

SVALBARD WITH SLEDGE

Pulking across Nordenskiöld Land, April 2010

Michael Smith

In a third visit to Spitsbergen, Club members John Brown, Rory Newman and Michael Smith were joined by Simon Atkins and James Marson. The pulking trip was a success despite a number of setbacks. Glaciers were traversed and mountain tops climbed.

Ten days before their planned departure for Spitsbergen the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull erupted launching dust clouds into western European airways and grounding practically all aircraft for a week. Normal services returned only a day or so before they made their way out via Copenhagen, Oslo and Tromsø to Longyearbyen. A few days after their return ten days later, some British airports were again closed because of more volcanic dust. The party were lucky to fit in their expedition between the disruptions.

Their second setback was only discovered on trying to collect their pre-arranged hired pulks (individual towed sledges), fuel and rifles at the Paulsen's depot: despite Paulsen's paperwork only stating that rifle hire for over a month needed additional authorisation, new regulations required a Spitsbergen Governor's (or Sysselman's) permit for any gun hire. This discovery was made on Sunday morning and the Sysselman's office opened only on weekdays. Further, the application for such a permit had to be supported by a report of good character which Norwegians would normally obtain from the police. Quickly abandoning any idea of setting out without a rifle on account of the possibility of an encounter with a polar bear, an electronic copy of a recent Criminal Records Bureau report was requested from home. When this arrived on Monday the Sysselman was on the outskirts of the township encouraging a bear to go elsewhere. On his return he had lunch and issued the permit within the hour.

Meanwhile, Sunday saw the team taking the local ski track along the Longyear valley past ruminating reindeer and beneath shimmering drifts of newly-arrived Little Auk patrolling the cliffs above the township.

Better luck was had with provisioning. Parcellforce had delivered 13kg of camping food to the Mary Ann's Polarrigg hostel without difficulty and for about two-thirds the cost of excess baggage. As an alternative the supermarket had quality dehydrated camping food at a cost about twice that of ordinary UK packs. Also on the baggage front, ski packs pre-booked with SAS are charged at under £20 for the return journey and can weigh up to 10kg.

By Monday afternoon the team were transported by taxi out to the roadhead at the entrance to Bolterdalen and skied past returning dog-sledding groups for a couple of hours in deteriorating weather. Overnight the wind rose, spindrift flowed and a little snow fell. Tuesday was only fit for a short excursion up the Rieperbreen and improving the wall round the tents. Using GPS made finding the camp easier on the skiers' return.



Camp with bear alarm cord

Wednesday dawned calmer and after packing the pulks progress was made round Foxtoppen. A few fulmars passed as a gentle ascent was made slightly over the Bolterskaret pass then down to the foot of the Plogbreen. The way upward to the Foxpasset was smoothest on the left (true right) of the Dalburgerbreen. Skiing was interrupted to allow a reindeer with calf to cross the glacier and gather up a second mildly distressed calf which had fallen behind the family group. Clear skies and the prospect of expansive views tempted three of the group to climb Gilsonryggen. They crossed rotten snow and rock slopes to reach the point at the western end of the ridge but were put off the traverse to the tottering tower by the summit by the long double corniced ridge. Their descent required great care.



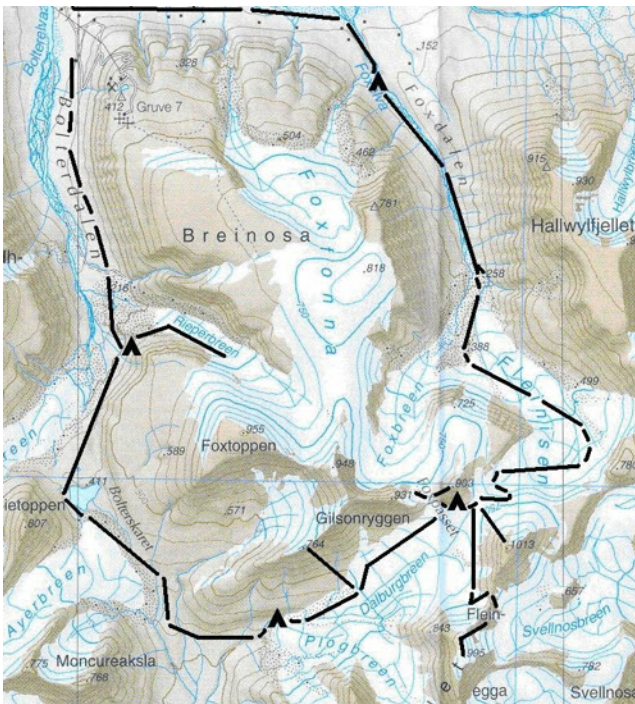
Rory comes a cropper

Camp was made that night inside a ring of snow blocks around 750m at the very head of the Dalburgbreen. Calmer clear conditions prevailed for 2 days and allowed the wide views of pristine snow-covered peaks to be enjoyed to the full.

The following day was passed exploring those peaks and prospecting the onward route. Views in all directions for scores of miles were of white peaks, fjords and icecaps. Back in the township the authorities were issuing avalanche risk warnings and care was needed because of the fresh snow on top of hard old snow. Ignorant of the warning but well aware of the conditions the party's medic bailed out of a direct assault on the highest peak a short distance from the summit ridge taking a somersault and slide down the face.

Thankfully no harm was done.

The descent was started early on Saturday by dropping over the col onto the upper Fleinisen glacier. A loop to the left avoided an ice cliff in the middle of the slope. Then a larger loop to the right avoided the steeper ground on the inside of the glacier's bend towards the Foxbreen. Most retained the skins on their skis to slow their descent with pulks. The medial moraine between these glaciers provided a way through between their snouts and terminal moraines. Sheltered from the worst of the cold breeze snow buntings chirruped and ptarmigan were spotted as Foxdalen was followed to a final camp close to the skidoo thoroughfare of Adventdalen. The campsite was chosen to take advantage of the morning sun but to no avail as descending thick cloud and rising spindrift gave a dreary finish. Thankfully, the prevailing wind was on our backs.



The route

Flying in and out seals were seen on the remaining fjord ice. This might explain why, as they returned, the Sysselman was again on the outskirts of Longyearbyen encouraging a bear to leave the area.

After returning and repacking gear and having a long hot shower, the team met Club member David Large, his student, a geologist and a leading member of the Longyear development team. They had spent the day taking coal samples from mines to try and understand the processes involved in ancient peat bogs. Conversation flowed freely over a Thai meal at Mary Anne's Polarrigg.

The trip met its objectives of travelling through the glaciated valleys and taking in some of the tops.

The two calmer, clear days at the high camp made life easier and the experience more rewarding. The attractions of this trip for the newcomer were the flexibility in route choice resulting from taking everything with you and the opportunity to explore an unspoilt wilderness. For those who had been before following river valleys or crossing an ice-cap, the glacial terrain brought new perspectives on the area and more opportunities to climb peaks.



Lunch below Foxpassat



Tunnel tent entrance and kit



A tottering tower

Pointers for others thinking of the area for a spring trip:

- * Temperatures were about -5°C to -17°C
- * Fuel consumption at these temperatures was one litre of Polar Fuel (gasoline) per day for five people when used for cooking but not for tent heating.
- * Fishscale skis with skins performed well.
- * Rifle hire required a permit. Applications should be made more than a month in advance with foreigners having to provide evidence of good character. Out of date paperwork may refer to permits only being needed for hire periods longer than a month.
- * Starting on a weekday rather than a weekend allows such paperwork to be sorted out with the local authorities.
- * Costs per person were about £400 in addition to personal equipment, food and flights. This included hire of flares, pulks, rifles and a satellite phone and payments for fuel and accommodation.
- * The personal metal pen-flare launchers are no longer in use. A mostly plastic replacement version is now commonplace but the two systems are not compatible.