

# ARCTIC ATMOSPHERE

Kugaaruk, Nunavut

May 27, 2012, Issue 43



The Misesks take a final walk through Kugaaruk May 25, visiting their former “backyard” at Unit 888.

## Bittersweet Farewell

Life’s slow pace ceased this week as preparations for our departure kicked into high gear — a reminder that life as we’ve known it for the past 10 months will soon be a thing of the past.

*Aine’s Journal ~ May 21, 2012, Monday ~*

Kugaaruk resembled a ghost town this weekend with most of the residents out on the land participating in the fishing derby.

Signs of life reappeared this afternoon as people returned for the evening deadline and prize distribution.

The overcast, dreary weather made it easy to stay inside. We spent the day packing and now realize we’ll have to mail some boxes to London.

After tucking the girls into bed and having a cup of tea with John and our friend Kim Walton, Kim and I ambled to the Hamlet to see the derby results. John took Mari over at 6 p.m., but the fish weren’t yet on display.

ATVs jammed the Hamlet’s icy, snow-packed parking area but by the time Kim and I arrived at 8:30 p.m., people were already removing fish. The weigh-in was over and prizes forthcoming. I’m glad we got there when we did because people kept pushing their way out the door with fish in hand.

Lake trout, arctic char and a variety of sculpin, known locally as “ugly fish,” filled the tables inside the community centre’s gym. Dozens of Kugaaruk residents crowded around the tables to inspect the display while others sat on the benches lining the walls.

I’ve never seen such large fish in person and wish I could have watched the fishermen in action. What a sight to see — those giants pulled up on a line.

Folks were waiting for the winners to be announced, but with my bedtime quickly approaching, I didn’t stick around to hear the big news.

John will have to get the scoop tomorrow at school.

*Aine’s Journal ~ May 22, 2012, Tuesday ~*

Michael Illuitok took the grand prize for the fishing derby (two roundtrip plane tickets to Yellowknife, two \$500 vouchers to the Co-op and a kitchen dining

set) with a hefty 13.1-kilogram/28.8-pound lake trout.

Plenty of other prizes awaited the runner-ups in various categories — even the ugly fish garnered rewards.

*Aine’s Journal ~ May 23, 2012, Wednesday ~*

Blue and white streamers and balloons hung from the ceiling in the small round room. A couple dozen people trickled into the chairs that formed a thick crescent facing a simple podium and a single chair.

The sound of recorded music drew everyone’s attention to the doorway as Jacob Sikkuark — Kugaaruk School’s Class of 2012 — walked into the room. The young man who had taken two years off from his education — a year after his brother committed suicide; a



During most of the spring and summer, the stained glass window above the altar in St. Peter’s church never completely darkens. As of May 23, the sun no longer sets in Kugaaruk, turning the Land of the Midnight Sun into the Land of 24-Hour Sun until the end of July.

BITTERSWEET FAREWELL CON'T. — second year when his girlfriend gave birth to a son — walked into the room with his grandmother/adoptive mother on his arm, a smile lighting his face.

I felt slightly teary as I watched them slowly walk to the front of the room. There is something much more intense about watching a single person graduate than a class of 200 or even 20.

Kugaaruk School awarded its first diplomas in 2003 to four students. I don't know how large or small the classes have been since, but I did hear seven students graduated in 2011.

Out of nine possible candidates at the start of the school year, Jacob was the only one to earn all of the credits he needed to graduate. Lack of motivation is one of the main obstacles students in Kugaaruk face and Jacob somehow managed to overcome.

I hope he'll continue to persevere. Life in Nunavut is hard, especially for the young. If they leave to pursue additional studies or employment, they usually get incredibly homesick. If they stay, job opportunities are few.

For tonight, it is time to celebrate Jacob's milestone and watch him smile.

*Aine's Journal ~ May 24, 2012, Thursday ~*

Packing up is hard to do. We've fallen short of our goal and mailed our first box to London today. I fear we'll be mailing a couple more, but at least the postage is not quite as horrendous as I thought it would be.

In addition to clothing, books and various household items, we're hauling home various mementos made from northern wildlife and about 11 kilograms/25 pounds of caribou meat. John froze the meat into a block, which we're wrapping in towels and John's clothing for the trip south. Wish we had space to take more.

I thought *tuktu* (Inuktitut for caribou) would be a tough meat because caribou are constantly on the move, but it is incredibly tender and tasty. The colour is extremely dark, not unlike other game meat. We had some ground beef for dinner the other night; when compared to caribou, its paleness resembled pork.

This evening we dined on roast beef at the DEA (District Education Authorities) end-of-the-year dinner for the school's staff in the school gym.

After dinner, we left the school and walked down the road toward the stone church and river to torch the packing crate that once contained our ship-delivered groceries. Soggy snowflakes spattered our faces as we headed down the hill.

John and I were sad tonight. It's hard to say goodbye, especially when you're bidding farewell to people who live in one of the most remote communities in North America. The chance of ever returning is, shall we say, slim.

*Aine's Journal ~ May 25, 2012, Friday ~*

My hopes for a clear sky were dashed this



The community centre's parking area becomes ATV central as the fishing derby draws to a close May 21. Snowmobile traffic on the bay is still heavy, but roads are rapidly melting down to the gravel so only the diehards still ride the hamlet roads.



Lake trout fill tables in the Hamlet community centre where fishing derby entries were weighed and displayed.



Despite John and Mari's failed attempt, some folks did manage to land a few "ugly fish" during the weekend. A particularly repulsive variety of sculpin, the flesh from these hideous creatures apparently tastes a bit like lobster. Unfortunately, the Misesks didn't get the opportunity to test that opinion.



Jacob Sikkuark, the sole graduate of 2012, listens to his grandparents speak during the Kugaaruk School graduation ceremony May 23. Jacob's grandparents adopted him from their daughter when he was a newborn.



Bartholemy Nirlungayuk surprises John by giving him his personal *pana*, snow knife, enclosed in a sheath on which Bartholemy sketched an igloo, as a going-away gift during the DEA end-of-the-year dinner for Kugaaruk School staff.

BITTERSWEET FAREWELL CON'T. — morning as I looked out the broken, plastic-covered window in our living room. An overcast sky met my glance. Rats. I wanted one last look at the Kugaaruk I like best, the hamlet surrounded by a wildly white bay and mountains engulfed by a blue dome.

I didn't have long to gaze out the window. The

morning was a rush of final preparations. We mailed three more boxes, bringing the total to four, or is it five? The borrowed bassinet headed back to its owners. John returned the internet modem. I crammed tooth brushes, our shower curtain and Mari's sheets into a suitcase.

By 12:15 p.m. we'd checked off every item on our to-do list and eaten a simple lunch so we headed outdoors for a final stroll through Kugaaruk.

I felt like singing when I saw the clouds giving way to patches of blue. Conditions today were considerably warmer than they were yesterday evening. Right before I disconnected the internet, I checked Kugaaruk's weather, probably for the thousandth time this year. At 9 a.m. it was  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}/27^{\circ}\text{F}$  with a wind chill of  $-8/18$ .

The school bus was scheduled to haul our family and luggage, plus two other teachers and their gear, to the airport at 1:30 p.m. By 1:50 p.m. the bus still hadn't arrived and I felt rather concerned. Granted, Kugaaruk's airport is tiny and the opposite of busy, but luggage is supposed to be checked in an hour before departure and our flight was scheduled to leave at 2:55 p.m.

The words, "perhaps we should call Josh," had just left my mouth when who should drive around the corner? RCMP Constable Josh Atkinson in his truck. He'd just received word that the school bus wasn't working. Mari was delighted to get one more ride in the



## Quick Picks

- Barren ground **caribou**, called *tuktu* in Inuktitut, are large deer that roam the taiga and tundra of northern Canada.
- Caribou are the only species of deer in which both the male and female grow antlers. They have the largest antlers of any deer relative to body size.
- Male caribou weigh 100 to 140 kilograms (220 to 308 pounds), depending on the time of year, and stand about 110 centimeters (43 inches) tall at the shoulder. Females are slightly smaller.
- In the winter, caribou feed mainly on a diet of lichen. Their excellent sense of smell helps them sniff out the snow-covered food.
- Migrating hundreds of kilometers between their winter feeding grounds and spring calving areas, caribou put their excellent swimming skills to work, crossing rivers and even lakes. The animals have been observed crossing bodies of water up to 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) wide.
- The caribou's hollow guard hairs provide buoyancy in summer and warmth in winter.
- Predation by wolves and grizzly bears are the leading causes of death.
- Caribou have always been and still are a vital source of food throughout northern Canada. The Inuit use the hides for clothing and bedding. Traditionally, all parts of the animal were used for survival.
- Without the warmth of caribou clothing, life in the Arctic would have been impossible.

Sources: Government of the Northwest Territories, Parks Canada

BITTERSWEET FAREWELL CON'T. — “paddy wagon,” as John taught her to call the truck’s backseat.

Our First Air flight arrived late, no surprise there. Northern flights rarely run on time, it’s just the nature of this place. The delay gave us time to chat and bid friends farewell. Five other teachers were also on our flight.

As I walked across the gravel tarmac to the ATR-42 and climbed up the steps with Nora tucked in the BABYBJÖRN, it was hard to grasp that this was the last goodbye.

Within minutes, the airplane zoomed upward along the south edge of town. I could see the school, our two homes, the Co-op, a glimpse of the white bay and a few of the islands before Kugaaruk disappeared beneath a gray cloud.

I didn’t cry. I’d done that the night before.

Snow-covered terrain spread as far as the eye could see as we headed south on our direct flight to Yellowknife.

As we approached the Northwest Territories’ capital city, the rocky landscape gave way to the murky green of the boreal forest and the snow disappeared. The smooth white surfaces of still-frozen lakes eventually gave way to the open water of the small lakes surrounding Yellowknife.

To our great relief, the plane made the three hour trip to Yellowknife with ample time to transfer our abundant luggage to our next carrier, Canadian North.

After a short layover, we boarded the Boeing 737-200 Combi for the two hour flight to Edmonton, Alberta. The front half of the plane held cargo so it was easy to fill the reduced passenger section. Cargo is the money maker in the North; airlines wouldn’t be able to afford to fly passengers without it.

As the plane taxied down the runway, I could see the Buffalo Airways hanger and several of their piston pounders on the tarmac. Buffalo’s green and silver colours are hard to miss.

I again had the good fortune to have a window seat and spotted Extra Foods, Nova Court and Stanton Territorial Hospital as we soared into the air. I jokingly pointed them out to Nora. I wonder if she will ever visit her birthplace again?

The edges of Great Slave Lake have thawed, but the rest of the surface is still covered with ice, though giant cracks have fractured the pristine, white surface with bolts of deep blue.

The next time we touch the ground, we’ll be south of the 60th parallel for the first time since July 27, 2011, and that’s just the start of our summer travels.

Tomorrow John flies to London, Ontario, and the girls and I will catch a non-stop flight from Edmonton to San Francisco. We’re going to visit my family; John will join us in June. Hard to believe today marks the end of this unforgettable adventure.



The Misesks and friends commemorate their final evening in Kugaaruk May 24 by burning the plywood crate that contained John and Aine’s barge order. Heat from the fire was welcome — with the wind chill it felt like  $-12^{\circ}\text{C}/10^{\circ}\text{F}$  around 7 p.m.



John and RCMP Constable Josh Atkinson unload the Misesks’ two suitcases, four black plastic tubs and six carry-on bags at the Kugaaruk airport May 25.



### Ups & Downs May 19 – May 25, 2012

Overcast all week with very light snow flurries  
**Wind chill**  $-9/16$  [May 27 at 10 p.m. MDT,  $-4^{\circ}\text{C}/25^{\circ}\text{F}$ ]  
 Sunrise and sunset no longer listed as of May 24  
Source: Environment Canada, Station Kugaaruk A, Nunavut

#### In London, Ontario...

May 28 at 12 a.m.,  $17^{\circ}\text{C}/63^{\circ}\text{F}$   
**Sunrise** = 5:51 a.m. **Sunset** = 8:54 p.m. EDT

#### In San Francisco...

May 27 at 9 p.m.,  $12^{\circ}\text{C}/53^{\circ}\text{F}$   
**Sunrise** = 5:51 a.m. **Sunset** = 8:22 p.m. PDT

## Leaving the Arctic Atmosphere

• This issue of *Arctic Atmosphere* concludes our Northern stories, but watch for an epilogue on July 28, 2012. We can be reached at [arcticatmosphere@gmail.com](mailto:arcticatmosphere@gmail.com).