VOYAGING TO THE TOP OF AMERICA: A TWO-SEASON CRUISE TO ARCTIC ALASKA

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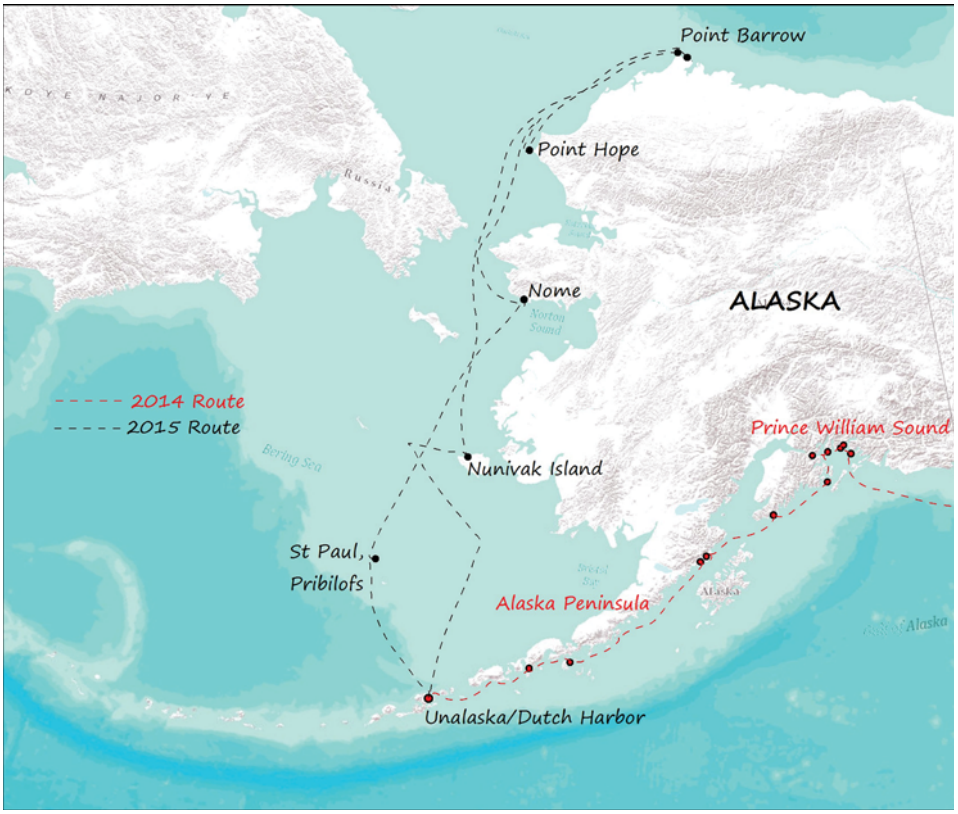
(*Crossing an ocean had been a dream of Ellen's since childhood until, in 2006 at age 20, she set sail on a circumnavigation with her then boyfriend, now husband, Seth Leonard. Despite moving to landlocked Switzerland soon after completing their voyage in 2010, they've continued to cruise every summer. The two-year voyage described here covered some 6500 miles.*

Celeste *is a 40ft custom cold-moulded cutter, designed by Francis Kinney and built by Bent Jespersen in Sidney, BC in 1986. Although classic above the waterline, she sports a fin keel and a separate skeg-hung rudder.*

*Ellen's photograph of '*Celeste *and sea ice near Barrow' appears on the front cover of this issue. To admire more of her stunning photographs, visit Ellen and Seth's fascinating and highly-recommended blog at www.GoneFloatabout.com.*)

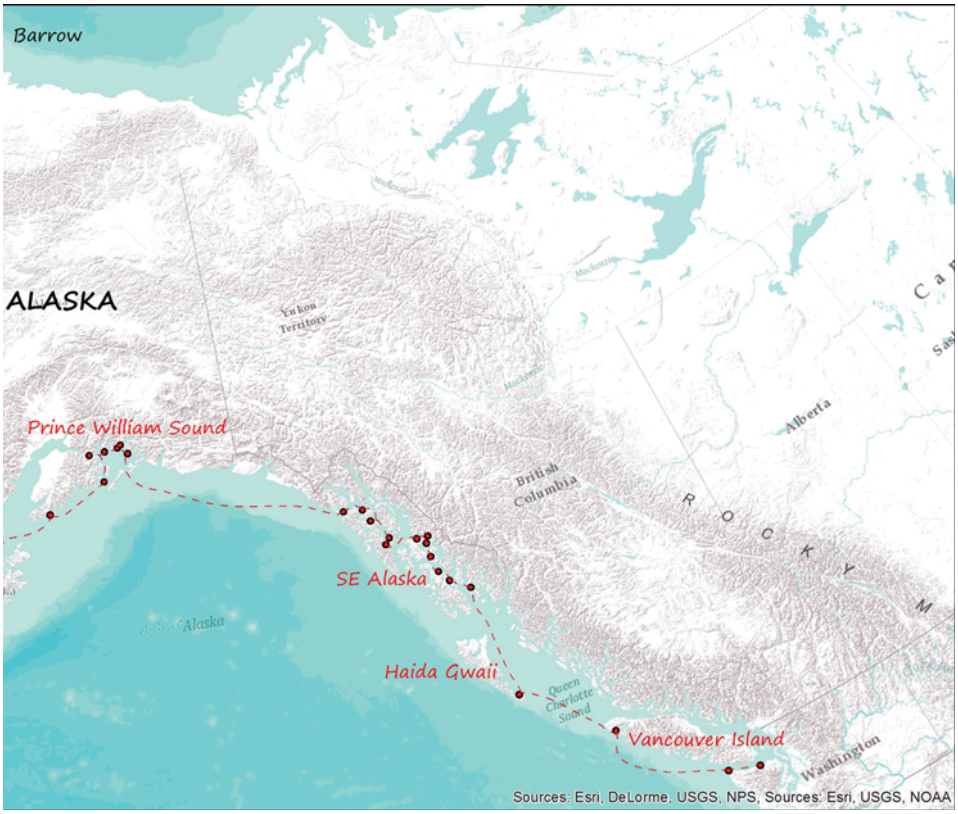
One of the best things about cruising, for me anyway, is that the more one does, the more one wants to do. Fairly early during our circumnavigation my husband – then boyfriend



– Seth and I started discussing other potential voyages. These weren't serious discussions, more like musings, because of course we were focused on the journey at hand. But the seed of an idea was there, and over the last two summers that idea became reality.

In 2013 Seth and I cruised my childhood waters of British Columbia aboard our new-to-us yacht, *Celeste*. (We'd sold our previous boat after completing our circumnavigation.) Although *Celeste* was fit and sound for temperate waters, we decided to go ahead with a full '25-year refit' before embarking again in 2014. Our destination was the Arctic, not a place we particularly wanted to be doing unexpected yacht restoration on the fly. So over the winter, *Celeste* was treated to a new barrier coat, engine, heater, wiring, batteries, plumbing, radar and her first GPS ever. There were also myriad smaller projects, as there always are.

We launched on 20 June 2014 and headed down the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the Pacific. We'd intended to make a straight shot to Alaska, but the one item we hadn't replaced – our sails – caused an unplanned stop in Winter Harbor on Vancouver Island's west coast. It took us about thirty seconds to be thrilled we'd put in there. Bald eagles and ospreys soared overhead, sea otters floated on their backs cracking open shellfish, and a family of black bears grazed in the tall grass. We repaired the blown-out genoa, but then we invented more projects, just so we could stay a little longer. A 24 hour weather window was too good to pass up, however, so *Celeste* was soon flying downwind to the Haida Gwaii islands, where we rode out a gale at anchor – interpreting our emergency Canadian clearance rather loosely – before pressing on to Ketchikan.



Celeste in Chatham Strait, Southeast Alaska

North of the touristic Ketchikan, Southeast Alaska was everything it's reputed to be – fast sailing in protected channels, serrated peaks soaring above the canneries of Petersburg, scoter sea ducks flying in flocks just above the water, sea lions barking at us from bell buoys, waterfalls tumbling hundreds of feet to the sea. Seth and I hiked through lush rainforest on the mainland and soaked in the hot springs on Baranof Island. We walked the boardwalks of Elfin Cove and glimpsed the snow-capped mountains behind Glacier Bay. We navigated fog and currents, high winds and calms, deep anchorages and crab pots. And just like on Vancouver Island, our most memorable experiences had to do with wildlife.

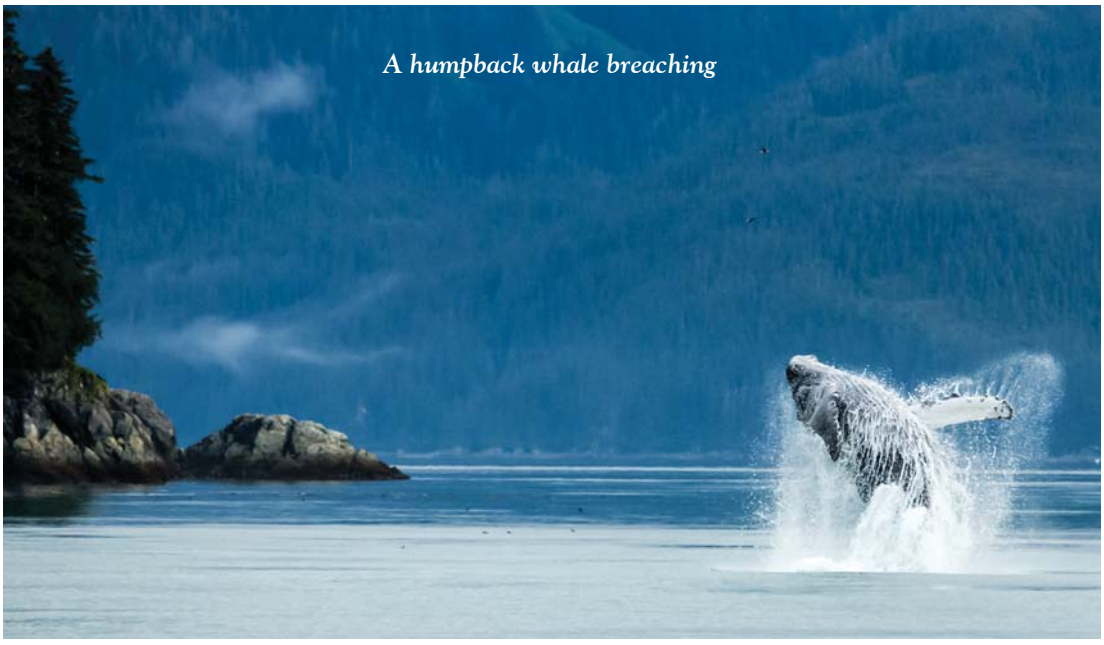
On leaving Thomas Bay north of Petersburg, I steered *Celeste* into Frederick Sound, intending to sail the whole 50 miles to Baranof Warm Springs that day. Then Seth saw a spout, and another, and another. *Celeste* was surrounded by humpback whales! I didn't know which way to look – a pod was bubble-net feeding close to shore, in the distance was the splash and boom of a whale breaching, and right next to *Celeste*'s starboard side were two placid giants, lazily spouting and diving, and then coming up again on the port side! We didn't make 50 miles that day – we barely made five.

A few days later we anchored off Admiralty Island in a bay headed by a lagoon. Rowing against the tide into the lagoon wasn't easy, even with each of us on an oar, but Seth and I were rewarded by a wilderness even more pristine and quiet than Winter Harbor's. Spruce and hemlock grew thick on all sides, their reflections turning the water a deep green. An eagle with a nest high above us shed a feather which drifted down to float on the calm surface. Spawning dog salmon teemed around the dinghy whenever we dipped our oars. Three or four harbour seals kept popping their heads up, alternately looking at us and hunting the salmon. And then, as we rode the tide out, back to *Celeste*, a juvenile brown bear came out of the underbrush and stood watching us, eyes wide, atop a fallen log.

During our stop in Winter Harbor we had decided to slow down our Arctic voyage from one summer to at least two, so as to spend more time in our ports of call along the way. Three weeks of this idyllic cruising certainly confirmed our decision. Still, we did want to continue onward, and as if Neptune smiled on our plans, a once-in-a-lifetime weather window for the Gulf of Alaska opened up just when we needed it. For three days the sun shone and a light breeze nudged us towards Prince William Sound. Black-footed albatross circled *Celeste*, and the 18,000ft peaks of the St Elias Range gleamed white between sea and sky. Everything changed at Hinchinbrook Entrance with a sudden fierce gale (genoa and full main quickly gave way to staysail), and for two weeks the wind blew strong and the clouds and rain persisted.

Nonetheless, Seth and I enjoyed nosing around this emerald of the Alaskan coast. The gale drove us to seek shelter closer to the head of the Sound than we'd intended for our first night, which positioned us well for a foray to Columbia Glacier. Friends from Unalaska in the Aleutians (better known as Dutch Harbor) had told us not to expect much – the glacier has retreated significantly, so they advised us to spend our time in College Fjord. That was our plan, but we thought we'd poke our bow into Columbia Bay en route. We were glad we did. Our day there was the best we had in the Sound – after that fog and torrential rain shut down any possibility of navigating safely among icebergs. So Columbia was the only tidewater glacier we got to see up close and, despite its retreat, it certainly impressed us. Great blue icebergs, twisted into fantastic shapes, floated down the bay to ground on the 60ft deep underwater moraine. Growlers and bergy bits dotted the water everywhere, tongues of glacier swept down from the 10,000ft tops of the mountains surrounding us, and the terminal face of the main glacier was just as jagged and blue as we'd hoped.

Due to the deteriorating visibility, the rest of our time in the Sound was spent exploring nooks and crannies – anchorages so snug we had to stern-tie despite being the only boat, bays surrounded by taiga forest, coves headed by waterfalls and populated by otters. Nothing to complain of!



A humpback whale breaching

Mt Shishaldin smokes at sunset, Unimak Island, Aleutians

Time was running out, though, so we sadly missed all of the Kenai Fjords save for one wilderness bay. The first moment the wind let us lay our course we were off to the Alaska Peninsula. We made the overnight passage in fog, which lifted to a spectacular dawn and one of the most stunning landfalls we've made in 40,000 miles of voyaging. Immense glaciated peaks reared up from the ocean, dusted in alpenglow and seeming to hover above the last layer of fog. As the sun rose, and *Celeste* reached across Shelikof Strait in a light westerly, we saw that forested Alaska had given way to the vast splendour of tundra Alaska. We hoisted the 'chute – a rare event for this part

Brown bears fish for salmon, Alaska Peninsula

of the world – to sail into Kukak Bay. By the time we dropped anchor off a river delta criss-crossed with bear and wolf prints, we could almost see the woolly mammoths that used to roam these hills.

The primordial Alaska Peninsula was arguably our favourite part of the whole 2014 voyage. The sailing itself could have dampened our enthusiasm – winds consistently 35 knots, and one full day of 45–50 knot headwinds – but the anchorages can't be beat. In one bay we spent five days watching brown bears around a salmon run until we could identify individual bears. There was the young flirting pair, the mother with two unruly cubs, the mother with three rather more dutiful cubs, the mother digging for clams with her yearling. There was the huge male that stalked the stream, and a leaner male who charged our dinghy when he came out from behind tall grass and saw us. I'm not sure who was more surprised, but I bet we were the most frightened.

Thousands of nesting puffins greeted us as we approached another port, and in our last shelter before embarking for the Aleutians we climbed a ridge to views spanning the Pacific, the Bering Sea, the smoking volcanoes of the Peninsula, and the green chain of islands for which we were bound. Fortunately our last two-day passage of the year, to Dutch Harbor/Unalaska, was uneventful. There we winterized *Celeste* and put her into the care of voyaging friends who live there. *Celeste* was to brave the Bering Sea winter with them while we returned to work.

Seth and I flew back to Dutch Harbor/Unalaska in early June 2015, just as the snow was retreating from the mountains and the wildflowers were opening their colourful buds. Unalaska Island gets short shrift among sailors – what sailors there are, anyway, coming from Japan or heading north to the Arctic – and I've heard it dismissed as

Celeste on a rare tranquil morning, Kukak Bay, Alaska Peninsula

uninteresting and merely a provisioning stop. For Seth and me that couldn't have been further from the truth. The deep inlets and towering green volcanoes reminded me, believe it or not, of the Marquesas, and the hiking trails – climbing to an eagle rookery, skirting hidden waterfalls, crossing chortling streams, and weaving through a carpet of lupine and avens – are paradise. We could have stayed there all summer and never set sail at all.

Sail we did, though, first on a two-day passage to the Pribilof Islands, once almost a penal colony of Russians and enslaved Aleut natives annihilating the northern fur seal population for their fur. Fortunately that's long since stopped and we were able not only to see beaches covered in seals, but to celebrate 4th of July with the modern Aleut community. Today the Pribilofs are best known to birders for their cliffs full of nesting puffins, auklets, murres, red-faced cormorants, northern fulmars, and the famed – in bird nerd circles – red-legged kittiwake with legs as red as Twizzler candy. Seth and I spent hours lying in the grass above the cliffs, cameras and binoculars poised.

All too soon it was time to push north again, this time on a four-day passage to Nome. Nome's slogan is 'There's no place like Nome' and isn't that the truth! Founded in 1899 thanks to the discovery of gold literally lying on the beaches, the area around the town is still mined today. The most common method is by dredger – homemade pontoon boats sporting enormous vacuum hoses that look a lot like what comes out of a clothes dryer. Divers take the hose down to the seabed and vacuum up the rocks, which go through a sluice on the boat. These vessels have all kinds of wonderful names like *Honey Pot* and *Moose Gold*. The village itself is dominated by saloons, as it always has been, although it also sports two upscale coffee shops selling muffins and lattes ... an incongruity I certainly hadn't expected.

A crested auklet, St Paul Island, Bering Sea

Two incredibly generous people – Pat and Sue – absolutely made our stay in Nome. Pat was involved in the voyages of Arctic scholar John Bockstoce in an Eskimo *umiak* and regaled us with his tales while we devoured Sue's baked salmon and oatmeal

A musk-ox, a creature supremely adapted for the Arctic, in the wilds outside Nome

cookies. They loaned us books about the places to which we were headed, and bicycles on which to explore the vast Seward Peninsula. As it was nesting season we saw red-throated loons patrolling their ponds, Arctic terns diving from telephone lines, and a mother merganser feeding her newborn flock. Best of all, though, were the four herds of muskoxen we observed, one quite close up. Muskoxen are a relic from before the last ice age, a truly prehistoric-looking creature with big horns and long, fragrant guard-hair (hence the name muskox) covering the warmest downy fur on earth. Despite appearing to be a kind of Arctic bovine, their closest living relative is in fact a Himalayan antelope.

With the summer fleeing and many miles still to cover, Seth and I set out from Nome in worse conditions than we'd have liked. We beat against strong westerlies to get around Sledge Island and into the Bering Strait. The Strait's ripping currents then helped us on our way north, but added to the already sickening motion of high winds in 100ft (30m) deep water. On top of that, we were enveloped in pea-soup fog in 30 knot winds!

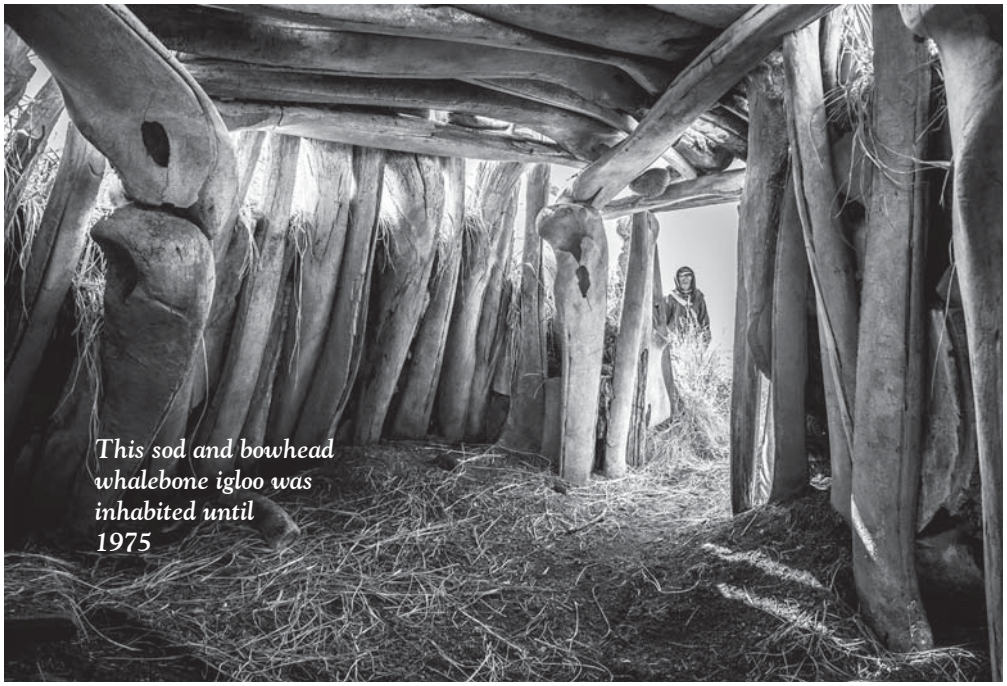
Conditions didn't improve for three days until the wind clocked into the north. At first this was great, but the forecast called for it to build, reaching 40 knots two days later. We didn't want to beat into that, especially in the short, nasty chop of shallow Alaskan Arctic waters. But there's nowhere to hide up there. The coast has no shelter until the lagoon at Point Barrow. The only place was 50 miles behind us – Point Hope, a low peninsula that would block the waves if not the wind.

Celeste waited there for a week while the north wind blew and the sun never set. The whole time Seth and I were thinking what a great wind this would be for our return trip ... if it could only have come later! Meanwhile, however, we discovered what an

A snowy owl, unworried by the midnight sun, North Slope

incredible place is Point Hope. At first glance it is flat and bleak, dust swirling through the newly-built, modern Inupiaq village. But looking closer one sees the vibrant life of the tundra – the wildflowers, the ground squirrels hiding from the huge and regal snowy owl, the thousands of gulls and terns, the spotted seals hunting salmon, the belugas and gray whales in the clear blue water.

Seth and I also got to know some of the villagers, who showed us the deep human history of the place. Point Hope has been continuously inhabited longer than anywhere else in North America, and the modern residents have retained a traditional way of life. The last person to move out of her sod and whalebone igloo did so in 1975, and many people still use permafrost cellars to keep their whale meat cold in summer. Racks of drying salmon lined the beach and even smartphone-wielding teenagers described the spring whale hunt – in sealskin *umiaks* propelled by wooden paddles – with enthusiasm.



This sod and bowhead whalebone igloo was inhabited until 1975

Celeste approaches the polar pack ice in the Beaufort Sea

Although Point Hope was probably our favourite place on the 2015 voyage, we were less than 400 miles from Point Barrow – the northernmost tip of the United States at 71·4°N – so when the wind went into the south, off we went. That passage wasn't much fun, but the wind moderated on the last day, a real blessing since we couldn't have entered Barrow's lagoon otherwise.

Point Hope's apparent bleakness was nothing to Barrow's. On Point Hope one can see the Brooks Range in the distance; in Barrow nothing but flat tundra stretches for mile upon mile. The wind blows strong on Point Hope; Barrow gets the full blast of every low pressure sweeping over from Wrangell Island north of Siberia. The sea ice melts a little later and freeze-up comes a little earlier around Barrow, too. It had all melted by the time we rounded the point, but it wasn't far away and on two excursions we found ourselves sailing amongst bergs and growlers.

The first was intentional – we sailed a few miles north to the ice edge to look for walrus. Unfortunately we didn't find any, but we did experience that feeling of vastness, loneliness and emptiness that only comes from being in the middle of an ocean. We were out of sight of land – easy to do in the flat Alaskan Arctic – and the only reminder of human beings on this earth were each other and *Celeste*. Any blue water sailor has experienced this, and I thought I was fully familiar with it. But somehow the ice made the impression that much stronger. It made it lonelier, harsher, and, frankly, surreal. At a distance it looks like landfall, but as you approach the polar pack ice you remember that this is ocean – that this frozen water, flat in places, twisted into strange uplifted shapes in others, stretches all the way across the pole, over to Greenland, Siberia and Svalbard. I felt very small.

Ellen and Seth on Point Barrow, with Celeste at anchor behind

The other ice experience was unintentional: we sailed 50 miles east along the coast, scanning the barrier islands for the polar bears that had been reported in the area. We were unlucky with the bears, but we did see the huge bergs that had broken off the pack ice there – just a week earlier this area had been impassable. On our way back to Barrow we stopped at Cooper Island, where scientist George Divoky has been studying seabirds for more than 40 years.

Ellen speeds around Point Hope's tundra on an ATV

Although we also had a great time making friends, playing on ATVs*, and running with a dog team, much of our time in Barrow had to do with birds. Thousands pass through on their migrations. As we saw eiders lose their breeding plumage, and black brants and oldsquaws gather before fleeing south, Seth and I thought this was a sure indication that we should be doing the same, especially given the fierce reputation of the Chukvchi and Bering Seas in autumn.

We departed in the best weather we could get. We'd waited and waited and here, finally, was a northwesterly (we were headed southwest.) Let's just say our passage back to Dutch Harbor was unpleasant. It's 1200 miles and it took 18 days. On three of them we averaged 8 knots on our course (*Celeste* has a 28ft waterline). On one of them we drifted 160° to our course while hove-to. On four of them we stood anchor watches in a bay on Nunivak Island in 45 knot winds and 5ft seas (*in* the bay). On one of them we made 7–8 knots 90° to our course in order to be able to lay Dutch Harbor when the next fierce southwesterly came. It did come. And on the last day, as if to welcome us back, we sat in the cockpit in sunshine, reading and watching the birds and whales.

* All terrain vehicles, generally known as quad bikes in the UK and four-wheelers in most of the southern hemisphere.