

More Ice Than You Can Shake a Stick At!

Nome to Inuvik

1 June - 13 August 1991



Off Bridget Creek, I waited in vain for four days for the solid sheet of sea ice to break up. there were pools of melted sea water, It was like watching grass grow.

1991 NOME to INUVIK Slowed by Ice

In the northern summer of 1991, my cunning plan was to paddle from Nome through Bering Strait into the Chukchi Sea, then around Point Barrow- the northern tip of Alaska - into the Beaufort Sea then eastwards along the coast to the Canadian town of Inuvik in the Mackenzie River delta. This town had road access. A distance of only some 1,500 miles, I expected the paddle to take a maximum of 50 days. This was based on my all-up average of 31 miles per day for the 1990 trip. However, the 1991 trip ended up taking a total of 73 days; very much due solely to ice conditions. What commenced in May as being one of the best years for ice, turned out by August to be a worse than average year for difficult ice conditions.

The False Start from Nome

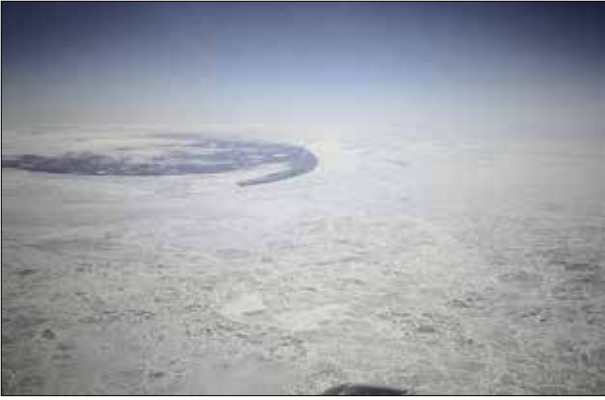
On 1 June 1991, I flew from Anchorage to Nome via the coastal village of Kotzebue. I knew the ice break-up had occurred early at Nome on 6 May, so as the aircraft banked over Kotzebue Sound, I was shocked and stunned to see a solid sheet of ice filling the sound from shore to shore. Not a single lead or glimmer of sea was visible. I could not believe my

eyes. I had hoped to cross Kotzebue Sound 10 days or so after leaving Nome.

As the aircraft descended to land at Nome, the sea was ice free with only a few remnant winter snowbanks scattered around the town. My kayak had been in safe storage at Nome for the winter. All I had to do was check my equipment and purchase fresh food



The Alaskan Airline Flight after landing at Kotzebue. A beautiful balmy, summer day



On board the flight from Kotzebue to Nome, this was my first view of a solid sea ice cover filling Kotzebue Sound. The curving point in the distance is Cape Espenberg

for the first 200-mile leg to Shishmaref. One week previously, I had posted out my five food resupply parcels from Anchorage, to the isolated coastal villages of Shishmaref, Point Hope, Point Lay, Barrow and Kaktovik. Each cardboard box included a letter to the postmaster stating I was a Kiwi paddling around Alaska and would arrive on an approximate date.

Only two days out of Nome, I reached the southern limits of the ice pack. Progress slowed and on 5 June, launching from an overnight camp on Cape Douglas, I followed a narrow shore lead for only three miles before reaching impenetrable ice. To reach terra firma from the lead, I had to drag the kayak over 200 yards of shore-fast ice. For the next four days, while I waited for the ice to either melt or move offshore, the weather was perfect. Overnight, ice would form on my tent and the sea would freeze but the days were sunny and calm. It was so frustrating to wait on shore while the weather was so perfect.



Harold Ahmahsuk (left) and a friend discuss the perils of walrus hunting from skin umiaks in the old days at Sinuk

Not that I was content just to sit on the beach and wait. I walked six miles along the coast to see if there was a shore lead, which there wasn't, and tried paddling out to sea around the ice pack. Pressure ridges up to 15 feet high, where the floes had been shoved together, allowed me a commanding view across the ice pack. When I began losing sight of shore, and there was still no way on through the ice, I decided to retrace my tracks back to my campsite.

Since this was my first experience with sea ice, I was learning new techniques each day. Landing on the ice floes had worried me immensely since some of the best kayakers have been lost during or after landing on ice floes. In August 1932 Gino Watkins disappeared without trace while seal hunting in the ice floes on the east coast of Greenland. His trousers and sprayskirt were found on a floe, his kayak found floating but of Gino, who had learnt the art of kayaking and rolling from the Inuit, no trace was ever found.

I did have a marked advantage over the old skin boat paddlers in that the hull of my kayak was built from two layers of kevlar. Combined with the swept up Nordkapp bow, I found I could paddle the kayak on to low ice floes with ease. All I had to do was find a low section of floe that was not more than six inches above sea level and was also reasonably flat. At full paddling speed the kayak would slide easily onto the ice where I could step out of the cockpit with dry feet. I learnt quickly to have a rope from the decklines handy to secure the kayak. This was vital particularly if a wind was blowing since the ice was so slippery. Launching was also very easy. Sitting in the cockpit, I simply pushed off from the ice and the kayak slid into the water stern first.

Following four days of watching and waiting for the ice to melt, the novelty of being surrounded by ice



My overnight camp on an old Inuit hut site at Cape Douglas. Open water eastwards to the next headland



had worn off. I realized that sunny days with warm temperatures were not moving the ice pack - strong winds, big seas and strong currents were required to break up the ice. It was now day eight since I had left Nome. I had halved my daily food ration, and since continuing fine weather was forecast on the radio, I felt there was no alternative but to paddle back to Nome and stock up on more food.

Crossing the Arctic Circle

Back safely in Nome, a spell of bad weather finally arrived. Rain, sleet and snow were accompanied by a strong southerly wind. With a report of favourable ice conditions up to Bering Strait, I started out again on 16 June and reached the small Inuit village of Wales by the 18th. The winter had been harsh. The ice pack had only moved offshore in the past few days. The village's main street was still buried under six-foot-deep snow drifts. The town was only small with a population of some 160 people. Apart from the houses, there was a school, store and a white geodesic dome structure, which contained the post office and town council office.

I was fortunate to see and photograph two walrus skin-covered umiaks, which in 1990 had been used to make a crossing from Siberia across Bering Strait to Wales. Umiaks are a large open boat, built with an internal frame of either driftwood or sawn timber, lashed together with walrus skin cord and covered



The two walrus skin-covered umiaks at Wales; they were used for a crossing of Bering Strait.

with walrus skins. They vary in length from 15 to 40 feet and in ancient times were propelled by paddles. Although some are now set up with mast and sail, it is more common for modern umiaks to have a well near the stern for an outboard motor. From Wales to Barrow, umiaks were still used to hunt and harpoon bowhead whales.



Sunlight glows through the translucent walrus skin, The mast step for sailing visible with hole in the seat to support the mast for sailing

From a hill above Wales, I had a commanding view across Bering Strait to Big and Little Diomed islands and beyond them, 50 miles away, the snow-clad hills of Siberia stood clear above the ice pack. I was looking out across the migration route for the American Indian population when they moved eastwards from Asia across the Bering Land Bridge. Thousands of years later, the Eskimos and Aleuts migrated across the land bridge into Alaska and then the sea level rose, slowly submerging and cutting off this migration route. South of the strait lay the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea, while to the north lay the Arctic Ocean and the Chukchi Sea.

To the north, the ice pack's southern fringe lay only a few miles away. Only 18 miles along the coast from Wales, towards my first food dump at Shishmaref, I hit impenetrable ice. I was held up for another two days before crossing the Arctic Circle on 25 June.



A selfie after crossing the Arctic Circle

There was no marker or stake behind the sand beach to mark this latitude of 66 degrees and 33 minutes. It was my very first time in the land of 24-hour daylight. To celebrate this auspicious occasion, all I could do was hold up the map and snap a self portrait. As I paddled northwards towards Barrow, I would not see a sunset again until late summer when hopefully, I would be nearing the end of my trip.

Sandy beach backed by a low dune ridge formed this next long section of sweeping shore to Kotzebue Sound. Further inland, low bare tundra flats extended as far as the eye could see. The ice pack was always close against the beach, sometimes with a narrow continuous shore lead, where I could paddle in a straight line but at other times, small floes were packed in tight against the beach. The tightly packed floes required zig-zagging, backtracking and even bashing the kayak bow against small floes so I could open a passage just wide enough for the kayak. When the ice formed an impassable barrier, I would land and wait patiently for the ice to move. I could have dragged the kayak



My first experience of sea ice - melting floes all around. In the background, the hills beyond Port Clarence.

across the ice, but I was determined to paddle every inch of the way around Alaska.

Kotzebue Sound

At Espenberg, the site of an old fish camp and now a summer home for a reindeer farmer, I landed to climb onto a dune and look across Kotzebue Sound. The outlook for a quick crossing of the sound looked bleak. Beyond a narrow shore lead, a continuous sheet of sea ice stretched as far as my eye could see.

I met Freddie Goodhope, an Inuit reindeer farmer, and his wife Janie. Although it was 2:00 pm, Freddie was just getting out of bed when I arrived. He and his family had been out all night seal hunting from a skiff in the ice. Freddie invited me to join him in an aluminium runabout to check his set nets up river. The catch of five whitefish and trout was boiled up for breakfast at 4:00 o'clock in the afternoon!

Freddie farmed a herd of 288 reindeer, which were corralled twice a year, once for dehorning and again at freeze-up to give the animals their shots to ward off disease and parasites. When selected animals were slaughtered, the meat was either flown to Shishmaref, or taken by skidoo and sled across the snow-covered tundra.

Kotzebue Sound at its narrowest point is 35 miles wide. Because of the ice pack, I could not take this shortest course when I launched at 7:30 am on 26 June and was forced to follow the shore lead eastwards. One promising lead headed northwards but after four miles it came to an absolute dead end in solid, unbroken first year ice. I had no option but to backtrack to the shore lead. I tried several more leads but they always came to a dead end.

Hovering above the ice was a mirage or band of white, but I kept seeing a short section of blue mirage above the ice to the north, which I felt sure lay above open



Freddie Goodhope steers his tinnie up-river at Cape Espenberg to check his set nets.



water. No matter how I tried, I couldn't find a lead that headed in the right direction. Several times I landed on the ice and climbed onto pressure ridges to search for a lead. At 12:30 pm, I was feeling demoralized and tempted to turn back to Cape Espenberg.

One last time I landed and climbed on top of a pressure ridge. Half a mile away, there appeared to be a lead and I could hear the sound of breaking waves working in the lead. Normally in the densely packed ice floes, there was virtually no sound, just the gentle dripping of melt water into the sea and lapping and surging under the floes. When I heard the sound of chop, I knew there was an area of open water. It had taken me five hours to find this lead..

I knew it would head to open water, as a low westerly chop was tossing. Hour by hour, as I paddled, the lead went on and on and the wind kept lifting. The lead would close down to a narrow gap then open up into a broad open area. Mid-afternoon, I landed in the lee of a large floe and pulled the kayak onto the ice. The chop was beginning to break over the kayak decks. This was one great advantage of paddling in ice - I could stop in the middle of Kotzebue Sound for a pee and a look-around, and pull on my survival suit.

Twelve hours after launching, I broke clear of the ice onto open water. Two hours later, I ground the kayak bow onto a gravel beach on the north side of Kotzebue Sound. When I tried to stand up, my left knee was all knotted up. Too long locked into the foam knee rests. I staggered around for a minute or two like I had been on the turps!

The ice had turned a 35 mile open water crossing into a 50 mile ice dodge. I was immensely relieved to be ashore again, after 14 hours on the water. This was the largest crossing I had to complete for the 1991 trip.

Brown Bears

By the time I reached Cape Beaufort on 6 July, I was considering myself fortunate. I had not seen a single

brown bear. But paddling past a gravel beach, backed by gentle rolling tundra slopes, working my way through loose pack ice, I saw a movement on shore. Two bulky shapes, moving across the tundra towards the beach – they were too big for Arctic foxes, too solid for caribou.

They were big coastal brown bears!

Standing on hind legs, they sparred and pawed at each other as they neared the beach. I lost sight of them behind a stranded ice floe and pulled out my two cameras. Then I put on speed and glided out from behind the floe towards where the two bears were scrapping on the beach. I kept my arm movements very slow as I drifted in close to the beach. The bears glanced in my direction but otherwise took absolutely no notice of me.

Clouds of mosquitoes hovered thickly around the bears. They were magnificent specimens with black patches of fur around their eyes. When they walked into the sea, directly towards the kayak bow, my heart began to pound. I realized they were simply trying to get rid of the annoying clouds of insects. One bear came so close, with just his head out of the water, he could have touched the kayak bow with his paw. I felt no threat from the bears and it was obvious the bears felt no threat from me. It was a magic moment - almost an unbearable one - a great highlight of the



*What do we have here?
Is this breakfast?*



21 July 1991 - leaving Barrow for the next leg along the north Alaskan coast to Kaktovik.

Alaska trip.

Barrow - the Northern Tip of Alaska

Late afternoon on 17 July, I was struggling to reach the town of Barrow. Swirls of thick cold, clammy fog limited visibility to 200 yards. An onshore wind had forced the ice pack hard against the beach, leaving only short stretches of shore lead where I could paddle in a straight line. The kayak took a hammering as I used the bow as a battering ram to force a way through the floes. I nearly capsized while skating at speed over a low tongue of ice. I had not seen a projecting knob of ice, and at speed, it nearly flipped me over. Only a desperate slap support stroke kept me from a dunking in the icy water.

The fog was so thick it was difficult to estimate the distance remaining to Barrow. I could hear the sounds of vehicles and machinery so knew it was close. The ice was really bad, packed hard against the beach, forcing a snail's pace. Through the murk I noticed an old Inuit chap strolling along the gravel beach.

"How far to Barrow?" I called out.

"Keep paddling for half a mile and land by some skiffs parked on the beach," he replied.

"Where have you come from?" the chap asked.

"I started this year from Nome and camped last night at Skull Cliffs."

The Eskimo chap looked at the fog and the ice packed hard against the beach and said, "You've just come from around the corner, haven't you?"

For the next three days I stayed with Geoff and Marie Carroll, which fortunately coincided with a spell of bad weather, snow, sleet, rain and strong winds. Geoff worked as a ranger for the Fish and Game Department, keeping track of the numbers of caribou, bears and bowhead whales. Marie, his Inuit wife, was a representative for the North Slope Borough on the

International Whaling Commission.

Hunting of bowhead whales was still carried out from Barrow in late spring. When the first lead formed offshore, umiaks were towed on sledges behind ski-doods to open water where the hunters waited until a whale was spotted. The umiaks were launched and the whale was killed by harpoon and darting gun. After a kill, many of the Barrow townsfolk helped to winch the whale onto the ice where it was cut into small pieces. The blubber and meat were shared out amongst all the villagers. Bowhead whales grow up to 60 feet long and weigh as much as 60 tons. The umiak men had to be highly skilled to avoid being capsized by a harpooned bowhead.

Geoff Carroll was a member of the 1986 Steger International Polar Expedition, which reached the North Pole by dog team and sled. Ever since, Geoff has been fond of Greenland huskies and kept a team of 12 dogs tethered at the back of his house. Geoff asked me if I would like to join him exercising the dogs. Although it was supposedly summer, with no



Geoff harnessing the excited dogs

snow on the ground, sleet and snow were falling as we harnessed the excited dogs. Normally in summer, the dogs remain tethered with little or no exercise, so the dogs were overjoyed for the chance of a romp over the tundra. Clinging to a big freight sled with clouds of steam from the dog's breath and bouncing over the tundra on the sled was a magic experience.

Barrow, with a population of over 3,000, is one of the largest Inuit settlements and is the center of local government for the North Slope Borough, the world's largest municipal government. At the modern supermarket I was able to stock up on fresh food, meat and milk for the next 360 mile leg to Kaktovik. When the sun rises on 10 May in Barrow each year, it does not set again until 2 August - no wonder this country is called the 'land of the midnight sun.'

Reaching the Border

On July 21, I farewelled Geoff at Point Barrow, the northernmost tip of Alaska, and paddled from the Chukchi Sea onto the Beaufort Sea. By this date in a normal year the icepack has broken up and moved offshore, however 1991 was turning into a bad year for ice. No freight barges or vessels had been able to near Barrow let alone the producing oilfields at Kuparuk and Prudhoe Bay.

For the next 15 days I dodged through the ice, mostly under cloudy skies and often through thick fog until I closed on the goal of my Alaska trip, the border between Alaska and Canada. On a cloudy evening on 4 August, I slowly maneuvered my way through tightly packed floes alongside a gravel beach until abeam of a navigation tower near the border. I landed, climbed a 20 foot high mud bank, and walked across a broad tundra terrace to a low bronze plinth. On the east side, was Canada and on the west, Alaska. For four years of planning and three years of paddling,



Sea ice in the background, tundra in the foreground with a selfie of Paul hugging the pointy border plinth, between Alaska and Canada

I had been struggling to reach this solitary bronze monument. There was no one to take a photo or to say, "Well done, old chap," so I had to settle for a self portrait hugging the border monument.

Since there was not a decent campsite near, I climbed back into the kayak and paddled into Canadian waters. Although I had completed my trip around the coastline of Alaska, it was by no means the end of the 1991 trip - another 240 miles lay ahead to reach the road end at Inuvik.

Northwest Passage

Ever since leaving Barrow, I was paddling through ice-laden waters where some of the great names in Arctic exploration had attempted to find the elusive Northwest Passage. Starting with John Cabot in 1497, the British made a concerted effort to blaze a trail through the passage, culminating in the 1845 Franklin Expedition, which virtually disappeared without trace with the loss of two ships and 129 men. In the following years, search parties on both ice and sea made the final connection for the Northwest Passage, however it wasn't until 1906 that the first complete sea traverse of the Northwest Passage was completed. In August of that year, Roald Amundsen passed through Bering Strait in the 47 ton herring sloop Gjoa. With a crew of six, he set off from Norway in 1903 and spent two winters at Gjoa Haven, carrying out scientific observations and exploring by dog team. In the summer of 1906, Amundsen's goal was Bering Strait but poor ice conditions forced him to winter over for a third year at King Point.

Snow was piling up on the sleeves of my survival suit as I neared King Point. An Arctic front had passed through only hours before with gale-force winds and freezing temperatures. When seas began breaking over my shoulder, I landed through surf on a very exposed beach. With no shelter and chilling temperatures, I was almost an exposure case within minutes. Fortu-



The virtue of proximity to the Mackenzie River; a driftlog windbreak built in minutes

nately, as it was only 50 miles from the Mackenzie River delta, driftwood was piled thickly at the head of the beach. I used an Inuit trick to quickly build a solid wall of drift-logs behind which I could shelter from the biting wind. Using slivers of the resin rich timber, I had a fire going in minutes and was able to warm up with a hot brew of tea.

When the wind and sea eased I paddled along to King Point and landed to see where Amundsen and his men had spent 10 long months waiting for the ice to break up. It was a desolate place, a long gravel spit backed by a small lagoon with rolling tundra slopes inland. I would have liked to spend more time there, but as it was so cold and sleet was still falling, I decided it was far warmer paddling the kayak.

The Mackenzie River Delta

On August 11, I finally left the icepack astern and entered the swift flowing, murky waters of the Mackenzie River delta. For another two days, I plugged upstream against the strong current for 80 miles. I was heading for Inuvik but trailing a cloud of mosquitoes and steam as I sweated in warmer temperatures. At 7:15 pm, on 13 August, I ran the kayak bow onto a mud bank at the Inuvik barge dock. The Alaska trip was finally completed.

Summary for 1991 - Nome to Inuvik

- Total distance covered: 1,511 miles
- Start to finish time: 73 days
- Rest & Recuperation days: 1
- Icebound days: 8
- Weatherbound days: 12
- Total paddling days: 52
- Total non-paddling days: 21
- All up average: 20.7 miles per day
- Paddling day average: 29.1 miles per day



Must be close to the finish of the Alaskan paddle; not only proper small trees but also the remains of a strip-built Canadian canoe



A strange mixture of fulfillment, achievement and disappointment - that the end of the Alaskan trip is only minutes away at the Inuvik barge landing - 13 August 1991

