

InfoNorth

An Extraordinary Polar Bear Encounter

by Glenn M. Stein

DURING JUNE AND JULY 2016, I worked as the polar historian for One Ocean Expeditions, onboard the Russian R/V *Akademik Sergey Vavilov*. We sailed from Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen, and since the ice did not descend down to Svalbard that year, it was decided to take the ship north to look for polar bears among the sea ice.

As we approached the ice, an around-the-clock polar bear watch was initiated. At 4:30 p.m. on July 7, the ship was at latitude 81°16' N, longitude 23°43' E, when I went on the top deck (Deck 7) to begin my duty on a high-powered scope. With all eyes on a bear swimming well off the port side, I decided to search to the front and right of the ship. I quickly spotted the profile of a bear very far off (afterward determined to be about two miles distant), but while trying to contact someone to verify my target, I lost sight of the bear.

The ship was steaming off to port, so I scanned to the right, and there was the bear on a flat piece of ice about 20 yards long. Several pairs of eyes scrambled to lock on to the bear, and I saw it sit down away from us, then lay down. When the ship edged closer, we realized this was an adult male in very good condition—and that he had a harp seal carcass beside him.

As we closed in, the bear began feasting on the seal, but he eventually decided to abandon the piece of ice, by dragging his prey into the water with its jowls and swimming to a larger piece of ice close by.

Here he started doing something that struck me as very odd: taking his paws and shoveling ice over the dead seal (Fig. 1). The bear was well aware of our presence, so I thought he might have been trying to hide the seal from us. He eventually simply lay down beside his prey and took a nap. I asked Dick Filby, the senior naturalist onboard, about the bear's behavior, and he said he had never seen anything like it during his many years of Arctic work.

I signed up for the 9:30–10:30 p.m. slot of the polar bear watch, since we needed to keep an eye on the bear throughout the night, and move the ship if he changed locations. About 10 minutes after my watch began, the expedition leader came onto the bridge to inform me that another bear was swimming off our port side, in the direction of the male bear. This swimming bear eventually slightly altered course and came up onto a piece of ice, directly across from the male bear.



FIG. 1. Polar bear gathering snow to cover a seal.

This was a much smaller female bear (about half the size of her counterpart), and was surely attracted by the scent of the carcass. She walked around the piece of ice, perhaps trying to figure out how to get over to the male's piece of ice without going into the water again; a couple of times, she laid down to apparently think things through. In the meantime, the two pieces of ice slowly drifted closer to one another. At one point, the male started to drag away his prey, but stopped and half-covered it with ice; he also pawed the ice up for several feet in front of him—it almost looked like he was marking his territory.

The male was well aware the female was testing the ice to try and jump across, but then the male did something strange: he turned his back on the female bear and began feeding off the carcass again. I think the male deliberately did this to entice the other bear to come across, so he could confront her. Sure enough, the female jumped over the three-foot gap and began pacing back and forth, but the male pretended to take no notice. The female got closer and closer until the male suddenly whipped around and charged, and she ran and jumped back onto the other piece of ice, where she quietly laid down.

The two pieces of ice then slowly drifted apart, and the *Vavilov* was quietly maneuvered to keep both bears close by. Over time, the pieces came close together again, but fog rolled in. The larger bear eventually abandoned his worked-over seal, and the female rapidly moved in to chew at what remained.

After my return home, I decided on further investigation. On 21 August, I sent a message to population biologist and ecologist Dr. Robert F. Rockwell at the American Museum of Natural History, who had observed the eating habits of polar bears over a number of years. Replying the same day, Dr. Rockwell wrote that he had never seen polar bears behave this way. “I have seen them drag seals and beluga calves away from the water’s edge, carry dead geese to islands—where they ate most of the carcass—but I have never seen them bury, even partially, their prey,” continued Rockwell. “I have also seldom come across “buried” or

partially buried prey, the exceptions being obvious wolf kills of geese—lots of wolf tracks and goose feet sticking out of the mud—and fox caches inside fox dens or clearly dug fox holes.”

Glenn Stein, FRGS, FRCGS, is a polar and maritime historian. His latest book, Discovering the North-West Passage: The Four-Year Arctic Odyssey of H.M.S. Investigator and the McClure Expedition, was published by McFarland Publishing in 2015.

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