RCGS Expedition Report – Qajaqtuqtut Expedition

Written by:
Katherine Breen, Erik Boomer, Eric and Sarah McNair-Landry

Overview

This summer, Erik Boomer, Katherine Breen, Eric McNair-Landry and Sarah McNair-Landry embarked on a 1,000 kilometre crossing of southern Baffin Island by traditional Inuit kayak, cross-country ski and on foot.

The idea

Several years ago, siblings Eric and Sarah McNair-Landry ended up on the shores of a small Inuit settlement in Greenland. A traditional kayaking festival was taking place in the community, and they joined the crowds to watch the kayaking races. It struck them how vibrant the traditional kayaking culture was, in contrast to their area back home in Nunavut.

From that, the idea was born: to research and build traditional Baffin kayaks and use them on a major expedition following the trails that Inuit have been walking, dog sledding and paddling for generations. It didn’t take long to convince Katherine Breen and Erik Boomer to join the team.

Through this expedition, the team hopes to inspire others, especially the people of Nunavut, to keep the tradition of Inuit sea kayaking alive.

The route

The route was a crossing of Southern Baffin. The first challenge was to ski up and over the Penny Ice Cap, before descending into the Akshayuk Pass, and paddling the Weasel River.

The river dumped into the ocean. At that point, the team traded their modern boats for hand-build Inuit kayaks. Their journey then followed old traditional Inuit routes that led 900 kilometres across Baffin Island.

Building the kayaks

After Eric McNair-Landry did a great deal of research and built two prototypes, the team settled on the skin-on-frame Baffin style design and Eric mentored the rest of the team in constructing the kayaks. The kayaks were built at the Iqaluit High School. It took two months to build them. Traditionally, Inuit would have used bone and driftwood, but we opted for white oak and cedar, covered by nylon and polyurethane.
During the construction of our kayaks, we also held workshops and presentations for students. During the workshops, the students learnt about the Inuit kayak, and each had the chance build their own scale model boat.

**Crossing the Penny Ice Cap**

We were awestruck by the beauty and scale of Coronation Glacier, as huge cliffs emerged from the ice on either side. This glacier led us up onto the Penny Ice Cap, traveling by ski, hauling all of our gear in a sled and in Boomer’s white water kayak.

The biggest danger traveling on glaciers are the crevasses. To reduce the risk of falling into one, we ski-roped up. In this way if a team member fell in, we would be able to arrest the fall and help them out of the crevasse.

After crossing over the Penny Ice Cap, we descended through the Turner Glacier that allowed us to pass directly below Mount Asgard and Mount Loki, and into Akshayuk Pass.

**Paddling the Weasel River**

Once off the glacier, we used our kayak and pack-rafts that we had hauled across the Ice Cap.

Erik Boomer, a professional whitewater kayaker, descended the Weasel River, which carves a path below some of the tallest cliffs in the world. Boiling class V rapids churn through boulders and crash over drops.

The rest of the team hiked around the white water and set up safety for Boomer. For the mellower section of the river, the other team members inflated a small pack raft and joined Boomer paddling downstream.

Nine days after departing Qikiqtarjuaq, the river led us straight to the Arctic Ocean and the community of Pangnirtung.

**Sea kayaking**

In the Pangnirtung community, the team traded their modern boats for the hand-built sea kayaks, and set off for a 55-day, 900-kilometre journey. There was a small gathering to celebrate our launch from Pangnirtung and we met some people who shared stories of traveling to the Nettilling Lake area.

Good weather and pleasant days of paddling through rough and rocky scenery marked the first few weeks of the expedition. High winds pushed a large amount of sea ice back into Cumberland Sound, which threatened to block the expedition’s progress and increased the risk of polar bear encounters. Luckily, the team weaved its way through the pack ice.
Tidal rapids
The Nettilling Fjord tidal rapids were the first big concern, as many Inuit from Pangnirtung had told the team about their dangers. They turned out to be every bit as impressive as the warnings. The team scouted this section thoroughly and saw for themselves the standing waves, reversing falls, and huge whirlpools.

They were a bit nervous about timing their passage through this section, but during the slack tide, the white water features had completely disappeared and the paddling was easy.

Portaging to Nettilling Lake

Once they passed the tidal rapids, they embarked on a series of portages between small lakes, leading inland toward Nettilling Lake.

They saw lots of evidence of previous travellers along this section of the route, from ancient tent rings, inuksuit (stone cairns) and even an old grave. As they got close to Nettilling Lake, they observed changes in the geography as the rugged, barren coastline turned to more fertile tundra.

Biblical proportions of mosquitoes complicated the crossing of Nettilling Lake. Each team member developed his or her own coping mechanisms for dealing with the bugs while in the kayaks and at camp. Except for the occasional day with high winds, bug jackets were a necessity.

Up the Amadjuak River

One of the biggest obstacles was the Amadjuak River. This large volume river runs 60 kilometres from Amadjuak Lake to Nettilling Lake, and the team had to travel it upstream.

The river, being swift with big rapids, slowed their daily progress down from 25 kilometres to 4-7 kilometres per day. When possible, they paddled their long boats upstream, battling the currents. When the currents were too strong, they lined their boats and pull them upstream. Other times, the rapids were so fierce that the team was forced to unload and portage, shuttling gear back and forth.

After 11 days of battling the river, they reach the Amadjuak Lake. The winds and cold weather showed no mercy, with a three-day snowstorm at the end of August. The unusually cold weather made it challenging to travel. The river had also taken its toll on the boats, with scrapes on the bottoms creating small leaks. Wet and cold was not a great combination, and the team continually worked on keeping the boats dry.

Food cache
The food cache lay halfway down the Amadjuak Lake. The river had taken much more time than anticipated, and the team was running low on food rations.

With only one day of food left, they finally reached their food cache, and were happy to see that animals and weather had not destroyed it. They celebrated arriving at the halfway point with chips, chocolate, and other treats.

In the cache was a month of food, enough to complete the expedition.

**Toward the ocean**

The trend on the last month of the expedition was unusually cold temperatures married with strong head winds. The combination of both creates challenging travel conditions. It was a constant job to repair the scratched bottoms of the boats to attempt to stay dry.

Once leaving Amadjuak Lake, they started a series of long portages, working their way back to the ocean. After several two- to four-kilometre portages, they embarked on the final and longest eight-kilometre portage. It took two days to shuttle all the food, gear and boats back and forth on several different trips.

**Tough times**

Back on the Arctic Ocean, the team embarked on the toughest section of the trip. It was September, and fall storms were frequent, bringing daily head winds of 15 to 25 knots. The biggest dangers were the tides. As they would rise and fall by 30 feet, the water funnels through narrow fjords, creating tidal rapids similar to rapids on a river, making big waves only to disappear several hours later and eventually reverse. These rapids were too dangerous to paddle through, forcing the team to portage around or wait for them to change. Out in the open, the team would often encounter turbulent waters, boils and whirlpools big enough to flip a kayaker. In those frigid waters, a swim would be a terrible idea. Consequently, the team proceeded with caution, staying together.

The Arctic Ocean is home to the polar bears, and the team was now in their territory. They saw several fresh bear tracks, and a fresh bear kill, but did not see any bears.

With sub zero temperatures, snow covering the ground, and strong headwinds day after day, they pushed to get to Cape Dorset before winter set in. The temperatures were so cold that it took all their energy to stay warm. In the tents at night, it was a daily chore to dry all of the gear. During the day, they often had to stop and run or dance around to get the blood flowing back into their feet and hands.

**Final push**

It was Sept. 20, the first calm day in the ocean in weeks. They were not the only ones enjoying the good weather. An Inuit family out seal hunting and camping spotted them, and pulled up to talk. These were the first people the team had seen since leaving
Pangnirtung. They shared chocolates, fresh bread, and caribou meat with the team.

The team cooked up fresh caribou at the last camp; off in the distance, the lights of Cape Dorset were visible. The team was looking forward to hot showers, fresh food, and seeing friends and family, but also sad to leave the expedition life behind.

**Cape Dorset**

On Sept. 21, they paddled into the small bay in front of a community of just over 1,000. On the beach, about 200 people had come out to greet them and congratulate them on the expedition. They were excited that the team had built boats like their ancestors had, and paddled them where their ancestors once lived and traveled.

They offered a warm welcome and prayer on the beach, and that night, they organized a square dance party to celebrate. The team couldn’t have wished for a better welcome into the community. One of the highlights of the trip was being in the communities and sharing stories with local people about the land.

The expedition is complete, but this project is just beginning. The team has been asked to head back to the Pangnirtung and Cape Dorset communities to teach kayak building in the future. This winter, Eric will teach a traditional kayak building course in Iqaluit, hopefully the first of many.

The team has had great media coverage internationally, and Sarah and Boomer have just returned from giving 20 presentations throughout the United Kingdom and Idaho.

The boats, photographs and video from the expedition will be displayed this winter at both the Iqaluit museum and the Nunavut Legislative Assembly in hopes to inspire the community about their past.