

Kite-skiing in the Arctic

Polar bears, melting ice and a lot of chocolate!



The Northwest Passage is a sea route along the Arctic coast of Canada and Alaska. It connects the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. In the past, many explorers tried to sail through the Northwest Passage because it was a much shorter route from China to Europe. The freezing ice made travelling by sea very dangerous and difficult.

In 2011, Sarah McNair-Landry and her brother, Eric, decided to kite-ski 3,300 km (2,500 mi) across the frozen Northwest Passage in Canada. They each took four kites – big kites for days when there wasn't much wind, and small kites for days when the wind was very strong. Of course, they also packed sleeping bags, a tent and a lot of food, including 200 bars of chocolate! In total, they had four sledges, with about 180 kg (400 lb) of equipment. Sarah and Eric were on skis for the journey.

On windy days, the kites pulled Sarah and Eric (on their skis) and the sledges with all the equipment. But on days when there was no wind, they had to pull the sledges themselves with no help. Sometimes, when the weather was really bad, they only travelled 5–6 km (3–4 mi) per day.

Sarah and Eric started their journey in the west, in Tuktoyaktuk. Along the route, they stopped at seven small communities, where they stayed with local families. They visited the schools at each community and talked to the children about their trip.

One of the most difficult parts of their trip was at Boothia Strait. The ice started to melt, and Sarah and Eric had to change their route. They decided to camp for the night and make a new plan the next day.

At four o'clock in the morning, Sarah woke up suddenly. There was a polar bear outside the tent and it wanted to come inside! Eric tried to scare it away with a snow shovel, but the snow shovel was very small and the polar bear was very big! Then Sarah found her rifle and shot it once above the bear's head. The bear ran away, but Sarah and Eric didn't go back to sleep. They wanted to leave. On the same morning, they saw five more polar bears.

On 11th June 2011, after 85 days, Sarah and Eric finally arrived at the tiny Inuit community of Pond Inlet. They were very tired, hungry and wet from the melting ice. The Mayor of Pond Inlet greeted them on the beach. In the evening, the local people organised a dance party. It was an amazing end to a wonderful expedition.



Sarah McNair-Landry's route

1. For this journey, Sarah and Eric travelled by kite-ski. Think about the advantages and disadvantages of travelling by kite-ski. Would you like to travel this way? Why or why not?
2. For many days of their trip, Sarah and Eric were alone in the middle of the Arctic. What are the dangers of travelling so far from a town or village? Why do you think people like travelling in remote locations?
3. Imagine you are planning a journey with an unusual means of transport. Explain why you want to travel this way and where you want to go.

AFTER YOU READ Work in pairs to answer the questions.

1. Why did people in the past want to use the Northwest Passage?
2. Which days were easier for Sarah and Eric – windy days or days with no wind?
3. Why did Sarah and Eric change their route at Boothia Strait?
4. How did Sarah make the polar bear go away?
5. How did the people of Pond Inlet welcome Sarah and Eric?