



*At rest on Eagle Lake,
Alberta, Canada, after
a long day in the sky
en route home.*

Jim Clark
photographer

the GREAT ARCTIC

Air Adventure LOCATION | BAKER LAKE

BY DOUGLAS DEVRIES



AAS

I ADVANCED THE THROTTLE, THE ROAR OF THE PRATT & WHITNEY WASP ENGINE SHOOK THE CABIN OF OUR DE HAVILLAND BEAVER. For the next anxious moments, while 450 super-charged horses strained, we leaned into our belts, as if to will the heavily laden seaplane into the air. We were attempting to depart a small lake in the eastern Canadian Arctic. Two days earlier, the lake had no name, but my partner and co-leader for this Great Arctic Air Adventure, Mark Schoening, had since christened it Dog Days Lake, a moniker that needs no explanation.

IN A FEW HOURS, WE'D BE WISHING FOR THE DREARY MONOTONY OF DOG DAYS LAKE. As our aircraft staggered off the water, our spirits lifted. Our jaded outlook on Arctic life was reinforced last night, when it started to rain around midnight. Not that pitter-patter rain we love to hear on the roof back home on a warm spring day. Not that spitting Yukon rain of a couple weeks ago, the kind that's barely an annoyance. No, this was an Arctic rain that came in sideways driven by a frigid 30-knot blow, blasted through the seams of our tent, slid under our ground cloth, and seeped into our sleeping bags.

But we were finally flying again, buoyed by the prospect of getting to Qamani'tuaq, a small Inuit community

just north of Hudson Bay, also known by westerners as Baker Lake.

The soggy overcast ahead cast a pall over the rolling tundra stretching out to the indefinite horizon. The dreary conditions awoke a sense of impending doom, an unwanted emotion I'd been battling since crossing the Arctic Circle some three weeks ago, reminding me that we really didn't belong here.

The squawk of the radio startled me from my reverie, "Doug, buddy, what's your position?" Mark's ebullience radiating from Beaver N2SF was infectious, momentarily displacing my gloom. If there is a yang to my yin, it is Mark. Swarming mosquitoes, cold wet feet, and unflyable weather only fueled his optimism. As one team member observed, "Mark's not capable of a negative thought." While I agonized over future problems not yet met, Mark thrived on the adversity of the moment.

I was at times envious of this strength, and the adoration it evoked from our comrades. I rationalized it must be genetic, as he comes from a long line of outdoorsmen. To wit, his father, Pete Schoening, was a world-renown climber—best known for "the belay." In the 1953 American K2 expedition, he single-handedly saved the entire expedition by setting an ice axe and holding five teammates who had slid off the mountain and were dangling thousands of feet in the air.



ABOVE: The view from deHavilland Beaver N67DN. The Arctic lakes are a seaplane pilot's dream...and sometimes nightmare.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Author Doug DeVries blogging on the tundra. The team updated its website nightly. You can read all their posts at: www.GreatArcticAirAdventure.com.

My dad, though a cool guy to be sure, was a chemist. Through mutual trust, Mark and I worked well together as co-leaders of the adventure, but it wasn't always so. When we started planning this 12,000-mile Arctic odyssey two years before, we barely knew each other. Recognizing the need for a solid connection to bind us in tough times, we embarked on a series of shakedown trips.

One memorable trip encompassed a 4,000-mile mad dash from Seattle to the high-Arctic village of Resolute in the confines of a Cessna 180, replete with atrocious weather. We had a couple of blow-ups—mostly over "to-fly or not-to-fly" questions—but in the end we overcame our animosity and were better for our travails.

Baker Lake, some 95 miles to the southeast, was planned as a quick fuel stop on our way to Coral Harbour and points south, our last mad dash to escape the clutches of the deteriorating Arctic weather. It was late August, but the falling temperatures, high winds, and freezing rain heralded the arrival of winter.

The flyable gap between the heavens above and the earth below was shrinking, and in the face of the building head wind our groundspeed was deteriorating from a norm of 95 knots to under 60 knots, a precursor of things to come.

Robert McGhee, the noted Canadian historian, describes the Arctic as "the last

imaginary place." In a world where Darwin's Galapagos can be reached in a few hours and enjoyed from the deck of a cruise liner, the relatively inaccessible Arctic remains largely an enigma. This is a place literally beyond the end of the road, a land that supports neither farming nor livestock. Wood, the building material of the world, is nonexistent in the Arctic. Visitors must adapt.

The northland is strewn with artifacts that tell the story of human habitation, from the Dorset culture of 500 BC, through the current native Inuit people, to the Europeans who arrived over the last few centuries. For these newcomers, the holy grail was the long-sought Northwest Passage, a westerly trading shortcut from Europe to the Far East, bypassing the long route around the Cape of Good Hope. Most of these explorers succumbed to the harsh environment, as illustrated by the infamous expedition led by Sir John Franklin.

On the morning of May 19, 1845, the Franklin party set sail from Greenhithe, England, in the HMS Terror and the HMS Erebus, with orders to complete the exploration of the Northwest Passage. The expedition was last spotted by Capt. Dannett of the whaler Prince of Wales on July 26, 1845, near Lancaster Sound in the eastern Arctic, sailing west into the passage.

FRANKLIN AND HIS CREW WERE NEVER AGAIN SEEN ALIVE.

What happened next is still being pieced together, but we know the Erebus and Terror were frozen in, forcing the crews to abandon ship and begin a southward journey on foot. Over the next several years, the crew succumbed to scurvy, lead poisoning, and starvation. In the throes of hunger, many of the crew resorted to cannibalism. (Lesson learned; take plenty of food and make sure your mates are well fed.)

In fact, it would be another 60 years before the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen completed the first transit of the Northwest Passage in 1905. Soon after, Arctic aviators began using aircraft to further explore the unknown lands and discovered the difficulties of flying in the north. We were not the first travelers to visit Baker Lake by seaplane in search of fuel and supplies. In 1931, the Lone Eagle himself, Charles Lindbergh, together with wife and copilot Anne Morrow Lindbergh, was commissioned by Pan Am to conduct a survey flight to the Orient in an effort to find the fastest route from New York to Tokyo. Flying a highly modified Lockheed Sirius fitted with floats, the Lindberghs departed on July 27, 1931, from Long Island, New York. Their first stop in the Arctic was Baker Lake, where they were welcomed by calm winds and still waters. Nonetheless, Anne's description of the place captures a sense of haunting isolation, an emotion not uncommon to Arctic travelers:

“Toward evening we came upon a gray glassy lake, bounded by gray bleak shores a little higher than the marshes. And on shore, the only points of accent in that monotonous landscape, stood three or four white houses. This was Baker Lake... how could anything live here, even animals?”

Some 70-plus years later, our Great Arctic Air Adventure originated in Seattle and initially took us north, then east on a 12,000-mile odyssey to circumnavigate Canada via the Northwest Passage. We conceived the trip in 2006, and over the next two years Mark and I spent hundreds of hours wrestling with its logistics.

We elected to fly the Beavers on straight floats, thus gaining access to thousands of remote Arctic lakes only reachable by float-plane or on foot. As romantic as this sounded, from a practical standpoint all fuel and supply depots had to be water-accessible, limiting the available resupply sites. Our greedy Beavers would consume nearly 6,000 gallons of fuel through the trip, requiring fuel depots every few hundred miles. Upon reaching fuel depots, delivery to the planes would feature a humorous array of electric pumps, drums, and jerry cans. Some places had only auto fuel (usable in a pinch), while others had no fuel at all. For the latter sites, such as Resolute and Eureka, we shipped avgas in drums via a Canadian Coast Guard ice-breaker in the summer of 2007, a full year before they were needed.



Cameraman Eric Thiermann sports an essential piece of tundra apparel—a head net for protection from the relentless bugs.

Our fueling stop at Kugluktuk, a small Inuit hamlet hugging the rugged coastline of the Coronation Gulf, typified the fueling experience. Landing on rough seas into a 20-knot wind, we bounced through the waves, searching for a suitable docking place. After locating a flimsy dock with room for one plane, Mark secured his Beaver while I beached N67DN. We were greeted by an



A hard-working deHavilland Beaver reflects on the day's adventure.

This is a place literally beyond the end of the road, a land that supports neither farming nor livestock.

enthusiast mob of Inuit children, who immediately crawled on the planes, “helped” with fueling, and performed other mischievous deeds such as untying the Beavers while our attention was diverted elsewhere. After rousting the village fuel guy, avgas was delivered to the dock, where we pushed, pulled, and rolled the 350-pound drums to the aircraft. We then pumped more than 200 gallons—by hand—into the thirsty Beavers, in a driving rain.

There are certain aspects of Arctic fueling that cannot be fully appreciated until experienced. For example, Beaver tip tanks require the hapless pilot to crawl out on the slippery wing, maintaining a precarious balance while the wings surge wildly up and down over the waves 10 feet below. Somewhere in the process, I would always get my gloves soaked with the high-octane fuel. Aside from the smell, the Arctic wind rapidly evaporated the fuel and cooled my hands, rendering my afflicted fingers numb within minutes.

Four hours later, we were fueled and on our way. All in all, one of our better stops, as some refueling, such as the upcoming Coral Harbour, would take us eight hours. Strangely, we had a great time, getting to know the tough yet friendly Inuit people and

testing our fortitude. It was, after all, the Great Arctic Air Adventure.

As we approached Baker Lake, Mark radioed the Baker Lake CARS (Community Aerodrome Radio Station) to report our position and get the updated weather. When the operator gave us an altimeter setting of “28.89,” a stunned silence ensued, followed by Mark's incredulous reply, “Say again?” We had never received an altimeter setting this low. We would later learn this was the lowest barometric pressure recorded at Baker Lake for the past six years.

With deteriorating weather and dwindling fuel, we had no choice but to continue on to Baker Lake. Reaching the water, we stared with disbelief at the 3- to 4-foot waves, a sea condition well outside the landing capabilities of both pilot and craft. An awkward silence ensued as I, along with my crew, Dave Good and Dan Nobel, quietly wrestled with the ramifications of these unwelcome developments.

Even the de Havilland Beaver, arguably the most durable bushplane ever designed, has water-landing limitations. Up until now, I'd never tested that limit, but Beaver lore held that waves of 2 feet or more were about the limit. At higher wave heights, the risk of overturning the aircraft increases

dramatically. Once the craft flips upside down, chances of survival deteriorate rapidly.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada conducted a study of 1,432 seaplane accidents. Of the 103 fatal accidents that terminated in water, less than 10 percent of the 276 occupants involved in these accidents escaped unhampered from the aircraft.

Our preparations for this improbable event had been extensive—including inflatable life jackets, insulated dry suits, and underwater egress training (escape from an overturned and submerged cockpit). Even in the safety of a heated pool, with swimmers all around, escaping from an underwater cockpit made for some anxious moments.

I WAS HOPING WE WOULD NOT NEED THOSE SKILLS IN THE FRIGID WATERS OF THE ARCTIC.

Thwarted in our plans to land on Baker Lake, we searched our charts for a more suitable landing surface, one with smaller swells. As seaplane pilots know, the height of the waves is a function of A) the strength of the wind, B) the length of time the wind has been blowing, and C) the span of water exposed to the wind, known as the “fetch.” With no control over A and B, we looked for water with a shorter fetch, aka a smaller lake. To our delight, we spotted a place named Airplane Lake a couple

AND THEY DID IT Why...?

In an interview with The New York Times, the British mountaineer George Leigh Mallory was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, and he replied, “Because it's there.” The answer became famous, although I confess to not really understanding his meaning; perhaps it's too Zen for a left-brainer like me.

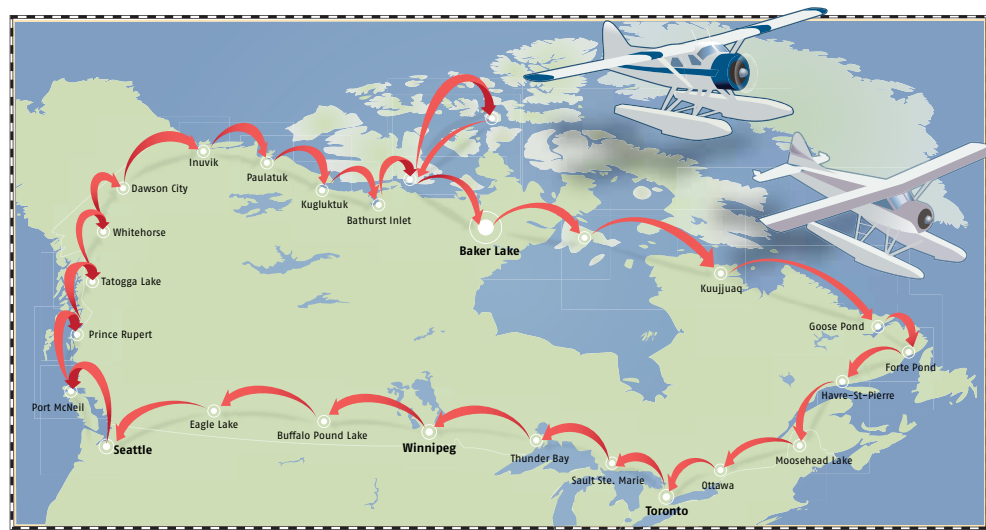
To be sure, the Arctic is there, but at first blush, the allure can be elusive. In the summer, it's cold, wet, and drab, and that's the good season. Thinking back, my interest was first piqued while reading of the early explorers seeking a northwest passage through the Canadian Arctic. From the endless nights in winter to the sun that never sets in summer, this mysterious place

is, in a word, exotic. So as a pilot, seeing the Arctic from the air seemed like a great way to go, and just to add a higher degree of difficulty, we decided to do it in seaplanes on straight floats. (Amphibs are for wusses...)

The famous explorer Roald Amundsen once dryly observed, “Adventure is just bad planning.” With that in mind, we embarked on a planning extravaganza that ultimately spanned two years and consumed more than 1,000 man-hours. Picking the plane was easy; what other choice could there be than the “immortal Beaver,” the plane that opened the Canadian North. Finding the right partner was tougher, and in Mark Schoening I

found the right guy. The perfect field general who thrives on adversity, he's also a pretty cool guy to hang out with.

The planning was a seemingly endless string of details. For the Beavers: fuel shipped ahead on ice-breakers, a risk analysis to identify and prepare for mechanical failures, and extensive preventive maintenance. For the pilots, training: cold water survival, underwater egress, rough water landing, and CPR, to name a few. And then, on August 2, 2008, plans morphed into action, and the Great Arctic Air Adventure lifted off Lake Washington and banked to the north.



The route of the Great Arctic Circle Air Adventure, circumnavigating the Northwest Passage



Co-adventurers Doug DeVries (left) and Mark Schoening.

of miles to the east. It was a terrible case of false advertising.

With the storm intensifying, and dwindling fuel gauges closer to “E” than “F,” it was time to land. After circling the lake several times, we lined up for our final approach. The Beaver was pitching and rolling violently, requiring large stick corrections to maintain a semblance of controlled flight. I elected to land at the windward end of the lake, where the waves were the lowest. With beads of sweat forming on my forehead, I pulled the stick back and braced for touchdown. When it came, the spine-rattling jolts felt like driving over speed bumps at 60 miles per hour. And then, somehow, we were down on the water, and the nightmare was over—or was it?

Mark, in an effort to land closer to the beaching site, elected to set down at the west/leeward end of the lake. By now, the winds were 30 knots with gusts to 40, and the waves were pounding us.

Pummeled by high winds and raging water, we searched—unsuccessfully—for a suitable beaching site. I tried to turn the plane out of the wind and search down lake, but in spite of standing on the right rudder, the weather-vane effect prevented the turn. Amid the roar of the wind, Mark’s voice crackled through the headset, “Do not do that.” He feared the stormy conditions would blow us over during the turn. Mark’s crew attempted to maneuver N2SF to a beaching site, but the rocky shore coupled with the pounding surf threatened to shred the thin-skinned floats. The team elected to set an anchor, but they had to keep the propeller turning to keep the plane from being pushed back into the rocks. Jim, a member of Mark’s crew, crawled out on the slippery float near the lethal prop and set an anchor while Mark maintained position by working the rudders and throttle. Jim recalls, “The driving rain was stinging my eyes, making it almost impossible to see. Toward the end, I lost all dexterity in my fingers and could only use my hands like clubs.” Eventually, Mark and his crew struggled to shore, but not before getting soaked while wading through the frigid waters.

Meanwhile, at the far end of the lake, we were enduring a drama of our own. Unable to turn downwind, I decided to shut the engine down and “sail” back to Mark’s location. A few minutes later, we heard a sickening thud; we’d struck a rock just under the surface of the churning waters. Firing up the engine, and with tremendous help from Dan and Dave, we “tacked” backward down

the lake through a series of sailing and power-taxiing maneuvers, all the while checking the relative freeboard of both hulls to see if they had been breached. (An inspection would later show that we hit the rock directly on the keel, the only part of the hull strong enough to withstand the impact.)

As we approached the landing zone—backward—Mark and Jim again jumped in the chest-high frigid waters and set an anchor for us. Our fear of capsizing the planes was finally past, but the crew, especially Mark and Jim, were cold and in need of shelter.

Hiking out to the muddy road, I hitched a ride into town with some miners, while the rest of the crew shivered in the driving rain. Anxious about my mates, I frantically sought help from the locals, eventually stomping into the local detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Constable and fellow seaplane pilot Cpl. Cam Lockwood took one look at me and immediately drove me out to the lake to fetch my mates, who were by now shaking badly. In retrospect, I believe Mark and Jim were on the verge of hypothermia.

Our time machine, the venerable de Havilland Beaver seaplane, provided unique access to this unfamiliar place. From the sky, we observed the big picture, a mosaic of lakes and rolling tundra, punctuated by the occasional esker rising from the plain. On landing, our craft became a boat, gliding to the shore where we set our nightly camps. Once on the tundra, we experienced the other Arctic, an unexpected ecosystem teaming with life against impossible odds. A curious weasel popping up from the tundra like a jack-in-the-box, a pair of sik-siks (arctic ground squirrels) scolding the intruders, a curious caribou wandering by to gawk at the visitors from the sky, a pair of regal Arctic swans floating in the distance, all part of a community of life thriving in an unlikely land.

I’m home now, trying to reintegrate into my old life. As I fumble with the TV remote or inch along the 405, my mind returns to the Arctic, the last imaginary place. *EAA*

Douglas DeVries, EAA 526210, is an engineer, pilot, and restorer residing in Kenmore, Washington. He spends his leisure time flying a 1942 Stearman and a 1955 de Havilland Beaver seaplane. Contact him at douglasd@verizon.net.

For links to a photo gallery and video from this adventure, visit www.SportAviation.org.

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