



Arctic Bay Floe Edge Trip Report (May 23 - 29, 2022)

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Written by: Sarah Gutowsky The inaugural expedition to the floe edge of Admiralty Inlet, Nunavut, timed in early spring to coincide with the mass return of Arctic marine life to the North. Day 1 - Our intrepid group of explorers met bright and early on our first day, convening in the Ottawa International Airport. We all came ready for an epic travel day, beginning at 45.3°N in a bustling southern metropolis and ending at 73.4°N snoozing in our tents on the fast ice of Admiralty Inlet. We were incredibly fortunate to avoid any travel hiccups, flying from Ottawa to Iqaluit to Pond Inlet to Arctic Bay. We were cheerfully greeted upon arrival by our partners at Arctic Bay Adventures.



Eagle-Eye Tours group 2022, Arctic Bay

After our safety briefings and Q&A, we geared up and headed straight to the snowmobiles and komatiks (sledges towed behind) to begin our journey across the ice to camp.



Komatik ride to camp

With plenty of light in this land of 24-hr sun paired with the excitement of our adventure, we were absolutely buzzing for the entire 2 hr ride. The soft evening light and long shadows made the spectacular scenery of Admiralty Inlet even more photogenic, as we took in the towering cliffs and shimmering fast ice wedged between Baffin Island and the Brodeur Peninsula.



Ship Point near camp

We arrived around 9pm to camp, located just south of Ship Point at the opening to Baillarge Bay on the eastern side of Admiralty Inlet. Here we officially met our contingent of local guides. They all expressed excitement to share their land and culture with us over the next four days, further fueling our anticipation for the days to come. After a camp tour and a warm meal, we were easily enticed by our cozy tents equipped with propane heaters and top-notch sleeping bags to sleep off our travels and get ready for our first full day with our guides out on the ice. Day 2 - On our first morning, we awoke to polar opposite conditions to which we fell asleep; a complete white out and high winds. Thus is the nature of the High Arctic, where the weather can turn on a dime! In the expedition spirit, everyone donned their outer gear and made their way to the communal dining tent, where we were briefed over a delicious warm breakfast with our plans for the day. Persistent northerly winds overnight had pushed the pack ice in Lancaster Sound up against the floe edge, meaning there was likely no open water that could be safely accessed. However, our highly experienced guides planned to explore the fast ice in search of seals and bears, and to scope out potential access points to the floe edge. We headed due north from camp toward Cape Crauford (Kangiq) at the northeastern tip of the Brodeur Peninsula. Along our way, the conditions improved and we came upon our first evidence of seals and bears; a Ringed Seal den where a pup had recently been pulled out and eaten!



Evidence of polar bear kill at Ringed Seal den © Sarah Gutowsky

Our guides expertly read the signs left behind by the interaction (including a carcass about 25 ft away) and walked us through the stages of the encounter. They estimated the bear's size to be 9 ft long based on its tracks, an impressively large individual.



Polar bear tracks © Sarah Gutowsky

We continued on our way to Cape Crauford, a high point with excellent visibility of Lancaster Sound. We set up our spotting scopes to search the landscape.



Spotting scopes at Cape Crauford © Sarah Gutowsky

It wasn't long before we had our first real bear sighting of the trip, a distant but huge animal starkly highlighted against the colourful cliffs of the Brodeur Peninsula.



Our first polar bear © Sarah Gutowsky

From our vantage point, we were also able to spy what looked to be open water, but it was clearly not possible to get there today through the jumble of pack ice. We spent the remainder of the day enjoying numerous Ringed Seals at their breathing holes, and a diverse array of birds passing by over the ice including Snow Buntings, Common Ravens, Common Eider, Brant, Northern Fulmar,

and Rock Ptarmigan. We headed back to camp excited for what tomorrow may bring. Day 3 - We awoke today expecting the worst but instead were greeted by blue skies and not a breath of wind. The plan today was to return to Cape Crauford in hopes of getting closer to the open water at the floe edge. Our guides expertly manoeuvred the snowmobiles and komatiks over the jumbled pack ice. We arrived to a relatively flat area where we could hide behind an ice ridge watching for wildlife passing by between us and the open water. From here we were incredibly fortunate to observe multiple piles of sleeping walrus drifting by on ice floes. As if this weren't enough, a mother Polar Bear with two cubs appeared in the distance, making their way along the floe edge toward us.



Mother Polar Bear and cubs with walrus © Sarah Gutowsky

The family passed right by at close range, providing amazing viewing and photo opportunities to our group. At the same time, 10s of 1000s of migrating King Eiders continuously streamed past in the distance. We marvelled at the spectacle before us for hours before turning back to camp for the night.



Migrating King Eiders © Sarah Gutowsky

Day 4 - Today we awoke feeling like true Arctic explorers as we dug ourselves out from inside our tents; high winds had caused deep snow drifts to accumulate around us overnight. The winds had again turned to the north, packing in the ice onto the floe edge and making access to open water impossible. We headed out for adventure regardless, and spent the day searching the eastern side of Admiralty Inlet for interesting ice features and wildlife. The persistent strong winds seemed to keep most animals hidden from sight, but we did find a number of Ringed Seals at their breathing holes, as well as an enormous ice berg that had grounded and become encased in the fast ice.



EET group at grounded iceberg © Sarah Gutowsky

Day 5 - On the morning of our last full day on the ice, we were blessed once again with clear skies and calm winds. We headed toward the floe edge straight away after breakfast, eager for our last chance at experiencing open water. We were fortunate to find a path allowing us to come within 100 ft of the floe edge, but we were stopped by a large crack in the ice.



Cracks in the ice near the floe edge © Sarah Gutowsky

We opportunistically dropped a hydrophone through the crack, and we were not disappointed. Through the speaker came the haunting sounds of Ringed Seals, Bearded Seals, and Beluga! The Beluga's whistles and clicks were unmistakable.



Listening to the hydrophone dropped through a crack in the ice © Sarah Gutowsky

Scanning through our spotting scopes, we were able to make out bright white bodies surfacing on the open water in the distance. We decided to relocate in hopes of finding a closer vantage point. After a bit of searching, our guides found us the perfect spot; an extensive solid area of flat ice where we could set up right at the edge. From here we watched hundreds of Belugas pass close by, many with calves, while we were serenaded by their songs through the hydrophone speaker.



Beluga with calf at the floe edge © Sarah Gutowsky

Seabirds were enjoying the food bonanza created at the ice edge too, including hundreds of Northern Fulmar, Long-tailed Duck, Pomarine Jaeger, Thick-billed Murre, Black Guillemot, and Glaucous Gulls.



Northern Fulmar at the floe edge © Sarah Gutowsky

All the while, our guides were busy behind us building a traditional igloo. It was truly a perfect day on the floe edge.



Our Inuit guides build an igloo while we watch wildlife at the floe edge © Sarah Gutowsky

Day 6 - Today we said our goodbyes to our guides and headed back to Arctic Bay in a blizzard. The white-out on the ride gave us plenty of time to reflect on the Arctic whirlwind we had experienced over the past four days. We were left feeling truly grateful to our gracious hosts for sharing all that their land and culture had to offer. We spent our last night at the Taqqut Inns North Hotel before flying south the following morning.



Our guides at Ship Point on the way back to Arctic Bay © Sarah Gutowsky