



## Narwhals & Polar Bears: Arctic Bay 2023 Trip Report

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**June 7 - 13, 2023** When you travel north to the high arctic, you know you are in for an adventure, you just never know what the adventure might entail... Our hardy group of adventurers assembled in Ottawa and met to discuss the days ahead.

### Day 1 - Arrival in Arctic Bay, Nunavut

We were off early the next morning for a flight to Iqaluit and onward to Arctic Bay. All went smoothly and we arrived in Arctic Bay more or less on schedule. Flying in we had beautiful views of the mountains and sea ice below. We got a ride into town and to the hotel for dinner. The plan was to leave for that camp that evening, but word came that the warm weather had water pooling on the ice around our tents at the camp and they needed to move the tents before we could go. Most of us took a walk to the local stores and then out to the pier and up the road to Victor Bay. At the pier we met a very friendly local that shared with us her story of growing up in Arctic Bay and her ambitions to finish high school and head off to university.



*Arrival in Arctic Bay 2023*

## **Day 2 - Off to the camp and onward to the floe edge**

Our mid-morning departure was pushed to noon and then we headed over the hill to Victor Bay, our launching point on to the ice and out to our camp. We loaded our gear into the qamutiks, the gear hauling sleds of choice in this part of the world. Once snowmobile keys were located and loads tied down we were off for our first experience of travel on the sea ice with our highly skilled local guides. We travelled north along the towering cliffs of Baffin Island to our camp in Admiralty Inlet. This would be our base for the next four nights. We stopped for some food at the camp before heading off to our real destination, the floe edge. This border of the 'fast' ice that we can travel on with the open ocean or moving pack ice is where the action is. Driving north, our guides expertly navigated the sea ice to get us to the floe edge after roughly 2 hours of travel. We stopped at a spot with open water nearby and within a minute we spotted our first polar bear. Their beautiful fur coats actually appear more as butter-coloured than white when they are standing on pure white snow. The bear was initially far away, but moving in our general direction. As it got closer, and appeared to be coming in our direction, we got back in the qamutiks and moved away from the floe edge and enjoyed views as this magnificent bruin walked along the ice. Glowing after great views of one of our target species, we moved a little further east, closer to shore and set ourselves up to watch the ocean. There was a strong wind and significant waves on the water, which meant that there were no whales to be found. We did, however, get an introduction to some of the common birds in this area, including Northern Fulmar, Black Guillemot, and Glaucous Gull. We returned to camp for a very late dinner and some more tent setup before crawling into bed for a much needed rest. But, with 24 hours of sunlight, I had made good on my promise that we'd be home before dark ;).



*Arctic Bay camp 2023 © Cam Gillies*



*Thick-billed Murre at the floe edge © Cam Gillies*

### **Day 3 - First narwhal sightings!**

After a late night, it was a slow exit the next morning. We had breakfast and got organized to return to the floe edge. We headed northwest toward Cape Crauford at the other side of the inlet to try our chances at this part of the floe edge. It wasn't long before Angie spotted our first narwhals of the

trip! The whales were mostly quite distant, but we saw several groups and most of us saw their tusks sticking out of the water several times. One of our first sightings of a tail from a diving whale may have been a bowhead whale, but we didn't get a good look and didn't see it again. We watched these whales for a good amount of time before pack ice moved in from the west and covered the open water adjacent to the floe edge. We moved east to the other side of the inlet. We didn't see any more whales, but did see a ringed seal. We headed back to the camp over some bumpy ice and the guides and I decided we preferred the smoother route in the middle of the inlet. We had dinner and were off to bed with eye masks on, under the midnight sun.



*Narwhal surfacing at the floe edge © Cam Gillies*





*Narwhal tusk sighting © Cam Gillies*

#### **Day 4 - Beautiful day at the floe edge**

It was a beautiful morning and the night felt warmer than the previous night. Our cook had been up all night helping another group get ready so we let her have a well deserved rest and Olivia and others stood in to get breakfast happening. We headed west again to the far floe edge. We were greeted with calm seas and sunshine. It was the floe edge at its aesthetic best. We set out the chairs and put on more sunscreen to relax and enjoy. We didn't see any whales, but we soon had ringed seals surfacing at the floe edge to have a look at us. They entertained us by rolling their heads back to look in the water. Another seal surfaced, initially with just the top of dark grey head visible. This was something different and as it raised its head further out of the water the long bushy whiskers of a bearded seal came into view! This seal surfaced repeatedly in front of us, raising its body out of the water for a good look at us before making a splashy exit. We watched as pack ice moved closer and eventually covered the open water where we were watching. Yet another lesson about how dynamic this environment is! We moved east to find open water and Justin immediately spotted two beluga whales right away. We lingered there until the evening then returned to our camp for a late dinner.



*Floe edge photographers © Cam Gillies*



*Beluga mother and calf © Cam Gillies*

## **Day 5 - Pack ice and polar bears**

We awoke to a sunny and warm day at the camp. After much back and forth to get ice for water we were in motion and returned to the spot in the middle of the inlet that we were at the day before. There was too much pack ice to have any open water for whales, but we saw a very large bear

heading from the fast ice out onto the pack ice. We had a look at the bear's very large footprints then headed west toward Cape Crauford. It was very windy and we didn't find any open water there either. We moved south and spotted another bear in the distance. We stopped for a look before carrying on. We made another stop to look at the hole that a ringed seal was keeping open to come to the surface in the middle of a vast expanse of solid ice. The local Inuit call this an 'aglu'. We returned to camp earlier than normal for dinner. After dinner some of us went for a short walk with one of our guides to get a closer look at the beautiful cliffs behind the camp and we could see nesting Northern Fulmars through the spotting scope.

## **Day 6 - Whales and wind at the floe edge before returning to Arctic Bay**

We were up relatively early today knowing this was our last chance to get to the floe edge. After breakfast we departed, going directly to near Cape Crauford with a stop to view another polar bear along the way. When we arrived, there were strong northwest winds and a swell from the north that was hitting the floe edge and moving it up and down. We immediately saw belugas and noticed a narwhal a little further west. We moved along the edge and stopped and set up our chairs for some very good viewing of small groups of narwhal and beluga surfacing just off the floe edge. There was at least one beluga with a young gray calf. We did manage to see some tusks as some of the narwhal surfaced or as they swam quickly. In the midst of all the excitement our guides noticed a small crack that had formed near us. They were concerned about the ice breaking due to the strong wave action so we moved a short distance east, but soon found more cracks there as well. After a quick discussion we concluded that it was time to move away from the floe edge for safety. We travelled south on the ice to a safe spot and stopped for a picnic lunch. Minestrone was on the menu, but alas, we were out of propane :). We enjoyed some other lunch instead and snapped a group photo then headed back to our camp. We grabbed our luggage and then headed back toward Arctic Bay. We made several dramatic crack crossings before arriving at the beach. We rode in the van from there over the hill to the community and checked back into the hotel for dinner and a hot shower.



*Narwhal mother and calf © Cam Gillies*



*Arctic Bay midnight sun © Cam Gillies*

## **Day 7 - Return to Ottawa**

We had breakfast at the hotel then departed for the airport. Our flight was delayed by about an hour. From Arctic Bay we flew north to Resolute Bay to pick up other passengers. This provided beautiful views of Sommerset Island and Lancaster Sound. From there we flew south to Iqaluit where we changed planes and carried on to Ottawa for an evening arrival. We eased back into the reality of the south after an incredible adventure under the 24 hour daylight of the high arctic.



*Our group 2023*