

# A winter's night in Greenland

Trevor Robertson

*Awarded the RCC Challenge Cup*

On 1 November 2011 I set sail for Trinidad from Newfoundland to paint *Iron Bark*. Making a 4,500nm round trip do a bit of painting may seem excessive, particularly as I would have preferred to spend the winter in Newfoundland drinking *screech* with the *b'ys*. But, drunk or sober, you cannot paint a steel boat in winter in Newfoundland.

The passage south took 24 days and was a rough one. First we (*Iron Bark* and I) ran before a northerly gale, making 115nm in a day under bare



poles. Then later, east-northeast of Bermuda, we had a brush with tropical storm Sean, during which a woman was lost from a yacht nearby and two yachts were abandoned. In March 2012, after three months in Trinidad refitting *Iron Bark*, I sailed north to meet Annie Hill for a summer cruise of the Maritimes provinces of east Canada. March is early for that voyage and it took 24 days, largely to windward.

Annie flew out from New Zealand and through May and June we coasted along Nova Scotia and southern Newfoundland, sailed 1281nm and anchored in 25 harbours before returning to Halifax. Annie returned to New Zealand and I gathered the food and gear for a solitary winter in

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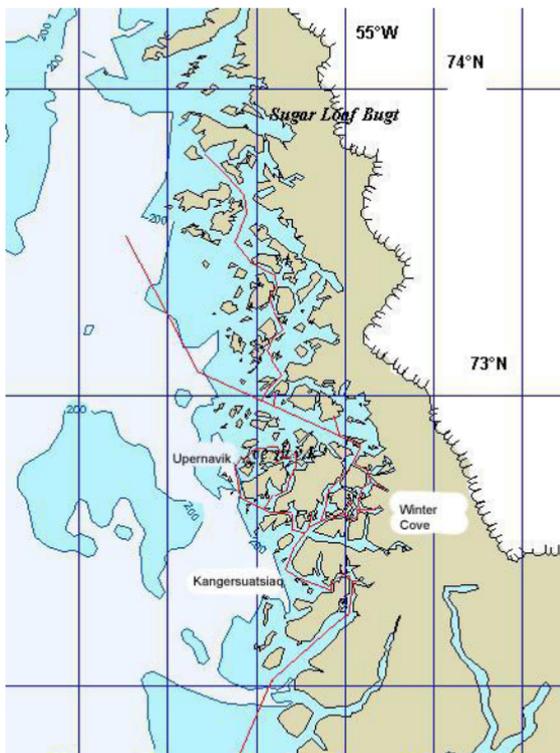
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My abiding memory of the passage north is of fog. For ten days we dodged fishing boats in fog on the Nova Scotia fishing banks and the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. The Labrador Sea was just as foggy, but there were no fishing boats or, I hoped, ice, making it easier to get some sleep. The final 600nm up Davis Strait to Disko Bay on west Greenland took eight cold, wet, weary days. There was enough ice to need a constant lookout, so I stared into the mank until I could stay awake no longer, then let *Iron Bark* drift and slept. Scattered bergs loomed out of the murk as we entered Disko Bay, no surprise as Disko's glaciers produce them by the thousand. A line of grounded bergs appeared ahead, then a rocky shoreline. I nosed around the ice into Fortune Bay and anchored, 23 days out from Halifax.

The next day I went on to Qeqertarsuaq (Godhavn) where the harbour master was welcoming and blessedly uninterested in any formalities. A minkie whale, one of the local quota of four, was being butchered on the foreshore and I was given a chunk. I did a bit of shopping, bought some fuel, went back to Fortune Bay

Greenland. This was easy with only one person's taste to consider, but provisions for 16 months without resupply is a bulky load. Most of the gear necessary for a polar winter was already aboard, this being *Iron Bark's* third winter in the ice. I bought a new pair of snowshoes and a few other oddments and sailed from Halifax on 14 July 2012.

My abiding memory of the



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Bjørnefælde – an unlikely chapel

and then sailed north on 14 August with a fair wind. A gale warning was issued as we approached the north end of the Vaigat that separates Disko Island from the mainland. There is always a lot of ice in the Vaigat and it is no place to be in a gale and fog. The only anchorage within reach, near the abandoned settlement of Nuussuaq, is open to

the southwest, but would probably do as the gale was forecast to be from the south. As we approached Nuussuaq the fog lifted revealing several hundred icebergs and, thankfully, the entrance to the anchorage. The recommended anchorage was choked with ice but the next cove north was open, so I anchored there for two days waiting on weather. There is a stone ruin ashore called Bjørnefælde, ‘the bear trap’, supposedly a thirteenth century Norse chapel. It looks like a bear trap.

There was a strong, fair wind and no fog as we continued north on 18 August, still dodging ice. When the wind failed I motored up Søndre Upernavik to anchor in Uvijoq Uluâ. The chart of the area is devoid of soundings and this cove has a narrow, rocky entrance that I had lead-lined in 2004. It was now high summer and I was glad to have an engine as we continued in calm, sunny weather to the village of Kangersuatsiaq. I bought fuel, entertained twenty exuberant children aboard, then motored around Kangeq Peninsula (Kangeq means peninsula) to the Nordre Sunds.



Autumn colours in Winter Cove

The Nordre Sunds are a maze of protected channels between Laxefjord (72°30'N) and Upernaviks Isfjord (73°00'N). They are uninhabited, except for Upernavik with a population of 1,000 and perched on an island on their seaward side. Nearby there is the hamlet of Augpilagtoq. The Sunds have spectacular scenery, several bays suitable for winter quarters and are almost ice-free in summer. The most detailed chart of the area has a scale of 1:400,000 with almost no soundings, but I had sketch charts from our 2004 visit.

That night, or the brief twilight that is night there in August, I anchored in Winter Cove, where Annie and I had spent the winter eight years earlier. In this latitude, 73°N, the year divides into four nearly equal parts. In early August the midnight sun sets for the first time in three

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months. Over the next three months the days get rapidly shorter until in early November the sun does not rise at all and the 80 day long winter's night begins. The sun reappears in early February, the days lengthen until May when the sun rises and does not set again until August.

After three days poking around the Nordre Sunds, I sailed north to investigate Upernaviks Isfjord. It was cluttered with ice ranging from large bergs to brash, but it was possible to weave and barge through it. The bleak shore had nothing that looked promising as winter quarters. This was burning more fuel and knocking off more paint than seemed worthwhile, so I turned back to the Nordre Sunds.

In the Sunds my first choice for winter quarters was a bay that we named Capelin Cove in 2005. I shuttled fuel from Kangersuatsiaq and Upernavik until by 25 August I had eight hundred litres cached in Capelin Cove, enough for the winter. So far no one had asked me what my intentions were in Greenland so it seemed easiest to lay low and say nothing. Rather than advertise my presence in Capelin Cove, I moved on.

I spent September pottered around the Nordre Sunds expanding the sketch charts we had drawn in 2004/2005. The days got shorter, the dwarf willows turned brown, puddles froze and snow advanced down the hillsides. On 1 October, I returned to Capelin Cove and ran mooring lines ashore. There were hundreds of moulting, flightless eider ducks in the bay as well as cormorants and gulls, and ashore there were still a few redpolls, snow buntings and ravens. By mid-October there was ice around the boat most mornings, the eiders had fledged and were leaving, and the only birds left ashore were ravens. An arctic fox began visiting after I fed it some cod.

On 15 October a man and his son arrived in Capelin Cove in a small motorboat and came aboard for coffee. They were from Augpilagtoq, out shooting eiders. No one in Augpilagtoq would mind me being in Capelin Cove, but it would only take a day or two for word of my presence to get to Upernavik where various authorities might prefer me to be under their eye. It seemed simpler to shift camp than to discuss the matter. I reloaded everything stored ashore, retrieved the mooring lines and retreated to Winter Cove on Nako Island where I knew I would not be disturbed.

Winter Cove was covered with eight or ten centimetres of hard freshwater fast ice. This is the maximum that *Iron Bark's* eighteen horsepower engine can break and then only if rammed at speed. Turning meant backing into the ice using the rudder as a battering ram. The fourth or fifth time I did this the tiller's relieving tackle parted, allowing the tiller to slam into the cockpit coaming, breaking the tiller. I made a temporary repair and limped off to anchor.

It took a week to run mooring lines, land the deck cargo of winter fuel and establish a dump with camping gear and food to give me a chance of

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survival if anything happened to *Barky*. It was slow work: the lanolin on the shackle pins was frozen immovably and mooring lines were stiff with ice. I installed the double-glazing, bulkheaded the fore cabin and aft peak off from the saloon with foam and let the ends of the boat freeze. The engine is keel cooled with a dry exhaust, so I left it in commission but shut down the domestic electrical system to prevent the batteries from discharging. A flat battery will freeze and split its case.

On 21 October there was thick snow on deck and the sun shone through the portholes for the last time that year. On 4 November I climbed a hill for a final glimpse of the



I let the ends of the boat freeze

sun. The lakes were frozen but the sea ice was still thin enough to break a path ashore by hauling the dinghy down a mooring line and chopping away with an ice axe. After burning the last of my firewood, I dismantled the wood burning heater and installed the oil fired one. There is little driftwood in northwest Greenland and dwarf willow is too scarce to use for heating, hence my reluctant reliance on oil.

On 9 November the ice was thick enough for a fox to walk out to the boat. The next day I walked ashore - winter had arrived. Although Upernavik was only 45nm away, there was too much open water to walk there and too much ice to row. I was isolated for the winter. I do not carry long-distance communications or a distress beacon because I believe that anyone setting out on this type of venture has an obligation to succeed or fail without asking for help. If I have another polar winter I will build a survival craft that can be pulled over sea ice and paddled across sheltered water. A 2.1m *pulk* (goods sled) with a watertight fabric cover on hoops, the cover having a manhole with an apron like a kayak, should let me manhaul and paddle my way to safety.

As the sun sank lower below the horizon and the twilight around noon got shorter, my mood became gloomier. This happened when I spent a winter alone in Antarctica, but not during the winter Annie and I spent in Greenland. Having a companion makes a huge difference. The food is better and the bed warmer. Although Saturn and the six brightest stars were visible at noon in midwinter, there was enough light to work outside for two hours each day without using a lamp.

Each morning after breakfast I put windproofs on over three layers of wool and fleece, then gloves, mittens, hat and snowshoes, and went out into the gloom to empty the slops bucket, clear the mooring lines

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Blue

of ice and feed the fox, who answered to 'Blue'. Blue waited, curled up in a snow hole in the cockpit, for breakfast. When I came out she stretched, yawned and trotted after me to get a portion of rice and beans put aside from my evening meal. Most days I made an excursion. I snowshoed along the coast, skied down the lake in the centre of the island and made forays on the sea ice. These were curtailed after I broke through the sea ice twice in a week. Each time I was able to throw myself on to firm ice and only got wet to the thighs, but I know from experience how difficult it is to scramble out on rotten ice and how quickly clothes freeze once you do.

I spent the evenings on cleaning, domestic chores and reading. It is difficult to clean things properly by candlelight and the candles themselves made the deckhead sooty. The cabin became grubby despite my best efforts. Once a week I spent four hours with pick, shovel and ice auger digging a water hole through 1.5m of ice in the nearest lake and hauling water to the boat. Not having to melt snow for water saved a lot of fuel.



*Iron Bark as an igloo, with fox*

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In November I started shovelling an insulating snow cover over the boat. This part of Greenland is a near desert and there was little snow around the boat. I only had the job half done by Christmas when we had the strongest gale of the winter. The gale broke the fast ice into floes, but thankfully they did not raft and drive us ashore. This gale packed the snow ashore into drifts firm enough for igloo building. I cut snow blocks from them and hauled them across the ice, converting *Barky* into a gaff-rigged igloo. After building the igloo the inside temperature rose 5°C and there was seldom ice in the water bucket or frost flowers on the deckhead.

Sunrise is the big event of winter and long anticipated. I calculated I would see the sun on 31 January if I were higher than 200m. The day was clear and from a hilltop I briefly saw half the sun's disk over the mountains to the south. You probably need to spend a polar night alone to understand the feeling of joy the first sunlight brings. I found the eighty



Sunrise after eighty days of darkness

days of polar night hard on mind and body.

The sun rose perceptibly higher each day and on 21 February shone into the galley. In early March, although the temperature was still below -20°C, there were signs of the approach of spring. Six strange foxes visited us and they, along with Blue, yelled mating calls from the ridge tops. Blue was a grumpy, mangy old fox but counted as a friend, so I was worried about territorial conflict should another fox take up residence near *Barky* in March. Blue and the new fox took to arriving together to be fed and did not fight if I fed Blue first. They exchanged low clucking noises and were probably mates. One March morning they arrived together as usual, but Blue was acting strangely. She repeatedly attacked me as I walked across the sea ice. This astonished me as Arctic foxes are about the size of a rabbit and usually as timid. I belted Blue a couple of times with the bucket I was carrying and drove her off. Both foxes then set off across the



Spring morning

ice, Blue zigzagging behind, and neither ever returned. Fortunately Blue was unable to bite through the multiple layers of my outdoor clothing. She almost certainly had rabies.

In the last days of April the temperature briefly reached freezing and on 2 May the first snow buntings arrived. With the return of the midnight sun on 6 May I began turning *Iron Bark* back into an ocean going vessel. I demolished the igloo, overhauled the rigging and bent on the sails. A couple of days after I finished removing the igloo the bow jumped up 25cm. The rudder was still frozen in, pulling the stern down a similar amount. I ran the engine to get water flowing across the rudder and hacked away at the ice until the stern bounced free. The propeller hit the ice and stalled the engine, mercifully without damaging the shaft or propeller. We floated with a narrow moat all round.

In late May I excavated steel and wood from the ice in the aft peak to repair the tiller and some rot in a hatch. The bilge pump thawed in early June, saving me the hand-chilling daily task of bailing meltwater. The first trickles of water appeared ashore on south-facing rocks. Then an ice dam in the valley above Winter Cove burst, sending a torrent down the valley and breaking the ice around the shore. This allowed the floe in Winter Cove to drift out, carrying *Barky* with it until the mooring lines were twanging taunt. I did not want to use her keel to stop a floe weighing over a thousand tonnes from drifting ashore, so I hung on to the lines. They

dragged the bow up on the ice until it cracked under the boat's weight, allowing the floe to move out a little and forcing the bow up on the ice again. After repeating this for ten hours, we eventually broke clear of the floe. I used the dinghy to get ashore for the first time in seven months.

On midsummer's day we headed north from Winter Cove. There was a lot of ice outside the coastal islands, but not enough to stop us. After plugging north for 63nm, a fog bank rolled in. There was too much



All dressed up and nowhere to go

ice to heave-to for sleep so I turned back to the shelter of Nordre Sunds where I anchored after 30 hours at the tiller. On 26 June, I set out to see if there was an inshore route northward with safe anchorages where I could rest. I threaded north through islands and ice across Upernaviks Isfjord to Gieseckes Isfjord and on to Sugar Loaf Bight. None of the bays I looked into were safe from all winds. The best prospect had a narrow entrance obstructed by boulders. I hit several trying to get in. North of Gieseckes Isfjord the weather looked threatening so I turned back. By the time we reached Upernaviks Isfjord we were dodging ice in thick fog under staysail and motor, making little headway into a F7 headwind. An engine failure in these conditions would be disastrous, so I bore away for open water. Four hours later we were clear of the coastal islands but there was still plenty of ice to worry about. The wind then veered, allowing me to fetch Upernavik, but I kept the engine running for manoeuvrability. With visibility of 100m there was about a minute between seeing one of the numerous bergs and hitting it. When I eventually anchored I had been 37 hours without sleep.

There was clearly too much ice north of Upernavik for single-handing so I started south and three days later reached Kangersuatsiaq. No one there spoke English, so my first conversation after eight months alone was

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in sign language. I bought fuel and sailed to the nearest safe anchorage to await a fair wind. On 3 July I continued south with the wind in the north and fog that froze to the sails, sending sheets of ice sliding to the deck. For the next six days, until south of the Arctic Circle, I hove-to for sleep. Thereafter there was little enough ice to leave the sails drawing while I slept. Apart from two days hove-to in a gale, the rest of the passage to the Labrador coast was uneventful.

We were 25nm off the Labrador coast beating into SSE4 under full lowers and had just seen the first ice since the Arctic Circle when a blast from a clear sky laid us nearly on our beam ends. Within a minute it was blowing NW9 and as *Barky* would not pay off until I had the main down, I got everything down and secured without losing a sail, at the cost of torn fingernails, fragile after a year without fresh vegetables, and bloody sails. I had had enough of this, so I motor-sailed in to anchor at the abandoned outpost of Bateau Harbour on the Island of Ponds, 18 days out from Greenland. After resting there for a day, I coasted 150nm south to St Anthony. St Anthony is Newfoundland's northernmost port with a population of 3000. It was a bit overwhelming and I got a sore throat from talking. Lack of practice probably.



Gaff rigged igloo with burgee