

Rowing the Northwest Passage Expedition Attempt 2023

THE EXPEDITION

DAYS 1- 3

17th-19th August

Pond Inlet to Lancaster Sound

After a busy few day preparing the boat and organising our kit, we were ready to depart and set off from Pond Inlet on the morning of the 17th August. It was rather surreal to be on our way after over two months spent delivering the boat from Scotland. We were waved off by the crew of Marie Tharp as well as members of the RCMP and several locals.

Once we rounded Eclipse sound and entered Navy Board inlet again the wind and swell picked up and we had to work hard to ensure we stayed on course. We spent a couple of days battling headwinds as we rowed slowly northwards. All of the sea ice that had been there on our way down had now melted and/or been blown away and so we only passed a couple of icebergs.

Due to the tough conditions, we anchored in the same anchorage where we had met Ocean View on our way into Pond Inlet. We anchored there for one night and were then able to push northwards out of Navy Board Inlet and into Lancaster Sound.

The first few days involved getting used to the two hours on two hours off routine, figuring out the bathroom facilities (a small black bucket) and getting to grips with rowing and steering. The whole crew adapted pretty well but the first few days were definitely the hardest whilst our bodies adapted to this new “normal”.

DAYS 4-6

20th-22nd August

Lancaster Sound

We slowly made our way west along Lancaster Sound. We found that although we had tail winds, we still struggled to keep the boat straight or make good speeds as the currents ran in every direction, making for very confused seas. We had a lot of fog in Lancaster Sound which made steering harder as there is no fixed reference point to focus on.

We entertained ourselves on shifts by all learning the words to “The Northwest Passage” by Stan Rogers and by singing some sea shanties as well. Morale was pretty high but people were definitely still adapting to the routine. It became quickly apparent that it was very important to ensure everyone was taking on



The crew of Hermione at breakfast on the day of departure



Rowing through Lancaster Sound

enough water and food. After a tough shift sometimes all you want to do is crawl into bed, but it is so important to eat and drink something, otherwise low blood sugar and dehydration creep up on you.

DAYS 7- 11

23rd-27th August

Prince Regent Sound to Fort Ross

We started making our way down Prince Regent Sound and moved across to the west side, staying tucked in close to Somerset Island. The fog cleared a bit and we had good views of the land. We passed by Batt Bay where the HMS Prince Albert overwintered for two years whilst searching for the lost Franklin expedition and we also saw our first sightings of beluga whales, almost lazily breaching the surface of the water close to shore. We were hailed on the VHF by SY Aquijo, the world's largest ketch, which was also planning to complete the passage this year.



Our first polar bear sighting on the shore of Somerset Island

The strong winds were causing us to be blown offshore and so we decided to anchor whilst waiting for the winds to die down. We anchored just off Fury Point, Somerset Island and in the evening saw our first polar bear. It walked down the shoreline and once it spotted us quickly turned and headed back off the way we came. It was exciting to finally see one after hearing that so many of the other NWP boats had spotted lots already, but I was glad that it chose not to come too close to us.

We waited at anchor for a couple of days, having to reset it a few times after being blown offshore. We were able to slowly creep south over time and ended up anchored just south of Cresswell Bay. We had a couple of nights with very cold weather and so whilst on anchor watch we made sure everyone was having lots of warm drinks. My feet were feeling the cold and constantly felt like ice blocks and looked all red and swollen. One evening it snowed with thick flakes hitting us horizontally from our starboard side, we also had a night where the deck froze a little and everyone had to be careful moving around, so as to ensure no one slipped overboard.

Whilst anchored just south of Cresswell Bay we were unfortunately blown out to sea a little and in our attempt to get back into sheltered water we hit a sandbank (depth soundings are pretty inaccurate for the passage). Unfortunately, our daggerboard pin got jammed and we couldn't lift our stern daggerboard in time, causing the boat to list heavily to the port and for the daggerboard to then snap. This wasn't a complete disaster as we still had the front daggerboard, but it was an inconvenience to say the least.

We found that we couldn't get a good holding where we were and it wasn't very sheltered, so rather than risk being blown across Prince Regent Inlet we opted to sacrifice the complete human powered component of the expedition and use the electric engine. This was a real blow to many of the crew but one thing I had learned from the delivery expedition is that safety should always be the priority. We could not afford to risk having the boat washed up on rocks and potentially injure the crew, it was more important we got to somewhere safe and assessed the broken daggerboard and looked at how to proceed.

We continued the last 20NM south down the coast of Somerset Island and round into Depot Bay, where Fort Ross is located. Upon arrival at Fort Ross, we anchored on the shore line and were able to get off our boat and walk the short distance to the old Hudson's Bay Company trading post huts.

Opening the doors felt like stepping back in time and inside we signed the visitors book, and looked back to see the names of many of our friends we had met on the delivery journey, who had stopped there a few weeks previously. Half of the crew stayed in the maintained hut that night, whilst the rest of us stayed on Hermione.

DAYS 12- 16

28th August- 1st September

Fort Ross

Having looked at the weather window we decided we would stay anchored at Fort Ross for a few days. The next step on our journey would be crossing through the Bellot Strait, which has strong currents at the narrows and so we wanted to time our crossing so that there was minimal wind.

Since it was decided that we would stay in Fort Ross a few days, we took advantage of being able to beach the boat and a group of



Coming ashore at Fort Ross



Outside one of the two remaining Hudson's Bay Company huts at Fort Ross



Daniel standing next to McClintock's Cairn (built in 1857 by Francis Leopold McClintock whilst in the Arctic verifying information about the lost Franklin expedition)

us headed off for a couple of walks. We loved exploring the area and walked up to McClintock's cairn and then circled around towards Oliver Lake. We saw lots of beautiful little arctic flowers, muskox hair, caribou antlers and evidence of polar bear scat too.

We had a visit from a superyacht travelling the passage and met one of the owners and the crew. The captain and ice pilot had a mutual friend with Davie and I so we spent a long time chatting to them in the hut and hearing about their voyage from Holland to Canada.

We had quite a lot of spare ration packs and so organised them neatly in the huts at Fort Ross to leave them there for any weary travellers passing who might like a nourishing meal. We left a note with our contact details in the hope that anyone who uses them might let us know of their experiences at Fort Ross.

On our last morning at Fort Ross those of us on the boat awoke to find a polar bear dipping its toes in the water just a few feet from our bow. It was sniffing the air and looking right at us and was the classic example of a polar bear that is more likely to attack. It was extremely skinny with a dull, yellowish coat and was probably close to starvation. We shouted to scare it away and when it paid no attention, I prepared our polar bear deterrents and radioed the crew in the



A close encounter with a polar bear at Fort Ross

DAYS 17- 25

2nd-9th September

Bellot Strait to South coast of Victoria Island

We made good speeds most of the way through Bellot and had beautifully calm seas. As we left the Bellot Strait and entered Franklin Strait the winds picked up and we worked hard to get over to the Southeast coast of Victoria Island to find shelter. The darker nights became obvious as after a few days at Fort Ross as we now had several hours of complete darkness at night which made steering a little harder.

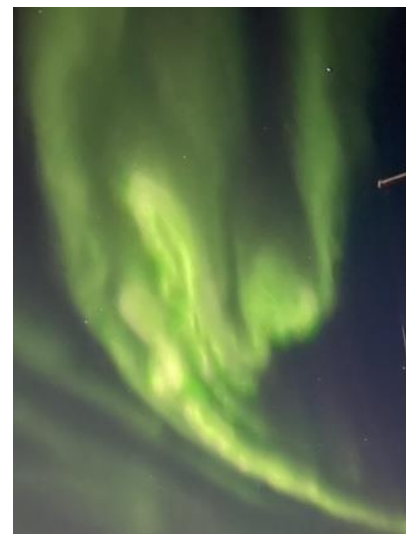
We were treated to our first sight of the aurora borealis, which was wondrous to behold, and particularly magical for those members of the crew who had never seen it before.



Spare rations left at Fort Ross for future visitors

cabin. Two of them came out and shouted as well and eventually the bear moved off along the shoreline where it then lay down and sat and watched us for nearly an hour before moving away further.

After the polar bear encounter, we packed up the boat again and were ready to set off in order to reach the mouth of Bellot Strait at slack water before high tide in order to make the crossing when the current would be with us.



The spectacular aurora borealis lighting up the night sky

Southerly winds picked up, hitting us on our port side and making it hard to move forwards, so we decided to anchor off the South coast of Victoria Island. There was a slight lull in the wind and we were able to move a few miles west before anchoring in a small bay sheltered by a spit of land.

We spent four days anchored off the coast waiting for a break in the weather. Travelling through the passage had so far been a great lesson in patience and we were by now used to having to sit and wait for the right opportunity to move forwards.

On the clear evenings, Mike and I would try to identify the planets and constellations that we could see and we would all look in awe at the sky whenever the Aurora Borealis appeared. We spent a lot of time checking the weather forecasts looking and hoping that things had changed and we would be able to move forwards.

DAYS 26-28

10th to 13th September

Victoria Island to Cape Alexander

We finally had a good break in the weather and headed southwest from our anchorage on calm seas. We made good progress and moved towards the northern coast of mainland Canada. It felt good to be on the move again and we hoped the predicted tail winds would help us move forwards and make up for the time spent at anchor.



An inquisitive seal following us near Victoria Island

Unfortunately, as ever the Arctic weather was predictably unpredictable, and we ended up with much stronger winds than had been forecast. Inside the cabins it felt like being on a rollercoaster as the boat lurched forwards and rolled side to side.



Rowing under sunny skies and on calm seas near Victoria Island

Steering the boat was a nightmare, it was like being on a knife's edge and although the wind was behind us if the boat got hit by a wave, we would be blown side on and it was almost impossible to bring the nose round again. We used the para-anchor off the stern to pull us back round and would then retrieve the anchor and continue for a bit before being blown round again and having to repeat the process. Ironically, we did end up heading in the right direction, however, a lot of the distance we covered we did by going sideways which was a less than ideal scenario as it increased our risk of capsizing.

We eventually opted to anchor again; this time tucked in just west of Cape Alexander behind a small island. On shore there were a couple of hunting cabins but these were empty. We anchored there for a couple of days looking at the weather forecast.

Although there was going to be a small gap in the weather to move further west the long-term forecast was not favourable. We still have about 700NM to cover to reach Tuktoyaktuk and we began to discuss the chances of us actually making it to the finish. We had suffered damage to our daggerboard and found that we were struggling to steer in the winds. The risks of being blown onshore or onto rocks and damaging the boat, as well as potentially injuring the crew seemed pretty high when we were in such strong winds. We were also concerned about the increasing hours of darkness and the decreasing temperatures.

We were faced with two options. To push on regardless, knowing we had low chances of success and would potentially need rescued if we couldn't make it, or to head back 50NM to Cambridge Bay where we could end the expedition for this year, overwinter the boat, and look at completing the rest of the passage next year.

In the end the whole group voted to head to Cambridge Bay. As I have said before safety has to be the priority in the Arctic and although many of the crew were gutted not to keep pushing on it would have been reckless to continue.

DAYS 29-30

14th-15th September

Cape Alexander to Macalpine Islands

After having made our decision to head to Cambridge Bay, we opted to use the engine to motor back. There were strong winds in the Queen Maud Gulf and so we hugged the mainland coast line and made our way west for a few hours. We anchored in the shelter of the Macalpine Islands whilst we waited for an opportunity to cross over to Cambridge Bay.

There were mixed emotions amongst the crew. However, now that the decision had been made to end the expedition for this year, I think everyone was eager to get back home to dry land and their families.

DAYS 31-32

16th-17th September

Macalpine Islands to Cambridge Bay

Just as we were lifting our anchor to depart for Cambridge Bay we were hailed on the VHF by Canadian Coastguard vessel Sir Wilfrid Laurier. They told us not to move and that they would be there in 15 minutes. We awaited their arrival in some confusion. When their zodiac arrived, we were told that someone (perhaps a concerned citizen) had alerted them to our presence and told them we were in need of assistance. We said that although we had experienced some issues we were not in any distress and were just leaving to head to Cambridge Bay. The coastguard insisted on either towing or accompanying us to Cambridge Bay, and so five of us were taken by zodiac to Sir Wilfrid Laurier and then Hermione was escorted, under her own steam, by Sir Wilfrid Laurier and the zodiac as well as a local search and rescue vessel. We were extremely grateful to the coastguard for their assistance and fast response, and felt very guilty about using up search and



Approaching RCGV Sir Wilfrid Laurier

rescue resources, but thankfully no other calls came in requiring their presence. Once close to Cambridge Bay the five of us onboard Sir Wilfrid Laurier were dropped off by the zodiac on the dock and went ahead to sort arrangements for overwintering the boat in Canada.



View from Sir Wilfrid Laurier- Hermione as a small speck in the distance and the coast guard rapid response vessel

We had to speak to the RCMP as they had been told we had not yet cleared customs in Canada. After clearing up the miscommunication and getting all the details of what we needed to do to store the boat over the winter we then met up with the crew of the RV Martin Bergmann. A research vessel that had been involved in the finding of both HMS Terror and HMS Erebus. The captain was extremely helpful and offered to help us haul Hermione out of the water where we would then store her at the cabin of a mutual friend. With all the details sorted we could then book our flights to head back home.

Myself and the majority of the crew flew out the following day, leaving the Arctic and closing this chapter of the expedition.

I was extremely sad to be leaving the Arctic. The delivery and the expedition had taught me so much and have no doubt changed my outlook on life. I feel I have grown as a person from all the experiences I have had. I have learnt new skills, got to experience some of the most remote landscapes on earth and even though we didn't make it through the passage I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to spend so much time in the Arctic.



Mike and I with the crew of RV Martin Bergmann, who were involved with finding the lost Franklin ships, and helped us to get Hermione out of the water in Cambridge Bay



Stepping foot on land in Cambridge Bay

For me the best part about the entire expedition has been the friendships I have made. At every place we stopped we were greeted with open arms by locals, fellow Arctic explorers, research vessels and government officials. I have no shame in admitting that we wouldn't have made it half the distance we did if it wasn't for the kindness of strangers, many of whom are now close friends.