

Four Specks in the Ocean; Tales from a Northern Sea Kayak Expedition

In the summer of 2017, TA Loeffler, Mark Dykeman, Des Sullivan and Marion Wissink, spent two weeks paddling in Northern Labrador. Labrador is affectionately referred to as the 'Big Land' and as our intrepid paddlers explained, it has big waters as well...especially from the perspective of a kayak. Furthermore, Labrador has big bears...black ones and white ones!

TA's presentation (with her three paddling friends in attendance) on February 1st was Paddle NL's first of a five winter presentations. By the time of their first strokes, our members had already had quite an expedition involving flights and a truck from St. John's to Happy Valley-Goose Bay and a two hour flight from Happy Valley-Goose Bay to Saglek. Travelling St. John's to Saglek, from one corner of the province to another, is a distance equivalent from Toronto to the Alberta border...with a lot fewer people.

TA, described the trip to Saglek including side visits to the museums in North West River and the municipal council office in Happy Valley-Goose Bay, complete with a canoe constructed by Mr. Joe Goudie, suspended from the ceiling. Saglek, has a runway, was established in the cold war as one of many across northern Canada to warn of possible invasions.

TA has the ability to tell a story in a pleasant fashion, and easily held the attention of the 45 who were fortunate enough to attend the evening. Of course, her outstanding photos of massive landscapes, sunsets, wet paddlers, seals and guns helped to keep the audience riveted! Guns, bear fences...yes, and pictures of black bears! While describing landscapes which looked like the Grand Canyon, wonderful hiking and open ocean crossings, it was apparent the group was wary of bears. One day there was an abundance of seals...should they be concerned the seals might attract bears of the fact the seals were relaxing on rocks an indication they were not aware of any bears in the area? They later learned from native residents the abundance of seals was a good omen...the seals would have not been so casual if there were white bears in the area!

TA informed the group they were lucky to experience the best weather of the summer, even though the temperature dropped to middle single digits in the rain. The flies were not bad. In two weeks, they saw two planes and a helicopter...no other boats. It was apparent the remoteness, the untouched landscape, the lack of human activity and being with friends was the main attraction of going so far at significant expense. TA explained to me the dangers of a such a trip convinced her for the first time to always wear a personal location device on her body. If someone got in trouble, or she was separated from the group, she would not hesitate to contacting the gang with the yellow helicopters...mistakes can be costly. The group also had satellite radios and were able to obtain timely weather forecasts. They also had with large scale maps. It was clear the group had conducted extensive research to ensure a safe trip.

On return to Saglek, the group learned there could be delays in in the return of the charter plane. Tents were erected and in the morning, following a windy night, TA decided to check the boats. As she went around a derelict building from the cold war days, she looked up and there it was...a white bear, a polar bear, just 12 feet away. She backed up slowly, "polar bear, polar bear, POLAR BEAR!" Within a half a minute, Mark went from deep sleep to shooting at gravel in front of the bear. We knew from their attendance, they all survived! Whether its bears or paddling in such an unforgiving environment, the morale of the story was to never let your guard down!

Hazen Scarth
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