

By John Reisenauer Jr, KL7JR

# DXing with Polar Bears

The author's self-described "best trip to date" involved a rare island, a rare county, 10-10, contesting, Northern Lights and polar bears. For a dedicated Arctic ham-traveler, it doesn't get any better than that.

An irresistible force continues to beckon me to the Arctic, where my pride in being an American and an Amateur Radio operator is somehow amplified. My mind was on operating HF from the Arctic Ocean as I gazed out the bush plane window to the flat expanse of tundra a few thousand feet below. I'd been planning this trip for a long time. Small frozen streams and lakes zig-zagged everywhere, adding brilliant contrast to the treeless landscape of Alaska's North Slope. Captain Jim broke the Arctic silence.... "Kaktovik Tower, this is Frontier 1-3-9er with one passenger on board. Request permission to land, over." The mystique and overpowering sense of belonging I felt was intense. Minutes later the small plane set down on the frozen tundra.

## Warming up—the Gear, that is!

Five minutes after checking in to my room, I started to unpack the radio gear I had shipped up earlier. A converted man camp, relic of Prudhoe Bay construction days, Waldo Arms Hotel would now be my home for the next week. The Northern Lights were out in all their splendor as I assembled my Solarcon A99 vertical antenna (10 through 17 meters) in the dining hall. Once the mast and coax were connected I merely carried the assembly outside and climbed a snowdrift to the roof. The swirl of the Northern Lights flashing across the dark sky made it difficult to concentrate on doing antenna work. The combination of moonlight and twilight made for a rich blue and pastel display. Hoarfrost clung to everything

Although polar bears may appear friendly, they see everything else as food and can easily kill a person with one swipe of their paw!



STEVEN KAZLOWSKI (WWW.LEFTEYEPRO.COM)

in sight on this 23 below zero (F) afternoon. My rig was a Kenwood TS-50 with matching AT-50 auto-tuner. Both units are compact and pack well. By 0400Z December 13, I had heard only weak signals on 15 meters. At 0500Z I worked JA1CG and JK1BMF who were now loud. KL7JR was spotted on the Japan Packet Cluster. JAs rolled in for 20 minutes before the band dropped out. I turned in early, exhausted but pleased.

After a hearty stick-to-my-ribs breakfast of reindeer sausage and sourdough pancakes, I headed for the radio room.

First in the log on 15 meters was DL5ME, AA5AT and EA8BYR. I moved to 10 meters and it didn't take long for a pileup to start after I announced Barter Island was AK-044S for the US Island awards program and NA-050 for Islands on the Air! VE2NW, VE1VE, SMØFWW, UA9YE, ZL1ARY and VP2EY had very strong signals and reported the same for me. In the deepening twilight and with excellent propagation, I was enjoying a wonderful time with Amateur Radio under the Northern Lights. By 0200Z I had made about 400 QSOs on 10, 15 and 17 meters with Japan, Germany, Spain, Norway, Italy, Russia, New Zealand, Cuba, all over Canada and the USA. At times on 10 meters it was almost impossible to copy any signals, even operating split, because everyone was 5x9 plus 20! I was overwhelmed to say the least. Two or three times throughout the day sled dogs barked, announcing the presence of polar bears in the village. The tough northern dogs not only pull sleds but double as "white bear" alarms here at the top of the world.

## Casual Operating

On day 2 it was a balmy 8 below zero (F) and at 1700Z WJ8Y spotted me on packet. He said, "I'm going to put you to work." That he did! Later W1VJ and N3EEI spots kept me go-



Northern Lights and sunset on Barter Island, Alaska.

## Just where are We?

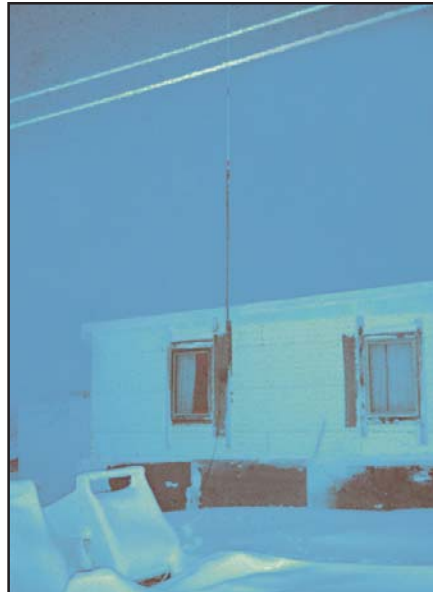
The North Slope of Alaska stretches above the Arctic Circle at latitude 66.3, between the Brooks Range to the south and the Arctic Ocean to the north. Roughly 500 miles from the nearest traffic light, or more precisely, 120 miles east of Prudhoe Bay, Kaktovik on Barter Island is about as remote as it gets.

Barter Island was an important stop for trading (hence the name) by the commercial whalers during the 1890s and early 1900s. In 1923 a permanent settlement came to be when Tom Gordon established a fur trading post. During the years that followed, residents of the region were semi-nomadic, moving from place to place depending on the availability of fish, fur, game and marine mammals. In 1947, the US Air Force installed the DEW (Distant Early Warning—for detection of enemy aircraft or missiles along the northern rim of Alaska) line station creating jobs for the indigenous people. At one time, there were 20 such stations spaced about 35 miles apart across Alaska's North Slope. By 1968 Kaktovik was becoming popular with the discovery of oil at nearby Prudhoe Bay. 1997 saw the end of the DEW line on this tiny island. Amenities here include two hotels, a school, trading post, city hall/community center, fire department, post office, fuel depot, medical clinic, two cafés, a grocery store and even a Bed and Breakfast. A new diesel generator supplies electricity for the island and a cable TV network via satellite is available. About 100 small homes occupy the island, some with running water and sewer systems. Kaktovik is home to around 250 residents whose families have lived in the region for centuries.



ing. Sweden, Australia, Argentina, Chile and Mexico were now in my log. Packs of dogs howled loudly. I looked out my window to catch a fleeting glimpse of something “big and white.” “Was that an Eskimo in a traditional parka, or a polar bear,” I thought while waste-deep in a pileup. Later I learned two polar bears had been scared out of a dumpster by a villager with firecrackers! Polar bears are most often found near arctic coastlines and the southern edge of sea ice. Sightings are common in the oil fields of Prudhoe Bay and North Slope communities. Polar bears are the largest predators in the world. They top the food chain in the Arctic, where they dine primarily on seals. I took a break from radioing to ride with Waldo Audi, owner of this Amateur Radio-friendly establishment, to the bone yard. The bone yard is where whale bones are discarded after each annual hunt. “White bears” often congregate there. In the twilight of a crisp 27 below zero afternoon, we saw eight Arctic fox dining on a bowhead whale carcass that had washed ashore last summer. The fox bounced up and down in our spotlight like rats on a garbage heap. Unlike myself, they were well adapted to the fierce Arctic Ocean winds. DX worked today included JK2JEP, P40Y, XE2LV, SM0AJU, KH7RS, LA3WAA and VK3UY.

Besides the island chasers and contestants, I was amazed by the number of



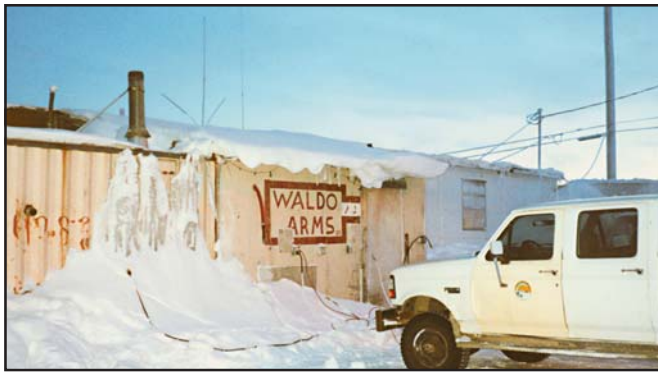
**In the dim Arctic daylight: The operating shack window (back of hotel) and A99 antenna on roof with dog sleds in front.**

county hunters, 10-10ers and the WAS gang (looking for Alaska on 30, 17 and 12 meters) who called me. Several hams said they needed North Slope Borough (aka 2nd Judicial District) or Alaska on 17 meters “big time”! Strange as it seems, this county is the largest in the US and perhaps the most sought after by hams. I

got Waldo (aka Walt) to squeeze the mike on 15 meters for a taste of ham radio. Walt, a bush pilot, has lived here for 37 years and worked on the DEW line before constructing his lodge. We worked K4XH, W6FAH, N5XG, N7JSM, W1NG and others before all bands dropped out.

In the Inupiat Aboriginal calendar, December is called “moon with no sun.” Moonlight and pitch darkness entombs the Arctic much of the winter. Getting used to the lack of daylight is about as difficult as getting used to “tundra time.” Tundra time is that clock inside you telling you when to eat, sleep and work. Everything else is secondary. I soon fell into a rhythm. I’d get on the radio around 1400Z when 15 and 17 meters opened, then work 10 meters until it closed around 0400Z when I’d go back to 12, 15 or 17 meters to work anyone I could.

Day three was slow, as signals were weak and heavy noise was present. I checked into the OMISS (17 meters) and Family Hour (15 meters) nets to work WA2QOM, K9VY, IK5ACO, KB2HJ, GU3EJL, HK4CYR, F5NOD and a few others. I was happy to slow the pace and get whatever contacts I could. Daylight, if you want to call it that, is between 11:30 AM and 1:30 PM “up here.” It’s 39 below zero as I spin the dial for contacts. The most commonly asked questions, besides “What’s the temperature now?” or “Where are you from



The main entrance of the Waldo Arms Hotel, an Amateur Radio-friendly establishment. The A99 antenna is mounted on the roof.



A fuel oil truck just leaving Christmas-decorated home. In remote Arctic villages, the fuel oil man is your best friend!

Fairbanks?” were “Seen any polar bears?” “Do you work for an oil company?” or “Are the Northern Lights out?” The Northern Lights—the aurora borealis—are always present in the far North, even when we can’t see them due to daylight or cloud cover. After about 200 contacts today, I decided to slow down and ragchew with an old friend when I heard him in the pileup. Geno, AL7GQ in Colorado, was 59 on 10 meters, then we switched to 15, then 17 and finally 12 meters for back-to-back QSOs with 57 reports both ways. This was a record for us! We were both using A99 verticals.

Sometimes the bands are exceptional up here. Others worked on 17 meters were N2BI, KF7UX, N3TSV, KD5PPS, several W6s and *QST* Publisher K1RO. One ham commented, “WARC bands from the Arctic Ocean—imagine that.” Hours later in the dining hall I feasted on a caribou steak dinner—I sure was eating well up here!

### Let’s Contest—The Big Chill

It’s one hour before the ARRL 10 Meter Contest starts and 28 MHz is quiet but you just know a thousand contesters are lurking in the shadows! The mercury dropped past 35 below zero and I’m glad I’m in for the night! Frigid Arctic winds stirred, sandblasting everything on this frozen ice sheet of land. It was futile calling CQ with my peanut whistle station, so I switched to “hunt and pounce” for contacts. Ten meters was slam-full of big signal stations! When 10 faded I was on 17 working KQ6F, K7PE, JA7FVA and many others.

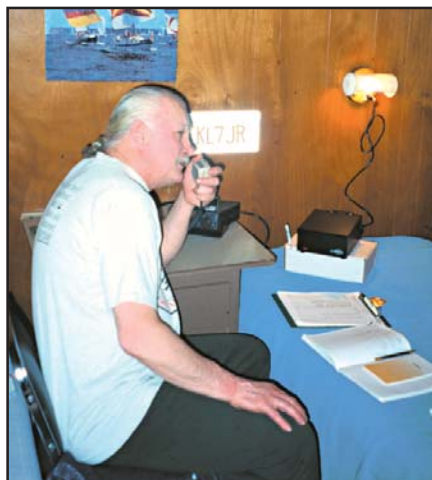
The day ended with a nice hot shower and a delicious baked Alaskan halibut dinner complete with all the trimmings. Many villagers greeted me with, “So, you’re the ham operator” or “How’s the contest going?” Apparently I was the talk of the town—and not the wandering polar bears! Early the next morning I enjoyed very good band conditions. I was

surprised to work short skip in to Fairbanks (KL7RA and KL7FAP were 55) and later to Anchorage (KL7FH and AL7KC were 59). The temperature had been holding right at 29 below zero most of the day.

The last day of the contest saw terrible band conditions up here—the interference, noise and fading was extreme. Ten meters opened late and closed early. Arctic flutter was present on some Florida and Georgia station signals as well as mine. Strange conditions in the Arctic indeed! Twenty hours operating and 275 Qs was the best I could get in here for the contest. Some contest DX worked included JH1IED, LW9EOC, HL3AMO, EX2M, ZL1ANJ, UA9YAB, VK4WPX, LT1F, LR6D, DU1UGZ and PJ2T. Fifteen and 17 meters later produced some contacts but conditions were also rough. All in all, I made just over 1250 QSOs with about 40 countries, and 85% were on 10 meters.

### Time to Head South

It was great to be this far north again. I had relived many fond memories of my



Walt having a great time on 15 meters.

working and radioing from Prudhoe Bay a decade ago. A short 30-minute flight back to Deadhorse Airport (Prudhoe Bay), then by jet back to Anchorage allowed me some time to reminisce about the fun I’d just experienced. Special thanks go to Waldo and Marilyn of Waldo Arms Hotel for the warm hospitality shown me. Your cooking is the best in the Arctic! I’ve experienced Arctic Alaska once again, but this time I left a part of me “up here.”

“Barter Island Tower, this is Cape Smythe 2-1-4 taking off with 2 on board for Prudhoe Bay....have a nice day, over.”

*Photos by the author.*

*John Reisenauer, KL7JR, was first licensed in 1979 as KA7BKI. He grew up in North Dakota and was a SWL for many years. John does electrical consulting work nationwide and has worked for industry giants such as Boeing and General Electric. Amateur Radio complements his other interests such as camping, fishing, travel, photography and writing. Building wire antennas, island activating and contesting from the North are his favorite ham things to do. He called Alaska home for many years and was quite active in SCARC (Anchorage), including serving as president in 1994. John is the founder and past program director for the US Islands (USI) awards program (KL7USI) and is currently activities manager for the North Country DX Association (K7ICE). His love for the North Country, especially Alaska and the Yukon, is evident by his travels and literary efforts. Many of John’s northern ham adventures have been published in *QST*, 73 and *TCA* magazines over the past decade. His son John III, KC7FVA, and YL, Claire, WL7MY, often accompany him on trips. He and Claire reside on 10 acres (can you say antenna farm!) near Benton City, Washington. You can reach John at PO Box 4001, West Richland, WA 99353; kl7jr@owt.com.*

