

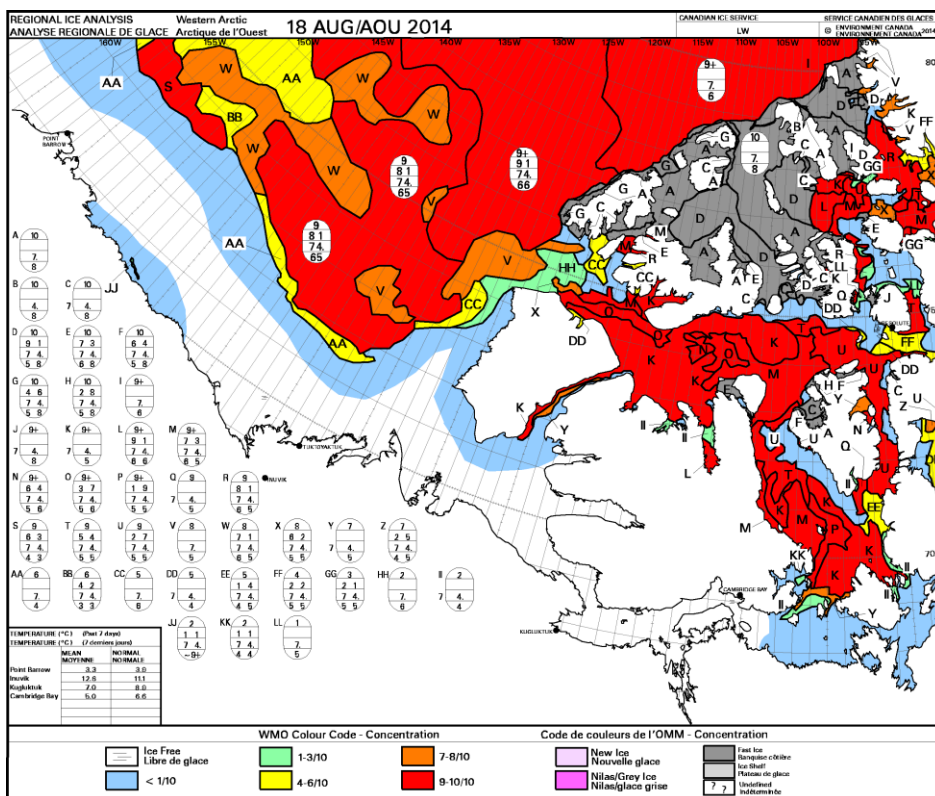
## In Search of Our North West Passage.

In reality there is not one but seven alternative routes that can be called the North West Passage. Six of them can be considered variations on a theme as all cross the Arctic Circle in the Davis Strait and re-cross the Arctic Circle in the Bering Sea when headed east about. The exception is the Hecla and Fury Strait that heads into Hudson Bay and the west coast of Baffin Island and is the most difficult of the routes, its shallow, shoal strewn waters remaining ice bound in most years despite the impact of climate change.

With 2014 considered a “difficult year” it would be the ice conditions beyond Pond Inlet that would dictate the route we would attempt for our NWP transit.

Much to the chagrin of our Norwegian crew member Terje Lokken, we would not be alone in our search for a route through. The excellent tracker on our blog created by ice man and techno whiz Fred, had shown as many as 17 boats attempting the NWP plus a French kayaker and a French rower not counting the ice strengthened “expedition” cruise ships that we would also encounter en route. Although a number of the early arrivals had left after spending weeks waiting for the ice to recede there were still at least 6 others attempting an east west transit and 4 coming the other way!

With bad weather forecast our decision to leave the exposed anchorage at Pond Inlet and head to the more sheltered Arctic Bay settlement on the northwest corner of Baffin Island looked to have backfired with strong westerly’s driving ice across the entrance to Admiralty Inlet and blocking our exit. We would just have to wait.... but it was now the 19<sup>th</sup> August, the settlement of Resolute in Lancaster Sound was still ice bound. Prince Regent Inlet, Peel Sound, Larsen Sound, The McClintock Channel, The Prince of Wales and McClure Straits were all still choked by ice blocking our way to the west and time was running out before the onset of winter and the return of the big freeze.



We had met up with the expedition cruise ship “Silver Explorer” at Pond Inlet and her ice pilot Mark, an ex Canadian icebreaker skipper. They had planned to leave Pond Inlet and force a way through Bellot Strait to meet up with an icebreaker that was to escort them through Larsen Sound and Victoria Strait to Cambridge Bay.

Some days later we were somewhat chastened to learn that both ice breaker and cruise ship had become trapped in Larsen Sound and had taken four days to break free!

My experiences in the mountains have taught me that if you wait for the right conditions you would never climb anything. You have to get yourself into a position to maximise the brief weather windows that present themselves. Even so, there was some debate regarding the best time to leave Arctic Bay, head

around the Brodeur Peninsula and attempt to force a way through to Fort Ross. One boat left 24 hours before us and another 12 hours before but both had to find shelter on the north east coast of Somerset Island. Our view was that we would avoid both headwinds and ice coming our way if we left a little later. We blasted out of Arctic Bay, broad reaching in 15kt Sou' Westerly's, and ran into the ice tongue that stretched out from the top of the peninsula. We picked our way through this and after judging that the central area of Prince Regent Inlet had blocked, changed our plans and headed south west and across to the east coast of Somerset Island towards Batty Bay where we considered stopping overnight before trying to force a way south, along the coast to Fort Ross and the Bellot Strait.

A cold, wet and miserable night with snow falling at times and poor visibility throughout gave way to a brighter, more hopeful day and it seemed that our judgement had been vindicated with ice conditions much easier than expected along the coast with no more than a few bands of 2/10ths ice and open water between. We hoped to get updated ice and weather information verbally from Fred to confirm our view that the way was relatively clear down to Fort Ross and the entrance to the Bellot Strait, the Gateway to Peel Sound and beyond.

We made excellent progress down the coast of Somerset Island in relatively clear water. Conditions were such that we did not waste time stopping at Fury Beach but continued on overnight direct to Fort Ross. Initially the only difficulty we had was a few wide bands of packed ice stretching out from Fury Point and the back of Cresswell Bay until we hit the ice off Cape Clara that was thought to have dispersed. Not so...."come into my parlour said the spider to the fly" .....and before we knew it we were surrounded by a huge area of 4 -6/10ths pack ice.

### **Weaving through the ice**



Once again Novara came into her own and we were able to barge our way through towards the coast some 10nm distant. Phil and Ding did a great job of navigating through the pack, picking out the small patches of open water and crunching through the thinner ice between. It took 4 hours before we managed to get into slightly clearer water and then close to shore where there was less ice and so on south to Depot Bay where we anchored just after 2.30am some 285nm and 45 hours after leaving Arctic Bay. An exciting couple of days!

### Surrounded by history



We spent much of the day exploring around the old Hudson Bay Company's trading post. There are still two buildings remaining, one the old living quarters with much of the interior intact, if a little weather beaten and the other building the old storehouse that has been maintained to provide an emergency shelter complete with bunks, stove, etc plus some basic supplies that have been left by passing boats. The walls are covered with the names of boats that have passed this way, many of them and their skippers known to me. Phil used his artistic skills to draw a picture of Novara and we also added our names to the new visitor book that was put there in 2013 by our friend David Scott Cowper, a veteran of 6 NWP transits.

Now having committed ourselves to the Bellot Strait route we had no option but to sit, wait and watch for a change in the ice conditions that would allow us onward passage or more seriously block our route back the way we had come.

Only a few days earlier Bellot Strait had been completely ice free, although blocked at both ends so Terje and I took a long walk along the south coast of Somerset Island to take a look at the central section of Bellot Strait. With ice coming into Depot Bay overnight we suspected that ice was being driven through the strait from west to east (not good news for us) and so it proved to be with the strait at Zenith Point choked with 9/10ths ice and a sea of white beyond.

Our only chance to get through the strait and into Peel Sound was for the winds to change from westerly's to strong easterly's and blow the 9/10ths ice away and allow us to creep down the coast and on to Gjoa Haven.

Later in the day the expedition cruise ship the MV Bremen came into the Bay and anchored giving us the opportunity to talk to their captain who invited us on board to get the latest weather and ice information. What followed seemed somewhat surreal when one of the Bremen's large ribs came over to collect us and take us back to the ship. After a lengthy discussion with the captain and his officers on the bridge we were given a cabin to use to shower and then invited to stay, first for afternoon coffee and cakes and then later for a 5 course dinner. Sitting in the saloon area answering the many questions from the passengers, I had to keep pinching myself as it seemed so unreal.

Dinner was excellent, the bottle of French Medoc that accompanied it went down well after 2 months drinking "Chateau Cardboard" and we left taking with us the best wishes of passengers and crew as they waved us goodbye from the ship's rails.

The Bremen left Depot Bay to head through the Bellot Strait and as they left, the Bruce Roberts designed Arctic Tern sailed into Fort Ross having been held back for a couple of days by the ice in Cresswell Bay. We had confirmation from them of the whereabouts of the Norwegian tug, the Tandberg Polar, towing its large steel barge and a few hours later this unlikely Arctic traveller sailed into the Bay and anchored.

### **The Tandberg Polar**



We dinghie'd over to Arctic Tern to exchange G'days and met up with skipper Les, his partner Ali and their crew Nick, Nicky and Randall. Les and Ali had made it as far as Fort Ross in 2013 and were turned back by the ice in Bellot Strait and beyond and sailed all the way back to Newfoundland to sit out the winter before trying again in 2014.

As is the cruisers' way the world over we invited them over for sundowners later that evening.

After an exchange of information on conditions, the use of the icebreaker, etc, the crew of the Tandberg Polar were also invited over for drinks. One drink became two and with five Norwegians on board two became lots and our precious supply of beer, wine and rum was a shadow of its former self by the end of the evening!





A wind shift to the south forced ice into Depot Bay overnight and despite setting an anchor watch we had great difficulty extricating ourselves from the bay before heading 6 miles south to a more sheltered anchorage in Levesque Harbour. En route we passed a young male Polar Bear who allowed us to gently drift with the current until we were almost alongside the large ice floe he was sat on.

As promised the Captain of the Bremen called us on VHF as they came back through Bellot and told us that conditions in the Strait and over in Peel Sound were bad, difficult for him with ice breaker escort and impossible for us. He also gave us an update on weather for the next week and once again this was not good news with light westerly winds continuing to drive the ice into the Bellot and in these conditions the Canadian ice breaker, Pierre Raddisson would not escort the tug and tow to Cambridge Bay.

We felt pretty secure in our new anchorage right at the back of Levesque Harbour, tucked behind a spit of land, but a change in the wind to light north easterlies combined with a west going current drove more ice floes into the bay and around our protective arm and so accompanied by Arctic Tern, we had to up anchor and leave, the upside was a good look at a mother and two Polar Bear cubs walking across the ice floes and taking a short cut across the bay..... 6 bears in one day.... So back to Fort Ross and Depot Bay where last night's ice was now beginning to head out into open water.



## Novara and Arctic Tern forced out of Levesque Harbour



As we were no longer in Fort Ross when he passed by, the Captain of the Bremen launched one of his ribs and left two small rucksacks in the care of the Tandberg Polar to be collected upon our return. When we got back to Fort Ross we collected these rucksacks and found one contained an assortment of goodies and the other some bananas, lettuce and tomatoes but the real treasure was the ice charts and grib files that did holdout some hope for our onward journey.

The ice charts showed that the ice in Peel Sound, and in the Franklin and Victoria Straits was continuing to melt and thin out a little, the better news was the prediction that winds would switch to the north east for two days, blowing 15kts or more in the Bellot and 20 kts plus on the other side.

Sure enough in the afternoon the winds began to move into the east and increase in strength. Initially this gave us more problems with the ice as the floes that had driven us out on their way in now wanted to do the same on their way out. But anticipating this we had anchored closer to shore in much shallower water and was able to fend off the ice until around 2.00am in the morning when there was non left in the bay.

With the ice charts showing only a slight improvement but the wind continuing to blow in our favour, Terje and I took another walk along the Bellot Strait to see what conditions were like. It was clear that the north easterlies had cleared some ice from the strait but there was still a choke point in the narrows and a lot more ice at the western entrance.

We had been joined in the anchorage by a 3rd boat, the Canadian flagged Gjoa with Anne and Glenn on board who planned to wait for the tug to head through and then follow them, to overwinter in Cambridge Bay. Both Arctic Tern and Novara had no plans to overwinter in the Arctic, both preferring to get down to Alaska before the ice closed Cape Bathurst and Barrow Point.

Of the 14 boats that had posted their intent to transit the NWP in 2014 from east to west, only 4 remained and of these four, three were OCC members.

The ice charts that evening gave more encouragement and showed that the winds had created a lead down the west coast of Boothia Peninsula that we could use to make our way south. We would leave the next morning to head south along the west coast of Boothia Felix and try to get to Gjoa Haven.

That night all three boats took up the offer of dinner on board the Tandberg Polar and for some of us it was our first taste of Arctic (Seal) stew, and very nice it was too. The six Norwegians on board were great company and the engineer, Erik is the great grandson of the famous Norwegian explorer Frijdtof Nansen and shares his grandfather's surname.

We had seen firsthand how quickly things change in the Arctic. Winds and current affect the ice in ways that cannot be imagined. We timed our departure from Fort Ross to give us the best chance to get through the Bellot and reach Gjoa Haven and on to Cambridge Bay. We had one eye on the ice conditions further west at Cape Bathurst and Point Barrow, knowing that if we got there too late it could possibly stop us in our tracks and force a retreat to Cambridge Bay and a winter in the ice. Over Cautious and we could miss the window, too gung ho and we could get stuck in the ice.

We also had to take account of what was happening behind us that could block off our line of retreat back to Pond Inlet and all points south. The latest ice chart showed that the route we took down Admiralty Inlet to Fort Ross and also from Bellot south down Franklin Strait to Gjoa Haven was now blocked again by drifting ice.

We decided to delay our departure until 6am the following morning when we could use the last of the west going current to punch our way through any ice we encountered and this proved to be a useful tactic helping us to get through the choke point. The ice build up at the western end proved far more formidable with 4/10ths or more stretching across the entrance. Once again Novara proved her icebreaker credentials and by using the strong west going current we were able to pick out a narrower section and punch our way through.

#### **Novara heading south under full sail after transiting the Bellot Strait**



Our journey south was not without excitement, now at the end of August we had 6 hours of darkness and with a considerable amount of ice to pass through before we could round King William Island and begin our long journey west.

As we approached Gjoa Haven in the fading sunlight we saw a strange sight ahead, as we edged closer it became clear that it was the French rower Charles Heydrich who was attempting to row the NWP. We exchanged greetings, asked if he needed anything and gave him an update on conditions in the Bellot Strait and beyond.

Peter Ustinov always said it was a fine line between genius and madness but in the case of those that attempt the NWP it is a fine line between adventure and lunacy!



Gjoa Haven, where Amundsen had spent two winters carrying out his primary task of taking magnetic observations and where he learnt so much from the Inuit that was to stand him in good stead when he made his successful attempt to be the first to the South Pole. With open water between here and Cambridge Bay, our next port of call, we were confident of making further progress and with the exception of a spectacular show from the northern lights the passage proved uneventful.

In Cambridge Bay we were able to collect the spare parts required to repair our damaged steering and with open water ahead all the way to Point Barrow and beyond we were able to rest up for a couple of days before tackling the 3,500nm to Homer in Alaska.

We awoke to snow overnight and ice on the decks, it was now the 6<sup>th</sup> September and for some days now we had been watching Geese flying south as winter approached the Arctic. With the gale force westerly's abating overnight we left Cambridge Bay at 6.00am with a good forecast for at least 5 days ahead, our first target, Cape Bathurst and the first of the remaining ice gates as we head west, 550nm away. With sleet and snow blowing all day we were particularly grateful to have fixed the steering so we could use the autopilot and without any ice to worry about, Novara's snug, warm pilothouse came into its own. 162nm run in 24 hours as we sailed west along Amundsen Gulf and then a 2 day slog against headwinds up the Dolphin and Union Strait before we could round Bexley Point.

We finally got the strong easterlies that were forecast for the 10th and made good progress to the west in 20 to 25kt winds and 10ft seas. The winds continued to build to 30kts and we steadily reduced sail until we were running under twin storm sails in big following seas with both daggerboards down to aid steering. The seas were spectacular if uncomfortable with sleep difficult at best in the roly conditions but we rounded Point Barrow at 12.30UT in 30kt winds and big breaking seas. Gybing the boat in these conditions took some care but went without any hiccups and we broad reached south in 25kt winds with 8ft seas. We had now travelled over 1,250nm since leaving Cambridge Bay and had put the last of the ice obstacles behind us.





The storm force winds and big bouncy seas had taken their toll on the boat. Novara had withstood the pounding incredibly well but some of the ancillary items have not fared so well.

The wind generator lost one of its blades as we bounced our way up Dolphin and Union Strait. Fortunately it hit Phil on the shoulder and we were able to save the blade.

The Foghorn was less fortunate, coming loose and hanging by its wire, we were unable to climb the mast to save it before it decided to abandon ship and disappear over the side. Nuts and bolts appeared mysteriously and we could not find where they came from and later as we walked the deck checking rigging, etc. we saw that the Radome had come loose, spun around 30 degrees and would have also disappeared over the side in the next big storm.

This sailing lark is tough on the crew but even tougher on the boat.

Novara re-crossed the Arctic Circle at 66:33N 167:52W as she headed south towards Nome. Since she crossed as we headed north in the Davis Strait at 66:33N 61:16W we had successfully completed our 2014 transit of the North West Passage, taking 42 days and covering 3,380nm.

But we still had some way to go before we reached our winter quarters. Nome was interesting and the people helpful and friendly. The Beaufort and Chukchi seas had been lively but the trip down the Bering Sea was notable for blue skies and abundant wildlife and we chose to play safe and make our way through the Aleutian chain in the Unimak Pass and stop at Sand Point until a front had passed safely by before we headed north to Homer.

With a succession of gales forecast we had to pick the best of a series of less than perfect weather windows and as always where boats are concerned plans are subject to change at a moment's notice and so they were as we headed out from Sand Point and north up the Shelikof Strait and into gale force winds and 12 to 15ft seas! Both the boat and the crew were feeling the strain after more than 3 months and nearly 7,000nm, I took the decision to go to plan B (or was it C) and turn east and through the Pass between Cape Trinity and Aiktalik Island and up the east coast of Kodiak Island to the port of Kodiak.

**Novara in her winter quarters – Kodiak, Alaska**



It had been an amazing adventure; living up to our expectations and giving us memories that will live with us forever.

**The Motley Crew..Terje, Phil, Me and Ding**

