

ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut

May 20, 2012, Issue 42



A puddle, nearly four inches deep, inundates the Co-op entranceway May 15, attracting children seeking amusement.

Spring Flurries

This is our last Sunday in Kugaaruk.

Like a pendulum, we swing from one emotion to the next. One day we're elated about our upcoming departure; the next day we feel sad.

May's mostly crummy weather has generally pushed us toward the former outlook. Last week, six flights into Kugaaruk cancelled because of the poor conditions. We hope travel prospects brighten by May 25.

Aine's Journal ~ May 14, 2012, Monday ~

The end of our Arctic habitation is approaching and it seems I should be immune to cabin fever attacks, but that is not the case. Today's shack attack was the worst I've experienced.

I long to see grass flourishing in the warmth of the sun. I want to hear a gentle breeze rustle freshly unfurled leaves. I can't wait to run through a sprinkler on a hot day with Mari instead of playing Lego indoors with her for the hundredth time.

Perhaps the sight of giant snowflakes swirling down to meet the melting snow yesterday pushed me over the edge, though I still thought the flakes were pretty — unbelievable, I know.

The road outside our front door is a pool of dirty slush, the exact consistency of a snow cone. I hear the ice and pooling water splash as people plunge through with their snowmobiles. ATVs appear in greater numbers each day as the snow gives way to gravel. The road to the airport is already clear of snow and nearly dry.

Hard to believe that in 11 weeks all of this snow and ice will disappear and conditions will be dry as a bone and dusty as a desert, just as they were when we arrived last year.

Much of the Arctic classifies as desert — counterintuitive given the fact that most of the area within the Arctic Circle is covered by water.

"The arctic is known for its cold, desert-like conditions. The growing season ranges from 50 to 60 days. The average winter temperature is -34°C (-30°F), but the average summer temperature is $3\text{-}12^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($37\text{-}54^{\circ}\text{F}$) which

enables this biome to sustain life," according to the University of California Museum of Paleontology.

"Rainfall may vary in different regions of the arctic. Yearly precipitation, including melting snow, is 15 to 25 cm (6 to 10 inches)." In comparison, the inland part of the Sahara Desert receives less than 1.5 cm (0.6 inches) each year and American deserts receive almost 28 cm (11 inches) annually. "Deserts cover about one fifth of the Earth's surface and occur where rainfall is less than 50 cm/year."

Despite the melting snow and growing puddles, I definitely felt like a desert exile today.

Aine's Journal ~ May 15, 2012, Tuesday ~

Buffalo's Lockheed L-188 Electra arrived today with the shipment of last Sunday's groceries. Bad



Fighting deteriorating snow conditions, some Kugaaruk residents use a qamutik towed by an ATV to relocate a shed May 16. The sled got stuck on the gravel road just outside the Misesk's front door so an SUV took over the towing job for while.



Ups & Downs May 12 – May 18, 2012

Maximum = $-3^{\circ}\text{C}/26.6^{\circ}\text{F}$ Minimum = $-9^{\circ}\text{C}/15.8^{\circ}\text{F}$

Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut [May 17]

Partly overcast; mostly windy with some snow flurries

Wind chill $-15/5$ [May 19 at 10 p.m., $-7^{\circ}\text{C}/19^{\circ}\text{F}$]

May 19 Sunrise = 1 a.m. Sunset = 10:51 p.m. MDT

SPRING FLURRIES CON'T. — weather continues to hinder travel.... I headed over to the Co-op after John got home from work in hopes of procuring a head of lettuce. Other than some browning wilted iceberg, the store has been out of lettuce since May 7.

The week of my birthday a shipment of beautiful romaine arrived. I laughed at the wording on the California company's packaging, "From our hands to yours and not much in between!" Right.

I was thankful for my waterproof BOGS boots as I waded through the giant puddle engulfing the parking area in front of the Co-op steps. Some kids were playing "island" on a couple of skids.

The snow is melting, but the ground underneath is hard. The Arctic doesn't have much humus so the prospect of mud looks slim.

Wildlife is on the move again. The caribou have moved north for the season. Grizzly bears are on the prowl. We saw a couple of grizzly hides drying outdoors in the hamlet; the brown fur contrasts sharply to the polar bear's. A few seagulls have returned. Ravens and ptarmigans were the only avian representatives we'd seen since autumn.

We heard rumours that some wolves were spotted near the dump. John saw four skinned wolf carcasses in front of a house the other day, but we don't know where they were shot. Hopefully way out on the land, many kilometers from the hamlet.

Tonight John and I watched the season one finale of *Ice Pilots NWT* (see Issue 25). I can't really recommend the program because of the crude language and some unseemly conversation topics, but the footage of the North and the jobs Buffalo Airways employees undertake are entertaining. I can see why production of a fourth season is underway.

In *Up In the Air*, Nunavut finally gets some substantial airtime. I was surprised to recognize a Buffalo pilot, Gord Cooling. He was one of the two pilots on my First Air flight to Yellowknife on Nov. 2.

In the finale aired February 2010, Cooling, 24, was 100 flight hours away from the 2,700 he needed to become one of the youngest captains in Canada and the youngest DC-3 captain in the world. He later resigned from Buffalo and went to work for First Air.

Aine's Journal ~ May 19, 2012, Saturday ~

This is certainly the coldest May Two-Four I've experienced — no surprise there.

For my American family and friends, this three-day weekend lengthened by the observance of Victoria Day, "is colloquially known as *May Two-Four* in parts of Canada; a double entendre that refers both to the date around which the holiday falls ... and the Canadian slang for a case of twenty-four beers (a "two-four"), a drink popular during the long weekend," according to Wikipedia's Victoria Day article.

Kugaaruk is nearly deserted. This weekend is the



Aine, Nora and Mari hide from the wind in a plywood qamutik box John and a friend shoved from the shore onto the bay May 19 for shelter while ice fishing.



The Misesks (Nora is under the sleeping bag) sit in their makeshift shelter on St. Peter Bay May 19. The temperature registered -6°C/21°F at the airport, but felt like -14/7 with winds gusting to 35 kilometers (22 miles) per hour.



An eight-foot tall snowdrift below the school blocked the roadway most of the winter, but a plow made it through recently. Spring may be in the air, but it's still plenty wintery here.

SPRING FLURRIES CON'T. — fishing derby, a major annual event with generous prizes awarded for the biggest fish. Most people are out on the land, or rather lakes, jigging for giants. We'll see the results tomorrow at the Hamlet community centre.

Snowmobileless, we Miseks tried to keep in the spirit of things by making our own attempt at ice fishing close to home.

John rigged a makeshift wind shelter on the bay next to an abandoned hole and took Mari out for an early afternoon of fishing. A half dozen other Kugaaruk residents were also jigging in the area, but no one got a single bite, let alone a prize winner. Not that they were expecting to — all the big fish are up in the lakes during this time of the year.

I stayed home with Nora and made cinnamon rolls. After I finished frosting them, I bundled her up in the BABYBJÖRN carrier and trekked across the bay to see how Mari and John were faring. It felt more like autumn than spring!

The wind whipped around us and despite the blanket over her head, I could hear Nora's little gasps when a current managed to reach her. We didn't stay long, but at least we ventured outdoors and received a healthy dose of fresh air.

Northern Craftsmanship

The photograph of a delicate ivory comb from the Thule era (1000 to 1600 A.D. — the direct ancestors of contemporary Canadian Inuit) caught my eye as I flipped through *Carved from the Land: The Eskimo Museum Collection* by Lorraine E. Brandson.

The artifact was found by Levi Illuitok — the elder John traveled with last month — near Pelly Bay (Kugaaruk), according to the 1994 publication's caption.

Small carved objects dating back nearly 3,000 years have been found in Canada polar region.

The semi-nomadic lifestyle of the Arctic's inhabitants resulted in easily portable, small objects. Carvings were often religious in nature or served as ornamentation on items needed for everyday survival.

Walrus tusk appears to have been the medium of choice, but artifacts carved from bones, caribou antlers and stone also exist.

While carving was always a part of Inuit tradition, contact with the outsiders prompted the Inuit to use it as a means to generate income. Today, Inuit artwork includes many stone pieces, some of which are quite large, but the style in Pelly Bay still harkens back to a time before the cash economy reached the North.

Born in 1970, Kugaaruk resident Alina Tungilik started carving at the age of 12, an art she learned from her parents. Alina's mother was the older sister of Pelly Bay's famed artist Emily Pangnerk Illuitok.

Emily, who was born in 1943 and married Levi Illuitok, died this spring after battling cancer, but her

legacy lives on in her niece's artwork and the classic Kugaaruk-style ivory, whalebone and caribou antler carvings.

Alina carved some pieces for us. She also made our wonderful mittens and modified the fur on Mari's snowsuit hood, deeds we greatly appreciate. ~ A.M.



Kugaaruk artist Alina Tungilik stands beside Aine and holds a walrus tusk into which she carved two scenes for the Miseks: a team of dogs pulling a sled and its driver; on the opposite side, a Northern nativity with Jesus, Mary and Joseph housed in an igloo and three parka-clad wise men presenting a traditional drum, kakivak and harpoon (see photo Page 4).



A three-inch long polar bear, carved by Alina Tungilik from a piece of walrus tusk, sports a black nose made from a piece of bowhead whale baleen.

Alina's Artwork

from the Land



TOP LEFT: A carved caribou antler serves as a cribbage board with miniature ivory qamutik and inuksuk sculptures for pegs. **MIDDLE LEFT:** An Inuit nativity scene decorates a walrus tusk. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Ivory inuksuk and seal earrings, the size of a quarter, are typical of Kugaaruk-style miniature carvings. **TOP RIGHT:** An ivory hunter grips a harpoon. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** Ivory narwhals swim near a hunter. The carvings are held upright with a slices of caribou antler. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Miniature *kamiks* (traditional Inuit boots) made from sealskin and felt are often used as zipper pulls on modern parkas or hung on rear-view mirrors.