ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut

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Aine and Mari overlook Pelly Bay from a stone lookout atop the coastal mountains just south of Kugaaruk.

Top of the World

Favoured with two consecutive sunny Saturdays in early September, John, Aine and Mari hiked south on Sept. 10 to explore a minuscule part of the mountains that form a natural barrier between Kugaaruk and the land beyond.

Aine's Journal ~ Sept. 10, 2011, Saturday ~

After last week's hike, we couldn't believe we'd been blessed with another Saturday of good weather. Cool weather kept us inside most of the week. We threw together picnic gear and some plastic containers for berry picking and headed south on the road leading past the sewage leaching pit, dump and whale beach to the mountains overhanging Kugaaruk's tiny cemetery.

A school berry-picking outing during the week gave John a chance to check out the terrain so he led the way to the plentiful blueberry patches, passing one of the golf course "greens," a worn piece of dirty white carpet with a hole in the middle. Apparently nine of these exist. I could only spot one other. A diehard golfer must have lived here at some point.

The bright red berries I avoided last week grew in boggy areas at the foot of the mountain. John learned they were safe to eat during the school trip. The taste and texture are similar to cultivated cranberries. Mari quickly filled her mouth, despite the sour tang.

Last week's hike seemed like a walk in Toronto's High Park (ok, maybe not quite!) compared to the isolation of the southern mountains. Kugaaruk shrank behind us as we climbed higher and higher, seeking a stone monument we could see against the skyline. To our surprise, rather than a pile of stones, we found a small circle of them, about shoulder height and broken by a doorway, overlooking the bay. Taller mountains still blocked the southern view. We were just about on par with the cross on the mountain north of the river.

Clear skies paled against the water's deep blue and the scattered clouds appeared to be added with a paint brush. Far across the bay we could barely see the

shoreline with the aid of binoculars. Bright white marked spots of ice along its uninhabited expanse. We searched for a sign of the Coast Guard ship and Mari



Wild cranberries flourish in a few boggy areas surrounding Kugaaruk. The cranberries, pictured in **Mari's hand**, are quite small compared to domestic ones. An **inuksuk** (pronounced inukshuk in English) standing on the second peak John, Aine and Mari climbed Sept. 10, overlooks the rocky mountain range and river valley stretching eastward and inland from the shore.

TOP OF THE WORLD CON'T. — called out, “Where are you flour boat?” but to no avail.

The stone tower, as we dubbed it, blocked the wind, which whipped over the top of the mountain, and gave Mari a chance to eat her snack in relative warmth. An inuksuk atop the next-highest point lured John onward while Mari and I rested.

A few minutes after he left, he and I both wondered if it was such a good idea to split up, despite the seemingly harmless landscape. Before my imagination could cook up potential scenarios, he returned and reported “it’s closer than it seems.” We headed upward together.


I saw more rocks as we hiked than I may have seen in my entire life — at least that’s how it seemed as we clambered over countless boulders. A small marsh provided a bit of a reprieve but as we crossed the flat space surrounded by sheer rocky cliffs on one side and giant stones on the other, the stillness suddenly rang in my ears and I imagined a pack of wolves swooping down on our vulnerable position. Thankfully, the only wildlife we saw on the six-hour trip were two arctic weasels.

The view from the second summit was spectacular and we could finally see southward to the endless wilderness. We felt as though we were standing alone on top of the world.

But the world is a small one after all. Near the inuksuk we found a geological marker placed by a Northwest Territories government official and a five iron, left, perhaps, by that avid golfer I mentioned earlier.

We wanted to stay up there for the rest of the day, but weren’t sure how long it would take to get home. The scramble downhill led us farther west than we intended and the steep cliff above the cemetery forced us to backtrack somewhat, but we managed to cut our time by hitchhiking a ride with a construction worker once we reached the road.

I have a feeling this may be one of our last snow-free, gun-free hikes. Mid-September is when the snow starts to fall and polar bears prowl.

 **Winter’s First Blast**
Sea ice, which floats down the bay from the Arctic Ocean as winter approaches, made its first appearance in Kugaaruk Monday. A polar bear on a nearby island was also spotted. Coincidentally, the first storm of the season hit that night.

Storm winds forecasted to reach gusts of 90 kilometres (56 miles) per hour started to howl through town after dark and, except for a couple of hours here and there, continued to blow strongly through Friday, though not at such high speeds.


Tuesday morning likely heralded the end of the hamlet’s snow-free season with about 15 centimetres



Islands dot the southern end of Pelly Bay, as seen from a summit near Kugaaruk marked by a Northwest Territories geological marker, Survey Control 16 50590.



Mari and John take a break to enjoy a much-cherished chocolate bar on top of a mountain south of Kugaaruk.



Ups & Downs Sept. 24 – Sept. 30, 2011
Maximum = 4.0°C/39.2°F **Minimum** = -3.4°C/25.9°F
Sunrise = 6:15 a.m. **Sunset** = 5:23 p.m. MDT
Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut [Sept. 24-28]
 Season’s first snow storm hits; high winds, flurries all week

drifting through town forming slick sheets of packed snow and ice. A loader spent the day clearing Kugaaruk’s gravel roads. Temperatures didn’t fall far; a bit of slushy rain fell before noon.

Temperatures dropped toward the end of the week and the high winds whipped the crusty snow viciously. Saturday morning the river was partially ice encrusted, but the ice disappeared by dusk.