

# ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut

November 13, 2011, Issue 15



A polar bear and two seals mounted by Robertson's Taxidermy Ltd. greet travelers in the Yellowknife Airport baggage claim area.

## Yellowknife Whirlwind

Aine received notice Oct. 18 that she was booked for an ultrasound in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, on Oct. 31, which happened to be the day John returned from his Kugluktuk soccer tournament trip. Fortunately, with just a bit of extra work, an appointment was set for later in the week.

*Aine's Journal ~ Nov. 2, 2011, Wednesday ~*

Finally airborne, I sank into my seat and gazed out the window at a pitch black void as the ATR-42's twin turboprops droned. Kugaaruk's few lights had faded out of sight within seconds of the 5:50 p.m. take-off, obscured by snow, clouds and distance. The First Air flight departed 40 minutes late, a chain reaction caused by bad weather that delayed the plane in Taloyoak during its previous stop.

Next destinations: Gjoa Haven followed by a stop in Cambridge Bay before the final leg of the journey to Yellowknife — estimated time of arrival originally set for 10:05 p.m.

After an extra month of waiting, I was looking forward to getting a peek at the fourth person in our family. An ultrasound and follow-up appointment with a doctor were set for Wednesday morning.

When we landed in Gjoa Haven at 6:37 p.m., little did I know that the scheduled 25-minute layover would turn into a four-hour race against numerous obstacles.

Light fog at landing rapidly thickened and obscured the moon and hamlet. Our pilot said we'd be grounded indefinitely unless it cleared enough for take-off. I asked a fellow passenger, who made a bit of a harumph at that announcement, if the fog in Gjoa Haven ever lifted after settling in for the night. He said he didn't know but he'd been stranded in other Nunavut towns on two separate occasions for 10 and 12 days because of fog. I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach.

The fog formed into thick ice on the plane. First Air's de-icer was malfunctioning. Some fellow passengers, who were electricians, joked they'd find a way to fix it. The door to Canadian North's de-icer was locked.

Accessing the Canadian North de-icer didn't help. Pilots are the ones who de-ice the planes in the Arctic (they also handle the cargo) and the ice was building up so fast our pilot couldn't de-ice the plane and takeoff within the six minutes before ice would encrust the plane again.

Plus, the pilots were running out of time to fly to Yellowknife. Fourteen hours is the maximum shift length and their deadline was rapidly approaching.

After completing only the shortest leg of my journey, the prospect of reaching Yellowknife in time for my appointment looked dim. I certainly hoped we'd at least get out of Gjoa Haven where the sole inn was already partially full and there were about 15 of us without a place to go. At least the terminal was filled with laughter during the long wait. My fellow passengers and the crew certainly seem to live by the saying Grandma



Aine's ultrasound results from Nov. 3 show Baby Misk resting her hand on her forehead during what appeared to be a nap.



### Ups & Downs Nov. 5 – Nov. 11, 2011

**Maximum** = -5.5°C/22.1°F **Minimum** = -24.0°C/-11.2°F  
Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut [Nov. 5,6,7,8,9]  
Occasional clear skies, few flurries, some fog; with wind it felt like -30°C  
Nov. 13 **Sunrise** = 8:08 a.m. **Sunset** = 1:19 p.m. MST

YELLOWKNIFE WHIRLWIND CON'T. — uses, “You might as well laugh as cry.”

Wondrously, a window of escape appeared! The pilot of a First Air cargo plane, which had arrived shortly after us, de-iced our plane when the fog briefly lifted — minutes before the pilots’ shift cut-off would have grounded them — giving our pilots the chance to takeoff before ice troubles reoccurred. We left Gjoa Haven at 10:15 p.m., landed in Cambridge Bay at 11:17 p.m., and flew toward Yellowknife twenty minutes later.

*Aine’s Journal ~ Nov. 3, 2011, Thursday ~*

I wouldn’t normally relish a midnight dinner, but this trip calls for exceptions. I dug into the flight’s meal, served despite the delay, with relish. The flight attendant gave us sandwiches in the Gjoa Haven terminal, but I was hungry again.

I felt like I was flying into Toronto as the lights of Yellowknife came into view. Kugaaruk changes one’s perspective!

When we arrived in Yellowknife at 1:54 a.m., only twenty minutes before the end of our pilots’ shift, snow gently swirled around the empty airport. Taxis slowly made their way to the deserted parking lot; I managed to get to bed by 3 a.m.

Yellowknife — a town of about 20,000 people — serves as the main community for miles and miles up here, giving the town the feel of a small city. Stepping on pavement, riding in a taxi, using a purse again, eating poultry, and seeing more than one store for the first time in three months was novel.

Stanton Territorial Hospital sits just a short walk away from the Super 8 Hotel. Baby Misek cooperated for the ultrasound and confirmed Mari’s guess regarding her sibling as I departed for the airport yesterday, “I think it’s a girl.” Mari knows I am in Yellowknife getting some special pictures of the baby; the technician kindly printed some extra shots for her benefit.

The hitch in the morning was the 11:30 a.m. follow-up appointment with the doctor. It was booked impossibly close to the 10:45 a.m. ultrasound. I didn’t even finish with the ultrasound until 12:15 p.m.

Knowing that I am part of the Northern Women Health Program (meaning it’s a feat to get to an appointment in the first place!), the hospital staff assisted in solving the problem, rebooked the doctor’s appointment for 2:45 p.m., and even gave me a quick tour of the obstetrics ward.

I raced from the hospital to Extra Foods, the grocery store across the street, and revelled at the sight and smell of the produce section. Dreams of farmers’ markets and Ontario’s autumn apple crop have plagued me for weeks. Afraid of running late for my appointment, I rushed through the store, took a taxi through the swirling snow the short distance to the hotel (my driver said this was the first big snowstorm of the season), hauled the

*For the rest of the story, see Page 3.*



Aine wheels purchases from the first of two grocery shopping trips into her Super 8 Hotel lodgings in Yellowknife and displays one of the Rubbermaid ActionPacker tubs — a common luggage item in the Canadian territories — she brought in order to take advantage of the bigger selection and lower-prices.



**LEFT:** Groceries cover an entire bed as Aine guesstimates the total volume and weight of her Yellowknife purchases. **RIGHT:** Items jamming the room’s mini fridge fill half an ActionPacker as Aine prepares to depart for Kugaaruk.



A lone suitcase and snow machine sit near the Gjoa Haven airport terminal Nov. 4. The landscape surrounding Gjoa Haven is quite flat and barren.



## Revenge of the Raven

By John Misek

Is there a place on earth the raven doesn't live?

Daily I can watch these graceful fliers cart wheeling over Kugaaruk while fighting for food from my unbelievably well-situated classroom window, which commands a wonderful view of the tail end of Pelly Bay. Students have commented I look out the window too much, and I suppose they are right, but wow – what a view!

Ravens aren't as hated in Nunavut as they were in Australia where I was given strict instructions to shoot them on sight from my tractor as I broke new ground, or in northern Alberta where I witnessed a band of them descend on a parking lot and pull all the rubber squeegees out of every cars' windshield wipers before departing with what I could have sworn were smirks on their beaks.

These enigmatic creatures seem to read minds. I can't put my finger on it exactly. If I spotted a raven sitting on the ground during a day I that I'd forgotten to grab the rifle before mounting the tractor for a day's work, the bird just stared at me. On days I had the rifle with me (even when it was hidden and I was at an impossible range), I can clearly remember what a raven would do if I even let the words *reach for the gun* enter my mind – it would leave... smirking too, I'm sure.

Here in Kugaaruk, legends about animals run deep and are firmly held by people of all ages. My class



Photo source: Wikipedia

once explained to me that when eating polar bear it is important to *cut* the meat into small pieces and not tear the flesh with my teeth. I was confused at first. I told my students I chew my food well before swallowing so there's no need to worry about my choking. They replied, "No! No! If you *tear* polar bear flesh with your teeth, its brother will come and eat you." I was inclined to laugh their comment off, but withheld my mirth when I turned from the window and saw their serious faces.

A couple of weeks ago, as students were entering my classroom and getting their books and pencils ready, and I, of course, was looking out the window at the wheeling ravens, a funny thing happened.

I started wondering whether or not people in Nunavut hunt and eat raven. Historically, little went to waste here and with pickings as slim as they are in the middle of an arctic winter, I can understand why. I turned from my window and asked the class my question.

"You don't eat raven," was all I was told.

I never had the slightest intention of eating raven. I was just wondering and making small talk; I told

the class as much.

I then turned to look out the window once more before starting class, and just as my face was squarely turned to the window, the very instant my eyes focused on the vast horizon, a large plop reverberated through the classroom as a big blob of raven poop hit the window on a trajectory that would have landed it squarely between my eyes had it not been for the blessing of glass.

I laughed at the coincidence and looked back toward my students but my mirth was met with the same serious faces that accompanied the lecture on the etiquette of eating polar bear. Their thoughts seemed to reproach me, "When will you learn, *kabloonak?*"\*

We proceeded with the lesson on the primary trig ratios – a topic more within my area of expertise than animal behavior.

*\*Kabloonak and kabloona, words commonly used in Nunavut, are terms combining the Inuktitut word qallunaaq, which means a white person or a non-Inuit, with the Greenlandic word kablunák, which means foreigner. Kabloonak/kabloona can be used in a pejorative manner, depending on context. Supposedly, the etymology relates to the Inuktitut word for eyebrow (qallu) because the early European explorers were known in the Arctic for their bushy eyebrows.*

YELLOWKNIFE WHIRLWIND CON'T. — groceries upstairs and then hailed another taxi for the trip downtown.

The rest of the day went like clockwork: doctor's visit, a stop to shop for more vitamins (especially D!), a meal, a search for St. Patrick's Catholic Church and 5:30 p.m. mass — the first I could attend since July 24 (Kugaaruk's priest is on sabbatical this year.), another trip to the grocery store, a trip to Walmart, and a phone call to John and Mari followed by a failed attempt to fit everything in my luggage. I'll have to buy another tub in the morning.

Traveling with groceries is common here. Lodgers can check their frozen meat or other foods at the hotel's front desk, a service I used for the turkey, ham and lamb roast I bought.

*Aine's Journal ~ Nov. 4, 2011, Friday ~*

Thank goodness for strong, helpful cab drivers! Getting my three tubs (weighing in at 86, 72 and 57 pounds on the airport scale — my weight estimates last night were *way off*) checked onto my flight was a feat.

Despite a bit of bad weather, I made it to Kugaaruk only an hour late, arriving at 3:30 p.m., after one layover in memorable Gjoa Haven — an infinitely better day of travel than that of a fellow passenger who'd just had surgery in Yellowknife. She'd flown all the way to Kugaaruk yesterday only to soar over the hamlet and then head back to Yellowknife — via two stops — because of suddenly inclement weather.

I feel like I can truly say mission accomplished!