RAINBOWS IN THE ARCTIC

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Category: Opinions

By Kevin McGill MSW, Nunavut, 11 October 2009

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About a kilometer north, I caught sight of an old bull in the distance grazing by himself. So I put down my pack, set up my tripod, and bent down to drag out my camera again.
When I stood up, the rainbow was back. It was not only back, it was a full half-circle rainbow that spanned across the water lake. And I was right there at the start of it. (Unfortunately, I must have been at the end without the pot of gold. Darn!)

Now I had my rainbow but in a way I was too close to it. I couldn’t get a full shot. However I did get to watch it and to get some shots to prove that I was right there at its beginning. I also got some shots with it in the foreground and the muskox in the far background.
Then there was the “River Runs Through It” moments.

This year, we took advantage of some nice late August/early September weather to go fishing along the river. We took along a picnic and our fishing rods and just casted and listened to the rush of the water over the rocks. We went several times before the char run was over and the colder weather closed in. If I had a better audio recorder, it would have made for a super mood video, like those fireplace and aquarium videos.

As it was, the pictures I got of Mena and Irene fishing along the banks are priceless.

Mena continued the fishing prowess that she demonstrated in the summer on the Trent River houseboat trip. There she caught a fish with her first cast off the end of the boat.

She didn't have any luck on the river. I didn't catch anything either, which is not unusual for me. However, one Sunday, she decided that she didn't want to take the long walk to the river and suggested that we take a short walk to the local pier. There she met the "ugly" fish.

There's this fish up here that the gods let go before they were finished making it. It's called a Scalpin. It is almost all head. It has this skinny body that looks more like a tail with fins. Apparently the older folks like to cook the head in a soup and find it quite the delicacy. I think it should be entered into the Special Olympics for fish.

Anyways, we went to the dock and there were all kinds of little kids there without fishing rods. Sometimes it's like Calcutta up here with all the kids begging to use stuff because they don't have their own. You sometimes just have to say no because you can't provide for them all. Besides we were worried about them getting stuck with the fishhooks.

So Mena carefully casted out, making sure not to snag some kid's eye. As she reels in, she snags into this "ugly fish". She drags it up and a dozen kids scramble over to see the fish. As they crowd in, they are stepping on her jacket with their muddy shoes, putting themselves in danger of toppling off the edge of the pier into the freezing waters below and generally showing why health and safety rules should apply to children's playtime. (Believe me, the water doesn't warm up much here.)

The kids made them useful doing the task that we didn't want to do, taking the hook out of the fish. The fish was flopping around but they knew how to take care of that. They simply stepped on it and reached down to pull out the hook. Unlike their grandparents, they had no particular interest in fishhead soup, so we tossed it back in the water.

At which point, Mena caught it again!

This was beginning to look like the kind of fishing that we did with our kids when they were younger and we took them out in the canoe or to the Big Chute. Every cast was going to catch a fish. Only this time it wasn't a little rock bass or perch but a pound of fish head. This poor ugly fish was taking a pounding what with being hauled up ten feet to the dock, stepped on and then a hook ripped out. So after a couple more tries, with a fish that just wouldn't take the hint, we gave up and I went for a long walk instead.

I wound up back on the river, just casting away, catching nothing, just being out there. Now that's my kind of fishing. The thing is whether it's standing by the river or trekking out on the tundra, one looks around and sees a world that hardly exists anymore. No fences, no "no trespassing" signs, a place where for a little while at least, a person can just be.

I miss the real fall colours back home … quite a bit, actually. There is a little compensation in that the little shrubs here also change colour. You can look down and see the yellows and oranges and reds. It's not the real thing but it gets one by. And there is actually grass up here.

And, every once in a while, you get to see a muskox or two …. Or eight or twelve. They haven't been coming too close to town this year, so I've been able to enjoy the long walks to search for them.

A couple of weeks ago, one of my colleagues had the van so we drove up the river road a bit further and parked at the elder's picnic area by the river. We climbed up the hill and got out the spotter to check things out. Way, way in the distance we could see a black shape that looked like another of those lone bulls cut off from the herd.

We decided to try to get closer and as we walked over the next rise, another muskox came into view from behind a hill. It was the distance of about two soccer fields away and separated from us by another fork of the river. So there we were walking parallel to it as another muskox ambled into view, then another and another and another. In the end, there were about 8 of them, heading to the river for a drink and a nibble of the plant life on the edge. We got to watch them socialize and then drift back behind the hill that had hidden them from view in the first place. Quite a nice experience!

The cold is starting to settle in here. It's Thanksgiving weekend. It has been consistently between 0 and minus 5 degrees. There hasn't been a real snowstorm or blizzard. There has been enough snow that has fallen to cover much of the tundra and make the streets slippery. The small lakes are frozen and kids have been out skating or sliding on them. The bay is still unfrozen as well as the main river which will start freezing over soon.

I still surprise myself at the attraction that cold weather now has for me. When I was a kid, I hated cold weather. My toes always froze within minutes of being out in any weather below about 10 degrees. Now, I go outside in the freezing cold and the air feels fresh and oddly invigorating. I always thought that I would wind up in the tropics and now I'm not sure that I wouldn't find all that heat oppressive. (I'd still like to try it though.)

So do I love the Arctic?

Well, I miss folks back home. And there are times when I can't get out on the tundra and there's really nothing but high winds and snow and not much to do.

I am close to water but realize that I can't go swimming or anything. Besides, it is frozen much of the time.

Due to a lack of trades people and planning, it's not easy to get anything fixed if it gets broken. We sometimes run out of water. Food is expensive and not the best quality.

Most people are nice. However, I am an outsider to a world that can often be violent and hurtful Some people do hate me for the colour of my skin and think that this is alright because they were

hurt for the very same reason. I feel sad for the people stuck in this situation and angry with the leaders both northern and southern who keep this system going. Sometimes my work seems like a drop in the bucket.

But then again, I get out on the tundra and get to take a picture of an Arctic Hare crouching in the rocks with its ears down, plainly visible, not 10 feet away but pretending that I can't see it because it isn't moving.

Yeah, the Arctic has its moments.