The aim of Ellesmere Light was to make a lightweight north-south hiking traverse of Ellesmere Island. In the months leading up to the expedition my team mate Clive Rubens and I refined the plan in order to attempt the journey unsupported i.e. without food caches en route. This change was mainly brought on by worries that we would not reliably and economically be able to put in one of our caches; namely at Vendom Fiord.

The upside of trying for an unsupported traverse is that it is much more satisfying to just head out with two months of food and supplies and be totally immersed in the wilderness; rather than having the deadlines of trying to reach a cache. The downside it that you have to move all your stuff at once! Now obviously one cannot carry 55 or 60 days of food in a backpack, so we planned to start with sledding over the sea ice, then put wheels on the sled and finally to cache the sled and hike. See overview map on page 5.

After three days in Resolute Bay, hub of high arctic logistics, we were keen to be away. Our pilot was pretty confident that he could fly north of Eureka and land at a strip beside Otto Fiord. This sounded good, since it would get us closer to the Arctic Ocean. At Eureka the melt was well underway; all the snow had gone and there was already a shore lead of water between the land and the sea ice. The chances of a snow free landing further north looked good so we decided to go for it and spend the extra $$$$. The surface of Greely Fiord was already very wet from melt, summer had clearly arrived! But amazingly in the course of the next 50 km or so, as we flew over Hare Fiord into Otto Fiord, we went right back into winter. There was snow everywhere and nowhere for our wheeled Twin Otter to land. Reluctantly we flew back to Eureka and started sledding around the Fosheim Peninsula from there. Ironically, sitting on the airstrip at Eureka, was a ski-equipped Twin Otter. But we could not muster the enthusiasm to spend another $5,000+ to try again to reach Otto Fiord.

For the next 15 days, up until July 1st, we made a clockwise loop around the north shore of the Fosheim Peninsula. We traveled by day on the sea ice and then pulled in to shore to camp, usually right on the gravel beach or just beyond. The weather was unbelievably good, pretty much 24/7 sunshine. Temperatures at Eureka peaked at 18°C during this time. Clive found plenty of use for his shorts and, being his first Arctic expedition, he assumed that it was always like this. My pre-trip warnings of the summer months being some of the cloudiest were looking a bit pessimistic.

At Iceberg Point we cached our excess supplies under heavy rocks and made a lightweight dash northward across Greely Fiord. The aim of this diversion was to make up for the earlier disappointment of not being able to land further north. The dash was more of a prolonged 25km splash. There was an alarming amount of water on the sea-ice and we were very happy to make landfall. After a very boggy hike the next day we high-tailed it back to the Fosheim: another 25km of cold, wet feet.
Resuming our journey along the north coast of the Fosheim we saw many musk ox, as well as numerous arctic hare. Even a couple of wolves trotted along the beach at one point, ignoring us almost entirely in their pursuit of prey. Quite a few birds too: some so well camouflaged as to be virtually invisible. We had been at one camp for a few hours before discovering a red knot nesting just meters away.

To the casual observer our expedition may not have looked too “lightweight” at this stage: burdened as we were with 50+ days of food and the wheels for later use when we would leave the ice. But we saved weight in other areas: particularly with our tent which was less than a kilo. A pyramid shaped, single skin, floorless design, it was a huge success, with its vast 9’ x 9’ footprint giving us a palatial space inside. This is always a good thing on a long expedition! Hiking poles did double duty as a central tent pole. Other weight savings including not taking a gun for bear protection: at least three kilos saved right there. Given our route and my lack of problems with bears over many previous journeys this seemed like a safe gamble. Indeed it was, for we saw no polar bears. Actually I was a bit disappointed about that!

Another specialist piece of kit, namely our 1.4 kilo raft came into good service as June came to a close. The shore lead was generally getting wider, making it more progressively more difficult to access the beach for camping. Our tiny raft, powered by a converted hiking pole paddle saved the day. Crossing the ever-widening leads on Canon Fiord also required the raft, occasionally under the watchful eye of a seal.

By the end of June we had covered 250 km on the sea-ice and reached South Bay; our planned jumping off point for inland travel. Not a moment too soon, as the ice further into Canon Fiord looked decidedly rotten. Well beyond its use-by date! I was looking forward to using the wheel rig, developed and tested on various expeditions over the previous 7 years; but certainly never anything like the planned 250 km that lay ahead. Our chosen valley cut a broad swath south through the mountains, rising only 500 ft in the first 40 km. On an arctic topo map that means just one contour line. As suspected they valley proved to be a great wheeling route. Running down the centre was a wide, sluggish and very muddy river. No drinking water there, nor in most of the very silt laden side creeks; evidence that the endless warm days were having their effect and leading to some rapid melt of ice fields in the surrounding mountains.

The downside of moving inland was the addition of some mosquitos to the mix. While mossies are not a new addition to the High Arctic, the Inuit a Grise Fiord later told us that for them mosquitos are definitely increasing: surely related to climate change? The combination of mosquitos, endless sun and a tent that was only bug proof when fully zipped up meant that sleeping was insufferably hot on a few occasions. This was solved by actively seeking shade for the “night”.

At our second inland camp we were visited by a lone wolf who howled to his pack mates in the hills and soon we had four wolves checking us out from as close as 20m. Further on the
valley suddenly narrowed to an impassible canyon. This signaled the start of six arduous days of wheeling and portaging as we slowly worked our way across the grain of 15 km of geologically unfriendly terrain. Unfriendly to sled-wheelers at least, but otherwise spectacular. Some canyons required a lengthy reconnaissance. The continuing perfect weather lulled us into a false sense of security and we would set off in shorts and t-shirts for hours of hiking, leaving all our extra clothing and safety gear behind. Possibly not the best plan given our extreme isolation.

Just as we exited the last gorge the weather at last began to turn and even a few raindrops fell: we were treated to that wonderful fresh aromatic scent of new rain on a desert. A easy run down valley bought us to Irene Bay. On the way a lone Peary Caribou circled around us before deciding we were not to be trusted and dashing off.

Throughout the wheeling we worked hard to leave no trace of our passing and the vast majority of terrain was firm enough to achieve this. At the head of Irene Bay we wheeled along the beach to avoid leaving marks on the soft dirt inland. Our tracks on the beach would be washed away by the rising tide or the next storm waves.

Irene Bay, and the big river flowing down from Sverdrup Pass, heralded the start of a new and more dangerous section of the journey. One where where our path was cut by large rivers running from the ice caps and glaciers of central Ellesmere. At least by this time, mid-July, the main melt was long over and it was our good fortune to have a long series of cloudy days which reduced run-off still further. But crossing big braided rivers is always a challenge. The most memorable for us being the Augusta River....filled with fast-moving grey meltwater and an abundance of ice chunks. It was cold!

Our plan to use the ice cap itself for a few days...to get around some of the rivers...came to an early end when my crampon broke, making it almost impossible to manage the sled safely. We were happy to make it back to “dry land” without injury. As it turned out, the ensuing poor weather would have made travel on the ice-cap very hazardous. The mainly cloudy weather until the end of the trip also made solar charging quite a challenge.

At Vendom Fiord we were finally “within range” of Grise Fiord settlement. After caching the sled and wheels (for possible further use one day) we set off with 14 days food in our backpacks. With 250 km to go, we had to average about 17 km a day. The climb out from Vendom led to a landscape of rolling
hills with scattered groups of muskox; bison on the plains of Wyoming came to mind. To reach Makinson Inlet we followed a canyon of thoroughly rotten rock: this quasi-industrial landscape reminiscent of a disused quarry reappeared a few times on the way to Grise Fiord. It seems we were stuck in the same geology.

I had been to Makinson Inlet several times before and so it felt a bit like coming home. We ran down a steep scree slope above Split Glacier. I had descended the same slope with my son a dozen years before. Clive remarked that he would not have taken a 9 year old down it!

The grey landscape at the head of Starnes Fiord did not promise too much wildlife but we were very happily surprised by the arrival of a pod of about 80 beluga whales who hung out just off the beach. Amazingly in Grise Fiord we had a repeat, but this time it was scores of narwhal...another great sighting.

As we approached Grise Fiord we thought we had long since crossed the last river of any significance. But some real rain cooked up a few surprises. Run-off from the ice caps rapidly swelled the rivers and to our dismay were we were able to cross all but the very last one. With time running out and our food almost gone we were forced to take a chance on the glacier that fed this uncrossable river. Getting on the glacier was OK, but how would we get off? Clive recalled from his climbing past that some folks who could not afford crampons had used socks over their boots. Sure enough it was like wearing velcro and the expedition was saved by socks!

After 50 days and 750 km Grise Fiord settlement came into view. A very wet and decidedly dodgy 300m scree slope was carefully negotiated and we were done. It had been a challenging and very rewarding journey.