

# FOX BASIN

# ARCTIC EXPEDITION

**The glassy surface of** Canada's Arctic Ocean and the lack of movement in the broken ice pack were welcome sites for our eyes when Christine and I looked out of our beach front tent frame. We were camped on the Fury and Hecla Straits, named after the wooden sailing ships of the famous Arctic Explorer Robert Perry that weathered the North Atlantic storms. An appropriate name for a strait where the fury of the tidal water changes are a recognized danger for Inuit voyagers of Canada's north.

Through our friend, a pioneer of arctic expeditions, Jerome Knapp of Canada North Outfitting we were about to embark on an expedition of whale watching, fishing for arctic char and Atlantic walrus hunting with our Inuit guides and Brad Parket, the Renewable Resource Officer, and our host in Igloolik, Nunavut (formally the Northwest Territories).

Our camp was located on an isolated gravel beach on the point of an island at the north end of Melville Peninsula. It was the location of the summer hunting and fishing tents and camps for people from the nearby village of Igloolik.

We had traveled to the camp and our comfortable, heated, new tent and tent frame accommodations in Brad's 24-foot cruiser with its twin 90 horsepower outboards. But for two days the wind had been too gusty and unsettled for our estimated three and a half hour voyage across the Arctic Ocean to hunt the Atlantic walrus in the 20 foot freighter canoe of our guide. Actu-

ally, the body of water is called the Fox Basin and it's a mere 250 miles across this isolated section of the frigid waters of the Arctic Ocean to Baffin Island.

The ice pack had in early August drifted far from shore and it was on this extensive floating mass of interlocked, iceberg-size blocks of ancient broken ice where the thousands of walrus would be crowded together sunning themselves in the warm, Arctic summer sunshine.

The clatter of footsteps on the rounded rocks of the gravel beach that thousands of years ago was the shore of the Arctic Ocean signaled that there was human activity outside and Brad confirmed this by shoving his head through our tent's half open door. It wasn't "Good morning," or "Sleep, well?" All he said was "The wind has dropped and the guides want to go, now!"

Jerome Knapp had provided us with Mustang survival suits. We had practiced for two days with the multitude of zippers, buckles and straps. Christine and I headed for our respective boats in our fluorescent suits. We were a sharp contrast to the guides, and Brad, in sealskin pants, Kamiks (moccasins) and even blue jeans. The nylon exterior cloth was definitely not made with a bow hunter/stalker of big game in mind. However, we were from the landlocked western Canadian prairies and this was our first Arctic Ocean expedition on water that in mid-summer still hosted floating, house-size, blocks of drifting ice. The warmth, comfort and

security of the survival suits offset the passing remarks and looks of our hosts especially when we knew we'd be out of sight of land and traveling in a canoe.

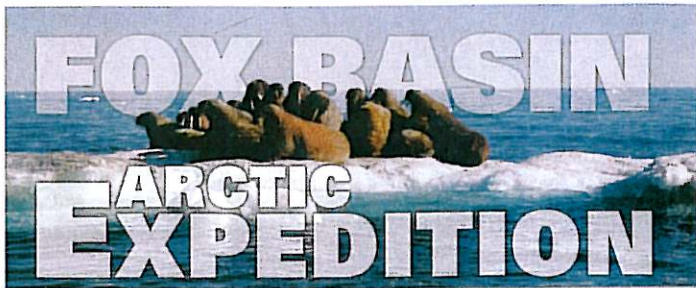
Our Igloolik Island beach front home on this expedition was located on a peninsula where crumbled remains of ancient sod houses tens of thousands of years old confirmed that this has been the whaling and hunting homes of ancient Inuit hunters who survived this often harsh and always varied climate in the Canadian Arctic. It was here for centuries that the Inuit ancestors collected and preserved meat in the long summer daylight hours for the long winter season when hunting was not possible as there is no light at all for months.

Virtually, all hunting by Inuit is now with the modern-day high-powered rifle and telescopic sight. For centuries it was spears, harpoons and bows and arrows. Today's laws require that the harpoon and float be used – a recovery technique. If rifles are used they must create at least 1500 ft./lbs. of energy. Hunting with traditional equipment continues to be within the laws of Canada and our objective was to be the first hunters to take the great Atlantic walrus with modern day bow and arrow.

In this land, where pack ice drifts in the Ocean all summer long, one cannot help being amazed at the variety and quantity of wildlife in the "barren lands." The land seems overpopulated with the number and species of bird life. The caribou and muskox are prolific on the main-

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Photos courtesy of author

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land and even on some of the Arctic Islands. Even in the dark and freezing cold of winter the tracks of the great polar bear can be found along pressure ridges. The ocean hosts several species of seals, the Atlantic walrus, several varieties of fish including the famous arctic char, as well as the beluga, narwhal and bowhead whales. These great mammals have been preserved and their numbers enhanced because of the hunter and his desire to maintain their sustained use. Hunting was the reason that Christine and I had

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come to the Arctic. Hunting of the Atlantic walrus was being opened for the non-Inuit.

In fact, as we headed out for our walrus, a group of Inuit hunters headed out from another village for the first hunt, after a 20-year ban, for a bowhead whale. It has been several decades since foreign whalers devastated the numbers of the largest mammal in the Arctic. The conservation programs of the Inuit and the Canadian government biologists have restored the population to the point where one of the Arctic communities will now be allowed to harvest a bowhead each year. With the Atlantic walrus several communities are hoping to take advantage of the economic benefits of hunts by non-Inuit. Jerome Knapp is helping the Inuit market the hunts.

Brad Parker was our host and of course he had the help of his wife, Tam, our interpreter (whenever it was needed). Brad had been instrumental in developing not only the only whaling program but also the walrus hunting program for the eastern Arctic.

The financial injection to the Arctic by sport hunters is one of the

North's biggest non-government subsidized industries and the opportunities and the prospective benefits are growing. It confirms however, that without the efforts of people like Brad Parker and Jerome Knapp, this situation would most definitely not be the case for the Inuit people. However, it will be the members of the Safari Club International who will make it a viable exercise. There will have to be another amendment to the U.S. Marine Mammals Protection Act for the program to really be successful and meaningful.

We were often served tea and bannock as we journeyed across the seemingly endless Arctic ocean, out of sight of land in our comfortable freighter canoes. We felt secure and undaunted by the floating ice and there was a constant lookout for seals, whales and walrus.

On this expedition we did not have the good fortune to see a pod of bowhead whales. However, we will return to Igloodik, some year, earlier in the summer and hopefully then be able to drift up beside one of these enormous mammals as they drift just inches below the bottom of our boat like a 50-foot submarine. Brad is the expert at whale hunting. He has a couple of crossbows and with them he has arrowed more than anyone in history. The point of each crossbow bolt (arrow) has a scientifically engineered tissue/skin collecting cylinder that retains samples from each bowhead for DNA identification. The data will not only help identify and age a bowhead but it will allow scientists to map the travel routes of individuals and pods. Of particular interest is whether there is mixing of bowheads between the Western and Eastern Arctic oceans.

The Fox Basin waters are generally not that deep. The water and the ocean floor have abundant plant and animal life. Even though the pack ice may drift more than 50 miles from shore the walrus are easily able to dive to the bottom of the ocean and have their daily feasts of clams.

Our canoe, in addition to my hunting equipment, had the mandatory, government required recovery equipment for walrus in the form of handmade harpoons with ropes and floats attached. Some of the setups I saw were steel and brass points and hooks, hemp ropes and large

inflated plastic, floating, commercially-made buoys. In our boat we had the removable custom handmade points that fit in the end of a five foot steel harpoon shaft. But each rope that attached the points to the floats was made from the skin of one large bearded seal. Paul had cut circular rings around the seal and had pulled off the skin in one long strand. It is then straightened, stretched and dried. The float we had was a sewn up, inflated, life-size skin of a mature ring seal. The floats are required because typically, a walrus will leave the pack ice when hunted and it will sink when wounded or dead. The harpoon and float insures against a loss.

It was our seasoned veteran of these arctic waters, our guide Paul, who spotted the first group of walruses and as beginner's luck had it, it was large group of males lying in the noonday sun on an isolated island of drifting ice.

We were still a half mile away, when Paul shut off the outboard and we stopped to glass the walrus, judge the size of the tusks and ready ourselves for the approach. First and foremost for me was removal of the survival suit. I needed that for mobility.

Our approach was with caution, we shut off the outboard motor and drifted and paddled the last hundred yards. The nervousness of the walruses was obvious. Several abruptly swayed their heads, necks and chests back and forth. They all seemed to be grunting at us. The smell of days, weeks or months of them resting on the glistening surface of the same sheet of ice filled the air. Pungent!

There were several large males and two with exceptionally long and heavy tusks. One looked enormous and I readied myself for the shot. But as he turned his head to look directly at us I noticed that the tip of one tusk end had been broken and worn smooth. We were searching the group for another large male when two of the thousand pound males on the end of the ice closest to us grunted and dove into the glassy water. Within seconds, the whole group had vanished beneath the surface and my opportunity was lost.

The group surfaced again 50 yards away but only for a few seconds. There was no chance of judging the size of their tusks. There was lot less

chance of combining that and the time necessary to take a lethal shot.

Fortunately, our luck had continued with us and ahead of us were more than ten ice floes with groups of five to 50 walrus. The next group we approached was the largest in numbers and they were mostly females, young and juveniles. At several hundred yards more than half the herd had disappeared into the ocean. Several large females swam aggressively toward us. Snorting and blowing water through their nostrils. They waved their tusks at us defiantly.

Walrus are known to attack boats. With a ton or more of force behind them they drive their tusks into the boat and with their natural tusk ripping motion they can easily tear the side out of the wooden, canvas-covered canoes. Paul quickly started the outboard and backed away.

From a distance, we watched several groups of walrus and finally selected a group of males where one enormous bull was squeezed into the center and surrounded on all sides by other bulls wedged against each other, two or three deep.

If I was able to take a lethal body shot, then it would be almost impossible for the bull to make it to the water unless all the others, on one side of him had gone in first.

This group of mostly large, mature bulls seemed oblivious to the quiet approach of the grayish colored freighter canoe. Paul maneuvered me, in my bow position, to within 30 yards. A narrow shooting lane opened as we drifted to the edge of the ice and my first arrow was straight and true. It took a long time for there to be any reaction from the other bulls but finally their keen sense of smell warned them that something was wrong. There was movement and uneasiness. Many bulls were grunting loudly and some were making threatening lunges in our direction.

Paul wanted to stay close in case our bull made it to the water. We would have to harpoon it for sure, otherwise it would most certainly sink out of sight, forever.

Finally several bulls dove from the ice and with amazing speed and

agility for their enormous mass and proportions, the whole group was on the move. Paul yelled in Inuit to his son, Simione. He pointed at the walrus. Simione, who all the time had been holding a harpoon and float, jumped on the ice floe and ran at the walrus bulls.

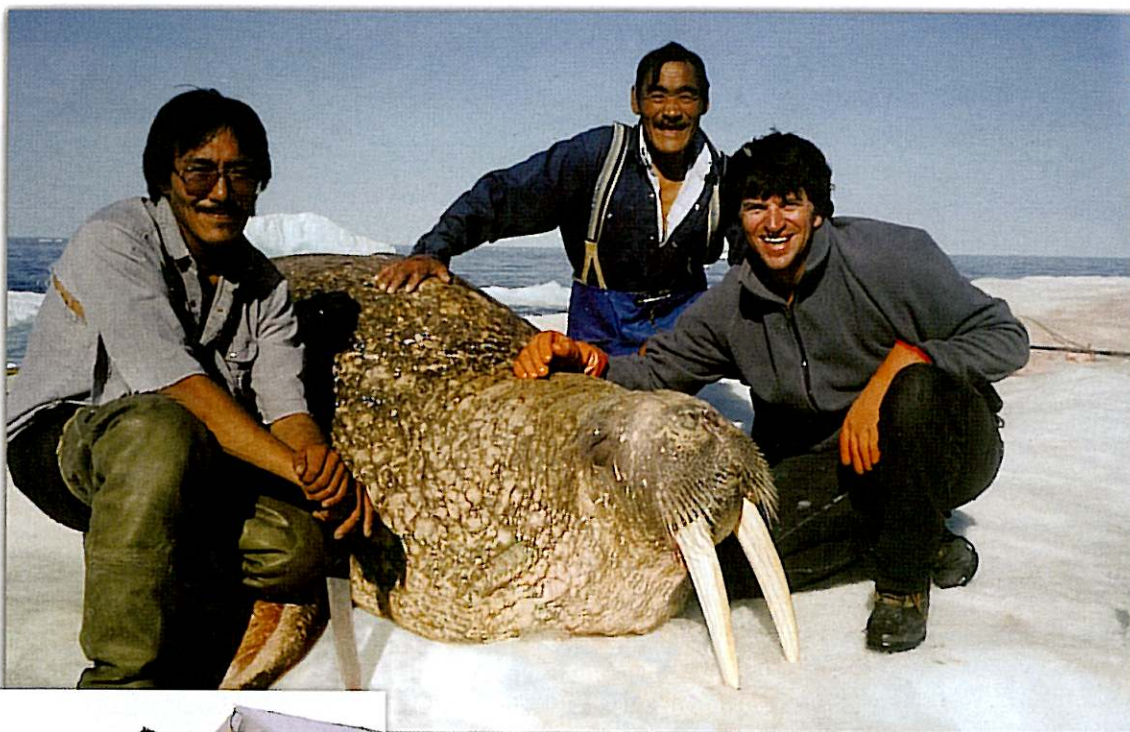
Our bull was now the last one on the ice and was approaching the edge when Simione securely anchored the harpoon to the tail flipper. He alone held the entire weight of the massive bull from sliding from the ice and sinking to the bottom of the Arctic Ocean.

When we left the ice floe our boats contained every ounce of the skin, meat and internal organs of the walrus. Even the intestines were

eral feet of beach gravel. Several months later it is uncovered and then, we understand, the feast begins.

On our return to town we were treated to the comfort and hospitality of Brad Park's Bed and Breakfast. The big exception was that we received lunch and dinner too! At Brad's we tried narwhal muktuk and also some fresh, dried Arctic char.

Our return trip was scheduled in two days so, on our first morning in town, Brad announced that we were going after char. Three hours later we were approaching a river mouth in a small protected bay on the isolated Arctic Ocean coast. At several hundred yards the dorsal fins of 20 or more Arctic char could be seen on



the surface of the glassy water right by shore. We took a char, up to 20 pounds, with almost every cast. Although we fished only a couple of hours it was a thrilling and exciting ending to our Arctic expedition.

Canada's Arctic, barren lands and waters offer a wide variety of hunting, fishing and expedition opportunities, virtually on a year-round basis. The diversity of the changing climatic conditions, the variety of wildlife, make the Arctic an accessible, affordable and rewarding experience for any outdoor enthusiast. It is the hunter who has preserved many of the wildlife species that are unique to the Arctic where hunting continues to be a way of life. ▲▲▲

**ARCHIE J. NESBITT, WITH HIS ATLANTIC WALRUS SCORING 95-4/8 POINTS. THIS WALRUS IS THE FIRST HUNTER-TAKEN ATLANTIC WALRUS EVER ENTERED IN BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB'S AWARDS PROGRAM. INSET: ARCHIE AND CHRISTINE SHOW OFF THEIR MUSTANG SURVIVAL SUITS IN FRONT OF THEIR BEACH FRONT CAMP.**