

The Bears at The Pillars of Goldstein Baffin Island, August, 1982

Well, they weren't officially "The Pillars of Goldstein" but that's what my brother Fred and I called them. We had camped across the Owl River from a wall of gray rock split into two spiky towers by a deep gully running all the way from the talus chutes at river level to the skyline. It was our ninth camp from Pangnirtung, up the Weasel River, over Pangnirtung Pass, and now heading for tidewater and Broughton Island¹.



We were having a good time, having dealt successfully with some tricky terrain, occasional bad weather, and what had been heavy packs. But it isn't a good idea to be too conscious of having a good time: it gets noticed and something happens. Making camp and cooking dinner were by now second-nature, no more "Is this part of the tent?" or "Is the stove supposed to do that?"



¹ Traversing Auyuittuq National Park ("The Land That Never Melts") on Baffin Island, in the eastern Canadian Arctic. Pangnirtung and Broughton Island are small towns, population about 1325 and 500 respectively.

It was late enough in the season that the sun did actually set, though it never really got dark. In the twilight, we had the usual session about which peak was which, trying to match the map with the earth, and finally cleaned up camp for the night, the “kitchen” all set for breakfast, the two packs leaning against each other a few yards from the end of the tent, boots under the edge of the rain-fly, and so to bed.

Early morning. It was already quite bright, though the sun hadn’t cleared the ridge east of us. It was the time of morning for wrestling with the conflicting demands of “nice warm sleeping bag” and “how big is my bladder?” and I sat up in my bag to check the weather through the door of the tent. As I went up, I passed Fred going down and he said something that in my groggy state sounded like “I dreamt I saw a polar bear.” What he actually said was “I saw a polar bear! I said something to it. I shouldn’t have!”

He’d awakened just before I did, and looking through the door of the tent he could see the yellow-white side of a small bear just where we’d left the packs, with its jaws around the side of his pack. True New Yorker that he is, he yelled at it, “Get outa there! Put that down!” but immediately realized this wasn’t the polite or tactful thing to do². Fortunately, the bear wasn’t easily offended. A small bear, I thought, until I realized that the situation was stickier than that. It was a cub, which meant that Mama was somewhere close by. A big male might be more dangerous, but not by much.

Fred refused to look, believing with the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* that if he couldn’t see them, they couldn’t see him. I couldn’t stand not knowing and had to watch. The cub had Fred’s pack in its mouth and was wrestling with it to free it from mine. To us, the packs were still far from weightless, but in short order the cub got Fred’s loose and trotted off easily with it in its mouth to the gravel river bank, about 10 yards away. I could just see it off to the side if I pushed my head against the closed mosquito netting. I was not about to leave the safety of sturdy nylon and netting. A short distance upstream, sure enough, was Mama with another, less adventurous, cub.

I reached for my camera but before I could think better of shutter noises attracting attention, Fred whispered quite softly³ that he’d get me before the bears did, if I did anything to make them notice us; as if they didn’t know we were there, but there is comfort in such fictions and delusions. I’d turned around, still mostly in my sleeping bag, to watch them. We had a quick whispered debate about whether we should get out of the bags completely, since in them, “we looked like seals,” but we dropped the idea – it would have involved too much wriggling around and noise, never mind how silly the idea was anyway.

Before we left, we had gotten all sorts of pamphlets from the NWT about polar bears, filled with horror stories. So much so that when we showed them to an overly-solicitous friend, A----, he firmly (and futilely) ordered us not to go. We bravely quoted the Auyuittok Park Guide Book: “Polar bears are very rare in the park.” Obviously, the kiss of death. My second or third thought upon realizing the position we were in was that my last act would be to write a note to my kids telling them to lie to Andy about what had happened to us, to thwart an eternity of “I told you so.”

² When we got back from the trip, I wrote to Miss Manners, describing my brother’s rudeness and asking, if one finds oneself talking to a polar bear, what would be the polite and proper thing to say. Her answer must have gotten lost in the mail.

³ Something no one in our family is very good at, under more normal circumstances.



[sic]

Picture of the bears

Fred's pack opened with a double-zipper and he'd left the tabs together in the middle. The cub pawed at the back of the flap and it opened easily, no tearing, nothing broken. If we got out of this in one piece each, our only souvenir was going to be bear spit⁴. Mama and the timid cub weren't hungry at all, neither for us nor camp food, but the intrepid one was ripping open packages of gorp, cheese, and pepperoni and happily inhaling lunches and chocolate bars, aluminum foil and all. Freeze dried dinners had no appeal. It opened a package of freeze-dried scrambled eggs, sniffed at it, and left most of it, yellow powder all over the tundra. Fred, who hated the stuff too, begrudgingly credited the cub with gourmet tastes.

After hours of wondering if they'd get around to us as the main course, or maybe actually only forty minutes, Mama mumbled something and the cub left the mess and rejoined the family, and they strolled off upstream, where they were even rarer. From inside the tent, they were quickly out of sight. And their grunts (indigestion?) faded, quickly replaced by noisy squawks and croaking, a nature documentary with us in the middle: a dozen or so ravens and a few seagulls, looking for scraps from the bears, were perched on a huge boulder near the tent, complaining about the lack of food and not at all pleased at having to settle for the powdered eggs instead of us.

Suddenly brave with only birds nearby, we crept out of the tent. The bears were still visible, far upstream, and heading away. About five miles downstream, where we were heading anyway, was the nearest refuge hut⁵. From there it was another 10 or 12 miles to the last hut at tidewater, where we'd radio park headquarters for a boat ride to Broughton Island⁶. The wooden shacks seemed so much more secure than mere nylon and so strong was our desire to increase the distance between us and the bears, that we debated briefly whether we should just leave the tent and "run like hell" for the hut. But it was a new tent and not cheap, and the bears were quite far off, so we packed⁷ the tent and retrieved the litter the cub had left. We weren't going to starve, with what was in my pack and the little bit left in Fred's, and only a few days to go.

It took us two hours to do the five miles, on what was pretty good going along the relatively well-drained river bank. We marched to a mantra from one of the pamphlets

⁴ On the pack and especially on a pair of Fred's shorts that were inside, with some blood on them from a cut he'd gotten earlier in the trip. The cub was drawn to them and tossed them about a few times.

⁵ Small wooden shacks big enough for two bunks, a table, and some storage space, every 10-15 miles apart through the length of the park. Usually with a battery-powered radio, and some fuel and food.

⁶ The town, named after the island, has an airport with scheduled flights "out."

⁷ "Packed" is perhaps not quite accurate. We didn't use the tent again, and when I took it out at home to clean it, there were knots and tangles everywhere, in the lines, and somehow even in the fly. I know we brought everything into the tent to pack up inside, where it was "safer," but it seems we might have actually tried to fold and pack the tent from within.

about bears: “Most people survive polar bear maulings.” A lot of time was spent looking back. And in discussing tactical options: would we have enough time to saunter casually⁸ away from the river and up the steep side of the U-shaped valley, not quite a mile away, if the bears reappeared, getting larger.

But they didn’t. We thought they might have crossed over to the next fjord via a side valley. The park guide book said it’s a route used by bears in the winter, when they weren’t quite so “rare in the park.” We’d considered it for a possible side trip but skipped it.

We got to the hut by late afternoon, moved in, and checked out our “fort”. Unlike the others we’d passed, this one did not have a bar to secure the door from inside. It was fairly sturdy, though I think a sufficiently angry bear, certainly a large male, could have broken in, bar or no bar. There was a radio and we called park headquarters. The ranger was quite taken by our bears: “They are very rare in the park this time of year, but it’s nice to know about them!” He did make sure we were ok and had enough food and fuel, and agreed with our guess about their route. We were all eager to believe that the bears were elsewhere.

We made dinner and settled in. It was a pretty site but all the cautionary tales we’d read kept us nervous, and going outside was always a matter of looking around every corner hoping not to surprise or be surprised by a lurking bear. The hut was on an isolated flat-topped rise next to a small stream running within very steep cut banks. Across the stream was an outhouse, which could only be locked from outside, strange to say. This led to silly but seemingly necessary rituals when one of us had to use it: checking carefully for bears hiding in the stream bed, locking the user inside for a pre-determined amount of time (trusting that in the event a bear wouldn’t just knock the bar off or simply destroy the whole outhouse), trusting the non-user to return and open the door without any wisecracks, bear jokes, or stalling.

We spent a quiet night, interrupted by frequent noises, wind or the hut creaking, which always led to “What was that? Was that you? Or the bears?” To cover all possible answers, we named the Mama bear “Maybe” and the two cubs, “Yup” and “Nono”. But we made it through the night. The next day brought lousy weather, so we stayed put, playing gin, reading, and eating, and again to bed.

Midnight, or a bit after. And a distinctively different clunk. “Freddy, was that you?” “No, there’s a paw at the window.” In fact, it was Yup. In the angle just below the peak of the roof, the window, about a foot square, made of heavy glass with wire reinforcing, was now half covered by a paw. Little Intrepid was on the roof. The two of us, with a single thought between us and still in our sleeping bags, rolled off the bunks to the floor and slithered like caterpillars to the door to hold it shut against all comers. Mama and Stay-At-Home were a few yards away in front, visible through the small window in the door. Apparently, the side trip to the next fjord hadn’t appealed to them either.

The cub crawled all over the hut and finally wound up in front, curious about an oil drum filled with trash. It scratched a paw on the corner of some sheet metal and yelped, which had Mama up on her hind legs looking for what had hurt her baby. But it’s a wise bear that knows her own cubs and she just grumbled that he should be careful and anyway it was time to leave. We exhaled for the first time in several minutes and watched them amble off, downstream this time.

⁸ One must not run.

Of course, that was no good. That was where we were going and we wanted no part of bumping into them again. Back on the radio to the ranger, who agreed that “Twice was lucky” – he would send somebody to accompany us out. We needed a boat ride from the next hut anyway, and the Inuit from the boat would meet us in a day or so. Would we mind waiting? Because first he had to deal with rescuing three hunters who’d gotten stranded on some ice when their boat ran out of fuel. Now we felt guilty for bothering him and assured him that we were fine and could wait, no problem.



Barry Fred (on a rock)

Which was true. We ate, played cards, explored around the hut, nervously and never very far, and wondered what the escort would be like: able to walk for twenty hours a day across tundra at five miles per hour. We’d die trying to keep up with him.

Another night of sleep and “Was that you?” By noon of the next day, we were lying around bored when a very strange noise grew louder and louder. The debate about our escort ended when a very beat-up three-wheeled ATV bounced up to the hut, the passenger armed with a Remington 222, which might have annoyed the bears. Allan and Jolie Kinaloosie had spent the night at the tidewater hut, where we were headed, and the bears had visited them there. Shooting the rifle through the ventilation opening made enough noise to scare the bears out to sea (or more likely, that’s where they were going anyway), so there was actually nothing more to worry about, but they figured they’d come by anyway and we could all go out together. All this with a little bit of English and a lot of gestures. And lunch.

We worked out a travel plan: they’d putt-putt ahead a half-mile or so, usually stopping on a rise where we could still see them. We hiked, steadily, but not any faster than usual (how much faster could we go?), and caught up. They waited patiently. We only cheated once, when we came to a stream deep enough to warrant changing into sneakers to wade across. They laughed and drove the ATV back to our side and we took turns getting ferried over.



Allan and Jaolie Kinaloosie

We spent a crowded but pleasantly uneventful night at the last hut. In the morning, we helped load the boat. Not worrying much about salt water or corrosion, they pushed the ATV into the water next to the boat and managed somehow to heave it aboard. We put on every bit of clothing we had – it was at least a four-hour trip to the village on Broughton Island and it was going to be very cold just sitting in the boat (there was a cuddy cabin in the bow, but it was tiny, all but filled with their gear, and we didn't want to miss anything anyway, nor to seem wimpy).

Four hours if we went directly there. First, we did go straight down the fjord, riven black cliffs looming close on either side with clouds hanging a few hundred feet up, something right out of Mordor. Once out into the open on the west side of Davis Strait, it got windier and colder and the trip turned into a seal hunt. It seemed futile to us city folk, but the they took turns with the rifle, shooting at a seal's head, no bigger than half a football in the water, up to a hundred yards from the rocking boat. They did miss a lot. Finally one took a shot straight over the bow and they thought they'd hit it, but it disappeared. They kept a sharp eye out ahead. Fred and I figured that our job was just to sit there, not having eyes sharp enough to see a seal's head among the waves, but we looked off to port and there it was, or another just like it. Should we tell them, honoring a self-sufficient hunting culture (and getting out of the cold that much sooner), or not, peace to the animal? Oh, well. I tapped the one with the rifle and pointed, he looked, nodded, and shot; so much for peace to animals. We motored over and tied the former seal to the gunwale, still in the water to keep the boat from getting even messier.

And then came a detour to one of the flat rocky islets, almost awash, where we made tea while one of them butchered the seal. We liked that they were going to use the whole seal, as in times mostly gone now, but after some effort at it and some discussion, they decided to leave the carcass and just take the skin⁹. We did taste the raw seal meat – it was very oily and rich, with a slightly nutty flavor, not at all fishy.

There was a seagull swimming along the edge of the islet, molted and unable to fly. They caught it and put it in the boat, to take back to the village, we couldn't imagine what for.

⁹ At least in Canada. When I told this story to some Greenlanders, they said they wouldn't leave the meat. The Hudson's Bay Company pays a few dollars for a seal skin.

Back in the boat and in another few hours we came to the edge of the broken-up ice floes near the beach at Broughton Island. They were very careful with the boat, never getting even close to the ice, not treating it at all casually¹⁰. Eventually they found a route through it and we beached the boat, wrestled the ATV ashore, unloaded our gear and the sealskin, and watched as the now frantic seagull managed to scramble over the side and paddle away at half the speed of sound. We found out later, confirmed by finding older examples on the beach, that the seagull was meant as a present for their kids, who would tie a string to its leg and let it swim or fly around, or swing it around their heads, if it couldn't fly on its own, a kind of living kite.

We spent a couple of days in town, waiting for the next plane south. We stayed in the transients' rooming house and were known as "those guys with the bears" wherever we went – it's a very small town. Ravens perched on the power poles, ignoring the kids shooting makeshift bows and arrows at them.

Everywhere we went, we were followed by a small crowd of local kids. In the one café in town, they played "Stare at the Kablunas"¹¹ while we ate. We would have felt bad about it, except that they were all quite cheerfully plump.

¹⁰ Unlike the Greenlanders, in their 20's, I was with in similar ice on their cabin cruiser. They bumped and pushed and tried to force a way through, though not with any speed and not with old (thick) ice or bergs.

¹¹ The term in Inuktitut for Europeans, literally "bearded ones". It can be used pejoratively, like most such terms for "the others".

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appeared in the 6/15/99 issue of the
AMC's *Appalachia* journal
13 December 2009 7:14 PM
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