



When I learned in June that I had won the Denali road (they allow 400 cars per day in mid-September to drive through the park after the bus service stops) I needed to justify the trip all the way to Alaska so I researched the possibility of an excursion to see Polar Bears. Kaktovik appeared to be the best option and while by no means cheap, it was relatively less expensive than a trek to Churchill or Svalbard. I was almost too late to book the rest of my itinerary. My first choice for guides was already booked through the 2 month prime window for polar bear viewing but I found another alternative that looked promising and after several rounds of email and voice communicating I had reserved an afternoon boat trip, one night at a bed and breakfast, and then a morning boat ride before my early afternoon departure. Many of the visitors to Kaktovik book packages through non-local tour operators who charter flights to the island and are only there long enough for a single short trip to see the bears and fly out the same day. Not really knowing the situation on the island that seemed a bit risky if the bears weren't readily viewable or if the weather failed to cooperate, and I would also miss the experience of spending a night in the arctic. I opted to book my commercial flight directly through Rav'n Air the primary provider of transportation to and from many of Alaska's remote villages or destinations. I also booked my tour directly with information provided on Kaktovik Arctic Adventure's website. Robert Thompson is the local guide and his daughter, Hazel helps with reservations from Anchorage. Robert grew up near Fairbanks but married someone from Kaktovik and has lived there for more than 3 decades. <https://www.kaktovikarcticadventures.com/> As our trip drew nearer we watched for reports of whale hunting in Kaktovik and nervously checked for weather updates. I wasn't really sure if we were likely to see polar bears regardless or if we needed to get there soon after the locals caught one of their annual

allotment of 3 bowhead whales. The weather was even more concerning as I had read Rav'n Air's fine print that their airfare was pretty much non-refundable. They might be able to get you on a future flight but my schedule didn't allow for much variation. And the flights were looking full anyway. With Kaktovik's location in the Beaufort Sea it is subject to the nasty weather you'd expect for arctic coasts—wind, precipitation, and enough fog to stop planes from landing and obscure the Northern Lights. I would keep my fingers crossed until we landed in Kaktovik.

Andrew, my 14 year old son and my animal loving clone, and my younger sister Beth would be my travel companions. We arrived in Fairbanks late Thursday night September 12<sup>th</sup> for a quick night's sleep before our morning flight to Kaktovik. When we stepped outside to the curb we were met with fall—birch trees in bright yellow leaves and the unmistakable smell that somehow makes the odor of damp leaves crisply delicious. I don't understand that scent but I love it! The fall foliage was near its peak, dominated by the crisp yellow of the birch and the more muted yellow of the poplar. On a morning walk we spotted a snowshoe hare mid coat change with large white feet and ears. It was a perfect fall morning, brisk enough that I needed to keep moving to stay tolerably warm in my jeans and t-shirt. I still like to pretend like I'm an Alaskan. Our flight was scheduled for 9:10 and we arrived shortly after 8:00. In the grassy median entering the airport Beth spotted a gorgeous cross fox (red and black). The Rav'n Air gates are downstairs and after checking our luggage I realized that the gate was right next door and there was no TSA or security check. It has been decades since I flew commercially without the burdensome security measures that have become the global norm. I'm still not quite sure why nothing was required but I wasn't about to complain. As time passed I began to fear the weather was going to do us in. There were no announcements and the departure screen still listed us as on time. By 9:10 the screen said the flight was boarding but I was still sitting in the same chair and saw no sign of activity for flight preparation. I walked over to the luggage check and was told that everything was fine but they had no control over what appeared on the screen. Shortly before 10:00 we were ushered through the gate where they ticked off our names with a pencil on their printed checklist of the 9 passengers. Every seat was filled and I had plenty of leg room on the front row.

As we climbed out of Fairbanks we could look back at the pond that services the many float planes. Within 20 minutes the leaves began to thin and we were soon beyond the reach of fall and into early winter. We spoke to a few other passengers, a man from Las Vegas in search of Polar Bears, a friendly couple from South Africa (the husband wore shorts during his entire stay in Alaska), and a man who had been trying to fly into Kaktovik for four days to do repairs and maintenance on the large generator. The weather had apparently prevented several flights from landing. Eventually all evidence of man subsided and it was just taiga and rivers below us. Then tundra lakes, and rivers. And then the Brooks Range rose before us, at first rough and barren and then snow-capped. The North Slope was hidden beneath clouds but the ground slopes quickly from the heights of the Brooks Range to the Arctic Ocean coast. We dropped beneath the clouds and suddenly were on the ground. A light rain fell as the ground crew opened the door to the plane and asked, "Is anyone continuing on to Deadhorse? I didn't look."

Kaktovik is an Inupiat village of approximately 250 hardy souls located on the northeast coast of Barter Island. The island is less than 8 square miles and has historically been used as a trading place where Inupiat from Alaska and Canada would meet to exchange goods and also as jumping off point for whale

hunting expeditions. There is a large fresh water lake and protected shallow lagoon. In 1953 a runway was built to support the Distant Early Warning Line radar station that was established on the island. Today you can count the structures in town from a google earth image. It appears that most all of the residences were constructed after the runway. Typical houses are mobile/modular homes raised on stilts of some sort to keep them off the permafrost/tundra/puddles (think SE Asia without the palm trees, snakes, and mangos) and apparently as we would later see to give the Polar Bears a place to play hide and seek from the local Polar Bear Watch. The newer and nicer buildings were primarily the government or public ones, including a senior center, police station, and a first class school. The school had fences securing the space created by the stilts. At first glance I thought that was just for storage but later decided it was probably also a preventative measure to keep the bears from hanging out too close to kids.

The next person we met upon exiting the plane was from the Fish and Wildlife Service who shared the good news that there were 22 bears on the island and 61 within 18 miles of the island. She warned us not to venture outside of the village for our safety and to remember that the homes and pets were private property and to not take pictures without permission. And please don't ask your guides to get closer than 30 feet to the Polar Bears. I was pretty sure she meant yards but that would be close enough for me. Our bags along with a dozen or more Amazon boxes were loaded into an ancient blue bus—how on earth did that make it to Kaktovik? The nearest road is 112 miles away in Deadhorse/Prudhoe Bay. As we drove away from the airstrip (there is no terminal, and the only gate is part of the fence that presumably keeps the Polar Bears off the runway) we saw snow geese, gulls, and other bird species on the tundra. The bus driver asked us where we were staying and all we could say is Robert Thompson, the name of our guide. That was enough for her and she dropped us off at a slightly newer looking yellow mobile home. We climbed the stairs to the entryway and knocked. The rain continued to fall as we waited. I knocked again and still no answer. We tried to arrange our luggage under the overhang of the roof but it was narrow enough that it seemed to just catch the run off and drip directly onto our bags. We began to walk up the dirt road towards the barking husky chained to his small wooden hut. An elderly woman yelled from the top of the street to go inside and knock again. I should have recognized that door I had been knocking on was an addition to the home to serve as an arctic entry, a place to take your coat and boots off out of the weather while keeping the frigid air, snow, rain, or wind out of the house proper. Inside the door was a freezer topped with a musk ox skull and pelt and several guns lying on the floor. Welcome to the bed and breakfast, the name of which I never really learned. We knocked on the second door and were welcomed into a room with a couch and tv, and a dining table next to small kitchen.

A couple of obvious guests were sitting on the couch reading old magazines and others were seated at the table. There was no check in desk. We removed our dirty boots and introduced ourselves. Nathan, who apparently worked there in some capacity, seemed surprised to see us. He mentioned that it would be nice if he knew when guests would be arriving, and maybe even how many, but that was beyond the scheduling capabilities of the current system or process of communication. I noticed the wall calendar was showing August 2018—maybe that was part of the problem ;-). The laminate hardwood floor was loosely set with gaps large enough for the pieces to slide and for dirt fall between

them. A broom and dust pan were ever present in the kitchen and we all took turns using it as sometimes you just didn't want to hassle with removing your boots. My Verizon cell phone had zero bars but I later learned that AT&T had a great signal. It must run on radar. Nathan said to put our bags in the back room and he would work on making the beds. And then we met Robert Thompson, probably the second most interesting man in the world.

I'm not really sure how old Robert is, but I'd wager comfortably north of 60. He wears tall boots, old jeans, a weathered knit hat and coat and wind toughened skin. He is deliberate in speech and action and somehow seems both quiet and talkative. He likes to tell stories and of his experiences but talks calmly, slowly, even sparsely as if conserving words. He later complained that a journalist had described him as portly in an article—he preferred burly. Both were probably fair. He has traveled the world from Cochabamba, Bolivia to The Hague, Netherlands, and Washington DC to speak on the growing impact of climate change for those living nearest the North Pole. He could be seen tinkering with the water heater one minute, which he reportedly switched with the one at his house, taking the nicer one home, and then quietly disappear. We asked Nathan when he would be back. Maybe 3:00. That was still 3 hours away and Kaktovik is a small town and we knew we weren't to leave town even with the bear spray that lined a shelf in the kitchen as though it were a food staple.

We dressed for winter and decided to take a walk to the opposite corner of town for lunch at the Marsh Creek Inn. I think it safe to say that all the routes in Kaktovik are scenic. It was difficult to refrain from snapping pictures as we walked up and down the handful of streets. I took a few of what seemed less like personal property—chunks of this seasons whale baleen on the side of the street, a fresh wolverine pelt draped over an ATV, one of the lonelier cemeteries I remember seeing nestled in swampy tundra, a knocked over dead end sign at the end of road that stopped abruptly in tundra that may be unchanged for centuries. The tallest vegetation scattered across the spongy tundra was a 10-12" plant with a single tuft of what looked like pure white cotton. Snowmobiles seemed to be parked haphazardly in yards and other open spaces and left in place until the snow melted beneath them. It was hard to tell which ones were operable and which had past their useful lives. Day or night, the temperature during our entire stay ranged from 34-40 degrees, but felt much colder with the 90+ percent humidity. In those conditions the slightest wind would cut through my layers of synthetic fibers.

We weren't fooled by the arctic entry at the Marsh Creek Inn but were pleasantly surprised by the aroma in the kitchen. Tim, the chef and newly designated manager must have gotten lost on his way from Hawaii to somewhere else but smiled constantly and quickly learned our names well enough to call me by name each time I returned during our stay. \$17 for a bacon burger did not seem like too much after I ate it. The best burger I've had outside the US, wait, this is still the US. The \$9 fries weren't bad either. The fresh salad bar could not have had any local ingredients but was welcome anyway. Tim is a man who makes much out of little and seasons it well with sincerity. The Marsh Creek Inn also boasts Wifi which was not available at the bed and breakfast so I was able to let my family know I had arrived safely in Kaktovik. The patrons were a mix of Polar Bear watchers, contract workers, and locals.

At the far end of town, opposite where every visitor first enters stood an elevated sign designating the town as Kaktovik with 3 wooden Polar Bears beneath. We had walked most of the town but still had an

hour before it would be time to go out on the boat. The only direction left to explore was towards the spit. As we walked towards the shore with bear spray in our pockets we realized for the first time that the white specks across the lagoon on the barrier island were indeed Polar Bears. They looked ridiculously large despite their distance. I couldn't wait to get on the boat and see them up close.

In addition to Beth, Andrew, and Robert, our passenger list included two semi-professional photographers who travel the world together in retirement, and a videographer from Europe. We used a small step ladder to board Robert's gray and red boat named "Seanachai." Beth made us look old and stiff as she ducked under the overhang and into the cabin. There was just enough room for the 6 of us on two benches facing each other. Robert's Captain chair was at the front on the right side and a small gas stove to warm the cabin was at the front left. We were warned by Dave to not let our coats or hands touch the scalding metal. On the dash next to the stove lay a large caliber pistol, just in case the bears got too frisky.

To the northeast of Barter Island the narrow spit that separates a calm protected lagoon from the arctic surf is like the cellphone waiting area at the airport. The bears wait for the ice to form, sometimes patiently, other times crankily. They have little to eat and drop weight quickly during their months stranded on shore. They pass the time sleeping, bathing, playing, doing yoga, and posing for pictures.

The first bear was the biggest I'd ever seen, and the dirtiest too, at least until the next day. Robert agreed it was the largest he'd ever seen and I don't think he was talking it up for the tourist. It easily looked 2x most of the other bears. I couldn't imagine what it looked like at the end of a winter feasting on seals. We eased our boat directly in front of the behemoth as it lay on the sand front paws extended towards. He hardly bothered to glance up though I'm sure he could hear the rapidly clicking camera shutters. When he yawned his black tongue looked much longer than my hand. Eventually he stood and stretched and I thought if he were a horse I would struggle to reach the saddle. His shaggy coat, perfected over millennia for the polar air and water draped over his entire feet. I soon realized that seeing Polar Bears in Kaktovik did not require spotting skills (though Andrew continued to shout whenever he "spotted" another one), binoculars, patience, staying down wind, good eye sight, or even a good guide. It was less a matter of looking for bears and more deciding which bears to approach. We saw another bear sleeping nearby and in the distance we could see a mother with twins but stayed focused on the subject at hand. Checking the time stamps on my photos I was surprised to realize we watched the giant for 40 minutes!





The next specimen had rinsed more recently and sported a creamy white coat. He walked up and down the rocky point and then waded out into the lagoon and swam between the watching boats. When he emerged from the water on the other side of the lagoon he headed east with a purposeful walk and Robert knew he was in route to the bone pile so we looped around and stopped in front of a large pile of the remnants of many bowhead whales. It was like the elephant graveyard from the lion king with bears instead of hyenas. I have no guess how long the bones have been there or if any are ever removed but many were covered with thick green algae. The bear had further to traverse so we took pictures as he gradually approached, first in front of an abandoned transport ship and then poking amidst the bones in search of a morsel to fill his empty stomach. 35 minutes later I had taken 800 pictures of this single bear.



The last hour passed from a single stationary point. With the boat at anchor my yoga instructing sister christened the Polar Bear position when a bear laid on its side and stretched two feet forward and two feet backwards. Another gargantuan bear joined the scene. While not as tall or long as the first, he was significantly fatter. As we watched bears wander back and forth down this polar bear road some would greet it each with friendly snout rubbing, others would entirely ignore one another and some would remain aloof watching warily out of the corner of their eyes. We witnessed nothing that hinted of aggression or contention. The humidity must have been near 100% and I had to wipe my camera off to soak up the moisture. Two bears with energy to spare met on the water's edge and began to play with multi-pronged water smoothed branch. Tug of war turned into fetch and they ended up in the water. The game was on and soon looked like wrestlemania. The jostled for position, pushed each other under the water, lunged, feinted, flashed their yellow teeth. At one point as they stood on their hind legs the

distant bear wrapped his paws around the others back in a literal bear hug. Periodically they would take turns shaking the water from their fur like shaggy dogs. From a distance they could have been mistaken for a pair of dogs frolicking. At a quarter to 8:00 they exited the water and I thought I took my last photo for the evening.

Back at the trailer we dined on snacks and giddily shared our observations from the day. At 9:00 PM as the last sun rays melted into the street lights a bustle of noise and activity outside drew our attention. The Polar Bear watch was earning their keep and we had front row seats. Out the dining room window a large white uninvited guest had the chained dogs barking wildly. We opened the windows to take pictures and video with our phones and Nathan headed outside with his camera to document the human/bear interactions that he hoped to write a book about. The bear walked directly beneath our bedroom window and then underneath the neighboring house. Several cars raced around the block with flashing lights and blaring horns to spook the bear. It soon felt more like a rodeo or circus gone awry. The bewildered bear had nowhere to run as traffic circled him in every direction. I questioned the ineffective tactics and wondered what the bear's options were other than running directly at or past a vehicle. The clown was played by a local on a 4-wheeler who drove directly at the bear who was obscured behind some of the neighbor's unintentional lawn decorations. The driver yelled and revved the engine and the bear ran in the opposite direction into the street and down towards the coast. Nathan entered the house with a personal experience to include in his book and a great picture of the bear emerging from under the house next door walking towards him with headlights lighting the bear from behind. Who needs internet or tv when you have polar bear chases in the backyard? The space heater in our bedroom was put to good use to warm us up for a comfortable sleep. We decided not to take the risk of having only cold water in the shower.





I slept as long as I could Saturday morning which meant waking up shortly before 7:00 AM. Nathan, the “volunteer” help cooked us breakfast which made me wonder what the situation would have been without him. I heard him chopping in the kitchen. I’d never seen anyone use an ulu to dice an onion but he made it happen. He fried the onions and added not quite enough eggs for an omelet like concoction. There was sliced bread shipped up from Fairbanks for toast which made the Cutco bread knife on the counter seem out of place. How did a single premium kitchen knife find its way to Kaktovik? I don’t think I would have been successful during college trying to sell Cutco in the village. Robert was on time for our 8:00 AM departure and we climbed aboard the suburban for the short drive down to the boat. The group was the same except for the departure of the videographer.

Our priority today according to Andrew’s directions was to find the bear cubs up close. It did not prove difficult. There seemed to be bears in almost every direction. Just down the beach from a mother with twins were a couple of bears who were either bored or had a lot more energy than the rest. They began by competing for a stick that had washed up from hundreds of miles upstream. Their contest continued from the shore into the shallow water and they transformed instantly into children when wet. For 90 minutes I pivoted between photographing the mother with twins and the entertaining pair in the water. Occasionally the water aerobics would stop long enough for the beasts to catch their breath and we could hear them pant like oversized dogs. Some of the guide boats were equipped with spider like legs that could be lowered into the water and stabilize the boat to facilitate the earnest photographers quest for the perfect shot. Our boat did not have the stabilizers but our travel companions shot from monopods while standing. I claimed the boat’s edge to rest my bean bag on. My camera moved more than I would have liked but I stayed out of the sight lines of the others in the crowded back of the boat. The near water level view created some unique images but left me with a kinked neck. I was glad to have rain pants on so I could ignore the mud and water sloshing about. The cubs did their best to keep our attention by rough housing and standing up. The COYs (cubs of the year) born in January now looked like full grown black bears or small grizzlies.







What a difference a little sunshine makes. The clouds thinned and we saw blue skies for the first time. The colors popped in the pictures, and we saw the whale boats going out to sea. Robert says they have a 50/50 chance of success when they actually get to go out but that the weather is fickle this time of year and doesn't let them venture out frequently. The whales are typically found 10-15 miles off shore and it takes several hours to haul them back to shore depending on the size and weather.

Next we putted to the west edge of the strip where we watched a sleeping grayish brown bear and a pile of white fur that after 10 minutes we realized was a mother and twins, not a single cub. I caught a shot of one of the cubs resting on its back with both feet propped up on its sibling's side, looking very much like an adult in a recliner at the end of a long day. We returned to the bone pile but there was nothing living in site so we circled back to where we began the day with the other mother and twins. They darted nervously to their mother's side when a large male passed within 15 feet but mom only cocked her head to watch him. My last image of *ursus maritimus* from Kaktovik will be that mother snuggled up with her cubs. I hope the ice comes quickly for them and that they survive the long dark winter at sea. More distressingly, I wonder what else will change in their environment over the 2 or 3 decades they typically live. Will their summer on land last longer than their stores of fat? Will Andrew be able to bring his children to the arctic to share what we did?



We begrudgingly packed our belongings and returned to the Marsh Creek Inn for lunch before our 1:25 flight. Rumors in small towns spread rapidly and there were no independent sources of truth. The restaurant proved a breeding ground for possibilities. The flight would be delayed, but how long? How could I know for sure? They seemed confident, but what made it official? The nuisance bear last night had been killed, but not according to Robert. The whalers had found success! Our flight would leave at 5:00. Would that be late enough for us to see the whale brought in? Andrew asked what Polar Bear tastes like and Robert said he didn't care for Polar Bear meat and that it wasn't commonly eaten though he had tried it. Robert laughed when I shared that I had eaten dog in the Philippines, but he had also eaten wolf, and lynx—which not surprisingly tastes a lot like chicken. Robert told Andrew that he was just the 2<sup>nd</sup> teenage visitor he remembered seeing in Kaktovik—it was a good reminder how lucky he was!

We chose to walk back to the bed and breakfast to savor our remaining hours outdoors. You never knew what you might encounter walking through the streets. The Polar Bear Patrol, a cop, a woman asking Beth “Are you the new teacher?” Nor could you predict how someone may be dressed. Attire ranged from rugged working clothes and modern arctic wear to traditional Inupiat designs. My favorite, worn by a woman walking past us, was a wolf head hat with wolverine legs for trim over the shoulders.

As we sat around the kitchen table watching our new friends edit spectacular images. Though I haven't learned to edit I had plenty of work ahead just to delete the thousands of Polar Bear pictures that weren't worth showing. An excited call shifted our focus out the same window to see another white creature where we had seen the nanook last night. This time it was an ermine dodging in and out of the



wooden scraps on the tundra. His sleek coat had already turned white for the coming winter but his paws and the tip of his tail retained a deep black to match his eyes. He reappeared again with a lemming in his mouth and we went outside to catch this scurrying predator on film.



We were getting antsy not knowing when our flight would arrive, whether we would be staying another night, or even how we would learn what was going to happen. Nathan volunteered to call Robert but rather than calling once and leaving a message, he called repeatedly with no answer. "He must be taking a nap," Nathan opined. When Robert arrived later without having responded to the calls he confirmed that he had indeed been sleeping. Nathan had helped cut up the last whale and had been permitted to take pictures of the process but had warned us it was not allowed. It was a matter of respecting the culture unless the captain of the successful vessel approved. 10 minutes later Robert said it was no big deal to take pictures, just don't get in the way of the people carving up the leviathan. We learned that Sue at the Waldo Arms Inn was the official rumor ender for flight information. Should we call or walk to Waldo Arms to find out about the flight? Robert and Nathan talked past each other for several minutes, unable to reconcile personal or cultural communication styles so I decided for them by announcing that we would walk up the street to see if there was a smoke signal or not. It was nearing 4:00 when we found Sue working outside the inn. Looking down from a ladder, she replied, "maybe 7?" I heard, "you get to see the whale" so I responded "Good!" She warned us we couldn't go down to the beach for the whale but I just said that I would trust Robert to keep us out of trouble...maybe I should have known better.



Looking down the street we could see that Robert had already departed for the beach with the others in his old gas soaked suburban so we walked down. Any excuse to walk was usually preferable to riding in the well-used vehicle as the fans always blew full blast cold air so that it was colder inside than out. Later when they arrived at the whale scene after driving to the end of the strip they dropped the others off and then went looking for us to take us to the airport not knowing that we had learned of the further delay. By 4:25 we were among the growing crowd peering into the distance looking for the boats. The mechanic we had met on our inbound flight was there with co-workers as they had nothing else to do while waiting days for the needed part to arrive. Someone must have been in radio contact with the captain because we didn't have to wait long.

The mood at the beach was buoyant, even festive as nearly the entire village (and most of the visitors, whether contractors or tourists) turned out to watch and cheer as the small armada of boats came into view off the northern shore. The boat in front had lines protruding behind it to a large bright buoy connected to the whale. When they could approach no closer the lines were released from the boat and 20 or so people engaged in a tug of war that eventually brought the whale to the beach. The two lines, one attached to each flipper or pectoral fin were then tied off to a backhoe that was tasked to bring the whale out of the water. The ropes went taught and then loudly snapped one quickly after the other. I wondered, was this whale larger than the last? Were the ropes worn? I later read that Bowheads typically grow up to 50+ feet and are known to live well beyond 100 years. A massive strap was then secured around the tail fin and bowhead emerged from the sea. A couple of images remain fixed in my mind as we milled around on the beach. There were a couple of strollers clumsily being pushed through the sand and pebbles. Andrew immediately engaged with the kids watching the whale and made faces at an infant tucked beneath his mother's native parka. The most distinct, and out of place caused me to double take—two ferrets on leashes. We had seen snow white wild ermine just an hour earlier but these were pets.

At the beach, the successful captain, said we were welcome to watch, just not to photograph. I kept my Nikon in its bag, though when Robert and Nathan returned from looking for us I saw Nathan taking pictures through the front windshield. The crowd quickly surrounded the Bowhead. We circled from head to foot, inspecting the fins, the massive mouth (the largest mouthed animal in the world) filled with several hundred baleen, and the blood that pooled and then ran back toward the water. The harpoon head was still obscure in its side but a thick cord hung down to the ground. Kids clambered up the cetacean's spine and took turns posing in groups of 6-10 standing on its broad back. Eventually the crowd was asked to step back and a front end loader brought several bucket loads of sea water to pour over the whale and clean its skin before the flesh would be exposed to the elements. The western arctic bowhead whale population is estimated at 17,000 and has been growing more than 3% annually so the permitted harvest of less than .5% per year is not threatening the species in any way while preserving an important cultural heritage a supporting a near subsistence lifestyle across native communities

In talking with Robert the difference between our cultures was that in the white/American world someone would be in charge and directing the work of others, but here, everyone knew what to do and no one was in charge, the work would just get done without orders or formal structure. Regardless of the management style, an efficient operation unfolded before us. Some arrived with boxes of rubber

gloves, others brought visqueen tarps, aprons, rubber rain gear, and then a few things that could have come from a medieval torture museum—large stainless steel hooks and carving utensils that looked like long straight scythes.

Others were examining and touching the whale so I stepped forward to do the same. I touched it timidly because Nathan warned us the smell of whale oil would linger for weeks. He said after washing his clothes the washing machine reeked of whale oil and he feared he had ruined it. Eventually vinegar's acidic powers won out. The feel of the skin was totally new for me, somehow smooth and oily, tender, but after giving an inch firm.

People bustled about bringing tools, preparing, but it was as if they were waiting for something. It became clear when another old suburban pulled up driven by a grandmotherly figure with an even older gentleman in the passenger seat. Robert said it was captain's parents. His father had recently had a pacemaker implanted but that did not deter him from smoking away. His face was gaunt and hardened by the icy winds but an obvious pride shown through as he embraced his son. The mother wept from the driver's seat as she watched them. A chair was placed on the beach for the aged man in front of the 34' 5" long whale and the rest of the family gathered near for a triumphant family picture.

When the razor sharp knife first sliced through the  $\frac{3}{4}$ " skin and 12" of blubber it was clear that however unformal, there was a very specific system for butchering a whale that had been developed and refined over centuries if not millennia. They worked in pairs one on each side starting from the middle and cutting towards them in 12" wide slices. After making several parallel openings, the strips were cross cut so that hunks could be extracted. When the first was removed the now exposed blubber's bright pink surprised me. The carvers regularly paused to sharpen their utensils.

As blood ran down to the shore I looked across the lagoon and saw bears milling a hundred yards away, patiently waiting the turn they knew would come when night fell. We had been told this was a 4-5 hour process which would put its completion shortly after dark. I wouldn't want to be the last one there on foot as the famished bears closed in.

Robert was later rebuked by the captain for Nathan taking pictures—it wasn't me. Their voices raised and some mild insults were exchanged. Robert was the only one trying to make money off the polar bears. Robert told us privately he had been on Kaktovik longer than he had been alive. And that the real issue was that they disagreed over drilling for oil in the refuge and that's why he was picking a fight over whales and bears. Robert is staunchly against drilling and argues that it doesn't make economic sense anyways and therefore would not bring wealth to the natives. There was no prohibition on the locals taking pictures or videos and one enterprising man even had a drone for aerial images that he had ordered from Best Buy.

The butchering team settled into a routine skillfully dicing the enormous carcass. The weather cooled in the early evening and in our inactivity we felt it more acutely. Our time was up. Robert took us to the airstrip. On the way he chuckled as Beth tried in vain to buckle the broken seatbelt. 6:45 and no one was there. "I've seen planes fly away 20 minutes before their scheduled departures. Maybe he was ready for us to go. But there was really no rush because his new guests, if he had any, couldn't arrive

unless we were able to depart. 7:03, "I hate to call Sue," but he does. "20 minutes out," she says. Apparently she gets a call when the plane is near. The blue bus appears approaching the fenced runway. It is joined by a Police vehicle and the FWS agent. Robert said there's nothing else for the cop to do in this law abiding community so he meets the planes to stave off boredom. I stood nearby as the FWS agent lectured the new arrivals. I couldn't help but interject, "Don't worry, you'll see Polar Bears," as I knew that was all they really wanted to know. Her icy response left no room for humor or excitement—"Can I finish?"

We landed in Fairbanks at about 9:30 PM and stayed with some family friends that night. After attending church the next morning we made the two hour drive south from Fairbanks to Denali National Park to pick up our entry pass so we would not have to wait for the rangers to arrive at 7:00 the next morning. Since we had a couple hours of daylight to burn we made the 14 mile drive into Savage River as it is open to the public. That stretch of the road is the well forested and is prime moose habitat. During the fall rut you are not permitted off the road in the most sensitive areas. We saw a couple of moose but nothing else. We stayed in a "Cabin" at McKinley Creekside Cabins that was more of a motel 10 miles south of the park entrance but it was nice, new, and clean.

We entered the park at 6:00 the next morning well before light. We had debated the optimum strategy whether to enter as early as possible to try to beat the crowds or was that what others would do. Or wait until daylight to avoid passing anything in the dark. We chose to drive through the more thickly vegetated area in the dark in hopes of being in better bear country as the sun rose. The earliest you could pass the Savage River checkpoint was 6:00 AM and the Teklanika River crossing another 17 miles in at 7:00 AM. The only other restriction for the road usage that day was to be east of Savage River by midnight. We crossed our fingers as we drove through the black spruce forests hoping for a lynx to emerge. It wasn't to be. As we crossed the Teklanika River a heavy mist and fog set in and visibility diminished sharply even though the sun was rising higher. We could hardly look for animals beyond the shoulder of the road. We continued slowly for miles past Sable Pass, Polychrome Pass, and the Toklat River. And then brake lights ahead of us indicated animal activity. We pulled to the left side as a grizzly ambled through the brush towards the road. Despite the proximity it wasn't easy to see in the fog. Unperturbed by the 5 cars and clicking cameras the bear crossed the dirt road and disappeared into the mist. Although at 20,320 feet Denali towers over most of the park which lies at elevations below 5,000 it is only visible on about 20% of the days. The iconic viewpoint between Toklat and Eielson has a pull off for pictures with the park road in the foreground jutting towards the distant peak. Today you couldn't even see the road below you, let alone the mountain. The road that usually makes my stomach squirm as you look down off steep cliffs was shrouded in an ethereal fog, the dangers hidden from view. Heavy rains caused landslides and road closures earlier in the season and numerous spots had orange cones along the roads edge to identify cracks forming and prevent you from driving too close. At Eielson it was difficult to even see the visitor's center across the parking lot.

Last summer we had seen grizzly, moose, and a wolf in the 15 miles after Eielson but today we were excited to even find a ptarmigan on the road. As we neared the Kantishna turn off the sun broke through and visibility improved. It was a new feeling to again search for wildlife in the varied terrain and small ponds on either side of the road. I'd never been to Kantishna, an old mining camp that remains

private land in the middle of the National Park. A car was stopped at a stream crossing to watch a black bear on a distant hillside. We talked with the women in the other car and it was the first animal they had seen all day. We had managed a couple of snowshoe hare but no moose, caribou, or dall sheep. It was my first ever black bear in Denali and completed the 3 bear species sweep for the trip. There were more lodges and cabins than I realized in Kantishna, probably room for a couple hundred people scattered across several properties. At the literal end of the road was an airstrip and just before it a pioneer cabin.

We took the short detour down to Wonder Lake and didn't miss the summer mosquito hordes. Activity picked up on the way out as the fog rose. It was never clear and drizzled periodically but compared to the drive in the conditions were fabulous. East of Eielson we stopped at the first river and decided to hike downstream on the rock strewn river bed. We identified bear, moose, and caribou tracks in the sandy breaks. Our eyes couldn't venture far from our feet on the uneven terrain. But a movement caught my eye and I looked up to see a grizzly bear running about 600 yards away. He headed up the mountain side and hardly slowed as we watched him cover the steep slope in a couple of minutes. I think it would have taken me 30 minutes to climb across the same space. According to Andrew's detailed records we saw another 4 grizzly bears, 12 moose, 10 caribou, 31 dall sheep, 1 spruce grouse, and 6 tundra swans though none of the sightings were close enough for great pictures. We took a short walk the black spruce down to the Teklanika River. We spooked several snowshoe hares but didn't find the predator we hoped to see pursue them. At Savage River we hiked straight up one of the few formal trails in the park to a rocky point with a commanding view of the river valley below. We left the park as darkness closed in after 8:00.



